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# Seeking the Feminine Divine: Mormon Women's Religious Authority and Power in Rachel Hunt Steenblik's *Mother's Milk*

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## Abstract

Literary theorists like H el ene Cixous and other French feminists have written about *l' criture feminine*, a deconstructive force which allows female writers more freedom from male-dominated areas. Because Christianity has been historically male-dominated, Christian women have long used this idea to great effect, using their writing as a space in which they are free to assert power and authority. Mormonism, which arose in the 1830s during the Second Great Awakening, has grown to reinforce a patriarchal model for both family and church leadership, making Cixous' separate space of writing necessary for Mormon women of the twenty-first century. The Mormon poet Rachel Hunt Steenblik's volume *Mother's Milk* explores the idea of a feminine God, using poetry to teach theology with authority she is not afforded in traditional church spaces. Hunt Steenblik uses traditionally feminine themes alongside phrases and stories familiar to Mormon audiences to establish her authority as a Mormon woman. In doing this, she makes a space for theological ideas outside mainstream ecclesiastical authority, which is denied to women in the Mormon church. Hunt Steenblik's poems explore the connection between femininity and God through the embodied experience of birth and a mother-daughter relationship to validate female religious authority as well as align the author with male prophetic leaders and mimic language from Mormon scripture to broaden the Mormon definition of divinity and

leadership. Hunt Steenblik's work asserts the need for redemption of humanity as a whole as well as of the feminine divine and female religious power.

*Keywords:* Contemporary American poetry, women's writing, poststructuralism, Mormonism, Christianity, embodiment

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## **Introduction**

Women's voices and experiences have often been left out of Christian theological writing, but Rachel Hunt Steenblik's volume of poetry, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* foregrounds the female embodied experience of childbearing while presenting a powerful representation of the feminine divine and the religious authority, power, and presence women in Christianity claim. In the introduction to *Women, Writing, Theology: Transforming a Tradition of Exclusion*, Emily Holmes argues that writing, while often a tool of oppression by the dominant culture, is also a tool of liberation because it cannot be completely controlled by the dominant group (4). Likewise, Subashish Bhattacharjee and Girindra Narayan Ray assert, "women's writing has consistently challenged patriarchal norms by the simple act of creation independent of male intervention" (2). Women's theological writing specifically has allowed women access to religious authority typically only given to men in Christian structures, because writing about one's personal experiences with God conveys a certain authority regardless of gender (Holmes 6-9).

Hunt Steenblik's poems explore what connection with and knowledge of a feminine deity might look like, figuring God as a woman giving birth and caring for children while speaking with (female) prophets and orchestrating the redemption of humankind. Her work allows women

to claim religious authority and leadership. However, in order for works of women's theological writing to have lasting impact they must deconstruct traditional authority structures, not merely scabble for individual power in a system of domination. In this spirit, Hunt Steenblik's poems do not seek to establish absolutes, but rather to question binary structures that keep everyone, not just women, in limiting boxes that restrict their potential for connection with the divine and ultimately prevent churches from gaining the benefits of diverse leadership. Thus, Hunt Steenblik's poems revalue female religious authority, power, and presence. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term "religious authority" primarily to refer to the authority that comes from one's personal connection with God, "religious power" to connote institutional leadership roles, and "religious presence" to address women's visibility in their authority and power.

*Mother's Milk* uses imagery of childbirth and childrearing while re-appropriating scriptural language to imagine female deity and prophets and thus break down the traditional binary structure that separates female bodily experience from male religious authority, gesturing toward possibilities for religious authority and knowledge rooted in embodied and domestic experience alongside traditional paths toward connection with God. The deconstruction in which *Mother's Milk* engages, which questions traditional binaries that set male and female, spirit and body, and reason and emotion as opposites by depicting a deity that encompasses both sides of the binary, allows Hunt Steenblik to claim her own religious authority while offering similar authority and institutional power to other women and putting women into scriptural narrative. *Mother's Milk* re-imagines women's role in Christianity, bringing women into equal partnership with men in religious spaces.

## **Poststructuralism and Binary Thinking in Christianity**

In order to understand how Hunt Steenblik reclaims female religious authority, power, and presence by deconstructing the binaries have mandated women's exclusion from these spaces, we must first articulate the basics of poststructuralist theory. Jacques Derrida, perhaps the most well-known post-structuralist, outlined the flaws of structuralism throughout his work, arguing that the "center," or what structuralism privileges as the fixed origin of meaning, actually represents a paradox, because "while it often appears to be within a particular structure of signification, it simultaneously occupies an exterior position that allows it to operate and control the structure" (Chow 197). The center is both within and outside the structure. Thus, structures, particularly those that signify meaning through binary oppositions, can be understood as arbitrary, rather than natural or inherent. The opening of binary structures has vast implications. Derrida notes that when the world is categorized in terms of dualistic differences, these differences are put into value systems, privileging one half of an opposition over the other half (Williams 28). In other words, "usually one of the two terms in a relation of difference is given epistemological precedence and used as the criterion to determine the value of the other in a hierarchical fashion" (Chow 197). Poststructuralism demonstrates that one of the primary distortions that result from binary oppositional thinking "has been the distortion of humanity as male and female into a dualism of superiority and inferiority" that leads to women's subordination (Ruether 165). Hélène Cixous, in her use of post-structuralism to develop a theory of *l'écriture féminine*, or women's writing, refers to this process of valuing one side of a binary as inherently or naturally better than the other side as "patriarchal binary thought," also arguing that all systems of binaries lead back to the male/female binary in which the female is lesser (Moi 102-03).

The damaging effects of the binary oppositional thinking that is foundational to patriarchal structures can be clearly seen in major trends in Christianity. Certainly, these generalizations are not true of all Christian faiths; however, the basic sketch outlined by feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in her book *Sexism and God-talk* is useful to understand the intersection between poststructuralist thought and trends in Christianity. Ruether argues that because the male has been privileged over the female historically, Christian leadership has been, for the most part, male, and Christian theology figures its God as male as well (Ruether 194). Ruether notes the implications of what she terms “male monotheism,” arguing that “male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule” (53). This sets up a structure in which God is above men, who are in turn above women. When women can reach God only through men, men are seen not only as representatives but also a representation of God, and women become “the image of the lower, material nature” of humanity (Ruether 54). Further, Ruether argues that male monotheism splits reality between “transcendent Spirit (mind, ego) and inferior and dependent physical nature,” associating women with the physical and men with the spirit (54). Men come to represent reason, spirit, and goodness while women are seen as irrational, carnal, and sin prone (Ruether 94, 168, 195).

When Christian theology is based on a binary opposition between men and women, further dualisms follow, splitting reality between mind/body and reason/emotion. Women become associated with the side of the binary pair that is determined to be inferior. Again, it is important to remember that there are many Christian faiths that avoid the pitfalls of patriarchal binary thought, and that these trends are generalizations. However, for the most part, this binary thinking has meant historically in Christianity as well as other major social institutions that men have not attached authority to female voices (Moi 35), both leaving women out of theological

discussion and work as well as preventing them from claiming the authority needed to join the spaces in which theology is done (Holmes 3).

### **Woman as Religious Authority**

The French literary theorists Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Wittig have developed a concept of *l'écriture féminine*, or "women's writing," to describe writing that subverts the patriarchal binary structures described above. Male domination of binary oppositional structures—specifically, for this paper, in Christianity—has made women “the Other” in opposition to men, turning them from agents into objects (Moi 90). Thus, a poststructuralist philosophy is essential to a theory of women’s writing as a way to break out of the limited roles in which women have been contained. While the particularities of each theorist’s work on *l’écriture féminine* invariably differ and cannot be covered in the scope of this paper, these theorists all work from the basic premise that the female body opposes itself to male cultural domination (Jones 252), and that a focus on the female body exposes the false dichotomies between male/female, mind/body, and reason/emotion that are replicated throughout patriarchal social structures (Crowder 141).

Hunt Steenblik's poetry and her context as a Mormon woman fits into this definition of poststructuralist women’s writing. The general Christian tendency to devalue the body as inferior and sinful and to associate susceptibility to the body’s passions with women in particular, as outlined by Ruether, continues in Mormonism, the Christian religion to which Hunt Steenblik belongs. While Mormon doctrine teaches that the body is important to God’s plan, the body is generally regarded as something to be mastered, continuing older Christian traditions that privilege the mind and spirit above the body. Mormonism sees the body as part of the soul and believes in an embodied God, but religious scholar Aaron S. Reeves argues that this premise has not been fully realized, noting that earlier positive teachings about the body have become less

common as leaders emphasize that the fall of Adam and Eve led to a body that is unredeemed, weak, and susceptible to temptation (145, 149).

The focus on the body as eventually eternal but currently flawed is seen in common interpretations of the Book of Mormon, part of Mormonism's scriptural canon, which focus on the idea that redemption includes triumph over the "carnal" nature of the body to a spiritual state and that God's influence helps people reject the body's passions (Volluz 154-58). Therefore, despite belief in an embodied God and that the body is part of the soul, these teachings and interpretations engender a theology in which the body and the spirit are currently opposed, and will only be reconciled once the body has been sufficiently mastered or improved by the spirit's influence (Reeves 147-51, 153-63). Mormon theology does not specifically label women as more bodily and thus more sinful, but in a society shaped by binary thinking, devaluing the body as lesser than the mind means that often, in Mormon culture, women are associated with the body because gender is mapped to binary oppositions. Further, because Mormon spiritual leadership is mostly male, men become implicitly associated with spirituality, which in turn, due to binary structures that shape societal thought, connects women to the body and excludes them from positions of authority. For example, the common Mormon understanding that the female equivalent of the all-male Mormon priesthood is motherhood (Farnsworth 166-68) is directly related to the lasting cultural foundation that associates men with spirituality and women with the body, because motherhood is generally an embodied experience. In contrast to Christianity's harmful connection women and the "inferior" body and Mormonism's complex but often disdainful attitude toward the body, Hunt Steenblik uses embodied motherhood as a metaphor for God, allowing a deconstruction of the patriarchal binaries that separate the female body from traditional conceptions of God and God-given authority. Thus, *Mother's Milk* conceptualizes a

form of religious authority that validates embodied experience, allowing both bodily and spiritual experiences to confer the authority to know and speak about God, regardless of gender.

The poem "Postpartum" illustrates this trend; "Postpartum" deconstructs the binary between male religious authority and female bodily experience by depicting revelation that is rooted in the female body during and just after giving birth. That Hunt Steenblik chooses birth as the subject of this poem is significant, as birth has often been seen in traditional Christian theology as an example of women's "bodily... inferior, sin-prone self" and thus a fact that precludes women from religious authority (Ruether 95-97). However, Hunt Steenblik's use of embodied womanhood as metaphor for God allows her to claim religious authority from—not in spite of—her female identity. "Postpartum" discusses "the Mother," using capitalization to set up the metaphor of God as an embodied woman. The capitalization, which occurs throughout the volume, signals a larger and more important mother than one woman giving birth, connecting motherhood and Godhood. "Postpartum" begins, "After creation / the Mother knew" (Hunt Steenblik 53 lines 1-2), connecting the creation of the world by God to physical birth through the juxtaposition of the title and the first line. The contrast between the title and the first line sets up the metaphor of the poem and the book: that God is an embodied woman.

The metaphor of God as embodied mother, as seen in the connection between the title and the first line of "Postpartum" as well as its capitalization of "Mother," suggests that women, through their embodied experiences, have authority to speak about God. Further, in "Postpartum," the act of creation results in knowledge, thus reinforcing the idea that women's embodied experiences can be a revelatory process that brings women close to God. This idea directly opposes the historical religious notion that reason and understanding must be separated from the body and that men—because of their separation from the body—are more suited to

spirituality (Ruether 54) by depicting an embodied experience as a form of connection to God. Thus, "Postpartum" contributes to the deconstruction of the binary between male religious authority and female bodily experience through its connection between God's actions and women's experiences giving birth, demonstrating that embodiment, rather than a detriment to spirituality, is a way to connect with God and something that bestows religious authority. The poem continues, "The emptiness / that comes after fullness, / the softness that remains / for a long time" (lines 3-6). These lines depict Hunt Steenblik's experience after giving birth as well as God's experience following the creation of the world, reiterating the metaphor of Godhood as embodied womanhood, and, further, developing the idea that the female bodily experience can be a revelatory process. It is Hunt Steenblik's own experience with the "emptiness" and "softness" after birth that also give her the further understanding of God.

Finally, lines 3-6 of "Postpartum" present a view of opposites that are contained within a single body, destabilizing the validity of a structure built upon binary oppositions. The final lines of the poem oppose "emptiness" and "fullness," "softness" and hardness, the joy and "sorrow" of creation. That these conflicting emotions and physical attributes can exist in one person argues against the false dichotomy set up by patriarchal binary thinking. If one person can experience both emptiness and fullness, softness and hardness, joy and sorrow without valuing one above the other, a system built on strict binary oppositions becomes suspect. "Postpartum" opens the possibility of a religious experience that does not set male and female, mind and body as oppositional and hierarchical, promoting instead an experiential and bodily view of revelation and religious authority that does not use gender or embodiment to preclude one group from religious authority. This rhetorical move paints Hunt Steenblik—and all women—as representatives of God, granting religious authority. Men have claimed their religious authority

on the basis that God is male, and therefore men are God's representatives (Ruether 53-54). If God can be figured as female and found in the female embodied experience, Hunt Steenblik argues, women can be God's representatives and leaders too.

Domestic life is a connecting theme throughout *Mother's Milk*. The focus on the domestic links the roles and realm typically assigned to women with Godhood, breaking down the theological construction that God and God's prophets and leaders are necessarily male. It is no controversial claim to note that, particularly after the Industrial Revolution precipitated what modern scholars call the Cult of True Womanhood, women have been limited to the domestic sphere, seen as defenseless and in need of protection against the world of business and political leadership (Boydston 142-44). Mormonism arose during the nineteenth century, when this romanticized view of women as the "Angel of the Hearth" was at its peak and is understandably marked by the culture in which it grew. Mormons have sacralized traditional gender roles, painting women's role as "birther and follower" and men's role as "provider and ruler" as God-given (Kline 193). These roles are justified by "women being described by Church leaders as inherently nurturing, loving, sympathetic, spiritual, and kind" (193). Women's most divine role, in Mormonism, is mother, while the primary role for men is "leader and priesthood holder," and while neither is explicitly categorized as superior, this view sets up a God-given structure in which women are associated with nurture and men with leadership (194-96). Thus, in order to fulfill their spiritual potential, women must not concern themselves with power and leadership and instead focus on their children. However, this worldview assumes the inherency of a dualistic split between male and female natures and the need to assign roles accordingly.

Rather than replicate the separation between conventional female roles and male religious authority by depicting herself reflecting in isolation in order to learn about God, Hunt Steenblik uses her domestic experiences as a way to connect with God, similar to her use of embodied womanhood as metaphor for God. For example, in the poems “Mother Tongue” and “Veil,” Hunt Steenblik associates raising her daughter, Cora, with how God might interact with her. In “Mother Tongue,” she writes, “Cora sticks her fingers / in my mouth, to learn / my language” (33 lines 1-3). “Veil” opens, “When my daughter cried / for me as I showered, / I gave her soft words” (124 lines 1-3). After illustrating an experience with her daughter, Hunt Steenblik then carefully links these events with God’s nature. “Mother Tongue” finishes with Hunt Steenblik asking, “Did I do this / with my Mother?” (lines 5-6). “Veil” recounts the reassurance Hunt Steenblik gave her crying daughter—“*I’m right here. / I’m just on the other side / of the curtain*” (lines 4-6)—before finishing, “And suddenly, / I knew my Mother / was” (lines 7-9). These epiphanies about God are explicitly connected to domestic life, demonstrating the false nature of the traditional split between womanhood, associated with the domestic, and manhood, associated with leadership. Hunt Steenblik, and the God she portrays, embodies both domestic care and religious leadership.

The single-stanza structure of these two poems depicts the revelatory nature of domestic life. The lines containing realization and revelation about God come directly after the lines describing Hunt Steenblik’s interactions with her daughter, without a stanza break to separate the different ideas. This further entangles the domestic sphere and religious authority, making it clear that these two things are not mutually exclusive, nor is Hunt Steenblik retiring to a space separate from her domestic life to learn about and connect with God. Rather, her knowledge of

God comes directly from her domestic life. The lack of space between the domestic experience and the religious epiphany illustrates the merging of the two sides of the traditional split between domestic care and religious leadership.

Hunt Steenblik rejects the idea that childbirth and motherhood preclude or exempt women from religious authority and instead turns the female embodied experience into a revelatory and transcendent experience that actually bestows religious authority. While narratives about the inferiority and punishment of women make them “the Other” in binary opposition with men, Hunt Steenblik illustrates how childbirth can bring knowledge of and closeness to God and makes women the subject of the story, restoring their authority to know, learn, speak, and teach about God. Hunt Steenblik’s emphasis on the embodied female experience as a metaphor for God deconstructs the separation between body and revelation, demonstrating the false nature of this duality by showing that embodied experience can lead to connection with God, thus allowing women to reclaim bodily experience and insist on religious authority alongside men.

The theory of *l’écriture féminine* has been criticized for its gender essentialist and cis- and heteronormative tendency to promote biological and inherent differences between men and women’s personalities and ascribe the liberatory potential of women’s writing to their bodies in particular, which runs the risk of upholding systems of oppression by legitimating the arguments that support patriarchal binary thought (Crowder 132, 136-36; Jones 252-55; Moi 109, 146-48). Hunt Steenblik’s focus on embodied motherhood could be seen as falling into the same trap; not all women want or are able to be mothers, not all mothers experience childbirth, and many women do not find fulfillment and connection with the divine in domesticity. Further, men as well as nonbinary and genderqueer people can find connection with God in parenthood and other

embodied experiences. Nor are these experiences necessary for religious authority and leadership. However, while these potential critiques are valid and important, it is equally as important to consider Hunt Steenblik's audience. According to the Pew Research Center, Mormons are more likely to be married than other American adults and have more children than average (Lipka), and 58% of Mormons said that "the more satisfying kind of marriage is one where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children" ("Mormons in America"). Hunt Steenblik's emphasis on family life meets her audience where they are. Additionally, it is significant that Hunt Steenblik chooses to use embodied motherhood as a basis for religious authority, as women's association with the body and ability to bear children are two of the loudest arguments used against female religious authority and power. These arguments must be rebutted before real change can take place. With these practicalities in mind, we can read poems that center traditionally feminine experiences and roles as a starting point and as suggestions for women's religious authority and power, rather than as definitive and absolute.

In Hunt Steenblik's work, the body is not an obstacle to religious authority but rather, an asset. Thus, women can both embrace their embodied selves and claim religious authority. She does not seek, however, to reverse binary structures and place women on top instead of men, or insist that only women who embrace traditionally feminine roles can claim religious authority, but to open different possibilities for our understanding of God's nature, such as seeing God as an embodied woman rather than as solely male, and to validate the many different ways in which people—male, female, and nonbinary—connect with and learn of God, whether through their bodies or their minds. These different possibilities release women from the negative association with the body while also not requiring that they bend to the assumptions of society and reject the

body as prohibitive of connection with God, freeing religious authority from limiting binary structures.

### **Woman as Religious Leader**

The poems of *Mother's Milk* use embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God as a way to demonstrate the falseness of this binary thinking and the religious authority bestowed by embodied experiences facilitate a connection with and knowledge about God. However, the binary thinking that has become entwined with Christianity, including Mormonism, cannot be deconstructed by merely validating embodied experience as a way to connect with God. That knowledge must be translated into the ability to lead and hold institutional religious power. Hunt Steenblik's *l'écriture féminine* continues to break down the binaries that separate male and female, reason and emotion, and body and spirit by appropriating the language of male Mormon and Biblical prophets in juxtaposition to her validation of traditionally female experiences which are often characterized as obviating the need for institutional religious authority. Hunt Steenblik places the power of prophetic leadership alongside her embodied experience with motherhood, forcing readers to reconsider what "prophet" and "God" really mean, allowing them to separate these roles from their traditional gender categorization.

Christianity has been historically male dominated, denying women leadership for centuries (Ruether 194). In Mormonism, only men hold the priesthood, or authority from God to lead church organizations, and thus, only men can be appointed to the highest levels of leadership (Terry 4-11). As discussed earlier, leadership in the Mormon church is often seen as a male God-given role that corresponds to women's role as mothers (Kline 198; Farnsworth 166-68). While many women do hold leadership roles at all levels in the Mormon organization, women "do not actually have *the priesthood*, an abstract authority that is bestowed only on men

and boys” (Terry 17-19; emphasis added). While it may seem that Hunt Steenblik embraces the role Mormon culture has assigned to her, her focus on traditional embodied and domestic motherhood serves a larger purpose. When we compare poems that relate embodied and domestic experiences, which provide their own connection with God, with Hunt Steenblik’s poems that position herself and other women as religious leaders, *Mother's Milk* clearly disavows the dualistic split between female experience and male power and fully integrates womanhood, as portrayed through embodied experience and domestic imagery, alongside religious power.

For example, Joseph Smith, who translated the Book of Mormon and established the Mormon religion, wrote thirteen Articles of Faith explaining Mormon Christianity to the world. These are well-known by members of the Mormon faith today and have been canonized as part of Mormon scripture. Hunt Steenblik's poem "My First Article of Faith" tweaks the well-known aphorism, associating her with the prophet Joseph Smith and his ethos in the Mormon community. The original version of the First Article of Faith reads, "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost" (Articles of Faith 1:1). Hunt Steenblik's changes to this sentence, along with her versification, bring a new meaning to light. The poem begins, "I believe in God the Eternal / Father and Mother / and in their Son" (132 lines 1-3), adding "and Mother" and referring to Christ as "their Son" rather than using the male possessive pronoun that Smith employs. These changes bring to the surface a broader understanding of God by recognizing a female deity figure who is equal with and involved alongside the traditional male God, and a more expansive idea of who can exercise religious leadership by positioning Hunt Steenblik as a prophetic teacher. Hunt Steenblik claims the ethos of a prophet by using the words of Joseph Smith and by teaching further doctrine about God.

Hunt Steenblik also uses the line break between the first two lines of “My First Article of Faith” in order to broaden readers’ understanding of God, cementing her prophetic status with concrete teaching. The first two lines read, “I believe in God the Eternal / Father and Mother” (lines 1-2), splitting the introduction of God from further descriptions of God. While Smith’s version presents “God the Eternal Father” as one noun, Hunt Steenblik’s poem uses the line break to split apart God and the question of gender, separating the roles God plays as “Father and Mother” from God’s identity as “the Eternal.” This separation allows readers to understand God’s identity and power isolated from the socially constructed gender norms with which parenthood is laden. That Hunt Steenblik strays from the typical Mormon conception of God indicates her prophetic role. In “My First Article of Faith,” not only does she clearly align herself with perhaps the most-celebrated prophet of Mormon history, Hunt Steenblik leverages that association alongside her own teaching to fully claim religious leadership for herself and other women.

As Holmes and Bhattacharjee et al. note, writing is used as a tool of patriarchal power structures, but it is not inherently patriarchal. Similarly, Kristeva articulates this nuance in her conception of *l’écriture féminine*. She asserts that cultures give language its context, and therefore its sexism or lack thereof. Writing is productive, according to Kristeva, and we can get more out of it than what we put in (Moi 156-57). Therefore, when women have the freedom to express their stories and make their own meaning out of their experiences, language can be used to shift society away from the binaries that have resulted in male being privileged over female, reason privileged over emotion, and mind privileged over body. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, prominent feminist Biblical scholar, articulates the liberatory potential even historically patriarchal texts like the Bible have, arguing that while the Bible has “often inculcated patriarchal

... (i.e., lord, slave-master, father, elite male domination) values and visions,” we need not simply disregard the Bible, but can learn “new ways of reading the Bible in order to prevent Biblical knowledge from continuing to be produced in the interest of domination and injustice” (1, 89).

Hunt Steenblik’s project of deconstruction, which first validates female religious authority by revaluing female embodied experience and restores female religious leadership by demonstrating the illegitimacy of the priesthood/motherhood binary, ultimately allows the freedom to re-make religious narratives so they are inclusive of women, facilitating a new reading of the Bible seen throughout the volume. In a cyclical pattern, female religious authority and leadership grants the right to re-write religious narratives, and this re-writing serves to further affirm female religious authority and leadership. In the poem “The Spirit of Eliza,” Hunt Steenblik draws on well-known scriptural language and stories, but subverts the expectation the familiar language evokes and uses it to foreground feminine deity and prophets, putting female experience into sacred text, thus liberating women to claim the religious authority, power, and presence Mother’s Milk demonstrates is theirs.

“The Spirit of Eliza” uses a familiar scripture with gender-bent substitutions to question why religious leadership has been so male-dominated historically and suggest that righting gender relations is a key part of a true Church’s work. “The Spirit of Eliza” uses Malachi 4:5-6 as its inspiration, an eschatological prophecy in which Elijah appears as a messenger to “reinforce and restore the covenant” (Davis 102); in other words, Malachi sees Elijah’s work as necessary before God can come. Elijah “will restore people to God by reforming their bad behavior” (Davis 104). In Hunt Steenblik’s version, the messenger is a woman—“Eliza the Prophetess” (96 line 1).

That the eschatological messenger is identified in female serves a similar purpose to the substituting of female for male in “Genesis.” The substitution renews female presence in religious narratives. Met with this unexpected turn, readers slow down and ask themselves why women are not typically identified as prophets and whether there is something inherent about women that makes them incapable of religious leadership in the highest offices.

It is important also to note the tense of these lines. In this poem, “Eliza the Prophetess” has already come and “turned / ... the hearts of the children / to their Mother” (lines 2, 5-6). In Mormon tradition, Malachi’s prophecy about Elijah was fulfilled “when Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple,” restoring Godly power to seal families together for eternity (“The Great” 226, 228). Hunt Steenblik’s poem mirrors this belief, but refers to a different messenger. The name Eliza is not merely a female analogue for Elijah. When we note the tense of the lines alongside its focus on the feminine divine, we can recognize it as a reference to Eliza R. Snow, who was one of the first Mormons to write about a female Deity. Snow was an extremely influential leader and public figure in early Mormonism, was married to two Mormon prophets and sister to a third, and was an advocate for women’s spiritual capabilities (Mulvey 253-54). The third verse of Snow’s hymn “O My Father” states, “In the heavens are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare! Truth is reason; truth eternal tells me I’ve a mother there.” Therefore, in Hunt Steenblik’s version of Malachi 4:5-6, a necessary step toward the eventual redemption of the world is recognizing the imago Dei of women—their presence and participation in Christian traditions—as well as their potential for religious authority and leadership. The “Mother” to which we, “the children,” must turn is the feminine divine, yes, but in light of Hunt Steenblik’s larger project, it is also the unrecognized

and undervalued female authority in the Mormon church today. According to the poem, without a righting of the gender relations in the church so that women's authority, leadership, and presence are recognized, we cannot move toward a redeemed world.

The juxtaposition between these two roles, the conventional mother and the new prophet, is key in understanding the deconstruction *Mother's Milk* accomplishes. Hunt Steenblik positions herself as both on every page. To write a section about her prophetic role and then a section about motherhood would be to replicate the patriarchal binary that already separates these two roles. Instead, each page contains records of Hunt Steenblik's domestic experiences and her revelation and teaching, demonstrating through the structure of the book the invalidity of the dualistic thinking that has informed the exclusion of women from religious leadership.

### **Conclusion**

Hunt Steenblik uses embodied and domestic imagery alongside scriptural language in order to present a version of God that is bodily and female and resists common traditional Christian binaries that privilege male above female and mind over body. Poems like "Postpartum" show the process of giving birth, a specifically female embodied experience, as a revelatory process that facilitates communion with God; they also connect God's creation of the world to physical birth, suggesting that God has experienced embodied womanhood. These two arguments help undo the binary structure that has associated women with body and categorized both as inferior by representing God as an embodied woman. Further, poems such as "Mother Tongue" and "Veil" depict domestic life as another avenue for revelation, as Hunt Steenblik shows herself learning about God through interacting with her daughter. Juxtaposed with these domestic-focused poems are poems like "My First Article of Faith," which puts Hunt Steenblik in the position of prophet alongside Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet, and "The Spirit of Eliza,"

which re-writes a Biblical prophecy to remind readers of the vital role women play in religious leadership. The Christian binary has separated women from religious leadership by aligning motherhood and leadership as distinct and gendered roles that do not overlap, but Hunt Steenblik resists simple categorization by demonstrating that she can gain knowledge about God through embodied and domestic experience and can encompass both the role of mother and prophet.

As Hunt Steenblik's poems deconstruct patriarchal binaries, allowing the equalization of male and female religious authority, the liberation of women to claim that authority and lead in new ways, and the representation that proves this model of leadership is possible, they assert a new, more egalitarian basis of knowledge, and therefore, authority. *Mother's Milk* resists merely recognizing women's rationality; these poems also emphasize the validity of the body. In doing both, Hunt Steenblik not only opens traditional forms of religious leadership to women but also demonstrates possibilities for different types of knowledge, roles, and leadership not based on gender. Her use of embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God suggests that everyone, not just women, can use their bodies as a site of religious authority, indicating a plurality of foundations for that authority. Hunt Steenblik's juxtaposition of domestic life, traditionally assigned to women, and religious leadership, typically given to men, allows a fluidity in which both men and women can be both invested in the home and have institutional religious power. Finally, Hunt Steenblik's appropriation of scriptural language to include women in traditional religious narratives like the words of Joseph Smith and Elijah the prophet provides an example of what it might look like to have women and men share religious power equally and makes clear that women have always been intimately involved in religious matters.

Writing about *l'écriture féminine*, Diane Crowder asserts, "Oppression is a state in which one is prevented by others from acquiring or acting upon knowledge which one needs and

wants” (125). *Mother's Milk* is an opening of essential knowledge, a key to dismantling the binary structures that have meant leaving Mormon women out of authoritative and leadership roles for so long. Words have the power to shape reality; our theological words change the way we see the world. So too does representation. Words and representation in Hunt Steenblik's poems become liberatory by deconstructing the dualisms that separate men and women, leaders and led, mind and body. *Mother's Milk* enacts the arguments it makes, as Hunt Steenblik herself uses her embodied and domestic experiences in order to connect with God and share the knowledge she gains as a prophet, making it clear that religious authority, power, and presence is available to anyone willing to resist traditional binaries and claim it.

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