
Dr. Ela Nutu’s revised University of Sheffield dissertation has now been published as Volume Six in Sheffield Phoenix’s The Bible in the Modern World Series. Earlier versions of two chapters (three and six) were published in 2003 and 2006. It is not entirely clear when Nutu’s dissertation was completed, but since the book’s nine page bibliography only lists four entries from 2000 or later, one can surmise that most of the work must have been completed around 1999. Although the dissertation is not particularly fresh in its theoretical underpinnings (Derrida, Lacan, et al.), its attempt to juxtapose contemporary films and New Testament texts is, in many ways (sadly), still on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship.

The book is divided into five major chapters, with Chapter One (“Postmodernism, Texts and Selves”) functioning as a short introduction to the work, and Chapter Seven (“Not Quite a Conclusion”) functioning as a brief summary of the book. A nine-page bibliography, along with indices of “References” (primarily Scripture), “Authors,” and “Subjects” round out the volume.

Natu states in her introduction that the scope of her book “is to explore the contours of identity as a decentered, fragmented work of the subject through identification with elements of visual, legible texts” (6). The book’s argumentative structure—such as can be discerned—is likewise decentered and fragmented. Or, as she describes it, it is a structure that is “re-interpreted, recycled within many discourses” (6; primarily the theoretical discourses of Derrida, Lacan, and the post-Lacanian thought of Kristeva and Irigaray, with a touch of psychoanalytic film theory tossed into the mix).

Chapter Two, entitled “Reading the Prologue through the Postmodern Lens,” begins with a fourteen-page fragment of a tongue-in-cheek conversation between Jacques Derrida, Raymond Brown, and Madonna. The opening scene takes place in “Madonna’s temple; her boudoir . . . of red brown, [with] a red carpet that leads to a clean, blue pool” (7). Coupled with the “large sofa” in the room (9), one is reminded of the opening scene in DeMille’s 1927 film The King of Kings, where the courtesan, Mary Magdalene lounges on a couch surrounded by leering suitors. Although Nutu does not seem to be aware of this cinematic connection to her own setting, readers’ expectations are set up for more edgy conversations to follow. But alas, Nutu never returns to her opening dramatic dialogue over the Johannine prologue. In fact, Raymond Brown is relegated to just one footnote reference in the rest of the book, and the Johannine prologue, surprisingly, does not fare much better. Perhaps ashamed of being caught carrying on a semi-private conversation in the pop star Madonna’s boudoir, Father Brown just can’t get up the courage to make a subsequent appearance.

Chapter Three, “The Incarnation of the Word and the Inscription of the Flesh: John’s Prologue and The Pillow Book,” explores Peter Greenaway’s 1997 postmodern film, connecting that to the prologue through the visually arresting images of a calculating calligrapher who writes a book on human bodies (including the corpse of a lover) and sends them off to her publisher. Quite frankly, I had never seen the film—or even...
heard of it—but being intrigued by Nutu’s analysis, I set off for our local Hollywood Video store and asked the young woman behind the counter for Pillow Talk.

“You mean the 1959 movie starring Rock Hudson, Doris Day, and Tony Randall?”

“Umm. That doesn’t sound right, but let me look at it.”

“You know Rock Hudson was gay?”

“Yeah, I knew that. And think of the coincidence! It rhymes with ‘Day!’”

I check out the movie blurb on the back of the DVD, after the bouncy high schooler finally finds it.

“No, I don’t think this is it. I saw this on TV once. This can’t be it. The pillow movie I want takes place in Japan, and has something to do with writing on bodies. It’s more contemporary.”

“A film about writing on bodies? Really? That’s probably not something we have. But let’s look it up on the computer…. Ah, could this be it? The Pillow Book?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Thanks!”

“Yup. I was right. We don’t have it here. Looks sorta like an artsy film. No one wants to rent those types around here. Not even in Seattle. Not even in the winter…. Oh, look here! The computer says Woodinville has one copy. And it’s in stock—no surprise there.”

I drive to Woodinville, the next town over, and think as I drive home with the DVD perched beside me that there would be an interesting postmodern conversation for Nutu: the films Pillow Talk (orality) and The Pillow Book (writing), mixed up together with John 1:18’s eis ton kolpon. Strangely, Nutu’s chapter makes nothing of the fact that Clement of Alexandria translates John 1:18’s kolpon as “womb,” or of the fact that the word can also mean “fold of a garment” or “lap” (see also Anne-Claire Mulde’s 2000 dissertation, revised and published as Divine Flesh, Embodied Word: Incarnation as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian’s Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Work [Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006]). The point is, Nutu could have milked a whole lot more postmodern exegesis from the Johannine prologue if she had been more attentive to early Christian interpretations of the text.

Chapter Four is entitled “The ‘I’s of the Feminine and the Veiled Word.” It is the most theoretical chapter in the book; and, correspondingly, it is even less connected to any exegesis of the Johannine prologue than was the preceding chapter. Here Nutu traces post-Lacanian thought through Greenaway’s The Pillow Book, focusing particularly on Cixous’s and Irigaray’s feminization of writing and subject formation. Out of the forty-five page chapter, only eight pages deal explicitly with the Johannine prologue.