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# Between God and the Apple: Divinity, Violence and Desire in A.L. Kennedy's 'Original Bliss'

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### **Between God and the apple: divinity, violence and desire in A.L. Kennedy's *Original bliss***

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This article investigates how female sexuality and desire can be refigured beyond dynamics of fear and subjugation. By offering a close reading of A.L. Kennedy's novel *Original bliss* through the theories of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, this work highlights the relationship between violence and Western religious notions of divinity, sexuality and the female body. Kennedy's novel portrays, in violent detail, that the way in which the religious dimension has been conceptualised and articulated enforces negative views of female sexuality and justifies violence against the body. Rather than merely confronting the religious denigration of feminine sexuality, however, Kennedy's novel also attempts to refigure the connection between eroticism and divinity, and points toward the possibility of renewed relationships that cultivate 'horizontal transcendence' between women and men.

**Keywords:** Cixous; Irigaray; religion; Scottish literature; sexuality; violence

#### **Introduction**

Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy's work continually investigates the complex connections between religion, sexual desire and violence, and the impact these forces have on the development of the female subject.<sup>1</sup> Her fiction has been recognised as 'powerfully' exposing 'the effects of the male culture of violence in urban Scotland', and it is the aim of this article to show how she also illuminates the religious roots of that culture (Bell 1995, p. 220). Kennedy, who has spoken openly about her Christian faith and background, refers to herself as a 'self-hating Christian', a phrase that reflects more than a little ambivalence towards her religious tradition (Bolonik 2005). This ambivalence, as well as the thorny relationship between Christian discourse and sexual desire, is confronted head-on in the novel *Original bliss* (1997), which tells the story of Helen Brindle, a housewife trapped in an abusive marriage, and her complicated love affair with Edward Gluck, a neuroscientist/self-help guru.<sup>2</sup> Aside from Helen's husband and lover, there is another prominent male character in Kennedy's novel: God. *Original bliss* is as much about Helen's relationship with 'Him' as it is about her relationship with Edward. Indeed, as will be shown, Helen's relationship with God is depicted as directly determining both her sense of self and her relationships with men, initially fostering dynamics of violence and

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masochism and eventually, by the end of the novel, enabling a newfound relationality that celebrates rather than censures sexual desire.

### **Helen and the apple**

As *Original bliss* opens, Helen is presented in a state of loss, feeling as though she has been abandoned by God. Despite this sense of abandonment, God remains acutely omnipresent in the narrative through his absence. Helen voices a bygone connection with God, yet even in the midst of this connection, she describes him as far removed from her earthly existence. Helen refers to God alternatively as a capitalised 'He' and as 'Something Else', signifying not only his greatness, but also his separation and difference. The God that once filled the emptiness and gave 'shape' to Helen's existence is primarily characterised in the text by his maleness, transcendence and radical otherness. The hierarchical opposition between divinity and humanity is also evoked by the representation of Helen's sexuality, which is initially tied to God rather than human relationships. Somewhat paradoxically, Helen's relationship with her 'out of reach' God is her only relationship marked by sensuality and eroticism. To Helen, God was 'a comfort in her flesh', her 'best kind of love', 'the hot Heart of it all' (Kennedy 1997, p. 16). In sharp contrast to her erotic connection to God, Helen views a sexual relationship with a man in resolutely negative terms. To her, sexual diseases seem 'correctly frightening', a God-given consequence of 'bad sex, wrong sex' that could make one 'explode inside' because of 'men and badness' (p. 131). This fear of men and sexuality is kept alive, even fuelled, by her violent and coercive marriage. Mr Brindle's touch, in direct contrast to her erotic experience of God, is always depicted as a brutal invasion of her body. Mr Brindle never attempts to give Helen pleasure; his touch is a violation, a means of asserting dominance through causing pain. Even his foreplay reads like rape: 'Mr Brindle ripped at the cloth of her blouse, dug his cold, blunt fingers under her bra and wrenched it up, squeezed at her, squeezed again, enjoyed a twist' (p. 141). Sex, for Helen, is something that is done *to* her, and years of abuse have convinced her that she is not in charge of her own sexuality; Mr Brindle is, and she has learned that it is 'unwise' to refuse his unwanted sexual advances (p. 98). Helen's violent relationship with Brindle affirms her negative, transgressive view of sexual relations; for Helen, fear and sex have become inseparable. This fear has been so fully internalised that, despite her practised denial, Helen's body reacts against the thought of going home to Brindle; she experiences a 'pale, metallic sensation in her limbs' and her face begins 'to feel clumsy and unpredictable' (p. 89). In Kennedy's portrayal, Helen's body, subjected to constant violence, has been reduced to a conduit of pain and fear.

The intense fear that permeates Kennedy's novel is emblematic of much of contemporary Scottish literature, where, according to Cairns Craig (1999, p. 51) 'fearful selves proliferate'. In his *The modern Scottish novel: narrative and the national imagination*, Craig (1999, p. 37) makes the claim that the common motif of fearfulness in Scottish fiction reflects how 'the potency of fear remains central to Scottish culture'. This, he argues, is largely due to the 'enduring legacy' of Calvinist Christianity, which has 'shaped' Scottish identity and remains embedded in the 'Scottish imagination'.<sup>3</sup> Craig references Kennedy's *Looking for the possible dance* (1993) as depicting this fearful Scottish imagination, and I would argue that *Original bliss* brings it into even sharper relief, as a decidedly Calvinist vision of a judgmental, merciless God looms over much of the narrative. In this novel, Kennedy exposes how the dialectic between 'fear-stricken submission to a greater power' and that which is 'fear-inspiring', as described by Craig (1999, p. 37), manifests in gendered relationships.

Helen, in her fearful state, seems unable to hold together a coherent identity, and so begins to seek out someone else to complete her, another male authority through which she can define herself. Edward Gluck enters the narrative first as a disembodied, authoritative voice over BBC Radio Two, and he makes an ample God-substitute, immediately exhibiting some of the characteristics of Helen's God: he is masculine, authoritative, both removed and accessible. She seeks him out for advice, for an ultimate answer, but instead Helen discovers something even more life-altering: the full power of sexual desire. Helen unexpectedly experiences intense longing for Edward that is depicted in sensual detail; rather than recoiling from physical touch, as she does with Mr Brindle, Helen relishes the slightest brush of Edward's skin and aches for more. The view of pleasure she voices earlier in the novel begins to shift; she no longer sees ecstasy as an irrelevant facet of human experience, 'neither usual nor useful'. Rather than continuing to believe, as she was taught in biology class, that the female orgasm is 'a relatively pointless sexual extravagance', in contrast to procreative male orgasms, Helen decides that she is now 'quite in favour of pointless sexual extravagance' (Kennedy 1997, p. 67).

It is important to emphasise that Kennedy's depiction of Helen's burgeoning sexual desire is not resolutely positive, but emotionally complex; Helen's excitement is mixed with a tumult of negative emotions, namely fear and shame. This perspective reflects a long history of Christian tradition that views the sexual desire of the 'flesh' as a facet of fallen and corrupt humanity, a force always at war with God. Feminist theologian Carter Heyward (1989, p. 89) confirms this idea, asserting that 'the relation between God and the erotic, spirituality and sexuality, in the history of christian [sic] control is largely one of violent opposition'. Heyward's assessment of traditional Christianity describes a religion suffering from 'erotophobia', which can be traced to the influence of Augustine, who 'targeted' sexuality as a 'source of sin', 'setting in theological motion a violent antagonism which christians (and others) have suffered to this day' (1989, pp. 89–90). Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher (1998, p. 203) likewise assert that, since Augustine, Christian tradition has regarded desire 'as a subversive, destabilizing force' that needs to be 'suppressed, mastered and controlled'. They go on to note that this war with desire is highly gendered, 'acted out in male attempts to master others who represented the bodily and the sexual – women' (Stuart and Thatcher 1998, p. 203). Helen's marriage certainly reflects this dynamic with Mr Brindle's violent attempts to assert control over Helen's body and sexuality.

Soon after Helen meets with Edward and her desire for him begins to surface, God re-enters the narrative – not as her lover, but as a voyeuristic Judge. This judging God is no longer a 'comfort in her flesh', as described earlier in the novel. This God mirrors the Knoxian Calvinist vision of God, sternly brooding over the human realm, rendering judgment over fates already written. He is characterised by his transcendence and disapproving gaze, which glares down when Helen and Edward tentatively explore physical contact. In her essay 'Extreme fidelity', H  l  ne Cixous (1988, p. 2) describes an ongoing internal struggle between desire, specifically desire for pleasure, and fearful devotion to divine law. She connects this struggle to 'the first story of all human stories, the story of *Eve and the apple*':

[...] ever since the *Bible* and ever since bibles, we have been distributed as descendants of Eve and descendants of Adam. [...] The Book wrote that the person who had to deal with the question of pleasure was a woman, was woman; probably because it was indeed a woman who, in the system which has always been cultural, underwent this test, which men and women have been subjected to ever since. (1988, p. 15)

According to Cixous, this story of Eve's temptation does not merely reflect the laws and values of culture, but helps create and sustain them. She interprets the myth of Eve and the apple to illuminate two distinct 'relationship[s] to pleasure': the masculine and feminine libidinal economies. In this 'first fable', she writes, 'there are two principal elements' at work: 'the word of the Law or the discourse of God and the Apple' (1988, p. 16). This apple is pleasure, sensual pleasure, pleasure that can be touched and tasted. In Cixous' analysis, the possibility of pleasure is always accompanied by prohibition; the individual standing before the apple is caught between the fulfilment of her desire and obedience to the law.

Kennedy's characterisation of Helen reflects this dilemma; as soon as Helen begins to desire Edward, she encounters the God of prohibition. She finds herself up against the law, 'the law which is absolute, verbal, invisible, negative, it is a symbolic *coup de force* and its force is its invisibility, its non-existence, its force of denial, its "not"' (Cixous 1988, p. 16). As Cixous illustrates, this struggle between the apple and the law is a struggle 'between presence and absence' (1988, p. 16). Similarly, Helen is caught between her desire for tangible, corporeal Edward and her compulsion to submit to the law of a distant, disembodied God – a God whose presence is hardly more than a gaping absence. In the original myth, Eve chooses the apple; she chooses and thereby gains 'access to pleasure', an access that 'threatens society and must be controlled', which is why Eve is punished (Cixous 1988, p. 17). It is not incidental that the title of this novel is *Original bliss*, a title that directly recalls the story of Eve and the genesis of original sin. Helen is, in many ways, a modern-day Eve, but as I will argue throughout this article, her eventual choice to 'taste the apple' does not lead to sin, but provides an escape from 'sin' into bliss.

#### **'How do I pleasure?'**<sup>4</sup>

In Cixous' analysis, the relationship to pleasure embodied by Eve, who ultimately tastes the fruit of her desire in defiance of the law, reflects what Cixous calls a feminine economy. The biblical myth of Abraham, who unquestioningly submits to God's incomprehensible command to murder his own son, demonstrates a masculine economy.<sup>5</sup> Cixous argues that these economies reflect opposing ends of a spectrum, and that each individual fluctuates between these extremes. In 'Sorties: out and out, attacks/ways out/forays', she elaborates on feminine and masculine relationships to pleasure in the context of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. Cixous discusses the fundamental binary logic of Western discourse, asserting that 'the world is divided in half, organized hierarchically, and [...] it maintains this distribution through violence' (1986, p. 70). This violence is specifically a violence that 'murders' the autonomy and alterity of the (feminine) other. As she writes, 'in the (Hegelian) schema of recognition, there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman' (1986, p. 79). Cixous points out an 'implied irony' in this 'master/slave dialectic', and this is that 'the *body* of what is strange must not disappear, but its force must be conquered and returned to the master' (1986, p. 70). In other words, because the master defines himself through his relationship to the slave, this slave cannot be obliterated completely, but must rather be appropriated as an object that anchors his identity. This dialectic sustains itself by fulfilling and exciting the desire of the master, while denying and obscuring the desires of the slave. As an illustration of this dynamic, Cixous references the figure of Helen from Greek mythology, who by inciting the passions of Paris serves as a catalyst for the Trojan War. In the dialectic of masculine master and feminine slave, the woman 'is Helen', 'carried off from herself' to a place

'where she revives' the 'restlessness and desire' of the man: 'Within his economy, she is the strangeness he likes to appropriate' (1986, p. 68). It is striking that Kennedy's protagonist alludes to this same mythic Helen, a woman caught up in the violent mechanisations of men, whose own desires remain largely unspoken. Cixous argues that in this phallic economy, woman is 'no more than this shape made for him: a body caught in his gaze'; although women 'represent the eternal heat' of men's desires, their desire and jouissance are never fully articulated (1986, p. 67). She links this phallic dialectic to a woman's sense of fear and shame regarding her body and sexuality. Women, she writes, have not yet explored the terrain of their bodies: 'their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized' (1986, p. 68). In a masculine economy, wherein woman is the object that sustains the male subject, 'woman is disgusted by woman and fears her' (1986, p. 68).

Throughout most of *Original bliss*, Helen represents a woman existing in a phallic economy. She has a troubled relationship with desire and is far more accustomed to self-denial than self-indulgence. As she tells Edward, 'I just don't often do what I want' (Kennedy 1997, p. 131). She has no relationship to her own pleasure, instead articulating a sense of alienation from her body, as well as extreme shame and disgust at her own sexual desires. She constructs a pathological sense of self around her masculine God and, when God abandons her, she looks to Edward for answers and guidance. In contrast to herself, she perceives that Edward, as a man, neither experiences the internal conflict nor the associated struggle with sexual shame that permeate her self-awareness and identity. This perception proves misguided, however; Edward is similarly caught in the violence of Hegel's dialectic, and by showing Helen's obsequiousness and Edward's self-loathing, Kennedy depicts the master/slave relation from both sides, revealing the violent consequences for both men and women. As Edward confesses in a late night phone call to Helen, he is addicted to violent pornography and is incapable of having a relationship with a woman:

I am sorry, but, I have a picture here of a woman with two men inside her. [...] this is her ideal position in any case, because these photographs are meant to help us understand the whole of her truth. We have to see the suck *and* the prick. *And* the fuck. [...] the two men shoving themselves into pleasure, and the woman having none. She's there to make them come, to make whoever's looking come; that's the entire reason for her, no need to add a single thing. The men can touch all of her, inside and out, but they needn't make her come [...]. I want to have her, too. And she would want me, the pictures make her made that way. I want to be in her while she's raw, while she's open all the way to her fucking womb. (pp. 92–95)

This startling confession exposes the Edward concealed behind Helen's hero worship, and reveals that his view of sexuality is not all that different from Helen's: both present violent dynamics of female subjugation and masculine domination. Reflecting Cixous' analysis, the woman is depersonalised, objectified, and her pleasure is irrelevant. Moreover, even though Edward is rational enough to realise the sadistic nature of this pornography, his rationality is unable to curb his compulsive desire; he *wants* to subjugate the woman in the picture, and this desire fills him with shame and self-loathing.

When Helen and Edward eventually begin a physical relationship, they set strict ground rules, which actually enforce the master/slave trajectory described by Cixous. Their primary rule is the restriction of touch, which 'would make things go wrong' (Kennedy 1997, p. 168). During their first sexual encounter, Helen agrees to undress in front of Edward, so that 'he could see' more of her, and he asks to cut her pubic hair (p. 168). Even though Edward is gentle and whispers to Helen that she is 'perfect', that she

isn't like the women in his 'pictures', Helen nonetheless feels that they are merely enacting Edward's violent fantasies:

Edward didn't have to tell her, she quite understood; he was making her look like one of the women in his films, like what he must want, a body pared down to its entrances, a splayed personality. But even her disgust yawed and clamoured for more of him when he was finally done and drew his hands away, because inside herself she *was* like the women in his films. (p. 174)

I describe this episode in detail because it starkly reveals the underlying dynamic of Helen and Edward's relationship, and how each of their views of sex severely limit how they are able to interact with each other. Edward is unable to separate his desire and love for Helen from his 'pictures'; even though he tells her how different she is, he is still comparing her to the 'splayed', commodified women in his pictures and altering her appearance to make her resemble them. Helen is similarly unable to conceive of sex outside of violence; her desire for Edward makes her feel dirty and degenerate. She forbids him to touch her, because it violates God's moral law, and without 'morality's prohibition to protect her, she will be stripped down to her soul and the empty fault inside it' (p. 171). There is no place, in Helen's self-conception, for a sexually active and desiring woman; for her, to be sexually active and embrace her desires is to become a subhuman and dismembered object of male pleasure. The presentation of Helen and Edward's initial sexual encounter as problematic and destructive should not be read as a sex-negative indictment on pornography or sadomasochistic play *per se*. What is drawing critique is the shame-driven and violent nature of these interactions, which in fact actually stems from the sex-negativity voiced by both characters. For both Helen and Edward, sex is inherently iniquitous and depersonalising.

Even though Edward is not a religious man, the parallels between Helen's and Edward's views of sexuality reveal how deeply steeped these notions of shame and transgression are in the Western mind. Martin Bergmann (1992, cited in Hamman 2000, p. 324), in his study of child abuse and its roots in Judeo-Christianity, argues that the violence of Western religious culture is 'alive in the unconscious and is just as important to atheists as to believers'. Regina Schwartz (1997, cited in Hamman 2000, p. 320) makes a similar assertion that, because of 'the Bible's enormous cultural weight, identities born in violence can be traced to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures' and 'become transcendentally authorized within a monotheistic belief system'. Religious discourse has had, and continues to have, a formative effect on Western culture, and this effect can clearly be seen in sexual norms. Both Helen and Edward, though one is religious and one is not, view their sexuality as shameful, as 'dirty', and best expressed in an inherently violent dynamic – one they both find difficult to escape.

### **The 'palpable gift' of God's judgment**

It might seem that although Helen's relationship with Edward is characterised by subjugation, she is nonetheless presented as a woman beginning to take ownership of her desire for pleasure. However, I would argue that a closer reading reveals how Helen's desire for Edward is entangled with a masochistic desire to be seen, judged and punished by God. Helen's encounters with Edward are not depicted as titillating in and of themselves; part of the excitement is the fact that these transgressions, from Helen's perspective, provoke God's anger:

Edward was an influence for good, [...] because keeping a trace of him with her tonight was bringing her up against the force of Law. She was doing a little wrong, and finding Someone

there who would object. A touch of her God was back. His disapproval set a charge in the air, a palpable gift. (Kennedy 1997, p. 64)

Helen does not only want to touch and be touched by Edward; she wants the 'gift' of God's judgment. Helen's sexual desire is awakened early in her relationship with Edward, but she feels unable to challenge God's law. This inability to escape 'the straight and narrow' fills her with sadness – not because her desire for Edward remains unsated, but because, after resisting temptation, 'God no longer needed to keep her from urgent sin and, because He didn't want her for Himself, He'd left her alone' (p. 107). This exposes a distinct pattern in Kennedy's characterisation of Helen: she feels sexual desire for Edward, which is primarily pleasurable because it elicits God's wrath, the only remaining religious experience left to Helen. Even deeper than Helen's sexual longing is her masochistic desire to both subvert her own will to God's and be punished by him.

Helen's shame-driven relations with both Edward and God are most profoundly revealed in Kennedy's accounts of her dreams. After the first sexual encounter with Edward, when he watches her undress and cuts her pubic hair, Helen dreams of being naked in a garden. As soon as she becomes aware of her own nakedness in the dream, lizards fall from the trees around her and flatten 'themselves across her skin', and 'their claws tear at her minutely' (Kennedy 1997, p. 175). There is a bearded gardener present, who says that he could bless Helen with his sacred heart, but that a 'blessing won't do any good', because she is 'past saving' and 'underneath the lizards, there's nothing to [her] anymore' (p. 176). Helen longs to touch the heart, knowing 'it would forgive her and she would be saved' (p. 176). The heart rejects her touch, however, because Helen's 'badness' would make it 'burst', and the open wound in the gardener's chest closes, shattering the bones in her wrist – echoing the time Mr Brindle broke her hand in a drawer (p. 176). In this dream, the allusive Edenic and reptilian imagery, as well as Helen's sudden awareness of nakedness and subsequent shame, recalls the figure of Eve in Genesis. This dream signifies how Helen perceives herself as fundamentally flawed and desperately in need of redemption. Like Eve after the Fall, who by eating the apple allows sin to enter the world, Helen is rejected from the presence of God and her body is seen as monstrous, a source of pain. In God's eyes, there is nothing to her but shameful flesh, and God's elusive heart remains out of reach.

As I have argued, Helen's relationships with men and her sense of self-worth are characterised by violence and self-abasement, and *Original bliss* clearly roots Helen's shame and self-loathing, as well as her ultimate attempt at self-sacrifice, in religious discourse and traditional (and notably Calvinist) conceptions of God. The fact that Helen's masochism intensifies into complete self-sacrifice in the novel has interesting implications, and turning to Luce Irigaray proves helpful here, as her work *Marine lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* exposes the central role of self-sacrifice in the Christian paradigm. As she observes, the Christ 'handed down to us by tradition' is the 'son of the Word' who 'will enter into his glory only when he has suffered crucifixion and death' (1991, pp. 166 and 164). Though the vision of the 'Word made flesh' is a compelling one, it is significant that the incarnated one will 'find communion with the whole and within the unique only through the sacrifice of his person to the Father' (Irigaray 1991, p. 164). Irigaray asks, 'must the individual be immolated if unity with God is to be achieved?' and the answer offered by Christian tradition, a 'tradition that reveres the wound in the side of the crucified one', seems to be yes (1991, pp. 164 and 166). 'Agony and crucifixion' are presented as the 'passages from incarnation into eternal life' with God (1991, p. 165). In other words, under the traditional model, divinity is only accessible through suffering.



Irigaray also describes how this ideal of self-sacrifice is coupled with the notion that a relationship with God necessitates a renunciation of the flesh and human sexual relationships. In Christ's interactions with women throughout the gospels, 'sex is virtually absent'; Christ 'listens, but does not marry/make merry with women, for already he is bound to his heavenly Father' (1991, p. 166). 'At best', she writes, 'he takes part in some symbolic union that ignores [...] the fulfillment of carnal exchange' (1991, p. 166). According to Irigaray's analysis of Christian ideals, concupiscence is utterly at odds with the divine; the human body is meant to be a source of pain rather than pleasure, something that must be violently conquered for one to be united with God. Religious masochism, in this light, demands the complete annihilation of the desiring, sexual, embodied self.

Helen exhibits the masochistic attitude described by Irigaray most strongly through her submission to abuse in an effort to redeem herself in the eyes of God. She does not only submit to the abuse, but invites it. She chooses, after leaving to have an affair with Gluck, to return home to Glasgow and Mr Brindle, for one reason only: to surrender to God's will, which she knows will be delivered at the hands of her husband. Throughout the novel, in fact, Brindle and God are presented as having an alliance of sorts, at least from Helen's perspective. Brindle, as her husband, is on the side of God's law, and his physical abuse is an enforcement of God's justice: 'She had come [home] to submit and Mr Brindle would do God's will to her, even though he was an atheist' (Kennedy 1997, p. 182). With this ironic twist, Kennedy exposes how the influence of religion is not contingent upon belief. By depicting the atheistic Brindle as the primary enforcer of God's punishing will, she shows how religious notions of fear, submission and divinely ordained violence remain embedded within the seemingly secular Scottish imagination.

At this point in the novel, the narrative shifts from third to second person, and 'Helen' disappears entirely. This shift in perspective places Helen in a distant object position; she has become utterly alienated from her sense of self. Helen's fear and shame, her painful awareness of God's judging gaze, have pushed her to the limits of her subjectivity. She has defined herself so completely through God's detached 'anatomising Stare' that she cannot see herself any other way (Kennedy 1997, p. 189). She has 'let God see it all', all her perverse desires and actions, and feels her only possible redemption is self-sacrifice (p. 190).

[...] your Father who art in Heaven, but who is also much nearer and much more terrible than that; He will forgive you now. Forgiveness. Feel it pick you back down to the child, take you off your hinges and clean you to the bone. He's here, your Father who is tender like a furnace and who will hold you for eternity, if you will only ask and He can make you ask. He can make you go through fear into somewhere else entirely. (p. 190)

For Helen, to be forgiven is to be punished at the hands of her husband, who is the violent instrument of God's justice. Echoing Irigaray's assertion that divinity must be encountered through suffering, Helen submits herself to violence; she is a willing sacrifice. Even though she believes her husband will kill her, what matters most is not her own life or happiness, but God's acceptance and approval, which can only be earned through the destruction of the flesh.

### **Coming to our senses**

Until the last 20 pages of the novel, after her self-sacrifice, Helen defines herself in self-effacing relation to God, a relation that determines not only Helen's relationships with men, but also her sense of self, and it seems unlikely that Edward and Helen will be able to have a sexual relationship untarnished by violence and shame. After Helen's self-sacrifice,

however, a significant shift occurs. Helen wakes up in a hospital, surprised to be alive. Waking up is like a resurrection for her; she had intended to let herself be killed at the hands of Mr Brindle in order to redeem herself in God's eyes, but instead she wakes to find that Mr Brindle is dead and she is alive.<sup>6</sup> This resurrection is depicted as a rebirth; afterward, Helen's conceptions of God, herself and her erotic desires are transformed. God becomes a lover rather than a damning judge. While she is recovering in the hospital, moving in and out of consciousness, Helen is visited by the gardener from her dreams, and his 'heart liked her now, it was warm and insistent against her fingertips' (Kennedy 1997, p. 194). No longer rejecting her, deeming her 'past saving', the gardener welcomes and blesses her. This dream is a reversal of the myth of Eve and original sin, which was affirmed in Helen's earlier dream. The God-figure in this later dream does not see her as flawed, fallen and unworthy of his presence. Helen is no longer an object trapped in God's disapproving gaze; rather, she is finally able to touch the heart of God. She has discovered a newfound faith, not just in a loving God, but in herself. This faith is characterised by a positive self-conception rather than blind obedience to an incomprehensible law: 'I believe in Something – or Something believes in me. And I believe in me and I can do any and every living thing a living person does. I am alive' (p. 202). 'Any and every living thing' includes loving, desiring, and at last, *touching* Edward. As soon as Helen's health permits, they fully consummate their love in a sexual encounter that is the stark opposite of their previous attempt. Touching is no longer forbidden, but indulged in fully; in bed, they explore each other and 'begin the gentle, strenuous fight to cling and be still and kiss and move and touch every place when there are acres of places, all moving and turning and wanting to be touched' (p. 210). They are both now able to fully embrace their desires for each other, shame-free: 'they have exactly what they want [...] they are holding it' (p. 210). Helen no longer views God as violently opposed to her love for Edward; she 'knows precisely who she loves and precisely Who has let her love him' (p. 213).

Carter Heyward's work on the erotic and its connection to divinity sheds some light on Helen's transformation. As discussed earlier, Heyward reads Christianity as erotophobic, and because of Christianity's overwhelming influence on Western culture, she asserts, all 'westerners have been christianized' and 'have absorbed through [their] bodies sexual taboos' (1989, p. 89). This influence can be seen in *Original bliss*. Helen's internalisation of Christian taboos is quite blatantly linked to her religious faith and background, but her notion of sexuality as shameful and debasing is shared by the non-religious Edward. Heyward argues that this view of sexuality inherited by the Christian paradigm 'produces antierotic (or pornographic) psyches and lives, in which our bodies and feelings are jerked off by abusive power dynamics', dynamics of 'domination, coercion, and violence' (1989, p. 95). Suppressing the senses and sensual desire leads to self-alienation, as well as alienation in relationships with others, as can clearly be seen in the character of Helen. As a remedy, Heyward attempts to refigure the erotic and its connection to divinity. The divine, for Heyward, is not a transcendent entity removed from corporeal human experience; rather, the divine is 'embodied between and among us insofar as we are moving more fully into, or toward, mutually empowering relationships' (1989, p. 94). According to Heyward, mutuality is the process of 'struggling to share power between/among ourselves', a process that can be cultivated by eroticism, which 'moves us to touch, not take over; transform, not subsume' (1989, pp. 104 and 100). The connection between the erotic and mutuality within love relations is also explored in the work of Luce Irigaray, who locates transformative potential in the dimension of *touch*.

For Irigaray, touch is a means of overturning traditional power dynamics of feminine submission to masculine control. In her essay 'The fecundity of the caress', Irigaray

describes how touching limits 'the reabsorption of the other in the same' (1993, p. 169). Much of Irigaray's philosophy echoes Cixous' account of the master/slave dynamic, recounting how the masculine defines itself in opposition to the feminine, which is paralysed in an object position to serve as the mirror for male subjectivity. Touch, however, has the potential to undermine this dynamic because 'giving the other her contours, calling her to them, amounts to inviting her to live where she is without becoming other, without appropriating herself' (Irigaray 1993, p. 169). In the traditional binary of masculine subject/feminine object the objectifying power of sight is privileged, but Irigaray argues that the sense of touch 'transcends the gaze' by perceiving itself and the other simultaneously (1993, p. 159). As Irigaray writes, through the sensual pleasure of touch one can 'return to the evanescence of subject and object' and undo the 'schemas by which the other is defined' (1993, p. 154). Rather than reversing traditional power positions, touch serves as a reminder that each person is both self and other. When two lovers are touching each other, neither is fixed in the object position; their exchange is 'untouched by mastery' and 'what is most interior and what is most exterior are mutually fruitful' (1993, pp. 155 and 157). A caress creates pleasure without subsuming, for a touch reaffirms the physical boundaries, and thereby the autonomy, of the other. To use Irigaray's words, 'the other's hands [...] give me back the borders of my body'; 'eros' has the potential to 'arrive at that innocence which has never taken place' where the other is not appropriated but allowed to remain other (1993, pp. 155 and 154).

Touch can lead to what Irigaray calls *horizontal transcendence*, when transcendence is experienced in relation to another person, rather than in relation to God. Christian tradition, 'by measuring every subjectivity in relation' to a transcendent deity, has occluded 'the importance of the alterity of the other' within human relationships (Irigaray 2004, p. 189). Irigaray argues that affirming the mystery of the other is essential for spiritual and ethical becoming. Horizontal transcendence, in contrast to the vertical transcendence of God, is experienced sensually *through* the flesh rather than representing an escape from the flesh. Horizontal transcendence is central to Irigaray's reinterpretation of divinity. In *Key writings*, Irigaray argues that the concept of God must be rethought in order for love between a man and a woman to be redeemed from violence and appropriation. This would require conceiving of a God 'who does not stay outside of humanity and finally opposes it – for example in its carnal desire' (2004, p. 169). Irigaray's recasting of divinity 'coincides with the accomplishment of humanity itself'; as she put it, 'God is us, we are divine, if we are woman and man in a perfect way' (2004, p. 169). For Irigaray, being man and woman 'in a perfect way' means cultivating a relationship of horizontal transcendence, in which each retains his and her sexuate difference and autonomous subjectivity. As Elizabeth Grosz (1993, p. 212) describes in her reading of Irigaray's notion of the divine:

Irigaray asks how to establish a time and place, subjectivities and positions, whereby the two sexes can touch each other without loss or residue: where one is not autonomous at the expense of the other; where one does not occupy the negative and the other the positive poles of a fixed opposition; where there is mutual recognition, mutual caressing, the satisfaction of the needs of both. Such a relation cannot exist if either sex has no positive identity, no relation of autoeroticism or positive evaluation of their bodies, and no positive relation to members and ideals of their own sex.

Heyward echoes the notion of horizontal transcendence in her writing when she asserts that 'the erotic' is 'the source of our capacity for transcendence, the "crossing over" among ourselves' (1989, p. 99). As she describes, erotic touching affirms the self without harming the other: 'lovemaking turns us simultaneously *into* and *beyond* ourselves' (1989, p. 4). This is not to say that touch can never be violent or oppressive. The touch described

by Heyward and Irigaray is more than just physical contact; it is not a violation but an affirmation and celebration of sensuality and alterity. For them, touch is a sensual expression of the desire for mutuality.

Kennedy's novel traces the transformation from relations of violence and appropriation to horizontal transcendence. As I have argued, by initially banishing touch from their relationship, Edward and Helen affirm dynamics of violence and control. After Helen's near-death, however, their relationship is starkly different. The last few pages of the novel are a colourful, sensual romp. Touch is everywhere. Even Edward's profession of love is experienced as touch: 'it washed along, snug under her skin' (Kennedy 1997, p. 203); and later, when they are about to make love for the first time, Edward's words are tactile, 'each of his syllables rubbing and snuggling in' (p. 208). As quoted above, their lovemaking is an exploration of touch, touch that not only arouses but *satisfies*: 'Edward's skin, she could never have fully imagined how completely satisfactory Edward's skin would be' (p. 210). Touch has not only infused Helen's relationship with Edward; in her dreams, she is also finally able to touch the heart of God, signifying that her conception of God, as well as her notion of her own self-worth, has changed. Rather than gazing in distant judgment, set apart from her desire for Edward, God is within their desire, within their love:

And, having nothing more to say, Helen lets herself be. She is here and with Edward as he folds in around her and she around him and they are one completed motion under God the Patient, Jealous Lover: the Jealous, Patient Love. (p. 214)

The violent God who demanded the sacrifice of the flesh seems to have died with Mr Brindle, replaced by a God with an open heart that Helen can – at last – touch.

## Conclusion

There are clearly a number of positive developments unfolding as the novel closes: Helen is no longer ensnared in an abusive marriage, and she is no longer responding to her sexual desires with shame and fear; Edward has broken his self-loathsome addiction to violent pornography and the two of them have entered into a new love relation of erotic mutuality. God's imposing law seems to have vanished, and God is now more loving than judging, exhorting Helen to 'go' and 'be satisfied' with Edward. This is not an unambiguously happy ending, however, namely due to one unanswered question: have these transformations come about in spite of Helen's self-sacrifice, or because of it? As Irigaray's analysis shows, Christian tradition asserts that union with God must be achieved through violent self-sacrifice, and it is ambiguous whether or not this notion is affirmed in *Original bliss*. It remains unclear whether God's law has been conquered or satisfied; after all, with the death of Mr Brindle, Helen and Edward's affair is no longer adulterous. The transformations that have occurred are no doubt liberating and positive, but the fact that they came at the cost of Helen's silent submission to Brindle's violence remains problematic. Has Helen overcome her religious masochism, or has she simply fulfilled its mandate?

Heyward's thoughts on the erotic and sadomasochism prove helpful in addressing these ambiguities. As she writes:

'Having sex,' if it is erotic, is about power-sharing. As such, it involves journeying together through places of brokenness and pain toward safety and tenderness. Sadomasochistic eroticism does not signal necessarily that something is wrong with us individually, but rather indicates, unmistakably, how fundamentally formed we are – emotionally, spiritually, physically – by the world we inhabit. We cannot journey entirely beyond sadomasochism

because the culture breeds it faster than we are able to imagine expunging it from our midst.  
(Heyward 1989, p. 108)

For Heyward, then, mutuality is an ongoing 'relational process of moving through sadomasochism', a continual effort to redirect 'wrong relational power' (1989, p. 106). She does not assert that sadomasochistic urges need to be completely denied; in fact her analysis shows how deeply embedded those urges are in Western culture. Heyward is not offering *eros* as a quick utopian fix, but as an ongoing movement towards better love relations, a process that will no doubt be fraught with setbacks and paradox. This fumbling movement toward mutuality, I would argue, is what is ultimately depicted in *Original bliss*. An unambiguous ending in which Helen's and Edward's problems with shame, violence and self-abasement simply vanish would oversimplify the complexity of human sexuality. Helen's conception of God has transformed, but the description of him as 'jealous' signals that there is still unresolved conflict between Helen's relationship with God and her relationship with Edward. Feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky, in her book *Femininity and domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (1990, p. 57), argues that feminine masochism is deeply rooted in patriarchal oppression, and she criticises the idea that a woman with masochistic desires can simply 'reprogram her consciousness'. This perspective, she argues, holds 'a shallow view of the nature of patriarchal oppression':

Anything done can be undone, it is implied; nothing has been permanently damaged, nothing irretrievably lost. But this is tragically false. One of the evils of a system of oppression is that it may damage people in ways that cannot always be undone. Patriarchy invades the intimate recesses of personality where it may maim and cripple the spirit forever. [...] Many human beings [...] may have to live with a degree of psychic damage that can never be fully healed.  
(Bartky 1990, p. 58)

The unanswered questions surrounding Helen's religious masochism reveal that, although Helen has made startling progress 'journeying [...] through places of brokenness', as Heyward puts it, she has not fully freed herself from the violence of internalised religious discourse. I would argue that Kennedy points to the possibility of refiguring God and redeeming relationships from violent appropriation, but she simultaneously problematises the possibility that God can be completely rewritten beyond the phallic economy. Although he becomes loving, and his will aligns with Helen's desires, the God of *Original bliss* ultimately remains possessive and masculine, retaining a somewhat Calvinist profile, as Helen believes God 'has *let* her love' Gluck (Kennedy 1997, p. 213, my emphasis). What Helen does seem fully freed from, however, is fear. Craig (1999, p. 54), in his account of fearfulness in the Scottish imagination, notes that 'for many Scottish novelists, the conflict of the fearful and the fearless is unresolvable in the social – and male-dominated – world of Scotland'. Kennedy, however, does seem to escape this dialectic through the demise of Mr Brindle and the transformation of a fear-inspiring God; in the final, fleshy revelry of this novel, no one is fearsome and no one is afraid.

Kennedy's novel ends with unresolved tensions, but what does remain clear is that Helen's concept of God and her ability to embrace her desires and enter a love relation of mutuality are inextricably connected. How Helen perceives God determines, throughout the novel, how she relates to men. In this way, *Original bliss* serves as a powerful exposé of religious erotophobia and offers the idea that a God conceptualised as existing within human connections, particularly erotic ones, opens the potential for renewed relationships that cultivate horizontal transcendence rather than fear and subjugation.

## Notes

1. Several critics have noted Kennedy's recurrent interest in religion and sexuality, albeit cursorily. Sarah Dunnigan (2000, pp. 144 and 153) states that Kennedy's writing 'redraws the permissible boundaries of the female erotic', and observes that, although 'Kennedy is not an overtly religious writer', 'religious metaphors underlie, or can be applied to, her fiction'. Glenda Norquay (2005, pp. 145 and 147) similarly recognises that Kennedy is 'fascinated by the relationship between subjectivity and the body, as pain and pleasure define identity', and she notes that Kennedy's 'interest in the body is fuelled as much by metaphysical speculation as it is by gender politics'. In addition, David Borthwick (2007, p. 268) mentions Kennedy's fondness for 'religious symbolism' and her intermittent use of 'divine interventions'. Kaye Mitchell's book-length work, *A.L. Kennedy* (2007, p. 68) gives more measured attention to Kennedy's religious interests, specifically the exploration of 'connections between religious faith or experience, romance and writing' in the novels *So I am glad*, *Everything you need* and *Original bliss*.
2. *Original bliss* was initially published in a collection of short stories of the same name, before being released as a self-contained novel. In this article, all textual references to *Original bliss* appear parenthetically and refer to the New York Vintage edition, published in 1997.
3. In making this ambitious claim about the influence of Calvinism on Scottish culture and identity, Craig (1999, p. 35) offers this caveat: 'If there is a stress to my argument on the Calvinist inheritance of Scottish culture, that is not to ignore the significance of other religions and intellectual traditions in Scotland, but rather it is recognition of the powerful role that Calvinism has played in shaping the institutions which have, in many ways, defined and maintained the nation in the absence of a national government'.
4. This quote is from Cixous (1986, p. 82).
5. Derrida's analysis of this myth in *The gift of death* (1995, p. 57) similarly highlights how Abraham obeys, without question, a distant, silent God who refuses to disclose the reasons for his demands, which emphasises God's separateness as 'wholly other [*tout autre*]'. In the biblical account, Derrida (p. 73) asserts, 'God is absolutely transcendent, hidden, secret, not giving any reason he can share in exchange for this doubly given death, not sharing anything in this dissymmetrical silence'. Derrida's (p. 75) reading also notes the underlying masculine dynamic at work: 'It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman' in this story, which is fundamentally a story 'of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men'.
6. After severely beating Helen, Mr Brindle is convinced that he killed her and subsequently takes a lethal dose of paracetamol. His desire to die after believing he murdered Helen underscores how his own identity was anchored in their abusive relationship, reflecting Hegel's dialectic.

## Notes on contributor

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