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Intro by Letecia Layson

Mary Condren, Th.D is director of *Woman Spirit Ireland* and a Research Fellow at the *Centre for Gender and Women's Studies* in the School of Histories and Humanities at Trinity College Dublin. Her critical work concerns the role of violence and the discourses of sacrifice in contemporary politics. Her constructive work focusses on recuperating the indigenous female traditions of Old Europe in Ireland.

Publications: <https://tcd.academia.edu/MaryCondren>

The Living Gifts of Love: or the Burnt Offerings of Sacrifice

Thank you for the invitation and especially to Genevieve Vaughan who has encouraged me to talk about my work on sacrifice. Unfortunately, I'm going to talk about the shadow side in Western cultures rather than the positive side that Gen and Darcia have been speaking about so far and are hoping to make possible. I'm speaking as a feminist theologian and a theorist and what I'm going to try to do today is offer a brief encounter with the phenomenon of sacrifice and what it might have to do with the Gift. Basically, if sacrifice is the problem, the maternal gift economy is the solution.

The word *sacrifice* is used all over the world as though it meant the same thing. It doesn't. It means very different things in very different contexts. In this presentation, I want to make it clear that I'm not speaking about sacrifice in indigenous societies where people make offerings to the earth in gratitude for and acknowledgement of abundance.

I'm speaking about the discourse of sacrifice in *Societies of Empire* and how this discourse legitimates the social structures under which we live. From the beginning, when these empires began to be created (I know I'm covering a huge amount of history and time frames) women protested about sacrifice. Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac, but when his wife Sarah heard what he had tried to do she fell dead. In Irish tradition, in a poem the Virgin Mary pleaded with God the Father about Jesus, and she said: *Please save the world in some other way but don't let my son be killed.*

The story I'm going to thread through my presentation today is the *Oresteian Trilogy* written by Aeschylus. This was not just a performance, it was performative, much like the Mass today, in that its aim was to remind the ancient Greeks about the terms of their social contract.

Agamemnon, who was the hero, had won a war and had taken a new lover, but was sitting in Thrace trying to get back home to Greece. But the wind wouldn't budge so that his ships could sail. And so he decided the best thing to do was to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia, which he did.

Shortly after, his wife Clytemnestra arrived on the scene. And to Agamemnon she said: *He thought no more of it than killing a beast, and his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece, but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter, the agony I laboured into love, to charm away the savage winds of Thrace.* From that point on in the *Eumenides*, the choruses exclaim: *We must suffer, suffer into truth.*

So why should we relate this to the gift? The *Oresteian Trilogy* is one of the foundation narratives of patriarchal civilization, which has wide-spread implications.

Power relies on misrecognition of the forces and tactics that underlie it. As Michel Foucault argued: *power is only tolerable on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.* We need to go further and in this paper I will argue that that power not only makes its own mechanisms, but also suppresses the social substrate on which it stands. That substrate is the maternal gift economy.

The word *Sacrifice* is one of those arenas where misrecognition runs riot. There is no agreed definition. I've been working on this issue for many years; I even wrote my doctoral dissertation on sacrifice, and I have yet to find an intelligible definition. But I can reduce it to something very simple. Sacrifice creates the sacred; the sacred needs ongoing sacrifice. In other words, there's a splitting at the heart of contemporary sacrificial discourse and rituals. Priests, politicians, human bombers, self-sacrificing women all use the word as though it had the same meaning. It doesn't.

In *Societies of Empire* sacrifice is a weasel word, and (beyond the usual anthropological definitions) in political terms there are two main types; there are legitimate and illegitimate. Legitimate sacrifice plays a major role in the construction of the imagined nation, whether that be of an empire or an anti-colonial struggle. Illegitimate sacrifice takes the form of so-called terrorism, martyrdom, suicide, human bombers and that's considered to be illegitimate. In other words, at least in the eyes of the powerful so-called *illegitimate sacrifice* does not contribute to creating the *social imaginary* in the country where it has taken place as a form of opposition. It is only legitimate in the eyes of the insurgent/terrorist.

The decision as to whether sacrifice is legitimate or illegitimate rests in the hands of powerful functionaries, originally religious but now political, and even economic. In other words, cutting to the chase: sacrifice is whatever the reigning or prospective elites say it is.

There are several aspects of sacrifice I want to look at today because insofar as they relate to the gift and the question of gender. One is guilt and indebtedness; the other is gender, the way in which sacrificial discourse creates the A and the Not/A. In this sense, sacrifice also contributes to splitting the ethics of the private and domestic world and those of the public world. In that sense, sacrificial discourse can be a form of alienation and mystification.

Indebtedness and guilt: In religion, indebtedness to a founding figure – the son, the grandson, or other innocent male figures who died violently plays a major part in the ongoing rituals and discourses that maintain that social order. Indebtedness to a saviour figure occurs from the onset and this debt becomes the currency of theological exchange, which is a precursor to the exchange economy itself. Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia, by the way, did not found a state and is not representational because the sacrifice of women does not count.

In Christianity, the sacrifice relates to the death of Jesus. In Islam, the sacrifice relates to Husayn, the grandson of Muhammed. In Judaism, it relates to the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac. Likewise in contemporary states indebtedness to those soldiers who gave their lives or were willing to do so constitutes an extreme gift and indebtedness - the gift of their lives. But it's not a gift which gives something or adds value to somebody else; it's a gift which creates a superstructure which then creates a form of mystification.

Ancestor cults that celebrate such *gifts* and *debt* serve to construct and consolidate political relationships and hierarchies. Here in Ireland, we have a very famous political figure called Wolfe Tone. On the anniversary of his death there are at least six political parties who take their time to process to his grave, claiming his traditions and his legacy for their own political power.

When we come to neo-liberal economics, there is a new form of indebtedness: to those heroic individuals who risked their money, their time, their expertise setting up enterprises. It's another cult of the hero. It also fosters a cult of individualism, which has diminished responsibility for the less fortunate. In other words, individuals are held accountable for the quality of their lives regardless of class, intelligence, or whatever structures of inheritance that they had.

Yet, when the economic crash came some years ago, individualism went out the window. Whole societies were told to make *sacrifices* for the good of the very same society that had cultivated extreme individualism. Major western governments reneged on the consequences of such risk taking of the entrepreneur, and ostensibly this was for the good of the collective. Banks and other monetary institutions were bailed out, and sure enough, as soon as they were on their feet again, they continued as they went on before. And so debt and guilt is never-ending. It can never be erased. Guilt and debt are passed on from generation to generation.

Guilt: The second aspect is the question of guilt. I go back here to the *Oresteian* trilogy, because after Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon she was killed by her son Orestes. The final part of the trilogy concerns the time when Orestes is being brought to judgment by the Furies and by the courts. The Furies arrive at the shrine of Pythia, the shrine of the serpent, which can hold ambivalence in tension), but has now been taken over by Apollo.

This is what they say, speaking of the young god, Apollo:

Such is your triumph, you young gods

World dominion past all rights.

Your throne is streaming blood,

*Blood at the foot, blood at the crowning head –
I can see the Navelstone of the Earth, it's bleeding
Bristling corruption, oh, the guilt it has to bear.*

The chorus was speaking of the guilt at the overthrow of the old chthonic gods in favour of the rising Apollonian gods who would carry all before them.

In other words, behind a great deal of ostensibly intelligent and rational social action lies the question of guilt.

In the religious field guilt comes from the original sin of Adam and Eve, the crucifixion of Jesus desired by God the Father to redeem the wound caused by Original Sin, or guilt on the part of Muslims for not saving the grandson of Muhammed. In the religious field such guilt is also political and in ideal circumstances the force of guilt, or the debt incurred, will secure a particular community's compliance to whatever religious or political agreements are said to have been arrived at. But the force of guilt for those who died to make our lives possible exercises an enormous burden, which also fuels the militarist mentality, sometimes under the auspices of *religious wars*.

In the economic sphere guilt is displaced onto the poor. The poor are guilty. In some ways it's another kind of an economic caste system that *Societies of Empire* have instituted. The poor are guilty, they're responsible, they're liable for their own poverty. Guilt is displaced from the high-risk entrepreneurs onto the poor, the abject, who cannot afford designer clothes, or expensive watches or phones. They are not *unemployed*: they are *unemployable*.

Gender: When it comes to a psychoanalytic explanation for these dynamics, the question of gender becomes crucial to understanding different types of guilt and sacrifice.

Freud held that envy and guilt had to do with killing the father in the Oedipal complex. He obscures other sources of guilt, especially with regards to women. Melanie Klein, one of his successors, talks about a pre-Oedipal complex. She argues that ambivalence and envy and gratitude is directed toward the mother's breast which signifies the primordial source of life (the womb). She argues that infants alternate between gratitude and envy.

We need to ask the question: If Freud identified guilt to be at the heart of the Oedipal complex concerning fathers and sons, how much greater is the unconscious guilt now waiting to be harvested in relation to the mother and all her children given our current gender arrangements?

When we ask about the relationship between envy, gender relations and the relationship to sacrifice, the feminist anthropologist, Nancy Jay, talked about envy and true sacrifice as *birth done better on purpose on a higher, more spiritual level than ordinary women do it*. And in the discourses of war, we can see this how this is played out. Copious evidence exists of how sacrificing soldiers give birth to a sacred legacy, a dynasty erected on the violent death of the martyr, or the life-risking of the soldier rather than the life-giving energies of the mother. These discourses give birth, not to infants, but to whole nations. This gendered discourse runs all the way through the language of war. As A. E. Housman wrote when he was going to war:

For the calling bugle hollows/
High the screaming fife replies/
Gay the files of scarlet follow/
Woman bore me,
I will rise.¹

Melanie Klein's work suggests that envy and gratitude arise from major infant trauma. But the question that we have to raise, and Darcia has raised it very acutely in her presentation, is this: in what kind of society does such trauma exist in infants?

Scholars of psychoanalysis who are in touch with indigenous forms of childrearing ask why and how western society cultivates the kinds of envy and gratitude which contributes to the sacrificial social order. They analyse the position of women in indigenous societies, and indigenous attitudes toward children and childbearing. In addition, scholars such as Alice Miller, Ian Gibson Lloyd deMause (among many others) also ask the question: in what kinds of culture do such charter stories and accompanying social practices feed or disrupt that kind of infant trauma?

Some of them refer to what happened when the colonialists went into various societies. They couldn't believe that the indigenous people would not beat their children. They wrote back to their owners of the excessive love the Savages bear their children ... *the Savages prevent their instruction; they will not tolerate the chastisement of their children, whatever they may do, they permit only a simple reprimand.*²

Now how does all this relate to the question of women's place in the Sacrificial Social Order? I am going to go on to argue that it has something to do radically with the way in which the ethics of the private sphere, or the domestic sphere, are utterly discounted when it comes to the public sphere. And that possibility is maintained by sacrifice.

Although there is disagreement among theorists as to how to define sacrifice there is one issue they have all agreed on from Tertullian, St. Augustine to St. Aquinas, and even more recently, Emile Durkheim: that women should be excluded from the sacrificial arenas. Women can sacrifice themselves but that has no repercussion in the symbolic realm, it's simply not taken seriously.

Even though we don't do sacrificial rituals in so-called advanced cultures, (warfare excepted) sacrificial discourse is everywhere. Such discourse is a form of cultural labour that facilitates gender splitting and which is also a form of mystification. In the public world, the male is the norm. The A, the normative male of Aristotle and Aquinas. In the private world the female

¹ A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (Portland, Maine: Thomas B. Mosher, MDCCCVI) p.47. The attitude of the male poets towards women during the war years is that of scarcely veiled contempt. As Eric Leed writes, there was a "widespread assumption that the "release" of war was a release from houses crowded with things that had no function or place. August liberated many a bourgeois youth from shelves lined with carved cocoanuts, arcadian porcelains, gilded lilies of plaster, rooms stuffed with upholstery and damask draperies and sprinkled with handicrafts enjoying the patina of time. Leed, *No Man's Land* p.64.

² Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross Culturally*, (Monthly Review Press, 1981), pp.46-47. David Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries: Colonists, Christianity, and Community among the Wampanoag Indians of Martha's Vineyard, 1600-1871* Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.209.

is Not/A. She is derivative; she is the misbegotten male, who only gets to be born when the wind blows in the wrong direction. She inhabits the world of the profane.

The public sacred political and economic world is in the hands of men. The private profane world is the domain of women. And the ethics of the public world happily cultivates ruthless individualism, greed, envy, exploitation and hierarchies of persons entitled to the goods of this world. In that sense, it is quite distinct from the ethics of the so-called domestic, private world, caring, compassion and nurture that Gen and Darcia have so eloquently spoken of.

However, things are not that simple, because underneath all of this is the hidden sacrifice. In reality the public world, as Gen has just mentioned, could not exist without drawing on the caring labour, energies and metaphors that characterize the so-called private world. Furthermore, at the time of collective effervescence, as Durkheim called it, or as his disciplines called it, the *festival*, the carefully guarded religious or political figures enter the realm of the sacred only to find that it holds all that has been repressed, especially the attributes of women. In that sense it is what Freud called *the return of the repressed* which happens very explicitly at wartime.

But it also happens in some ancient texts. I came across this text from a 12th century Irish source on the celebration of the Mass and the distribution of Holy communion. The consecrated host forms a circle, and the text outlines how the circle is to be divided. One part is for the accompanying priests; the other for the presbyters, one part is for the laity, or bishops, but the most important part is the circle in the middle. The middle particle is that to which the masspriest goes, the figure of the breast with the secrets.

And what breast was that? Chaplains report back that when soldiers are dying on the battlefield, often the last words they utter is a cry for their mothers. And even Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, when the men who had gone to fight the wars against the Turks landed and died on Turkish soil, he took time to write back to their mothers and here's what he said:

Those heroes who shed their blood and lost their lives! You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore, rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours.

You their mothers, who sent your sons to a far-away country, wipe away your tears, your sons are lying in our bosom and are at peace. After having lost your sons on this land they have become our sons as well.

Now that's maternal language. The metaphor that they are *lying in our bosom* is not accidental. It is a particular kind of appropriation, of the birthing, birthing through war and not through maternal labour and nurture,

So, I will go back to the *Oresteian Trilogy*, and ask how patriarchal mythologies, through sacrificial discourse accomplishes the erasure of the mother.

At the end of the *Eumenides*, when the jury was split as to whether Orestes was guilty for killing his mother, they had to bring Athena (sister of Orestes) onto the scene to make the final decision. Athena arrived and the first thing she said was *no mother gave me birth. I honour the male in all things but marriage*. Clearly that qualified her to act in the patriarchal world that was being established and being consolidated by *Eumenides*.

And at the end of the *Eumenides*, (and this relates to what Darcia has just presented in relation to splitting), as Athena is putting the Furies, the old defenders of matricide, under the ground she issued this plea:

Let our wars wage on abroad with all their force, to satisfy our powerful lust for fame. Give joy in return for joy, one common will for love, And hate with one strong heart: such union heals a thousand ills of men.

Athena is reflecting the fact that that in public life, in the sacrificial social contract, we've never gone beyond what Melanie Klein calls the paranoid/ schizoid position: splitting between envy and gratitude; splitting between the public and the private world.

Throughout the history of the last two thousand years of western culture, we are taught to achieve our identities at someone else's expense. The peace of Athena is achieved when primal envy is displaced through a kind of sacrificial catharsis with these words: *Let All our Wars be fought abroad.*

Societies of Empire cultivate and foster ongoing collective trauma based on erasure of the mother and her work in the private world and the mystification and denial of that work running through the discourses and practices of the public world.

Sara Ruddick wrote a brilliant book called *Maternal Thinking* in which she argued that we need to reconcile the ethics of the public world with those of the private world. In other words, no parent would allow unequal portions to be served to their children at a dinner table, but this is precisely what we do in the public world with devastating consequences for the poor.

What can feminist theory offer? Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, both feminist theorists for whom I have enormous regard, speak about the *debt*.

Speaking of the abject, Kristeva says that in Western culture the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature.

Irigaray says, *the son is unable to accept the debt of life, body, nourishment and social existence he owes the mother. An entire history of Western thought is intent on substituting for this debt an image of the self-made, self-created man.*

Both Kristeva and Irigaray argue that the self-made man creates empires with never a backward look at the ground on which he is standing. But they refer to the *maternal debt*. To that extent, they are still within the logic of the exchange economy.

For that reason, the work of Genevieve Vaughan is extremely important, in that it makes bridges between some of the most critical feminist theorists: Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's work on the matrixial.

Gen talks not about the maternal debt, which increases guilt and envy and all the paraphernalia that goes with it. Gen speaks about the maternal gift. One of my hopes is that Gen's work will begin to be taken seriously within the feminist philosophical and sociological community.

In the words of Jean Baker Miller, Naomi Klein and other distinguished feminist theorists, Gen's work, *This Changes Everything*.

And there's one other thing I will say as a feminist theologian because, having criticized sacrifice, there is also a prophetic stream that runs through the major religious traditions on which we can also draw. And that is the word of the prophets, including the words of Jesus Christ, who said, *I desire mercy, not sacrifice*. Elaborating on the question of mercy holds open the possibility of returning maternal or matrixial thinking to the major religious traditions, whose prophets have cried out in no uncertain terms.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Thank you.