



**MARY AND JESUS: THE POLITICS OF HIGHLIGHTING IN  
ROBERT GRAVES' *KING JESUS***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the politics of representation that informs the apotheosis of Mary, Jesus' mother. Given her status in a collective imaginary that justifies a divine-human transaction, her status cannot be defended or explained in verifiable terms. Having said that, we also see that this imaging of Mary—whether religious, social or cultural—is already determined by patriarchal considerations as well as social-sexual politics. In other words, imagining Mary as virgin mother can be seen in terms of patriarchal interest and insecurity, especially defended by this powerful and influential image of the Mother, virtuous in her purity and pure in her virtuosity. This insistence on purity and model womanhood is not simply a matter of Mary's divinity. It is likely that Mary's representation as a divine figure is part of a strategy to undermine her role in the early history of the faith. Robert Graves challenges the erasure of women from Jesus' life and works by presenting three Marys at work alongside Jesus: Mary the Virgin Mother, Mary of Bethany, his wife and Mary Magdalene, the prostitute. What is at work is a politics of erasure.

**Key words: politics of erasure, exclusion, highlighting, representation**

This paper looks at the politics of representation of Mary—mother and woman—in Robert Graves' 'historical' novel *King Jesus* (1946). It is argued that by repeatedly highlighting Mary's virginity, divinity, and otherworldliness, Christology seems to have been complicit in an ideology of exclusion insofar as Mary's role in Jesus' career is concerned. Graves presents not one but three persons carrying the name of Mary: Mary the Virgin Mother, Mary of Bethany, Jesus' wife, and Mary Magdalene, the hairdresser and prostitute. Each presents a side of womanhood that challenges the human Jesus, but interestingly enough, legitimizes his divine status.





Mary is a mother, a divine mother, to be sure, but her womanhood dents her divinity. The refusal of Christian institutions to acknowledge the contribution of women to the faith is often refracted through complex representation strategies. One of the less obvious but more effective strategies is one of asymmetrical highlighting. This process entails the highlighting of one or two select attributes of a famous figure, where the fame of the figure is not only informed but also imprisoned by the highlighting process itself. In Mary's case it is her supernatural transactions with God and the divine messenger that guarantees the virgin childbirth. Her later transactions with Jesus and his disciples are designed in such a way that she morphs into an icon without a voice. She is elevated and erased at the same time. In any presentation of Mary as the iconic virgin Mother, her womanhood and her human standing are uncomfortable facts that must not be factored in. In other words, for the iconic Mary to hold, the human/woman Mary must be erased. Graves offers a layered interpretation of this process of exclusion and erasure by excessive highlighting of her divinity and supernatural motherhood.

Theologians, clergy and other recorders of history have been complicit with this simultaneous apotheosis and condemnation of women. Religious history is notorious for perpetuating the denigration of women while seemingly making cons out of them. Mary has been praised and exalted as a "pure" woman. The stress on her purity, especially the prevailing idea that her virginity was permanent and life-long has made her a most complicated role model to follow—to be a mother and yet be a virgin.

It presents a contradictory image—both fascinating and forbidding—that is humanely impossible for women to aspire to. Speaking of virginity, Jesus' conception has to be understood as a 'mysterious' happening between God and Mary, with Mary remaining a virgin, a condition she seems to have retained all her life. These beliefs were put forward so that her *holiness* is not compromised by any involvement with human sexuality, given the negative value attributed to human, especially female, sexuality. Again, Mary's lifelong virginity, the Immaculate Conception and the mothering of the divine made her immune to death, a proposition which would have compromised her purity and holiness. Such an ideology laden depiction serves patriarchal purposes.

Mary often serves as a model for the feminine situation that women are expected to accept in patriarchal societies. She represents femininity and portrays the feminine attitude, as one of passively receiving love and protection from a father figure. She stands as a prototype, a model and stands as the prototype of Christian attitude towards life. She has a role to play in the human redemption story. Hilda Graef observes that Mary appears as "a semi-divine being" and is "so unequivocally approximated to the Godhead" (199-200).





Historical novels like *King Jesus* throw up questions on his mother that offer no easy answer. In the novel, Jesus declares that he has come to make a new beginning: “to destroy the work of the Female” and to establish an order of God, the Father. Graves seems to be fascinated with the Bible and has a passion for ‘restoring’ or looking at texts along matriarchal rather than patriarchal lines. As in his other famous novel *The White Goddess* (1948), he is convinced that the key to civilizational truths lie in woman and her mysteries. In *King Jesus*, he traces back the lineage of Jesus both on the paternal and maternal side to the House of David, the purest of the pure bloodlines.

This book attempts to set Jesus’ life in a fictional setting and a historical context but more than that it is a reinterpretation of Jesus’ mission on earth. The relatives identified in the lineage are historical figures who are legitimate heirs to the throne of Israel. The importance of his mother’s lineage is stressed more than that of his father in the early part of the novel. It projects Jesus as the rightful heir to the throne of Israel but temporal kingship is not what he aspires to. “My kingdom is not of this world” (390), he says echoing the Biblical Jesus. He yearns for the spiritual power that the crown of Israel offers.

### ***The Three Marys***

This paper is not a study of Jesus’ efforts to accomplish his mission or acquire his kingship but to figure out the representation of women mentioned in the novel, especially Mary, Jesus’ mother and Mary of Bethany, Jesus’ wife, and Mary Magdalene, the Hairdresser. These women in the novel are depicted as passive, accepting and suffering. Graves suggests that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not the virgin mother but the secret queen of Antipater, son of King Herod I and heir apparent to the Herodian dynasty of Judea. Her secret identity is known to a select few who respect and protect her. These people are awaiting the birth of the Messiah and the signs have shown that the son borne by Mary would be the one.

The death of Antipater, and Mary’s subsequent marriage to the septuagenarian Joseph of Emmaus, leads to their flight to Egypt to avoid being killed by Herod. Joseph and Mary live in Egypt incognito bringing up Jesus as a devout Jew. He is instructed on religious education by the rabbi Simon who is the exiled High Priest Temple of Jerusalem and taught the trade of carpentry by Joseph his adoptive father. As a child Jesus is described in *King Jesus* as “a boy prodigy” (201), “modest, pious, courageous, prodigiously industrious and intelligent” (173). This child, like most child prodigies exploited by the media today, is very curious, asking a lot of questions which makes a lot of people uncomfortable. On their return to Emmaus after the death of Herod, Joseph finds his once-affluent family impoverished and scattered and his older children not very welcoming. He moves to Nazareth with Mary and Jesus and starts a carpentry shop. In this new





environment Jesus comes across as a precocious child, always up to mischief with his questions and smart answers. Jesus' relationship with his parents is of a loving and respectful nature.

On his visits to Jerusalem over the Passover festival, Jesus likes listening to the debates of the learned scholars of the Temple. In one such debate on "the completeness of the number ten" (190), he participates and embarrasses a highly learned scholar not only with his questions but also with the answer he gives when he finds the scholar's answer inadequate. He also takes part in another debate on whether donations or offerings of money made by prostitutes should be accepted in the Temple.

Jesus' introduction as the son of Joseph of Emmaus reminds the scholars of a scandalous rumour surrounding the marriage of Joseph. It is at this point that Jesus comes to know from the temple records that he may be an illegitimate child. This affects him as he is not able to reconcile the "look of innocence and the written record of your (Mary's) shame" (202), in the Temple records. He starts doubting his mother and his respect for her comes under a cloud. Even when he is told the truth, Jesus accuses his mother of hiding facts from him and thus preventing him from paying his unconditional respect and love to his adoptive father, Joseph. Clearly, the role of Mary in keeping what is a family secret is highlighted to her disadvantage, and Jesus already participates in this patriarchal game.

Jesus leaves home to pursue his training and education at the monastery of the Essenes at Callirhoe from where he is dismissed for trying to interpret and understand a religious, prophetic text mandated to be read only by senior monks. He reads the prophecies of the destruction of the Female, "the threefold demoness who is Mother, Bride and Layer" (215). The basic premise of this belief—that the Female is the root of all causes bad—is that with the temptation of Adam by Eve into sin, Death and suffering entered earth and so it is necessary to defeat the Female for the establishment of the realm of God, the Father.

Jesus wanders around Israel and ends up in On Heliontopolis where he meets many scholars from around the world: "a Persian, a Ligurian, a Galatian, a Phoenician, an Indian, a Caspian, a Greek an Armenian, a Spaniard or a Scythian" (224), who help him in gathering knowledge. These men have a longing for immortality, and complain about the lack of unity among the nations of the world. After seven years in Egypt he returns to Nazareth and lives with his mother and goes to work together as a carpenter with Thomas. He lives the life of an ordinary Jewish man and waits for a sign which should get him ready for baptism by his cousin John. John the Baptist has been





preaching repentance and dipping “into the swift stream of Jordan all sinners who come to seek him out. When they emerge they are like new men” (228).

### ***Challenging the Gospel***

Here, the chronology of the Gospel story is changed. John refuses to baptize Jesus but then leads him to the Mount Horeb for the trial and then the Temptation by Simon the High Priest and Jesus’ old mentor who was prophesied to die only after seeing the face of the Messiah. Jesus tames the lion which symbolizes anger, the he-goat which symbolizes lust and the seraph which symbolizes fear but before he could tame the white bull, it disappears. Jesus then overcomes the temptation of greed symbolized by the boar, and pride symbolized by an elephant with a gilt tower on his back. It needs to be mentioned that though he defeats the other temptations he could not tame the white bull that represents haste. Jesus realizes this but is unable to understand its significance and is scared.

At the fair of the Terebinth, Jesus seeks out Mary, the Hairdresser—the pythoness who is an oracle of the Mother at the Oaks of Mamre— “determined to measure and subdue the power of the Female” (247). The fact that the text refers to ancient mysteries associated with the cult of Mamre, and Mary’s possible links to the tree, cannot be set aside as the rambling of a person who knows nothing. It is clearly an evidence of the discomfort of patriarchal historiography with female sexual rites, feared and hated by men. This is best read along with the explosive episode, (249-259). It is here that Jesus tests his power against the power of the Female and is able to subdue Mary and drive out the seven demons by defying the Female in her own house.

He says:

“It is written: ‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death I shall fear no evil, for Thou, Lord, art with me.’ Therefore, my fate will be as the Father ordains, not as your Mistress ordains. I am released from the jurisdiction of the Female; I have come to destroy her works” (256).

Before the devils are driven out, Mary the Hairdresser cautions Jesus about the fourth animal he could not tame, which scares Jesus. Even after the exorcism, Mary refuses to follow Jesus as “the end is not yet”. It makes us wonder if Mary, the Hairdresser, the priestess of the Female knew more than Jesus about his fate. It is significant that the baptism by John happens after this, and also as opposed to the Gospel narratives, John anoints and proclaims Jesus the King of Israel. He is then dressed in the robes of a King, carried in a litter to his “marring” or coronation ceremony which ended with his wedding.





### ***Mary, Marriage and Marring***

What is even more significant is that Mary, his mother, resurfaces at his “marring” (264). The pun is not to be missed here. For, ‘marring’ also wickedly refers to the wedding with Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, the Essene and daughter of Jose Cleopas. Marrying and marring are homonyms that operate as spoilsports in the life of the divine man Jesus. Jesus refuses to consummate his marriage, “not do the act of darkness, which is the act of Death” with Mary of Bethany by remarking that maintenance of chastity is required for making a new beginning.

This new beginning is the beginning of the establishment of the practices and traditions of God the father and the end of what he calls the female rituals and practices. He designates her as his sister, thereby ‘condemning’ her to a life of celibacy and childlessness. He even rebukes his mother for trying to interfere in matters between a husband and a wife by reminding her of her secondary status in the changed family dynamics.

With her son’s marriage, the mother and the wife start looking like doubles. The mother loses the seat as the head of the family and is relegated to the status of a dependent. Mary of Bethany, the new queen, is stunned by the turn of events. She, too, can do nothing but shed tears and accept Jesus’ word as law. When Jesus desires to know if Mary would be willing to join him in his wanderings, Mary of Bethany very subtly throws the ball in his court saying “either desire your servant to accompany you and she will obey, or allow her to return to Bethany” (270). Jesus desires Mary to return to Bethany and though her heart broke to obey him, “her woman’s pride” or the “Power of Michal forced her to feign indifference” (270). Like Mary the Mother, Mary of Bethany is depicted as the suffering woman, who accepts and obeys her husband and her fate without any questions. This image of the wife is modelled on Mary, the Mother, who is ever-suffering, silent, compassionate, subservient, and loving, but non-sexual, a passive, consensual and accepted image of the ‘ideal’ woman.

What Graves does here is that he imposes the qualities of purity and chastity, which are attributed to the mother of Jesus in the gospel and liturgy, to Jesus’ wife also. This perhaps, is a strategy of avoiding being accused of sexualizing Jesus and being faithful to the biblical Jesus. We are told that Mary of Bethany is unhappy with her marital life whereas her brother Lazarus, the Essene is all praise for “her sexless wedlock”. As an Essene, he is already under a vow of chastity. It seems he is highly pleased and excited “to live in Paradisial love together and never grow old” (308). He argues that engaging in sexual act is an act of death; having children is giving in to death.







When Mary questions him on the married status of many of Jesus' disciples, Lazarus has no answer to give her.

Martha, sister to Mary of Bethany, seems to be practical in her response to this situation. She feels that Jesus is intent only on his salvation and not bothered about his wife. Lazarus rebukes Mary for not defending the honour of her husband against her sister's malicious words. To be returned to her parent's house without the marriage being consummated is a matter of great concern and shame for the family of the girl. Jesus seems unmindful of such concerns. Then again, the coronation and marriage is a sworn to sacred silence affair (264). Jesus and Mary's marriage seems to reflect the marriage of his parents' with the only difference that Antipater consummated it.

### ***Who's Afraid of Mary?***

The next time that Mary of Bethany meets Jesus is when he visits Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. Left alone with Jesus, Mary of Bethany asks him if his married disciples are doomed for being fathers. Mary also notices that Jesus "exchanged looks of love" (309) with his disciple John but withheld the same from her. Her jealousy is apparent when she enquires if her beauty is not enough to lure her. Jesus answers that the spiritual beauty of John is more enduring and pleasing and surpassed the love of women.

The way Mary uses Jesus' own teachings about fasting to put forward her argument on the desirability of sexual relationship shows that Jesus has met his match. Very shrewdly, Mary confronts Jesus with his physical response to her proximity for "I am a woman" she says "and you cannot conceal from me that your body longs to be joined in love with mine" (310). When challenged, he says: "Women are not all evil, for our God created woman to be man's helpmeet. Yet it is well said: 'man is to woman as reason is to the bodily senses, as upper to lower, as right to left, as the Divine to the human'" (310). Mary's answer to this merits further attention here: "Yet, my lord, what is reason when it is divorced from the bodily senses? Or can an upper storey stand without a lower to bear it up? Or can an ass stand on his two off-legs only? And what honour has our God on earth unless humankind worship Him?" (310). It is almost as if Jesus is blaming Mary for asking these difficult questions. He leaves her abruptly when she says this.

The next time Jesus meets his wife, it is in Bethany after the death of Lazarus, his brother-in-law. When Jesus reaches Bethany, Mary demands that her brother be raised from death or Jesus fulfill his marriage vows and give her a child. Interestingly, Jesus prefers raising Lazarus from the dead to giving Mary a child. What is of interest here is not just Jesus' apparent abhorrence of a possible sexual union with Mary, even if to have a child, but also the fact that another life would have to





be given for Lazarus' life. Even in the Gospels we do not have a record of Jesus preaching abstinence for husband and wife. Jesus' project of defeating the 'female' is in conformity with the patriarchal idea of associating a woman with all that is base and negative. Clearly, his decision is suggestive of a politics of emotional and physical marginalization of women in society, pushing them into an unsolicited hierarchy to give political leverage to men.

In his Kingdom, women "would be honoured citizens of the Kingdom and permitted to form sacred choirs ... and even to prophesy but, would have no part in government" (285). This Jesus believes that "only by a return to that love between man and woman from which the dangerous joys of carnality are banished can mankind return to Eden" (293). "Only by refraining from carnal love are man and wife joined together in the love of God" because whoever gives in to carnality is corrupted for life (313). Therefore, he calls on his disciples to "renounce delight in the flesh" or they "will never become citizens of this Kingdom" (313).

In the novel, Jesus treats not only his Mother and wife in a rude and brusque manner but we see him treating almost all the women who came across him in a manner somewhat bordering on disdain. It is significant that Peter's mother-in-law is portrayed as a cantankerous old woman pretending illness as she is angry with Peter and Andrew for not going to work. In this novel we find that Jesus almost refuses to heal a widow's cataleptic daughter because she is not an Israelite and he does not want bread from the children's (Israelite) table be thrown to the dogs (foreigner), whereas he proclaims his Kingdom to be not only for the Israelites, but for all nations in the world.

In *King Jesus*, Robert Graves' foregrounding of the image of Mary—Jesus' mother forever allied to Jesus for her purity and legitimacy—can be seen as part of the politics of highlighting. It can be argued that highlighting could very well be a process of erasing, as in the case of texts we read, words and sentences we highlight. In this process, the highlighted object is obscured by that which highlights it, creating a paradoxical condition where what is highlighted is forever condemned to secondary status.

Mary is the chosen, the mother of God's Son. Her spiritual motherhood to all Christians is based on her divine maternity or physical relationship to the Son of God. Therefore, her purity, her holiness is based on this relationship. When we speak of Mary what we notice is the feminine qualities associated with Mary—loving, compassionate, nurturing, silent, suffering, and passive—that make her a model mother. She is represented as the interlocutor between Jesus and his followers, often in the role of a mediator. What is ignored is that Mary had been "a central figure in her son's ministry and also a leader of the nascent church" (Shoemaker 441). By highlighting her passive, submissive the so-called semi-divine side, we erase the image and reality of a woman who possibly played a leading role in the founding of Christianity. Highlighting Mary's divine







maternity and model motherhood is a way of marginalizing her. In this way we relegate Mary to the status of just an image which silences her.

Graves repeatedly draws our attention to this politics of highlighting and hiding simultaneously working towards elevation and erasure of a significant person who happens to be a woman. In all social discourses of exclusion, one or two features of a person's physical or spiritual—even sexual or linguistic—attributes are highlighted so that several other features are erased or ignored. Mary's place in early Christianity as a possible stake-holder—even an apostle—could very well be undermined and erased by harping on her divinity as Jesus' mother and docility as Jesus' co-religionist. On the other hand, her possible claims to power as Antipater's suspected widow—however distant—must also be contained by distracting everyone from these political issues. The wife and the prostitute are 'doubled' by Graves to show what is at stake in this of politics of exclusion and erasure by way of highlighting.

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