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The Disappearance of Women and Feminist Studies in the Academia¹

1. The Jubiläumsplakat (Anniversary Poster) in Graz

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the research focus on Theological Women's and Gender Studies at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Graz, the poster for the symposium shown below was designed with a logo.²



Fig. 1: Screenshot of the designed logo for the symposium “Macht – Gender – Religion” at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Graz from 2024

- 1 This article is based on a lecture given at the symposium ‘Power – Gender – Religion’ on 10 October 2024 at the University of Graz.
- 2 “Symposium Macht – Gender – Religion”, University of Graz, Last Accessed: January 14, 2026, https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/_files/_faculty_sites/_theol/unigrazform/News_Veranstaltungen/Gender_Symposium_Graz_2024.pdf.

A few remarks about that:

The background had the feminist color lila occupying exactly half of the available space and turning into a kind of orange in the other half.

The center of the poster had a legend in German “30 Jahre Fakultäts-Schwerpunkt 2024” that could be translated as *30 years as a research focus in our faculty 2024*.

A feminist circle surrounded the central legend; the circle was interrupted below by the words *Universität Graz* and above, in bold print bigger in size than all other words, one could read what was clearly the most important word of the poster, that is: GENDER.

Wait a minute! Are we sure that the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Graz has highlighted ‘gender’ as a research focus for 30 years? Yes, indeed, but the whole story is:

*Die Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät Graz hat im Juni 1994 die Errichtung eines eigenen Fakultätsschwerpunktes “Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung” beschlossen.*³

(In June 1994, the Catholic Theological Faculty of Graz decided to establish its own faculty focus on “Women’s and Gender Studies”.) Thirty years ago (1994) the program started with Women’s Studies. Now the official name of the research focus is Women’s and Gender Studies. Why has the word ‘Frauen’ (women) disappeared from the poster for the anniversary symposium? Well, it is not only the poster that has omitted the word ‘Frauen’ (women) but the explanation on the website of the program itself. It reads:

*2024 feierten wir das 30-jährige Jubiläum des Gender-Forschungsschwerpunktes mit diversen Veranstaltungen.*⁴ (In 2024, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Gender Research Focus with various events.) *An unserer Fakultät besteht eine Gender Arbeitsgruppe, die sich speziell mit der Förderung und Planung von Initiativen und Veranstaltungen sowie Projekten beschäftigt, sodass möglichst viele gendersensible Gruppierungen und am Diskurs Interessierte sich angesprochen fühlen.* (Our faculty has a gender working group that

3 “Theologische Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung“, University of Graz, Last Accessed: January 14, 2026, <https://genderforschung-theologie.uni-graz.at/de/>.

4 “Theologische Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung”.

focuses specifically on promoting and planning initiatives, events, and projects so that as many gender-sensitive groups and individuals interested in the discourse as possible feel addressed). Actually, the very link to the webpage of the department omits the word 'Frauen' (women) and leaves only the word 'gender': genderforschung-theologie.uni-graz.at.

Maybe the shift in colour from lila to orange is intended precisely to indicate that a shift has happened: from 'women' (Frauen) to 'gender'. One could argue that the colour in the Jubiläum-poster implies no transition but actually a sharing of space. After all, the exact same space is occupied by the lila and the orange. Yes, this is true, but it is also true that in design, when a space is divided diagonally into two, the upper triangle corresponds to the past and the lower one to the future. Why has the word *women* disappeared from the official link and from the presentation of the official website of the program? I do not think there is any intention to weaken the role of women in this particular faculty, quite the contrary, so has a phenomenon that has become significant in the academic world crept into the faculty's wording unconsciously?

2. Women, the Feminine and LGBTQ+: A False Dilemma

One answer to the question of why women as such have disappeared as a research focus would be that women have disappeared in order to make room for the wider sexual inclusivity represented by the word 'gender' (in English) or by the acronym LGBTQ+. It is true (and a joy!) that feminism has tended to be inclusive from its inception. Early feminists Lucretia Mott (a Quaker minister), Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the other participants at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 advocated not only for the full political rights of women but also against slavery and for the full political rights of black people.⁵ I assume that back in 1994, when the program was founded

5 Victoria Elliott, "A Great Inheritance: The Abolition Movement and the First Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls. National Park Service", Last accessed: December 19, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-great-inheritance-the-abolition-movement-and-the-first-women-s-rights-convention-at-seneca-falls.html>

at Graz University, this was the intention: to be inclusive of all those who were discriminated against (principally homosexual and transsexual people). It is also very possible that from the beginning there was not only a desire to contribute to the fight for justice with regards to the rights of women (political, ecclesiastical, social...) but an authentic intellectual curiosity as well to deepen the understanding of what is *a woman*. This is why I call the either/or approach to Women Studies and Gender Studies a false dilemma. The problem is not that we have both. The problem is that there seems to be a tendency to have *women* disappear and to reduce the diversity of the LGBTQ+ acronym to the *gender fluid*. Most lesbians are not gender fluid; they are lesbian women and have no problem with being women. Most transsexual women do not seem to be gender fluid either. Precisely the contrary seems to be true. They are so clear that they are women that they are ready to undergo multiple often expensive and very complex surgeries and hormonal treatments in order that their body matches their subjective sense of sexual identity. Trans women do not threaten the existence of women. They just want to be counted in. From a theological perspective, I recommend reading “This is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians”, edited by Christina Beardsley and Michelle O’Brien in 2016.⁶ The book does not provide a unified voice or theory about transgender. It allows very different voices to emerge and it makes room for all of them in their diversity.

Because the LGBTQ+ movement is about acknowledging and fostering diversity and not about blending all identities into homogenizing labels, the disappearance of women cannot be justified in terms of inclusivity.

3. Joan Kelly’s Critical Assessment of Humanism and the Rise of the Universities

If inclusivity is not what makes women disappear, what is it? Joan Kelly’s critical assessment of humanism comes to mind. Joan Kelly (1928–82) was a feminist American historian considered one of the

6 Christina Beardsley et al. (Ed.), *This Is My Body. Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2016).

founders of Women's Studies. Kelly challenged the wide-spread idea that humanism and the rise of universities signified a step forward for women:

Imbued with renescent ideas of civic virtue, humanism was far more narrow in its views of women than traditional Christian culture. The religious conception of women, although misogynist in its own way, did regard women as equally capable of the highest states 'man' could attain: salvation and sainthood.⁷

Kelly's argument is very far-reaching. It implies that modern society enshrines an anthropological model that excludes women: the 'autonomous rational dominant man' becomes the model. Women are excluded because they are not autonomous (they tend to be forever attached to the children they bear and they insist in taking care of the elderly and the infirm), they are for the first time (in the Renaissance) considered less rational and more emotional than men and they clearly do not dominate society.

Salvation and sainthood, the highest state a *man* could attain in medieval societies was open to women. Salvation and sainthood (as opposed to scholarly erudition, economic success or political power) can be pursued in the most humble of homes while doing the most menial of jobs. Any medieval woman could feel equally entitled than any men to salvation and sainthood. And the churches were filled with female saints who were upheld as models of the highest human achievement for men and women alike. The humanist model and the rise of the universities changed this radically. To fulfil the humanist ideal, one needs to have access to universities and to public office. Women were not allowed into the universities. Women were not allowed in public office. Feminism has fought for both these causes and has won them. However, Kelly tells us that the problem of women's discrimination cannot be solved only by allowing women into universities and public offices. There needs to be a more fundamental change than that. The anthropological model has to change again, so that women do not need to masculinize to attain it. For example, it cannot be that the dominant model for being an accomplished scholar, businessperson or politician is incompatible

7 Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle des Femmes'", *Signs* 8, No. 1 (Autumn 1982): 4–28; 8.

with caring for children and the elderly. This is why Judy Syfers in 1971 wrote her manifesto *I Want a Wife*.⁸ In it, Syfers does not limit herself to list all the material services that a wife performed (performs?) for her husband, but, most importantly, the non-material ones that can be summarized in creating and sustaining what can truly be called *a home*.

Social hierarchy in medieval times was established between nobles and peasants. A noble lady was considered in her human essence closer to a noble gentleman than to a peasant woman. Social hierarchy in modern times is between men and women. A rich woman is considered in her human essence closer to a poor woman than to a rich man.

The exclusion of women from universities was momentous. So much so that since the beginning of humanism (and not before), women's achievements in intellectual matters have been considered with incredulity and downplayed or plainly denied until feminist scholarship with great determination and academic excellency has succeeded in unearthing the memory of some of the women of the past. Three salient examples in science would be the Spanish physician Olivia de Sabuco (16th century), whose remarkable medical texts had been until mid-20th century wrongly attributed to his father with no other basis than misogynist prejudice,⁹ the British mathematician Ada Lovelace (19th century), daughter of the poet Lord Byron, first computer programmer,¹⁰ and the English chemist Rosalind Franklin (20th century), discoverer of the double helix

8 Judy Brady Syfers, "I Want a Wife", *New York Magazine*, December 20–27, 1971, Last accessed: January 14, 2026, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/11/i-want-a-wife-by-judy-brady-syfers-new-york-mag-1971.html>.

9 Oliva Sabuco de Nantes Barrera, *New Philosophy of Human Nature. Neither Known to nor Attained by the Great Ancient Philosophers, Which Will Improve Human Life and Health*, Trans. and Ed. Mary Ellen Waithe et al. (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); see also Juan Francisco Maura, "Arte de saber vivir, filosofía presocrática y oriental en la Nueva filosofía de Oliva Sabuco (1562–1622)". *Lemir. Revista de literatura medieval y del Renacimiento* 27 (2023): 359–409.

10 "Ada Lovelace Symposium – Celebrating 200 Years of a Computer Visionary", University of Oxford, Podcasts/Videos, Last accessed: December 18, 2026, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/ada-lovelace-symposium-celebrating-200-years-computer-visionary>.

molecular structure of our genetic information (DNA).¹¹ In theology, we can remember Hildegard of Bingen (12th century) whose works were at least partially attributed to her secretary, the monk Volmar, until the nuns from the monastery of Saint Hildegard in Eibingen decided to pursue academic studies to prove the full authorship of their foundress.¹² In this latter case, the memory of Hildegard had not fully disappeared because it was preserved in the Church: every 17th of September her feast is celebrated, her works have been copied and studied and her social/ecclesiastical initiatives have found continuity in the current monastery in Eibingen. The same is true for so many of the women of the past: their memory is preserved if they were linked to the Catholic Church, but it is otherwise forgotten. This is not to deny the structural misogyny of the Roman Catholic Church. However, it is important to highlight that despite this structural misogyny, this Church has managed to preserve the names, the memory, the works and the social initiatives of thousands of women of the past. Where are the Chinese women of the 12th century who experienced, thought, wrote or initiated something extraordinary? They are nowhere to be seen. Didn't they exist? Of course, they existed! But there is no institution that has preserved their memory. Certainly not, the modern university.

For me it was fascinating to hear professor Irmtraud Fischer recount at the Jubiläums-Symposium *Macht-Gender-Religion 2024* in Graz the circumstances that led to the establishment of the “Forschungsschwerpunkt für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung” back in 1994. In brief: Fischer was clear-sighted enough to use a political opportunity to have it approved as a minor evil. Confronted with the dilemma of having to convene a press conference to confront the misogynist papal document *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (John Paul II, 1994), the conservative dean and faculty agreed to what seemed to them the minor evil of establishing a research focus on feminist studies.

11 Doris T. Zallen, “Despite Franklin's work, Wilkins earned his Nobel”, *Nature* 425, No.6953 (2003): 15.

12 Hildegardis Bingenensis, *Scivias, lib. III*, Ed. Adelgundis Führkötter et al., (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, Vol. 43 and 43A) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003); Adelgundis Führkötter, *The Miniatures from the Book Scivias: Know the Ways of St Hildegard of Bingen from the Illuminated Rupertsberg Codex* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977).

If Kelly is right, the exclusion of women must be considered intrinsic to the very being of universities. It is no surprise that women keep disappearing. Women disappear as subjects of study and women disappear as full-professors because, in order to thrive, they need a wife and most of them cannot find one. We need new institutions.

4. Situation of Women Today: Barcelona 2019 Compared with Barcelona 2000

For many years, I have been quoting an official statistic from my city, Barcelona, done in the year 2000 that shocked me. The statistic reflected what I think lies at the bottom of women's discrimination: the gap between the average amount of time that women and men, respectively, dedicate to household chores. Household chores include not only cleaning, cooking, washing and shopping but also taking care of the dependant members of the family (children, elderly, sick), remembering anniversaries and calling the family members and friends from whom we have not heard in a while. In summary, *creating a home*, a real one. In the year 2000 in the city of Barcelona women worked as average 15h a week in household chores and men 7h. More women had part-time jobs because of that. In average, in the year 2000 in Barcelona, women worked equal or more than men and perceived half the pay.¹³ In the year 2019, the city of Barcelona published new information (the information was published in 2019 but reflects the result of the statistical studies carried on in 2017).¹⁴

13 "Dones i feminisms", Dones i feminismes | Ajuntament de Barcelona, Last Accessed: January 14, 2026, <https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/bitstream/11703/90386/7/4370.pdf>.

14 "El gènere en xifres", Ajuntament de Barcelona", Last Accessed: January 14, 2026, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dones/sites/default/files/documentacio/el_gènere_en_xifres_resumexecutiu.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

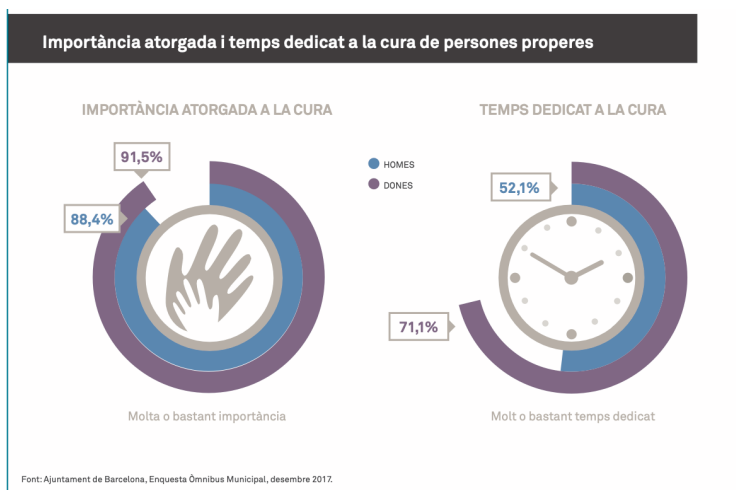


Fig. 2: Figure about Care-Work of relatives in Barcelona 2017

The figure illustrates the high social importance attributed to caring for close relatives and dependents. A clear majority of respondents consider care work to be of great or very great importance. The chart highlights gender differences in the perception and distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

91.5 % of women in the city considered the task of taking care of dependent persons to be quite or very important vs. 88.4 % of men; there are no significant differences here. The difference is in the second graphic: despite both sexes considering taking care of others a quite or very important task, 71.1 % of women and only 52.1 % of men dedicated quite a bit or a lot of time to it.

I do not know why the city of Barcelona didn't publish in 2019 complete statistics comparable to those published in the year 2000, which allowed us to know clearly how many hours of household work was done in average by women and by men. In contrast, asking about whether you consider taking care of others important or quite important and whether you dedicate a lot of time or quite a bit of time to do it is vague and doesn't allow a clean comparison. Is this another example of the lila colour turning orange?

An interesting datum of the report from Barcelona 2019 (2017) is that 90 % of household chores in the Spanish autonomous region of Catalonia (of which Barcelona is the capital city) were performed by women. 90 % vs. 10 % (in Catalonia) is not the same than 71,1 % vs. 52,1 % (in the city of Barcelona). At first glance, the city seems to be a better place for women. However, what really happens in the capital city is not that men share a bit more the domestic tasks and the care for others, but that migrant women take over this task. Due to their irregular or illegal administrative status, these women will never appear in the statistics.¹⁵ The American sociologist Arlie Hochschild has named this phenomenon *the global care chain* and has considered it a form of emotional colonialism: after having extracted the raw materials from the colonized lands, the rich West is now extracting their *emotional capital* in the form of migrant women who are willing to take care of others (and still have the knowledge of how to do it). Often, these women leave behind their own parents, their own sick or their own children to care for the parents, the sick or the children of the women of rich countries. In the country of origin of the migrant woman, it is not the brother or the husband who takes care of the parents, the sick or the children left behind, but the mother or the grandmother of the migrant women.

5. Bodies with Vaginas

On 24 September 2021, The Lancet medical journal highlighted an article on its cover with a single sentence in large text “*Historically, the anatomy and physiology of bodies with vaginas have been neglected.*” This statement, in which the word “women” was replaced with the phrase “bodies with vaginas,” is part of a trend to remove sexed terms such as “women” and “mothers” from discussions of female reproduction.¹⁶ The article is signed by ten researchers from Nursing Schools across the UK, USA, Vietnam, India and Australia. The

15 “El gènere en xifres”; see also Arlie R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

16 Karleen D. Gribble et al., “Effective Communication About Pregnancy, Birth, Lactation, Breastfeeding and Newborn Care: The Importance of Sexed Language”, *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 3, Art. 818856 (2022): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2022.818856>.

authors inform us that every day (2022) 810 women die in the world due to pregnancy, delivery or post-partum and that the health of mothers and their children is affected when the desexed language becomes mandatory in order to publish in certain journals. For example, by using *parents* instead of *mothers*. In medical research this is a problem that leads to the practical erasure of the experience of women and their associated health risks and pathologies. It is not the same to study the mortality of the mothers of a given region that to study the mortality of the *parents*. Studies are needed to request and allocate financial resources and disappearing from the studies implies disappearing from the official programs and from the allocation of financial support.

It is interesting that the original article that uses the desexed and indeed dehumanizing expression “bodies with vaginas”¹⁷ does so in the context of a feminist critique of the historical and scientific erasure of women. The author of the original article is a woman, Sophia Davis, who reviews an exhibit at the Vagina Museum (London) on *Taboos about menstruation*. Among many other things, visitors of this exhibit learnt the story of Mary Kenner, who was the inventor of the adjustable sanitary belt in the early 1920s. The adjustable sanitary belt was a device that allowed women to deal with menstrual blood in a clean and practical manner. Kenner had to wait 30 years to patent her invention and then saw it not being developed because she, the inventor, was a black woman. When her patent expired, others benefited from it. Kenner died in 2006 and apparently never stopped inventing practical devices to help take care of people.

6. Valerie Saiving ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’ (1960)

After having said above that the Catholic Church has been able to preserve the memory of thousands of women of the past, let me now clarify that Catholic theology has its own ways of being misogynist

17 Sophia Davis, “Periods on Display”, *The Lancet* 398 (September 2021): 1124–1125, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)01962-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01962-0).

or deleterious for women.¹⁸ While working as a theological intern in a social project in East Boston (USA) in the 1990s, I was dismayed at learning that the senior members of the team considered ‘being Catholic’ a risk factor for not being able to move beyond an abusive spousal relationship:

[as opposed to Protestant women] biblical material has not formed the religious framework for their [Catholic women’s] acceptance of battering. Rather, it has been the church and its teaching about the role of women, divorce, and contraception that has provided religious legitimation for battering.¹⁹

Besides this Catholic institutional specificity, there seems to be a theological notion common to all Christian denominations that greatly contributes to the invisibilization of women and has the potential to halt their spiritual growth. This notion is the sex-blind understanding of sin. In the year 1960, Valerie Saiving wrote a ground-breaking article about it:

For the temptations of woman ‘as woman’ are not the same as the temptations of man ‘as man’, and the specifically feminine forms of sin – ‘feminine’ not because they are confined to women or because women are incapable of sinning in other ways but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure – have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as ‘pride’ and ‘will-to-power’.²⁰

What is it supposed to be, this *basic feminine character structure*? Saiving draws heavily on the late work of anthropologist Margaret Mead to distinguish the binary feminine/masculine across cultures. After having studied the wide variations on the concrete content of ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ she encountered in her field work, Mead realized that she had never found a culture that did not acknowledge the existence and the importance of the sexual binary feminine/masculine. There were exceptions to the binary and there

18 Gabrielle Tremblay, “A Domestic Violence Paradox: Catholic Teachings as Source and Solution”, *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 48, 1 (May 2024): 25–43.

19 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 104.

20 Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”, *The Journal of Religion* 40, No. 2 (1960), reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Ed. Carol P. Christ et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992).

were crossovers, but all those were understood with regards to the binary (the very notion of *exception* or *crossover* having no sense without a reference of normalcy). In brief, for Saiving, the *feminine structure* has to do with the fact that, in general, a woman is a woman without having to do anything to achieve womanhood: menstruation happens to her, pregnancy might happen to her without her consent or active participation – she might even be unconscious, like the Marquise of O –, ²¹ labor happens to her, having milk to nourish the newborn happens to her. Of course, any of these events in a woman's life might have exceptions and many women today might actively (medically, hormonally) search to have control over menstruation, pregnancy, delivery or lactation. But this control does not come naturally or without side effects. Manhood is precisely defined in opposition to the passive-natural aspects of femaleness: manhood has to be achieved demonstrating a particular capacity, passing a test of some kind in order to be acknowledged as a man. Womanhood is thus about *being*; manhood is about *becoming*. In consequence, according to Saiving, the temptations associated with 'the basic feminine character structure' are not those of 'pride' or 'will-to-power'. Instead,

They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.²²

The American sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow argued in her own way a similar differentiated *basic structure* for femaleness and maleness. She called it "primary subjectivation."²³ In short, the erotic object is for all newborns, regardless of their sex, the mother. The mother is for the developing subjectivity of all babies the absolute reference of desire. This has two consequences: girlhood/womanhood is associated with motherhood (a girl/wom-

21 Heinrich von Kleist, *The Marquise of O—: And Other Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 1978).

22 Saiving, "The Human", 37.

23 Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

an is one that can become a mother) and girlhood/womanhood is developed by continuity with the erotic object: *to be myself* for a girl/woman is to be *like her* (like the mother). In contrast, boyhood/manhood is not developed by continuity with the erotic object (the mother): *to be myself* for a boy/man is to be *unlike her* (unlike the mother). Patriarchy stops here. For patriarchy, the *primary subjectivation* is all there is: a woman will/should remain all her life *an actual or potential mother* and a man will/should have to demonstrate all his life that he is not a woman. Chodorow, however, is not patriarchal. She does not stop at the *primary subjectivation*. For her, adulthood implies precisely taking responsibility for one's *primary subjectivation* and moving toward a *mature subjectivation* able to develop a sense of self and of the other.²⁴ In the words of the gospel of John: one must be born again, not from a mother, but from the water and the spirit (Jn 3:3–5).

7. Queer Mary and Platonic *metaxu*

According to Catholic theology, Mary of Nazaret is mother *and* virgin. She is not only mother and in that she breaks the patriarchal mould. She remains virgin after becoming mother. Her identity is not contained in her being a mother. She is for others (mother) *and* she is as well in herself, for herself (virgin). Being a virgin is not for her a prerequisite for being a wife. She is a wife and continues to be a virgin.

How I understand this is not that Mary is an unattainable exception that demeans all other women because no other can be like her. Quite the contrary. As some medieval women so well understood, even Mary Magdalene, considered to have been a prostitute, could join Mary of Nazaret in leading the choir of virgins in heaven.²⁵ Medieval female devotion turned Mary Magdalene into one of the virgins. As simple as that. It was not the Dominican or Franciscan preaching friars who did that. It was the praying women. Church

24 Like Kleist's Marquise of O is so beautifully and surprisingly able to do.

25 Katherine L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

historian Katherine Jansen has shown that it was the faithful women who refused to conceive the theological, spiritual or mystical notion of *virginity* in a biological way, but conceived it instead in relationship to their own spiritual awakening, to their "being born again, not from a woman, but from the water and the spirit" (Jn 3:3–5).

Mary of Nazaret overcomes the *feminine structural sin* described by Saiving and encourages other women to do likewise: Mary has no underdevelopment and no negation of the self. She is a woman who represents what is to be a good follower of Christ for both, women *as well as* men. Mary is a model of discipleship for all Christians. Men should be like her. Here Mary breaks again the patriarchal mould according to which *manhood* must always assert itself in being *unlike the mother* (Saving, Chodorow). What a challenge! Men, structurally set up to think of themselves as unlike her, now are called to be *like her*! One can see the potential violence, but I hope one can see as well the potential liberation. Thirdly, besides being both mother and virgin and besides being a model also for men, in the Annunciation Mary of Nazaret was not a passive tool in the hands of a divine Power. Mary did not become pregnant passively. She had to give her conscious assent (*Fiat mihi*; Lk 1:38). And to add insult to injury, she did not become pregnant by means of intercourse with a man. God didn't need a man to incarnate: God needed only the conscious assent of a woman who in her free and loving *Fiat* represented each of us, female and male alike. This is why I call Mary 'queer':

[...] to be queer is to reject all 'essential' labels. I believe that all labels that claim to be absolute and exclude those who do not conform to them are to be rejected. For all we know, Mary was a woman and in her 'being a woman' she represented all humanity at the crucial moment of the Incarnation. She spoke for all of us. That means that there is something essential that all we humans share, regardless of our sexuality.²⁶

I do not call Mary *queer* because I think that she had a *fluid sexual identity*. For me, to conceive Mary as a member of a sexual minority

26 Teresa Forcades, "Queer Mary: Can we apply the adjective 'queer' to Mary of Nazareth and what can we learn by doing so?", *Marianum* 86, No. 205–206 (2024): 33–48; Cf. also Teresa Forcades, *Queer Mary: Il futuro dell'esperienza cristiana* (Roma: Castelvechi, 2025).

would not be a problem, but I do not have any reason to believe this was the case and I do not need to argue that in order to apply the adjective *queer* to Mary. For me, to be *queer* is to de-essentialize all identity labels. To de-essentialize is not the same as *to eliminate* (more on this, below). Thus conceived, for me to be *queer* is part of mature subjectivation: moving beyond the primary subjectivation of the child. Moving beyond the primary subjectivation (and hence beyond patriarchy) can also be described as *being born again* and being born again (Jn 3:3–5) equals christification (Gal 3:27–28) or, as the ancient theologians would call it, *theosis* (divinization).²⁷ Mary of Nazaret is the prime example of theosis. In Mary, the important point is not the integrity of a biological membrane (cf. Lk 11:27–28), but the description of her fulfilled life as being, simultaneously, fully for others (mother) *and* fully in herself (virgin).

The notion of *queerness* applied to Mary and as applied to any of us brings to mind the Platonic notion of *metaxu* (in between).²⁸ As explained by the French philosopher Simone Weil, *metaxu* is a necessary mediation:

What is it a sacrilege to destroy? Not that which is base, for that is of no importance. Not that which is high, for even should we want to, we cannot touch that. The Metaxu. The Metaxu form the region of good and evil. No human being should be deprived of his Metaxu, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible.²⁹

Metaxu: relative and mixed blessings. Weil names home, country, traditions, culture etc. and I suggest adding sexual identity as *structural being* to the list. Sexual identity as a structural given is metaxu: a non-essential reality that, like the wall between two prisoners, is a limit that separates and connects at the same time:

Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them, but it

27 Norman, Russell, *Theosis and Religion: Participation in Divine Life in the Eastern and Western Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

28 Platon, *Das Gastmahl* (Trans. /Ed.) Otto Apelt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1960), 202d13-e1.

29 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.

is also their means of communication. It is the same with us with God; every separation is a link.³⁰

In the introduction to his Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant wrote: “The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space.”³¹

Metaxu is like the resistance of the air: it might be experienced as a limit, but in reality is what allows us to fly. It is only a *means*. It must not be essentialized. It must not be absolutized. *Metaxu* applied to sexuality is what I call *queer*. The top *queer* gesture of Mary is that of pointing to Jesus in her lap: the mother (the universal erotic object) gently diverts the gaze and the attention of the beholder away from herself and towards the image of a powerless baby-God.

In this article I wanted to explore the disappearance of women and feminist studies in the academia. Here is my conclusion: The academia/the modern university excluded women violently in its inception and for several centuries thereafter; nowadays it continues to do so in more subtle ways (it imposes to women some degree of masculinization); unless the institution itself and the culture and society that surround it change in a radical (queer) way, women will continue to disappear.

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30 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 145.

31 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Trans.) John M. D. Meiklejohn (Raleigh: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 1998), 30.

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Figure 1: Screenshot of the designed logo for the symposium "Macht – Gender – Religion" at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Graz from 2024. Last accessed: January 14, 2026, https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/_files/_faculty_sites/_theol/unigratzform/News_Veranstaltungen/Gender_Symposium_Graz_2024.pdf.

Figure 2: Figure about Care-Work of relatives in Barcelona 2017, in: “El gènere en xifres”, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Last Accessed: January 14, 2026, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dones/sites/default/files/documentacio/el_genere_en_xifres_resumexecutiu.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.