Miaozong's Opening

Tracing the role of woman's sexuality in a classical Chinese Buddhist text

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA Media Studies at Leiden University

01-06-2019

Textual Background

The central text of this thesis is the 12th century Ch'an Buddhist dialogue *Miaozong's Dharma Interview.* This story, which was recently discovered and translated by Buddhist scholar Miriam Levering, is here included in full.

Miaozong's Dharma Interview[1]

Before Miaozong became a nun, she used to visit Master Dahui Zonggao's monastery to study with him, and he gave her a room in the abbot's quarters. The senior monk, Wanan, did not approve.
Dahui said to him, "Although she is a woman, she has outstanding merits."
Wanan still disapproved, so Dahui urged him to have an interview with Miaozong. Wanan reluctantly agreed, and requested an interview.
Miaozong said, "Do you want a Dharma[2] interview or a worldly interview?"
"A Dharma interview," replied Wanan.
Miaozong said, "Then send your attendants away." She went into the room first and aftr a few moments she called, "Please come in."
When Wanan entered he saw Miaozong lying naked on her back on the bed. He pointed at her genitals, saying, "What is this place?"
Miaozong replied, "All the Buddhas of the three worlds, the six patriarchs[3] and all great monks everywhere come out of this place."
Wanan said, "And may I enter?"
Miaozong replied, "Horses may cross. Asses may not."
Wanan was unable to reply. Miaozong declared: "I have met you, Senior Monk. The interview is over." She turned her back to him.
Wanan left, ashamed.
Later Dahui said to him, "The old dragon has some wisdom, doesn't she?"

1 Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, ed., *The Hidden Lamp*: *Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women,* (Somervile: Wisdom Publications, 2013)*,* 107. The story was discovered by Miriam Levering under the record of Wanan.
2 For a glossary of Buddhist terms, please see the Appendix
3 The first six teachers in the Ch'an lineage since it was brought from India to China are commonly referred to as the six patriarchs.

Introduction

The text *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* has in recent years been the subject of talks and workshop groups of many Zen Buddhist teachers globally.[4] It has been viewed as a koan[5], or a story used for deep contemplation and enlightenment, but it differs markedly from most other texts thus named. Koans of the classical canon deal almost exclusively with men. None of them refer to sexuality, the female body, or the experience of being-woman.[6] Grace Schireson created a threefold categorization of "classical" Zen depictions of women, namely as: "Tea ladies, Iron Maidens and Macho Masters". This refers to the following three groups, which can be found in the better-known Zen texts: savvy old Buddhist laywomen who bring overly proud and intellectual males down to the level of simple truth; nuns whose sole narrative function is to bring shame to male practitioners; and a few exceptional female teachers who were described as manly. With reference to the work of Miriam Levering, a translating scholar who has focused on the role of women in Chinese Buddhist history, Schireson writes:

> As Levering has explained, we always hear about women's Zen contribution in (male) conquest language. All distinguishing female characteristics seem to disappear in the light of Zen. We are without any archetype of a female or feminine Zen master. As Levering notes, while classical portrayals show that Zen included women, Patriarchs' Zen never became androgynous, incorporating the varied experiences of both men and women as a way of enriching the tradition.[7]

Schireson responds to her own cry with a book that explores those more marginal accounts of women's Zen stories told with sufficient detail that other women may relate to them. She spends eleven pages on Miaozong, signaling the unusual character of her story and its usability in the search for the "archetype of a female Zen master".
Miaozong's action seems to indicate that here is a woman who displays the "classical" characteristics of a Zen Master -bold and unrestrained delivery of non-dual wisdom, without having donned her relationship to her female embodiment and the specific experience it entails. She seems to harbor a positive relationship to her body and the creative abilities that are specific to her gender.

The fact that characters like Miaozong, who express themselves about the specific experience of being woman, are so rare in Zen literature, and on the other hand references to "Manly Men", and other such terms to denote positive masculine achievement, are so common in describing the Zen experience,[8] could easily make one suspect that Zen is a highly patriarchal spiritual practice with little space and appreciation for women's perspectives. Yet here we have a case that shows us that a woman expressing herself positively about her femininity and proudly about her sexuality was not only possible, but even endorsed, appreciated and recorded within the male lineage. It may be an

4 Among others, see Bibliography entries: Norman Fischer, Judith Ragir, Grace Schireson.
5 For a glossary of Buddhist terms, please be referred to the end of the text.
6 There are few examples of koans which are not part with the classical training curricula which do deal with these topics. In the curriculum used at my monastery, for instance, which is semi-modern as it has been added to by a twentieth century teacher, there is one koan that digs into male and female embodiment. There are also the lesser-known stories *Eishun's Deep Thing* and *Yoshihime's "Look, Look!".* Both these latter stories can be found in *The Hidden Lamp* and stem from Japanese times. *Eishun's Deep Thing* tells of a nun who retorts to a monk bragging about his "three-foot long thing" that her "thing is infinitely deep". *Yoshihime's "Look, Look!"* tells of a woman who answers a question about the gate that Buddha's must pass through by putting the questioners' faces between her legs. Possibly the latter was inspired by Miaozong.
7 Grace Schireson, *Zen Women: Beyond Tea Ladies, Iron Maidens and Macho Masters,* (Somervile: Wisdom Publications, 2009) 10
8 Ibid, 9-10

exceptional case, but it nonetheless seems to indicate that there is an opening in Zen Buddhism for women's perspectives to be fully included and valued.

Femininity is a very slippery topic. As a female Zen practitioner myself, I am provoked on the one hand to face my attachment to my feminine identity and the wounds that come with it, as well as to deconstruct my ideas of what "femininity" is supposed to look like. On the other hand, I feel compelled to explore whether there may be a core of truth in my love for the topic of femininity and my longing for a practice which addresses the qualities and challenges which may be specific to the female gender. Stories such as Miaozong's strongly indicate that it is indeed possible to advance in Zen *and* experience life in a woman's body deeply. However, as will be further outlined in chapter 1, in Buddhism itself there is very little terminology available to express female experience, with the notable exception of Buddhist Tantra, where women's embodiment and sexuality are honored and explored in detail.[9]

It is for this reason that I turn to the terminology of contemporary French feminism for support. Hélène Cixous has made a life-long exploration of what it means to be a woman -physically, artistically, spiritually and philosophically, and she has developed extensive vocabulary to describe what she sees as the specifically feminine experience. The word "feminine" as distinct from "female", "women's" or "female-embodied", is a notoriously elusive term: the use of it always begs questions of cultural specificity. Whereas the other terms point to qualities more or less specific to biological sex, with "feminine" we are entering the shaky territory of gender. This, especially in conversation with Zen, brings up a whole range of challenging questions, which I have not taken much space to address in the present writing.

Cixous's texts show us that the experiences specific to women have a nature which is a blend of "biological" traits- such as the capacity to include other life-, socio-mythological conditioning and what could be in her work discerned as a more mystical source of energy and creativity. Questions about to what extent Cixous's feminine is cultural-mythological in her make-up, to what extent she is a political figure and to what extent she can be said to contain a more mystical or spiritual essence, are deeply demanding and would require a thesis in themselves to be properly addressed. I therefore have resigned myself to simply bring Cixous and *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* into a cross-cultural and cross-historical dialogue. This is not to find cross-cultural or cross-historical answers. It is rather a matter of heuristics: the dialogue helps me see things. I try to stay away as much as possible of the question of any type of "essence" of femininity, whether mystical or biological, and to stay in my investigations as close as possible to "experiences that are specific to women". I am aware that "experiences specific to women" vary widely cross-culturally and also individually. Since all of the texts and subjects included in this research have some relationship to patriarchy, I take this as a common denominator. Furthermore, when one enters the conversation with Cixous, it becomes apparent that in her "feminine", the boundaries between mysticism, biology and culture are simply completely blurred, so I contend that it is unavoidable that some of this blurring is noticeable in my writing.

The question that I ask to *Miaozong's Dharma Interview*, using Cixous, is whether the text can show us something about the place of experiences that are specific to women in the Zen Buddhist tradition. I use Cixous's terminology to investigate what those specific experiences might be, beyond the crude "pregnancy, childbirth and monthly blood". Is there a place for speaking about women's experiences in a religion which focuses on deconstructing binaries and experiencing the non-dual? Does this text show that this dimension of experience is already to some extent incorporated?
It is my hypothesis that *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* shows that there is and has historically been a space for including specifically feminine perspectives in Zen Buddhism. I use Cixous's concepts, most notably her "feminine libidinal economy", to explore and deepen this hypothesis. I believe, or found,

9 See Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* for a full description of the positive appearance of women and the feminine in Indian Tantric Buddhism.

that this interaction is fruitful and yields new insights that are usable for revalorizing Buddhist values in such a way that they may integrate women's perspectives more fully.

However, this conversation works in both directions and apart from Cixous's theory bringing useful additions and questions to Buddhist vocabulary, the Buddhist perspective and its non-uniform relationship with patriarchy also brings new questions to Cixous's theory.

This research could be said to take three distinct angles: historical, affective and analytical. In the first chapter, the history of Buddhism with respect to women and sexuality is summarized. Then, we dive into the analysis by means of laughter: what is the role of humor in this text and how does that tie up with Cixous's theory?

The third to fifth chapter explore more deeply the parallels between Cixous's work and Miaozong's text. In the third chapter, we explore how and whether the character Miaozong displays the attributes of transgression and vulnerability that are ascribed to the feminine libidinal economy by Cixous.

In the fourth and fifth chapter, we examine more closely the character Wanan and his utterance of "May I enter?". First, we will enquire into the paradoxical position of this character who first seems to take the classical "masculine" position in Cixous's terms, but with this question suddenly echoes a curiosity that Cixous characterizes as feminine.

This will bring us in the final chapter to explore Buddhism's relationship to laws and the subversion of laws as different from Cixous's patriarchal Law. In my reading, this puts Buddhism in a distinct position which manifests itself as a structural openness towards innovation and experimentation. In my interpretation, this distinct position creates a possibility for a celebration of femininity to manifest, as we see happening in the story of Miaozong.

Methodology

Accurate and Usable: criteria for feminist revalorization

I follow Rita Gross in attempting to apply both the criteria of accuracy and of usability to my reading of the story of Miaozong and Wanan.

> Recognizing that history is never neutral and objective, but always reinforces certain values and perspectives, the feminist historian seeks a past that is not only accurate, but usable. S/he seeks historical models, often ignored in androcentric record keeping and interpretations, of historical events that empower, rather than disempower, women.[10]

The very selection of the topic of writing reflects this inclination towards "usability". I deliberately venture towards the inclusion and examination of Buddhist sources that are empowering to women and may shed innovative light on our understanding of Buddhist practice. Throughout my reading I employ feminist terms in order to supply this evocative story with various tones and shades of subtlety which may hopefully lead to a more deeply usable reading of the text.
Feminism has its own agenda, and this research employing feminist methodology clearly shares in that agenda. However, I also mean for the text to be, in the words of Christian feminist scholar Eleanor McLaughlin, "*responsible,* that is, grounded in the historicist rubric of dealing with the past on its own terms"[11]. This corresponds to Gross' criterion of *accuracy*. With "on its own terms" I understand, in this case, the Zen method of investigation which always keeps a lot of space for "not-knowing" and which asks of us to drop any possible agenda in order to come more deeply into contact with the texts we study and with our life itself. From this perspective, feminist agendas such as the intention to find a "usable past" are nothing but a hindrance and it is for that reason that I also attempt to temporarily suspend them at various points in the text, even though this is not the text's main focus.

Problematizing / Discussion

Making an analysis of Buddhist teachings from a feminist or feminine perspective, especially a summarizing one, is necessarily problematic. The body of teachings and its expressions are incredibly vast, and in the matter at hand it presents us with continuous incongruities. These incongruities are themselves not incongruous to Buddhist teachings, which easily incorporates the possibility of self-contradiction. It can be witnessed from the research in chapter one that the Dharma is very resistant to sweeping statements and generalizations. We have to take into account that this is a tradition which has been extremely hesitant to express itself in language, because of the very strong propensity of language to divide and create illusion. Because this is an academic work not allowing for much poetic liberty, this warning applies especially.

In a way, a similar warning applies for the treatment of Cixous's work, which also necessarily contains an excess that simply overflows what can be contained by academic language. Any conclusions drawn by this work are necessarily limited by this constraint.
The sources that are asked to engage with one another have come from vastly different traditions. It is a cause to be heedful. What is being asked of Miaozong and Cixous and her tradition is that they converse: that they sit together, look at one another and start to ask questions to one another. This conversation involves some kind of translation beyond the translation of the words, which comes

10 Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 20

11 Eleanor McLaughlin, "The Christian Past: Does It Hold a Future for Women?" In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion,* ed. by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 94-95, qtd. By Gross

closer to the translation that is always happening between selves and others. For Cixous, this translation between selves and others is the essential work of life in which we have a chance to lessen our self-identifications and take risks to become that which we did not think we were.[12] Cixous sees this as a specifically feminine enterprise, and yet as we shall explore it has much in common with Zen practice. Unfortunately, it seems too much to ask that a translation in the sense of Cixous's non-dual unfolding and blurring of boundaries could take place between these two profound traditions within the constraints of an academic paper which is moreover authored by someone of youthful experience.

For a somewhat more "humble" translational methodology, I turn to another term of Cixous's. In terms of translation of a text from one language into another, or the effort of translation that is involved in a conversation between texts, persons or cultures, a key phrase is how Cixous describes Clarice Lispector's texts as "texts of *the right distance"*[13]. I have used "the right distance" as a methodological device for this work, as a testing phrase for the respectful unfolding of this conversation. It is a somewhat subjective measure, including the word "right", and thus it leaves space for the trial and error, approach and retreat, that must be a part of the process of finding this right and respectful distance between different traditions.

12 Sinclair Timothy Ang. "(Giving an Other) Reading (of) Hélène Cixous, *écriture* (and) *feminine*." In *PostModerne Diskurse zwischen Sprache und Macht*, ed. Johannes Angermüller and Martin Nonhoff (Hamburg: Argument, 1999), 84.

13 Hélène Cixous, "Extreme Fidelity," in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: Routledge, 1993), 136.

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Women in Buddhism now and then

This chapter serves to create a historical and theoretical context for the analysis of *Miaozong's Dharma Interview.* It includes an overview of the history of Buddhist attitudes towards women and the feminine, which will, following Rita Gross among others, be analysed as ambiguous. On the one hand the tradition, especially in its lived historical practice, has been strongly androcentric, often excluding women from serious practice and from leadership roles through all kinds of institutional structures. The foundations for this inequity can be traced back to the early beginnings of Buddhism and the scriptures. On the other hand, Buddhism's core teachings declare its non-dogmatism, and many of its foundational texts can and have been used as self-subversive tools, creating space for ever new developments in the Buddhist tradition. Also, there clearly does exist a scriptural tradition, though less pervasive than the androcentric one, which empowers and celebrates women and femininity.[14]

Buddhist history and women

Providing an accurate overview of the position of women in Buddhist history is complicated. The story is from its beginning ridden with contradictory evidence, pointing to the fundamental inclusivity of the religion as well as providing many textual and historical examples of its misogynistic practice. Based on the surviving evidence, it is possible to read into the historical Buddha someone with a strongly androcentric and female-fearing conditioning, as well as a revolutionary redeemer, creating new possibilities for women in an extremely unfriendly social climate.[15] The subsequently evolving Buddhist traditions have equally been surrounded by ambiguity regarding the matter. A few conclusions have, however, been drawn by contemporary scholars.

The Buddhist feminist scholar Rita Gross concludes in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* after a careful feminist analysis of the various Buddhist traditions' history, that there is nothing in Buddhism's core teachings that makes the religion inherently androcentric. However, she describes how the gap between this theoretical fact and the practice of institutional Buddhism has historically always been big, resulting in a tradition which has been predominantly led, practiced and crafted by males for the past twenty-five centuries. Because of this, she writes, the way Buddhism has been taught and practiced has also been catered towards experiences typically more accessible for males, with a strong emphasis on monastic practice, "home-leaving"[16], and a predominant tendency towards the transcendental perspective, with less attention for how everyday life in non-monastic circumstances could be considered part of the Buddhist path.[17] Given that, in most of the cultures Buddhism has historically taken root in, it was very difficult for women to separate themselves from familial responsibilities, this made the threshold for women to join practice considerably higher. Moreover, for those women that did seek ordination, the opportunities were often little. An adverse social climate to female renunciation frequently resulted in very poor and little supported nunneries, with subsequently often little prestige. Also, the nuns were subjected to numerous extra rules which

14 See for example the *Therigatha* for examples from early Indian Buddhism; the *Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala* as an example of an empowered Mahayana female teacher; and the "Chapter on Skillful Means", *Ocean Dragon King Sutra* and *Splendid Dharma Gate Sutra* of three scriptural examples of empowered women using sexuality for teaching. The latter examples are provided by Stevens in *Lust for Enlightenment*, ch. 3

15 See John Stevens, *Lust for Enlightenment* chapter 1 and 2 versus chapter 3 and 4. In Gross and Schireson, the "revolutionary" angle is dismissed: they prefer to think of the Buddha as "a spiritual genius who was still living with his own karmic consequences" (Schireson, 7) or as "not a social reformer seeking to correct social injustices and inequities" (Gross, 36)

16 A traditional term for seeking Buddhist ordination, implying the turn away from the worldly life

17 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 226.

placed them in a position of dependency towards monks. According to Gross and Schireson, these "Eight Special Rules" that were issued by the Buddha upon his reluctant admission of nuns' ordination, can be attributed as a root cause of much of the later inequities between monks and nuns.[18] Still today, Tibetan nuns are not recognized as full monastics and regardless of their attainment and age will have to sit behind and make obeisance to even the youngest monks.[19] One can imagine what it does to self-confidence and the quality of one's spiritual education if one is always made to sit in the very back of the room, with poor view and sound.

In the present-day however, from harvesting the available literature[20] it seems that the monastic life-style is only attractive to a small percentage of modern Buddhists, and many are actively seeking ways to root their Buddhist practice in the "flames" of working and family life. Gross spends the remainder of her book with the difficult and confusing task of imagining how the practice and value system of Buddhism would change in a post-patriarchal setting.

I will provide a short overview of the core teachings that Gross analyses to be gender-neutral, and subsequently zoom in on one aspect of Buddhist history: the role and position of the female body and of sexuality in Buddhist history. I hope that in focusing on this aspect I will be able to provide an image of the ambiguous position of women in Buddhism, as well as supply some historical context for the Miaozong-text. This aspect is the role and position of the female body and of sexuality in Buddhist history. It has to be noted that, since none of Buddhism's core teachings are literally concerned with gender, the section describing the position of the female body necessarily presents a partial image of some of the institutionalized expression(s) of Buddhism, rather than what could be considered its essence.

Core Teachings

From the perspective of most of East-Asian and Tibetan Buddhism, the core teachings of Buddhism came in three successive stages or "Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma". The first turning consists in a very pragmatic practice manual which is based on the observations of the Buddha that all of human life seems to be entrenched with suffering due to wrong observations about our true identity and a subsequent clinging to these wrong observations. Through a "noble eightfold path" featuring such elements as "right view", "right action", "right speech" and "right livelihood", the practitioner may eventually reconnect to a correct identification of self as Self: not identifying with the assembly of ideas and memories, but rather as the all-encompassing, all-benevolent Self beyond ego.

The second turning brings in a focus on the idea of emptiness, or *shunyata*, following the realization that nothing has any lasting substance or identity through to its furthest conclusions: every individual self is empty, language is empty, the idea of emptiness is empty, and, radically, even the Buddhist Dharma itself has no everlasting substance. This last step assures that Buddhism is foundationally non-dogmatic and has a deeper level of flexibility than any other of the big religions today. It has to be noted that, although there are some tendencies for this second-turning teaching to become philosophical, the emphasis of Buddhism is always on self-realization: thus the fact of emptiness is never something to be learned or accepted, but something to be realized experientially through practice.[21] In the third turning, the radicalism of the second turning is tempered somewhat by taking a reverse perspective, centering on the permanent and all-pervasive quality of Buddha nature which is the essence of every being.

We can summarize by saying that the core teachings present us with the reality of suffering, the cause of suffering, the path that integrates suffering, the realization of the inherent non-existence

18 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 38 and Schireson, *Zen Women,* 6.

19 Vicki MacKenzie*, Cave in the Snow* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 155.

20 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 228.

21 Ven. Sheng Yen, "Realizing Emptiness Versus Understanding Emptiness," Youtube interview, Sept 4, 2006. Video, 5:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EFyhO5TmQw.

of life as we have known it, and the realization of our True nature of all-pervasive compassion and intelligence. Rita Gross concludes: "Overall, the view of Buddhism, expressed in major teachings of each of the three turnings, is that "the dharma is neither male nor female." This view is expressed explicitly in texts presenting second-turning teachings of emptiness and implied in the first-turning teachings of egoless-ness and the third-turning teachings regarding the Buddha-nature. None of the major teachings of Buddhism supports gender inequity or gender hierarchy."[22] In other words, each of these teachings points towards a deeper truth than the one which is determined by the physical characteristics of our current body, or by the characteristics of our individual conditionings. However, Gross is also quick to point out that "neither male nor female" is not at all the same as "both male and female" and she argues that "the sex-neutral model is not sufficient to overcome androcentrism."[23]

The male gaze

In *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* we are presented with an aspiring nun who unflinchingly uses her naked body as a tool for challenging and awakening a man. How can we appreciate this gesture fully in its historical context?

Throughout Buddhist teachings, it seems that where sexuality is mentioned, the female body follows its trail and vice versa: where there is talk of the female body, sexuality is never far behind. This can be explained quite easily when looking at the cultural climate of India in the Buddha's time, during which women's sexuality was highly objectified and there were elaborate books describing exactly how a perfectly attractive female body should look, how women should behave and adorn themselves, etc.[24] Because sexuality was usually seen as a threat to the monastic community's existence in the early Buddhist teachings, women's bodies are often discussed in similar cautionary terms. Consequently we find that, most of Buddhism's foundational texts having been written by men, the perspective with regards to the female body available in the scriptures and in various meditations or visualizations is generally an *outsider*'s perspective –the perspective of someone who is looking at and thus separate from the female body, and moreover one that often seems to be tainted by various layers of cultural conditioning.[25]

With regards to this, Liz Wilson has made a study researching several Buddhist texts from the first millennium of the Common Era which use the female body especially in its decaying or mutilated form, as an object for meditation on impermanence.[26] This type of practice was indeed common and cannot be ascribed specifically to either Mahayana or First Turning teachings, as we find expressions of it throughout the blossoming periods of both teachings. Wilson elucidates how women also took part in these type of reflections (we find many examples of this in the Therigatha, the first collection of nun's Enlighenment poetry), and argues how this type of perspective fits in with an objectifying, distant gaze that separates woman from the lived experience of her own body but instead causes her to examine it through projected male eyes. It is clear that Wilson has the perspective of someone with little personal experience of Buddhist practice and she is obviously not very eager to try this type of meditation on the decay of her own body herself, which one might argue leads her to hold something of a distant and objectifying position of her own. However, her argument of the felt distance between the Buddhist practice and the subjective experience of a woman's body finds echo

22 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 209

23 Ibid, 222

24 See for Instance John Stevens, *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and* Sex (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1990), 5-6.

25 Various writers make the daring case that the Buddha himself may have still been dealing with some remnants of his past as a prince who felt suffocated by the temptations of his extensive harem. (Schireson, 7 and Stevens, ch. 1)

26 Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

in *The Hidden Lamp*, the contemporary collection of women's koans and commentaries in which *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* was also included. In the commentary on the story of Miaozong, for instance, Chris Fortin relays how her physical embodiment of Miaozong during a skit performance helped her to realize that she had always approached her study of koans (which traditionally involves the "becoming-one-with" an array of encounter dialogues involving exclusively male characters), with a subtle shift out of her own, woman's body into a male body.

Although there were in the very early times of Buddhism some highly regarded and influential female teachers, throughout Buddhist history their contributions to canonical writings has been extremely marginal. We can thus imagine that, though a large part of the Buddhist teachings come forth from a "beyond-gender" perspective, the influence of the various patriarchal societies that gave birth to the history of Buddhist practitioners has still left its mark and can be felt in a gender bias of its teachings. I am talking in this case not specifically about gender bias as in unequal opportunities, but rather about the fact that the teachings, having been developed by men, are likely to present a system that is male-biased.[27]

We may ask: does "beyond-gender" mean that femininity is totally included, or rather that it is simply skipped over? The claim that "Buddhism is beyond gender" (and, by implication, those who assert themselves for more attention to the female position are "stuck in duality") as issued by powerful male leaders has gained a certain notoriety among feminist Buddhist writers, who perceive it as a trope which too easily dismisses a reality of unequal opportunities and moreover refuses to allow for the possibility that the way most of the classical Dharma has developed does not include female subjectivity at all.[28] As a reaction to this, many contemporary female Buddhist teachers argue that the inclusion of the female perspective, and the research into specifically female-embodied practices and how these could differ from the traditional ones created by males, is vital.[29] This phenomenon is mirrored in French feminism, where Hélène Cixous and others declare their stubborn commitment to the word "feminine" and the idea of gendered, non-neutral writing. Cixous compares the reluctance to take a feminine position as a writer to the fake position of being "non-political":

> [W]e all know what that means! It's just another way of saying: "My politics are someone else's! And it's exactly the case with writing! Most women are like this: they do someone else's –man's- writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that is in effect masculine.[30]

We can compare this to the position of Tibetan Lama Tsültrim Allione, an important contemporary voice in the discussion of the "feminine" in Buddhism. She declared that she went through a period of doubt, thinking that she should perhaps "just drop the whole feminine issue". These thoughts were influenced by the dominant voice, seemingly issued from within her as well as by powerful Buddhist teachers, that told her that her allegiance to femininity was simply being "stuck in duality".[31] However, a major world event changed her around and she now emphasizes the importance of integrating both perspectives (gendered *and* non-dual).

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27 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* e.g 40-1

28 Schireson, *Zen Women,* xi-xiv

29 Lama Tsültrim Allione, *Wisdom Rising: Journey into the Mandala of the Empowered Feminine* (New York: Enliven Books, 2018), 5-12

30 Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, No.1 (Autumn 1981): 52

31 Lama Tsültrim Allione, "Divine Feminine," Youtube interview, June 11, 2009. Video, 9:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=L31KkVuz5_w.

The female body and sexuality in Buddhist history

The following presents a short overview of some of the attitudes popularly taken towards the female body and sexuality throughout Buddhist history. Because of the aforementioned co-emergence of female body and sexuality in Buddhist teachings, it will be easiest to present the case history of these two topics in a rather interwoven way, hoping that it is clear that the possible implied connection is one emerging out of this particular history and not some wagered metaphysical connection.

One may distil a distinctly "puritan" tradition which is prevalent in early Buddhist texts, most notably the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the codes of conduct for monks and nuns which is still upheld today by all except Japanese Zen monks and nuns). Zen priest and Eastern philosopher John Stevens distils three possible attitudes assumed by early puritan Buddhists with regards to the female body. Either it can be imagined to be one's sister, mother or daughter, or one may meditate on the loathsomeness and filth of the body, or the female body may simply be avoided as much as possible.[32] We will not deal in detail here with the first attitude. The second attitude, already touched upon above, expresses itself in the following quote, said by the Buddha to the tempting illusory goddesses that came to plague him on the eve of his Enlightenment:

> Beautiful you may seem
> But from the crown of your heads
> To the soles of your feet
> You are nothing more than bags of skin
> Filled with blood, pus and filth[33]

This proposed way of practicing meditation on the impurities of the human body was not restricted to female bodies alone; it could equally well be practised by men towards their own bodies or by females towards males. However, the historical reality is that in almost all situations that this approach is mentioned, and it is highly prevalent in the scriptures, it refers to the female body.[34] The implications of objectification have already been discussed.

The third attitude, of ignoring women, we find expressed here by the Buddha:

> The one thing that enslaves a man above all else is a woman. Her form, her voice, her scent, her attractiveness, and her touch all beguile a man's heart. Stay away from them at all costs.[35]

This too is a pervasive attitude, to be found in many scriptures. Although in this quote there is no specific agency placed on women, there are also stronger claims which specifically point towards women as evil temptresses and seductresses with a "mind of sin".[36] One text, which is often cited because of its exceptionally misogynistic tone, reads that

> It would have been better, confused man, had you put your male organ inside the mouth of a terrible poisonous snake than inside the vagina of a woman … It would have been better, confused man, had you put your male organ inside a blazing hot charcoal pit than inside the vagina of a woman.[37]

32 Stevens, *Lust For Enlightenment,* 45

33 Ibid, 24

34 See Stevens, *Lust for Englightenment,* 22-29 and Wilson, *Charming Cadavers.*

35 F.L. Woodward and E.M. Hare, *The Book of Gradual Sayings*. (London: Pali Text Society, 1979) qtd. in Stevens, 23

36 Stevens, 48

37 Vinaya Pitaka 3:20

With regards to the early tradition of portraying women and women's bodies as temptresses and potential threats to practice, Gross counters the tendency of feminist sources to interpret this as misogyny by adding scriptural material which points in the opposite direction, too: female practitioners being tempted by men. She concludes: "When the various stories of attempted seduction and temptation are analysed, many variants and motifs, rather than a single theme of misogyny, emerge." (46). However, she does suggest that such texts are easily misinterpreted and can thus have misogyny in their heirloom. Though scriptural misogyny is not a direct conclusion of the above, what we may conclude is that the majority of writings about sexuality take a distant perspective that objectifies the female body instead of including its perspective. Moreover, we can taste an attitude towards sexuality that is distinctly cautious and avoidant, one might even say fearful.

These early Buddhist attitudes would have lasting influence throughout all traditions, most especially the South-Asian Theravada schools. However, there have been later traditions in Buddhism with quite different attitudes towards sexuality, most notably the Tantric schools. Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism originated in India in the 8th century CE and was subsequently brought to Tibet where it has been practiced and kept alive ever since. There is also a Japanese Tantric school called Shingon. Rita Gross, whom herself practiced in the Tibetan tradition, writes the following about Tantra: "The world of Vajrayana practice is built on an intuition of the primordial purity and sacredness of the phenomenal world, which brings with it an intuition of the inherent workability and transmutability of *all* human emotions and experiences."[38] This emphasis on the workability and sacredness of every aspect of human life has led to a Buddhist practice which does not only accept sexuality, but even uses its powerful forces in order to kindle the flame of Enlightenment. Possibly also owing to a heritage from Tibet's earlier shamanic religion, the female body also has an entirely different position in Tantra. Images of fierce nude deities are ubiquitous and there exist specifically female visualization techniques in which the practitioner aims to realize their one-ness with these female deities through meditation.[39]

In Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, where we situate our text in the 12th century, the attitude towards sex was again slightly different. John Stevens writes that "compared with the writings of the puritan and the Tantric Buddhists, where sex, pro and con, is a major concern, Zen classics ignore the subject almost entirely, as if it didn't exist." He continues that "where sex does appear, it is almost always in a negative context. Chinese monks and nuns are forever being praised for their steadfast refusal to have anything to do with sex."[40] This puritanism is likely to have something to do with the heritage from early Indian Buddhism, the prevailing (neo-)Confucian strict morals, as well as a strong emphasis on celibate monastic practice. Still, if one scrutinizes the actual teachings of Ch'an and Zen one might find them fairly inclusive of all kind of expressions of "humanness" and theoretically spacious enough to incorporate the experience of sexuality as a part of practice. Zen/Ch'an's founding father Bodhidharma actually said that "Once one sees into his or her nature, sexual desire is perceived as essentially empty, and one no longer delights in it as purely physical pleasure. However even if one continues to indulge in sex, it is performed as a function of Buddha-nature, free of attachment."[41]

There are a few teachers in the history of Chinese Buddhism who don't hold back from the topic. Yuan'wu (Jap.: Engo), who was the teacher of Dahui Zonggao and thus the "Dharma grandfather" of Miaozong, was publicly non-celibate and has left us with several romantic poems. It is clear also that Dahui, Miaozong's teacher, has no fear of the matter: without hesitation he allows women to ordain alongside men, and even allows his lay student Miaozong to live at the monastery

38 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 80

39 Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) e.g. 41

40 Stevens, *Lust for Enlightenment,* 86

41 Red Pine, *The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 39ff (qtd. by Stevens)

in his quarters. He must have been aware of the image that he created by doing so, but does not seem to be bothered. From the legacy of master Zhaozhou or Joshu, one of the most famous Ch'an masters from the 9th century, it is also clear that his wisdom extended to the point of full integration inclusive of sexuality. He unhesitatingly teaches women of all ages and classes with great intimacy and care. In one famous koan, he subtly and beautifully faces the topic of sexuality with one of his nuns:

> A nun asked, "What is the deeply secret mind?"
> The master squeezed her hand.
> The nun said, "Do you still have that in you?"
> The master said, "It is you who have it."[42]

Considering the strict *Vinaya* rules which did not allow monks and nuns to even be alone in a room together, one might appreciate his lack of inhibition that dare use touch as a teaching device on a nun. Moreover, his daring reveals care and delicacy. Her answer in its turn shows the great openness and trust she feels towards him: rather than, as many women at least in the contemporary would, "shutting down" and feeling privately either harassed or excited, she innocently asks him about his relationship to his sexuality.

In terms of sexuality, the Song dynasty during which Miaozong and Wanan lived seems to have been a restrictive time. The widespread influence of Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi led to a heavy emphasis on restraint, self-control and a critique of desire and pleasure as selfishness.[43] We thus find ourselves in an historically interesting situation: the profoundly open-minded teaching tradition of Joshu, Engo and Dahui, embedded historically in the early tradition of puritan Buddhism and culturally in puritan Neo-Confucianism, brought forth the probing *pas-de-deux* of Miaozong and Wanan. As we will discuss in the following chapters, we can see all of these historical and cultural aspects make their appearance in their exploration of the boundaries of various types of inner and outer law.

42 "Joshuroku", trans. by James Green as *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu,* 104

43 Cuncun Wu, "Pornographic Modes of Expression and Nascent Chinese Modernity in Late Imperial China," *Modernism* Modernity 1, no. 2 (Oct. 2016): Online. https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/pornographic-modes-expression-and-nascent-chinese-modernity-late-imperial-china#_ednref14

2

Affective perspective: What does the text do?

> And finally this open and bewildering prospect goes hand in hand with a certain kind of laughter. Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women – which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen … And her first laugh is at herself.
> (Cixous, *Castration or Decapitation,* 55)

What I read firstly into *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* is laughter. We find in it a pattern of comic reversal which is ubiquitous in Zen texts[44] and which is also a marker of Michael Bakhtin's carnivalesque, in which hierarchical, rigid patterns are upset to provoke a type of laughter which relieves the common people from the pressure of strict and absolutist Christian rites and mores.[45] The Head Monk, high in rank, is interviewed by a lay woman without rank or qualifications and she puts him to shame. Our expectations about hierarchy are upset, and so are our expectations about what belongs in a Buddhist text and what not. As Schireson says: "[S]he vindicates the vagina: she extracts it from the Buddha's "blazing hot charcoal pit" and "mouth of a poisonous black snake" and transforms it into the passageway and birthplace of all Buddhas and practitioners."[46] There is a certain type of comic relief here: something is being transformed from a hellish and dangerous place to the very origin of all that is pure and good. The ensuing laughter is a typically Bakhtinian relief-laughter that "purifies from dogmatism, from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality."[47] As we shall see, this laughter resounds through Julia Kristeva's theorizing of *jouissance* and plays a significant role in how both Kristeva and Cixous portray the feminine.

When one traces the history of laughter in its relation to women and the feminine, one can come upon two almost contradictory findings. The first, which traces its origin to Aristotle, relegates laughter to the terrain of men, who use denigration as a humorous tool in order to uphold hierarchical structures.[48] Within this strand of the history of laughter, one finds throughout the centuries the exclamation that "women do not have a sense of humour".[49]Although pervasive, I prefer to leave this perspective aside for present purposes and focus on another view on laughter, which has come into academic consciousness in the past decades, supported by Michael Bakhtin's work on the carnival and Julia Kristeva's writings on *jouissance.* In this perspective, laughter is appreciated for its power as a tool of subversion, an erotic bodily force which has the power to undo the hierarchy of signification.

Jo Anna Isaak has made a comprehensive study of the role of women's laughter in contemporary art.[50] In her analysis, Bakhtin's study of the function of laughter as a subversive tool during the Medieval carnival suggests the historical alignment between women and the subversive popular comic culture, as well as their political stake in that culture. According to Bakhtin, in the

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44 Hyers, "Humor in Zen," 272.

45 Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World, trans.* Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 123.

46 Schireson, *Zen Women*, 187.

47 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* 123.

48 Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (New York: Palgrave, 1993), 24.

49 Ibid, 3.

50 Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996).

popular comic tradition, women usually took on the role of undoing the rigidity and stratification of the men's world, in this case the dominant discourse of strict, moralistic Christianity.[51] We see in his research this tension or dance between the ascetic, didactic and oppressive prevailing order and the force of laughter issuing out from the "lower bodily stratum", that area of defecation, death and regeneration. Somehow the body of woman seemed especially fit to represent the primacy of this stratum, with the mysterious life-giving womb and the utterly profane lower intestine in such close proximity that they may almost be confused with one another, as happens in Bakhtin's treatments of the grotesque body.[52] Indeed, Bakhtin frequently alludes to the womb as the "bodily grave".

Jo Anna Isaak in her chapter *Herstory of Laughter* ascribes to Kristeva and Ronald Barthes "notions of laughter as libidinal license, the *jouissance* of the polymorphic, orgasmic body."[53] Kristeva's theorizing on the "semiotic" can help us clarify somewhat the relationship between laughter, *jouissance* or feminine pleasure, subversion and language. The semiotic is a foundational property of our ability to language which roots it in the bodily, in the pre-cognitive field.[54] This quality of language and speech simultaneously precedes, envelopes and undoes the structures of symbolic organization, as the boundaries of order always give way into the surrounding space of chaos. Semiotic territory being linked to the first, "pre-signification-" year of life, for Kristeva and other French feminists, the semiotic is an extension of the body of the mother. It is the space of pre-discontinuity (before Freud's mirror stage) and of play which "experimental writing liberates, absorbs, and employs, a "pre-sentence making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense [that] makes nonsense abound with sense: makes one laugh"".[55] We see here how *jouissance,* the pure pleasure and joyfulness which accompanies relating to or from the playfulness of the semiotic field, has a liberative quality in language. If we see the semiotic as the *foundation*[56] of language, then we can see how this liberative or subversive quality stems not from a negative relationship of rebellion towards the "Symbolic" which is the space of signification ruled by the father and, according to Lacan, the phallus, but from a positive relating to a foundational property of language, which underlies and thus exceeds and includes the Symbolic.

Laughter as *jouissance* is, for Isaak, Bakhtin and Kristeva, a liberating force which "may be a catalyst that could enable a break or subversion in the established representational and social structure" and apparently its relationship to or as non-linear Eros is crux to this subversive power. It seems that, in certain situations, laughter is connected with the liberation of a particular sexual energy which is non-goal-oriented. This can be differentiated from Freud's perspective on the laughter which provides relief in the case of sexual jokes, because the erotic energy described by Freud is always a directional desire, rather than the "polymorphous, orgasmic" type of erotic energy which is characterized as the feminine sexual force by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray. Above it was mentioned how for Bakhtin, laughter is a force that liberates from "the single meaning", from dogmatism and absolutism, and how this type of upset of single meaning may be found in *Miaozong's Dharma Interview*. When the "*jouissance* of the polymorphic orgasmic body", which according to Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray is the quintessentially feminine Eros, is added to the equation, we begin to see how there may be something of this "relief-laughter" which may be experienced in reaction to Buddhist koans about feminine sexuality which points to a more

51 Isaak, *Women's Laughter,* 18.

52 As happened in Rabelais' novel: see Bakhtin, *Rabelais¸* 225.

53 Isaak, *Women's Laughter*, 15.

54 Ibid, 15.

55 Ibid.

56 This is stressed by Terry Eagleton: "It is important to see that the semiotic is not an alternative to the symbolic order, a language one could speak instead of 'normal' discourse: it is rather a process within our conventional sign-systems, which questions and transgresses their limits…On this view, the feminine—which is a mode of being and discourse not necessarily identical with women—signifies a force within society that opposes it" (Isaak, *Women's Laughter,* 15-16)

fundamental, perhaps even cosmic rumble of the feminine belly which finds its resonance throughout cultures and times. In what follows we will explore this connection between laughter and feminine Eros manifesting in various cultural contexts. The appearance of a central-stage vagina seems to be a running theme with special potency to unleash the joyful rumble of *jouissance*-laughter. What this may reveal is that Miaozong's story and its affective response are not an insular or even culture-specific phenomenon but can be embedded in a larger affective trend.

Most studies on women and laughter feature the Greek goddess Baubo, who does not have a head but sports eyes in her nipples and speaks from her vagina. Baubo cheers up Demeter from her deep mourning after the loss of her daughter Persephone, by telling her dirty jokes. After meeting Baubo and having a few good belly-laughs, Demeter regains the strength to resign to an agreement of annual cycles of loss and hope. The Baubo figure played a significant role in the Eleusinian Mysteries, where she appeared to those who participated in the transformative ritual on a bridge marking the transition from sorrow to joy: the seminal moment of rebirth. Michael Bakhtin writes: "Like the Sybil of Panzoult in Rabelais's novel, she lifts her skirts and shows the parts through which everything passes (the underworld, the grave) and from which everything issues forth".[57] What this signals is the ubiquitous association of the vagina (and, metonymically, of woman), with the qualities of both birth and death. This double association may be found throughout non-patriarchal or female-venerating cultures, for instance in the Celtic goddess Cerridwen who gives birth and eats her offspring and in the Saharan goddesses painted by Spero whose skeletal bodies carry a baby inside. We can discern it similarly in Tantric and sometimes Mahayana Buddhism where the feminine principle –in esoteric Mahayana personified as Prajnaparamita, the Mother of The Buddhas- represents the space of wisdom or emptiness which is both the origin of all phenomena and where all phenomena return to.[58]

Another writer who mentions Baubo is Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her hugely popular Jungian analysis of women's psychic development *Women Who Run With The Wolves.* Remarkable about her chapter on sexuality is that this whole chapter revolves around laughter, and the sexual stories and jokes that are told by women to other women in order to lighten their hearts and open up the rumble of their bellies. One of these stories is about a group of indigenous women who are given skirts and shirts to wear by a colonial official so that they may look decent as they welcome a governor in parade. As it turns out, the women don't much like the blouses so they leave those at home, but as they have been explicitly told to cover their breasts, upon arrival of the official vehicle they dutifully lift up the given skirts to cover their heads with them. The author describes how this story and the laughter it provoked was like a talisman for her for many years: something she wore in secret on the skin of her breast and would press against her in difficult times.[59] This story shows again the power of "naughty" laughter (and the silently roaring rebellion of the bared vagina) not just as a force of liberation, but also as a connection between women as a kind of common secret that has protective powers.

Another example of this can be found in the quaint figure of Sheela-na-gig, the Celtic goddess who is, in stark opposition to almost any other depiction of a female body at any time, really not much more than a very big head and a very big vagina which is being held open by her own two hands. Jo Anna Isaak writes about artworks featuring Sheela and other genital-exposing female bodies that "[t]hese images have the opposite effect of fetishized images of women; they are not engaged in a cover-up. The laughter they provoke, like the laughter of the carnival, defeats the fears of the unknown." In the artworks analysed by Isaak, for example by Nancy Spero and Niki de Saint-Phalle, she sees the great abyssal vagina, the psychoanalytic "lack", the "unsignifiable"[60], being

57 Isaak, *Women's Laughter,* 25.

58 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 204.

59 Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women who Run with the Wolves* (London: Rider, 1992), 343-4.

60 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation", 45-46.

transformed into something delightful. In both Spero and Saint-Phalle (the latter is not actually mentioned by Isaak, but the similarity is striking), the Sheela figure appears in celebratory, dynamic artworks marked by bright colours and abundant form, but in both artists we can also discern an artistic period before this celebratory stage in which they represented the female body as fragmented and disfigured, in black and white, with vaginas marked by empty spaces, demons and weapons.[61] Soon we arrive, also, at Hélène Cixous and her Medusa, whose archetypal qualities of abyss and castration, as Isaak notes, are transformed in Cixous' writing to beauty and laughter.

These transformations –Baubo who with her talking and laughing vagina helps Demeter to embrace the yearly cycle of "underworld to overworld"; in Spero's and Saint-Phalle's artworks which made Sheela-Na-Gig its jolly muse, and in Cixous' writing about the beautiful Medusa - seem to resonate very closely with Miaozong's, which transformed the vagina from a "blazing hot charcoal pit" into the birthplace of all Buddhas. Baubo's victory over Hades, Spero's and Saint-Phalle's artistic journeys, Cixous' rebellion against Freud, and Miaozong's vindication of the vagina from early puritanism: in all cases the vagina is transformed from a space of absence and danger into the bringer of joyous, laughing life.

61 See for example Saint-Phalle's black and white relief bodies and hearts and Spero's "Codex Artaud XXVI".

3

"Leave your attendants at the door": vulnerability and transgression in *Miaozong's Dharma Interview*

Feminine libidinal economy

Hélène Cixous's life work has been to explore what it means to write through a female body. To her, as mentioned, writing is never neutral but always bears the marks of gender and her effort has been to wrest out a specifically feminine voice from a landscape of literature which she perceived to be speaking exclusively "in the masculine". In so doing, she has mapped the feminine experience in texts ranging from "avant-garde" novels to pointed academic essays. In the following three chapters we will employ some of her concepts in order to explore what *Miaozong's Dharma Interview* can teach us about the role of femininity in Buddhism.

One of Cixous's key terms is the "feminine libidinal economy". Throughout her writing she draws forth this specifically feminine way of "spending"[62] in evocatively detailed and various terms. The feminine way of spending is one of relentless giving, which contrasts to the masculine pattern of withholding and reckoning. Note that I would personally prefer to use the word "patriarchal" rather than masculine. Cixous in her work sometimes states that the masculine is in a sense still unexplored terrain,[63] so rather than equating it with the way it has historically played itself out in patriarchal ways, I would find it more generous to grant the masculine some space in which it may find a truer expression. However, for the sake of clarity and also out of a certain respect for Cixous's daring, I continue to employ the terms in Cixous's manner. Cixous's masculine is always keeping the accounts and only gives as an investment for future returns in profit or pleasure.[64] The feminine gives totally and without looking back. What does the feminine give? Herself/ves: she throws herself into life viscerally and physically through speech, writing, care, love.

In this chapter, we will explore what Miaozong's action has in common with Cixous's way of feminine spending. We encounter in Cixous how the feminine economy expresses itself in taking risks and breaking laws, notably, the absolute "Law" of the signifier, as well as in a vulnerable opening up and in innocence. There is often an interplay and a tension between these two attitudes. For instance, in *The Book of Promethea,* at which we will look a little more in-depth below, the "I" regularly voices her allegiance to armament and violence, whereas Promethea, the book's heroine, is characterized by complete innocence and non-defense.

Treating these two qualities as separate will not entirely do: the whole endeavor of *The Book of Promethea* is to chronicle the meeting, intertwining and inter-absorption of these characters. We are led to see how there is violence in innocence and how there may be vulnerability in transgression. For the purposes of textual clarity, however, we will mostly treat these "traits" or characteristics (while trying to avoid reducing ourselves to thinking in terms of strictly delineated categories) as separate and hope their interpenetration will nonetheless take place from their separate textual spatiality. First however we need to situate Cixous's terms in the psychoanalytic background theory.

Libido and Law: a (post-)psychoanalytic perspective

The masculine libido, for Cixous as for Freud and Lacan before her, is constituted out of a lack, an unfulfilled desire, which emerges out of the eternal, unfillable distance between the signifier and the signified (word and meaning), between the Real and the Symbolic, or between self and other.[65] This separation originates at the initiation of the mirror stage, the initiation of the child into language and

62 Fr. *Dépenser*: spending, but also "un-thinking"

63 For example, see Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa", 877, footnote 1.

64 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman,* trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 87; 91.

65 Ang, "Reading Hélène Cixous", 81.

into a separate identity from the mother. Lacan calls this distance "a *metonymic remainder that runs under it... an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued.*.."[66] The metonymic remainder is "the excess of articulation": the aspect of language that is not-meaningful, the physical act of vocation that allows words to emerge. With "under it" Lacan means the attempt of the linguistic subject of translating "real" experience into symbolic language; a translation that never quite works. As soon as a conception of the self begins to form as a separate, comprehensive entity, the notion of "the rest of the world", or "not-me" comes into being. This is intimately tied up with the functioning of symbolic language, in which every "thing" exists only by virtue of every other "thing" that it is *not*. The *Not* thus fulfils a vital function in this classical Freudian libido. There is always a distance, a separation, a disunion. This distance, in classical psychoanalysis, is what creates the desire. Freudian desire is thus by nature something which is un-quenchable, an eternal force or motion attempting to glue together the distance between the mother and the son, between the Symbolic and the Real. In Buddhist terms, one could perhaps say: between illusion and enlightenment.

Because the other is fundamentally distant and different from self, it is essentially un-knowable. Therefore, the (in Cixous's terms: masculine; in Freud's terms: only) libidinal effort is to subsume, conquer or appropriate the other, so that it can be considered part of the territory of the self (*propre:* own, proper, selfsame), neutralized by having been translated into the familiar language of the self. The domination of the incomprehensible, mysterious and unknowable has been one of the major efforts of patriarchy and woman was often put exactly in that position of the eternal mystery.[67] In a similar vein, in classical psychoanalysis, woman is placed outside of the Symbolic order, because she lacks a relationship to the paternal threat of castration.[68] This view expresses itself in the highly prevalent stereotype that "women don't speak": they may *talk* (too much), but they do not actually say anything. They sing, or they babble, or they whisper or whimper.

For Cixous and Kristeva, this sidelining puts woman in a good position to undermine the patriarchal Symbolic system, that is, if she is able to own her otherness to it. Because of her culturally assigned position on the margin of the Symbolic, woman is closer to *jouissance*, to the enjoyment and play that are prohibited by Symbolic signification.[69] Because *jouissance* stems from a pre-signifying libidinal realm (and is thus unconditioned by the threat of lack), feminine desire is vast, unbound and unlimited.

<u>Zen and subversion of knowledge</u>

For someone who is beyond the mirror stage, this space of *jouissance* only becomes available through a disloyalty to the Symbolic Law or in other words, through an undoing of the Symbolic urge to "know": to dominate and possess the Other through knowledge. Cixous writes: "As soon as the question "What is it?" is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation." This remark, coupled with the feminine endeavor of *dépenser* ("spending" but also, "un-thinking"), is interesting to consider in relation to Zen Buddhism. The question "What is it?" may be a fundamental tool in Zen practice, as long as it is used *without a reply being sought*, but rather as a kind of method to undress ourselves from knowledge. From Cixous's perspective, we could see this practice as a kind of inversion of masculine interrogation, or perhaps even as a form of mimesis that undoes the dominant discourse exactly by unfaithfully reiterating it.

There is, for instance, a koan which reads as follows:

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66 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Book XI,* trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Allain Miller (New York: Norton, 1981), 154.

67 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation", 49.

68 Ibid, 45-6.

69 Ang, "Reading Hélène Cixous", 84 under "jouissance".

Attention!
Master Jizo asked Hogen, "Where have you come from?"
"I pilgrimage aimlessly," replied Hogen.
"What is the matter of your pilgrimage?" asked Jizo.
"I don't know," replied Hogen.
"Not knowing is the most intimate," remarked Jizo.
At that, Hogen experienced great enlightenment.[70]

We could say, with the danger of being slightly reductive, that this space of incomprehensibility, Lacan's "metonymic remainder", the gap between Symbolic and Real, is exactly where this koan tells us to search for intimacy. This beyond-space is the playground of Zen, and it is, as we will see, the forbidden forest of Cixous's feminine. My question is: is it the same play-forest?

Woman who enters

From the perspective of ego, the "un-knowing" at stake in Zen and with Cixous's feminine transgression is not at all desirable. In order for the ego's integrity to be maintained, it is vital that the threat of non-signification or not-knowing is undone, but this results in all kinds of "to here, but no further" signs in the ego-ic landscape. There seems to be no real difference here between men and women: every woman who speaks language finds herself before and defined by these (stop-) signs. But there is a difference in possible attitudes towards the unknown. One might choose to engage with the danger, or one might not, and here is where Cixous makes the difference between masculinity and femininity. To her, the feminine is the one who dares to transgress, who dares to take the step into what is forbidden, what is behind the signs. Whether this characterization of feminine and masculine traits is arbitrary, a play of cultural constructs, or whether it holds some kind of deeper *essence* is something we do not have space to explore here. For now I follow Cixous's line of argument.

"Entering" for Cixous has a very physical connotation as well as a symbolic one. In Genesis, Eve "enters" the apple with her mouth: she discovers it, tastes it, finds out that there is an inside and that this inside is good, pleasurable.[71] In the same motion she breaks into God's incomprehensible absolute Law by trespassing it. There is this double motion, which is really one motion, in Cixous's entering: woman enters into the forbidden territory that is closed off by the law (God's Law, the Law of language) and in the same movement she is able to "enter" into the physical, into her own embodiment which was unavailable to her because of being "unsignifiable": something that could not be spoken about: an "other".[72]

One thing that matters in Cixous's definition of transgression is that we are dealing here with a kind of "entering forbidden territory" which is really a self-territory, a demarcated space of self which is questioned and overthrown, with the risk of losing ground, losing life and everything. So the subversion that is at stake in this entering is really *self-subversion* and this is where Cixous takes a step that not every feminist and cultural theorist is so willing to make: the step of giving up blaming the outside "daddy", but confronting the delineations of inner patriarchy. She writes: "Not forgetting doesn't mean not forgetting oneself. Means forgetting oneself just enough. No more self."[73] And in this position she brushes arms with Zen's founding fathers Dogen Zenji in what is probably the most-quoted passage of Zen wisdom: "To practice the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be Enlightened by the ten thousand things." Taking that step is

70 Shoyo Roku, Case 20.
71 Cixous, "Extreme Fidelity," 133.
72 Cixous and Clement, *Newly Born Woman,* 103.
73 Hélène Cixous, "Lemonade Everything was so Infinite," in *The Hélène Cixous Reader,* 115

much easier said than done, requiring a life-long attitude of vigilance, inquisitiveness and persistence.

This also means that the transgression of the feminine that Cixous talks about is not necessarily marked by the usual signs of outer rebellion: struggle and resistance. Instead, her transgressing is more characterized as a kind of hurling oneself over the boundaries of the over-active Superego; a leap of faith into the unknown territories of the psyche. This being necessarily an act of trust and surrender, it is thus that transgression and vulnerability are really one in her writing. Interestingly, we can see this proximity also echoed in Chris Fortin's commentary on Miaozong's Dharma interview, where she describes a women's Zen retreat (which had the Miaozong koan as its theme) named "Ferocious Vulnerability and Vulnerable Ferocity". My question is: Can Miaozong be said to display the feminine qualities of "transgressive entering" and vulnerably giving herself as described by Cixous?

Miaozong and Transgression

In one reading, it is possible to appreciate Miaozong's action as highly experimental, transgressive and subversive of all kinds of laws. In a monastery, where strict celibacy and monastic codes reign, she takes her clothes off in a Dharma interview. "Let the priests tremble", Cixous's words echo, "we are going to show them our sexts."[74] If we view Miazong's words, as she points to her genitals, that "this is the place where all Buddhas and ancestors come into the world through", as a conversation with the historical Buddha and the tradition which took no particularly positive stance towards either motherhood[75] or female sexuality, she comes across as rather a rebellious lady. Neither her native Song culture, nor the Buddhist tradition that she was in the process of committing herself to seem to have been very encouraging about flashing vaginas. On the contrary, even the mention of the existence of female genitalia is rare, in the Zen tradition perhaps not unsurprisingly, but also in Song China generally, where even medical texts speak shyly of "below the girdle".[76] She thus definitely seems to break open an area of conversation that could be said to be at the very least ignored if not suppressed in the dominant culture(s). We may consider the historical impact of the simple gesture of putting the female body *central* and moreover of clearly speaking *from* and *as* that body.

According to Cixous, it is woman's separation from her body, her inability to speak and act from a place of embodiment, that makes her into a patriarchal subject. It is perhaps thus that Cixous speaks about "entering life" and "entering the law" quite interchangeably. In *The Newly Born Woman* we find a passage which very clearly illustrates this interweaving:

> And they told her there was a place she had better not go. And this place is guarded by men. And a law emanates from this place with *her* body for its locus. They told her that inside her law was black, growing darker and darker… And she doesn't enter her body.[77]

Here we have a description of the particular mystique of *woman's* body, and the (im)possibility of inhabiting that body by socialized female subjects. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous paints us a rather earth-quaking picture of what it would look like if woman *did* inhabit her body fully:

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74 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 885.

75 Gross: In Buddhism, the figure of the mother is either seen as someone to be pitied for being excluded from participating in practice and inevitably being victim to the endless chains of attachment (to her children), or as an object of one's endless gratitude and generosity for "all that she has suffered on one's behalf". She is rarely viewed as an example. *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 234-5.

76 Sabine Wilms, "Ten Times More Difficult to Treat. Female Bodies in Medical Texts from Early Imperial China", NAN Nü 7, no. 2 (2005): 182.

77 Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, 103.

> We are stormy and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking.[78]

Now, who wouldn't want to enter into such a dynamic? Yet, it gives to think that today, more than 40 years after its publication, what Cixous described in *Laugh of the Medusa* still seems like a largely unrealized potential. Indeed much of the book *Newly Born Woman* deals with the history of how woman has come to *not* inhabit her body and to live in separation from this potential.
We may remember here the tradition in Buddhist textual history of regarding woman's body from a distance rather than including it as a subject position. In traditions where it *is* explicitly included as a subject position, such as Tantric Buddhism and tantric Hinduism, we are presented with images not entirely dissimilar to Cixous's poetic rendering in *Laugh of the Medusa*.[79] However, in the tradition of Miaozong, such discourse is not readily available. Surviving written expressions of women in Ch'an are rare, marginal and almost never make explicit reference to being female or the experience of female embodiment.[80] Thus we can appreciate that Miaozong is doing something rather unusual here, by singling out her femininity, and even pointing to her very femininity as the origin of Enlightened life. To position herself naked in bed is a suggestive thing to do of Miaozong on several levels: she implies something about women's "place": she mimetically enlarges a stereotype by enacting it. Cixous writes that the archetypal place of woman is in bed, passive. We find her in bed where she is either sleeping, as in the fairytales, or unable to participate in culture, as in the psychoanalytic fairytale of the hysteric. In both cases, she is passive and silent. If we cannot say with absolute certainty how this "bed-archetype" translates into Song context, we do at least know that woman's place was thought to be "inside" the house and compounds, an attitude which seems to have led to a great paucity in female written expression during Song times.[81]

There is an relevant parallel between Miaozong's demonstrative "bed-move" and Cixous's writing about the hysteric woman. The hysteric, Cixous writes , cannot speak: she is placed outside of the Symbolic by patriarchal subjects who preclude the possibility of woman speaking about her own experience.[82] Cixous sees the hysteric as the ultimate embodiment of the patriarchal fantasy of woman, but it may not be so difficult for many women to sympathize with the position of feeling strangely muted and unable to express something that is vitally important to them in the presence of a patriarchal audience.

As they are unable to communicate in words, hysterics speak with their bodies: "What talks is not heard because it is the body that talks, and man does not hear the body."[83] Miaozong can be seen

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78 Cixous, "Medusa", 899

79 E.g. "Because her great bliss is imperturbable, She is a mountain. Because lesser beings cannot fathom her profundity, She is a forest. Because her cavern is filled with nectar, She is a cave. Because her union of wisdom and skill is deep, She is a riverbank." Tsonkhapa, *sBas don kun gsal.* Qtd. in Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment,* 150-1.

80 See Beata Grant, *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns (*Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

81 "Although Ming-Qing Dynasty scholars enjoy a wealth of woman's writing, historians of the Song dynasty must commit themselves to an exhaustive search of the widest possible range of surviving sources."
Man Xu, *Crossing the Gate: Everyday Lives of Women in Song Fujian*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 5.

82 "You are aware, of course, that for Freud/Lacan, woman is said to be "outside the Symbolic": outside the Symbolic, that is outside language, the place of the Law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and the cultural order." Source??
"Lacan … says "A woman cannot speak of her pleasure""
Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," 45-6.

83 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," 49

as taking on the one hand this position of the speaking body, but at the same time she overturns the archetype of the muted woman by articulating herself very clearly in language. This can be regarded as a typical example of Luce Irigaray's "mimetic" feminist strategy,[84] which aims to subvert stereotypes by disloyally repeating them.[85]

First, we have been provoked by Wanan to deal with the body-as-object, as viewed from outside, either a threat or a thing to be possessed, an "other". For patriarchy, woman's bodily perspective is totally incomprehensible,[86] leading to either its mystification or its marginalization. So Wanan's initial attitude of opposition to Miaozong's presence results in quite a typical positioning of the female body "on the edge" (of legality, for instance). This positioning finds resonance throughout Buddhist history, right towards the extremely hesitant admission of nun's ordination by the Buddha himself, on the account that the inclusion of women would shorten the lifespan of the Dharma with five hundred years.[87] Ever since, women have mostly (up to now) been very much on the margins of Buddhist practice, and we can from that perspective consider the transgressive nature of Miaozong's "entering" into the very heart of the monastery and its teachings.

Now, Miaozong has, in a move that shows courage and wisdom, put her woman's body completely central in their conversation. "Was this your problem?", she seems to say. Or: "Is "this" illegal? An anomaly? Matter out of place?" By positioning herself very much in a classically objectified position (naked, in bed, at a distance), but in a situation completely inappropriate for such objectification, she invites Wanan and us to move from body-as-object, and consider other perspectives on this body, her body. What is it? Is it really so strange? So different? So mysterious? In a sense, Miaozong confronts us with woman's body as a question.

This is an uncomfortable question, not only to Wanan but also to many of his predecessors. But it is rather a good question to be asked. And it *is* asked in the present day, now that Buddhist teachers such as Rita Gross and Lama Tsültrim Allione have started to ask themselves how the Dharma would look if it took the perspective of female embodiment as its starting point. Particularly in Tibetan Buddhism there are a lot of examples to draw from: there is a major figure called the *dakini*, who is a kind of spiritual feminine manifestation of extraordinary wisdom, skill and fierceness. She is represented naked, often in full show of her vulva, in a dancing posture and amidst a fire that manifests the intensity of her wisdom. She holds a knife that cuts through dualistic thinking high above her head, and has a staff that represents her inner masculine side, and thus her independence and completeness as a woman. Lama Tsültrim Allione has started a movement of spreading an old Tibetan practice in which the practitioner identifies as these dakinis.[88] In such ways, it is possible to experience the subtleties of the path of meditation that are particular to a female body.

On the other hand, in a reading which is more concerned with historicity, one may well wonder if it really makes sense to attach the category of subversivity or transgression to a text from such a

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84 Sarah Donovan*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* "Mimesis," under "Luce Irigaray," Online. https://www.iep.utm.edu/irigaray/#SH4a

85 It is noted by the editors of *The Hidden Lamp* that "[m]any of these stories turn stereotypes about women upside down." (7) They go on to provide the themes of mimetic inversion that occur throughout their collection. It would seem then that these type of "corrections" have been to some extent prevalent in Buddhist (marginal) history.

86 "She is the strangeness he likes to appropriate." *Newly Born Woman,* 68; and: "As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time that they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. … We the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies, we are black and we are beautiful." "Medusa," 877-8. To me, these quotes shows the double movement of both the solidifying of women's otherness in patriarchal discourse, making her other also to herself, and subsequently the re-appropriation of that otherness, that "dark space" by woman. Speaking "from the dark", she owns the space of incomprehensibility.

87 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 32.

88 Allione, *Wisdom Rising.* The entire book is dedicated to this practice.

different cultural background. If we look a little deeper, we do see that Miaozong's action is not exactly met with the type of resistance which is typical to follow a highly subversive act. Her teacher appreciates her wisdom. Wanan acknowledges his defeat. There seems to be neither a subsequent effort to tie back together the strands of the old discourse by covering up what happened, nor any scandal or blaming- and shaming party in order to outlaw the transgressor.

If no resistance follows, can we then say that her action was one of resistance? Or does it simply display the curiosity and exploration which marks Cixous's subversive subject, the Little Red Riding Hoods innocently investigating their inner forests with their unrestrained libidos? As said, in Cixous's dealing with feminine or feminist subversiveness, it seems to be rather a byproduct of the unrestrained feminine self-expression than that it is really targeted *against* something.

From a more historical-realistic point of view, we can ask whether this type of exploration is really what is happening here. Is this jouissance in action? How could we tell? It may seem to us that Miaozong is laughing inside like we are when we read her story, but in another reading she may be simply following her intuition to create the situation most conducive to liberation. In yet a more challenging reading, perhaps she is just looking to "score a point". We may have to contend that there may be yet something else going on altogether, something which is elusive to the contemporary or un-trained mind.

In traditional Zen koan study, what one does to "solve a koan" is to fully enter and become one with the situation and/or the characters of the koan. We read in the commentary to this koan in *The Hidden Lamp* that Chris Fortin has learned from "entering Miaozong's skin" (in this case very literally by enacting a kind of performance in which she wears a skin-coloured body stocking) that *her very body*, a woman's body with womb and breasts and vagina, is the body of wisdom and enlightenment, the body of the Buddha. Fortin saw that in her previous koan study she had always made a subtle shift towards male embodiment in order to identify with the male characters in the story.[89]

But the question is whether Chris Fortin really became one with Miaozong. The issue is whether she intimately was able to "not-know" Miaozong and Wanan and the strangeness between them. It is at least possible that she is simply reliving the situation from her perspective and leaning on it as a support for her own emotional growth. The question, here, is who can really say *why* Miaozong took off her clothes or who can say what that meant for her in the given situation. In fact, in one way it seems that this tendency to project meaning, to search for her intention and to approach her from the standpoint of our contemporary feminist hopes (for a world in which vaginas can freely speak and be spoken about) may in the end also be an obstruction to a respectful meeting "of the right distance" with Miaozong and Wanan. I would argue that, even if we read her as a feminist, and I believe it fruitful to do so, we may at the same time read her as a "non-feminist" as well, or at least to keep an openness to entirely different interpretations to enter the conversation.

<u>Femininity and Openness / Surrender</u>

If we read Cixous's feminine only as rebellious, actively investigating, rattling and shaking up the big man's world all the time we are not doing her altogether justice. She also has a quality of total letting go, of opening, surrendering and dissolving and in fact, as we have already touched upon, it is often in her very surrender that her transgression lies. Cixous performs, sings, the feminine becoming, the dissolving of boundaries, the spaciousness of the feminine I, as when she says:

> Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide … When id is ambiguously uttered – the wonder of being several- she doesn't defend herself against these unknown women whom she's surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability. I am

89 Caplow and Moon, ed. "Hidden Lamp," 108-109.

> spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation.[90]

In Cixous's utopian cantations we discern the non-defense against transformation, and the pleasure of giving oneself without restraint. In *Laugh of the Medusa* these experiences might have still looked somewhat like distant monumental ecstatic states, but in *The Book of Promethea,* Cixous guides us more intimately into the difficult, often painful journey of offerings and openings that this attitude entails.

Cixous tells us about her love story with a mystical angel called Promethea. Promethea has stolen the fire from heaven, but she herself is unarmed. Promethea says: "I want to be your slave your queen." And the "I" responds: "She, bareheaded, weaponless, without paper, without a mount, without a car, without a ship to sail, without a place to fall back, said that to me" (89). The "slave and queen" connote total surrender as well as total dignity and mastery. In patriarchal thinking, this would be a paradox or an impossibility, but these are the characteristics of Cixous's feminine project. She gives herself to the point of total disappearance and from that, her power is born.

The love story with Promethea sets in motion an awakening in the author, who characterizes herself as carrying all kinds of arms, shields and other protective devices. Being a writer, she is foremost armed with words and paper, with the luxury of the distance of description. She has a literary civilizedness about her, but Promethea confronts her with the direct and ruthless reality of the body.

> I saw your bare feet. I saw the nakedness of your feet. I saw the nakedness of your soul…. I in full armor, I no longer able to read my own book, I no longer able to think my own thoughts, my eyes were struck by the light of your two feet, and that was the simple truth, the simplest, the most unthinkable … Your innocence, Promethea, was what flashed this dreadful light into my eyes, and I had no defense against it.[91]

What does it mean to open to another like that, when we let go of our defenses to the world, with its beauty and its pain, and allow ourselves to be touched in our innocence and vulnerability? Most people will know the experience of being "taken off guard" by something. It may be the song of a bird that suddenly hits us, or a plastic bag flying on the wind. Or the smell of a beloved one. It can be anything. We see, hear, smell that and suddenly our life turns into poetry, whether lyrical or melancholy. These are moments of grace that we can to some extent prepare for but never provoke. And yet, there are not so many people willing to embody the fierce trust that Cixous describes in Promethea. This raises the question of what it takes to trust and let go; or how to send our attendants away.

Zen provides answers to these questions, as we can see in the example of Miaozong. Her saying "Send you attendants away" may mean, in my reading: "Take off your armor. Drop your defenses." You are entering a space where all your past experience, where everything you've accumulated will not help you. You are entering there where status, clothes, helpers, ideas and gadgets will only be an obstruction to intimacy, to true meeting. So how naked can you strip? How much can you bare yourself? Can you give it all up? If so: how?

This is the challenge of vulnerability that Miaozong poses, and that is not something she herself invented, but a defining quality of the traditional Dharma interview. Contemporary Zen teacher Joan Sutherland describes this as follows:

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90 Cixous, "Medusa," 889.

91 Hélène Cixous, *The Book of Promethea,* trans. Betsy Wing (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 47.

> Zen meetings have the simplest of forms: two people sitting on the floor, face inches from face, in a candlelit room. And yet that small room is a large field, containing the stars and the earthworms and poems and cities. In the vastness, the Chinese teacher Linji said, the true person has no rank; everyone and everything is perfectly equal, and completely themselves. Here we don't even have stories about what meetings are for. The world of how you think it ought to be and whether you're making a good impression is a ghost world; work in the room is sitting together in the real, where anything might be possible. Authority lies in the timeless moment itself: What is most real, most true, right here and right now?[92]

Sutherland indicates some of the characteristics of a "Zen meeting": there will be a suspension of ordinary ranks and hierarchies; stories and expectations, or in other words knowing "what" and knowing "how" suddenly become useless, as the authority is brought back to the unpredictable uniqueness of each moment; ordinarily perceived boundaries of time and space are loosened as the room gives way to a "vast field". We can gather that in this type of meeting, the participants do not have much to hold onto. They are robbed of those favorite shields and swords of modern minds: knowledge, rank, social codes, plans, boundaries.

We could say that this type of vulnerability is really a defining quality of Buddhist practice, which aims at giving up our attachments to securities and familiarities and surrendering to the ultimate, which is beyond boundaries of self.[93] Here in the Dharma interview however, which is an integral part of traditional Zen training and usually takes place between teacher and student, we have a specific practice that aims at uncovering this vulnerability *in relationship to the other*. This is quite a difference with sitting alone on a mountain and giving oneself to the profundity of the starry night. Rita Gross writes about relationship as a domain of life more associated with the feminine and part of her exploration of what an androgynous future Dharma practice could look like centers on the importance of integrating relationship.[94] This aspect is also central to Cixous's project of femininity which speaks "of femininity as keeping alive the other that is confided to her, that visits her, that she can love as other".[95] In a way the "intimacy" which is made very explicit in the interaction of Miaozong and Wanan –the relational aspect of Enlightenment and all the challenging aspects that come with "relationship"- are implicitly present in the Zen teachings; we can deduce this for example from Sutherland's description of the Dharma interview, and also from the koans of Joshu and Jizo earlier in this text.

Relationships to others pose challenges that a solitary life would not necessarily do. With Miaozong's gesture she puts extra emphasis on the "personal" aspect of their interaction, which creates another atmosphere than an exchange which centers around transcendent wisdom. Even though the transpersonal is always a factor in a Dharma interview, with her nudity Miaozong skillfully maneuvers both players into a layer of deep fragility, the physical body's "lower strata", where the unconscious is at its most complex and where the tempting exercises of spiritual transcendence may always leave behind some (un)pleasant rubbish in a corner. As one famous Zen koan reads: "In order to know the Way in perfect clarity, there is one essential point you must penetrate and not avoid. The Red thread of passion between our legs that cannot be severed. Few face up to the problems, since it

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92 Joan Sutherland, "What Is Dokusan?" *Lion's Roar,* December 1, 2004.
https://www.lionsroar.com/dharma-dictionary-dokusan/

93 "So becoming a refugee is acknowledging that we are homeless and groundless, and it is acknowledging that there is really no need for home, or ground. … We are suspended in a no-man's land in which the only thing to do is to relate with the teachings and with ourselves."
Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, "The Decision to Become a Buddhist," *Shambhala Sun,* May 2001.

94 Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 258-69.

95 Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born Woman,* 86.

is not at all easy to settle…"[96] This koan brings awareness to the fact that even if one meditates and ignores the opposite sex for lifetimes, there may still be some uncomfortable traces of personal longings, dreams and fantasies left in the "passion between our legs". Miaozong seems to want to make sure that Wanan does not take the "spiritual elevator", but that his wisdom and compassion be inclusive of those darkest nooks and crannies, too.

By showing herself naked, unarmed and vulnerable, Miaozong disarms, undoes layers of achievement and civilization, and Wanan is left rather startled. In Cixous we read that Promethea "speaks with her feet": her physical being conveys the message of her whole life to the author. Her feet tell the story of a life of courage and defenselessness and the author cannot help but receive it, even though she strongly resists. And she is disarmed by this nakedness: her usual strategies and word-games are no longer available to her: an affront she actually experiences as violent. Likewise, and bearing in mind the story of Baubo, the headless Greek goddess who cheers up Demeter with her lower-lipped jokes, we could say that Miaozong is speaking from her vagina. Remarkably, we do not find a trace of shyness or withholding in the text. Much like Cixous's Promethea, Miaozong seems totally comfortable in exposing herself: she shares the vulnerability of her clothes-lessness freely.

Cixous writes about women speaking that "[s]he doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward … Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking."[97] For Cixous, the body and the word are one in woman's speech, which has to traverse a great precipice in order to come into existence for "even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine."[98] So, even if we do not witness any shyness or withholding in Miaozong and Promethea, there is a certain vulnerability to "speaking in the feminine", or speaking with the body, at least according to Cixous. It lies in the trespassing of the hegemony of the signifier and its endless systems of censorship. It also lies in the act of giving oneself, that this type of embodied speech is always necessarily personal, it touches on a place within the speaker and thus presents us with a part of her. This is rather different than reiterating the facts.

In *The Book of Promethea*, we read that Promethea:

> Never stretches out along the shores of the night without having left a window wide open through which to throw herself towards God at the first sign that he wishes it.
> "Do you want me to throw myself out of the window?" She calls out. And God remains silent, too.[99]

The "silent too" is a clear sign that Promethea does not call in terms of speech. It is her silent body calling. The strength and confidence in her gesture shows us how this character in her capability of total submission has the potential towards total subversion, and even God does not feel compelled to challenge her. Perhaps Miaozong displays something of the same kind: the deep total humility of an infant paired with the power to silence "great men".

96 Koan by Shogen Sogaku (1139-1209), exact origin unknown to author. This koan is famous for its explicit reference to sexuality, but it is not part of any of the official koan teaching curricula.
97 Cixous, "Medusa," 881.
98 Ibid.
99 Cixous, *Book of Promethea, 1*54.

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Wanan: the "masculine feminine"

This chapter may be seen as continuous with the previous one, where we discussed the transgressive nature of femininity in the case of Miaozong. Now, with Wanan's question "May I enter?" our story seems to present us with a classical Cixousian feminine, daringly moving towards the fleshy perspective, but it is not a woman but a seemingly stern Buddhist monk who teases the boundaries here. It may make us wonder about our feminist analysis: is Wanan beautifully illustrating Cixous theory with a kind of "feminine masculinity"? Or is he creating trouble by turning things around like this?

When I hold close the sentence "May I enter?", weighing it and juggling it and bouncing it off my life, it starts to reveal a lot of beauty. May I enter may mean, in my readings: may I be submerged in life's fullness, its mystery? May I sink totally into this life, not as a mere visitor but finding the miraculous friendship with the chair underneath me, the sounds of wind and chainsaw, my anxieties? For me, the question instantly acquires a double direction: if I enter life, it enters me. Asking to enter is asking to be entered. And how beautiful, also, that it is a question; that there is a "please" in it, implying a respectful waiting at the door for the other to respond. It is an opening for communication, for being not-alone, and an opening for receiving a yes or a no.

In the reception of the story there appear to be many different responses to "May I enter?" In some recent commentaries, Wanan is scolded as a pervert.[100] In some, he is appreciated for his sincerity and innocence.[101] One Zen teacher mentions an interpretation of a woman who saw in Wanan's question his deep wish to penetrate into and be intimate with the mystery of femininity.[102] In a certain sense we can take the luxury of allowing all these perspectives and more. However, what will resound most in this analysis is the perspective on Wanan as curious and explorative. I choose that reading because it creates an interesting resonance with Cixous' theory, and thus may be supportive of the "usability" of this feminist analysis, and also because it allows for a certain non-closure regarding Wanan's intentions. I add to that, in the following chapter, a possible reading of his question as actually addressing the importance of boundaries by emphasizing the limits of so-called limitless self-expression. An alternative reading could employ Wanan here as embodying a typical Cixousian masculine desire to know, own and conquer the (feminine) mystery, but I find it more playful and thus possibly more innovative to read Wanan's question as feminine. In other words, I choose not a resistant reading, but an embracing one.

In Grace Schireson's reading, Wanan's question is characterized by earthy curiosity and a kind of direct innocence.[103] We will see that in Cixous' treatment of Eve and the apple, this original story of transgression and exploration seems to come very close to Wanan's question. In "Extreme Fidelity", Cixous writes that "Every entry to life finds itself *before the Apple*."[104] We then get a taste of what this apple might be, symbolically or metonymically:

> What is at stake here is the mystery which is assailed by 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." And facing the law, there is the apple which is, is, is. It is the struggle between presence and absence, between an undesirable, unverifiable,

100 Judith Ragir, "Miaozong's Dharma Interview", blog entry, http://www.judithragir.org/2017/03/miazongs-dharma-interview/

101 Schireson, *Zen Women,* 196-7

102 Zoketsu Normal Fischer, "Miaozong's Dharma Interview," Zen talk recorded Sep. 12, 2012 in Tiburon, audio, http://everydayzen.org/teachings/2012/miaozongs-dharma-interview-talk-3-zens-women-ancestors.

103 Schireson, *Zen Women,* 196-197

104 Cixous, "Extreme Fidelity," 133.

> indecisive absence and a presence … What Eve will discover in her relationship to simple reality, is the inside of the apple, and that this inside is good.[105]

On the one hand, we are considering here, at a rather primitive level, the affective dynamics of living beings. What does it take to enter life? According to Cixous, it takes a relationship of embodiment, of touch and taste, of engaging with matter. It takes a certain heedlessness which takes little notion of abstract codes and prohibitions and simply follows its urge to relate to life in full ownership of the sexual and sensual flows and forces that naturally accompany this relating. Note that "simple reality" and "mystery" are presented here as in very close proximity to one another. It is perhaps as simple as that what a plant does, or a cell that is repulsed or attracted by its surroundings; although we may consider that the force of pleasure/*jouissance* is what creates a factor of mystery here.

In this light, we can rather appreciate the functioning of Wanan in our story, for he truly brings us back to "matter". Miaozong has created a setting of electric viscerality for their conversation. She introduced Eros into the room – she must have known at least that – and she asks Wanan how to deal with it. This is her contribution to "entering life". However, Wanan really takes it one step further, echoing Eve's transgression, when he proposes to take the matter down to the level of skin-on-skin. Perhaps he is asking, with his question: what kind of all-inclusive spiritual teaching would Buddhism be if it would not accommodate the profound level of skin-on-skin? And if it would not take into consideration the essential "Dharma"[106] of procreation? We are landing deep in the fibers of the semiotic, the landscape of *jouissance*. And it is a man who takes us there! Moreover, this is the very man who proposed to "interrogate" Miaozong about her seemingly transgressive womanhood. It is rather a fascinating weave, and, in terms of libidinal education, it does not entirely correlate with Cixous's example of Eve and the apple. Here, both female and male protagonist seem to have an interest in transgressing *and* preserving the law. Despite Wanan's initial concern about law and order, his question directly addresses one of the most contentious points of Buddhist history, exposing his relationship of confusion to it. Reading Wanan as a symbol for conservative masculine order would not take into account his daring questioning of boundaries here.

Yet there is more to the story, of course, than totally innocent and primitive exploration. Eve does not eat the fruit just because she is "following her flow": she eats *this* particular fruit exactly *because* it is the forbidden one; because there is a relationship with a master who has told her that she is allowed to do everything except this one thing. And she does not know why. She is presented with an apple, an apple which is forbidden and so it contains a secret. It is attractive not only because it is an apple, but because it is a secret-apple. It contains the "no" to the incomprehensible imperative. It is as if Eve says: "No, I will not accept your law just because 'you say so'; I have to find out for myself." We may ask here if something similar is going on with Wanan and the rules of celibacy. We find the same motif in the tale of Bluebeard, in which the entering of the forbidden room allows (in Clarissa Pinkola Estés' Jungian analysis) the maiden to experience the deepest darkest secrets of her psyche.[107] It earns her "the knowledge of good and evil", and it relieves her from ignorant innocence, because she gets an acquaintance with the darkness within herself and learns about its functioning. Now, after she is initiated, she is no longer a naïve prey like she was when she foolishly decided to trust and marry Bluebeard, whom her sisters immediately distrusted. Having experienced her inner dark side, which she encountered in Bluebeard's room full of skeletons, she has a deeper understanding of the world and thus a less-obstructed access to her intuition.

In these two examples of naïve and immature women, the choice to go forth and trespass the boundaries commanded by an elusive authority represents the choice to not trust authority blindly, but to follow their own journey of experiencing and discovering so that they may then be able to

105 Ibid.

106 One of the meanings of the word Dharma is phenomenon; another one is "natural law"

107 Pinkola Estés, "Stalking the Intruder: The Beginning Initiation," *Women who Run with the Wolves*, 35-69.

understand or intuit which kind of authority can be trusted. According to Pinkola Estes, this kind of journey is vital for the maturation of a woman's sharp intuition.[108] In Buddhism, the relationship with authority is a bit more complex. We can take as an example the Kalama sutra which is also discussed in the next chapter. In that text, the listeners are encouraged not to trust any authority blindly but to test every teaching by their own experience and only *then*, if they find the teaching acceptable, to live true to it. We see there that own investigation is encouraged, but subsequently submission to the teachings is also required, although it would be a different kind of submission than in the patriarchal examples. Perhaps we can see this tension or balancing between submission and subversion or exploration as brought forth by the Buddhist teachings expressed here by Wanan.

Wanan seems to be neither naïve nor immature: he is Head Monk, meaning that he has the highest position of authority in the monastery after the teacher, Master Dahui. He can be assumed to have undergone a journey of testing and trying the authority of his teacher and the authority of the monastic codes on his own accord. Apparently he has decided them worthy enough to stick it out with them for quite a while. And yet he here has come to a point where he feels compelled to penetrate the rules. Is it perhaps a little girl or little boy inside him, some unfulfilled longing, some aspect of his psyche left totally unchartered and unexplored? We may well imagine that within a strict monastic upbringing, there may be some areas of playfulness and curiosity within him still beckoning his research. Here we can also consider again the perspective of Roshi Fischer's student, who was touched by Wanan's question which she perceived as the heart-rending curiosity of a male subject to inhabit a feminine subjectivity. Perhaps Wanan is simply asking entry to the mystery of the Mother of the Buddhas, the mystery of that which gives birth, whether on a personal or on a cosmic level.

We can appreciate that Wanan is given the space to examine his inner laws, thus, the laws of their conversation and of the monastery, without the threat of major punishment. We can gather from their conversation that Wanan and Miaozong are also given the space and opportunity to fail. In that sense, we can say that in Buddhism, the law needs to be tested, scrutinized and rediscovered again and again by every generation, in much the same way as Cixous suggests to us that in our dealing with words "there is nothing to do, except to shake them like apple trees, all the time"[109], as we will explore in the next section.

Rather than seeing this development of the "curious feminine male" as a point of critique on Cixous's theory, I would choose to view it as a deepening and enrichening of that theory. We are being shown here a man who within a context endorsed by semi-patriarchal religious authority is free to test and explore his inner laws in much the same way as Cixous's Eve does. I see it as an opening, a space of possibility. This situation is rather not black and white in terms of typical patriarchy and typical femininity and masculinity in Cixous's terms, as we will later explore more, but Cixous's theory is not black and white by any length either. In my view the richness of this example provides hope of real lived situations in which the daring of *jouissance* plays itself out upsetting all our remaining tendencies to divide and categorize, shaking those trees of "feminine" and "masculine" that can have such a tendency to solidify in people's minds.

What Wanan's question does do in my opinion, is critique his position of celibacy, addressing the role that sex may or may not play in the pursuit of freedom. Is it "in" or "out", a part of the journey or a no-go area? We have seen how woman's body and sexuality were conjunctly shunned in puritanical early Buddhism. We have also seen how, for Kristeva and Cixous, the feminine experience is intimately tied up with Eros: *jouissance* is its laughing language. Hence, one question that could come forth from this interaction is: can a feminine perspective be fully included in Buddhist practice without sexuality also being embraced? In Japanese and Western contemporary Zen, celibacy rules

108 Pinkola Estés, *Women who Run with the Wolves*, 68.
109 Cixous, "Extreme Fidelity", 132.

have been dropped, also for ordained monks or priests, but in many other Buddhist contexts, such a change remains completely unimaginable.

We can appreciate that every situation is different, every teacher is different and may have different ways to address the issue. We can appreciate that sensuality and Eros can take many forms, some nearly invisible, and that femininity too can express itself in various ways. Still I believe that Kristeva and Cixous would probably argue that in a celibate context, the necessarily tumultuous shift of moving towards inclusion of feminine perspectives is not possible. I believe they might say that there simply is too much stuck in our throats after all those silent centuries that will not be cleared out without some proper loudness – a subtle shift won't do. The voices of female teachers in *The Hidden Lamp* seem to suggest the same thing, as their longing for the explicit inclusion of sexuality as part of the path is frequently stated.[110]

110 See pg. 70 and 122-3

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The issue of 'entering' and Buddhist Law

As stated previously, for Cixous the entering of life and the entering of the law happen in one motion. This final chapter will examine more closely what this specific situation can teach us about "entering the law". Is this the same "law" as Cixous speaks of, or is the legal situation different in the Buddhist context? I believe that the subtleties that we can find in Buddhism's non-uniform relationship to absolutism and patriarchy create an interesting layered picture which does not entirely coincide with Cixous's theory but poses valuable questions to it.

If we consider Wanan in his situation as a celibate head monk, his question seems quite a bold and courageous one. Whether he is guided by lust, love, curiosity or divine inspiration, by this question he rattles the boundaries of this "unbounded" Dharma interview, since one possible paraphrase of his question, at least is: "Alright Missy, you seem to be implying that in Dharmic conversation anything is permitted, so how about this? How about sex?" By touching these boundaries, he reveals their existence, thereby creating the possibility of questioning them and at the same time, opening up for the possibility of their reaffirmation. The latter is what actually happens, as Miaozong establishes a very clear, very dualistic boundary. She echoes the words of the famous 9th century teacher Joshu who said about his famous stone bridge that "horses may pass, donkeys may pass" over it.[111] Joshu revealed the non-dual depth of the Dharma undiscriminatingly carrying all. Yet Miaozong's cutting answer reaffirms the need for realistic boundaries in a relative world. The analysis which forms the core of this chapter intends to shed light on this wrestling between non-dual inclusivity, limitless feminine trespassing and the need for boundaries and structures in everyday lived situations with several stakeholders.

Various things are going on here in terms of legality and "entering". After Miaozong's trespassing "entering" into the heart of the monastic walls, Wanan and Miaozong together enter into a space of law's possible suspension, the Dharma interview. Within this space, the limits of various laws are explored and we reach the point where Wanan asks to "enter" into the body of Miaozong, proposing a kind of ultimate trespassing. We will look a little more deeply at this sequence of events.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the (celibacy) laws of the monastery seem to have been endangered: a woman's body has "entered" in a place where it is not supposed to be –the abbot's quarters, where it is posing a threat to order. If Master Dahui who holds the authority of religious leadership of the monastery, is suspected of breaking the monastic codes, this could lead to a breakdown in trust and a great shift in the monastic order. Thus, head monk Wanan stands up in its defense.

However, in doing so he is maneuvered into a Dharma interview, which is typically a space where various kinds of laws have less authority. This is a second type of entering which is interesting: the entering of the room in which the interview is to take place. What kind of a room is this? Apparently, there is a difference between what Miaozong calls a "worldly interview" and a Dharma interview, which is in Japanese called *dokusan*. Had Wanan chosen for the first, there would have been certain social codes that their meeting would have had to adhere to, but in the choice for the Dharma interview, Wanan chooses to enter a space in which normal social conventions are temporarily suspended. Due to some of the most famous stories in Zen history, every monk at the time would know that strange things may happen in a Dharma interview: one could get severely beaten or even have one's leg broken by a teacher.[112] In the words of Roshi Philip Kapleau: "Once students enter the dokusan room .... they are perfectly free to say or do anything so long as it is a

111 *Hekiganroku* Case 52

112 Founding father Rinzai was famous for his beatings and shouts. Zen master Unmon according to the tradition got the door slammed on his leg when he climbed up to the cave of master Obaku to ask for teachings.

genuine expression of their quest for truth and is legitimately connected with their practice."[113] So the freedom of expression in the Dharma interview is expected from teacher as well as student.

We may also remember the words of Roshi Joan Sutherland that "[i]n the vastness, the Chinese teacher Linji said, the true person has no rank; everyone and everything is perfectly equal, and completely themselves. Here we don't even have stories about what meetings are for…" This kind of meeting is characterized by a collapse of ordinary structures of hierarchy, then. We see how that plays out in our story, where Miaozong, who is not even an ordained nun and thus ranks much lower than Wanan who is head monk, gets to conduct an interview with him in which she suddenly takes on the role that is usually reserved for a teacher.

In the midst of all this upheaval and topsy-turvy however, Wanan has brought us to the point of asking: how much suspension can the law bear without breaking down in a complete collapse of the basic trust of its citizens? My resulting major question is: what is the purpose of the vows, the laws and the codes that are being addressed in this story? It seems to me that it is these very vows, laws and codes that keep up the structure that allows the unbridled flow of Life in this Dharma interview to exist. Miaozong seems to say that she will speak with the body, she will give birth to the universe with her cave of *jouissance,* but this begs the question of the need for order and structure, if only that of grammar and punctuation. These all are implications of Wanan's question, which really does "enter" the situation into a deeper level of complication. There is clearly a tension between Buddhist law and the quality of freedom that is the pursuit of Dharma. This tension provokes us to think about how we relate to laws.

By approaching so closely the boundary of their possibilities of interaction, Wanan reveals that there is a boundary and we are now free to ask whether this boundary has a function or not, and to ponder whether there a function to boundaries at all. Is it possible to experience the joys of exploration and trespassing, the awe of chaos and disorder without a structure, a system, a tradition to hold the space for such venturings? Even if part of Zen practice is to test laws and rules on different levels, as we shall see, this does not, apparently, mean unbridled transgression. Miaozong makes perfectly clear with her response "Horses may cross, donkeys may not", that transgressing boundaries is not something that can be done by anyone at any time, but that there is a need for maturity, or there is a need for a particular type of situation that warrants that the transgression be more than heedless rebelliousness. Zen teacher Maezumi Roshi used to teach "Right place, right time, right position, right amount."[114] The message of this teaching is that, in a world view which does not judge anything as inherently right or wrong, it takes deep listening to the uniqueness of every situation in order to be able to establish what is the right thing to do. Even if, at the deepest level, there cannot be any human-made laws or codes of how to behave, the responsibility of behaving appropriately in each moment becomes all the greater and more complex. As we shall see, this also points to one of the older definitions of *Dharma* in which the word denotes "cosmic Law and order".

Law and Buddhism

I would like to discuss the implications of the above-written for what we are speaking of as law. In order to prevent creating too much confusion, I will write capital "L" when discussing Law in Cixous's definition, and small "l" for other definitions. Cixous speaks about Law as the absolute discourse of incomprehensible but unquestionable signification: A means B, and nothing else. Why? Because we/they/He said so. As we will gather, in Cixous's treatment of Eve and the apple, it is God who lays down this law as the transcendental He. In the monastic setting we are studying, we can distinguish several layers of Law/law, and several agents serving to protect and/or question them. It will be my argument that the complicated structure that we find here, with the law's self-questioning mechanisms in place, creates interesting questions for and possibly deepening of Cixous's theory.

113 Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 99.
114 Tenkei Coppens Roshi, Dharma teaching at Zen River Temple.

The transcendental Law of the Symbolic signifier is continually questioned by Buddhist discourse and especially by Zen: if A meant B yesterday, it might as well mean C or D today. The unraveling of our attachments to words' meaning is one of the most constant red threads throughout Zen literature.[115] In my experience, the role of the teacher is to question this Law and loosen our attachments to it. Again as I have experienced it, the role of all participants in a "Dharma interview" is equally to loosen the conditioned bonds of this Law and to use language in ways that convey spontaneous insight and freedom. However, the Law of the signifier nonetheless has its place: the monastery has a relationship to the wider society, which has not only likely educated all of its inhabitants through their primary years, but which also scrutinizes and threatens the existence of this monastery if it seems to fall too much out of pace with it. Thus the Law of the signifier may sneak into the monastic walls in all kinds of ways.

We know that the legal structure of the Song Dynasty had strong absolutist characteristics, for example its belief in legalism, or the strict and universal application of crime and punishment, and the legal status of its emperor as "Son of Heaven" with the right and decree to create the laws of the land.[116] Within this context, Buddhist monastic activities were strictly controlled and scrutinized, with a law change during Song times effecting that the Song government had the legal power to appoint monasteries' abbots.[117] One can imagine how detrimental this could be, and how vulnerable monasteries and their inhabitants must have felt to governmental control. This makes Wanan's heedfulness again a little more understandable. It also shows how monasteries were legally directly connected to an absolutist system.

On another level of law, there are the Buddhist teachings, the scriptures and the monastic codes and rules. These could be said to prescribe a sort of law too, on two levels. On one level the Buddhist teachings (Dharma) are believed to point at or reveal the deep law of the functioning of the universe. For example, in the teachings on the "twelve-chained link of interdependent co-origination", it is explicated how human consciousness perpetuates itself and continually keeps creating the next moment in time through a series of links of causes and effects. Being "one with the Dharma", in this sense means one's awareness is in accord with the hidden law of the universe which reveals a level of spontaneous truth that has a certain kind of logic, but is inexpressible. In commonly used similes, the Buddha himself compares the Dharma to a "finger pointing to the moon"[118] and also to a raft that is to be used but discarded once the other shore is reached.[119] These parables show that there is a fundamental level of Dharma, truth or law which is the birth ground of the written or spoken teachings, but is also the only essential locus of lasting truth and thus the most important. This is the mystical tenet of Buddhism which emerges again and again in different forms and may be at tension with some of the more strict and literal interpretations of scriptures and codes.

Then there is a level of "Dharmic law" which are the monastic codes created by the Buddha, known as the Vinaya. There is a correspondence between these laws and Cixous's Law inasmuch as they are executed strictly and literally. Even though there have been arguments recording the humoristic aspects of the Vinaya, as it seems to make fun of the figure of the "learned monk"[120], and also it is recorded that there are many references in which the Buddha points out that "it is the spirit of the rules that counts",[121] nonetheless the Vinaya are in themselves one of the most elaborate and precise law books of any spiritual tradition known today. Each different "law" or rule is provided with

115 Jin Park, "Zen and zen philosophy of language: A soteriological approach," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 1, No. 2 (June 2002): 209-228.

116 Robert Andrew Eddy, "Heresy and orthodoxy in Song dynasty China" (MA Thesis, McGill University, 2007), 63.

117 Ibid, 55.

118 *Lankavatara Sutra*, trans. D.T. Suzuki, 193.

119 Majjhima Nikaya 22.

120 Gregory Schopen, "The learned monk as a comic figure: on reading a Buddhist Vinaya as Indian literature" *J Indian Philosophy,* 35 (2007), 201.

the history of its origin, a very precise definition of each of its terms, a classification of the seriousness of its offense, and the proper punishment in case of offence. In cases of a more serious offense, the punishment is expulsion from the monastic community. The Vinaya thus offer a strict and literal system of crime and punishment, which in many Buddhist communities throughout the ages has been scrupulously studied and observed. We can read how the monastic setting is embedded in at least two kinds of absolutist law, then: Song law and the Vinaya. At the same time we may observe how within the very foundational importance in Buddhism of Dharma as ungraspable and ineffable, a fundamental undermining of any type of literalism is present.

In Zen Buddhism, the relationship towards the strict and literal observation of sutras and Vinayas is rather questioned and loosened. For example, the foundational Zen teacher Rinzai (Linji) said:

> I myself was formerly interested in the Vinaya and diligently studied the Sutras and Treatises. Then I realized that they were only drugs suitable for appeasing the ills of the world, only relative theories. At one stroke I threw them away, set myself to learn the Way, started Zen training and met great teachers.[122]

This questioning of the original Buddhist texts and of the whole enterprise of studying in general, is quite a typical expression of Zen, which is sometimes called, the "sutra-less path".[123] [124]

The questioning attitude of Zen is also expressed in its relationship to humor. Whereas in the classical Buddhist sutras humor is not a very common element, in Zen literature it is pervasive. In an ancient Indian classification of six types of laughter, it was thought by early Buddhist scholars that the Buddha would have only engaged in the first and most elevated type: a serene smile. The fifth and six types, involving roaring sounds and bodily convulsions, were regarded as base and lowly.[125] However in Zen texts there is frequent mention of masters bursting out laughing, for example the monk Shao-li who could not stop laughing after his enlightenment and of masters portraying themselves as bullfrogs or ugly hunchbacks, portraying the Dharma as a little farting boy[126], or deliberately naming themselves "old fool".[127]

The humor used is typically of a type which subverts any quality, person or thing which could be considered as uniformly holy, often by a type of comical inversion in which something generally thought of as high and desirable is equated with something generally thought of as lowly, as in the following: "A monk asked Unmon, "What is Buddha?" Unmon answered, "a piece of dried shit""[128] Or: "A monk asked Sozan, "What is the most prized thing in all the world?" Sozan answered, "A dead cat""[129] We see here how Zen shows some of the characteristics of what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque: there is a reversal of roles and of common hierarchical patterns, which is accompanied by humor and laughter. Also, contrary to the earlier Buddhist tendency to only associate Enlightenment with the elevated smile, in Zen enlightenment the "lower bodily strata" of the roaring belly laughter and the farting master are not at all avoided. One could say it is a religious expression

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121 Richard Gombrich*, Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo.* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 89.

122 Rinzai Gigen*, The Record of Rinzai*, trans. Irmgard Schloegl, (London: The Buddhist Society*,* 1975) 21-23.

123 Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Buddhas*, (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1993) xiv, foreword by Robert Thurman.

124 Nonetheless it is often mentioned that "the only way one can become free of the sutras, is by studying the sutras"

125 Conrad Hyers, "Humor in Zen: Comic Midwifery," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (July 1989): 268.

126 Ibid, 271.

127 Ibid, 269.

128 Mumonkan Case 21.

129 Hyers, "Humor in Zen", 272.

which is more inclusive of folk culture and the carnivalesque in Bakhtin's terms, and we may remember that, again according to Bakhtin, these areas were characteristically associated with women.

We have noted that in early sutric Buddhism the elements for self-subversion were already in place, as when the Dharma is described as a raft to be discarded upon reaching the shore. Another important early instance is the Kalama sutra, in which the Buddha teaches that one should not rely on any outside authority or scriptures unless they have been tested in appropriate ways by one's own experience.[130] In Mahayana Buddhism, under which we can categorize Zen, this premise is deepened and centralized: the Dharma is itself established to be empty of any lasting characteristics. The main message of the Prajnaparamita sutra, which is the central Mahayana sutra, is that the only source of truth is the experience of non-duality which is beyond words and concepts. Thus it is not completely beyond expectation to find in Zen more structural elements of self-questioning such as the openness of the Dharma interview and the use of humor.

So, with the ultimate authority lying not with "the Word", in the sense of God's assignment, religious teachings or the signifier, but rather with the experience of the practitioner him- or herself, we find ourselves in a rather different starting place than, for instance, Cixous uses in her analysis of Western culture. Rather than an all-knowing perfect and sovereign God whom is to be blindly believed and followed, we have here a more complex situation in which there is still a kind of religious authority, but it is always and principally questionable. However, the possibility of questioning is conditional: whether the questioning is appropriate depends on who is doing it and at what place and time. There are also in this story clearly some influential patriarchal elements in place that could account for what Cixous calls a masculine economy: the influence of the Vinaya, of the Song legal system and the puritanical historical attitudes of Buddhism. However, there are other structural elements which do not exactly accord with Cixous's masculine economy, such as the prevalence of laughter and hierarchical inversion that we find in Zen. It seems difficult to characterize the interactions we find in this story as belonging to either a feminine or a masculine economy per se. We seem to be on somewhat of a threshold or a liminal area between the two. Especially the role of masculinity seems not to correspond completely to the way it is characterized by Cixous. Master Dahui both reaffirms a patriarchal trope about women's credentials *and* revolutionarily endorses her presence and wisdom; Wanan questions Miaozong's presence but subsequently can be seen as displaying the questioning attitude of Cixous's feminine.

It seems that the type of legal environment, whether symbolical or somehow juridical, we find in Buddhism presented enough of an opening for the topics of sexuality, birth, the vagina and the female body to be openly discussed and even celebrated as we have seen happening *in Miaozong's Dharma Interview*. Nonetheless, the rarity of these topics being addressed in (non-Tantric) Buddhist literature also indicates that the influence of patriarchy has still been substantial, if we are to view these as Cixous's and Kristeva's markers of feminism.

130 Sutta Pitaka, *Anguttara Nikaya,* 3.65

6.
Conclusion

Miaozong's Dharma Interview "exposes" in several ways, bringing to the fore topics that were generally kept silent both in Zen and in Song China. The vagina, sexuality, birth and motherhood as supreme achievements: these "earthy" matters that by a tradition of puritanical or transcendentalist Buddhist would rather have been avoided or relegated to a realm of lowliness, are here introduced as central concerns for Dharma. We could say this brings "intimacy" in the embodied, *jouissance*-like manner that Kristeva and Cixous see as feminine, together with the "intimacy" that is often spoken about in Zen, as in the koan "Jizo's not-knowing" introduced in chapter three. The text also provides us with different types of "entering" and with Cixous we have come to regard the proximity between the "entering" or transgression of law and of the body, *jouissance*, or life. From scrutinizing Buddhism's legal position which permits for self-questioning and –subversion, we come to appreciate how "entering" the law and the dynamics of *jouissance* are made possible by this specific legal attitude.

In the conversation with *Miaozong's Dharma Interview*, we have come to see that the relationship between this text and Cixous's feminist theory is far from straightforward; that under the unique umbrella of Buddhist law things appear to happen that neither fit well into a patriarchal picture, nor exactly into a feminist framework. If the interaction brings forth questions to Buddhist history and its present, notably the position of sex and of the female body in it, it also does to Cixous's theory, as it brings masculine and feminine characters in slightly different flavours than they are often represented by Cixous. Although the character Miaozong seems to fit well into Cixous's theory, the characters of Wanan and Master Dahui do not fit with Cixous's typical masculine very well. Since in Cixous's work the masculine is mostly treated as equivalent to patriarchy, these findings may suggest a vista on another type of masculine that is not patriarchal. Particularly interesting would be to examine more closely the figure of Master Dahui and the role of "authority" in a Buddhist context, as possibly differing from theistic one. The relationship between structure and chaos in Buddhism is also a topic that is touched upon here, but could be much more deeply explored, with possibly interesting results. There is a dynamic in this text in which structure is subverted but at the same time it is re-confirmed and it is the very structure of Buddhism which seems to create the possibility for "chaos" or subversion or "feminine exploration" to arise. Due to this text's limitations, these latter points are not explored here, but they could be of interest for future research.

Glossary of Buddhist terms

Bodhisattva – An “Enlightening Being”: an advanced follower of the Buddhist path who has committed themselves to liberating all sentient beings.

Buddhadharma – The Buddhist teachings.

Ch’an/Zen – Ch’an is the Chinese word for Zen. The terms refer to a specific Chinese and Japanese Buddhist tradition which focuses on direct insight rather than extensive study or faith. Both words derive from the Sanskrit term Dhyana, which means concentration.

Dharma – The word has different meanings, some of which are explained in the text. Generally in this thesis it is mostly used to denote the Buddhist teachings.

Koan – Usually an anecdote of a meeting between a student and a teacher, though modern approaches vary. A koan often contains an awakening or an interaction that raises questions or emotion. The story is used as a device for awakening, as students are usually encouraged to merge their life with the koan, remembering it or embodying it while sitting and going about their daily things. In some of the Zen traditions, a curriculum of koans was and is used. Students would have to “pass” between 700 and 1700 koans in order to scrupulously test their understanding.

Realization/enlightenment – Realization is sometimes used as a term for advanced insight

Sutra – Buddhist sacred text. According to the Theravada tradition, only the earliest sutras in the Pali language are included as the actual words of the Buddha. According to the later Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, texts that originated from later date are still attributed to the Buddha, but may have been hidden by him to be revealed only when his body of students had matured and was ready.

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