



The Canonization of Laura Palmer

Christy Desmet

In the first season of *Twin Peaks*, director David Lynch was widely praised for bringing innovative television to the prime time networks. According to *Time* reviewer Richard Zoglin, "the show has proved that original, challenging, and idiosyncratic fare can be done for TV, even within rigid network confines, and that people will tune in" ("A Sleeper" 86). Viewers began to lose patience, however, when Lynch failed to resolve Laura Palmer's murder at the end of the first season; they were outraged when the murderer was revealed to be both a fantasy character named BOB and Laura's father, Leland Palmer.

On one level, the failure of *Twin Peaks* is a narratological one. What Lynch and Mark Frost hoped would hold the interest of their audience—*Peaks'* byzantine plot—became its fatal weakness.¹ When, on November 19, 1990 *Newsweek* asked, "Does anyone still care who killed Laura Palmer?" it was becoming clear that the American public would not accept "Who shot Agent Cooper?" as an answering question. I will argue that the narrative peculiarities of *Twin Peaks*, especially Lynch's reluctance to conclude his plot and the show's coyness on the question of father-daughter incest, are related to its thematic obsession with the fine line between good and evil. Both originate in a particular sexual economy, one centered around Laura Palmer and her uncanny refusal to be classified either as saint or as sinner.

Superficially, the main plot line of *Twin Peaks* traces the dethronement of Laura Palmer as Homecoming Queen. At the beginning of the first episode, Laura is represented as a typical middle-class teenager; in the course of time, she is shown to be sexually promiscuous, dependent on drugs, and plagued with psychological problems. The fact that her own father murdered her sug-

gests incest as a motive for both Laura's problems and her death.² Dr. Jacoby's assertion that she was a woman rather than a girl and that she was "filled with secrets" is overly sentimental, but it highlights Laura's untimely projection into an adult role. More specifically, her cocaine habit, her involvement in pornography, her career as a prostitute at One-Eyed Jack's, and her desire to find a father-substitute or male protector in Doctor Jacoby and others all identify Laura Palmer as an incest victim. *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*, published under the name of David Lynch's own daughter Jennifer, provides further hints that incest lies behind the murder. Recording Laura's first pre-adolescent encounters with BOB—sexual visitations that primarily involve masturbation—the diary chronicles also Laura's "bad dreams" and early feelings of fear, guilt, and self-loathing, which over time produce in her a resolve to be "de-sensitized" and become the "nasty" girl BOB claims she is.

Television audiences, whether or not they found the revelation palatable, seem to have accepted without question the reality of incest in the Palmer family and the primacy of incest as a motive for murder. In an outraged essay published in *Commonweal*, for instance, Warren Goldstein complains that "the real secret to *Twin Peaks* and Laura's murder, the real message of that scene, is incest: father-daughter incest. I suppose I knew it, didn't want to think about it. Lynch had seduced me into his forbidden world. And now it's the morning after and I'm ashamed" (741). On one level, perhaps, Lynch does suggest that a rapist-murderer lurks within every loving father. But by introducing BOB as Leland Palmer's doppelganger, he raises as many questions as he resolves, making the plot line of *Twin Peaks* somewhat incoherent. In one version of the murder of Laura Palmer, BOB is a serial killer, Laura merely the successor to Teresa Banks in his string of randomly-chosen victims. In the other, Leland kills his own daughter in a fit of sexual jealousy and rage, both common emotions of incestuous fathers. Neither plot accounts perfectly for the facts as we know them. Lynch therefore leaves his audience in a hermeneutic quandary; the denizens of *Twin Peaks* find themselves in a similar position. That Lynch hopes we will examine self-consciously the narrative "seduction" decried by Goldstein is suggested by his own skeptical analysis of the way the town produces a socially acceptable narrative to palliate the incest in its midst. In this way, the show's psychological content and narrative form coincide.³

Twin Peaks, both the show and the community, masks the sociological fact of father-daughter incest by canonizing Laura Palmer as a post-Freudian saint victimized by the evil BOB. Thus, *Twin Peaks* becomes not simply a murder mystery, but a martyr's mystery. Through a second twist in the plot, *Peaks* reconstructs the seduction theory to reveal how both Laura's canonization and the Freudian subplot it covers up suppress feminine desire and sexuality. By examining both incest and martyrdom as metaphors, Lynch broadens his analysis of the psychodynamics of American culture. More specifically, he examines woman as subject as well as sexual object, revising the

The Canonization of Laura Palmer

Freudian master plot of *Twin Peaks* in directions suggested by feminist psychoanalytic theory. In Lynch's continuation of his martyr mystery, feminine desire, through its connection with what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic chora, remains central to *Twin Peaks*. For the semiotic, that realm of signification in which "the owls are not what they seem," is the origin of the knowledge sought by Dale Cooper as well as the source of BOB's evil. Finally, the economy of desire in *Twin Peaks* and the narrative form it produces help to account both for the show's unusual appeal and the ultimate dissolution of its "cult."

I

Saint Laura

Laura Palmer can be seen as an icon for *Twin Peaks*, both the town and the show. A portrait of her as Homecoming Queen, which adorns the high school trophy case and the fireplace mantle of her own home, also provides a ground for the concluding credits of every show. Her father/murderer kisses that picture with devotional fervor. And while her given name reinforces Laura's connection with Petrarch's secular idol, her patronymic suggests also an affinity with religious pilgrims.

What we know of Laura's life before the murder, and the murder itself, ironically evoke the pattern of a saint's life. After his arrest, Jacques Renault tells Agent Cooper that Laura and Ronette Pulaski "was no nuns." But unlike Ronette, who remains a mere victim, Laura comes from a bourgeois family of some social standing, a fact that makes her social alienation and untimely end more poignant and significant.⁴ Laura's frenetic pro bono work—tutoring Josie Packard in English, caring for Johnny Horne, and particularly organizing the Meals on Wheels program—also suggests a vocation of some kind. Medieval women saints were often characterized by service to others—the sick, the poor, and the outcast.⁵ As Carolyn Walker Bynum discusses in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, medieval saints were especially associated with food.

After her death, Laura Palmer's life begins to conform even more neatly to the pattern of a saint's legend. Like many martyrs, Laura is tortured ritualistically, in several stages and places. Laura's corpse, inscribed with multiple shallow stab wounds that make her a kind of adolescent Saint Sebastian, takes on a mysterious aura when it is discovered by Pete Martell, "wrapped in plastic." The veneration of Laura Palmer continues in the morgue as the faithful struggle to rescue her body from Albert Rosenfeld's irreverent probing. Laura's necklace becomes a coveted relic, enshrined in a coconut reliquary by Dr. Jacoby. She also leaves several testaments for the devout, including her tape-recorded messages to Dr. Jacoby and the secret diary held by Harold Smith.

After her death Laura continues to be felt as a presence in *Twin Peaks*. She does not perform miracles per se, unless we consider the eerie up-and-down movement of her coffin as a sign. But she is spotted by Dr. Jacoby, if only in the person of her cousin Maddy Ferguson dressed up in a blond wig. (Appropriately, she appears to Jacoby in Easter Park.) Laura's voice—or rather, Maddy's close approximation of her voice—is heard by Dr. Jacoby and then more mysteriously by Maddy herself. Moaning either “Maddy” or “Daddy,” Laura seems to be warning her luckless twin/cousin. The visions of Sarah Palmer also contribute to the show's hagiographic tone. But although Mrs. Palmer is a visionary in her own right, the otherwise unexplained appearance of a white horse in the Palmer living room at the moment of Maddy's murder may be a sign from Laura; for in the apocryphal *Secret Diary*, Laura's childhood love for and eventual betrayal of her pony are detailed at length. Perhaps even Leland's dramatic change of hair color is a “miracle” from Laura. In one bizarre moment, the videotape of Laura and Donna cavorting in the mountains, which for once seems to be directed at the audience rather than at any of the characters being interrogated by Agent Cooper, intones either “hold me” or “help me.” By witnessing its own miracle, Lynch's television audience is initiated into the cult of Laura Palmer.

These “signs” of Laura's sanctity have meaning, however, only within the evolving legend of her life. The show's villains, Jacques Renault and Leo Johnson in particular, are never troubled by Laura's “double life” as small-town idol and “wild girl.” They take for granted the idea that female paragons are really whores in disguise. The small circle of Laura's disciples, by contrast, examines obsessively the contradictions in her character. In this case as in most, the female saint's life is written by her male advisors and devotees. In the aftermath of a family therapy session soon after Laura's funeral, Bobby Briggs and Dr. Jacoby join together to recall a grotesquely sadistic Laura Palmer who was driven by a combination of frustrated altruism and spiritual abjection. Laura wanted to die, Bobby affirms. “Did she say that there was no goodness in the world?” prompts Jacoby. Bobby replies:

She said people tried to be good, but they are really sick and rotten—her most of all. And every time she tried to make the world a better place something terrible came up inside her and pulled her back down into hell and took her deeper and deeper into the blackest nightmare. Every time it got harder to go back up to the light.

Dr. Jacoby's analysis of Laura's descent into hell, however, depicts her more as a succubus lying in wait for unsuspecting travellers than as the tragic Persephone of Bobby's account. Not only did Laura want to die, according to Jacoby, she was driven to “consciously try to find people's weaknesses, to prey on them, tamper with them, make them do terrible, degrading things. Laura wanted to corrupt people because that's how she felt about herself.” In

an astonishing confession that belies his very professional involvement in the Twin Peaks drug business, Bobby concurs that Laura actually made him sell drugs so that she could have them.

According to Laura's bereaved lovers, she was a tormented but nevertheless dangerous corrupter of men. Dr. Jacoby's covert allusion to her "terrible secret" keeps open the possibility that Laura's self-loathing originated in real incestuous abuse, so that the legend of Laura Palmer's life is poised between two master narratives: she is either a psychologically imbalanced victim of social evils or a powerful agent of unspecified dark powers. Another story, however, is also beginning to emerge. Bobby's testimony stresses Laura's desire to do good which, combined with her conviction of her own sinfulness, suggests the mindset of a future saint.⁶ The *tete-à-tete* between Bobby and Dr. Jacoby concludes with swelling music and cuts to a sweeping panorama in which a majestic bird, perhaps an eagle, sails serenely over the Pacific Northwest mountains. Laura's spirit, as Lynch's less-than-subtle symbolism suggests, has apparently transcended the paradoxes of her earthly existence. As a masculine symbol, however, the eagle also suggests the incompatibility of transcendence and femininity and so undermines its own metaphoric assertion of Laura Palmer's transfiguration.⁷ Thus the life of Laura Palmer remains open, unfinished, resistant to closure.

As the show progressed, so did the revision of Laura's life. While being interrogated at a later date by Agent Cooper, Dr. Jacoby reminisces that near the end of her life, Laura seemed "to have reached a kind of peace." Deciding to end her life, she may have willingly allowed herself to be killed. By a series of transformations, then, murder becomes suicide and then martyrdom. Most important for Laura's canonization, however, is her role as intercessor for her father at his death. With Agent Cooper acting as his witness and spiritual guide, Leland Palmer describes how his daughter—beautiful, serene, and apparently harboring no ill feelings—welcomes him into the "light." At this point in the *Twin Peaks* series, Laura's story has been successfully rewritten in the community's image. Agent Cooper, as spokesman for *Twin Peaks* and its purported values, assures Mrs. Palmer and others that Leland and Laura are reunited in the afterlife as father and virginal martyr/daughter. As in the case of other modern saints—Elvis Presley, for instance—Laura's drug habit and sexual promiscuity are erased by the community of faithful that rewrites her life.⁸

On one level, the canonization of Laura Palmer is a familiar story, one in which a small-town community piously conspires to cover up its sinister psychosexual realities. As a result of this hagiographic coverup, Laura is recuperated as the Homecoming Queen everyone knew and loved, while BOB is scapegoated as the vicious "pagan suitor" persecuting the young female saint. The Freudian subplot of *Twin Peaks*, however, remains before us: in Audrey Horne's hairbreadth escape from a sexual encounter with her own father at One-Eyed Jack's; in Nadine Hurley's dual role as Ed's wife and as

a high school student; in Josie Packard's sexual bond with her patron Mr. Eckhardt, who took her off the streets at the age of fourteen; and perhaps in Catherine Martell's secret alliance with her elderly brother Andrew against his young wife. Blaming Laura's murder on BOB the spiritual parasite rather than on Leland himself requires a collective act of will. After Leland's confession and suicide, Agent Cooper bluntly asks Sheriff Truman whether he would prefer to believe that BOB worked through Leland or "that a man would rape and murder his own daughter." At this moment *Twin Peaks* articulates a revision of the seduction theory. Little girls are not abused by their fathers; if they meet an unhappy end, the reason must be sought outside the family circle.

Once again, however, the Life of Laura Palmer resists closure on a narratological as well as on a psychological level. Although Agent Cooper eloquently recounts Leland's vision of Laura in order to comfort Sarah Palmer, alert viewers might recognize that the vision has a more banal textual precedent. In the ninth episode of the series, soon after Leland's hair has turned white, he and Sarah spend an excruciating evening at the "Hayward Supper Club," where Harriet, the middle Hayward girl, recites a poem that deserves quoting for its hagiographic decorum if not for its poetic merit:

It was Laura,
And I saw her glowing in the dark wood;
I saw her smile;
We were crying and we were laughing,
In our sadness I saw her dancing.
It was Laura,
The glow was life;
Her smile was to say
It was all right to cry.
The woods was our sadness,
The dance was her calling.
It was Laura,
And she came to kiss me good-bye.

In Harriet's "dream vision," the beatified Laura, appropriately crowned by a saint's aureole, comforts her and holds forth the promise of a better life beyond death. Leland expresses his approval of her apocalyptic vision by following it with a robust version of "Get Happy . . . Get ready for the Judgment Day." If at the eleventh hour Leland adopts Harriet's mawkish poem for his own deathbed needs, his image of Laura beatified is unmasked as desperate, second-hand sentimentality. At the very least, Harriet and Leland draw on a common stock of hagiographic imagery. In either case, this moment of intertextuality points to the artificial nature of Laura's elevation to sainthood.

Interestingly, *Fire Walk with Me*, the belated "prequel" to *Twin Peaks*, both clarifies Laura's status as a saint and simplifies her relationship to the

Twin Peaks community. In the film, Laura's bedroom features a sentimental picture in which an androgynous angel presides over a group of children: this heavenly figure disappears portentously from the frame the night Laura is murdered. Although Laura seems to be abandoned by her spiritual guide, in reality she herself is transformed into the guardian angel. Moments before her murder, Laura—dressed appropriately in white robes—appears to Ronette Pulaski, guiding Ronette out of the trailer to eventual safety. At the film's conclusion, Laura and Agent Cooper, who now plays the role of the saint's male confessor, receive together a vision in which Laura herself, wearing angelic wings in addition to her white robes, appears transfigured to them. Cherubini's *Requiem in C Minor* swells in the background. In this most extreme of revisions, Laura becomes both saint and witness. In *Fire Walk with Me*, she is not only the object of a saint's legend, but its subject, confirming by her transfiguration a simple "truth" that vulgarizes *Twin Peaks*' complex martyr mystery.

II

Maddy and Laura: From *Twin Peaks* to *Twinspeak*

In *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch utilizes but also comments satirically upon the ways in which communities heal, or at least cover up, their social wounds by absorbing a dangerous woman like Laura Palmer into a conventionally pious narrative of redemption and transfiguration. Nevertheless, both the fictionality of the saint's life and the reality of the incest it disguises are called into question by the replication of the initial murder. Even before the case of Laura Palmer is closed, BOB fulfills his promise to "kill again." Leland Palmer's murder of Maddy Ferguson, Laura's twin cousin and a more likely saint than Laura herself, moves the question of BOB/Leland's motives to new ground. With this second move, Lynch not only invalidates with devastating finality *Twin Peaks*' master narrative of sin and redemption, he also casts a skeptical eye on the sexual reality that supposedly underlies the saintly cover-up. In this way Lynch proposes a more complicated and threatening answer to the initial question of "Who Killed Laura Palmer?" than Agent Cooper's murder/martyr mystery would permit.

That characters tend to double one another in *Twin Peaks* has been observed at length. Ben Horne and Agent Cooper, Donna and Audrey, and Shelley and Norma all bear a physical resemblance to each other. In many cases, the pairs also function as moral opposites. Characters can also be divided within themselves. The pilot show opens with Josie Packard looking at her image in the mirror, calling attention to the fact that nearly all of the characters lead double lives, two-timing their lovers and presenting a false face to the world.

The most complicated and most important pair of doubles is Laura Palmer and her cousin Madeleine. Laura and Maddy seem to illustrate the familiar

patriarchal division of women into virgins and whores. Maddy is chaste where Laura is wanton, solicitous of her relatives where Laura brought them only grief, and considerate of the teenage friends Laura exploited. But the symbolic attributes of this allegorical pair are reversed. Laura is a blond, Maddy a brunette. And while Laura bears the name of Petrarch's exemplary lady, Madeleine is associated with Mary Magdalene, the archetypal fallen woman.

The iconographic confusion between Laura and Maddy suggests that in Lynch's hagiography, the distinction between good girls and bad, or between virgins and whores, is irrelevant. Both must ultimately be destroyed in order to be controlled. The father's role in saints' legends suggests as well the patriarchy's ambivalence not only toward female sexuality, but also toward virginity and the autonomy that freedom from sexuality can provide women. In the lives of virgin martyrs, fathers generally oppose their daughters' efforts to resist marriage and to preserve their virginity. In the extreme case of St. Dymphna, a thirteenth-century saint whose biography borrows liberally from folklore, the father himself is the unwanted suitor. When she will not submit to his incestuous overtures, the father kills both Dymphna and her male confessor. Even when a patriarch does support his daughter, he can only accelerate her martyrdom. In the story of Appius and Virginia, recorded in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Physician's Tale" and elsewhere, the father of Virginia kills her to protect her chastity, then overthrows the tyrant who had sought to rape his daughter. The voluntary death of the virgin results directly in justice.

The fathers of female saints therefore represent the interests of the patriarchy. The incestuous father-murderer violates an important cultural taboo, but he also ensures the daughter's subjection to sexuality and family.⁹ The father who sacrifices his daughter to protect her virginity also subordinates her life to broader social and political aims. Significantly, both fathers must kill their daughters: the desires of the daughter and the imperatives of society are always at odds and the father's recourse is either murder or sacrifice.

Leland/BOB fulfills this archetypal pattern closely, sacrificing both of his "daughters" to the interests of the patriarchy as well as to the prompting of personal desire. In a twist of plot that makes her a modern Virginia, Laura's martyrdom leads to social justice, for the discovery of cocaine in her safe-deposit box ends finally in the deaths of the Renault brothers and the dissolution of their cocaine ring. The case of Maddy is more complicated. Leland Palmer kills Maddy to prevent her from leaving Twin Peaks, which implies that she is a fantasy substitute for Laura, the imperfect daughter. A desire for control rather than passion, however, seems to govern this act of violence. Leland's fit of rage is sparked specifically by Maddy's announcement that she will return to Missoula, Montana, where as Maddy says, she has a job, her own apartment, and "a life of [her] own." In *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*, Thomas J. Heffernan notes that female saints are by definition politically subversive, since they regularly disobey their

parents, refuse to marry, and exceed the bounds of feminine modesty by asserting themselves in the name of humility.¹⁰ Madeleine Ferguson—a “real saint”—is therefore just as dangerous as the girl in Lynch’s film *Wild at Heart*. She accordingly suffers the same fate. Laura Palmer refuses to fit neatly into her social role, just as she refuses to be buried quietly in the funeral episode. Likewise, Maddy refuses to fill Laura’s shoes in the Palmer household. By killing both girls, Leland Palmer fulfills the double role of the female saint’s father, acting both as distraught parent and as angered citizen. In committing the murders, then, Leland expresses not only his own incestuous rage but also the community’s outrage at Laura’s refusal to submit to the classic American script for beautiful Homecoming Queens and at Maddy’s failure to be a dependent daughter. Bobby’s melodramatic statement that “we all” killed Laura Palmer, delivered at her funeral, is therefore accurate.

Laura Palmer and Maddy Ferguson are, in a very real sense, the same person: both are errant daughters returned to the control of their fathers. Because Maddy is truly a “virgin martyr,” however, the ontological status and symbolic significance of Leland’s incest with Laura, the horrifying fact uncovered and then glossed over in the investigation of Laura’s death, also falls under Lynch’s skeptical eye. The murder of Maddy, represented in extensive and gruesome detail, seems oddly callous and impersonal next to that of Laura. After strangling Maddy, Leland casually practices his putting in the Palmer living room. His disposal of the body also seems perfunctory, for although Maddy is wrapped in plastic, this gesture seems designed more to protect Leland’s golf bag than to enshrine her body. Finally, when the body is discovered, Maddy’s face is still covered in blood. At the same time, however, Lynch insists on the presence of sexual desire in Leland’s attack on his niece. As Leland strangles Maddy in a mad dance, he metamorphoses alternately into BOB and then back into himself: Leland cries, BOB kisses and bites. By replicating not only the murder of Laura but the illicit desire behind it, Lynch renders more problematic the factual status of that incest, since in Maddy’s case the father (figure) emphatically did not realize his sexual feelings for his virginal niece.

Through the symbolic conflation of Laura and Maddy, we are left with an act of incest that both did and did not happen, and with a daughter who both encourages and remains oblivious to her father’s desire. Exploring stories of incest as psychological legends rather than as sociological facts, Lynch turns his attention to the social subtext of Laura Palmer’s legend. Canonization depends on a binary opposition between virtue and vice, or between sexuality and virginity. As we have already seen, however, in the case of the female saint, social autonomy, like the sexual freedom of lesser mortals, is punishable by death. By demonstrating that woman’s autonomy rather than her sexuality threatens the psychological foundations of culture, Lynch gestures toward the concerns of feminist post-Freudian theorists.

Luce Irigaray's skeptical reading of Freudian and Lacanian psychology in *Speculum of the Other Woman* shows how Freud's denial of the reality of female sexuality ironically is used to validate his theory that women experience seduction fantasies for their fathers. According to Irigaray, in Freud's account of sexual development, the little girl is really a little man: "A little man with a smaller penis. A disadvantaged little man. A little man whose libido will suffer a greater repression, and yet whose faculty for sublimating instincts will remain weaker" (26). First and foremost, then, woman's sexuality is defined by her relationship to man. It is her "lack" or castration, the absence of a penis, that ratifies man's possession of the phallus. Since the girl is defined by her incomplete initiation into the Symbolic and into the Law of the Father, her libido is also less controlled, less sublimated than that of the little boy. From here, it is only a small step for Freud to attribute illicit sexual fantasies to the daughter rather than to the father. More precisely, as Irigaray sees it, the father's seduction of his daughter is "covered up both in theory and practice by a normative statement, a law, which denies it" (37). That law is both the incest taboo and the Law of the Father, the symbolic order that organizes both masculine and feminine desire. Irigaray continues: "It is neither simply true, nor indeed false, to claim that the little girl fantasizes being seduced by her father, since it is equally valid to assume that the father seduces his daughter but that, because (in most cases, though not in all) he refuses to recognize and live out his desire, he lays down a law that prohibits him from doing so" (38).

Lynch shares with Irigaray the idea that seduction both does and does not occur and the equally important recognition that this paradox depends on the subordination of woman's sexuality to man's. Both stress the double bind of the daughter, whose "duty would be to sustain with her desire the enticing delusion of a legislative discourse, of a legal text that would state, among other things, that the father has no desire for her" (39). The murder of Laura Palmer demonstrates both the daughter's (illusory) desire and the (equally illusory) law that defines it. By planting the letters of his name under the fingernails of his adolescent victims, BOB brands them as his property even as he violates them. In the case of Laura Palmer, he literally inscribes on her body the nickname of the father. In a less direct way, when Harold Smith elicits from Donna an innocent but titillating "coming of age" story, he makes her desire "real" by incorporating it into his notebook, writing it down and sequestering it in his bookcase. The fact that Harold also possesses Laura's secret diary highlights the fact that Laura's fantasies are not only produced for and controlled by men, but also used to preserve the purity of man. When Donna and Maddy attempt to steal the diary, Harold castigates them for lying and for being "like all the rest," frantically tries to fumigate his apartment, and ultimately commits suicide. In a sense, the dialectic between the father's seduction and the daughter's fantasy functions as *Flesh World* does, assuring men like Deputy Andy Brennan (who uses the magazine to produce his sperm sample) that the women

featured in pornographic magazines, not the men who read them, are sexual deviants. In a sexual economy where woman exists to define man, where she is denied both subjectivity and desire, the distinction between virgin and whore becomes irrelevant because the real object of fear and loathing is woman herself. More precisely, what is at stake is the possibility of feminine subjectivity and sexuality. Like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva examines the ways in which Western symbolic systems deny the existence of, or at least the reality of, feminine desire. In "About Chinese Women," Kristeva considers Christianity as a "homosexual economy" where woman, to be included in the "symbolic order," must think of herself "as a virgin impregnated by the Word." She should therefore "live and think of herself as a male homosexual" (*The Kristeva Reader* 147). Kristeva's notion, although counter-intuitive, makes sense in *Twin Peaks*. The war waged against the timeless evil lurking in the Northwest Woods is entrusted to masculine fraternities: the Bookhouse boys, the Sheriff's deputies, and in Major Briggs's case, the army. "Good women" in *Twin Peaks* are physically or psychologically mutilated: Donna Hayward's mother is confined to a wheelchair, while the psychologically fragile Sarah Palmer is helpless to save her daughter and niece. On a lower sociological level, Norma cringes from her jailbird husband while Leo leaves Shelley to die melodramatically in the mill fire. The show's most prominent emblem of female castration is one-eyed Nadine, who, according to Ed Hurley's account of the accident on their honeymoon, bore her wound patiently and happily as a condition of her marriage. Those women who have power—Catherine Martell, Josie Packard, and even Norma's mother the food critic—are androgynous or masquerade as men. When Catherine reappears as Mr. Tojimura, she even greets her flabbergasted husband with a resounding "homosexual" kiss. Finally, when Coop nearly dies at Jean Renault's hands, it is not Audrey but Denise the transvestite Drug Enforcement agent who comes to his rescue. The only good woman, it seems, is really a man. Therefore, the evil that the Bookhouse Boys and their fathers have fought for generations is woman herself. The owl, emblem of what lies hidden in the woods, is the bird of Athena, the "female" goddess of wisdom—Zeus's fantasy creation who always affirms the male vision of things. Fear that "the owls are not what they seem," that they may represent something other than phallicentric knowledge of Athena or the Satanic evil of Christianity motivates the secret sign system and chivalrous expeditions of the Bookhouse Boys.¹¹

Why the feminine evil associated with the dark forest cannot be eradicated from *Twin Peaks*—which is related to the question of why the plot of *Twin Peaks* refuses closure—becomes clearer when we look at woman's association with what Kristeva calls the semiotic chora and with the mother's importance in the pre-Oedipal stage. Like Irigaray, Kristeva counters Freud's emphasis on the Oedipal drama by focusing on the mother-child dyad of the pre-Oedipal stage and on the semiotic signification associated with it. The

ruptures, revisions, rhythm and echolalia that characterize the semiotic also mark the visions and enigmatic messages used to unravel the mystery of Laura Palmer's murder.¹² The halting, reversed speech of Laura and the dwarf in Cooper's dream, the show's recurring musical themes, the bird Waldo's imitation of Laura's cries, the information communicated by the Log Lady's log, and the simple echo of Cooper's name (mysteriously projected from the woods to the army's receiver) all suggest the presence of a semiotic signification in *Twin Peaks* that predates the masculine symbolic order and is necessarily involved with it.

In cult shows, the eminently repeatable "tag lines" enjoyed by cultists generally belong to the realm of phatic communication. (A good example might be George Peppard's "I love it when a plan comes together," from *The A Team*.) In *Twin Peaks*, these tag lines can be purely phatic, but more frequently they are portentous, holding forth the promise of a meaning that eludes rational understanding. At the beginning of his quest, Cooper interprets confidently the various messages sent to him. The smiling bag (Jacques Renault's body bag) and even a syntactically ambiguous utterance such as "without chemicals, he points" (which refers to the One Armed Man's hypodermic needle) are interpreted swiftly if not always accurately. But as time passes, seemingly inane utterances such as "where we come from the birds sing a pretty song" (a reference to the ill-fated Waldo) or more famously, "that gum you like is going to come back in style," become consequential. Nevertheless, the decrepit Old Bellhop's remark about the gum alerts Cooper to the fact that Leland is the murderer not directly but by an associative trigger that brings Laura's whispered message—the simple statement that "my father killed me"—to his consciousness. The most memorable and significant sayings from the show, the log lady's "The owls are not what they seem" and BOB's vaguely threatening "Fire walk with me," offer neither Cooper nor the audience any rational guidance to the show's enigmas. By the time Cooper rashly decides to enter Annie Blackburne in the "Miss Twin Peaks" contest, the frustrated but concerned giant is reduced to exaggerated pantomimes of warning. The echolalia and subvocal signs of the semiotic—what we might call feminine Twinspeak—therefore co-exist with and challenge both the patriarchal canonization of Laura Palmer and its Freudian subtext. Like Audrey Horne, whose tongue-in-cheek trick with the cherry stem at One-Eyed Jack's epitomizes bodily signification outside the symbolic order, the feminine semiotic refuses to submit to the Law of the Father.

Given its preoccupation with the semiotic and the feminine, the plot of *Twin Peaks* must necessarily fail to fulfill the classic shape of the murder mystery plot. It rejects the phallogocentric perspective, the drive toward satisfaction and closure, and the moral oppositions that such a perspective entails. The subject of *Twin Peaks* is not the subject of the Freudian master plot; it is more closely related to Kristeva's notion of the self in process/on trial, which

threatens the boundaries between self and other and disrupts the impeccable facade of the Symbolic order by uncovering the defilement associated with maternal abjection.

In *Twin Peaks*, the visual embodiment of the self in process/on trial is Laura's corpse. Lynch is often accused of misogyny; but Lynda K. Bundtzen has argued convincingly that in *Blue Velvet* he avoids objectifying woman by refusing to "prettify" Isabella Rossellini's nude body, thus denying viewers the scopophilic pleasure that Laura Mulvey has associated with classical cinema. Laura's corpse serves a similar function. The corpse, according to Kristeva, is a fundamental symbol of abjection, that which disturbs system and order. Being both person and object, the corpse breaks down the borders that ensure the subject's integrity. As Kristeva imagines the scene:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (*Powers of Horror* 3-4)

Wrapping Laura in plastic, Leland/BOB attempts to transform her into the object of his desire (*objet a*, in Lacan's terminology). At the same time he venerates her body as a sacred relic. Lynch's camera, however, refuses to participate in this pious sexual fantasy. Even in the photograph attached to Doc Hayward's medical folder, in which Laura's serene face and modestly closed eyes are framed by the wavy hair of a Botticelli Venus, the blueness around her lips is evident. During the fracas in the morgue, which ends with Albert Rosenfeld locked in an unintended embrace with Laura's body, Lynch represents his dead Homecoming Queen unsentimentally. Although Agent Cooper tries to restore decorum by reverently placing Laura's dangling arm on her breast, the camera lingers on the corpse's fingernails, which have continued to grow in death.

Lynch's willingness to face abjection by insisting on the presence of defilement—of the corpse itself—at the heart of Laura's saintly legend characterizes the direction his series takes after the solution of Laura's martyr/murder mystery. *Invitation to Love*, the classic soap opera that everyone in Twin Peaks watches, dramatizes an apocalyptic struggle between meek, saintly Chet and the brutal Montana over their aged father-in-law and his fortune. Emerald and Jade, the good and bad daughters, remain discreetly in the background. *Twin Peaks*, by contrast, begins to be dominated by its female characters. Nadine Hurley, for instance, abandons her role as castrated woman,

pathetically dressed up in pretty clothes for her own suicide: a cheerleader and champion wrestler, Nadine demonstrates that a girl can be strong and also popular, winning for herself the boy of her dreams.

At the same time, the patriarchal effort to control woman by subjecting her to martyrdom grows more sinister. In the final confrontation with Windom Earle in the Black Lodge, Cooper encounters a succession of threatening women. Maddy turns away her face and utters vague warnings against her cousin. Laura leers at him, her agonizing death screams having been transformed into a vampire's howl. Perhaps most disturbing, the women metamorphose into one another in a confusing way. When the dwarf claims that he and The Giant are "one and the same," the assertion is absurd on its face, since they are perched politely on their chairs in a way that emphasizes the grotesque difference in size between them. But when Annie Blackburne (who transforms into Caroline Earle and then back into herself) says that "my husband killed me," it is hard to distinguish between literal fact and metaphor. Annie, the former nun, still appeals to her Christian God in times of need. Having fallen into Windom Earle's clutches, she mumbles Psalm 141, a prayer which, according to the Jerusalem Bible, protects "against the attraction of evil." As winner of the "Miss Twin Peaks" contest, Annie also preaches with inspired eloquence in favor of environmental responsibility. But as Cooper's newest lover, she is a paradoxical saint and therefore seems destined to succeed Laura and Maddy as the next female martyr of *Twin Peaks*. Although the female figures of the Black Lodge are frightening, Cooper's downfall seems to come not from woman but from the eradication of the feminine in a world based on paranoid fantasies of her destructive power. In Major Briggs's dream, the White Lodge is a place where fathers and sons are reconciled, but it also an ancestral home, reminiscent of the maternal womb. In the Black Lodge, by contrast, woman is defined as man's sexual subordinate rather than as the powerful mother. In Cooper's initial dream, the dwarf's red room contained a statue of the *Venus Pudica* type, whose hands chastely cover her breasts and genitalia. In the Black Lodge, the *Venus Pudica* is still present, functioning as Maddy's icon. In the "hall," however, there stands a replica of the *Venus de Milo*, a Venus without arms. Thus, Cooper's trial takes place under the aegis of the mutilated woman, whose castration validates the Freudian myth of sexuality. The episode in which Cooper relives the shooting that ended the first season of *Twin Peaks* implies that his lovers, Caroline and Annie herself, will destroy him. When he discovers the wound in his side the *Venus de Milo* disappears, suggesting that Cooper himself has now become a martyred, castrated female saint. Like many questing heroes, however, Cooper is actually brought low by his own values rather than by a seductive woman. Stoically offering his soul in return for Annie's safety, Cooper engages Windom Earle in a manly psychomachia, so that he is finally undone by his chivalrous code of honor and by the patriarchy's drive to destroy rather than accommodate the

The Canonization of Laura Palmer

feminine. With BOB now acting through Agent Cooper, we can foresee only a continuation of Laura's martyrdom, as first Audrey (chained to the bank vault in protest against Ghostwood) and then presumably Annie fall victim to the murderous rage of men.

What happens to Agent Cooper mirrors in an uncanny way what happened to his show, as if Lynch confronted his remaining audience with their own narrative folly. Because the owls are not what they seem, because the feminine power at the center of the forest is inextricably involved with the Law that would eradicate it, *Twin Peaks* had to continue beyond the conclusion of Laura's martyr/murder mystery: the spinning out of other plotlines was inevitable. Unlike the martyred corpse of Laura Palmer, the serpentine plot of *Twin Peaks* cannot be canonized, wrapped up neatly in plastic and delivered to the devout. But unfortunately, like Laura herself, *Twin Peaks* finally succumbed to the bureaucratic Law of the Father and was canceled.

Notes

1. Producers Lynch and Mark Frost apparently recognized that the show addressed a diverse, nearly unmanageable audience. According to Frost, "some people think of the thing as one big inside joke, and have a ball with it, and see it as some ironic commentary on the history of soap operas, which it really isn't intended to be. And many people see it very solemnly as an in-depth exploration of the life of a town, and get involved in the lives of these people. And I'm hoping that we can pull those two audience segments into one big viewing group" (Pond and Coburn 157). On November 8, 1990, an article in the *New York Times* reports Frost as saying that "what we want people to realize is there is more to the show than Laura Palmer" (Carter, "Who Killed Laura Palmer" 21). Both Lynch and Frost expressed faith in their ability to interest viewers in other characters from the cast.

2. The Palmer family does exhibit some characteristics of incestuous families. Sarah Palmer herself is not physically handicapped (like Donna Hayward's mother), alcoholic (like James Hurley's mother) or perpetually humiliated and shunted aside in favor of male family members or a mistress (like Audrey Horne's mother); she is not even psychotic, just "spooky" in her psychic powers. Nevertheless, like many *Twin Peaks* women, Sarah Palmer is a rather weak and ineffectual mother, and therefore fits a common pattern for incestuous families. As the show progresses, Leland Palmer himself becomes more obviously an incestuous father. Certainly Laura, his "baby," seems special to him. In Leland's pathetic dances, it seems clear as well that she has replaced Sarah as the object of his romantic attention. Like many incestuous fathers, Leland is capable of violent outbursts and jealousy toward his daughter, but seems harmless, even deferential to outsiders. For my understanding of father-daughter incest and the families in which it occurs, I am relying on Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman's *Father-Daughter Incest*.

3. That Lynch himself finds the issue of incest problematic is suggested by variations on the initial murder worked out in different versions of *Twin Peaks*. The expanded version of the pilot show that was released commercially develops BOB's

character in a final scene between BOB, Mike, and Cooper, making BOB appear to be an ordinary psychopath rather than a demonic force. Conversely, the movie that functioned as a "prequel" to *Twin Peaks* made Leland Palmer the murderer of Teresa Banks as well as of Laura Palmer. Both narrative choices represent an effort to iron out the problems of Leland's ontological relationship to BOB.

4. On the subject of the female saint's social standing, see Heffernan 268, Bynum, Goodich 69-81, and Weinstein and Bell 196-219.

5. See also Goodich 175-76.

6. On the prevalence of penitential feelings in female saints, see Bynum and Weinstein and Bell 233-34.

7. Like many early female saints memorialized by male biographers, Laura is made to conform to a masculine ideal of virtue (Schulenburg 114 and *passim*, and Bynum). In classical iconography, of course, the eagle is most frequently associated with Jove. In Christian iconography, it is associated with Christ's ascension (Schiller 1:53 and 2:5). The eagle is also the symbol of St. John of Patmos, and is often represented as bringing John the gospel. It may not be accidental that "Hawk," the Native American policeman, is the *Peaks* character most in touch with the spirit world.

8. For Elvis as a saint, see Beckham. For discussion of this saint's life and its political overtones, see Shepherd 179-82.

9. Lynda Boose suggests that although in Western culture daughters exist to be given away, by marrying a man in obedience to her father the daughter acknowledges his continuing claim over her. Thus, incest merely represents a limit case of a standard scenario, in which the sexualized daughter subordinates herself absolutely to her father's will.

10. For specific examples of female saints who come into conflict with their families and particularly with their fathers, see also McLaughlin 99-130, and Goodich 100-11.

11. For the association of the owl with Satan, see Schiller 2:210, and Ferguson 21.

12. See Kristeva, "From One Identity to Another," in *Desire in Language* 124-48.