

Roman Weretelnyk

A WOMAN'S WAY TO GOD: THE OBSESSED

«Одержима: дороги жінки до Бога» – це розділ докторської дисертації «Феміністичне прочитання драматургії Лесі Українки», захищеної автором 1989 р. в Оттавському університеті (Канада). Після історико-теоретичного наświetлення проблематики автор пропонує власне прочитання драматургії Лесі Українки у світлі феміністичних теорій, що дозволяє йому заглибитися в ті аспекти творчості письменниці, які інакше залишаються невидимими. В дисертації застосовано комбінацію психоаналітичного, постколоніального та архетипного підходів до аналізу літературних явищ. З цих позицій і розглядаються деякі драми Лесі Українки. Так, «Блакитна троянда» постає як тлумачення різновиду жіночого божевілля, «Бояриня» аналізується як відповідь на романтизований погляд української історії на козаччину. А «Камінний господар» є, на думку автора, жіночим варіантом чоловічого архетипу. У розділі, що пропонується читачеві, з урахуванням історичної ретроспекції автор розглядає труднощі і проблеми теологічного трактування жінки. Аргументується, що в цій драмі Лесі Українки Міріам виступає Хрисловою фігурою (яка ототожнюється з Христом) і є одним із перших подібних прикладів у європейській літературі.

The Obsessed (*Oderzhyma*), Ukrainka's first of several plays on religious and biblical themes, marks an important turning point in her development as a dramatist [1]. In form it is the first of her dramatic-poems, the genre in which she would write all but one of her subsequent plays. In content *The Obsessed* represents a development away from an emphasis on a heroine's social quest (In *The Azure Rose – Blakytna troianda*), to one of a spiritual quest (a quest only hinted at in Ukrainka's first play) [2].

The Obsessed is unique among Ukrainka's religious plays in that it depicts an episode in the life of Jesus Christ (called the Messiah in the play), and is thus a "fictionalized biography" of Christ (where an author's focus is on the historical Jesus) [3]. Such appearances of Christ in literature are not, of course, uncommon. What is uncommon, however, is that the play really has two Christ figures, that of Jesus himself, and that of Miriam, or the "Obsessed with the spirit", as she is also referred to (in the play's title and opening stage direction). That Miriam is in fact a Christ figure can be delineated from her strong identification with Christ as well as from the parallels between her life and philosophy and those of Jesus. She emerges as a character who consciously *wants* to become and succeeds in becoming a Christ figure.

From a feminist point of view the play is remarkable because it represents what is one of modern literature's earliest depictions of a female Christ figure, a figure which has become increasingly popular with feminist writers of the twentieth century [4]. That Ukrainka was more concerned with Miriam than with Jesus as a Christ figure is evident in the title of the play: initially titled *Miriam and the Messiah* (which suggests parity), it was renamed *The Obsessed* [5].

The Obsessed is divided into four short acts. In act I Miriam encounters the Messiah, who has been wandering in the desert. Miriam, who has a great love for Jesus, is incensed that he is so alone and suffers so much. She hates his enemies, and cannot agree with his teaching to love them. Jesus offers Miriam peace, but she declines, wanting to suffer either for him or along with him, just as he suffers for others. Jesus, however, turns away from Miriam because in not doing his will he believes that she does not totally accept his teachings. Act II sees Miriam extending her hate to include Jesus' friends (primarily the Apostles), whom she sees as hypocrites unworthy and unappreciative of him.

In act III Miriam finds herself alone at the foot of the crucified Jesus. She expands her hate to include both the friends who abandoned him as well as the enemies who crucified him. At the same time her personal tragedy intensifies because she realizes that Jesus will never know how much she loves him, and because she has not succeeded in sacrificing herself for him. In act IV the rumour spreads that Jesus is resurrected. In front of the authorities only Miriam admits to knowing him while others pretend not to. After she curses and accuses a mob of people for causing Jesus' suffering, the mob stones her to death [6].

By her own testimony, Ukrainka wrote *The Obsessed* during the harrowing night of January 18, 1901 in Minsk, at the bedside of

her dying friend, Serhii Merzhyn's'kyi [7]. That there is an immediate correspondence between the play and the person of Merzhyn's'kyi, whom Ukrainka both loved and admired, there is no doubt. In a foreshadowing of Miriam's action toward Christ in *The Obsessed*, Ukrainka wrote to Ol'ha Kobylans'ka "I will not abandon him [Merzhyn's'kyi], as he has been abandoned by his friends" [8]. As Miriam comes to hate Christ's supporters in the play for their falseness, so Ukrainka came to hate Merzhyn's'kyi's friends who abandoned him when he needed them. In letters to V. Kryzhaniv's'ka-Tupchans'ka, Ukrainka wrote: "he [Merzhyn's'kyi] hasn't heard a word from them [his friends] for a half year, and feels himself forgotten by them..." Of all of his old friends you alone act toward him like a friend should, others... I'd better not speak about them, otherwise you might hear from me many bitter and unsavory words" [9].

If Ukrainka saw Merzhyn's'kyi as a Christ-like figure because of his suffering and his abandonment by friends, she also equated her own suffering for Merzhyn's'kyi in Christ-like terms: "How can one be of help to someone for whom a 'miracle' is necessary? One probably should be the Messiah!.." [10].

Unlike *The Azure Rose*, however, a play whose central concerns are inseparable from Ukrainka's biography, *The Obsessed* is more than a representation of the relationship and events that transpired between Merzhyn's'kyi and Ukrainka. Although Merzhyn's'kyi's suffering and abandonment by his friends may have inspired Ukrainka to write a play about Christ's suffering and abandonment, the play's problems are resolved on an abstract and sophisticated philosophical-theological level which is far removed from biographical reality [11].

Not only the problems, but also the personages and verbal echoes of *The Obsessed* in fact appeared in several of Ukrainka's poems years before the crisis involving Merzhyn's'kyi's death [12]. Thus, in "The Sacrifice" ("Zhertva", 1900) an "obsessed" woman appears before the Messiah, offering him both myrrh and her tears. The poem asks why the Messiah didn't tell the woman "What is it that you want of me" [13]. Later, Jesus instructs the apostles to "offer that woman peace..." [14]. In *The Obsessed* in an almost identical phrase Jesus asks Miriam "What is it that you want of me, woman?" and then "Woman, I want to offer you peace" [15]. Moreover, the theme of opportunism on the part of Christ's supporters is found in "The Sacrifice", as it is in *The Obsessed*. In the poem the apostles are said "to have taken more from him than they gave to him" [16]. In the play, after Jesus is unable to awaken the slumbering apostles before he goes to his death, Miriam says "Perhaps later they will gather to say a warm word about him, for whom they cared so little when he

was alive!" [17]. The poems "I Saw how You Stooped Downward" ("Ia bachyla iak Ty khylyvs' dodolu", 1900) and "And, Maybe There Will be a Second Miracle" ("To, mozhe stanet'sia i druhe dyvo", 1900) are both about women aiding the Crucified Jesus.

Another theme central to *The Obsessed*, that of the relationship between love and hatred is first found in the poem "To a Friend in Remembrance" ("Tovaryshti na spomyn", 1896): "Only he does not know hate, who has never loved anyone!" [18]. In *The Obsessed* Miriam's intense love of Jesus is in part motivated by her equally intense hatred of his enemies and false friends.

Other poems with strong thematic resemblances to *The Obsessed* are "The Sinner" ("Hrishnytsia", 1896), "I Know That Much Will Still Rush By" ("O, znaiu ia, bahato shche promchyt'", 1896), "I Would Like to Embrace You as If I Were an Ivy" ("Khotila ia b tebe, mov pliushch, obniaty", 1900), and "Always a Thorny Wreath" ("Zavzhdy ternovyi vinets'", 1900) in which the conscious "climb up Golgotha" is depicted as the greatest of acts [19]. "Jephtha's Daughter" ("Dochka Iiefaia") shows the importance and necessity of sacrifice and a passionate dislike of passivity.

Despite *The Obsessed's* overtly religious nature, the play has not been considered a religious play, but rather, it has been interpreted as a political allegory, perhaps because critics were not prepared to seriously consider theological thinking on the part of a woman. As a result critics have both misunderstood *The Obsessed* and failed to uncover its philosophical depth.

Several views have emerged in the play's interpretation. One, which can be termed the Soviet view, held that *The Obsessed* is a work in which Ukrainka polemicizes with, rejects, and ultimately discredits Christianity as an instrument of class subjugation. A leading proponent of this view, Oleh Babyshkin, regards *The Obsessed* as Ukrainka's first work "in her consistent and many-sided unmasking of the reactionary essence of Christianity" [20]. Babyshkin, as do others who support this view, sees Miriam and the Messiah as representing two warring and irreconcilable positions. Babyshkin writes: "The position of Miriam – is to transform slaves into people, the position of the Messiah – is to transform people into slaves... The humanism of the Messiah – is abstract and groundless in nature, through it all sorts of evil and violence, deceit and unfairness are excused. The humanism of Miriam is based on love for all, which moves life forward, a true humanism of the struggle for the well being of free people. The Messiah's humanism – is an excuse for slavery, the humanism of Miriam – is the denial and condemnation of slavery and the spirit of slavery in a person [21]."

Another defender of this view, Olena Shpyl'ova states: "the image of the Messiah embodied the Christian morality of submission, pre-ordainment, and universal forgiveness, all of which the poetess hated... That is why Lesia Ukrainka so strongly condemns Christian morality, which in the work is represented by the Messiah" [22].

Shpyl'ova points to the following passage in the play to prove that Christ is a defender of the exploiting class: *The Messiah*: "You [Miriam] are stubborn, like a slave, who knowing her master's will does not listen. A strict punishment awaits such slaves" [23]. Shpyl'ova then argues that "People who have accepted the words of the Messiah have also accepted the existing order as being fair and not subject to change, because it has been created by God" [24]. Consequently, "To rise up against this order – means to rise up against God, and the Church" [25]. Soviet critics considered that this is precisely what Ukrainka does in *The Obsessed* through Miriam's confrontation of the Messiah.

Another view on *The Obsessed* is based upon the theory, originated by Dmytro Dontsov, that Ukrainka through Miriam casts herself as a disciple of individualism and of the necessity for a prophet-like leader of the Ukrainian nation [26]. "The problematics of Ukrainka's dramas," writes Dontsov, "is the problem of the prophet and the mob... in pivotal times of the life of a society... [27]. Dontsov maintains that through Miriam Ukrainka appropriates the role of prophet: "she was aware of her great prophetic mission amidst a lost generation" [28]. Although Dontsov's view is motivated by his own nationalism, and thus has little in common with the class-based Soviet view of the play, the two views are remarkably similar in that they both see Miriam as a disciple of hatred towards one's enemies. Whereas Babyshkin sees the ruling exploitative class and its Christian apologists as the object of Miriam's scorn, Dontsov takes aim at Ukrainian liberals: "she [Miriam] could not agree with the teachings of humanism, which disarm one because they preach passive love of one's own and tolerance of enemy forces, which was being embraced by that time's Ukrainian officialdom" [29]. Dontsov ends his argument by dismissing Ukrainka's theological concerns in the play: "The Messiah, the cowardly throng of Jerusalem – are only symbolic..." [30].

A somewhat more moderate interpretation of Ukrainka's individualism is put forth by Borys Iakubs'kyi in his introduction to *The Obsessed* in the Knyhospilka edition of Ukrainka's works. Iakubs'kyi distances himself from Dontsov's Nietzschean view of Ukrainka's messianism, and considers Ukrainka's "excessive" individualism in the play representative of an early stage of her world-view. He interprets Miriam's non-compromising self-sacrifice as representing an individualistically-motivated resolution of a

frustrating problem: "Miriam the obsessed finds an outlet for her excessive individualism in her self-sacrifice; no other option exists for this excessive individualism" [31]. Iakubs'kyi equates Miriam's individualism with that of Ukrainka and sees Miriam's hatred of Christ's passive supporters mirroring Ukrainka's hatred of the passivity of her contemporaries. Iakubs'kyi concludes his discussion of *The Obsessed* by stating that Ukrainka would soon begin writing works that would more accurately reflect her true position as a writer very much concerned with a more global solution to society's problems [32].

Agreeing with Iakubs'kyi in his qualified interpretation of individualism in *The Obsessed* are two other distinguished critics of the 1920s, Mykola Zerov and Mykhailo Drai-Khmara. Zerov states that any leader, poet, or thinker necessarily experiences moments when he or she feels removed from the masses and consequently lapses into a mind-frame of individualism. Zerov adds, however, that in no way can Ukrainka's individualism (as it is manifested in the play) be considered an individualism of despair or anarchy [33]. Drai-Khmara terms Ukrainka's individualism "totally original and completely saturated with social content... When the strong person in Lesia Ukrainka opposes the base and inert society, she does so not out of egotistical, but out of altruistic motives and through it fulfills not individualistic but societal needs... Lesia Ukrainka does not extol her own 'I', does not create her own cult and does not hide in the catacombs, but goes toward life..." [34].

An important variable in the discussion of *The Obsessed*, that of the characterization of Miriam as an unstable person, is introduced by Iakubs'kyi and is subscribed to by Drai-Khmara and Zerov. Iakubs'kyi makes the following statements about Miriam: "Miriam... has a great and tragic, even insane love for Christ. This great love necessarily demands a sacrifice for the beloved... The theme of the poem is the idea of a great, mad, insane love... the woman Miriam becoming enraptured by the sermons and miracles of the Messiah, has come to love him madly... [and] in an insane ecstasy gives her life... for love" [35].

The identification of Miriam's love for and devotion to Christ as an act of madness has several important ramifications. In part it represents patriarchal unacceptance of a woman choosing her own way to God. Christianity's prescribed roles for the devotion of women are well defined, and are modeled, for instance, on images like that of the Virgin Mary. Comments Barbara Hill Rigney: "Mary's suppliant assent to the sacrifice of her humanity in order to become the mother of God sums up the qualities idealized for women by Christianity: sacrificial love, sexual purity, humility, passivity" [36].

Although exalted by the Church as the mother of God and as an ideal figure, Mary also causes the Church great anxiety because of her femaleness. Christianity is particularly uncomfortable with woman's sexuality and the "otherness" of her body. Tertullian calls the woman's body "a temple built over a sewer," and St. Augustine is obscenely horrified to contemplate the reality of birth: "We are born between feces and urine" [37]. Considering the Church's revulsion with the female body it is no surprise that Church canon declares the concept of the virgin birth of Christ. Simone de Beauvoir adds, "The aversion of Christianity in the matter of the feminine body is such that while it is willing to doom its God to an ignominious death, it spares him the defilement of being born" [38].

Christianity's views on female biology are just part of its overall condemnation of women to a status far inferior to that of men. A roll call of misogynistic statements of prominent theologians would be too long to list here. Representative are the comments of one of the Fathers of the Church, Tertullian, who remarks: "Woman, you are the devil's doorway.... It is your fault that the Son of God had to die; you should always go in mourning and in rags;" and St. John Chrysostom, greatly venerated in the East: "Among all savage beasts none is so harmful as woman;" Later, St. Thomas Aquinas: "Man is above woman as Christ is above man. It is unchangeable that woman is destined to live under man's influence, and has no authority from her lord" [39]. Such opinions were not relegated to the realm of theory; canon law profoundly influenced the laws of society and resulted in a situation where (until relatively recent times) women were treated as the property and slaves of their fathers and then, later, of their husbands. "The given," writes Rigney, is that "sexism permeates almost every facet of the major traditional religions, that religious institutions are completely dominated by men, and that ideological reinforcement of this domination has contributed in no small part to the tragedy that has often been women's history [40].

Miriam's most serious violation of Church law and belief is her refusal to submit her will to the will of God. Of all the vows that the Church demands of its believers, and especially of women, the most important is the vow of obedience, for Jesus declared "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" [41].

Miriam loves the Messiah and is ready to die for him but just for him and not for his enemies as well, something he demands of her. Because of Miriam's refusal to love on his terms, Jesus tells her, "He who has denied everything but not himself does not love" [42]. Miriam asks Jesus, "Do I have to love everyone?... [To love] *You* and *everyone* – is beyond my power. For what, for what do I have to

love them?" [43]. The Messiah's answer is "Only unbelievers ask 'for what?'" [44]. Miriam, who cannot bring herself to love Christ's enemies, as he tells her she must do, is faced with a choice: either to submit her will to his, or to stand on her principles. In choosing the latter she defies the most sacred of Christian laws [45].

Miriam, because she attempts to emulate Jesus, is considered to be insane. Men (as shown in Ziolkowski's study), are comfortably accepted in a wide range of literary depictions as being Christ figures [46]. This is the culturally based double standard which prevents critics such as Iakubs'kyi from seeing in Miriam's search for God as valid a quest as that which exists for any male Christ figure.

Miriam's categorization as a Christ rather than a Mary figure in *The Obsessed* may be ascertained in several ways. A strong theme of aloneness and apartness runs throughout the play. Miriam feels tremendous pity for the Messiah because of his solitude and unhappiness: "How he stands alone, God knows! Can no one help him? Will he always be alone?... To give everyone happiness and to be unhappy himself, unhappy, because he is always alone. Who could rescue him from his aloneness..? [47]. Miriam is able to understand the Messiah's suffering while his supporters remain oblivious to it because she, too, sees herself as isolated and alone: "here I sit, as always, alone... And I will always be alone in this and in the next world. Yes, my dark longing will never end and sorrow will always burn my heart" [48].

The Messiah, responding to Miriam's question "And what do I lack? Oh Messiah, do You know?!" offers her peace: "Do not worry woman, I want to offer you peace" [49]. Miriam, however, cannot accept Jesus' offer because she believes that if he is not at peace then neither will she be: "But you, Teacher, left behind the peace which was yours in quiet Nazareth" [50]. Through her words Miriam equates her quest, along with its suffering, with the Messiah's, as a conscious choice for a necessary struggle over the comforts of inaction. The Messiah, understanding the implications of Miriam's response, asks, "Do you want to equal..." but before he can complete his question Miriam interjects, "No, Messiah, I am not equaling myself to You, no! I know that I am an unfortunate woman" [51].

This last dialogue indicates that the Messiah is well aware that Miriam is attempting to identify herself with him. However, the Messiah cannot accept this notion. He asks: "For what reason do you forsake peace, the only solace of all the unfortunate?" [52]. By answering "Because You do not have it, Son of God!" Miriam both confirms her identification with Christ and rejects Jesus' prescribed advice for the "unfortunates" [53]. Jesus is then prompted to further chastise Miriam for forgetting her place: "You are stubborn, like a

slave, who, knowing her master's will does not listen. A strict punishment awaits such slaves" [54].

At question in Jesus' chastisement of Miriam is the issue of her belief in God. Jesus expects that if Miriam believes in himself and in God the Father, she will without qualification accept all of his teaching. The Messiah asks Miriam: "Miriam, say, do you believe in me?" to which she answers, "I believe that You are the Son of God, Messiah, and will give everyone, except me, salvation" [55]. Christ then asks, "Have you accepted my words?" and Miriam responds, "I shall never forget them" [56]. Not content with Miriam's answer, Christ asks, "And you will follow them?" in reply to which Miriam offers, "They will follow me wherever I go, beseeching me: 'You are going on an improper course!' And I will step on Your fiery words as if they were a painful open flame,— my tracks will be bloody from them".

The Messiah interprets Miriam's words as indicating a lack of faith in him: "There is little faith in you. If you only possessed a grain of faith..." [57]. Terribly pained by the Messiah's inability to understand her, Miriam replies, "Oh I believe, without a doubt I believe in You, Son of God, only I don't believe in myself! I don't believe that I will be able to accept your words" [58]. Miriam's tragedy is that she deeply loves Christ but cannot accept all of his teachings, which he interprets as a lack of love for him.

There is nothing more that Miriam would like to do than to offer herself in sacrifice to help Christ, as he will for all of humankind: "And perhaps with my blood I will be able to redeem... If You would accept from me redemption, so that Your holy blood would not flow!" [59]. After Christ incredulously asks, "You want to redeem me?" and answers, "It is in vain!" Miriam pleads, "Then allow me at least to die along with You, if not for You!" [60]. After Miriam cries out one last desperate time, "Messiah!" his words to her are: "No, to you I am not the Messiah. You do not know me" [61].

Ultimately, Miriam is rejected by the Christ whom she so boundlessly loves. He is a Christ who, despite his deity and love for all people, is constrained by the law of God, which as it is interpreted on earth by the Church, is necessarily confining. It is this conditional acceptance of Miriam by Christ which does not allow her to show her love for him on her own terms [62].

Miriam's actions are not those of an unstable, insanely infatuated woman, nor are they those of an unbeliever. Unlike Christ's false supporters in the play, Miriam does not expect Christ to offer her happiness and redemption. All she asks is to be able to truly express her love for him: "Where is there greater grief than in not being able to sacrifice oneself for the soul of a friend?.." [63].

The reason why Miriam identifies so strongly with Christ, apart from her philosophical choice to do so, is that she is able to feel Christ's suffering because of its similarities to the sufferings naturally experienced by women. Rigney writes about such a parallel: "That Christ was persecuted and suffered as a martyr, that he performed the social function of the scapegoat and bled for the salvation of humanity, are qualities which lend themselves as literary symbols for the personal and political suffering by women" [64]. Thus Miriam's philosophical sympathy for Christ's solitude and suffering which she compares to her own spiritual loneliness and suffering has more than just abstract-philosophical grounds. It is both rooted in and reinforced by the otherness and the suffering of her female experience.

Like Rigney, de Beauvoir sees women's identification with Christ in psychological terms: "In the humiliation of God she sees with wonder the dethronement of Man; inert, passive, covered with wounds... she is overwhelmed to see that Man, Man-God, has assumed her role" [65]. Simone de Beauvoir contends that such identification with Christ can lead to deeply-neurotic and destructive behaviour, sometimes manifested through inner experiences and sometimes through concrete action [66]. It can also, she says, manifest itself as "erotomania": because a neurotic woman sees that Christ has died for her "All she can do is abandon herself to his fires without resistance... in platonic or in sexual form... Woman seeks in divine love first of all what the *amoureuse* seeks in that of man: the exaltation of her narcissism; this sovereign gaze fixed attentively, amorously, upon her is a miraculous godsend" [67].

Women's identification with Christ, de Beauvoir adds, however, does not have to result in neurotic behaviour. It can also take the form of constructive and even visionary acts: "There are women of action like St. Catherine, St. Theresa, Joan of Arc, who know very well what goals they have in mind and who lucidly devise means for attaining them: their visions simply provide objective images for their certitudes, encouraging these women to persist in the paths they have mapped out in detail for themselves" [68].

Miriam is also such a woman, certain and persistent in her chosen path.

Miriam must, however, prove her selflessness to none other than Christ himself. She tells the Messiah that she has given her soul for him because of her love for him. The Messiah asks, "What does it mean, woman, to give one's soul?" to which Miriam replies, "It means – to be ready to die for love" [69]. The Messiah interprets Miriam's answer as not including enough, when he says, "That would be called sacrificing one's body. There is no soul involved" [70]. What the Messiah really wants is Miriam's total submission and not

her sacrifice. He interprets the latter as a manifestation of her narcissism.

On the contrary, Miriam pays a monumental price for her devotion to Jesus because he does not accept the sincerity of her love. Able to accept the damnation of her soul, she cannot live with the thought that Jesus does not believe in her love for him: "Oh Son of God! Let everything in my life be untrue, but believe me, that I loved *You*" [71]. The Messiah, though, does not believe Miriam. Unlike Jesus's false friends, who "devote themselves" to him for truly selfish reasons, he cannot see that Miriam loves him so selflessly.

Miriam's last words before she is stoned to death reaffirm her love for the Messiah: "I am now giving for You... my life... and blood... and soul...! Not for happiness... not for the Kingdom of God... but for love! [72]. Nowhere is Miriam's identification with Christ stronger than it is here: both truly love and out of this unconditional love both sacrifice themselves for those whom they love. Thus even though Miriam proclaims "He did not spill a drop of blood for me," she nevertheless unreservedly continues to love him [73]. Miriam's "obsession" with Christ is not an irrational act of self-gratification. It is an identification with, and subsequent emulation on Miriam's part of the selflessly loving Christ. It is, however, an emulation which is not accompanied by a loss of identity. It thus stops short of necessitating a total subordination of Miriam's will to the laws of the Church – it is a woman's way to God on her own terms.

Ukrainka's play represents an example of what Rigney terms "some of the ways in which contemporary women are perceiving, revising, and exorcising the archetypal images and ideas of traditional religions," Rigney's focus being "not an interpretation of what male theologians think about women, but of what women think about themselves and God" [74]. In *The Obsessed*, Ukrainka challenges fundamental cornerstones of Christianity such as the concept of the importance of the subjugation of personal will to the will of God (and of the Church). Ukrainka regards such total subjugation as being destructive, and as being a form of enslavement.

In depicting Miriam as a Christ figure Ukrainka permits herself another departure from the patriarchal theological canon. Building upon the "femininity" of the Christ figure which many feminists have recognized, Ukrainka's Miriam contributes to a further feminization of the Christ image. Although Miriam manifestly represents a rebellion against the Virgin Mary's docility and passivity, she embraces Mary's charity, pity, tenderness, and her role as a protector and mother. These features do not appear as weaknesses in Miriam, but rather, as positive strengths which parallel Miriam's boundless love.

Thus it is Miriam, who despite having been rejected by her beloved Messiah, stands alone at the foot of the cross after Jesus is abandoned by everyone else [75].

In creating an androgynous Christ figure Ukrainka rejects society's insistence on attributing to Christ patriarchal values simply because he was a man. Her "feminization" of the Christ figure represents a major "de-patriarchalization" of God.

A concrete example of this revision is the rejection by Ukrainka of the concept of glory in being God. Miriam questions the revered male concern with glory, and, emphasizes its hollowness. After pondering the good his sacrifices will bring to humanity she asks, "And for the Messiah? –... glory in excelsis?... To bring happiness to everyone and to be unhappy himself, unhappy, because he is eternally alone. Who could rescue him from his aloneness, his terrible glory?" [76]. Rather than attempting to emulate the male pattern of behaviour which extols glory by striving for "supremacy" or by being jealous of it, Miriam argues with the illogic and destructiveness of glory.

Carol Christ writes that a woman's spiritual quest involves her asking questions such as "Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the Universe? In answering these questions, a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience... Because she can no longer accept conventional answers to her questions, she opens herself to the radically new" [77]. In no other play does Ukrainka pose such questions more emphatically and, as a result, opens herself to the "radical new". In listening to her own voice and experience Ukrainka forces herself to confront the greatest authority figure of all – that of Christ-God. In this confrontation she comes to terms with the way the image of Christ has been used to justify patriarchy. Remarkably, and in spite of the magnitude of the challenge, Ukrainka characteristically does not abandon her convictions.

Because Miriam's challenge of the traditional Christ figure is accompanied by tremendous guilt, her triumph is achieved at great personal cost. When the Messiah sees Miriam's anguish because she cannot love him as she would like, he tells her that her soul "cannot be as black" as she imagines it to be [78]. Miriam answers him, "Oh no teacher, it is blacker than the blackness of a burned-out empty shell of a house." Such is the self-image of Miriam's soul, the result of her guilt over her feelings about Christ. At the play's conclusion, Miriam is stoned to death, which in the Israel of Christ's time was a punishment which awaited an adulterous wife. By dying in this manner Miriam not only fulfills her last Christ-like act, dying for her Lord, but is also punished for her deed [79].

It is only through such intense spiritual experiences, however, argues Rigney, that women can successfully continue their struggle

for justice in a holistic sense: "women's spiritual quest provides new visions of individual and shared power that can inspire a transformation of culture and society... By enabling women to recognize the grounding of their lives in the ground of being, women's spiritual quest gives women the strength to create alternatives" [80]. Adds Rigney, "political freedom is dependent on spiritual freedom" [81].

In light of the complex theological problems raised in *The Obsessed* it is difficult to understand the play merely as reflecting political or class concerns. Such concerns are but part of a larger discussion which centres on the philosophical considerations of spirituality, love, sacrifice.

The play represents Ukrainka's coming to terms with the superhuman demands of Christianity and with the concept of an unwavering, principled, male God. Her creation of a female Christ figure indicates that much of what Ukrainka cannot accept in Christianity bears a direct relationship to her being a woman. The kinds of problems raised in the play indicate that Ukrainka's disputes with her religion are serious and of a large magnitude. As in other areas of her life, Ukrainka is a Romantic: she expects much from religion, and thus opens herself up to disillusionment.

Despite its severity and harshness, however, Ukrainka's critique of religion is also typically loving. It is a critique which arises out of caring, not out of scorn. Any claim that *The Obsessed* proves that Ukrainka is anti-Christian or a disbeliever is totally dispelled by an examination of the intensity and passion with which she comes to terms with her beliefs in the play. Miriam's words can be used to reflect Ukrainka's deep anguish over her own tragic way to God: "It is not that my faith is too small, it is that I believe too much, and this faith of mine will damn me forever" [82].

1. It is difficult to find an appropriate word in English to convey the meaning the word *oderzhyma* has in Ukrainian. The eleven volume dictionary of the Ukrainian language provides the following definitions: 1) someone who is under the strong influence of a feeling, idea, passion, mood; 2) an ill person, in whom, according to backward, superstitious people, an evil spirit has implanted itself; 3) someone, who, to extraordinary lengths, has become enraptured or enamoured with something. See: *Словник української мови* / Ред. І. К. Білодіда: В 11 т. – К.: Наук. думка, 1970–1980. – Т. 5. – С. 625. It is noteworthy that Ukrainka's description of Miriam as a woman "possessed with a spirit" is rendered in quotation marks, thus suggesting an element of irony. In translating *Oderzhyma* as *The Obsessed* therefore, it is prudent to keep in mind the various meanings of "oderzhymist" and Ukrainka's subtly ironic use of the term.
2. Carol P. Christ distinguishes women's social quest from their spiritual quest by terming the former "women's struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society..." and the latter as a woman's "awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe". *Carol P. Christ. Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest.* – Boston: Beacon, 1980. – P. 8.

3. See: *Ziolkowski T.* Fictional Transfigurations of Christ.— Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.— P. 13. Ziolkowski distinguishes five main currents in literary depictions of Christ. One main group, which he identifies as “fictional transfigurations” of Christ features a fictional narrative “in which the characters and the action, irrespective of meaning or theme, are prefigured to a noticeable extent by figures and events popularly associated with the life of Jesus as it is known from the Gospels” (P. 6). Such a work is set in modern times, and its hero’s life is prefigured by Jesus. (This group is the focus of Ziolkowski’s study.) Other depictions include the aforementioned “fictionalized biography”, where the historical Christ’s life is embellished with imaginary episodes, “Jesus redivivus”, in which Jesus miraculously appears in modern times, “imitatio Christi”, where a hero lives his life as he imagines Jesus would live His if He were alive, and “pseudonyms” of Christ, a vague grouping in which a hero is felt to be “Christ like” (P. 13–26).
4. Note that Ziolkowski includes no female Christ figures in his study. For a representation of twentieth century female Christ figures see: *Barbara Hill Rigney.* Lilith’s Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction.— Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1982. Both Rigney and Ziolkowski were unaware of Ukrainka’s play.
5. Див.: *Шнильова О.* Драматична поема Лесі Українки «Одержима» // *Леся Українка: Публікації, статті, дослідження / Ред. Бабишкін О., Каспрук А.: У 3 т.— К.: Академія наук УРСР, 1954–1960.— Т. 2.— С. 337.*
6. Woman as a prophetess/religious figure is an image that would reappear in Ukrainka’s dramas. Miriam’s fate of being spurned by a mob is not unlike that of Tirtsa in “On the Ruins (Na ruinakh)” and of Cassandra in “Cassandra (Kassandra)”.
7. “I wrote it [*The Obsessed*]”, Ukrainka says in a letter to Ivan Franko, “during a night, after which I will no doubt live long, having survived it... If someone were to ask me how I emerged from all of it alive, I would answer ‘J’en fait un drame...’” — *Леся Українка.* До І. Я. Франка, 13–14 січня 1903.— Лист 5 // *Леся Українка.* Збір. творів: У 12 т. / Ред. Є. С. Шаблійовський.— К., Наук. думка, 1954–1960.— Т. 12.— С. 18.
8. *Леся Українка.* До О. Ю. Кобилянської, 29 січня, 1901.— Лист 116 // Там само.— Т. 11.— С. 206.
9. *Леся Українка.* До В. Г. Крижанівської-Тучапської, 11 лютого, 1901.— Лист 118 // Там само.— Т. 11.— С. 209; 4 лютого, 1901.— Лист 121.— Т. 11.— С. 213.
10. *Шнильова О.* Вказ. праця.— С. 331.
11. Although many of Ukrainka’s plays have autobiographical elements, her biography never again plays as integral a role in her work as it did in her first play. Prime examples of plays which at the same time are highly autobiographical and philosophically independent of Ukrainka’s biography are her two greatest works: “The Forest Song (Lisova pisnia)” and “The Stone Master (Kaminnyi hospodar)”.
12. Ukrainka was drawn to Jewish themes, especially to what she called the “wild poetry” of the Bible. Див.: *Леся Українка.* До М. П. Драгоманова, 2 січня, 1892.— Лист 64 // *Леся Українка.* Збір. тв.— Т. 10.— С. 125.
13. *Леся Українка.* Жертва.— Там само.— Т. 1.— С. 210.
14. Там само.— Т. 1.— С. 210.
15. *Леся Українка.* Одержима.— Там само.— Т. 3.— С. 128–129.
16. *Леся Українка.* Жертва.— Там само.— Т. 1.— С. 210.
17. *Леся Українка.* Одержима.— Там само.— Т. 3.— С. 140.

18. *Леся Українка*. Товаришці на спомин.— Там само.— Т. 1.— С. 130.
19. *Леся Українка*. Завжди терновий вінець.— Там само.— Т. 1.— С. 189–190.
20. *Бабишкін О.* Драматургія Лесі Українки.— К.: Державне видавництво образотворчого мистецтва і музичної літератури, 1963.— С. 59.
21. *Бабишкін О.* Вказ. праця.— С. 59. Others who espouse this view are Lelia Kulins'ka, Oleksandr Deich, and Oleksii Stavyts'kyi.
22. *Шильова О.* Вказ. праця.— С. 136.
23. *Леся Українка*. Одержима // *Леся Українка*. Збір. творів.— Т. 3.— С. 130.
24. *Шильова О.* Вказ. праця.— С. 351.
25. Там само.
26. Dmytro Dontsov, who wrote extensively on Lesia Ukrainka, is better known as the controversial chief theoretician of Ukrainian nationalism in western Ukraine after the first World War. His writings exerted tremendous influence over a whole generation, including many emigré literary critics. Див. *Сосновський М.* Дмитро Донцов: Політичний портрет.— Toronto: Trident International, 1974. An example of an emigré critic developing Dontsov's theory to an extreme is found in: *Задеснянський Р.* Творчість Лесі Українки: Критичні нариси.— Мюнхен: Українська критична думка, б. д.
27. *Донцов Д.* Трагедія Одержимої («Одержима» Лесі Українки) // *Визвольний шлях*, 1955.— № 3.— С. 13.
28. Там само.— С. 17.
29. Там само.
30. Там само.
31. *Якубський Б.* Поема надмірного індивідуалізму (Драматична поема «Одержима» // *Леся Українка*. Твори / Ред. Якубський В.— В 12 т.— К.: Книгоспілка, 1927–1930.— Т. 5.— С. 115.
32. Там само.— С. 114.
33. *Зеров М.* Леся Українка: Критично-біографічний нарис.— К.: Книгоспілка, 1924.— С. 63–64.
34. *Драй-Хмара М.* Леся Українка: Життя і творчість // *Драй-Хмара М.* З літературно-наукової спадщини.— Нью-Йорк: Наукове товариство ім. Шевченка, 1979.— С. 142.
35. *Якубський Б.* Вказ. праця.— С. 109–112.
36. *Rigney V. H.* Op. cit.— P. 36.
37. Quoted in *Simone de Beauvoir*. *The Second Sex* / Trans. H. M. Parshley.— New York: Knopf, 1953.— P. 167.
38. Op. cit.— P. 167.
39. *Ibid.*— P. 98.
40. *Rigney V. H.* Op. cit.— P. 3.
41. Quoted in *Fremantle A.* *Woman's Way to God*.— New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.— P. 4. Although Christian doctrine demands obedience from both men and women, it clearly demands more obedience from women than from men by virtue of its insistence on the subordination of women to men.
42. *Леся Українка*. Одержима. // *Леся Українка*. Збір. творів.— Т. 3.— С. 135.
43. Там само. Miriam's is a significant question because it draws attention to the idealistic part of Christianity. To love one's enemies is an enormous – inhuman request, one with which Miriam cannot agree.
44. Там само.
45. By being disobedient Miriam actually becomes a rebel-Christ figure. Since Christ Himself was perfectly obedient to His Father, to follow His example means to be just as perfectly obedient to Christ.

46. Ukrainka's Miriam must not be understood as what Ziolkowski refers to as a "Christomaniac", that is someone who believes that he is Christ but in reality "may simply be sick"; "Christomania" is the only category in Ziolkowski's study reserved for insane male Christ figures. (Див.: *Ziolkowski T. Ibid.* – P. 141). Miriam doesn't schizophrenically believe herself to be Christ. She consciously and for good reason wants to emulate his life.
47. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.* – Т. 3. – С. 127.
48. Там само. – С. 140.
49. Там само. – С. 127–28.
50. Там само. – С. 128.
51. Там само.
52. Там само.
53. Там само. – С. 128–29.
54. Там само. – С. 130.
55. Там само. – С. 129.
56. Там само. – С. 130.
57. Там само. – С. 131. That Miriam feels terrible guilt that she will not be able to follow Christ's teaching and live up to His expectations of her is not surprising considering the impossible course the Church sets for women. In the words of Anne Fremantle, it is impossible for women to live up to the image of the Virgin Mary: "Unfortunately, having thus started at the top, woman in Christianity had nowhere to go but down".
58. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.* – Т. 3. – С. 131.
59. Там само. – С. 136. Miriam's desire to die like Christ is also heretical – since by this act she would supplant him.
60. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.* – Т. 3. – С. 137.
61. Там само.
62. Ukrainka saw one of the basic faults with Christianity as its separation of God – the master from his people – slaves. In a letter to Ahatanhel Kryms'kyi she wrote: "I do not accept Tolstoy's theory that today's Christianity is an aberration, a disease of this religion. No! In the earliest of documents, in the "Acts of the apostles", in the letters of the apostle Paul, in the authentic fragments of the first Galilean propaganda I see the seed of this slave mentality, this narrow-centered political quietism, which consequently expanded itself in Christianity. Understand it as you wish, but it is not accidental that in the parables and in the Gospel that the word "slave" and the antithesis of "master and slave" are used as the only possible form of relations between a person and God". See: *Леся Українка. До А. Ю. Кримського, 9 лютого, 1906.* – Лист 80 // *Леся Українка. Збір. творів.* – Т. 12. – С. 155. An interesting variation on Miriam as Christ figure is its reverse, Christ as ordinary man. This notion, however, loses merit considering that even though Miriam wants to be a friend to Jesus devoid of any "master-slave" connotations, she still patterns her life on his. Jesus remains very much the Biblical Christ rather than a humanized figure in which the man outweighs the God.
63. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.* – Т. 3. – С. 141.
64. *Rigneу В. Н. Op. cit.* – P. 7.
65. *de Beauvoir S. Op. cit.* – P. 677.
66. See: *de Beauvoir S. Op. cit.* In their attempt to imitate the Redeemer who "saved the flesh by the denigration of his own flesh" mystic women "are not content with abandoning themselves passively to God: they apply themselves actively to self-annihilation by the destruction of their flesh. No doubt asceticism has been practiced by monks and priests, but the mad rage with

- which woman flouts her flesh assumes special and peculiar forms... through humiliation and suffering she transforms it [her body] into a glory. The mystic will torture her flesh to have the right to claim it; reducing it to abjection, she exalts it as the instrument of salvation" (P. 675-676). Such excesses include St. Angela drinking with delight the water with which she had washed lepers, and women of the Italian town of Abruzzi lacerating their tongues by licking the stones on the road along the Way of the Cross (P. 675).
67. See: *de Beauvoir S.* Op. cit.— P. 674. It is common, theorizes de Beauvoir, for neurotic women to confuse God with the man they are in love with, and even to "deify" such a man (P. 670-671). A strong temptation exists for considering Miriam's "obsession" with Christ as reflecting Ukrainka's love of Merzhyn's'kyi. Such, however, is not the case. Ukrainka's play goes well beyond representing a "narcissistic" need on Ukrainka's part to show love for a man whom she considers to be Christ-like.
 68. *de Beauvoir S.* Op. cit.— P. 678.
 69. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.— Т. 3.— С. 134-135.*
 70. Там само.— С. 135.
 71. Там само.— С. 140.
 72. Там само.— С. 147.
 73. Там само.— С. 143. Miriam's statement also distances her from those women whom de Beauvoir classifies as neurotic because of their repayment of Christ's sacrifice for them.
 74. *Rigney B. H.* Op. cit.— P. 3.
 75. Ukrainka's intimation that it is a woman who remains with the Crucified Christ is Scripturally correct. In all four of the Gospels it is women who are with Jesus at the Crucifixion (excepting John). It is also women to whom the Resurrected Jesus appears. See: *Heilbrun C.* Toward a Recognition of Androgyny.— New York: Knopf, 1973.— P. 20.
 76. *Леся Українка. Одержима.— С. 127.* Phyllis Chesler writes: "Women are impaled on the cross of self-sacrifice. Unlike men, they are categorically denied the experience of cultural supremacy... In different ways, some women are driven mad by this fact". *Chesler P.* Women and Madness.— New York: Avon, 1972.— P. 31. Miriam is definitely not such a woman, a fact which distances her even further from the neurotic mystic women about whom de Beauvoir writes.
 77. *Christ Carol P.* Op. cit.— P. 8-9.
 78. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.— Т. 3.— С. 131.*
 79. See: *de Beauvoir S.* Op. cit.— P. 85. Miriam's punishment confirms and brings to its conclusion the underlying notion throughout the play that she considers herself to be Christ's lover. By introducing the element of sexuality, Ukrainka confronts the Church's discomfort with and fear of it.
 80. *Christ Carol P.* Op. cit.— P. 131.
 81. *Rigney B. H.* Op. cit.— P. 4.
 82. *Леся Українка. Одержима // Леся Українка. Збір. творів.— Т. 3.— С. 133.*