***Romance with Jesus***

“Do you realize that Jesus has been wooing you, longing to awaken you to Him, from the time you were a little girl?” Dee Brestin and Kathy Troccoli ask readers of their self-help book, *Falling in Love with Jesus: Abandoning Yourself to the Greatest Romance of Your Life*. Brestin and Troccoli’s romantic depiction of Jesus as “wooing” and “longing” is woven into a growing trend among literature written by and for conservative Christian women, in which Jesus is presented as the ideal intimate partner. Books and blogs suggest that Christian women can “date” Jesus, by drinking coffee with him, holding his hand, even sitting with him on the washing machine. The texts suggest that Jesus desires haptic, or physical, romantic intimacy with women, and that he actively pursues women whose hearts are “open” to receiving his love and control.

Jesus’ “love,” as it written in these texts, often follows typical patterns of abuse. The cost of dating Jesus is complete submission—once you date Jesus, he may tell you to stop seeing your friends, he may tell you to leave school, he may physically take away your capacity to eat, speak, or walk. Jesus’ violent demonstrations of love, and love-based coercion set a precedent in which, more than love excusing violence, violence is understood as love, in and of itself. Narrative of romance and love set up by romance-with-Jesus enable the more explicit violent rhetoric of Christian patriarchy. The divine model for a human romantic relationship is itself violent, and, submitting to human violence is implicitly written as the price of Jesus’ love.

I first noticed references to what I refer to as “romance-with-Jesus” in my research on evangelical abstinence movements in the United States. Texts encouraging unmarried women to abstain from sex, and at times, from dating and all physical contact with men, frequently offered up Jesus as a site in which women’s emotional, romantic, and, at times, physical, needs could be met without the risk of sin.What was initially notable to me, however, was less the (in)efficacy of romance-with-Jesus in reducing pre-marital or illicit sex, but rather, the divine physical and romantic intimacies that young Christian women *are* experiencing. When I began to explore Christian self-help books and blogs, I realized that “dating Jesus” was not merely a metaphor, it was a quite literal experience.The supplementation of forbidden human intimacy with divine intimacy was less surprising than how happy Jesus seemed to be making girls and women. Nonetheless, when one reads the literature, it becomes clear that its authors are writing in response to the deep disappointment of acceptable heterosexuality. Perhaps contradictoraly, however the literature exalts the relationship women can have with Jesus, while simultaneously describing his love in terms of violence.

**Christian Patriarchy**

The texts that make up my archive are written by, and target, women in a range of Christian denominations, including mainline Evangelical, Reformed Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Reformed Baptist and various “Bible-believing” churches that do not explicitly name their theological affiliations. Reformed traditions are derivative of Calvinism, a strict branch of Christianity that emphasized pre-destination. Many of the authors base their arguments upon the work of theologians and authors who are also foundational to the Christian Patriarchy Movement.

Romance-with-Jesus authors come from a range of conservative evangelical Christian traditions, but never explicitly name their theological affiliations in their writings on Jesus. While some of the authors do identify themselves with a particular church group on their websites (Dee Brestin, for instance, identifies as a conservative Presbyterian, ) the majority of the women do not locate themselves within a specific church or denomination. The absence of church or denominational affiliation reflects the individualism of romance-with-Jesus. The oft-quoted “it’s not a religion, it’s a relationship” catchphrase emphasizes these women’s reluctance to explicitly self-identify as part of a national religious movement. Nonetheless, the theological citations made in the texts do suggest an ideological relation between romance-with-Jesus and Christian Patriarchy.

Protestant women may date Jesus, but they *marry* self-described imperfect men. The body of literature I consider deploys romance-with-Jesus in advising unhappily married women along various axes. First, it suggests that women should expect less from their husbands—no man will give them the unconditional love and intimacy they desire, as that can *only* be found in Jesus. Second, it builds upon the premise that romance-with-Jesus is dependent upon obedience and submission by extending a woman’s duty to submit to Jesus and God to a duty to submit to her husband. The rhetorical shift that grounds this claim is rooted in analogy. Citing Corinthians, marital guides consistently remind wives that their relationship with, and submission to their husbands is a reflection of their relationship with, and submission to Christ.

The physical danger to women in this paradigm seems obvious, however, it is deeply caught up in tangled discursive webs of intimacy, love, violence, romance, submission, power, recognition, will, and agency. Finding a way out of this net requires an understanding of how these narratives work, and the geohistorical and political foundations on which they are built.

The Jesus of Christian women’s self-help books is not bound by contemporary understandings (feminist, legal, or otherwise) of consent. Romance-with-Jesus suggests that Christian women can and should feel romantic love towards Jesus, and that he reciprocates this love. However, it is only by sacrificing emotional and bodily agency and subjecthood to Christ and their husbands, women can have “the greatest romance of their lives.” Many of the texts I will discuss often hint at, or openly name, the imbrication of power, domination, and divine love. The divine relationships promoted by this species of self-help are inherently violent because of their insistence that intimacy with Jesus is predicated on surrender, submission, and “dying unto the self. ” Further, I will suggest that if and when Christian women marry men, their romances with Jesus serve as foundation which creates and normalizes unequal, potentially abusive, power dynamics; while at the same time making unfulfilling and abusive marriages more bearable.

Women’s love, as defined by patriarchal Christianity, is inherently imbricated with violence. Romance-with-Jesus operates in a kind of rhizomatic, multidirectional logic. Jesus loves you *so* you should obey him; Jesus is an ideal partner, and he is violent; his violence is a sign of love; your husband should love you like Jesus loves you; Jesus wants you to obey your husband, and you should because you love Jesus. Romance-with-Jesus is in itself violent, that it enables violence, and that, at the same time, it offers comfort and emotional intimacy that do very meaningful work to make bearable the often unbearable conditions of Christian patriarchy.

**Divine Violence**

For the women writing romance-with-Jesus, flesh is primarily receptive. It matters less what the flesh does and more how the flesh feels. Flesh is the site at which Jesus can most materially make himself known. This occasionally plays out in violent, and not merely romantic, ways. When Jesus really wants to make a point, he does it through physical touch. The same can be said of the patriarchs who attempt to model themselves after Jesus in their relationships with their wives.

The authors of *Beautiful One: A Walk into Deeper Intimacy with the One Who Created Us* self-help book directed at an exclusively female audience tell their readers: “God has marked you with a seal(…).He comes with a seal, with a fire branding, and brands you. Like a burning on your soul, His name is on you(…)Sssss….you can feel Jesus branded there.”[[1]](#footnote-0) In a book about intimacy, this line is, on its surface, surprising. God and Jesus are violent actors. The visual and sonic imagery in this text is graphic. We are explicitly invited to “feel” the brand of Jesus, which is “like a burning.” Burning and branding *hurt.* God’s violence is no longer metaphor. He is causing injury. In the United States, the act of branding humans is haunted by the legacy of chattel slavery. Branding bodies functions to mark something considered “livestock” as property. Branding was often used to punish runaway slaves, permanently and painfully marking them as owned, livestock, not-human. The claim that physical branding (however figuratively) can be a romantic love act, is deeply disturbing.

In *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the Body,* Elaine Scarry points to the numerous accounts of God inflicting violence on the human body, and suggests that this violence is key to belief. She writes: “The problematic scenes of hurt (...) tend to occur in the context of disbelief and doubt: the invisible (and hence periodically disbelieved-in) divine power has a visible substantiation in the alterations in the body tissue it is able to bring about[[2]](#footnote-1). ” The texts I have looked at certainly use claims of material, bodily harm to emphasize God’s reality. While the human body can’t “see” God, it can be acted upon in ways that demonstrate God’s power, and visibly mark it for the benefit of others. Jesus taking away your ability to move, speak, or eat creates a public exhibit of his strength. In one account, a woman is rendered immobile, unable to walk, stand, eat, or communicate for several days in what she describes as a demonstration of God’s love. Many people witness her immobility and are further convinced of their faith. The materiality of God is mediated through Baker’s body—his “loving” violence against her is not just about her, it is about all of those who witness his physical control.

Intimacy with Jesus comes at the cost of one’s own claims to agency and will. In one of several articles about her romantic intimacy with Jesus, Ludy, who earlier described Jesus as her “true prince” and “tender knight,” discloses having to give up her friends to have a relationship with him. She writes:

The gentle voice of Christ, drawing me to intimacy with Him, began to challenge this

ingrained assumption. Wasnʼt He far more important to me than being considered

normal? Even if it meant that I never had friends again and became a social outcast, with

all my heart I wanted to build my life around Him. So I withdrew from my circle of

friends. They hardly noticed I was gone. [[3]](#footnote-2)

The Jesus of Ludy’s account requires her to isolate herself to demonstrate love and commitment– a technique frequently deployed by abusive partners—and, notably, endorsed by one of the Christian patriarchal marriage guides.

The conflation of divine love and violence spills into a dangerous understanding of human love. In Romance-with-Jesus literature, and conservative Christian marriage guides, (as within other women’s literature), love is used to make the unbearable bearable. The violence of branding is eroticized because Jesus is the one enacting it, and he “loves us.” Berlant writes that women’s literature creates a genre of femininity that is characterized by women’s “sacrifice of emotional labour to a variety of kinds of callousness, incompetence, and structural inequity.”[[4]](#footnote-3) Romance with Jesus literature is very much about the creation of a genre of women, characterized by piety, submission, and self-sacrifice produced by divine love.

***Patriarchal Violence***

Romance-with-Jesus is foundational to contemporary Christian heteropatriarchy. As I have discussed, the genre forecloses disappointment with the limitations of heteropatriarchy and fills painful gaps where human intimacy lacks. Further, it addresses anxieties around the role of the human and flesh by proposing that fleshly desire and feeling should always be mediated by and channeled through Christ. Finally, and most unsettlingly, the “perfect prince” of the literature exhibits violence and control, and the literature suggests that violence and control are interwoven in a “perfect romance.” Romance-with-Jesus intentionally becomes the template for romance-with-men.

Further, the kinds of self-renunciation and turn away from one’s own will that are central to Pearl, Botkin, and Botkin’s writings are predicated on the same kind of transactional relationality set up in romance-with-Jesus writings.

Citing Ephesians 5:22-24 (“Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior”) and 1 Corinthians 11:2 (“Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife”) , conservative Christian theology analogizes the relationship of Jesus: human :: man: woman. In her ethnography of Quiverfull families in Massachusetts, Kathryn Joyce cites Doug Phillips, the founder of Vision Forum, one of the hubs of the Christian Patriarchy movement, as counseling a group of Christian women:

*Are you willing to call your husband ‘Lord’?* (...) We’re not talking about Lord as in

Creator, but your earthly head. And one that *you have to follow, even when he makes bad*

*judgements*. Are you ready to do the most vulnerable thing a woman ever can do and

submit yourself to a man (...) Can you call your husband ‘Lord’? If the answer is no, you

shouldn’t get married.”[[5]](#footnote-4) (emphases mine.)

The conflation here is obvious and unapologetic. The rights Jesus has over one’s life are mirrored by the rights of one’s husband.On one level, Phillips is careful to caution against the complete conflation of Jesus and the husband, but only to the extent of avoiding recognizing the husband as his wife’s “Creator.” He is, however, to be referred to using an honorific typically reserved for God (or for kink contexts, though this is likely not a comparison Phillips would appreciate.) The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Lord” as: “Someone or something having power, authority, or influence; a master or ruler; A name for God or Christ.” The OED defines “head” (outside of its physical corporeal function) as: “regarded as the location of intellect, imagination, and memory.” It is difficult to see what “no” would mean for a woman who took Phillip’s demand seriously—or, conversely, what a “yes” that existed outside of coercion, would look like.

In their self-help book targeting unmarried women, *So Much More,* Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin are unequivocal in their argument that women’s purpose is to be *for* men: “God saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone and said, “I will be a helper suitable *for* him” (emphasis mine) Being companions and helpers is more than just a job God gave us. It’s what we were actually created *for.* It’s what we were designed and specially equipped to be. In fact, it’s an intrinsic and inextricable part of our natures to be helpers to men. It’s not something we can get away from, even by choice[[6]](#footnote-5)” (emphasis original.) There are a few key things to unpack here: the emphasis on “for” and purpose, and the negation of agency. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel suggests that to feel sure of one’s subjecthood, one needs the recognition of another subject, who is essentially willing to assert that it exists *for* the other subject, negating its own subjecthood. For Subject A to feel certain of its subjecthood, it needs Subject B to say “you are a subject and I exist *for you.”* Normally, this is a problem, because both subjects see themselves as Subject A. The self-help literature I have looked at insist that women must accept that they are Subject B—they exist *for* their fathers or husbands, it is their responsibility to “complete” fathers and husbands, and it so doing, confirm the subjecthood of men and their own relational objecthood. Their purpose (what they are for) is to be for someone else. This relational existence is described perhaps most literally in Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter’s article “Liberated Through Submission? The Worthy Woman’s Conference as a Case Study of For*men*ism.” Nadar and Potgieter look at a specific women’s conference’s rhetoric around patriarchy, complementarianism, and what Nadar and Potgieter, borrowing from Deniz Kandiyoti, identify as “patriarchal bargaining,” The italicization and implied emphasis of for*men*ism is Nadar and Potgieter’s. I would argue that an alternate emphasization that might, for the purpose of this analysis, be more useful to draw on the italicization of “for” in *So Much More*: *for*menism. I make this distinction because, based on the literature I have read, it seems that the point of Biblically mandated patriarchy is less about men than it is about purpose. When the Botkins write that “we were created *for,*” the sentence’s implied actor is God. Women were not passively created to be for men, women’s for-men-ness is an intentional part of God’s plan. The Botkins argue, in line with the theologians on whose work they draw, and the less dogmatic books that draw on their work, that women should accept that they were created *by* God *for* men. Anna Sofia and Elizabeth write:

A real woman is a woman who recognizes that she has been exquisitely and perfectly created by a loving God *for* a unique purpose. Out of genuine gratitude, awe, and a desire to please her Maker, a real woman joyfully submits *every aspect of her identity*—the attitudes and affections of her heart and mind, her appearance, her manners, her speech, her ambitions, and her beliefs—to God’s original and unique design for her as a woman[[7]](#footnote-6) (emphases mine.)

The suggestion that women are not simply *for* men, but *created* *for* indexes the a-priority of women’s for-ness[[8]](#footnote-7). When Anna Sofia and Elizabeth write that women should be willing to “joyfully submit every aspect of her identity” to God’s “original and unique” design for her, they are saying that she should be willing to be willing to sacrifice her identity to be completely *for* her husband. Her attitudes, affects, appearance, manners, speech, ambitions and beliefs are *for* men.

Admittedly, none of the texts I consider explicitly advocate that husbands have the right to kill their wives, however, their discussion of the responses to physical violence do encourage women to accept violence—even at the threat of their lives. In Debi Pearl’s self-help book for wives, *Created to Be His Help Meet,* her husband asks readers:

“Has your husband reviled you and threatened you? You are exhorted to respond as Jesus did. When he was reviled and threatened, he suffered by committing himself to a higher judge who is righteous. You must commit yourself to the one who placed you under your husband’s command. Your husband will answer to God, and *you must answer to God for how you respond to your husband, even when he causes you to suffer*. Just as we are to obey government in every ordinance, and *servants are to obey their masters, even the ones who are abusive and surly*, ‘likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands’…You can freely call your husband ‘lord’ when you know that you are addressing the one who put him in charge and *asked you to suffer at your husband’s hands just as our Lord suffered at the hands of unjust authorities…When you endure evil and railing without returning it, you receive a blessing, not just as a martyr, but as one who worships God.*(emphases mine)

Pearl isexplicitly *not* making an exception for women’s safety, or even lives. The claim that: “you must answer to God for how you respond to your husband, even when he causes you to suffer” directly links piety to enduring abuse and violence. Pearl isn’t kidding about enduring abuse: in *Created to Need a Help Meet,* a companion guidebook for men, Pearl unapologetically describes his early sexual and physical abuse of his wife, describing “changing (his wife’s) mind when she says she is too tired for sex;” forcing her to run alongside him in the middle of the night, barefoot, along sharp rocks, to go crabbing; calling her a “crab” when she runs away in tears after the crabs she is single handedly cooking escape, and chasing her across hot asphalt when she runs away (and this all during their honeymoon!) Pearl is talking about divinely sanctioned intimate-partner violence. God puts husbands “in charge,” and submitting to one’s husband *is* submitting to God. Saying “no,” then, to suffering, or to having sex five times in forty-eight hours (as Pearl boasts of) is saying “no” to God. The simile “suffer at your husband’s hands just *as* our Lord suffered at the hands of unjust authorities” invokes death. Christ, according to the Christian gospels, was brutally killed. It is difficult to read this line, especially alongside promises of martyrdom, as advocating anything but submission unto death. The devaluation of women’s lives, however, does not start with a discourse of martyrdom, but rather with a renunciation of subjecthood and claims to agency.

The authors of romance-with-Jesus literature make clear that women’s for-men-ness is ultimately about for-God-ness. God’s authority is mediated through human men. And yet, there is something more complicated going on than the simple analogy of God:Jesus :: Jesus: Man :: Man: Woman, there is also the analogy that is presented more and less explicitly of Jesus: Woman :: Man: Woman. This slippage than forecloses possibilities for women to say no to men (very specific men, the authors I examine are careful to clarify, women are *not* obligated to submit to *all* men, but exclusively to their fathers and husbands.)

The Christian Patriarchy Movement creates a transactionally gendered economy of love, in which women submitting to their husbands is the price of receiving their husbands’ love, and husbands’ love is the price of their wives’ obedience. In *Between Jesus and the Market,* Linda Kintz explores the rhetoric of the Patriarchy Movement in which women’s submission is posited not only as an expression of their love for Jesus, but also as the guarantor of a present husband and provider. The general argument is that women need love, and men need respect. Women loving their husbands is, it seems, secondary. Women do not necessarily respect their husbands out of love for their husbands, but instead out of love for Jesus. In The Female Complaint, Lauren Berlant loosely defines love as what women live for, and “the gift that keeps on taking .” This definition of love is particularly apt in the construction of women’s love in the marriage guides that suggest that divine love should motivate women to accept emotional, verbal, and physical abuse at the hands of their husbands in the name of love. Love is the condition of sacrifice and of martyrdom.

It is perhaps not surprising that while these discourses used to be propagated by and targeted at men, they now are largely the purview of women. Romance-with-Jesus self-help literature targeting U.S. women started to gain momentum in the 1980’s—not, I think coincidentally, co-occurring with the backlash against the availability of birth control, access to legal abortion, and the “women’s movement.” As women have (kind of/technically) gained legal recognition of subjecthood, the rhetorical subject who needs to surrender has shifted away from men and toward women.

Romance-with-Jesus literature, like patriarchal marriage guides, emphasizes the importance of women’s sacrifice. Accessing intimacy with Jesus is dependent upon “dying unto the self,” rejecting one’s own desires, and right to agency and will. The notion of “dying unto the self” is deployed both in literature promoting romance-with-Jesus, and in Christian marriage guides. I am working from an archive in which woman’s negation of self, subjecthood, and will are central to intimacy—with Jesus and with men. Hegel argues that at the outset of the dialectic a self-conscious subject want to be recognized as being for itself by another subject without recognizing that subject as being for itself. He suggests that this creates a tension, in which each self- consciousness insists that it is for itself, and not the for the other. Christian patriarchy attempts to solve Hegel’s metaphorical battle by insisting that wives willingly give up their claim to be for themselves, and instead identify themselves as existing for their husbands. In her book *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Jessica Benjamin writes that for Hegel, one must “exist for another” in order to exist for one’s self, and that domination is defined by the rejection of this condition. The marriage advice that I analyze essentially asks women reject this condition, not in an act of domination, but in one of submission. Women are taught that embracing God’s plan for their life is a prerequisite to intimacy with God, and that God created women for to be for their patriarchs—fathers and husbands.

The analogy created by romance-with-Jesus literature, particularly that which is situated within Christian Patriarchy, is intensely violent. This violence is multifaceted. First, romance-with-Jesus literature present behavior that would otherwise constitute abuse as “love,” because Jesus is the one enacting it. Next, it uses this violent, divine love, as the model for human love, suggesting that human men’s love for their wives should mirror Jesus’ love. Texts that spell this analogy out do not provide a caveat to exclude the replication of physical violence. The model of marriage held up by proponents of the Christian Patriarchy movement demands a kind of Hegelian renunciation of subjecthood, in which women are asked to identify as having been created specifically for their husbands, and negate their own subjecthoods and rights to agency. The Movement posits women exercising rights of agency and consent as antithetical to Christ’s love. Women’s consent is a tricky thing for patriarchal authors to argue within the framework of Christianity, because consent is at once necessary and irrelevent. The Christian Patriarchy Movement essentially attempts to use coercion to elicit affirmative consent. The very thing that this theological move uses to get the thing it wants is the thing that stands in its way. Christian Patriarchy is essentially asking women to consent to the idea that they never had a claim to consent to begin with.

1. Shae Cooke. *Beautiful One: A Walk in Deeper Intimacy with the One Who Created Us*.

   ( Pennsylvania: Destiny Image Publishers, 2010.) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Elaine Scarry *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* (New York: Oxford

   University Press, 1985,) 183 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ludy, “First Love.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Berlant, 2008, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009,) 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ann Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, *So Much More: The Remarkable Influence of Visionary*

   *Daughters on the Kingdom of God,* (Texas: The Vision Forum Inc, 2005.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Botkin and Botkin, *So Much More,*  76. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. The Botkins, like many other writers supporting patriarchal Biblical interpretations, allude to Genesis 2, in which Eve is created from Adam’s rib, for the purpose of helping or completing Adam, and not Genesis 1, in which Adam and Eve are created together, at the same time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)