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The Christian Parody in Sara Paretsky's *Ghost Country*

Abstract

Paretsky is best known for her V.I. Warshawski detective novels; in this non-series book, Chicago is haunted by what may be an avatar of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Includes a listing of references to other fictional detective stories in the Warshawski series.

THE CHRISTIAN PARODY IN SARA PARETSKY'S *GHOST COUNTRY*

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

SARA PARETSKY IS KNOWN mainly for her novels about a Chicago private detective named V.I. (Victoria Iphigenia) Warshawski. Warshawski, as the narrator of her adventures, comments at one point:

Neither of my parents had been religious. My Italian mother was half Jewish, my father Polish, from a long line of skeptics. They'd decided not to inflict any faith on me, although my mother always baked me little *orecchi d'Aman* at Purim. (*Deadlock*, Ch 1)¹

More specifically, her maternal grandfather was Jewish and her maternal grandmother was a Jewish convert ("Grace Notes," sec. 2); this would not make Warshawski a Jew by Orthodox standards, but it would by Reform standards—not that she is a practicing Jew, anyway. She has many Catholic relatives on her father's side (e.g., *Killing Orders*, Ch. 1, and *Deadlock*, Ch. 1). In another passage, Warshawski refers to herself as a "heathen" (*Hard Time*, Ch. 30). Finally, Warshawski at one point begins two consecutive sentences, "If there really was a god [...]" and "If there is a god [...]" (*Blood Shot*, Ch. 23). The second sounds agnostic; the first, atheistic. Perhaps it is significant that, in the standard authorial write-up in *Contemporary Authors*, Paretsky gives no religious affiliation for herself—but, in *Total Recall* (2001), the dedication is a prayer to "the One" (vii).²

One curiosity of Paretsky's detective novels is that they have a series of allusions to other fictional detectives (Appendix). Even more curious is that fact that a detective mentioned in five of the first six novels is Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey (mentioned just as Peter Wimsey). (Another character from the Wimsey stories is mentioned in the single novel of the first six in which Wimsey is not mentioned.) The curiosity of these references is that Wimsey is hardly an example of the private-eye tradition in which Paretsky is writing; he belongs to the amateur-detective tradition. Further, the references to Sayers's

¹ Since the V.I. Warshawski novels are available in a wide variety of editions with different paginations, references will be give by chapter number.

² For an account of Paretsky's difficulties with her Jewish family, see the first half of her autobiographical *Writing in an Age of Silence* (London: Verso, 2007).

characters brings in, very indirectly, a Christian background. Of course, Wimsey himself is not a Christian (*The Mind of the Maker*, Ch. 9), but his fictional universe is, in one major case, a Christian one—in *The Nine Tailors* (cf. Cawelti 119-125; Christopher, “Complexity”). Sayers is, in addition, known as a Christian essayist, Christian dramatist, and a translator of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: these biographical aspects are not significant in Warshawski’s references to Lord Peter, but they relate, in their indirect way, to two other references by Warshawski. One is to C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, after Warshawski has had her face cut in one novel:

A torrent of images cascaded through my head—Sergio as a worm, me as the evil witch in *The Silver Chair* turning into a worm, my terror in that little black room, and a nagging fear that my face would be permanently scarred. (*Bitter Medicine*, Ch. 8)

Another reference to a Christian writer of the same circle of Anglican friends appears when Warshawski visits a Chicago friary:

A corridor ran at right angles to the entrance. I crossed to it, my heels echoing in the vaulted chamber, and looked doubtfully around. A scarred wooden desk had been stuck in a corner formed by the entry hall and a stairwell. A thin young man in civvies [that is, not in a friar’s robe] sat behind it reading *The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams. He put it down reluctantly after I’d spoken several times. His face was extremely thin; he seemed to burn with a nervous asceticism, but perhaps he was merely hyperthyroid. At any rate, he directed me to the prior’s office in a hurried whisper, not waiting to see if I followed his directions before returning to the book. (*Killing Orders*, Ch. 3; cf. Ch. 5)

Whatever else these references to Sayers, Lewis, and Williams indicate, they suggest some knowledge of the popular Christian literary culture of the twentieth century on Paretzky’s part. (That *The Silver Chair* and *The Greater Trumps* are fantasy novels may imply a taste on Paretzky’s part that led to her book to be discussed here.)

Certainly, all of this is background for a consideration of Paretzky’s one non-detective novel, *Ghost Country*.³ About half the way through the volume, in the twenty-sixth chapter of fifty-seven, a slightly ambiguous goddess appears in Chicago. Paretzky has written on her website, “while I wish for magic, I can’t quite believe in it” and about the goddess, called Starr in the book, “I myself

³ Paretzky has recently published another non-series book, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Putnam, 2008), a contemporary novel echoing some of the themes of fundamentalism and mysticism the author explores in *Ghost Country*.

could never decide whether Starr was just a woman of intense empathy, or a manifestation of the divine" (saraparetsky.com) (on the latter point, cf. the wrap-up discussion by the characters, 376-77). In this essay, the woman will be referred to as a goddess; but whether or not she actually is one, does not ultimately affect the key episodes to be discussed here. These episodes are certain parallels to the life of Christ.

One may add that the book includes some unflattering portrayals of Christians and some Christian churches, some of which will be sketched below; further, the aspects of the goddess which create the Christian parallels—that is, which are a parody of Christ—arise only occasionally from her personality and certainly not from her speeches (she does not speak English, so her communications are limited) but mainly from some of her actions.

Some background is needed before the goddess sequence is analyzed. Paretsky essentially sets up five groups of characters. The first includes an alcoholic opera diva, born Janice Minsky in Chicago, but legally Luisa Montcrief. Her family also appears, but, except for her niece, they are not important in this survey—except that the adults are trying a "tough love" approach, hoping Luisa will stop denying her alcoholism. They put her in a cheap room near downtown Chicago that she can afford; however, she ends up on the streets.

The second group focuses around Hector Tammuz—he is Jewish by background, but obviously Paretsky deliberately gave him as a last name that of the young lover of Ishtar in Babylonian myth. He is a psychiatrist doing his internship at Midwest Hospital, not far from Lake Michigan. He has problems with the head of the psychiatric department, who does not believe in any discussions with patients beyond the immediate and believes in medicines like Prozac—for the poor. The wealthy, who can pay their hospital bills, receive greater care (e.g., 12-16).

Also involved in the hospital is Dr. Abraham Stonds, a grandson of one of its founders and a rigid personality type (16). He and his granddaughters form the third character group. The granddaughters are Harriet Stonds, thirty-two years old, a lawyer and, in standard terms, a beautiful woman, and Mara Stonds, thirteen years younger (25), a college flunk-out (28-29), and, in the same terms, less beautiful. Mara seems to have had an African American father, for she has "wiry black hair" (10) and "muddy olive" skin (20). Complicated family relationships are developed—the granddaughters' mother is long dead, for example, and Harriet has taken her grandfather's name, not her equally dead father's; but this is enough for background purposes.

The fourth group centers around the Orleans Street Church (37, 44-45). This large Protestant church—denomination not indicated—adds several complications. The church is running a night shelter for homeless women; one of the church's members is very much into a Promise Keepers type of masculine

rule of the family (here called Family Matters, 47), and he preaches to the homeless women one night per week (46-47). The Stonds family are members of the congregation.

Finally, there is a group of homeless women—particularly, Madeleine Carter, who thinks a rusty pipe leak in a wall beneath the Hotel Pleiades (east of Michigan Avenue) is the blood of the Virgin Mary miraculously appearing. This is actually on Lower Wacker Drive, a delivery road beneath the main roads of downtown Chicago (32-33). In one of her private-eye novels, Paretsky refers to “the homeless on Lower Wacker” (*Hard Time*, Ch. 29)—perhaps, since it is in a news summary, of a sort, it refers to the same events as in *Ghost Country* (*Hard Time* was published the year after *Ghost Country*).

This brief exposition of a complex background is enough for present purposes. The goddess first appears at the wall that Madeleine Carter believes is holy. By this point in the novel, the hotel management is trying to get rid of Carter. They had the crack in the wall cemented up, but the water broke out in a torrent. The news media is interested in the story. Civil-rights lawyers are raising issues of freedom of religion. Harriet Stonds, the lawyer for the hotel, sees the goddess; here is her reaction to what she believes is another of the homeless:

The woman was a horrible specimen. Her hair was piled in a massive pompadour that looked like snakes, but Harriet was more revolted by her breasts. The newcomer was naked from the waist up, and her breasts looked so enormous, Harriet had the fantasy that they were reaching across the sidewalk to suffocate her. (186)

This is a curious reaction, obviously: it may reflect the type of self-controlled, success-oriented career Harriet has adopted to gain approval by her grandfather, with a denial of her instinctive nature (cf. 24-25, 80, 136-37, 146, 148); it may also reflect the denial of her dead mother, a drug addict who abandoned her years earlier, with occasional reappearances before her death (24-25, 31, 99).

The reactions of other women are also interesting. The alcoholic diva, who (as her given name suggests) is Jewish by background, looks at the goddess and asks, “Queen Vashti?” (186), referring to a person in the Biblical book of *Esther*. (This does not seem to be a musical reference—for example, the 1732 version of Handel’s oratorio *Esther* does not have the part of Queen Vashti.) Madeleine Carter, who believes the Virgin Mary’s blood is seeping from the wall, says, “Holy Mother [...], you’ve come to save me” (186). In a later account, she is reported to have said, “The Blessed Mother is here, She has appeared to me, She forgives me and is calling me Her own pure daughter” (192), although that is probably just a dramatized version of her original words. Mara Stonds, who has never believed in the death of her mother and suspects she is somewhere on the streets, says to her sister, “Harriet, look at her hair. It’s like mine. Harriet, it’s

Mother" (186). This comment ignores the likelihood that Mara got her dark, curly hair from her father, but it is a good example of how the women see the goddess in terms of their own situations.

The reactions of men, on the other hand, are usually sexual. Hector Tammuz may be typical. This passage follows his thoughts in a third-person way, beginning with a fragment:

Naked from the waist up until one of the orderlies found an old T-shirt for her. Her breasts were large and golden, like ripe gourds, the nipples glowing cherries. Even after Millie Regier, the psychiatric charge nurse, managed to cover them [...]. Tammuz found his gaze returning to the woman's bosom, looking past the red cotton, with its gaudy pictures of athletes, basketballs, trophies, seeing those ruby nipples.

Millie coughed warningly. Hector flushed. With an effort—a man pulling his legs from a tar pit—he withdrew his gaze, looked at the woman's face. Hawk's eyes, under brows like overhanging cliffs, he had the uneasy fancy that they stared with merciless amusement into his soul. (189-190)

The final detail, about her seeing into his soul, ties to her being a goddess—or being unusually empathetic. The text literally says that this insight on her part is Tammuz's "fancy," but this text at least does not deny the possibility that the fancy is true.

Tammuz spends some time in the latter part of the book searching for Starr near the underground garage and on the edge of Lake Michigan, where she and some of her women followers spend the nights. After his searches, he is not certain whether he has met Starr on the beach or only dreamed it: "Have I ever suckled those breasts, drunk from that sweet vulva, or has that happened only in my dreams? How can I tell?" (279; cf. 282). This at least suggests his sexual fantasies about Starr. Whether or not Paretsky intended it, the passage would also suggest to a Freudian that Tammuz retains much of the oral period (from birth to two years old). But the effect of the goddess is not limited to fantasies: she is involved in a sexual episode with the opera singer, for example, although it is told in dream-like imagery (209). Perhaps Paretsky wants the effect of the goddess to remain mainly psychological, not explicitly physical.

Who is this goddess (if one assumes she really is a goddess)? There is little doubt that she is—at least in part—Ishtar, the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and war. Since two different goddesses are named in the text, she may be intended to be a blend of them. The maternal grandmother and great-grandparents of the Stonds sisters died in the Assyrian mountains during a snowstorm while they were on an archeological expedition; he was "looking for the remains of a temple to the goddess Gula" (26). Later, Mara, in her rebellion

against her grandfather, chants prayers to Gula (94, 98) and announces Gula speaks through her (95); one time at the garage wall, she prays for Gula to come and drive away the oppressive men—the men from the hotel and the police that drive by regularly (116). An Assyriologist—a friend of Dr. Stonds, but mainly in the book for expository purposes—explains that Gula is the Sumerian goddess of healing. She comments that feminists trying to find goddesses to worship usually pick Inanna, who was the most important goddess in the Assyrian pantheon (96). Certainly, the current popularity of Inanna is suggested by a Google search of the internet: 26,000 references are found, including information on a pagan rock opera about the goddess. What the Assyriologist does not say is that Ishtar and Inanna were variant names of the same goddess, perhaps because she professionally thinks in terms of the Assyrian name, not the Babylonian one. (A check of Google search for *Gula* is misleading, for that is a proper name in several languages. If *Gula* and *goddess* are combined in the search, 608 citations are found; the combination of *Inanna* and *goddess* gives 987.) One may add that ancient carvings of Ishtar and Inanna sometimes show them with bare breasts.

What seems to make it certain that the goddess in this novel is Ishtar is that the opera singer, Luisa Montcrief, who claims to understand, at least to some degree, the noises made by the goddess, says that her name is Starr—with two *rs* at the end (193), presumably meaning a hard or a rolled *r*. *Ishtar* understood as *Starr*. Finally, the matter of the goddess's hair is significant: in a passage quoted earlier—giving Harriet Stonds's first reaction to seeing the goddess—her hair was compared to snakes. When the goddess was put into a t-shirt at the hospital, Dr. Tammuz reflects that the psychiatric charge nurse had problems—among them getting the t-shirt over her head, for “the woman's hair was piled high with heavily waxed curls that looked like horns” (189). Snakes or horns, in other words. Near the end of the novel, the Assyriologist displays “a lapis lazuli [cylinder] seal from ancient Sumer, almost five thousand years old.” She says, “the figure with the horns is the goddess Inanna”; Mara comments that the figure on the seal has cow's horns, but that Starr was not like that, for she took her hair down in the evening and braided it back up in the morning (376). But obviously the impression that she makes in the book includes that of horns. She is referred to as “a great horned beast” by some of the church mob that attacks her (337; cf. the ten-horned beast of Daniel 7:7, 19-24a and the two-horned beast of Revelations 13:11-18).

When the Assyriologist displays the cylinder, Dr. Tammuz asks, “[Do] you think Mara really brought the goddess Gula to life with her chants[?]” (376—actually a teasing statement in the book, not a question). She has not mentioned Gula in connection with the seal, but this brings the other goddess into the text again. Paretsky seems to want the healing goddess, as well as the goddess of sex and violence.

One final detail: sparrows, which were sacred to Aphrodite, another fertility goddess of the ancient world—and perhaps to Ishtar—appear often in the book. For example, here is a passage from an episode at the garage wall:

The sparrows began chattering, swooping from the rafters to perch on the scaffolding, their cheeping so loud it drowned the women's shouts and the static on the police walkie-talkies. Hector, looking up to see the bars darkened by the mass of birds, caught sight of Starr at the edge of the wall. (242)

And here is a passage from the end of the book, when Mara is at Lake Michigan:

She sat awhile longer among the grasses, letting the winter wind blow through her hair, enjoying the peace that came from reaching a decision. She sat still for so long that the sparrows gathered again, cheeping loudly as they pecked among the plants for food. Their cries grew so shrill that Mara looked around, to see who was approaching. (386)

Who approaches will be discussed later in this essay, but the parallel to the previous passage suggests it will be the goddess Ishtar.

Now to the parallels to Jesus. To begin with, Starr does bring, or seems to bring, healing. Two physical examples involve Mara Stonds and Luisa Moncrief, who are living on the streets with Starr. At one point the goddess licked Mara's broken tooth—"her broken stub of a tooth"—and "the throbbing in it eased" (296). Another time, after Luisa was kicked in the kidneys by a policeman and the next day she "was bleeding and feverish," "green-faced and waxen," Starr chewed some bread until it was mushy and forced it down Luisa's throat—in half an hour, she began to recover (297). If the licking of the tooth and the chewed bread seem odd methods, one should remember that Jesus cured a deaf man by, among other things, touching his tongue with spittle (Mark 7:33) and a blind man by putting spittle on his eyes (Mark 8:23). These instances of Mara and Luisa being helped show the Gula-side of the goddess.

In addition to the physical healings, the goddess is involved in psychological changes. For example, when Luisa's niece, Rebecca, goes to downtown Chicago to see what her aunt is involved in, she has the following experience:

She looked up to see Starr scrutinizing her. In the shadows under the scaffolding it was hard to make out Starr's face, but Becca thought the big woman was laughing at her. That was the last straw, after a day spent in heat and discomfort, when she was trying to stand up for her ideas, for this gross woman to laugh at her misery, when Becca suddenly realized

she wasn't miserable, she was in the middle of an adventure, she was young, she was excited, and her feet in their high-heeled lace-up sneakers no longer hurt, but wanted to dance. (262)

Later, on television, she is seen swaying in some sort of dance, near the garage wall. When she arrives home, her mother, who has seen the telecast, grounds her for going to downtown Chicago without permission:

To Karen's astonishment, instead of going into a teenage huff, Becca laughed. You should go down there yourself. You don't know how cool she is, how totally awesome. No, not Mara Stonds, the strange woman who doesn't talk. Starr. You can't tell on TV, you have to see her in person. When she touches you it's like she's totally reorganized your brain. You really should check her out. (262-63; thus, without quotation marks)

Rebecca's new maturity lasts only for a while (cf. 346-47); and, when Starr is killed, she gives up, at least at that point, her independent spirit (348-49).

Perhaps more significant to this paper is the development of Hector Tammuz because it involves a Biblical allusion. As indicated above, he begins with a typical male attraction to Starr—and he searches for her at the garage wall and elsewhere (279, 281). This search climaxes (if the pun is acceptable) with the dreamlike sexual encounter quoted above. But later, when he is sent with hospital security officers to bring in Starr and Mara for "treatment" (284-85) and when he deliberately calls to them on the lake front in a way that warns them away (300), he finds that his sexual passion for Starr fades (315). This does not mean that he turns away from her in some type of psychological rejection, for he tries to defend her in the church *mêlée*—and receives, among other wounds, a broken cheekbone (343, 351). While he is in the hospital, he has a dream that ends this way:

Starr leaned over him, her black eyes gleaming with compassion. "You are the bravest of all the Trojans, Hector; I am well pleased in you. The scar along your cheekbone will be your permanent reminder of your courage." [...]. He stretched his arms out toward Starr, but she vanished. He woke sobbing, his face throbbing. (350-51, paragraphing removed)

The tie of Hector Tammuz's first name to the Trojans is a recurring motif in the novel (e.g., 200; explained earlier on 350), but the significant thing here is that he first warned Starr and then he fought for her and, in the dream, she rewards him with the phrase that God the Father used of Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:11); Paretsky's language, with the choice of "I am well pleased in you" seems to echo the King James' Version, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

For Starr's pleasure in his attempted defense of her, one should remember that Ishtar is, among other attributes, a war goddess. Battle on Starr's side seems to be equivalent to baptism among Christians. (This dream situation could be much more complicated in a full analysis. In the dream, Starr reduces the psychological power that Tammuz's mother has over him and he is freed from the bonds of death; his stretching his arms to her could be those of a child reaching for his now "true" mother. In short, the dream words may be spoken by God the Mother to her son by psychological adoption.)

These examples of the niece and the psychiatrist are two of the positive examples of Starr's influence. Several negative examples also appear—examples in which those to one degree or another against what Starr stands for are punished. The easiest example is that Rafe Lowrie, the man who led the Family Matters group and who preached to the homeless women, is, after the fight in the church, unable to speak and fearful of his daughter (381). The moment of the loss of his voice occurs in the church:

Starr turned to stare at him. Rafe tried to stare back, but the reflection on those flat black eyes was too appalling. He saw himself, not very big, trying always to make himself bigger by forcing everyone else to be small. He tried to blink and look away and found himself gasping for air. He wanted to cry for help, but his voice, his instrument of power in the cattle futures pit [his regular job, on the Chicago stock exchange], had disappeared. (336)

This passage, although overly didactic (for a modern novel, not for a "gospel"), and other such negative effects are, in a very general way, similar to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the Books of Acts (5:1-11), who die because they keep back part of the money they had promised to the early church.

These physical and psychological effects of Starr's life are significant, but several other specific parallels to the life of Christ reinforce the presentation.

After the publicity about the garage wall, many people—mainly women—begin coming, with hope of cures or with other spiritual requests. One television reporter says over the air, "Some of the women claim that the wall's miraculous properties are only felt when this woman [over a photograph of Starr on the TV screen] is present" (254). The flocking of people to the report of miracles at the wall is like the people coming to Jesus for cures (cf. Mark 1:32-34, 2:1-2, 3:7-9), but it is not an unusual phenomenon—crowds have gone to many places for spiritual help through the centuries. An interesting quotation following Luisa's thoughts shows this:

Feed me, feed me, feed me. A constant howl for sustenance that rose wherever they [Starr, Luisa, Mara] went, at the wall, in the crowds of

homeless who slept on the beaches at night, even among well-dressed commuters jostling past them in the coffee shops in the morning. The clamor filled her brain, drove Verdi from her mind [...].

[.....]

Now all she could hear was feed me, cherish me, heal me, save me—as if her own thirst, that bottomless craving that not even a quart of whiskey could slake, were magnified a hundred thousand times. (295-96)

This both shows the psychological cause of the people coming to the wall, and it hints at Luisa's eventual cure of her alcoholism at the end of the novel (355-56).

The feeding that this passage can refer to can be entirely physical. The book says, speaking of the people who came to the wall as miracle-seekers,

If the miracle seekers gave them [Starr, Luisa, and Mara] money, Mara would buy food and hand it out to any other homeless people they encountered. A rumor even spread about an evening when Mara had fed a large crowd at the beach from one bag of day-old bread. (267)

This obviously echoes Jesus' feeding of the four and five thousand (Mark 8:1-10 and Mark 6:30-44, respectively)—an echo but not as certainly supernatural as the Gospel accounts, for this is presented as a rumor.

Late in the book, before a Saturday service at the Orleans Street Church, Mara and Starr drink some of the grape juice left over after cups were filled for communion. Luisa is unhappy that it is not wine (321). Later, when the communion takes place, the congregation is greatly upset that the cups *are* filled with wine (327). This is not the same thing as Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-10), here it is grape juice to wine, but again it is close enough as an echo.

This church service is climactic in several ways, but first a background of church reaction to Starr is needed. Monsignor Alvin Mulvaney, an expert on the miraculous for Chicago's Roman Catholic Archdiocese, is quoted on television, assuring the viewers that the red substance on the wall is rust, not blood (253); he says that there is no change in chemistry or in electrical charge between when Starr is there and when she is not (255). He appears on television to say "that prayer can achieve many miracles," but God would not grant miracles for prayers to pagan deities (264-65). When he and Pastor Emerson of the Orleans Street Church go to the wall one noon and meet Starr there by chance, they lecture her about what she is doing; but while they lectured Starr, they could not "take their eyes from her body, the full red lips with their promise of fuller lips below [...]. Faces shining, trouser fronts bulging, [the men talked]

louder, harder, to overcome their treacherous bodies" (270). Later, Pastor Emerson denies to himself his physical reaction to her:

[T]he public should be fully aware that Starr was a dangerous cult leader. Whether Starr was a kind of genuine medium, speaking in grunts that only Luisa Montcrief could interpret, or whether she was a charlatan cynically playing with the emotions of women like Mara, Emerson didn't care. The point was that Starr threatened the stability of his parish, of the city—really, of all human relationships.

Emerson realized this the day he encountered Starr at the wall. Her mocking smile, her voluptuary's body, didn't arouse him the way they did [...] the monsignor. Starr's wantonness seemed to Emerson more dangerous than mere sexuality: in her face he read a delight in overthrowing—everything. Emerson thought she took a malicious pleasure in [...] Monsignor Mulvaney's discomfort, that she laughed as [he] lost self-control. Emerson had a sudden vision, through her eyes, of people all over the world casting off authority. The anarchy she invited would destroy property, families, churches, all the deepest structures of civilization. (318-19)

Sexuality is often a disruptive influence, of course. In the present American culture, with a fifty per cent divorce rate, and with the influence of divorce on the children in many of the homes, this is obviously true—even though only some percentage (if probably a large one) of the divorces are due to sexual attractions outside marriage or other sexual matters. The 1970s in America, with their celebration of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, upset many people—as the youth often do. What one sees in the responses of Mulvaney and Emerson are two conservative positions. The monsignor is defending the Roman Catholic church and casting doubt on any supernatural aspect to the wall or to Starr. Emerson believes this disruption threatens civilization as he understands it. The Dionysian element must be suppressed. Both clergymen are in the position of the Pharisees and most Scribes in the New Testament, defending a legalistic status quo (cf. Mark 2:1-12, 2:15-3:6, 7:1-13, 10:1-12, 12:13-17). Parson Emerson is driven to denunciatory sermons (272, when he had not yet repressed his knowledge of his sexual response, and 324, 326); most dangerously, he says, "The women who tempt the weak into worshipping there [referring to the wall] are the same harlots, practicing the same abominations that Ezekiel saw a thousand years before the birth of Christ [when only the righteous, given a mark by Ezekiel, escaped the angel of death]. [...] Harlots and mothers of harlots. Daughters of harlots. [...] Turn your back on them. More than that, eradicate them from our midst, so that we may be found worthy of that holy city, the New Jerusalem [...]" (326).

This sermon is more effective than probably he intended, for Starr, Luisa, and Mara are found hiding in the balcony of the church and are dragged down before the congregation—at the special prayer and communion service before a meeting of Family Matters, the masculine Christian group. When Luisa, thinking she is supposed to sing “Ave Maria” for a church service, begins, Rafe Lowrie shouts at her to shut up, tries to choke her to stop her singing, and then as, she is defended by others, pushes her so that she hits her head on the communion table and collapses on the chancel steps (331-33). (His later inability to speak, mentioned above, may have been the result—psychological or otherwise—of his trying to silence Luisa’s singing.) According to Dr. Stonds’s thoughts, when he checks Luisa after she has fallen, she is dead (335); afterward, he says she obviously was just drunk, not dead (337, 347-48). Starr picks her up, puts her on the communion table, and kisses her on the mouth and the forehead—whereupon Luisa immediately recovers (336). One of the homeless women who was with the other women in the balcony, cries out, “Praise Jesus, oh, praise Him,” which adds a certain ambiguity to the resurrection (336). Obviously, this scene is parallel to Jesus raising from the dead the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43) and raising Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Perhaps, since Paretsky referred to one of the Narnian stories in one of her mysteries, it also echoes the scene in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in which Aslan, having been killed on the Stone Table, returns to life also on the Table (Chs. 14-15)—with the exception that in Lewis it is the witch who kills Aslan, while here it is the woman who some think of as a witch (e.g., 337) who restores Luisa to life.

In the church at this point, hysteria reigns. Dr. Stonds, thinking Mara had arranged a faked death by Luisa to show him up, grabs her; men from the congregation charge the chancel, stimulated both sexually by the presence of Starr and non-sexually, angrily, by the presence of such disruptions of the church service and misuse of the communion table—they grab the golden candlesticks and fling them at Starr, and then, with hands and with candlesticks, they beat her to death (337-38). In this case, rather than like Jesus being arrested somewhat after he had disrupted the Temple worship and killed later (Luke 19:45-48, 23:47-53, 22:26-46), Starr is killed by the congregation in the equivalent of the Temple itself.

Later, after Starr’s body was taken to the Chicago morgue, it vanishes. Again, matters are left ambiguous—someone could have filled out the proper form, from an authorized funeral home, and removed the body; but it does not seem likely (367-69). The body is never located, and Hector Tammuz finally gives up going whenever there is a report that Starr has been seen alive (377). The parallel to Christ’s body vanishing from the tomb is obvious—although the reported sightings are more like Elvis’s reappearances than like Christ’s.

However, something related to a resurrection does appear at the end of the novel. Mara is on the beach, in an area where she, Starr, and Luisa has slept during the summer. There she makes the decision to return to college. Earlier in the book, several times Starr's eyes were described as black—as in the episode with Rafe quoted above, and, for another example, when Pastor Emerson and Monsignor Mulvaney met her: "Faced with those unwinking black eyes, Pastor Emerson faltered in the midst of a plea to let the miracle seekers return to their homes and families" (270)—the significance here is "those unwinking black eyes." Here is the penultimate paragraph of the book, with Mara on the beach:

A swan that had strayed from the lagoons into the open lake swam to shore and moved toward her through the brown grass. When it came on her it stopped, and cocked its head to examine her. Mara stared into the flat black eye and thought she saw herself reflected back, sweet, not bitter, with strong wings of her own poised for flight. (386)

The significant passage here is the description of the swan's eye directed at Mara—"the flat black eye." As in Rafe's loss of speaking ability, the new situation is reflected in the eye(s). This hints that the swan is, in some sense, the goddess; that the goddess cannot be killed when her human body is killed. The Christian analogy is a combined one. In the Gospels, Jesus, after his resurrection, was lifted up to Heaven (Luke 24:50-53); the parallel to Christ's ascension is in the last paragraph, when "The swan fluffed out its feathers and took to the air" (386). But Jesus promised after his going that the disciples would receive the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-15, Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 2:1-13). One of the symbols for the Holy Spirit is the dove (Luke 3:21-22). The swan is at least a bird, and in this context it may be taken as the coming of the equivalent of the Holy Spirit to Mara. Mara sees herself in the swan's eye as "sweet, not bitter," refusing the Hebrew meaning of her name, bitter. She sees herself as "with strong wings"—and she has decided to return to college, to make some meaning in her life. The gift of this particular Holy Spirit is the empowerment of a woman. (If Paretsky knows W.B. Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" and knows his cyclic theory of history, she may have chosen the swan to usher in the next two-thousand-year pattern, one in which women are empowered—although that is not quite what Yeats expected.)

After these parallels to Christ's miracles and related matters, one may pause for a theological (and Biblical) context—again related to Paretsky's book. When reporters want statements from Moncrief and Tammuz in the hospital, after the killing of Starr, in a summary of their questions appears this clause: "Was she a saint, a demon, a psychopath?" (357). This is a summary of what has been called the Lewis trilemma, based on C.S. Lewis's prominent use of it in his book *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said [such as "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), at which words some Jews want to stone him for blasphemy] would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Bk. 2, Ch. 3)

Probably, as the present writer has suggested elsewhere (*Lewis* 65), this trilemma goes back to the New Testament, in a response to a speech by Jesus:

These words [a different speech by Jesus from that cited above] caused disagreement among the Jews. Many said, "He is possessed, he is raving; why bother to listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the words of a man possessed by a devil: could a devil open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:19-21)

Admittedly, to the Jewish mindset of the period, madness ("raving") and being "possessed by a devil" (or just being a devil, as in the second question) are identical, so this is stated as a dilemma; but for Lewis the options are split into three.

At any rate, Paretsky's reporters (asking about the goddess) and Lewis (writing about Jesus) set up similar options:

Paretsky	Lewis
A saint	The Son of God
A demon	The Devil of Hell
A psychopath	A lunatic

Later, when a television program has a panel discussing Starr, this trilemma is restated in a four-fold version: "Was she a saint or a demon, a homeless psycho or a supernatural creature[?]" (375). But the term "supernatural creature" is ambiguous; it is technically an overlapping term. If she were a demon, she would have been a supernatural creature. Perhaps the four-fold distinction should have been (1) a saint—that is, a human inspired by God; (2) a demon; (3) a psycho; or

(4) a goddess. It is a consideration of this fourth option that will conclude this essay.

An obvious question is why did Paretsky abandon her mystery series for a novel about a goddess? But the critical question needs to be phrased without the issue of authorial intent since Paretsky's comments on her website about this book are not helpful. She does discuss some of the inspiration for the book there, such as experiencing the treatment of Astrafiammante in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*; she does explain that she emotionally felt the need for Ishtar to remake society, so daughters would not be turned against their mothers (as in Mozart). (When W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman translated and adapted *The Magic Flute*, they were not bothered as much by the Queen of Night's role as by that of Sarastro, her opposite—he needed also to retire from power at the end [ix]—which, at least, suggests some problem in the Sarastro and Astrafiammante plot.) Yet, if *Ghost Country* were no more than a feminist dream of a goddess-remade world, it would be a book like Robert Graves' *Watch the North Wind Rise* (British title, *Seven Days in New Crete*); in Paretsky's novel, the goddess, while changing the lives of some individuals, is killed without changing the whole world. Perhaps Paretsky has too much of the realist in her to allow her to write of a universal transformation—and perhaps the parallel to Christ's career led inevitably to the goddess's death.

Perhaps, then, the question should be: why is the goddess's career like a parody of Christ's life? This is a simplistic question about the whole meaning of the book, but this essay will return to it, as basic to a religious understanding of *Ghost Country*.

First, a negative statement. This does not seem to be a neo-pagan work in any typical way. In the novels of Diana Paxson, for example, the pagan supernatural is accepted as the true spiritual reality.⁴ In this book, Paretsky has deliberately allowed for possible secular explanations of the goddess—even if the supernatural explanation seems, except for a very strong naturalist, more likely. As has been said, Mara at one point takes to chanting to the goddess Gula; but, as she later realizes, she was more intent on bothering her grandfather than on calling on the goddess (167).

Second, the first of the positive statements of meaning. This novel does seem to be an attack on the institutional church—and, although this paper has not emphasized them, the institutionalized practice of law and of medicine. The representatives of the Roman Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity are more interested in preserving their institutions than in the possibility of a new revelation. They are, it is suggested, threatened by feminine sexuality—in critical terms, by the Dionysian spirit. Their Apollonian positions are very

⁴ See the author's "Pagan Beliefs in *The Serpent's Tooth*" in the previous issue of *Mythlore*.

masculine—with the Protestant minister, this is shown by his decision to align himself, on one Saturday, with the quasi-Promise Keepers.

Third, the novel is an affirmation of the lower classes. Again, the emphasis on this paper on a religious reading has not shown this clearly. For example, several street women are characterized and are of significance in the book besides the one who believes she has found the blood of the Virgin Mary (e.g., Jaqui and Nanette, who appear throughout). For a second example, at the end of the book, Hector Tammuz and Harriet Stonds are planning to work for a foundation that will focus on the homeless (378). One may recall that Jesus also tended to side with the poor rather than the wealthy, saying a rich man has little chance of being saved (Mark 10:17-27).

Fourth, the novel does some things that a completely realistic novel also does. For example, Luisa Montcrief, seemingly cured of her alcoholism by Starr when she is seemingly brought back to life—to phrase the episode in realistic terms—nevertheless is still a self-centered diva. Her voice restored, she leaves for a voice trainer in the east before the planned funeral for Starr; she sends an elaborate wreath (charged to her brother, although he did not know it) saying, in Italian, “My pain has ended; I am reborn, stirred by an unusual vigor” (368). In short, she is still concerned with herself and her music first—this is not a simplistic, the-goddess-can-cure-all-your-problems novel.

Fifth and finally, this novel is indeed a curious, deliberately provocative, feminist reshaping of the life of Christ. The identification of Starr with Ishtar is almost deliberately misleading. Starr is certainly seen sexually by the men in the book (with the exception of the cold, self-contained Dr. Stonds). This may be simply an exaggeration of the way men might react to a feminine minister under normal conditions, but to state this approach is to rationalize what Paretsky has done: it is trying to control the book’s Dionysian elements. Starr is not supposed to be acceptable, just as, in a different way, two thousand years earlier, Jesus of Nazareth was not found acceptable by his society. Starr, in contrast to Jesus, adds sex and subtracts a voice for telling parables. The life pattern may be that of Christ, with a sudden and brief “ministry” (so to write), but the disruptions are those of Dionysus.

The parallels to Christ also suggest that the members of an established church—and by implication most established churches—cannot see the Christlike pattern if it is taken out of the familiar Gospel accounts and put in the streets of Chicago. However, to be factual, Monsignor Mulvaney does see the parallels, claiming it is impious “for this creature Starr to pretend to re-create the miracles Our Lord performed at Galilee. This is blasphemy, bordering on witchcraft” (268). He urges the reporters to stop publicizing her actions. Thus, when a spokesman for an established church does see the parallels, he sees them as strictly speaking a parody of Christ’s actions, not as actions that might partake

in some spiritual way in a divine reality. Paretsky has not made the situation easy for the established Christians or for her readers. After all, Starr is *both* Dionysus and Christ, and female.

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Appendix

The following list is that of all the references to fictional detectives and/or their authors in Sara Paretsky's novels and short stories about V.I. Warshawski through 2002. That Paretsky continually alludes to detection fiction in her detective fiction can be taken in several different ways. Some critics will see it as trivializing her fiction, in its depiction of social reality, especially if they note that most of the fictional detectives are alluded to in a way that does not indicate they are fictional. Others may consider that this helps create a cultural universe, rather like that of the classics in Renaissance and Augustan literature—here, a *popular* cultural universe, tied to the last century. (References to detectives of the movies and of TV series have been omitted here; they are fewer in number than those of fiction, but a study might find them interesting since they are generally not mentioned so that they could be taken as real in the Paretsky's fictional world. As an instance of the distinction between fictional and dramatized detectives, in *Killing Orders*, references appear to the Avenger [Ch. 15] and to the Shadow [Ch. 24]—the former is not listed below, since it was predominately a television show, *The Avengers*, despite there being at least nine books based on the series; the latter is, despite the Shadow beginning as a host of a radio show, since there were 325 issues of a pulp magazine *The Shadow*, which established the narrative character, and at least thirty-six novels, some reprinted from the pulp magazine and some originals. (The later radio show was based on the person as presented in the fiction, with some minor differences.)

Indemnity Only (1982; with introduction and minor revisions, 1990)

- | | | |
|-------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Ch. 4 | Philip Marlowe | (Raymond Chandler) |
| Chs. 12, 14 | [Lord] Peter Wimsey | (Dorothy L. Sayers) |
| Ch. 14 | Sherlock Holmes | (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) |
| Ch. 17 | Jane Marple | (Agatha Christie) |
| Ch. 17 | Professor Moriarty [villain] | (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) |
| Ch. 17 | Dick Tracy [comic strip] | (Chester Gould) |

Deadlock (1984)

- | | | |
|--------|---|--------------------------|
| Ch. 11 | (Chet Gordon) | (Kenneth Millar) |
| | <i>Note:</i> Warshawski, in this chapter, uses the phrase “trouble follows me”; this was the title of a Kenneth Millar novel, before he began writing under the pseudonym of [John] Ross Macdonald about Lew Archer. | |
| Ch. 12 | (Sherlock Holmes) | (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) |
| | <i>Note:</i> another allusion. Warshawski uses the phrase, “Elementary, my dear Warshawski”; with Watson as the name, this is a famous misquotation, not actually appearing in Doyle's Holmesian fiction. Adrian Conan Doyle uses it in his pastiche “The Adventure of the Red Widow” (1953). | |
| Ch. 13 | Mike Hammer | (Mickey Spillane) |
| Ch. 20 | Sam Spade | (Dashiell Hammett) |

Note: a general allusion to a movie version of *The Maltese Falcon*—"Lauren Bacall trying to get Sam Spade to do her dirty work for her"; probably a mistaken recollection of the third movie version, which starred Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, but in which Mary Astor played Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

- Ch. 27 [Lord] Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L. Sayers)
Ch. 27 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
Ch. 29 (Philip Marlowe) (Raymond Chandler)

Note: the chapter title is "The Long Good-bye," the same title as one of Chandler's novels (except Chandler's is without the hyphen in the third word).

Killing Orders (1985)

- Ch. 16 [Lord] Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L. Sayers)
Ch. 24 The Shadow (Maxwell Grant [house pseud. on the pulp magazine and some novels, mainly used by Walter B. Gibson—who also published some novels about the Shadow under his own name])

Note: this allusion ("Only the Shadow knew") seems to be to the later radio series, since those shows had the tag line "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."

Bitter Medicine (1987)

- Ch. 5 Gervase Fen (Edmund Crispin [pseud.])
Ch. 5 [Lord] Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L. Sayers)
Chs. 6, 29 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
Ch. 9 Sam Spade (Dashiell Hammett)
Chs. 29, 30 Nancy Drew [teenage fiction] (Carolyn M. Keene [house pseud.])
Ch. 29 Nero Wolfe (Rex Stout)

Blood Shot (1988)

- Ch. 12 --- Agatha Christie [authorial reference]
Ch. 13 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
Ch. 18 Kinsey Millhone (Sue Grafton)

Note: *Millhone* was spelled with just one *l* in the first edition—no doubt just an accidental typo.

- Ch. 25 Jane Marple (Agatha Christie)
Chs. 25, 28 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
Ch. 27 (Sherlock Holmes) (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Note: the title to Ch. 27, "The Game's Afoot," drawn from Shakespeare (*King Henry V* [3.1.31]), was famously used in the Holmes sequence ("The Adventure of Abbey Grange").

- Ch. 40 Mervyn Bunter [Lord Peter's "man"] (Dorothy L. Sayers)

Burn Marks (1990)

- Chs. 5, 31 Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)
Ch. 5 Spenser (Robert B. Parker)
Ch. 21, 38 [Lord] Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L. Sayers)
Ch. 27 (Jack Ryan) Tom Clancy [authorial reference]

Guardian Angel (1992)

- Chs. 9, 18, 25 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
 Ch. 19 Mike Hammer (Mickey Spillane)
 Ch. 22 (Lew Archer) Ross Macdonald (pseud.) [authorial reference]
 Ch. 25 John H. Watson [assistant] (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
 Ch. 46 Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)
 Ch. 46 "the great detectives" ---

Tunnel Vision (1994)

- Ch. 7 Dick Tracy [comic strip] (Chester Gould)
 Ch. 13 Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)
 Chs. 25, 55, 56 Nancy Drew [teenage fiction] (Carolyn M. Keene [house pseud.])
 Ch. 34 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Windy City Blues (short stories, 1995)

- "The Maltese Cat" (Sam Spade) (Dashiell Hammett)
Note: in the "Author's Note" at the first of the book, Paretsky says, "in 'The Maltese Cat,' I simply wanted to pay my own particular homage to the great master of the hard-boiled detective." The cat in question is an actual cat, not a statue as in *The Maltese Falcon*; other allusions also have been largely re-imagined.
 "Settled Score" --- Agatha Christie [authorial reference]
 "Skin Deep" Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Hard Time (1999)

- Ch. 6 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
 Ch. 24 Mycroft Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
 Ch. 25 Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)
 Ch. 26 James Bond [and SMERSH] (Ian Fleming)

Total Recall (2001)

- Ch. 1 Race Williams (Carroll John Daly)
 Ch. 1 Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)
 Ch. 20 --- Edgar Wallace [authorial reference]
 Chs. 31, 40 Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

V.I. × 2: "Photo Finish," "Publicity Stunts" (short stories, 2002)

- "Photo Finish," Sec. 1 Race Williams (Carroll John Daly)
 "Photo Finish," Sec. 1 the Continental Op (Dashiell Hammett)
 "Photo Finish," Secs. 2, 3 James Bond (Ian Fleming)
Note: The first of these is stated as a reference to the James Bond movies.
 "Publicity Stunts," sec. 2 (Sharon McCone *etc.*) Marcia Muller [authorial reference]
 "Publicity Stunts," sec. 2 (Kate Fansler) Amanda Cross (pseud.) [authorial reference]