**Shaving Jesus: Conchita Wurst and the Christlike body in trans\*formation**

Mariecke van den Berg (Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, c.a.m.vandenberg@uu.nl)

In this paper I would like to explore the theological potential of the trans\*formation of the body in popular culture, more specifically, in the performance of drag artiste Conchita Wurst (Tom Neuwirth) at the Eurovision Song Contest finale of 2014. Contrary to Dana International, the first (known) trans\* woman to win Eurovision for Israel in 1998, Conchita did not ‘pass’ as either male or female. As a ‘bearded lady’ she operates on the borderline of the masculine and the feminine, combining the aesthetics of both as she performed the winning song *Rise Like A Phoenix*. In various media Conchita was read as a contemporary Christ figure. With her parted long hair, kind eyes, dress and beard she does indeed resemble those representations of Jesus Christ that have become dominant in the ‘religious imagery of visual piety’ of Western popular culture (Morgan 1998, 1). There are, however, more resemblances. Both the performance of the song and Conchita as a stage character play with themes of misrecognition, suffering and resurrection. Read as a ‘Christ-like figure’ by Eastern Orthodox church leaders, moreover, Conchita was accused of blasphemy.

In this paper I argue that if we take Conchita seriously as a contemporary Christ figure, she enables us to construct a liberationist theology of uncertainty and being in-between. In order to do so I will attempt to understand current cross-dressing performances such as Conchita’s from a genealogy of the beard. The beard recently seems to have made a come-back in at least some Western and Eastern European countries. The urge to ‘return to nature’ that turns people to superfoods seems to together well with the emergence of the hipster beard in the gentrified neighborhoods of European cities. The return of the beard, however, signifies not only a cultural turn toward healthy and ´biological´ nutrition, but also a backlash in which some societies seem to turn towards traditional family values, including the ideology of the male breadwinner and the female caregiver –the beard, obviously, has and always has had multiple meanings.

In this paper I would like to bring into dialogue the meaning of the beard in Biblical times as well as in the history of women with facial hair: the archive of the bearded lady. In the Old Testament and in Christian tradition, beards have often been simultaneously among the most important markers of hegemonic masculinity as well as the site where this masculinity might be jeopardized. I will illustrate this double function of the beard by discussing what I found to be two (potentially) queer texts on the beard. The first is from 2 Sam. 10, v.1-5 where David, as a token of his goodwill towards the Ammonites, sends a number of envoys to pay his respect to king Chanun. The Ammonite king, however, distrusts this act of loyalty and shaves off half the envoys’ beards and cuts half of their garments, “even to their buttocks” (v. 4) . The semi-bearded envoys are then summoned by David to remain in Jericho until their beards are fully grown. The second text to be discussed is from Isaiah 50:6: “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.” I would like to read these texts through the archive of the bearded lady where we find beards and facial hair as a significant characteristic of women on the margins of society (funfair ‘freaks’, witches, old ladies from the countryside), as well as confident queer activists who publically claim the beard, showing how it fails as the ultimate marker of masculinity.