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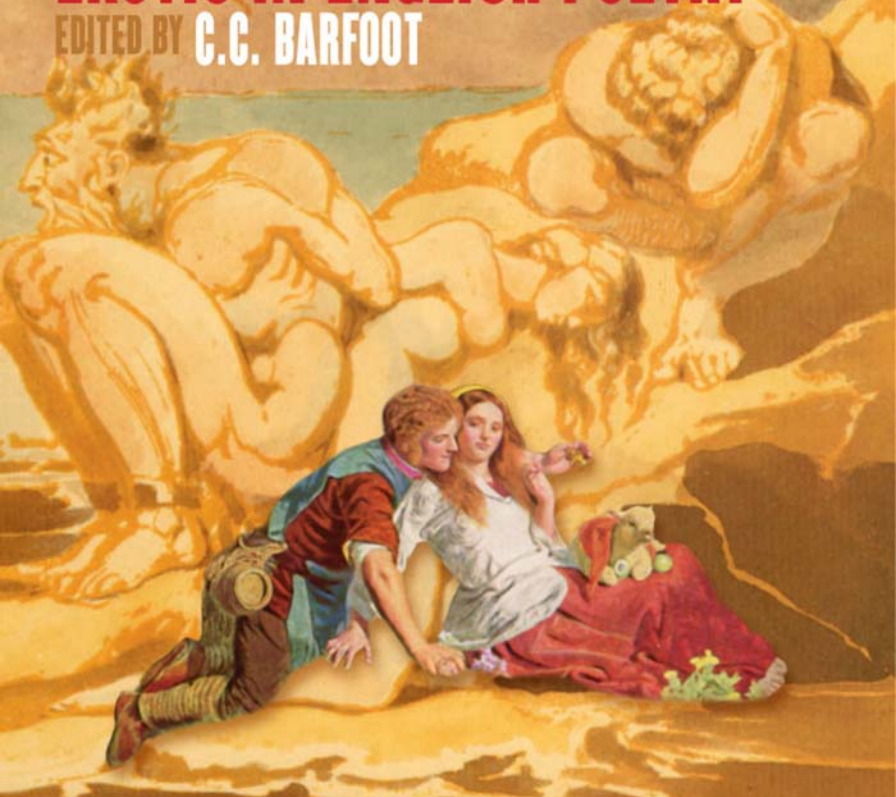
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STUDIES IN  
LITERATURE

# AND NEVER KNOW THE JOY

## SEX AND THE EROTIC IN ENGLISH POETRY

EDITED BY C.C. BARFOOT



# **“And Never Know the Joy”**

## **Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry**

**36 DQR** STUDIES IN  
LITERATURE

Series Editors

C.C. Barfoot - A.J. Hoenselaars  
W.M. Verhoeven

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## **Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry**

**Edited by  
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Amsterdam - New York, NY 2006

The cover design by Aart Jan Bergshoeff incorporates images from William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and William Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd* (Manchester City Art Gallery).

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of 'ISO 9706: 1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents - Requirements for permanence'.

ISBN-10: 90-420-2075-X

ISBN-13: 978-90-420-2075-7

©Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2006

Printed in The Netherlands

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## PREFACE

Several of the participants in the 2003 Leiden October Conference, whose articles form the kernel of this book, remarked how difficult it was to get their colleagues to take seriously the theme of sex and eroticism in English poetry. Surely, the response of their peers seemed to be, there must be weightier and more philosophical issues involved in the canon of English poetry than sex, and its pleasure and pains? And so there are, but erotic expressions and concerns are part of the substantial fabric of English poetry, from the highest to the lowest, from Shakespeare *passim* and Milton in Books IV and IX of *Paradise Lost* to the raunchiest street ballads. Since one of the earliest and most prized English lyrics in the canon is Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They flee from me", with its erotic middle stanza, and the unforgettable culminating voice of the unexpected but welcome visitor speaking directly out of the poem to poet and reader alike, "Dear heart, how like you this?", it is all more astonishing that this vein of English poetry is so neglected as a topic of discussion and research.

Regrettably, this volume does not have the space to cover the whole range of what might be considered sexual and erotic texts in English poetry and there are some notable omissions – no other mention of Wyatt, for instance, nor anything on Shakespeare, which is something of a surprise, nothing on Wordsworth, although an article was promised but failed to materialize (and had it appeared that might have been an even greater surprise). At certain points articles cluster around a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, around Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and around Christina Rossetti. There is nothing very much in this book about popular poetry, poetry of the salon or of the street. There are many gaps to be filled by future volumes that are to be looked forward to.

Perhaps this volume ought to be entitled "How Like You This", but the title of the book, like that of the conference, is taken from a poet usually first thought of when one utters the two words "sex" and "poetry", the renowned Earl of Rochester. Tactically, perhaps, this

immediate connection should have been avoided, but when trying to find a catchy title the lure of the rakish nobleman's phrase was irresistible (as I am sure he would have been gratified to hear). It happens to come from one of the few poems of his that does not contain a four-letter word of the kind only recently admitted to the *OED*, but it is nevertheless characteristic in the dark malevolent twist he gives to the *carpe diem* theme that, as one might expect, frequently haunts this book:

Phyllis, be gentler, I advise;  
 Make up for time misspent:  
 When beauty on its deathbed lies,  
 'Tis high time to repent.

Such is the malice of your fate:  
 That makes you old so soon,  
 Your pleasure ever comes too late,  
 How early e'er begun.

Think what a wretched thing is she  
 Whose stars contrive, in spite,  
 The morning of her love should be  
 Her fading beauty's night.

Then, if to make your ruin more,  
 You'll peevishly be coy,  
 Die with the scandal of a whore  
 And never know the joy.<sup>1</sup>

Readers will be grateful to discover that their passionate engagement with the mouth-watering contents of "*Never Know the Joy*" is not to be delayed through an extended Introduction. All it is necessary to say is that this volume promises you much to enjoy and to reflect on: riddles and sex games; the grammar of relationships; the cunning psychology of bodily fantasies; sexuality as the ambiguous performance of words; the allure of music and its instruments; the erotics of death and remembrance, are just a few of the initial themes that emerge from many an invitation to "seize the day". Reproduction, pregnancy, and fear; discredited and degraded libertines; the ventriloquism of sexual objects; the ease with which men are reduced to impotence by the carnality of

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<sup>1</sup> "Song", in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth, New Haven and London, 1974, 32.

women; orgasm and melancholy; erotic mysticism and religious sexuality; the potency and dangers of fruit and flowers; the delights of the recumbent male body and of dancing girls; the fertile ritual use of poetic texts; striptease and revolution; silent women reclaimed as active vessels, are amongst the many engaging topics that emerge out of the ongoing scholarly discussion of sex and eroticism in English poetry.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude for the financial support of Pallas, LUF and Editions Rodopi BV, and for Christa de Jager's assistance in making a memorable conference run so smoothly; and to thank Marieke Schilling for her skill in the final stages of preparing the book. All of these organizations and individuals have made it possible for readers also in one way or another, “to gather the roses” of text and discussion before it is too late. In love and appreciation for all she has done to enable me “to know the joy”, I dedicate this book to my wife, Helga.

C.C. Barfoot

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## RIDDLING EROTIC IDENTITY IN EARLY ENGLISH LYRICS

JANINE ROGERS

In this essay I will consider how the subjects of early English lyrics that engage erotic or sexual material employ a technique that I call “riddling”, in order to present taboo subject material in the first person without exposing the circulators of these texts to public censure for that eroticism. I suggest that the subjects of early erotic lyrics tend to be presented as unknown identities which must be solved, just as a riddle is solved. I construct the model of “riddling” on an interpretation of Anglo-Saxon erotic riddles from the Exeter Book that construct unstable erotic identities which both expose and protect the lyric subject as sexual. I then apply this model to the early English lyric texts.

In transferring this model, I do not mean to suggest a direct lineage between the Exeter riddles and those lyric forms that came hundreds of years (and a few national cultures) later. Nevertheless, the Exeter riddles and English lyrics of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries share some formal and thematic traits, most notably the first-person speaking subject. The “I” (or implied “I”) tempts the reader to see a “real” subject in the text, and this creates an illusion of intimacy in the text. This co-option of the readers into the identity game, I suggest, has the effect of destabilizing readers’ own identities, to the extent that we are led to question what we know, or what we understand about ourselves and our own reading processes.

I suggest that while the later erotic lyrics are not riddles *per se*, they employ a “riddling” gesture, posing the question “Who am I?”, and presenting multiple clues that evoke both the true speaking subject – the author, composer or reciter of the lyric – and an eroticized false speaking subject. The sexual identity is thus simultaneously revealed and obscured. The listener/reader is encouraged to make erroneous assumptions about the speaking subject – assumptions that are also highly sexualized. Yet, as in the Freudian trick of the riddles, the sexual

answer is only mock erroneous – the lyric appears to catch the reader out as possessing a “dirty mind”, and yet slyly acknowledges that we all have such minds. Therefore, in the final analysis, the erotic, not the innocent, answer is the most pertinent one – if not the “right” one.

### Anglo-Saxon erotic riddles

A good example of an erotic riddle from the Exeter Book is Number 23, here translated by Michael Delahoyde:

I am a wondrous creature, a joy to women,  
 useful to neighbours; not any citizens  
 do I injure, except my slayer.  
 Very high is my foundation. I stand in a bed,  
 hair underneath somewhere. Sometimes ventures  
 a fully beautiful churl's daughter,  
 licentious maid, that she grabs onto me,  
 rushes me to the redness, ravages my head,  
 fixes me in confinement. She soon feels  
 my meeting, she who forced me in,  
 the curly-haired woman. Wet is her eye.<sup>1</sup>

The answer is “an onion”; or, of course, a penis. Here is another example, in a prose translation by Edith Whitehurst Williams:

My head is beaten by a hammer, wounded by a pointed instrument,  
 rubbed by a file. Often I open wide to that which pricks against me.  
 Then, girded with rings, I must thrust hard against the hard, pierced from  
 the rear, press forth that joy which my lord cherishes at midnight.  
 Sometimes, by means of my countenance, I move to and fro, backwards,  
 the entrance of the treasure when my lord wishes to receive what is left  
 of that which he commanded from life (i.e. to death), which he thrust  
 with deadly power according to his desire.<sup>2</sup>

The answer is a keyhole; or, a vagina. Anglo-Saxon riddles, like those above, are often written in the first person. Sometimes the first-person

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Delahoyde, “Anglo-Saxon Riddles”: [www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/riddles.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/riddles.html) (22 December 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Edith Whitehurst Williams, “What’s So New About the Sexual Revolution?: Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles”, in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen, Bloomington: IN, 1990, 142.

“I” does not refer to the object being described, but even so, the implicit question is “Who am I?” or “Tell me my name”. An example of this is Riddle 43, translated again by Michael Delahoyde:

I have learned that something grows in the corner,  
swells and expands, has a covering;  
on that boneless thing a woman grasps  
around with hands, with a garment  
the lord's daughter covered the swollen thing.<sup>3</sup>

The double answer (in this case, either dough or penis) has the effect of simultaneously affirming and denying identity: you think it is dough, but really it is a penis or you think it is a penis, but really it is dough. One answer affirms an eroticized identity, the other denies it. The subject refuses to settle in such a way that it can be definitively identified, or, by extension, that its sexual nature can be definitively stated. The answer is really just an extension of the riddle question “Who am I?”, because there is no single answer, but two. The “I” that we are supposed to find in the riddle hides behind two identities. One is an erotic self, the other not. So readers might think they are seeing an erotic identity, but the innocent answer simultaneously denies what they are in fact seeing.

I call this trope of simultaneously presenting and denying the erotic identity in Anglo-Saxon riddles the “I-not I/Me-not me” answer: the “I” gives the illusion of an intimate subject (like the penis), while the “not I” (the onion) obscures that subject in the same moment. Because one of the answers is sexually marked, and therefore subject to social censure, we as readers of the riddles experience a similar type of identity slippage, in the sense that we know something that we suspect is not the right answer, and therefore we question the way our own minds work. The eroticism of these riddles is overt, but it is supposed to be unacknowledged. The sexual answer is supposed to be the wrong answer, yet obviously we are meant to come up with it. The correct answer is an item of domestic

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<sup>3</sup> “Anglo-Saxon Riddles”: [www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/riddles.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/riddles.html) (22 December 2004).



banality and innocence: onion, keyhole, dough, etc. There are therefore two identities being constructed in the poem, and in turn, in the reader – one sexualized, one not. The real humour of the texts comes from the slippage between these two answers or identities.

The fact that these texts are written as poems with the complex Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre, and that they are anthologized in the Exeter poetry collection, links the tradition of riddled identity games to the poetic enterprise. Much is made of the enigmatic quality of the Exeter Book elegies that are anthologized alongside the riddles. The difficulty of interpreting these elegies is often attributed to problems of linguistic or cultural difference. But it could be that poetic language is intrinsically akin to riddling language, and that poetic subjects are intrinsically riddled identities. The conflation of the riddle form and the eroticized poetic subject demonstrates how the intellectual gamesmanship of riddles can be an erotic gesture in itself. Mysterious and duplicitous identities are inherently erotic.

The connection between riddling language and poetic language is our first link between the Anglo-Saxon riddles and the erotic lyric traditions that developed later in the Middle Ages. The second link, mentioned earlier, is the use of the first-person speaking subject, which is usually designated as a formal requirement of lyric texts. The first-person voice is what connects the lyric subject to the performer or reader of the text. This results in a transference of identity, much like the identity transference that occurs between the Anglo-Saxon riddles and their readers. Like an Anglo-Saxon identity riddle, though less explicitly, an erotic lyric asks “Who am I?” or, perhaps, “Is this me? Am I really who I say I am?” This transference, and its attendant doubled answer of “I – not I” or “me – not me”, has the effect of simultaneously revealing and obscuring personal sexuality. This may be particularly useful in a society where sexuality is marked as dangerous or transgressive, as was the case throughout the Middle Ages, and, indeed, is often the case still today.

### **Late Medieval and early Renaissance lyrics**

Two types of early English lyric from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries are worth considering in this discussion: the popular carol form, and the courtly love lyric. Both types of lyric, like the Anglo-Saxon riddles, are largely anonymous texts written in the first person. The carols are associated with oral circulation – a history that is reflected in

their structure, which includes a burden or refrain.<sup>4</sup> Courtly lyrics tend to be more literary, in a formal sense. They sometimes contain structural echoes of an earlier oral tradition, but without the more definite refrain in place. In general, the carols tend to be more sexually explicit, and therefore can be considered as erotic texts proper. But since the definition of “erotic” tends to be flexible and expansive, no discussion of early lyrics pertaining to sexuality can neglect the courtly tradition, even if courtly texts tend to be less sexually explicit.

The enigmatic, floating subjects of medieval English carols have long fascinated readers, who tend to waver (as I do) between seeing these subjects as stock characters – the collective fictional voices of particular poetic traditions (the randy youth, the woman-hater, the jilted maiden, the bawd) – and seeing the subject as a more direct, if less tangible, echo of a historical person. Indeed, it is the nature of medieval lyrics to *perform* a personality – to create a first-person speaker, an “I”, that performers or readers can insert themselves into. Some of these subjects are very convincing, and appear to reveal intimate details about the “I”. Moreover, given the opportunities that these texts give for performance, it is easy to imagine that a singer could develop a character in a carol subject, or use the fictional “I” to reveal something about his or her own character. The tantalizing hint of a real historical identity, a real self, behind many of these songs, then, may be due in part to their long history of oral circulation.

Even if the speaking subjects of these lyrics are largely stock conventions, the fact that it is possible for readers or performers to appropriate the identity of the text, however temporarily, creates another kind of identity riddle, wherein we are trying to untangle the historical speaking subject (if any), the poetic subject, and the performer’s subject. Like the identities constructed (and simultaneously deconstructed) in the riddles, the relationship between the speaker and the reader/performer of a lyric text is a slippery “me – not me”.

The few woman-voiced lyrics that have survived from the Middle

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction to *The Early English Carols*, ed. Richard Leighton Greene, Oxford, 1977, xxxii-xxxiii.

Ages pose a particular challenge to the project of decoding erotic identities. From the perspective of a discussion of riddling, these texts are especially intriguing, since the nature of their female voices is a gender riddle of a sort. Manuscript evidence suggests that many of the texts, especially those in the carol tradition, were penned by men, and therefore the sexual revelations of the texts are largely to be read as ironic. An example is a carol found in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius MS 383, a mid-fifteenth-century cleric's manuscript, which describes a maiden's holiday tryst. The lyric is fairly explicit, for example:

Sone he wolde take me be the hond,  
 And he wolde legge me on the lond,  
 That al my buttockus ben of sond  
 Opon this hye holyday.

In he pult, and out he drow,  
 And ever yc lay on lym y-low:  
 "By Godus deth, you dest me wow  
 Vpon this hey holyday!"<sup>5</sup>

As John Plummer has noted, "there is no conceivable motivation for such self-exposure" on the part of a real historical woman,<sup>6</sup> and therefore there is no reason to think that songs like this contain any real female subject – in effect, they are not meant to be read as women's voices at all, but as the voices of male poets mimicking women. This poetic cross-dressing by male poets is in itself a reflection of the riddling principle in the lyric tradition: the male poet is speaking an "I" that is clearly "not I".

In this respect, I agree with Plummer. But Plummer's comment falls into the trap of assuming that the lyric "I", if constructed by a female poet or performer, is a sincere or stable identity and given the slippery quality of the lyric subject generally, there is no reason to work with such an assumption. If a woman were to write, sing, or read such a text, she could avail herself of the simultaneously revelatory and obfuscating tendencies of the lyric subject as could a male poet or performer; the form itself allows this. Therefore, it is possible that bawdy carols in women's voices allowed medieval women to express explicitly sexual

<sup>5</sup> "Al this day ic han sought", ll. 32-39 (*The Early English Carols*, 275-76).

<sup>6</sup> John F. Plummer, "The Woman's Song in Middle English and Its European Backgrounds", in *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Woman's Song*, ed. John F. Plummer, Kalamazoo, 1981, 150.

themes, even with an ironic suggestion that they were singing about themselves, because they would be shielded by the riddled subject. Such performances are lost to history, but characters such as the Wife of Bath suggest that there were medieval women who would articulate sexual themes in the face of social strictures on female eroticism. In the riddling of medieval carol identities, we can see one literary strategy these women may have employed.

The strategy of riddling is at play not only in carols which imply a history of oral circulation (where the lyric subject might be highly manipulated by the performer), but also in lyrics from a more literary tradition, like the courtly lyric. In fact, there is manuscript evidence that medieval authors and audiences were not only highly sensitive to the riddling possibilities of the lyric subject, they actively embraced those possibilities. In a love lyric found in Cambridge University Library Additional MS 5943, the gender of the speaking voice has been switched by a hand which changed the pronouns so that the male love object becomes female. If we assume a heterosexual paradigm, then the female speaker has undergone a literary sex change – to a male speaker. On the page, the lyric (ll. 1-8) still contains both possibilities:

The man/Sche that I loued Al ther best  
In al thys contre, est or west,  
To me sche/he ys a strange gest;  
What wonder est thow I be woo?

When me were leuest that he/sche schold duelle,  
He/sche wold nought sey onys fare welle;  
He/sche wold noght sey ones fare welle  
When tyme was come that he/sche most go.<sup>7</sup>

The ambiguity of the subject of this lyric fits nicely into the broader ethos of the courtly tradition, where eroticism itself is riddled in courtly language. Very few (if any) courtly lyrics are explicitly sexual, but

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<sup>7</sup> L.S. Mynors, *Music, Cantelenas, Songs, Etc. from an Early Fifteenth-Century Manuscript*, London, 1906, 44.

traditions of courtly love are closely linked with ideas of medieval sexuality. In courtly lyrics physical love is encoded in elaborate metaphors of emotion. In this respect the riddle is desire itself, as the language of love masks physical sexuality. One sixteenth-century lyric expresses this idea of riddled desire quite directly (ll. 1-2, 11-12):

The knyght knokett at the castell gate;  
The lady mervelyd who was therat.

She asked hym what was his name;  
He said, "Desyre, your man, madame."<sup>8</sup>

The riddling of eroticism in courtly love, and of the identities of those who participated in the tradition, is further evidenced by some books from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. Manuscript evidence shows that collecting courtly lyrics was a literary and social parlour game with strong erotic undertones. Just like the autograph book circulated in Jane Austen's *Emma*, where poems and riddles are used as tools of courtship, manuscripts of courtly lyrics were circulated by late medieval and early modern readers. The lyric texts were sometimes circulated alongside other poetic texts and marginalia that engaged in identity riddling, all in the same manuscript.

One of the most intriguing examples is the Findern Manuscript (Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6). Identity-play in this book is signalled by some marginalia: there are puns on a couple of names: a small drawing of two fish and a barrel, which may be a visual pun on a name ("luce [pike] -tun" or Lewiston), and another probable pun ("A God When", or A. Godwin), the latter item occurring twice.<sup>9</sup> These marginalia occur in the same folios that contain male- and female-voiced courtly lyrics. This proximity suggests the possibility that the lyrics may have acted as identity-riddles or role-playing texts for those who read and circulated the Findern Manuscript. Perhaps the Findern community (of Derbyshire gentry) was imitating a social habit of the court by collecting lyrics and using them in a literary "game of love".<sup>10</sup>

One Findern lyric seems to reflect an interest in this idea of playing with identity in a courtly game. It begins: "What-so men seyn, / Love is

<sup>8</sup> John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, London, 1961, 402.

<sup>9</sup> Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Findern Anthology", *PMLA*, LXIX/3 (1954), 629.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1985, 123.

no peyn / To them, serteyn, / Butt varians" (ll. 1-4).<sup>11</sup> The exact meaning is elusive, but it might be glossed as: "Whatever men say [regarding] love being painless, for them, certainly, it is without exception." Men, the lyric suggests in subsequent stanzas, "feyn" (feign) their suffering in love, and in fact are guilty of "doubleness" and "newfangledness". Since the performance of sincerity in love by men is "butt [a] game", the speaker of the lyric proposes a radical solution. It would be only fitting, she suggests, if men were "beguiled without mercy" by women in turn.

In essence, the female speaker is calling on her sisters to be as duplicitous as men in the game of love. While this is clearly meant in the sense of "feyning" sexual fidelity, the lyric is also self-consciously articulating the aspect of the courtly love tradition that involves constructing a false or doubled identity. This lyric embraces the riddling quality of poetic language in its cryptic, enigmatic phrasing, which frequently contains multiple possibilities for meaning. It is difficult to tell if the speaker (who advocates duplicity) is sincere in her censure of male behaviour; the word "seyn" in the first line draws our attention to the rhetorical performance or literary construction of courtly love. The lyrics and the marginalia together in Findern suggest that part of the erotic charge of playing the courtly game was decoding – or attempting to decode – the identities of those playing.

Two other poetic forms found in courtly collections along with lyrics are acrostics and literary games. An acrostic is a more overt sort of literary riddle: the person discussed is textualized into the body of the poem in the most literal way. We discover the subject reading the poem in a different direction (down, not across). In Oxford, Bodleian Library MSS Fairfax 16 and Tanner 346, we find the poem "Envoy to Alison", which ends with an acrostic stanza. "Alison", as poetic subject, is constructed by the poet, who builds her name into the poem in the process of describing her character (ll. 22-27):

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<sup>11</sup> "What-so men seyn", in *Women's Writing in Middle English*, ed. Alexandra Barratt, London, 1992, 268-69.

Aurore of gladnesse, and day of lustinesse,  
 Lucerne a-night, with heavenly influence  
 Illumined, rote of beautee and goodnesse,  
 Suspiries which I effunde in silence,  
 Of grace I beseche, alegee let your wrytinge,  
 Now of al goode sith ye be best livinge.<sup>12</sup>

“Alison” is probably a stock character, but the form could be used to record historical identities, as was done in the Devonshire Manuscript, which circulated in the court of Henry VIII. It contains an acrostic that spells “Sheltvn”, referring to Mary Shelton, one of the women who circulated the book.<sup>13</sup> Devonshire, it should be noted, also contains a little marginal name-riddle along the lines of the “Lewiston” and “Godwin” riddles in the Findern Manuscript. A rather weak identity riddle is found on f.67v with the “punchline” “I ama yours an”, which Raymond Southall decodes as indicating Anne Boleyn herself.<sup>14</sup> Although his suggestion is ultimately unprovable, it has the happy effect of providing a historical riddle for later readers of the manuscript, thus involving us in the same sort of identity games as those experienced by the original courtly participants.

This consideration of identity riddles in early lyric collections will end by considering the presence of some literary games, found in Fairfax 16 and another Bodleian MS, Bodley 638. “Ragman Roll” and “The Chance of the Dice” are both literary games of chance, to be played by a group, wherein the participants draw or choose a stanza that describes a character.<sup>15</sup> In “Chance”, the selection would have been made by rolling three dice, and then matching the resulting combination to a stanza marked by a drawing of the same combination in the manuscript margin. The methodology for “Ragman” might have been similar, or it may have involved a draw wherein little rolls were constructed of the stanzas.

<sup>12</sup> *The Complete Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer: Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, ed. W.W. Skeat, Oxford, 1894, VII, 360.

<sup>13</sup> Julia Boffey, “Women Authors and Women’s Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England”, in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, Cambridge, 1993, 173; and Elizabeth Heale, “Women and the Courtly Love Lyric: The Devonshire Manuscript (BL Additional 17492)”, *Modern Language Review*, XC/2 (1995), 301.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Southall, “The Devonshire Manuscript Collection of Early Tudor Poetry, 1532-41”, *Review of English Studies*, NS XV/58 (1964), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Prescott Hammond, “The Chance of the Dice”, *Englische Studien*, LIX/1 (1925), 1-4.

These games are formally connected to the broader lyric tradition through the descriptive stanzas being written in poetic verse, and by the fact that they construct a little literary subject in the form of a courtly identity. However, they are written in the second, not the first, person, as the identity in question is to be imposed on the person who rolls the dice and draws the character. For example:

Your colour fresshe, your Percyng eyen gray,  
 Your shap and your womanly gouernaunce,  
 Constraynyn menne of grace yow to pray,  
 That day fro day sojourn in penaunce  
 Tille that yow lyst hem sendyn alegaunce;  
 But al for nought; Danger, that deynous [devious] wreche,  
 So chasyth peté frome your remembraunce,  
 That to your grace may there no wight strecche.<sup>16</sup>

In these games, virtue, especially as it pertains to courtly ideals of masculinity and femininity, is the result of nothing more than the luck of the draw. As William Carew Hazlitt remarks of “Ragman Roll”, “a certain amount of amusement and drollery was, no doubt, afforded by the frequent discrepancy between the choosers and their choices”.<sup>17</sup> These games might have ended at the drawing of the stanzas, or perhaps they went on to have become dramatic presentations with the players acting out scenarios based on the characters assigned to them (maybe even in a game of charades). Either way, the games indicate an awareness on the part of the manuscript readers of the extremely literary nature of courtly codes and gender ideologies.

The title of “Ragman Roll” is a pun itself; the roll of the dice, or the paper roll, determines the courtly “role”. Furthermore, this game indicates some awareness, on the part of medieval readers/players, of the

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<sup>16</sup> “Ragman Roll” (ll. 41-48), in *Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of England*, ed. William Carew Hazlitt, London, 1864, 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



slipperiness of courtly constructions of masculine and feminine character. The men and women who played these games were highly accomplished readers of courtly love. They were able to grasp the ironic representations of character, and, assuredly, to find humour in unflattering representations. Perhaps it was not unusual to even draw and play the opposite sex, giving us another opportunity for literary cross-dressing, like the cross-dressing possible in the lyric tradition.

These games basically present character riddles: they have a “guess who I am” element, in the sense that they are supposed to be comic revelations of certain personalities that would be matched with or juxtaposed against the personalities of the people playing the game. The role is a riddle to be solved, not just in the sense that the poetic description must be decoded so that we can see the character being described, but also in the sense that the relationship between the role and the player must be decoded – and that is the real point of the game. In the courtly context, the discourse of love is a riddle of sexuality itself. Therefore, the social stakes in these literary games are somewhat higher than the decorous language might suggest.

All of the poetic forms in the courtly tradition – the name riddles, the acrostics, the games of chance and, most importantly, the lyrics themselves – are performing riddling gestures of identity that are very reminiscent of the Exeter riddles. They construct a speaking subject that is inherently sexual, yet unstable. It is impossible to pin down that identity as erotic, even while it constantly exclaims eroticism (“I’m a penis!” / “I’m a lover!”), because the subject can slip away to a “not-me” position (“no, I’m an onion” / “no, this is only a song”). As readers we are fooled into assuming the erotic subject is there, and when it is revealed to be an illusion, we are left with our own “dirty minds” which have just revealed our own erotic (and possibly illicit) psychology, not the text’s.

# BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE: EMBODYING RIOTOUS PERFORMANCE IN THE HARLEY LYRICS

KEVIN TEO KIA CHOONG

## Towards an anatomy of knowledge

The title of my essay is based on two keywords – “bodies” and “knowledge” – which are crucial to defining the interplay of sex and the erotic in the medieval Harley lyrics. But before I start with the lyrics proper, I want to dwell on the significance for the literate culture of medieval Europe of those passages in the Book of Genesis that link “knowledge” to the “body” and load that association with potent attraction and danger.

In the second chapter of Genesis (16-17), we are told that “the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”. In the third chapter (1-7), the serpent enters the garden and the story, and sets out to tempt Eve:

God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth *know* that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, *knowing* good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they *knew* that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

And in the first verse of Chapter 4, we learn that “Adam *knew* Eve his wife”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations from the Authorized Version. Italics added.

These three episodes in the biblical account of the Fall present a series of ambiguities concerning the nature of the complex relations between language and knowledge. Firstly, if the command not to eat the forbidden fruit was issued to Adam before the creation of Eve, as Genesis tells us, how did Eve manage to get wind of this command subsequently? Was the message relayed by her husband, Adam? Or did God somehow ensure that Eve managed to hear of it again? If the message was passed on to Eve by Adam, would it not be possible that the message was slightly different from what it was originally? The ambiguities presented by these passages thus point to the possibility of language misfiring, to the chance that it does not communicate its originally intended meaning.

Secondly, if knowledge was indeed what God condemned in man (and woman), why then was the command given to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) by means of sexual procreation conceded as a legitimate form of knowledge? Thirdly, what marks the postlapsarian condition of the bodies of Adam and Eve as opposed to their prelapsarian state? The sudden recognition of their nakedness points not only to an internalizing of a sense of shame over their nakedness, but more than that, it was a recognition that it was wrong to be naked.

A close look at these passages sets a context for our understanding of the Harley lyrics, insofar as they point to a Western-Eurocentric tradition of thought in which the body gains its meaningfulness from the human experience of language itself. Even more, they indicate the extent to which the institutional power enacted within the medieval church is capable of adapting these discourses to their own ends in order to control and limit knowledge, including sexual knowledge, within its own *magisterium*. It is in the light of these questions that I propose to pursue my thesis here.

Sex, while inextricably tied to the body as its chief agent for the consummation of desire, is itself a form of knowledge, of knowing not only the other’s body (or at least claiming to know it) and hence possessing it in the name of “discourse”. But it also points to poetic self-mastery, to both the mastering of control over one’s own body and over one’s language. Not surprisingly, the Latin word “corpus” denotes not only “text” or “book”, in a body of collected writings, but also means literally a corporeal body.

The body of the possessed or the potential object of possession, the beloved lady, never fully arrives by means of love-speech as performance; neither does the masculine body of the poet or performative

personae within the secular lyrics of the Harley 2253 manuscript. Sex-talk in the extant Middle English love lyrics found there, thinly veiled under the self-suppression exerted by institutional Christian shame over man's Fall, is at the same time a delight that, by virtue of its conventionality in its sublimation of love, transgresses. Thereby, it draws attention to its own internal inconsistencies.

### Butler at large

Judith Butler's theoretical paradigms, found notably in *Bodies that Matter*, the essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", and her related works on gender are crucial insofar as they stress the problems inherent in performativity itself. Performativity cannot be construed as a passive essence, but as scholars like J.L. Austin dwelling on the functions of speech acts have stressed, performativity is "that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names".<sup>2</sup> In performing, the speaker has the ability to produce the object named, and he (or she) posits a claim and control over that which he (or she) names as the speaking subject. There is a distinct difference between mere description of the thing and creating the thing via performance, on the strength of pronouncements such as "Hereby I pronounce you man and wife", which are constitutive. By claiming, in line with Butler, that in the Harley lyrics gendered bodies are further constituted in the performance (rather than the other way round), I am acknowledging that there is a limit to the claims of fixed and stable gender identities, between "male" and "female", between "desiring subject" and "desired object". The performative dimensions of the Harley lyrics, which posit that identity is event and becoming rather than being, inform my epistemological approach to reading the Harley lyrics.

Butler's implications of power at work to produce the illusion of being – itself a process of becoming – in her theory of gender performativity is imbedded in her argument that

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, "Gender as Performance", in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne, London, 1996, 112.

which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Butler's remarks foreground a process in which institutional discourses of power lead a performing subject to think he has the right to monopolize his discourse that, at the same time, runs into slippage and self-contradiction. In *Bodies that Matter* this is examined as the problem of how to define "sex" and "gender" through performance itself:

"sex" [the discourse institutionalized over time] not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls .... It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms .... it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.<sup>4</sup>

In performance, the repetitions of the spoken (and written) word constitutes itself as a range of possibilities that works to de-stabilize the texts and their male-centredness, and to encourage us to read against its grain. Butler's paradigm allows one to recognize that in appropriation of what has been regarded as the norm in speech acts, the act of appropriating is never purely a self-assured act but has the innate ability to produce its own subversions and inconsistencies. In this sense, we can never know the bodies we or others speak of, although they are materialized through the gendered decorum of difference between "female" and "male", because they are always incomplete and lacking.

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Critically Queer", in *Gender*, ed. Anna Tripp, Basingstoke, 2000, 155.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, "Selections from *Bodies that Matter*", in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, Cambridge: Mass., 1998, 71.

### The lacunae of the body: never know the body

To revert to the age-old adage of how gender identity is composed, “clothes make the man”, or “the woman”. In the context of medieval love poetry, *fin’ amor* (courtly love) incorporates the aristocratic values of the medieval courts through a loving appeal to the presence of the lady in all her external beauty (manifest not only in her body but also in her clothes and cosmetics), her social manners and her moral virtue. Yet the literary performance of the beloved lady’s presence in itself poses an epistemological problem, since the persona’s attempt to describe either aspect of the presence becomes a lacuna within the text. How do we speak of a feminine body we cannot see but only obtain material access to by way of displaced metaphors and metonymy and express the pleasures it offers both to a voyeuristic impulse and to an impulse towards the consummation of desire?

The glossatory functions of courtly love language in the Harley lyrics work to undermine a vital sense of feminine presence, since the approximation of that gendered body through poetic discourse both explains and closes up the sense of the text. As Butler remarks on the ambivalent functions of a “performative”: “a performative ‘works’ to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Fair Maid of Ribbesdale” is a poetic example of how, in exposing the failures of vision pertaining to a male “scopophilic enterprise of representation” that treacherously plays us out,<sup>6</sup> bodies of pleasure never fully arrive, true sex-talk in the Harley lyrics cannot be fully approximated and pleasures never fully obtained at its climax. By recourse to the conventional rhetorical techniques of *similitudine* (the use of simile and figures-of-comparison such as “as”, “like”) and *effictio* (the description of physical attributes),<sup>7</sup> the poem implicates us in its cycle of voyeuristic vision just as it commits itself to the attempt to embody the beloved lady, as we see in the first stanza:

Mosti ryden by Rybbesdale,  
wilde wymmen forte wale,  
ant welde whuch ich wolde,

<sup>5</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer”, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Gayle Margherita, *The Romance of Origins*, Philadelphia, 1994, 69.

<sup>7</sup> See Nathaniel B. Smith, “Rhetoric”, in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, eds F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis, Berkeley: CA, 1995, 410.

founde were þe feyrest on  
 þat euer wes mad of blod ant bon,  
     in boure best wiþ bolde.  
 Ase sonnebem hire bleo ys briht;  
 in vche londe heo leomeþ liht,  
     þourh tale as mon me tolde.  
 Þe lylie lossum is ant long,  
 wiþ riche rose ant rode among,  
     a fyldor fax to folde.<sup>8</sup>

If through recourse to the physical sense of a body, seeing is meant to be reliable, and, in Laura Mulvey's words, to see a woman's body itself connotes a visual form of pleasure,<sup>9</sup> this passage achieves it through its sprawling images and overstrained metaphors and similes. The *topos* of Ribblesdale becomes synonymous with pleasure, almost as if, based on the whims of personal desire, an array of beautiful women was physically presented before men's eyes for visual consumption. By the use of the technique of *effictio* – of the sunbeams (blinding light) and the vibrant colours of the lily and rose, which end in an synecdochal image of a strand of gold hair, where it becomes a larger representative of her body at large – this hyperbolic figure-of-speech is stretched even further with the metaphors and similes used to characterize the lady.

However, in the uncanny way where the eschatological and scatological are aligned alongside each other as figures of comparison, this anatomizing of the woman's body through the substitution of a series of object fetishes becomes queerly de-familiarizing ("queerly" both in the sense of "strange" and of "non-diametrically opposed gender identities"). These parallelisms turn upon an inherent double bind of

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<sup>8</sup> *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS Harley 2253*, ed. G.L. Brook, 4th edn, Manchester, 1968, 37 (f.66 v.), ll. 1-12: "If I could ride through the Ribble valley / to choose wanton women, / and which I also want to possess, / for there are to be found the fairest / ever made of flesh and blood, / the best for powerful men to have in the bedroom / Her complexion is as bright as a sunbeam; / she shines brightly in every land, / so I have been told. / The lily is lovely and tall / with here and there a rich rose and rosy hue, / a gold thread to bind her hair."

<sup>9</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, XVI/3 (1975), 19. Mulvey defines the act of visual gazing (within a context of cinematic spectatorship) as a predominantly masculine act, which enforces a dominant patriarchal order. In claiming the binary distinction "between active/male and passive/female", she actually suggest that insofar as women desire to be gazed upon by men, conversely men derive their pleasure from gazing upon women, thereby implying a subordination of women to men. The article is reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington: IN, 1989, 14-27.

reading (and performance), where at the same time similarity is indicative of difference (examples being the conjunctive “as” and “like”). This hesitancy qualifies this process of voyeuristic pleasure for us as readers. This is seen in the sudden shift in registers in stanzas four to six:

swannes swyre swyþe wel ysette,  
a sponne lengore þen y mette,  
þat freoly ys to fede.  
Me were leuere kepe hire come  
þen beon pope ant ryde in Rome,  
styþest vpon stede.

...

Hyre tyttes aren anvnder bis  
as apples tuo of Parays,  
ouself 3e mowen seo.

Hire gurdel of bete gold is al,  
vmben hire middel smal,  
that trikeþ to þe to,  
al wiþ rubies on a rowe,  
wiþinne coruen, craft to knowe,  
ant emeraudes mo;  
þe bocle is al of whalles bon;  
þer wiþinne stont a ston  
þat warneþ men from wo;  
þe water þat hit wetes yn  
ywis hit worþeþ al to wyn;  
þat se3en, seyden so.<sup>10</sup>

Here the roving “eye” (and “I”) of the persona moves downwards from the face to the neck and the bodily regions covered by clothes and finery.

<sup>10</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 38, ll. 43-48 and 58-72: “A swan’s neck, so well set, / a span longer than I have come across, / lovely enough to give pleasure. / I would rather wait for her arrival / than be the Pope and ride through Rome, / the strongest on horseback .... Her breasts under fine linen / like two apples of Paradise, / you can see for yourself. / Her girdle is all of beaten gold / around her slim waist, / and hangs down to her toe, / with a row of rubies, / carved within to reveal skill, / and many emeralds; / the buckle is all of whalebone; / within which stands a stone / that protects people from harm; / the water that wets it, / all turns to wine, truly, / as those who witnessed it have said.”



This downward movement corresponds to a movement from the sacerdotal order of the Pope who makes his sacred processions to bless the masses upon his steed to biblical tropes of Sin, the Fall and Redemption – a gesture that increasingly fudges the diametric oppositions between “male” and “female”. Since the linen (“anvnder bis”) obscures direct visual access to the breasts of the woman through the effect of veiling,<sup>11</sup> they are compared to the two apples of Paradise that are so crucial to Christian theology – the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the fruit of the tree of life – respectively taken to represent a fall that ensues from sinful, illegitimate desire, and later redemption, including the beatification that ensues.

The transference from the joys of the scatological to the joys of the eschatological continues in the *descriptio* of the stone within that buckle. By virtue of its topographical location in the middle region of the woman’s body – the waist – and therefore representing a coital area, it is likened hyperbolically to Christ’s miraculous transformation of water into wine at Cana. Therefore it becomes a metonymy of the saving qualities of the communion wine transformed into blood of Christ by the consecration of the priest and thus guaranteeing remittance of sins for the communicant.

Tempting us to desire to see that woman’s body, and hence making us accomplices in will (if not in deed), this performance takes care to unfold to its logical climax in “seeing is indeed believing” – this woman’s body would indeed have us believe in its beauty and its femininity. This is emphasized especially in the whole premise of poetic belief, “pat se3en, seyden so” (l. 72), a presumption that sight of an object precedes speech about it, and that speech is always a recounting of the coital pleasure of voyeurism and sexual consummation.

If one were to understand the poem in this way, one could not be more wrong, since the poem ends with a final epiphany of coital vision, where in its stuttering nature speech is seen to constitute not only vision but also its inherent failure:

Al þat ich ou nempne noht  
hit is wonder wel ywroht,  
ant elles wonder were.  
He myghte sayen þat Crist hym se3e

<sup>11</sup> Margherita, *The Romance of Origins*, 68.

bat myhte nyhtes neh hyre leze,  
heuene he heuede here.<sup>12</sup>

Akin to the apophactic declarations of medieval mystics in which Christ's glory becomes unnameable, here the woman's beauty can no longer be described, and the declaration becomes a palinodic ending in which the only assurance of what can be said affirmatively is "noht", the persona's retractions of what he had uttered about the woman's body. This final slippage, where we are prompted into the realization that we may never arrive at the full joy of seeing the naked glory of the woman's body and the climactic orgasm of poetic voyeurism for the audience is qualified by the constant repetition of the hypothetical "myhte". The closest approximation in the performance of her body is ironically the body of a God incarnate as man, Christ naked in his loincloth, a dissolution of both the categories of "male" and "female", "man" and "woman". In purporting to enjoy the woman's body, the persona obtains pleasure from Christ's body almost like a Eucharistic act of love for the Host – an originating fantasy of gendered enjoyment. Clothes – both in the sense of the clothes created through a language performance and the clothing of language itself – can indeed re-make and un-make a man, and/or a woman.

### Unruly speech and unruly bodies: never know the truth

The failure of attempting to create images of a person's beauty and sexual identity through external appearances and even through the clothing of language itself, for the sake of gaining pleasurable access to the body, has been shown to be a game that takes the ludicrousness of the visual enterprise of representation to its limits. Such visual acts of representation which renege against themselves to thwart a full unfolding of the body has to be traced to the functions of rhetoric – specific acts of persuasion that have been accepted as essential to achieving the desired effects on listeners as well as on speakers.<sup>13</sup> The Classical Quintilian

<sup>12</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 39, ll. 79-84: "All that I don't mention / is wonderfully well made, / and it would be a wonder if it were otherwise. / He might say that Christ watches over him / who lies with her by night, / for here he has heaven."

<sup>13</sup> For a more comprehensive definition of the term "rhetoric", see Edward Schiappa, "Constructing Reality through Definitions: The Politics of Meaning" (Lecture Presented for the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing and the Composition, Writing and Rhetorical Studies Minor, Speaker Series No. 11, 1998, ed. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles). Accessed 21 October 2003. <<http://cisw.cla.umn.edu/Speaker%20Series/Schiappa.pdf>>.

concept of rhetoric as adequate persuasion defines it as the appropriate use of words (*logos*) for a controlled and desired effect (*ethos*), while ensuring a means of emotional delivery that will stir the listeners' feelings to perform the desired action (*pathos*). This is an idealistic and self-assured notion of rhetoric that works to effect in theory but is matched by a concomitant sense of scepticism. In his analysis of the rhetoric of the troubadours, Nathaniel B. Smith highlights the duplicity inherent in rhetoric – that it can misbehave against the wishes of its speakers or be used by speakers to ill effect. As he states:

As Augustine and his contemporaries were aware, the genius of the rhetorical system is to organize, persuade, and embellish, but not necessarily to promote the true and overthrow the false. Rhetoric, like all sign systems, can be turned in any direction; it exists at the service of whatever force in society – whether in the fourth, twelfth, or twentieth century – has the resources to appropriate it.<sup>14</sup>

Two Middle English lyrics in the Harley manuscript 2253, “Blow, Northerne Wynd” and “Advice to Women”, represent the philological and generic problems that surround this corpus of texts when conventional rhetorical *topoi* are used to embody and possess the beloved woman and subsequently the male persona himself. If the primary function of rhetoric is to make the listener believe what “is said” is literally what “is”, these two lyrics become specular reflections upon the failures of rhetoric, a case of rhetorical convention reined in to highlight its own flaws as part of the game of bodies. The use of personification in the former is an indication of the desired rhetorical effect in the art of *courtoisie* (the wooing of the lady):

Blow, northerne wynd,  
sent þou me my suetyng!  
Blow, norþerne wynd,  
blou! blou! blou!<sup>15</sup>

The abundance of onomatopoeic “b” sounds literally yokes the lady, also the *amor de lonh* (“love from afar”), to the source of poetic-subjective presence in the text. The rhetoric of the speaker then switches to the

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However, I will stick to the one definition that is most pertinent here.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, 418.

<sup>15</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 48 (f. 72 v., col. 1), ll. 1-4: “suetyng” = dear one (sweetheart).

epideictic register, where he tries to create a qualification for the lady's presence. *Epideixis*, as indicated in the prefix of "epi-" ("on") and its suffix that refers to "demonstration", is a rhetorical exercise to "show forth" the virtues or flaws of a person, but may be extended to include abstract elements, inanimate objects and deities, through a "high degree of stylistic ornamentation", as Joop F.M. Smit explains.<sup>16</sup> With the correlation of her moral virtues and her physical beauty in a series of ornate parallelisms, the poet speaks as if love and the distant lady are just beside him:

Heo is coral of godnesse,  
 heo is rubie of ryhtfulnesse,  
 heo is cristal of clannesse,  
     ant baner of bealte;  
 heo is lilie of largesse,  
 heo is paruenke of prouesse,  
 heo is solsecle of suetnesse,  
     ant ledy of lealte.<sup>17</sup>

How the physical object represents ethical virtue is a big chiasmic leap ahead in the reader's (or listener's) imagination, since it creates a series of ellipses: as listeners, this appeal to a sense of the possession of meaning and of a feminine body that can be read off the surface is based on the premise of good faith (*bonne foi*). The switch to the use of the *plainte d'amour* in the last four stanzas, yet another commonplace of lyric love poetry, subsequently becomes the point upon which the final rift is driven between rhetoric and its claims to represent the dichotomously gendered bodies of "male" and "female". Particular attention must be drawn to lines 63 to 70 and 79 to 86:

To Loue y putte pleyntes mo,  
 hou Sykyng me haþ siwed so,  
 ant eke Þoht me þrat to slo  
     wiþ maistry, 3ef he myhte,  
 ant Serewe sore in balful bende

<sup>16</sup> See Joop F.M. Smit, "Epideictic Rhetoric in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 1-4" (22 October 2003): <http://arachnid.pepperdine.edu/~colbricht/heidelberg/smit.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 50 (f. 72 v., col. 2), ll. 47-54: "She is a coral of goodness, / she is a ruby of virtue, / she is a crystal of purity, / and a banner of beauty; / she is a lily of generosity, / she is a periwinkle of prowess, / she is a marigold of sweetness, / and a lady of loyalty."

þat he wolde for þis hende  
me lede to my lyues ende  
vnlahfulliche in lyhte.<sup>18</sup>

...

For hire loue y carke ant care,  
for hire loue y droupne ant dare,  
for hire loue my blisse is bare,  
ant al ich waxe won;  
for hire loue in slep y slake,  
for hire loue al nyht ich wake,  
for hire loue mournyng y make  
more þen eny mon.<sup>19</sup>

Through the use of the pronoun “him”, Love, the abstract figure of “*dieu d’amour*” (in the macaronic lyric, “Dum Ludis Floribus”<sup>20</sup>) to whom the persona complains, is itself characterized in the performance as “male”. Yet, as Allen J. Frantzen points out, insofar as the pronoun itself can take either the masculine or feminine gender, such pronouns in Old English, and this may be applied to Middle English too, represent manifest “gender anxiety”, that “confusing sexual terrain that had to be ordered to make the masculine clearly superior to the feminine”.<sup>21</sup> Read as a displaced metaphor for the beloved lady, this figure of Love (*Amor*) marks an inversion of conventional gender binaries of male/female, dominant/dominated, and oppressor/oppressed through a commonplace appeal to the *topos* of unfulfilled desire in a *plainte d’amour*.

What is constitutive of gender troublemaking lies in the hyperbole of the final verse where the persona claims he is “more [capable] than any man” of giving such obvious lovesick displays. Isidore of Seville had himself defined *femina* (“female”) by calling love beyond measure “womanly love”, which means that “a man in love acted as a woman and thereby lost status as a man”. The translations of Constantine the African

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50 (f. 73 r., col. 1), ll. 63-70: “To Love I put more complaints, / how Sighing has followed me so, / and also Grief threatens to kill me / with force, if he might, / and Sorrow swears in grievous captivity, / so that for this fair one he will / lead me to my life’s end / unlawfully openly.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, ll. 79-86: “For her love I fret and grieve, / for her love I languish and lie dazed, / for her love my bliss is bare, / and I grow utterly pale; / for her love in sleep I become weak, / for her love all night I lie awake, / for her love I mourn / more than any man.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 55, l. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Allen J. Frantzen, “When Women Aren’t Enough”, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 458.

extant in medieval medical literature located the sensations of love “within the brain rather than the heart”; in short, it was therefore “primarily a disease of men, rather than women, and that men who fell in love were, in a sense, getting a feminine disease”.<sup>22</sup> As the final hyperbole reveals, if the persona is, as he claims, more manly than all other men in falling in love, his greater manliness is based on the irony that he is in effect more feminized than any other man – a case of rhetoric pointing in directions other than were intended.

That such rhetoric can create such unruly bodies, thwarting the attempt to arrive at any full materialization of heterosexually bonded bodies of “male” and “female”, is revealed similarly in “Advice to Women” in the ironies that pervade its moral platitudinizing. The second stanza of the poem starts with the rhetorical poise of a man – very likely a clerk – giving moral advice to a maid on the art of love:

Wymmen were þe beste þing  
 þat shup oure heȝe heuene kyng,  
       ȝef feole false nere;  
 heo beoþ to rad vpon huere red  
 to loue þer me hem lastes bed  
       when heo shule fenge fere.<sup>23</sup>

This performance makes use of the original moments of Creation and the Fall as a source of authority for controlling the woman’s will: by choosing to disobey the will of God as conveyed through Adam not to eat of the forbidden fruit, woman has relegated her body to the realm of the unruly. This misogynistic conception of women in medieval clerical culture plays upon a set of diametrical oppositions that are meant to control women both in will and body, such as male/female, rational/emotional, spiritual/carnal, order/riot, and so on.<sup>24</sup> The verse that places women on a pedestal (“the beste þing / þat shup oure heȝe heuene kyng”) is balanced with a conditional clause, its negation, to the effect

<sup>22</sup> Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages”, in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, eds Claire A. Lees, Thelma Fenster and Jo Ann McNamara, Minneapolis, 1994, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 45 (f. 71 v., col. 2), ll. 13-18: “Women would be the best thing / our high heavenly king created, / if many [men] were not false; / she is too hasty in her plan of action / to love where men offer her sinful conduct / when she shall gain a lover.”

<sup>24</sup> For a view that conforms to this, see Howard M. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago, 1991.

that “were it not for that fact ...”. This rhetorical image of woman as a riot that needs to be contained is further highlighted as the poem unfolds with its advice to the woman to beware men’s empty promises in love. This, however, turns against itself with an ending much like a twist in the *pastourelle* genre of courtly love lyrics:

Wymmen bueþ so feyr on hewe  
 ne trowy none þat nere trewe,  
       ʒef trichour hem ne tahte;  
 ah, feyre þinges, freoly bore,  
 when me ou woweþ, beþ war bifore  
       whuch is worldes ahte.  
 Al to late is send aʒeyn  
 when þe ledy liht byleyn  
       ant lyueþ by þat he lahte;  
 ah wolde lylie-leor in lyn  
 yhere leuely lores myn,  
       wiþ selþe we were sahte.<sup>25</sup>

Like the metamorphoses of Ovidian characters, this ending occurs with an ironic twist where the words of the speaker renege against him: if the lady literally is to be wary of the words of men, why then does she need to hear his “leuely lores” (l. 47) in any obvious way? This move is akin to Chaucer’s Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* who in claiming that although “myself be a ful vicious man,/ A moral tale yet I yow telle kan”,<sup>26</sup> at the end immediately takes back that claim of authority when he exhorts the pilgrim audience to buy and kiss his relics – drawing attention away from his tale to his queer “eunuch” body again, a body that is a “geldyng or a mare”.<sup>27</sup>

From the poise of a clerk who occupies a role as a preacher on womanhood’s fallen state and subsequently of man’s treachery, this advice – a form of moral sermonizing – slips out of the speaker’s control

<sup>25</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 45 (f.72 r., col. 1), ll. 37-48: “Women being so fair in hue, / I don’t believe that there are any that are not true, / if the deceiver does not mislead them; / ah, fair creatures, of gentle birth / when men woo you, be aware / of what the wealth of the world is. / It is too late to send it back / when the lady lies deflowered / and he has taken lives on; / oh, where the fair-faced lady dressed in linen / to hear my advice with favour, / we would happily be reconciled.”

<sup>26</sup> “Prologue” to *The Pardoner’s Tale*, ll. 459-60 (*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn, London, 1957, 149).

<sup>27</sup> See “General Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 691 (*ibid.*, 23).

to draw attention to itself as an episode from a scene in the *pastourelle*. The irony of that final declaration lies in the understanding that if both men and women are to be reconciled in happiness, the only means is for the man to actually copulate with and deflower the maid. Contrary to his own wishes, the words of the clerical voice wind up against himself, unruly like a woman's speech itself which he himself stigmatizes and tries to gain control over. Both poems, "Blow, Northerne Wynd" and "Advice to Women", in revealing the unruliness with which rhetoric behaves, although it has been adopted as a means of control and expressing desire, show us the duplicity inherent within rhetorical speech itself. The user of rhetoric can only aspire to create heterosexualized bodies that make sense, based on the diametric categories of "female" and "male", of "controlled" versus "controller", but these bodies never really arrive at the "treuthe" of desire they desire: a final coitus.

### Phallic re-inscriptions and rupture: never know the same

Earlier I have argued that the unruly functions of poetic discourse and rhetoric in the Harley lyrics ensure that bodies – traditionally split between a logic of male/female, subject/object, lover-poet/poet's beloved, etc. – never fully materialize. As Butler has argued: "gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond."<sup>28</sup> Recent gender criticism influenced by the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan has similarly alerted us to the collapsible distinctions between pen/phallus, paper/vagina, ink/sperm, by highlighting how textuality is inextricably linked with sexuality and the *corpus* ("body"); and being the key both to unlock meaning in a text as well as to problematize it, it is impossible for us to ignore the implications.<sup>29</sup> The pen/pen(is) obsession, disseminated by way of Galenic conceptions of sexual-corporeal differences, is one example of these various late medieval obsessions with body and gender anxieties that modern people are fascinated by through the projection of

<sup>28</sup> Butler, "Critically Queer", 161.

<sup>29</sup> See Martin Irvine, "The Pen(is), Castration and Identity: Abelard's Negotiations of Gender" (Proceedings of the Cultural Frictions Conference held at Georgetown University, 27 to 28 October 1995): [www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/conf/cs95/](http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/conf/cs95/) (24 October 2003). See also Laurie A. Finke, "Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: 'Séparés, On Est Ensemble'", in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, New York, 1996, 360.



our own current fantasies and anxieties. Galen asserted the biological superiority of the male, maintaining that “he”

was warmer and it was this greater body warmth that allowed his sex organs to grow outside the body and fully develop, whereas a woman’s organs, like the eyes of the mole, could never fully develop and remained only embryonic. Medieval etymology only reinforced this. Man was the complete being who drew his name (*vir*) from his force (*vis*), whereas woman (*mulier*) drew hers from her softness. Women had to be physically weaker than man in order for her to be subject to him and so that she could not repel his desire, for once rejected, he might then turn to other objects.<sup>30</sup>

“The Poet’s Repentance” is a Harley lyric which replays and questions the validity of these anxieties over male performance anxieties about fully embodying “woman” and, subsequently, “man” as universalizing categories of human experience. In the lyric, the persona questions his own aptitude fully to do justice to women by means of writing with his own pen(is), since all that he can engage in are misogynistic and anti-feminist clichés:

Weping haueþ myn wonges wet  
 for wikked werk ant wone of wyt;  
 vnblīþe y be til y ha bet  
 bruches broken, ase bok byt,  
 of leuedis loue, þat y ha let,  
 þat lemep al wiþ luefly lyt;  
 ofte in song y haue hem set,  
 þat is vnsemly þer hit syt.<sup>31</sup>

...

Al wrong y wrohte for a wyf  
 þat made vs wo in worlde ful wyde;  
 heo rafte vs alle richesse ryf,  
 þat durfte vs nout in reynes ryde.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages”, 33.

<sup>31</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 35 (66 r.), ll. 1-8: “Weeping has wet my cheeks / for my wicked behaviour and lack of understanding; / I will be miserable until I have made amends / for broken transgressions, as the book commands, / against the love of ladies, that I have lost, / who all shine with a radiant hue; / I have often set them in song, / in an unbecoming manner.”

With self-diminution, the poet-persona draws attention to his tears and weeping, signs of a feminine tendency towards sentiment that expresses an innate sense of emasculation, a blemished state in which he cannot express adequately the truth of what “woman” is. The “wonges” (his “cheeks”) which have been “wet” point to a slippage of gender roles, insofar as the poet-persona slides from the position of the “masculine”, traditionally associated with rationality and control over emotions, to that of the “feminine”, reinforcing the medieval “gendered perceptions of women as emotional, physical, non-intellectual beings”.<sup>33</sup> Inept at expressing with ink on paper the song of love he desires to create, he can only find solace in the misogynistic belief that Eve, the universal representative of womanhood, was the cause of the unfortunate Fall into original sin, which is indicated in the biblical allusion to a “wyf” as the origin of woe.

Where the re-inscription of socio-cultural fears of emasculation, both in the letter (his flesh-body) and the spirit (his song of love), is reinforced in his manifest inability to write secular love poetry, the poet-persona’s direction suddenly makes a shift towards the re-inscription of religious poetry (a displaced form of “amor” for the Virgin Mary). This constitutes yet another attempt to hide behind the universal categories of “male” and “female”, as another level of re-écriture that places Mary as the new object of desire.<sup>34</sup> The psychic transference of sexual desire from the adulation of “midons” (“my lady”) to that of Madonna, from the earthly lady to the heavenly lady, unlike what Moshe Lazar has argued of *fin’ amor* however, hardly constitutes the “ultimate refinement” of courtly poetry, but subsequently problematizes its gendered norms of male-female heterosexuality, as is shown in the second stanza:

A stybye stunte hire sturne stryf,  
 þat ys in heouene hert in hyde.  
 In hire lyht on ledeþ lyf,  
 ant shon þourh hire semly syde.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, ll. 13-16: “I did all this wrong because of a woman / who caused us trouble throughout the world; / she deprived us all of great riches / so that we don’t ever dare to ride in the lists.”

<sup>33</sup> Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance*, Carbondale: SC, 1997, 83.

<sup>34</sup> On universal categories of “female” and “male”, see Jacqueline Murray, “Hiding Behind the Universal Man: Male Sexuality in the Middle Ages”, in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, 123-52.

Pourh hyre side he shon  
 ase sonne doþ pourh þe glas;  
 wommon nes wicked non  
 seþþe he ybore was.<sup>35</sup>

Gayle Margherita notes that “Mary here is both contained (in heaven’s heart) and container” and used this to highlight the nature of Mary’s body as a transparently maternal one.<sup>36</sup> But this point is debatable as Mary’s “body” which contains the “male” presence of the Logos incarnate – Christ in human flesh – is never fully embodied as “female”. Situated in its locale of heaven, where she must necessarily be as “the angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:29) with her new body of the Assumption, the categories of “male” and “female” are temporarily suspended in what I would call a “hermaphrodite hermeneutics”, where both “female” and “male” are interpolated between each other.<sup>37</sup> The beam of light that represents Christ being given birth through Mary’s side becomes a phallic symbol she allows to pierce her body, but also the very symbol her body is host to as a fabric of her being.

If this hermaphrodite hermeneutics forms the poem’s thrust by dissolving diametric oppositions between “male” and “female”, the final rupture that constitutes its re-inscriptions lies in the concluding address to Richard, the persona’s *auctoritas* who embodies the ideals of *amor courtois*:

Richard, rote of resoun ryht,  
 rykening of rym ant ron,  
 of maidnes meke þou hast myht;  
 on molde y holde þe murgest mon.  
 Cunde comely ase a knyht,  
 clerke ycuð þat craftes con,  
 in vch an hyrd þyn aþel ys hyht,  
 ant vch an aþel þin hap is on.  
 Hap þat hapel hap hent

<sup>35</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 35 (66 r.), ll. 17-24: “A strong one put a stop to her trouble-making, / hidden in the heart of heaven. / A certain person was born in her radiance, / and shone through her beautiful side. / Through her side he shone / as the sun does through glass; / no woman was ever wicked / from the time he was born.”

<sup>36</sup> Margherita, *The Romance of Origins*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> The counterpoint to this is found in Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Madison, 1995, in her proposition of a “eunuch hermeneutics”, which she bases on her study of Chaucer’s Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*.

wip hendelec in halle;  
selpe be him sent  
in londe of leuedis alle!<sup>38</sup>

The homosocial context, where the poet-persona includes himself within a *comitatus* (community) of *troubadours* and *trouvères* engaged in the use of women as “token of exchange”,<sup>39</sup> necessitates his gazing upon the “body” of Richard, the “man” who has truly embodied “woman” in his poetry, so conducting his eulogy of Richard through the extant body of his writings. However, the assertion, that “Richard” is the “man” who has fully embodied the masculine ideal of courtly poetry, is charged with irony, since “Richard” himself is performed as an empty referent, one whose life has been claimed by “hendelec” (“fortune”), and has thus ascended to heaven very much like Mary. The final four verses of the lyric ends with a masculinized fantasy that remains at best incorporeal, of Richard ending up in a paradise filled with ladies enamoured of him – an allusion to the Muslim idea that those who are martyred for their holy beliefs will end up in heaven with seventy black-eyed virgins to serve them (Richard for his “holy” beliefs of “love”, *amor courtois*).

### Embodied eros, sexuality and jouissance: never to know the joy

In teasing out the implications of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity as event-becoming and possibility, vital paradigms for reading the Harley lyrics, these lyrics have been shown to be affirmations of the gendered norms, literary and rhetorical, of courtly love poetry – with these norms predicated upon a division of human sexuality into universalizing categories of “male” and “female”. As much as the thrust of these various forms of “luf-talkynge” in the lyrics is towards embodiment, these bodies never fully materialize in the final moment of perfected pleasure between “male” and “female”. These performances, instead of representing a passive acquiescence in established poetic traditions that reveal an age-old medieval art of *courtoisie* (the sexual desire of a man for a woman he cannot attain), offer immense pleasure and joy for

<sup>38</sup> *The Harley Lyrics*, 36 (66 r), ll. 61-72: “Richard, root of true reason / in judging rhyme and song, / you have power over gentle maidens; / on earth I think you’re the happiest man. / Well-bred seemly as a knight, / a famous and accomplished scholar, / your excellence is acknowledged in each household, / and it is your good fortune to have every excellence. / That man has received good fortune / with courtesy in hall; / may he be granted happiness / everywhere, by all ladies!”

<sup>39</sup> Finke, “Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: ‘Séparés, On Est Ensemble’”, 354.

modern readers in their potential to be read against the grain of the text. As Lazar has pointed out, the word, “joy”, is not necessarily derived from the Old French *joie*, “but the Latin *joculum* (*jocum*, ‘play,’ ‘jest,’ ‘frolicking’); however, *joya* (resulting in Old French *joye*, *joie*) derives from the neuter plural *jocular*, which bore the meaning of *gifts*, *reward*, *prize* bestowed upon him that had played the game well and won it”.<sup>40</sup> What he calls the “telescoping” of two concepts, of *jocus* “play” and *gaudium* “joy”, reflects not only the pleasure that the speaking-performing subject in the love lyrics aspires to, but also the play of words and concepts that they present for both medieval and modern people, as I have indicated in this essay. For us, this “joie” of hearing “luf-talke” performed aloud can never be enough, because its fulfilment is never to be expected, because fully heterosexualized bodies will never arrive, and the rewards of re-reading and re-embodying a lyric performance are never enough. As readers and participating voyeurs, will we ever know the full joy? Your guess is as good as mine.

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<sup>40</sup> Moshe Lazar, “*Fin’ Amor*”, in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, 77.

## THE PRONOUNS OF LOVE AND SEX: *THOU* AND *YE* AMONG LOVERS IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

LUISELLA CAON

As a consequence of the loss of the distinction between formal and informal pronouns of address in Modern English (“you” is the only pronoun that is left for indicating both formality and informality between two speakers),<sup>1</sup> English writers cannot rely on personal pronouns alone to indicate whether two people share a formal or an informal relationship, whether they are friends or enemies and what their degree of mutual respect is. To convey such things, modern writers need to add extra information in their texts, using such adverbs as “angrily”, “formally” or “passionately”. However, this was not the case in Chaucer’s time, since Middle English allowed speakers and writers to express both informality and formality towards a person being addressed by means of the singular personal pronouns “thou”, “thin(e)”, “thee” and the plural pronouns “ye”, “your(e)”, “you”, respectively.<sup>2</sup> The choice between “thou” and “ye”<sup>3</sup> was therefore a stylistic rather than a grammatical one, and Chaucer exploited this possibility in his works for dramatic purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical survey as well as a semantic and stylistic analysis of the use of the second person pronoun in several European languages, see Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, “The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity”, in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, Cambridge: MA, 1960, 253-76.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the use of personal pronouns in Middle English literature, see David Burnley, “The T/V Pronouns in Later Middle English Literature”, in *Diachronic Perspectives on Address Term Systems*, eds Irma Taavitsainen and Andreas H. Jucker, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2002, 27-45. For further references on the same subject, see Derek Pearsall, “*The Franklin’s Tale*, Line 1469: Forms of Address in Chaucer”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 17 (1995), 75, n.15. See also Judith A. Johnson, “*Ye* and *Thou* among the Canterbury Pilgrims”, *Michigan Academician*, X/1 (1977), 71-76, for an analysis of the relation between social status and the use of the second-person pronouns in *The Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth I will use “thou” and “ye” to refer to all forms of the informal and formal pronouns of address.

In this article I will concentrate on one aspect of Chaucer's usage of the second-person pronouns – their occurrence in the dialogue between lovers. More precisely, I intend to argue that in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer uses “thou” and “ye” quite systematically to indicate the degree of closeness or distance that characterizes the relationship between two characters of the opposite sex. In fact, in most of the dialogues that take place between lovers, the use of either “ye” or “thou” tells the medieval audience whether these characters love or hate each other or share close or distant feelings.

Middle English had two pronouns for the second person: singular “thou” for addressing one person and plural “ye” for addressing one or more people. Both of them are used by Chaucer and, as Burnley explains:

The choice between *ye* and *thou* when addressing a single individual is a stylistic rather than a grammatical one, and it has certain social and attitudinal implications. Most obviously, they are concerned with the relative status of the speaker and the addressee.<sup>4</sup>

When the age and status of two speakers are not the same, the superior will address the inferior with “thou” and will expect “ye” in return, but this rule only applies in polite society. In polite society formal “ye” is also the pronoun used between husband and wife, who are of equal status, while the courtly gentleman uses formal “thou” for his male friends; children are also addressed with “thou”, but they respectfully use “ye” when talking to their parents and to older people. People in the lower ranks of society usually address each other informally, and this also applies to husband and wife. Examples of this are provided by *The Miller's Tale*, in which John the carpenter and the clerk Nicholas always address each other with “thou”, and where John says to his wife: “What! Alison! Herestow nat Absolon” (I 3366).<sup>5</sup> “Thou” is also used by believers towards God, while pagan gods are addressed with “ye”. This is because, to quote Burnley once again, “ye has associations of detachment deriving from that remoteness which stems from formal address and discrimination of status; *thou* connotes nearness and intimacy in which such determination is forgotten”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, London, 1983, 18.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn, Oxford, 1987. The italics in the quotations are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, 19.

However, this rule is not so hard and fast as it seems. Switches between “thou” and “ye” are in fact very common in the speeches of Chaucer’s characters, and several examples of this practice can be found in *The Canterbury Tales*. Provided that they are not authorial slips or scribal mistakes, such switches often indicate a change in the speaker’s attitude towards the addressee. Burnley calls them “affective switches”, and he argues that:

in any extended conversation ... there will be selections of forms ... arising from changes in attitude and emotions in the speaker. This “affective switching”, when resulting in *ye*, often connotes detachment, distancing, formality, objectivity, rejection or repudiation. The contrary switch from *ye* to *thou* is perhaps associated with the use of *thou* for intimates, children, or those of lower social status, for it has specific significances related to these distinct uses. It can, for example, be used jokingly and patronisingly (D 432-3); and it can also be used to indicate a sudden *rapprochement* between speakers: a sense of engagement or solidarity, sudden intimacy, cajolery, and even conspiracy. It draws attention to the relationship existing between the speaker and addressee.<sup>7</sup>

Several studies on the use of “thou” and “ye” in *The Canterbury Tales* have shown that Chaucer employs these pronouns quite consistently not only to indicate formality and informality, but also to describe the intensity of his characters’ emotions. Norman Nathan, for instance, investigated “the use of *ye* in the function of *thou*” in *The Friar’s Tale*, showing that Chaucer alternated the use of formal and informal personal pronouns in order to achieve “dramatic and satirical effect”.<sup>8</sup>

In this tale the Devil almost always addresses the Summoner with “thou” in order to assert his superiority over the man. In his speeches, the Summoner, by contrast, alternates between “thou” and “ye” according to whether he considers himself the devil’s equal or his inferior. A more drastic switch from formal to informal pronouns of address occurs in the speech of the old lady who is charged with adultery by the Summoner. The lady addresses the Summoner with “ye” as long as she is talking to him respectfully but when she grows angry with him because of his false

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21; on page 20 Burnley provides a flow chart that illustrates the various situations that “thou” and “ye” may be used and, in particular, the reasons that a switch may be made from one pronoun to the other.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Nathan, “Pronouns of Address in the ‘Friar’s Tale’”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 17 (1956), 39.



accusations, she switches to “thou”. Nathan argued that only once in this tale, in line 1567, is the pronoun used wrongly, with “ye” instead of “thou”. Since the most authoritative manuscripts support this reading, he concluded that this instance “seems to be a slip of Chaucer’s pen”.<sup>9</sup> In a later study of the use of “thou” and “ye” in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Nathan suggested that:

it appears that Chaucer is generally most careful about his use of pronoun of address in the *Canterbury Tales*. Seeming errors often disappear after further analysis. And of the five tales that violate Chaucer’s normally precise usage, three may well be relatively early.<sup>10</sup>

The five tales “that violate Chaucer’s normally precise usage” are *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, *The Canon Yeoman’s Tale*, *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Pardoner’s Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*; the last three are those in which Nathan could not find evidence of Chaucer’s systematic use of the pronouns.

A few decades later, Burnley analysed the use of “ye” for individuals, arguing that:

it is a linguistic nicety which belongs to the world of *courtoisie*. This is emphasized by the clear correlation which exists in the works of Chaucer between address by *sire*, *lord*, *dame* and *madame* and the pronoun *ye*, and perhaps even more significantly by the circumstance that the conjuration *by youre curteisie* never occurs with the singular pronoun, not even on the lips of the rather uncourtly Alison in the Miller’s tale, who switches from *thou* when she finds urgent need to use this expression.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, the informal “thou” may be used by a speaker who rejects formalities and who takes the role of the clerkish instructor, as in *The Tale of Melibee*. In fact, Melibee and Prudence usually address each other with “ye”, but in those sections where the wife quotes authorities or makes exhortations she switches to “thou”. By doing so Prudence is no longer depicted as the wife who is just talking respectfully to her

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Nathan, “Pronouns of Address in the ‘Canterbury Tales’”, *Mediaeval Studies*, XXI (1959), 201.

<sup>11</sup> David Burnley, “Langland’s Clergial Lunatic”, in *Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition*, ed. Helen Phillips, Cambridge, 1990, 35.

husband, but as a woman who has acquired the authority of the words she has just pronounced.<sup>12</sup>

Wilcockson's studies of *The Clerk's Tale* (1980) and *The Franklin's Tale* (2003) explore more closely the use of "thou" and "ye" as indicators of people's strong emotions especially when the characters in question are lovers. In the first of his two articles Wilcockson argues that "the subtle use Chaucer makes of the second person pronoun is part of a larger shift of emphasis towards the humanity of the protagonist".<sup>13</sup> He proves that Chaucer totally disregards the sources of his tale – a Latin version and its French translation – and uses "thou" and "ye" with the specific purpose of stressing the human drama of the narrative. Indeed, Chaucer makes Walter shift from "ye" to "thou" when he addresses his wife in two crucial speeches. The first time is when he has just told his wife, Griselda, that he is going to marry again and that she has to leave the castle and go back to her father. Griselda's humble reaction (IV 834-89) moves Walter so much that he drops the deferential or courtly "ye" and for the first time addresses her with the more affectionate "thou" (IV 890). This pronoun might be a way of conveying the idea of Walter's social superiority to his wife, but Walter's persistent use of the informal pronouns until the end of the tale has to be interpreted differently. Shortly afterwards the husband reveals to his wife that he has always loved her and that he has acted cruelly towards her only to test her faithfulness and goodness. The use of the informal pronoun, therefore, has the function of emphasizing Walter's feelings of love and intimacy for his wife.

In his later study, Wilcockson shows that in *The Franklin's Tale* also Chaucer makes a husband (Arveragus) switch from the formal "yow" to the informal "thee" and "thou" when he needs to stress the intensity of the characters' emotions:

But with that word he brast anon to wepe,  
And seyde, "I *yow* forbede, up peyne of deeth,  
That nevere, whil *thee* lasteth lyf ne breeth,  
To no wight telle *thou* of this aventure, –  
As I may best, I wol my wo endure, –

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Wilcockson, "'Thou' and 'Ye' in Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale'", *The Use of English*, XXXI/3 (1980), 38.

Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,  
That folk of yow may demen harm of gesse.”

(V 1481-83)

This takes place in the scene in which Arveragus tells his wife Dorigen that she must keep her promise and make love to the squire Aurelius. Since he loves the woman and hates the idea of losing her, Arveragus bursts into tears in the middle of his speech and twice addresses her informally. Once he can control his emotions again, he resumes the formal attitude by switching back to “yow” (V 1486). Pearsall offers an alternative interpretation of this scene, arguing that “the movement from lover and courtly equal to husband-lord is clearly marked here”.<sup>14</sup> He thus interprets the exceptional use of “thou” as a way of showing the husband’s superiority, although this reading does not take into account the man’s tears as a sign of his unrestrained display of love. In either case, it is important to notice that for a short period in the narrative something has changed in the way the husband expresses his feelings towards his wife and that this change is signalled by Arveragus’ switch from “ye” to “thou” when he talks to Dorigen.

The studies carried out so far on Chaucer’s use of “thou” and “ye” agree on two points: that these pronouns are used consistently to distinguish formal from informal address, and that they contribute to the description of the characters’ feelings. The last point is worth exploring further, because when “thou” and “ye” occur in dialogues between lovers in *The Canterbury Tales*, they are actually crucial to the description of the speaker’s emotions. In particular, sudden switches from “ye” to “thou” and vice versa are introduced in the narrative to signal to the medieval audience that changes in the emotional state of a given character are taking place. Therefore these pronouns either lend verisimilitude to the story or convey the story’s ironic or paradoxical character. To show all this, I have analysed several tales in which the main characters are lovers. Since *The Clerk’s Tale* and *The Franklin’s Tale* have already been studied, I have focussed on the two other tales belonging to the “marriage group” – *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale*.

I then compare these two tales with *The Miller’s Tale*, *The Reeve’s Tale* and *The Shipman’s Tale*, three fabliaux in which love and sex, but

<sup>14</sup> Derek Pearsall, “*The Franklin’s Tale*, Line 1469 ...”, 76.

not necessarily marriage, play a role.<sup>15</sup> These three tales have been chosen because the lovers portrayed in them are people from the lower strata of medieval society who, according to Burnley, are not very scrupulous in their use of “thou” and “ye”.<sup>16</sup> My findings will prove that in these fabliaux also the supposedly incorrect use of “thou” and “ye” is not due to the speakers’ lack of scrupulousness, but to Chaucer’s intention to convey specific information about the characters’ emotions to his audience.

In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* the main characters are a knight and an old hag. They are unnamed and, as Cooper suggests, “they remain embodiments of a male and female principle – not in any abstract sense, but the lack of particularity underlines their quality as paradigms in the battle between the sexes”.<sup>17</sup> The knight is sentenced to death for having raped a young woman, but he is given the chance to save his life. All he needs to do is to find the answer to the question “what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (III 905). At the end of the time allowed for his search, the knight is in despair because he has not found one but many different answers. Then he meets an old hag who is willing to tell him the right answer on condition that he promises to do anything she asks in return. The knight has no choice but to accept, and once the old hag has saved his life by saying that “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love / And for to been in maistrie hym above” (III 1038-40), she asks him to marry her. He cannot refuse, despite the fact that he hates the woman for this request.

In the various exchanges that occur between two main characters, both the formal and the informal pronouns are used. The knight speaks to the old hag only three times: when he first meets her, he addresses her with “ye”, the woman being old and unknown to him. Later, on their wedding night, when the old hag asks him why he does not behave in bed as a husband should, the knight tells her “*Thou* art so loothly, and so oold also” (III 1100). “*Thou*” here indicates the anger and hate that the knight

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<sup>15</sup> I have deliberately excluded *The Knight’s Tale* from my study because it is a romance. Moreover, the verbal exchanges between Emilye and her two lovers are few and all of them are formal. For an interesting study of forms of address in this tale, see Thomas Honegger, “‘And if Ye Wol Nat So, My Lady Sweete, Thanne Preye I Thee, ...’: Forms of Address in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale”, in *Diachronic Perspectives on Address Term Systems*, eds Taavitsainen and Jucker, 61-84.

<sup>16</sup> Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer’s Language*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, 1989, 158.

feels towards the old hag. After having been extensively lectured about “gentillesse”, however, the knight calls the woman “my lady” (III 1230), switching back to the formal pronoun. The choice of “youre” (III 1231), “yourself” (III 1232) and “yow” (III 1233 and 1235) in the knight’s third and final speech agrees with his social position, since, as we have seen, in polite society husbands and wives address each other formally. More crucially, the use of the formal pronouns characterizes the man as a courtly lover who surrenders to the superiority of his woman, to her “sovereynetee” and “maistrie”. Therefore it tells the audience that this knight, who raped a girl, thus displaying the worst form of male power over a woman, has finally learnt how women should be loved and how to show his feelings towards people of the other sex.

The speeches of the old hag are likewise indicative of changes in the woman’s feelings towards the knight. In fact, she starts off by calling him “sire knight” (III 1001) and by telling him “Tel me wat that ye seken, by *yours* fey” (III 1002), for she does not know the man and therefore addresses him formally. As soon as the old hag understands that the man desperately needs her help, however, she switches to “thou” and tells him:

Plight me *thy* trouthe heere in myn hand, quod she,  
 The nexte thyng that I requere *thee*,  
 Thou shalt it do, if it lye in *thy* myght,  
 And I wol telle it *yow* er it be nyght.

(III 1009-12)

And she continues to use “thou” until they are married.

There are several reasons that justify the woman’s switch to the informal pronouns at this stage of the narrative. She is, in fact, older and wiser than the knight, who has, moreover, just addressed her as “my leeve mooder” (III 1005). All these elements stress the social superiority of the woman over the knight. But a better explanation is that the old hag knows the right answer to the man’s crucial question and, therefore, the knight’s life depends on her help. This makes the woman superior to the man at the emotional level as well, and justifies her use of “thou”. There is one exception to this, in line 1012, where “yow” appears instead of “thee” (see the quotation above). Manly and Rickert discovered that seven scribes replaced “yow” with “thee” in their manuscripts, probably thinking that the formal pronoun must have been a slip of Chaucer’s

pen.<sup>18</sup> However, it cannot be ruled out that Chaucer meant the pronoun to be the formal one, for “yow” occurs at the end of the old hag’s speech, in a sentence that is pronounced very solemnly and whose formal tone would be spoiled by the use of the informal “thee”.<sup>19</sup>

From the moment the two characters are married until the end of the tale the old hag addresses her husband only with “ye”. She also calls him “deere housbonde” (III 1087), “sire” (III 1106 and 1205) and “leeve housbonde” (III 1171), regardless of the man’s expressions of hate and anger towards her. Once again, the wife shows her superiority to her husband by means of her language, even though it is now the superiority of the courtly lady who allows her suitor to love her. According to the idea of courtly love, in fact, a lover is subordinate to his lady, and a courtly lady is supposed to educate her lover, who thus becomes more genteel through the experience of love.<sup>20</sup> In this tale the wife tries to educate her husband by means of a long sermon about gentility, delivered while they are in bed. At the beginning of this sermon the old hag switches from “thou” to “ye”, so as to indicate that her feelings towards the knight are now those of a courtly lady. Such feelings will be reciprocated only when the knight’s education is completed. This happens at the end of the sermon, when the husband switches from “thou” to “ye” too, and addresses the old hag in the same courtly way.

In *The Merchant’s Tale*, the last of the “marriage group”, the situation is inverted. January, an old, rich and lusty knight, decides to marry May, a woman who is young and beautiful, but of low rank. May always uses “ye” to address her husband. This could be interpreted as a way of indicating that she now belongs to the polite society and acts accordingly. Alternatively, it could indicate that she is younger and socially inferior to January and that she ought to show respect to him. There is, however, a third and probably more likely interpretation for her use of “ye” in the tale, namely that the formal pronoun is meant to suggest that May does

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<sup>18</sup> *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, eds John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols, Chicago, 1940, VI, 103.

<sup>19</sup> A search of two early manuscripts, the Hengwrt MS (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 392 D) and the Ellesmere MS (San Marino: CA, Huntington Library, MS 26 C9), reveals that in the entire *Canterbury Tales* the verb “tellen” is followed eighteen times by “yow” and three times by “thou”, which might also explain the sequence of the two words as almost compulsory in the writer’s mind.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the courtly love convention, see Lillian M. Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*, New York, 1998, 219-22.

not love January and that she feels emotionally distant from him. By contrast, in those speeches in which January addresses May, he twice alternates between formal and informal pronouns. These two switches from “ye” to “thou” crucially correspond with the two moments at which the husband experiences very strong but conflicting feelings towards his wife – first passion and then anger. January, in fact, starts by using “ye” when he talks to May in his thoughts (IV 1758 and 1760) and when he makes love to her for the first time (IV 1829). In both cases, the formal pronoun conveys the idea that, despite the lovemaking, the two characters share a formal relationship that lacks the closeness usually experienced by lovers. Yet, once January becomes blind and consequently extremely jealous, Chaucer portrays him as a passionate lover who needs to be physically close to his wife. Such intimacy is indicated by January’s language, for when the old knight makes love to May in his private garden he addresses her with “thou” and calls her “my love, my wyf, my lady free” (IV 2138), “trewe deere wyf” (IV 2164), or simply “wyf” (IV 2160), which usually collocates with the informal pronoun.<sup>21</sup>

Later on in the same scene, when he lectures his wife about the reasons why she should be loyal to him, January twice refers to his old age (IV 2168 and 2180), reverting to the formal “ye”. This portrays January as a wise old man, who speaks with authority and, once again, it conveys the idea of emotional distance between the two characters. Finally, as soon as January miraculously regains his sight, he can see that May has disregarded his words, for she is making love to Damian in the pear tree. The anger he feels towards May is signalled by the fact that he calls her “stronge lady stoore” (“brazen crude lady”: IV 2367) and again addresses her, though this time for different reasons, with the informal “thou”. The informal pronoun once again has the task of conveying January’s strong feelings towards May, although this time the man does not experience the passion of love but of rage.

It is interesting to notice that when in *The Merchant’s Tale* Proserpine and Pluto argue about the deceitful nature of women, they never address each other informally. The goddess, in fact, uses “ye” even though she is

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<sup>21</sup> Pearsall argues the same point but for a different reason. He believes that in Chaucer’s usage both the “unadorned personal name vocative” to address a woman and the use of simple “wyf” imply a relationship in which the wife is subordinated to her husband-lord. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, as well as in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, however, he finds that there is too much social ambiguity about the marriages to produce an evaluable consistency of usage” (Pearsall, “*The Franklin’s Tale*, Line 1469 ...”, 77).

very angry with Pluto (IV 2264-2319), and the god replies with “yow” twice (IV 2254 and 2314). This is probably a way of showing the difference between immortals, who are never prey to extreme feelings, and common people, who, as human beings, can feel very strong emotions.

*The Merchant's Tale* has been considered part of the “marriage group” because, as in the tales just discussed, marriage is its main topic; with respect to its genre, however, it is a fabliau. By definition fabliaux deal with love, trickery, sex and adultery, and most of the characters in them belong to the lower ranks of society. The distinction between formal and informal ways of address is not always obvious for these characters, with the result that they use “thou” and “ye” inconsistently. Lovers are the sole exception, for, as in the tales of the “marriage group”, in the fabliaux Chaucer also switches between formal and informal personal pronouns in order to describe the characters' feelings, regardless of their age and social status, as we can see when we analyse the three fabliaux in *The Canterbury Tales* in which sex actually takes place.

In *The Miller's Tale*, which is intended as a parody of *The Knight's Tale*, Alison is married to John the carpenter and has two suitors, the clerk Nicholas, whose attentions she reciprocates, and the parish clerk Absolon, whom she despises. Most of the dialogue between these characters entails the use of the informal personal pronoun. There are two switches, however, which characterize changes in the characters' attitude towards each other. The first of them is in one of Alison's speeches, and occurs when Nicholas grabs her “by the queynte” (I 3276) and declares his intentions by telling her “lemman, love me al atones” (I 3280). Initially, Alison addresses Nicholas with “thee” (I 3284), as she will do in almost all the rest of the tale, but then switches to “youre” and “ye” (I 3287 and 3295-97) in a speech that is playfully meant to characterize the woman as a courtly lady. This is indicated not only by the use of the formal pronouns, but also by the occurrence of words like “curteisye” (I 3287) and “mercy” (I 3288), which are distinctive of the courtly love tradition. Hence, by shifting from informal to formal pronouns Alison communicates the idea that she, the carpenter's wife, is momentarily playing the part of the courtly lady addressing her suitor.

The other switches occur in the speeches delivered by Absolon, a character portrayed as a parody of the courtly lover – and as such he uses the formal pronouns on both occasions he sings love songs outside



Alison's window (I 3362 and 3698-3702).<sup>22</sup> Absolon switches to the informal "thy" (I 3726), however, to signal the intensity of his emotions upon seeing Alison and being promised a kiss. Shortly after this, he addresses Alison informally again, but for a totally different reason – because he is extremely angry with her. Alison has, in fact, allowed him to kiss her bottom instead of her lips, and Absolon's rage is stressed by the use of the pronoun "thee" to refer to Alison in the line that reads: "And to hymself he seyde, I shall *thee* quyte" (I 3746). Absolon uses the informal pronouns again when, later in the story, he sings under Alison's window for the last time (I 3793-3805). At this stage, "thyn", "thee" and "thou" are employed to express intimacy. Absolon is now pretending to be madly in love with Alison in order to attract her attentions once more and take revenge on her.

In *The Reeve's Tale* there is just a single piece of dialogue between characters of the opposite sex, and the informal second-person pronouns used in it are essential to convey the characters' feelings. This comes in the exchange between Malyn, the miller's daughter, and Aleyn, one of the two young Cambridge students who have been tricked by the miller and who pay him back by taking advantage of his wife and daughter. When in the morning Aleyn leaves Malyn's bed, he says to her: "I is *thyn* awen clerk, swa have I seel!" (I 4239). Likewise, the girl repeatedly addresses him with the informal personal pronoun (I 4240-47). Aleyn's use of "thou" seems perfectly acceptable. He is, in fact, superior to the girl both socially, for he is a clerk, and emotionally, since he does not love her but has simply taken advantage of her in order to punish her father.

Malyn's informal address, however, needs some explanation. Even if Aleyn is introduced as a poor scholar (I 4002), he is still a clerk from Cambridge. In the eyes of the miller's daughter, he must therefore have looked like a respectable person whom she would address formally without expecting the formality to be reciprocated. It is possible that the girl's use of the informal personal pronouns represents the wrong use of "you" typical of characters from the lower classes.<sup>23</sup> Yet, despite the fact that Aleyn has abused her, there is nothing in Malyn's speech that

<sup>22</sup> Line I 3361 reads "Now, deere lady, if thy wille be" in most manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Only in Bo<sup>1</sup>, Ph<sup>2</sup> and Ps did the scribes write "your" instead of *thy* (*The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, eds Manly and Rickert, V, 334). "Thy" was very likely in Chaucer's manuscript, and it may be that this is an authorial slip of the pen.

<sup>23</sup> Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, 18.

betrays her anger or hate towards the clerk. On the contrary, the repetitions of “thou” and “thee”, the fact that she calls him “deere lemman” (I 4240) and “goode lemman” (I 4247), tells him where he can find the cake made with the flower that her father stole from the two students and almost weeps when he leaves (I 4248), convey the sense that she actually feels some kind of affection for Aleyn. This is very likely the effect that Chaucer wanted to achieve with his choice of the personal pronouns, perhaps for the sake of stressing the simplicity of the Malyne’s feelings.

The last example of Chaucer’s use of the second-person pronoun to show his characters’ feelings is provided by *The Shipman’s Tale*. Here the characters are a rich middle-class merchant, his beautiful wife, and a young and handsome monk, who is a very good friend of the merchant. The woman asks the monk to lend her a hundred francs to pay some debts. She also promises to pay him back “And doon to *yow* what plesance and service / That I may doon, right as *yow* list devise” (VII 191-92). The monk borrows the money from the merchant, gives it to the merchant’s wife and spends a night in bed with her as payment for his efforts. At his next meeting with the merchant, the monk informs him that he has already returned the money to his wife.

The next morning the merchant reproaches his wife for not telling him that she had already received the money, for he might have offended his friend by asking him something that the monk had actually already given back. This is the only section of the tale where a switch in the use of personal pronouns occurs. In fact, the monk and the woman always address each other with the formal personal pronouns. Likewise, the wife never uses “thou” when talking to her husband. The merchant, by contrast, usually addresses his wife with what in this tale seems to be an affectionate “thou”, only switching once to a formal “ye”. He does so when he is in bed with his wife and he tells her “I am a litel wrooth / With *yow* my wyf, although it be me looth” (VII 383-85) because she had taken the money from the monk without telling him. The choice of the formal personal pronoun in this speech suggests that the man cannot be very angry with his wife and that his emotions are not very intense: the merchant’s words are simply meant to produce a temporary distancing effect. Nonetheless, the substitution of the formal personal pronoun for the informal one has the function of signalling to the Chaucerian audience that something has changed in the merchant’s feelings towards his wife. After reproaching her, the merchant switches back to the usual

and more loving “thou”, which, together with his words of forgiveness, is a sign of the affection that he normally feels for his wife.

The analysis of the tales of the “marriage group” and of three additional fabliaux presented here shows that Chaucer’s use of the second-person pronouns has a precise function in the dialogues that occur between lovers. It tells the audience what these characters feel towards each other and how intense such feelings are. By and large, “thou” is preferred to “ye” to convey the idea of strong emotions. Hence, it can signal either intimacy as in the case of Malyne (in *The Reeve’s Tale*) and the merchant (in *The Shipman’s Tale*) or superiority as in the case of Aleyn (in *The Reeve’s Tale*). By contrast, “ye” is used when the idea of emotional distance between characters has to be transmitted, as in the case of May (in *The Merchant’s Tale*), who does not love her husband at all. In addition, sudden switches of the pronoun of address usually coincide with changes in the way characters experience their feelings. Hence, switches from “ye” to “thou” almost always indicate that strong and often conflicting emotions such as love and amorous passion or hate and deep anger become predominant. This is exemplified by Walter (in *The Clerk’s Tale*) and Arveragus (in *The Franklin’s Tale*) who suddenly abandon the formal “ye” in favour of “thou”, and who by doing so emphatically express their love for their wives. January (in *The Merchant’s Tale*) and Absolon (in *The Miller’s Tale*) also switch from “ye” to “thou”, but they do so when their sexual attraction for May and Alison needs to be stressed. By contrast, the knight (in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*), January (in *The Merchant’s Tale*) and Absolon (in *The Miller’s Tale*) change from formal to informal pronouns of address when they need to express the extreme anger that they feel towards their women. The old hag (in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*), finally, switches to “thou” to emphasize her superiority over the hopeless knight.

Switches from “thou” to “ye” occur in the narrative when strong feelings have to yield to more moderate and often benign ones, and also when rationality prevails over the characters’ emotions. This is exemplified by the words of the old hag (in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*) when she talks like a courtly lady, and of Alison (in *The Miller’s Tale*) when she pretends to be one. Other examples are in the speeches of January (in *The Merchant’s Tale*) when he lectures his wife about faithfulness, of the merchant (in *The Shipman’s Tale*) when he is

somewhat angry with his wife and of the knight (in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*) when he finally learns to accept and respect his old and ugly wife.

It has always been acknowledged that on occasions Chaucer was exceptionally frank in his portrayal and representation of the intimate relations between men and women in *The Canterbury Tales*, and for later readers this could be something of an embarrassment and even dismissed as an example of medieval vulgarity. We are more at ease with such accounts nowadays and may even be able to enjoy them in a manner comparable to that of Chaucer's contemporaries. However, what we have long been unaware of and perhaps have missed completely (probably due to our lack of familiarity with the intricacies of address forms in Middle English) is the subtlety with which he was able to indicate to his medieval audience what lovers felt about each other, their shifting feelings and the range and variety of their intimacies by his delicate handling of personal pronouns.

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## REASON VERSUS NATURE IN DUNBAR'S “TRETIS OF THE TWA MARIIT WEMEN AND THE WEDO”

BART VELDHOEN

Until 1500 little is known about the Scottish poet William Dunbar (c. 1460-1513), apart from the fact that he was a Lowlander from Lothian, who studied the Arts at St Andrews University, where he is listed among the masters in 1479. There is no evidence of him studying Law or Theology, yet in 1502 he was acting as a lawyer. Guesses about his activities between 1480 and 1500 vary from being a Franciscan novice, a Scots Guard of the French king or an ambassador. From 1500 his presence at the court of James III is attested as court poet, secretary and envoy. He was ordained as priest in 1504 and became court chaplain in 1509.<sup>1</sup> His large poetic *oeuvre* ranges wide, including religious poems, aureate allegories, satire and melancholy lyrical verse. The date of the “Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo” is unknown; it appeared in print in 1507.

In a collection of articles on sex and the erotic in English poetry the “Tretis” (some 530 lines long) is rather the odd one out, being neither English nor lyrical, but something that looks like a narrative. It is certainly about sex and the erotic, but, as the title suggests, not a love story in the style of the romances, either. It belongs to the genre of the dream-allegory – the medium in which medieval literature explored love and sex and marriage and the emotions involved. If it is to be compared with later poetry, it is not unlike the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poetry of John Donne and, especially, Andrew Marvell’s dialogue and garden poems.<sup>2</sup> A.C. Spearing stresses its Midsummer Eve

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<sup>1</sup> William Dunbar, *Selected Poems*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, Longman Annotated Texts, London, 1966, 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> When T.S. Eliot linked Byron to Dunbar, it is to the Dunbar of the flytings and satires, very unlike “Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo” (see T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, London, 1957, 206).

quality, “the time for fertility rites, folk-customs going back to pre-Christian times”. He draws a parallel to the Saint Valentine’s day of Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls*, another “licensed occasion, a moment for the temporary return of what is repressed by civilization and more specifically by medieval Christianity”.

Further he notes that the three ladies “are described in the idealizing style of courtly poetry” in the opening part of the poem, but that viewpoint is undercut when they – and especially the widow – are placed “in the context of fabliau or anti-feminist satire rather than of courtly idealization”, although it is closer to the courtly love doctrine than to the fabliau.<sup>3</sup> Priscilla Bawcutt concurs with this view and sees the chief structural pattern of the “Tretis” as that of the social pastime of the *demande d’amour*, “a playful discussion of love in the form of questions and answers”.<sup>4</sup> The uniquely detailed sexual licence of the “Tretis” would seem to suggest the idea of a parody of the dream-allegories.

But the situation is rather more complicated. In her article on “Sexuality in the Middle Ages”, Ruth Mazo Karras has recently reminded us “that there was no such ‘thing’ as sexuality in the Middle Ages”. Medieval people, she states,

had sex, but they did not have sexuality, which is not just a series of sex acts but a category of human experience, a discourse about the body and what we do with it, a way of constructing meaning around behaviour. They had sex acts, but they did not have sexual identities.<sup>5</sup>

They had discourses of the flesh and of desire, but their sexual identities were not separable from the imperative of procreation. Sexual identity was further denied by the clerical criticism of marriage and extolling of virginity, based on St Jerome’s strictures in his writing against Jovinian.<sup>6</sup> Specially relevant for our poem, Ruth Mazo Karras also reminds us that

for medieval people, sexual intercourse was not something that a couple did, it was something that a man did. He did it to someone – usually a

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<sup>3</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives*, Cambridge, 1993, 260.

<sup>4</sup> Dunbar, *Selected Poems*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, “Sexuality in the Middle Ages”, in *The Medieval World*, eds Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, London, 2001, 279.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

woman .... “Futuo”, “foutre” and “swiven” are all transitive verbs, used almost exclusively with a masculine subject.

The act had “very different ethical ramifications” for the two parties, to which a double standard was applied.<sup>7</sup>

If she is correct in assuming that “there is little hint of sexual desire on the part of the woman” in the more courtly literature, Dunbar’s “Tretis” is something of a rogue text – although the double standard is clearly visible in it. Spearing also denied a female speech-act performance, stressing that the “female language” was actually written by a male poet: “Dunbar, consciously or unconsciously, has unmasked not the truth about women but the truth about the nature of male fantasy about women in a patriarchal society.” The “truth” that the women reveal about their own natures and about what they “really” feel about men is “no more than an unusually graphic realization of orthodox clerical anti-feminism; it is precisely what Dunbar as priest ought to have known all along, though it is what (in theory at least) Dunbar as courtly poet must not say”.<sup>8</sup>

If Dunbar produced a rogue text with his “Tretis”, he was by no means the only joker in the pack. Already in the *Roman de la Rose* (1237-75), the “mother of all love-allegories”, Jean de Meung’s continuation of Guillaume de Lorris’ idealized dream-vision attacked not only the idealization of courtly love, but also the asceticism implied in the traditional ecclesiastical view of women. John B. Morrall, in his discussion of the “sublimely muddled attitude” towards courtly love in the lyrical poems, romances and other love-stories in the later Middle Ages, takes a similar position.<sup>9</sup> De Meung’s part of the *Roman de la Rose* might serve as a frame of reference for Dunbar’s “Tretis”, since right at the beginning of his continuation de Meung has Reason, personified as a lady, denounce love to the idealistic Amans as merely ardent passion. Nature had brought it into the world, she states, in order to ensure procreation. It was meant to make the work pleasurable so the workers should not hate it. But “lovers” forget the original purpose and seek only carnal gratification, which becomes a source of endless strife, turning everything to its opposite: the “paradoxes” of love.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>8</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 265-66.

<sup>9</sup> John B. Morrall, *The Medieval Imprint: The Founding of the Western European Tradition*, Penguin, 1970, 122-26.



Reasonable, good love would be Friendship or Charity. And if that is aiming too high, the next best form of good love is to love men generally: to behave towards others as one would wish them to do to oneself. The lowest form of good love is to love like animals, only for procreation.<sup>10</sup> This deserves neither praise nor blame: like eating, only not doing it would be blameworthy. The elevated “courtly” love that Amans is defending as a follower of the God of Love is mere submission to Fortune, so Reason teaches, a lack of moral courage or of stoic strength. Reason’s proof for this is that Jupiter cut off his father Saturn’s testicles and flung them into the sea. But then, Venus was born from them. Love, she concludes, is a weakness and a madness.

Some thirteen thousand lines further on, in a chapter called “Nature’s Confession”, her verdict on love already announced by Reason is formally pronounced by Nature: Natural Law requires that men apply themselves energetically to the task of procreation.<sup>11</sup> Concentrating on that will make them true lovers, and their souls will be filled with delight. After all, everything has been made for a purpose. Nature has given stylus and tablet, hammer and anvils, ploughshares and fallow fields, she says, and to be enjoyed all these have to be worked. If God had wanted chastity, He would have wanted it for everyone. But since mankind would die out as a result, that is obviously not the case. Therefore any reason not to go to work – whether celibacy or chastity, marriages of interest or idealized relationships – any excuse not to use the tools is Pride.<sup>12</sup>

This is a pretty aggressive parody of the highly idealized and romanticized explorations of love that this age of the love-allegories and the romances gloried in as part of the growing court culture, which was really the self-justification of the aristocracy after they had lost their use as a warrior-class. It is interesting to notice that de Meung’s parody of this endeavour aligns both Reason and Nature against the aristocratic idealization of love. There is a political message here, or so it would seem, a learned clerical and bourgeois reaction. Dunbar’s “Tretis” is a similar combination of an underlying clerical misogyny and a flaunting of bourgeois values. In his close analysis of the poem Tom Scott points to the bourgeois immorality of the theme that hypocrisy is the answer to

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<sup>10</sup> Later we shall explore Dunbar’s use of animal imagery in his “Tretis”.

<sup>11</sup> Lack of energy is one of the main themes in Dunbar’s poem, as we shall see.

<sup>12</sup> An excellent modern English edition is to be found in *The Romance of the Rose* translated by Frances Horgan, Oxford, 1994.

the problems of marriage and respectability the norm.<sup>13</sup> His final analysis is that the “Tretis” shows the bourgeois reaction to courtly love as a cult of adultery called for by the property-based marriages of feudal society.<sup>14</sup>

Property and adultery certainly play important parts in the “Tretis”. But I would like to concentrate on the imagery used to express the experience of love and sex. Making love is, after all, a verbal performance – if the poet is a “maker”. And in a parodic text such as this, the images will be most conspicuously telling.

Let us examine, first, how the details of the text give shape to all this. It opens, as one would expect of a parody, with the perfectly conventional *loci* of the *reverdie* and the *alba* (spring and daybreak) and the *hortus conclusus*. The latter, ironically, began originally in the West as the image of the self-sufficiency of the Virgin/Holy Mother Mary, but with its plants and birdsong, meandering rivulets and eternal spring, it is as old as the image of the world as Paradise, the Garden of Eden and the Golden Age before sin – the classic *locus* for the love-vision, through the Middle Ages, up to Shakespeare’s arbours and Marvell’s gardens.<sup>15</sup>

Apon the midsummer evin, mirriest of nichtis,  
 I muvit furth till ane meid as midnicht wes past,  
 Besyd ane gudlie grein garth, full of gay flouris,  
 Hegeit of ane huge hicht with hawthorne treis,  
 Quhairon ane bird on ane bransche so birst out hir notis 5  
 That never ane blythfullar bird was on the beuche hard.  
 Quhat throw the sugarat sound of hir sang glaid  
 And throw the savour sanative of the sueit flouris,  
 I drew in derne to the dyk to dirkin efter mirthis.  
 The dew donkit the daill, and dynnit the feulis. 10

I hard, under ane holyn hevinlie grein hewit,  
 Ane hie speiche at my hand with hautand wourdis.  
 With that in haist to the hege so hard I intrang  
 That I was heildit with hawthorne and with heynd leveis.  
 Throw pykis of the plet thorne I presandlie luikit, 15  
 Gif ony persoun wald approche within that plesand garding.

I saw thre gay ladeis sit in ane grein arbeir  
 All grathit into garlandis of fresche gudlie flouris:  
 So glitterit as the gold wer thair glorius gilt tressis,

<sup>13</sup> Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems*, Edinburgh, 1966, 190.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>15</sup> The text is taken from *Selected Poems of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar*, ed. Douglas Gray, Penguin, 1998, 282-309 (the translations are my own).

Quhill all the gressis did gleme of the glaid hewis. 20  
 Kemmit war thair clier hair and curiouslie sched  
 Attour thair schulderis doun schyre, schyning full bricht,  
 With curches cassin thairabone of kirspe cleir and thin.  
 Their mantillis grein war as the gress that grew in May sessoun,  
 Petrit with thair quhyt fingeris about thair fair sydis. 25  
 Off ferlifull fyne favour was thair faceis meik,  
 All full of flurist fairheid as flouris in June –  
 Quhyt, seimlie and soft as the sweit lillies,  
 Now upspredd upon spray as new spynist rose;  
 Arrayit ryallie about with mony riche vardour, 30  
 That Nature full nobillie annamalit with flouris  
 Off alkin hewis under hevin that ony heynd knew,  
 Fragrant, all full of fresche odour, fynest of smell.  
 Ane cumlie tabil coverit wes befor thair cleir ladeis  
 With ryalle cowpis apon rawis full of ryche wynis; 35  
 And of thair wlonkes wycht, tua weddit war with lordis,  
 Ane was ane wedow, iwis, wantoun of laitis.  
 And as thair talk at the tabill of mony taill sindry  
 They wauchtit at the wicht wyne and waris out wourdis;  
 And syn thair spak more spedelie and sparit no matiris.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “On Midsummer Eve, merriest of nights, / I went out alone to a meadow as midnight was past, / Next to a beautiful green garden full of brightly coloured flowers, / Hedged to an enormous height with hawthorn-trees, / In which a bird on a branch so poured forth her notes / That never a more joyful bird was heard on the bough. / Partly through the sweet sound of her merry singing, / And partly through the health-giving savour of the sweet flowers, / I moved up quietly to the wall to lie still in the dark after (my) revelry. / The dew moistened the dale, and the birds clamoured. / I heard, from under a holly tree coloured a heavenly green, / Loud speech near at hand, with haughty words. / At that I hastily pushed in to the hedge so hard / That I was concealed by the hawthorn and by the pleasant leaves. / Through the prickles of the intertwined thorns I looked presently / If any persons would approach inside that pleasant garden. / I saw three gay ladies sitting in a green bower / Arrayed with garlands of fresh goodly flowers. / As glittering as gold were their glorious golden tresses, / While all the green plants were gleaming with the glad hues. / Well-combed was their bright hair, and carefully parted, / Over their shoulders straight down, shining brightly, / With kerchiefs thrown over them of delicate fabric, clear and thin. / Their mantles were green as the grass that grows in the season of May, / Fastened by their white fingers around their beautiful figures. / Of wonderfully fine appearance were their meek faces, / Full of blossoming beauty like flowers in June – / White, fine and soft like sweet lilies, / Now blossoming on the small branches like the newly opened rose, / Arrayed richly around with many noble green plants / That Nature coloured brightly with flowers in noble manner, / Of all the colours under heaven that a courteous person knew, / Fragrant, fresh odour everywhere finest to the smell. / A table daintily laid stood before those bright ladies, / With rich goblets in rows, filled with noble wines. / And of these beautiful splendid creatures two were married to gentlemen, / One

The widow then proposes that they each relate their attitudes towards marriage and their experience of it. The first wife begins:

Than spak ane lusty belyf with lustie effeiris:  
 'It that ye call the blist band that bindis so fast 50  
 Is bair of blis and bailfull, and greit barrat wirkis.  
 Ye speir, had I fre chois, gif I wald cheis bettir:  
 Chenyeis ay ar to eschew, and changeis ar sueit.  
 Sic cursit chance till eschew, had I my chois anis,  
 Out of the cheinyeis of ane churle I chaip suld for evir. 55  
 God gif matrimony wer made to mell for ane yeir!  
 It war bot merrens to be mair bot gif our myndis pleisit.  
 It is agane the law of luf, of kynd, and of nature,  
 Togiddir hartis to strene that stryveis with uther.  
 Birdis has ane better law na bernis be meikill, 60  
 That ilk yeir, with new joy, joyis ane maik,  
 And fangis thame ane fresche feyr unfuleit and constant,  
 And lattis thair fuleit feiris flie quhair thai pleis.  
 Cryst gif sic ane consuetude war in this kith haldin!  
 Than weill war us wemen that evir we war born.<sup>17</sup> 65

Then, she continues, we would appreciate our mates more; and we would be able to flirt in church and in the marketplace, to find a fresh one for the next year. About her own husband she reveals:

I have ane wallidrag, ane worme, ane auld wobat carle,  
 A waistit wolroun na worth bot wourdis to clatter, 90  
 Ane bumbart, ane dron-bee, ane bag full of flewme,

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was a widow, jesting, wanton of manners. / And as they were talking at the table about many different matters, / They drank deeply of the strong wine and uttered words / And ever they spoke more quickly and spared no subjects."

<sup>17</sup> "Then spoke one beautiful woman at once with vigorous expression: / That which you call the blessed bond that binds so fast / Is bare of bliss, and wretched, and causes great strife. / You were asking, if I had free choice, whether I would choose better? / Chains are always to be avoided, and changes are sweet. / To get away from such cursed fate, if I had my choice for once, / Out of the chains of a boor I should escape forever. / God grant that matrimony were made to copulate for one year (only)! / For it to be longer is only a vexation, unless it pleases our minds. / It is against the law of love, of nature, and of the natural order, / To force together hearts that are at strife with one another. / Birds have a better law than men by far, / That each year with new joy enjoy a mate, / And take themselves a fresh mate, unwearyed and constant, / And let their wearyed mates fly where they please. / Christ grant that such a custom were observed in this country! / Then it would be well for us women that ever we were born."

Ane scabbit skarth, ane scorpioun, ane scutarde behind.  
 To se him scart his awin skyn grit scunner I think.  
 Quhen kisset me that carybald, than kyndillis all my sorow.  
 As birs of ane brym bair his berd is als stif, 95  
 Bot soft and soupill as the silk is his sary lume.  
 He may weill to the syn assent, bot sakles is his deidis.<sup>18</sup>

In short, she does not enjoy sex with him. Moreover, he is jealous and ill-tempered and suspicious that she may be showing favour to younger men, she says.

Bot I may yuke all this yer or his yerd help. 130  
 Ay quhen that caribald carll wald clym one my wambe,  
 Than am I dangerus and daine and dour of my will;  
 Yit leit I nevir that larbar my leggis ga betuene  
 To fyle my flesche na fummyll me without a fee gret,  
 And thocht his pen purly me payis in bed, 135  
 His purse pays richely in recompense efter.<sup>19</sup>

The imagery of the tools here is particularly reminiscent of the *Roman de la Rose*, not only picking up Reason's and Nature's examples, but even faintly hinting at the story of what Jupiter did to his father. Anyway, they all drink to that.

Then the second wife is called upon to reveal the joys of her marriage. Her husband had been going to the whores and has been such an intense lecher that he cannot perform any longer more than once in seven weeks. And yet he dresses and behaves as if he is still a valiant lover:

He semys to be sumthing worth, that syphyr in bour,  
 He lukis as he wald luffit be, thocht he be litill of valour; 185  
 He dois as dotid dog that damys on all bussis,

<sup>18</sup> "I have a slovenly fellow, a worm, an old hairy caterpillar churl, / A wasted wild creature, good for nothing but to chatter words, / A lazy fellow, a drone, a bag full of phlegm, / A worthless cormorant, a scorpion, a farter at the back. / To see him scratch his own skin I find disgusting. / When that monster kisses me, then all my grief is kindled. / His beard is as stiff as the bristle of a fierce boar, / But soft and supple as silk is his wretched tool. / He may well assent to the sin, but his performance is innocent."

<sup>19</sup> "But I may itch for a whole year before his yardstick may be of any help. / And when that monstrous boor will climb on top of my belly, / Then I am disdainful and haughty and grudging with my desire; / Yet I never allow that impotent chap to come between my legs / To defile my flesh, nor to fumble with me, without a large fee, / And though his pen pays me poorly in bed, / His purse pays richly in recompense afterwards."

And liftis his leg apon loft thought he nought list pische.  
 He has a luke without lust and lif without curage;  
 He has a forme without force and fessoun but vertu,  
 And fair wordis but effect, all fruster of dedis. 190  
 He is for ladyis in luf a right lusty schadow,  
 Bot into derne, at the deid, he sal be drup fundin.<sup>20</sup>

If I had my choice, she says, I would gladly exchange this braggart at the next Valentine's Day. I am tormented in my thoughts, she continues, why my stupid relatives ever pushed me on to this good-for-nothing, while there are so many better men about. So, she concludes, I pretend to frequent headaches.

Then the two married ladies question the widow. She begins her part in the manner of a sermon, then gradually slips into confession:

God my spreit now inspir and my speche quyckin,  
 And send me sentence to say substantious and noble,  
 Sa that my preching may pers your perverst hertis  
 And mak yow mekar to men in maneris and conditiounis. 250  
 I schaw yow, sisteris, in schrift, I wes a schrew evir,  
 Bot I wes schene in my schrowd and schew me innocent;  
 And thought I dour wes and dane, dispitois and bald,  
 I wes dissymblit suttelly in a sanctis liknes;  
 I semyt sober and sueit and sempill without fraud, 255  
 Bot I couth sexty dissaif that suttillar wer haldin.  
 Unto my lesson ye lyth, and leir at me wit,  
 Gif y ou nought list be forleit with losingeris untrew:  
 Be constant in your governance and counterfeit gud maneris  
 Thought ye be kene, inconstant and cruell of mynd; 260  
 Thought ye as tygris be terne, be trefable in luf,  
 And be as turtoris in your talk, thought ye haif talis brukill.  
 Be dragonis baith and dowis ay in double forme,  
 And quhen it nedis yow, onone note baith ther stranthis;  
 Be amyable with humble face as angellis apperand, 265  
 And with a terrebill tail be stangand as edderis;

<sup>20</sup> "He seems to be quite something, that zero of the bedchamber, / He looks as if he should be loved, though he is little in performance; / He acts like a stupid dog that makes water on all the bushes, / And lifts up his leg high though he will not piss. / He has the looks without the ardour, and the sprightliness without the courage; / He has the fair shape without the force, and the appearance without the power, / And fair words without efficacy, all vain in action. / He is, for ladies, in love the very shadow of lust, / But in private, at the deed, he will be found feeble."

Be of your luke like innocentis, thocht ye haif evill myndis;  
 Be courtly ay in clething and costly arrayit –  
 That hurtis yow nought worth a hen; yowr husband pays for all.<sup>21</sup>

Her first, elderly husband never doubted her affection, for she was always loving to his face, and compensated with a secret and discreet young lover. Thus she avoided the mental anguish of the situation. And she made sure that she had a child, and her husband's possessions secured. After his death she married a rich merchant of middle age, whom she made always feel and remember that she had married beneath her. She was cutting and pert with him and kept him in reverence to her by insisting all the time that she had only taken him out of pity and grace. Again, she avoided damaging her reputation, until she had another child and his possessions secure in their names:

Bot quhen my billis and my bauchles wes all braid selit,  
 I wald na langar beir on bridill, bot braid up my heid;  
 That myght na molet mak me moy na hald my mouth in,  
 I gert the renyeis rak and rif into sondir; 350  
 I maid that wif carll to werk all womenis werkis,  
 And laid all manly materis and mensk in this eird.  
 Than said I to my cummaris in counsall about:  
 "Se how I cabeld yone cout with a kene brydill.  
 The cappill that the crelis kest in the caf-mydding 355  
 Sa curtasly the cart drawis and kennis na plungeing.  
 He is nought skeich na yit sker na scippis nought on syd."  
 And thus the scorne and the scaith scapit he nothir.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "May God now inspire my spirit and give life to my words, / And send me wisdom to speak weighty and noble thoughts, / That my preaching may pierce your perverse hearts, / And make you meeker towards men in manner and disposition. / I will show you, sisters, in my confession, that I have always been an evil creature, / But I was fair in my gown and showed myself innocent; / And though I was stubborn and haughty, contemptuous and bold, / I was disguised cunningly in likeness of a saint; / I seemed mild and sweet and simple without fraud, / But I could deceive sixty who were considered more subtle. / Listen to my lesson and learn sense from me, / If you do not wish to be abandoned by untrue deceivers: / Be constant in your conduct and counterfeit good manners / Even if you are keen, inconstant and cruel of mind; / Though you are ferocious like tigers, be compliant in love, / And be like turtle-doves in your talk, though you have frail tails. / Be both dragon and dove always in double form, / And when necessary, employ both their strengths at once; / Be amiable with humble face, appearing like an angel, / Then sting with a terrible tail like an adder; / Be like an innocent in your appearance, though you have an evil mind; / Be always courtly in your dress and arrayed in costly manner – / It hurts you less than a hen's worth; your husband pays for all."

So, she confesses, he paid dearly for her favours with jewels and costly clothes, in which she flirted around:

Bot of ane bowrd into bed I sall yow breif yit: 385  
 Quhen he ane hal year wes hanyt, and him behuffit rage,  
 And I wes laith to be loppin with sic a lob avoir,  
 Also lang as he wes on loft I lukit on him nevir,  
 Na leit nevir enter in my thocht that he my thing persit;  
 Bot ay in mynd ane othir man ymagynit that I haid, 390  
 Or ellis had I nevir mery bene at that myrthles raid.  
 Quhen I that grome geldit had of gudis and of natur,  
 Me thocht him gracelese on to goif, sa me God help.<sup>23</sup>

And so he died. As a widow, she continues, she is well respected and attractive. Black weeds and a veil are quite charming. And she always carries a sponge to counterfeit tears and people admire her as a proper widow, appearing respectable where she needs to be and attractive wherever and whenever she pleases. The moral of her story is:

According to my sable weid I mon haif sad maneris  
 Or thai will se all the suth – for certis we women  
 We set us all for the syght to syle men of treuth.  
 We dule for na evill deid, sa it be derne haldin. 450  
 Wise women has wayis and wondirfull gydingis  
 With gret engyne to bejaip ther jolyus husbandis,  
 And quyetly with sic craft convoyis our materis  
 That undir Crist no creatur kennis of our doingis.

<sup>22</sup> “But once my legal documents were all provided with a large seal, / I would no longer bear a bridle, but tossed up my head; / No bit could keep me quiet nor make me hold my mouth, / I caused the reins to strain and break to pieces; / I made that womanish man to perform all the work of a woman. / And buried all manly things and honour in the earth. / Then I said to my gossips sitting in council: ‘See how I tied up that colt with a sharp bridle. / The horse that threw the baskets on the dunghap / Now courteously pulls the cart and shows no inclination to violent plunges. / He is not inclined to shy, nor to be restive, and does not skip aside.’ / And thus he escapes neither the scorn nor the humiliation.”

<sup>23</sup> “But about one jest in bed I shall tell you yet: / When he had been restrained a whole year and he would like to take sexual pleasure, / And I was reluctant to be mounted by such a clumsy old horse, / As long as he was on top of me I never looked at him, / Nor let it ever enter my thought that he was penetrating my thing; / But the whole time I imagined in my mind that I was having another man, / Or else I should never have been merry at that mirthless invasion. / After I had gelded that man of his goods and of his potency, / I thought him unattractive to look at, so God help me.”



Bot folk a cury may miscuke that knowlege wantis. 455  
 And has na colouris for to cover ther awne kindly fautis;  
 As dois thir damysellis for derne dotit lufe,  
 That dogonis haldis in dainté and delis with thaim so lang,  
 Quhill al the cuntré know ther kyndnes and faith.  
 Faith has a fair name, bot falsheid faris beittir; 460  
 Fy on hir that can nought feyne, her fame for to saif!<sup>24</sup>

Then there are another fifty lines about her jolly life and flirtations, before the poem zooms out once more to the setting, as a rounding-off:

Thus draif thai our that deir nyght with danceis full noble,  
 Quhill that the day did up-daw, and dew donkit flouris.  
 The morow myld wes and meik the mavis did sing,  
 And all remuffit the myst, and the meid smellit. 515  
 Silver schouris doune schuke as the schene cristall,  
 And berdis shoutit in schaw with ther schill notis.  
 The goldin glitterand gleme so gladit ther hertis,  
 Thai maid a glorius gle amang the grene bewis.  
 The soft sowch of the swyr and sounne of the stremys,  
 The sueit savour of the sward, singing of foulis, 520  
 Myght confort ony creatur of the kyn of Adam,  
 And kindill agane his curage thocht it wer cald sloknyt.  
 Than rais thir ryall rosis in ther riche wedis,  
 And rakit hame to ther rest throgh the rise blumys;  
 And I all prevély past to a plesand arber, 525  
 And with my pen did report ther pastance most mery.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> “In accordance with my sable weeds I must have serious manners / Or else they will see the whole truth – for certainly we women / Set ourselves up to the sight, to deceive men about the truth. / We do not grieve for evil deeds, as long as they are kept secret. / Wise women have their ways and wonderful acting skills / With great ingenuity to befool their jealous husbands, / And quietly with such craft to conduct our business, / That under Christ no creature has knowledge of our doings. / But people who lack the know-how can spoil the dish in cooking, / If they do not have the deceptions to cover their own natural faults; / As do those damsels in a dotting secret love-affair / Who hold worthless men in favour and keep them so long / While the whole country knows their kindness and faith (in their relationship). / Faith has a fair name but falsehood fares better; / Fy on her who cannot feign, to save her reputation!”

<sup>25</sup> “Thus they passed that dear night with noble dances, / While the day dawned and dew made the flowers damp. / The morning was mild and the thrush was singing meekly / And the mist vanished completely and the meadow became fragrant. / Silver showers came down like beautiful crystal / And the birds were shouting in the woods with their piercing notes. / The golden glittering gleam made them so happy in their hearts, / That they made glorious music among the green boughs. / The soft murmur of the valley and

The return to the glorious morning, however conventional it may be in dream-allegories, comes as rather a shock in this poem. The “all is well with the world” quality of the conventional frame stresses, in a shamelessly ironic way, the nightmare quality of the dream, even if there is no explicit waking up from it – nor, indeed, was there a falling asleep in the beginning. The paradisaical setting is not the idealized setting of the dreamer’s state of mind as a man who would learn about love – to paraphrase Chaucer’s usual introduction to his dream-allegories – but the setting of the overheard conversation, which could hardly be assumed to “confort any creatur of the kyn of Adam” (l. 521). The words of these daughters of Eve might, indeed, “kindill agane his curage” (l. 522), but, most likely, in something other than the conventional sense. The fact that the poet is plying his “pen” “all prevély” (ll. 525-26) after his dream is both in keeping with the revelations overheard (compare also ll. 135-36) and, at the same time, a mark of the difference between men and women noted in this text and presented, quite literally, as a difference as between night and day.

If the opening and closing scenes have the traditional imagery of flowers and brooks, birdsong and the weather of the *hortus conclusus* convention, which spells an analysis of love in the dream-allegories, the imagery of the ladies’ revelations shows a remarkable contrast in being entirely animal. All the scenes have been selected that have any imagery at all, and they are all animal images. The fact that the animal is the lower state that man can fall to in the Great Chain of Being makes animal imagery not only degrading, but also gives it a quality of sinfulness and depravity.

Boethius was quite explicit about this in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Book IV, prose 3: “Since only goodness can raise a man above the level of humankind, it follows that it is proper that wickedness thrusts down to a level below mankind those whom it has dethroned from the condition of being human.” After giving specific examples of the use of wolf, dog, fox, lion, hind, ass, bird and sow as images for wicked men, he concludes that a man who “ceases to be human, being unable to rise to a divine condition, ... sinks to the level of being an animal”.<sup>26</sup> Taking the

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the sound of the brooks, / The sweet savour of the sward and the singing of the birds / Would comfort any creature of Adam’s kin / And kindle again his heart, even if it were extinguished cold. / Then these noble roses got up in their rich clothes / And went home to their rest through the brushwood blossoms; / And I moved secretly to a pleasant arbour / And reported with my pen their most merry pastime.”

<sup>26</sup> Boethius: *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated V.E. Watts, Penguin, 1969, 125.

“being unable to rise” ironically as physical impotence, the ladies’ representations of men is more (im)moral – by medieval standards – than it might seem – which is, of course, rather a reflection on them than on the men. What seems to be simple and effective natural imagery in the ladies’ imaginations, may, therefore, also very well be the poet’s most damaging moral comment in his representation of the ladies. The parody would appear to be double-edged.

Tom Scott’s assumption that this kind of text can only operate in misogynistic surroundings<sup>27</sup> has been confirmed by Nicky Hallett’s recent article “Women”, in which she detects “a pattern of women’s representation within Western culture, where man writes woman and thus determines by his writing the bounds of her identity. She has no substance without him, and there is no prospect of a language of autonomous female desire”, a claim, she admits, that needs to be shown to be “historically and culturally contingent”.<sup>28</sup> With the help of speech-act theory and the notion of language as “performative”, she makes a case about language having “an effect on actions” which

sometimes may be different from the one(s) intended by the speaker’s interlocution. The effect, too, may be larger in scope than the moment of speaking and writing, since users of language do not necessarily originate it, but often restate prior performative exercises.<sup>29</sup>

Applied to Dunbar’s case, this would place him in the clerical anti-feminist tradition, not only by his restating of prior performative exercises, but also by the double parody reflecting on the ladies.

So a step backwards, it would appear, from de Meung’s parody in the *Roman de la Rose*, where the injunctions of Reason and Nature were aimed precisely at the clerical ideal of chastity and the connected anti-feminism of the clergy – apart from parodying the idealizations of love in the hands of the courtly makers as well. Chaucer is more modern, with all due respect to Nicky Hallett’s *caveats*, in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, because there he stresses the fundamental inequality of men and women in marriage, making his Wife the woman’s reply to the “clerkly makers”, turning the tables on them by using their own

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<sup>27</sup> Tom Scott, *Dunbar: Critical Exposition*, 181-82.

<sup>28</sup> Nicky Hallett, “Women”, in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown, Oxford, 2002, 480.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

arguments against them. “Turning the tables on them” may be what Dunbar is doing, too, but Chaucer’s *Prologue* for the Wife of Bath does not pretend to be about love at all, since she deftly turns the inequality around – as, indeed, do Dunbar’s ladies. But by presenting his apparent defence against anti-feminism in the form of a love-vision, with all its tension between the frame and the vision suggesting its parodic nature, Dunbar makes his text more likely to be “the cleric’s revenge”.

Even though to agree with A.C. Spearing’s comment that the presentation of the ladies in Dunbar’s poem is more of an uncovering of male sexual fantasies of a masochistic kind than a revelation of any truth about women<sup>30</sup> may spoil the fun a bit, it leaves intact the conclusion that the “Tretis” is a conservative “cleric’s revenge”. Its very masochism gives the poem its merciless quality, which is, in fact, the core of its bourgeois parody – mercy being once in courtly love the lady’s greatest gift.

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<sup>30</sup> Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 262.

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## PRICK-SONG DITTIES: MUSICAL METAPHOR IN THE BAWDY VERSE OF THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

GLYN PURSGLOVE

A good deal has been written about the importance of musical ideas and images in the English literature of the early modern period and much of it is excellent.<sup>1</sup> What most of these studies have in common is that, generally speaking, they take what one might describe as a rather elevated view of music's place in the thought of the period (and by no means unjustifiably so). In this regard they are largely expanding and re-articulating a view which frequently found direct expression in Renaissance texts themselves. They build on the sort of ideas that Baldassare Castiglione articulates with characteristic succinctness in *Il Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*):

I shall enter in a large sea of the praise of Musicke, and call to rehearsall how much it hath alwaies beene renowned among them of olde time, and counted a holy matter: and how it hath beene the opinion of most

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Linda Phyllis Austern, "Love, Death and Music in the English Renaissance", in *Love and Death in the Renaissance*, eds Kenneth R. Bartlett, Konrad Eisenblücher and Janice Liedl, Ottawa, 1991; Edward Doughtie, *English Renaissance Song*, Boston, 1986; Gretchen Ludke Finney, *Musical Backgrounds for English Literature: 1580-1650*, New Brunswick, 1962; Daniel Fischlin, *In Small Proportions: A Poetics of the English Ayre 1596-1622*, Detroit, 1998; S.K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics*, San Marino, 1974; John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500-1700*, New York, 1970; Elise Bickford Jorgens, *The Well-Tun'd Word: Musical Interpretations of English Poetry 1597-1651*, Minneapolis, 1982; Erik S. Ryding, *In Harmony Framed: Musical Humanism, Thomas Campion and the Two Daniels*, Kirksville: MO, 1993; Louise Schleiner, *The Living Lyre in English Verse: From Elizabeth through the Restoration*, Columbia, 1984; I. Silver, "The Marriage of Poetry and Music in France: Ronsard's Predecessors and Contemporaries", in *Poetry and Politics from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of James Hutton*, ed. G.M. Kirkwood, Ithaca: NY, 1975, 152-84; Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan Mythologies: Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music*, Cambridge, 1994.

wise Philosophers, that the worlde is made of musicke, and the heavens in their moving make a melodie, and our soule is framed after the verie same sort and therefore lifteth up it selfe, and (as it were) reviveth the vertues and force of it selfe with Musicke.<sup>2</sup>

Writers such as Andreas Werckmeister believed that music embodied the highest religious truths:

Music reminds us of another Christian idea if we let the musicians represent God the Father, the instrument or organ God the Son, and the beautiful chords and sweet harmony that come forth from it the Holy Spirit. For just as there is no God besides the Trinity, music is incomplete and can have no effect without these three elements .... We see, too, how our dear music symbolizes all kinds of Christian virtues: for as God has openly shown us through his preachers how we should live in love and unity with our neighbours and ever strive towards the one divine Being, so this is done figuratively in music – for which reason, moreover, it belongs in worship.<sup>3</sup>

For others, music offered man's readiest access to truths otherwise mysterious and inexpressible:

This is an *Undeniable* and *Unutterable Mystery*, viz. *Infinity of Infiniteness*; both of an *Unlimited*, and *Wondrous Vastness*; and likewise a kind of *Boundless Interminated-Littleness*; both of which, in the *Mystery*, signifie the same Thing to me, concerning the *Wonderfulness of the Almightyes Mystical Being*; which is the *Thing*, I would have *Well Noted*, from *This last mentioned Mystery*, so *Discernible Plain in Musick*; and is a *Most Worthy*, and *High Consideration*, becoming the *Highest Divine Philosophers*, and the *Largeness*, and *Capaciousness* of our *Souls and Minds*.

And from hence, I cannot but Apprehend some sort of *Analogy*, relating to the *Manifestation* of some *Significant* (though *Unexpressible*) *Conception*, of the *Infinite*, and *Eternal Being*; the *Center*, and the *Circumference*, have such an *Absolute Uniform Relation*, and *Dependance* the *One* to the *Other*, that Both are *Equal Mystery*, and

<sup>2</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (published 1561), London, 1975, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Werckmeister, *Musicae Mathematicae Hodegus Curiosus, oder Richtiger musikalischer Weg-Weiser* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1687), quoted thus in Joscelyn Godwin, *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, Rochester: VT, 1993, 298-99.

*Wonder*. Thus I hope *Musick* may be conceiv'd, and allow'd to have a near *Affinity to Divinity*, in reference to the *Deep*, and *Undeterminable Mysteries* of Both, after This way of *Comparison*.

*Much-much more* could I say, of the *Admirable*, and *Sublime Effects*: The *Unexpressible*, and *Unvaluable Benefits* of This *Divine Art*; the which (I thank God) I have found to my *Internal Comfort*, and *Refreshments*.<sup>4</sup>

Other less transcendently-given writers insisted that music was the key to an understanding of the principles of orderly government. Sir Thomas Elyot was careful to warn against the possibility that a future “governor” might overindulge in music (“the people forgetting reverence when they behold him in the similitude of a common servant or minstrel”) but was equally careful to insist that the tutor of a child destined to rule should teach important lessons through the study of music:

Yet notwithstanding, he shall commend the perfect understanding of music, declaring how necessary it is for the better attaining the knowledge of a public weal; which ... is made of an order of estates and degrees, and by reason thereof containeth in it a perfect harmony; which he shall afterward more perfectly understand, when he shall happen to read the books of Plato and Aristotle of public weals, wherein be written divers examples of music and geometry. In this form may a wise and circumspect tutor adapt the pleasant science of music to a necessary and laudable purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, for every Castiglione, or for every Marsilio Ficino or Robert Fludd<sup>6</sup> writing with rhapsodic eloquence of the harmony of the spheres,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument* (1676), quoted thus in Daniel Fischlin, *In Small Proportions: A Poetics of the English Ayre 1596-1622*, Detroit, 1998, 58-59.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named The Governor*, ed. S.E. Lehmborg, London, 1970, 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> On Ficino see, *inter alia*, Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, Chicago, 1993 and a series of essays by Angela Voss: “The Renaissance Musician: Speculations on the Performing Style of Marsilio Ficino”, *Temenos*, 11 (1990), 31-52; “The Music of the Spheres – Ficino and the Renaissance Harmonia” [<http://www.rvrcd.co.uk/catalogue/ficino/fessay1.htm>]; “Orpheus Redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino” [<http://www.rvrcd.co.uk/catalogue/ficino/fessay2.htm>]. (These last two essays are associated with a remarkable recording, *Secrets of the Heavens*, issued by Riverrun records, RVRCD53). For Fludd's ideas, see Peter J. Ammann, “The Musical Theory and Philosophy of Robert Fludd”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), 198-227; Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd: Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of*



there was someone else ready to puncture such pretensions. So, for example, the anonymous author of a poem from a seventeenth-century anthology promising “recreation for ingenious head-pieces” took a rather less lofty view of “A Musickall Lady”:

A Lady fairer far then fortunate,  
 (In dancing) thus o’r-shot her self of late,  
 The musick not in tune, pleas’d not her minde,  
 For which she with the Fidlers fault did finde;  
 Fidlers (quoth she) your fiddles tune for shame,  
 But as she was a speaking of the same,  
 To mend the consort, let she did a (f.)  
 Whereas the fidling knaves thus did her greet,  
 Madam your pipe’s in tune, it plays most sweet;  
 Strike up qd. they, (but then the knaves did smile)  
 And as you pipe, we’ll dance another while.  
     At which, away the blushing Lady flings,  
     But as she goes, her former notes she sings.<sup>7</sup>

While it may be true that, as Renaissance theorists would have it, music is an embodiment of the Pythagorean numbers, it is also true that in the performing of it, music is a matter of tonguing and fingering, of plucking, of bodily fluids, of touching and stroking. Whatever power music had, it was rooted in things utterly physical and, consequently, ephemeral:

*Upon Lute strings Cat-eaten*

Are these the strings that Poets feigne  
     Have clear’d the Air & calm’d the Maine?  
     Charm’d Wolves, and from the Mountain crests  
     Made Forrests dance, with all their Beasts?  
 Could these neglected shreds you see,  
 Inspire a Lute of Ivorie,  
 And make it speak? oh then think what  
     Hath been committed by my Cat,  
 Who in the silence of this night,

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*Two Worlds*, London, 1979; William H. Huffman, *Robert Fludd and the End of the Renaissance*, London, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> [Sir John Mennes], *Recreations for Ingenious Head-peeeces, or A Pleasant Grove for their Wit to Walke in*, London, 1650, G5<sup>r-v</sup>.

Hath gnawn these cords, and marr'd them quite,  
 Leaving such relicts as may be  
 For frets, not for my Lute, but me.

....

But I forbear to hurt or chide thee.  
 For't may be Pusse was Melancholy,  
 And so to make her blythe and Jolly,  
 Finding these strings, shee'd have a fit  
 Of Mirth; nay, Pusse, if that were it;  
 Thus I revenge me, that as thou  
 Hast plaid on them, I on thee now;  
 And as thy touch was nothing fine,  
 So I've but scratch'd these notes of mine.<sup>8</sup>

In performance, the physical contact between the performer and his or her instrument – physical contact intended to provoke a response – is of such an intimacy and sensuousness, that an analogy with sex seems unavoidable. Certainly it was not avoided by many Renaissance poets. Modern critics have, however, been more responsive to what the Renaissance had to say about music's spirituality than about its physicality. My concern here is to restore the balance a little, to concentrate on the physical, sexual discourse of music, or, to invert the analogy, on how musical discourse provided a language for the discussion of human sexual activity and to illustrate some of the uses to which writers put such language.

"Prick-Song" was the Elizabethan (and later) term for descant or divisions on a basic melody or ground which were "pricked", that is, written down or printed in dots rather than being left for improvisation. The term was, of course, an open invitation to an obvious pun – an invitation often accepted by the poets and dramatists of the period – which has provided me with my title. It was, thus, of more than his vocal prowess that Bussy was boasting, in Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*, when he declared to the Duchess of Guise: "I can sing prick-song, lady at first sight" (I.ii.80).<sup>9</sup> William Small-Shanks, in Lording Barry's *Ram Alley* (IV.i.1517-18) uses the same terms to assert his sexual experience when talking to the young girl Taffata:

<sup>8</sup> Anon., *Musarum Deliciae: Or, The Muses Recreation*, London, 1656, 52-55.

<sup>9</sup> George Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, ed. Maurice Evans, London, 1965, 16.

Blood, dost think I have not learnt my prick-song?  
 What, not the court prick-song? One up and another down?  
 Why I have't to a hair.<sup>10</sup>

In Middleton's *Your Five Gallants* (II.i), Primero (a "Bawde-Gallanty") introduces two courtesans:

To fooles, and strangers these are Gentlewomen  
 Of sort, and worship: Knights heires, great in portions,  
 Boorded here for their Musicke,  
 And often times 'tas beene so cunningly carried,  
 That I have had two stolne away at once,  
 And married at Savoy and prov'd honest shop-keepers;  
 And I may safely sweare they practis'd Musicke:  
 Their naturall at prick-song.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Phoenix*, by the same dramatist, the Captain declares that "A kiss is the gamut to pricksong" (I.ii.100).<sup>12</sup> The anonymous play *Timon* contains the following dialogue (II. 397-401) between Gelasimus and Pseudocheus:

GELAS: Doe men woe maides soe among th' *Antipodes*?  
 PS: They doe.  
 GELAS: W<sup>th</sup>. pricksong?  
 PS: yes, yes, pricksong is  
       the only way to woe and wynn a maid.  
 GELAS: I'st soe? I'st soe? shee shall not want for that  
       I'le tickle her w<sup>th</sup>. prick-song.<sup>13</sup>

When Philautus (described as a "dandy") in *Every Woman in Her Humor*, declares that "prick-song to Ladies is most pleasant, and delightfull"<sup>14</sup> we can be confident that he is not speaking merely of their musical tastes.

The imaging of sexual performance as a quasi-musical activity also draws on many other areas of the language of music. This may, for

<sup>10</sup> Lording Barry, *Ram Alley or Merry Tricks*, eds Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, Nottingham, 58.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Middleton, *Your Five Gallants*, ed. C. Lee Colegrove, New York, 1979, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Phoenix*, ed. John Bradbury Brooks, New York, 1980, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Anon., *Timon*, eds J.C. Bulman and J.M. Nosworthy, Oxford, 1980, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Anon., *Every Woman in Her Humor*, ed. Archie Mervin Tyson, New York, 1980, 115.

example, take the form of the poet inviting “Womankind” to bestow him a full range of kisses, including “The Musick-Kiss, crotchet and quaver time”<sup>15</sup> or recording the happy lovemaking when

As she prescrib'd, so kept we crotchet-time,  
And every stroke in order like a chime.  
Whilst she, that had preserv'd me by her pity,  
Unto our music fram'd a groaning ditty.<sup>16</sup>

When, in *The Malcontent* (III.iv.29-32), Pietro instructs his Page to “Sing of the nature of women, and then the song shall be surely full of variety, old crotchets and most sweet closes; it shall be humorous, grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, sprightly, one in all, and all in one”,<sup>17</sup> the use of “closes” clearly puns on its musical sense (cadences). That the verb “to play” belonged to both musical and sexual discourses made it a ready vehicle for bawdy:

Orpheus hath wed a young lusty wife,  
And all day long upon his Lute doth play:  
Doth not this fellow lead a merry life,  
Who plays continually both night and day?<sup>18</sup>

The language of musical bawdy, as well as punning on some of the technical terms of the art, often exploits the associations of particular instruments.

There are many poems, particularly of the seventeenth century, in celebration of the lady singing and playing the lute. Many of these belong to the idealizing tradition. Two short, but beautiful, examples will suffice to illustrate this tradition. The first, “Upon a Gentlewoman with a Sweet Voice”, is by Herrick:

So long you did not sing, or touch your Lute,  
We knew 'twas Flesh and Blood, that there sate mute.

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<sup>15</sup> “Kissing”, in Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *The Poems: English and Latin*, ed. G.C. Moore Smith, Oxford, 1923, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Nashe, “The Choice of Valentines”, in *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, ed. J.B. Steane, Penguin, 1972, 464.

<sup>17</sup> John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. Bernard Harris, London, 1967, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Guilpin, *Skialetheia: Or, A Shadow of Truth in Certain Epigrams and Satyres*, London, 1598, B1<sup>r</sup>.

But when your Playing and your Voice came in,  
 'Twas no more you then, but a *Cherubin*.<sup>19</sup>

The second is by Owen Felltham:

When I but hear her sing, I fare  
 Like one that, raised, holds his ear  
 To some bright star in the supremest Round;  
 Through which, besides the light that 's seen,  
 There may be heard, from heaven within,  
 The Rests of Anthems that the Angels sound.<sup>20</sup>

In these – as in many similar poems – the imagery is heavenly, the hearer is, by the sound of voice and lute, inspired to states of mind which transcend mere “Flesh and Blood”.

It is important, however, to realize that there was also a counter-tradition in the poetry of the period that built upon the convention of the finest courtesans being gifted players of the lute. Gervase Markham's dramatic monologue *The Famous Whore, or Noble Curtizan containing the lamentable complaint of Paulina, the Roman curtizan, sometimes mes. [sic] unto the great Cardinall Hypolito, of Est* has Paulina, even after the fading of some of her physical charms, recording how her prowess on the lute continued to find her rich patrons:

Besides, I had so good and bold a grace,  
 That though all beauty had forsworne my face,  
 Yet wit in stead of beauty did supply,  
 And was assisted by an amorous eie,  
 That each was glad my winter crop to take:  
 Sted of my spring, and much thereof did make  
 In wanton sports I was so youthfull still,  
 The world might take new precepts from my skill.  
 Never (then me) daunc't aire more light on ground,  
 Nor *Orpheus* made his lute give better sound:  
 But mine, no musicke was esteemed choice,  
 And Angels learnt their sphear-tunes from my voice  
 Was never lady yet that could rehearse  
 So much as I of learned *Petracks* verse.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. J.M. Patrick, Garden City: NY, 1963, 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Lusoria*, 31-32, in *Resolves, Divine, Moral, Political*, London, 1661.

<sup>21</sup> London, 1609, D3<sup>v</sup>-D4<sup>r</sup>.

John Marston cannot mention the famous courtesans of Venice without alluding to lutes (and, predictably enough, to the “pictures” of Aretino<sup>22</sup>):

O worthless puffie slave!  
 Did'st thou to *Venis* goe ought else to have?  
 But buy a Lute and use a Curtezan?  
 And there to live like a Cyllenian?  
 And now from thence what hether do'st thou bring?  
 But surpheulings, new paints and poysonings?  
*Aretines* pictures, some strange Luxury?  
 And new found use of *Venis* venery?<sup>23</sup>

Images of Venus frequently represented her as playing the lute, as in *The Lute-Playing Venus with Cupid* (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest) by Parrasio Micheli (or Michieli), a Venetian pupil of Titian (the subject of this painting has sometimes been said to be “A Courtesan Playing the Lute”). It is not, then, surprising that the beautiful woman playing the lute sometimes acted as a stimulant to thoughts far from cherubic. Thus it is the sound of Corynna's lute song that begins Ovid's temptations in George Chapman's *Ovids Banquet of Sence*:

And thus she sung, all naked as she sat,  
 Laying the happy Lute upon her thigh  
 ....  
 While this was singing, *Ovid* yong in love  
 With her perfections, never proving yet  
 How mercifull a Mistres she would prove,  
 Boldly embrac'd the power he could not let  
     And like a fiery exhalation  
 Followd the sun, he wisht might never set;  
 ....  
 And having drencht his anckles in those seas,  
 He needes woulde swimme, and car'd not if he drounde.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent study of Aretino's *I sonetti lussuriosi* and their “source” in the work of Giulio Romano – and for a wide ranging discussion of Renaissance attitudes to the erotic, see Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*, Princeton, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> “Certaine Satyres”, II, 139-46, quoted from *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. A. Davenport, Liverpool, 1961, 76.

<sup>24</sup> George Chapman, *Ovids Banquet of Sence*, London, 1595, B1<sup>v</sup>-B2<sup>r</sup>.

At a less elevated social level, it was customary for barbers to provide a lute or cittern for any waiting customer to play on. When, in the second part of *The Honest Whore*, Matheo wants to affirm that Bellafront is a whore, he says that she is “A Barbers Citterne for every Servingman to play upon” (V.ii.151);<sup>25</sup> the same reference is made in an exchange between Truewit and Morose in Jonson’s *Epicoene* (III.v.58-60):

MOROSE That cursed barber!

TRUEWIT Yes, faith a cursed wretch indeed, sir.

MOROSE I have married his cittern, that’s common to all men.<sup>26</sup>

The lute’s associations with courtesans (and the simple pun on “play”) are drawn on in poems such as the four lines usually attributed to Richard Corbet:

*Little Lute*

(Upon one comming to visit his M<sup>ris</sup>,  
and shee being absent, hee wrote:)

Little lute, when I am gone,  
Tell thou thy M<sup>ris</sup> heere was one  
That did come with full intent  
To play upon her instrument.

In many manuscript miscellanies the lines are accompanied by an answer written in the persona of the courtesan:

(The said M<sup>ris</sup>. going to visit him at his chamber in  
his absence, shee wrote on [one] of his bookes thus:)

Little booke, when I am gone,  
Tell thou thy maister heere was one  
That in her heart would be content  
To bee at his commandement.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Cambridge, 1955, II, 208.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. R.V. Holdsworth, London, 1979, 79.

<sup>27</sup> *The Poems of Richard Corbet*, eds J.A.W. Bennett and H.R. Trevor-Roper, Oxford, 1955, 8.

Another supposed reply also survives – preserved, for example, in two manuscripts in the Bodleian Library in Oxford:

Little lute, tell the lout,  
He might have plaid, though I were out.

But hee cam with full intent  
To play on mee, not th'instrument.<sup>28</sup>

Another common trope associates women with a different instrument, the virginal. Presumably the obvious pun on virgin had something to do with this, though it is not irrelevant to note that it was at the time an instrument particularly played by young women. The trope can be conveniently illustrated by a single stanza from an early seventeenth-century poem:

My Mistriss is a Virginal,  
And little cost will string her;  
She's often rear'd against the Wall  
For every man to finger;  
But to say Truth, if you will her please  
You must run Division on her keys.<sup>29</sup>

To “String” something is to prepare it for action – perhaps here, it is specifically, to tighten a string to a certain point of tension? “She’s ... rear’d against the Wall” because some sets of virginals were upright models; “to run division” seems here to be used in the sense of playing very rapid sequences of notes (the term being originally imagined as involving the division of each long note into several short ones). A conceit closely related to the one that informs this poem was actually adopted by some musical instrument makers (see, for example, the clavichord in the form of a woman, made in Germany around 1775).<sup>30</sup> Not only were some able to say, like this poet, “My Mistriss is a

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107 (MS. Ashmole 36, 37, fol. 143<sup>v</sup> and Ms. Eng. Poet c. 14, fol. 71).

<sup>29</sup> In *Merry Drollery Compleat*, 1691, quoted from *Bawdy Verse: A Pleasant Collection*, ed. E.J. Burford, Penguin, 1982, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Thierry Guffroy, “I musicisti tedeschi ai tempi di Buxtehude”, *Orfeo*, 41 (Oct. 1999), 23.



Virginal”, but others were in a position to claim “My Virginal is a Mistress”!<sup>31</sup>

The sexual innuendoes activated by the pun on virgin/virginals (and, perhaps, on vagina and vaginal) were regularly employed by many writers, as in the opening exchange of Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*:

MAUDLIN Have you played over all your old lessons o’the virginals?

MOLL Yes.

MAUDLIN Yes, you are a dull maid alate, methinks you had need have somewhat to quicken your green sickness; do you weep? A husband. Had not such a piece of flesh been ordained, what had us wives been good for?<sup>32</sup>

The sexual references are clear in the “musical” instructions Face gives to Doll Common prior to the approach of the “Don of Spain” in *The Alchemist* (III.iii.66-70):

Sweet Doll,  
You must go tune your virginal, no losing  
O’the least time. And, do you hear? Good action.  
Firk, like a flounder; kiss, like a scallop, close,  
And tickle him with thy mother-tongue.<sup>33</sup>

(The musical metaphor is sustained in “time” and “action” – the mechanism of the keyboard instrument.) The same weight of sexual innuendo is carried by the naming of the same instrument in a dialogue between Palamon and Arcite in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (III.iii.28-36):

PALAMON Give me more wine. Here, Arcite, to the wenches  
We have known in our days. The lord steward’s daughter.  
Do you remember her?

ARCITE After you, coz.

PALAMON She loved a black-haired man.

ARCITE She did so; well, sir.

PALAMON And I have heard some call him Arcite, and –

<sup>31</sup> One finds the word-play used in reverse, as it were, in the title of an early English volume of music for the instrument: *Parthenia Inviolata; or Mayden-Musick for the Virginnalls*, London, 1614.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, ed. A. Brissenden, London, 1968, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. F.H. Meres, London, 1967, 109-10.

ARCITE Out with't, faith.  
 PALAMON She met him in an arbour –  
 What did she there, coz? Play o'th' virginals?  
 ARCITE Something she did, sir –  
 PALAMON Made her groan a month for't –  
 Or two, or three, or ten.<sup>34</sup>

There are, of course, other instrumental possibilities too. As a verb, “fiddle” is recorded by Eric Partridge in his *Dictionary of Slang* as meaning “to play about intimately with, to caress familiarly, a woman” and as a noun to mean (at least by the nineteenth century) the female genitals as objects of that attention. The poetry suggests that the meaning existed rather earlier as, for example, in the following poem from 1749:

My fiddle and Flora  
 Begins with a letter.  
 My fiddle I love  
 But my Flora much better.  
 Could I play on my Flora  
 As I do on my fiddle,  
 I'd begin at her neck,  
 And play down to her middle,  
 Her middle, her middle, her middle.  
 I'd begin at her neck and play down to her middle.

There briskly I'd play  
 Pricked notes sweet and mellow  
 Till my Flora should say,  
 “Play on, my kind fellow.  
 You charm me for ever,  
 Your touch gives me pleasure.  
 Such a man sure I never  
 Did find out so clever.”

Then with my long bow  
 I'd play a sonata  
 Till my Flora should say,  
 “Play on, my sweet creature.  
 Your music is taking.

---

<sup>34</sup> John Fletcher and William Shakespeare, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, 1986, 1395-96.

I love such sweet shaking.  
 I fear you will leave me.  
 O! my heart is breaking,  
 Is breaking, is breaking, is breaking.  
 I fear you will leave me. O! my heart is breaking.”<sup>35</sup>

The independently-minded female protagonist of one of the songs gathered in D’Urfey’s *Pills to Purge Melancholy* asserts her determination to be in control of her own sexual choices by reference to the same musical instrument:

A Master of Musick came with an intent,  
 To give me a Lesson on my Instrument,  
 I thank’d him for nothing, but bid him be gone,  
 For my little Fiddle should not be plaid on.”<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere the same allusion is employed in a rather coarser fashion as, for example, in Matthew Stevenson’s splendid burlesque of the story of Hero and Leander, “Hero’s Answer to Leander” (1680). In this poem, Hero, bereft of Leander, who does not visit her, is cheered up when she gets a letter from him:

With laughing when I read your Prose,  
 I was ready to bepiss my hose:  
 And nothing else, except your stick  
 Cou’d so much tickle me to th’Quick.  
 Excuse my Passion (Sir) for no man  
 Can find the bottom of a Woman.

She sits with her nurse, waiting, and eventually dozes off:

At last, my comfort, while I snort,  
 I fancy we are at the sport;  
 I clasp’d my shanks about your middle,

<sup>35</sup> From *An Antidote Against Melancholy*, 1749 (see *Lovers, Rakes and Rogues*, ed. John Wardroper, London, 1995, 101-102).

<sup>36</sup> “My Thing Is My Own”, in Thomas D’Urfey, *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719-20), New York, 1969, IV, 217 (see also *The Common Muse: An Anthology of Popular British Ballad Poetry 15th-20th Century*, eds Vivian de Sola Pinto and Allan Edwin Rodway, Penguin, 1965, 436). For further references to and stanzas from this poem, see Kari Boyd McBride’s article in this volume, 146-48.

And thought you plaid upon my Fiddle.  
 My Fountain burst into a stream,  
 But Pox upon't, 'twas but a Dream.<sup>37</sup>

Almost a century earlier, in 1598, the same puns underlie one of Edward Guilpin's epigrams in his volume *Skialetheia*:

The world finds fault with *Gellia*, for she loves  
 A skip-jack fidler, I hold her excus'd,  
 For loving him, sith she her selfe so proves:  
 What, she a fidler? Tut she is abus'd?  
 No in good faith; what fidle hath she us'd?  
 The *Viole Digambo* is her best content,  
 For twixt her legs she holds her instrument.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the Viol, placed between the lady's legs as she plays it, has obvious potential in this context. One anonymous poem, "On His Mistress' Viol", which in the seventeenth century was occasionally, somewhat unbelievably, attributed to John Donne, exploits that potential very directly:

Why dost thou, dear, so dearly love thy viol  
 When thou hast made of me a better trial?  
 Thou'lt kindly set him on thy lap, embrace  
 And almost kiss, while I must void the place.  
 Thou'lt string him truly, tune him sweetly, when  
 Thou'lt wrest me out of tune and wrack me. Then  
 Thou'lt stop his frets, but set no date to mine.  
 Thou'lt give whate'er he wants, but let me pine.  
 Thou knowest him hollow-hearted, yet will hear  
 Him throughout with an attentive ear,  
 And sing him such a pleasing lullaby,  
 Would charm hell's churlish porter's watchful eye,  
 Keeping true time with him, as true as may be –  
 But find no time to keep thee true to me.

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<sup>37</sup> "Hero's Answer to Leander", in Matthew Stevenson, *The Wits Paraphras'd: Or, Paraphrase upon Paraphrase. In A Burlesque on the Several Late Translations of Ovids Epistles*, London, 1680, 38, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Guilpin, *Skialetheia*, Bs<sup>r</sup>. Guilpin's epigram is quoted in *The Return from Parnassus*, Part II (E3<sup>r</sup>). See also Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois* (III.ii.259-60), in which Pero talks of her "chastity, which you shall neither riddle nor fiddle".

Dear, as thy instrument would I were thine,  
That thou mayst play on me; or thou wert mine!<sup>39</sup>

In Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (I.i.131-34), Onesiphorus Hoard proclaims his niece's aptness for marriage in the following terms:

She now remains at London with my brother, her second uncle to learn fashions, practise music; the voice between her lips and the viol between her legs; she'll be fit for a consort very speedily.<sup>40</sup>

Here "consort" puns on "husband" and "a company of musicians". James T. Henke provides an interesting gloss on the use of the word "viol" in this passage:

*Viol.* Play on (1) the viol de gamba, a string instrument held between the legs of the player while being played (*OED*; Bullen); (2) "vial" = a vessel of small or moderate size (*OED*) – hence innuendo of vagina.<sup>41</sup>

In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll (in her masculine disguise) is asked to play the viol with Sebastian (IV.i.87-101):

MOLL Well, since you'll need put us together, sir, I'll play my part as well as I can. It shall ne'er be said I came into a gentleman's chamber and let his instrument hang by the walls!

SEBASTIAN Why, well said, Moll, i'faith. It had been a shame for that gentleman, then, that would have let it hang still and ne'er offered thee it.

MOLL There it should have been still, then, for Moll, for though the world judge impudently of me, I ne'er came to that chamber yet where I took down the instrument myself.

SEBASTIAN Pish, let 'em prate abroad. Thou'rt here where thou art known and loved. There be a thousand close dames that will call the viol an unmannerly instrument for a woman, and therefore talk

<sup>39</sup> This occurs in at least three manuscripts: Stowe 962 (British Library), E. e. 5. 23 (Cambridge University) and MS. 8012 (Chetham's Library, Manchester). In this last it appears amongst a group of poems by Donne. The text quoted here is taken from *Love and Drollery*, ed. John Wardroper, London, 1969, 176-77.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Middleton, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, ed. G.J. Watson, London, 1968, 10.

<sup>41</sup> James T. Henke, *Renaissance Dramatic Bawdy (Exclusive of Shakespeare): An Annotated Glossary and Critical Essays*, Salzburg, 1974, II, 309.

broadly of thee, when you shall have them sit wider to a worse quality.

MOLL Push, I ever fall asleep and think not of 'em, sir; and thus I dream.

The sexual dimension of the performance is again referred to when Moll stops playing the instrument (ll. 129-31):

MOLL Hang up the viol now, sir; all this while I was in a dream. One shall lie rudely then; but being awake, I keep my legs together.<sup>42</sup>

It is not only of the viol, as it is played by the lady, that the poet can find himself feeling jealous. Poems in which the male poet desires to be the instrument played upon by the female are perhaps best seen as a particular variant on that kind of poem of desire in which the speaker expresses a wish to be transformed into some object with which the lady has intimate contact – a sub-genre which goes back at least to the fifteenth poem in the second book of Ovid's *Amores*. A famous exemplum of the musical variant of this topos is to be found, of course, in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 128":

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st  
 Upon that blessèd wood whose motion sounds  
 With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st  
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,  
 Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap  
 To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,  
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,  
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand.  
 To be so tickled, they would change their state  
 And situation with those dancing chips,  
 O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,  
 Making dead wood more blest than living lips.  
     Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,  
     Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.<sup>43</sup>

The poetic power of this sonnet is not, perhaps, unduly compromised by its inaccuracy. The speaker expresses his jealousy of "those jacks that

<sup>42</sup> Text from *English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington, New York, 2002, 1422-23.

<sup>43</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. J. Kerrigan, Penguin, 1986, 140.

nimble leap / To kiss the tender inward of thy hand". But the jacks are part of the inner machinery of the instrument; the jack is a piece of wood, raised by the pressing of the key, which when it is raised brings the plectrum into contact with the relevant string. The "tender inward" of the lady's hand would not be touched by the jack when playing – unless, a few centuries early, she was playing one of those pieces by Henry Cowell or John Cage which requires the performer to reach inside the instrument. Perhaps Shakespeare did not know the terminology; or perhaps he did, but did not want to forfeit the pun on "jacks" meaning "lad, fellow, chap ... an ill-mannered fellow, a 'knave'" (*OED*).<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, this is one of those few sonnets by Shakespeare which survives in a manuscript text which may just offer evidence of an earlier version. This is a manuscript in the Bodleian Library (Ms Rawl. Poet 152):

How oft, when thou, dear, dearest music play'st  
 Upon that blessed wood whose motions sounds  
 With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st  
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds –  
 O, how I envy those keys that nimble leap  
 To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,  
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,  
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand.  
 To be so touched, they fair would change their state  
 And situation with those dancing chips  
 O'er whom your fingers walk with gentle gait,  
 Making dead wood more blest than living lips.  
     Since then those keys so happy are in this,  
     Give them your fingers, me your lips to kiss.<sup>45</sup>

Terminological inexactitude is avoided here, with keys being spoken of rather than jacks – but the poem is altogether less powerful. Rather later in his career, in *The Winter's Tale*, when Leontes jealously observes Hermione in conversation with Polixenes, Shakespeare returns to a variation on the same image: "Still virginalling / Upon his palm? How now my wanton calf!" (I.ii.125-26).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Dekker, *The Honest Whore: Part Two*, IV.iii.9-10: "there's no Musike when a woman is in the consort ... for she's like a pair of Virginals, alwaies with Jackes at her taile" (*The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Bowers, II, 197).

<sup>45</sup> Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, ed. Kerrigan, 446.

Just as excessive practice can make musical performers weary – so there are, of course, circumstances in which sexual play can seem excessive. One amusing piece from the middle of the seventeenth century expresses one form of weariness in the language of the other:

My mistress is in music passing skilful  
And plays and sings her part at the first sight,  
But in her play she is exceeding wilful  
And will not play but for her own delight,  
Nor touch one string nor play one pleasing strain  
Unless you catch her in a merry vein.

Also she hath a sweet delicious touch  
Upon the instrument whereon she plays,  
And thinks that she doth never do too much,  
Her pleasure is dispersed so many ways.  
She hath such judgment both in time and mood  
That for to play with her, 'twill do you good.

And then you win her heart. But here's the spite:  
You cannot get her for to play alone.  
But play you with her, and she plays all night,  
And next day too, or else 'tis ten to one;  
And runs division with you in such sort,  
Run ne'er so swift, she'll make you come too short.

One day she called me for to come and play  
And I did hold it an exceeding grace;  
But she so tired me ere I went away  
I wished I had been in another place.  
She knew the place where prick and rest both stood  
Yet would she keep no time for life nor blood.

I love my mistress, and I love to play,  
So she will let me play with intermission.  
But when she ties me to it all the day  
I hate and loathe her greedy disposition.  
Let her keep time, as nature doth require,  
And I will play along as she desire.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> From *Merry Drollery* (1661). Text from *Love and Drollery*, ed. Wardroper, 179.



For many of these poems an enlightening context is provided by the iconography of contemporary painting, where scenes of music being played are frequently replete with amatory or sexual implications. Christopher Brown observes that in the art of the period

Love ... is often associated with music, and this is made explicit by Gabriel Rollenhagen in his emblem *Amer docet musicam* which shows a cupid holding up a lute and pointing towards music-making lovers in the background. An emblem by Jacob Cats shows a man playing a lute while in front of him another lies on a table. The motto is "*Quid non sentit amor?*" ("What does love not feel?") and in the text the lute-player invites women to pick up the second lute and join him in a love duet.<sup>47</sup>

Titian's *Venus and the Lute Player* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is a familiar and striking example.<sup>48</sup> The playing of music is often represented in ways that speak of seductions more than merely aural – as, for example, in Jan Steen's *Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man* (National Gallery, London) or in Caspar Netscher's *Musical Company* (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich) where clear erotic energies are communicated by the interlocking gazes of the performers.

There are at least four interesting examples by Vermeer. The first two are both in the National Gallery in London. In *Lady Standing at the Virginals*, the most immediately striking of the paintings-within-the-painting is of a bold and saucy Cupid that may be intended to suggest the lady and her music are as powerful a force for the inspiration of love as are Cupid and his bow. In the second picture, *Lady Sitting at the Virginals*, however, the painting-within-the-painting seems to say something rather different about the instrumentalist. This painting can be identified precisely – it is a painting of a procuress by Dirk van Baburen, in which the triangle of procuress, young girl and client, has at its (and the painting's) centre a lute (interestingly, the painter signed and dated the picture on the lute). The painting, which Vermeer's mother-in-law owned, also features in *The Concert* (one of the pictures stolen in 1990 from the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston). We see a man with

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Brown, *Scenes of Everyday Life: Dutch Genre Painting of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1984, 48-49 (see also 134-37).

<sup>48</sup> The painting may owe more to the artist's workshop than to Titian's own hand. On Titian's series of paintings, see Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women*, New Haven, 1997, 159-69 ("Lovers: Venus and the Musician").

his back to us and two girls, playing and singing, in profile, one either side of him. Behind the girl on the right is van Baburen's painting once more. Is there a sexual (and perhaps a monetary) exchange going on, as well as a musical exchange?<sup>49</sup> In *Young Woman Tuning a Lute* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) the instrument awaiting its player and the young woman's air and actions all help to build up a distinct atmosphere of erotic anticipation.

The music-lesson is a particular sub-genre of Dutch painting in this period<sup>50</sup> – often making use of the kind of associations I have been discussing. This is a motif which turns up with some frequency in literary texts too as, for example, in the following anonymous piece, “On a Musitian and His Scholler”:

A man of late did his fair daughter bring  
 To a Musitian for to learne to sing,  
 He fell in love with her, and her beguil'd,  
 With flattering words and she was got with child,  
 Her Father hearing this was griev'd and said,  
 That he with her but a base-part had playd,  
 For w<sup>ch</sup> he swore that he would make him smart  
 For teaching of his daughter such a part:  
 But the musitian said, he did no wrong,  
 He had but taught her how to sing prick-song.<sup>51</sup>

Theatrically speaking, *The Taming of Shrew* offers a familiar instance, as does Beaumarchais' *Le Barbier de Séville*, with Almaviva's entry into Doctor Bartolo's house to woo Rosina, disguised as her music master (and so, of course, does the parallel episode in Rossini's opera). Less familiar examples abound. In *Blurt, Master-Constable* (III.iii.79-91), Lazarillo advises the ladies thus:

<sup>49</sup> There are interesting (if not always convincing) things said about the musical elements in Vermeer's work in A.P. de Mirimonde, “Les Sujets musicaux chez Vermeer de Delft”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 57 (1961), 29-52. See also H. Rodney Nevitt Jr., “Vermeer on the Question of Love”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne E. Franits, Cambridge, 2001, 89-110.

<sup>50</sup> See Peter Fischer, *Music in Paintings of the Low Countries in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Amsterdam, 1975; and Richard D. Leppert, *The Theme of Music in Flemish Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, Munich, 1977.

<sup>51</sup> *Witts Recreations Selected from the finest Fancies of Moderne Muses*, London, 1640, F8<sup>v</sup>.

It shall be your first and finest praise, to sing the note of every new fashion, at first sight; and (if you can) to stretch that note above *Ela* .... But if your good man, like not this Musicke, (as being too full of Crochets) your onely way is, to learne to play upon the Virginals, and so naile his eares to your sweete humours: if this bee out of time too, yet your labour will quit the cost; for by this meanes your secret friend may have free and open accesse to you, under the cullour of pricking you lessons.<sup>52</sup>

In Robert Davenport's *The City Night-Cap*, Lodovico has employed Francisco to teach his wife music, with predictable results – of which he is ironically unaware:

LOD. I shall so laugh to hear the Comical History of the great Count *Lorenzo*'s horns; but as I have such wife now, what a villain did I entertain to teach her musick? 'has done her no good since he came, that I saw.

CLOWN Hang him, 'has made her a little perfect in prick-song, that's all; and it may be she had skill in that, before you married her too.<sup>53</sup>

When Nicholas Hookes writes in praise of "Mr *Lilly*, Musick-Master in *Cambridge*", there is an insistently erotic tone to his lines:

*Sir*, I have seen your scip-jack fingers flie,  
As if their motion taught *Ubiquitie*:

....

*I've* heard each *string* speak in so short a space  
As if all spoke at once; with stately grace  
The surley tenour grumble at your touch,  
And th'ticklish-maiden *treble* laugh as much,  
Which (if your *bowe-hand* whip it wantonly,)  
Most pertly chirps [a]nd jabbbers merrily;

....

Sometimes thy murmur like the shallow springs,  
Whose hastie streams forc't into Crystal rings,  
And check't by *pebbles*, pretty *Musick* make  
In *kisses* and such *language* as they speak

....

Were you a *Batchelour*, and bold to trie  
Fortunes, what Lady's she, though ne're so high

<sup>52</sup> *Blurt Master-Constable, Or The Spaniards Night-walke*, London, 1602, E4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Davenport, *City-Night-Cap .... A Tragic-Comedy*, London, 1661, 14.

And rich by birth, should see the tickling sport  
Your finger makes, and would not have you for't

....

You in the swiftnesse of your *hand* excel  
All others, my *Amanda* sings as well,  
No *Musick* like to *hers*; I wish in troth,  
That we with her might *play in Consort* both;  
Might I my self, and *you my friend* prefer,  
You with her *voice* should *play*, and I with her.<sup>54</sup>

One of Donne's protagonists (in "Loves Growth") comes to the recognition that

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,  
But as all else, being elemented too,  
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.<sup>55</sup>

His contemporaries, it is apparent, knew that the same was true of music. Music (like love) was both gloriously insubstantial and utterly physical; it lent itself to being talked about both as idea and as act, belonging as it did both the realm of spiritual abstraction and to the arena of bodily satisfaction:

*Sylla* hath many parts that blase her fame,  
All do not know her that know her name,  
She Makes a Lute speake in his airy voice,  
Will force sad melanchollies selfe rejoyce,  
The Syrens tunes bewitching Travailer,  
Themseleves would be bewicht should they here her  
Daunces without compare, paints best in Towne,  
Yet for all this I know one puts her downe.<sup>56</sup>

Even the keenest musician may, after all, have a fondness for more than one kind of prick-song:

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<sup>54</sup> N[icholas] H[ookes], "To Mr *LILLY*, Musick-Master in *Cambridge*", *Amanda, A Sacrifice To an Unknown Goddess, or, A Free-will Offering of a loving Heart to a Sweet-Heart*, London, 1653, 56-58.

<sup>55</sup> John Donne, *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner, Oxford, 1965, 76.

<sup>56</sup> J. C[ooke], *Epigrammes*, London, [1604], C5<sup>r</sup>.

*Arions* thoughts are growne so musicall,  
That all his talke's of crotchets, and of quavers;  
His very words to sembriefe time doe fall,  
And blowing of his nose of musicke savours:  
Hee'le tell you of well fretting of a Lute,  
Even til you fret, and of the harmonie,  
Is either in a still Cornet or Flute,  
Of rests, and stops, and such like trumperie,  
Yet loves he more, for all sweet musick sence,  
His mistris belly, then these instruments.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Guilpin, *Skialetheia*, A8<sup>v</sup>.

# **“CEASE THY WANTON LUST”: THOMAS RANDOLPH’S ELEGY, THE CULT OF VENETIA, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF CLASSICAL SEX**

MARK LLEWELLYN

One of the most colourful and infamous characters of the early seventeenth century, Venetia, Lady Digby (1600-33) led an eventful and notorious life. Born Lady Venetia Stanley in 1600, she was the daughter of a Shropshire knight and, through the maternal line, granddaughter of the eighth Earl of Northumberland. As children, she and her future husband, the diplomat, courtier and scientist Kenelm Digby (1603-65) lived in close proximity. If we follow Digby’s own later accounts the two fell in love at an early age. However, with Digby’s mother set firmly against any match to the noble but penniless Venetia, Digby was sent abroad. During his prolonged absence, Venetia, said to have been under the impression Digby was dead, enjoyed a series of rather public liaisons. John Aubrey recounts that so public and so dangerously scandalous were these relationships that someone even went so far as to daub the warning message “Pray come not near, for Venetia Stanley lodgeth here” above the entrance to her London home.<sup>1</sup>

Upon Digby’s return the couple married in 1625, despite his continued family opposition and his knowledge of her affairs. In fact he appears to have found her past something of a challenge, declaring that “a handsome lusty man that was discreet might make a vertuose wife out of a brothel-house”.<sup>2</sup> Both Digby and Venetia became great artistic patrons, with Venetia earning herself the title of Ben Jonson’s muse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ann Sumner, “Venetia Digby on Her Deathbed”, *History Today*, XVI/10 (October 1995), 21.

<sup>2</sup> John Aubrey quoted in Jackson I. Cope, “Sir Kenelm Digby’s Rewritings of His Life”, in *Writing and Political Engagement in Seventeenth-Century England*, eds Derek Hirst and Richard Strier, Cambridge, 1999, 56.

<sup>3</sup> For the details on Sir Kenelm Digby and Venetia, see Digby’s entry in the *Dictionary of*

Yet despite the public nature of their relationship and the scandals which surrounded them, it is largely for her unexpectedly early death in 1663 and his lifetime of mourning that Venetia and Digby are now famous – a death that was captured in the iconic picture by van Dyck, and memorialized in many elegies, mainly penned by Jonson and his circle. Indeed, modern readers might only be familiar with the name of Digby through the poetry of Jonson or Umberto Eco's 1994 novel *The Island of the Day Before*, where he makes an appearance in Paris as "Monsieur d'Igby", creator of the "Powder of Sympathy". In the novel he is presented as a figure who is generally popular although "his prestige suffered a blow among some gentlewomen to whom he had recommended a beauty cream of his own invention; it caused one lady blisters, and others murmured that his beloved wife, Venetia, had actually died, a few years earlier, victim of a viper wine he had concocted".<sup>4</sup> As this passage from Eco's novel suggests, it was Venetia's death that not only haunted Digby for the rest of his life but which also haunts our more general memory of him. Whether this fascination itself stems from sympathy for Digby or from a macabre curiosity about his possible role in Venetia's death, it is the iconography surrounding the dying Venetia that remains the key issue – an iconography Digby himself initiated.

Thomas Randolph's Elegy on Venetia Digby has long posed a problem for critics.<sup>5</sup> In 1822, an anonymous author in *The Retrospective Review* wrote of how he was "arrested by the Elegy on the Lady Venetia Digby ... for the singularity and beauty of its conceit",<sup>6</sup> a view not shared by Robert Lathrop Sharp, writing some hundred and forty years later,

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*National Biography*, and also E.W. Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, London, 1932.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before*, London, 1998, 162.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Randolph (1605-35) was educated at Westminster School (1618-23) and Trinity College, Cambridge (1624-28). He became a fellow of Trinity in 1629. Renowned in his day as a university wit, he wrote several successful plays and college entertainments. During the late 1620s and early 1630s he was associated with the "Tribe of Ben" and was adopted by Jonson as one of his "sons". Viewed by his contemporaries as Jonson's heir apparent, he died two years before his "father". As his most recent editor, G. Thorn-Drury, states the "tributes published after his death expressed such a sense of the loss to letters which it involved as I think has never attended the death of any other English poet" (*The Poems of Thomas Randolph*, ed. G. Thorn-Drury, London, 1929, vii). As Thomas Randolph is now rarely read or studied, the text of "An Elegie upon the Lady Venetia Digby" will be found as an Appendix at the end of this article.

<sup>6</sup> *The Retrospective Review*, VI (1822), 67.

when he described the same poem's opening lines as being "in the worst metaphysical manner, compounded of startling conceits and tasteless rhetoric".<sup>7</sup> Digby's biographer, E.W. Bligh, also chastised Randolph for writing "an elegy built up of lines which are separately fine, but which end in rhetoric without recalling Helen from the tomb".<sup>8</sup> What I intend to argue in this essay is that neither Sharp nor Bligh really understands the point of what Randolph is trying to do in his *Elegy*. Both are working on the assumption that Randolph is aiming for a metaphysical style, whereas what I want to suggest is that Randolph's *Elegy* is not so much about fitting in with the drive to immortalize or sanctify the memory of Venetia as to mark the passing of a more adventurous life. Indeed, what my reading will suggest is that Randolph pulls off something of a feat in making the erotic and the sexual aspects of Venetia's life the real subjects of his *Elegy*.

There is no doubt that Randolph's poem, particularly the opening lines, could indeed appear rather "tasteless" if one is looking for a stock metaphysical response to Venetia Digby's death. The overtly sexual imagery, the apparently metaphysical conceit that Death is a rapist, and especially the idea that the poet might want to "change prerogatives" with him, create a jarring and unexpected air if what the reader anticipates is a traditional elegy. However, Randolph's apparently incongruous use of such a conceit serves an important purpose. Where Venetia Digby's other elegists write of their appreciation of her beauty, none is so daring as to define that beauty within the realm of openly sexual desire. Here this is done very carefully: Randolph tempers the dramatic nature of his reference to rape with the idea of Venetia's "fairness", but the sexualized nature of this woman, her own "wanton lust" is an inescapable feature of Randolph's text. Several lines later, for instance, he writes of how her very hot nature must have affected even Death himself: "Did shee not lightning-like strike suddaine heat / Through thy cold limbs, and thaw thy frost to sweat?" By combining traditional images and working with very simple techniques of binary opposition ("rape" / marriage; "suddaine heat" / "cold limbs"; "frost" / "sweat") Randolph is able to present a constantly fluctuating impression,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Lathrop Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden: The Revolt Against Metaphysical Poetry*, Chapel Hill: NC, 1965, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 2-3.



and in a bizarre way, he thereby manages to simultaneously stay within the complimentary and come very close to the insolent.

The slipperiness of Randolph's meaning continues throughout the Elegy. Immediately after the opening lines, he asks "Where was her Mars, whose valiant armes did hold / This Venus once, that thou durst be so bold?" (ll. 5-6). The image is apparently an innocuous one, until one delves beyond the surface effect of Randolph's mythical allusion: for the relationship between Mars and Venus was an adulterous one. Venus' husband, Vulcan, was informed about the affair by Apollo and set a trap to catch the lovers and expose them to public ridicule. Given the public awareness (at least in Court circles) of Venetia's own past, and the considerable rumours that abounded even after her marriage to Digby, the myth is both appropriate and highly indelicate, for, as Bligh puts it, "to Digby [Venetia was] an angel of virtue, but to her other contemporaries a driver in pleasure's chariot with a very light touch on the reins of virtue".<sup>9</sup>

Randolph thus appears to exploit the public perception of Venetia by a subtle process of mythical encoding, and casts doubt on the assertion that "Everyone admits that after her marriage Lady Digby was a model of virtue".<sup>10</sup> If this were the only rather dubious use of mythical comparison in Randolph's text it might be overlooked. However, only a few lines later (ll. 17-22) Randolph again falls back on the mythic, chastising Death and warning him to

Remember Paris, for whose pettier sin,  
The Trojan gates let the stout Grecians in;  
So when time ceases (whose unthrifty hand  
Ha's now almost consum'd his stock of sand)  
Myriads of Angels shall in Armies come,  
And fetch (proud ravisher) their Helen home.

Superficially the attack on Death and the charge that by raping Venetia he has actually sealed his own fate and will bring ruin on the heavens is an acceptable flight of fancy. But Randolph's intense reading in and knowledge of classical literature makes it impossible to accept that he was unaware of the connotations of comparing Venetia with Helen. Always viewed as the most beautiful woman in the world, there are two

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

main versions of the Helen myth: one says that she was seized by Theseus when she was only ten-years old and was rescued by her brothers Castor and Pollux undefiled, but the other, if one follows Pausanias' recording of the story, points to Helen's own nubile nature and the fact that she bore Theseus a daughter. This element of the child born out of marriage actually has a parallel in Venetia's affair with the fourth Earl of Dorset, Edward Sackville and the widespread rumour that she had given birth to his child. Nor can the long list of Helen's suitors, from Ulysses onwards, be ignored, given its appropriateness in relation to Venetia's numerous liaisons, and can hardly have escaped the attention of the readers of Randolph's poem.

In its depiction of the relationship between Death and Venetia, the poem also hints at elements of the story of Persephone. This might be read as a more subversive aspect of Randolph's poem, since the myth of Persephone includes reference to the eating of a forbidden food (pomegranate) which results in her spending only part of her time above ground and the rest of her time in the underworld. Given the widespread public suspicion of Digby's own potions and concoctions to keep his wife looking young, a parallel might be made with this vision of a life suspended between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

There is a precedent for this kind of relationship between the poet's duty, poetic honesty and the use of myth in another of Randolph's poems, his epithalamium for George, Lord Goring, son of Queen Henrietta Maria's favourite courtier. In this poem, Goring, whom Randolph must have known while at Trinity College, Cambridge, is portrayed as a womanizer, or at least someone whose taste in women is derived from experience rather than from any inherent sense of refinement. An insult to the groom is not unexpected in such wedding poems, indeed it is part of the tradition, but Randolph jokingly (and more unusually) also calls the bride's virtue into doubt. Randolph says of the bride, Lady Lettice Boyle (ll. 69-76), that

Even such as was the Cypri[an] Q[ueene]  
When as shee first was risinge [seene]  
From Neptunes froth, where wit[h] desire]  
Shee sett the very seas on fire  
Fayrer then when on Ida pla[in]  
Shee did the golden apple gain

As beauteous as the Eastern [bride]  
When shee getts up from Ty[thon's side]<sup>11</sup>

In these few lines, we see Randolph exploding the epithalamic conventions in the process of supposedly fulfilling them. The traditional epithalamium demands a description in praise of the bride and, although Randolph freely admits that he has never once laid eyes on her ("How faire shee is I cannot say": l. 53), he is apparently determined to provide the required mythical comparison. But not only has Randolph already undercut his portrait of her by making explicit the fact that he has never seen her, his choice of myths is decidedly dubious. Aphrodite, the "Cyprian Queen", was born of the froth of the ocean after Cronos castrated his father Uranus and tossed the genitals into the sea. Quite what Randolph is suggesting about Goring's bride it is difficult to tell, but the mythology becomes even murkier when one considers that "the golden apple" is presumably the apple of discord, and that the "Eastern [bride]" is Eos, the abductor not only of Tithonus but several other men.

Randolph manages to imply through these few lines that Lettice Boyle is a kind of mythic nymphomaniac. Obviously, this is far from the kind of mythological detail expected in a marriage poem. Placing this mock-description in a framework of mythic comparison, Randolph thoroughly exploits the epithalamic tendency to make such classical analogies. But these lines also suggest an important feature of the poem as a whole – Goring must have been in on the joke. After several years studying at Cambridge it would be hard to believe that Goring lacked the basic knowledge of mythology needed to read these lines correctly. The knowingness or otherwise of Randolph's reader has relevance for the Digby Elegy, too.

Given Randolph's use of myth in his Elegy it might be thought highly surprising that his poem was actually collected amongst other pieces on Venetia's death in a manuscript book (now part of the British Library's collection – British Library Additional Manuscript 30259) supposedly compiled by Sir Kenelm Digby himself.<sup>12</sup> The manuscript contains

<sup>11</sup> *The Poems of Thomas Randolph*, 52-53.

<sup>12</sup> See Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 186. The British Library Catalogue of Manuscripts makes no reference to the manuscript being compiled by Sir Kenelm.

poems by William Habington,<sup>13</sup> George Digby,<sup>14</sup> Ben Jonson, Thomas May,<sup>15</sup> Joseph Rutter,<sup>16</sup> Aurelian Townshend<sup>17</sup> and Randolph where, given some of the issues I have already discussed, it is interesting that the word “vertuous” has been inserted into the title of his *Elegy*.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly the inclusion of the *Elegy* in the manuscript book might pose a problem for my interpretation of Randolph's clever but topically subversive use of mythical material. However, it is worth looking closely at how Digby himself uses a classical framework within his own autobiographical writing.

In the late 1620s Digby wrote a version of his romance with Venetia, entitled by some *Private Memoirs*, but by Digby himself *Loose Fantasies*. The text is remarkable not only in its honesty, and the unsparing attitude that Digby took towards Venetia's previous sexual relationships, but also for its central device of telling the story through a series of assumed classical names. Thus, Venetia is named Stelliana, Digby becomes Theagenes, Ursatius is the courtier who desires Stelliana, and Mardontius is the name of the courtier who successfully seduces Stelliana.<sup>19</sup> What is not made clear in the few pieces of critical work

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<sup>13</sup> William Habington (1605-54) was the descendant of an old Catholic family. He was educated in Paris and married Lucy Herbert, daughter of the first Baron Powis, celebrating his wife in his collection of love poems *Castara* (1634). He also wrote a tragic-comic play, *The Queene of Aragon* (1640) (see *DNB*).

<sup>14</sup> George Digby (1612-77) was a young cousin of Sir Kenelm and friend both to him and Venetia. He was to become the second Earl of Bristol.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas May (1595-1650) was educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. He became a Parliamentarian and was made secretary for the Parliament in 1646. He wrote a number of historical narrative poems, translations and several plays. His conversion to the Parliamentary cause is believed to have come about after he was overlooked by the Court as a successor to Jonson, the post of poet laureate going instead to D'Avenant (see *DNB*).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Rutter (*fl.* 1635) author of *The Shepheard's Holy Day*, published in 1635, which included his elegy on Venetia. Rutter was a member of Jonson's circle and a friend of Kenelm Digby, with whom he lived after Venetia's death. See *DNB* and “A New Digby Letter-book: ‘In Praise of Venetia’”, ed. Vittorio Gabrielli, *National Library of Wales Journal*, X/1 (Summer 1957), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Aurelian Townshend (?1583-?1643) travelled widely, especially in France and Italy, before appearing in 1632 as a writer of court masques. He collaborated with Inigo Jones in *Albion's Triumph* and is believed to have contributed verses for the queen's masque *Tempe Restored*. He was a favourite at Charles I's Court and a member of Jonson's circle (see *DNB*).

<sup>18</sup> See BL Add. MS 30259, 35.

<sup>19</sup> See Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 23.

surrounding Digby's memoirs is the importance that should be given to Digby's own use of code-names and how much his choice of specific nomenclatures must be taken into account when reading the text. Having given his work the seemingly contradictory titles of "loose *fantasies*" and "private *memoirs*" it could be argued that this romanticized account should be read as a fiction.

However, is it likely that a man presenting the story of his own relationship with the woman he loves, no matter how vaguely fictionalized, and intending it to be read by a coterie audience made up of those close to the author and his wife, would select names completely at random? The point is an important one, because it inevitably colours our view of Digby's presentation of his and Venetia's lives, and the possibilities of the comparative subversive naming or references used by Randolph. Clearly when Bligh, for example, writes that "Digby was a man who did everything and achieved nothing",<sup>20</sup> given the several achievements of Digby's life, this rather bold assertion might not be so much a personal statement as an allusion to the very name Digby chose for himself in *Loose Fantasies*.

Theagenes was the name of several Athenians and it is worth noting that besides one famous for his strength and another known for his classical commentaries, there was a third surnamed *χάπνος* because he had a great promise that remained unfulfilled. Therefore Sir Kenelm Digby's manuscript reading circle appears to be one that thrived upon a deep knowledge and ready understanding of the connotations of classical names, and mythical sources and references. As one critic has explained, Digby's memoirs were "anything but" private and instead acted as something to "be circulated among those in Digby's court-centred group as a romance displaying the author's narrative and stylistic skills, with the added attraction of a frequently titillating allegory of coded names".<sup>21</sup> Read in this context, Randolph's Elegy might be seen as an inversion of Digby's own practice. Unlike Digby's adoption of pseudonyms for himself and Venetia, Randolph's Elegy makes plain who it is about but adds an increased significance to the use of specific mythic comparison.

Although Bligh states that "I am not aware of any evidence that this private book ever did widely circulate in manuscript"<sup>22</sup> we do know that the book was begun in 1627/8 and it is not unreasonable to suppose that

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Cope, "Sir Kenelm Digby's Rewritings of His Life", 54.

<sup>22</sup> Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 18.

if Bligh's further statement that "Ben Jonson ... was probably always about the Digby house" is true,<sup>23</sup> then Randolph, an adopted "son of Ben", might well have been aware of Digby's text. Indeed, Jackson Cope has recently highlighted the fact that Jonson's tribute to Venetia, "Eupheme", "echoes so faithfully the themes of saintly charity and apotheosis elaborated in Digby's letter-book 'In Praise of Venetia' that one must conclude that [it] had passed through Jonson's hands".<sup>24</sup>

Certainly Randolph must have had some contact with Digby either personally or, less likely, through an intermediary, because in 1632 the printed version of Randolph's play *The Jealous Lovers* carried a dedicatory poem to "that complete and noble Knight Sir Kenellam [*sic*] Digby". The poem is clearly a patronage-text, and given that Randolph was by this time widely perceived to be the heir apparent to Jonson it is not unlikely that Digby (and perhaps, given her patronage of Jonson, even Venetia) would have been prepared to be Randolph's patron at court. *The Jealous Lovers*, it should be noted, was written and performed in 1632, and thus three to four years after Randolph's adoption as a "son" by Jonson in London around 1628. Randolph's regular stays in the capital (by 1632 both Randolph's plays *The Muses' Looking-Glass* and *Amyntas* had been performed in London) may well have included gaining the closer acquaintance of noble knights like Sir Digby.

Written mainly by poets who were part of Digby's own circles of patronage, the poems in the British Library manuscript present a relatively unified image of Venetia. Some focus on the grieving Sir Kenelm himself – Joseph Rutter, for example, invents a pastoral scene in which he imagines Digby declaring his intention of creating a lasting monument for his dead Venetia

When to thy lasting name I haue uprear'd  
A Monument which time shall ne're deface,  
And made the world wch: as yet haue not heard  
Of they rare vertues and thy honor'd race,  
Know who thou art, and that thou wentst frō hence  
At Natures great expence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Cope, "Sir Kenelm Digby's Rewritings of His Life", 55.

<sup>25</sup> BL Add. MS 30259, 33.

Thomas May takes a different approach and in tapping into the mythology surrounding Venetia's devotion during the final months of her life, states that

Her piety, the servants that did waite  
Her chamber neerest, will enforme the straight  
That many houres deuotions euery day  
To God's high Throne her bended knees did paie.<sup>26</sup>

May thus provides a leaf of the script taken directly from Digby's letter-book "In Praise of Venetia".<sup>27</sup>

Of the other elegists, Aurelian Townshend is probably the only one that comes close to Randolph in re-asserting the physicality of Venetia. Townshend's commemoration of Venetia centres upon her visual bodily delights, erotically comparing her to a well-designed piece of music, he declares that she is all harmony:

Thou wer't eye-Musicke, and no single part,  
But beauties concert; not one onely dart,  
But loues whole quiuer; no prouinciall face  
But uniuersall, Best in euery place.  
Thou wert not borne as other women be  
To need the help of heightning Poesie,  
But to make Poets; Hee that could present  
Thee like thy glasses were superexcellent;  
Witnesse that Pen, which prompted by thy parts,  
Of minde, and bodie, caught as many heartes  
With euery line as thou with euery looke;  
Which wee conceiue was both his baite and hooke.  
His stile before, though it were perfect steele,  
Strong, smooth, and sharp; and so could make us feele  
His loue or anger; witnesses agree  
Could not attract till it was toucht by thee.<sup>28</sup>

For Townshend, Venetia is most aptly summed up in his phrase "Visible Angell",<sup>29</sup> that is someone to be looked at and revered. Perhaps more important, Townshend, like Jonson and, to a certain extent, Randolph

<sup>26</sup> BL Add. MS 30259, 24.

<sup>27</sup> See Cope's discussion of Digby's rewriting of his life.

<sup>28</sup> BL Add. MS 30259, 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

(particularly in the phrase "I cannot write" towards the end of his poem), emphasizes the relationship between Venetia's beauty and its effect on poets. No doubt the irony would not have escaped Townshend, just as it would not have escaped Randolph, that such reflections on the inadequacies of verse and of themselves as poets now the subject of their poems is dead are themselves made in verse.

Whether Digby was Randolph's patron or not, it is clear from Randolph's *Elegy* that he was not as prepared as some of the other poets to help build the cult of Venetia. The possibly dubious nature of Randolph's *Elegy* may be hinted at in an elegy written by another poet in response to the death. Although not included in Digby's manuscript compilation, Owen Felltham's poem "On the Lady Venetia Digby, found dead in her bed, leaning her head on her hand", is a lively defence of Venetia's posthumous reputation, which attempts to tie itself to the iconic visual imagery surrounding the dead Venetia. Bligh rather sweepingly states that "Poets do not write about a woman because she is a good wife: there is something else in the air, and that something else is the eternal mystery of beauty",<sup>30</sup> and Felltham's poem locates Venetia's fascination firmly in her physical beauty:

... there are those, striving to salve their own  
 Deep want of skill, have in a fury thrown  
 Scandal on her, and say she wanted brain.  
 Botchers of Nature! Your eternal stain  
 This judgement is. Can you believe that she  
 Whose great perfection was, that she was she,  
 That she who was all Charm, whose frail parts  
 Could captivate by troupes even noblest hearts,  
 And from wise men, with flowing grace conquer  
 More than they had, until they met with her?  
 Can you believe a Brain, the common tie  
 Of each flat Sex, could ever tower so high,  
 As to sway her, from whose aspect did pass  
 Life, death and happiness to men?<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Owen Felltham, "On the Lady Venetia Digby, found dead in her bed, leaning her head on her hand", ll. 19-32, in *Lusoria*, published with *Resolves, Divine, Moral, Political*, London, 1661, 13-14.



Apart from the unintentionally though possibly adulterous nature of the plural “men” there is little that is subversive about Felltham’s judgements here. Instead, the poem, as signified by its title, is part of a concerted strategy to create the “cult of Venetia”, a cult initiated by Sir Kenelm Digby’s commission to van Dyck to make a portrait of the dead Venetia only twenty-four hours after her death. It is worth mentioning that this portrait held up the autopsy on Venetia’s corpse, which threw further suspicion on Digby for Venetia’s murder – and given his chemical experiments with the painter, the level of suspicion was already high.<sup>32</sup>

The tradition of the deathbed portrait was nothing new, although it was less common in England than on the Continent. Famously Donne had himself painted in a shroud and spent much time in the final weeks of his life contemplating the resultant image, spiritually and mentally engaging with this highly personalized *memento mori*. But in the case of Venetia Digby, van Dyck’s portrait, *Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby, on Her Deathbed* (1633), marks the start of Digby’s attempt to reclaim and purify the image of his dead wife. The portrait, which Digby kept close by him ever after, is both simple in its representation of Venetia’s lifeless body and deliberately artistic in the addition of Venetia’s favourite pearls, and the petals falling from a fading rose.

Van Dyck also painted another portrait of Venetia that is even more startling in its attempt to re-make her public image after death. In what is believed to be a posthumous portrait, van Dyck portrays Lady Digby as Prudence, standing firm and bold as she tramples on Cupid and spurns the two-faced Deceit. With the inclusion of doves and a snake Venetia holds, the image alludes to the Gospel of Matthew 10:16 and the command: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” As a piece of posthumous public relations its meaning could not be clearer: this was a woman who recanted for her sinful ways, but was she not always the victim of the “wolves” around her?

Through his poem, therefore, Felltham is adding his contribution to this posthumous memorialization of the sainted and sanitized version of Venetia. But more than this, Felltham actively engages in a poetic conversation with those critics of Venetia both in her life and after her death. Interestingly, one section of the poem even suggests that he may

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<sup>32</sup> For this point and details on van Dyck’s portrait of Venetia, see Sumner, “Venetia Digby on Her Deathbed”, 20-25.

be deliberately presenting a counter-image to Randolph's idea of Death-as-rapist. Felltham writes (ll. 40-44) that Death was "mannerly":



***Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby, on Her Deathbed* by Sir Anthony van Dyck (reproduced by Permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery).**

[and] came not like a Tyrant, on whose brow  
 A pompous terror hung; but in a strain  
 Lovely and calm, as is the June serain.  
 That now, who most abhor him can but say,  
 Gently he did embrace her into clay.

Jonson too draws a natural, peaceful vision of the dying Venetia in the “Elegy on My Muse” section of “Eupheme”: Venetia was

So sweetly taken to the court of bliss,  
 As spirits had stolen her spirit, in a kiss,  
 From off her pillow, and deluded bed;  
 And left her lovely body unthought dead!<sup>33</sup>

Although Randolph questioned whether or not Death could have remained “cold” to the charms of Venetia, his Elegy was undoubtedly one in which the rapist-reaper was far from “lovely and calm”. It is therefore possible that Felltham (and maybe Jonson) is in some sense “answering” Randolph and attempting to re-establish Digby’s imagery of her death. Yet even Digby’s posthumous presentation of his wife and himself was not as straight-forwardly pure as some of the visual and poetic imagery surrounding her demise suggests.

Jackson Cope highlights how Digby continually rewrote versions of his life-story and his relationship with Venetia in the alternative versions found in *Loose Fantasies* and his letter-book “In Praise of Venetia” – in some versions and drafts she is all purity, in others not so, and the same applies to his own self-confessions.<sup>34</sup> Randolph’s Elegy closes with an intriguing couplet which in a sense reflects a similar difficulty to Digby’s in his changing accounts of his relationship with Venetia: “Whilst for an Epitaph upon her stone / I cannot write, but I must weepe her one.” Ostensibly an overt display of the poet’s grief at Venetia’s death and a signal that Randolph, like Jonson, is overcome with sadness at the loss, the words also place an emphasis on the poet’s inability to write. Most striking of all perhaps is Randolph’s utter failure to convey an image of Venetia within his Elegy, leaving the claim in the epitaph that “Nature despaire, because her pattern’s gone” sounding rather hollow. Indeed, the only points within the poem where specific references are made to

<sup>33</sup> “Elegy on My Muse”, ll. 41-44, in Ben Jonson, *Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson, Oxford Standard Authors edn, London, 1975, 269.

<sup>34</sup> See Cope, “Sir Kenelm Digby’s Rewritings of His Life”, 59-60 and 68.

Venetia are precisely those moments when Randolph falls back on his allusions to classical myth, suggesting that the appropriate reading of the myths is our key to the poet's view of the woman herself.

Digby, like George Goring, the subject of Randolph's epithalamium, was an educated man and would have known more than enough about mythology to decode Randolph's references and recognize what they implied. Perhaps Digby, if he did, as is assumed, compile the manuscript of poems, realized that Randolph's poem was an elegy about the real Venetia, or one of the Venetias, that existed. Jonson, for instance, in his explicit desire "To publish her a saint" overplays the supposed purity of this formerly most infamous courtesan.<sup>35</sup> He writes of "A mind so pure, so perfect fine, / As 'tis not radiant, but divine"<sup>36</sup> – and his piece in general resounds with a Christian and sanitized vision of his saintly Venetia. (It should be noted that whilst in Jonson's "Eupheme" "The Mind" section is over twice as long as "The Picture of the Body", it is "The Mind" which contains the language of the body.) But this very saintliness in a sense dehumanizes the vision and removes it from mortal recognition – it aids in the construction of a cult yet it is not only an immortal vision but also an inhuman one. The slipperiness of Randolph's poem, the ambiguities of its praise and its presentation of Venetia, together with his use of a clever classical frame of sexual rather than Christian reference, may reflect more closely Digby's own ambiguous biographical and autobiographical understanding of his wife than those of her other elegists.

Digby's biographer Bligh provides an insight both into why Digby was attracted to Venetia and how her elegists got her wrong, writing that when Venetia and her future husband met

Digby had come to the conclusion that a masculine mind in a beautiful woman was a rare and most desirable thing. The thought is striking enough when at a period when the poets were so busy praising the outward perfections of their mistresses that the mistresses seem seldom to possess any particular qualities of mind, except a temporary cruelty, at all.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Elegy on My Muse", l. 228, in Jonson, *Poems*, 274.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 265: "The Mind", ll. 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia*, 112.

The poets who marked her death actually fall into this older traditional trap of being too “busy praising the outward perfections” and Randolph is at moments of his Elegy clearly guilty of this too, especially in the anodyne and unoriginal “epitaph”. But in another sense we can argue that at least he – and Digby in his early reference to the brothel-house – is prepared to be honest about this physical, sexual and erotic aspect of Venetia’s life, and to reflect in his Elegy a certain kind of truth, rather than an imagined ideal.

## APPENDIX

*An Elegie upon the Lady Venetia Digby*

*Death*, who'ld not change prerogatives with thee,  
 That dost such rapes, yet mayst not question'd bee?  
 Here cease thy wanton lust, be satisfi'd,  
 Hope not a second, and so faire a bride.  
 Where was her *Mars*, whose valiant armes did hold 5  
 This *Venus* once, that thou durst be so bold?  
 By thy too nimble theft, I know 'twas feare,  
 Lest he should come, that would have rescu'd her.  
*Monster* confesse, didst thou not blushing stand,  
 And thy pale cheeke turne red to touch her hand? 10  
 Did shee not lightning-like strike suddaine heat  
 Through thy cold limbs, and thaw thy frost to sweat?  
 Well since thou hast her, use her gently, *Death*,  
 And in requitall of such pretious breath  
 Watch sentinell to guard her, doe not see 15  
 The wormes thy rivals, for the Gods will bee.  
 Remember *Paris*, for whose pettier sin,  
 The *Trojan* gates let the stout *Grecians* in;  
 So when time ceases, (whose unthrifty hand  
 Ha's now almost consum'd his stock of sand) 20  
 Myriads of Angels shall in Armies come,  
 And fetch (proud ravisher) their *Helen* home.  
 And to revenge this rape, thy other store  
 Thou shalt resign too, and shalt steale no more.  
 Till then faire Ladies (for you now are faire, 25  
 But till her death I fear'd your just dispaire,)  
 Fetch all the spices that *Arabia* yeelds,  
 Distill the choycest flowers of the fields:  
 And when in one their best perfections meet  
 Embalme her course, that shee may make them sweet. 30  
 Whilst for an Epitaph upon her stone  
 I cannot write, but I must weepe her one.

*Epitaph*

Beauty it selfe lyes here, in whom alone,  
 Each part injoy'd the same perfection.  
 In some the Eyes we praise; in some the Haire; 35  
 In her the Lips; in her the Cheeks are faire;  
 That Nymphs fine Feet, her Hands we beauteous call,  
 But in this forme we praise no part, but all.  
 The ages past have many beauties showne,  
 And I more plenty in our time have knowne; 40  
 But in the age to come I looke for none,  
 Nature despaire, because her pattern's gone.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *The Poems of Thomas Randolph*, 52-53.

## THE NYMPH'S REPLY NINE MONTHS LATER

REBECCA C. POTTER

Come live with mee and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove  
That vallies, groves, hills and fieldes,  
Woods, or steepie mountaine yeeldes.<sup>1</sup>

The simple, sensuous lyrics of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" beckons his listener to follow him into an enchanted world of sylvan valleys and verdant fields preserved from the ravages of time. In the last verse of the poem the shepherd reasserts the pleasant refrain of the moment by describing how "The shepherd swains shall dance and sing / For thy delight each May morning" (ll. 21-22) as if every day will be spring. The shepherd attempts to propel his "Love" outside time's grasp, and for good reason; time is love's greatest enemy. Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" uses a similar premise for the purposes of seduction, but cast in very different terms. Rather than promise his mistress that love stops the effects of time, he harshly reminds her that the effects of time destroy the joys of love, since the ravages of age create such a drastic transformation of the body rendering it unfit for love:

Had we but World enough, and Time  
This coyness, Lady, were no crime  
...

But at my back I alwaies hear  
Times winged Charriot hurrying near ....<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (1599), ll. 1-4, in Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Works*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Oxford, 1973, II, 517.

<sup>2</sup> "To His Coy Mistress" (ll. 1-2 and 21-22), in *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H.M. Margoliouth, Oxford, 1977, I, 26.



Following fast on the heels of old age, death brings an even more odious change by turning the woman's body into something horrific, a process which Marvell describes to his mistress in detail:

... then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity:  
And your quaint honor turn to dust;  
And into ashes all my lust.<sup>3</sup>

In these frequently anthologized poems, Marlowe and Marvell both deftly employ the rhetoric of *carpe diem*: “seize the day”, and the chance for sexual delight, before the physical decay of aging makes attracting a lover nigh impossible. Lyrics on the topic of women and love have long enchanted readers with their delightful participation in the classical tradition inherited from Catullus and Anacreon. The fear of death, and the urgency it generates, are essential to the *carpe diem* convention, which casts the easeful valley of sensual paradise in the shadow of lurking spectre, and the cry to “eat, drink, and be merry” is inevitably followed by the sobering thought that “tomorrow we die”.<sup>4</sup>

While claiming that time will quickly take away the beauty that makes the coy lady so desirable, the *carpe diem* poem subsequently reinforces her desirability, and encourages her to enjoy love while she is still able to be its object. Yet the reminder “to seize the day” before it is too late also warns the beautiful maiden against valuing virginity too highly, and too much enjoying the power it gives her over men. Therein lies the tension between the woman's desirability as a virgin and the brevity of her value as a desirable sexual object. Therefore to fully understand the rhetorical power of the *carpe diem* poem, it is necessary to determine the reasons why a young lady would choose to be, as Marvell puts it, “coy”.

Whether by promising that love (and sex) are the “ageless” pleasures of youth, or by invoking the images of old age and death as the ultimate threats to the beautiful woman, Marlowe and Marvell attempt to divert the thought of an unspoken fear associated with having sex: pregnancy.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 27-30.

<sup>4</sup> See Anya Taylor, “Coleridge, Keats, Lamb, and Seventeenth-Century Drinking Songs”, in *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism*, ed. Lisa Low, Cambridge, 1994, 222. Taylor provides an excellent synopsis of the *carpe diem* tradition in the opening of her article, which is mainly concerned with Keats' and Coleridge's odes to the pleasure of drink.

Swollen breasts, bloated belly, and the damning evidence delivered nine months later meant that sexual intercourse held the threat of radically and undeniably transforming the virginal maids into "great-bellied women".<sup>5</sup> Pregnancy alters the woman's body more immediately than aging, and more apparently than the loss of hymen.

Sylvia Plath's description of the pregnant body in "Metaphors" – as "A riddle in nine syllables, / An elephant, a ponderous house, / a melon strolling on two tendrils" – brings the transformative power of pregnancy into sharp focus. Not only can the woman expect a radical physical transformation when she is pregnant, her sense of self goes through an equally perplexing change. As Plath continues,

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train, there's no getting off.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay I read these poems by Marlowe and Marvell, and responses to them, in light of the threat and expectancy of pregnancy, and thereby uncover the cunningly erotic discourse concerning pregnancy presented in them.

Using the *carpe diem* theme, Marlowe's shepherd creates a rhetorically appealing argument presented in a syllogistic form. Love exists outside of Time's influence, which subsequently should make lovers also immune to its passing. The poem's major premise is implied: when lovers love, time stops. This is followed by the minor premise, which is presented in the form of an offer: we will be lovers. The conclusion to the argument also delivers its rhetorical power: when we are lovers, time will stop for us. The offer is hard to refuse, as it creates an alluring fantasy of eternal life granted through eternal love. But the falsity of the first premise is hard to ignore, since love does not stop time, a fact that neither nymph nor lady will deny, recognizing in their resistance to seduction that any attempt to displace time is futile, even when the power of love is invoked.

The fallacy inherent to the shepherd's argument is, of course, easy to spot, and as easy to mock. Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepheard" (1599) famously brings Marlowe's speaker back to harsh

<sup>5</sup> An epithet William Shakespeare employs in *Henry VIII* (IV.i.78).

<sup>6</sup> "Metaphors" (1959), ll. 1-3 and 7-9, in Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, New York, 1981, 116.

reality when she summarily rejects his offer to come live with him and be his love:

But could youth last and love still breede,  
 Had joyes no date, nor age no neede,  
 Then these delights my minde might move,  
 To live with thee, and be thy love.<sup>7</sup>

But youth does not last, age has its needs, and these effects of time cannot be ignored, denied, or forgotten. Time's immanent presence renders the shepherd's promise nothing more than a vain attempt at seduction through a false illusion that cannot be sustained, that is easily discovered and as easily dismissed. By revealing how the syllogistic argument of Marlowe's poem is fallacious because time does not stop when lovers love, although admittedly the nymph in Raleigh's poem wished it did, "The Nymph's Reply" lays bare the rhetorical failure of "The Passionate Shepherd" to convince.

In fact, the fallacy is so easy to spot, the reader is bound to ask whether the shepherd has another intent in employing it, especially when we consider the visual images invoked by Marlowe's shepherd. Frolicking lambs, blooming fields, the Maypole celebration, all are direct reminders not only of nature's beauty but above all of her fertility. Thus while the shepherd overtly creates a scene meant to convince his nymph to love while the time is ripe, he surrounds her with visual reminders that the effects of consummated love are to be seen in its progeny. The poem boldly employs an eroticism associated with the possibility of reproduction, while also boldly arguing against its possibility by invoking a timeless world in which nothing develops. By riddling his pastoral world with the after-effects of sexual intercourse while simultaneously arguing for eternal youth, Marlowe thereby reveals how both fear and desire combine in the possibility of conception. An erotics of reproduction underscores the theme of *carpe diem* love poetry – "Enjoy sex now for tomorrow we may die" – by implying that the threat of death is assuaged to a degree by bearing children.

When read in the light of the erotic appeal of pregnancy, blending fear and joy for the unwed woman, "The Nymph's Reply" becomes not just a saucy rebuttal to a naive shepherd, but also a response that uncovers the

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<sup>7</sup> "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepheard", ll. 21-24, in *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes C. Latham, London, 1962, 16.

fundamental tension created by the *carpe diem* theme between the unwed woman's desire for sex and her desire to avoid pregnancy. This tension is further underscored by the male speaker's wish to stop time, while he also communicates his fear of death, which the bearing of children can assuage. What shapes these two rhetorical strategies, seduction (through the fear of time) and resistance (motivated by a fear of pregnancy), is the difference between linear and cyclical perceptions of time, articulated through the discourse of erotic play. The nymph's playfulness, or *jouissance*, rests upon her depiction of cycles, such as in the changing seasons, and the biological rhythms of nature driving "flocks from field to fold" (l. 5), which mocks the shepherd's attempt to displace the danger of reproduction as presented in the cycles of nature, while fixing time in nature's most prolific season – spring. For the nymph the unwavering cycle of nature is seen in the ways that time continually transforms place to denote the seasons of reproductive life. The nymph's language is so dependent upon cyclical imagery that reproduction dominates the tenor of her rebuttal. So embedded in the nymph's reply and inseparable from it is the reminder that pregnancy and birth will transform her much more quickly than aging.

For example, in describing how, "The flowers doe fade, and wanton fieldes, / To wayward winter reckoning yeeldes" (ll. 9-10), the nymph refers to more than the fading of love and beauty caused by the effects of time, but also to the cycle of conception, or sowing seed, and birth, or harvest. Raleigh also creates a revealing pun associated with pregnancy, by mentioning how "flowers fade", since "flowers" was a popular common term during the Elizabethan age for a woman's menstruation, which would, of course, fade away when she becomes pregnant. Just as "wanton fieldes" yield crops in winter, a woman who conceives a child in spring would have a "winter reckoning" nine months later, when the pregnancy would come to term. "Wanton"<sup>8</sup> a term used more often in reference to a woman's amorous nature than a man's, coupled with the word "fieldes", creates a sexual image of the unchaste female being impregnated, and then reaping the harvest. The nymph then further counsels that "A honny tongue, a hart of gall, / Is fancy's spring, but sorrowes fall". The moment of indiscretion on a fine May evening would

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<sup>8</sup> "Wanton: Lascivious, unchaste, lewd. Also, in milder sense, given to amorous dalliance. a. of persons (in early use only of women)" (*OED*). This definition is traced back to the fourteenth century, and was in common usage in Raleigh's day.

begin to show its effects the following autumn,<sup>9</sup> which can be read as a pun. Signs of pregnancy subsequently lead to the lady's own fall from grace.

In the next stanza the nymph refers to the temporary beauty of her clothing consisting of leaves and flowers woven into a dress befitting a springtime maiden such as herself. However, she further observes that the gown, the "kirtle" and "poesies" that adorn the lithe maid "Soone breake, soone wither, soone forgotten" (l. 15). The line points to the brevity of a posy's freshness, but the image of a girdle that soon breaks also invokes a comical picture of a transformed nymph, growing large in pregnancy. Such a transformation of her body in pregnancy would wreak havoc on a costume and "soone break" its seams, and then to be forgotten.

The stanza's last line "In follie ripe, in reason rotten", is a quip on a common proverb found in Kingsmill's *Comforts for the Afflicted* (1585): "All the glorie of man is as the flower of the fiede, soone ripe, soone rotten."<sup>10</sup> The proverb echoes a linear and historic sense of time that ends in death: a man's glory, like his life is of short duration and does not live on. The nymph uses the proverb in a way distinctly oriented towards pregnancy by recalling meanings for "ripe" that include fullness, readiness, and being at the point of giving birth. In this context to be made ripe in folly holds a double meaning: the woman's folly has made her ripe, or ready, for insemination, but also the sexual act has made her ripe with child. Once ripe with child, the nymph suggests that after pregnancy and birth she will become "rotten" as an object of erotic desire.

Although the threat of pregnancy is a reason for the nymph to decline the shepherd's offer, it also provides a reason why the nymph would find his proposal appealing. If time were to stop, gestation would stop with it, which makes the shepherd's promise of eternal youth also a promise of infallible birth control. This perspective provides a new meaning to the nymph's final remark, "but could youth last, and love still breede" (l. 21), which emphasizes that love would "breede" rather than she. Yet she embeds a double meaning in her wishful statement by the very use of the

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<sup>9</sup> Although "fall" as the word for "autumn" is nowadays thought of as almost exclusively US usage, in Elizabethan English it would simply have been regarded as a generally available alternative term.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Kingsmill, *A Treatise for All Such as Are Troubled in Mynde of Afflicted in Bodie: Comforts for the Afflicted*, London, 1585, ii.

word "breed", which carries the reminder that consummated love and breeding are one and the same. However, the opportunity to enjoy sex without worrying about pregnancy, the nymph muses, "my minde might move" (l. 23), implying that this would truly be a seductive proposition.<sup>11</sup>

Raleigh humorously presents the female perspective in answering Marlowe's shepherd, but with a perceptiveness that recognizes how both sexes are well aware of the intricacies of the debate. The telling signs of pregnancy would have been on Raleigh's mind, as well, if one accepts that in all likelihood Raleigh composed his reply before Marlowe's death in 1593 while both were members of the School of Night.<sup>12</sup> As the reigning favourite of Elizabeth, Raleigh was known for his continual attempts to court and maintain her favour. No other man had freer access to Elizabeth's private circle. Thus a love affair with one of the Queen's maids of honour, Elizabeth Throckmorton, was kept secret until the telltale signs of pregnancy revealed all. Throckmorton gave birth to Raleigh's son in 1592. The affair and subsequent scandal led to Raleigh's fall from grace as the Queen's favourite, and to his being clapped in the Tower from July to September, along with Throckmorton (whom he later married). The incident would have made Raleigh painfully cognizant of how effectively pregnancy betrays a sexual union, and how difficult it is to regain "paradise" once lost.

One detects Raleigh's sense of dejection in *The 11<sup>th</sup>: and Last Booke of the Ocean to Cynthia*, composed while in the Tower, in which he invokes a winter world blighted by Cynthia's anger and estrangement:

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<sup>11</sup> Sir John Suckling's poem, "Against Fruition", presents the woman's side of the argument in unambiguous terms. The female narrator urges her male lover to "ask no more, be wise" (l. 1) and restrain from sexual intercourse. "Fruition" contains a double meaning in this and the subsequent version of the poem, in which the narrator is male. In both, fruition refers to sexual conquest, but in the version with a female narrator, fruition takes on an explicit reference to pregnancy. She cautions in unambiguous terms that sexual conquest and the pregnancy that results puts and end to male sexual desire, "Fruition adds no new wealth, but destroyes" (l. 7), so that "even kisses loose their tast" (l. 12). Also invoking the image of a woman like a field being planted for harvest, Suckling's narrator argues (ll. 15-18) that: "The World is of a vast extent we see, / And must be peopled; Children then must be; / So must bread too; but since they are enough / Born to the drudgery, what need we plow?" (see *The Works of Sir John Suckling: The Non-Dramatic Works*, ed. Thomas Clayton, Oxford, 1971, 37). "On Fruition" more explicitly reveals female resistance to the possibility of pregnancy, which will be played upon more subtly by Marlowe (see below).

<sup>12</sup> See M.C. Bradbrook, *The School of Night: A Study in the Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh*, New York, 1965, 4-5; and Agnes Latham, *Sir Walter Raleigh*, London, 1964, 11.

From fruitful trees I gather withered leaves  
 And glean the broken ears with miser's hands,  
 Who sometimes did enjoy the waughty sheaves.<sup>13</sup>

Raleigh conveys a sense of loss and despair stemming from what has been described by M.C. Bradbrook as reflecting “sustained and unadulterated regret”.<sup>14</sup> His affair with Throckmorton, revealed by her subsequent pregnancy, was a pleasure purchased at too high a price – the loss of the Queen’s favour. Throughout the poem Raleigh stresses the desolate world he lives in as a time he is reaping the bitter harvest of his folly, and contrasts the cold bleakness of his emotional spirit with the verdant warmth of his Cynthia. She stands outside this blighted world, and wields a power over nature that makes her immune to nature’s power over the human body:

Knowinge shee can renew, and cann create  
 Green from the grounde, and flouers yeven out of stone,  
 By vertu lastinge over tyme and date.<sup>15</sup>

If anyone could actually realize Marlowe’s pastoral world where “every day will be May” it is Elizabeth, whose power and virtue gives her control over the biological effects of time. While Raleigh eventually did recover a place in court, he never regained his old standing after his marriage.

The possibility of preventing pregnancy by stopping time holds even greater appeal given the understanding in the early modern period of how women conceived. Knowledge concerning conception generally followed the theories of human reproduction presented in pseudo-Aristotelian writings and those of Galen of Pergamum (c. 130-200 AD).<sup>16</sup> This sense of the male body and the female imagines two genders corresponding to one-sex, the male. The Galenic and Aristotelian notion viewed woman’s genitalia as being the same as a man’s, but located inside of the body, instead of externally, and operating in the same way, ejaculating through arousal. Just as a man needed to ejaculate seed for conception to occur, according to the Galenic view, the woman needed to ejaculate fluids

<sup>13</sup> *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, 25-43.

<sup>14</sup> Bradbrook, *The School of Night*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge: MA, 1990, 150.

necessary for conception.<sup>17</sup> Conception was not only viewed as a matter of chance and timing, but was directly linked to the woman's state of sexual excitement. If reciting an erotic poem had the desired effect by increasing his lover's amour to a pitch that would lead her to having sex, it also made it more likely that she would conceive.

This physiological understanding of the female body placed pregnancy in a rather damning light for the unwed woman because it indicated her willing participation in the sexual relationship – since mutual pleasure was a necessary factor for conception, she must have become pregnant as a willing partner. In the first legal-medicine text to be written in English, Samuel Farr stated in 1785 that “without an excitation of lust or enjoyment in the venereal act, no conception can probably take place”. Based on this and older arguments that reflected common opinion, Thomas Laqueur further argues that “Whatever a woman might claim to have felt or whatever resistance she might have put up, conception in itself betrayed desire or at least a sufficient measure of acquiescence for her to enjoy the venereal act”.<sup>18</sup> By engaging in verbal foreplay with his mistress, the seducer is doing her no favour if pregnancy is to be avoided.

Given the early modern view that heightening desire in a woman made her more likely to conceive, the seductive rhetoric in “To His Coy Mistress” provides a fascinating example of an attempt to dispel fear of pregnancy, while boldly indicating its possibility. Marvell's poem overtly seeks to displace the fear of pregnancy with the fear of aging, while covertly hinting at its possibility. The question arises whether these hints are intentional, and whether they should be read as erotic. Marvell opposes one loss, the loss of virginity, with another, the loss of youth and beauty. His rhetoric attempts to make the choice a simple one by emphasizing how the loss of hymen would be a transformation obvious

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, 148-50. Laqueur summarizes also the findings of William Harvey, who wrote *Disputations Touching the Generation of Animals* in 1651. Harvey's work illustrates the shift away from the Gallenic view that both men and women possessed testicles, requiring ejaculation from both partners. While discovering that the male sperm penetrated the female egg, he still insisted that fertilization would only be possible when the female was aroused. Laqueur writes, “While rejecting Galen's interpretation of female orgasm as a sign of semination, Harvey saw sexual passion as deeply significant, an expression of the body's vital force .... Males and females, Harvey told his students in 1616, are ‘never more brave sprightly blithe valiant plesant or bewtifull than now that coitus is about to be performed’” (147).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-62.



to few, in comparison to the loss of youth and beauty, which would be obvious to all. What he conveniently fails to mention is that pregnancy also causes a radical transformation of the body apparent to all, and much more quickly than the effects of age, and with the effect of making her less desirable for other suitors.

Like Marlowe's shepherd, Marvell's lover imagines a timeless world of harmless flirtation, but unlike the shepherd he reminds his lady that this world does not exist. Rather than view this as a defeat, however, the lover uses the pressures of time to persuade his mistress to have sex with him while she is still young. Yet when the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" mentions to his lady that her own desire for sex is easily apparent to him, "the youthful hew / Sits on thy skin like morning dew"<sup>19</sup> and that "thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant Fires" (ll. 33-36), he also makes her danger of becoming pregnant equally apparent. In this state of sexual excitement the coy mistress, like the nymph, would be likely to rue the consequences and conceive a child. Therefore the speaker's turn to describe the lady's state of arousal is curious, since it would not only remind her that such behaviour is not becoming in the "innocent" maid, but also that it would signal her sexual readiness. Nevertheless, the lover perseveres in an erotic description of having sex: "Let us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into one Ball." Yet this playful image is followed by a violent description of the loss of hymen, or perhaps the process of birth: "And tear our Pleasures with rough strife, / Thorough the Iron gates of Life" (ll. 41-44).

The image of two lovers rolling all their "strength, and ... sweetness" into "one Ball" conveys an erotic play between pleasure and violence that is echoed in the image tearing "Pleasures with rough strife", while the mention of the "Iron gates of Life" reaffirm sexual pleasure as a life-affirming act. The subtext of these lines is as equally charged with a sense of sexual play, implying that life is affirmed through reproduction, and capturing both the thrill and violence of childbirth. Robert Halli has convincingly read these two lines as a conscious and deliberate attempt by the speaker to seduce his mistress not because he seeks the sheer pleasure of sex, but rather because he wants her to bear his child – the "Iron gates of Life" directly referring to the newborn passing through the

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<sup>19</sup> In the original folio of Marvell's poems, the final word of line 34 is "glew". In his Oxford edition "Margoliouth conjectured 'lew' (warmth)", but according to the note on the word in his edition of *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, London, 1958, 167-68, Hugh MacDonald says that Margoliouth "would not now contend for 'lew'".

birth canal.<sup>20</sup> Halli emphasizes how in the mind of the speaker the time is right for his lover to become pregnant. Such a reading also recognizes a revealing pun in the last two lines: "Thus, though we cannot make our Sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" (ll. 45-46). By using the pun "sun"/"son" the speaker indirectly communicates his desire to activate the generation of his own male child.<sup>21</sup>

Halli's argument explains then why the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" would be so bold as to describe to his lady her own state of sexual arousal. Clearly the poem emphasizes the immediacy of desire. He has more difficulty in effectively defending why the lady would be willing to give the speaker a son out of wedlock. Even as Halli himself admits but never rectifies, the stigma of pregnancy out of marriage was extreme, no matter what the woman's social class.<sup>22</sup> Nor was it so easy to conceal or terminate a pregnancy. Increased social condemnation of the unwed mother can perhaps be seen in the passing of a law in 1623 that made abortion and infanticide a felony in common law (before such cases had been heard in ecclesiastical courts). The 1623 law was an extremely harsh measure, which imposed capital punishment for infanticide, and assumed guilt whenever there were no witnesses to a stillbirth. While the draconian nature of the law made juries reluctant to convict, it did mark a change in the social perception of motherhood, which reduced women's choices in pregnancy.

It is more convincing, I believe, to recognize in the last lines of "To His Coy Mistress" the same jest that we see in the closing of "The Nymph's Reply". Just as the nymph teasingly hints how in a timeless world breeding love would free her from the onus of breeding children, the lover in "To His Coy Mistress" plays upon the fear and desire projected through the possibility of pregnancy. Since "we cannot make our sun stand still", he argues, we had better get to breeding. By

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Halli, "The Persuasion of the Coy Mistress", *Philological Quarterly*, LXXX/1 (2001), 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>22</sup> Halli concedes that "It is certainly true that the woman is unlikely to be persuaded that sexual activity outside of marriage is desirable on the grounds that through it she may become pregnant" (*ibid.*, 59). He then proposes that the speaker's true intention is to marry in order to legitimize his progeny. While this conclusion is plausible up to a point, it still does not rectify the speaker's obvious attempts to displace the thought of pregnancy while using language that constantly reminds his mistress of its possibility in rather threatening terms.

reminding the coy mistress that she, too, will die, her lover implies that their deaths can be assuaged through bearing a child.

The fear of pregnancy out of wedlock is charged with an eroticism stemming not only from the desire for sexual pleasure, but also a desire to reproduce. Marvell indicates that his mistress feels the same desire as he does, and makes her readiness for conception apparent to her, as well as her mortality. Rather than shirking from the terror of pregnancy and childbirth, which in the first case could mean social condemnation for the woman, and in the second case, her possible death, Marlowe eroticizes sex by evoking the titillating possibility that a child could come out of it. He does so by using the teleological threat of the *carpe diem* theme – for tomorrow we die – with the cycle of life realized through reproduction, which is captured in the poem's final couplet. The linear passage of time cannot be stopped, yet it can be thwarted through the bearing of children.

The underlying subtext found in both "To His Coy Mistress" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Sheepheard" puts into play two opposing constructions of time, the linear and the cyclical. These two dimensions of time are distinguished by the sense of chronological progression that cannot be repeated, and propitious moments that also culminate in recurring patterns representative of the cyclic time of nature, such as the change of seasons, or the process of reproduction. These two aspects of time are analogous to distinctions made between time as chronology (*chronos*) and time as fulfilment or opportunity (*kairos*). *Chronos* describes the measurement of days, months, and years. *Kairos* marks moments of opportunity or fulfilment that are often celebrated and repeated, such as the time of planting, the time of harvest, or the time of a religious celebration. There is also a distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* that reflects different genderings of time. *Chronos* is the Greek god of time, whereas *kairos*, a feminine word in Greek, describes the dimension of time habitually as female, inasmuch as it charts propitious life events, such as impregnation, giving birth and death in a way that signifies the cycles in "mother" nature.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The distinction between a male *kronos* and female *kairos* has continued to be made, most notable in the work of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva attempts a more contemporary, feminist articulation of a female and male sense of time by proposing a definition of time from the point of female subjectivity that emphasizes "cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm ... whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnamable *jouissance*" ("Women's Time", trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, Tallahassee: FL, 1986,

Finding a distinction between these two Greek terms for time, *chronos* and *kairos*, can perhaps help to further nuance the sense of erotic play found in Raleigh's and Marvell's use of the *carpe diem* theme. The two formulations of time, linear and cyclical, are presented as text and subtext that stand in contradiction while simultaneously informing each other. The linear, textually explicit sense of time projects the male speaker's desire for sex, and his awareness that time is short. The subtext can be found in the female resistance to the man's urgency, expressed through a mutual awareness of the cyclical aspect of time seen especially through reproduction. Hence, the dalliance between *chronos* and *kairos* expressed through these poems contains both threat and promise articulated through the impending spectre of death and the expectancy of birth, both of which intensify the sexual energy of the discourse. The sexual act holds the promise of thwarting the chronological inevitability of aging, infertility and death through its participation in the cycle of intercourse, pregnancy and birth.

But is the *carpe diem* argument persuasive? Stopping time in order to make time for love is cast in a suspect light not only by such female speakers as Raleigh's nymph, but also by the narrative voice in women's poetry in the eighteenth century. While Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" seems to hint that making his lover pregnant may be the seducer's motive – precisely in order to persuade his mistress to marry – the risk of being forced into an undesirable marriage rather than becoming an unwed mother lies at the heart of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "The Lover", and Lady Mary seems to have "To His Coy Mistress" specifically in mind when the speaker declares:

This stupid Indifference so often you blame  
Is not owing to Nature, to fear, or to Shame,  
I am not as cold as a Virgin in lead,  
Nor is Sunday's Sermon so strong in my Head:  
I know but too well how time flies along,  
That we live but few Years, and yet fewer are young.

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472). For Kristeva, spatiality further defines women's time in that intuitively space better describes the maternal relationship to time and the woman's structural place in reproduction. In other words, a woman's "time", which through no accident echoes the sense of a woman ready to give birth, manifests spatially through an increase in progeny, and the space of a growing family.

But I hate to be cheated, and never will buy  
Long years of Repentance for moments of Joy.<sup>24</sup>

The speaker then describes how she is waiting for a man who embodies the virtues she seeks in a husband – learning, gentility, trust, and respect. If she were to find such a man, she would willingly meet him “with Champagne and Chicken at last” (l. 26), in other words, marry him. She would be tolerant, and he would be kind; in her spouse “Let the Friend, and the Lover be handsomely mix’d” (l. 34). But until she meets this man she refuses to be a coquette, “Or be caught by a vain affectation of Wit” (l. 42). She would rather remain a virgin.

Montagu’s female lover shows more concern for being trapped into a marriage to an unworthy man than concern for being abandoned after she had surrendered to his advances. Her emphatic descriptions of the right and wrong sort of man imply how living one’s life with such a person would be a trial she will avoid at all costs, even if it means spinsterhood. When viewing the men she has met so far, she fears their tyranny after a forced marriage. Pregnancy contains a new threat in this case, since it would force her into a choice between two undesirable options, enter a bad marriage, or be subjected to the social condemnation of having a child out of wedlock. Montagu’s concern that “Long years of Repentance” would be bought “for moments of Joy” is based on the possibility that sexual intercourse with the wrong man could lead to the wrong marriage. This is not an unfounded concern, given that, according to Lawrence Stone, during the first half of the eighteenth century there was a dramatic rise in the number of pregnant brides, with at least one-third of all marriages occurring after the bride had become pregnant or had recently given birth.<sup>25</sup>

In Montagu’s poem the woman fears pregnancy not because of subsequent abandonment, but rather because it would necessitate an undesirable marriage. The argument reiterates views common to Bluestocking literature: to marry your moral and intellectual equal, to demand a spouse worthy of respect, or if these conditions could not be

<sup>24</sup> “The Lover”, ll. 6-9, in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Essays and Poems and Simplicity*, A Comedy, eds Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy, Oxford, 1977, 234-36.

<sup>25</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987*, Oxford, 1990, 157. In *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, London, 1977, Stone further observes that between 1500-1800 penalties in Church courts for pre-nuptial pregnancy were not severe, merely requiring “open confession in Church on Sunday or at the time of marriage” (519).

met, to prefer a celibate life in female society. But we should not dismiss Montagu's poem as an example of Bluestocking feminism. The speaker insists repeatedly that she has sexual desire; she is not "as cold as a virgin in lead". She looks forward to the wedding night with her ideal lover when "He may cease to be formal, and I to be proud, / Till lost in the joy we confess that we live" (ll. 30-31). By describing sex as a kind of "confession of life", Montagu connects the erotic charge conjoined with sex as a both sensual pleasure and the pleasure of continuing life through reproduction. The fantasy both acknowledges the eroticism of sex as joyous reproduction and celebrates it.

"The Lover" provides a fascinating response to the seductive power of the *carpe diem* theme. While recognizing the eroticism of having sex as an affirmation of life, partly through the link between intercourse and reproduction, she also asserts that pregnancy "weds" her to her lover eternally. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu indicates an awareness of this irony and proposes an alternative model for the woman of childbearing age. Pursue the lover you desire: "From such a dear Lover, as here I describe, / No danger should fright me, no Millions should bribe" (ll. 37-38). But she affirms that if does not find him, she has no concern for time, and she will not let the pressures of aging (the "biological clock") make her more susceptible to having sex with the wrong man: "But till this astonishing Creature I know, / As I long have liv'd chaste, I will keep my selfe so" (ll. 39-40). Rather she proposes a different image of the coy virgin, with tropes of both death and timelessness. Quoting Ovid, Montagu states that chaste women "Harden like Trees, and like Rivers are cold" (l. 48). Hardening and coldness invoke the transformation of the body in death as it becomes catatonic, and yet Montague creates an image of frozen virgins immune to time's affects, until they are thawed by a worthy lover.

As the *carpe diem* theme informs each of these poems by Marlowe, Marvell, and Montagu respectively, we see various treatments of pregnancy: as a fear to be displaced, as a fear to be eroticized, and as an erotic joy of sex between equals. The implication of pregnancy underscores an erotics of desire directly associated with the fear of death that the *carpe diem* theme invokes through a playful recognition of both male and female desire to reproduce. By juxtaposing that desire with the social and physical costs of pregnancy for the unwed woman, these poems reveal a female dilemma: to know the pleasure of sex, or to not risk the consequence. While Marlowe and Marvell whisper "risk it",

Raleigh and Montagu impose conditions that would make such a choice possible, either ensure that love truly stops time or find a lover you can endure over time. Setting rationality and passion at war, the eroticism of pregnancy provides an intoxicating subtext to the pleasure of seizing the day, and the aftermath nine months later.

## LOWERING THE LIBERTINE: FEMINISM IN ROCHESTER'S "THE IMPERFECT ENJOYMENT"

TRACY WENDT LEMASTER

Any frank discussion of Restoration-era sexuality must adequately address the issue of the libertine ethos as a troubling political and cultural posture that privileged gender inequity and stratification all in the name of pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

The dominance of male sexuality in Restoration England was a force wrought in social movement and royal persuasion. From commoners to the crown, the pursuit of pleasure superseded all moral goals, epitomized in libertinism and King Charles' promiscuity. The reaction to the pious reservation of Puritanism was an emphasis on physical pleasure as a pursuit and a power reserved for men. Although women were physical participants, their political status remained the same. While males expressed their sexual prowess, the female remained docile and virginal. Although men were free to pursue education, work, and pleasure, women fulfilled purely sexual needs as wives or whores, acting in both roles as a sexual tool, secondary in lovemaking. The woman's intellect was not questioned, nor were her desires, just her power.

At least this is the stereotypical view of the Restoration period. However, in "The Imperfect Enjoyment", the Earl of Rochester portrays the popular promiscuous male libertine, but subverts his power and, consequently, the legitimacy of the ideal, by making him impotent. Rochester satirizes the valiant male as a powerless figure, arguing against traditional male conceptions. Furthermore, the female's sexuality defies convention as desiring, autonomous (not an extension or tool of the male), and powerful. The ridiculousness of a sexually prioritized lifestyle leaves the male a spent force. His denial of a very present female sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, Cambridge, 1995, 268.



power shocks him into impotence. Lastly, he cannot maintain his riot of playboy living within love relationships, exchanging his libertine lifestyle for a more sexually and emotionally satisfying one:

But when great Love the onset does command,  
Base recreant to thy prince, thou dar'st not stand.<sup>2</sup>

Rochester's discrediting of male sexual priority, his recognition of female sexuality, and the implied move towards a truly fulfilling reciprocal relationship mark him as a proto-feminist, undercutting stereotypes of men, women, and the sexist formats they create.

Feminism is a principle that calls for the recognition of women as equal to men and, therefore, requires the granting of equivalent political, economic, and social rights. It is an issue that calls men's ideals to action as much as women's. Restoration England's ideal male figure, believed to be superior in intellect to women, is not compatible with a liberated, feminist woman figure. Therefore, the male stereotype reflects and, at times, controls the female's position. Although Rochester's portrayal of women is crucial in determining the extent of his feminist beliefs, his depiction of men is just as important in reinforcing those beliefs. Because "The Imperfect Enjoyment" is primarily a male sketch, one must begin with how this operates and eventually leads to a more direct feminist link in his depiction of women.

"The Imperfect Enjoyment" depicts its male lover by having him indulge in and idealize the excessive joys of libertinism until, when his eventually spent body fails, he is reduced to the image of a penis, a lesser, animalistic imitation of man. Rochester subverts Restoration society's ideal of a sexually powerful male with the image of a powerless one whose sexual priorities are fulfilled as he metaphorically becomes a penis and comically laments its failure. Therefore, the lover, thinking of himself and women purely in terms of sex, becomes a satiric, discredited libertine figure. He fails physically (with premature ejaculation), emotionally (with lamenting), and psychically (with the reduction of himself to a phallic symbol).

The piece begins with the typical build-up of masculine sexual desire but deconstructs when victory turns to defeat:

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<sup>2</sup> "The Imperfect Enjoyment", ll. 60-61, in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth, New Haven, 1974, 37-40.

Naked she lay, clasped in longing arms,  
I filled with Love, she all over charms;

...

Swift orders that I should prepare to throw  
The all-dissolving thunderbolt below.

...

In liquid raptures I dissolve o'er,  
Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore.<sup>3</sup>

As libertinism promotes the force of male sexuality, the lover is at first a “thunderbolt”. However, in idealizing the male purely for his sexual stamina and regarding women only as conquests, Rochester reveals a detrimental outcome – premature ejaculation (“In liquid raptures I dissolve o’er”). The “thunder[ing]”, powerful male becomes instead a “Trembling, confused, despairing, limber, dry / A wishing, weak, unmoving lump” (ll. 35-36). His libertine lifestyle “at last confirms [him] impotent” (l. 30).

Sarah Wintle, commenting on Rochester’s subversion, says “his poetry bears an oblique and complex relationship to the conventions and themes it uses, turning them upside-down, and deflating them, sometimes with a certain viciousness”.<sup>4</sup> By “turning upside-down” what society views as normal (the superior male), one is able to critique the reality of those norms. If male sexual dominance is viewed as all-important, and it fails, the male is made ridiculous. Therefore, social standards themselves are a ridiculous set-up of male principles of superiority (impossible to maintain) and female principles of inferiority (impossible to prove). Rochester “deflate[s]” a machismo view into its actuality. Kirk Combe writes, “Political manhood itself *as men like to define it* is under attack in this poem”.<sup>5</sup> The politics of masculinity and how they reciprocally affect femininity are both being scrutinized. Rochester argues that manhood and womanhood “*as men like to define [them]*” are a farce. The farcical lover whose “dart of love, whose piercing point, oft tried, / With virgin blood ten thousand maids have dyed” cannot satisfy the female who cries

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1-2, 9-10 and 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Wintle, “Libertinism and Sexual Politics”, in *Spirit of Wit: Reconsiderations of Rochester*, ed. Jeremy Treglown, Oxford, 1982, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Kirk Combe, *A Martyr for Sin: Rochester’s Critique of Polity, Sexuality, and Society*, Newark, 1998, 120.

“Is there then no more?” (ll. 37-38 and 22). With traditional manhood reversed, Rochester completes the scene with the lover’s crude, comic diatribe.

The premonition of sex and the lover’s failure are brief. The body of the poem becomes, instead, the cursing and lugubrious narrative of the lover aimed at sex and his body. A defining characteristic of “The Imperfect Enjoyment” is its crude language, which Rochester was notorious for. The deliberately offensive language accurately expresses the crude ideology the lover embodies – of sexual appetite alone. The lover recounts previous conquests to inflate his ego:

Stiffly resolved, ’twould carelessly invade  
Woman or man, nor ought its fury stayed:  
Where’er it pierced, a cunt it found or made –

...

Breaks every stew, does each small whore invade,

...

Worst part of me, and henceforth hated most,  
Through all the town a common fucking post,  
On whom each whore relieves her tingling cunt  
As hogs on gates do rub themselves and grunt.<sup>6</sup>

Because the language is so coarse and the assertions so outlandish (“ten thousand maids”, “breaks every stew”), the obvious libertine parallel is mocked as a brutish vulgar figure. The vision of a controlled suave gentleman libertine is transformed into a coarse invasive lecher (it is significant that the word “invade” occurs twice in that last passage) whose sexuality controls him. As Kirk Combe says, “Rochester accuses the young man of being a slave to lust”.<sup>7</sup>

The lover is further removed from any superior status by his total embodiment as a penis: “A wishing, weak, unmoving lump I lie. / This dart of love ...” (ll. 36-37). From this line onward all action and emotionality is transposed onto the penis, a synecdoche for the lover. The lover does not break “every stew”, his penis does. “Like a rude, roaring hector in the streets” (l. 54), the penis enacts the role of a man. His totality is now a “fucking post” (l. 63). When his “flame” of passion, an

<sup>6</sup> “The Imperfect Enjoyment”, ll. 41-43, 59, 62-65.

<sup>7</sup> Combe, *A Martyr for Sin*, 112.

emotional feeling, is extinguished, it is not the lover's heart or mind that exhibits that loss but his penis, "Shrunk up and sapless like a withered flower" (l. 45). This "worst part of [him]" takes over, revealing a ridiculous, carnal manifestation of libertinism (l. 62). This satirical image portrays the sexually prioritized man as mindless and, hence, bodiless, except for his overriding sexuality.

The crude language and imagery used to describe the male is a tool in his mockery. However, one might question why, if Rochester is arguing against traditional notions of men as obsessed with profligation and women as sexually profitable, he uses a similar coarseness with the female. The degrading words with which he names the female, such as "hog" (l. 65), "whore" (l. 59) and "cunt" (l. 18), would at first appear a highly misogynist form of expression. However, this language becomes one of the strongest supporters of the feminist cause in the poem when we consider who is using them – the ridiculed, pitiful lover. Combe suggests that "Yet, once more, to the thoughtful reader, the poem soon becomes not raillery against women, but a frenetic piece of irony directed at the fragile male pride of the overthrown libertine swiver".<sup>8</sup> The words are the ineffectual cursing of a wounded male ego and since the male is sexist, it would be inconsistent for him to address the female with respect. In addition to satirizing the young man, Rochester is trying to strip him down to the very pith of libertinism which houses a crude, sexist inequality. A man who does not value a woman's mind or heart (only her body) would think of her, whether consciously or not, as a "whore" or a "cunt".

To smooth out or soothe the language would only serve to cover up the larger issue of what is going on beneath the degradation of the male – the degrading of the female. By discrediting the male lover and his ideology, Rochester also discredits this crude view of women. If the lover is the epitome of how not to live and how not to value human life, his words are above all an instance of what not to call a woman. Through his use of the reciprocal stereotypes of male and female, Rochester's denunciation of a furious and, in reality, spent libertine lifestyle also condemns how that lifestyle treats women. The libertine view of the male pursuit of sex and the female as the one-dimensional goal is not dividable; one idea cannot stand without the other. Therefore, Rochester's implied argument for a more intelligent, realistic male calls for the recognition of a smarter female to match him.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

Although Rochester presents a female attitude in his exposure of the male as not superior (sexually or emotionally), his strongest statement lies in his portrayal of the female lover. Discrediting male sexuality as inflated, Rochester embraces female sexuality as unfairly understated. In contrast to ideals of femininity as virginal, coquettish, and docile, Rochester presents his female as the more powerful sexual aggressor, a desiring, active figure in intercourse. This reversal, like the libertine's, exposes the fallacy of conventional mores. However, this new female is not a mockery, for her actions, although decided, are not made ridiculous by overstatement or crudeness.

The female enters amidst the libertine's feminine preconceptions but soon becomes the aggressor, shocking him to impotency. Rochester begins (ll. 6-10):

She clips me to her breast, and sucks me to her face.  
Her nimble tongue, Love's lesser lightning, played  
Within my mouth, and to my thoughts conveyed  
Swift orders that I should prepare to throw  
The all-dissolving thunderbolt below.

As we have seen earlier, the male, assuming the role of aggressor, is the "thunderbolt" while the female's sexuality is the "lesser lightning". However, because they are "both equally inspired with eager fire", the female now exhibits equivalent power as her "thoughts" become "Swift orders". The male libertine, unaccustomed to the reality of female sexual desire, is shocked by her "orders" and by the experience of her "busy hand" guiding "that part / Which should convey my soul up to her heart" (ll. 13-14), which indicates that she is not only physically but also mentally active.

Confronted now with her real sexuality the male cannot maintain his false, inflated libidinous self, and prematurely dissolves into "liquid raptures" (l. 15). Evidence that he blames his premature ejaculation on her advances is in his immediate transition from the wooing language of "the pointed kiss" (l. 11) to his castigation of her as a "cunt":

In liquid raptures I dissolve all o'er  
Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore.

A touch from any part had done't:  
Her hand, her foot, her very look's a cunt.<sup>9</sup>

Her “touch”, or more dynamically her advance, strike him impotent, and as Kirk Combe says, “the man is overwhelmed by his partner’s sexuality; the ugliness of the word ‘cunt’ strikes me as a kind of verbal shield held up feebly against female onslaught”. The male, now rendered powerless, is prey to the female’s aggression as she antagonistically “smil[es]” and “chides” him (ll. 19-24):

Smiling, she chides in a kind murmuring noise,  
And from her body wipes the clammy joys,  
When, with a thousand kisses wandering o’er  
My panting bosom, “Is there then no more?”  
She cries, “All this to love and rapture’s due;  
Must we not pay a debt to pleasure too?”

Here there is an apparent gender role shift as the power transfers from the man to the woman. As Combe suggests, “‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’ is a poem not only of male sexual humiliation, but of outright sexual overthrow by the woman”.

The zenith of the woman’s “overthrow” is in her final lines where she directs the male toward her desires, not the fulfilment of his. She becomes the sole desirer, replacing the male’s domination established at the beginning of the text. Furthermore, she is not concerned with “love” or “rapture” – it is “pleasure” she seeks. She completes the transition of the text from the male as primary (his point of view, his active pursuit of her body) to the female as primary (no longer “Naked she lay”, as in the opening phrase of the poem). It is her point of view, her questioning now. She is the desiring, active party, demanding he gives her pleasure, while he is inactive, “forlorn”, “lost” (l. 25), “shamed” (l. 29), and most importantly, “obedient” (l. 26):

In the ensuing unsuccessful attempt to collect her “debt to pleasure,” the woman then initiates a terrifying inversion of sexual preeminence: she takes the role of the aggressor. The rake has turned from victimizer to victim.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “The Imperfect Enjoyment”, ll. 15-18.

<sup>10</sup> Combe, *A Martyr for Sin*, 119.

Rochester reverses traditional gender sex roles not only to expose hidden female sexuality but to submerge the male into the oppressive field he created for the female. Inequality, whether or not in the bedroom, will bring about a humiliation. For “The Imperfect Enjoyment”, it is the male’s turn to be humiliated:

In this poem, the debauchee hits rock bottom according to his own social and sexual conventions: he becomes the self-degrading object of unwanted sexual pressure. Vicariously, then, the libertine reader is piqued into examining not only his own mindless profligacy, but more perturbingly the servile and paradoxical self-loathing that comes from *being* tyrannized – that is, the awful predicament to which he routinely places women.<sup>11</sup>

Because the male lover has adhered so strictly to the female stereotype, he is shocked all the greater when the woman reveals her power. The mindset of limiting another had limited him. With Rochester’s reversal, the male is able to experience the confines of his own libertine stereotypes. He becomes the helpless, virginal “flower” to the powerful, sexually prioritized aggressor (l. 45): “In a world of mechanical appetite, he who has used others as objects becomes an object in turn.”<sup>12</sup> The male is left lamenting his stake in life, psychically reduced through oppression to little more than his penis, a sexual tool, paradoxically, the identical value he gave the female – her genitalia. Combe concludes, “Via such gender bending and fulfilling the promise of its paradoxical title, ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’ forces the sexual oppressor imaginatively to experience something of the crisis of the sexually oppressed”.<sup>13</sup> The transposition of gender hegemony reveals the capacity for female power and the incapacity, for either men or women, to remain powerless.

Since the male and female are at odds in the distribution of sexual power, Rochester finally discounts those discordant energies for a union more equal in affection – that of love. The sexually prioritized lifestyle, at once incompatible with skewed masculine and feminine ideals, is now too crude an arena for its superior emotion, love. Apart from suffering from the effect of the sudden exertion of the female’s power, the male is

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Reba Wilcoxon, “Pornography, Obscenity, and Rochester’s ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’”, *SEL*, 15 (Summer), 384.

<sup>13</sup> Combe, *A Martyr for Sin*, 121.

also rendered unable to perform because of his emotional attachment to the relationship. He maintains his playboy romp among a stream of women he does not care for, but with Corinna, whose mistreatment he laments he cannot put right, the libertine cannot perform (l. 72). Rochester writes (ll. 46-49):

Thou treacherous, base deserter of my flame,  
False to my passion, fatal to my fame  
Through what mistaken magic dost thou prove  
So true to lewdness, so untrue to love?

Famous for his past sexual triumphs, when confronted with love, his dependable sexuality and physicality have deserted him. His libertine style of living is “untrue to love”, perfidious and false to emotions raised above mere animalistic lust (ll. 58-61):

Ev’n so thy brutal valor displayed,  
Breaks every stew, does each small whore invade,  
But when great Love the onset does command,  
Base recreant to thy prince, thou dar’st not stand.

At ease copulating in “stews” and with “whore[s]”, “Love”, not a trite emotion but “great”, leaves the lover impotent.

As Reba Wilcoxon indicates, “The theme emerges through two controlling logical propositions in the poem: in a situation where ‘great Love’ is present, the lover is inadequate; in a situation where feeling or concern for the gratification of the sex object was not present, the lover experienced unlimited sexual power”.<sup>14</sup> On one level, Rochester’s assertion dismisses sex as an inadequate expression of “great Love”. This could be interpreted as his calling in other, more valid expressions such as communication, honour, or respect, all proto-feminist ideas when directed at the woman. “Feeling or concern”, as Wilcoxon explains, is thus more honourable than desire. Carole Fabricant agrees: “the body is characteristically shown to be incapable of matching the vitality of passion. Sex inevitably winds up back in the realm of the mind.”<sup>15</sup> This mental focus is also apparent in Rochester’s “The Disabled Debauchee” where an aged admiral does not participate in sex but “vicariously

<sup>14</sup> Wilcoxon, “Pornography, Obscenity, and Rochester’s ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’”, 388.

<sup>15</sup> Carole Fabricant, “Rochester’s World of Imperfect Enjoyment”, *JEGP*, 73 (1974), 343.



indulges” through observation.<sup>16</sup> He, too, is impotent and left to recount his former glories:

I'll tell of whores attacked, their lords at home;  
 Bawds' quarters beaten up, and fortress won;  
 Windows demolished, watches overcome;  
 And handsome ills by my contrivance done.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the youthful lover in “The Imperfect Enjoyment”, the debauchee’s old, incapable body is the physical manifestation of Rochester’s belief in the inferior body and superior mind. His sexuality has failed him so he turns to the stronger force – a mental life. When the misguided libertine in “The Imperfect Enjoyment” is confronted with his mentally limiting stereotype, he realizes that sexuality fails to fulfil human desire. With his turning away from a narrative of sex to the contemplation of sex, Rochester’s lover learns to idealize not the body but the mind.

But even as a psychic representation, sex remains vile. Because the crudity of promiscuous sex cannot honour true love, sex still remains in the animal realm. As Fabricant maintains, “The venomous comparison with hogs indicates that Rochester does not accept sexual gratification as a value in itself”.<sup>18</sup> The coarse language alone, besides the larger argument of sex relationships as inadequate to love relationships, creates this “revulsion of sexuality and becomes a metaphor of the failure to fulfill human desire”.<sup>19</sup>

Hidden within the vile language is a moral attack on human reductionism that calls for such negative associations. The lover cannot remain promiscuous and detached, using the woman purely for sexual means, when he feels love for her: “Hedonistic as its speaker means to be, his words include an ethical norm, ‘Love,’ against which pure sensuality and sexuality are viewed as inadequate.”<sup>20</sup> In his declaration that the body is inferior and incapable of housing greater emotions such

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>17</sup> “The Disabled Debauchee”, ll. 33-36, in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Fabricant, “Rochester’s World of Imperfect Enjoyment”, 384.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>20</sup> Wilcoxon, “Pornography, Obscenity, and Rochester’s ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’”, 380.

as love, Rochester marks his final, most feminist assertion for reciprocal relationships between man and woman.

His love for Corinna and his concern to right her “wronged” status physically disables his libertine ways, and leads Rochester in the final couplet of the poem (ll. 71-72) to express the hope that

... may ten thousand abler pricks agree  
To do the wronged Corinna right for thee.

The libertine’s mere consideration of pleasure being granted beyond his own shows a movement from selfishness to concern. Wilcoxon argues that:

The speaker, who has “wronged” Corinna, acknowledges an obligation beyond the mere satisfaction of self and an obligation to the needs and desires of another. Such a concern is surely an ethical statement, transcending any disagreement about sexual mores.

Even if a querulous reader is unable to take the coarse language of the conclusion (“pricks”) without demur, and, consequently, declares the ending a joke, the lover’s consideration cannot be regarded as insincere:

The narrator conveys affection and tenderness toward the disappointed mistress. She is his “great Love,” that he wishes to show his “wished obedience” to, implying a concern beyond the satisfaction of lust.

The love narrative, brief as it is, but untainted by crude language, strikes the reader as wholesome and genuine. Additionally, the male’s lamentation lends foul language to his many past lovers but leaves Corinna’s description much more subdued. Besides his one instance of name-calling (“cunt” in l. 18) when he is first rendered impotent, references to Corinna are devoid of crudity. Additionally, “cunt” may be interpreted as not being derogatory in this instance since it is the most sexually charged, and, hence, appropriate, word to describe the immense sexual power she portrayed at the time. Wilcoxon suggests that:

The insufficiency of sexual power alone is poetically reinforced by the insistence of unrefined language of sex – tingling cunt, oyster-cinder-beggar-common whore, fucking post: and by diminishing physical references – rub, grunt, ravenous chancres, consuming weepings, and the

like. By contrast, when the fair mistress is present, the language of sex, though it still might be thought of as unrefined by some, is not conjoined with images that debase her.<sup>21</sup>

Sexual, emotional, and finally, linguistic considerations mark a lover realizing the incompatibility of love with a disconnected, promiscuous front. The satirized lover of “The Imperfect Enjoyment” may mirror Rochester himself, a notorious libertine, tiring of his unfulfilling ways. Whether or not the narrative is inspired by the poet’s own experience, the feminist themes it evokes are hardly fiction and have been realized in an existing realm of reality beyond the book.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

## **“UPON A LITTLE LADY”: GENDER AND DESIRE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LYRICS**

KARI BOYD MCBRIDE

James Grantham Turner’s project to revise “the history of [early modern] sexuality according to new readings of the texts and artifacts that constituted that history” has resulted in two groundbreaking studies, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London* and the recent book on *Schooling Sex*.<sup>1</sup> Turner suggests that the libertine literature of England, France, and Italy represented a “hard-core curriculum” that was “thought to constitute a complete theory and practice of sex”.<sup>2</sup> But that very claim raises the question, complete for whom? Whose desire is represented by these practices? Whose gaze? Indeed, who speaks? For the libertine literature, while copious and popular, offered a very narrow, inevitably male and overwhelmingly heterosexual perspective on early modern sexuality; there is really no information to be gleaned from these documents regarding women’s desires or their practice of sex.

For reasons so obvious as to hardly need exploring, there never developed a parallel libertine corpus concerned with the practice of the pleasures particular to women’s bodies. Not that dominant thinking about women in the era assumed that they were free from pleasure and desire; indeed, women were thought to be more susceptible than men to sin and temptation, particularly sexual sin, and therefore in need of a kind of sexual enclosure, whether in the family or in the cloister. But that understanding of women’s sexual weakness inhibited rather than fostered libertine expression. Instead, both within libertine literature and within the household, women and their desires were subject to men and

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<sup>1</sup> James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics, and Literary Culture, 1630-1685*, Cambridge, 2002; *Schooling Sex: Libertine Literature and Erotic Education in Italy, France, and England, 1534-1685*, Oxford, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> James Grantham Turner, “Libertine Speculation”, Unpublished Paper, 1.

obscured by men's desire. As the author of the 1623 treatise on *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* declared, women "make no Lawes, they consent to none, they abrogate none". Rather, women "are understood either married or to bee married and their desires are subject to their husband", an interpretation that gestures to the text of Genesis where, in consequence of her sin, Eve's desire was henceforth to be "to" Adam.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, given this kind of thinking, there was little toleration for women's expression of desire, certainly not in the explicit libertine literature of the social underworld. There were a number of libertine texts published under female pseudonyms – such as *The City-Dames Petition* (London, 1647), by Mrs I. Straddling, Han. Snatchall, Na. Lecher, Sa. Lovesicke, *et al.* – and many, many others. But these works merely ventriloquized male desire through the mouths of female sexualized objects. Such works effectively silenced women twice: women in these narratives not only fail to express their own desire, but they are forced to articulate what the male authors desire them to desire. So where might we look, to borrow Jonathan Goldberg's locution, for a "desiring woman writing"?<sup>4</sup>

Before undertaking that quest, it seems essential to clarify my use of some terminology, particularly "male" and "female", "woman" and "man". I do not assume that the desires of persons inhabiting those dimorphic categories arise naturally or organically from gendered bodies in a kind of complementary sexuality; I do not assume, for instance, that all men will express a uniform heterosexuality, either in print or in practice. Rather I take the categories "man" and "woman" to be givens of the social structure, and I proceed from the premise that, while the forms and orientation of desire are produced culturally, socially, and economically, there exists, as the *sine qua non* for such production, a

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Edgar, *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights: Or, the Lawes Provision for Women. A Methodicall Collection of such Statutes and Customes, with the Cases, Opinions, Arguments and points of Learning in the Law, as doe properly concerne Women*, London, 1632, sig. B3v. In the Authorized Version, the text of Genesis reads, "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (3:16). A marginal note gives the alternative reading, "subject to thy husband".

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, *Desiring Women Writing: English Renaissance Examples*, Stanford, 1997. Goldberg notes that in the early phases of the feminist recuperative project, that is, the scholarly work to recover writings by and about women, women's expression of sexuality has tended to be suppressed: "the prevailing trend has been tantamount to the recovery of morally pure, suffering subjects ... " (5).

sexual dynamic – if I may be allowed to borrow that term from psychoanalysis, a sexual drive. I assume that human beings are sexual, that they have a capacity for sexual pleasure. Or, to abandon the psychoanalytic matrix as soon as I have invoked it, I assume that the absence of a literature of sexual practice by and about women does not signal women's absence from or lack of interest in sexual expression or the absence of desire, any more than the copious literature by and about men indicates that all men are studs. Rather, the regulation of these discourses along lines of gender is a salient means for the production of those two gender categories in the first place, as well as their continuing regulation. But, if you will admit my assumption of sexual pleasure, it seems reasonable to ask how those early modern persons inhabiting the category “woman” understood, experienced, and expressed sexual pleasure. If not in explicitly sexual literature – if not explicitly, in sexual literature – then where?

The problem of locating women's pleasure and practices dogs even Valerie Traub's groundbreaking study of *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. Traub aims to document the “unprecedented proliferation of representations” of “female homoeroticism” in early modern England, relying on medical texts, wherein she documents the history of the “discovery” of the clitoris by early modern physicians, as well as lewd lyrics and poems. The naming of the clitoris and the understanding of that organ as the seat of women's sexual pleasure produced a small but significant literature by men instructing men to attend to the satisfaction of women's pleasure. As Traub notes, in that literature, “female erotic pleasure is a central component of reproductive, marital chastity”. And Angus McLaren has suggested that “from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries it was commonly assumed that women not only found pleasure in sexual intercourse but that they positively had to if the union were to be a fruitful one”.<sup>5</sup>

But the texts that detail women's pleasure and its relationship to conception are written by men. Thus, in terms of primary resources, Traub's material substantially overlaps Turner's in that she mostly discusses male-authored texts; though her methodology is refreshingly

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<sup>5</sup> Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, 2002, 78; and Angus McLaren, “The Pleasures of Procreation: Traditional and Biomedical Theories of Conception”, in *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility of England from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1984, 29 (quoted in Traub, 81).

feminist, like Turner's her sources are mostly confined to men's thinking about women's bodies and pleasures. Indeed, Traub notes that what she calls the "renaissance of *lesbianism* occurred during a period when women's documented voices were largely silent about erotic acts":

... few women wrote stageplays, love lyrics, or diary entries that allude explicitly to desire among women. Consequently, most – but not all – of the representations discussed in this book were created by men. Not surprisingly, they reveal a great deal of ignorance about, and suspicion of, female bodies and desires.<sup>6</sup>

Traub does, in fact, provide some interesting readings of texts written by women in the process of producing a history of the rhetoric of "lesbianism", but her caution about the paucity of woman-authored sources can be applied to sources expressing heteroerotic desire, as well. That is, whether their inclinations were, in our terminology, hetero- or homosexual or something else altogether, early modern women were mostly silent about sex.

At the same time, though one will struggle to identify many assuredly woman-authored popular texts that reveal much detail about "what women wanted", such popular literature can provide insight into widely-held ideas about gender, sexuality, and sexual practice that illuminate the cultural economy in which those terms functioned. So in *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany*, Joy Wiltenburg suggests that

The English [street literature] strongly emphasizes women's sexuality as an instrument of control over men ... ; [women's] sexual prowess can cow inadequate mates into domestic submission .... Men who succeed in satisfying women's sexual requirements are seen as dominant both within marriage and without.

Thus, in "seventeenth-century English ballads, ... one hears constant complaints from women about their husbands' nocturnal performance; men apparently are failing to supply the price of female subjection":

Sex ... is depicted as a decisive test for the male; a demonstration of potency affirms his dominance, while failure to satisfy the female brings him shame and subordination. Impotence, even the merely relative

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<sup>6</sup> Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 21.

impotence of cuckoldry, implies a complete upheaval in the sexual order and gives the woman power to flout, ridicule, and sometimes command her mate .... The woman's sexual victory over her husband [in these anonymous ballads], begun by his inability to satisfy her and consummated by her selection of a superior lover, often extends to complete usurpation of his domestic authority.

As a result, seventeenth-century England was obsessed with cuckoldry, a phenomenon that did not exercise the pamphleteers of Germany (the second site of her comparative study) to nearly the same extent.<sup>7</sup>

Wiltenburg's analysis is interesting for the way in which it demonstrates that early modern folk assumed that women were sexual creatures, that they were capable of sexual pleasure and that their capacity for pleasure might or might not be fulfilled by men. Wiltenburg's "low culture" sources also help to illuminate those rare expressions of women's desire in high literary forms like the lyric and help to situate more precisely poems of imperfect enjoyment (that is, poems of sexual failure and male impotence) like Aphra Behn's 1680 poem "The Disappointment". There it is precisely a woman's expression of her own sexual desire that makes a man "unable to perform the sacrifice".<sup>8</sup> When the "fair Chloris" resists Lysander's importunities, it turns him on; but when Chloris begins to return desire for desire, he is put off. Behn makes the economy of this sexual relationship very clear:

In a lone thicket made for love,	
Silent as a yielding maid's consent,	
She with a charming languishment	
Permits his force, yet gently strove;	
Her hands his bosom softly meet,	15
But not to put him back designed,	
Rather to draw 'em on inclined:	
Whilst he lay trembling at her feet,	
Resistance 'tis in vain to show;	
She wants the power to say – Ah! What d'ye do?	20

<sup>7</sup> Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany*, Charlottesville: VA, 1992, 142, 148 and 149.

<sup>8</sup> Behn's poem is widely available, both through anthologies, including *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, eds Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, New York and London, 1996, 112-15, and online. It is cited in this essay by line numbers.



Her bright eyes sweet and yet severe,  
 Where love and shame confusedly do strive,  
 Fresh vigor to Lysander give;  
 And breathing faintly in his ear  
     She cried – *Cease, cease – your vain desire,* 25  
*Or I'll call out – What would you do?*  
*My dearer honor even to you*  
*I cannot, must not give – Retire,*  
*Or take this life, whose chiefest part*  
     *I gave you with the conquest of my heart.* 30

Chloris' feigned and faint resistance is designed to "draw [Lysander] on" (l. 17). But Chloris is soon desiring as overtly as Lysander:

Her balmy lips encountering his,  
 Their bodies, as their souls, are joined;  
 Where both in transports unconfined  
 Extend themselves upon the moss.  
     Cloris half dead and breathless lay; 55  
 Her soft eyes cast a humid light,  
 Such as divides the day and night,  
 Or falling stars, whose fires decay:  
 And now no signs of life she shows,  
     But what in short-breathed sighs returns and goes. 60

He saw how at her length she lay;  
     He saw her rising bosom bare;  
 Her loose thin robes, through which appear  
 A shape designed for love and play;  
     Abandoned by her pride and shame 65  
 She does her softest joys dispense,  
 Offering her virgin innocence  
 A victim to love's sacred flame,  
 While the o'er-ravished shepherd lies  
     Unable to perform the sacrifice. 70

Behn's poem offers one explanation for the impotence and inadequacy of men as represented in the street literature: a desiring woman is not desirable. In fact, as Aphra Behn's reputation attests, a desiring woman is at best a whore, and a castrating whore, at that. Little wonder that for most women there was not any love that dared to speak its name.

Likewise, Wiltenburg's analysis helps to situate Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's poetic response to Jonathan Swift's misogynist invective on the corruption of the female body in her 1734 "The Reasons that Induced Dr S to Write a Poem Called the Lady's Dressing Room". Montagu's poem attacks Swift's potency, a potency that fails him in bed as well as in print. Swift's poem portrays the hapless Strephon stealing into Celia's chamber when both Celia and her maid, Betty, are away. There he discovers the foulness of her body that a lengthy toilet – "Five hours, (and who can do it less in?) / By haughty *Celia* spent in Dressing" (ll. 1-2) – cannot ultimately hide.<sup>9</sup> His frightful tour through her room reaches its abyss with his examination of her close stool:

That careless Wench! no Creature warn her  
 To move it out from yonder Corner;  
 But leave it standing full in Sight  
 For you to exercise your Spight.  
 In vain, the Workman shew'd his Wit 75  
 With Rings and Hinges counterfeit  
 To make it seem in this Disguise,  
 A Cabinet to vulgar Eyes;  
 For *Strephon* ventur'd to look in,  
 Resolv'd to go thro' thick and thin; 80  
 He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,  
 He smelt it all the Time before.  
 ...  
 Thus finishing his grand Survey, 115  
 Disgusted *Strephon* stole away  
 Repeating in his amorous Fits,  
 Oh! *Celia*, *Celia*, *Celia* shifts!

The admission that "Celia shifts" is, of course, an acknowledgment of her carnality and corporeality, a knowledge that Strephon will not soon forget. Henceforth, he will, with Pavlovian inevitability, think of a woman whenever he smells a fart (ll. 121-24):

His foul Imagination links  
 Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks:

<sup>9</sup> The first edition of "The Lady's Dressing Room" (London, 1732, the text here quoted) is in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1966, II, 524-30.



Celia is too carnal, Dr S is inadequately so; his desire is unconsummated because he lacks the physical ability to complete the act.

To illustrate this point, the Montagu must eschew “Noble thoughts” – the idealization of desire that led Strephon to mistake Celia’s nature – and descend to the truth of bodies, where incarnation is essential to consummation:

Here many Noble thoughts occur	
But I prolixity abhor,	60
And will persue th’instructive Tale	
To shew the Wise in some things fail.	
The Reverend Lover with surprize	
Peeps in her Bubbys, and her Eyes,	
And kisses both, and trys – and trys.	65
The Evening in this Hellish Play,	
Beside his Guineas thrown away,	
Provok’d the Preist to that degree	
He swore, the Fault is not [in] me.	
Your damn’d Close stool so near my Nose,	70
Your Dirty Smock, and Stinking Toes	
Would make a Hercules as tame	
As any Beau that you can name.	
The nymph grown Furious roar’d by God	
The blame lyes all in Sixty odd	75
And scornful pointing to the door	
Cry’d, Fumbler see my Face no more.	

And just as women’s sexual failings were thought to influence the quality of their writing – critics of Behn and Montagu could rarely comment on their poetics without a reference to erotics – so, too, Dr S’s sexual failing implicates his ability to write. He replies:

With all my Heart I’ll go away	
But nothing done, I’ll nothing pay.	
Give back the Money – How, cry’d she,	80
Would you palm such a cheat on me!	
For poor 4 pound to roar and bellow,	
Why sure you want some new Prunella?	
I’ll be reveng’d you saucy Quean	
(Replys the disappointed Dean)	85
I’ll so describe your dressing room	
The very Irish shall not come.	

She answered short, I'm glad you'l write,  
You'l furnish paper when I shite.

In the end – one seems compelled to speak scatologically at this point – Dr S's sexual failure is not caused by Betty's (or Celia's) shit, by their corporeality. Rather, sexual failure, like sexual success, is implicit in sexuality itself, a feature of the realm of the body.

There were not many women like Behn and Montagu who deigned to risk a full frontal assault on bodies and desires; so there are few poems that present explicitly desiring women. But there are many poems where sexual desire is expressed in concert with religious desire, and I would suggest that the search for “a desire of her own” must rely heavily on devotional literature. Even in a religious culture that valued chastity (variously defined), an eroticized desire for God – or, more pointedly, for the man Jesus – was long promoted among women religious. Medieval mystics, both female and male, developed the language of eroticized devotion to an exquisite fullness, and those tropes continued to influence the devotional poets of the Renaissance, whether Protestant or Catholic.<sup>12</sup> It would be easy to dismiss these expressions as being precisely not about sex but rather about the suppression of desire, but I think that disavowal misses the erotic quality of such writing in a world where there were few acceptable avenues for the expression of women's pleasures.

Dame Gertrude More's early seventeenth-century poem “Magnes Amoris Amor” is a case in point. Like the medieval mystics, More uses eroticized language to express devotion to Christ, her “spouse divine”:

*Mirroure of Beauty in Whose Face  
The essence lives of every Grace!  
True lustre dwels in they [sic] Sole Spheare.  
Those glimmerings that sometimes appeare  
In this dark vayl, this gloomy night  
Are shadows tip't with glow-worm light.  
Shew me thy radiant parts above,  
Where angels unconsumèd move  
Where amorous fire, maintaines their lives,  
As man by breathing Air, survives.  
But if perchance the mortal eye,*

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<sup>12</sup> This confluence of sexual and religious longing is due chiefly to the Song of Songs or Canticles, to the history of its reception in the hermeneutical traditions of both Judaism and Christianity, and to the primacy of its metaphors in devotional literature.

*That views Thy dazzling looks must dye  
With blindfaith heer ile kis them & desire  
To feele the heat, before I see the fire.*<sup>13</sup>

More's focusing of desire on the body of the divine Christ draws on the orthodox doctrine of incarnation to insist on the embodiment of both lover and beloved. As a result, More's "desire" to "kis" Christ's "radiant parts" and "dazzling looks" and to "feeel the heat" of that interaction is more explicitly erotic than many secular lyrics of the period. But More's reliance on "blind faith" is a rejection of the scopophilic obsession of that discourse and enables alternative ways to think about erotic exchanges, ways that escape the relentless objectification of the visual economy.

Unlike More, the devotional poet Aemilia Lanyer retained the centrality of the visual in her blazon of the dying Christ in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611). But by altering the expected gendered hierarchy of eroticism, Lanyer makes Christ the object of a description in which his dying, passive body is a spectacle for female desire:

This is that Bridegroom that appeares so faire,  
So sweet, so lovely in his Spouses sight,  
That unto Snowe we may his face compare,  
His cheekes like skarlet, and his eyes so bright  
As purest Doves that in the rivers are,  
Washed with milke, to give the more delight;  
His head is likened to the finest gold,  
His curled lockes so beauteous to behold;

Blacke as a Raven in her blackest hew;  
His lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet  
Than is the sweetest hony dropping dew,  
Or hony combs, where all the Bees doe meet ....<sup>14</sup>

Lanyer's take on the gendered hierarchy of desire is no simple reversal. Rather, the relationship between gender and desire is complex and avoids

<sup>13</sup> More's poem can be found in Dorothy L. Latz, *Glow-Worm Light: Writings of Seventeenth-Century English Recusant Women from Original Manuscripts*, Salzburg, 1989, 41. The poem's title is taken from the caption under More's portrait on the page facing the poem as printed in the original editions of More's work (1657 and 1658). Latz provides a thorough analysis of the influence of the mystical tradition on More's poems.

<sup>14</sup> *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ll. 1305-16, ed. Susanne Woods, Oxford, 1993, 107.

the simple binaries of male and female, of hetero- and homoerotic, that define the tradition of the love lyric. Hers is a feminized Christ who is both desirable and debased – this is a description of his crucified body, after all – but the gaze here is also feminized. Rather than being merely objects of the male gaze, women here express their desire through looking. Again, as with More’s poem, Lanyer’s focus on the eroticized body of Christ allows for the explicit expression of women’s desire in a way that affirms their carnality rather than – or perhaps in spite of – an idealized virginity. Furthermore, Lanyer’s address to “Each blessed Lady that in Virtue spends / Your pretious time to beautifie your soules” redeems women from the charge of narcissism, part of a process of debasement that makes them available for male sexual and political control – as in, for instance, Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room”, where women’s obsession with make-up is a consequence of their need to disguise their putrid, stinking bodies. In a significant alternative to the way in which the erotic lyric had traditionally figured women, here women’s souls – as well as their bodies – are their own

To claim one’s body as one’s own seems an essential step in the process of claiming – and expressing – one’s desire, and, in this context, it is relevant to consider the early modern ballad “My Thing Is My Own”.<sup>15</sup> There is no way of knowing who wrote the ballad – if, indeed, it had only one author – but it undoubtedly portrays sex from the perspective of female desire. The refrain of this ballad says (repeatedly): “My Thing is my own, and I’ll keep it so still, / Yet other young Lasses may do as they will.” The claim of ownership of what was known in this period as a woman’s “commodity” recalls the fact that maidenhead – and, therefore, women’s sexual desire – were a kind of property, but one that, in law, belonged to a woman’s father or her husband. In the ballad, the woman’s desire is, as one might expect, recouped in the end by marriage: the final refrain saying “My thing is my own and I’ll keep it so still, / Until I be Married, say Men what they will”. But the initial claim of ownership in the refrain is repeated in various forms in each verse, usually to the detriment of male potency in a manner suggestive of Wiltenburg’s analysis:

I, a tender young Maid, have been courted by many,  
Of all sorts and Trades as ever was any:  
A spruce Haberdasher first spake to me fair,

<sup>15</sup> See also Traub’s discussion of this ballad in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 100-103.

But I would have nothing to do with Small ware.  
 My Thing is my own, and I'll keep it so still,  
 Yet other young Lasses may do what they will.

...

A Master of Musick came with an intent,  
 To give me a Lesson on my Instrument,  
 I thank'd him for nothing, but bid him be gone,  
 For my little Fiddle should not be plaid on.

An Usurer came with abundance of Cash,  
 But I had no mind to come under his Lash,  
 He profer'd me Jewels, and great store of Gold,  
 But I would not Mortgage my little Free-hold.

A blunt Lieutenant surpriz'd my Placket,  
 And fiercely began to rifle and sack it,  
 I mustered my Spirits up and became bold,  
 And forc'd my Lieutenant to quit his strong hold.

...

A fine dapper Taylor, with a Yard in his Hand,  
 Did profer his Service to be at Command,  
 He talk'd of a slit I had above Knee,  
 But I'll have no Taylors to stitch it for me.

...

My thing is my own, and I'll keep it so still,  
 Until I be Married, say Men what they will.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Common Muse: An Anthology of Popular British Ballad Poetry 15th-20th Century*, eds V. de Sola Pinto and A.E. Rodway, Penguin, 1965, 435-37. The refrain "My thing is my own ..." follows each verse. The poem was first published in Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy: Being a Collection of the Best Merry Ballads and Songs, Old and New*, London, 1719-1720. I have reproduced but a few of all the extant verses here. See Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 101-102, for one complete version of the ballad. (It is also the title number of a CD of the "Bawdy Songs of Thomas D'Urfey" performed by the Hesperus ensemble: Koch International Classics 2001.)



Of particular interest here is the range of metaphor for a woman's "thing". The trope that characterizes a woman's sexuality as "my little freehold" is particularly notable, as it is contrary to expectation and to the legal practice of the time (wherein women's bodies were the property of their fathers or husbands). The images of "placket" or "slit" are fairly typical of the era and may even imply that women's bodies exist to fulfill male heterosexual desire by providing an appropriate receptacle for the penis (a sense that survives in the word "vagina", a sheath or scabbard). But the image of a "little Fiddle" may imply a different kind of desire and may refer specifically to the kind of clitoral rubbing that marks female desire including women's same-sex desire. The term "fricatrice" (from *fricare*, to rub) could stand for any "lewd woman" at this time, but, as both Turner and Traub have shown, that term was sometimes Englished as "tribade" or "rubster" to refer in particular to sex between women.

So in Anne Killigrew's 1686 poem "Upon a Little Lady", the priapic desire of Apollo and Eros for the "little lady" – that is, the clitoris in particular and, more generally, female sexual pleasure – is frustrated, and their rays and arrows thrown back at them. But when the little cupids of the poem "chang'd [their] wanton bows" for "Lyres", the desiring god Apollo is effectively replaced by the goddess Eudora, the one who can satisfy the female desire by "tun[ing] the Lady like her Lute", that is, by fingering or rubbing rather than through phallic penetration. In this image, Killigrew's poem provides rare insight into women's sexual practice in the early modern period. Furthermore the poem provides an account of female sexual satisfaction, another poetic rarity: "what one did Nobly Will, / The other sweetly did fulfil."<sup>17</sup> The suggestion here that only another woman can satisfy the little lady's desire may provide an expanded reading of Wiltenburg's argument, suggesting that male anxiety about performance as expressed in English street ballads is not about the prospect of personal failure but of the ontological failure of the whole male sex.

Expressions of women's homoerotic desire may be the best place to look for an alternative to the sexuality represented in the libertine

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Killigrew, "Upon a Little Lady: Under the Discipline of an Excellent Person", Stanza VI, from Lady Anne Killigrew, *Poems*, London, 1686, 97-98 (a facsimile edition of this collection, ed. R.E. Morton, Gainesville: FL, 1967, is available). Because it is not widely available in anthologies, the entire poem is printed as an Appendix at the end of this essay.

literature. However, as Wendy Weise has shown in her study of “Sapphic Lyrics and Authorial Hermaphroditism in Behn, Philips, and Donne”, such lyrics do not necessary escape “masculinist discourses of desire” any more than lesbianism automatically provides “a refuge from the violence of heterosexual relations”; indeed, her analysis suggests that Donne’s homoerotic poem “Sappho to Philaenus” “conveys eros much less violently than [many poems] ... by women writers”.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, in a world where any overt or public expression of women’s desire was subject to violence, it perhaps makes sense to seek that desire in the closet rather than on the street, whether in the closet of homoerotic and forbidden sexuality or the prayer closet, a site that authorized a range of powerful and often erotic expressions. For, as is so often the case when it comes to women’s history, we need to look in unexpected places for data on women and, more to the point, not in the same places we look for information on men, even when what we might wish to produce is a comparative study of the production and articulation of men’s and women’s experiences. That is not to suggest that men’s and women’s experiences were or are utterly discrete – that men are from Mars and women are from Venus – but that the gender norms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries dictated that men’s and women’s expression of the sexual would differ in kind and in occasion. We must take those circumstances into account when seeking information on women’s sexual pleasures and their practice, looking not only in the public records of an overtly sexual nature but also in the most private and veiled references in the poetic record of the era.

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<sup>18</sup> Wendy Weise, “Sapphic Lyrics and Authorial Hermaphroditism in Behn, Philips, and Donne”, unpublished paper, 2003.

**APPENDIX**

Anne Killegrew, "Upon a Little Lady: Under the Discipline of  
an Excellent Person"

**I.**

How comes the Day orecast? the Flaming Sun  
Darkn'd at Noon, as if his Course were run?  
He never rose more proud, more glad, more gay,  
Ne're courted Daphne with a brighter Ray!  
    And now in Clouds he wraps his Head,  
As if not Daphne, but himself were dead!  
    And all the little Winged Troop  
    Forbear to sing, and sit and droop;  
    The Flowers do languish on their Beds,  
    And fading hang their Mourning Heads;  
    The little Cupids discontented, shew,  
    In Grief and Rage one breaks his Bow,  
    An other tares his Cheeks and Haire,  
A third sits blubring in Despaire,  
    Confessing though, in Love, he be,  
    A Powerful, Dreadful Deitie,  
A Child, in Wrath, can do as much as he:  
    Whence is this Evil hurl'd,  
    On all the sweetness of the World?  
    Among those Things with Beauty shine,  
    (Both Humane natures, and Divine)  
    There was not so much sorrow spi'd,  
No, no that Day the sweet Adonis died!

**II.**

Ambitious both to know the Ill, and to partake,  
    The little Weeping Gods I thus bespake.  
    Ye Noblest Pow'rs and Gentlest that Above,  
    Govern us Men, but govern still with Love,  
    Vouchsafe to tell, what can that Sorrow be,  
    Disorders Heaven, and wounds a Deitie.

My Prayer not spoken out,  
One of the Winged Rout,  
With Indignation great,  
Sprung from his Airie-Seat,  
And mounting to a Higher Cloud,  
With Thunder, or a Voice as loud  
Cried, Mortal there, there seek the Grief o'th'Gods,  
Where thou findst Plagues, and their revengeful Rods!  
And in the Instant that the Thing was meant,  
He bent his Bow, his Arrow plac't, and to the mark it sent!  
I follow'd with my watchful Eye,  
To the Place where the Shaft did flie,  
But O unheard-of Prodigy.  
It was retorted back again,  
And he that sent it, felt the pain,  
Alas! I think the little God was therewith slain!  
But wanton Darts ne're pierce where Honours found,  
And those that shoot them, do their own Breasts wound.

## III.

The Place from which the Arrow did return,  
Swifter than sent, and with the speed did burn,  
Was a Proud Pile which Marble Columnes bare,  
Tarrast beneath, and open to the Aire,  
On either side, Cords of wove Gold did tie  
A purfl'd Curtain, hanging from on high,  
To clear the Prospect of the stately Bower,  
And boast the Owners Dignity and Power!  
This shew'd the Scene from whence Loves grief arose,  
And Heaven and Nature both did discompose,  
A little Nymph whose Limbs divinely bright,  
Lay like a Body of Collected Light,  
But not to Love and Courtship so disclos'd,  
But to the Rigour of a Dame oppos'd,  
Who instant on the Faire with Words and Blows,  
Now chastens Error, and now Virtue shews.

## IV.

But O thou no less Blind,  
Than Wild and Savage Mind,  
Who Discipline dar'st name,

Thy Outrage and thy shame,  
 And hop'st a Radiant Crown to get  
 All Stars and Glory to thy Head made fit,  
 Know that this Curse alone shall Serpent-like incircle it!  
 May'st thou henceforth, be ever seen to stand,  
 Grasping a Scourge of Vipers in thy Hand,  
 Thy Hand, that Furie like-----But see!  
     By Apollos Sacred Tree,  
     By his ever Tuneful Lyre,  
 And his bright Image the Eternal Fire,  
     Eudoras she has done this Deed  
 And made the World thus in its Darling bleed!  
     I know the Cruel Dame,  
 Too well instructed by my Flame!  
     But see her shape! But see her Face!  
 In her Temple such is Diana's Grace!  
 Behold her Lute upon the Pavement lies,  
 When Beautie's wrong'd, no wonder Musick dies!

## V.

What blood of Centaurs did thy Bosom warme,  
 And boyle the Balsome there up to a Storme ?  
 Nay Balsome flow'd not with so soft a Floud,  
 As thy Thoughts Evenly Virtuous, Mildly Good !  
 How could thy Skilful and Harmonious Hand,  
 That Rage of Seas, and People could command,  
 And calme Diseases with the Charming strings,  
 Such Discords make in the whole Name of Things ?  
     But now I see the Root of thy Rash Pride,  
 Because thou didst Excel the World beside,  
 And it in Beauty and in Fame out-shine,  
 Thou would'st compare thy self to things Divine!  
 And 'bove thy Standard what thou there didst see,  
 Thou didst Condemn, because 'twas unlike thee,  
 And punisht in the Lady as unfit,  
 What Bloomings were of a Diviner Wit.  
 Divine she is, or else Divine must be,  
 A Borne or else a Growing Deitie!

## VI.

While thus I did exclaime,  
And wildly rage and blame,  
Behold the Sylvan-Quire  
Did all at one conspire,  
With shrill and cheerful Throats,  
T'assume their chirping Notes;  
The Heav'ns refulgent Eye  
Dance't in the clear'd-up Skie,  
And so triumphant shon,  
As seven-days Beams he had on!  
The little Loves burn'd with nobler fier.  
Each chang'd his wanton Bow, and took a Lyre,  
Singing chast Aires unto the tuneful strings,  
And time'd soft Musick with their downy Wings.  
I turn'd the little Nymph to view,  
She singing and did smiling shew;  
Eudora led a heav'nly strain,  
Her Angels Voice did eccho it again!  
I then decreed no Sacriledge was wrought,  
But neerer Heav'n this Piece of Heaven was brought.  
She also brighter seem'd, than she had been,  
Vertue darts forth a Light'ning 'bove the Skin.  
Eudora also shew'd as heretofore,  
When her soft Graces I did first adore.  
I saw, what one did Nobly Will,  
The other sweetly did fulfil;  
Their Actions all harmoniously did sute,  
And she had only tun'd the Lady like her Lute.

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## **“FREEBORN JOY”: SEXUAL EXPRESSION AND POWER IN WILLIAM BLAKE’S *VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION***

LISA MARIE LIPIPIATVONG

Sexuality as determining all aspects of human nature is a common theme that runs throughout William Blake’s works – in his notebook lyrics, in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, and in the myths he was to create, sexual relations explain the functions and failings of society as he saw it. Nowhere is this so apparent as in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, which tackles such issues as the imbalance of gender rights that Mary Wollstonecraft protested against in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published a year earlier in 1792, as well as slavery and religious oppression. Harold Bloom calls *Visions* “a tragic but exultant hymn to the exuberant beauty of sexual release”, where Blake’s “longing for full freedom in sexual expression” already evident in his lyrics “receives its final and perfect statement”.<sup>1</sup>

The heroine of the poem, Oothoon, represents America, a land of liberty and of oppression, which fought a revolutionary war with Britain in order to become independent but at the same time used slave labour. To Blake, justice is an all-encompassing freedom for every individual, including women, children, and black people. Though Blake relied heavily on the Bible for inspiration, he turned away from the laws of the church that he saw as a manipulation of the Scriptures. Robert Ryan notes that “Blake’s usual religious posture ... is a detailed indictment of the collaboration of all the churches in the exploitation of the poor, the degradation of labour, the subordination of women, the abridgement of political liberty, the repression of sexual energy, and the discouragement of originality in fine arts”.<sup>2</sup> Any institution that seeks to repress and restrict the normal tendencies of human nature, Blake opposed. *Visions of*

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, New York, 1970, 101.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ryan, “Blake and Religion”, in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves, Cambridge, 2003, 150.



*the Daughters of Albion* is Blake's version of a minor epic where the heroine struggles to find freedom in a confining world of such laws.

Whereas slavery is the power of one man over another, freedom can be seen as the individual wholly empowered. However, there are various levels of power that are exemplified through the characters in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Ranging from the "Enslaved" Daughters of Albion, to Bromion and Theotormon who abide by the laws of Urizen, and to Oothoon who seems to rise up and outside of society, each character or group of characters has its own form of power, its own ideal of freedom, which, when they are brought together, causes a conflict left unresolved by Blake at the end of the work.

The epigraph on the title-page – *The eye sees more than the heart knows* – seems to signify that whereas the eyes accept the reality of the world they are exposed to, the heart is selective in what it perceives or understands. This phrase will come to judge the characters, who see and hear and feel as humans, but perceive as individuals. Following the epigraph is "The Argument". Since this is expressed from the point of view of Oothoon, we may assume that she is the character we are meant to sympathize with and her plight we are meant to comprehend:

I loved Theotormon,  
And I was not ashamed;  
I trembled in my virgin fears,  
And I hid in Leutha's vale.

I plucked Leutha's flower,  
And I rose up from the vale;  
But the terrible thunders tore  
My virgin mantle in twain.<sup>3</sup>

S. Foster Damon describes the role of "Leutha" as "sex under law", and therefore "may most easily be understood as the sense of sin, or guilt". Damon also notes that the plucking of Leutha's flower, a marigold, is symbolic of a sexual act.<sup>4</sup> Oothoon explains that she was not "ashamed" to love Theotormon and is aware that to progress human nature has to

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<sup>3</sup> William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, in *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W.H. Stevenson, text by David V. Erdman, Longmans' Annotated English Poets, London, 1971, 173.

<sup>4</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, London, 1973, 237-38.

proceed to sexual experience. For a time Oothoon feared the transition from innocence into experience and felt guilty about leaving her virginity behind. She had to overcome her “virgin fears” in order to enter into the next phase. Nonetheless, she prepared herself for the act and was finally able to reconcile the loss of her virginity with the gaining of experience in love. When she “rose up” from the vale she stood as a woman, brave and ready for her new position. Yet once she was exposed to the New World, the thunders of an angry storm assaulted her and “tore” her “virgin mantle in twain”. Within “The Argument”, it appears that Oothoon has been punished for her attempt to liberate herself sexually.

The first plate of the narrative begins by recalling the plot defined in “The Argument”. The heading at the top of the page is the word “Visions”, which is significantly larger than the text of the poem. Whereas “The Argument” was told from Oothoon’s point of view, these “Visions” are those of an omniscient narrator who recalls the actions and speeches of all the characters. The chorus members are the first to be introduced, and they support Oothoon much the same way as the daughters of Jerusalem support the bride in the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon). The daughters hope that Oothoon can save them from their confinement:

Enslaved, the daughters of Albion weep – a trembling  
lamentation  
Upon their mountains, in their valleys sighs towards America.  
For the soft soul of America, Oothoon, wanderd in woe  
Along the vales of Leutha, seeking flowers to comfort her;  
And thus she spoke to the bright marigold of Leutha’s vale:

“Art thou a flower? Art thou a nymph? I see thee now a flower,  
Now a nymph! I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy bed.”

The golden nymph replied: “Pluck thou my flower, Oothoon the  
mild  
Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight  
Can never pass away.” She ceased and closed her golden shrine.

Then Oothoon plucked the flower saying, “I pluck thee from thy  
bed,

Sweet flower, and put thee here to glow between my breasts,  
And thus I turn my face to where my whole soul seeks.”<sup>5</sup>

The initial word “Enslaved” is larger than the rest of the text, which emphasizes the Daughters’ predicament. The “Daughters of Albion” are imprisoned in some way. Damon claims that these are “simply Englishwomen, enslaved in the social mores of their time, who weep over their sorrows and long for the freedom of the body, or ‘America’”.<sup>6</sup> They are looking towards the new country and Oothoon to free them from imprisonment.

The marigold is not trusted by Oothoon at first, but then it imparts to her a crucial piece of wisdom. Oothoon is uncertain of its nature or being, and asks the marigold whether it is a “flower” or a “nymph” – and the answer will determine whether or not she will feel safe engaging with sexual experience. The marigold explains to Oothoon that even if she is plucked, “another flower shall spring”. The life cycle continues both in nature and in humanity. Oothoon may choose to lose her physical virginity to Theotormon, but true virginity is purity of the mind, not of the body. Therefore the flower will never die, “because the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away”. If Oothoon’s soul is able to remain innocent, then she can achieve freedom in the state of experience. In a symbolic act of sexual initiation she plucks the flower and places it between her breasts, close to her heart.

Oothoon leaves Leutha’s vale to where “her whole heart seeks”, Theotormon. She goes in “winged exulting swift delight, / And over Theotormon’s reign, took her impetuous course”. Oothoon is now excited about the prospect that lies ahead of her and goes to her lover as quickly as possible. However, her journey is called “impetuous”, which implies an impulsive action without thought. Theotormon’s “reign” that Oothoon flies over is the Atlantic Ocean, the seas that swell between her and America and the Daughter’s England.<sup>7</sup> Before Oothoon can reach him

Bromion rent her with his thunders; on his stormy bed  
Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalled his thunders hoarse.

<sup>5</sup> Plate 1:1-13 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 174: “Visions”, ll. 1-13).

<sup>6</sup> Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, 107.

Bromion spoke: "Behold this harlot here on Bromion's bed,  
 And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid!  
 Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south.  
 Stamped with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun;  
 They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge;  
 Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.

Now thou mayest marry Bromion's harlot and protect the child  
 Of Bromion's rage that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons'  
 time."<sup>8</sup>

As a slaveholder, Bromion claims Oothoon as his property, since she represents the open land of America. She too will now be one of the "swarthy children of the sun", the black-skinned slaves he commands. He hijacks Oothoon and assaults her. Oothoon's sexual purity is tainted with Bromion's rage, expressed in his thunder and his storm, and he impregnates her, increasing her value as a slave but destroying her sexual freedom of choice. He tells the "jealous dolphins" of Theotormon's seas to bear witness to the possession he has taken. In her excitement and impetuosity to gain experience, Oothoon could not see the nature of the evil awaiting and defeating her.

Theotormon responds to Bromion's violence with his own "storms". Bloom notes that his name suggests a "man tormented by his own idea of God".<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Damon finds the Greek word "*theo* (god) and *torah* (law), signifying the divine in man under law".<sup>10</sup> Theotormon is Oothoon's desire, but when she is captured and raped he becomes jealous and indignant. In Theotormon's world, a woman's first sexual act binds her for life, and Theotormon cannot bypass the only laws he has known. His religion tells him now that Bromion and Oothoon belong together, even though Oothoon did not choose her situation. Theotormon jealously binds them together as an "adulterate pair" who have betrayed him. He sits mourning at the mouth of Bromion's cave,

With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a desert shore  
 The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money,

<sup>8</sup> Plates 1:14-23 and 2:1-2 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 175: "Visions", ll. 14-25).

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 401.

That shiver in religious caves beneath burning fires  
Of lust that belch incessant from the summits of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Bloom argues that Theotormon is among those who “hide from the liberating fires of desire in the frozen caves of religious oppression”.<sup>12</sup> However, the fires that “belch incessant”, the gas constantly being released from repression, hint that eventually the volcano must erupt. Theotormon refuses to see Oothoon as a victim; rather, he has closed his heart to her. For the rest of the story she is tied to Bromion, “back to back”, where “terror and meekness dwell”.<sup>13</sup> Bromion is the terrible one, and Oothoon meek, but her forbearing nature should not be confused with weakness. She is amongst those who will “inherit the earth” during the Second Coming as predicted in the Psalms (37:11).

Oothoon is initially in shock at what has happened to her. We are told she “weeps not, she cannot weep, her tears are locked up, / But she can howl incessant, writhing her soft snowy limbs”.<sup>14</sup> Oothoon’s tears are captive just as she is. Bloom argues that “in fact she does not really believe her first sexual experience, though involuntary, was a defilement of any kind”.<sup>15</sup> This is because Blake emphasizes that sexual purity is of the mind and spirit rather than of the body. Oothoon’s howls are also like those “fires / Of lust”, for her desire for Theotormon is still strong despite his reactions. Her “soft snowy limbs” still yearn for her chosen lover.

Oothoon’s initial attempt to redeem herself in Theotormon’s eyes is to sacrifice herself, like Christ on the cross, so her “sins” may be forgiven. Her cry is to “Theotormon’s Eagles to prey upon her flesh”:

“I call with holy voice kings of the sounding air,  
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect  
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.”

The Eagles at her call descend and rend their bleeding prey.  
Theotormon severely smiles ...<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Plate 2:7-10 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 176: “Visions”, ll. 30-33).

<sup>12</sup> Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Plate 2:5 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 176: “Visions”, l. 28).

<sup>14</sup> Plate 2:11-12 (*ibid.*: “Visions”, ll. 34-35).

<sup>15</sup> Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Plate 2:13-18 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 176: “Visions”, ll. 36-41).

The eagles eat away her bosom, where she had once placed Leutha's marigold in the hope that Theotormon would accept her. But his severe smile indicates that he is not displeased to see her defiled. His pain finds pleasure in the pain of his lover, while Oothoon welcomes any pleasure that she can afford him, though it is at her expense, therefore "her soul reflects the smile, / As the clear spring muddled with the feet of beasts grows pure & smiles". The Daughters of Albion recognize her failed attempt, "*hear her woes, and echo back her sighs*".<sup>17</sup>

The rest of the poem consists of speeches by the three main characters that demonstrate their conflicting views of the world's order. Oothoon first confronts Theotormon to try and justify the action she has taken. Though she is physically near him, her persuasion is "in vain". She uses as an example the fact that all species can recognize a change in nature:

I cry, "Arise, O Theotormon, for the village dog  
Barks at the breaking day, the nightingale has done lamenting.  
The lark does rustle in the ripe corn, and the eagle returns  
From nightly prey and lifts his golden beak to the pure east,  
Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake  
The sun that sleeps too long. Arise, my Theotormon, I am pure!  
Because the night is gone that closed me in its deadly black."<sup>18</sup>

Throughout Blake's works, night is depicted traditionally as a time when wickedness reigns, whereas morning brings afresh purity and goodness. The night of terrible assault has ended for Oothoon, and with the morning light, she is born again innocent. But although she tries to make Theotormon see what the other creatures do – "the village dog", "the nightingale", the "lark" and "the eagle" – he is unwilling to recognize her state, his blindness stemming from the restrictive view of the world he subscribes to. Theotormon's sight is not natural and his heart is closed.

In contrast, Oothoon cannot be mentally confined despite her physical bondage. At the dawn of her new day, she comprehends the power of the mind over body, and her freedom resides in that strength:

"They told me that the night and day were all that I could see;  
They told me that I had five senses to enclose me up,  
And they enclosed my infinite brain into a narrow circle

<sup>17</sup> Plate 2:18-20 (*ibid.*: "Visions", ll. 41-43).

<sup>18</sup> Plate 2: 22-29 (*ibid.*, 177: "Visions", ll. 45-52).

And sunk my heart into the abyss, a red round globe hot-burning,  
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.<sup>19</sup>

Here Oothoon speaks of those who follow the unnatural laws of life on earth. For such people, there is a night and a day, but they are no more than mere segments of time. But for Oothoon, “night and day” are symbolic of spiritual and mental change. Oothoon also knows that although the body has five senses, there are also unknown senses that cannot be measured or defined, such as intuition. The five senses are restricting if only they are used to understand the world. Therefore, as the epigraph to the poem indicates, the eye can see all, but it is the heart that judges what is seen. The enforcers of the law endeavoured to limit her brain to a “narrow circle” of a globe, but her mental powers travelled beyond the boundaries of the earth into territories unknown. They attempted to push her heart into a terrestrial hell to a point where she lost her sense of self. However, when she was “obliterated and erased” she did not lose her identity, but rather became one with the universe. Thus, the restrictive religion and laws of the experienced world, in their attempt to reduce Oothoon to nothing, instead made her aware of true liberation.

Nevertheless, Theotormon cannot abandon his sense of self in order to be saved. He sees only that Oothoon has had a sexual experience with another and so can never be his lover. To him, “Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye / In the eastern cloud”. It is as if his eyelids are closed; the morning sun does not shine brightly, but there is an intense darkness, as if his vision is surrounded by smoke. For him night has not passed; instead it is a place of the dead, a “sickly charnel-house”. In order to be saved, Theotormon must bypass death and enter a heavenly afterlife. He will not listen to Oothoon’s reasoning. To him “night and morn / Are both alike – a night of sighs, a morning of fresh tears”.<sup>20</sup> Theotormon is a slave to his sorrow, while Oothoon lives liberated in her mind, though her body is chained.

Though making no apparent progress, Oothoon continues to pose rhetorical questions to Theotormon: for instance, why a weaker animal should scorn a predator, or why a caged bird should try to measure the infinity of the sky. Her point is that Theotormon, bound by his imposing laws, is denying an opportunity to grow in spirit with her, as well as the true God who is everlasting. She then changes her tactic to compare

<sup>19</sup> Plate 2:30-34 (*ibid.*: “Visions”, ll. 53-57).

<sup>20</sup> Plate 2:35-38 (*ibid.*: “Visions”, ll. 58-61).

different animals, and ask why their natures are dissimilar though they share certain traits:

“With what sense does the bee form cells? Have not the mouse and  
frog  
Eyes and ears and sense of touch? Yet are their habitations  
And their pursuits as different as their forms and as their joys.”<sup>21</sup>

For Oothoon, all creatures have their purpose and each purpose is unique and important in its work. Creatures do not have to define their functions in order to perform them – they just act. In the same way, every human is an individual and has his or her own life and objective. Generalized reason and regulations do not make sense for the individual, since an all-encompassing law denies the rights of the particular. Oothoon asks Theotormon to tell her “the thoughts of man that have been hid of old”. For her, man in the present age has forgotten the original purpose of existence.

Regardless of Theotormon’s ignorance, Oothoon still desires him and refuses to see herself as impure. She would be patient and wait for him, silent all day and night, if she knew that he “would turn his loved eyes upon” her. She declares “Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on, and the soul preyed on by woe” as well as the “new-washed lamb tinged with the village smoke, and the bright swan / By the red earth of our immortal river”. Oothoon points out that even though these things may appear soiled, they are still inwardly pure underneath. So is she: she has “bathe[d]” her “wings” and is “white and pure to hover round Theotormon’s breast”. Like a symbolic spiritual baptism, Oothoon has cleansed herself to reveal an innocence of mind.<sup>22</sup>

Theotormon’s response is that he cannot tell the night or day because he is one “o’erflowed with woe”. He cannot feel joy in his present state and would not know where to look for it. He asks her “Tell me what is a joy and in what gardens do joys grow”. Theotormon is one of “the wretched / Drunken with woe, forgotten and shut up from cold despair”.<sup>23</sup> His prison is his mind; he is his own jailer and he rejects escape. Theotormon is afraid that even if he were to remember his past joys and bring them into the present, they would only serve to make him

<sup>21</sup> Plate 3:4-6 (*ibid.*, 178: ll. 65-67).

<sup>22</sup> Plate 3: 13-20 (*ibid.*, 178-79: ll. 74-81).

<sup>23</sup> Plates 3: 22 and 24 and 4:1-2 (*ibid.*, 179: ll. 83 and 85, 87-88).



more jealous. If he were to look upon Oothoon with love, it will only make him more envious. Therefore Theotormon will never be able to pass into the next phase, after experience, where true joy exists.

Having remained silent up to this point, Bromion finally releases a “lamentation”. He starts as if he is to some degree convinced by Oothoon’s arguments, but ends with his mind closed again. He first explains that though the eyes have seen many kinds of “ancient trees” and they “have fruit”, there are also trees in existence that “gratify senses unknown”. There are plants and creatures “unknown”: “unknown”, but “not unpercied, spread in the infinite microscope” of the world. Bromion’s mind is aware of the presence of intuition and faith, but the power of an expansive mind is too great for him and he falls back again. He concludes by positing “one law for both the lion and the ox”,<sup>24</sup> which goes against Oothoon’s argument of individual joys and intentions. Bloom notes that:

Oothoon *has* seen the ancient trees that once were visible to unfallen men, and she does know that these trees still have fruit to gratify her awakened senses .... Other trees and fruits exist in the infinite abyss of the unbounded and prolific world of experience, to provoke and gratify senses best left unknown.<sup>25</sup>

Bromion is the one who believes that these “senses are best left unknown”, because once he has been given a glimpse of the immeasurable universe, for comfort he recoils into a world of laws.

After waiting and musing “all the day, and all the night”, Oothoon directs her attention to Urizen, “creator of men”.<sup>26</sup> In later works by Blake, as Damon notes, Urizen is “the God of This World, the ‘jealous god’ of the Old Testament”.<sup>27</sup> He is a force that governs the world of experience. Oothoon curses his dominion, and calls him the “mistaken demon of heaven”, proclaiming:

“Thy joys are tears, thy labour vain, to form men to thine image.  
How can one joy absorb another? Are not different joys  
Holy, eternal, infinite? And each joy is a love.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Plate 4: 12-16 and 22 (*ibid.*, 180: “Visions”, ll. 98-102 and 108).

<sup>25</sup> Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, 112-13.

<sup>26</sup> Plates 4:25 and 5:3 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 180: “Visions”, ll. 111 and 114).

<sup>27</sup> Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 420.

<sup>28</sup> Plate 5:3-6 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 180: “Visions”, ll. 114-17).

Her argument is a rebuttal of Bromion's belief that there is "one law for both the lion and the ox". No matter how others may be deceived by Urizen's laws, Oothoon's faith surpasses his reason. So, by not believing and conforming to the ways of Urizen, Oothoon's power is stronger than that even of the dominant will.

She celebrates individual expression over encompassing oppression. She shows how foolish Urizen and his followers are, by asking: "wilt thou take the ape / For thy counsellor, or the dog for a schoolmaster to thy children?" She wonders whether one type of person can "feel the same passion" as another: asking, for instance, "With what sense does the parson claim the labour of the farmer?".<sup>29</sup> Aers remarks that Oothoon's question "is a striking illustration of the fact that our sense, our sense-experience and perceptions, are socially made, bound up with our practical activity and, indeed, our class position".<sup>30</sup> The class system is part of the domination of Urizen: another way of ruling over and controlling natural human abilities and free will. Oothoon's central argument is that sex is a means of defining the human condition just like manual labour. The woman

"... who burns with youth and knows no fixed lot, is bound  
In spells of law to one she loaths. And must she drag the chain  
Of life in weary lust? Must chilling murderous thoughts obscure  
The clear heaven of her eternal spring, to bear the wintry rage  
Of a harsh terror, driven to madness, bound to hold a rod  
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; and all the night  
To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that wake her womb  
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form,  
That live a pestilence and die a meteor and are no more –  
Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed he loathes,  
And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth  
Ere yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day?"<sup>31</sup>

In Blake's time a woman usually had few options apart from marriage or spinsterhood. Since Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had been published a year earlier than *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, it is probable that Blake was familiar with the

<sup>29</sup> Plate 5: 8-9, 11 and 17 (*ibid.*, 181: "Visions", ll. 119-20, 122 and 128).

<sup>30</sup> D. Aers, "William Blake and the Dialectics of Sex", *ELH*, XLIV/3 (Autumn 1977), 501.

<sup>31</sup> Plate 5: 21-32 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 182: "Visions", ll. 132-43).

work.<sup>32</sup> Blake describes the confinement felt by a woman trapped in a loveless marriage in a manner similar to Wollstonecraft. Oothoon also is one who “burns with youth”, for her sexual desire for Theotormon has not faded. Nonetheless, she is bound to Bromion by a false convention that claims the loss of virginity belongs only in marriage. Aers claims that

Blake registers the fact that in such a society social sexual energy is a threat to all “fixed” boundaries and conventional order. It must therefore be contained within marriage, and economic and ideological institutions determined by the social structure he has just been depicting.<sup>33</sup>

Arranged marriages have often been made to ensure family and social security, and women who entered into such marriages were not supposed to feel longing, though Blake was aware that, as humans dominated by sense and feeling, they must have done so. To Oothoon, such a woman “must drag the chain / Of life in weary lust” until she eventually hates the partner who cannot fulfil her needs. The children born into such a household are innocent until experience weighs them down and their lives are sickened by the absence of true goodness. Oothoon foresees the cycle as never-ending with no signs of a better life.

As her lamentations continue, Oothoon emphasizes once again that all earthly creatures are different and have varying views of the world. Though “the eagle scorn[s] the earth and despise[s] the treasures beneath”, other creatures in the ground like “the mole knoweth what is there, and the worm shall tell it thee”. The experience of every individual is distinct. But the worm “in the mouldering churchyard” builds his “palace of eternity” in a place where death dwells. Life feeds on life. Oothoon imagines that over the worm’s “porch these words are written: ‘Take thy bliss, O man! / And sweet shall be thy taste and sweet thy infant joys renew’.” Death is not the end for the worm, but his nourishment, and the cycle proceeds with rebirth.

Oothoon celebrates childhood:

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<sup>32</sup> Although there is no written evidence that Blake had read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, he would have been known her ideas through their mutual friendship with Joseph Johnson, the radical publisher of Mary Wollstonecraft’s works. For Johnson’s reissue of Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* in 1791, Blake had provided the illustrations.

<sup>33</sup> Aers, “William Blake and the Dialectics of Sex”, 502.

“Infancy, fearless, lustful, happy, nestling for delight  
 In laps of pleasure! Innocence, honest, open, seeking  
 The vigorous joys of morning light, open to virgin bliss!”<sup>34</sup>

Lust and pleasure are not something to be ashamed of. The infant, who looks for comfort in his mother’s breast, delights in the warm sensations of intimacy. It is not until a child grows older and becomes sexually aware that restrictions are imposed, and a person seeking for pleasure begins to feel guilty. The child knows from its nature, without reason intervening, what is good and pure – like the “morning light”. Oothoon is still childlike, for she has retained her “virgin bliss” in the face of experience.

However, Oothoon exists in a world where people slowly become confined, because they are told of no other path than that of false religion and its laws. She forecasts that when a child passes into experience, the time of “night and sleep”, the child will awaken having been taught “subtle modesty”, which is not to be confused with purity. This is a crafty manipulation of the laws of experience:

“When thou awakest, wilt thou dissemble all thy secret joys –  
 Or wert thou not awake when all this mystery was disclosed?  
 Then com’st thou forth a modest virgin, knowing to dissemble  
 With nets found under thy night pillow to catch virgin joy,  
 And brand it with the name of a whore, and sell it in the night,  
 In silence, even without a whisper, and in seeming sleep.  
 Religious dreams and holy vespers light thy smoky fires –  
 Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn.”<sup>35</sup>

The natural joys the child has known will become a distant memory, or wilfully buried in the unconsciousness. A young woman, knowing the ways of the world, will act as though she is still innocent, in order to catch a husband. Her untrue modesty makes her a “whore” who sells her body in marriage in return for financial security.

Aers remarks that this tactic is “a cunning strategy for using the containing and perverting structures to salvage at least something from

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<sup>34</sup> Plates 5:39-41 and 6:1-6 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 182-83: “Visions”, ll. 150-58). Erdman’s text has a “place of eternity” instead of Blake’s “palace of eternity” (see pl. 6 in the facsimile edition of *Visions*, London, 1932: but this may simply be a misprint in the Longmans’ Annotated English Poets edition).

<sup>35</sup> Plate 6:7-15 (*ibid.*, 183: “Visions”, ll. 159-67).

an alienating reality which has been accepted: the woman accepts her reduction to the status of commodity and sets out to make herself as valuable a commodity as possible".<sup>36</sup> In a society that places particular value on virginity, the cunning woman uses her virginity as a tool to get what she wants. To Oothoon, the limiting of desire is another form of prostitution. Unfortunately, the man she loves sees these limitations as the norm:

"And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,  
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?  
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed, and all the virgin joys  
Of life are harlots, and Theotormon is a sick man's dream,  
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness."<sup>37</sup>

Regarding Oothoon as a "whore" for engaging (though involuntarily) in a sexual act with someone other than himself; and the beliefs she maintains are "selfish holiness" which seeks pleasure for the sake of pleasure, Theotormon is a slave to a obstructing decree and in this state will never be able to open his heart to her.

Oothoon defends herself, for her own sake and for the sake of the daughters of Albion who believe in her, and for the world that follows the "mistaken demon of heaven", Urizen. She may never be able to convince her lover, but she stands up for herself in the hopes that her words will echo into eternity. She knows she is not a whore, but instead

"... a virgin filled with virgin fancies,  
Open to joy and to delight wherever beauty appears.  
If in the morning sun I find it, there my eyes are fixed

In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work,  
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this freeborn joy."<sup>38</sup>

Oothoon is advocating a form of free love, though not an "indiscriminate, and therefore superficial planting of the affections",<sup>39</sup> but more accurately, as Max Plowman distinguishes, a "'sensual enjoyment' which is dependent upon the recognition of the body as a 'portion of the

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<sup>36</sup> Aers, "William Blake and the Dialectics of Sex", 505.

<sup>37</sup> Plate 6:16-20 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 183-84: "Visions", ll. 168-72).

<sup>38</sup> Plates 6:21-23 and 7:1-2 (*ibid.*, 184: "Vision", ll. 173-77).

<sup>39</sup> Max Plowman, *An Introduction to the Study of Blake*, London, 1967, 131.

Soul””.<sup>40</sup> Oothoon, pure of mind, can delight in her ability to choose without becoming tainted. The hardships of life deserve reward, and to Oothoon, the body can derive “pleasures” of “freeborn joy” as a gift from the senses. Body and mind are in balance and can coexist together with the soul.

Oothoon even goes so far as to analyse one of the most sensitive moral issues within the church – masturbation. Seeking to control natural desires, religion has almost compelled the individual to find sexual satisfaction with shame in secret places:

“The moment of desire! The moment of desire! The virgin  
That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous joys  
In the secret shadows of her chamber. The youth, shut up from  
The lustful joy, shall forget to generate and create an amorous image  
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.  
Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence,  
The self-enjoyings of self-denial? Why dost thou seek religion?  
Is it because these acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude,  
Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of  
desire?”<sup>41</sup>

Although by nature humans feel desire, they are made to feel uncomfortable about it, so that the stirrings of desire must needs be satisfied within the privacy of their own rooms: the effect of sexual abstinence is the recreation of “lovely” acts in “secret shadows”. If sex were not a normal instinct, then why would people try to recreate those acts by themselves? Oothoon sees this as fallacious and blames Urizen for propounding such laws. Since her loved one, Theotormon, follows these conventions, and will never see the light, Oothoon sees herself as destined to become “a solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity”, for her persuasions are unrecognized and she will not conform to the laws that she knows are hypocritical.

Oothoon’s final vision is a world of liberty, where all are free and full of joy. Love is the key to infinity, and she imagines what life with an enlightened Theotormon would be like, but not before restating that jealous love is restricting love:

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> Plate 7:3-11 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 184-85: “Visions”, ll. 178-86).

“I cry, Love! Love! Love! Happy, happy love, free as the mountain wind!

Can that be love that drinks another as a sponge drinks water,  
That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all the day;  
To spin a web of age around him, grey and hoary, dark,  
Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before his sight?  
Such is self-love that envies all, a creeping skeleton  
With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed.

But silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread  
And catch for thee girls of mild silver or of furious gold;  
I'll lie beside thee on a bank and view their wanton play  
In lovely copulation, bliss on bliss with Theotormon,  
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,  
Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with jealous cloud  
Come in the heaven of generous love, nor selfish blightings bring.”<sup>42</sup>

True love would never consume another and make everything sorrowful and unclear. Jealous love is actually self-love, a stubborn sense of pride that binds the other. Then the lovers grow old, sickened by a false sense of security, paranoid and guarding the “marriage bed” out of habit. Bound by law and social norms, marriage becomes possession and denial. Instead, Oothoon would prove that her love is perfect by never denying Theotormon joy. His pleasure is her pleasure, in whatever form it would take. The “nets and traps” she would use to catch girls for Theotormon are not the same as the “nets and gins and traps” of the parson.<sup>43</sup>

Nicholas M. Williams notes that:

What might be taken as repetition of the ideological trap is really its utopian fulfillment, for these are, paradoxically, the nests of generosity and openness, not of jealousy and secrecy. The strength of Blake's utopian vision lies precisely in his refusal to leave behind even his symbol of jealous love, which is here redeemed for the purpose of utopian sexual liberation.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Plate 7:16-29 (*ibid.*, 185: ll. 191-204).

<sup>43</sup> Plate 5:18 (*ibid.*, 181: l. 129).

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas M. Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*, Cambridge, 1998, 95.

Her love is “generous love” as opposed to greedy love. Nevertheless, Theotormon is ignorant and could never imagine a life of joy in the way that she can.

Oothoon is forgiving of Theotormon in her last words. She knows that he is bound “Beside the ox to [the] hard furrow”. However, he is still touched by light in her eyes, though he cannot see it. She proclaims that all species are different, and though some may dwell in darkness, light will never be denied them:

“And trees and birds and beasts and men behold their eternal joy.  
Arise, you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy!  
Arise and drink your bliss! For everything that lives is holy.”

Oothoon, in her greatness, can see beyond men’s faults and still celebrates life as blessed, while “every morning wails Oothoon ... Theotormon sits / Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire”. Oothoon’s lamentations have no effect on her immediate audience, and only “*The daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs*”.<sup>45</sup> It is not yet time for the revolution of spirit that Oothoon envisions, but her believers have faith that some day it will be realized.

At the end, Oothoon is a heroine with a vision that cannot exist in the world she inhabits. She is unable to persuade her lover and the others who follow the laws of Urizen, the selfish father, that they are mistaken. Aers speculates about the possibility of a member of society able fully to rise above the society that shaped her:

Blake represents Oothoon as able to transcend the consciousness of her fellow women absolutely: but how this can be so, how she has attained so clear a revolutionary critique of sexual and social exploitation, and of their interaction, how she has reached so full an understanding of the psychological effects and perverted indulgences of repressed sexuality ... remain a mystery. For no one, not the most revolutionary figure, stands clearly outside alienated society, beyond alienation.<sup>46</sup>

Oothoon can be seen as one who transcends or exists on a level other than that of society as a whole. Oothoon has spoken powerful, revolutionary words, and though her followers hear and believe in her,

<sup>45</sup> Plate 8:3-4 and 8-13 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 186: “Visions”, ll. 208-209 and 213-18).

<sup>46</sup> Aers, “William Blake and the Dialectics of Sex”, 505.



she is unable to counsel and lead the rest of the world. Yet Oothoon has serenity for herself and escapes through the glory of her visions. By leaving Oothoon in chains, with Theotormon ignorant of her pleas, Blake shows the almost static nature of progress in society. Oothoon may be free in her mind, but the world remains enslaved.

## OF MELANCHOLY AND MIMESIS: SOCIAL BOND(AGE)S IN *VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION*

NOWELL MARSHALL

Although Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, first published in 1793, has long been championed for "Oothoon's rhetoric of free love", critics researching the history of sexuality have often overlooked the poem.<sup>1</sup> Yet, "the very real process of gender codification that was going on throughout the early modern period of cultural formation, most energetically and at times virulently, of course, in the eighteenth century" merits consideration in any discussion of the poem since the "very notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' were sites of cultural conflict throughout the century".<sup>2</sup> Therefore, analysing the powerful dynamics of sex, gender, and property in the period provides a more complex understanding not only of Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion, but of late eighteenth-century England as well.

Despite critical claims to the contrary,<sup>3</sup> the initial relationship between Theotormon and Oothoon conforms to René Girard's theory of triangular desire as delineated through the example of *Don Quixote*:

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Ellen Haigwood, "Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: Revising an Interpretive Tradition", *San Jose Studies*, XI/2 (1985), 78.

<sup>2</sup> George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1999, 2.

<sup>3</sup> In "Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*", Nancy Moore Goslee observes that "The frontispiece – in some copies, as I mentioned earlier, the tailpiece – presents three crouching figures, two men and a woman between them". However, she fails to observe the function of triangular desire in the poem: "Although one might expect the three central figures to be gazing at one another in some triangular configuration of desire, they do not" (105). This oversight is most likely because Goslee assumes that triangular desire must occur between three people when, in fact, it only requires two people with a shared desire. Simply put, previous critics have discounted the possibility of triangular desire in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* because they were looking in the wrong place.

Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual's fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire – Amadis must choose for him. The disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of chivalry. We shall call this model the *mediator* of desire. Chivalric existence is the *imitation* of Amadis in the same sense that the Christian's existence is the imitation of Christ .... But desire is always spontaneous. It can always be portrayed by a simple straight line which joins subject and object .... The mediator is there, above that line, radiating toward both the subject and the object.<sup>4</sup>

In this scenario, Girard's theory posits that triangular desire occurs whenever two people's desires are jointly mediated by a codified model of behaviour. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the desires of both Theotormon and Oothoon are mediated by the gender roles of the period, which are socially constructed, as Gayle Rubin argues: "Sex as we know it – gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood – is itself a social product",<sup>5</sup> the result of "a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products".<sup>6</sup>

Yet, because culture is a recursive linguistic process generating and being generated by the subjects that comprise it, Rubin's assertion must be expanded to account for the ways in which culture interacts with gender in the broadest sense of the term. Thus, the "systematic social apparatus" of sex can be said to take up people as raw materials, fashioning them into products according to culturally mandated gender roles:

Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of "feminine" traits; in women, of the local definition of "masculine" traits. The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. The same social system which

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<sup>4</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, Baltimore, 1965, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter, New York, 1975, 166.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, oppressive social systems affect both men and women.

Andrew Elfenbein explores the history of this “rigid division of personality” in *Romantic Genius* where he argues that the progression from the older model of civic humanism to the newer model of civil humanism near the end of the eighteenth century drastically altered gender norms:

Whereas the civic humanist model assumed there was one right mode of behavior – manly discipline and self-control – to which men and women might aspire, the civil humanist model posited a sharp distinction between male and female forms of virtue .... This model located differences between men and women not merely in externals, such as clothing, but in deep, internal traits belonging to masculine and feminine essences.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, Oothoon and Theotormon’s initial desires stem from the rigid gender models of the period when “Numerous works repeated that men should be manly, and women, womanly”.<sup>9</sup>

Taking these models into consideration, Girard’s theory applies to the poem as follows: the civil humanist model of gender becomes the mediator of Theotormon’s desire to establish himself in the manner that society dictates, that is, through the “manly” conquest of Oothoon’s virginity. In turn, this same civil humanist model mediates Oothoon’s desires to fulfil her proscribed “womanly” gender role by surrendering her virginity to Theotormon through the act of consummation. In placing “the bright marigold of Leutha’s vale / .... / here to glow between [her] breasts”,<sup>10</sup> Oothoon links “a symbol of fertility in May Day festivals”<sup>11</sup> to “where my whole soul seeks”. The narrator then emphasizes how “Over

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*, New York, 1999, 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 1:5 and 12, in *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W.H. Stevenson, text by David V. Erdman, Longmans’ Annotated English Poets, London, 1971, 174: “Visions”, ll. 5 and 12.

<sup>11</sup> *British Literature 1780-1830*, eds Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, Boston, 1996, 294.

the waves she went in winged exulting swift delight", which illustrates the intensity of Oothoon's desire.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, both Oothoon and Theotormon are unable to satisfy their desires because instead of tasting "The moment of desire!" ending in "happy copulation", "Bromion rent her with his thunders; on his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalled his thunders hoarse".<sup>13</sup> Following the rape, Oothoon loses value because "she, like all victims, is property".<sup>14</sup> Bromion's dialogue makes the connection between Oothoon and real estate clear when he says, "Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south".<sup>15</sup> Gayle Rubin supports this reading of Oothoon as socialized property when she writes that "Capitalism is a set of social relations – forms of property, and so forth – in which production takes the form of turning money, things, and people into capital".<sup>16</sup> Luce Irigaray concurs: "What makes such an order possible, what assures its foundation, is thus *the exchange of women*."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Plate 1:13-14 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 174-75: "Visions", ll. 13-14).

<sup>13</sup> Plate 7:3 and 1 and Plate 1:16-17 (*ibid.*, 184 and 175: "Visions", ll. 179, 176 and 16-17).

<sup>14</sup> James E. Swearingen, "The Enigma of Identity in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XIC/2 (1992), 205.

<sup>15</sup> Plate 1:20 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 175: "Visions", l. 20). In positing a feminist reading of the poem, Laura Ellen Haigwood ("Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* ...") challenges the critical perception of Oothoon "as a victim of the more powerful men around her" by arguing that "Oothoon is not a rape victim but an active and aggressive participant in her experience" (83) and that such "guilt is inextricably linked to power" (77). However, if Oothoon purposely brought about her rendezvous with Bromion, then why would she inform the reader of her commitment to Theotormon? Rather than demonstrating Oothoon's agency, such an act would undermine any sense of tragedy regarding Oothoon because instead of invoking pity, Theotormon's rejection of Oothoon would seem earned, thereby relegating her to the level of pathos and relieving the reader of any sympathy for her plight. Furthermore, Haigwood argues against interpreting the poem as rape because such a reading "assumes that sexual possession implies total possession" (87). Yet, given the legal status of women during this period, this was in fact true. Numerous literary examples throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ranging from *Clarissa* to *Mill on the Floss* illustrate that even the suspicion of premarital intercourse implied "total possession". As a result, David Punter's interpretation of the line "Bromion rent her with his thunders" as "a politically displaced representation of rape" seems more plausible ("Blake, Trauma and the Female", *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, XV/3 [1984], 483).

<sup>16</sup> Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 161.

<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca: NY, 1985, 184.

The exchange of women is particularly important to Theotormon given Rubin's argument that such an exchange is "more powerful than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship so established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship".<sup>18</sup> In raping Oothoon, Bromion disrupts Theotormon's participation in the kinship system where "Gift giving confers upon its participants a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid".<sup>19</sup> As Jane E. Peterson argues, Theotormon's inability to possess Oothoon's virginity indicates his failure to solidify such a kinship relationship, and this failure separates Theotormon from society, establishing his "marginal position" that is "maintained throughout the poem" because he "is 'rent' as Oothoon was, but by his own storms".<sup>20</sup>

Instead, Bromion takes possession of Oothoon, treating her like capital – what Karl Marx terms a "use-value" that is also one of "the material depositories of exchange-value".<sup>21</sup> In taking Oothoon's virginity, Bromion reduces her cultural exchange value because

*The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men.*<sup>22</sup>

Given the high value that society, and men in particular, placed on female virginity during the period, the rape negates any possibility of Oothoon's exchange between men, rendering her a "harlot here on Bromion's bed"<sup>23</sup> devoid of exchange value. In this instance, Bromion's desire is mediated by the same model of civil humanist model of gender that infuses Theotormon with the desire for the conquest of virginity. In Girardian terms, Bromion experiences mimesis, duplicating Theotormon's desire to possess Oothoon's virginity.

However, because exchanges and relationships between men are "*both required and forbidden by law*",<sup>24</sup> this competitive relationship between Theotormon and Bromion develops a homosocial triangle. As

<sup>18</sup> Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 173.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Jane E. Peterson, "The *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: A Problem in Perception", *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), 257.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Oxford, 1998, 268-69.

<sup>22</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 186 (italics in the original).

<sup>23</sup> Plate 1:18 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 175: "Visions", l. 18).

<sup>24</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 193 (italics in the original).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, “in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent”.<sup>25</sup> Within this homosocial triangle, Bromion and Theotormon become the socially mediated contestants in the struggle to possess Oothoon, who they no longer treat as a person, but as an object, a commodity to be obtained. Yet Bromion finds divesting Oothoon of her virginity unsatisfactory because

Desire, as soon as there is exchange, “perverts” need. But that perversion will be attributed to commodities and to their alleged relations.<sup>26</sup>

In much the same way, Theotormon blames Oothoon because the civil humanist model bars him from accepting “Bromion’s harlot” as his mate. This rejection, in turn, leaves Oothoon unable to conform to the model of civil humanism. So she becomes “A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity”,<sup>27</sup> and her incessant cries for Theotormon near the end of poem indicate her return to the older model of civic humanism because “in the civic humanist model, femininity was lack of moderation, a rampant sexual appetite was naturally feminine”.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Oothoon demonstrates both a “lack of moderation” and “a rampant sexual appetite” in the latter sections of the poem when she advocates “Love! Love! Love! Happy, happy Love! free as the mountain wind!”, saying that she will

.... catch for thee girls of mild silver or of furious gold;  
I’ll lie beside thee on a bank and view their wanton play  
In lovely copulation, bliss on bliss with Theotormon,  
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,  
Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e’er with jealous cloud  
Come in the heaven of generous love, nor selfish blightings bring.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, 1985, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 177.

<sup>27</sup> Plates 2:1 and 7:15 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 175 and 185: “Visions”, ll. 24 and 190).

<sup>28</sup> Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Plate 7:16 and 24-29 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 185: ll. 191 and 199-204).

Helen Ellis argues that Oothoon offers Theotormon “not a literal harem of girls for his bed but, if only he will free his senses as she has hers, the bliss, the liberating joy, of her own perceptual breakthrough”.<sup>30</sup> While Laura Ellen Haigwood claims that Oothoon’s breakthrough is only partial:

It is important to bear in mind that sexual liberation, in itself, is not invariably liberating to women, either psychologically or socially. On the contrary, to liberate women sexually without liberating them politically and economically as well is at best insufficient.<sup>31</sup>

The back-to-back bondage of Bromion and Oothoon as depicted in the poem’s tailpiece illustrates this tension between sexual and social liberation. Indeed, a materialist perspective suggests that the chains linking Bromion and Oothoon literally illustrate the social bonds that sexual union creates between them. Oothoon’s dialogue confirms such a reading when she depicts herself as “she who burns with youth and knows no fixed lot, is bound / In spells of law to one she loathes. And must she drag the chain / Of life, in weary lust!”<sup>32</sup> In other words, Oothoon can no longer give herself to Theotormon because she is bound by the ideologies of gendered propriety surrounding her. She has lost cultural exchange value, and, as such, she offers women of gold and silver because they remain inviolate, retaining their worth.

This reading of the poem demonstrates Blake’s repudiation of late eighteenth-century codification of gender roles under the burgeoning civil humanist model and also of the socio-ideological conditions that result from such rigid systems of categorization. This disavowal is particularly evident in the remainder of the poem, which recounts the ways the inter-relation of strictly defined gender roles and the consequences of the gender-based economy devastates these three characters. Theotormon laments the loss of capital/property (Oothoon) and his inability to acquire the social position he had aspired to because, as Luce Irigaray argues, “This society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women”, which “assures the foundation of the economic, social, and cultural order that has been ours for centuries”, “because women’s bodies – through their use, consumption, and

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<sup>30</sup> Helen Ellis, “Blake’s ‘Bible of Hell’: *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and the Song of Solomon”, *English Studies in Canada*, XII/1 (1986), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Haigwood, “Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* . . .”, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Plate 5:21-23 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 182: “Visions”, ll. 132-34).



circulation – provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown ‘infrastructure’ of the elaboration of that social life and culture”. Since “passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves”, Theotormon’s failure to participate in this system represents his failure to enter the social order and, ultimately, his failure to embody the requisite social role of “manhood”.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, the material conditions that bind Oothoon render her doubly unable to re-establish her relationship with Theotormon because

The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he “pays” the father or the brother, not the mother ....), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another .... The economy – in both the narrow and the broad sense – that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities.<sup>34</sup>

As a result, Oothoon’s status as objectified woman precludes her from actively participating in the realm of exchange since “To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give”.<sup>35</sup> Having lost her cultural exchange value, Oothoon exists only as the aftermath of “mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself” – Bromion has already capitalized on what she had to give.<sup>36</sup>

At this point in the poem, any move on Theotormon’s part to embrace Oothoon becomes impossible because commodities

mirror the need/desire for exchanges among men. To do this, the commodity obviously cannot exist alone, but there is no such thing as a commodity, either, so long as there are not *at least two men* to make an exchange. In order for a product – a woman? – to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) her.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 170-71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-72.

<sup>35</sup> Rubin, “The Traffic in Women”, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 193.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 181 (italics in the original).

Therefore Theotormon's indifference to Oothoon parallels, indeed mirrors, Bromion's loss of interest in her. Because the desires of both men are mimetic of each other, Theotormon's loss of interest in Oothoon dissipates Bromion's, further divesting Oothoon of cultural value.

Oothoon recognizes her plight when she asks, "How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant?". In this line, Oothoon questions her socially constructed status as the object of exchange by acknowledging that the gift of love that she offers cannot compete with the "delights of the merchant", including the increased social acceptance that Theotormon pursues through the civil humanist model. Even so, Oothoon continues to assert her worth by comparing herself to buried treasure: "Does not the eagle scorn the earth and despise the treasures beneath? / But the mole knoweth what is there, and the worm shall tell it thee."<sup>38</sup> Of course, Theotormon is unable to accept Oothoon's comparison because in a social system in which men exchange women, "the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desires of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response".<sup>39</sup> In this way, "*Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man* .... They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and mirage of his activity"; likewise

*Commodities thus share in the cult of the father, and never stop striving to resemble, to copy, the one who is his representative.* It is from that resemblance, from that imitation of what represents paternal authority, that commodities draw their value – for men.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, Oothoon attempts to mirror Theotormon by

... calling Theotormon's eagles to prey upon her flesh:

"I call with holy voice kings of the sounding air,  
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect  
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast."

The eagles at her call descend and rend their bleeding prey.  
Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the smile,

<sup>38</sup> Plate 5:12 and 39-40 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 181-82: "Visions", ll. 123 and 150-51).

<sup>39</sup> Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 182.

<sup>40</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 177 and 178 (italics in the original).

As the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts grows pure and smiles.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, Oothoon attempts to physically alter her body to more closely resemble that of Theotormon. Yet, to her dismay, Oothoon's entreaties remain unanswered:

"Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent,  
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me;  
How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?"<sup>42</sup>

This communicative disconnection results from Theotormon's perception of Oothoon as property:

*So commodities speak. To be sure, mostly dialects and patois, languages hard for "subjects" to understand.* The important thing is that they be preoccupied with their respective values, that their remarks confirm the exchangers' plans for them.<sup>43</sup>

So, the more Oothoon asserts her innocence and purity, the more Theotormon remembers his initial plan and his subsequent loss: "Tell me what is the night or day to one o'erflowed with woe?"<sup>44</sup>

Aligning Theotormon's behaviour with Julia Kristeva's theory of melancholy, then, the loss of Oothoon's virginity becomes a source of depression for Theotormon because it prevents him from successfully imitating the civil humanist model of gender that mediates his desire. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva defines the source of melancholy: "some setback or other in my love life or my profession, some sorrow or bereavement affecting my relationship with close relatives – such are often the easily spotted triggers of my despair."<sup>45</sup> Oothoon recognizes Theotormon's frustrated desire as the source of his melancholy when she asks: "Is it because acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude, / Where the horrible darkness is impressed with

<sup>41</sup> Plate 2:13-19 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 176: "Visions", ll. 36-42).

<sup>42</sup> Plate 3:14-16 (*ibid.*, 178: "Visions", ll. 75-77).

<sup>43</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 179 (italics in the original).

<sup>44</sup> Plate 3:22 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 179: "Visions", l. 83).

<sup>45</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1989, 3.

reflections of desire?”<sup>46</sup> For Kristeva, such a prolonged desire for solitude indicates the presence of “an unsymbolizable, unnamable narcissistic wound” because

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the “Thing” as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated .... the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time.<sup>47</sup>

So, the loss of Oothoon’s virginity becomes a black sun for Theotormon, driving him into a melancholy state in which

Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage. Talking about depression will again lead us into the marshy land of the Narcissus myth. This time, however, we shall not encounter the bright and fragile amatory idealization; on the contrary, we shall see the shadow cast on the fragile self, hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the *loss* of that essential other. The shadow of despair.<sup>48</sup>

However, “*A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable ‘bodies’*: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values”.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Oothoon acts as a mirror, imitating Theotormon’s frustrated desire and further exacerbating his depression. As such, this mimetic process compounds his misery by continually reminding him of his loss. In other words: “The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendancy that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, Theotormon’s frustrated

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<sup>46</sup> Plate 7:10-11 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 184-85: “Visions”, ll. 185-86).

<sup>47</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 12 and 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (italics in the original).

<sup>49</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 180 (italics in the original).

<sup>50</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 5.

desire leads him to blame Oothoon, to see her as one who has betrayed him and deprived him of ascendancy.

Yet, Oothoon refuses to be blamed, exonerating herself by reminding him of Bromion's actions, who came "With nets found under thy night pillow to catch virgin joy, / And brand it with the name of whore, and sell it in the night". Not only does Oothoon disavow Theotormon's assertions of guilt, she also questions his motivations:

"And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,  
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?  
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed, and all the virgin joys  
Of life are harlots, and Theotormon is a sick man's dream  
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness."<sup>51</sup>

In fact, she describes the melancholy "That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all the day, / To spin a web of age around him, grey and hoary, dark, / Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before his sight" as his narcissistic inability to accept the past: "Such is self-love that envies all, a creeping skeleton / With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed."<sup>52</sup> Again, Oothoon's dialogue conforms to Kristeva's theory that to the depressed person

An infinite number of misfortunes weigh us down every day .... All this suddenly gives me a new life. A life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty.

Subsequently, "I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow".<sup>53</sup> Theotormon acknowledges a similar fixity in the past when he says, "Tell me where dwell the joys of old, and where the ancient loves. / And when will they renew again and the night of oblivion past".<sup>54</sup>

However, Theotormon is not the only character in the poem who suffers from melancholy; even as Oothoon recognizes Theotormon's

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<sup>51</sup> Plate 6:11-12 and 16-20 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 183-84: "Visions", ll. 163-64 and 168-72).

<sup>52</sup> Plate 7:18-22 (*ibid.*, 185: "Visions", ll. 193-97).

<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Plate 4:4-5 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 179: "Visions", ll. 90-91).

melancholy, she fails to see her own. Oothoon's inability to identify the source of her own sorrows is partially because her affliction manifests itself in a different form from that of Theotormon. Whereas Theotormon's melancholy manifests itself through his solitary "weeping upon the threshold", "With secret tears", "Oothoon weeps not, she cannot weep, her tears are locked up, / But she can howl incessant, writhing her soft snowy limbs". Furthermore, unlike Theotormon, who secludes himself and "hears me not. To him the night and the morn / Are both alike – a night of sighs, a morning of fresh tears",<sup>55</sup> Oothoon finds a different way to express her melancholy, which otherwise

prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach the place I have referred to? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the co-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole "container" seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing.<sup>56</sup>

In this way, Kristeva's theory of melancholy provides an explanation for Oothoon's strident protestations because "Persons thus affected do not consider themselves wronged but afflicted with a fundamental flaw, a congenital deficiency".<sup>57</sup> As a result, Oothoon's urgent singing functions as her method of "working out the loss within the psyche".

In addition, Kristeva's theory offers an explanation of Oothoon's masochistic behaviour:

For the speaking being life is a meaningful life, life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters.<sup>58</sup>

In this scenario, losing Theotormon and the access he once provided to her socially mediated desire shatters Oothoon's sense of meaning, creating a rift within the self. As Kristeva details:

According to classic psychoanalytic theory (Abraham, Freud, and Melanie Klein), depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed

<sup>55</sup> Plate 2:21, 7, 11-12 and 37-38 (*ibid.*, 176-77: "Visions", ll. 44, 30, 34-35 and 60-61).

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

person with respect to the object of mourning. “I love that object,” is what the person seems to say about the lost object, “but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it within myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am nonexistent, I shall kill myself.”

Similarly, Oothoon embeds Theotormon within herself, thereby internalizing this love-hate relationship, and these feelings, in turn, engender her masochistic episodes:

For my identification with the loved-hated other, through incorporation-introjection-projection, leads me to imbed in myself its sublime component, which becomes my necessary, tyrannical judge, as well as its subject component, which demeans me and of which I desire to rid myself. Consequently, the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore the realization that the complaint against oneself is a hatred for the other, which is without doubt the substratum of an unsuspected sexual desire.<sup>59</sup>

As this passage illuminates, Oothoon’s internalized hatred for Theotormon manifests itself through her masochistic attempts to disfigure the other within the self.

This reading matches Nancy Moore Goslee’s contention that “Oothoon’s final speech, which makes up the third section of the poem but almost half of its total length, should be read neither as a triumphant prophesy of sexual liberation nor as Blake’s ironic recognition that liberated sexuality in this physical and social world is impossible”.<sup>60</sup> Although Harriet Kramer Linkin maintains that

While Oothoon does not and cannot approximate a contemporary feminist ideal, she comes closest to bridging the curious gap between Blake’s belief in human liberation and his poetic representation of the female. As the best (and perhaps only) active, good female figure, Oothoon occupies a special place in Blake’s canon,

Haigwood establishes “That Blake was familiar enough with both contemporary feminist theory and the personal life of one of its major

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Moore Goslee, “Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*”, *ELH*, LVII/1 (1990), 116.

proponents, Mary Wollstonecraft, to conceive and execute a subtle critique of feminism's internal contradictions and inconsistencies".<sup>61</sup>

However, both Linkin's and Haigwood's arguments require fine-tuning because Oothoon's speech illuminates not only the status of women during the late eighteenth century, but larger questions of gender, in particular the inherent problems of gender binaries, such as the civil humanist model. Furthermore, whereas Swearingen concludes that "this poem boldly studies the socialization of gender in a way that reveals the social and moral origins of sexual violation",<sup>62</sup> it seems more appropriate to read the poem as an in-depth study of the intricate ways in which culture mediates human desire, the ideological bonds that frustrated desire creates, and why:

... every morning wails Oothoon. But Theotormon sits  
Upon the margined ocean, conversing with shadows dire.

*The daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs.*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Harriet Kramer Linkin, "Revisioning Blake's Oothoon", *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XXIII/4 (1990), 192; Haigwood, "Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* ...", 90.

<sup>62</sup> Swearingen, "The Enigma of Identity in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*", 206.

<sup>63</sup> Plate 8:11-13 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 186: "Visions", ll. 216-18).



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## **“HAPPY COPULATION”: REVOLUTIONARY SEXUALITY IN BLAKE AND SHELLEY**

MONIKA LEE

Why in Romantic poetry is sexuality so often unnoticed or disregarded? Discussions of sexual meaning in the poetry of Aphra Behn, the Earl of Rochester, Ted Hughes or Sylvia Plath are plentiful. When Aphra Behn in “The Willing Mistress” writes, “Ah who can guess the rest?”, or Andrew Marvell writes, “Now let us sport us while we may” in “To His Coy Mistress”, the reader understands that the poetic speakers are referring to coitus.<sup>1</sup> In Shelley and Blake, however, two poets unreservedly and unashamedly interested in sexual activity and vocal in their support of free love, the reader’s position is different. We are not invited into the sexual poem as a voyeur, but rather as a desiring subject in a complex interplay of *eros* and *thanatos* – an experience of the body as text and the text as body. The reader is forced from passivity (a static and unwavering missionary position of readerly receptivity) into active co-creation in the erotically unfolding dance of the text.

The sexual desires and encounters depicted in Shelley’s and Blake’s poetry often receive sparse commentary or are altogether overlooked.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For recent discussions of sexuality in seventeenth- and twentieth-century poetry, see Leo Brady, “Remembering Masculinity: Premature Ejaculation Poetry of the Seventeenth Century”, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, XXXIII/1 (Winter 1994), 177-201; Jonathan Goldberg, *Desiring Women Writing: English Renaissance Examples*, Stanford, 1997; and *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, eds Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, Columbia: MO, 1993. On Rochester, see Jonathan Kramnick, “Rochester and the History of Sexuality”, *ELH*, LXIX/2 (Summer 2002), 277-301, and S.H. Clark, *Sordid Images: The Poetry of Masculine Desire*, London, 1994. On Sylvia Plath, see Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation*, Cambridge: MA, 2003, and Barbara Hardy, “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath”, in *Women Reading Women’s Writing*, ed. Sue Roe, Brighton, 1987, 207-25. On Ted Hughes, see David Holbrook, “The Crow of Avon? Shakespeare, Sex and Ted Hughes”, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, XV/1 (1986), 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Hagstrum’s book *The Romantic Body: Love and Sexuality in Keats, Wordsworth*,

Yet, as Hagstrum argues, no other period of English literature is so free of anxiety and guilt about sexual pleasure as the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Perhaps one reason that sex in Romantic poetry does not always look like sex is because of this unabashed delight. The Renaissance use of bawdy is implicated with shame; post-Freudian fantasies are full of neuroses. So when Blake or Shelley equates coitus with pure joy or transcendent love, we are easily misled by the unfamiliar idiom and tone. As Hagstrum writes, “there seems to be no room in Romantic sensibility for any kind of asceticism or sexual denial. In this respect our period is quite unlike any that has preceded – or indeed followed it.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past, critics of Romantic poetry have been inclined to ignore the body and immediately leap into metaphysical, ideological or linguistic abstractions.<sup>4</sup> In Shelley criticism, the sense of the unearthly angel

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and Blake, Knoxville, 1985, is an important antidote to the pervasive critical asceticizing of the Romantic poets. There is an increasing trend towards the discussion of sexuality in Blake and Shelley, especially in Blake. These discussions focus primarily on *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* by critics such as Catherine L. McClenahan (“Albion and the Sexual Machine: Blake, Gender and Politics, 1780-1795”, in *Blake, Politics, and History*, eds Jackie DiSalvo, G.A. Rosso and Christopher Z. Hobson, New York, 1998, 301-24), Jane Sturrock (“Maenads, Young Ladies, and the Lovely Daughters of Albion”, in *Blake, Politics, and History*, 339-49), Helen Bruder (*William Blake and the Daughters of Albion*, New York, 1997) and Tristanne J. Connolly (*William Blake and the Body*, New York, 2002). Alicia Ostriker’s delineation of four different Blakes with respect to sexuality in “Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality”, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XVI/3 (1982-83), 156-65, is the most comprehensive and flexible of interpretations. Nathaniel Brown (*Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*, Cambridge: MA, 1979), William A. Ulmer (*Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love*, Princeton, 1990), Peter Finch (“Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna*: The Bride Stripped Bare ... Almost”, *Keats-Shelley Review*, III [Autumn 1988], 23-46), Teddi Chichester Bonca (*Shelley’s Mirrors of Love: Narcissism, Sacrifice, and Sorority*, Albany, 1999) and Christopher Nagle (“Sterne, Shelley, and Sensibility’s Pleasure of Proximity”, *ELH*, LXX/3 [Fall 2003], 813-45) have all contributed to the recognition the centrality of sex in Shelley studies through thoughtful re-integrations of Shelley’s avowed and pervasive interest in sexual expression.

<sup>3</sup> Hagstrum, *The Romantic Body*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> The tendency in Romantic criticism to emphasize the mythic and the metaphysical at the expense of the concrete and the physical began with M.H. Abrams (*The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford, 1953), Northrop Frye (*Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, Princeton, 1947, and *A Study of English Romanticism*, Brighton, 1983) and Earl Wasserman (*Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Baltimore, 1971). Recent attempts to historicize Blake and Shelley through more contextualized approaches still tend to favour matters of history, politics, and gender over the subject of sex itself. In Romantic studies sex has largely become a lens through which

remains, and not without reason. Shelley's own language frequently suggests the uncomfortable cohabitation of spirit "with purer nutriment supplied"<sup>5</sup> and body, imagined in *Adonais* as "th'unwilling dross" holding back the spirit's flight.<sup>6</sup> Blake, on the other hand, represents life and sexuality as inevitably fallen, since the very existence of two sexes is for him the outcome of the Fall. By the end of his poetic career, his vision of human sexuality as a contest of wills in which interpenetration is resisted by the evil "Female Will" has led more than one reader to conclude that he has frustrations about his own sexuality and certainly about women.<sup>7</sup>

But such qualifications do not render Romantic poetry any more anxious or less sexual than Restoration or modern poetry. In fact, the contrary may be true. Blake and Shelley are more consistently and meaningfully sexual than many writers of straight erotica whose main purpose is to excite the reader. For Blake and Shelley, the sexual permeates all aspects of the psyche, nature, social interaction, politics and even spirituality. As a result, they are among the most complex and interesting poetic commentators in the English language on sexual activity and its meanings. As we will see, for them sex is not an isolated and dissociated experience of sensual pleasure, but a vision. This "sexual vision", oxymoronic as the term sounds, is the basis of their poetics. It is an imaginative, social and political vision in which free love as embodied imagination is the path of human liberation. The radical proposition that free love – sexual and affective freedom, unconstrained by religion, law or custom – is the physical expression of the imagination in bodily form permeates all their poetry. Sexuality is not a mere trope for the imagination, but rather a clear expression of freedom, radically defined, and analogous, for these writers, to the aims and goals of the French Revolution.

Whereas frank discussions of sexuality in literature are more prolific in ages when sex is equated with materialism, as in the libertine

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to view matters of gender, whereas for Blake and Shelley sexuality itself dominates their poetic purpose to a much larger extent than is generally recognized.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, l. 202, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, London, 1914, 508.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley, *Adonais*, l. 384 (*ibid.*, 436).

<sup>7</sup> Alicia Ostriker, "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality", 156; Susan Fox, "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry", *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1977), 509; Anne K. Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine*, Berkeley, 1974, 148.

traditions of the seventeenth century or in the modern age,<sup>8</sup> criticism needs to recognize Blake and Shelley as poets of sexuality. Through an overview of the sex acts portrayed in several poems, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Milton*, *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *Alastor*, *Laon and Cythna*, and *Prometheus Unbound*, we can see that Blake and Shelley are intensely interested in the intersections of physical and psychological desires, and are advocates for sexual freedom as an integral part of democratic and republican aspirations.

Literary criticism may be an uncomfortable genre in which to write about sex. Part of this discomfort arises from the inherently immaterial or disembodied nature of the discipline. Poetry is undoubtedly a better vehicle for the topic for several reasons. In poetry, especially lyrical poetry, emotion or desire is primary; poetry, too, tends to privilege merging over differentiation. Its intensity of focus might be seen as analogous to or symbolic of the intensity of arousal or climax, and it is every bit as irrational as sexual desire.<sup>9</sup> The abandonment or oversight of sexual encounters in poetry no doubt follows in part from the inevitable transcendence of the physical that occurs in conceptual writing. Although Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and others have tried to “write the body”,<sup>10</sup> most literary criticism and theory retain a characteristic detachment from the flesh. It can be argued that as soon as the body is transcribed, it ceases to be the body.

Elizabeth Grosz attributes this tendency in literary criticism to a Western metaphysical tradition that has conceived of the body as the passive object of the mind or even primarily as “a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason”.<sup>11</sup> Dualistic assumptions fuel most conceptual systems in Western philosophy, religion and literature, and thus these texts inadequately recognize or validate the body as “a series of processes of becoming”.<sup>12</sup> No group of poets is more aware of the interconnections, sometimes even identifications, of mind

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, 1980, 3.

<sup>9</sup> It is for this “irrationality” that Bakhtin condemns the lyric form in “Discourse in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: Texas, 1981, 296-97.

<sup>10</sup> See Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Paris, 1975; Luce Irigaray, *Essays: Selections*, Cambridge: MA, 1991; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: IN, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

and body than the Romantic poets. In Blake and Shelley especially, identity is an embodied position, but the body is also a subjective experience: sexuality and psyche are not distinct or separate. Nonetheless, criticism has a tendency to gloss over the tangible, physical acts and run headlong into their ideological or mythical dimensions.

To take an obvious example of this mode of critical sexual blindness, we might ask why the poet/visionary's masturbatory fantasy in *Alastor* is interpreted as a quest for a Platonic ideal, an abstract or metaphysical love, or simply a death wish? Shelley's words of sexual desire and orgasmic release could hardly be more explicit. The veiled maid of his dream reaches out to him. She is "quivering eagerly" (l. 180): "He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled / His gasping breath." He reaches out to her "panting bosom". She holds back a bit and then "yields" to the "irresistible joy, / With frantic gesture and short breathless cry" (ll. 183-86). Then he essentially blacks out and experiences a kind of emptiness. His brain is described as "vacant" and he falls asleep.<sup>13</sup> Critics have variously characterized the dream and the object of the *Alastor* Poet's quest as an allegory for the Platonic Ideal (Notopoulos), Love (Ulmer), Death (Schapiro), and Nature (Lee).<sup>14</sup> But the language is unequivocally sexual. As a description of masturbation, this passage continues to be ignored. But whatever its symbolic or allegorical associations, on a literal level a description of the poet masturbating is impossible to refute. Nathaniel Brown identified the passage as a "wet dream" decades ago.<sup>15</sup> The question then becomes: why is this physical level of meaning still ignored?

Part of the problem arises from the commonly accepted opposition of dream and reality in Western thought. Sexuality as an experience of the body is often fully experienced in solitude – in dreams, whether waking or sleeping dreams. Although we might assume dreams to be non-physical, the intensely physical sensations of erotic dreams and daydreams challenge and refute the binaries of body/psyche. Moreover, dream states more than most states of consciousness are often able to furnish direct and intense sensual embodiment. That physiological states

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> See James A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Platonic Mind*, Durham: NC, 1949, 189-94; Ulmer, *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love*, 28ff.; Barbara Schapiro, *The Romantic Mother: Narcissistic Patterns in Romantic Poetry*, Baltimore, 1983, 19-20; Monika Lee, *Rousseau's Impact on Shelley: Figuring the Written Self*, Lewiston: NY, 1999, 106ff.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*, 1.

of arousal and orgasm originate in or cohere with the psyche does not render them imaginary. To conjecture, therefore, that the Alastor Poet's masturbatory dream is unreal or disembodied is an incomplete reading.<sup>16</sup>

The veiled maid he imagines may be bodiless, but the sexual response to the psychic projection is actual. To presume anything else is to suggest that orgasm is not physical or real. We might then read the Alastor Poet's darkened quest that follows on the heels of his waking dream as the flight from his body, rather than as a pursuit of the ideal. It is the force and power of embodied sexuality that terrifies him. It is his attempt to run away from this experience of the body, the psyche's embodiment through sexuality, that leads to annihilation. His love of nature is clearly part of his attachment to the regenerative world, yet it is the impulse to escape this world rather than to engage erotically or otherwise with it that leads to his destruction. As a lover without a female body to love and a poet who never writes a single word, his failure is the failure of limitless human potential sucked into a fatal vortex. His refutation of the sensual and social impulses behind his experience, not his embrace of them, leads to death.

The second reason the physical is frequently ignored in Shelley is that his language about physical arousal and orgasm is unusually idealistic. He never employs the crude or bawdy language of his forebears, nor does he suggest that the physical is divorced from the mental, emotional, and spiritual. In fact, Shelley's language does just the opposite. While celebrating erotic desire, he also extols every other kind of desire – for poetry (the dream woman is a poet, speaking poetry), for nature (Mother of this unfathomable world), for love (both real and ideal), for knowledge (he scours the world for it), and, ultimately, for death (a kind of obliteration of the self analogous to the obliteration of self through orgasm – orgasm being the little death of poetry from the Renaissance through to the eighteenth century).<sup>17</sup>

The same quandary applies to Panthea's dream at the beginning of Act II of *Prometheus Unbound*. She tells Asia her erotic dream. However the dream as fantasy does not negate but rather necessitates the dream as

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<sup>16</sup> William Keach writes, "the 'light' with which the dream maiden's limbs 'glow' comes from the mind which creates and perceives them; the reflexive locution signals a self-inclosed psychical experience" (*Shelley's Style*, New York, 1984, 82). See also Irvin B. Kroese, *The Beauty and the Terror: Shelley's Visionary Women*, Salzburg, 1976, 32.

<sup>17</sup> In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope employs this *double entendre* in the Baron's mock epic battle with Belinda: "[He] sought no more than on his Foe to die" (Canto V, 78).

embodiment. The desire is transferred through an arousal that challenges virtually every sexual taboo in Shelley's England. Panthea's dream is auto-erotic or masturbatory. Orgasm is achieved: "I saw not, heard not, moved not, only felt / His presence flow and mingle through my blood" (ll. 79-80). Other indications of her orgasmic moment are "I was thus absorbed" (l. 82) and "My being was condensed" (l. 86). Secondly, the dream is both lesbian and incestuous, since she is actually embracing and fondling her sister Ione during her dream of Prometheus:

Our young Ione's soft and milky arms  
Locked then, as now, behind my dark, moist hair,  
While my shut eyes and cheek were pressed within  
The folded depth of her life-breathing bosom.<sup>18</sup>

The dream is actually doubly incestuous, since she links erotically with Prometheus, her sister's lover/husband. But in this utopian vision of the politically and spiritually redeemed world, there is no shame at all attached to these formerly taboo sexualities. Because the source of sexual pleasure is free love, in the sense of physical love ostensibly unfettered by preconceptions and ideologies, it can be a full expression and embodiment of the liberated imagination. The utopian political project is thereby embedded in this eroticism without hierarchies and controls. Here the mental and the physical are not dichotomous states or binary oppositions at all. For Shelley, mind and body are an interrelated system of subjectivity and experience. In seeking to detach himself from those Shelley deemed the "mere reasoners",<sup>19</sup> who categorize rather than synthesize thought, he opts for imaginative and sensual experience over the analytical.<sup>20</sup>

Blake is known for his prolific and eloquent rebuttals of the Mind/Body split of rationalism: "that called body is a portion of soul discerned by the five senses."<sup>21</sup> Or as Tristanne Connolly so succinctly

<sup>18</sup> Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, ll.i.46-49 (*The Complete Poetical Works*, 224-25).

<sup>19</sup> *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E.B. Murray, Oxford, 1993, 292, n. 62.

<sup>20</sup> In his landmark study *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*, Nathaniel Brown identifies Shelley's sense of the social and political value of free love as a kind of utilitarian hedonism (89).

<sup>21</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 4, in *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W.H. Stevenson, text by David V. Erdman, Longmans' Annotated English Poets, London, 1971, 105-106.



phrases it, "Blake's eternal body [is] most definitely a body".<sup>22</sup> Blake, moreover, attacks Cartesian dualism, Lockean empiricism, Newtonian rationalism, and French materialism with the most dogmatic expressions of disgust.<sup>23</sup> He continually reasserts the divinity of the body as an interconnected physical and spiritual being. For Blake, in accord with the Swedenborgians, the resurrected body is the same body that exists on earth. According to this doctrine, conjugal love plays a large role in the afterlife. Blake celebrates the body in his gloriously depicted nudes, as in "Glad Day", and he extols the body's experiences as physical and mental experiences in all his major poems. Christ, for Blake, is essentially a body – "the Human Form Divine".<sup>24</sup>

In Blake, the boundaries of mind and body are not so fluid and blurred as they are in Shelley; rather, they are repeatedly collapsed and exploded. Blake's most radical statement about sexuality, in direct defiance of orthodox Christian doctrine, is that copulation is the necessary vehicle of spiritual renewal and apocalypse: that holy communion itself is the interaction of male and female flesh. He asserts that "the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite and holy, whereas it now appears finite and corrupt" as a result of "an improvement of sensual enjoyment".<sup>25</sup> However, the idea that sexuality and sensual enjoyment had wider ramifications than the physical pleasure of the individual was not unique to Blake or Shelley but was rather a predominant theory of their age.

Nicola Watson has thoroughly demonstrated that female sexual desire, expressed through eighteenth-century sentimental novels in France, was widely castigated by English conservatives as the cause of the French Revolution. As bizarre and unlikely as it seems, this correlation was made so frequently in the 1790s as to become a sort of

<sup>22</sup> Connolly, *William Blake and the Body*, viii.

<sup>23</sup> A representative example is found in *Milton* (Plate 40:11-13) where Ololon asks, "how is this thing, this Newtonian phantasm / This Voltaire & Rousseau, this Hume & Gibbon & Bolingbroke, / This Natural Religion, this impossible absurdity" (*The Poems of William Blake*, 562). See also *Milton*, Plate 41:1-6 and *Jerusalem*, Plates 15:10-12, 15-16; 66:12-14, and 93:21-26 (*ibid.*, 563, 654, 655, 767 and 832). For Blake's rejection of dualism, see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plates 4 and 14 (*ibid.*, 105-106 and 114).

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "Human Form Divine" occurs throughout Blake's work: in "The Divine Image" (ll. 11 and 15) and "A Divine Image" (l. 3) in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in Night the Ninth of *The Four Zoas* (126:10 or l. 364), in *Milton* (Plate 32:13), as well as in *The Everlasting Gospel* (VI, l. 66). See *The Poems of William Blake*, 69, 143, 443, 574 and 857 respectively.

<sup>25</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 14 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 114).

commonplace.<sup>26</sup> As a result, in *A Letter to the National Assembly* Burke could invoke Rousseau's Julie as a shorthand for the disruption of political hierarchy:

That no means may exist of confederating against their tyranny, by the false sympathies of this Nouvelle Héloïse, they [the Revolutionaries] endeavour to subvert those principles of domestic trust and fidelity which form the discipline of social life. They propagate principles by which every servant may think it, if not his duty, at least his privilege, to betray his master.<sup>27</sup>

The transgression of servant against master, and the transgression of a daughter against her father and later her husband in Rousseau's novel, are read culturally as the essence of revolutionary thinking. In Burke and in the rhetoric of conservative writers in *The Anti-Jacobin*, the French Revolution is characterized as an act of adultery and France as a fallen woman.<sup>28</sup>

Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or *Julie* is the tale of a tutor who falls in love with his student and has sexual (and sentimental) relations with her; he then becomes a friend of hers and of her husband after she marries. Strangely, Monsieur Wolmar, the husband, welcomes the doting young lover into their married life. The book was a bestseller in England (Shelley read it in 1816), and it was widely interpreted as an allegory of the political climate in France. St Preux's disruptions of the social order of Europe are multiple: he breaks down class barriers by making love to the daughter of his employer. He is, after all, a mere servant. Julie, by continuing to desire St Preux after she marries, was thought to be guilty of psychological adultery. Monsieur Wolmar, by benevolently accepting the love of the two young people, divests himself

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<sup>26</sup> Nicola Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825*, Oxford, 1994, 1-17.

<sup>27</sup> "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly" (1791), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, VIII: The French Revolution, 1790-94*, ed. L.G. Mitchell, Oxford, 1989, 318-19.

<sup>28</sup> "Hence in 1798, at the height of the backlash against all those supposed even remotely to have sympathized with the Revolution (fuelled by the eruption of the French-backed Irish rebellion), *The Anti-Jacobin* is at pains to point out, in its review of William Godwin's radical philosophical treatise *Political Justice* (1793), that a proper policing of female desire both before and after marriage is necessary to preserve the health of the state." Watson gives multiple fine examples of "this identification of political liberty and female desire" (*Revolution and the Form of the British Novel*, 9-10 and 11).

of his rightful powers: the hierarchal privileges inherent in his class, age, gender, wealth and marital status. According to the conservative argument expostulated by William Barrow, John Bowles, Edmund Burke, Thomas Harral and others, the fact that his behaviour is idealized in Rousseau opens the floodgates of republican immorality. The argument was that such emotional and sexual licence broke down the necessary strictures and hierarchies that ensured peace and prosperity in Europe. Unrestrained desire, the conservatives argued, led to the violent excesses of the Revolution. Not surprisingly, this wayward writer was the same Rousseau who argued for a form of republican democracy in *The Social Contract*.

The links between sexually liberal and revolutionary political views were abundant. Voltaire, another republican writer and a deist, wrote some pornography, along with his attacks on monarchy, church and state. Although less interested in sentiment than Rousseau and Shelley, Voltaire was also considered to be one of the primarily licentious figures behind the French Revolution. But perhaps the most sympathetic of the *philosophes* to the Romantic ideal of sexual freedom is Denis Diderot, who recommends a kind of sexual freedom based on uninhibited physical consummation coupled with affection or tenderness. An early influence on Shelley, Diderot wrote disparagingly of European shame and primitive sexual joys: "Creep away into the forest, if you wish, with the perverse companions of your pleasures, but allow the good, simple Tahitians to reproduce themselves without shame under the open sky and in the broad daylight."<sup>29</sup> Such idealizations of native sexuality are pervasive in Blake, where they are generally accompanied by imagery of childhood or youth as a time of sexual innocence and pleasure: "Sweet babe, in thy face / Soft desires I can trace" ("A Cradle Song").<sup>30</sup>

Catherine L. McClenahan and Jane Sturrock have also shown the ways in which specifically female libido was adopted as a trope for revolutionary energies. McClenahan provides much evidence that this trope informs Blake's political allegory in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, since Oothoon is "a revolutionary" with a "passionate analysis of

<sup>29</sup> Denis Diderot, *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage"; Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen, New York, 1964, 190.

<sup>30</sup> *The Poems of William Blake*, 148. Cf. "Infancy, fearless, lustful, happy, nestling for delight / In laps of pleasure! Innocence, honest, open, seeking / The vigorous joys of morning light, open to virgin bliss!" from the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 6:4-6 (*ibid.*, 183: "Visions", ll. 156-58).

interlinked systems of oppression”, while Bromion is a “ruthless oppressor whose cruelty and greed provoke revolutions”.<sup>31</sup> Jane Sturrock’s analysis of the female characters in *Jerusalem* also demonstrates how the violent, threatening, and powerful female forms are part of this cultural representation of the French Revolution as a maenad, harpy or other powerful, sexually uncontrollable, mythical female monster, but with the crucial difference in Blake that the monstrous female is associated with chastity rather than libido.<sup>32</sup>

In this major respect, Blake is turning the conservative assumption about female sexuality on its head. For Burke, the licentiousness of the female image brings with it violence and horror. Blake, in anticipation of more modern thinking, implies that violence and horror are more likely the result of sexual repression.<sup>33</sup> Leaving to one side the issue of whether Blake was a feminist or a misogynist or both (as is most likely),<sup>34</sup> we can still observe that female sexual libido maintains its connection to the forces of revolutionary change in Europe and elsewhere. The intensely desiring and sexual Oothoon is “the soft soul of America”.<sup>35</sup>

Shelley’s incredulity at his society’s distortions of human sexuality owes its existence to his early and extensive reading of Diderot and other French materialist philosophers. Diderot wrote “but how did it come about that an act so solemn in its purpose, an act to which nature invites us by so powerful a summons – how did it come about that this act, the greatest, the sweetest and the most innocent of pleasures, has become the chief source of our depravity and bad conduct?”.<sup>36</sup> But what is remarkable in Shelley is not that he was influenced by the idealization of

<sup>31</sup> Catherine L. McClenahan, “Albion and the Sexual Machine: Blake, Gender and Politics, 1780-1795”, in *Blake, Politics, and History*, 312.

<sup>32</sup> See her “Maenads, Young Ladies, and the Lovely Daughters of Albion”, in *Blake, Politics, and History*, 339-49.

<sup>33</sup> See Hagstrum, *The Romantic Body*, 116, and Christopher Z. Hobson’s *Blake and Homosexuality*, New York, 200, 158.

<sup>34</sup> I concur with Alicia Ostriker who writes that we “find in Blake both a richly developed anti-patriarchal and proto-feminist sensibility, ... and its opposite, a homocentric gynophobia” (“Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality”, 164). Michael Ackland’s insightful interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s influence on *The Four Zoas* (“The Embattled Sexes: Blake’s Debt to Wollstonecraft in *The Four Zoas*”, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XVI/3 [1982-83], 172-83) makes Blake appear more unequivocally feminist than I believe he was.

<sup>35</sup> *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 1:3 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 174: “Visions”, l. 3).

<sup>36</sup> *Supplement to Bougainville’s “Voyage”; Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, 222.

native cultures but that he praised *La Nouvelle Héloïse* so effusively in the presence of widespread recognition of it as a politically charged piece of propaganda at a time when even radical, Romantic and Jacobin writers were distancing themselves from Rousseau and his novel. The belief that free love and female sexual desire laid the emotional groundwork for the French Revolution appealed to Shelley because in 1816, he was one of the few remaining people in England who had not succumbed to the new conservatism but continued to embrace the goals and aspirations of that Revolution. (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley were all more in tune with the times.)

Like Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* later in the century, Shelley continued to assert that the temporary evils of the Revolution, the Reign of Terror and the Empire would eventually give way to some of the democratic and republican goals that inspired the Revolution in the first place. Yet Shelley, like his opponent Edmund Burke, accepted the correlation between political and sexual freedoms. That he continued to support and extol these freedoms in a time of increasing puritanism and repression is crucial to our understanding of his works. For Shelley, arbitrary hierarchies of ownership and control owe their existence to the same outdated and tyrannical metaphor of the punishing, withholding God to which his society ardently adhered. Hence, in Shelley, there is a correlation – indeed an integral connection and not merely an analogy – between the authority of a king over his subjects, a priest over his parishioners, and a husband over his wife. Because control and authority could not be randomly imposed from outside, love was supposed to fill the gap and cure the woes of an ailing world. Considered in this manner, coitus is not just a personal but a social and political act.

Although on one level the narrative of *Laon and Cythna* is a narrative of desire, consummation and post-consummation, the Preface that introduces the poem shows it to be inherently political in its allegorical significance. The only way to construct a defence of erotic love, for Shelley, is to relate it to the trope of revolution so common in his England. Political freedoms, like the freedom to love, were increasingly suppressed during this period. The reactionary rhetoric of Edmund Burke, embedded with its misogynistic terror, provides some of the context: “the revolution harpies of France, spring from night and hell, or form that chaotic anarchy, that generates equivocally ‘all monstrous, all prodigious things,’ cuckoo-like, adulterously lay their eggs.”<sup>37</sup> A

<sup>37</sup> “Letter to a Noble Lord” (1796), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, IX:

consequence of this reactionary view of women, combined with its imagery of destructive sensuality, is that lust is deemed essentially unfeminine.

For Shelley, however, the portrayal of feminine libido is in every respect the opposite. His conception of feminine desire is indeed so intensely idealized as to appear as unrealistic as its Burkean antithesis. The only place where they cohere is in the co-opting of the Revolution as female desire. Shelley's heroines of revolution are intensely and erotically desiring subjects who liberate confined humanity: Cythna, Queen Mab, the Witch of Atlas, Emily, and the triad of Ione, Panthea and Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*. Although critics are beginning to recognize the liberational value of Asia as love, the erotic nature of that liberation is underplayed. Shelley is at pains to insist that the new liberated and utopian world is still characterized by "passion", just "passion", free from guilt and shame.<sup>38</sup> It is in fact precisely this passion, an intensive interconnection of body and psyche, which redeems and liberates that world in the first place.

In *Laon and Cythna*,<sup>39</sup> the entire poem revolves around the sexual consummation of the incestuous lovers as an allegory for the political aspirations of a revolutionary Europe. As Peter Finch so compellingly illustrates, the poem is structured around experiences of orgasm which mirror "political downfall of France's monarchy" and also the collapse of linguistic representation.<sup>40</sup> The detailed account of Laon and Cythna's lovemaking in Canto VI is the pivotal point of the poem. Finch argues that each phase of physical intercourse is inscribed in the poem. Body and psyche are not alienated but interpenetrating in what Finch characterizes as "a deliberate political intervention at a point where these particular discursive components of the existing cultural order all intersect".<sup>41</sup> Shelley himself writes in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* that "It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend".<sup>42</sup> So not only is coitus pleasurable and shame-free, a breaker of walls and taboos, but it is

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*The Revolutionary War 1794-1797, II. Ireland*, ed. R.B. McDowell, Oxford, 1991, 156.

<sup>38</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, III.iv.197-98 (*The Complete Poetical Works*, 249).

<sup>39</sup> The poem is better known in the revised version published by Shelley in 1818 as *The Revolt of Islam* (see the headnote to the poem in *The Complete Poetical Works*, 31).

<sup>40</sup> Finch, "Shelley's *Laon and Cythna*: The Bride Stripped Bare ... Almost", 35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>42</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works*, 875.

also socially and politically redemptive. The basic human drive to connect imaginatively and physically with another is the driving impetus in bettering the world through the equalization of opportunity and the sublimation of the ego.

The situation is somewhat different in Blake, though critics generally argue that sexual encounters stand as allegories for some kind of psychic, intellectual or spiritual process. In the prophecies especially, the sexual meetings of Milton and Ololon, Los and Enitharmon, Orc and whomever he can manage to pin down are often interpreted as reabsorptions of the female emanation into the male, with “emanation” understood as a psychological rift.<sup>43</sup> While the emanation has a psychological dimension for Blake, coital activity is the cornerstone of the resolution of such rifts. Hence *America* and *The French Revolution* both begin with sexual intercourse in their opening scenes.

The revolutionary urge is a sexual urge: in Blake, Orc who represents masculine desire is the embodiment of this one urge, not a mere allegory in the service of an abstract truth. Furthermore, the language and imagery in *Milton* are unequivocally sexual. Beulah, Blake’s symbolic garden of sexual pleasures, is full of flowers that behave like female genitalia:

... the rose still sleeps –  
None dare to wake her; soon she bursts her crimson-curtained bed  
And comes forth in the majesty of beauty. Every Flower –  
The pink, the jessamine, the wall-flower, the carnation,  
The jonquil, the mild lily – opes her heavens. Every tree  
And flower & Herb soon fill the air with an innumerable dance,  
Yet all in order sweet & lovely. Men are sick with love.<sup>44</sup>

The apocalyptic culmination of *Milton* is represented by the erotic and indeed apocalyptic fusing not only of Milton but also of Christ with Ololon:

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<sup>43</sup> S. Foster Damon (*A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, London, 1973, 120-22), Northrop Frye (*Fearful Symmetry*, 73), and David V. Erdman (*Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, Princeton, 1954, 253) have contributed toward establishing as a critical axiom the view of the emanation primarily as a metaphor for an internal, psychological state. In “The Female as Metaphor in William Blake’s Poetry”, Susan Fox accepts this critical position, but takes issue with Blake’s use of woman as metaphor (“The Female as a Metaphor in William Blake’s Poetry”, 507-19).

<sup>44</sup> *Milton*, Plate 31:56-62 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 545).

With one accord the starry eight became  
One man Jesus the Saviour, wonderful! Round his limbs  
The clouds of Ololon folded as a garment dipped in blood ....<sup>45</sup>

The clouds and folds dipped in blood are the enfolding vaginal space of the female emanation which is imagined as a kind of apocalyptic holy communion. While “the fires of intellect” may have helped to obscure the sexual message in these and similar lines, Blake has earlier in the poem provided his own gloss on such fusings: “Affection or love becomes a state, when divided from imagination.”<sup>46</sup>

In Blake the word “affection”, like the word “tender” in Shelley, is always sexual. In the apocalyptic mergings of *Milton*, sexual fulfilment and free love bring about the liberation of Milton from his spectre and pave the way for a human apocalypse looked forward to in the last line of the poem – “the great harvest & vintage of the nations”.<sup>47</sup> The prophetic and authoritative voice of the poem proclaims that wives shall share their husbands with other women: “she shall begin to give / Her maidens to her husband, delighting in his delight.”<sup>48</sup> Although the argument has struck many a female reader as androcentric and self-serving, the point that human liberation begins with the liberation of sexual desire is consistent here with Blake’s overall conception of the centrality of sex to the human imagination. His poetry seeks forever to mend the splits between conception and actualization, desire and fulfilment.

In their poetry, Blake and Shelley have many sexually liberated female characters, but perhaps the most compelling is Blake’s Oothoon, who has been frequently discussed as both heroic and disappointing in her sexual heroism. By Fox and Mellor, she has been seen as anti-feminist and complicit in her patriarchal enslavement, but also as the great spokesperson for revolutionary and sexual freedom by Chapman<sup>49</sup> and Ackland. I think it would be hard to deny, however, that Oothoon’s unequivocal endorsement of the value of pure sexual pleasure is a revolutionary undertaking. Neither the intellectually gifted and sensually

<sup>45</sup> *Milton*, Plate 42:10-12 (*ibid.*, 565).

<sup>46</sup> *Milton*, Plate 32:33 (*ibid.*, 574). In the edition of Blake being used for this essay, Plate 32, missing from copies A and B of Blake’s *Milton*, is placed after the main body of the text.

<sup>47</sup> *Milton*, Plate 43:1 (*ibid.*, 566).

<sup>48</sup> *Milton*, Plate 33:17-18 (*ibid.*, 545-46).

<sup>49</sup> See Wes Chapman, “Blake, Wollstonecraft, and the Inconsistency of Oothoon”, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, XXXI/1 (Summer 1997), 4-17.



beautiful Emily in *Epipsychidion* nor the prototype of sensual desire in Rousseau's Julie compares to Oothoon in terms of her panegyrics on sexual desire and enjoyment. She describes herself as

"Open to joy and to delight wherever beauty appears.  
If in the morning sun I find it, there my eyes are fixed

In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work,  
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this freeborn joy.

The moment of desire! The moment of desire! The virgin  
That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous joys  
In the secret shadows of her chamber ....<sup>50</sup>

Although her position in the narrative is a compromised or compromising one, her words at least are an unfettered expression of the truth of human sexual desire and consummation. She will neither apologize for her sexual activity (despite the many punishments inflicted on her for it), nor will she bind another's pleasure to her (when she invites her husband to copulate with beautiful girls in front of her). It is hard to imagine a more complete representation of the ideal of free love than the words of this speech, although critics have rightly pointed out how troubling its contexts are.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in Blake's *Milton*, Ololon expresses her love for Milton through her delighted participation in bringing concubines to him. The emphasis in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, while admittedly androcentric (Theotormon and Milton will be given many loves, whereas Oothoon is punished for experiencing only two), is still, in her mouth, an eloquent rebuttal of the sexual double standard that punishes her for what she willingly allows her husband. It is this celebratory and liberational idiom that characterizes Blake's and Shelley's unifying and poetic perspectives on sexuality.

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<sup>50</sup> *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plates 6:22-23 and 7:1-5 (*The Poems of William Blake*, 184: ll. 174-180). In respect to the phrase, "in happy copulation", Tristanne Connolly has rightly suggested that, according to Oothoon's theory of the relationship between perceiver and perceived, the reader is "copulating with the book" (*William Blake and the Body*, 18).

<sup>51</sup> Nancy Moore Goslee is the best writer on the problematics of race and slavery in the narrative of Blake's poem (see "Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*", *ELH*, LVII/1 [Spring 1990], 101-28).

In Shelley, another celebration – the marriage song of Earth and Moon in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* – is among other things a song of erotic fulfilment. The Moon's chastity is unfrozen by the earth:

As in the soft and sweet eclipse,  
When soul meets soul on lovers' lips,  
High hearts are calm, and brightest eyes are dull;  
So when thy shadow falls on me,  
Then am I mute and still, by thee  
Covered; of thy love, Orb most beautiful,  
Full, oh, too full!<sup>52</sup>

The Moon is penetrated by the Earth in a cosmic, erotic dance. This dance is the fulfilment of erotic desire at the same time as it symbolizes the new political equality of men with each other and with women. There is a sense of such a copulation being to the point of excess; when she says of her husband's love, "Full, oh, too full!" the passionate and desiring tones of the interjection "oh" and the adverb "too" are erotically charged, as is much of the dialogue in this final Act of Shelley's most ambitiously utopian poem. In the Moon's next speech, with each simile she compares herself to the loving/desiring new bride: "I, thy crystal paramour" (l. 463), "a most enamoured maiden / Whose weak brain is overladen / With pleasure of her love" (ll. 467-69), "an insatiate bride" (l. 471), "a Maenad" (l. 473), and "As a lover" (l. 483). This rhetoric of erotic desire, as so frequently in Shelley, is female desire. If, in the popular consciousness, female erotic desire actually generated the French Revolution, here Shelley recasts the trope, as Blake does, as the liberating force that will serve to redeem and free enslaved humanity from its spectre, its alienating ego, and all its tyrannical self-projections.

For Blake and Shelley, as in our own feminist age, the sexual is political and the political sexual. In the 1790s, the intellectual attempts to break down walls of religious, political and patriarchal oppression led to a greater appreciation of women as sexually motivated individuals. The basic sense in Shelley and Blake is that both women and men are brimming with sexuality and entitled to sexual freedom and agency. Furthermore, given that female desire, increasingly recognized as a potent physical, emotional and political force in the Romantic period,

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<sup>52</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, IV.450-56 (*The Complete Poetical Works*, 261).

should once again have imposed on it the “triple edict of taboo, non-existence, and silence” in the Victorian age,<sup>53</sup> the importance of Blake and Shelley in creating a discourse of freed sexuality, a sexuality integrated with political, personal, social and spiritual aspirations, is important not only historically, but, in its challenges of taboos and repressions still with us, for our present age as well. Foucault postulates a future sexuality, in which “one can bring into coexistence concepts which the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from putting side by side: revolution and happiness; ... or indeed, revolution and pleasure”.<sup>54</sup> Blake and Shelley bring “revolution and happiness” and “revolution and pleasure” into coexistence in their poems. The drive for sexual freedom and the impetus toward democratic political representation throughout Europe are represented as one and the same – the overthrow of outmoded and repressive laws and institutions, personified respectively by Urizen and Jupiter in Blake and Shelley, which contribute to human suffering. These tyrannical rulers keep humanity from loving one another by preserving laws, taboos, plus many artificial distinctions and hierarchies of rank, age, gender, race, and wealth. Blake and Shelley contextualize, politicize, and celebrate liberated and loving sexual impulses in poems that present sexual joy as a human right.

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

## **“BURSTING JOY’S GRAPE” IN KEATS’ ODES**

DANIEL BRASS

This essay takes as its basis four odes by John Keats and treats them as a sequence of poems in which he develops, discusses and elaborates the themes of permanence and transience, both at the level of an individual human life and in a larger, transgenerational, cosmic view of time. Underlying the four poems – “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” – is the idea of fullness or satisfaction, an intense climax of experience preceding the melancholia that inevitably attends the decline from such a heightened moment of experience. The pattern, I suggest, is founded on the sexual experience: increasing excitement and stimulation leading to a climax followed by a post-coital decline which Keats describes in various guises in each of the poems. In addition to this appearance of the orgasm in their structure, sexual imagery is prevalent throughout the odes.

While the deployment of devices and images in poetry may be a deliberate choice on the poet’s part, analysis of a collection of works by an author reveals underlying structural features that recur throughout the work. The orgasm is one such feature prominent in Keats’ imagination. Individual sexual images may be intentional, but the structure of the odes points to a less overt occurrence of these sexual structures. Keats wrote the four odes I will be considering during 1818, the year after he met Fanny Brawne, with whom he immediately fell in love. Moreover, some critics have suggested it was during this time that Keats became aware that he was suffering from tuberculosis and that he would not live very much longer.<sup>1</sup> Biographical interpretation of these poems does not, in itself, offer much insight into them, but Keats’ emotional life and his experience of illness must have influenced his psyche and may have produced the fascination with questions of presence and absence,

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<sup>1</sup> Don Colburn, “A Feeling for Light and Shade: John Keats and His ‘Ode to a Nightingale’”, *Gettysburg Review*, 5 (1992), 217.

permanence and transience, which are so often raised in his poetry, and for which the orgasm, as a transient event, is an apt metaphor.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud wrote that the instinct to pursue sexual pleasure is counterbalanced by the “instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization”.<sup>2</sup> The Freudian analysis draws the orgasm on to a broader field where sexual tension can be seen as a constant and decisive element in the unconscious mind. The “Pleasure Principle”, a component of this essential human impulse, is inevitably present in art because it is part of unconscious life. Indeed, it is in art that civilized perfection and the expression of a naked instinct for carnality are forced into an uncomfortable cohabitation. The tension between a high level of stylistic control and the inescapable sexual element in these odes illustrates the point. The transient physicality of the sexual experiences is in conflict with a larger view of time and the eternal existence of art both as an abstract concept and as a collection of individual artistic events.

The overt themes of permanence and transience are explored in critical studies that draw comparisons between Keats’ poetry and his philosophy.<sup>3</sup> They suggest that Keats held a single, coherent view of the world. Such conclusions are, in many cases, highly plausible, and the famous aphorism that concludes “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”,<sup>4</sup> is an illustration of Keats’ interest in aesthetics and larger philosophy. But the couplet is couched in ambiguous language, since “beauty” could denote either the abstract beauty of art or the more fundamental beauty of sexual tension and climax, experienced both internally in the images depicted on the urn and externally in the poet’s imaginative participation in them. A discussion of sexual imagery in the poems does not preclude the application of more elaborate philosophical patterning, but suggests that far from writing a treatise in these odes, Keats was giving expression to a tension between a primal sexual drive and a competing instinct to control this drive.

The general mood of uncertainty and dissatisfaction in Keats’ poetry results from this tension. In the sonnet “Bright Star”, for example, he

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<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of William Freud*, trans. James Strachey, London, 1955, XVIII, 42.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, E. Douka Kabitoglou, “Adapting Philosophy to Literature: The Case of John Keats”, *Studies in Philology*, 89 (1992), 115-36.

<sup>4</sup> *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott, London, 1970, 537.

expresses his envy of the star's permanence but laments its sterility. The octave describes the isolation of the star, its role as eternal voyeur, while the sestet fantasizes a reconciliation of sterile permanence with active life. The poem concludes with the speaker's apparently unambiguous claim that if he cannot live forever with his love, he would rather "swoon to death".<sup>5</sup> But irrespective of the choice the speaker makes, the whole debate can only take place in a world of fantasy. Such a choice does not exist except in a metaphorical sense. Unlike Tennyson in "Tithonus", which treats similar themes but where the poet achieves a level of distance between himself and the character through the use of a persona, Keats always conveys the impression of speaking as himself, unable to conceal, much less to abandon, his envy of the star's permanence and his inability to accept human transience. He is unable to reconcile his envy of eternal life with his urge to enjoy the immediacy and physicality of sexual experience.

The same indecision about how to reconcile gathering rosebuds with the pursuit of immortality or permanence, runs through much of Keats' poetry, and the same issue lies at the heart of the famous letter to his brothers, written in December 1817 at the beginning of the "Great Year". In this letter, he enlarges upon the argument about truth and beauty: "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." Art, to Keats, mediates between these two elements. Art is the site of coexistence between two essentially contradictory but equally instinctive impulses: to pursue pleasure as a primal human instinct; and to conceal this desire to pursue pleasure, as a refinement of civilization. This is the letter that, a few sentences later, introduces the notion of "Negative Capability",

that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 736-39.

<sup>6</sup> John Keats, "To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817", in *Letters of John Keats*, A New Selection, ed. Robert Gittings, Oxford, 1970, 42-43.

In this latter part of the letter, Keats enunciates an alternative to the view that “Beauty” and “Truth” exist together in art. He now believes the poet should stand beyond competing impulses and devote himself completely to “the sense of beauty”. Art is no longer mediation: it should give itself over entirely to a concern for beauty rather than truth. In Freudian terms, resistance to the sexual drive is beginning to dominate Keats’ mind. The conscious rejection, though, would meet the Freudian answer that an instinctive impulse cannot be put aside: in some form, it will always remain.

Both Keats and Freud thus reach similar conclusions, although by different routes. Keats holds that “beauty is truth; truth beauty”; that these two abstract ideas, which he acknowledges are distinct by giving them separate names, exist together. He sees them as compatible, not antithetical, and contends that art tries to achieve a closeness to them; while Freud’s ideas suggest that “truth” (the primal sexual urge, a heightened moment of reality, a “little death”) and “beauty” (the instinct to repress that urge in accordance with civilized mores) are fundamentally opposed. But in the Freudian formulation their opposition is dualistic and each instinct is inseparable from the other. To Freud, psychopathology is often the result of a conflict between the competing impulses; and the tension between them is therefore present in any subject and, as Keats also believed, in any work of art. The difference is that for Freud they are present in a conflict whereas for Keats they are present and in harmony.

The orgasm, then, is simple neither as a physical experience nor in its cultural representation, if such a separation can be made. The orgasm is a climax of physical experience when the impulse to art is entirely abandoned in the moment. In the four odes here to be discussed, Keats negotiates the question with skill, establishing the conflict between permanence and transience, between the experience of pleasure and the decline from that experience, but reconciling them in a paradoxical acceptance that without the experience of the melancholy decline, the pleasure of the climax would not be the same. The experience of life and art, these odes suggest, depends for its meaning on its own transience and the orgasm provides a vivid illustration of this view.

The opening lines of the “Ode to a Nightingale”,<sup>7</sup> with their images of an aching heart, poison and death, establish a tone which seems incongruous given the poem’s ensuing celebration of the nightingale and

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<sup>7</sup> *The Poems of John Keats*, 523-32.

its song. The nightingale will become symbolic of the beauty of art, Keats drawing on a pre-existing association that makes the opening lines seem even more out of place. But by the fifth and sixth lines, the reason for the vividly depressing images is clear:

’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness –

Far from being led to a melancholy emotion by the nightingale’s song itself, it is the external appreciation of the beauty, the excess of sensibility, which provokes the sadness. The paradoxical “too happy in thine happiness” is an early example of Keats’ imagery of excess and the consequent melancholia. The opening stanza is written after hearing the bird, when the melancholy has already set in and perhaps even passed. It is with this in mind that Keats draws out the melancholy mood at the beginning, creating the illusion that we are privy to the experience of the decline from pleasure as it happens. An initial delight in the bird’s song soon reaches excess, “too happy”, when the poem is composed after the event of hearing. The full implications do not emerge until the end of the poem, when the poet asks whether the experience “was ... a vision, or a waking dream” (l. 79), but the tone of whole poem is affected by the early melancholia.

The dark images that prevail in the first stanza reflect the poet’s ambiguous attitude to the bird. The images of declining youth, beauty and love in the third stanza contrast with the nightingale’s “forest dim” in the second. This mysterious, pastoral place is imagined as permanent and unchanging, the home of the nightingale the poet hears but also of all other nightingales “heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown” (ll. 63-64). To the poet, all nightingales heard through all generations are one, heard in the same way by generations of humans. This ode, although it addresses itself to a nightingale, a symbol of nature, is rather about the human experience of nature than about nature itself. The nightingale produces in the poet a range of emotions, but most powerful is the awareness of his own impermanence, the transience of his existence in contrast with that of the bird whom he regards as “immortal” (l. 61). Although this is a fiction, the poet sees all nightingales as one: to human consciousness there is little difference between the song of one nightingale and that of another, and the bird’s enshrinement in literary symbolism grants it an ongoing life that no human can ever attain. Human life is fundamentally transient, as Keats reminds us with his



images of death throughout the ode, but all nightingales are subsumed in an eternal beauty which he is able to appreciate as such only because he knows that he will die.

In the other odes, the same theme emerges: human consciousness ends, and it is the awareness of the approaching end that allows us to appreciate the beauty we see. In imagination Keats can accept that the bird's song is permanent; in reality, he only hears it for a time, the bird's departure leaving him at a loss in the transient human reality to which he has returned. In the poem's closing question, "Fled is that music ... Do I wake or sleep?", Keats is not only uncertain of whether he is conscious, but also of whether he is living or dead. Hearing the nightingale's song has been a climax of experience, hence the claim in the sixth stanza that

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

(ll. 55-60)

The word "ecstasy" in this context suggests the ecstasy of orgasm, *la petite mort* ("little death"), which is the recurring image of the odes. The experience of beauty, to Keats, is the height of experience, of living life, and in a moment of such experience, it seems "rich to die" before the melancholy which is described in the opening stanza of this poem can set in. The poet juxtaposes the heavenly image of the nightingale's "requiem" with the literally earthy image of the "sod". Moreover, in the seventh stanza the nightingale is once again a symbol of permanent and unchanging art:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown ...

(ll. 63-64)

This nightingale is not the same nightingale that was heard "in ancient days", but Keats sees the nightingale's song as art, permanent and unchanging as the Grecian urn. The difference, though, is that the nightingale is alive. The nightingale is involved in the reproduction and regeneration which are so significantly absent from the Grecian urn. In

the final stanza, the poet's thought is summoned by the melancholy word "forlorn", returning him to the melancholy reality of daily human existence, a return which is a decline from the ecstasy induced by hearing the nightingale's song. "The fancy", Keats writes in his return to the mundane reality, "cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf" (ll. 73-74). At the conclusion of the poem, though, the poet casts doubt over both the nightingale's song and the poetic descriptions that he has given of the "vision". The vividness of his imaginary journey has led him to question whether it was experienced in consciousness or whether it was produced by the unconscious during sleep. By the end of the poem, the nightingale's song has been "buried" and the poet is left, after "ecstasy", with post-coital melancholia.

The "Ode on a Grecian Urn"<sup>8</sup> can be characterized by a similar interaction between the imaginative depiction and the reality of life. The poet's thought shifts, throughout the poem, between marvelling at the eternal beauty of the urn and its figures and at the same time acknowledging its sterility and lifelessness. Two perspectives are at work here: the poet's observation of the urn and appreciation of it as art (what one might call the external appreciation of the urn) must be distinguished from his attempt to involve himself in the scenes depicted on the urn (the internal story the urn tells). The clash between the two perspectives is the subject of the poem. As he does in "Bright Star", Keats tries to reconcile the external beauty of the urn with the internal sterility. He is always seeking a representation of eternal beauty and youth, but the quest invariably returns him to an awareness that moments of beauty and passion, often experienced through art, can only be transient. Beauty, in the words of the "Ode on Melancholy", must die.

The opening stanza has explicit sexual imagery, the first line directing our attention to this important theme: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness ...." The initial apostrophe leads into sequence of cumulating questions that end with the climactic "what wild ecstasy?" (l. 10), the word echoing the "Ode to a Nightingale". This stanza gradually builds in tension, the poet's excitement growing as the stanza progresses. The rhythm picks up pace, the questions become shorter and the imagery of sexual pursuit and conquest becomes more apparent:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 532-38.

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

(ll. 5-10)

The urn's internal world draws on the tradition of the French *pastourelle*, where the pastoral landscape ("Tempe or the dales of Arcady") is interrupted by sex, and most often by the rape which the imagery here seems to suggest in "maidens loth" and "struggle to escape".

Given this frantic activity in the first stanza, the second effects a strong contrast. It is much quieter, more contemplative and reflective in tone:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

(ll. 11-14)

The perspective shifts from the first stanza's internal description of the pure sensual experience depicted on the urn to an external version where the poet is moved by the beauty of the urn itself as a work of art. The distinction between perspectives is clearly marked in the first stanza and the first lines of the second, but from this point on, the poet's pleasure in the scenes which appear on the urn is balanced against the external awareness that these scenes, no matter how beautiful, are sterile in their permanence.

Throughout the rest of the poem the imagery reflects this balance between the two perspectives, Keats employing puns extensively to convey the double perspective he uses to observe the urn. The youth "canst not leave / Thy song" and nor can "the trees be bare", but equally, the "Bold lover" cannot kiss the maid, "Though winning near the goal": "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love and she be fair!" (ll. 15-20). Far from the active sexuality of the opening stanza, Keats is now describing a scene in which the lover can only ever look at the maid: a permanent pleasure, but a pleasure that can never reach its climax.

The third stanza appears to praise this kind of love, "all breathing human passion far above" (l. 28), but the sterile reality cannot be

escaped. In the last five lines of this stanza, the reality of sexual climax receives short shrift in comparison with a love that retains its potential:

For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,  
 For ever panting, and forever young –  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

(ll. 26-30)

In these fascinating and highly complex lines, Keats draws a contrast between the perfected and the potential versions of love, depicting the post-coital experience in negative terms: melancholia with “a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed” and physical fatigue with “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue”. Yet the absence that is so prominent in internal depictions of the urn in the second stanza, colours our reading of these lines. The “Bold lover” who can never kiss, “though winning near the goal”, is in the same position as Tantalus in the Greek myth: forever unable to achieve his task. Far from an experience of passion, this seems more like a torture, as it was intended to be in the case of Tantalus. The permanence of a potential passion is fruitless because the passion is never really experienced. Passion is only so, as Keats acknowledged, because it is passing, so a potential passion could be said to be an oxymoron. The lover will never know what he is missing.

The final stanza of the poem, which draws these various strands together in a puzzling and paradoxical way, plays on the internal and external perspectives, the words “brede” and “overwrought” most effectively bridging the gap. The *breed* of men depicted is balanced with the *braid* on the urn; the maidens are “overwrought”, internally, in their sexual excitement, but externally the word means that they are somewhat “overdone” – the artist has not completed them in perfect taste. The poet is teased by the urn with its confusion of images and the eternal potential for perfected love:

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity. Cold pastoral!

(ll. 44-45)

The contemplation of eternity is impossible, because the time involved is so far outside the comprehension of any single human being that it is

inconceivable. Similarly the permanence of the urn's beauty, but also of its sterile sexuality, is challenging to the human imagination. The pastoral, conventionally an ideal to which an urban society longs to return, is here "Cold", both in the physical coldness of the urn and in the metaphorical sterility of its life. Although the urn's figures have a kind of eternal life in sexual pleasure, it is a pleasure which is never consummated.

Keats projects onto the urn his own transient experience, but soon realizes that his enthusiasm is misplaced, that the internal life of the urn is an illusion. In this poem's focus on sterile permanence in contrast with an active but transient existence, the orgasm is once again the underlying image. Keats' enjoyment of the urn is another climax of experience for him, as he makes clear in his vivid description of frantic sexual pursuit in the first stanza. But his involvement with the urn is only passing. While, to him, it can be a climax of the experience of art, within itself the urn is sterile.

In the two poems so far discussed, Keats has not identified the emotion he is feeling. Although he describes the symptoms of his feeling, he does not use language to give the emotion a name and thereby to limit it. The "Ode on Melancholy"<sup>9</sup> provides a name for Keats' feelings but also explores the meaning of that emotion in a new way. Instead of applying a word as a kind of verbal shorthand for the whole range of emotions which his observation of the nightingale and the urn have evoked, Keats personifies melancholy and locates it in a complex web of relations with other emotions. The tripartite structure of the poem gives direction to the exploration: the first stanza confronting the conventional view of melancholy and rejecting it with the powerful opening negations; the second substituting a more profitable alternative for the flawed convention outlined in the first; and the third expressing, in all the elaborate beauty of Keats' style, his own thoughts about the relationship between the beauty he describes in the other odes, and this most powerful of emotions.

The "Ode on Melancholy" begins, like the "Ode to a Nightingale", with the imagery of literal and metaphorical death. The imagery, though, is relatively straightforward: conventional symbols (Lethe, nightshade, Proserpine, yew-berries, death-moth, owl) are employed to denote the yearning for death that comes in moments of melancholia. The imagery reflects the simple connection that is generally assumed between

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 538-41.

melancholy and death by suicide. The second stanza is much more complex, and in abandoning literary symbolism for metaphor filled with meaning, Keats suggests a deeper and more profitable employment of a melancholy mood. The imagery consistently involves excess, where the melancholy enables the sufferer to experience another heightened moment of experience. "When the melancholy fit shall fall", Keats advises the sufferer to "glut thy sorrow", to "imprison" his mistress's hand, to let her "rave", to "feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes" (ll. 11, 15, 19-20). All these images denote an unusual depth of feeling and emotion, and once again the double-meanings that are prominent in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", play their part. To "rave" is both to talk at length and to enter a quasi-bewitched state, where one's words carry no meaning. To "feed deep, deep" involves the metaphorical image of returning her raving stare, but also implies, literally, that it is through the experience of this "raving" that the melancholiac derives the nourishment he needs. Finally, "peerless" carries the meaning "without equal", implying that the mistress's "rich anger" has a quality beyond the human from which the melancholiac, once again, can derive benefit, but it also means "unseeing, not peering". This latter meaning suggests an intensity of experience: the mistress is so deep in her anger that she is removed from the world. Collectively, these images give melancholy an unearthly quality, and suggest that it is superhuman, beyond ordinary daily existence, a height of human experience.

Finally, the third stanza presents "Veiled Melancholy", now personified, in relation to other emotions: Beauty, Joy, Pleasure and Delight. This stanza introduces a binary in which melancholy possesses not only inherent value but also a value in its supplying a contrast with the happier moments in life. Without experience of melancholy, experience of beauty, joy, pleasure and delight is much less, if not impossible. Each is dependent on the other, and Keats emphasizes that the sensibility which experiences extremes of joy must also experience its melancholy corollary:

Aye, in the very temple of Delight  
    Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
        Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
    Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;  
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
    And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

(ll. 25-30)

The powerful but ambiguous image of “bursting Joy’s grape” is one of the concluding images of the poem, and it leaves the reader in some doubt as to its meaning. Does “bursting Joy’s grape” mean experiencing a height of joy which cannot be surpassed? Or does it mean the destruction of joy, the moment when “Joy” ends and the return to ordinary life begins? Keats’ answer is that both are true. The height of joy, the moment when the world can improve no further, is both the end of joy and the beginning of melancholy. A climax implies a denouement, and “bursting Joy’s grape” involves both the experience of ultimate satisfaction, with the powerful image of the juice bursting forth from a burst grape, and the beginning of a decline. The parallel between this image and the orgasm needs little elaboration. The increasing sexual tension and excitement lead to a very brief moment, the orgasm, when the height of experience is achieved and the post-coital melancholia begins. The bursting grape functions, in this reading, as an unequivocal metaphor for the male orgasm.

Similar themes of excess and climax pervade “To Autumn”,<sup>10</sup> the last of the four odes this essay addresses. Like melancholy, Autumn is often imagined as a period of decline, but Keats reminds the apostrophized Autumn that “thou has thy music too”. The connection between the two relies on an understanding that both human emotions and natural processes are cyclical, with a height balanced by a decline. The decline, Keats suggests, is no less valuable than the height, because appreciation of each depends upon understanding and experience of the other.

The poem opens with an affectionate address to a season conventionally associated with death and decline: “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.” In the first stanza, the change from summer to autumn is once again a peak, a moment when the land and its fruits are full of goodness and fertility, but at the same time at the beginning of their decline. The sense of completeness and excess, an extremity reached at the moment when the inevitable return to normality begins, is common both to autumn as described in this ode and to the orgasm. This is the ode in which the erotic is most prominent as an undercurrent in the imagery (ll. 5-11):

To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 650-55.

With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy shells.

The apostrophe continues throughout the poem, the season personified and visible. The second stanza shifts from the description of its beginning in excess to a more gentle account of its end in lethargy. As the fullness of summer reaches its end, the decline into autumn begins and it is precisely this moment of transition that occurs between the first and second stanzas of the poem. At the end of the first stanza, "summer has o'er-brimmed" the flower's "clammy cells", but by the beginning of the second stanza, we find autumn "sitting careless on a granary floor" (l. 14). The imagery is entirely different, with the effort of the final push in the first stanza giving way to a relaxation of that effort, a collapse that the contrast in the language of the two stanzas reflects. This moment is analogous to coitus, orgasm and the decline into post-coital melancholia described in the "Ode on Melancholy".

Yet in autumn the last elements of summer still exist late into the season. Although, as expressed in the second stanza, the mood of autumn is "drowsed with the fume of poppies" (l. 17), the concluding image of the stanza describes the draining of the final juices of the cider-press, the slow vowel sounds in "last ooziings hours by hours" (l. 22) reflecting the paradox of languid effort in a time of weariness and lethargy. Such images recur throughout the second stanza: autumn is to be found "sitting careless on a granary floor" or on a "half-reaped furrow", pointedly "sound asleep" (l. 16). The second stanza draws specifically on the features of early autumn, when the pleasure of summer has ended but the pleasure of autumn has not yet appeared.

This pleasure appears in the third stanza, where the bleakness of the scene is suffused with the sights and sounds that draw the poet's attention. Beginning the third stanza, as he did the second, with a question, the poet sets about undermining the conventional negative impression of autumn and emphasizing its peculiar and attractive qualities:

Where are the songs of spring? Aye, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too –

(ll. 23-24)



Autumn is not an inferior partner to the other seasons. Just as the feeling of melancholy is necessary to appreciate joy, one must experience autumn to appreciate the other seasons. But according to Keats, both melancholy and autumn are themselves pleasures. As in the other stanzas, the imagery powerfully conveys the atmosphere during the autumn months: “the soft-dying day”, “rosy hue”, “wailful choir”, the gnats “mourn / Among the river shallows”, “sinking as the light wind lives or dies”, lambs “bleat from hilly bourn”, and “gathering swallows twitter in the skies” (ll. 25-30, 33).

The powerful impression is of the stillness of the scene, yet it is filled with activity. Keats sees it as his task, in this stanza, to draw attention to these frequently ignored characteristics of autumn, comparing them with those of other seasons. In the last line of the stanza, and of the poem, the “gathering swallows” suggest some sort of future movement, emphasizing the cyclical nature of the seasons. The swallows are preparing to go somewhere, their migration based on seasonal change. They instinctively understand that permanence is an illusion and accept the transience of existence, each end of the spectrum depending on the other for its meaning. By concluding the poem with this image, Keats invites us to share their understanding.

The “Ode on Melancholy” and “To Autumn” have similar features, each poem expressing those moments in which excess of experience or pleasure makes a subsequent return to reality inevitable. Life does not consist of a constant high, and any kind of pleasure must be followed, if not by a decline into depression or misery, at least into that subtle moment of melancholy when we experience the loss of pleasure. This view of life, which Keats presents repeatedly in these four odes, equally informs the sexual experience in which increasing activity, pleasurable tension and excitement lead to a climax that lasts a bare moment and leads into a post-coital decline. The prevalence of sexual imagery in both these poems makes them peculiarly susceptible to a reading in which they are seen as describing sexual experience in the guise of some other emotion. Although descriptions of nature are common to the Romantic sensibility, it seems likely that a poem which evokes loss as strongly as “To Autumn”, is a more complex expression of a fundamental experience of human life.

These four odes represent the poet’s development towards an understanding of the interdependence of contrasting experiences. In the first two odes, Keats uses symbols to express his concern about the

permanence of art in contrast to the transience of life. The nightingale’s song represents nature but the poet does not recognize that nature is also involved in the cycle of death and regeneration. The nightingale’s eternal song is symbolic of art rather than nature and the poet’s confusion over whether the song is desirable is reflected in the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, eternal and passing images. In the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Keats uses the urn as a symbol of art, but it depicts scenes of frozen life. Art, he realizes at the end of the poem, is not truth but just one side of human existence. Keats eventually condemns the urn, and reduces it to the sum of its physical parts, “overwrought” and “Cold”, a reminder to humanity that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, that only the reality of experience is beautiful, not the permanent but sterile life of the urn and those depicted upon it. The theme is taken up in the third ode, in which the poet identifies the emotion he has been feeling, melancholy, and acknowledges that “She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die”. Melancholy is a state that comes at the end of an experience of beauty. The artistic beauty described in the “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, when it departs or when the poet is forced to return to the real world, leaves the poet in a state of melancholy. Beauty, Keats realizes, is necessary to experience melancholy, and the reverse is also true. The final ode in the sequence, “To Autumn”, brings together the images of the previous three odes and sees human experience as part of a cycle. The ode that describes the disappearance of the summer concludes with an image of spring, emphasizing the inevitability of the cycle.

The feeling of melancholy is the theme that unites these four poems, with the decline from the pleasure of experience into melancholy the undercurrent of them all – and the expression of that theme, and of that pleasure and the decline, is frequently in sexual terms. Keats’ fascination with the interrelation of aspects of human experience derives from an understanding of the sexual drive, which is given expression in various allegorical forms throughout Keats’ poetry and particularly in these four odes.

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## **“IN THIS STRANG LABOURINTH HOW SHALL I TURNE?”: EROTIC SYMMETRY IN FOUR FEMALE SONNET SEQUENCES**

C.C. BARFOOT

I believe that the four sonnet sequences, by Lady Mary Wroth (“A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love”<sup>1</sup>), Mary Robinson (*Sappho and Phaon*), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (*Sonnets from the Portuguese*) and Christina Rossetti (“Monna Innominata”),<sup>2</sup> discussed in this article, have an erotic power and a sexual appeal that the great male sonneteers do not achieve, indeed may not even aspire to achieve. Of course, I may be falling into a characteristic male trap here: when the lascivious thoughts of a woman or her explicit sexual behaviour is revealed, in most instances men are aroused not because of what the woman involved may say or do, but simply because it is a woman doing and saying.<sup>3</sup> However, I hope that in the course of this article I will be able to demonstrate that the eroticism discerned in these sequences is not simply the product of an ingrained masculine bias.

In these sets of sonnets there is a formal as well as an erotic symmetry: the first and last of them, by Wroth and Rossetti (the Prologue and Epilogue to this article) each consist of fourteen poems. This particular symmetry is not entirely unexpected: Wroth’s sequence is called “A Crowne of Sonetts” – “The Crowne, or *corona* an Italian poetic form in which the last line of either a sonnet or stanza served as the first line of the next”; and in which the “number of sonnets (stanzas) could

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<sup>1</sup> This “Crowne” is from her larger sonnet collection, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* that “appears in a separately numbered section following the prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*” (Introduction to *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts, Baton Rouge, paperback edn, 1992, 42 – all the texts of Lady Mary Wroth’s poems quoted are from this edition).

<sup>2</sup> The dates of the first publication of these works, although not necessarily of their writing, are respectively 1621, 1796, 1850, and 1881.

<sup>3</sup> A point already touched upon in Bart Veldhoen’s “Reason versus Nature in Dunbar’s ‘Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo’” in this volume (see page 51 above).

vary, from seven to as many as fourteen”.<sup>4</sup> Christina Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata” is “A Sonnet of Sonnets”,<sup>5</sup> although it is not a *corona*. There is no reason to suppose that Christina Rossetti knew Wroth’s work at all, but in their different ways they both draw upon an established Italian tradition.

Christina Rossetti did, of course, know Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry and expressed her admiration for her and her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in her prefatory note to “Monna Innominata”. But it is unlikely that either knew Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon*. And here there is an unexpected symmetry, since both *Sappho and Phaon* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* consist of forty-four sonnets. So with these four sets of sonnets, we have two sequences of forty-four sonnets enclosed between two sequences of fourteen sonnets. What else do they have in common? How do they differ? And, more relevant to the concerns of this book, in what respects may they be considered erotic achievements, even, to risk a compromising term, “masterpieces”?

As far as form is concerned all four poets in their distinctive ways play with conception of the Italian, or, as Mary Robinson would have it, the “legitimate”, sonnet.<sup>6</sup> All four sequences are presented to the reader

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<sup>4</sup> Headnote to “A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love”, in *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 127. John Donne’s “La Corona”, which precedes his “Holy Sonnets”, consists of seven poems.

<sup>5</sup> The subtitle of Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata”. Compare the sequence of twenty-eight sonnets, “Later Life”, in the same 1881 volume, *A Pageant and Other Poems*, subtitled “A Double Sonnet of Sonnets”.

<sup>6</sup> See Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, London, 1796, 5-8 (all quotations are taken from this edition). However, although her rhyme schemes may be “legitimate” (ABBAABBA CDCDCD) which clearly divides her sonnets into the Petrarchan structure of eight and six, in most cases there is very little shift in tone or argument at the beginning of line 9, and characteristically line 8 more often ends with an exclamation mark than a period. In thirty sonnets line 8 ends with an exclamation mark, and in five sonnets there is a question mark. In one sonnet, XXXIX, surprisingly enough, there is an enjambement. Only eight sonnets close the octave with a period. Christina Rossetti also keeps close to the Italian model, and in all but one sonnet the octave and the sestet is divided by a period (in the odd one out it is a question mark), but her rhyme schemes are quite various. Nine of the sonnets have the same rhyme scheme in the octave (ABBAABBA), but each of the other five sonnets has a different rhyme scheme (ABABBCCB, ABBABABA, ABBAACCA, ABBABAAB and ABBAACAC). In the sestets, the first and the seventh sonnets share a rhyme scheme (CDDECE), as do the sixth and twelfth sonnets (CDEDCE); each of the other ten sonnets have a different rhyme scheme in the sestet. By occasional use of near rhymes, half rhymes, even Byronic rhymes (for which she was much criticized), Elizabeth Barrett Browning follows a regular rhyme scheme throughout the whole sequence (ABBAABBA CDCDCD), but formally, and even rhetorically, the *volta* hardly exists and syntactically the

in a fictional guise: Christina Rossetti has invented the persona of an “unnamed lady”, and by referring to the happiness of “the great Poetess of our own day and nation” which is reflected in her “Portuguese Sonnets”, she reinforces the impression she wants to give that while her great predecessor’s cover story may be blown, her own is all the more easily to be taken as genuine – these are the poems of just one of “a bevy of unnamed ladies ‘donne innominate’”.<sup>7</sup> But despite the poet’s introduction and the epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch, most readers will find it more congenial and more satisfying to attribute the voice and tone of the sonnets to Christina Rossetti than to some nameless medieval lady.<sup>8</sup>

So both these sequences are to be read as expressions of personal experience, however masked by a fictional frame. Is this also true about Mary Robinson’s and Lady Mary Wroth’s sequences? The latter is attached to a fanciful Renaissance romance, and the names of the woman who voices her pains and pleasures and of the lover who creates such joy and distress are flamboyantly whimsical in a characteristic Renaissance fashion. But few commentators have doubted that the poems are closely related to Lady Mary Wroth’s own intimate relationship with her first

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lines stride across the break between octave and sestet. Throughout *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Lady Mary Wroth freely moves between the Italian sonnet (usually structured in the form of two quatrains and two tercets, but with little observance of the *volta*) and the English sonnet with three quatrains and a final couplet. In the “A Crowne of Sonetts”, she retains the English form throughout, but restricts herself to two rhymes only in the first eight lines (ABABBABA), except in the third sonnet where she uses the same rhyme throughout the poem. The third quatrain uses two more rhymes followed by the couplet (CDCDEE). The last line of the couplet supplies the first line of the next sonnet, and one of the pair of rhymes in its first two quatrains.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, Text by R.W. Crump and Notes and Introduction by Betty S. Flowers, Penguin, 2001, 294. All quotations from “Monna Innominata” are taken from this edition. For a brief account of the genesis of “Monna Innominata” and its link with *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, see Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, London, 1994, 470-76.

<sup>8</sup> As William Michael Rossetti says in the notes to the sequence in his edition of his sister’s poetry, “To anyone to whom it was granted to be behind the scenes of Christina Rossetti’s life – and to how few was this granted – it is not merely probable but certain that this ‘sonnet of sonnets’ was a personal utterance – an intensely personal one. The introductory prose-note, about ‘many a lady sharing her lover’s poetic aptitude,’ etc., is a blind – not an untruthful blind, for it alleges nothing that is not reasonable, and on the surface correct, but still a blind interposed to draw off attention from the writer in her proper person” (*The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, London, 1904, 462: quoted in the notes to the Penguin edition of *The Complete Poems*, 953).

cousin, William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke.<sup>9</sup> As for the narrative Mary Robinson's relates in *Sappho and Phaon*, it has a good pedigree in classical myth (although the heroine herself is an historical figure), and at first sight we have no reason to believe it is anything but a retelling of a familiar story, told by Ovid and, closer to Mary Robinson's own time, translated and retold by the youthful Alexander Pope.<sup>10</sup> However, it does not take much stretch of the imagination to connect the story of Sappho and Phaon with Mary Robinson's own relationship with her lover, Banastre Tarleton.<sup>11</sup> Therefore all four sets of poems, despite their various attempts to disguise the autobiographical relevance of the tale they tell or imply, and the situations they explore, are probably intimately related to the lives of their authors.

### Prologue: Lady Mary Wroth's "A Crowne of Sonetts"

Perhaps it is a vain hope to attempt to show, if not to prove, a comparable female erotic voice making itself heard in different degrees in all four of these sequences. From the outset the attempt is not encouraged by what the editor of *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, Josephine A. Roberts, says in her opening remarks about *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*:

Mary Wroth's contemporaries recognized that her verse belonged to the Petrarchan tradition and strongly identified her as Sir Philip Sidney's successor .... Despite the early seventeenth-century fashion of "hard lines" and metaphysical wit, Lady Mary chose to reach back to a much older poetic model. Although her sonnet collection uses the voice of a female persona, the sequence contains many Elizabethan elements, especially in its structure, diction, and imagery.

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<sup>9</sup> See Introduction to *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Ovid's epistle was translated by Pope as *Sappho to Phaon*, and published in 1712 (when the poet was in his early twenties). It is possible, however, that he had started the translation as early as 1707 (for details, see the Introduction to the translation in Alexander Pope, *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, eds E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, The Twickenham Edition, London and New Haven, 1961, I, 339 ff.).

<sup>11</sup> As Paula Byrne says in her recent biography of Mary Robinson: "It has been supposed that she wrote [*Sappho and Phaon*] on being deserted by Tarleton, but Godwin's journal reveals that Tarleton was present at supper parties and accompanied her on theatre visits throughout the months leading up to the book's publication." However she adds: "But [Mary Robinson] had been through the experience of separation from him, and from previous lovers, so she had no difficulty in writing from the point of view of the mother of ancient Greek lyric poetry, Sappho ... [when Phaon] deserted her" (*Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson*, London, 2004, 344).

However, immediately after these opening remarks there is a let out: “Yet the distinctive tone of her poems is much closer to that of Donne’s lyrics, with a harsh, occasionally cynical attitude toward earthly constancy.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the traditional moral context that the “Crowne” conjures up of pure and impure love, sacred and profane love, love inspired by Cupid and lust driven by Venus his mother, chastity and honesty compared with deceit and corruption; and despite the exploitation of familiar symbolic and metaphorical sources (the universe as a whole, the stars, the moon, the sun; dark and light; heat and cold; pain and pleasure), something quite different is also to be heard – a personal private voice, a meditative, self-reflective voice, quite distinct from that of the male sonnet writers of the period, and not principally implicated in a sense of public drama:

And bee in his brave court a gloriouse light,  
Shine in the eyes of faith, and constancie,  
Maintaine the fires of love still burning bright  
Nott slightly sparkling butt light flaming bee

Never to slack till earth noe stars can see,  
Till Sunn, and Moone doe leave to us dark night,  
And secound Chaose once againe doe free  
Us, and the world from all devisions spite,

Till then, affections which his followers are  
Governe our harts, and prove his powers gaine  
To taste this pleasing sting seek with all care  
For hapy smarting is itt with smale paine,

Such as although, itt pierce your tender hart  
And burne, yett burning you will love the smart.<sup>13</sup>

Shakespeare’s sonnets are self-evidently from a great dramatist expecting an audience even for his private soliloquies, which is what in effect the sonnets are; and Spenser, possibly the least dramatic of Elizabethan poets, begins one of his best known sonnets:

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<sup>12</sup> *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> “A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love”, Sonnet 4 (*ibid.*, 129-30).



Of this worlds Theatre in which we stay,  
 My love, lyke the Spectator, ydly sits;  
 Beholding me, that all the pageants play,  
 Disguysing diversely my troubled wits ....<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the male sonneteers of the period give the impression of a love pageant being played out, at times effectively and glamorously, the quiet and private erotic voice of the troubled lover, tenderly touching the pains and pleasures of his passion in his mind, his nerves and his body, is rarely heard.

However, in the case of Lady Mary Wroth's sonnets we do not sense someone parading her feelings and reflections to the lover or to the world at large, but a woman needing first to coax herself out of a painful predicament by exploring the nooks and crannies, the conscious and unconscious cares and gratifications, of her own interior world. She is first cajoling and persuading herself of the truth and reality of her sentiments, the tangle and contradictions of her feelings, before attempting to persuade the rest of the world. Whereas Donne is prepared to make a drama in bed alongside his lady, either addressing the sun or dissecting a flea, Lady Mary meditates silently and alone but in words, in terms, in phrases that evoke a feeling of comparable sensation that can only be described as erotic.

What, however, do we understand by the "erotic"? At one level, it is simple enough and the *OED* does not make the matter more complicated than it need be, primarily describing the adjective "erotic" as "Of or pertaining to the passion of love; concerned with or treating of love; amatory"; then as a noun indicating "An erotic or amatory poem" and also "A 'doctrine' or 'science' of love. Hence **erotical**", an obsolete adjective indicating "the nature of, or pertaining to, sexual love. **Erotically** *adv.*, in an erotic manner; in an erotic sense. **Eroticism**, erotic spirit or character; also, the use of erotic or sexually arousing imagery in literature or art." To which is added a medical and psychological significance for "eroticism": "A condition or state of sexual excitement or desire; a tendency to become sexually aroused, usu. by some specified stimulus."

What one does not find in these definitions, and perhaps one should not expect it even of the *OED*, is a sense of the "erotic" as it may be

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<sup>14</sup> "Amoretti", LIV, in *The Complete Works of Edmund Spenser*, The Globe Edition, ed. R. Morris, London, 1879, 581.

represented in literary texts, in art in general, even in one's own experience, as a sense of ecstasy. But the *OED* definition of "ecstasy" makes no mention of sexuality or the erotic. Indeed it starts with rather pejorative definitions,<sup>15</sup> but even when it moves onto more exalted notions, one still senses an attitude of disparagement or basic disapproval and disbelief:

Used by mystical writers as the technical name for the state of rapture in which the body was supposed to become incapable of sensation, while the soul was engaged in the contemplation of divine things [this is considered now as only "historical ... allusive"] .... The state of trance supposed to be a concomitant of prophetic inspiration; hence, Poetic frenzy or rapture .... An exalted state of feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought; rapture, transport. Now chiefly, Intense or rapturous delight: the expressions *ecstasy of woe, sorrow, despair*, etc., still occur, but are usually felt as *transferred*. Phrase, *to be in, dissolve* (trans. and intr.), *be thrown into ecstasies*, etc.

In none of these definitions is sexual or erotic ecstasy mentioned, almost certainly because, even in the latest edition if the *OED* online, they and the quotations cited to support them, are still the essential Victorian entries (none of the quotations cited is later than 1882).<sup>16</sup>

Many people today asked to consider the notion of ecstasy might immediately think of Bernini's sculpture in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome of *The Ecstasy of St Teresa*, where spiritual ecstasy does not seem far removed from erotic ecstasy, and even sexual orgasm – a connection made easier by the presence of the angelic figure, hovering over the swooning Teresa with an arrow in his right hand, who seems identical with Cupid. How easily one might ascribe Pamphilia's (or Lady Mary Wroth's?) thoughts acknowledging the indispensable role of Cupid to the ecstatic Teresa:

<sup>15</sup> "The state of being 'beside oneself', thrown into a frenzy or a stupor, with anxiety, astonishment, fear, or passion", and in pathology it was used by "early writers ... vaguely, or with conflicting attempts at precise definition, to all morbid states characterized by unconsciousness, as swoon, trance, catalepsy, etc."

<sup>16</sup> The only sign of any updating (1993) is an entry (a new sense 5) for "Ecstasy" as "A name for the synthetic hallucinogen 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine" (for which the first quotation is 1985, just over a century later than the last quotation for the older established meanings of the word).

And burne, yett burning you will love the smart,  
 When you shall feele the weight of true desire,  
 Soe pleasing, as you would nott wish your part  
 Of burden should bee missing from that fire;

Butt faithfull and unfained heate aspire  
 Which sinne abolisheth, and doth impart  
 Saulves to all feare, with vertues which inspire  
 Soules with devine love, which shows his chaste art,

And guide hee is to joyings; open eyes  
 Hee hath to hapines, and best can learne  
 Us means how to deserve, this hee describes,  
 Who blind yett doth our hidenest thoughts diserne.

Thus wee may gaine since living in blest love  
 He may our profit, and owr Tuter prove.<sup>17</sup>

If one identifies the erotic with the voluntary suspension of physical and emotional control through sexual arousal or the contemplation of such arousal; with an act of willing surrender of self to another in order to enjoy that emotional and material suspension and to appreciate, possibly even more, the awakening from that experience of arrest, then Lady Mary Wroth's "Crowne of Sonetts" cannot be regarded as anything but an intricate and tortuous wrestling with the summons to such ecstasy:

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<sup>17</sup> "A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love", Sonnet 5 (*The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 130). Bernini was working on *The Ecstasy of St Teresa* between 1645 and 1652, more than twenty years after the first publication of Wroth's poems. Therefore, there is clearly no link between the sculpture and Wroth's poems. The most direct literary references usually given for Bernini's sculpture are such lines as "Thou art loue's victime; & must dy / A death more mysticall & high. / Into loue's armes thou shalt let fall / A still-suruiuing funerall. / His is the DART must make the DEATH / Whose stroke shall tast thy hallow'd breath; / A Dart thrice dip't in that rich flame, / Which writes thy spouse's radiant Name, / Vpon the roof of Heau'n" from Richard Crashaw's "Hymn to Sainte Teresa" (1648: ll.75-83), and his "The Flaming Heart Upon the book and picture of the seraphical Saint Teresa" (1652), in particular ll.47-58 (Richard Crashaw, *The Poems*, ed. L.C. Martin, Oxford, 1927, 317-21 and 324-27), which appear to be inspired by Bernini's work (for the possible relationship between "The Flaming Heart" and Bernini's statue, see the headnote to the poem in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th edn, New York, 2000, I, 1640-41). Thus, one might argue that either Wroth was anticipating Crashaw or that knowingly or unknowingly he was influenced by her example.

How blest be they then, who his favors prove  
 A lyfe whereof the birth is just desire,  
 Breeding sweet flame which hearts invite to move  
 In the lov'd eyes which kindle Cupids fire,

And nurse his longings with his thoughts intire,  
 Fixt on the heat of wishes formd by love,  
 Yett wheras fire distroys this doth aspire,  
 Increase, and foster all delights above;

Love will a painter make you, such, as you  
 Shall able bee to drawe your only deere  
 More lively, parfett, lasting, and more true  
 Then rarest woorkman, and to you more neere,

Thes be the least, then all must needs confess  
 Hee that shunns love doth love him self the less.<sup>18</sup>

The sense of personal intimacy derives from our recognition that the male pronoun is used in this and the other sonnets of the “Crowne” mainly to refer to Cupid and that the most troubling part of the relationship is between Pamphilia and love itself. On other occasions the “hee” is used in a gender unspecific way. Thus when she says in the last line of Sonnet 7 (and therefore the first line of the next sonnet) “Hee that shunns love doth love him self the less”, the pronoun should more properly be female, and refers to her own pains and dilemmas as she struggles with the question that both begins and ends the sequence: “In this strang labourinth how shall I turne?”<sup>19</sup>

### **Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon***

At first sight, how different from Lady Mary Wroth’s sequence Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* appears to be. As we have already noted, exclamation marks abound: in thirty of the forty-four sonnets, the eighth line (which completes the octave) ends with an exclamation mark (in another five sonnets there is a question mark at this point). There are something like another hundred and ninety exclamation marks in the sequence as a whole (giving an average of five exclamation marks a

<sup>18</sup> “A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love”, Sonnet 7 (*The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 131).

<sup>19</sup> The first line of Sonnet 1 and the last of Sonnet 14 (*The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 127 and 134).

sonnet). This hardly suggests the quiet meditative utterance of the inner woman troubled by the labyrinth of her erotic psyche. Clearly it is the voice of a woman used to having her voice heard in public – a striking dramatic voice, a fluent theatrical voice:

High on a rock, coæval with the skies,  
 A Temple stands, rear'd by immortal pow'rs  
 To Chastity divine! ambrosial flow'rs  
 Twining round icicles, in columns rise,  
 Mingling with pendent gems of orient dyes!  
 Piercing the air, a golden crescent tow'rs,  
 Veil'd by transparent clouds; while smiling hours  
 Shake from their varying wings – celestial joys!  
 The steps of spotless marble, scatter'd o'er  
 With deathless roses arm'd with many a thorn,  
 Lead to the altar. On the frozen floor,  
 Studded with tear-drops petrified by scorn,  
 Pale vestals kneel the Goddess to adore,  
 While Love, his arrows broke, retires forlorn.<sup>20</sup>

But whose voice? Are we listening to Sappho's or Mary Robinson's voice here? The answer, of course, is both. On the island of Lesbos, Sappho the poet, the striker of the lyre, singer and proclaimer of her own famous lyrics (most of which are lost) was a public voice, a voice belonging to her time and place, with a social function to fulfil – and this is one of the reasons we still know of her despite her lost lyrics. Mary Robinson was also a public figure, both in society and on the stage, where she was much acclaimed before becoming for a short while (in 1779-80) the mistress of the Prince of Wales, and then of the dashing Colonel Banastre Tarleton.<sup>21</sup>

She then became a poet of Sensibility and a best-selling romantic novelist. Towards the end of her comparatively short life – she was born

<sup>20</sup> Sonnet II, "The Temple of Chastity" (*Sappho and Phaon*, 40).

<sup>21</sup> Those seeking more detailed information about Mary Robinson as actress, fashion icon, lover and writer, have been well served in recent years by the appearance of three biographies (Paula Byrne's *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* already cited, Hester Davenport's *The Prince's Mistress: A Life of Mary Robinson*, and Sarah Gristwood's *Perdita: Royal Mistress, Writer, Romantic*), indicating a growing increase in her not only as a "celebrity" of the age (as Paula Byrne points out a "a word current then as well as now" [130]), but also as a writer.

in 1758 (or possibly 1757<sup>22</sup>) and died in 1800 – she became a very good poet.<sup>23</sup> Mary Robinson was rarely out of the gossip columns of the daily press and society journals in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, and the vicissitudes of her love life seems to have been as tragic and painful as the mythical tale indicates Sappho's was. Who better then to speak for the deserted poet of Lesbos? It is astonishing that until now *Sappho and Phaon* has been so neglected.

Mary Robinson's narrative sequence has more in common with Wroth's "A Crowne of Sonetts" than one might at first suppose. It is a more dramatically strident sequence – expressing Sappho's pain and anger, and many moods before and after, resulting from her love affair with Phaon and his desertion of her, his flight from Lesbos to Sicily, her journey after him there with slight prospect of winning him back, her disappointment and her decision to cure her love by leaping from the high promontory of Leucate into the sea and onto the rocks below. But the manner in which the narrative is unfolded through the sonnets, its combination of fond and passionate reminiscence, forlorn hope for the future, angry realization of reality, bleak determination to put an end to her pain, in a combination of daydream and nightmare, suggests the violent exclamatory drama of someone on the edge of a nervous breakdown rather than on the brink of a steep and dangerous cliff:

While from the dizzy precipice I gaze,  
 The world receding from my pensive eyes,  
 High o'er my head the tyrant eagle flies,  
 Cloth'd in the sinking sun's transcendent blaze!  
 The meek-ey'd moon, 'midst clouds of amber plays  
 As o'er the purpling plains of light she hies,  
 Till the last stream of living lustre dies,  
 And the cool concave owns her temper'd rays!  
 So shall this glowing, palpitating soul,  
 Welcome returning Reason's placid beam,  
 While o'er my breast the waves Lethean roll,  
 To calm rebellious Fancy's fev'rish dream;

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<sup>22</sup> See the Appendix in Paula Byrne's *Perdita*, 429-30.

<sup>23</sup> Her last volume, *Lyrical Tales*, published in the last year of her life (and revealing in its title her closeness to the authors of *Lyrical Ballads*, and certainly to Coleridge, who much admired her) contains some of most characteristic work, but several of her finest poems appeared posthumously.

Then shall my Lyre disdain love's dread control,  
And loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme!<sup>24</sup>

It is as if the physical leap from the cliff into the abyss below is to be perceived as an attempt at an emotional breakthrough, a hazardous mental return to the world of reason. The vibrant drama of the sequence (the addresses to people, places and abstractions) rather than portraying something happening in reality or on the stage in front of a responsive live audience, is being played instead in an interior theatre, or before a mental mirror, as a vindication of the self and its suffering. Mary Robinson the actress in society and on the stage turned solitary author is reflected inversely in a portrayal of the poet transformed into a desperate public performer – but both are playing their parts in an essentially inner world.

Although three sonnets (XVII, XX and XXV) are entitled “To Phaon” and other sonnets register Sappho’s feelings of longing, disappointment and anger in his presence, one feels that he is never really there, nor, for that matter, are her “Sylvan girls” helping her to prepare for the attempted seduction. It is a solitary Sappho who addresses her dreams, her anguished passions, despair and hope. Nevertheless, both she herself and the reader is captivated by her power to conjure up an erotic past or translate what may be nothing more than fantasy into cherished memories:

Now, o’er the tessellated pavement strew  
Fresh saffron, steep’d in essence of the rose,  
While down yon agate column gently flows  
A glitt’ring streamlet of ambrosial dew!  
My Phaon smiles! the rich carnation’s hue,  
On his flush’d cheek in conscious lustre glows,  
While o’er his breast enamour’d Venus throws  
Her starry mantle of celestial blue!  
Breathe soft, ye dulcet flutes, among the trees  
Where clust’ring boughs with golden citron twine;  
While slow vibrations, dying on the breeze,  
Shall soothe his soul with harmony divine!  
Then let my form his yielding fancy seize,  
And all his fondest wishes, blend with mine.

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<sup>24</sup> Sonnet XLIII, “Her Reflections on the Leucadian Rock before she perishes” (*Sappho and Phaon*, 81).

Bring, bring to deck my brow, ye Sylvan girls,  
 A roseate wreath; nor for my waving hair  
 The costly band of studded gems prepare,  
 Of sparkling crysolite or orient pearls:  
 Love, o'er my head his canopy unfurls,  
 His purple pinions fan the whisp'ring air;  
 Mocking the golden sandal, rich and rare,  
 Beneath my feet the fragrant woodbine curls.  
 Bring the thin robe, to fold about my breast,  
 White as the downy swan; while round my waist  
 Let leaves of glossy myrtle bind the vest,  
 Not idly gay, but elegantly chaste!  
 Love scorns the nymph in wanton trappings drest;  
 And charms the most concealed, are doubly grac'd.<sup>25</sup>

Mary Robinson has a wonderful flair for coiling her tongue around and between all the exclamation marks, and as a consequence amidst the declamatory tone there nestles an alluring verbal music:

Why art thou chang'd? dear source of all my woes!  
 Though dark my bosom's tint, through ev'ry vein  
 A ruby tide of purest lustre flows,  
 Warm'd by thy love, or chill'd by thy disdain;  
 And yet no bliss this sensate Being knows;  
 Ah! why is rapture so allied to pain?<sup>26</sup>

So theatrical bravura is not the only sound in Mary Robinson's register. As has been observed before, Keats' poetic strain owes more to the influence of the poets of Sensibility than to the older generation of Romantic poets, and what might later be recognized as a Keatsian register is certainly to be found in Mary Robinson and in particular in *Sappho and Phaon*. Keats too was drawn to classical scenes and myths for his themes and narratives, and, perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the sonnets in *Sappho and Phaon* begins "Oh! ye bright Stars!"<sup>27</sup> And both poets have a gift for producing succulent erotic accounts of grief and death: "Beguile with am'rous strains the fateful hours; / While

<sup>25</sup> Sonnets XII and XIII, "Previous to her Interview with Phaon" and "She endeavours to fascinate him" (*ibid.*, 50-51).

<sup>26</sup> Sonnet XVIII, "To Phaon", ll. 9-14 (*ibid.*, 56).

<sup>27</sup> Sonnet XXVII, "Sappho's Address to the Stars" (*ibid.*, 65).



Sappho's lips, to paly ashes fade, / And sorrow's cank'ring worm her heart devours!"<sup>28</sup>

### Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

With the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, we move to a different kind of fiction. Sappho's pain, passion, hopes, her expressed intention to throw herself off a cliff may or may not be registered as Mary Robinson's own response to Banastre Tarleton's treatment of her. In the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning we have no doubts, for from our knowledge of the letters that she wrote from her sickbed to young Mr Browning and the well documented account of their courtship, we know the sonnets, written in the 1845-1846 and published in 1850 after they were married and living in Italy, have nothing to do with the Portuguese.<sup>29</sup> Edmund Gosse told how Robert Browning got to know of his wife's sonnets when they were living in Pisa, soon after their marriage:

One day, early in 1847, their breakfast being over, Mrs Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Sonnet XIX, "Suspects his constancy" (*ibid.*, 57). Paula Byrne too refers to Mary Robinson's anticipation of Keats (*Perdita*, 289).

<sup>29</sup> V.E. Stack in a selected edition of *The Love-Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, London, 1969, indicates several parallels between the sonnets and the letters, and prints the sequence at the end of her volume, along with two apposite poems by Robert Browning.

<sup>30</sup> This was published in Gosse's *Critical Kit-Kats*, London, 1896, 2, and reproduced in the headnote to *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in the "Cambridge Edition" of *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Harriet Waters Preston, Boston, rpt. 1974 (from which all quotations of the sonnets come). The headnote goes on to say: "It was Robert Browning who overruled his wife's strong initial objection to making public these beautiful, but singularly intimate poems; and the fact furnishes an argument to those who believe that he, at least, would not have disliked the publication of the Love Letters. 'I who dared not,' he once said, 'reserve to myself the finest Sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare.' Mrs Browning's reluctance once overcome, her first fancy was to call the collection *Sonnets translated from the Bosnian* (though why from one rather than another of the innumerable Slavic dialects, it would be difficult to guess). But they connected themselves in the husband's mind with another poem for which he had a

Diaries, in principle, are written only for the eyes of the diarist. Yet even though certain diaries may be kept with an eye to future publication, letters are almost invariably intended at least for the eyes of the recipient, and to that extent they are a public means of communication. From 10 January 1845, when Robert Browning wrote his first letter to the invalid Miss Barrett in Wimpole Street, to Elizabeth's last letter, written a week after their secret marriage on 12 September 1846 and the day before their elopement, six hundred letters passed between them, and Elizabeth Barrett drafted even if she did not entirely polish her forty-four sonnets.<sup>31</sup> In this respect although occasionally the sonnets touch on or are illuminated by points made in the letters, they are essentially to be regarded as a poetic diary kept during the time of the courtship.

It was Robert Browning who was responsible for the publication of the letters after his own death by leaving them to his son with the instruction "to do with them as you please when I am dead and gone", and his "son interpreted these words as sanction for the publication of this intimate correspondence".<sup>32</sup> Robert Browning was also responsible for the publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* four years after their marriage and while his wife was still alive. So even before her death in 1861 and his own eighteen years later, and the publication of their love letters, despite Elizabeth's trepidation (as described by Browning to Gosse), he was willing for her poetic diary to be published. Ostensibly disguised by an exotic title that probably fooled few, they nevertheless permitted the intimacy of the sentiments to be savoured by the Victorian reader. More importantly the poet's avowals were formally framed and sealed within the aesthetic structure of the sonnet and the sonnet sequence.

However much we may know about the life of the poet, the poet's private friendships and passions; however much we are aware or want to be aware of the relationship of the poetry to the life; however much research we may do into that relationship and however much speculation we may indulge in (and all three of the other sonnet sequences we are

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very special admiration, *Caterina to Camoëns*; and he decreed that they should be called *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. A small edition was first printed for private circulation, under the supervision of Miss Mitford, in a slender volume entitled *Sonnets by E.B.B.*, with the imprint Reading, 1847, and marked *Not for Publication*; but three years later the Sonnets were included in the new edition of Mrs Browning's complete works" (214).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Browning first visited Elizabeth Barrett on 20 May 1845.

<sup>32</sup> *The Love-Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, xi. All the rest of his correspondence Browning had destroyed.

concerned with here, by Lady Mary Wroth, Mary Robinson and Christina Rossetti, inspire and provoke such speculation), a sonnet remains a sonnet, a composition, an artefact, both drawing us into its own world and also distancing us from the exact circumstances which inspired it. In the case of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* it is impossible to pretend that we do not know the circumstances in which they were written, and we can even point to letters that passed between Elizabeth and Robert that are associated with certain sonnets.

But still, the sonnets are not letters. They are a private diary of a very particular kind (and all diaries even when published remain private, and one of the prurient thrills of reading a published diary, even a diary intended for publication, is that they remain private – we are eavesdropping, looking through the keyhole, even though the diarist himself deliberately left the door ajar or cleared the keyhole by taking the key out). A diary in the form of sonnets (even, to use Gosse's phrase, "singularly intimate poems") is doubly protected, by its poetic form and by the traditions and conventions that pertain to that form, and have done so for some four centuries.

This is even the case when the author, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in order to keep to her strict rhyme scheme (ABBAABBA CDCDCD) indulges in some near misses and does not attempt to match the syntax to the form of her sonnet:

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!  
 Unlike our uses and our destinies.  
 Our ministering two angels look surprise  
 On one another, as they strike athwart  
 Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art  
 A guest for queens to social pageantries,  
 With gages from a hundred brighter eyes  
 Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part  
 Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do  
 With looking from the lattice-lights at me,  
 A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through  
 The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?  
 The chrism is on thine head, – on mine, the dew, –  
 And Death must dig the level where these agree.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Sonnet III (*The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 215).

This is personal, but not particularly erotic. Yet already amidst the extravagant compliments directed at her suitor, the unflattering comparison she makes with herself, especially poignant in the penultimate line – “The chrism is on thine head, – on mine, the dew” – there is an almost deliberate comic awareness of the degree of exaggeration she is indulging in, a gentle, and even loving mockery of herself and the “princely Heart!”, which implies a tender familiarity: “Thou, bethink thee, art / A guest for queens to social pageantries, / With gages from a hundred brighter eyes / Than tears even can make mine, ....” Her sense of his worth and her vulnerability (no doubt, like her jesting familiarity, partly derived from her being older than he is and reputedly more infirm) is intended to be taken to heart by the reader – in the first place the single reader silently addressed in the poetic diary he might never see (and had the love affair collapsed would he ever have seen it?), and then the many readers privileged to overhear the self-communication once *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were allowed into the public domain.

“Self-communication”, because despite the fact that “Thou” and “thee” appear in the poem (and we may well ponder the significance of the use of these particular pronouns here), this is a poet and poem dwelling in the otherwise silent solitary world of a bed-bound individual. It is true she is regularly talking to him, and writing letters to him, but these sonnets are the way she chooses to address the absent lover in the most concentrated way. You could say that they are the form in which the suitor becomes the lover, who may never come back, who may indeed let her down and desert her, and, possibly more apprehensively, they are the means she has adopted to confront her own fear that she may not be able to grasp what he is offering her:

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear  
 Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;  
 For we two look two ways, and cannot shine  
 With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.  
 On me thou lookest with no doubting care,  
 As on a bee shut in a crystalline;  
 Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love’s divine,  
 And to spread wing and fly in the outer air  
 Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
 To fail so. But I look on thee – on thee –  
 Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
 Hearing oblivion beyond memory;

As one who sits and gazes from above,  
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

When we met first and loved, I did not build  
Upon the event with marble. Could it mean  
To last, a love set pendulous between  
Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled,  
Distrusting every light that seemed to gild  
The onward path, and feared to overlean  
A finger even. And, though I have grown serene  
And strong since then, I think that God has willed  
A still renewable fear ... O love, O troth ...  
Lest these enclasped hands should never hold,  
This mutual kiss drop down between us both  
As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold.  
And Love, be false! if *he*, to keep one oath,  
Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold.<sup>34</sup>

But despite the image of herself as “a bee shut in a crystalline” in Sonnet XV, with the aid of his visits and his letters, his abiding words that she has heard from his lips and possesses on paper, she is able to create or revive a sense of her erotic being:

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!  
And yet they seem alive and quivering  
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string  
And let them drop down on my knee tonight,  
This said, – he wished to have me in his sight  
Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring  
To come and touch my hand ... a simple thing,  
Yet I wept for it! – this, ... the paper's light ...  
Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed  
As if God's future thundered on my past.  
This said, *I am thine* – and so its ink has paled  
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.  
And this ... O Love, thy words have ill availed  
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!<sup>35</sup>

Giving a lock of hair away as a special favour is not popular practice nowadays, although common in the Victorian period. Already more than

<sup>34</sup> Sonnets XV and XXXVI (*ibid.*, 217 and 222).

<sup>35</sup> Sonnet XXVIII (*ibid.*, 220).

a century earlier the occasion that prompted *The Rape of the Lock* may have seemed trivial (and Pope refuses to treat it with anything but mock solemnity), yet the implications of the baron's aggression are grave; and in a work published a dozen years after Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", the appalling implications of the "precious golden lock" that Laura surrenders to the goblin men in return for their fruit lies at the very centre of the narrative.<sup>36</sup> In November 1845 Elizabeth Barrett sent a lock of hair set in a ring to Robert Browning with a letter:

- - - I never gave away what you ask me to give *you*, to a human being, except my nearest relatives and once or twice or thrice to female friends, .. never, though reproached for it; and it is just three weeks since I said last to an asker that I was "too great a prude for such a thing"! it was best to anticipate the accusation! – And, prude or not, I could not – I never could – *something* would not let me. And now .. what am I to do .. "for my own sake and not yours?" Should you have it, or not? Why I suppose .. yes. I suppose that "for my own sense of justice and in order to show that I was wrong" (which is wrong – you wrote a wrong word there .. "right", you meant!) "to show that I was *right* and am no longer so", .. I suppose you must have it. "Oh, *You*", .. who have your way in everything! Which does not mean .. Oh, vous qui avez toujours raison – far from it.

Also .. which does not mean that I shall give you what you ask for, *tomorrow*, – because I shall not – and one of my conditions is (with others to follow) that *not a word he said tomorrow*, you understand. Some day I will send it perhaps .. as you *knew* I should .. ah, as you knew I should .. notwithstanding that "getting up" .. that "imitation" .. of humility: as you knew *too* well I should! - - -<sup>37</sup>

She also wrote a sonnet, which presumably Robert Browning did not see until that morning in Pisa over a year later. As one might expect, the tone of the sonnet, passionate and loving, aware of tragedy, both real (the death of her mother) and potential (her own death which she had

<sup>36</sup> In *Perdita*, Paula Byrne tells us that "The Prince [of Wales] went to the theatre to watch Mary [Robinson] whenever he could. On one occasion he sent a lock of his hair from his box to her dressing room in an envelope on which he had written 'To be redeemed'" (118). On her deathbed, Mary Robinson, we are told, "desired that locks of her hair should be sent to 'two particular persons' who must have been the Prince and Tarleton" (*ibid.*, 416).

<sup>37</sup> E.B.B. to R.B. Monday (Post-mark, November 24, 1845), in *The Love-Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, 67-68.

contemplated as imminent for several years), exerts an erotic tug quite absent from the somewhat embarrassed and embarrassing letter. The poem is indeed more frank, and, as you would expect, contains a more complex set of reflections and confessions:

I never gave a lock of hair away  
 To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,  
 Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully,  
 I ring out to the full brown length and say  
 "Take it." My day of youth went yesterday;  
 My hair no longer bounds to my foot's glee,  
 Nor plant I it from rose or myrtle-tree,  
 As girls do, any more: it only may  
 Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears,  
 Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside  
 Through sorrow's trick. I thought the funeral-shears  
 Would take this first, but Love is justified, –  
 Take it thou, – finding pure, from all those years,  
 The kiss my mother left here when she died.<sup>38</sup>

When she is even more evidently addressing herself rather than the absent lover, she can even risk seeming naively erotic:

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed  
 The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;  
 And ever since, it grew more clean and white,  
 Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list,"  
 When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst  
 I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,  
 Than that first kiss. The second passed in height  
 The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,  
 Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!  
 That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown,  
 With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.  
 The third upon my lips was folded down  
 In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,  
 I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Sonnet XVIII (*The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 218).

<sup>39</sup> Sonnet XXXVIII (*ibid.*, 222).

Earlier in the third sonnet she had written that “The chrism is on thine head, – on mine, the dew, –”, now too she has received “the chrism of love” (even if she characteristically refers to in a comical way, with Robert’s clumsy attempt to set the kiss on her forehead and missing). But now the erotic chrism, the consecrated anointing oil of love is shared, and death averted.

### Epilogue: Christina Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata”

In Christina Rossetti’s poetry the erotic content and context no longer takes one by surprise. “Goblin Market”, long regarded as a poem intended for children, is now read by adults in quite a different kind of way. Many of her explicitly religious poems contain a spiritual eroticism that links her boldly to the tradition of the Song of Solomon (the Song of Songs) and poets such as St John of Cross and John Donne.<sup>40</sup> “Monna Innominata” belongs to that tradition. Although the prefatory note to the sequence tells us that we are to imagine these sonnets as the response of all those silent women the Troubadours and others launched their poems at (all those unresponsive “women on the pedestal” as we habitually label them),<sup>41</sup> we are not really taken in – even without William Michael Rossetti’s note in his 1904 edition, already cited, we know that Christina Rossetti is the far from silent woman, the far from unknown or unnamed woman who is addressing these thoughts to the truly silenced, unknown man:

I loved you first: but afterwards your love  
Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song

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<sup>40</sup> See my “‘Thus Only in a Dream’: Appetite in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry”, in *The Tradition and Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick, Amsterdam and New York, 2002, 137-54.

<sup>41</sup> “Beatrice, immortalized by ‘altissimo poeta ... cotanto amante’ [loftiest poet, and lover of equal height]; Laura, celebrated by a great though an inferior bard, – have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness. These heroines of world-wide fame were preceded by a bevy of unnamed ladies ‘donne innominate’ sung by a school of less conspicuous poets; and in that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenses, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover’s poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour. Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend ...” (*The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, 294).



As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove.  
 Which owes the other most? my love was long,  
 And yours one moment seemd to wax more strong;  
 I loved and guessed at you, you construed me  
 And loved me for what might or might not be –  
 Nay, weights and measures do us both a wrong.  
 For verily love knows not “mine” or “thine;”  
 With separate “I” and “thou” free love has done,  
 For one is both and both are one in love:  
 Rich love knows nought of “thine that is not mine;”  
 Both have the strength and both the length thereof,  
 Both of us, of the love which makes us one.<sup>42</sup>

But the most distinctive aspect of Christina Rossetti’s sonnets is the extent to which the prospect and thrill of erotic satisfaction is linked to death, and, of course, to life after death which she is bound to look forward to as something more gratifying than life on earth:

Time flies, hope flags, life plies a wearied wing;  
 Death following hard on life gains ground apace;  
 Faith runs with each and rears an eager face,  
 Outruns the rest, makes light of everything,  
 Spurns earth, and still finds breath to pray and sing;  
 While love ahead of all uplifts his praise,  
 Still asks for grace and still gives thanks for grace,  
 Content with all day brings and night will bring.  
 Life wanes; and when love folds his wings above  
 Tired hope, and less we feel his conscious pulse,  
 Let us go fall asleep, dear friend, in peace:  
 A little while, and age and sorrow cease;  
 A little while, and life reborn annuls  
 Loss and decay and death, and all is love.<sup>43</sup>

This is the inevitable consequence of Christina Rossetti’s awareness of the prior commitment of her love to God, which does not necessarily hinder her from enjoying a material and earthly love, but does demand that she should make her priorities plain:

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<sup>42</sup> Sonnet 4 (*ibid.*, 296).

<sup>43</sup> Sonnet 10 (*ibid.*, 299).

Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,  
 I love, as you would have me, God the most;  
 Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost,  
 Nor with Lot's wife cast back a faithless look  
 Unready to forego what I forsook;  
 This say I, having counted up the cost,  
 This, tho' I be the feeblest of God's host,  
 The sorriest sheep Christ shepherds with His crook.  
 Yet while I love my God the most, I deem  
 That I can never love you overmuch;  
 I love Him more, so let me love you too;  
 Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such  
 I cannot love you if I love not Him,  
 I cannot love Him if I love not you.<sup>44</sup>

All these sonnet sequences in their different ways match love with death (probably the least of all in Lady Mary Wroth's "A Crowne of Sonetts"). Sappho will die after she pleased herself for the last time with her memories (or fantasies) of Phaon and her anger, pain and grief at his desertion of her; in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning celebrates the love affair which has proved to be an erotic therapy that rescued her from the early death she had long expected; Christina Rossetti waits impatiently for the love she looks forward to beyond the grave – for death is an entry into spiritually erotic existence denied to her on earth, and the greater her earthly denial, the greater her eternal recompense shall be. Who can say she has made the wrong choice? In her case in particular, the eternal erotic is a collaboration with death and not a defiance:

If I could trust mine own self with your fate,  
 Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?  
 Without Whose Will one lily doth not stand,  
 Nor sparrow fall at his appointed date;  
 Who numbereth the innumerable sand,  
 Who weighs the wind and water with a weight,  
 To Whom the world is neither small nor great,  
 Whose knowledge foreknew every plan we planned.  
 Searching my heart for all that touches you,  
 I find there only love and love's goodwill  
 Helpless to help and impotent to do,

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<sup>44</sup> Sonnet 6 (*ibid.*, 297).

Of understanding dull, of sight most dim;  
 And therefore I commend you back to Him  
 Whose love your love's capacity can fill.<sup>45</sup>

The last sonnet of “Monna Innominata” might be regarded in several different ways – as a resigned coda or as a rational account of why any sensible woman would at a certain age start looking for satisfaction elsewhere:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there  
 Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;  
 Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?  
 I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,  
 To shame a cheek at best but little fair, –  
 Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn, –  
 I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,  
 Except such common flowers as blow with corn.  
 Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?  
 The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,  
 A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;  
 The silence of a heart which sang its songs  
 While youth and beauty made a summer morn,  
 Silence of love that cannot sing again.<sup>46</sup>

In a characteristic way, Christina Rossetti even seems to be celebrating the decay of her looks and any possible sexual appeal she once may have had. The poem expresses itself in terms of tangible loss, but this is in the immediate shadow of what has just gone before. With such faith in the power of eternal God to fill the capacity of the temporal lover, no longer has the fading beauty any motive to celebrate material love. The only rational thing to aspire to is erotic satisfaction in the spiritual rather than in the earthly realm. Then Lady Mary Wroth's riddle – “In this strang labourinth how shall I turne?” – is resolved.

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<sup>45</sup> Sonnet 13 (*ibid.*, 300-301).

<sup>46</sup> Sonnet 14 (*ibid.*, 301).

## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "GOBLIN MARKET": THE EROTICISM OF FEMALE MYSTICS

BRITTA ZANGEN

Christina Rossetti's two older brothers had already been trying to further their sister's poetic career for some years, but with little success. However, a breakthrough finally came in 1861-62. She had just turned thirty and had been writing poetry for some two decades, when what was to be the decisive year started yet again with a setback: Dante Gabriel's own famous patron John Ruskin refused to provide any help with his sister's poetry. Although Ruskin recognized the poet's "observation and passion" and the poems' "beauty and power", their "Irregular measure" – this "calamity of modern poetry" – was as unacceptable to him as the poems' "quaintnesses and offences" would no doubt be to any publisher.<sup>1</sup> She should, he decreed, "exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like", and then "all will become precious".

Fortunately for the history of poetry, there was a more far-sighted man than Ruskin: in the same year Alexander Macmillan, who, with his late brother, had been making quite a success of his publishing house, published three of her poems in *Macmillan's Magazine* to great acclaim.<sup>2</sup> In autumn he "took the liberty", as he wrote to Dante Gabriel Rossetti,

of reading the *Goblin Market* aloud to a number of people .... They seemed at first to wonder whether I was making fun of them; by degrees they got as still as death, and when I finished there was a tremendous burst of applause.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism. Papers 1854 to 1862*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, London, 1899, 258-59.

<sup>2</sup> They were "Up-hill", "A Birthday" and "An Apple Gathering".

<sup>3</sup> *The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters: Some 133 Unpublished Letters Written to Alexander Macmillan, F.S. Ellis, and Others, by Dante Gabriel, Christina, and William Michael Rossetti, 1861-1889*, ed. Lona Mosk Packer, Berkeley, 1963, 7.

In early 1862 he brought out Christina Rossetti's first collection of poems, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*.<sup>4</sup> "Goblin Market" was met with bewilderment and disapproval but also with enthusiasm. Ever since the revival of interest in Rossetti, it has been accepted as a masterpiece, not least due to second-wave feminist scholarship in the 1970s. By 1985 Jerome McGann was able to assert: "The point hardly needs argument, for no one has ever questioned its achievement and mastery."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is for this reason that "Goblin Market" has attracted more interpretations than any of Rossetti's numerous other poems – interpretations not only greater in number but also more radically diverse than those of any other poem I know. Essays on "Goblin Market" often contain comments on its "multifarious [critical interpretations]",<sup>6</sup> its being "very complex"<sup>7</sup> or "most persistently puzzling".<sup>8</sup> The poem has baffled critics with regard to its genre, its main themes, and its sexual overtones.

Regarding genre it has been placed in such widely different categories as a nursery rhyme, a fairy-tale or a fairy-tale for adults, an erotic fantasy, a Gothic tale, a horror story, a Christian allegory. Its main themes have been designated a critique of capitalism, a celebration of sisterhood, a propaganda piece for lesbianism, a case study of anorexia nervosa, a rewriting of the Fall, a story of redemption.

Christina Rossetti's poems are also widely understood as some kind of unacknowledged autobiographical treasure trove. This kind of interpretation usually harps on Rossetti's two unfulfilled engagements or it relies on some unknown love affairs of hers.<sup>9</sup> Personal disappointments in love are thus taken to be the models for her (in McGann's words) "all but obsessive studies of women in love". He calls all these efforts

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<sup>4</sup> This is apart from the small volume privately printed by her grandfather when she was sixteen.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*, Oxford, 1985, 220.

<sup>6</sup> Sean C. Grass, "Nature's Perilous Variety in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, LI/3 (1996), 356.

<sup>7</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, "The Meretricious and the Meritorious in *Goblin Market*: A Conjecture and an Analysis", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* ed. David A. Kent, Ithaca: NY, 1987, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Connor, "'Speaking Likenesses': Language and Repetition in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", *Victorian Poetry*, XXII/4 (1984), 439.

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, she broke off the first engagement to James Collinson nine years prior to writing "Goblin Market" and rejected the second offer of marriage by Charles Bagot Cayley seven years afterwards.

"largely misguided", and asks his colleagues rather to try and "understand better the patterns of frustrated love *as they appear in the works*".<sup>10</sup> He is in line here with C.C. Barfoot, who sighs: "It would be better if we knew nothing about her at all, and only had her works."<sup>11</sup>

The amalgamation of what we know of Christina Rossetti's life with the contents of her poetry is particularly noteworthy with regard to the eroticism of her poems in general, and of "Goblin Market" in particular. The suggestive overtones are probably the most "persistently puzzling" element to many critics. But Rossetti's eroticism in "Goblin Market" is neither inexplicable nor in bad taste nor out of place when considered strictly within the realm of the poem. It only becomes all or some of these if looked at from a biographical viewpoint. Comparing the frank and persuasive eroticism of many of her poems with the poet's life, "the problem" most critics face lies in the seeming incompatibility of the marked sexuality of a poem such as "Goblin Market" both with the poet's deep religiousness and her virginal existence.

Before attempting to offer a satisfactory explanation for this problem (if it is one), here is a very condensed insight into the eroticism of "Goblin Market". Two teenage girls, Laura and Lizzie, live on their own in a house in the woods. On their daily evening walk to fetch water from a river they are accosted by goblins, who try to make them buy and eat some of their wondrously various and luscious fruits. While Lizzie, the prudent one, warns against the danger, curious Laura is very much tempted and one day she succumbs to temptation (ll. 128-35):

Then [she] sucked their fruit globes fair or red:  
Sweeter than honey from the rock,  
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,  
Clearer than water flowed that juice;  
She never tasted such before,  
How should it cloy with length of use?  
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more  
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore ....<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *The Beauty of Inflections*, 212 (italics mine).

<sup>11</sup> C.C. Barfoot, "Christina Rossetti In and Out of Grace", in *Beauty and The Beast: Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, R.L. Stevenson and Their Contemporaries*, eds Peter Liebrechts and Wim Tigges, Amsterdam, 1996, 8.

<sup>12</sup> "Goblin Market", in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, ed. R.W. Crump, Baton Rouge: LA, 1979, I, 11-26. See also Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, Text by R.W. Crump and Notes and Introduction by Betty S. Flowers, Penguin, 2001, 5-20.

Laura craves for more fruit, but as she can no longer hear the goblins' call and hence buy more fruit, she wastes away till death approaches.

This is when Lizzie, to save her sister, seeks the goblins, but they refuse to take her money, urging her to eat of the fruit herself. When she refuses (ll. 396-407):

Their tones waxed loud,  
 Their looks were evil.  
 Lashing their tails  
 They trod and hustled her,  
 Elbowed and jostled her,  
 Clawed with their nails,  
 Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,  
 Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,  
 Twitched her hair out by the roots,  
 Stamped upon her tender feet,  
 Held her hands and squeezed their fruits  
 Against her mouth to make her eat.

But Laura withstands and runs home to offer her face – streaming with the juices of the fruits – to her sister (ll. 464-72):

She cried “Laura”, up the garden,  
 “Did you miss me?  
 Come and kiss me.  
 Never mind my bruises,  
 Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
 Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
 Eat me, drink me, love me;  
 Laura, make much of me ....”

In response to which her sister “clung about [her], / Kissed and kissed and kissed her” (ll. 485-86), and after a long uncertain night recovers.

The poem ends with a short anticlimactic anticipation of the future: when the sisters have small children of their own, Laura tells them how she had once “go[ne] astray” (l. 565), how her sister had saved her, and asks them to “cling together, / ‘For there is no friend like a sister’” (ll. 561-62).

Mary Wilson Carpenter puts “the problem” very clearly: “The extraordinary homoerotic energies of ‘Goblin Market’ seem particularly

unaccountable in relation to the familiar assessment of Christina Rossetti as a devout Anglo-Catholic spinster."<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Mermin explains further: "we find it hard to allow a nineteenth-century religious poet the conflation of spiritual and erotic intensity that we accept without question in Crashaw or Donne" – in writers, like Christina Rossetti, who are, above all else, known for their religious poetry. While Mermin's awareness leads one to hope that she means to do differently, she denies her own perception when, to give an example, she states that "there is nothing erotic in Lizzie's jubilant shouts of triumph":<sup>14</sup> "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices." Squarely denying the erotic connotations of the poem is one device to cope with "the problem".

Some critics avoid having to grapple with the issue by toning down Rossetti's eroticism. Sean Grass, for instance, rejects a "strictly sexual" interpretation of "Goblin Market" as "rather hollow" in view of Christina Rossetti's "intense sacramentalism and devout Christianity".<sup>15</sup> He finds it "more likely" to interpret Lizzie as "a representative of Christ, offering Communion and Christian salvation".

Yet another way to come to terms with the seemingly unbecoming connection between Rossetti's life and literature is to accept the eroticism as such and then to find a "but" that will allow the critic a way out of any indelicate disclosure of the "devout Victorian lady poet".<sup>16</sup> One of these ways is to ascertain that Rossetti knew not what she wrote. Elizabeth Campbell argues:

Given what we know about Rossetti, her devout Christianity, her desire to be free from the taint of sin, and even her dedication of the poem to her sister Maria who became an Anglican nun, we must conclude that the poem is *not consciously* about erotic sex, despite its erotic overtones.<sup>17</sup>

Joseph Bristow acknowledges "the unconventional contours of desire that shape so many of Christina Rossetti's poems".<sup>18</sup> But then his

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Wilson Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", *Victorian Poetry*, XXIX/4 (1991), 417-18.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Mermin, "Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*", *Victorian Poetry*, XXI/2 (1983), 113.

<sup>15</sup> Grass, "Nature's Perilous Variety", 374.

<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me'", 419.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Campbell, "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Studies*, XXXIII/3 (1990), 402 (italics mine).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Bristow, "'No Friend Like a Sister'? Christina Rossetti's Female Kin", *Victorian Poetry*, XXXIII/2 (1995), 267.



argument takes us away from virginal sexuality and onto more conservative grounds: for him Rossetti's sisters in various poems are forced to choose between marriage or devotion to God, that is between sexual or spiritual love.<sup>19</sup> Carpenter explains the poem's sexuality as a vital means to portray "women's common plight as commodities in the linked capitalist and sexual economies" of its times.<sup>20</sup> D.M.R. Bentley finds his justification in Rossetti's life: he suggests that the poem might have been composed in order to be read aloud to the "fallen women" for whom Rossetti did charitable work.<sup>21</sup> To Cora Kaplan "Goblin Market" "undoubtedly remains an exploration of women's sexual fantasy which includes suggestions of masochism, homoeroticism, rape or incest".<sup>22</sup> But then, wondering why the sexual images are "incomplete and blurred", she speculates that one of the possible reasons may be "the result of sexual ignorance". So even here we are back with the more reassuring view that Rossetti knew not what she wrote.

I wonder whether "the problem" is not only the seemingly incompatible connection between sexuality and the Victorian spinster, but also an equally disconcerting but undeniable perception, namely that the lady poet did know or feel or sense what sexuality is all about. In Michèle Roberts' novel *The Book of Mrs Noah* a small incident illustrates the underlying unacknowledged problem very nicely – I have to turn to fictional writing at this point because a character in a novel can say things in a direct and rather rude fashion that academic critics too often can only delicately paraphrase. The novel's first-person narrator tells her readers: "I remember a male student shouting at me in the courtyard: you cold virgin sitting cooped up in the library reading medieval love songs, how can you understand them when you know nothing of sex?"<sup>23</sup>

There are two aspects to consider here: first, the alleged incompatibility of being a virgin and of knowing about sex, and second, the mentioning of medieval love songs because both are the essence of my attempt at mitigating the critics' uneasiness about Christina Rossetti's eroticism. Although the parallel with another kind of religious writing, that of medieval female mystics, has been noted by a few critics, not

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>20</sup> Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me'", 426.

<sup>21</sup> Bentley, "The Meretricious and the Meritorious", *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> Cora Kaplan, "The Indefinite Disclosed: Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson", in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus, London, 1979, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, London, 1999 (first published 1987), 210.

much has been made of its illuminating insights into the two vital dichotomies found to be a problem in Rossetti’s poetry, namely the dichotomies between desire and devotion and between desire and virginity.

Bristow interprets the sisters’ “sexual closeness” as “of course, indissociable from the distinct form of Christianity in which that love – like the Eucharist – is celebrated”.<sup>24</sup> But then he lets himself be distracted by arguing that it is death which promises “their greatest amatory rewards”.<sup>25</sup> While it is true that the mystic will only truly be united with her bridegroom, Christ, after death, the Eucharist in the Catholic tradition more than symbolizes her communion with Christ in the here and now – divine grace becomes physically obtainable.

Although Germaine Greer rightly draws attention to “true mystic poetry, [in which] the images of sexual intimacy serve as familiar, almost domestic analogues ... of the intense joy to be found in communion with [God]”, she then maintains that there is no “mystical intimation of communion with [God]” in Christina Rossetti’s religious poetry.<sup>26</sup> The nearest any criticism gets to drawing a connection between female mystics and Rossetti is Georgina Battiscombe’s. She declares that for Rossetti “there was no deep division between *eros* and *agape*, love human and love divine; she saw the two as very closely akin”.<sup>27</sup> But elsewhere in her book Battiscombe retreats on her own observation stating: “to explain [Rossetti’s] intense love of God simply in terms of repressed sex is too cheap and easy an answer.”<sup>28</sup>

The essence of mysticism, explains Wolfgang Beutin in his three-volume investigation into medieval women’s mysticism, is love. Since the time of St Augustine, and in contrast to the teachings of Christ himself, the Fathers of the Christian Church have differentiated two kinds of love: earthly or human *eros* and spiritual or divine *agape*. Only the latter was the “true love” and was as such estimated higher than the former.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Bristow, “‘No Friend Like a Sister’?”, 265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>26</sup> Germaine Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet*, London, 1995, 359 and 361.

<sup>27</sup> Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life*, London, 1981, 112.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-82.

<sup>29</sup> “Die ‘wahre Liebe’”, in Wolfgang Beutin, *Anima: Untersuchungen zur Frauenmystik des Mittelalters*, II (*Ideengeschichte, Theologie und Ästhetik*), 178 (*Bremer Beiträge zur Literatur- und Ideengeschichte*, eds Thomas Metscher and Wolfgang Beutin, Frankfurt

It was common for mystics of either sex – persons, that is, who experienced transcendental unions with the Divine – to record in writing their mystic encounters. The narratives of these encounters by female mystics often contain the same plot: the soul seeks a meeting with a supernatural being or beings, and when it finds the being a romantic relationship begins.<sup>30</sup> The meeting then advances along the five steps derived from the concept of what earthly love was said to embody: sight, conversation, touch, kiss, coitus.<sup>31</sup> Thus female mystics reunited the two loves and, doing so, introduced passion as an integral part of spiritual love. There is a widespread type of female mysticism called “bride mysticism” in which the person looked for – the object of the mystic’s passionate spiritual love – is Jesus. The relationship with Him culminates in the “mystical union”, tellingly also called “spiritual marriage” or “holy wedding”.<sup>32</sup>

It is not only the plot, but also the language used by female mystics to describe their spiritual love which is surprisingly similar to that used in texts about human love.<sup>33</sup> Beutin stresses that the sexual connotations of the documents cannot be said to be found merely peripherally, since, on the contrary, “the language of sexuality is central to mystic literature”.<sup>34</sup> Neither, according to Beutin, can the language be said to be used metaphorically, since the texts leave no doubt about a concrete erotic longing.

Beutin explains this sexualization of mystic texts historically: nuns, who found no outlet for their sexual feelings in nunneries, were forced to transfer these feelings into bride mysticism.<sup>35</sup> To Beutin it is undeniable that one of the main characteristics of female mystic writings since the twelfth century has been the extension of the concept of spiritual love through elements of erotic love. Filled with notions of sexuality as original sin, the Fathers of the Church could only accept this by insisting on two different kinds of love and thereby denying the unmistakable

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am Main, XXIII, 1998; translations from the German are mine unless otherwise stated).

<sup>30</sup> “Liebesgeschichte” (*Anima*, II, 175).

<sup>31</sup> “Anblick”, “Gespräch”, “Berührung (Umarmung)”, “Kuß” and “Koitus” (*Anima*, II, 183).

<sup>32</sup> “Brautmystik”, “myst[ische] Vereinigung”, “geistl[iche] Vermählung oder heil[ige] Hochzeit”, in *Anima*, I (*Probleme der Mystikforschung – Mystikforschung als Problem*), 87 (*Bremer Beiträge zur Literatur- und Ideengeschichte*, XIX, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> *Anima*, I, 82.

<sup>34</sup> “Die Sprache der Sexualität ist zentral für die mystische Literatur” (*Anima*, II, 187).

<sup>35</sup> *Anima*, III (*Tiefenpsychologie – Mystikerinnen*), 56-59 (*Bremer Beiträge zur Literatur- und Ideengeschichte*, XXIX, 1999).

sexual content of descriptions by female mystics of their spiritual love for Jesus. The aim, Beutin maintains, was to blind female mystics to the understanding that there is in reality only one love and one sexuality. In this context he points to Freud’s contention that only one libido exists and that Freud deliberately did not differentiate between love, sexuality, and eroticism, using the terms synonymously.<sup>36</sup>

But it was not only the Fathers of the Church who had their problems with the highly sensual expressions of female sexuality in the writings of the mystics. Modern psychologists and scholars of German studies alike have shared the clergymen’s uneasiness and zealously discussed the sexual content of the texts. In view of the evidence, Beutin concludes that it is in an act of a “remarkable misjudgement of the workings of language” that the sexual content of the writings has either been denied or maligned by many modern commentators.<sup>37</sup> Prejudices against female sexuality and female intuition by male commentators through the ages, Beutin asserts, are the reason why mystic writings by women have been devalued in contrast to those written by men.<sup>38</sup> In order to highlight the eroticism of medieval women’s mysticism one might consider a few lines of one of the most famous of the female German mystics, Mechthild von Magdeburg:

She [the soul] looks at her God with joyful eyes. Ah! how lovingly she is there received! .... And He, with great desire, shows her His Divine heart .... And God lays the soul in His glowing heart so that He, the great God, and she, the humble maid, embrace and are one as water with wine. Then she is overcome and beside herself for weakness and can no more. And He is overpowered with love for her .... Then she says, “Lord! Thou art my Beloved! My desire! My flowing stream! My Sun! And I am Thy reflection!”<sup>39</sup>

Returning to the dichotomies between desire and virginity and between desire and devotion which constitute “the problem” that most critics have with “Goblin Market” and others of Rossetti’s poems, the knowledge of the writings of medieval female mystics helps to dissolve these two seeming incompatibilities and hence, I believe, “the problem”.

<sup>36</sup> “Liebe, Sexualität, Eros (Erotik)” (*Anima*, III, 55: see also II, 188).

<sup>37</sup> “... eine merkwürdige Verkenntung der Leistung von Sprache” (*Anima*, II, 186).

<sup>38</sup> *Anima*, I, 94-95.

<sup>39</sup> “The Flowing Light of the Godhead”, trans. Lucy Menzies, in Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, New York, 1986, 215.

First, I would maintain, it is not a contradiction to find that an unmarried virginal woman knows about sexuality, and therefore we can stop protesting that Rossetti either did not know what she was about or what there is in “Goblin Market” cannot really be sexuality. The assertion that she “knows nothing of sex”, as the student shouts at a virgin in the quotation from Michèle Roberts’ novel, is wrong. One reason is certainly that the view of sex as necessarily involving a live partner, let alone a live male partner, is clearly too narrow.

In Jean Hegland’s novel *Into the Forest* another first-person narrator reads in an encyclopaedia that the word “virgin” originally had quite a different meaning from the one we generally assume it to have:

*The oldest use of the word “virgin” meant not the physiological condition of chastity, but the psychological state of belonging to no man, of belonging to oneself. To be virginal did not mean to be inviolate, but rather to be true to nature and instinct, just as the virgin forest is not barren or unfertilized, but instead is unexploited by man.*<sup>40</sup>

If we interpret Rossetti’s virginity in this sense, then the fact that she did not “belong to a man” does not – or not necessarily – presuppose sexual ignorance.

The second insight afforded by looking at mystic writings is that the embarrassing connection of devotion with desire that permeates “Goblin Market” and many of her other poems is neither Rossetti’s invention nor unusual. Barfoot plausibly believes that Rossetti would have been familiar with “The tradition of expressing religious longing and spiritual fulfilment in erotic terms ... from ... the Song of Solomon, and other pious texts derived from it” (including poems by St John of the Cross and John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets”),<sup>41</sup> but I suppose she would probably not have been familiar with texts written by female mystics. Even so I would tentatively suggest that Christina Rossetti belongs to this tradition because she did precisely what medieval nuns had done: finding no outlet for their sexual feelings in their lives, they were forced to redirect them elsewhere; for the devout Catholic nuns and the pious Anglo-Catholic poet Christ was the logical choice; and putting love songs on paper is a

<sup>40</sup> Jean Hegland, *Into the Forest*, London, 1998 (first published, 1996), 208 (italics in the original).

<sup>41</sup> C.C. Barfoot, “‘Thus Only in a Dream’: Appetite in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry”, in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick, Amsterdam and New York, 2002, 144.

tradition much older even than Christianity. If one looks, one finds other female writers between the twelfth and the nineteenth century in this tradition: writing erotic religious poetry in the vein – familiar and acceptable to us – of Crashaw and Donne.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, we might ponder why so little use has been made of the significant parallels between “Goblin Market” and the writings of female mystics. For obvious reasons the vast majority of commentators on Rossetti belong to a worldwide community of English native speakers, and in that community female mystics are rare. If I am not mistaken, there are only two comparatively well-known ones – Julian of Norwich and Marjorie Kempe – and they are not held in the highest regard. In contrast, within the German-speaking part of Europe not only are the female mystics greater in number, but in the past thirty years they have also enjoyed a growingly appreciative renown due to the work of feminist literary critics and spiritually minded feminist activists. For this reason some parts of the German-speaking world are more familiar with their mystic ancestors than English speakers, which is why they seem to have missed the parallel that struck me on my very first reading of “Goblin Market” years ago.

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<sup>42</sup> See, in this present volume, Dame Gertrude More’s early seventeenth-century poem “Magnes Amoris Amor” (“The Magnet of Love Is Love”), quoted in the article by Kari Boyd McBride (see pages 144-45 above).

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## **“TO TAKE WERE TO PURLOIN”: SEXUALITY IN THE NARRATIVE POEMS OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI**

FAHRİ ÖZ

Feminist thinkers have always been interested in the way the female body is “talked about, classified, disciplined, invaded, destroyed, altered, decorated, pleased, ... and more”.<sup>1</sup> And the Victorian age appears to be a time in which the female body was severely disciplined, partly due to an unprecedented proliferation of discourses on sex in medicine, law, and religion. As the works of William Acton and W.R. Greg demonstrate, women were denied *jouissance* and were confined within domesticity, marriage and motherhood.<sup>2</sup>

However, women were banned not only from sexual pleasure but also from textual pleasure – the pleasure of authoring texts. The literary canon, which operated throughout the publishing industry, anthologies and critics, belittled women’s writings – especially poetry – by demeaning their creations as feminine, domestic, and insignificant. Under such circumstances, one cannot expect a female Victorian poet to give vent to pent-up aspirations and desires, especially to sexual ones. This essay endeavours to demonstrate the way Christina Rossetti deals with sexual matters through metaphors and symbols based on flowers and fruit in her two long narrative poems, “Goblin Market” (1862) and “The Prince’s Progress” (1866).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brook, *Feminine Perspectives on the Body*, London, 1999, 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830*, London, 2000, 61; and Krista Lysack, “The Economy of Ecstasy in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Monna Innominata’”, *Victorian Poetry*, XXXVI/4 (Winter 1998), 1.

<sup>3</sup> All the quotations of Christina Rossetti’s poems are from *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, a Variorum Edition, ed. R.W. Crump, 3 vols, Baton Rouge: LA, 1990 (“Goblin Market”, I, 11-26; “The Prince’s Progress”, I, 95-110). See also Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, Text by R.W. Crump and Notes and Introduction by Betty S. Flowers, Penguin, 2001, 5-20 and 89-104.



The female body and sexuality plays an undeniably important role in Rossetti's fantastic narrative poem "Goblin Market". At first glance the poem reads like a fairy tale: two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, come across goblin men with beast-like forms selling fruit at twilight. The goblins manage to cajole Laura into buying their strange fruit. After tasting it, she pines away in a state of addiction. Lizzie decides to redeem her sister by an act of self-sacrifice. She finds the goblin men, who attack her, squeezing the juices of their fruit into her closed mouth. She comes home immersed in fruit juice. Laura kisses her, sucking the juice on her sister's body, which helps her recover. The poem ends in a peaceful atmosphere in which the two sisters, who are now mothers, relate their experiences to their daughters.

Despite its seeming innocence and simplicity, "Goblin Market" has led to various interpretations. Rod Edmond makes an inventory of such readings as

a Christian allegory; a feminist Christian allegory with a female figure; an allegory of sexual desire; a female rites of passage poem; a lesbian manifesto; a poem about the erotic life of children; a metaphoric statement about patterns of social destructiveness in Victorian England; and in psychoanalytic terms as a power struggle between mothers and children.<sup>4</sup>

Kooistra, who analyses various illustrations of "Goblin Market" such as those in *Playboy*, which turn the poem into pornographic material, claims that the poem is "about both female relationship and sexual exchange".<sup>5</sup> However, D.M.R. Bentley suggests that "Goblin Market" was written for merely didactic purposes, to be read aloud to "fallen women" at Highgate, as a warning about sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

This plethora of interpretations springs from the evasive and sexually charged content of the poem.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the interpretation might be, the

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<sup>4</sup> Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative*, London, 1988, 170.

<sup>5</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, "Visualizing the Fantastic Subject: 'Goblin Market' and the Gaze", in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, eds Mary Arseneau, Anthony H. Harrison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Athens: OH, 1999, 162.

<sup>6</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, "The Meretricious and the Meritorious in Goblin Market: A Conjecture and an Analysis", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent, Ithaca: NY, 1987, 58-66.

<sup>7</sup> For further readings of the poem, see the Britta Zangen's article in this volume,

centrality of the female body in “Goblin Market” cannot be ignored. The poem is open to a reading as an adult erotic fantasy because consuming fruit has sexual connotations. According to Michie, eating is intimately related to sexual appetite in the Victorian age; and Victorian sex manuals constantly equate food, especially certain types of food, with lust. This conviction was so strong that excessive appetites of all kinds were considered to lead directly to sexual disorders. For example, it was believed consuming salt and spice made the body “more and more heated, whereby the desire for venereal embraces is very great”.<sup>8</sup>

As Gilbert observes, fruit, which plays an important role in the poem, has been seen as a symbol of sexuality, reproduction and regeneration in religious and secular texts – ranging from the Genesis to D.H. Lawrence’s *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*: “In countless folk narratives fearful metamorphoses begin with the ingestion of alien substance, and Judeo-Christian mythology itself, of course, starts with such a meal of poison fruit.”<sup>9</sup> Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, Tennyson’s “Lotos Eaters”, and the folk ballad “Lord Randal” deal with transformations that begin with eating. Rossetti reverses this motif, because in all these earlier examples the eater is a male. In “Goblin Market”, however, the fruit is consumed by female characters. The fruit, which acts as an igniter of a transformation in the poem, is given in a startlingly wide inventory (ll. 5-14):

Apples and quinces,  
Lemons and oranges,  
Plump unpecked cherries,  
Melons and raspberries,  
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
Swart-headed mulberries,  
Wild free-born cranberries,  
Crab-apples, dewberries,  
Pine-apples, blackberries,  
Apricots, strawberries ....

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“Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’: The Eroticism of Female Mystics” (pages 247-57 above).

<sup>8</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies*, New York, 1987, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1990, 335.

The wide variety of fruit that Rossetti lists might even baffle a professional greengrocer in a huge supermarket. The catalogue of such sexually suggestive fruit in the poem alludes to a postlapsarian world: “If the first fruit of the goblin as well as satanic temptation is the allusive apple, the second (the quince) and the twenty-first (the pear) belong to the apple genus.”<sup>10</sup> The word “fruit” is almost synonymous with original sin. As Menke indicates, the *OED* entry for the word “fruit” suggests not only physical botanical products but also material gain and offspring as in the phrase “the fruit of the womb”.<sup>11</sup> Nor should one forget that the Latin source of “fruit”, *fructus*, means “enjoyment”. The use of fruit is also significant because the globe-like fruit connotes testicles, which are known to be the source of virile power. Rossetti employs an astounding list of fruit in order to foreground their irresistible power and symbolic value – sexual appetite and pleasure. Indeed, the fact that nearly half of the goblin fruit are not grown in England makes them even more attractive and tempting.

Above all, the poet’s deployment of such a deluge of fruit suggests that the poem has a quasi-pornographic content. As Marcus points out very clearly “the world of pornography is a world of plenty. In it all men are infinitely rich in substance, all men are limitlessly endowed with that universal fluid currency which can be spent without loss.”<sup>12</sup> The extravagant display of the goblin fruit accentuates the lavish sexual power and activity of the vendors. They are never short of fruit; they appear again and again with their sexually suggestive merchandise, ready to ravish their female clientele.

The fruit list is reiterated in the section where Lizzie visits the goblins to purchase fruit for her ailing sister, a repetition by means of which Rossetti foregrounds the sexual and transforming quality of the fruit. However, in “Goblin Market”, by its association with the goblins, fruit is presented as a source of barrenness and illness due to its association with the goblins, which is why Lizzie warns Laura not to “peep at goblin men” (l. 49). Inherent in her warning is the idea and dangers of voyeurism, and, by asking her to look away from the eerie yet enticing creatures, Lizzie wants Laura to repress her sexual appetite. Like well-

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Smulders, *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, London, 1996, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Menke, “The Political Economy of Fruit”, in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, New York, 1966, 22.

brought-up young Victorian women, she wishes to remain an object of gaze, or, at least, is content to be so, rather than a subject gazing herself.

Laura is lured by these strange vendors because she fails to realize that in the market women are not the buyers, but the “bought”. In fact the merchandise is not fruit but the female body. The goblins hawk their goods repeating “come buy, come buy” all the time. While “buying” refers to a commercial activity, “coming” alludes to having an orgasm; but this orgasmic allusion is intertwined with death. The issue of sex is also almost synonymous with physical death or ailment as in the case of Jeanie, the maiden who had died after succumbing to the call of goblins. Sexual pleasure is almost a taboo and a transgression – when it is associated with the female body, a transgression. In her encounter with the goblins, Laura sheepishly confesses that

“Good folk, I have no coin;  
To take were to purloin:  
I have no copper in my purse,  
I have no silver either ....”

(ll. 117-18)

The idea of taking or spending suggests not only economic power but also sexual pleasure as a man’s privilege. Due to the economic and sexual values of the age women cannot “spend”, cannot have an orgasm.<sup>13</sup>

Eating the fruit produces devastating results in Laura’s body and mind, because, in a sense, she loses her virginity and wants to have sex again. Normally in Victorian literature a woman who loses her virginity out of wedlock surrenders her pure exchange value and becomes either a prostitute like Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Jenny or a repentant woman like Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth. However, Laura becomes neither. She does not repent, because she wants to have access to sexual pleasure again, while a prostitute does not look for pleasure *per se*. The goblins do not appear to Laura after she has first eaten the fruit, because, if they were to do so, it would imply that they admit that as a woman she derives pleasure from sexual intercourse. Since she is deprived of sexual pleasure, she suffers a physical transformation, as a consequence of which

<sup>13</sup> For a consideration of the sexual meaning of the word “spending” and its use in Christina Rossetti’s poetry, see C.C. Barfoot, “‘Thus Only in a Dream’: Appetite in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry”, in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick, Amsterdam and New York, 2002, 146-49.

Her hair grew thin and gray;  
 She dwindled, as the full moon doth turn  
 To swift decay and burn  
 Her fire away.

(ll. 277-80)

She stops eating and begins to neglect her household duties, which is the only kind of labour she is associated with – her refusal to eat being related to her sense of dishonour and her desire to suppress her sexual hunger, which can also be taken as a symptom of a sexually transmitted disease or a guilty conscience. In her delirium Laura

thought of Jeanie in her grave,  
 Who should have been a bride;  
 But who for joys brides hope to have  
 Fell sick and died  
 In her gay prime, ...

(ll. 312-16)

Jeanie's story appears in the text as an embedded narrative that needs to be kept at a distance and mentioned only briefly since it involves perishing as a result of sexual indulgence.

Half way through the poem (lines 320 onwards), the focalizer becomes Lizzie, who sets out to redeem her sister. Lizzie puts "a silver penny in her purse" (l. 324), assuming that she can play the game according to the rules of the market. However, she is mistaken because the goblins will not accept her as a proper customer but only as another female body to ravish. In this part of the poem Rossetti gives a long description of the goblins' movements rather than a list of their fruit, which renders the goblins both beastly and alluring:

Laughed every goblin  
 When they spied her peeping;  
 Came towards her hobbling,  
 Flying, running, leaping,  
 Puffing and blowing,  
 Chuckling, clapping, crowing,  
 Clucking and gobbling,  
 Mopping and mowing,  
 ...

Chattering like magpies,  
Fluttering like pigeons,  
Gliding like fishes, –  
Hugged her and kissed her,  
Squeezed and caressed her: ...

(ll. 329-36, 345-49)

Like the deluge of fruit at the beginning of the poem, the abundance of verbs following one another (mainly as participles) suggests a pornographic plenitude, and expresses the goblins' activity and sexual potency as opposed to Lizzie's apparent passivity and timidity. In this scene of abuse, her body becomes the locus on which the goblin men try to satisfy their appetite. Lizzie is intent on buying the fruit and leaving as soon as possible. However, when she insists on leaving, they assume a more threatening and aggressive attitude:

They trod and hustled her,  
Elbowed and jostled her,  
Clawed with their nails,  
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,  
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,  
Twitched her hair out by the roots,  
Stamped upon her tender feet,  
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits  
Against her mouth to make her eat.

(ll. 399-407)

As the last two lines suggest, the scene is not an innocent one as in a fable – on the contrary, it depicts sexual abuse. Like Alec in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, who forces strawberries on the heroine, the goblin men act on sexual motives, and it is almost virtually a rape. The sexual import is also apparent in the successive use of action verbs. The description of Lizzie's resistance to eating the goblin fruit seems to be written in order to tone down this quasi-pornographic abundance through a series of similes:

White and golden Lizzie stood,  
Like a lily in a flood, –  
Like a rock of blue-veined stone  
Lashed by tides obstreperously, –  
Like a beacon left alone

In a hoary roaring sea,  
 Sending up a golden fire, –  
 Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree  
 White with blossoms honey-sweet  
 Sore beset by wasp and bee, –  
 Like a royal virgin town  
 Topped with gilded dome and spire  
 Close beleaguered by a fleet  
 Mad to tug her standard down.

(ll. 408-21)

Here too, the poem continues to oscillate between a tale for adults and a children's tale. While "white and golden", "lily" and "virgin town" hint at a sense of innocence, the words and phrases following are full of sexual connotations. Lizzie is compared to "a lily in a flood" or a virgin town to be taken and shamed, both implying a sense of threat and doom. There is a sense of stoicism in her resistance to the goblin men and their fruit: "Lizzie uttered not a word; / Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in" (ll. 430-32).

Since she is aware of the danger of being driven to death and illness like Jeanie and Laura, Lizzie does not totally yield to the goblins' lascivious call. She plays the game but at the same time cheats the goblins because she does not taste their fruit: "But laughed in heart to feel the drip / Of juice that syrudded all her face" (ll. 433-34). She gets back her money, which the goblins have not accepted.

In the next scene, the female body encounters not the male body but another female one. When Lizzie comes home she shares the juice with her ailing sister so as to appease her hunger. The scene is full of associations of lesbian love:

[Laura] clung about her sister,  
 Kissed and kissed and kissed her:  
 Tears once again  
 Refreshed her shrunken eyes,  
 Dropping like rain  
 After long sultry drouth;  
 Shaking with anguish fear, and pain,  
 She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.

(ll. 485-92)

While the encounters between the opposite sexes involve the use of physical force, this encounter between the two sisters suggests harmony, healing and regeneration. Although there is a kind of pleasure involved in the kissing of the sisters, Rossetti does not present it as pure pleasure since this erotic exchange is described in incongruous and contradictory terms: “the juice was wormwood to her tongue” and “[Laura] loathed the feast” (ll. 494-95).

Through such oxymorons as a loathsome feast and juice like wormwood, the poet attempts to eradicate implications of lesbianism in the poem. Still, the effects of this seemingly innocent intimacy are indicative of orgasmic convulsions:

Writhing as one possessed she leaped and sung,  
 Rent all her robe, and wrung  
 Her hands in lamentable haste,  
 And beat her breast.  
 Her locks streamed like the torch  
 Borne by a racer at full speed,  
 Or like the mane of horses in their flight,  
 Or like an eagle when she stems the light  
 Straight toward the sun ....

(ll. 496-504)

As in other crucial points in the poem, Christina Rossetti employs similes in succession to explicate the changes that Laura undergoes in her encounter with her sister's juice-immersed body. All these similes create a sense of indulgence in pleasure and breaking free from restraint, and their kissing and hugging each other imply a kind of sexual orgasm. When Laura is cured of her sickness, she asks herself “Is it death or is it life?” and comes to the conclusion that it is “Life out of death” (ll. 523-24). Despite her attempts to desexualize her narrative poem, Rossetti ends up implying that the predicament of the female body can be remedied through same-sex *jouissance* and solidarity.

Yet, at the end of the poem, the idea of the female body as capable of deriving sexual pleasure is discarded. The narrative re-introduces the sisters years later as mothers, with Laura telling the story to her daughters and nieces, with the reassuring refrain, “For there is no friend like a sister, / In calm or stormy weather” (ll. 562-63).

Eventually, Laura and Lizzie emerge as conscious female subjects who have discovered the perils confronting the female body. Referring to



Nancy Ziegenmeyer, a rape victim, whose story evolved into a book and film, Plummer suggests that sexual harassment may be turned into a means for finding a voice by women.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Rossetti transforms Laura into a narrator telling children what she and Lizzie experienced as young girls. This narrative twist turns the poem into a palindrome, in which the homodiegetic narrator retells a story which we readers have already heard. The palindromic nature of the narrative reduces the role of the poet, and the narrative turns into a text in which Laura tells the story without any mediation. Her poetic name, which is reminiscent of Dante's muse and the laurels worn by poets, attests her ability to author her own destiny despite adversities. Laura, in a sense, is like Scheherazade performing a vital function for survival. Thus, she helps build a tradition of awareness and resistance in her family.

"The Prince's Progress", written four years later in 1866, also deals with the issue of the female body. The poet does not allude to direct encounters between bodies of the opposite sexes as in "Goblin Market", and the female character does nothing but wait in a state of stupor. However, the female body is associated with flowers, gums and juices, which all suggest the female body and its erotic urges. The poem calls forth themes common to Chivalric Romances and courtly love poems such as the damsel in distress, and the knight setting out to save her. The opening of the poem heralds the existence of a pining lady who is waiting to be delivered from loneliness and distress:

Till all sweet gums and juices flow,  
 Till the blossom of blossoms blow,  
 The long hours go and come and go,  
     The bride she sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth,  
 Waiting for one whose coming is slow: –  
     Hark! The bride weepeth.

(ll. 1-6)

Rossetti establishes the repertoire of the discourse she sets out to parody. The events in the story are unmistakably suggestive of a Quest Romance: the Prince confronts a milkmaid who attempts to deter him from his journey, a volcanic wasteland, an old man in a cave who makes him

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<sup>14</sup> Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London, 1995, 9.

work on a fire in return for a life potion, then he crosses a dangerous river, and finally comes to a green valley where his Bride lives. Nevertheless, through narrative and stylistic devices, this Romance is subjected to deliberate interrogation. As a narrative twist, the conclusion of the story renders the Prince's quest pointless since his beloved is dead. Rossetti also demeans the Prince and his deeds through an extensive use of adjectives that denote his inefficiency and fickleness. The Prince is presented as a satiric fiction, a parodic construction, whereas the Bride is a real woman, not an ideal, for she is mortal.

At the outset of his journey, the Prince seems nonchalant and drained of energy and he wastes his time fantasizing about the Bride by means of floral imagery:

"By her head lilies and rosebuds grow;  
The lilies droop, will the rosebuds blow?

....

"Red and white poppies grow at her feet,  
The blood-red wait for sweet summer heat,  
Wrapped in bud-coats hairy and neat;  
But the white buds swell, one day they will burst,  
Will open their death-cups drowsy and sweet –  
Which will open the first?"

(ll. 25-26, 31-36)

The Bride is associated with drooping lilies, white poppies and blooming roses, which respectively connote virginity, innocence and sexual passion. At the end of his journey, the Prince muses about his Bride: "Rose, will she open the crimson core / Of her heart to him?" (ll. 436-37), which echoes Blake's erotically charged "Sick Rose", with its "bed / Of crimson joy".<sup>15</sup>

While the Bride is portrayed through erotically floral imagery, the Prince is associated with effeminacy and domesticity:

<sup>15</sup> *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W.H. Stevenson, text by David V. Erdman, Longmans' Annotated English Poets, London, 1971, 217. Rossetti employs the rose symbol also in a comparatively shorter narrative poem, "Brandon's Both", written in 1881 (*The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, II, 168).

In his world-end palace the strong Prince sat,  
 Taking his ease on cushion and mat,  
 Close at hand lay his staff and his hat.

(ll. 13-15)

This domesticity renders the Prince a laughing stock. He further loses his knightly traits when he is tempted by the milkmaid:

So he stretched his length in the apple-tree shade,  
 Lay and laughed and talked to the maid,  
 Who twisted her hair in a cunning braid  
     And writhed it in shining serpent-coils,  
 And held him a day and night fast laid  
     In her subtle toils.

(ll. 91-96)

Such details as the apple tree and serpentine hair allude of course to the temptation of Adam by Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, it is difficult to come to any conclusion as to whether the Prince is a ruthless womanizer, or a victim of the maid's erotic appeal. Although he seems to enjoy the maid's company he is far from being a seducer. Clearly he becomes the object of the maid's dominating sexual passion. Overpowered by a mere milkmaid, he proves to be both weak and disloyal.

In line with his inadequacy the tardy Prince is portrayed as "taking his ease on cushion and mat" (l. 13), "of purpose weak" (l. 47), a "sluggard" (l. 112), a "sleeper" (l. 117), "lagging ... and apt to swerve" (l. 301), "Lazy of limb" (l. 302), loitering and indecisive. In a sense, in contrast to the goblins, he is impotent. Furthermore, he is presented as a ridiculous figure incapable of acting without any outside prompt. He is always reminded of his task by other characters or beasts, who act as a kind of chorus. At the beginning of the poem his attendants or subjects urge him to embark on his journey at once: "'Time is short, life is short,' they took up the tale: / 'Life is sweet, love is sweet, use today while you may'" (ll. 37-40). But these entreaties with their echoes of the *carpe diem* theme – their familiar reminder of the ephemeral nature of life, of the need to enjoy life's pleasures while there is still time, and the call to virgins to abandon their chaste state and enjoy love – is not directed at the virgin Princess. She is a mesh of fluids and passions and is ready "to seize the

day". The appealing voices are directed at the Prince – summoning him to consummate his affair with his Bride.

The cave the Prince goes into can be interpreted as a metaphorical vagina, which he fails to penetrate in real life. He is like the old magician in the cave, who is too weak to move a finger. This elixir of life, which needs to be heated through bellowing, is, in a sense, the cure for his unmanliness. The potion is ready only after the old magician dies and his finger slips into the simmering water. This implies that it is not the Prince who manages to activate the potion of life and virility but the magician. If the finger is taken as a phallic symbol, once again the Prince's lack of sexual vigour is stressed.

The Prince's weakness is also apparent in his failure to cross the river, an action that once accomplished usually symbolizes sexual initiation and experience. In his attempt, he is almost drowned, which indicates his unmanliness. After the river incident, his attendants reprimand him once again for his tardiness: "The promise promised so long ago, / The long promise, has not been kept" (ll. 381-82). The description of the Prince as a man lacking valour, strength, and sexual desire for his beloved produces a comic effect.

The Prince's next destination is a wasteland, which signals his barren sexuality, and foreshadows the Bride's demise. Finally he arrives at the Bride's palace only to find her already dead. The tragic death of the Bride changes the mood of the parody. Here, Christina Rossetti's voice becomes a critical one questioning the medieval idealization of women and their dependence on men.

The final criticism comes from the attendants of the late Bride:

"Too late for love, too late for joy,  
Too late, too late!  
You loitered on the road too long,  
You trifled at the gate:  
The enchanted dove upon her branch  
Died without a mate;  
The enchanted princess in her tower  
Slept, died, behind the grate;  
Her heart was starving all this while  
You made it wait."

(ll. 481-90)

These premonitory voices criticize the values propagated by the Chivalric Romance that assigns to women the role of enchanted and weak damsels waiting, often in vain, to be saved. Through the Prince's deeds these values are proved to be meaningless and ridiculous. Neither the Prince nor his Bride gains anything. The sexual and erotic energies of both of them are wasted.

In this poem Christina Rossetti's attitude towards the female body appears to be different from that in "Goblin Market" because here the Bride's apparent virginal state leads to her demise. Unlike Laura, who consumes her sexual desire through the agency of the goblin men, the Bride in "The Prince's Progress" is afflicted because all her life seems to depend on the arrival of her Prince, who is too weak to achieve anything. Like the Prince's lack of virility, the Bride's act of slavish waiting is laughable.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their seeming innocence and naivety, "Goblin Market" and "The Prince's Progress" harbour a strong strain of sexuality. Christina Rossetti expresses her views on the female body and sexuality through a repertoire of symbols that is built on fruit and flowers. It is difficult to pin down her attitude towards sex and sexuality, for she is an evasive and ambivalent poet who prefers to keep her secrets to herself as in "Winter: My Secret".<sup>17</sup> Since writing on sex and sexuality in explicit terms was almost a taboo for Victorian female poets, Christina Rossetti's poems can be read as a double-voiced discourse, a palimpsest, containing a dominant as well as a muted story. While the dominant story conforms to traditional narratives and poetic genres, the muted one looms up revealing the kind of sexual issues that are deemed to be a taboo.

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<sup>16</sup> Christina Rossetti's suspicion of sex and men finds its reverberations also in *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), a Lewis Carroll-like collection of children's tales. The book includes three embedded stories, which are told by a female adult to a group of little girls as at the end of "Goblin Market". In the first story Flora, the heroine, finds herself in an enchanted room where she is surrounded by three boys – Quills, Angles, and Hooks – and two girls. The boys are endowed with hard and erect bodies, while the girls have fluid bodies that allow no grasping. While the boys can play brutal games, the girls either become victims or passive objects at the mercy of the boys. Flora's body becomes a toy in the game called the Pincushion, which, interestingly, is a slang word for the pudenda. The game is built on the principle that the weakest player is to be chased and pierced with pins. The female body becomes the locus of male desire and harassment as in the case of Laura and Lizzie. This is further stated in another cruel game called Self-Help, in which "the boys were players, the girls played" (*Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, eds David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood, New York, 1998, 132).

<sup>17</sup> *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, I, 47-48.

## RENAISSANCE EROTIC IN THE POETRY OF JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

J.D. BALLAM

It is a commonplace to suggest that authors in the late Victorian era interpreted the period subsequently described as the “Italian Renaissance” in terms of its supposed impetus towards the discovery, disinterment and revivifying of persons and ideals long lost – both by the Victorians themselves, and by the authors and artists of the Renaissance who were felt to be engaged in re-awakening the spirit of the classical age. Indeed, as John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) himself would write, the Renaissance saw “the liberation of humanity from a dungeon, the double discovery of the outer and the inner world”. It was “the resurrection of the free spirit of humanity”.<sup>1</sup> My emphasis in this essay is upon Symonds’ location of the place of intersection for this “double discovery” in the image of the recumbent male body, with its inner life and outer being at variance.

It is true to say that Symonds developed independent (or semi-independent) categories of experience in his poetry. That is, there are experiences to which observations of time and place are appropriate, and others for which these factors are obscured, in spite of the foregrounding of sensual data. Ed Cohen offers an explanation for this dichotomy – dichotomous because sensual perception presupposes both temporal sequence and spatial relation – by suggesting that a highly refined aesthetic temperament, such as Symonds’, derives pleasure not through contact, but through “mediated representation”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the case of Symonds’ poetry, it is not the immediacy of experience that is sought, but rather the seclusion, or privacy of a recollection, or reconstruction, with pleasure as its focus. This strategy is particularly

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despots*, London, 1875, 4 and 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ed Cohen, “Writing Gōne Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation”, *PMLA*, CII (1987), 807.

important in understanding the work of one of the era's most outspoken homosexual poets.

As Richard Dellamora writes, Victorian homosexual poetry is a mixture of secrecy and excess – and I interpret this view here to refer especially to Symonds' particularity in featuring his objects, while simultaneously disengaging them from an historical context.<sup>3</sup> The actual state of being Symonds proposes is something I will return to shortly.

Plainly, Symonds had reasons to be circumspect. Even poems as abstractly moulded as "Hesperus and Hymenaeus" (written in 1862) would be used as evidence against his character during the investigation into his conduct shortly before he left Magdalen College, Oxford.<sup>4</sup> But this early poem – and the use it was put to – notwithstanding, the direction Symonds' poetry would take, was not, as Joseph Bristow argues, a homosexuality characterized by a struggle between men, but rather a struggle between men-as-they-may-be-said-to-embody-philosophy and women-as-they-may-be-said-to-represent-religion.<sup>5</sup> In the context as Cohen describes it, all of Symonds' poems which enact some sort of drama do so outside social restraints; they are all, in some sense, exceptional.<sup>6</sup> But Symonds' specific mode is one that Cohen does not discuss. It is, in fact, one in which the most explicit, the most revelatory, and the most dramatic poems have for their logic and for their place of being the landscape and progress of dreams.

Here some facts of Symonds' biography deserve to be mentioned. As Phyllis Grosskurth writes:

Dream-like states, not necessarily sexual, would at times become so overpowering that [Symonds] sank into a trance, a condition which half-frightened and half-fascinated him. These experiences were marked by a progressive obliteration of space, time [and] sensation .... Gradually he would return to awareness of the world around him, first by recovery of the power of touch, followed by the rapid influx of familiar sensations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Chapel Hill: NC, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, London, 1964, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Compare the discussion in, Joseph Bristow, "Churlsgrove": Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Working-Class Male Body", *ELH*, LIX (1992), 693-711.

<sup>6</sup> See Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde ...", 801-803.

<sup>7</sup> Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, 21.

Symonds would, eventually, develop a number of terms to account for these "sensations", or to recapture this sense of being outside Time and Space, but one of the most curiously revealing is his description of the experience as "antenatal". What makes this term especially significant is the collection of ideals Symonds would deem manifest there.

At the age of seventeen, Symonds first read Plato's *Symposium*. Reading it, he says, "it was just as though the voice of my own soul spoke to me through Plato, as though in some antenatal experience".<sup>8</sup> Symonds, like Oscar Wilde, saw Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Symposium* (1469) as the almost magical link between ancient Greece and the Renaissance – magical perhaps, because it embodied the details of an inner existence, which both men were gratified to learn transcended time and gave vigour and poignancy to many of the artists and writers they admired. But for Symonds, at least, the actual mode of being, the access to this realm of feeling outside the sordidness and corruption of existence, was achievable through withdrawal, through contemplation of a figure like that he himself assumed – the statue-like pose of a reclining man. Or as he would describe it in his poem, "In Venice" (1880): "This is the bridge of Paradise."<sup>9</sup>

At times, this Paradise is a world rich to the senses, as the narrator of "Vintage" (1880) discovers, when he stumbles upon Bacchus – "I found him lying neath the vines".<sup>10</sup> But such carefree excess is unusual for Symonds. More often than not, the experience is like that he recounts in *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts* (1877): "When these dead deities rose from their sepulchres to sway the hearts of men in the new age, it was found that something had been taken away from their ancient bloom of innocence, something had been added of emotional intensity."<sup>11</sup> Retreating like his predecessors from such exuberance, Symonds would build his model of contemplation as one of complete repose. His fullest performance in this respect is his poem, "The Sleeper" (c. 1878), where two men lie sleeping together, and one wakes at sunrise to look upon the other:

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<sup>8</sup> Symonds read the *Symposium*, together with the *Phaedrus* in a school crib edition during a weekend break in March 1858: see Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, 34 (the quotation is from *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, ed. Phyllis Grosskurth, London, 1984, 99).

<sup>9</sup> J.A. Symonds, *New and Old*, London, 1880, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Symonds, *New and Old*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts*, London, 1877, 24.



Steadfastly gazing and with mind intent  
 To drink soul-deep of beauty, dares not break  
 By breath or sigh his own heart's ravishment.

Bare arms light folded on the broad bare chest;  
 Dark curls crisp clustering round the athlete's head;  
 Shoulder and throat heroic; all is rest,  
 Marble with loveliest hues of life o'erspread.

Life in the glowing cheeks, the hands sun-brown,  
 The warm blood tingling to each finger-tip;  
 Life in youth's earliest bloom of tender down,  
 Tawny on chin and strong short upper lip:

Life in the cool white, flushed with faintest rose,  
 Of flank and heaving bosom, where each vein,  
 Half seen, a thread of softest violet, flows,  
 Like streaks that some full-throated lily stain.

Deep rest, and draught of slumber. Not one dream  
 Ruffles the mirror of that sentient sea,  
 Whereon the world and all its pride will gleam,  
 When the soul starts from sleep, so royally.<sup>12</sup>

Several things may be observed about this. The quality of happiness, even celebration, here evident cannot mask the fact that the body described is poised strikingly like a figure upon a tomb, "arms ... folded ... on the ... chest"; "marble" and "cool white" "that sentient sea" of the sleeper's mind is utterly empty, a figure perfected by ultimate withdrawal.<sup>13</sup> Clearly half the message is that sexuality, as a means of

<sup>12</sup> Lines 6-24. The poem was privately printed on individual sheets and pasted by hand into Symonds' unpublished *Memoirs*. The extract is reproduced here from <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/poetry.htm#sleeper>.

<sup>13</sup> Compare the parallel to this poem which Symonds includes in his *Memoirs* as part of a tripartite series called "Phallus Impudicus" (1868?). While "Phallus Impudicus" repeats several of the details described in "The Sleeper", including the characteristics of "marble" and "alabaster", note the addition of details (lines 66-70) about the subject's genitals, which, as in all of Symonds' poems, are languorous and in repose: "The smooth rude muscle, calm and slow and tender, / The alabaster shaft, the pale pink shrine, / The crimson glory of the lustrous gland / Lurking in dewy darkness half-concealed, / Like a rose-bud peeping from clasped silken sheath" (see *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, 177-80).

discovery, disinterment and revivifying of "the outer and the inner worlds" begins, and, as I mean to show, ends with pleasure derived through enjoyment of erotic suspension, or latency.

Just as Symonds described the returning gods of antiquity as driven by the "emotional intensity" of their sublimated Uranian urges, so too he would describe Michelangelo critically as a Renaissance master of erotic repose, over-determining both the degree and direction of the sculptor's desires as fuelling the power of his figures and their ambient sexual identities.<sup>14</sup> Symonds writes of him that "all the documents make manifest, that the [Tomasso] Cavalieri episode was only a marked instance of Michelangelo's habitual emotion, whereas the friendship for Vittoria Colonna is unique in his biography".<sup>15</sup> Thus Symonds reverses the views of his own contemporaries (and Michelangelo's family) and seeks to establish the "habitual *emotion*" of the Renaissance artist and author as clearly homosexual in orientation.

Yet Symonds' view of that emotion is that, for Michelangelo at least, it was different in kind to the majority of what Symonds called "those exceptional, but not uncommon men, who are born with sensibilities abnormally deflected from the ordinary channel ... [with] a notable enthusiasm for the beauty of young men", because "Michelangelo's emotion was imaginative, ideal, chaste". He characterizes this further, declaring that "Buonarroti's leading passion was a purely Hellenic enthusiasm for beauty exhibited in young men". And this is something that Symonds describes – especially in the case of a creative artist – as seriously detrimental, saying Michelangelo was "a man of physically frigid temperament, extremely sensitive to beauty of the male type, who habitually philosophised his emotions".<sup>16</sup> Or, to put it crudely, Symonds registers his disappointment at what he sees as Michelangelo's being merely an "inactive" or "philosophical" homosexual.

Symonds' disappointment (not to say pity) is palpable when he says of these emotions that "In Hellas they found a social environment favourable to their free development and action, but in Renaissance Italy the case was different". Michelangelo's "tragic accent" "may be due to his sense of the discrepancy between his own deepest emotions and the

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<sup>14</sup> Symonds frequently discusses this aspect of Michelangelo's work. For example, see his various summaries of Michelangelo's fusion of passion and artistry as described in *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts*, 299-301 and 314-19.

<sup>15</sup> J.A. Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 2 vols, London, 1893, II, 382.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 384, 383 and 384 respectively.

customs of Christian society”.<sup>17</sup> This is especially “tragic”, as Symonds believed that in Renaissance Italy, “it seemed as if the Phallic ecstasy might actually revive”.<sup>18</sup> But that revival, in Michelangelo at least, is incomplete. As Symonds remarks, “His poems ... present a singular example of psychological and literary hybridization”.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, Symonds himself would be the first to undertake a large scale translation of Michelangelo’s sonnets into English, and it is tempting to read these sonnets – and Symonds’ frequent underlining of their homosexual content – as a means for Symonds to deal with the frustrations he himself felt about them, and perceived within them.<sup>20</sup> What is striking about them in Symonds’ version, is that his attention is drawn particularly to elucidating those poems wherein his original suggests that to act upon “the habitual emotion” in a way not “chaste” or “Hellenic” is to court pain, yet plainly suggesting that through that pain, and as a result of it, one may arrive at a state of perfection superior even to death. Thus, “the truest truth of love I know, / one pang outweighs a thousand pleasures far”, and “If only chains and bands can make me blest, / No marvel if alone and bare I go / An arméd Knight’s captive and slave confessed.”<sup>21</sup> But more importantly, such love is superior to love of women because the latter is “lawlessness accurst: This kills the soul; while our love lifts on high / Our friends on earth – higher in heaven through death.”<sup>22</sup> So while Michelangelo’s poems and figures represent a kindred spirit, their wholeness and their capabilities are limited because they represent a failure to develop more fully the “inner world” of feeling that the outwardly static body suggests to Symonds’ imagination. For Symonds, the exemplar of this mode of thought singularly attractive to him was Angelo Poliziano (1454-94).

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 385.

<sup>18</sup> This remark is taken from Chapter 18 of J.A. Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, London, 1873, and it is discussed by Richard Jenkyns in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*, Oxford, 1980, 281.

<sup>19</sup> Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, II, 385.

<sup>20</sup> See J.A. Symonds, *The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti and Tommaso Campanella*, London, 1878. There are numerous footnotes to Michelangelo’s sonnets that refer more or less explicitly to their homosexual content. For example, the note to “LIII”, “This is the doctrine of the Symposium; the scorn of merely sexual love is also Platonic”; and “LIV”, “Another sonnet on the theme of the Uranian as distinguished from the Vulgar love”.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 and 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

Symonds describes Poliziano as the “unrivalled humanist” of his era, praising his “exquisite tact and purity of style”, while claiming of his works, that “all repeat the same arguments, the same enticements to a less than lawful love”.<sup>23</sup> Because of this, or in spite of it, “Poliziano incarnated the spirit of his age”.<sup>24</sup> And it was an age when “bards ... deigned to tickle the ears of lustful boys and debauched cardinals”.<sup>25</sup> Yet capable as he was of these things, Poliziano was “the greatest student, and the greatest poet in Greek and Latin that Italy produced”.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning* (1877) Symonds discusses freely Poliziano’s avowedly homosexual verse in both classical languages, frequently, if obliquely, citing references.<sup>27</sup>

But plainly what interests Symonds in this, and what in Symonds’ mind distinguishes him from the chaste, Hellenic and philosophical emotions of Michelangelo, is the simple fleshiness of Poliziano’s verse. Whereas Michelangelo celebrates the abnegation of outwardness or display of sexuality on the grounds of philosophy, Poliziano is emboldened in his expressions because they are funded by the earthiness of pagan religious rites. Poliziano, Symonds writes, had a “conception of life rather Pagan than Christian”, and this “revived paganism, ... set the earlier beliefs and aspirations of the soul at unequal warfare with emancipated lusts and sensualities”.<sup>28</sup> But for Symonds, there is a key artistic danger inherent here. For, as Symonds writes of Poliziano, “the excellence of his work was marred by the defect of his temperament”.<sup>29</sup> This circumstances comes about, Symonds says, because “he and only he, was destined, by combining the finish of the classics with the freshness of a language still in use, to inaugurate the golden age of form”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 24; and *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, 2 vols, London, 1881, I, 364 and 366.

<sup>24</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, I, 355.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 352.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 348.

<sup>27</sup> For example, “The satires on Mabilus (so he called Marullus) are too filthy to be quoted. They may be read in the collection cited above, 275-280” (Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*, 345).

<sup>28</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*, 354; *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, I, 353.

<sup>29</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, I, 349.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 350.

As I have said earlier, Symonds placed an exceptionally high value on “form” – none more so than the reclining male nude. But that form must act as a means, a bridge, a guide, a sign, to the sexual drama it simultaneously hides and poses. Michelangelo too offered such forms, but he denied the volubility of the erotically charged encounter he invited. Poliziano, by contrast, would realize this potential most fully, acknowledging the second danger that Symonds perceived this potential to include – the violent desecration of the “outer world” of the male body, should the details of the “inner world” become known to those not sharing the orientation of that body’s erotic desires. The symbol Poliziano would choose for this scenario, and the one Symonds would finally develop as completing his own account of this phenomenon, was the figure of Orpheus.

In his *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*, Symonds, in fact, calls Poliziano, “the Orpheus of the classic literatures”.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, he would explain that, of course, “Orpheus was the proper hero of Renaissance Italy – the civilizer of a barbarous world by art and poetry, the lover of beauty, who dared to invade hell and move the iron heart of Pluto with a song”.<sup>32</sup> Symonds’ motive here, in part, is to highlight the originality of Poliziano’s play, the *Favola di Orfeo* (published in 1494), which he believed Poliziano had written in forty-eight hours at the age of eighteen.<sup>33</sup> The *Orfeo*, which Symonds himself would translate, “combined tragedy, the pastoral and the opera”, and it was, he believed pivotal for two reasons.<sup>34</sup> It is, temperamentally at least, a descendent of Greek theatre of a type otherwise lost – a type Symonds believed to have been expressed by the philosopher-poet (and in Symonds’ reading, homosexual) Empedocles, whose teaching centred upon a universe built from the conflicts of love and strife and sensuous versus rational thought.<sup>35</sup> Symonds writes in his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), that although “no fragments of the tragedies of Empedocles survive ... some of the lyrical plays of the Italians – such, for instance, as the *Orfeo* of Poliziano – may enable us to form an idea of these simple dramas”.<sup>36</sup> While crucially,

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<sup>31</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*, 350.

<sup>32</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, I, 358.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 359.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 357.

<sup>35</sup> Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 196.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

The strong belief in himself which Empedocles possessed, inspired him with immense personal influence, so that his looks, and words, and tones, went farther than the force of other men. He compelled them to follow and confide in him, like Orpheus.<sup>37</sup>

This process of subsuming the artist within the work of art, or in this case, even a wider tendency of certain works, is one that Symonds would extend to include Poliziano, about whom he would say that “the sentiments put into the mouth of Orpheus [by Poliziano, accord] with the personality of the poet scholar”.<sup>38</sup>

Thus for Symonds, the representative figure of the Italian Renaissance is Orpheus, a figure embodied by Poliziano, the self-dramatizing poet, whose conception of life “emancipated lusts and sensualities”, yet whose work with “exquisite tact” inaugurated the “golden age of form”. Or, to put it another way, it was in Poliziano that Symonds recognized the final dimension of the homoerotic male body partially masked by the chaste Hellenic portrayals offered both by himself and, as he believed, by Michelangelo. That dimension was the slaughtered, dismembered and emasculated corpse left after the religious vehemence of heterosexual wrath, or what Symonds calls, “the martyrdom of Orpheus by the Maenads”. These women, Symonds says, were acting solely as “avengers blindly following the dictates of power that rules the destinies of nations” – that is the socially inscribed authority of heterosexuality.<sup>39</sup> This image of a beautiful male body left ravaged and abandoned, had a singular appeal for Symonds, and is one which, as an example of the “mediated representation” I mentioned earlier, offered him a locus for pleasurable sensation.

Apart from his own translation of Bion's “Lament for Adonis” (1890) with its comparable description, it is worth noting that in his *Memoirs* (1984) Symonds recalls with special fondness the place of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* in the discovery of his own sexual orientation, recalling how he always identified himself with the figure of Adonis, believing as Grosskurth suggests, that this is how Shakespeare intended the poem to be read.<sup>40</sup> But what is of interest here is the manner in which

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, I, 358n.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 358.

<sup>40</sup> *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, 19 (see also *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, 62-63).

Symonds sees pain – physical pain – as being a conditioning factor of the individual’s inward journey towards his sexual self-realization. That is, towards the hidden dimension of the “double discovery” Symonds describes as the momentous enabler of Italian Renaissance thought and art. Having located the “outer world” voyeuristically in the timeless stasis of the beautiful male body, Symonds, looks “beneath the surface” as it were to chart the journey through which that body has passed in order to arrive at its perfection. The result, rather like the discovery made later by the fictional Dorian Gray, is that the middle passage of the soul’s descent into the lower worlds of sensual reality leaves indelible marks on the body.

Not that these are entirely without their gratifying aspects, as Symonds says in *New and Old* (1880):

I am torn  
By the quick pulses of the passionate sky,  
Throbbing with light of stars,  
...  
The world is thus a quiver stored with sharp  
Fledged shafts of inexpressible pleasure-pain.<sup>41</sup>

Elsewhere, as in “Hendecasyllables” (1880) he hopes to transcend the horrors attendant on the fate of his Orpheus-muse, saying he hopes “to vanish in mist upon your foreheads, / Melt in airiest films of vapour round you”. This is because he has already been, “Worn and torn to shreds by hopes that wither”. And in doing so, he longs to relive “rhythms felt by the soul in antenatal / hours”. It is this longing for a state of being pre-existent to birth and sexual determination that takes me back to the beginning of this essay and the description of the entranced figure of the young Symonds, lost to the worlds of sense, of Time and of Place.

It is this complex portrayal of a fixation upon one’s inner being that I believe Symonds is attempting to reconstruct in his poetry and its nascent alignment with figures drawn from classical mythology as moderated by Renaissance Italian literature and art. An account of this exists in the note Symonds appended to his long poem “Midnight in Baiae” (1893), in which he records that he had in fact dreamt the poem. As Phyllis Grosskurth describes it:

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<sup>41</sup> Symonds, “From Maximus Tyrius, V” (ll. 1-3 and 9-10), in *New and Old*, 136.

[The dreamer] slips stealthily, compelled by irresistible control, through a dark palace whose eeriness is heightened by the barking of watch-dogs in the distance. His footfalls are muffled by warm silky furs. Eventually he enters a high narrow room whose walls are lined with phallic horns holding amber oil and creamed essence. On a couch lies a beautiful young man who, on closer examination, is found to be dead, his throat slashed and his body bruised and battered by the onslaughts of a vicious passion.<sup>42</sup>

What Grosskurth does not identify, and what I believe should now be obvious from what I have said, is that the journey undertaken by the dreamer here is the same journey to Hades made by Orpheus. The “high narrow room” and “warm silky furs” of the coffin cannot disguise the reality of Pluto’s palace, where “the barking of watch-dogs” can be heard. The watcher then sees a reflection of himself in a “beautiful young man” who “lies on a couch” with his “throat slashed” and his “bruised and battered body” left as a warning to all those who succumb to “vicious passion”. There is no return, and no happiness here. Instead, safety (or privacy) is secured by the knowledge that the action is itself embodied in the recollection of the frame-narrator, himself a reclining male figure, journeying downwards on the currents of his own desire.

As remarkable as this description is, the most extraordinary exposition of this idea – both for its completeness and the singular manner in which the narrative voice alternates between the positions of actor and witness – is Symonds’ “The Valley of Vain Desires”.<sup>43</sup> This poem was written in the 1870s, shortly after Symonds had had an intimate encounter with a soldier in a London park.<sup>44</sup> It was, he says in his note to the poem, “an attempt to describe by way of allegory the attraction of vice that ‘fascinates and is intolerable’”.<sup>45</sup> In my reading, the poem is quite clearly an account of the soul’s descent into hell, a description of experiences there, including an encounter (as in the previous example) with a youthful double figure of Orpheus who, through his singing, liberates himself and the narrator, returning them to a world once again beneath clear skies. The “valley” itself is as nightmarish as that in Symonds’ later dream sequence, for:

<sup>42</sup> John Addington Symonds: *A Biography*, 269.

<sup>43</sup> Symonds, *New and Old*, 231-41.

<sup>44</sup> See Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, 177.

<sup>45</sup> Symonds, *New and Old*, 248.



There lurks a chasm, embedded deep, and drear,  
 Ringed round with jags and ragged teeth sublime  
 Of heights Himalyan; where the hills uprear

Their hideous circuit to far snows, and climb  
 By barren cliff and scaur and splintered stair  
 Funereal.<sup>46</sup>

At the bottom of this hideous mouth-like valley (with “ragged teeth sublime”), which also appears in some way to be moving (up-rearing and climbing upon itself), the narrator discovers an army of “men who yearn” moving listlessly about in an orchard of trees bearing forbidden fruit. He speculates what it is that has led these “hosts” of others like himself to come to this place – what it was that could “entice the languor of their dream-led feet”. Once amongst them, he is surprised to find himself drawn irresistibly to the trees where, he says in lines 58-61:

I stood,  
 And caught the falling juices; and, though shame  
 Shook in my shivering pulse, I snuffed the lewd  
 Scent of those corpse cold clusters.

“What next my dream disclosed”, he continues, “I spied / coming and going, men who yearned ... with a terrible strange longing, [until they] gained / The gangrened fruit, and ate, and, as they chewed, / Pain that was pleasure filled them”. But at this point he sees “a youth Phoebean” who suffers similarly. But this youth, in his misery, begins spontaneously to sing “a new lore”, and so powerful is his message, that inexplicably his teaching lights the way back to the wider world, so that “the smart of that past passion and all its sinful strife / Bloomed into bliss triumphant”. A bliss, that is, of course, stationary and self-regarding.

What I have undertaken to show in these examples, is the manner in which a single complex erotic symbol evolved in Symonds’ poetry. That symbol is at once a kind of sleeping beauty, and yet also the reflection of Narcissus. The figure of desire which Symonds so carefully devises is that of a single, beautiful, reclining male body, simultaneously posed as an invitation to erotic urges, and yet, in a sense turning away from them, engaged perpetually in a downward journey within himself, to the abyss of degradation Symonds regarded as the potential of erotic impulses

<sup>46</sup> Symonds, “The Valley of Vain Desires” (ll. 1-6), in *New and Old*, 231.

when moved into action. Indeed, to disclose itself is to invite the violent dispersal of those charms that made it initially attractive. Yet to deny (or to seem to deny) the reality of that inward journey, the “pleasure-pain” of self-knowledge, is to remain as tragic, and as incomplete as he supposed Michelangelo to be. The result for Symonds’ poetry is a representation mediated into circumlocution. What Symonds wrote of Poliziano his critics have applied with equal justice to himself:

He was not careful to purge his style of obsolete words and far-fetched phrases, or to maintain the diction of one period in each composition. His fluency betrayed him into verbiage, and his descriptions are often more diffuse than vigorous. Nor will he bear comparison with some more modern scholars on the point of accuracy. The merit, however, remains to him of having been the most copious and least slavish interpreter of the ancient to the modern world.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*, 349.

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## THE BRILLIANCE OF GAS-LIT EYES: ARTHUR SYMONS' EROTIC AUTO-VOYEURISM OBSERVED

R. VAN BRONSWIJK

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Angelo, finding himself attracted to the virtuous and virginal novice nun Isabella, asks, "The tempter, or the tempted, who sins most?" (II.ii.164). Angelo's attraction is anchored in what Isabella represents in her apparent powerlessness and overt asexuality. It defines his own position as a potent ruler and exposes his "glassy essence" (II.ii.121) as transparently ruled by his passion. The seductive attraction of this inverted mirror image is inescapable, magnetic and instinctive. The familiar paradox is that should Isabella give in to the temptations, she will lose precisely the identity that has attracted Angelo and cease to be of interest to him. The moment Isabella's symbolic identity changes from object of desire into conquered subject, both the observed and the observer are corrupted and their relation is distorted. The angelic Angelo is corrupted by his own sexual desire, but can he be blamed for his fall?

Somewhere in the memoirs of his eventful life, Arthur Symons muses:

Did I myself deliberately choose music-halls and public-houses or did they choose me? I imagine they chose me. I lived in them for the mere delight and the sheer animal excitement they gave me.<sup>1</sup>

It is the formulation of this question that should be seen in the light of debates in early psychological studies and legal questions about diminished responsibility and human nature. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was increasingly posited that criminals, alcoholics and other social misfits could not be held responsible for their deeds if

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<sup>1</sup> *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. Karl Beckson, London, 1977, 109.

their degenerate nature rather than any conscious will or decision-making inclined them towards certain kinds of undesirable behaviour.

Finding himself fascinated by and attracted to all things decadent, and many things increasingly associated with atavistic, degenerate or instinctive tastes, Symons could not help but view his own search for identity against the background of the scientific writings of the time. His good friend Havelock Ellis had introduced the British to Cesare Lombroso's ideas through *The Criminal* (1890) and his translation of *Man of Genius* (1891), as well as to Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, which he translated in 1895. Although Ellis repudiated the idea that artistic genius was a form of degeneration, the position of decadent artists and the morality of art was an issue over which the intelligentsia was divided. In the first place it was unusual, often non-reproductive yet instinctive sexual behaviour that seemed to hold the key to questions of degeneration.

Robert Sulcer, for instance, has noted that for John Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter literature inherently incorporates the perverse and deviant, and argues that the sensitivity of the anus and the nervous system and the ability to receive passively renders homosexuals very sensitive artists.<sup>2</sup> What rocked Arthur Symons' boat was not the adolescent boy that held the fascination of many decadent artists, but the heavily made-up child actress. The strange paradox that attracted Angelo to Isabel attracts Symons to the girls: the pure that always suggests the perverted, the uncorrupted that suggests its opposite. In a letter to Herbert Horne in March 1893, it is clear how Symons plays with morality and the suggestion of the oppositions involved:

The girls who were not on, you understand, had sought refuge in front, and petticoats and stockings sprawled over all the stalls and lounges. On one of the lounges, by the side of the stalls, lay three ladies (I can't say sat) – Rosie Dean and two others. They were coiled inextricably together, somewhat in the manner of Félicien Rops. I was standing in front of them with great dignity, addressing moral remarks to them, when a fatal remark of Rosie about “a nice young man”, in the general, which could have nothing but a particular reference, precipitated me – if only by mere courtesy – upon the too tempting seat, and before I knew it my

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Sulcer, “Ten Percent: Poetry and Pathology”, in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dollimore, Chicago, 1999, 240-44.

arms were round her waist, and the group was not less inextricable, but *I* was one of the group.<sup>3</sup>

Although Symons' playful attitude here reflects his adult and higher-class position of authority, the girls are not entirely powerless, as I will argue. Their power, however, is instinctive and not self-conscious for Symons. As Louisa A. Jackson, James Kincaid and others have amply shown, Symons was by no means alone in his preferences.<sup>4</sup> Jackson even notes that around 1890, the number of cases of sexual assault reached an all-time high.<sup>5</sup> However, this behaviour does place Symons' sexuality in a difficult category: deviant, maybe, but not necessarily at odds with nature's urge for procreation. Was it a degenerate mind that was instinctively attracted to corruption itself and the suggestion of corruption on the young girls' painted faces?

Barry Faulk has argued that Arthur Symons the critic of music halls was somehow able to blend his attraction to the music hall with a "structured form of knowledge" to arrive at a valid critical discourse.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, Arthur Symons the poet draws upon this criticism, but is not restrained by its discourse, Paterian or otherwise, so that it may be asked whether any deliberate thought, knowledge or structure is to be found in the verse of a writer otherwise drawn to theorizing and analysis? Yet, if Symons' visits to the music hall are sufficiently inspirational to result in two important bodies of work through different media, a cross-fertilization in terms of underlying ideas is at least to be expected.

I would propose that where the critical work focuses on the identity of the observed (on Angelo's Isabella, so to speak), the resulting poetry is primarily concerned with the identity of the observer (Angelo himself) and the process of his corruption by the supposed artificiality of the stage. A love of art and artifice for its own sake was a highly suspicious quality, as was sex for its own brief pleasure without the prospect of a long-term permanent relationship. But how artificial was the dance? As Symons points out over and over again, the young girls' subconscious

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Symons, *Selected Letters 1880-1935*, eds Karl Beckson and John M. Munro, Basingstoke, 1989, 101.

<sup>4</sup> See Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, London, 2000, and James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture*, New York and London, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Faulk, "Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music Hall, and the Defense of Theory", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, XXVIII/1 (2000), 172.

seductive movements are instinctive in the way that the sexual act is instinctive: instinctively, he is corrupted by them, as much as he corrupts them. Anthropological studies of the time and Ellis' work in particular would also repeatedly show that dance was ritual and, like storytelling and many other arts, part of most cultures. How unnatural, how artificial are these dancing instincts and the onlooker's reaction to them?

At a time when measurements and deviations from the norm determine individual and cultural identity, these become important questions for a compulsive music-hall admirer such as Symons. Symons is measuring himself against a yardstick of normality whilst at the same time trying, with sexologists like Ellis, to bend or break that yardstick. The interdependent definitions of the self and the other are fluid notions, and can only be founded on the exploration of the certainty of his necessarily subjective, but consistent, instincts. Symons, then, is self-consciously treating the music hall as a vehicle for sexual self-discovery. Through his poetry and criticism, he not only transforms his individual impressions of the music hall into a new form of art, in line with Paterian aesthetics, but he also intellectualizes his own aesthetic and sexual experiences and attempts to place them in the context of the psycho-sexual landscape of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

The first volume of the two-volume collected edition of Arthur Symons' poetry published in 1901 contains, "with numerous alterations", *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, which had originally appeared in 1892 and 1895 and contain the most interesting music-hall poems. They give a blended view of Symons' music-hall impressions of the Nineties and his (and possibly Ellis') more shaped retrospective views without being affected by that watershed in Symons' life and self-perception, his mental breakdown in 1908.

However, as we will see the onslaught of madness is already felt in this edition. But for today's reader merely to say that Symons' poetry reflects his life may not be enough to justify an intensely biographical reading such as is proposed here. Some further justification for recognizing in Symons' work a pragmatic philosophic role, determining individual identity and sexual identity can be found in his confessions:

As for the vices, the virtues, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the spirit, the desire, the passions that have possessed me, one need only turn over

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<sup>7</sup> Symons' *Days and Nights* (1889), his first book of poems, was dedicated "To Walter Pater".

the pages of my verses, and if you choose imagine this, imagine that, and I assure you that you will never fathom the unfathomable gulf that exists between the writer and the reader, nor the intensity of the meaning they contain, not the intensity of the pain and pleasure, of rapture and satiety and satisfaction, which only myself – who have lived them all and have lived through them – have the right to judge of: only myself. Is it for such a shifting guide that I am to forsake the sure and constant leading of art, which tells me that whatever I find in humanity (passion, desire, the spirit or the senses, the hell or heaven of man's heart) is part of the eternal substance which nature weaves in the rough for art to combine cunningly into beautiful patterns? The whole visible world, we are told, is but a symbol, made visible in order that we may apprehend ourselves, and not be blown hither and thither like a flame in the night.<sup>8</sup>

This passage at once points to such an overt self-conscious interaction between Symons' art and his experiences, and warns the reader to be wary and not to equate their own Paterian impressions of the work of art with Symons' individual identity. Yet, in true Symbolist style, it offers the poetry itself as an artistic bridge between these "shifting guides" and the "eternal substance" and a road into constancy and insight.

Not Symons' elusive individual experiences then, but the patterns and their sometimes elusive symbolic relations are to be explored in a search for a meeting place between Symons' passions and his philosophy, or within the latter, between Symons' individual instinct and the workings of the universally instinctive. Of course, to see Symons' Symbolism in action in his poems allows the reader insight into the literary philosophy hovering above the poetry, a philosophy that paradoxically seeks to de-intellectualize art and purify it by appealing to the instinctive, to the primitive, and restoring it to its natural place within the evolutionary model.

However, as Symons was well aware, thinkers in the vein of Lombroso could not see the Symbolist productivity as anything other than degenerate. For instance, Lombroso refers to the *Parnassiens*, *Symbolistes* and *Décadents* as "literary madmen" and states:

It will be seen that the *décadents* correspond exactly to the diagnosis of literary mattoids, in all their old vacuity, but with the appearance of novelty. At the same time, there are among them, real men of genius who

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<sup>8</sup> *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, 110-11.



– amid the (frequently atavistic) oddities of mattoidism – have struck an original note.<sup>9</sup>

Lombroso's original Italian *Genio e Follia* had been published as early as 1864, and its influence had spread throughout the Continent; in Britain it was most vigorously expressed in the work of Francis Galton, who first published his *Hereditary Genius* in 1869. Symons' awareness of this new strain of thinking in psychology necessarily makes him a different Symbolist from Verlaine and his *poètes maudits*, who were the source for Lombroso's observations just quoted and who were not themselves self-consciously concerned with atavism, degeneration or madness. The characteristics identified by Lombroso as indicative of the degenerate genius read like a checklist of all that Symons presents us with in his memoirs: emaciated appearance, vagabondage, instinctiveness, hereditary madness, somnambulism, delayed development (for example, in Symons' reading), hyperaesthesia, paraesthesia, hallucinations, moral insanity, criminal tendencies and cruelty, nightmares and dreams, egocentricity, obscenity in art, sexual abnormalities, religious zeal and isolation all have their counterpart in Symons' detailed picture of himself. The vast majority of his childhood and early anecdotes point to one or another abnormality also to be found in Lombroso and form the building blocks of the portrait and self-image of Symons the genius and madman. It may be argued that Symons' breakdown in 1908 was a self-fulfilling prophecy, and indeed Symons states that he had already suspected hereditary madness in himself.<sup>10</sup>

Symons was not just instinctively gravitating towards all of those tendencies that were increasingly considered as degenerate, but was observing himself doing so in the light of this highly intellectualized viewpoint fed by the interests of his friend Ellis. Matthew Sturgis comments on the time Ellis and Symons spent in Paris together:

To every feature of Ellis' vital and scientific new world, Paris offered an alluring opposite: to Ellis' universal laws, Paris (like Pater) proclaimed the individual experience; Ellis placed human life in the midst of Darwinian nature, Paris (like Pater) sought to remove it into the realm of art and artifice; to Ellis' heralding of "democracy", Paris proclaimed not only Pater's notion of the artist's superiority to the herd, but also a

<sup>9</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, trans. Havelock Ellis, London, 1891, 230 and 238.

<sup>10</sup> *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, 234.

deliciously novel code of antisocial bohemianism; Ellis' emancipated females were transformed by Paris into cruel yet alluring *femmes fatales*; instead of Ellis' well-rounded "education", Paris offered a regime of dissipation, immobility and dream. For Symons – a young ambitious literary provincial with a fascination for (sinful) sex, the choice between the two visions was not difficult to make.<sup>11</sup>

Although these observations paint a background to the Parisian scenes and illustrate the difference between the two men, it is also possible to see the two visions not so much as direct oppositions as two ways of mapping life's experiences on a continuum from the natural to the artificial or from the normal to the deviant. This concurs with the thinking of the period and specifically with the way that Francis Galton had used Quételet's normal distribution curve for the description of all sorts of human characteristics. Ellis was trying to fit the behaviours he saw within an overall model, generalizing the individual into patterns of behaviour. Symons, observing himself as well as others, was doing very much the same. Symons, however, emphasized the understanding and exploration of the deviant and original individual character against the background of the universal, whereas Ellis was foremost concerned with defining the universal.

A difference in emphasis and approach should not cloud a mutual field of interest and mutual influence shared by the two men. Yet Ellis' detached observations were more traditionally scientifically sound than Symons' auto-impressions and their Paterian rendering into new art forms. Although this was a fundamental difference, it made the insights of the self-proclaimed genius Symons of much interest to Ellis, who had also worked with the homosexual Symonds, equally questioning his own identity: not only were new potentially ingenious insights into the conditions of sexuality in themselves revealing, but the notion of sexual self-awareness was pushed to its very limits. The Victorian discussion of genius had led to the conviction that progress in any science was all too frequently the result of remarkable insights from one genius or other, who would not always be able to retrace or even understand the steps leading up to it. The instinctive creative genius, whether degenerate or not, comes to his remarkable insights automatically, as if in a revelation or vision.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s*, London and Basingstoke, 1995, 72-73.

The seventh edition of William B. Carpenter's *Principles of Mental Physiology*, which devotes a chapter to revelations and insights given access to in dreaming or somnambulist states, laments: "If, now, we inquire into the mode into which Genius works, we find ourselves baffled at the outset by the slightness of our materials; since no one who is unpossessed of the creative imagination can study its mode of operation in himself, while those who do possess it are seldom given to self-analysis."<sup>12</sup> Symons, the late-Victorian self-conscious genius is frequently more valued for his observational skills than his poetry. However, as we have noted, he was as much inclined to observe himself observing as he was to observe other people, off and on stage. But he necessarily becomes an involved observer as the emotions he desires to observe in himself render it impossible to detach his intellectual self from his instinctive dreamlike state, which is necessary both to experience his universal patterns and passions and to come to remarkable insights in relation to them. Yet, there is some kind of detachment that seems in itself instinctive and involuntary, in the same way that the passionate dreamer may be aware of his inert sleeping body.

In "Prologue: In the Stalls"<sup>13</sup> one of Symons' better-known poems, we read:

My life is like a music-hall  
Where, in the impotence of rage,  
Chained by enchantment to my stall,  
I see myself upon the stage  
Dance to amuse a music-hall.

(ll. 1-5)

The enchantment of the music hall is suggestive of a dreamlike state that allows his own subconscious muse to perform. Ronald Pearsall points out that erotic dreams were often considered concomitant to insanity because the nocturnal inhibitions pointed to a lack of mental control and could easily spill over into actual behaviour.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, dreams were for the hypersensitive and could also be prophetic. Symons' music-hall poetry is forever inviting parallels between the gas-lit nightly

<sup>12</sup> William B. Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874), 7th edn, London, 1896, 509.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Symons, *Poems by Arthur Symons*, 2 vols, London, 1902, I, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, London, 1969, 436.

performances and the dream which lights up the darkness of subconscious sleep, giving insight. "Décor de Théâtre. III. At the Foresters", for instance, is typical; it opens with the line "The shadows of the gaslit wings".<sup>15</sup> And just as performances in Symons' poems begin in the shadows, so they end in the shadows of the night.

Light, particularly artificial light, triggers a trance and dreamlike memories of performances. The speaker of "Stella Maris" is reminded of the radiant eyes of a dancer when he sees "The phantom of the lighthouse light, / Against the sky, across the bay, / Fade, and return, and fade away" (ll. 19-20) in a rhythm reminiscent of the dance itself.<sup>16</sup> Even when the speaker stalks the starlets, in "Décor de Théâtre. I. Behind the Scenes: Empire", before their "radiant moment" in "the footlights' immortality" (ll. 11-12), their brief lives on stage that are to result in this enduring memory is eerily announced: "The gusty gaslight shoots a thin / Sharp finger over cheeks and nose" (ll. 7-9).<sup>17</sup> This immortality is not just the immortality of the individual dancer and the lingering memory of her performance, or even only symbolic of the girl's brief cameo appearance in Symons' life. The dance in its own right is eternal and transcends generations as one of the oldest modes of expression that is to be found in high as well as in low culture.

Havelock Ellis considers dancing an important enough art to begin his work *The Art of Life* (1923) with an essay on the subject.<sup>18</sup> Like Symons, he regards it as a timeless practice:

Dancing and building are the two primary and essential arts. The art of dancing stands at the source of all the arts that express themselves first in the human person. The art of building, or architecture, is the beginning of all the arts that lie outside the person; and in the end they unite. Music, acting, poetry proceed in the one mighty stream; sculpture, painting, all the arts of design, in the other. There is no art outside these two arts, for their origin is far earlier than man himself; and dancing came first.

That is the reason why dancing, however it may at times be scorned by passing fashions, has a profound and eternal attraction even for those one might suppose to be farthest from its influence. The joyous beat of

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<sup>15</sup> *Poems by Arthur Symons*, I, 97.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hewitt has noted how Ellis was influenced by Symons in this essay: see Andrew Hewitt, "The Dance of Life: Choreographing Sexual Dissidence in the Early Twentieth-Century", in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, 280.

the feet of children, the cosmic play of philosophers' thoughts rise and fall according to the same laws of rhythm.<sup>19</sup>

Ellis emphasizes those aspects of the dance that bring the dancer in a state comparable to that of the genius about to receive his penetrating visions and insights. In many cases the dance is trance-inducing to the dancer herself, whose performance becomes instinctive, sometimes arguably bordering on the mad.

This can be seen in "Nora on the Pavement", for instance:

As Nora on the pavement  
Dances, and she entrances the grey hour  
Into the laughing circle of her power,  
The magic circle of her glances,  
As Nora Dances on the midnight pavement ....

(ll. 1-5)<sup>20</sup>

In "Décor de Théâtre. V. La Mélinite: Moulin-Rouge", the dancer's trance asks Platonic questions about reality which, as we shall see, form a theme in Symons' poetry. Here everything seems to be sucked into single consciousness that is the dance, whose only meaning is itself:

Before the mirror's dance of shadows  
She dances in a dream,  
And she and they together seem  
A dance of shadows,  
Alike the shadows of a dream.

(ll. 16-20)<sup>21</sup>

Yet if the dancer's seductive movements are auto-hypnotic, they affect the onlooker in a similar manner. A hypersensitive spectator (such as Symons) who is himself prone to somnambulist tendencies and other trance-like states is easily led into a hypnotic trance. A genius spectator will thus be able to use the dance and dancer as a vehicle for arriving at those revelations and deeper truths that he is consciously looking for and subconsciously aware of. If the spectator's main occupation is this

<sup>19</sup> Havelock Ellis, *The Art of Life* (1923), London, 1937, 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Poems by Arthur Symons*, I, 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 99.

inspired state of genius in himself and its relation to his sexuality, the music hall becomes a curious mode of self-discovery.

Perhaps this is why, in Symons' music-hall poems, the child dancers have no other voice but that of the dance itself. Unlike other alleged paedophiles like Lewis Carroll and J.M. Barrie, Symons does not address the child or solicit a child audience through his poetry, because his work is in the first place self-examining rather than seductive. His girls are not self-consciously naughty children taking delight in being implicated in the forbidden; on the contrary, their instinctive uncorrupted unself-conscious and, therefore, their arguably asexual sexuality is essential to Symons. James Kincaid argues the supposed innocence of children was forced upon them, but also says we tend to overestimate the dominance of this view in Victorian times.<sup>22</sup> However, for Symons, it is an important aspect of his own quest for self-discovery.

Kincaid also argues that:

The ... child who is being threatened is also the threat. The monster and the maiden in distress are the same. The child which beckons us and invites us to eat is also a ravenous maw. Just as we are about to bite, we find ourselves inside the mouth of our own shameful desires.<sup>23</sup>

As with Angelo's Isabella, a lack of awareness or intention to seduce is powerfully seductive because it holds up a mirror to the seduced and all his destructive tendencies. Once the child has become aware of its own seductive powers and initiated into the great secret, its identity in relation to the seduced will have changed and the loss of virginal innocence is irrevocable. Lisa Z. Sigel has argued in relation to Victorian pornographic photographs of children that for the Victorian "The danger came not from sexualizing girls, but from girls seeing representations of their own sexuality".<sup>24</sup> Knowledge leads to downfall, as of old, and represents a harsh awakening from the subconscious dreamlike state and a loss of the ability to seduce, hypnotize and inspire. Anne Higonnet notes the delicate balance that was to be struck in Victorian photographs,

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<sup>22</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> James R. Kincaid, "Designing Gourmet Children, or KIDS FOR DINNER!", in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, eds Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys, Basingstoke, 2000, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Z. Sigel, "Filth in the Wrong People's Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, 1880-1914", *Journal of Social History*, XXXIII/4 (2000), 876.

between making the young nudes look enticing and showing they are unintentionally so.<sup>25</sup> The same is true for the visualization on the stage – in spite of make-up, dress, audience and rehearsals, in order to seduce the act of dancing needs to be wholly instinctive.

Thus the knowledge of daytime reality is replaced by the artifice of the gas-lit music hall, where the dream provides both dancer and spectator, “tempter and tempted”, with another alternative reality, that of their own instinctive emotive being. For the philosophical spectator in his self-examining quest, the shades of light and darkness become essential in constructing this reality and coming to understand it. Of course, as solar mythologists like Max Müller and, later, anthropological folklorists of the school of Frazer would never tire of emphasizing, the opposition of light and dark, of day and night, was the subject of many myths and stories essential in the early stages of the development of civilizations.

Symons’ friend and colleague W.B. Yeats and other members of the Rhymers’ Club with a penchant for the Celtic tradition, were also making ample use of the mythical elements Frazer and others had categorized, which largely centred round fertility and sexuality. What is different to this traditional practice in the decadent, Symbolist writing of Symons – in opposition to it, even – is that it is no longer daylight that is welcomed as giving insight, hope and relief after the cold dark night. It is night itself that is loved; the darkness with its stage-filling stars by which the poet navigates and the artificial gaslight of the theatres and streets are hailed as bringers of “delight” (a frequently recurring pun) and of dreams that open up a new reality of self-discovery.

It may be argued that the modern artistic genius is the product of a civilization that has reached an arguably Comtean phase in which the mind and the self seem to be the only realms left subject to discovery by scientists, psychologists, spiritualists and the like. At the same time, as discoveries in psychology increasingly point to the subjectivity of every kind of observation, they discredit all the apparent certainties and discoveries of the world by daylight, so that an existing body of knowledge begins to decay and crumble. Consequently, new questions about age-old instincts and passions are asked, and answers are sought from unexpected sources. The *femme fatale* that stirs the passions in “Hallucination: II”, for instance, is such a source, because she blots out the world and makes deeper truths visible:

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, New York, 1998, 77.

Is it your eyes that flicker and gleam  
 Like mocking stars beneath the shade  
 Of leafy hair that seems to have curled  
 Its tendrils to blot out the world?  
 Dreams are the truth: let the world fade!

(ll. 4-8)<sup>26</sup>

Whenever daylight unexpectedly does shine through in a Symons' poem, it is not welcomed but rather instilled with a heavy sense of postlapsarian loss of passion and false insight, of disenchantment. It is the harsh awakening that hovers like a threat over the uncorrupted children of the night. The speaker of "Dawn" would "Watch for the dawn, and feel the morning make / A loveliness about me for your sake" (ll. 5-6) and feels the weight of "Your sweet, scarce lost, estate / Of innocence, the candour of your eyes" (ll. 13-14).<sup>27</sup>

The ability of the genius to observe his own inner passions and to see in the night what others fail to see by daylight comes at a high price. The threat of madness, ever fond of moonlight, is waiting in the wings amid the dancing girls, with a mask of false blushes ready to sweep you up in its rhythms. Most geniuses (and all Symbolist geniuses, according to Verlaine) feel the burden of their genius, but the self-conscious genius sees it, too. In "Nerves", we read:

Love, once a simple madness, now observes  
 The stages of his passionate disease,  
 And is twice sorrowful because he sees,  
 Inch by inch entering, the fatal knife.

(ll. 2-5)<sup>28</sup>

The general threat of madness is related here to Symons' own specific condition, as every stage filled with dancing girls holds up a mirror and represents another stage in the process towards insanity. Thus the inevitability of madness is acutely seen and felt, but it is also heard. It seeps though all the senses, whose hyperaesthetic sensitivity becomes self-occupied with counting down the hours in lines uncannily reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's story, "The Tell-Tale Heart":

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<sup>26</sup> *Poems by Arthur Symons*, I, 119.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 114.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 132.



O health of simple minds, give me your life,  
 And let me, for one midnight, cease to hear  
 The clock forever ticking in my ear,  
 The clock that tells the minutes in my brain.

(ll. 6-9)

In the desperate struggle for survival, the speaker demands the self-sacrifice of the sane and simple, thus giving vent to late-Victorian fears about the danger of degenerate minds. The genius sees those mental defects that make that self-same insight possible and knows it needs a dose of healthy simplicity to feed his self-destructive brain and to set back the hands of his inner clock. The health and simplicity of the younger civilizations he feels the need to pray upon and violate is also that of youth itself, particularly, the youth of the lower, less civilized, classes. By night, the genius is also a beastly Stokeresque vampire, lurking in the darkness, observing young girls by gaslight, with whom he satisfies his immediate needs, but cannot find lasting relief. The tragedy is that the genius vampire has highly sensitive emotions and, with every insight into himself, experiences a new level of pain, higher than that usually associated with such affairs:

It is not love, nor love's despair, this pain  
 That shoots a witless, keener pang across  
 The simple agony of love and loss.

(ll. 10-12)

His auto-voyeuristic meta-awareness, his ability to experience himself experiencing the process of going insane as he experiences love and loss, spirals into ever new and increasingly painful stages of self-consciousness. The “pang” that results is “witless”, because it is itself a revelation, a bringer of knowledge instinctively arrived at and not cleverly deduced. The unstoppable progression from genius to fool, from Lombroso’s *genio* to *folia*, and at the same time the desire to pray on lost elusive youthful simplicity fill the final lines with a terrible ambiguity: “Nerves, nerves! O folly of a child who dreams / Of heaven and, waking in the darkness, screams” (ll. 13-14). The children’s experiences, whose awakening and loss of innocence represent in Symons’ poetry the climax of his own insights and self-awareness, are suddenly equated with the speaker’s degenerate backward route from knowledge to ignorance. In his quest for self-knowledge, the ever-higher

meta-awareness confronts him with his own childlike atavism as he hits the ceiling of what his own genius is able to comprehend and finally experiences the complete darkness. This mad, debilitating, disorientating darkness is fearsome because no light, daylight or gaslight, can alleviate the dark oblivion that follows, in which, helpless, he will have to learn to know the world again like a new-born baby.

There is a curious dichotomy in Symons, involving the instinctiveness of sexual desire on the one hand and on the other that of genius itself. As a rule, it is true to say that the stronger the desire, the clearer the insight into that desire. This process, with the madness that inevitably results, also raises the unanswerable question of whether the auto-voyeurism of the observer and speaker who monitors his own rising sexual desires is in itself an erotic stimulus – whether indeed the role of the child and the dance is reduced to an initial trigger and then left behind in what becomes increasingly an act of self-stimulation and mental auto-eroticism.

The emphasis on the self inherent in Symons' poetry may be at best a pragmatic approach towards a philosophical idealism, but as a scientific basis for extrapolation from the individual to the universal the method is necessarily flawed. It is, therefore, the onslaught of madness and folly that renders the poems no longer valid as an enlightening body of work, but only as separate pieces to be read for their own sake entirely without any further claim to enlightenment, even for Symons himself. How enlightening have Symons' initial insights become for scientists such as Ellis? Let me briefly return to Shakespeare for a possible answer. When in the closing Act of *Measure for Measure*, Angelo asks the returning Duke if he may himself judge and investigate the accusations against him, an odd paradox emerges. Had Angelo indeed not been guilty of his crimes, justice would be done and the guilty punished. Yet Angelo's guilt renders him by definition a false judge; the same people would be punished, but now wrongly so. This means that although the outcome of the trial would be known, the meaning of that outcome would remain obscure to those not party to Angelo's guilt.

The final degeneration of Symons' speaker into folly, now unable to verify or falsify anything at all, throws a similar shadow of unreliability over his earlier insights and judgment of himself. Yet, Angelo has left his mark on the world, the traces and pieces of evidence that the Duke is able to use to pass his own merciful judgement, using his own methods. So too the music-hall poems provide the scientist and sexologist with

material that helped establish an Edwardian psychological perspective and they also enable us to look in more detail at some of the bricks and mortar of the hypotheses and theories that shaped it.

## THE EROTIC IN D.H. LAWRENCE'S EARLY POETRY

ANDREW HARRISON

Think about the erotic in English literature in the first half of the twentieth century, and probably the first name that springs to mind is D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence swiftly gained a profile as an erotic writer in both his fiction and his poetry. His first two novels, *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912), are tragedies centrally concerned with the conflict between erotic longing and the constraining forces of society and circumstance, while his first three published books of poetry chiefly concern themselves with sensual and sexual subjects. Conrad Aiken, reviewing the collection *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1917) for the *Dial*, while also drawing on the earlier books, *Love Poems and Others* (1913) and *Amores* (1916), wrote that “[Lawrence’s] range is extremely narrow – it is nearly always erotic, febrile, and sultry at the lower end, plangently philosophic at the upper”. Yet, as Aiken goes on to say, “within this range he is astonishingly various”, and indeed this variety in Lawrence’s work should make us pause to consider the slipperiness of the very term “erotic”.<sup>1</sup> Responding to reviews like this, and remembering the recent suppression of *The Rainbow* in England, Lawrence notes in his “Foreword to *Women in Love*” (written in September 1919):

I am accused, in England, of uncleanness and pornography. I deny the charge, and take no further notice. In America the chief accusation seems to be one of “Eroticism.” This is odd, rather puzzling to my mind. Which Eros? Eros of the jaunty “amours,” or Eros of the sacred mysteries? And if the latter, why accuse, why not respect, even venerate?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Aiken, review in *The Dial*, 9 August 1919, reprinted in *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, ed. R.P. Draper, London, 1970, 125-31.

<sup>2</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, eds David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, Cambridge, 1987, 485.

Erotic feeling can be expressed through personal intimacies and affairs, but in a broader sense it is the quality that connects us not only to individuals but to the universe of which we are a part. In this sense, erotic feeling works at the interface between sexual passion and the mysteries of religion and of life itself. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes has written, Eros for Lawrence signifies not simply a state of sexual arousal, but a condition of being where one's relation to the outside world is suddenly illuminated in an epiphanic instant.<sup>3</sup>

In Lawrence's writings from 1912 to around 1919, the transformative power of Eros is stressed and celebrated. In struggling to achieve union with a partner one is forced to move beyond the state of adolescent and youthful narcissism to realize the essential otherness of the partner; it is a painful liberation into a new kind of being, both sexual and spiritual. The heavily autobiographical poems from *Look! We Have Come Through!*, written after 1912 and published in 1917, describe in a narrative sequence the speaker's experience of achieving this "condition of blessedness" with "a woman who is already married" (an account of Lawrence's experiences with Frieda Weekley, whom he travelled to Germany with in May 1912 and finally married in July 1914).<sup>4</sup> In the sixth section of the poem entitled "Wedlock", the speaker addresses his partner as something outside his understanding:

... all the while you are you, you are not me.  
And I am I, I am never you.  
How awfully distinct and far off from each other's being we are!

Yet I am glad.  
I am so glad there is always you beyond my scope,  
Something that stands over,  
Something I shall never be,  
That I shall always wonder over, and wait for,  
Look for like the breath of life as long as I live,  
Still waiting for you, however old you are, and I am,  
I shall always wonder over you, and look for you.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Kinkead-Weekes, "Eros and Metaphor: Sexual Relationship in the Fiction of D.H. Lawrence", in *Lawrence and Women*, ed. Anne Smith, London, 1978, 101-21.

<sup>4</sup> The "Argument" of *Look! We Have Come Through!* is reprinted in D.H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, eds Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts, Penguin, 1993, 191.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 248.

This kind of writing about the power of erotic feeling to radically challenge and overturn staid and egotistic perceptions of the world is characteristically Lawrentian, but what of Lawrence's writings on erotic experience before 1912? The extent of his later insistence upon otherness, wonder and self-abandonment may be partly viewed as a gauge of his pre-1912 involvement with a solipsistic and narcissistic erotic discourse, and it is this lesser-known treatment of the erotic in Lawrence's early poetry that I want to consider in this essay.

In "New Heaven and Earth", also to be found in *Look! We Have Come Through!*, the speaker describes in telling detail an earlier phase of his life:

I was so weary of the world,  
I was so sick of it,  
everything was tainted with myself,  
skies, trees, flowers, birds, water,  
people, houses, streets, vehicles, machines,  
nations, armies, war, peace-talking,  
work, recreation, governing, anarchy,  
it was all tainted with myself, I knew it all to start with  
because it was all myself.

....

I shall never forget the maniacal horror of it all in the end  
when everything was me, I knew it all already, I anticipated it all in  
my soul  
because I was the author and the result  
I was the God and the creation at once;  
creator, I looked at my creation;  
created, I looked at myself, the creator:  
it was a maniacal horror in the end.

I was a lover, I kissed the woman I loved,  
and God of horror, I was kissing also myself.<sup>6</sup>

On a literal level, the speaker is describing (in a parody of Whitman's "Song of Myself"<sup>7</sup>) an adult intensification of the mirror stage: a state of

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-57.

<sup>7</sup> See Lawrence's comments on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, eds Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, Cambridge, 2003, 150-51:

self-enclosure in which the outside world seems hide-bound and predictable. Yet, figuratively, it is also a description of artistic and sexual impotence. To be the author and the result is to write about oneself for oneself; to be the lover and the beloved is to use one's partner merely to obtain a personal sensation. The convoluted syntax of these lines enacts the tortured process of turning back upon oneself in a cycle that is at once egotistic and damaging.

Lawrence diagnoses a profoundly interiorized state of being in which the self goes unchallenged by the external world; in fact, it is a state where the self is seemingly defined by its continuity with the world around it. Lacking separation from external objects, the individual is here trapped in the self-perpetuating realms of metaphor and pathetic fallacy. Possessed by the strong drive to articulate its erotic longing, this self finds its language draining away into figurative abstractions.

I would like to consider in this interpretive context an early Lawrence poem simply entitled "Erotic". The manuscript of this poem is located in the New York Public Library,<sup>8</sup> it appears among the juvenilia in the *Complete Poems*.<sup>9</sup> Although it is placed in this volume alongside early poems addressed to Frieda Weekley (who Lawrence first met in March 1912), "Erotic" is a poem of 1911 (and possibly of the autumn of that year<sup>10</sup>). Pre-dating the relationship celebrated in the poems of *Look! We Have Come Through!*, "Erotic" was produced at a moment in Lawrence's life when he was moving between women. Working as a teacher in Croydon, south-east London, he was engaged to Louie Burrows, yet painfully aware of their lack of shared values (and, more pointedly, of her sexual reticence), and he was sexually involved with two other women, Helen Corke and Alice Dax. "Erotic" is a poem about strong, self-aware erotic feelings dissipated into abstraction; it is a poem

"I embrace ALL," says Whitman. "I weave all things into myself."

Do you really! There can't be much left of *you* when you've done. When you've cooked the awful pudding of One Identity ....

This awful Whitman. This post-mortem poet. This poet with the private soul leaking out of him all the time. All his privacy leaking out in a sort of dribble, oozing into the universe.

<sup>8</sup> "Erotic" is located in a batch of early poetry manuscripts at the NYPL; it is Roberts E320.4 (see F. Warren Roberts, *A Bibliography of D.H. Lawrence*, 3rd edn, updated by Paul Poplawski, Cambridge, 2001, 660).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 887-88.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to John Worthen and Christopher Pollnitz for their advice on establishing a tentative date for the poem's composition.

informed by desire, self-restraint and the anguish of separation (what Lawrence describes in a September 1911 letter to his fiancée as the “conflict of unaccomplished passion”<sup>11</sup>).

The poem reads as follows:

Erotic

And when I see the heavy red fleece  
Of the creeper on the breast of the house opposite  
Lift and ruffle in the wind,  
I feel as if feathers were lifted and shook  
On the breast of a robin that is fluttered with pain,  
And my own breast opens in quick response  
And its beat of pain is distributed on the wind.

And when I see the trees sway close,  
Lean together and lift wild arms to embrace,  
I lift my breast and lean forward,  
Holding down my leaping arms.

And when black leaves stream out in a trail down the wind,  
I raise my face so it shall wreath me  
Like a tress of black hair,  
And I open my lips to take a strand of keen hair.

And when I see the thick white body of train-smoke break  
And fly fast away,  
I stifle a cry of despair.<sup>12</sup>

“Erotic” relies heavily on patterns of repetition: it piles up images, impressions and responses with a breathlessness calculated to reflect the urgency of the erotic longing. The progressively shortening stanzas seem to emphasize this urgency by their shift from imagery to symbolism to pathetic fallacy (that is, from the concrete to the abstract). Yet, the repetitions and the rhythm of the poem also stress the recurrence (and inevitability) of the experiences described: the speaker seems to be articulating a number of responses to the outside world which always occur when he is in this state of erotic unrest.

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<sup>11</sup> See *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. James T. Boulton, Cambridge, 1979, I, 300.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 887-88.



In the first verse paragraph, the accretive driving force behind the poem (“And when I see”; “And my own breast”; “And its beat of pain”) meets with resistance from a clever melding of images. The autumnal red creeper lifted by the wind from the chimney breast on the house opposite the speaker is associated with the lifting breast feathers of a robin rather pathetically pained by a strong wind. The imagery of breasts and pain inevitably circulates back to the speaker, who feels his own breast opening in response. There is a circularity evident beneath the urgent onward drive of the poem: the speaker’s awareness of the outside world is generated by his own state of unrest and anguish, and, when he responds to these external images of his pain, his anguish itself returns to the world and “is distributed on the wind”.

The second paragraph shows the speaker reading the outside world symbolically. The trees sway close to each other in the wind, seemingly extending their branches to meet; the speaker, noticing the embrace of their “wild arms”, sets himself against the wind (lifting his breast and leaning forward), deliberately holding his arms down in an act of self-restraint which anticipates the stifling of his cry in the final line of the poem.

Paragraphs three and four transform symbolism into pathetic fallacy. The black leaves blown by the wind suggest both death and the hair of the beloved, so the speaker responds by letting them “wreathe me / Like a tress of black hair”. The association between leaves, wreath and hair is so complete that the extended metaphor takes on a life of its own, as if the speaker has momentarily forgotten the outside world in the face of his charged response to it. The trail of black leaves is a wreath of black hair, but in taking a keen strand of this hair, it can hardly be imagined that the speaker opens his mouth to a passing leaf; it is more fitting to imagine him opening his mouth and taking a strand of his own hair, blown back in the wind and standing in as a surrogate for the hair of the absent female. The speaker’s imaginative and sympathetic response to the external world once again brings him back to himself and shows us (and him) the extent of his self-absorption (in this case a literal self-absorption).

The poem ends with a cryptic pathetic fallacy combining suggestive sexual symbolism with a movement of dissipation and a new (and shrill) expression of despair. It feels as if the poem has been steadily moving towards this moment of recognition, yet the final realization is carried off on the wind. The “white body” of the train smoke picks up the red fleece,

the breasts and the hair as a disembodied reminder of the female body (Lawrence had specific reason to associate fleeting erotic encounters with train travel at this time<sup>13</sup>); the movement of the smoke echoes the distribution of pain on the wind and suggests the dispersal of desire (with its auto-erotic overtones). This is a poem that achieves (we might say) an unsatisfactory climax: its self-conscious, insistent voice dies on the wind in a stifled cry of despair.

The remarkable thing about the poem is the extent to which it addresses the erotic as an intensity of feeling utterly devoid of an individualized object – unlike a number of the better-known early poems such as “Release” (addressed to Helen Corke), or “Kisses in the Train”, “The Hands of the Betrothed” and “Snap-Dragon” (addressed to Louie Burrows). The poem attempts to communicate what it is like to be afflicted with erotic longing in a situation where it cannot be satisfied; it brings us close to the limits of language, and in so doing it switches the emphasis to the language of the body, to the connection between desire and loss or absence; it self-reflexively thematizes the failure to communicate feelings. I want in the remainder of this essay to focus on these elements of “Erotic” and to suggest how we might think about their operation across Lawrence’s early erotic poetry as a whole.

The first aspect of the poem to emphasize is its peculiar concentration on the body as an object with a disturbing life of its own. The speaker of “Erotic” feels his breast responding to the spectacle of the creeper, shaken by the wind; he deliberately leans forward into the breeze but is forced to hold back his “leaping arms”. In this poem, the speaker’s move to prohibit the involuntary movement of his arms suggests deliberate self-restraint in the face of an overwhelming desire to give in to the forces that compel him. In other early poems by Lawrence, the body’s actions reveal insurgent and unsettling sexual longings, producing confusion or denial. I am thinking in particular of the summer 1909 poem entitled “The Body Awake”, and of the 1911 poem “Your Hands” (addressed to Louie Burrows). These poems are better known through their later versions, “Virgin Youth” and “The Hands of the Betrothed”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lawrence proposed to Louie Burrows in a train from Leicester to Quorn on 3 December 1910. Two poems addressed to Louie and Helen Corke (“Kisses in the Train” and “Excursion Train”) are set in trains. Lawrence was teaching away in Croydon, so visits from (and to) Louie, Helen Corke and Alice Dax would have required train journeys.

<sup>14</sup> There is an early version of “Virgin Youth” reproduced in Appendix III of *Complete Poems*; I will be referring to “The Body Awake”, the manuscript version of the poem

“The Body Awake” concerns itself with the strange sexual awakening of the young male speaker, as, on occasion,

the life that is polarised in my eyes  
That quivers in smiles and thoughts between my eyes and my mouth  
Flies like a wild thing escaped along my body.

His body is subject to

a flush and a flame,  
Gathering the soft ripples below my breasts  
Into urgent, passionate waves

and his “docile, fluent arms” respond to the sensations by knotting themselves “with wild strength / To clasp – what they have never clasped”. The body urges the speaker to an outward gesture towards union, but the compulsion goes unfulfilled:

the bursten flood of life ebbs back to my eyes  
Back from my beautiful, lonely body  
Tired and unsatisfied.<sup>15</sup>

In “Your Hands”, the speaker reflects on what he sees as the suppressed desire for him revealed in the behaviour of his partner’s body, and especially in the actions of her hands. While she swiftly repels his own hand when he places it on her breast, her “large, strong, generous hands” betray her desire, as they touch his knee or grasp her own arms rather too tightly, or as their fingers play with the fabric of her skirt. Michael Black has shown how Lawrence, in his early fiction, makes frequent recourse to the hands as the source of self-conscious sexual feeling in his characters;<sup>16</sup> and in “Your Hands”, sexual repression is revealed through their unconscious move to grasp.

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(Roberts E317) located at the University of Nottingham. “Your Hands” is reproduced in full in John Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Years, 1885-1912*, Cambridge, 1991, 309-11.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from the manuscript version of “The Body Awake” at the University of Nottingham (Roberts E317).

<sup>16</sup> See the Index entry for “Hand, Hands” in Michael Black, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Fiction. A Commentary*, London, 1986.

This emphasis in the early poetry on the body as possessing its own life, fixed to the wildness of nature, connects with an underlying pessimism concerning human desire, and it is important for us to dwell briefly on this point if we are to understand the overtone of despair in "Erotic". In early Lawrence there is a pervasive sense that our bodies figure forth a sexual determinism rooted in nature and conducive to unhappiness – or even to personal tragedy. When writing his first novel, Lawrence was deeply influenced by his reading of Schopenhauer's essay "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes", which sees human desire as an illusion created by a Will in nature, whose prime objective is to produce strong offspring.<sup>17</sup> The tragic love plot of *The White Peacock* involves a young farmer, George Saxton, who is drawn to Lettie Beardsall, the cultured daughter of a local family. After she rejects him in favour of the upwardly-mobile son of a local colliery owner, George falls into a cycle of self-damage. When the "will to mate" is denied, George's fate is sealed. In a letter of 24 June 1910 to Frederick Atkinson, Lawrence (who was poor at formulating titles) suggested that *The White Peacock* might be called "'Tendrils Outreach' – or 'Outreaching Tendrils' or 'Outreach of Tendrils'", because:

"Tendrils" is what "George" is always putting forth. He's like white bryony, that flourishes tendrils hysterically for things that are out of reach.<sup>18</sup>

In "Erotic", the speaker identifies with a (Schopenhauerian) natural world in which suffering seems to be the keynote: where images of desire and desolation are inextricably linked.

The association of the autumnal landscape in "Erotic" with a despairing and painful need for the warmth of contact brings us to another feature of the erotic theme in early Lawrence: the equating of love with pain and death (of *eros* with *thanatos*). The red creeper is drawn away from the warm chimney breast by a gust of wind; the bare trees, shaken by the same wind, seem about to embrace. Later in the poem, the black leaves are associated with tresses of black hair that wreath the speaker as he walks. The conventional equating of desire

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence first read Schopenhauer's "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes" sometime in 1906-1907, in a book entitled *Essays of Schopenhauer*, translated by Mrs Rudolf Dircks (see ET [Jessie Chambers], *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*, London, 1935, 111-12).

<sup>18</sup> *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, I, 167.

with cruelty, sadism and death is present throughout Lawrence's early erotic poetry. The poem "Love and Cruelty" (later re-titled "Love on the Farm") sees masculine passion as inseparable from the bloody cruelty of nature; "Cherry Robbers" makes a similar link between death in nature and the laughter and tears of erotic desire; and "Snap-Dragon", addressed to Louie Burrows (and expressing exasperation and frustration at her sexual reticence), views repressed female desire as finding an outlet in acts of barely-concealed sadism.

However, in "Erotic" the relation between eroticism and death functions on a more understated, implicit level, reflecting the long shadow cast by the death of Lawrence's mother from abdominal cancer in December 1910. During the period of her illness Lawrence wrote a poem entitled "Brooding Grief", in which the speaker sees a wet leaf blown along the pavement and is drawn from dwelling on his experiences by her deathbed to a startled recognition of the world around him.<sup>19</sup> The black leaves in "Erotic" seem to allude to an unannounced burden of brooding grief in the speaker. Erotic longing and the need for release from grief sometimes coalesce in the erotic poems of late 1910 and 1911. John Worthen has noted that:

A number of times in his writing after 1910 Lawrence showed the violent attraction to a woman of a man whose parent is dying, or has died. It is as if the strong sexual attraction, and the torture of the parent's often long-drawn-out death, became locked in the writer's imagination: as one love is torn away, so another is violently, even deliberately born.<sup>20</sup>

To a certain extent, the objectless desire for erotic satisfaction reflects a desperate need for the replacement of an affective maternal bond: absence appears to lie at the centre of the erotic craving. This connection between loss and erotic longing is made explicit in the poem "Reminder", where the speaker, addressing his lover, recounts nursing his dying mother, losing one bond of love and craving another:

So I came to you;  
And twice, after wild kisses, I saw  
The rim of the moon divinely rise

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<sup>19</sup> See Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 110-11.

<sup>20</sup> John Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Years, 1885-1912*, 290.

And strive to detach herself from the raw  
Blackened edge of the skies.<sup>21</sup>

The lover, however, refuses his further advances, "offering 'a better thing'". Similarly, in "Release", addressed to Helen Corke, some relief from the "turgid electric ache" of desire is sought through sexual contact with the partner, together with a feeling of stability and permanence to replace the anguish of death. In the final stanza of "Release", the speaker addresses Helen:

Since you have drunken up the drear  
Death-darkened storm, and death  
Is washed from the blue  
Of my eyes, I see you beautiful, and dear.  
Beautiful, passive and strong, as the breath  
Of my yearning blows over you.  
I see myself as the winds that hover  
Half substanceless, and without grave worth.  
But you  
Are the earth I hover over.<sup>22</sup>

It is precisely this impression of being half substanceless, detached and drifting (like Paul Morel in the final paragraphs of *Sons and Lovers*) that is captured in the successive stanzas of "Erotic".<sup>23</sup>

Finally, "Erotic" attempts to create a language and imagery for detached erotic desire, but its increasingly abstract efforts to articulate a profoundly emotional and sensual state ultimately reveal the absence at the heart of the poem. The imagery and symbolism skirt around the emotional state, but leave us grasping at thin air (a feeling which is similarly evident in another of the poems to Helen Corke entitled "Repulsed", where a welter of images are drawn upon to evoke a state of conflict, numbness and nullity<sup>24</sup>).

This can hardly be viewed, however, as a simple failing in Lawrence's early art, since he was intensely conscious from an early

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> The title of this poem ("Release") is reminiscent of the title of the chapter in *Sons and Lovers* in which Mrs Morel dies ("The Release"). The confluence of the titles suggests a connection between release from the tension of seeing a parent dying, the parent's release from suffering, and sexual release.

<sup>24</sup> See Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 97-98.

stage of the sometimes bitter attempt to put desire and the conflict of passion into words; in fact, in the early short stories a number of his characters articulate the problem with telling precision. Peter Moest, quarrelling with his wife in "New Eve and Old Adam" declares that in their complaints and feelings they have "come to the incomprehensible".<sup>25</sup> In "A Modern Lover", Cyril Mersham, back from London to visit his former sweetheart in the Midlands, refers to the "algebra of speech" which he must use to communicate his feelings to her;<sup>26</sup> in "The Witch à la Mode", Bernard Coutts chides his former lover for her usual recourse to "the foggy weather of symbolism", to which she replies: "It may be symbols are candles in a fog— —."<sup>27</sup> Winifred Varley's reply neatly dichotomizes our potential responses to a poem like "Erotic". Is this a case of youthful egotism generating an earnest and clever, but ultimately inane, fog of symbols, or does the poem succeed in illuminating a complex, almost incomprehensible state of erotic longing through its use of imagery and symbolism?

By the time he wrote "New Heaven and Earth", Lawrence had clearly come to criticize the erotically charged use of symbolism in his early work. Already in January 1912, while he made final revisions to his second novel, *The Trespasser*, he told Edward Garnett that he considered it "too florid, too 'chargé'".<sup>28</sup> Lawrence did not, of course, abandon the struggle to articulate erotic desire in his work, but his poetry after 1912 began to place greater stress on externalizing inner states, working by descriptive analogy rather than through the more decidedly subjective imagery, symbolism and pathetic fallacy. He began in his fiction to search for a new (and largely scientific) language to describe sexual desire.<sup>29</sup> The challenge to Lawrence's vision (and life) posed by Frieda Weekley created in the poems from *Look! We Have Come Through!* a re-

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<sup>25</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Love Among the Haystacks and Other Stories*, ed. John Worthen, Cambridge, 1987, 167.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, I, 358.

<sup>29</sup> Helen Baron has discussed the extent of Lawrence's engagement with Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* in *Sons and Lovers* (1913); in the third generation of *The Rainbow* (1915), Ursula Brangwen's desire is mediated through what Charles L. Ross has termed a "metallic-corrosive" vocabulary (see Helen Baron, "Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* versus Garnett's", *Essays in Criticism*, XLII/4 [October 1992], 265-78, and Charles L. Ross, *The Composition of The Rainbow and Women in Love: A History*, Charlottesville, 1979, 34).

imagining of the relation between subject and object, self and other, language and desire. Several of these poems found their way into Imagist anthologies of 1915, 1916 and 1917:<sup>30</sup> in their avoidance of abstraction and their concentration on otherness, they announce a new direction in Lawrence's poetry.

Yet, in celebrating later poems like "Green" and "Gloire de Dijon" for their particular achievements in these directions, we should not dismiss out of hand the kind of writing about desire encapsulated in "Erotic". This poem seems to focus much of early Lawrence's thinking about the nature of erotic longing: its physiological origins in the body; the link with Schopenhauerian pessimism; the connection between desire for contact and the shadow of death; and the struggle involved in attempting to say exactly what it is we are feeling when we feel "erotic desire". However self-absorbed, consciously literary and mawkish Lawrence can be in his early poetry, we should give him credit for taking risks and rising to the challenge of capturing an objectless erotic longing in language.

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<sup>30</sup>For example, "Illicit" (later re-titled "On the Balcony") and "Green" appeared in *Some Imagist Poets* (1915); "The Turning Back" (later re-titled "Erinnyes") and "Brooding Grief" appeared in *Some Imagist Poets* (1916); and "Terranova" (later re-titled "New Heaven and Earth") appeared in *Some Imagist Poets* (1917).



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## TRIANGULATION OF DESIRE IN H.D.'S *HYMEN*

NEPHIE J. CHRISTODOULIDES

In her book *Tribute to Freud*, where she reflects on her psychoanalytic sessions with Freud, H.D. notes, “There were two’s and two’s and two’s in [her] life”, implying, as Eileen Gregory puts it, an erotic triangulation.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, her poems in *Hymen* (1921) can be read as the very manifestation of the triangle motif. Dedicating the volume to her daughter Perdita and her companion Winnifred Ellerman (Bryher), H.D. sings the erotic bonds that have sustained her and celebrates her “marriage” with them (hence the title). Figures such as Demeter, Thetis, Leda, Helen, Phaedra and Hippolyta are employed as poetic masks to draw into focus the mother’s desire for the lost daughter, the woman’s erotic animation, and the daughter’s desire for homoerotic union with the mother, which are the main driving forces of the collection.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva develops her theory of the “object”, its relation to the concept of the mother and its significance in the constitution of the subject. The realm of the mother, the semiotic *chora*, is characterized by a lack of differentiation between child and mother, a pre-verbal dimension of language marked by sensual impressions, echolalias, bodily rhythms, sounds and incoherence. The mother must be repudiated and expelled (“abjected” is Kristeva’s term) so that the child will be able to turn towards the father, to the realm of paternal symbolic order, structured by language that conforms to the linguistic rules of grammar, syntax, propriety and, of course, socialization. The expulsion (“abjection”) of the mother is not only the precondition for entrance into the symbolic, but it also becomes the precondition for an idealization that is the basis of love as *agape* (paternal) always in conflict with *eros* (maternal, passionate and destructive love).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, Cambridge, 1997, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1987, 34 and 50.

Although the child constitutes the mother's authentication in the symbolic, the loving mother – different from “the clinging mother” – is willing to facilitate the intervention of the third party, the father, to allow the subject to be formed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the process follows a triangular pattern from which any diversion will entail disruption in the formation of the subject. A glimpse into H.D.'s childhood years reveals an inadequately structured triangle:

A girl-child, a doll, an aloof and silent father form the triangle, this triangle, this family romance .... Mother, a virgin, the Virgin ... adoring with faith, building a dream, and the dream is symbolized by the third member of the trinity, the child, the doll in her arms.

The loosely joined sides, however, were never meant to be fixed permanently for the father was “a little un-get-able, a little too far away”;<sup>4</sup> an inaccessible figure engrossed in planets and stars, “who seldom even at table focused upon anything nearer literally, than the moon”.<sup>5</sup> An equally absent mother would direct her maternal semiotic force into painting, but was never the one who would draw the girl to her, imbue her with her semiotic and then release her to enter the symbolic. She would instead favour the younger brother as more advanced, “quaint and clever”, and ignore “Mignon”<sup>6</sup> as “not very advanced”,<sup>7</sup> but “wispy and mousy”.<sup>8</sup>

In her effort to reconstruct the triangle, the adult H.D. first turned to the remote maternal figure and sought ways to rediscover her. She longed to share her art. She recalls that the sight of her mother's hand-painted dishes “fired [her] very entrails with adoration” and she wanted “a fusion or a transfusion of [her] mother's art”: “I wanted to paint like my mother.”<sup>9</sup>

As we have seen, according to Kristeva the speaking subject revolves round two conceptual and dialectical categories, the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is pre-verbal, characterized by rhythms,

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1982, 9-10 and 13.

<sup>4</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, New York, 1977, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Holland, *Poems in Persons*, New York, 1989, 13.

<sup>6</sup> H.D. was “small for [her] age, mignonne” (*Tribute to Freud*, 10).

<sup>7</sup> Holland, *Poems in Persons*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-51 and 117.

musicality, pulses, unspeakable energy, and drives. This is the category which is associated with the mother and which as poetic language ruptures the symbolic, the language of logic, grammar, the paternal language. Therefore, for H.D. another way to recover the mother is in signs, in her use of the maternal semiotic flow in writing. Although she finds the self vacillating between the maternal semiotic and the paternal symbolic, being, as she puts it, "on the fringes or in the penumbra of the light of [her] father's science and [her] mother's art", she "derives her imaginative faculties through [her] musician-artist mother".<sup>10</sup>

Then she started psychoanalysis with Freud: "The Professor had said ... that I had come to Vienna hoping to find my mother."<sup>11</sup> Freud believed that H.D. saw her mother in his face: "Why did you think you had to tell me? .... But you wanted to tell your mother."<sup>12</sup> He saw her problem as a "mother fix", a "desire for union with [her] mother":

Mother? Mamma. But my mother was dead. I was dead, that is the child in me that had called her mamma was dead.

Even Freud's "old-fashioned porcelain stove that stood edge-wise in the corner" recalls the mother: "*The Nürnberg Stove* was a book my mother had liked."<sup>13</sup>

Homosexuality is another means for a new subject formation. Freud in "Female Sexuality" argues that the girl who achieves normal femininity turns away from her mother "in hate" when she discovers that they are both castrated. Instead she loves her father and sublimates her desire for a penis into the wish for his child. Some girls, however, never give up their desire for their mother and their wish for a penis. Among these are women whom Freud considered neurotic, as well as those he identified as having a "masculinity complex".<sup>14</sup> These are the women who want to be men, a desire that manifested in their attempt to do what men do. For Freud they represent the "extreme achievement of the masculinity complex" and the women they love function psychically as

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 145 and 121.

<sup>11</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Holland, *Poems in Persons*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman, New York, 2002, 120 (*The Nürnberg Stove* is by Ouida).

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Femininity", in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, London, 1991, 155 and 158-59.

substitutes for their mothers, upon whom they remain, in the unconscious, fixated.<sup>15</sup>

An early passion for Frances Josepha Greggs, a friend of a schoolmate from Bryn Mawr College that H.D. attended briefly, and her later lifelong relationship with Bryher constitute the two landmarks of her homoerotic journey. Like other contemporary lesbian writers, however, she was silenced by a society characterized by a “climate that produced secrecy, coding, and self-censorship”.<sup>16</sup> Since society would not accept her homoeroticism, she used it as an intertextual layer mostly in her autobiographical novels (*HER*, *Asphodel*). Freud was convinced that H.D. did not repress her early psychological and sexual bisexuality, as most people do, but instead stuck to it because of her problematic connection with her mother. He suggested that H.D. should find a way to unite her split self, a feat H.D. never seems to have accomplished.<sup>17</sup>

The mother fixation, however, leads H.D. to the brother. She thinks that fusion with the brother will give access to the mother: “If I stay with my brother, become part almost of my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to *her*.”<sup>18</sup> She starts with a new family romance:

My triangle is mother-brother-self. That is early phallic mother, baby brother or smaller mother and self.<sup>19</sup>

However, as the maternal quest became an endless task that she did not seem to succeed in accomplishing, there was no point in turning to the quest for the father figure, since to merge with the father or a substitute paternal figure would entail no subject formation without the mother. She, therefore, sought to be involved in triangular patterns of a different nature to make up for it or merely to live a triangular relationship she never seemed to have experienced. She placed herself between males and females: she married Richard Aldington but the shadow of Ezra Pound was always cast on them, even moving into the same apartment block, “just across the hall”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Female Sexuality”, in *On Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, London, 1991, 376; “Femininity”, 164.

<sup>16</sup> *Analyzing Freud*, 180.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

<sup>18</sup> Holland, *Poems in Persons*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Richard Aldington and H.D.: Their Lives in Letters 1918-61*, ed. Caroline Zilboorg, Manchester, 2003, 142.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

In 1914 H.D. met D.H. Lawrence and originally their relationship was “intensely cerebral” mostly exchanging manuscripts, but Frieda Lawrence set them up for an affair “so that she could have one of her own with Cecil Gray”. In 1918, she met Bryher who became her lifelong companion, and in 1926 she “experience[d] an intense affair” with Kenneth Macpherson who later married Bryher. About this *ménage à trois* she wrote: “We seem to be a composite beast with three faces.”<sup>21</sup> A new triangle had been formed which, however, would soon dissolve because of Macpherson’s affairs with men, and the next *ménage* consisted of H.D., Bryher, and Perdita (H.D.’s daughter by Cecil Gray).<sup>22</sup>

Since her life always informed her work, constituting its intertextual layer, triangulation is to be found everywhere in her work from *Hymen* to the *Palimpsest* trilogy, three stories about three seemingly different women in different historical eras. Commenting on the choice of “hymen” as the collection’s title, Renée Curry notes that apart from the obvious denotation of the word suggesting “the connective attributes related to Hymen, god of marriage in classical mythology”, *Hymen* “resonates with allusions to ... the membranous connective qualities of the anatomical hymen”.<sup>23</sup> But I take this association a step further and see the use of “hymen” as suggestive of the marriage of the several forms of desire, which encapsulates maternal passion, passion for the daughter, daughterly homoerotic passion for the mother and female heterosexual passion. *Hymen*, like *Asphodel*, was written during a bitter and sometimes distraught period of H.D.’s life after the dissolution of her marriage and Aldington’s refusal to keep his promise about recognizing Perdita. Thus, it can be said that it constitutes her own lay analysis, her articulation of her predicaments, H.D.’s own *felix culpa*, her speaking sin, “the joy of [her] dissipation set into signs”.<sup>24</sup>

The introductory poem or play draws into sharp relief the notion of triangulation of desire. Sixteen matrons from the temple of Hera (protector of marriage), “tall and dignified, with slow pace” bring gladioli with “erect, gladiate leaves and spikes”, chanting:

<sup>21</sup> *Analyzing Freud*, 565, xxxii.

<sup>22</sup> *Signets: Reading H.D.*, eds Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau Duplessis, Wisconsin, 1990, 36, 37, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Renée Curry, *White Women Writing White*, Westport: CT, 2000, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 131.

Of all the blessings –  
 Youth, joy, ecstasy –  
 May one gift last<sup>25</sup>

The unnamed gift is implicitly stated through the phallic symbol of the gladioli and encompasses the orgasmic ecstasy induced by the phallus. The next group of very young girls carries crocuses. According to ancient Greek mythology, Crocus was a friend of Hermes who killed him accidentally while playing. According to another myth, Crocus was a young man who turned into a flower because of his unfulfilled passion for the nymph Smilax. In this way, the flowers are suggestive of alternative forms of erotic desire: homoerotic and heterosexual.

The next group of slightly older girls is boyish in appearance, suggesting the blur of boundaries between male and female. They carry hyacinths, implying the homosexual love of Apollo for Hyacinthus<sup>26</sup> and the blurring of gender boundaries. They are attendants of Artemis, endorsing her forcibly maintained virginity, perhaps celebrating the Bride's virginity which is soon to be lost. Finally the Bride enters – she is an amalgamation of purity and desire, anticipating a woman's heterosexual erotic animation. Beneath her “bleached fillet”, her myrtle-bound head, and “underneath her flowing veil”, she is white, pure and fair, but

All the heat  
 (In her blanched face)  
 Of desire  
 Is caught in her eyes as fire  
 In the dark center leaf  
 Of the white Syrian iris.

Following the entrance of the Bride, “Four tall young women, enter in a group”.<sup>27</sup> They carry “fragrant bays” and their reference to “laurel-bushes” and “laurel-roses” commemorates Apollo's unfulfilled passion for Daphne and her transformation into a laurel tree. Then “older serene young women enter in processional form”<sup>28</sup> carrying coverlets and linen,

<sup>25</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, New York, 1986, 101 and 102.

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, London, 1993, 178-79.

<sup>27</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

chanting a song about their use of different kinds of fragrant wood to alleviate the pain caused by the Bride's defloration. It is important to recall here Freud's observation concerning defloration and the pain it causes. As he puts it, this pain is to be seen as a substitute for "the narcissistic injury which proceeds from the destruction of an organ and which is even represented in a rationalized form in the knowledge that loss of virginity brings a diminution of sexual value".<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the several kinds of fragrant wood are meant to comfort the bride, perhaps soothing her psychical and physical pain with their fragrance. Finally a "tall youth crosses the stage as if seeking the bride door". Love enters as Eros: he has wings and his flame-like hair commemorates the myth of Psyche and Eros as narrated by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*). He carries a "tuft of black-purple cyclamen" and his song strongly echoes the sexual act: the cyclamen have phallic "honey-points / Of horns for petals".<sup>30</sup> The phallic "points" recall the clitoris as the sexual organ of the woman<sup>31</sup> which is perceived by little girls as a castrated penis.<sup>32</sup>

There with his honey-seeking lips  
The bee clings close and warmly sips,  
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway  
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;  
Ah, rare, ah virginal her breath!)

...  
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)

One moment, then the plunderer slips  
Between the purple flower-lips.<sup>33</sup>

The bee that is about to sip the nectar from these points is male, strongly suggesting the bridegroom who is going to taste the bride's virginity, whereas the flower petals "which draw back" when the bee

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<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity", in *On Sexuality*, 275.

<sup>30</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> In "Female Sexuality", Freud sees the clitoris as analogous to the male organ (*On Sexuality*, 142 and 374).

<sup>32</sup> Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman, New York, 1995, 197.

<sup>33</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 109.



attempts to sip suggest the behaviour of the vagina in sexual intercourse. As Helene Deutsch notes: "The breaking of the hymen and the forcible stretching and enlargement of the vagina by the penis are the prelude to woman's first complete sexual enjoyment." After the penetration of the penis, Deutsch observes, there are "localized contractions [in the vagina] that have the character of sucking in and relaxing".<sup>34</sup> In the poem, the "stern" (stiff and reluctant) petals draw back, but this is momentary; soon the bee enters lifting the flower-lips, penetrating through that which "suck" him in.

Once Love "passes out with a crash of cymbals", a band of boys advance. They are unmistakably male: "their figures never confuse one another, the outlines are never blurred." They carry torches and "Their figures are cut against the curtain like the simple, triangular design on the base of a vase or frieze".<sup>35</sup> Their posture strongly recalls the triangular pattern of desire as will be sung in *Hymen* and which begins with the song of Demeter. This is the mother's longing for the lost daughter that becomes a passion similar to the secret passion of the boy for the mother. Immobilized like a statue "sit[ting], / wide of shoulder, great of thigh, heavy in gold ... press[ing] / gold back against solid back / of the marble seat", Demeter pleads with her daughter, Persephone, not to forget her but to "keep [her] foremost", "before [her], after [her], with [her]", and thence demolishing any boundary meant to separate the two.<sup>36</sup>

Demeter refers to Bromios, Dionysus, as another instance of mother-child separation, due as she puts it, to the gods' desertion and indifference. The analogy, however, can be further extended to imply not only the dissolution of the mother-daughter dyad in the way Bromios was taken away from the dead mother's body after she had been blasted by Zeus' light, but also the repetition of the mother-son passion in the mother-daughter dyad. Demeter says:

Though I begot no man child  
all my days,  
the child of my heart and spirit,  
is the child the gods desert

<sup>34</sup> Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, New York, 1944, II, 71 and 73.

<sup>35</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

alike and the mother in death –  
the unclaimed Dionysos<sup>37</sup>

The force of the secret passion of the male child for the mother and his feelings of jealousy and competitiveness towards his father, whom he inevitably and intuitively perceives as a rival for the mother's affection, is replicated in Demeter and Persephone. In this case, there is observed dissolution of the mother-daughter dyad by a third party, the husband. The mother, however, is keen to call her daughter back, suggesting that although the abductor is physically stronger than she is, her own maternal passion is deeper, which implies that he could never replace her, since his passion was no match for hers:

Ah, strong were the arms that took  
(ah, evil the heart and graceless),  
but his kiss was less passionate!<sup>38</sup>

The connective attributes of the hymen join the passion of the bereaved mother with the passion and desire of the woman who wishes to rediscover the mother. For Julia Kristeva the mother-daughter bond, that Freud conspicuously neglected, is a seminal aspect that governs both a mother's life and her daughter's. She talks about the loss of the mother and her rediscovery in signs. Our articulation of the loss in language is but a recovery of the mother:

"I have lost an essential object that happens to be my mother," is what the speaking being seems to be saying. "But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language."<sup>39</sup>

As Kelly Oliver puts it, commenting on Kristeva's notion of the necessity of matricide in *Black Sun*:

The child must agree to lose the mother in order to be able to imagine her or name her. The negation that this process involves is not the negation

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1989, 43.

of the mother. Rather, it is the negation of the loss of the mother that signals proper entry into language.<sup>40</sup>

In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva also talks about another means of maternal rediscovery in childbirth – the blissful union of mother and child recalling another fusion, that of the daughter and the mother:

Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells, instants of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dreams, at night, opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my mother’s, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up dew from her hand, there, nearby, in the night. Alone: she, I, and he.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, in *About Chinese Women*, Kristeva commemorates the call of the mother that “generates voices, ‘madness,’ hallucinations” but if the ego is not strong enough to defeat it, it leads to suicide: “Once the moorings of the ego begin to slip, life itself can’t hang on: slowly, gently, death settles in.”<sup>42</sup> In *Black Sun*, proceeding further, Kristeva states that many women “know that in their dreams their mothers stand for lovers or husbands”.<sup>43</sup>

The maternal quest and the homoerotic passion it entails is another instance of passion evident in *Hymen*. “The Islands”, which many critics have seen merely as a classification of Greek islands reminiscent of Homer’s listing of ships in *The Iliad*<sup>44</sup> is but the prelude to a series of poems focusing on maternal passion. Discussing a 1937 note by H.D. on her early poetry – “I call it Hellas. I might, psychologically, just as well, have listed the Casco Bay islands off the coast of Maine ...” – Rachel Blau DuPlessis remarks: “But to call it Hellas means ‘it’ (this special source of writing) is going to be a version of her mother’s name”, that is Helen.<sup>45</sup>

In “The Islands”, the persona wonders what the Greek islands stand for her. And here it is important to note prevalent images of roundness strongly suggesting the female body in gestation: “What .... The Cyclades’ [κύκλος, circle] / white necklace?” Eileen Gregory observes a

<sup>40</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind*, Bloomington, 1993, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 247.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows, New York, 1986, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 76-77.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle*, Brighton, 2000, 1 and 15.

pattern of containing and contained "island within island",<sup>46</sup> a motif that once more recalls the semiotic pre-oedipal union with the mother or even the fusion of mother and child in gestation where there is alterity within but there does not seem to be a division of subject and object.

At the same time, however, phallic images are noted as well: "What is Samothrace, / rising like a ship", "What is Greece— / Sparta, rising like a rock?" Further the persona commemorates Sparta "entering", penetrating Athens, and the Greeks are said to be tall.<sup>47</sup> Circular motifs suggest the maternal semiotic, but phallic images make the mother a phallic, a pre-Oedipal, mother with whom the child wants to be fused, and who, since she is not castrated and can grant gratification, is always phallic.

If the mother, the addressed "you", Helen, Hellas, is lost then the islands will be lost since they constitute part of her: "What are the islands to me / if you are lost?"

What can love of land give to me  
that you have not,  
what can love of strife break in me  
that you have not?

I have asked the Greeks  
from the white ships,  
and Greeks from ships whose hulks  
lay on the wet sand, scarlet  
with great beaks.  
I have asked bright Tyrians  
and tall Greeks –  
"what has love of land given you?"  
And they answered – "peace."<sup>48</sup>

The expected answer "peace" is likely to be the outcome of the fusion with the mother, but at the same time this "peace" will be the outcome of "strife", a struggle perhaps between mother and child: "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body, the mother's, in order to be"; a "violent, clumsy, breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it

<sup>46</sup> Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 124, 115 and 126.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-26.

is stifling”.<sup>49</sup> However, this entire struggle will be wasted away if the mother “draw[s] back / from the terror and cold splendor of song / and its bleak sacrifice”.<sup>50</sup> If the mother refuses to endow the daughter with semiotic elements to rupture the symbolic, if she refuses to be sacrificed – lost – so that her daughter will recover her in signs, then the islands will come to nothing.

Fusion with the mother, which is associated with erotic passion, is manifested in a series of three poems concentrating on Phaedra, Theseus, Hippolytus, and Hippolyta. In “Phaedra” H.D. contrasts Phaedra’s passion – which the persona, Phaedra, feels to be diminishing – with Hippolyta’s chastity which in this case is to be equated with frigidity. Phaedra, implores the “Gods of Crete” to grant her “soul / the body that it wore” for she feels that

The poppy that [her] heart was,  
formed to bind all mortals,  
made to strike and gather hearts  
like flame upon an altar,  
fades and shrinks, a red leaf  
drenched and torn in the cold rain.<sup>51</sup>

Phaedra juxtaposes her passion with that of Hippolyta who prays to be endowed with Artemis’ chastity:

I never yield but wait,  
entreating cold white river,  
mountain-pool and salt:  
let all my veins be ice,  
until they break  
...  
forever to you, Artemis, dedicate  
from out my veins,  
those small, cold hands.<sup>52</sup>

In “She Rebukes Hippolyta”, Phaedra sees Hippolyta’s passion wasted on martial activities and her own chastity as a form of frigidity

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<sup>49</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10 and 13.

<sup>50</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 127.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

begotten out of this drain of passion. She keeps asking, "Was she so chaste?"<sup>53</sup> as if trying to find what lurks behind chastity. She sees her chastity as a form of frigidity; for she is "wild" and Phaedra assumes that Hippolyta would normally displace her wild feeling on sexual passion. Since she does not do so, she feels that she is frigid. She rebukes her as she sees her own passion diminishing as well. For by fusing with Hippolytus she fuses with his mother, too and acquires her frigidity.

Helene Deutsch associates feminine depression with frigidity by noting that they both stem from the vagina's biological fate of being the receptacle of death anxiety. The death anxiety accompanies motherhood and is mobilized in pregnancy and delivery and it is this anxiety that seems to prevent sexual responses in the vaginal part of the female organ.<sup>54</sup> Kristeva proceeds a step further, adding that a woman uses fantasy to enclose an inaccessible object (her mother) inside her body. The mother figure imprisoned is the bad mother whom the woman locks within her to prevent losing her, to dominate her, to put her to death, or even to kill herself inside. An imagined partner is the one who will be able to dissolve the mother imprisoned within the daughter "by giving [her] what she could and above all what she could not give [her], another life".<sup>55</sup> In the poem, however, the lover simply transfers frigidity to Phaedra and does not liberate her, for he does not seem to have been released by the maternal figure.

"Egypt", a poem H.D. dedicates to Edgar Allan Poe, recalls his poem "Helen" as well her own play *Helen in Egypt* (1952-54) in which, as DuPlessis notes, "she shows that all desire is matrisexual; that all polarities, including major oppositional conflicts (love and death, Eros, and conflict), can be sublated through the mother".<sup>56</sup>

The personae in "Egypt" feel that they have been cheated by Egypt who "took through guile and craft / [their] treasure and [their] hope".<sup>57</sup> Most probably the deception the personae attribute to Egypt goes back to Stesichorus' *Palinode* and Euripides' tragedy *Helen*. Euripides and Stesichorus give their own versions of the myth of Helen: it was Helen's phantom that triggered the war; the real Helen was "stowed away in

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>54</sup> Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 78.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 78.

<sup>56</sup> DuPlessis, *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 140.

Egypt under the protection of its virtuous king Proteus”.<sup>58</sup> However, the persona exclaims that “Egypt [they] loved” for she “had given [them] knowledge” which they “took, blindly, through want of heart”. Egypt had given them “passionate grave thought”, “forbidden knowledge” and “Hellas [was] re-born from death”.<sup>59</sup> Egypt, although she cheated the Greeks and Trojans by housing Helen, taught them that mother Helen was not to be lost, but just lay dormant until she was resurrected. Previous attempts to reach her through a lover proved unsuccessful as they only gave out frigidity. Now the personae seemed to have rediscovered her in signs: she offered a “spice”, forbidden knowledge, which caused the flow of the semiotic poetic language.

How could this be achieved? As the poem prefigures H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, one can say that the semiotic poetic language is what is presented as Helen’s acquisition of the ability to decipher hieroglyphs: she undertakes the difficult task of “translating a symbol of time into time less / time / the hieroglyph, the script”.<sup>60</sup> Further in the play both Helen and Achilles are re-united with the mother Thetis: “Thetis commanded, / Thetis in her guise of mother, who first summoned you here.”<sup>61</sup> As Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it in “Romantic Thralldom in H.D.”: “the poem concerns the parallel quests of Helen and Achilles which are not journeys to each other, but quests for access to the unifying mother .... both have found Thetis at the end.”<sup>62</sup> For by finding and unifying with the mother one can get her semiotic power.

Years later during her psychoanalytic session with Freud, H.D. brings up Egypt:

We talked of Egypt .... Then I said that Egypt was a series of living Bible illustrations and I told him of my delight in our Gustave Doré as a child. I told him of the Princess and the baby in the basket. He asked me again if I was Miriam or saw Miriam, and did I think the Princess was actually my mother?<sup>63</sup>

Egypt is associated with H.D.’s childhood as she recalls the illustrated Bible she loved to browse through as a child. Going back to this incident

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<sup>58</sup> *Signets: Reading H.D.*, 440.

<sup>59</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 140-41.

<sup>60</sup> H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, New York, 1974, 156.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>62</sup> *Signets: Reading H.D.*, 417.

<sup>63</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 108, 119.

it is as though she is telling Freud that she is regressing in a final effort to locate the triangle before she resorts to other ways of reconstructing it. Freud's question unmistakably leads to the mother. Was the Princess her mother or the mother who would rescue her after the desertion by the real mother, the way Moses was rescued by the Princess?

In more than one way, "Egypt" commemorates the homoerotic union with the mother, which, however, will not entail sexual passion but semiotic passion as another way of fulfilment. As I have already suggested, the dedication of the poem to Edgar Allan Poe is appropriate since it recalls his "Helen". But unlike his persona who says that he "had come home to the glory that was Greece",<sup>64</sup> she seems to be saying that Greece – Hellas – Helen – is to be found in Egypt: in the recovery and rediscovery of the mother in hieroglyphs, in the semiotic poetic power.

Erotic passion is the focus of "Thetis", which one may say rests oddly between "Simaetha" and "Circe" as if to break the continuity of witchcraft. As Eileen Gregory puts it, "body is by no means a clear fact – rather, it is (or it arrives at being) a presence, experienced through manifold erotic thresholds".<sup>65</sup> The poem focuses on Thetis' sexed erotic body and its boundary crossing:

On the paved parapet  
you will step carefully  
from amber stones to onyx  
flecked with violet,  
mingled with light.<sup>66</sup>

The female element abounds in the poem: "the island disk", the "curved" white beach, the "crescent" of the moon,<sup>67</sup> as if prefiguring the impregnated female body, when as Ovid puts it, Peleus "planted Achilles" in Thetis' womb.<sup>68</sup> But

Should the sun press  
too heavy a crown,  
should dawn cast  
over-much loveliness,

<sup>64</sup> Holland, *Poems in Persons*, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Eileen Gregory, "Ovid and H.D.'s 'Thetis'" ([www.imagists.org/hd/hder111.html](http://www.imagists.org/hd/hder111.html), 2).

<sup>66</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 116.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>68</sup> Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, London, 1997, 104.



should you tire as you laugh,  
 running from wave to wave-crest,  
 gathering the flower to your breast ....

Then she should step deeper and deeper “to the uttermost sea depth”. This threshold crossing will lead her beyond culture and further into nature, where the “anemones and flower of the wild sea-thyme / cover the silent walls / of an old sea city at rest”.<sup>69</sup> She will go deeper into the maternal sea, fuse with her, not only achieving “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world”, a feeling Freud would call “oceanic”,<sup>70</sup> but also rediscovering the mother in the conception of the child.

In “Thetis” the sexed erotic body is allowed *jouissance* in motherhood, whereas in “Leda”, Leda enjoys erotic heterosexual *jouissance*. Amid a landscape characterized by boundary crossings where “the slow river meets the tide”, “the level lay of sun-beam / has caressed / the lily”, “the slow lifting / of the tide, / floats into the river” Leda enjoys the fusion with the swan:

Ah kingly kiss –  
 no more regret  
 nor old deep memories  
 to mar the bliss; ...<sup>71</sup>

In “Evadne”, another poem characterized by erotic passion, Evadne recalls her sexual initiation by Apollo, but her passion is characterized by orality. She talks about her hair “made of crisp violets or hyacinths”, recalling Poe’s “Helen” whose hair is “hyacinth”. Equally Apollo’s hair feels “crisp” to her mouth and she still remembers his mouth “slip[ping] over and over” between her “chin and throat”.<sup>72</sup> Both lovers seem to be governed by devouring tendencies that lead back to the child’s oral stage, which is characterized by strong dependence on the mother, with food-taking constituting the first, and “most archaic relationship” between

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<sup>69</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents”, in *Civilization, Society, and Religion*, trans. James Strachey, London, 1991, 251-52.

<sup>71</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 120-21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

mother and child.<sup>73</sup> Once again, erotic passion is associated with the homoerotic union with the mother.

In "Simaetha", Simaetha, the sorceress, turns her wheel and concocts her love potion to bring her lover Delphis back to her:

Drenched with purple  
drenched with dye, my wool,  
Turn, turn, turn, my wheel!

Drenched with purple,  
steeped in the red pulp  
of bursting sea-sloes –  
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

Laurel blossom and the red seed  
of the red vervain weed  
burn, crackle in the fire.<sup>74</sup>

"Simaetha" is modelled upon Theocritus' "Idyll 2: Pharmaceutria":

Give me the bay-leaves, Thestylis, give me the charms;  
Put a circlet of fine red wood around the cup.  
Hurry! I must work a spell to bind my lover  
.... Turn, magic wheel, and force my lover home.<sup>75</sup>

However, H.D.'s Simaetha is equipped with a wheel, which is not only the "magic wheel" Theocritus' Simaetha is imploring to turn, and "force [her] lover home", but also the spinning wheel. Simaetha is not simply a sorceress but resembles Arachne in her spinning vocation. Her own *pharmakon* is not merely the love potion prepared for Delphis, but her song, the poem. The "red pulp" and the "sloe" may not merely denote the red flesh of "the small, sour blackish fruit of the blackthorn *Primus Spinosa*",<sup>76</sup> which is one of the ingredients of the potion, but they could be seen as metaphors for the page and the ink, and metonymically poetry itself.

<sup>73</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 75.

<sup>74</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 115-16.

<sup>75</sup> Theocritus, *The Idylls*, trans. Robert Wells, London, 1988, 60.

<sup>76</sup> *Webster's Unabridged Encyclopedic Dictionary*, New York, 1989, 1342.

At this point, it is important to consider an excerpt from *Asphodel*, which is strongly reminiscent of Simaetha and her spinning vocation. The protagonist, Hermione, is lost in a stream-of-consciousness reverie in which she identifies with Morgan le Fay: “Weave, that is your *métier* Morgan le Fay, weave subtly, weave grape-green by grape-silver and let your voice weave songs.”<sup>77</sup> Although many legends see Morgan le Fay as an instigator of the plot against King Arthur, she is also presented as a healer and a shape-changer (in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the *Vulgate Lancelot*, attributed to Walter Map, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*). Morgan’s healing powers resemble Simaetha’s magic gift that enable her to prepare the magic potion and heal her own erotic malady by bringing Delphis back. What joins the two figures, however, is the ability of both to use textile (through weaving) as text and produce words and not simply material. After all text is textile (ME < ML text[us], woven [participle of texere]).<sup>78</sup>

While spinning, Simaetha is worried whether Delphis will find her “blooming” when he comes or “worried of flesh, / left to bleach under the sun”.<sup>79</sup> Her worry, H.D. seems to be saying is groundless. Since she is spinning – not merely manipulating the spinning wheel but also spinning words, poems, songs – she is a poet and her journey back to the semiotic becomes certainly shamanic. The shaman, as Mircea Eliade said, is the witch doctor, the sorcerer, the traveller to the other world either to retrieve the souls of the people who are in danger of death or to bring back news and healings. His words or songs and poetry are thought to have magical powers. Thus, Simaetha becomes a shamaness, for by entering the world of the semiotic, she moves outside the norms and like a shaman (shamanism is an “archaic technique of ecstasy”) she becomes the master of ecstasy (ἐκ στάσεως = stepping outside). Coming back to the symbolic, equipped with her poetic semiotic power, she is resurrected the way a shaman is resurrected after his dismemberment.<sup>80</sup>

At this point, it is important to recall H.D.’s fourth vision in Corfu as she describes it in *Tribute to Freud*:

<sup>77</sup> H.D., *Asphodel*, London, 1992, 169.

<sup>78</sup> Webster’s *Unabridged Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1469.

<sup>79</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 116.

<sup>80</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, London, 1989, 34.

Two dots of light are placed or appear on the space above the rail of the wash-stand, and a line forms, but so very slowly .... There is one line clearly drawn, but before I have actually recovered from this, or have time to take breath, as it were, another two dots appear and I know that another line will form in the same way. So it does, each line is a little shorter than its predecessor, so at last, there it is, this series of foreshortened lines that make a ladder or give the impression of a ladder set up there on the wall above the wash-stand. It is a ladder of light .... I have the feeling of holding my breath under water for some priceless treasure .... in a sense, it seems I am drowning ... to come out on the other sides of things (like Alice with her looking glass or Perseus with his mirror?) I must be born again.<sup>81</sup>

The trip H.D. narrates is certainly shamanic, the ladder being her ascent to the other world to acquire ecstasy. At the same time, however, the journey could be experienced as a descent to the sea bottom to enjoy fusion with the mother, “back to the womb”<sup>82</sup> to acquire the semiotic forbidden knowledge.

Like H.D., Simaetha as a shamaness comes back rejuvenated, eternally young to bring back news of goings on in the transcendent realm, using her poetic *pharmakon* for eternal poetic youth. In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, H.D. stresses the importance of sexuality for people, but most importantly for creative people who need it to “develop and draw forth their talents”.<sup>83</sup> In the same way, Simaetha shows that sexuality will not fade away but can lead to the power to generate. By spinning the wheel to bring her lover back and quench her erotic thirst, she can at the same time spin the wheel as part of her creative drive, producing words and with her sexuality becoming the impetus for her creativity.

Simaetha's worry about eternal youth becomes Circe's despair about her own witchcraft's lack of effectiveness. She seeks a way to bring her lover, Odysseus, back: “how shall I call you back?” If she cannot have the man she desires, she would give up “The whole region / of [her] power and magic”.<sup>84</sup> It is as though she is renouncing the power of magic as erotic *pharmakon*, as if implying that witchcraft can be used

<sup>81</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 53-54.

<sup>82</sup> *Analyzing Freud*, 142.

<sup>83</sup> *Signets: Reading H.D.*, 279.

<sup>84</sup> H.D., *Collected Poems*, 118 and 120.

differently, perhaps as successful word alchemy, as Simaetha has proved before.

It was in 1920 during a trip to Corfu with Bryher that H.D. had a series of six visions, what in *Tribute to Freud* she called “Writing on the Wall”. The experience of these visions that drained her physically and mentally were seen by Freud as a “dangerous symptom” in the sense that they were manifestations of “the unconscious forcing its cryptic speech into consciousness by disrupting the mind’s perception of external reality”.<sup>85</sup> Apart from the dangerous disruption of the external reality and the blurring of the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, however, these visions can be regarded as the “leakage” of the unconscious into consciousness perhaps revealing her preoccupations and predicaments. Her fifth vision can be particularly illuminating in terms of her obsession with triangulation.

In this vision a Victory, a Niké figure, resembling a Christmas or Easter card angel, a three dimensional figure with her back turned towards H.D. “moves swiftly” with a “sure floating” that “gives [her] mind some rest, as if [it] had now escaped the bars .... no longer climbing or caged but free with wings”:

On she goes. Above her head, to her left in the space left vacant on this black-board (or light-board) or screen, a series of tent-like triangles forms. I say tent-like triangles for though they are simple triangles they suggest tents to me. I feel that the Niké is about to move into and through the tents, and this she exactly does.<sup>86</sup>

What the unconscious seems to telling H.D. is that for any kind of victory to be achieved, the route to be followed is by way of triangulation. The triangles do not simply represent “tents or shelters to be set up in another future content”, as H.D. thought they were.<sup>87</sup> They recall the missed triangle of H.D.’s childhood that she strove so hard to reconstruct seeking triangulation in every niche of her life. Niké’s moving into and through these triangles suggests that her passing may well have imbued them with her presence making them partake in her victory-giving properties, implying that real victory is to be achieved through triangulation.

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<sup>85</sup> *Analyzing Freud*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 55.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

**“SMILE, O VOLUPTUOUS COOL-BREATH’D EARTH”:  
EROTIC IMAGERY AND CONTEXT  
IN CONTEMPORARY RITUAL AUTHORSHIP**

PEG ALOI

There is a tradition of bold textual borrowing and embedding in the ritual literature of contemporary pagan witchcraft. Beginning with Englishman Gerald Gardner’s poetic pastiche of Crowley, Wilde, Virgil and others in his *Book of Shadows* written in the 1940s, this trend continues with contemporary rites incorporating Irish myth cycles and the conjectured folklore of Robert Graves by “Celtic Reconstructionists” in the United States. An attempt to achieve authenticity (for a comparatively young spiritual tradition) seems to be one justification for this practice, although the creation of an original ritual literature or liturgy also seems intended. By examining one such ritual cycle composed in the late 1970s by Michael DesRosiers, the founder of an American pagan group, The Coven of the Cthonioi in Boston, Massachusetts, we find that *The Book of the Provider*, a collection of rituals that serve as modern fertility rites, borrows from diverse poetic sources, from ancient to contemporary, and including excerpts from works by Longfellow, Kipling, Milton, Keats, Yeats, Whitman, Robert Duncan, John Masefield, and others. This essay will explore the literary underpinnings of this modern ritual cycle, which uses excerpts of English poetry in a unique and arguably post-modern manner, to forge a body of work rich with metaphor, sensuality and the iconography of modern nature worship. I will also discuss the way in which this excerpted poetry is eroticized, recontextualized and, perhaps, resacralized, in order to fulfil its contemporary ritual purpose.

I will begin by offering a brief introduction to the ritual text and its historical and cultural context (and perhaps before I go any further I should add that I am both a researcher and a practitioner of pagan witchcraft, as well as a member of the Boston coven I have referred to, which has afforded me access to and long-term experience of the ritual

text I am going to discuss).

*The Provider Cycle* is a series of seven rituals based upon an agrarian calendar of planting and harvest, and the rituals are structured as modern mystery plays in that they follow a known mythological form, with designated speaking roles for both singular and group parts. This is a fairly common format for contemporary ritual, and dates from Gerald Gardner's writings in the 1940s. Tanya Luhrmann's ethnographic study *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* examines the myriad ways in which modern witchcraft practitioners express their spiritual beliefs through ritual performance:

Magic is replete with psychologically-powerful images of death, fertility and regeneration, moulded in the symbolism of earlier cultures. The magician makes the ancient imagery personally relevant through meditation, story-telling, and theatrical enactment, and his involvement with the imagery seems to provide him with intense religious experience.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of *The Provider Cycle*, the imagery is that of a stylized act of human sacrifice, the slaying of the Harvest Lord, an act performed with the intention of propitiating the Mother or Earth Goddess, who serves as both consort and nurturing parent. This dyad of mother/son, creatrix/victim, is seen in many tales in world mythology, from Isis/Osiris to Psyche/Eros, and is illustrated with numerous examples in Frazer's well-known (if conjectural and reductive) anthropological work, *The Golden Bough*.<sup>2</sup> As Tanya Krzyzswinska states, the contemporary appeal of witchcraft and paganism "lies in their functioning as modern mystery religions", and Frazer's view of the sacred "was grounded in violence and sacrifice".<sup>3</sup>

The rites begin in spring with the "Day of the Awakening" (wherein the Corn Maiden and Harvest Lord meet for the first time), continue with the "Rite of Sowing", the "Rite of Seasoning" (performed three times for each full moon in summer), "The Coming of Autumn", and culminating in October with "Harvest Home" (when the Corn Maiden takes on the role of the Earth Mother and kills the Harvest Lord in an act of ritualized slaughter). Rituals observing this seasonal cycle of planting, seasoning,

<sup>1</sup> T.M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, Cambridge: MA, 1989, 337.

<sup>2</sup> The first volume of Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890, the twelfth and last volume in 1915. *Aftermath*, a supplement appeared in 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Tanya Krzyzswinska, *A Skin for Dancing In*, Trowbridge, 2000, 73.

and harvest, representing the universal cycle of birth, death and rebirth, are common among pagan witches, and even though this calendar is based on the climate and agriculture of feudal Britain, contemporary American witches appreciate that the old folk festivals are still alive in some areas – thereby enabling them to partake of an ancient and living tradition. The cycle is rooted in the Demeter/Persephone dyad and the Eleusinian mysteries, as well as other sacrificial and fertility rites described in *The Golden Bough*, and in anthropologist Margaret Murray's study of figures of male divinity in European witch cults, *The God of the Witches* (1931). Luhrmann, who worked with a number of pagan witch covens when researching her dissertation, describes the ways in which such mythological texts can have a contemporary resonance in the context of pagan magical practice:

In magic, ancient images of Persephone, Cerridwen, Osiris and so forth directly confront powerful psychological issues – death, pain, maturation, a mother's grief at the loss of a daughter to marriage, a son's rebellion at a father's command. They cast individual traumas of death, separation and love into the dramatic themes of romantic fantasy. Through the practice, the magician loads these mythologically redolent images with personal relevance and feeling. Potent images like the sickle-wielding crone, the destiny-spinners, the elderly guide, mischievous youth, or virgin huntress come to represent attitudes and events; dragons, moons, sacred chalices and magical stones embody personal fantasy.<sup>4</sup>

*The Provider Cycle*'s dramatic structure is certainly of the same primal bent described here by Luhrmann – its purpose is to encourage attunement with nature but also to further self-awareness through the exploration of mythic narratives. The cycle also borrows structural elements (and prose excerpts) from Thomas Tryon's 1973 novel *Harvest Home*. The ritualized courtship and lovemaking of the dramatis personae is central to *The Provider Cycle*, and the poetic excerpts are intricately woven together, creating a bucolic and often erotic tension, reminiscent of the many odes and paeans to pagan deities (particularly the forest god Pan) penned by the English Romantic poets, who were themselves standard-bearers for the rebirth of paganism in the nineteenth century.

The thematic heart of this ritual cycle is threefold: the cosmological theme of birth, death and rebirth, often referred to as the Eternal Return;

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<sup>4</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 340.



the anthropological or Frazerian theme of the youthful sacrificial king (also seen as a dying vegetation god); and the dramatic theme of romantic love and loss found in classical tragedy. DesRosiers creates a ritual structure that supports these three thematic elements by carefully establishing the *dramatis personae* and the central dramatic action with selected poetic and prose excerpts, as well as original passages of writing. The imagery that is central to the rituals, including fields, crops, orchards, the sun, the moon, young men planting or reaping, the sickle, pregnancy, birth, abundance, grain, flowers, fruit, rain, etc. are repeated and gather heightened emotional and dramatic effect as the cycle progresses. The development of the relationship between the two key players, the Harvest Lord and Corn Maiden, likewise intensifies, and identical passages of poetry may take on new meaning with repetition, as the players act out their meeting, flirtation, courtship, lovemaking, sacred vows, and, finally, slaughter and death.

The poetic passages chosen are thus rendered replete with complex meaning, and although many participants know what is coming, the cycle's climactic finale is no less affecting. To afford a better comprehension of the social context within which such rituals are created and performed, I would like to offer a survey of the influences DesRosiers was exposed to at the time he created these works. Modern paganisms, including Wicca, draw a great deal of their creative structure and content from unusual literary sources, and DesRosiers' use of modern and contemporary poetry in authoring his rituals calls to mind an earlier ritualist, Gerald Gardner.

### **Gerald Gardner: eccentric plagiarist**

What we today call modern pagan witchcraft is believed to have been at least partially invented in the 1940s in southwest England by Gerald Gardner, an English civil servant with a passing scholarly interest in antiquities. As I have mentioned earlier, Gardner cobbled together ritual and instructional material from divergent sources to create his *Ye Bok of Ye Arts Magical*, also known as *The Book of Shadows*: a primer of magic techniques and ritual material intended for initiates of pagan witchcraft of the type Gardner and his cohorts were practicing, and which eventually came to be called "Wicca". These sources included but were not limited to Victorian-era ceremonial occultism (such as that embraced by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), the Hebrew Kabbala, Eastern mysticism, the English Woodcraft Chivalry movement, British folklore,

the writings of Frazer and Murray, and the poetry of Aleister Crowley. Because Gardner never stopped trying to pass off his ingenious pastiche as an historical document, there tends to be a strong bias among modern practitioners of witchcraft towards authenticity of literature and practice.

The English historian Ronald Hutton suggests that Gardner's plagiarism and its attendant self-aggrandizement were not without precedent: "Gardner stood in a long tradition of leading figures in English occultism, who seem frequently to have felt the need to claim titles of honour to reflect a status in the world at large which they considered to be truly due to them."<sup>5</sup> The tendency of Gardner and his followers to refer to fabricated occult texts as "ancient" or "found" documents possessing provenance they did not have was clearly intended to reflect positively upon the "discoverer" (in some cases, the actual author or plagiarist of the work), thus lending a gloss of authority and authenticity to both text and practitioner. Hutton says Gardner "posed as a disinterested anthropologist" who had been lucky enough to discover evidence of a surviving pagan witch cult in England.<sup>6</sup> Word spread of Gardner's activities when he published two books in the 1950s, and Wicca became very popular both in the UK and the United States; especially, Hutton notes, "among people who were not already conversant with the sources from which it had been drawn".<sup>7</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that later adherents tended to cling to Gardner's works as a sort of Holy Grail of legitimacy, and to craft their own rituals in similar fashion, burying any evidence of outside authorship. Gardner succeeded in creating, almost from whole cloth, a system of worship and spiritual expression that eventually engendered a passionate social movement. It is odd that he felt the need to claim his very original collation of diverse source material was in fact found by him, when he could just as easily have wished to be celebrated for his vision and ingenuity in creating it. To this day, very little authentic literature exists that is older than the middle of the twentieth century – and those who do create original work often still persist in writing in an arcane voice, or, in DesRosiers' case, intersperse excerpted poetry with original writing in a seamless manner that gives it an antiquated ring. This is an example of what Catherine Bell has termed "tradition-

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford, 1999, 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, Oxford, 1991, 334.

alization”: an attempt to create rituals and other practices so that they give the impression of being consistent with activities of an earlier cultural era.<sup>8</sup> Hence, contemporary witches often create rituals that emulate a formality of language and tone similar to the patchwork fabrications of Gardner, in order to achieve a similar purpose: that of creating rituals which embody the language and imagery of an idealized pagan past.

In some cases this technique of textual appropriation becomes bricolage: no text is inappropriate if it can be used in an effective way. So Scottish poetry, Native American proverbs, Greco-Roman myth and pop-song lyrics could all contribute to effective ritual construction with no danger of anachronism, as long as the end result is constructed with consistency. This is what DesRosiers had in mind: the creation of a ritual literature that borrowed from the best of the old but that was wholly new. His resultant body of work, including *The Provider Cycle* and dozens of other works, possesses a literary sophistication not often found in contemporary pagan ritual texts. As we shall see, one of the most effective ways to impart a traditional patina to a contemporary ritual construction is to borrow from the great poetic texts of bygone eras.

### **Paganism’s rebirth in poetry**

The English Romantic poets created a body of work dedicated to a myriad pagan themes, including the mysteries of Eleusis, the rebirth of Pan, paeans to Proserpine and many other Greco-Roman mythic references which are especially well suited for the rituals of pagan witchcraft. In several scrupulously researched books, historian Ronald Hutton explores the origins of modern witchcraft and emergent paganisms in literature, archaeology and classical antiquity. His opening chapter in *The Triumph of the Moon*, entitled “Finding a Language”, is an inquiry into the literary sources that have found their way into contemporary pagan liturgical texts. Among other places, Hutton locates the fulcrum of the expression of pagan worship through poetry in the work of the Romantics, mainly Shelley and Keats (and others to a lesser extent), but notes their cadre dispersed in the 1820s and “for three decades the language of radical paganism is little heard”. That is, until 1866 when Algernon Charles Swinburne “raised the standard of paganism in the field of revolt, in conscious imitation of Shelley”.<sup>9</sup> At

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York, 1992, 145.

<sup>9</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 25.

one point, Hutton describes a romantic scene: Cambridge and Oxford undergraduates, linked arm in arm, walking through their quads and reciting aloud memorized passages from Swinburne's then controversial *Poems and Ballads*. The book caused a "public sensation" in part because it "celebrated the glories of the ancient and natural worlds, and the animal quality within humans, and especially within women".<sup>10</sup>

Hutton also points to Enlightenment ideas about secularism and the renaissance of the pastoral poetic tradition as further influences upon growing pagan sensibilities in England, as well as the roots of German Romanticism (found in three forces which emerged in the late eighteenth century: "an admiration for ancient Greece; nostalgia for a vanished past; and the desire for an organic unity between people, culture and nature"). Goethe, Hutton says, was a poet "deeply in love with the deities of ancient Greece and Rome", and his writings and those of Schiller and Hölderlin challenged Christian views of the world by passionately invoking a return to the paganism of the past. This "language", as Hutton calls it, reached England by the early nineteenth century and impacted on the English Romantic poets with varying degrees of enthusiasm – Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Byron did not wholeheartedly embrace the new paganism (Wordsworth was "too conventional", Byron "too irreverent"). Hutton calls Keats and Shelley the "true enthusiasts".<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps more than the other languages that comprise modern paganism, the poetry of the Romantics was by men whose own belief systems dovetailed with today's pagan witches, namely, their love of Greco-Roman myths and imagery, their valorization of the natural world as a source of pleasure and inspiration, their personal antipathy towards orthodox religions, their disenchantment with a growingly industrialized environment, their affinity for non-traditional sexual liaisons (what Shelley called "free love" and what contemporary pagans refer to as "poly-amoury"), and their self-identification as social and artistic outcasts. Some of the same books that inspired the pagan and magical revivals of the late nineteenth century also inspired twentieth-century pagans, as noted by Krzywinska: "during the 1960s and 1970s, the work of The Golden Dawn, Crowley, Murray and Frazer were being quite widely read (or at least talked about) by the 'hippy' counter-culture."<sup>12</sup> Even as these older occult and folklore texts were enjoying renewed

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 and 23.

<sup>12</sup> Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing In*, 78.

attention in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary writing on magic and witchcraft was also drawing considerable attention, as well as works on hallucinogens, sexuality, spirituality, feminism, ecology and politics. The excitement generated by Swinburne's poems, inspired by Shelley, among mid-nineteenth-century Oxbridge undergraduates was not so very different from the excitement generated on American college campuses by the controversial writings of Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Marija Gimbutas, Abbie Hoffman, and poets like Dylan Thomas, W.S. Merwin, or Denise Levertov.

Modern mystics also had additional textual forms to inspire them not available in earlier eras: recorded music and song lyrics printed on record albums. Many popular bands of the late 1960s and early 1970s explored alternative spiritualities, sexualities, ecologies and states of consciousness in their music and lyrics, including The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, The Moody Blues, H.P. Lovecraft, the Incredible String Band and countless others. Music was also at the core of the fashion movement of the 1980s that came to be called "New Romanticism", and a renaissance of interest in Romantic poetry and the art of the Pre-Raphaelites soon followed. Images from the paintings of Waterhouse, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Howard Pyle have graced the covers of many contemporary occult books with images of Circe, Merlin and Ophelia: pagan imagery full of dark forests and lush flowers.

The scene described by Hutton of the enchanted undergraduates' discovery of Swinburne is also reminiscent of a neophyte witch's affecting formative experiences with magically-relevant texts, which might comprise a vast array of topics, from magic and the occult (and subjects like astrology or herbology) to archaeology, folklore, history, or poetry. Indeed, such practitioners are often advised by teachers or fellow group members to keep journals of their dreams and their own poetic writings concurrent with their absorption of ritual material and other magical texts. Tanya Luhrmann observes that the liturgy of contemporary pagan witchcraft functions primarily as an invocation of a lost, romanticized past:

Their literature seems to be part of a conscious attempt to provide a mythology for their practice in a myth-impooverished world, and they borrow lavishly from the myths of other times and cultures .... Thus history becomes the raw material out of which to craft a personal vision,

and the role of tradition is to forge it anew, to suit your own particular symbolic needs.<sup>13</sup>

Journalist Margot Adler, who notes a marked trend towards bibliophilia among modern pagans in her sociological survey *Drawing Down the Moon*, puts it more bluntly: “The most authentic and hallowed Wiccan tradition – stealing from any source that didn’t run away too fast.”<sup>14</sup> Just as the Romantics expressed their enthusiasm for a new spirituality (built upon nostalgia for a simpler time thought lost to them) through writing poetry and occasionally through erecting altars and improvising rituals, modern pagans have expressed their spiritual awakening with rituals constructed in part with this poetry, the legacy of their forebears and spiritual kin.

### A poetic ecology

It was not just a nostalgic longing for the gods of antiquity that inspired the transporting verse of the Romantics, however. A passionate fascination with the natural world in the most immediate sense was also central to their poetic lexicon. Hutton acknowledges the connection between the human love of landscape and the reawakening of paganism when he says that from the 1870s onward, “an almost hysterical celebration of rural England began”, and “by 1900, the poetic vision of the English, when contemplating the rural world, was dominated as never before by the great goddess and the horned god”. Hutton also cites the influence of the writings of Victorian essayists in response to various archaeological and anthropological field-studies, particularly neolithic hill forts, burial chambers and sites believed to have been inhabited and used by Druids. Hutton in particular singles out the publication of John Lubbock’s *Prehistoric Times* in 1865, and Sir Edward Taylor’s *Primitive Culture* in 1871, as being responsible for framing tribal customs and beliefs in a broader cultural context than had previously been the case, and thus exciting an interest in antiquities among late Victorian writers (such as Grant Allen) who were inclined to more poetic expression.<sup>15</sup>

This renewed interest in monoliths, stone circles and hill figures occurred not only as England’s countryside was changing irrevocably through the impact of industrialization, but as folklorists and heritage

<sup>13</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 241.

<sup>14</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, Boston, 1979, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 9.

enthusiasts were bemoaning the practice of private landowners who damaged (or in some cases destroyed) sites that interfered with farming or animal husbandry. As Aubrey Burl puts it, “the extension of agriculture into marginal lands in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD gave an incentive to farmers to bury, to blast or to haul away the stones of an obstructive circle, though, fortunately, superstition sometimes caused them to leave a few stones standing”.<sup>16</sup> The Celtic Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (including the establishment of several Druid orders) engendered renewed interest in these ancient sites, and by the time Gardner introduced his meld of Masonic ritual, Woodcraft Chivalry and rural folk magic in the late 1940s, the bucolic view of the countryside had widened to encompass a mystical fascination with earthworks increasingly referred to as “sacred sites”, the study of which comprised a burgeoning field known as “earth mysteries”. Pagan witches and other earth mysteries enthusiasts came to see these sites as their spiritual property, and sought to protect them every bit as fervently as did the National Trust or English Heritage.

With interest in sacred sites increasing in the 1960s, these ancient, mysterious locales exerted a powerful pull upon the imaginations of a generation already attuned to an expansion of consciousness. Krzywinska states that the portrayal of sacred sites in British horror films of the 1960s and 1970s helps create “a holistic correlation between the psyche and the landscape. This is perhaps why paganism has such a seductive appeal to many eco-activists today.”<sup>17</sup> Environmental awareness exploded in the 1970s alongside other social movements, intersecting with renewed interest in Eastern mysticism, women’s rights, and the new psychology, and this led to many microcosmic areas of interest including eco-feminism, eco-eroticism, deep ecology, and experiential ecology.

In addition to being a ritual author and librarian, DesRosiers was an award-winning gardener and environmental activist, and his love of flora and passion for ecology is reflected in his choice of poetic passages in *The Provider Cycle* texts. Line after line celebrates the beauty of nature in sensual, often anthropomorphic terms: “She shall tread on frail arbutus in the moist and mossy nooks”, “a flower-encircled glow of fruitage and of wine”, “the hawthorn-blossoming boughs of the stars”, “Oh, lavish, brown, parturient earth”, “rich apple-blossomed earth!”.<sup>18</sup> *The Provider*

<sup>16</sup> Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of the British Isles*, London, 1976, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing In*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> *The Provider Cycle*, written and revised between 1972 and 1978, has never been

*Cycle* is not only a piece of ritual theatre meant to heal the planet, but in its unapologetic eroticism urges participants and observers to explore their sensual connections to the natural world.

The eroticized context of the ritual cycle occurs most prominently in three aspects: its invocation of the Corn Maiden/Earth Goddess figure; its invocation of the Harvest Lord/God figure; and its description and performance of the fertility rites themselves. In Wicca, the act of simulated sexual union known as “The Great Rite” is performed as a standard part of most rituals, often symbolized by the insertion of a dagger into a chalice. This is representative of the union of opposite forces in nature and the cosmos as well as the sexual act. But there are also occasions where “The Great Rite” is performed in more elaborate form, with the participants using a form of etheric energy exchange. Sometimes, actual intercourse may take place as an adjunct working to the ritual – most often this is done in private while the other coveners temporarily leave the room, or in the circle while the other coveners have their backs turned.

This conceit is explicit in *The Provider Cycle* rites, and the declamatory “Brothers and Sisters, turn away. The Mystery is at hand” in the “Rite of Sowing” is but one example of language which suggests several possibilities in performance, depending upon the participants and any ritual purposes agreed upon in advance. It is more or less agreed that the physical sexual act greatly intensifies the magical working, even as covens are aware such activity must be approached in a discreet and serious manner. Nevertheless, in *The Provider Cycle*’s thirty-year performance history, the etheric expression of the “Great Rite” has traditionally been seen as powerful enough for most purposes.

### **Crafting a magical liturgy**

DesRosiers sifted through his collections of books, searching for material that seemed appropriate for the rituals he was working on. Sometimes just a line or two would be used, sometimes whole stanzas. In some cases lengthy passages provided the main structural elements of a ritual, such as the lines from Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* which provide the narration for the “blessing of the cornfields” pantomime in the “The Rite

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published in a conventional way. Members of the coven have handwritten or typewritten copies, and it is available to members or others with a password on the coven website. The page numbers given in this article are from the online version.



of the Seasoning”, which takes place three times for each full moon during the summer months:

You shall bless tonight the cornfields,  
 Draw a magic circle 'round them  
 To protect them from destruction,  
 Blast of mildew, blight of insect,  
 From the birds, the thieves of cornfields,  
 From the beasts who steal the corn-ear!  
 In the night, when all is silence,  
 In the night when all is darkness,  
 When the Spirit of Sleep and Silence  
 Shuts the doors of all the dwellings,  
 So that not an ear can hear you,  
 So that not an eye can see you,  
 Rise up from your bed in silence,  
 Lay aside your garments wholly,  
 Walk around the fields we planted,  
 'Round the borders of the cornfields,  
 Covered by your tresses only,  
 Robed with darkness as a garment.  
 Thus the fields shall be more fruitful;  
 For the passing of your footsteps,  
 Will draw a magic circle round them,  
 So that neither blight nor mildew,  
 Neither burrowing worm nor insect  
 Shall pass o'er the magic circle.

This passage occurs about two-thirds of the way into the ritual, after the participants have recited a number of invocations to the sun and the earth, calling for good weather, for rain, and for an abundant season of harvest. While this segment is being recited, the two players representing the Harvest Lord and Corn Maiden perform the action suggested: they walk three times in a circle as if walking around the cornfields. They remove their ritual robes, as instructed in the poem.

When they have walked three times around the circle, they then perform the “Great Rite”. While this action takes place, the following segment of the poem is chanted as accompaniment:

When the noiseless night descended  
 Broad and dark o'er field and forest,  
 When the mournful south wind

Sorrowing sang among the hemlocks,  
 And the Spirit of Sleep and Silence  
 Shut the doors of all the dwellings,  
 From their bed they rose together.  
 Laid aside their garments wholly,  
 And with darkness clothed and guarded,  
 Unashamed and unaffrighted,  
 Walked securely 'round the cornfields,  
 Drew the sacred, magic circle  
 Of their footprints 'round the cornfields.  
 No one but the Midnight only  
 Saw their beauty in the darkness,  
 No one but the west wind  
 Heard the pantings of their bosoms,  
 In reverence the darkness wrapped them  
 Closely in his sacred mantle,  
 So that none might see their beauty,  
 So that none might boast "I saw them."<sup>19</sup>

Here the language of the poetry takes on an additional layer of erotically-charged meaning, since the participants are enacting a symbolic (or, in some cases perhaps, actual) act of sexual intercourse. The poem not only instructs the participants to disrobe, but also normalizes the experience of ritual nudity with language suggesting they should be "unashamed" and that they are "clothed and guarded" with darkness (in fact the interior of magical temple rooms are usually very dim, lit only with candles). The last line "So that none might boast 'I saw them'" also reiterates the usual practice of having the coveners turn their heads away while the "Great Rite" takes place. It is a stroke of luck and ingenuity for DesRosiers to have hit upon a passage which more or less requires ritual nudity. This oft maligned aspect of pagan witchcraft practice is described by Hutton as being a desirable and perhaps necessary component of ritual performance:

... in combination with other components normally present, such as candlelight, incense and music, it conveys a very powerful sense that something abnormal is going on; that the participants in the circle have cast off their everyday selves and limitations and entered into a space in which the extraordinary can be achieved. If the experience generates a

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<sup>19</sup> *The Song of Hiawatha*, XIII, ll. 36-59 and 76-95, in *The Poetic Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, New York, 1891, 170-71.

degree of nervousness – which is initially the case for most people – then this can have the effect of increasing their sensitivity and receptivity and so call forth more powerful ritual performances from them.<sup>20</sup>

Another poet (and an avowed naturalist, incidentally) whose work is frequently used in the cycle is Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* is surely one of the most eloquent and sensual paeans to nature ever written. Its use in *The Provider Cycle* allows Whitman's invocation of nature's beauty and valour to double as an invocation of the deities or god-forms associated with the dramatis personae, including Persephone, Demeter, Apollo, Hecate, etc. Here, in the "Rite of the Seasoning" (which takes place three times, for each of the full moons of the summer months), with slightly revised words from Whitman's "Return of the Heroes" (also known as "A Carol of Harvest") participants celebrate the beauty and fertility of the earth as seeds are ritually planted and blessed:

For the lands, and for these passionate days, and for ourselves,  
Now we awhile retire to Thee, O soil of summer's fields,  
Reclining on Thy breast, giving ourselves to Thee,  
Answering the pulses of Thy sane and equable heart,  
Tuning a verse for Thee.  
O Earth that hast no voice, confide in us a voice,  
O bounty of our lands – O boundless summer growths,  
O lavish brown parturient earth – O infinite teeming womb,  
A song to narrate Thee.<sup>21</sup>

The changes from Whitman's original are minor: "I" is changed to "we", and "autumn's fields" become "summer's fields". DesRosiers changes "harvest of our lands" to "bounty of our lands" to reflect the earlier seasonal timing of this ritual. But since the terms "bounty" and "harvest" also correspond to specific ritual actions, namely the vaunting of the Earth Goddess' fertility and the sacrifice of the Harvest Lord, the intentional editing and recontextualization takes on an additional layer of meaning. The word "harvest" may mean gathering of crops, and also functions as a synonym for "slay".

Since the ritual cycle unfolds over several months, such terms may be

<sup>20</sup> "A Modest Look at Ritual Nudity", in Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, London, 2003, 194.

<sup>21</sup> Walt Whitman, "The Return of the Heroes", ll. 1-9, in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon, New York, 1965, 301-302.

altered to reflect seasonally appropriate timing. The sickle displayed upon the altar, and which is later used in the pantomimed slaughter of the Harvest Lord during the “Harvest Home” rite, may be used equally effectively for cutting sheaves of wheat, or slitting the throat of the young lord. The descriptions of the flora and fauna of the first half (the first three rituals) of the cycle are full of vigour, colour and juicy vibrancy; the second half portends decay, dormancy and death. In the first half of the year, the Harvest Lord and the Sun are glorified, and the Goddess in her Virgin/Maiden aspect. In the second half of the cycle, the Earth is emphasized in her guise as Mother/Crone/Deathbringer, whereas the Harvest Lord has become a vehicle for propitiation of the fields. Within this thematic context we may again observe double meaning in words like “seed”. This image occurs again and again in *The Provider Cycle*: “Seeds Elemental in the Womb-Matrix”, “O seed we planted in the dark furrow!”, “Blessed be this seedtime and our new-sown seed, blessed be the seed implanted in a fertile field”, “the image of our longing is the full head of seed”, “for the seed of today is the flower and fruit of the morrow”, etc. The planting of seeds bears grain and fruit for sustenance; symbolically, modern pagans view the planting of “seeds” in a ritual framework as representative of goals and aspirations.

But “seed” is also used in its arcane sexual sense, referring to semen. Ritualized copulation in the fields is one of the oldest forms of sympathetic magic known to humanity – this act is still performed in some parts of the world to encourage crop growth. In the climactic scene of Thomas Tryon’s horror novel *Harvest Home*, which lends so much of its structure and language to *The Provider Cycle* (three of the ritual titles and a great deal of prose text are drawn from it), the ritualized sexual union (called “the making of the corn”) of the Harvest Lord and Corn Maiden is immediately followed by an orgiastic frenzy, as the women caress the Harvest Lord’s naked body, and then by a gruesome act of human sacrifice, in which the women gathered to perform the rite attack the Harvest Lord with garden hoes and hack him apart, scattering his flesh throughout the soil. In this way, the Lord’s “seed” is spilt upon the earth, providing a powerful symbolic, sympathetic component to the women’s rite, and his decaying flesh quite literally nourishes the soil, ensuring future growth. The following summer, a child is born to the Corn Maiden. The circle is complete.

Mircea Eliade discusses modern fertility rites as re-enactments of rites of creation myths of *Terra Mater*, and as having “religious significance.

Sexual union and the orgy are rites celebrated in order to re-actualize primordial events.”<sup>22</sup> In a passage which may well have inspired Tryon, Eliade elaborates upon the purpose of the ritual dismemberment of the sacrificial victim:

This bloody rite evidently corresponds to the myth of the dismemberment of a primordial divinity. The orgy which accompanies it enables us to glimpse another meaning as well: the fragments of the victim’s body were assimilated to the seed that fecundates the Earth-Mother.<sup>23</sup>

The next lines continue with more excerpts from “Leaves of Grass”, whose form DesRosiers truncates considerably, although leaving individual lines intact:

And Thou orb aloft full-dazzling! O sun of noon rufulent!  
Our special word to thee. Hear us, O illustrious!  
Thy lovers we, for always we have loved Thee.  
Thou that with fructifying heat and light;  
Thou that to fields and weeds and little wild flowers givest so  
liberally;  
Shed, shed Thyself on us and ours.  
Nor only launch Thy subtle dazzle and Thy strength for these;  
But prepare the later afternoon of our Day – prepare our  
lengthening shadows,  
Prepare our starry nights.<sup>24</sup>

DesRosiers decided to capitalize “Thee” in keeping with the tendency of neo-pagan writers to refer to Earth as a proper name, or deity. He also changed the spelling of “rufulent” to “refulgent” but this may have been an error in transcription. He replaces “grapes” with “fields” – another deferral to seasonal accuracy – and replaces “mine and me” with the converse “us and ours”. DesRosiers also felt the need to change “Prepare the later afternoon of me myself” to “*But prepare the latter afternoon of our Day*”.

DesRosiers then leaves Whitman behind for the moment and

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<sup>22</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, New York, 1975, 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>24</sup> Walt Whitman, “Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling”, ll. 1, 5-7, 15, 23-25 (*Leaves of Grass*, 388).

continues with excerpts from two poets within this same invocation (spoken by all present): three lines from Friedrich Hölderlin's "To the Fates", written in 1799, followed by four lines from a more contemporary poem "On Growing Old", by John Masefield. Although from very different sources, these excerpts sustain the same powerful, sensual language of Whitman's poetry:

Only one summer, grant us, Powerful Spirits!  
 One autumn, one, to ripen all our songs,  
 So that our hearts, sated with sweet delight, may more willingly die.  
 Let us have joy and beauty, wisdom and passion,  
 Bread to the soul, rain where the summers parch,  
 Give us but these, and though the darkness close  
 Even the night will blossom as the rose.

The first three lines are adapted from these four of Hölderlin's:

Grant me just one summer, powerful ones,  
 And just one autumn for ripe songs,  
 That my heart, filled with that sweet  
 Music, may more willingly die within me.

Or in another translation:

A single summer grant me, great powers, and  
 A single autumn for fully ripened song  
 That, sated with the sweetness of my  
 Playing, my heart may more willingly die.<sup>25</sup>

In Masefield's case, the transcription is faithful but for one important change. In his poem, he addresses "Beauty" as a proper name or concept. Masefield's original line is "Let us have joy and wisdom, Beauty, wisdom and passion". DesRosiers changes this to "Let us have joy and beauty, wisdom and passion" and beauty is here merely one of several

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<sup>25</sup> The first of these two translations is by James Mitchell in *The Fire of the Gods Drives Us to Set Forth by Day and by Night*, San Francisco, 1978, and the second is by Walter Kaufmann in *Twenty German Poets: A Bilingual Collection*, New York, 1963, 59. Hölderlin's original lines ("An die Parzen") are: "Nur einen Sommer gönnt, ihr Gewaltigen! / Und einen Herbst zu reifen Gesänge mir, / Daß williger mein Herz, von süßen / Spiele gesättiget, dann mir sterbe."

qualities wished for.<sup>26</sup>

DesRosiers takes a passage from Whitman again in “The Rite of Good Gathering” (a rite which serves as a harvest festival that usually takes place in late August or early September), again drawing upon “A Carol of Harvest for 1867”. The changes are somewhat more involved, and the recontextualization is profound. Whitman refers to America’s riches in terms of both her natural resources and her human ones, specifically soldiers. DesRosiers changes “America” to “Earth” but the image of sacrifice in exchange for abundance works powerfully here:

Fecund America! To-day,  
 Thou art all over set in births and joys!  
 Thou groan’st with riches! thy wealth clothes thee as with a swathing garment!  
 Thou laughest loud with ache of great possessions!  
 A myriad-twinning life, like interlacing vines, binds all thy vast demesne!  
 As some huge ship, freighted to water’s edge, thou ridest into port!  
 As rain falls from the heaven, and vapors rise from earth, so  
     have the precious values fallen upon thee, and risen out of thee!  
 Thou envy of the globe! thou miracle!  
 Thou, bathed, choked, swimming in plenty!  
 Thou lucky Mistress of the tranquil barns!  
 Thou Prairie Dame that sittest in the middle, and lookest out upon thy world, and lookest East, and lookest West!  
 Dispensatress, that by a word givest a thousand miles – that giv’st a million farms, and missest nothing!  
 Thou All-Acceptress – thou Hospitable – (thou only art hospitable, as God is hospitable.)<sup>27</sup>

DesRosiers makes the following changes (*italics mine*):

Fertile *Earth!* Today Thou art all over set in births and joys!  
 Thou groanest with riches, Thy wealth clothes Thee as a royal garment,  
 Thou laughest aloud with ache of great possessions.  
 Thou envy of the world! Thou miracle!  
 Thou bathed, *immersed*, swimming in plenty!  
 Thou *bounteous* Mistress of the tranquil barns!

<sup>26</sup> John Masefield, *Poems*, New York, 1967, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Walt Whitman, “The Return of the Heroes”, ll. 23-26, 30-35 (*Leaves of Grass*, 302).

Dispensatress, that by a word givest a thousand miles, a million  
farms, and misses nothing.  
Thou All-acceptress! Thou Hospitable!  
Thou only art hospitable as God is hospitable.

Whitman bemoans the loss of human life amidst natural beauty and fecundity; DesRosiers' purpose is to reawaken this same sentiment in ritual fashion, not only with regard to a neo-pagan view of the world, but an anti-war one. At the same time, it is an invocation of the Earth Goddess as personified by the Corn Maiden, and therefore the words of praise and wonderment for America/Earth is also contextualized as a language of seduction. Here we have again the threefold thematic elements: the Eternal Return, the sacrifice of the young man, and the romantic tragedy. The chosen one, whether the soldier or the sacrificial king, gives his life for others.

Christianity's appropriation of the sacrificed king trope is easily traced to pre-Christian myths of dying vegetation gods, whose lives are forfeit to fertilize the fields. The image of dead soldiers, the killing fields of war, provides a powerful symbolic parallel to this idea of youthful vigour offered up to provide an assurance of life, abundance and protection of a community. The fear of starvation is not so very different from the fear of invasion, perhaps; Hutton compares the fear of starvation of ancient peoples to the very modern sentiment of fear of a dying planet, devoid of vegetation.<sup>28</sup> Just as ancient peoples strove to protect their crops with magic, modern pagans use magic to protect the topsoil and groundwater, without which our potential for food growth would be seriously depleted.

Occult scholar Colin Wilson referred to the nineteenth-century pagan revival as "fundamentally a revolt against coarse-grained reality".<sup>29</sup> Regarding the Romantics, he says:

Their chief weakness was that they did not think. But their strength was an ability to be carried along on a flood of emotion that took them a long way towards mystical insight. The Romantics used the imagination to release pent-up frustrations and to conjure up the kind of world they would like to live in.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, 325.

<sup>29</sup> Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History*, New York, 1971, 325.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.



If the Romantics and occultists were rebelling against the coarse-grained realism of the increasing industrialization of England, those drawn to paganism and magic in the United States during the occult revival of the late 1960s-early 1970s were responding to more than the myriad distractions of the counter-culture.

Wilson's description of a childlike, emotionally driven approach to social change is appropriate for the neo-pagan hippies, as well. The Vietnam war prompted many young people to examine the most basic elements of human nature, contemplating not only danger and death but the true meaning of freedom and personal integrity. Consciousness-raising aimed at shared understanding of diverse social groups necessitated examining what stood in the way of human co-operation. The poisoning of the planet (perpetrated by a growing corporate based agricultural industry, and writ large in the chemical wasting of Southeast Asia by defoliants like Agent Orange) prompted not only the back-to-the-earth movement with its attendant organic gardening and vegetarianism, but a culture of environmental activism that spawned an interest in earth-based spirituality.

Just as the language and gestures of anti-war protests were augmented with the teachings of Gandhi and the Reverend Martin Luther King, the fight to save the earth was enhanced by the words of poets and naturalists like Walt Whitman, Wendell Berry and Rachel Carson. The earlier revival of paganism engendered some of the best loved and most artful poetry in the English language; it is little wonder that these words are used over a century later to revive the same imagery, ideals and ideology that inspired their creators, in rites designed to heal the planet and its people and to awaken a personal connection to the living Earth.

## TWO TONGUES IN ONE MOUTH: EROTIC ELEMENTS IN NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL'S IRISH POETRY AND ITS ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

WIM TIGGES

The Irish novelist and storyteller George Moore has a priest in one of his short stories maintaining that “The Irish find poetry in other things than sex”.<sup>1</sup> Whatever he may have thought about this Catholic view, Moore himself, well versed not only in the late nineteenth-century Continental literary tradition but also, if more indirectly, in the native Irish one, was well aware that when it comes to poetry and particularly that in their own language, the Irish have never been averse to the frank treatment of matters sexual and erotic. Indeed, the medieval Irish classic epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, in which the redoubtable Queen Medb of Connaught promises, in Thomas Kinsella’s translation, her “own friendly thighs on top of” more material rewards in return for the loan of that desirable Irish bull around which the whole cattle-raid story pivots, is a conventional mixture of prose and poetry, and therefore does not strictly fall within the parameters of this present volume. But one of the most famous poems in the canon of Irish literature is the highly erotic vision poem *The Midnight Court* (*Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, c. 1780) by Brian Merriman (?1745-1805).<sup>2</sup>

The literary history of Ireland is a bilingual one, and after a dip during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of its most celebrated

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<sup>1</sup> George Moore, “Patchwork”, in *The Untilled Field* (1903, rev. edn, 1931), Gloucester, 1990, 54.

<sup>2</sup> *The Táin*, trans. Thomas Kinsella, Oxford, 1969, 55, and see Lady Gregory’s translation (“my own close friendship”) from the “chaster” version in her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, in, for example, *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, ed. Claire Booss, New York, 1986, 522. Brian Merriman, *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. Liam P. Ó Murchú, Dublin, 1982, also contains a translation of this 1026-line poem into English. For a more accessible recent translation, see Brian Merriman’s *The Midnight Court and Other Poems from the Irish*, trans. David Marcus, Dublin, 1989, 5-40.

living poets now once again write in the Irish language. Obviously, they need translations of their work into English in order to become accessible to a wider public, even within Ireland. It may be of interest, therefore, to look in some detail at a handful of poems by one of the major Irish poets of the present day, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Born of Irish parents in Lancashire in 1952, but brought up in Irish-speaking West Kerry and Tipperary, and educated at University College, Cork, where she studied English and Irish, Ní Dhomhnaill is now one of the best-known poets in the Irish language. In this essay, I will look at a handful of poems from the bilingual collection *Pharaoh's Daughter*,<sup>3</sup> in order to note how the poet's Irish texts have been rendered into English by a variety of other poets, and in particular how the originals and the translations correspond as well as differ in their erotic charge.

To give readers who are not familiar with Ní Dhomhnaill's work an impression of her poetry, here is the first poem I intend to discuss, "Oileán", both in Irish and in English:

Oileán is ea do chorp  
i lár na mara móire.  
Tá do ghéaga spréite ar bhraillín  
gléigeal os farraige faoileán.

Toibreacha fíoruise iad t'uisí 5  
tá íochtar fola orthu is uachtar meala.  
Thabharfaidís fuarán dom  
i lár mo bheirfin  
is deoch slánaithe  
sa bhfiabhras. 10

Tá do dhá shúil  
mar locha sléibhe  
lá breá Lúnasa  
nuair a bhíonn an spéir  
ag glinniúint sna huiscí. 15  
Giolcaigh scuabacha iad t'fhabhraí  
ag fás faoina gciumhais.  
Is dá mbeadh agam báidín

<sup>3</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1990; selected poems in Irish with English translations by thirteen Irish poets, including Michael Hartnett, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, Derek Mahon, John Montague and Paul Muldoon.

chun teacht faoi do dhéin, báidín fiondruine, gan barrchleite amach uirthi ná bunchleite isteach uirthi ach aon chleite amháin droimeann dearg ag déanamh ceoil dom fhéin ar bord,	20
thógfainn suas na seolta boga bána bogóideacha; threabhfainn trí fharraigí arda is thiocfainn chughat mar a luíonn tú uaigneach, iathghlas, oileánach.	30

The English translation, “Island”, is by John Montague (b. 1929), author amongst many other works of a collection of love poems called *The Great Cloak* (1978):

Your nude body is an island asprawl on the ocean bed. How beautiful your limbs, spread- eagled under seagulls’ wings!	
Spring wells, your temples, depths of blood, honey crests. A cooling fountain you furnish in the furious, sweltering heat and a healing drink when feverish.	5
Your two eyes gleam like mountain lakes on a bright Lammas day when the sky sparkles in dark waters. Your eyelashes are reeds rustling along the fringe. And if I had a tiny boat to waft me towards you,	10
	15

a boat of findrinny, 20  
 not a stitch out of place  
 from top to bottom  
 but a single plume  
 of reddish brown  
 to play me on board, 25

To hoist the large white  
 billowing sails; thrust  
 through foaming seas  
 and come beside you  
 where you lie back, 30  
 wistful, emerald,  
 islanded.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of being two lines shorter than the original, Montague's rendering fairly closely reproduces the narrative as well as the imagery of Ní Dhomhnaill's poem. As becomes clear from the English version, it is partly based on the nature imagery as found in that erotic biblical poem, the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, where the lovers describe each other in terms of natural phenomena: wine and ointments, roses and lilies, roes and hinds, and so on. As in that Song, we here get a description of a male body from the female point of view. Like the luscious nature imagery, this motif is to be found already in some of the Old Irish love lyrics of the period preceding the tenth century.

To a much greater extent than is the case for instance in Old English or Middle French literature, which is predominantly masculine in outlook, medieval Irish poetry also reflects the feminine perspective.<sup>5</sup> As, for instance, in "Dún" ("Stronghold"), which in its translation by the Cork poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (b. 1942) opens "In your fortress arms / I will never die", Ní Dhomhnaill uses traditional Irish metaphors, where the protecting male body is compared to a fortress or a garden ("And in that garden / There are bees and olive-trees / There is honey on the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-42 (Irish text) and 41-43 (English translation).

<sup>5</sup> See *Early Irish Lyrics*, ed. and trans. Gerard Murphy, Dublin, 1956, rpt. 1998, a bilingual edition, for such "classics" as "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare" and "Liadan Tells of Her Love for Cuirithir". Another bilingual collection, James Carney's *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (1967), reproduced in one volume with *The Irish Bardic Poet*, Dublin, 1985, contains that lovely short Middle Irish love lyric (28): "cride hé, / daire cnó, / ócán é, / pócán dó" ("[my] heart he [is], a grove of nuts, a young man he, a little kiss for him" – my translation).

rushes”),<sup>6</sup> with the difference that in “Oileán” it is (like) an island – as is suggested by line 31 in the translation, possibly even the “emerald island” of Ireland itself, which is more usually equated with a woman who is simultaneously an old hag and a beautiful young woman.

In another poem, “Iarúsailéim” (translated by Tom Mac Intyre, b. 1931), Ní Dhomhnaill’s persona compares herself to “Jerusalem, the holy city, / the milk-and-honey flow, / carbuncle and sapphire / ground me ...”. But, she tells her lover in the second stanza of that poem, “I won’t tell you, / you’d get a swelled head”.<sup>7</sup> We shall learn to recognize this mixture of elevated classical Irish and biblical imagery and down-to-earth homely humour as typical of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetic style. The poem “Island” is more seriously lyrical all the way through, but by comparing the style of her Irish to that of her translator’s English, I will now proceed to look at the source and target text of this poem in more detail.

More or less literally translated, the first stanza reads as follows: “An island it is, your body, in the middle of the big sea. Your limbs are spread on a pure white sheet over a sea of seagulls.” Montague, in his translation, has added words like “nude”, “asprawl” and “spread-eagled”, as well as a final exclamation mark, which make the text more explicitly erotic. In the Irish, the nakedness of the body has to be guessed, and the body/island is not “asprawl” (suggesting sexual abandon, confirmed by the addition of “spread-eagled”), but simply “in the centre” of the sea. The adjective “gléigeal”, which means “pure white”, hence “brilliant”, also “beautiful”,<sup>8</sup> in the original qualifies the singular noun “bráillín” (“sheet”) and not the plural “géaga” (“limbs”). The limbs are simply described (the verb “tá” indicates a state of being), and there is no exclamatory (“How ...!”) quality to lines 3-4 at all.

Does this mean that Montague has mistranslated? Does it also mean he has made this paean of the beloved male into a more explicitly erotic poem? Of course, John Montague is a major poet in his own right, and it is probably best to qualify his version of “Oileán” as a rendering rather than a translation. What we can say is that Montague’s subject is

<sup>6</sup> *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>8</sup> Dictionary meanings of Irish words have been mainly derived from Niall Ó Dónaill’s *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, Dublin, 1977, rpt. 1998, the standard dictionary of Modern Irish. Occasionally, especially for obsolete literary terms, use has also been made of the classical Irish-English dictionary, Patrick S. Dinneen’s *Foclóir Ghaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish-English Dictionary*, Dublin, 1904, rpt. 1927.

presented in a more passionate atmosphere than that of Ní Dhomhnaill. In the second stanza, he translates “i lár mo bheirfin”, meaning literally “in the middle of my boiling heat” as “in the furious, sweltering heat”, which certainly raises the temperature. Lines 11-12 read literally “Your two eyes are like mountain lakes”; Montague adds that they “gleam”, which, again, is only an inference in the original, as is the “rustling” of the eyelashes/reeds in line 17, which in Irish are simply “growing” (“ag fás”).

Ní Dhomhnaill’s persona literally sighs: “And if I had a little boat to come near to you” (ll. 18-19) – “come”, not “waft”; incidentally, “fiondrúine” is a literary word which means “white bronze” – Montague facetiously transliterates it to “findrinny”, which is possibly a Hibernicism, although I have not found this word in either Terence Dolan’s *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* (1998) or Bernard Share’s *Slanguage – A Dictionary of Irish Slang* (1997). It is given in Richard Wall’s *Dictionary and Glossary for the Irish Literary Revival* (Gerrards Cross, 1995) with illustrative quotations from W.B. Yeats and Joseph Campbell, so we may conclude that the translator has here introduced an Anglo-Irish poeticism to render the classical Gaelic Irish one.

Apart from these seemingly carping remarks about Montague’s rendering of his source, it is clear that his “Island” is an erotic poem. The erotic charge, which in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem is implicit, here comes from a more explicitly suggestive use of sexually tinted words like “nude”, “asprawl”, “spread-eagled”, “furious”, “sweltering”, “gleam”, “waft”, “stitch”, “thrust”, “foaming”, and “wistful”. The original has “spréite” (“spread”), “braillín” (“sheet”), “beirfean” (“feverish or boiling heat”), “threabhfaínn” (“I would plough”) and “uaigneach” (“lonely” – the wistfulness is at best implied). Other erotic phrases have been rendered more literally, for instance in line 6, describing his temples (“uisí”): “tá íochtar fola orthu is uachtar meala”; Montague’s rendering (“depths of blood, honey crests”) is beautifully precise as well as poetical for a more literal “they have the bottom of blood, the top of honey [on them]”. Ní Dhomhnaill, too, has the “fever” (“fiabhras”, a noun, in line 10), and the studded (“bogóideach”) sails (ll. 29/27), but in the end her persona will come “to you / as you lie” (“chughat / mar a luíonn tú”) rather than the more suggestive “beside you / where you lie back” (ll. 31-32/29-30). The original, I would say, without deprecating the quality of Montague’s poem, is more subtle – perhaps, though it may be a dangerous statement to make, more feminine.

Having looked in some detail at the erotic nature of a complete poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and a rendering of it by John Montague, let us now look more swiftly at a few other poems from *Pharaoh's Daughter* and investigate how other translators have dealt with their sources. "Mo Mhíle Stór" has here been translated by the most famous contemporary (Northern) Irish poet, Seamus Heaney (b. 1939). The title, which Heaney has left intact, is a term of endearment, meaning something like "my dearest love", more literally "my thousand treasures". Ní Dhomhnaill starts off with a direct address: "I dtús mo shaoil do mheallaís mé ..." ("in the beginning of my life [with a wink at the Irish idiom "i dtús an tsaoil", in the beginning of the world] you beguiled me"), whereas Heaney prefers a more passive rendering – "I was under your spell from the start".<sup>9</sup> This is an acceptable colloquial rendering, but it does, however barely, introduce the suggestion that the persona is accusing herself for her infatuation rather than the partner she addresses. It is interesting to compare Heaney's rendering with that by Michael Hartnett (1941-99), a poet and translator from Co. Limerick, whose début collection, *Anatomy of a Cliché* (1968), is a book of love poems to his wife, and who was a great admirer of the work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, to whom he dedicated an Irish collection called *Do Nuala: Foidhne Chrainn* ("For Nuala: Patience of a Tree") in 1984, and many of whose poems he translated into English. His translation, "My Dearest One", opens with an active sentence: "At my life's start you coaxed me."<sup>10</sup>

Heaney, like Montague in his translation of "Oileán", chooses to introduce images that are not in the original. "When you sailed away / my goodbyes were the gulls in your wake" (ll. 7-8) does not quite translate what it says in the corresponding lines (9-10) in the original: "Ansan d'imís ar bord loinge, / chuireas mo mhíle slán i do choinne" (literally, "Then you went away on board a ship, I put my thousand farewells against you"). The gulls are a figment, however appropriately poetical, of Heaney's imagination; more importantly, once again his phrasing is more passive than that of the original.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Pharaoh's Daughter*, 48 (Irish text), 49 (English translation).

<sup>10</sup> For Hartnett's version, see *An Crann faoi Bhláth / The Flowering Tree: Contemporary Irish Poetry with Verse Translations*, eds Declan Kiberd and Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Dublin, 1991, 285.

<sup>11</sup> Hartnett's earlier translation is literal: "Then you boarded ship / my thousand farewells went with you."



The active phrasing of the original by a female narrator may be seen in the light of the theme of the Irish “strong woman”, which is also exemplified in the poem “Mise Ag Tiomáint”, translated by Tom Mac Intyre as “In Charge”, but literally meaning “I Am Driving”.<sup>12</sup> In this poem, consisting of five conventional quatrains, a female persona tells the “lover- / boy of [her] heart” that she is willing to go any place in Ireland with him, but that she has “paid for this vehicle” and she is the driver, so let him not dare leave the car to converse with other women while she is off to the toilet.

In “Mise Ag Tiomáint” Ní Dhomhnaill uses a traditional four-line stanza arrangement and a rhythmic and sound pattern that goes back all the way to the early Middle Ages, but the phrasing is flippantly contemporary. Mac Intyre’s “I’m desperate for a piss / and the johns is a climb / way up that ziggurat” (ll. 6-8) accurately if somewhat freely translates Ní Dhomhnaill’s “mo mhún agam le scaoileadh síos / is siogúrat le dreapadh suas / chun teacht ar an leithreas poiblí”. But in “Mo Mhíle Stór” she uses free verse with only occasional assonances (in Irish verse, full rhyme has never been obligatory and assonance counts for rhyme), but here it is her imagery that is traditional.

The lover who beguiled her promised her “big long sleeps on a duck-down bed / and gloves made out of the skins of fish” (ll. 5-6). The latter image (“lámhainní de chraiceann éisc”, l. 8) strikes an archaic note, and it is actually found in an anonymous Irish folk song of the nineteenth century, “Donall Oge: Grief of a Girl’s Heart”, which in Lady Gregory’s translation contains the lines: “You promised me a thing that is not possible, / That you would give me gloves of the skin of a fish.”<sup>13</sup> With the use of this image, Ní Dhomhnaill has placed her poem in the tradition of the woman’s lament for the former lover who has sailed across the sea. This theme in turn fits into the broader one, so popular throughout Irish literary history, of trust and betrayal, but here acquires a particularly erotic overtone, because in this case the lover returns. In the third and final stanza we learn that he “sailed through life” and “came back home” (l. 13). Then, the persona says, in a marvellously concise erotic image,

<sup>12</sup> *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, 102 (Irish text), 103 (English translation).

<sup>13</sup> For the full text of this poem, see *1000 Years of Irish Poetry: The Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Poets from Pagan Times to the Present*, ed. Kathleen Hoagland, New York, 1947, rpt. 1962, 238-40. Under the title of “Broken Vows”, five of its fourteen stanzas are recited by “Mr Grace” at the Misses Morkan’s Christmas party in John Huston’s film *The Dead* (1985), based on James Joyce’s story from *Dubliners*.

“your boat beached on my bed” (“Tháinig do long i dtír / ar mo leaba” : ll. 14/18-19). In Heaney’s subsequently more or less loyal version the poem then concludes (ll. 15-20):

As I covered you all in honey,  
I saw your hair had gone grey  
and straight;  
but in my memory the curls grew on,  
twelve coils in the ripening  
crop on your head.

In the background, one almost detects a whiff of Molly Bloom’s resigned “and I thought as well him as another” in her famous monologue that concludes James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.<sup>14</sup>

Molly Bloom’s half enchanted and half mocking attitude to the male physique (“with his two bags full and his other thing hanging down out of him or sticking up at you like a hatrack no wonder they hide it with a cabbageleaf”<sup>15</sup>) can also be detected in those poems where Ní Dhomhnaill mockingly and at the same time admiringly describes the naked male, “Gan do Chuid Éadaigh” and “Fear”.<sup>16</sup>

Like Hartnett, Paul Muldoon (b. 1955), who translated the first of these poems, is one of Ní Dhomhnaill’s favourite translators. His rendering, succinctly titled “Nude” (the literal translation of “Gan do Chuid Éadaigh” is the more directly personal “Without Your Clothes On”) is in snappy quatrains, splitting up the eight-line stanzas of the original Irish poem into free verse. The first eight lines of the poem, with a literal line by line translation beside it and Muldoon’s version beneath, read as follows:

Is fearr liom tú  
gan do chuid éadaigh ort –  
do léine shíoda  
is do charabhat,  
do scáth fearthainne faoi t’ascaill  
is do chulaith

I prefer you  
without your clothes on –  
your silk shirt  
and your cravat,  
your umbrella under your arm  
and your suit

<sup>14</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, eds Hans Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior, New York, 1986, 643-44 (18.1604-605).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 620 (18.542-44).

<sup>16</sup> *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, 90 and 140 (Irish texts), 92 and 142 (English translations).

trí phíosa faiseanta  
le barr feabhais táilliúrachta, ...

three-piece [and] stylish  
most excellently tailored, ...

The long and short  
of it is I'd far rather see you nude –  
your silk shirt  
and natty

tie, the brolly under your oxters  
in case of a rainy day,  
the three-piece seersucker  
suit that's so incredibly trendy, ...

The differences between the original and Muldoon's rendering is apparent at once. In *Ní Dhomhnaill's* Irish, the imagined undressed male is made out to be slightly pompous with his clothes on; probably, he sees himself as well-dressed and formal with unqualified cravat and umbrella – “scáth fearthainne” is a “rain covering”, like German “Regenschirm”, rather than a “brolly”, and his tie is only implicitly “natty”. His three-piece suit is “just so”, made “with the top of excellence of tailoring”, as it quite literally reads in Irish. Muldoon's naked ape is trendily casual, in fact “incredibly” so. The persona's tone is quite different as well – *Ní Dhomhnaill's* speaker is simply dismissive of the quality articles that cover her man's nakedness, whereas Muldoon's is more than mildly ironical.

Once again, I think it is not so much a matter of mistranslation as of replacing one erotic description by another. Muldoon apparently imagines his female persona as more critical of her lover, in any case as more explicitly teasing. So he creates a greater contrast when in the sequel, as the persona starts describing the man's physical being with admiration, she retains some of her initial comments on him:

For, unbeknownst to the rest  
of the world, behind the outward  
show lies a body unsurpassed  
for beauty, without so much as a wart

or blemish, but the brill-  
iant slink of a wild animal, a dream-  
cat, say, on the prowl,

leaving murder and mayhem  
in its wake.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas when he is dressed, he is a public figure, the naked man is something for her alone, private. Then he is beautiful and wild as an animal of prey. She notes his broad shoulders, his snow-white flanks, his slender waist, and “i do ghabhal / an rúta / go bhfuil barr pléisiúrtha ann” – “in your crotch the root in which there is the top of pleasure”, or, as Muldoon translates it: “the root that is the very seat / of pleasure, the pleasure-source” (ll. 30-32/31-32).

Eight more lines are devoted to a description of the softness and the magical smell of his skin, so that, as the narrator concludes in the final eight lines, if he comes out with her tonight to the dance, he had after all better keep his clothes on “rather than send / half the women of Ireland totally round the bend” (ll. 47-48).

A very similar poem is “Fear”, that is “A Man”, translated by a woman poet this time, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, as “Looking at a Man”.<sup>18</sup> In this poem, in five octaves, the narrator exhorts her lover to get undressed and join her in bed. The first octave describes the articles of clothing he should discard, in the second he is told to approach the bed so that she can run her eyes “all down the dark valleys of [his] skin” (l. 14). In the third stanza (ll. 17-24) he is given a basic lesson in lovemaking:

And don't be impatient  
With me tonight,  
Don't prompt me, “How will we do it?”  
Relax, understand  
How I can hardly, faced  
With the naked evidence,  
Satisfy my eyes  
Or close them, even to touch

Ní Chuilleanáin's translation is fairly close to the original, certainly in tone. In line 17 she translates the typical Irish synonymous collocation “grod ná giorraisc” (“neither sudden nor abrupt”) concisely as “impatient”, and “ná brostaigh ort” (“don't be in a hurry”) in line 20 as the equally colloquial “relax”.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, ll. 17-25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 140 and 142 (Irish text), 141 and 143 (English translation).

The fourth stanza describes in a few select details the naked man's fine physique, including his "ball fearga" ("male member"), "your sex / Perfect in its place" (ll. 31-32). In a contrapuntal development with "Gan do Chuid Éadaigh", "Fear" then concludes with a statement to the effect that this man approaching her bed is "the one they should praise / In public places" (ll. 33-34). He is "the model / For the artist's hand, / Standing before me / In your skin and a wristwatch" (ll. 37-40). The original text (ll. 37-38) suggests more specifically that he should be carved into a marble statue ("ba chóir go snoífi tú / id dhealbh marmair"), but both the original and the translation have as a closing line a contemporary version of Marvell's "time's wingèd chariot", the "uaireadóir" or "wristwatch". This love is not timeless.

Quite a number of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poems carry a sexual or erotic theme. In "An Bhean Mhídhilis", translated by Paul Muldoon as "The Unfaithful Wife",<sup>19</sup> we are presented with the narrative of a married woman who is approached in a pub by a delectable male. The adulterous affair builds up stanza by stanza, and we get most of the sordid details – the seduction by alcohol and "relentless repartee", the slipping of a hand between thighs, the unbuttoning of a dress, the dropping of trousers, the insertion of "his proper little charlie", the mutual delight, but also the far from romantic background of "plastic bags bursting with rubbish", the "refuse-sacks lying under the hedge" and the "dog-shit". At no stage of the proceedings, so the persona informs us at the end of each stanza, did she think it the appropriate moment to let on she is married, nor will she tell him if she runs into him again – "An ndéanfása?". This short final extra-stanzaic line means: "Wouldn't *you* do so?" rather than "Don't *you* think?". The Irish is more powerfully surprising in suddenly turning on a female reader and forcing her agreement.

A more curious text, finally, is the poem "Blodewedd" (a Welsh woman's name). I will first quote this poem in full in John Montague's rendering:

At the least touch of your fingertips  
I break into blossom,  
my whole chemical composition  
transformed.  
I sprawl like a grassy meadow  
fragrant in the sun;

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-109.

at the brush of your palm, all my herbs  
and spices spill open

frond by frond, lured to unfold  
and exhale in the heat; 10  
wild strawberries rife, and pimpernels  
fragrant and scarlet, blushing  
down their stems.  
To mow that rushy bottom;  
no problem. 15

All winter I waited silently  
for your appeal.  
I withered within, dead to all,  
curled away, and deaf as clay,  
all my life forces ebbing slowly 20  
till now I come to, at your touch,  
revived as from a deathly swoon.

Your sun lightens my sky  
and a wind lifts, like God's angel,  
to move the waters, 25  
every inch of me quivers  
before your presence,  
goose-pimples I get as you glide  
over me, and every hair  
stands on end. 30

Hours later I linger  
in the ladies toilet,  
a sweet scent wafting  
from all my pores,  
proof positive, if a sign 35  
were needed, that at the least  
touch of your fingertips  
I break into blossom.<sup>20</sup>

What are we to make of this poem? Even without knowing (as yet) who is addressing whom, the erotic element is predominantly present. Precisely what constitutes the erotic in a poem?

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 119.

More so than in the suggestive vocabulary (once again, “sprawl”, “lured”, “heat”, “blushing”, “wafting” and so on) the evocation of sexual arousal lies in the nature imagery, and in the mythical narrative. Sex and eroticism probably characterize humankind at their most natural, their most “primitive”, if you like. Hence, the emphasis in most of the poems we have dealt with here, both in the Irish and in the English, is on the metaphorical language which describes human feelings in terms of natural phenomena, and the human body in terms of animals and plants. Clothing, representative of restraining civilization, is rejected, as in “Gan do Chuid Éadaigh” and “Fear”. Secondly, with this Irish poet in particular, references are made to the imagery and narratives of ancient myths.

Even if we ignore an appeal to knowledge of the story of Blodewedd, the poem of that name still relates a universal myth of death and revival. A gesture of love makes the narrator “break into blossom”. She (we assume from the start that the narrator is feminine, although this is not textually confirmed until the somewhat down-to-earth reference to the ladies toilet – “leithreas / na mban” – in line 32) becomes like a “grassy meadow” with “herbs / and spices”. Like the natural scene, she has been “withered within, dead to all” during winter, and now the lover’s touch revives her. In the final stanza, the myth is pulled back into the humdrum human sexual world of a toilet, of “sweet scent”, of “proof positive”; the experience is clearly an erotic one, and at the same time one could read the whole poem as a narration by a *primavera* figure, a personified nature being revived in spring like a mistress by her lover.

The mythical story of Blodewedd or Blodeuwedd is told in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogion*, four Middle Welsh tales that have come down to us in manuscripts from the fourteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The mother of the young hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes, grandnephew of King Math of Gwynedd, swears consecutively that her son will have no name except she give it to him, will never be armed except by her, and “shall never have a wife of the race that is now on this earth”.<sup>22</sup> Being tricked by the plotting nephews of Math to give him the name of Lleu (“Fair”) and to arm him, the third taboo is overcome when Math conjures a wife for him out of the flowers of the oak, the broom and the meadowsweet. The beautiful result is Blodewedd, which means “Flower-face”.

<sup>21</sup> See “Math Son of Mathonwy”, in *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn and Thomas Jones, Everyman edn, 1949, rev. edn, 1974, 55-75.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

Soon afterwards, Blodewedd takes a lover, the hunter Gronw Bebyr, with whom she plots to kill Lleu the only way that is possible – when Lleu stands with one leg on a he-goat and with the other on the edge of his bath-tub. Gronw shoots Lleu, who changes into an eagle, but is later restored to his human shape and his rightful inheritance of Gwynedd, and Blodewedd is punished by being changed into an owl, to which all other birds will be hostile. When Blodewedd and Gronw first meet, “their talk that night was of the affection and love they had conceived one for the other”,<sup>23</sup> and Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem may more concretely reflect Blodewedd’s part in this love talk, or else Math’s first magically putting life into her. Metaphorically, the poem may mirror the nature of a woman like Blodewedd, but apart from the name occurring in the title, it is not made clear if and to what extent the myth is to be intertextually actualized in our reading of it. In the outcome, we can simply accept the text as a “turning on” poem, narrated in the language of nature myth, and leave it at that.

The aim of this essay has been to discuss the erotic elements in some original Irish poems by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and in their English renderings by various major poets. The fact that for whatever reason the poet had her Irish texts Englished by others rather than doing it herself has given rise to the creation of quite different poems, whose individuality, in spite of their relationship, gives the same *Ur-text* a variety of erotic charges. The English translations may be more than just that, but without them Ní Dhomhnaill’s fine Irish poems would have remained accessible to no more than a handful of readers. In their own right, they constitute a pluriform body of fine erotic poems, the poetic offspring of a single mother.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



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## SEX IN THE “SICK, SICK, BODY POLITIC”: TONY HARRISON’S FRUIT

SANDIE BYRNE

You complain  
that the machinery of sudden death,  
Fascism, the hot bad breath  
of Powers down small countries’ necks  
shouldn’t interfere with sex.

They *are* sex, love, we must include  
all these in love’s beatitude.  
Bad weather and the public mess  
drive us to private tenderness,  
though I wonder if together we,  
alone two hours can ever be  
love’s anti-bodies in the sick,  
sick body politic.<sup>1</sup>

Sex in Harrison’s poetry is represented as a sublime act of affirmation and unification opposed to forces of repression, division, and destruction, but as he says in “Durham”, yet it is indivisible from “the hot breath” of forces which, though they “shouldn’t interfere with sex”, “we must include ... / with love’s beatitude”. This essay examines Harrison’s opposition of sex/life/fire with war/death/fire, and the consolation and redemption for the body politic he finds in the body erotic.

The heartbeat and pulse of blood, the rhythm of sex, and the metre of poetry combine as the sign of a life force in Harrison’s work, though he acknowledges that the beat of our life’s blood is also counting down towards our death:

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<sup>1</sup> “Durham”, in Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems*, Penguin, 2nd edn, 1987, 70.

the metred couplet with its rhyme  
 revels in and coasts on time  
 we haven't got enough of – there  
 beneath the gently lifted hair  
 the artery that keeps repeating  
 life and its ending in one beating.<sup>2</sup>

This force is opposed to death, stasis, Tory politics, oppression and sexual repression, especially that of women. In some poems, life is associated with fire in the form of day, warmth, light, the sun, and sun-ripened fruit (Harrison's light-filled O), all of which oppose cold and darkness in the form of night, depression, blackness, and the void (Harrison's black O). In others, life opposes fire, which becomes a synecdoche of war.

As we might expect, sex is depicted as a unifying act – in the earlier poems politically as well as physically crossing borders. Poems and plays such as “The Curtain Catullus” and *The Common Chorus*,<sup>3</sup> might seem to be no more than a reiteration of “Make Love Not War”, but perhaps in a Cold War, the hedonistic or frivolous or somatic can itself be a kind of political statement.

In “The Chopin Express” Harrison imagines a US/Russian Cold War encounter:

Rusky, let my roving hands  
 sleigh and ski your Virgin Lands.  
 Let me trace out with my lips  
 the white indentures of your steppes.  
 The Mississippi is right glad  
 to wind right into Leningrad.

....

The fast express  
 makes our rhythms effortless.  
 Neutrality! Brave cocks and cunts  
 belong to no barbed continents.<sup>4</sup>

The sex between Communist and Capitalist begins as an act of defiance, but does not allay fears:

<sup>2</sup> “Deathwatch Dancethon”, in Tony Harrison, *Laureate's Block and Other Poems*, Penguin, 2000, 10.

<sup>3</sup> A version of *Lysistrata* set on Greenham Common (London, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Tony Harrison, *The Loiners*, London, 1970, 69.

Let no iron hammers crush  
 our tender parts to butcher's mush,  
 no whetted, scything sickle mow  
 my manhood off me and let no  
 weals, wounds or bruises, red or blue,  
 come from having slept with you.  
 I'm frightened, love; let no flag-stripes  
 flay your white flesh like wet tripes.

The gruesome images of these imagined consequences are however quickly subsumed by the comic audacity of the following stanza:

Relieve my tension. I can't come.  
 The world's a crematorium.  
 Hold me! Hold me! Eyes screwed tight  
 against the sizzling of the light.  
 I'm coming! Count-down! 3-2-1-  
 Zero! Earth! Moon! Sun!  
 The Constellations! Look, I spurt  
 my seed into her Russian dirt.

This uses a more contemporary register hinting at space-race and nuclear war fears. Nonetheless, the conclusion equates global with interpersonal *entente cordiale*:

The whole globe or the Bering Straits  
 divide the Soviets from the States.  
 They didn't then. Can they put walls  
 between a father and his balls,  
 A Russian and a Yankee gene?  
 I felt the broken world all come  
 together then, and all between  
 a conshie and a commie bum.<sup>5</sup>

The poet who writes of division and discontinuity seems to seek connection through the personal; through *eros*, rarely if ever *agape*.

Though much of Harrison's writing is staged in urban landscapes, he turns to natural imagery to represent sexuality. The virility of the poems' narrator is often associated with physical labour in gardens and in the cause of fertility. In "Cypress and Cedar", maleness is represented by the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

narrator's jeans, which take on a compound scent of denim, cedar wood, sweat, and leather as he works outside. The poem argues that the scents of cedar (said to be aphrodisiac, and standing for life) and cypress (standing for decay and death) should be blended, but here, labouring hard, the man becomes associated with the scent of the wood he works with, and therefore life and libido:

To quote the carpenter he "stinks o' shite"  
and his wife won't sleep with him on cypress days,  
but after a day of cedar, so he said,  
she comes back eagerly into his bed ....

Today I've laboured with my hands for hours  
sawing fenceposts up for winter; one tough knot  
jolted the chainsaw at my face and sprayed  
a beetroot cedar dust off the bucked blade ....

To get one gatepost free I had to tug  
for half an hour, but dragged up from its hole  
it smelled, down even to the last four feet  
rammed in the ground, still beautifully sweet  
as if the grave had given life parole  
and left the sour earth perfumed where I dug.

Bob gave me a cedar buckle for my belt,  
and after the whole day cutting, stacking wood,  
damp denim, genitals, "genuine hide leather"  
all these fragrances were bound together  
by cedar, and together they smelled good.<sup>6</sup>

Planting trees is represented as an act of faith in the future as well as a therapeutic act for the present.

In "Following Pine", for example:

Most of my life I've wanted to believe  
those words of Luther that I've half-endorsed  
about planting an apple tree the very eve  
of the Apocalypse; or the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 230-31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

The narrator's wife becomes a nurturing Eve in a private Eden, watering figs.

I knew I'd wake today and find you gone  
and look out of the window, knowing where  
you'd be so early, still with nothing on,  
watering our new plants with drowsy care.

....

I will what's still a hedge to grow less slow,  
  
and be tall enough to mask the present view  
of you watering the saplings as you spray  
rainbows at fig-trees planted 2-1-2  
and both of us still nude at break of day.  
A morning incense smokes off well-doused ground.  
Everywhere you water rainbow shine.  
This private haven that we two have found  
might be the more so when enclosed with pine.<sup>8</sup>

In "A Kumquat for John Keats", an Eve again stands for the living lover John Keats did not have – a provider of ripe, globular fruit:

but dead men don't eat kumquats, or drink wine,  
they shiver in the arms of Proserpine,  
not warm in bed beside their Fanny Brawne,  
nor watch her pick ripe grapefruit in the dawn  
as I did, waking, when I saw her twist,  
with one deft movement of a sunburnt wrist,  
the moon, that feebly lit our last night's walk ....<sup>9</sup>

But the image of woman as fruit-giver comes most poignantly, perhaps, in "Book Ends I" from *The School of Eloquence*:

Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead  
we chew it slowly that last apple pie.

Shocked into sleeplessness you're scared of bed.  
We never could talk much, and now don't try.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

*You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,  
Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare ...*

The "scholar" me, you, worn out on poor pay,  
only our silence made us seem a pair.<sup>10</sup>

The fruit-bearing Eve in "Book Ends" is the mother figure who fails Harrison's shibboleths of fire and poetry in poems such as "Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast" and "Bringing Up".<sup>11</sup> She is the absence at the core of the poem, a wife and mother who has recently died, removing all that connected the surviving men, husband and son. She is the space which they "bookend". The sign of her unifying function is the food she provided which the family consumed as a group. Once the men have consumed the last pie, significantly, apple, the last of the metaphorical glue (which ironically glues the men's throats as they try to swallow it), they have no more in common to bind them together. In a later poem, we see the son attempting to fill the void left by the unifying, nurturing Eve, and to restore a family bond by the provision of something edible, but in this highly gendered world view he is inadequate for the role; the gesture is last-minute, and clumsy, and his significantly named "Lifesavers" are rejected:

*Them sweets you brought me, you can have 'em back.  
Ah'm diabetic now. Got all the facts.*

....

*Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push  
food down mi throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out.*

....

When I come round, they'll be laid out, the sweets,  
*Lifesavers*, my father's New World treats,  
still in the brown paper bag, and only bought  
rushing through JFK as a last thought.<sup>12</sup>

Rushing through JFK to and from long stays in the USA provided Harrison with a perspective that reinvigorated his writing about Britain,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

but it also provided sources for some of his best loco-descriptive poetry. In his work, however, nature is rarely described as and of itself. There is no self-effacement. Trees are planted or nurtured for the fruit they bear, or to provide a screen and as an investment in the future, and the fruit is relished for its edibility and as sign. Eating fruit functions as both synecdoche and metaphor – a synecdoche of enjoyment of all life's pleasures and a metaphor of sexual pleasure. Those who devour fruit whole, suck fervidly, or bite deeply, are on the side of love, light, and life; those who don't are anti-life and usually allied to some kind of religious fanaticism. The opposition is made explicit by the narrator of "The Pomegranates of Patmos", a fruit-loving hedonist, whose twin, scribe to John, the author of the Book of Revelations, sees in pomegranate seeds only sin and death:

My orb of nibbleable rubies  
packed deliciously side by side  
his roes of doom-destined babies  
carmine with God's cosmocide.

....

And what made my brother really rave  
and hiccup and spit 666,  
what finally sent him back to his cave  
were my suckings and sensual licks.

....

Apoplectic with Apocalypse,  
his eyes popped watching me chew,  
he frothed at the mouth as I smacked my lips  
at the bliss of each nibbled red bijou.

So that verse (Rev. XXII.2)  
about the fruit tree with 12 different crops  
was my brother's addition, if John only knew,  
as a revenge for me smacking my chops.<sup>13</sup>

While eating fruit functions as metaphor and synecdoche, fruit itself, or Mediterranean, sun-ripened fruit, becomes a miniature version of the light-filled *orchestra* of the classical theatre, to which Harrison alludes in

<sup>13</sup> Tony Harrison, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1992, 30-31.



his dramatic work. “A Kumquat for John Keats” associates fruit and life, but the chosen fruit does not signify simple ripe sweetness:

it's the kumquat fruit expresses best  
how days have darkness round them like a rind,  
life has a skin of death that keeps its zest.<sup>14</sup>

Harrison describes the black circle of scorched cobbles with thick scars of tar the morning after the lighting of a bonfire to celebrate VJ night. The fire was celebratory, but the fires that made it possible were anything but. The black circle, like the night sky devoid of stars, comes to stand for all that in the twentieth century extinguished life. Only the light-filled circle of the acting space was adequate to stage the horrors of the black circle:

Things just as “dark” occurred in this orchestra of Dionysus but it was lit by the sun and was surrounded by a community as bonded in their watching as we had been by our celebratory blaze. It was a drama open-eyed about suffering but with a heart still open to celebration and physical affirmation .... Shared space and shared light. How different from the darkened auditoria of our day.<sup>15</sup>

The ambiguity of the bitter-sweet kumquat makes it an appropriate sign for mortal life, and for Harrison’s black and light-filled circles, but its consumption becomes a sign of life-affirmation, and its consumption whole and whole-heartedly becomes a sign of a whole-hearted immersion in life:

O kumquat, comfort for not dying young,  
both sweet and bitter, bless the poet’s tongue!  
I burst the whole fruit chilled by morning dew  
against my palate. Fine, for 42!<sup>16</sup>

Eating fruit and having sex become equated as acts that defy the void, and while the individual is connected into a “continuous”<sup>17</sup> by the act, the

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 193.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Harrison, Introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, London, 1990, vii-ix.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> The title of Harrison’s collection of fifty poems from *The School of Eloquence*, London, 1981.

body represented in the act becomes objectified as consumable. Figs and pomegranates function as simile and metonymy; compared to women's genitals and used to represent women:

The pomegranate! If forced to compare,  
to claim back what eschatology stole,  
what about, once you've licked back the hair,  
the glossed moistness of a girl's hole?<sup>18</sup>

Only in "Fig on the Tyne", a more recent poem, is there a reversal, in which a woman is to be the recipient of the fruit (though even here she has been its nurturer, and in the event does not get to eat it), and, concomitantly, the fruit, a fig, is compared to male genitals:

and now this one fig I discover  
I want to share with you, my lover

....

when I'd wanted, O so much, to share  
the fig with one who wasn't there,  
you with whom I hope to see  
years of figs from that same tree, ...<sup>19</sup>

now I feel,  
as reflected candle on the wall's  
flickering, licking the fig, like you my balls,  
so lost without you, that I've plucked  
the sweetest fig I've ever sucked.<sup>20</sup>

Women's sexuality in Harrison's work is often represented, reductively, in one of three ways: the anonymous other of congress represented synecdochically by body part or the act she performs on the male body; the repressive and repressed mother figure who opposes the life force by denial of sex or prevention of birth; and the earth mother/lover who represents the other side of the life force to that of the virile male. In poems such as "Newcastle is Peru", the recollected sexual

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, *Laureate's Block*, 95-96.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 97. This makes one think of "Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die" (Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, V.v.263-64).

partner is simply “one hand on my first woman’s breast”<sup>21</sup> and the present partner “you”. In “The Heart of Darkness” we see “Mouth! Breasts! Thigh” revealed as in a stroboscope and hidden by flickering shadows.<sup>22</sup> In “The Pomegranates of Patmos”, the partner appears as a “you” and a synecdoche worthy of a Victorian industrial novel:

Your left hand undoes  
my 501s

....

To hell with St John’s  
life-loathing vision  
when I feel in my jeans  
your fingers go fishing.

Only in the final stanzas does the woman becomes part of a “we”:

The stars won’t fall  
nor will the fig.  
Our hearts are so full  
as we fuck, fuck.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Harrison’s most contentious use of fruit imagery occurs when in “The White Queen” he describes an African man as “queer / As a clockwork orange”, and offers his exploitative relationships as love. The Queen considers his transactions with attractive and energetic partners morally superior to the “listless” copulations of “scrawny” married expats, and perhaps the momentum of the form and brilliance of the alliance between rhythm and diction momentarily fool us into sympathizing:

What’s the use? I can’t escape  
Our foul conditioning that makes a rape  
Seem natural, if wrong, and love unclean  
Between some ill-fed blackboy and fat queen.

Things can be so much better. Once at least  
A million percent. Policeman! Priest!

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<sup>21</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Harrison, *Gaze of the Gorgon*, 34-35.

You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,  
 And to him it was. It *was*. O he could move  
 Like an oiled (slow-motion) racehorse at its peak,  
 Outrageous, and not gentle, tame or meek –  
 O magnificently shameless in his gear,  
 He sauntered the flunkied restaurant, queer  
 As a clockwork orange and not scared.  
 God, I was grateful for the nights we shared.<sup>24</sup>

In an early poem, “The Flat-Dweller’s Revolt”, male sexuality is represented as life-affirming and life-enhancing, opposing death and nothingness, and female sexuality as repressed, denied and denying.<sup>25</sup> Desmond Graham suggests that the poem writes back to *The Waste Land*.<sup>26</sup> The fertility it celebrates and demands in opposition to Eliot’s aridity seems to be the exclusive product of male potency. Like a number of Harrison’s early poems, it depicts women enclosed in and enclosing men in worlds of “claustrophobic voices” and “suffocated talk”; worlds of silences, repression, and stillbirth. Masculinity can escape the flats and is connected to the earth and to a Lawrentian life-stream. Male procreative sexuality is a sort of *tsunami*: overwhelming, dyke-bursting. As Luke Spencer says, the only solution “that the man [in this poem] can imagine is one in which every bride’s defences will simply be overwhelmed in a sort of divinely sanctioned elemental gang-bang”.<sup>27</sup> Seduction of women by men, then, becomes an act of affirmation as well as pleasure, especially when it is achieved through the rhythm and rhetoric of poetry:

The very verse the poet employed  
 to make the virgin see the void  
 and be thus vertiginously sped  
 into Andrew Marvell’s bed,  
 is the beat whose very ictus  
 turns smiling kiss to smirking rictus, ...<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> The poem was first published in the Leeds University English Department magazine *Poetry and Audience* in 1961 and was included in Harrison’s 1964 pamphlet publication *Earthworks* (5-6).

<sup>26</sup> See Desmond Graham, “The Best Poet of 1961”, in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandie Byrne, Oxford, 1997, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, Hemel Hempstead, 1994, 10.

<sup>28</sup> “Deathwatch Dancethon”, in *Laureate’s Block*, 9.

We should recall the dedication to Harrison's *Selected Poems*:

for Teresa

"... son io poeta,  
essa la poesia."<sup>29</sup>

The denying woman and the urgently potent man figure in another early poem. In its 1970 form in *The Loiners* (91-99), "Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast" is fully recognizable as a Harrison poem, and survives to his *Selected Poems* of 1984. The original version was very different.<sup>30</sup> The epigraph to the *Poetry and Audience* version, "I gave you life", is bitterly ambiguous. The speaker could be the mother who demands repayment for the unsolicited gift, or the son who may have fathered an unsolicited child. The narrator is divided between an ardent and life-affirming lust and the filial duty he owes to the life-giver, who demands that he repress the instinct which makes him most alive – the sexual impulse of a man "not twenty-three". The woman who reminds him that "I gave you life" also denies him the ability to give life himself; or puts the fear of god into him about the possibility of his having done so, and makes that possible gift something abhorrent and cursed. Though the narrator regrets being denied the right to give "love and peace" to "wife and children", the putative wife appears only as "you"; the other in the secret trysts, the subject of the suspicions which surface in the mother's dreams, and the vehicle of the narrator's fantasy of love and peace and his dreams.

In the revised version, the wife becomes more tangible, more real, and more culpable. She takes on some of the guilt and some of the attributes of gaoler. The epigraph is replaced by a dedication to Harrison's daughter and two quotations, an inscription from the League of Friends rest room in the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and "*C'est mon unique soutien au monde, à présent!*" ("It's my only support in the world, at present!"), from Rimbaud's *Oeuvres*. The poem's centre has become a relationship between the narrator and a triad of his mother, wife, and daughter.

The occasion of the *Loiners* poem links the three generations of women with female fertility and sexuality both active and repressed,

<sup>29</sup> "... if I am the poet, she is the poem."

<sup>30</sup> Published in *Poetry and Audience*, VII/22 (20 May 1960), 6-7.

through the poet. "Ghosts" becomes, like "Newcastle is Peru", a circular journey through an imagined city – in this case through the wards of its hospital and surrounding roads and through a nightmarish day/night, but mostly through metonymic memories and preoccupations. In the second poem, the dream has come true. The fruit of sex, the child, "the one we married for", has been conceived but also lost in stillbirth. Another child, one completing the wife and child to whom "love and peace" could be given, has been born and has lived, but could be lost again from a road accident. The long desired peace has not come. The narrator denies himself the oblivion from "this newest sorrow" offered by Newcastle Brown beer, and love is no longer simply a consummation greatly to be desired, but something that has to be sustained, with difficulty:

I stoop to kiss away your pain  
 through stuff like florist's cellophane,  
 but my kiss can't make you less  
 the helpless prey of Nothingness –  
*ring-a-ring-a-roses* ... love  
 goes gravewards but does move.  
 Love's not something you can hoard  
 against the geriatric ward.<sup>31</sup>

All that is preserved from the first version is the location in the "no man's land" (or no-man's North) "Between night and dawn", when the ghosts of memory form a *ring-a-roses* chain, that is the same whether entered from a Leeds bedroom or a Newcastle waiting room, and one phrase, "the next descent of night" (presumably to be taken both literally and as the dark night of the mind), about which the narrator is still afraid. The longed-for peace has not been achieved, the ghosts still walk, but some kind of accommodation has been made with the dead, the guilt, and women. What could be a schoolboy pun on "laid" here is, I think, powerful, as the four-times repetition of the word allots one "laid" to each of the mother-wife-daughter triad: the mother whom the son will have laid in her grave and whose ghostly presence he will have to lay (Mrs Florrie Harrison was still alive at the time); the wife whom the narrator has "laid" sexually, and the daughter who has been laid in the hospital bed. Then there is one other, corresponding to the end of the preceding line, "ghost" – the ghost of the child lost, or of the past, or of

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<sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Selected Poems*, 73.

guilt? Or is this the collective of Women whom Harrison depicts as monsters rising from the unconscious to haunt with memories of thwarted sexuality?

An orderly brings tea and toast.  
 Mother, wife and daughter, ghost –  
 I've laid, laid, laid, laid  
 you, but I'm still afraid,  
 though Newcastle's washed with light,  
 about the next descent of night.<sup>32</sup>

Just as “The Chopin Express” defies Cold War politics with sex, so other poems defy the austerity of pre-1960s Britain with a Sixties’ ethos of sexual liberation. The taboos and reticences of the generation of Harrison’s parents represented in poems such as “Wordlists” and “Grey Matter”<sup>33</sup> are confronted by representations of both sexual and verbal liberation. But the sexual references that got Tony Harrison into most trouble are to be found his long poem *v.*, later a Channel 4 film-poem. These are not references to sexual acts but swear words cut-off from and drained of their original significance. The “torrent of four-letter filth ..... the most explicitly sexual language yet beamed into the nation’s living rooms”,<sup>34</sup> does not depict sex at all. The skinhead found defacing the grave of the narrator’s parents uses the words “cunt” and “fuck” again and again, to the extent that they function on a purely phatic level, like sentence markers of temper, while the one scene representing an encounter that might lead to sex is in couched in the most rose-coloured, soft-focus terms of tenderness, love, and, again, the desire for union:

Home, home to my woman, where the fire’s lit  
 these still chilly mid-May evenings, home to you,  
 ....

I hear like ghosts from all Leeds matches humming  
 with one concerted voice the bride, the bride

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 117 and 186.

<sup>34</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 12 October 1987: see the second edition of Tony Harrison, *v.* with photographs by Graham Sykes, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1989, which reproduces the press articles provoked by the poem, 40-41.

I feel united to, *my* bride is coming  
into the bedroom, naked, to my side.

The ones we choose to love become our anchor  
when the hawser of the blood-tie's hacked, or frays.<sup>35</sup>

But the restoration of harmony through erotic and personal love is interrupted by the internalized voice of "the aerosolling skin I met today" yelling "Wanker!". The profanity of choice here suggests not only that the skinhead *alter ego* remains in the narrator's own psyche, but also that the narrative voice knows the encounter he describes is less a loss of self in blissful, loving sexual union than his poet-aspect might wish to think.

If "Fig on the Tyne" shows a shift in Harrison's position on women's sexuality (women receiving fruit) then the poem that should be the apotheosis of Harrison's association of fruit-giving with life-nurturing and fruit-consuming with sexual pleasure should be "Fruitility". Here, Harrison ascribes his beginnings as a poet to his mother's offerings of fruit – in wartime Leeds the sign of loving effort. This is not Harrison's greatest poem; it revisits the themes of "Kumquat for John Keats" and contains too much Clevelandizing; but it has its moments. It begins with Earth as mother-goddess, and ends on a representation of woman, mother, Eve, quite different from that of "Ghosts" and the other early poems. From one who denies life (sex), she has become the source of that which helps Harrison to fight his darker side, the muse of fruitility, the *carpe diem* impulse, from the seed of which his poems are the fruit:

What a glorious gift from Gaia  
raspberries piled on my papaya,  
which as a ruse to lift my soul  
I serve up in my breakfast bowl,  
and, contemplating, celebrate  
nature's fruit, and man's air-freight ...  
I gave my kids fruit to repeat  
the way I once got fruit to eat,  
not so exotic but the start  
of all my wonder and my art.  
My mother taught me to adore  
the fruit she scrounged us in the War,  
scarce, and marred with pock and wart

<sup>35</sup> Harrison, v., 29-31, and *Selected Poems*, 247-48.



nonetheless the fruit she brought  
 taught me, very young, to savour  
 the gift of fruit, its flesh and flavour.  
 Adoring apples I've linked Eve's  
 with my mother's ripe James Grieves  
 no go could ever sour with sin  
 or jinx the juice all down my chin.  
 Still in my dreams my mother comes  
 her pinafore full of ripe plums,  
 Victorias, with amber ooze  
 round their stalks, and says: "Choose! Choose!"

...

Tomorrow's rasps piled on papaya  
 chilled, ready for the life-denier,  
 tomorrow when my heart says Yea  
 to darkness ripening into day,  
 remembering my mother whose  
 gifts of fruit taught me this ruse,  
 whose wartime wisdom would embrace  
 both good and grotty with sweet grace,  
 she who always used to say:  
 Never wish your life away!  
 Of all my muses it was she  
 first taught me to love fruitility.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Harrison, *Laureate's Block*, 45-56.

# **(UN)DRESSING BLACK NATIONALISM: NIKKI GIOVANNI'S (COUNTER)REVOLUTIONARY ETHICS**

CHERYL ALEXANDER MALCOLM

Rage is to writers what water is to fish. A laid-back writer is like an orgasmic prostitute – an anomaly – something that doesn't quite fit.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have noted that in common with Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove and Audre Lorde, Giovanni has raged against race, gender, and class divisions in American society.<sup>2</sup> While a protest voice rings loudest in poems such as “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro” with its chants of “Can you kill nigger / Huh? Nigger can you / kill”, it is also present in two of Giovanni's most erotic poems – “Seduction” and “Beautiful Black Men”. This essay will explore the notion that Giovanni is not putting rage aside in these poems, but, by employing erotic scenarios and erotic imagery, sets out to seduce the reader into hearing her protest message. These “seductions” will be analysed in relation to other forms of performance in these poems, in particular, performed blackness and masculinity. The significance of undressing and dressing, respectively, in “Seduction” and “Beautiful Black Men”, will be examined in the light of black nationalist rhetoric, symbols of the black power movement, and ideals of black masculinity promoted by Motown recording stars of the 1960s.

## **Stripping the tease**

“Seduction” is all about breaking rules. For one thing, the woman not only strips off her own clothes, she also strips off those of the man in the

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<sup>1</sup> Nikki Giovanni, *Sacred Cows and Other Edibles*, New York, 1988, 31.

<sup>2</sup> See Ekaterini Georgoudaki, *Race, Gender, and Class Perspectives in the Works of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde*, Thessaloniki, 1991.

room. For another, the implication from the poem's title is that the woman's intent is to get the man to have sex with her. An actual stripper's performance is not a means to an end but is from start to finish a tease. "The premise of the act", Dahlia Schweitzer writes in "Striptease: The Art of Spectacle and Transgression", "is to imply what both the performer and the spectator know will never come – sexual fruition and exposure".<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the woman stripping in Giovanni's poem breaks with convention. In another way, however, she is comparable to paid strippers in terms of being threatening because, like them, she appears "to be available on a grand scale" which defies most social norms and symbolizes her "freedom from social control".<sup>4</sup> Symbolized by her nudity, the major social norm the speaker of "Seduction" defies is invisibility. Furthermore, by stripping the man, she both literally and figuratively exposes the masculinist emphasis of black nationalism.

If one accepts the view of Sasha Weitman that the mutual giving of bodies is "the ultimate token, the proof and the guarantor of the reality of the experience of being – or of having once been – together", withdrawing one's body, or rejecting someone else's, should signify the end, or, absence, of that reality.<sup>5</sup> The rejection of the woman in "Seduction", however, does not contribute to an image of a defeated, sad, or lonely woman. If there is a pathetic figure in the poem, it is the man who takes no notice of the woman's nakedness or his own. If the woman alone had been naked, then his unresponsiveness could imply a lack of sexual interest thereby reflecting badly on her sexual attractiveness. But, by not initially noticing his own nakedness, the man appears to be self-absorbed to a comic extreme. Although his lack of arousal implies her failure to seduce him, the final lines of the poem in which he addresses her and what she is doing – "Nikki, / isn't this counterrevolutionary ... ?" – indicate that she does finally succeed in getting his attention.<sup>6</sup> By then, however, the scene has turned from being erotic to comic. Giovanni achieves this effect through the juxtaposition of two contrasting images –

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<sup>3</sup> Dahlia Schweitzer, "Striptease: The Art of Spectacle and Transgression", *Journal of Popular Culture*, XXXIV/1 (2000), 68.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Sasha Weitman, "On the Elementary Forms of the Socioerotic Life", *Theory, Culture and Society*, XV/3-4 (1998), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Nikki Giovanni, "Seduction", in *Black Feeling Black Talk Black Judgement*, New York, 1970, 38.

one, of a woman stripping her own clothes off and those of a man, the other, sitting in a house and talking about the "revolution".

From the opening lines of the poem, Giovanni suggests a disparity of power, which dispels any impression that the woman is to be pitied. The words "one day / you gonna walk in this house / and i'm gonna ..." imply two scenes – one is in the present (in which the woman tells the man what she will do), the other is in the future (in which she strips and he ignores her). Had the stripping scene been in the present or past, the woman would more likely be a pitiful figure. Placing it in the future, as something which she prophesies will happen "one day", puts her in a position of power as the more knowing of the two. What reinforces an image of female power and male powerlessness is the man's lack of sexual response. The vision of the future which is so threatening is not that the woman will try to seduce the man but that he will be unable to respond. His political fervour, as reflected in his talk of the "revolution", will have emasculated him.

By identifying the man with the rhetoric of black nationalism, his resistance to sexual union with the woman can be read as mirroring political disunity. The lack of notice the man takes of the woman is symbolic of the absence of black women in the consciousness of the new black identity male leaders were forging in the 1960s. In an interview in 1970 for *The Black Collegian*, Giovanni explains that, in contrast to whites, black women "are what the black man is. His status determines the status of the race."<sup>7</sup>

The fact that "Seduction" is spoken by a black woman to a black man is significant given the I/you division in Giovanni's militant poems (for example, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro"). This lays bare what Philip Brian Harper calls "the intraracial division that is implicit in movement references to the 'black' subject itself".<sup>8</sup> Rather than a positing of black speakers with white listeners, what characterizes much of the black arts movement poetry is a black and "Negro" opposition. The "you" of "True Import ...", for example, is "the Negro subject whose sense of self-worth and racial pride is yet to be proven".<sup>9</sup> With his use of the word "black" and his wearing African style clothing,

<sup>7</sup> "Nikki Giovanni: On Race, Age, and Sex", in *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, ed. Virginia C. Fowler, Jackson and London, 1992, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Brian Harper, "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s", *Critical Inquiry*, XIX/2 (1993), 251.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

the man in “Seduction” gives every sign of having a fully developed black political consciousness. Yet, his positioning in the poem, as the “you” to the first-person speaker, and his unawareness of her for most of the poem suggests that he is more unconscious than conscious. His treatment of the woman as if she were invisible symbolizes a notion of blackness that does not encompass black women.

Since the man is differentiated from the woman by words that denote his new found black identity, it might seem his thoughts are all on politics whereas hers are solely on sex. Yet, her virtual invisibility before the man and his lack of verbal response suggests she is not a part but apart from his political thoughts. He speaks, for example, of “this brother” but never “this sistuh”. The only time he directly addresses her is in the chastising last lines “Nikki, / isn’t this counterrevolutionary ...?”. Given the identification of the speaker with Giovanni and the political focus of the other poems in this collection, it is difficult indeed to accept that this speaker is not political. Thus, the opposition between the man and woman cannot strictly be that his thoughts are on politics and hers are on sex.

This leads us to the question “Why doesn’t her stripping excite the man?”. Nothing seems to account for it. The stripping is done slowly, teasingly, as the description of taking “one arm out” at a time from the woman’s dress implies. The constantly changing focus from what the woman is doing to what the man is doing further prolongs the striptease and creates an erotic tension based on delayed satisfaction. The shift from images of the woman to those of the man within the same line and uninterrupted by punctuation of any kind creates the impression that the stripper moves fluidly with clothing flowing like veils in a protracted dance. Irregular line lengths – from the single word line “gown” to the complex long line “then you – not noticing me at all – will say ‘What about this brother’” – make the poem unpredictable and its female speaker appear as complex as the twists and turns in her striptease.

Furthermore, by calling the woman “Nikki” and identifying the woman with herself – a young, attractive, and single black woman – Giovanni removes any doubts as to the sexual desirability of the woman. Most importantly, this identification implies that the woman is at least as black in consciousness as the man. As her adoption of African dress signifies, she regards herself as black, not “Negro”. If the man’s lack of arousal is to be understood at all, it must be considered in terms of what characterizes him. Although the woman is the poem’s speaker, the man is

the speaker in the house. If the house is read as symbol for the homeland or nation, the man represents the voice of black nationalism. He sexually ignores the woman just as the movement conceptually overlooks the black woman. When he notices his own nakedness, not hers, this mirrors the short-sightedness of excluding women from formulations of blackness.

Taking the sexual initiative, when women do so, frequently invites a discussion of gender relations. "Seduction" is no exception. Alicia Ostriker, for example, says that Giovanni and other women poets "seem best satisfied with themselves when they quit passivity and take some form of initiative".<sup>10</sup> Yet, this is to confuse the creative initiative of Giovanni, the poet, with that of the "Nikki" figure in the poem. While Ostriker considers "Seduction" solely in terms of gender issues, she does concede that "sexual union becomes a figure in women's poems for every reunification needed by a divided humanity".<sup>11</sup> By juxtaposing erotic imagery with political language, frequently within the same line, Giovanni unites notions of a highly charged black sexuality with an equally charged black nationalist rhetoric. In his essay "Once You Go Black: Performance, Seduction, and the (Un)Making of Black American Innocence", Robert Reid-Pharr puts it like this:

When the word "Black" is spoken, an arm is revealed. When a brother is criticized, a woman disrobes. With talk of the revolution, hands begin to massage stomachs. With the statement of the people's need, an arm is licked; with the expression of radical vision, pants are unbuckled, a whiff of revolutionary analysis and underwear falls to the floor.<sup>12</sup>

The performance of sexual seduction mirrors the performance of black nationalists in that both strip the "Negro" down to the black savage which is "seductive and sexy because it was *in* yet not of modern American society" (Reid-Pharr). Giovanni's message of sexual and political unity which the single stanza of "Seduction" symbolizes is thus revolutionary but not counter-revolutionary. Rather than opposing black nationalism, black female seductiveness is depicted as literally

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<sup>10</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Boston, 1986, 172.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Once You Go Black: Performance, Seduction, and the (Un)Making of Black American Innocence", *Cultural Matters*. <[http://culturalstudies.gmu.edu/cultural\\_matters/reid.html](http://culturalstudies.gmu.edu/cultural_matters/reid.html)>.

supporting its aims, among which, as Stefanie Dunning notes, the “call for the reproduction of the nation through heterosexual and mono-racial sex is one that is fundamental to black nationalist politics”.<sup>13</sup> Lest anyone think, like Stokely Carmichael, that the “only position” for women “is prone”, Giovanni sends the message – think again.<sup>14</sup>

### Here I come

“Beautiful Black Men” is in some ways the opposite of “Seduction”. Instead of taking his dashiki off, the speaker in this poem wants to keep this man’s on. Clothing, which gets in the way of pleasure in “Seduction”, is an integral part of “a brand new pleasure” in “Beautiful Black Men”. It generates excitement. Giovanni creates this impression through an almost explosive use of adjectives, repetition, and lists, which running over several lines, would leave any reader breathless. Pants, for example, which are merely unbuckled in “Seduction”, in “Beautiful Black Men” are described as “... fire red, lime green, burnt orange / royal blue tight tight pants that hug / what I like to hug”.<sup>15</sup>

Colour not only enlivens this image, the words “fire”, “lime”, “burnt”, and “royal” have connotations beyond denoting the intensity of each hue. “Fire” and “burnt”, in common with other “heat” words, have literal and metaphorical incendiary associations, both of which are supported by the first mention of the word “beautiful” in the title to its repetition in the opening lines (“i wanta say just gotta say something / bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight / black men”) and final lines (“and i scream and stamp and shout / for more beautiful beautiful beautiful / black men with outasight afros”). Giovanni’s repeated allusions to the Black Pride movement through variations of the slogan “Black is Beautiful” joins politics with erotics, revolutionary fervour with sensual passion.

The words “fire” and “burnt” which suggest metaphorical flames (of the heart, of erotic passion) also evoke something more public, an image

<sup>13</sup> Stefanie Dunning, “Parallel Perversions: Interracial and Same Sexuality in James Baldwin’s *Another Country*”, *MELUS* (Winter 2001). <[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m2278/4\\_26/86063220/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2278/4_26/86063220/print.jhtml)>

<sup>14</sup> See Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord*, New York and Oxford, 1992, 227-28, for more on how a general concept of “the black man” which did not include black women was foreshadowed in Stokely Carmichael’s remarks in 1964 concerning the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee).

<sup>15</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “Beautiful Black Men (With compliments and apologies to all not mentioned by name)”, in *Black Feeling Black Talk Black Judgment*, 77.

of the literal fires in the hearts of American cities such as those which caused \$175 million in damage to the Watts district of Los Angeles and reduced whole sections of Detroit to rubble during race riots in the 1960s. Given that it modifies clothing, "lime" conjures up images of the livid green that was fashionable in the late 1960s. But it is also a fruit, which, in common with the six and a half million Blacks who, between 1910 and 1970, migrated from the South to the North, has its origins elsewhere. Finally, "royal" suggests a regality that foreshadows the speaker's awe of Motown recording stars in the next stanza. Thus, colour visually enlivens the clothing and, through its associations, introduces a range of black historical and social contexts.

Yet, the pants, too, seem to have a life of their own as is suggested by the last words of the second stanza "pants that hug / what i like to hug". Whereas in "Seduction", clothing stands between the speaker and the male object of desire, here, it stands for desire. That the desire is sexual is implied by the focus on pants, not, for example, a shirt or other article of clothing. The rhythm produced by the repetition of "hug", and the syntactical simplicity, yet ambiguity, of the final line "what i like to hug", brings to mind songs whose sexual subject matter was implied when it could not be made explicit such as the hit by The Temptations, "The Way You Do the Things You Do". The reference to The Temptations in the next stanza indicates that the similarity is no coincidence. It begins:

jerry butler, wilson pickett, the impressions  
 temptations, mighty mighty sly  
 don't have to do anything but walk  
 on stage  
 and i scream and stamp and shout.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jerry Butler, known as "The Ice Man" because of his cool, was a member of The Impressions whose first major hit, "For Your Precious Love", was in 1958. Wilson Pickett, known as "Wicked Wilson", had a run of hits in the early 1960s which included "If You Need Me", "It's Too Late", "In the Midnight Hour", and "Don't Fight It", which he sang in a raspy, and, at times, screaming, voice. In the 1991 film *The Commitments*, he was idolized by an Irish soul group. The Impressions, led by singer-songwriter Curtis Mayfield, were the first to merge soul music with political lyrics in 1960s hits such as "Keep on Pushing", "Amen", and "We're a Winner". Mayfield went on to write the soundtrack to the film *Superfly*. The Temptations were a Detroit rhythm and blues quintet whose gospel inspired pop style gave them such hits in the 1960s as "The Way You Do the Things You Do" and "Since I Lost My Baby". More social commentary entered their lyrics in the 1970s with songs such as "Papa Was a Rolling Stone". Sly and the Family



While the names of these performers is almost synonymous with love music, the fact that they can excite the speaker without even singing a note suggests there are other reasons to be excited. As in “Seduction”, clothing is symbolic. Their “dashiki suits with shirts that match” identify these performers with the new black consciousness. Similarly, these “beautiful beautiful beautiful / black men” are distinguishable from Negroes by their “outasight afros”. Blackness is even suggested by their “dirty toes” that “peek” out of sandals. Jerry Butler and the others not only perform hit songs, they perform the new blackness and masculinity. In this, they are revolutionary just as Motown is revolutionary.<sup>17</sup> “We’re in places and doing things we’ve never done before”, Giovanni said in 1969: “That’s revolutionary.”<sup>18</sup>

Roger Scruton describes sexual arousal as “a response, at least in part, to a thought, where the thought refers to ‘what is going on’ between myself and another”.<sup>19</sup> What makes the men so arousing in “Beautiful Black Men” is their power to suggest something is “going on”. Like Marvin Gaye, in his song “What’s Going On”, their overt sexuality and social consciousness inspire thoughts of sexual union and black unity. Just as, by the end of the 1960s, “urban” had, according to Nicholas Lemann, become a euphemism for “black”, Motown had become a euphemism for black success and sex.<sup>20</sup> While black music may be created, as Giovanni says “by Black people to let other Black people know what we feel”, the fact is that black people are not the only ones who buy black music.<sup>21</sup> As a result, each time “the idea of blackness”, as Guthrie Ramsey calls it, is “refashioned” through music, it is refashioned for whites as well as for blacks.<sup>22</sup>

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Stone were a late 1960s soul-rock black and white, male and female, group among whose hits were “Everyday People” and, from the album *Stand*, “Hot Fun in the Summertime” which they performed at Woodstock.

<sup>17</sup> Motown Recording Corporation, the first black owned recording company in the USA, was started by Berry Gordy, Jr. in 1958 in Detroit or “Motortown” from which “Motown” is derived.

<sup>18</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “The Poet and Black Realities”, in *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Moral Philosophy of the Erotic*, New York, 1986, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, London, 1991, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “*The Sound of Soul*, by Phyllis Garland: A Book Review with a Poetic Insert”, in *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-five Years of Being a Black Poet*, Indianapolis and New York, 1971, 120.

<sup>22</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, Berkeley,

Like the woman stripping in “Seduction”, the singers who are iconized in “Beautiful Black Men” can seem to confirm negative stereotypes of black hypersexuality when their message is its most revolutionary. As noted in recent studies of Motown, “in years rife with social upheaval and racial unrest, even an innocuous party song could seem to be weighted with hidden, revolutionary meaning”. “Dancing in the Street” maybe was intended only to be “a party song” – as Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas maintains – nonetheless, to some listeners, “it was a clarion call for black Americans to riot”.<sup>23</sup> Frank sexuality, by appearing to confirm the negative stereotype of the savage black, actually subverts racist rhetoric by exalting eroticism and thereby reclaiming the black body from the racist gaze. When The Temptations sing “fee fi fo fum, look out baby ’cause here I come”, blackness is elevated by turning the master’s language upon itself. And this message, says Giovanni, whether told with dashikis on or off, is big, black, and beautiful.

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2003, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Renee Graham, “A New Look at Motown, a Driving Force in Music in the Motor City”, review of *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* by Suzanne E. Smith, *The Boston Globe*, 4 January 2000, D6.

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## **BIBLIO-EROTIC AND JEWISH EROTIC CONFIGURATIONS IN GEORGIA SCOTT'S *THE PENNY BRIDE***

WOLFGANG GÖRTSCHACHER

Critics have variously denounced or tried to deflate the significance of eroticism for the Nobel Prize winning Yiddish American writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, as they have done with certain sections of the Bible. Georgia Scott (Cheryl Alexander Malcolm) challenges these critics by giving voice to female characters in Singer's writing and the Bible. It is a voice that does not shy away from desire but delights in the physical expression of human love. In particular, this article will examine Georgia Scott's poems which have literary allusions to "The Song of Solomon" and Singer's short stories "Taibele and Her Demon", "A Wedding in Brownsville", and "A Quotation from Klopstock". It will explore the ways in which metaphorical and literal language combine to create an erotic dynamic and subversion of negative stereotypes of dark beauty. Georgia Scott's reconfiguring of the Jewish seductress will be considered in terms of her positive imaging of women whose love is as sexual as it is spiritual.

In October 2003 I co-organized a conference in Salzburg entitled "The Author as Reader: Visions and Revisions", where we occupied ourselves with concepts of revision – the author as reader of his own work, as well as with ideas of rewriting or revision by means of metafictional devices. One is tempted to apply the latter concept when reading the titles that Georgia Scott has given to some of her poems included in the section entitled "Jerusalem" in her collection *The Penny Bride*, published by Poetry Salzburg in March 2004: "Taibele's Diary", "Songs to Hurmizah", "Cakes with Bathsheba" and "Singer Character Sets Record Straight".

### “Singer Character Sets Record Straight”

While three of the poems just mentioned refer to characters in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short stories, the title of the last of the four, “Singer Character Sets Record Straight”, actually contains his name. The poem is based on Georgia Scott’s reception of Singer’s “A Quotation from Klopstock”, a short story that has been overlooked by literary critics.<sup>1</sup> The story is set in a Warsaw café where a first-person narrator listens to stories told by the author Max Persky, who “was known ... as a woman chaser”<sup>2</sup> in literary circles. The main story-within-the-story, which unfolds in front of the reader, focuses on Theresa Stein, “a spinster, a teacher of German literature ..., who took poetry very seriously, which proves that she was not too clever”<sup>3</sup> and, being in her fifties, Max Persky’s senior by almost thirty years. In need of a quotation from Klopstock’s *Messiah*, Max visits Teresa and starts an affair with her, which he considers “a joke”, but nonetheless carries on with it for many years. “I was ashamed of myself for my charity, if it could be called that”, Max comments, “but to leave her completely meant killing her”.<sup>4</sup>

One night, when his girlfriend “Nina had to go to Biala to visit her uncle”, Max invites Theresa (who in the meantime has become “a withered old woman”), for supper in a restaurant, after which he takes her to his home for the first time. Although “I had already decided that this night was the end of our miserable affair”,<sup>5</sup> as Max admits to the listening narrator, he has sex with her. Waking up in the middle of the night, Max realizes that Theresa has dropped dead in his bed. Together with his girlfriend Nina, who has missed her train, he disposes of Theresa’s corpse in the street.

In Singer’s story the reader has to put up with the male narrative perspective, which is characterized by a boastful lack of conscience and an egotistical belief in status and egotism, all represented in Max’s incapacity for true love. As the story is told in retrospect, the reader becomes acquainted with Teresa’s view only at second hand, by way of

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<sup>1</sup> But see “Calling a Corpse a Corpse: Singer and the Subversion of Nazi Rhetoric”, in Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, *Unshtetling Narratives: Depictions of Jewish Identities in British and American Literature and Film*, Salzburg Anglophone Critical Studies 3, Salzburg, 2006, 165-72.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, “A Quotation from Klopstock”, in *The Collected Stories*, New York, 1982, 387.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

Max. In Georgia Scott's "Singer Character Sets Record Straight", somewhat in the tradition of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Sheepheard", the dead woman speaks from heaven to set the record straight on her sexual relationship with Max, her much younger lover:

Is nothing private?

Writers! It's my turn now.  
I got time and no more rheumatism.

Ten cards I play at bingo.  
My fingers like a child's.

Now to Warsaw and that story.  
Things he *made* her do.

No one made. I gave  
from the heart. I think

the tutoring I cancelled  
for him. The dentist's daughter even.

A dullard. But, the father.  
There was talent. See this crown?

No one makes like that today.  
Like my love. Ach!

A nightgown I should of brought  
from the start. He'd have shut the light.

But no, it's Heine he wants.

The night we left the books behind,  
I died from happiness not age.

The rest is history.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Georgia Scott, "Singer Character Sets Record Straight", in *The Penny Bride*, Foreword by Elaine Feinstein, Salzburg, 2004, 31.

As the penultimate line tells us, she “died from happiness not age”. She gave her body willingly, because, as she tells us earlier, she “gave / from the heart”. She was far more interested in sex than he assumed. Georgia Scott uses a quotation from Max’s description – “*She was so pure that the things I forced her to do shattered her*” – as an epigraph to the poem, and this, in conjunction with the title, predisposes the reader to expect a female persona’s reply. Teresa’s introductory question “Is nothing private?” sets the tone of the poem, which is accusatory and self-confident, and contrasts sharply with Max’s credo in the story, “Prestige, not love, is stronger than death”,<sup>7</sup> and the narrator’s introductory comment, “Those who have to do with women must boast”.<sup>8</sup>

Georgia Scott’s Teresa, whose voice is that of an East Coast urban Jewish-American maiden, then appeals to the “Writers!” and not to Singer or to the readers. Thus she stresses the tripartite structure in literature of writers/authors – character(s) – readers/audience. Georgia Scott uses a situation familiar in postmodern literature, of characters who emancipate themselves from the author and assert lives and voices of their own. “It’s my turn now”, Teresa declares, she has now “got time” on her hands and “no more rheumatism” (l. 2), because she lives in heaven. This Georgia Scott makes a specifically Jewish-American realm – “Ten cards I play at bingo” (l. 4)<sup>9</sup> – the reference to bingo being such a marker, because synagogues often make their money by holding bingo nights, open to everybody.

Teresa implicitly criticizes Max’s diction and perspective by introducing in line 7, “Things he *made* her do”, a variation of the epigraph: “*She was so pure that the things I forced her to do shattered her.*” In this particular case Teresa foregrounds herself by replacing the verb “force” with “*made*” for phonetic and ideological reasons. In respect to the former the poet, obviously, wanted to compose an assonantal pattern – [er] “made” (twice) and “gave”: “Things he *made* her do. / No one made. I gave / from the heart” (ll. 7-9). While by having “made” and “gave” – verbs that function as leitmotifs in Georgia Scott’s collection of erotic poetry – in a single line, by introducing a caesura after “*made*” and moving “gave” into the prominent position just before the line-break, the

<sup>7</sup> Singer, “A Quotation from Klopstock”, 392.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>9</sup> In Singer’s short story “A Wedding in Brownsville”, a Jewish-American wedding suggests that heaven for these characters is specifically Jewish-American (*The Collected Stories*, 197-206).

poet creates a sharp contrast between the male and the female perspective.

Georgia Scott continues to use intertextual references to enable Teresa to “set the record straight”. While Max in Singer’s short story believes that the “rich Jews of Warsaw slowly lost their interest in German culture [which is why] Teresa earned less and less”,<sup>10</sup> Georgia Scott’s Teresa informs the reader that it was her decision to cancel the tutoring (l. 10), probably out of love for Max. Again, Teresa gives and is not made to do anything. The only self-criticism Teresa can think of is to be found at the end of the poem – “A nightgown I should of brought / from the start” (ll. 16-17)<sup>11</sup> – which refers to the time, when Teresa in the short story had become a boarder with other people and she and Max began “to meet in cafés in the faraway Gentile streets”.<sup>12</sup> In the poem she regrets not having been more straightforward and outspoken with regard to her sexual desire.

Max’s qualities as a lover are shattered by Teresa’s comments – “He’d have shut the light. / But no, it’s Heine he wants” – which refers to the last night they spent together in Max’s flat. In Singer’s story Max describes the scene: “After much hesitation, many apologies, and quotations from *Faust* and Heine’s *Buch der Lieder*, she went to bed with me.”<sup>13</sup> In the climactic lines at the end of the poem – “The night we left the books behind, / I died from happiness not age” – Georgia Scott resorts to the regular iambic tetrameter line, probably the most common metre in love lyrics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> These lines support, both explicitly and aesthetically, the concept of love Teresa believes in and calls “true love” and “real love” in Singer’s short story: “you will find treasures that will open the gates of Heaven to you.”<sup>15</sup> When Teresa’s concept of love is finally realized, she calls this state

<sup>10</sup> Singer, “A Quotation from Klopstock”, 389.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia Scott takes a liberty with the voices in Singer’s short story: her Teresa uses the syntax, the sound and voice of someone who has survived the Holocaust and come to New York.

<sup>12</sup> Singer, “A Quotation from Klopstock”, 390.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>14</sup> As, for example, in Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”, Ben Jonson’s “In the Person of Womankind”; and most of the Cavalier love lyrics, which are composed in iambic tetrameter lines, usually alternating with iambic trimeter lines – Richard Lovelace’s “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars” and “Love Made in the First Age: To Chloris”, for instance.

<sup>15</sup> Singer, “A Quotation from Klopstock”, 388.



“happiness”. In Singer’s short story Max’s male chauvinism and his inability to admit his feelings contrast sharply with Teresa’s erotic credo: “I was sure that I wouldn’t have the slightest desire for her but sex is full of caprices.”<sup>16</sup>

### “Taibele’s Diary”

Georgia Scott’s poem “Taibele’s Diary”<sup>17</sup> consists of two sections, two diary entries, the second of which can be called a pastiche in that it draws directly on Singer’s short story “Taibele and Her Demon”. In Singer’s short story Taibele, a grass widow abandoned by her ascetic husband, tells her friends a tale about “a young Jewish woman, and a demon who had ravished her and lived with her as man and wife” in all its details. Alchonon, the teacher’s assistant, a bit of a devil himself, overhears the story and conceives a mischievous prank. Posing as the demon Hurmizah, he visits Taibele that very night, and “After a while, the demon got into Taibele’s bed and had his will of her”.<sup>18</sup> Two nights a week Alchonon frees his imagination from all restraints, becoming a fanciful lover and an inventive storyteller. One wintry night when Hurmizah comes to her sick, with sour breath and runny nose, she listens as he leaves – “He had sworn to her that he flew out of the window even when it was closed and sealed, but she heard the door creak” – and she prays, “There are so many devils, let there be one more ...”.<sup>19</sup> But Hurmizah never visits her again. When she sees four pallbearers carrying the corpse of the teacher’s assistant, she “escort[s] Alchonon, the feckless man who had lived alone and died alone, on his journey”.<sup>20</sup>

In Singer’s story Taibele is a virtuous woman. Yet, as is characteristic of Singer’s writing, like many of his Jewish figures, she is not denuded of sexuality. Rather the Jewish characters’ sexual activity is a life-affirming feature. This is especially significant given that these are all effectively ghost figures, because Singer writes largely about pre-War Polish Jewry, which was virtually wiped out.

In the second diary entry of her poem, Georgia Scott manages to bring to life an incident that Singer’s omniscient third-person narrator describes in a fourteen-line paragraph, which is introduced by a matter-

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>17</sup> Georgia Scott, *The Penny Bride*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Singer, “Taibele and Her Demon”, in *The Collected Stories*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

of-fact statement – “On the following Sabbath, Taibele waited in vain for Hurmizah until dawn”<sup>21</sup> –

Winter now and snow up to the windows.  
Everyone complains but me.

Caught myself singing again today.  
Got to be careful or there'll be talk.

Closed up early so I could wash my hair.  
Such a length since he first touched it.

Tomorrow, I'll wear a wig like the other women.  
But tonight, I'll lie by the fire.

Oh, my toes curl for wanting him.  
It is the Sabbath.

Where is he?

In Singer's story there is hardly any direct speech by Taibele worth mentioning and, as is the case in “A Quotation from Klopstock”, on those rare occasions the direct speech is embedded in the narrator's story. Georgia Scott endows Taibele with a voice of her own. The reader/audience listens to or reads Taibele's enthusiastic remarks, most of them elliptical, each one only a line, which at the end of the poem become shorter and shorter, expressing the speaker's concern about her lover's absence: “Oh, my toes curl for wanting him. / It is the Sabbath. / Where is he?” Singer's original story is alluded to in the setting (“Winter now and snow up to the windows”) and in the fact that Hurmizah “persuaded her to let her hair grow under her cap and he wove it into braids”.<sup>22</sup> In the poem, Taibele “Closed up early” to wash her hair and its length is a marker for the time she has been together with her lover. Georgia Scott refers to the orthodox Jewish tradition of married women wearing wigs, so that only their husbands can see their hair, but at the same time seems to point implicitly to the Japanese *midaregami* or

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Singer, “Taibele and Her Demon”, 134.

“tangled hair” poems of Mikata Shami and his wife Sono No Omi Ikuha, who lived in the seventh century or the eighth.<sup>23</sup>

In the first diary entry Georgia Scott’s Taibele describes Hurmizah’s lovemaking by using three similes, in a style derived from “The Song of Solomon”:

The first time,  
he rushed like an exodus into my desert.

The second time,  
he raged like floodwater up my shore.

The third time,  
he played like a Purim jester.

By using biblical images to describe the joys of love, Georgia Scott secularizes religious material in order to elevate the physical experience. Taibele turns into a Jewish seductress whose love is as sexual as it is spiritual. The three similes express the joys of lovemaking in their variety and increasing intensity. Taibele, who has been deserted by her husband, lives in an emotional and sexual desert.<sup>24</sup> The metaphorical overtones referring to the state of her vulva can be easily recognized.

The effect of the sexual imagery is further heightened by the onomatopoeic quality of the verb “rush”. The combination of short half-open central vowel and voiceless palato-alveolar fricative in the monosyllabic verb gives the impression of an intense and quickly achieved orgasm. In the second simile the female sex organ is metaphorically compared to a shore. Again, the onomatopoeic quality of the verb “rage” heightens the act of lovemaking. This time it is the voiced palato-alveolar affricate in combination with the diphthong [eɪ] that achieves this effect. The audience will also note the fine phonetic effect achieved by the assonantal patterns of [aɪ] in “time” and “like” (three times each), and “my” (twice), of [eɪ] in “raged” and “played”, and of [ʌ] in “rushed”, “floodwater”, and “up”. The Purim jester in the third simile refers to the tradition of a hired entertainer, similar to the tradition of court jesters, who would entertain guests at a celebration of the Jewish

<sup>23</sup> See Georgia Scott, “Introduction to ‘Black Threads: A Tale of Ill-Fated Love’”, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, 3 (Autumn 2002), 71-73.

<sup>24</sup> “Exodus” refers, of course, to the second book of the Bible telling of the journey of Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt.

holiday; or, more generally, to the custom of a revelry at the time of this holiday.

**“Songs to Hurmizah”**

“Songs to Hurmizah”<sup>25</sup> follows “Taibele’s Diary”, and might well be called “Taibele’s Songs”, ten songs in all:

I.  
When I wake and find the trees topped with snow

I remember  
how you first tasted

melting  
bursts  
of snowflakes

as you pulsed

your dark sky above  
my open mouth.

II.  
You sprayed your stars into my sky.  
Then, lying spent at my side, you wept. So,  
I said “Take one back.” And you did.

With your lips, one was saved.  
With your hands, the others spread

a milky way in the night.  
Your glory encrusted my head.

III.  
Let me be your unleavened bread

Part me  
Spread me  
Fill me

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<sup>25</sup> Georgia Scott, *The Penny Bride*, 20-23.

As you want  
I will be the food of your exile  
Home in your desert

Take. Eat.

IV.  
Your body is a salt lick.  
How I love to linger there.

Though the trees tell me it is autumn  
and I see my fate everywhere,

I will go to you regardless  
of those who would shoot me down.

I haven't forgotten but chosen,  
in spite of their guns, to come.

V.  
I love you best without adornment  
your fingers in my hair,

dressed only in your nakedness  
no jewels but your hands.

I love you best without a title  
lover, friend or wife.

I love you best without explaining  
how I love or why.

I love you best without tomorrows  
or yesterdays to keep,

bound by your arms not promises  
nights when we need no sleep.

VI.  
My arms and legs  
vine the trunk of you.

Like a sugaring bucket  
I wait to be filled.

VII.

You asked me to kiss it and I did,  
nudging it gently,  
only my breath at first.

Then, it sprawled like someone asleep  
who drinks in the morning cool  
before the climb of summer heat.

It moved to me and seemed almost to sigh  
with pleasure. I proceeded,  
tickling its sides.

After it stretched far and wide,  
like a snail grown from its shell,  
it sought mine.

And so it happened, I gave it a home,  
though I knew before long  
it would be off again to roam.

VIII.

I thought perhaps a flower  
or these grains of sand,  
some hair I gathered from my head,  
a spot of blood pricked from my hand,  
but I could picture nothing  
spilling out onto your lap,  
nothing short of sending all myself  
for your fingers to unwrap.

IX.

Don't wash. Your scent is sweet  
nectar. I long to suck,  
twirling inside your buds until  
all of me smells of all of you.

X.

How can I forget?

Your sex in all its wealth,  
with time, is no less.  
Your arms bind me as tight.

The smell of you outlasts  
even your eyes.

You fall away from me  
like a flower falling from a stem.

Petal by petal  
so slowly, it is pain itself.

Remembering and waiting  
time heals

too like a natural death.

What I would give for speed  
I would give up in gentleness.

Already in the first line, Georgia Scott's Taibele takes up the winter setting from Section II of "Taibele's Diary": "When I wake and find the trees topped with snow ...." This time, however, the snow sets in motion the speaker's memory of their first lovemaking. Hurmizah's orgasm is equalled to "melting / bursts / of snowflakes", which form "a milky way in the night" on Taibele's head. If this line is read in the context of the first line of Song II – "You sprayed your stars into my sky" – one sees that Taibele projects a positive notion of her black hair, the black sky. As is the case in many of Georgia Scott's poems, hair signifies a persona's identity. Here it is black hair without adornment, no jewels or ribbons, as Taibele stresses later on in Song IV, except for her lover's stars, his "glory encrusted my head".

In the third song of the poem the mixing of literal, sexually explicit erotic language and metaphorical or religious lexemes to do with food come to a climax. The introductory line "Let me be your unleavened bread" refers to the Last Supper and the Holy Communion. But this time it is not Christ who offers his body as bread but Taibele. The partaking of bread/body is explicitly and literally demanded by Taibele: "Part me / Spread me / Fill me ...." The words in the final line of the third song of "Songs to Hurmizah" – "Take. Eat." – can be understood as crude

language inviting Hurmizah to go down on Taibele for cunnilingus and at the same time echo Christ's words repeated by priests at the Eucharist. In this way the spiritual sustenance that her love gives to him is expressed. The lines "I will be the food of your exile / Home in your desert" and the introductory line "Let me be your unleavened bread" contain biblical allusions that elevate the speaker's body to a virtual homeland, motherland to the male who is likened to the wandering Jewish people. Explaining her poetic technique in an email message (30 September 2003), Georgia Scott told me that

[her] use of such language is to convey the spiritual ecstasy of the speaker and the plain fact that this relationship is more than merely physical. Thus the religious language and images serve to elevate yet not sanitize the physicality of the relationship.

Her recent essay on Seamus Heaney's poem "La Toilette" has incidentally indicated that her use of ecclesiastical language is similar in certain respects to Heaney's.<sup>26</sup>

The essence of Judaism is a healthy celebration of Eros within the confines of marriage. According to Norman Lamm, President of the Orthodox Yeshiva University, as opposed to the modern religion of openness, Judaism advocates restoring the mystery to sex. At the same time, Judaism rejects any association of sex with guilt, as long as sex takes place within the framework of marriage. Lamm holds that "Any attitude brought to the marital chamber that ... regards sex as evil and identifies desire with lust, can only disturb the harmonious integration of the two forces within man: the moral and the sexual".<sup>27</sup>

*Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, a book of feminist Jewish theology by Judith Plaskow, seems to be of crucial importance for an understanding of Georgia Scott's poetry. Plaskow argues that all too often the tradition identifies sexuality with repugnance to women's bodies and sees women as sexual temptresses.<sup>28</sup> Male sexuality is identified with the *yetzer ha-ra*, a powerful, alien force triggered by women. With the exception of the kabbalistic tradition,

<sup>26</sup> Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, "The Last Veil: Eroticism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney", *Moderne Sprachen*, 47 (2003), 1-8.

<sup>27</sup> Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*, New York, 1977, 31-32.

<sup>28</sup> See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, San Francisco, 1990, Chapter 5.



mainstream biblical and rabbinic Judaism associated an asexual God with sexual control for human beings; male-formulated monotheism produced an “energy/control” paradigm of human sexuality. Therefore, Plaskow calls for a reconnection of sexuality with the sacred, first, by attacking the patriarchal inequality of male-female relationships and, then, by re-conceptualizing sexuality as the most positive form of human energy that unites the spiritual and the physical:

Feminist images name female sexuality as powerful and legitimate and name sexuality as part of the image of God. They tell us that sexuality is not primarily a moral danger ... but a source of energy and power that, schooled in the values of respect and mutuality, can lead us to the related and therefore sexual, God.<sup>29</sup>

### “Cakes with Bathsheba”

Georgia Scott’s “Cakes with Bathsheba”,<sup>30</sup> which consists of twelve sections arranged in the form of a dialogue, starts off with a reference to Singer’s short story “A Wedding in Brownsville”. The story ends with a dialogue between Dr Solomon Margolin – the allusion to “The Song of Solomon” in his first name is unavoidable – and his childhood sweetheart Raizel, in which Solomon points out that according “to Jewish law, I don’t even need a ring. One can get married with a penny.”<sup>31</sup>

I.  
For a ring, I’ll take a penny.  
For a veil, this sheet will do.  
For a canopy, I have you above me.

Your touch is my blessing.  
My wine, I’ll drink from you.

II.  
Your eyes are far off islands.  
Your lips beckon like coves.  
Your toes are jewels.  
Your hips are a ship’s bounty.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>30</sup> Georgia Scott, *The Penny Bride*, 24-25. All the poems discussed in this essay were first published in this order in a broadsheet entitled *Cakes with Bathsheba* by Sylvester Pollet’s Backwoods BroadSides Chaplet Series in 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Singer, *The Collected Stories*, 204.

I long to drink from your goblets  
and breathe the spices of your store.

III.  
Who needs wedding revellers?

You dance for me.  
I'll dance for you.

IV.  
Your laughter is the bells on harem slippers.

Show me your pillow.  
I'll just rest my head.

V.  
Why would I deny you all that I can give?

When a man is a Colossus  
shouldn't Rhodes lie down for him?

VI.  
I could feed on your figs forever.

VII.  
And I on your trunk.

VIII.  
Wrap me, my vine leaf.

IX.  
Fill up my pouch.

X.  
Not in all of Persia  
nor the best tents in the land –

I have never known such sweetness.

XI.  
Bathe me in your syrup.

## XII.

If I can also be your towel.

It is Raizel (Bathsheba), who takes the initiative: “For a ring, I’ll take a penny / .... / My wine, I’ll drink from you.” In the sections that follow the speakers continue, in the tradition of “The Song of Solomon”, to compare parts of the body (eyes, lips, toes, hips) metaphorically with “far off islands”, “coves”, “jewels”, and “a ship’s bounty”. The breasts are metaphorically compared to goblets, while he wants to “breathe the spices from your store”, that is her vagina. Her breasts metaphorically equal figs, her womb equals a pouch. The male and female bodies metaphorically equal a towel and a vine leaf respectively.

In the biblical text that is the source of the “David and Bathsheba” story (2 Samuel II:1-27), where David on a rooftop sees Bathsheba taking a ritual bath and falls in love with her – which one can only call love at first sight – Bathsheba is the stereotypical silent object, she has no voice of her own, and is only written about. In Georgia Scott’s poem she is transformed into a speaking character, indeed by being the speaker in the first section of the poem, she is the aggressor and initiator. Now it is the male speaker who remains anonymous and therefore ambiguous. We as readers ask ourselves: is Bathsheba talking to her husband Uriah, to David or to another suitor?<sup>32</sup>

The male speaker’s response in Section II is very dry, almost a parody of the grand tributes men might make to women, while Bathsheba’s lines are much more colourful. Again, in Sections III and V Bathsheba takes the initiative as seductress, while the male speaker is on the defensive, somewhat passive and evasive. It is he who cuts off his own utterance in Section X after the first two lines. In Sections VI and XII he uses the

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<sup>32</sup> In her essay “Bathsheba or the Interior Bible”, published in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, London and New York, 1998, Hélène Cixous offers her reading of Rembrandt’s painting *Bathsheba Bathing* as “twenty-four steps in the direction of Bathsheba” (3). In this painting, Cixous holds, “David is the outsider. The outside. The arranger. Invisible. ‘David and Bathsheba,’ that’s it: it is Bathsheba to the letter .... The letter resounds throughout the entire painting.” The situation in Rembrandt’s painting is similar to the one offered by Georgia Scott in her poem: while in the poem the speaker remains anonymous, David is only metonymically present in the painting by way of a letter. Cixous as reader/viewer only knows that this letter seen from the back, an anonymous letter for the audience, is by David, because “It is David, an old tale whispers to me” (11).

subjunctive and is almost asking for her permission; he offers himself as the object – the towel – to serve her.<sup>33</sup>

In Georgia Scott's poems that have been examined, we see metaphors combining the lexical fields of food, religion and the erotic in order to convey a spiritual as well as a physical level of intimacy. Her speakers, mostly female, borrow from the language of Judaeo-Christian worship, prayer, and scripture and are made more complex and far more persuasive and sympathetic than their negative stereotypes. In her poems she re-sexualizes and reclaims the woman as an active vessel, thereby subverting the image of passivity or the denigrating associations lurking in the pornographic exploitation of food language.

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<sup>33</sup> Several novels published in the past decade, in the main by Anglo-Jewish and Jewish American writers, re-write the Bible in ways that challenge conventionally gendered perspectives and are not afraid of addressing the sexual and erotic aspects of biblical characters' lives. In my view the most fascinating among these are Jenny Diski's *Only Human: A Divine Comedy*, London, 2000, which presents the story of Sarah and Abraham from Sarah's point of view, and Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, New York, 1997. The following novels make use of the Bathsheba-David story in interesting ways: Torgny Lindgren, *Bathsheba*, New York, 1989; James R. Scott, *Bathsheba*, Scottsdale: PA, 1995; and Francine Rivers's *Unafraid* and *Unspoken*, Wheaton: IL, 2001. For the reception of the Bathsheba-David story in English literature, see *The Bible and Literature: A Reader*, eds David Jasper and Stephen Prickett, Oxford, 1999, 147-58.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**Daniel Brass** is a research student in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. He is in the final stages of writing a doctoral thesis on representations of the garden in Victorian literature and culture. He has published several articles on the work of Elizabeth Gaskell and has presented papers on Gaskell and Charles Darwin. His current projects include a critical edition of Robert FitzRoy's *Narrative of the Beagle Voyage, 1831-36* and a study of earthworms in scientific and cultural history.

**R. van Bronswijk** completed a PhD in Birmingham (UK) in 2002 on the influence of fairy tales on Victorian prose and has since lectured at universities in Amsterdam, Leiden and Nijmegen. She has published an article on W.H. Henley. Her current research concentrates on late-Victorian folklorists and the relation to their European counterparts, as well as their echoes in *fin-de-siècle* poetry and prose. Other interests include the development of English as a means of international and intercultural communication.

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