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Kaye Kossick

Roaring Girls, Bogie Wives, and the Queen of
Sheba: Dissidence, Desire and Dreamwork in the
Poetry of Kathleen Jamie

As an impassioned celebrant of political and subjective autonomy, a picaresque traveler and negotiator of exotic distance and intimate urban space, it is incidental but appropriate that the key personal events of Kathleen Jamie's adult life have meshed coterminously with Scotland's drive towards independence.¹ Jamie is of the new order, the post-Renaissance, "storming" regiment of Scots women poets ready to "take [Scotland] by the thrapple and thrust it into the next millenia [*sic*]."² She begins, where many of the ladders now start, in the poetic praxis of reiving and revision, of transformative reevaluation: "poetry can alter the inner landscape of the poet, and be a means of enabling her to reach into the muddy well of her cultural and personal inheritance and hold the findings to the light" (*Dream State*, p. 36). In this sense Jamie perceives poetic language as the dynamic agency described by Hélène Cixous: "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard

¹"To speak personally, the movement from the last referendum in 1979, and this year's [1997], coincides with my adult life. I was seventeen in '79, too young to vote, just leaving school, cautiously writing my first poems. I voted Yes Yes this year at 35 years old, a mother, a graduate and what they call an 'established poet.' The politics are indistinguishable from my life." In "Dream State: Kathleen Jamie on the New Scottish Parliament," *Poetry Review*, 87, 4 (1997/98), 36. Henceforth *Dream State*.

²Interview with Richard Price, *Verse*, 8, 3 and 9, 1 (Winter/Spring 1992), 106. Henceforth Price.

for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."³ Cixous' theories on women's writing suggest that the seizure and re-valorization of what patriarchy elides and negates must be written by escapees, border-raiders who have "lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers" (Medusa, p. 258). The desire to "fly the coop" is one of Jamie's primary drives and she embraces her anomalous cultural and gendered positionality with the ex-centric pleasure of the traveler who is everywhere "not at home."⁴ The systolic ebb and dilation of distance in her major collections, *The Autonomous Region* and *The Queen of Sheba*, acknowledges the outward trajectory of Jamie's life and the centrifugal pull of the site of origin.⁵ "Somewhere in China" ("China for Lovers," *QS*, p. 33) or "under the pylons of Ormiston Brae" ("Bairns of Suzie: A Hex," *QS*, p. 25) the long gaze of the orphaned exile may yet be the most insightful, and the experience of cultural displacement a vital component in the transvaluatory processes of writing.

Jamie's "outsidedness" functions as a remedial instrument in the process of making the laws that delimit the autonomy of female subjectivity "appear visibly alien, heteronomous to the individual rather than the secret inner structure of her identity."⁶ Energizing Jamie's opposition to the monolithic forms of Standard English and cultural essentialism is her delight in being "one of the diverse, one of the plural" (Dream State, p. 36). In Bakhtinian terms, formal literary English is an "ennobled discourse" that "always presumes some privilege and exercises some social control."⁷ For a Scot to operate solely within the discursive framework of Standard English is therefore to remain the slave

³Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Brighton, 1981), p. 249. Henceforth Medusa.

⁴The theme of exile and rootedness in Jamie's work is discussed by Dorothy McMillan in "Here and There: The Poetry of Kathleen Jamie" in *Études Écossaises*, 4 (1997), 123-134. Henceforth McMillan.

⁵Kathleen Jamie and Sean Mayne Smith, *The Autonomous Region: Poems and Photographs from Tibet* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1993); other works by Kathleen Jamie quoted in this essay are from: *The Queen of Sheba* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1994), and *Penguin Modern Poets*, vol. 9, John Burnside, Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie (Harmondsworth, 1996). Henceforth *AR*; *QS*; *PMP*.

⁶Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism, Irony and Commitment" in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Eagleton et al. (Minneapolis, 1990), p. 32. Henceforth Eagleton.

⁷Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (London, 1981), p. 427. Henceforth Bakhtin.

of empire. Jamie champions the freedom to be heterogeneous and to engage with “the multifold voices and languages and attitudes which are ‘Scottish’” (*Dream State*, p. 36). Like one of her unruly “bairns of Suzie, the witch of the hill” running loose-limbed and laughing, Jamie jumps over the cracks, slips under and over discursive boundaries speaking the matrilineal “babel, the Scots polyphony” (“My Nana... is the source of my Scots language”—Price, p. 103) that subverts the gagging power of “English-male-posh-grown-up-dead speech.”⁸

Sean O’Brien believes that Jamie is becoming a poet of “the Condition of Scotland” because of her acute awareness of “the internalization of shame, the abolition of history, and, in a sense, of the self.”⁹ Jamie undoubtedly shares Scotland’s vexed post-colonialist inheritance of political negation, territorial insecurity and linguistic violation. But in addition to the injury of colonization by Englishness, she bears (and contests) the added humiliation of colonization by maleness.¹⁰ Accordingly, there are bogles and afreets in Jamie’s mythopoeia that specifically relate to her subject position as a woman. Some of the conceptual wraiths that haunt Jamie’s skull, like “Wee baby” (*QS*, p. 29)—a spectral manifestation of broodiness—are impish rather than demonic. The worst may be insidiously begotten through “‘hegemony’—that process whereby the particular subject so introjects a universal law as to consent to its imperatives in the form of consenting to his own deepest being” (Eagleton, p. 32). Glasgow poet Maud Sulter describes the interiorized “cancerous quellings” that break women’s voices in a culture still toxic with the fallout of Calvinist misogyny that has “no unnerstaunin—o ir / wimminhood.”¹¹ It is the bloated carcass of this dark inheritance that Jamie seems most determined to drag into the light and puncture with the barb and wit of an “arra’ heid” tongue.

Hugh MacDiarmid, mythmaker and shaman of Caledonian antiszygy, is a prime target for Jamie’s leveling appraisal. Famed for his “pissed thistle epistle,” as Helen Kidd has called *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, a Modernist epic that nets a chaosmos of incompatible states and bizarre contradictions,

⁸*Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* ed. Rebecca E. Wilson, Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 11

⁹*The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1998), p. 266.

¹⁰Helen Kidd notes the “persistence of those twin colonisations, maleness and Englishness” in an insightful discussion of contemporary Scottish women poets (though she does not discuss Kathleen Jamie). See “Writing Near the Fault Line: Scottish Women Poets and the Topography of Tongues,” in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 105.

¹¹Maud Sulter, “Thirteen Stanzas,” quoted in *Sleeping with Monsters*, p. 35.

MacDiarmid casts a giant shadow on many contemporary Scottish poets. Jamie dares to take a keek at colossus through the other end of the telescope and is “no feart” of what she sees: “To a young woman like myself, more interested in the Buzzcocks than thistles, MacDiarmid seemed like a ridiculous cockerel, crowing on his own tartan midden” (*Dream State*, p. 35). Moreover, Jamie constructs her own antiszygical frameworks in which ambivalent psychic impulses, parodic excess, irony and contestation, angle and jostle for prominence. Jamie is passionate in her moods of dissent, but she hauls the cables of rage (Audre Lorde’s phrase) with singing energy and a gritted resistance to polemic.

Jamie engages powerfully in the exercise of talking back / taking back that is a prime function in the construction of new female subjectivities. But as she herself points out: women and women writers sabotage the scope of their talents and their dreams by being “too self-belittling” (Price, p. 105). The female others in Jamie’s poems are therefore subject to the effects of the marginalized positioning that is equated with femininity, but may also betray the symptoms identified by Sulter. The conflictual wound caused when hegemonic misogyny is internalized creates a gender-specific form of antiszygy. This experience is dramatically realized in Jamie’s representation of “Estelle,” the aerialist:

Permanent Cabaret

Our highwire artiste,
knowing nothing of fear, will take
sparkling risks fifty feet high.

...

Our old friend the clown will stand
upside down in a shower of confetti
and chirp ‘Love me!’

...

Half way across Estelle glitters like frost.
She has frozen. ‘Remain professional.’ She
draws breath through her teeth, wavers
her hand: ‘Let Coco sense something for once!’
His red boots are edging towards her. He
coaxes, offers aid—his absurd umbrella.
The audience wonder: is it part of the show
this embarrassing wobbling,
this vain desperation to clutch? (*PMP*, p. 96)

Cixous refers to the “enticement machine” installed by the patriarchy to seduce women into embracing “virtuous servitude.” Gleaming still in this assemblage of “flashy signifiers...old handcuffs, baubles and chains” (*Medusa*, pp. 251, 263) is the Cinderella myth of romantic rescue, and the notion that

childbearing is the true, perhaps the only, expression of female creativity. Estelle dreams of being in “permanent cabaret,” a life dedicated to her art. Coco has dim thoughts of more prosaic projects: D. I. Y. and babies. But Estelle, like her poet-maker, re-invents herself with each performance, each articulation, on “the stage of her text.”¹² The dangers inherent in such an exercise, and the instability of female subjectivity, are literally rendered in the vertiginous terrors of her death-defying high-wire balancing act.

Cixous claims that a woman performing before an audience “physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (Medusa, p. 251). In Jamie’s representation, Estelle’s body speaks of painful ambivalence. Estelle figures a split between the dazzling specular illusion of myriad subjectivities projected by the “sparkling...glittering,” diamantine surfaces of her performance (“her costume, ladies is iced with hard diamonds”) and the insistent pulse and biological tic of “wobbling” female flesh. Estelle’s wobbling manifests both her self-perceived fleshly materiality and the psychodrama of her warring desires, either to deny the maternal destiny inscribed on her body or, indeed, to clutch at it. Using the circus ring as a physical and symbolic analogue of Estelle’s existential ambit, Jamie positions her heroine above the embarrassing ground-level functions of animal generativity, yet indicates through suggestive evocations of blank frigidity and sterility that Estelle may be frozen in the dead mirror of narcissism. Rather than being a producer of self-defined, polymorphous representations, Estelle may be caught and fetishized in the powerful arc of the patriarchal gaze, forced there to perform and to reflect in the tiny mirrors of her sequined costumed, the fixed repertoire of femininity. Her constrained choice is thus to defy gravity or to fall for the cooing blandishments of romance (“love me,” chirps Coco). The logical closure of this narrative is for her to fall pregnant and produce a clutch of wee chicks. But even the choices that Estelle appears to have power to make are ambiguated, for Jamie parodies and inverts the paradigmatic form of the rescue motif by translating the prince into a dull-witted clown (“let Coco sense something for once”) with an absurdly phallic umbrella and red boots. Raymond Friel suggests that Estelle’s existence “runs on adrenalin and the temporary suspension of the pressures of living in a specific time and place.”¹³ But what Jamie does not suspend or attempt to ironize out of existence is the embarrassing and insistent pressure exerted by introjected narratives of heterosexual romance and maternal fulfillment.

¹²Nancy Miller, “Women’s Autobiography in France: For a Dialectics of Identification,” in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman, eds. (New York, 1980), p. 260.

¹³Raymond Friel, “Women Beware Gravity: Kathleen Jamie’s Poetry,” in *Southfields: Criticism and Celebration* (London, 1995), p. 38.

Elsewhere, Jamie's self-figurations and the areas of psychic and experiential space they attempt to occupy are diverse, elusive, multiple and contradictory. In "Perfect Day" the persona speaks with a passive acquiescence that seems almost to welcome textual erasure (snow blanks out her tracks) and sexual absorption into the Other: "I am just a woman of the shore / wearing your coat against the snow" (*QS*, p. 34). Conversely, the fantastical "Ice Queen of Ararat," though snowblind, has a sibyl's power to open and read the hermetic inscriptions ("in a signature I couldn't read") on the body of nature: "at your feet / ice-lips part and speak" (*QS*, p. 61). The perilous aspect of her quest and its importance is acknowledged in the poet's passionate final urging: "I say: go on. Test every move with a hard staff" (*QS*, p. 61). Walking on air or on thin ice, Jamie's heroines literalize the precarious positioning of woman as Other. Her poems inhabit liminal landscapes, scoured desert tracts, glacial crests, ice-crusting oceans, rain-grey vastnesses of sky and sea, or the rotting perimeters of urban wastes. These desolate margins where difference/otherness is in constant negotiation serve as correlatives of the provisionality and indeterminacy of female subjectivities:

The golf course shifts
uneasily beside the track
where streetlight melts
to a soft frontier with winter dark.
I cross, then, helpless as a ship,
must let night load me, before
moving on between half-sensed
dry-stone walls; day-birds tucked in some nook.
("At Point of Ness," *QS*, p. 62)

There is melancholy here, anxiety even, but also an intimation of the freeing potential of motion, of moving on, and metamorphosis. Praise to the "God of movement, to Absolute / non-friction, flight, and the scary side" begins one poem ("The Way We Live," *PMP*, p. 114); "Begins to walk" is the endless ending of another (*AR*, p. 19). Even to be helplessly adrift, "lonely as a tossing cork" ("Wee Wifey," *QS*, p. 30) indicates a continuing journey or process rather than an atrophied state of figural closure.

Kristeva's theories on psychoanalysis and literature may offer some insights into Jamie's seeming compulsion to traverse borders, penetrate soft frontiers, and inhabit the scary side of things. In particular, there are notable parallels between Jamie's recognition/reanimation of "a wily, uncontrollable"¹⁴ occult female power and Kristeva's concept of abjection. This psychoanalytic

¹⁴Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), p. 70. Henceforth Kristeva.

term is used to describe “that which...does not respect borders, positions, rules.” It is therefore related to the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, p. 4). Abjection represents the restless interface between the precarious construction of subjective identity and the powers of death, corporeality, and animality that threaten constantly to defile, dissolve and destroy that identity. Woman’s more visible debt to animal nature, and therefore her abject status is inscribed on the body, “that poor, leaky, vulnerable bag of skin and bone and flesh so despised by churchmen.”¹⁵ The feminine functions as the underside of the symbolic order, and though, like the abject with which it is linked, it cannot be permanently expelled, it must be repressed if the frail structures of phallic dominance are not to be blown apart (Kristeva, p. 54).

The ambivalent lure of amorphous, abject, in-between states draws Jamie to the “civic landfill site”; the “dump beyond the cemetery” in “Mr and Mrs Scotland are Dead” (*QS*, p. 37). The bleak subtext here suggests that Scotland itself functions as the abject other to the dominant English hegemony. In “Mother-May-I” the foul, miasmatic wasteland of the dump represents the site of origin and of extinction: the place where myths of domination rise “thick as swamp mist” and corpses of murdered hitchhikers rot. Dread, disgust, and desire spawn fantasies of sadistic sexual violence: “They are the woods/ where men lift up your skirt/ and take down your pants/ even although you’re crying” (*QS*, p. 12). Jamie exploits the shock value of a hard-core image repertoire of pedophilia, sexual murder, female masochism, defloration and torn white flesh: “Mother may we/ pull our soft backsides/ through the jagged may’s/ white blossom?” (*QS*, p. 12). The effect is calculated to disturb and situates protagonists and readers on the razor edge of jeopardy, for the poem inscribes a challenging bricolage of sexual taboo, social realism, fairytale, and pornographic horror.

Jamie’s indebtedness to the baroque textual strategies of Angela Carter may be glimpsed here, for these sacrificial lambs have chosen to run with the tigers of their own imagination, even to the point of aggressive pursuit: “may I leave these lasses’ games/ and play at Man-hunt?” (*QS*, p. 12). As questing agents and articulating subjects of desire her protagonists resist categorization as passive victims. “Lasses’ games” often involve a rehearsal of the adult drag act of womanliness: playing with dolls and dressing up (practising to be a doll). Here they’ll have none of it. Jamie’s abject pastoral of “yellow-headed piss-the-beds” at the “bottom of the lane,” where lasses desire to squat in the dirt, suggestively “fanned out,” further contradicts the initially whispered horror story of helpless female innocence violated by ruthless male lust (*QS*, p. 12). These girls seem out to infiltrate and occupy the site of phallic mastery, to piss on the textual ground of gender and thus to mark it as their territory by

¹⁵Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1987), p. 258. Henceforth Warner.

reinscribing themselves in the masculine subject position of top dog. Jamie's questing virgins are street-canny, hang-nailed, duplicitous ("may I tell small lies?" *QS*, p. 12); they are not made of sugar and spice. Translating gendered metaphor into the facts of commodification, Jamie's punning has her "sweetie-breath[ed]" renegade nymphets smell of sugar, aspartame and sorbitol. Mythic representations of the sweet sanctity of virginal innocence/ignorance are thus exposed as synthesized, manufactured confections that render women toothless and powerless against the wolf. Their guerilla raid on the Arcanum may therefore arm them with the hard currency of truth and informed ruthlessness that will bear them through the dark wood. Destruction is nevertheless brought unnervingly close:

Mother may we
 ...
 run across the stinky dump
 and muck about
 at the woods and burn
dead pleased
 to see the white dye
 of our gym-rubbers seep downstream?
 ("Mother-May-I," *QS*, p. 12)

Jamie's provocative multivalency, sinister homonyms, and characteristic hanging lineation intensify anxiety through interpretive ambiguity. Are these neophytes dead pleased to murder the pale virginal self, to see the fake, bloodless white one die? Such an act of violent individuation could indeed represent a symbolic resolution of Cixous' urgent claim that if woman is to realize the "decensored relation of woman to her sexuality...her pleasures, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal," then she must first tear off the graven mask and "kill the false woman who is preventing the living one from breathing, inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (*Medusa*, p. 250). McMillan argues otherwise, suggesting that they are "half in love with their own potential degradation" (*McMillan*, p. 131). Masochistic complicity would interpellate them into a malignant, if classic, pornographic scenario in which the violated victims are asking for it (pleased to die). But such a reading occludes the significance of the revisionist ironies inherent in Jamie's textual slippage (though "half in love" acknowledges the oscillatory movement of interpretation). The act of textual play and the poet's insistence on shifting multivalency is itself subversive of monologism and enables the poem to function as a deconstructive parable in which the tightly rolled text of phallic dominance and female submission is challenged and exposed as a shabby myth, a dirty story that literally defiles women. The insidious power of such myths is nevertheless nascent in Jamie's recognition that the female body is the prime breeding site for myths and fetishistic codes of disguise and denial. In

psychoanalytic terms it functions as the “stinky dump” upon which are scrawled “the fantasies and longings and terrors of generations of men and through them of women” (Warner, p. 37).

Power breeds fear and fear breeds hatred and demonization. That “other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed” (Kristeva, p. 70). The ubiquitous figural embodiment of this supposedly feminine power is the witch, an “abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourse as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order.”¹⁶ For women writers, however, the fascination of the aberrant, the underside, and the transgressivity of the gothic may indeed reside in its resistance to the symbolic order and patriarchy. The witch “unsettles boundaries between the rational and the irrational, symbolic and imaginary” (Creed, p. 76). Her terrifying elemental powers are seen as part of her feminine nature, for she represents the magical alliance with infinite generativity. Jamie shows this secret confederacy working in the most numbingly quotidian of circumstances; even in concrete-skinned inner-city ghettos connection with the occult powers of “a goddess we can almost sense” (“The Fountain,” *QS*, p. 17) is effected through an ancient equation: women = sexual fertility = earth. Young mothers intuit their connectedness with the amniotic matrix and the primal generative powers of nature, even in the shallow, electrically-driven fountains of the shopping mall. Who says, challenges Jamie, as panniered women traverse a laminate arcadia: that “we can’t respond; don’t still feel, / as it were, the dowser’s twitch / up through the twin handles of the buggy”? (*QS*, p. 17). One of the dangers inherent in positing an exclusionary connection of woman and nature may be, as Christine Battersby points out, to risk giving credence to the “fiction that would make the culture within which we live monolithically male.”¹⁷ But nature must play a part in the lyric roar of women’s opposition to the cultural mechanisms that patriarchy uses to “limit female power, to tame women, and confine them to subsidiary roles” (Battersby, p. 230). Philip Larkin might dismiss Jamie’s young women as a “cut-price crowd, urban yet simple,” or suggest, with further patronage, that something is “pushing them / To the side of their own lives.”¹⁸ Jamie’s sly stratagem is to hook them into a chthonic web of such illimitable energies and transformative potential that they seem natural agents in a vast cadre of subversives.

¹⁶Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p. 76. Henceforth Creed.

¹⁷Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (London, 1944), p. 230. Henceforth Battersby.

¹⁸“Here” and “Afternoons,” in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1990), pp. 136, 121.

The age, says Jamie, has “a touch of the witch” (“Hagen and the Owls at Glencoe,” *QS*, p. 49) and fairies dance “blue as gas flames” near the motorway (“The Republic of Fife,” *QS*, p. 50). Something is happening as sacred horses, stalled for eons within the “earth’s black gut,” begin to sense light: “Let us out//to raise a new dawn this dull afternoon” (“The Horse-drawn Sun,” *QS*, p. 52). Magnificent argonauts come out of the West in a miraculous stone boat, bearing the justice harp. Masked in middle-class probity, but aided by a secret network of sympathizers, they plot transformations beyond reach (as yet) of our imagining:

... We ditched
 the cloaks, bought yellow
 Pringle sweaters in Spean Bridge,
 and house by safe house
 arrived in Edinburgh. So far so
 tedious: we all hold
 minor government jobs, lay plans, bide our time.
 (“One of Us,” *QS*, p. 43)

The political inflection of Jamie’s delight in covert networks of resistance and hidden founts of subversive energy finds its primary articulation in the insurgent irruption of the fantastical, the magical and the monstrous. This form of gothic antiszygy is deployed in “Bogie-wife” (*PMP*, p. 148) to render the borders between the imaginary and the real permeable and unstable. Jamie works through parodic excess to deconstruct mythic figurations of the abject devouring mother:

hands stained brown as dung.

She flusters hens, looking for babies:
 One eye swivelling in the middle of her forehead.
 She leaves, like a yeti
 the proof of her footprint.

She can smell babies.

Bakhtin describes the “grotesque body” of Rabelaisian carnival in terms of gross, protuberant physicality and oozing excess; refusing to be clean, contained or discrete, the fantastical form of the grotesque has every orifice agape and all sphincters dilate, thus defying the “bodily canon” of the “impenetrable façade...the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate

and completed phenomenon.”¹⁹ Jamie deploys the trope of hyperbolization to point the connection of the abject, the monstrous and the perceived otherness of the female. The flesh of the “Bogie-wife” is solid yet metamorphic; the essential organ that determines woman’s ontology: not her brain, but her “nether eye” is here exposed and bulbous in the Rabelaisian mode of “turning the body inside out” and foregrounding “excrescences...and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (Rabelais, pp. 317-8). Intellectually simple, linked with the animal, the sub-human, and organic fecundity (“arms strong as plum boughs/ twisting into fruit”), the Bogie-wife is a parody of essentialist conceptions of woman. Further cultural associations of woman and the abject are evoked by her corporeal rootedness in filth, corruption and decay: her hands bear the taint and the tint of ordure, her feet squash worms. The body of the Bogie-wife thus straddles and obfuscates the boundary between death and life, and like her covert avatars, she is relegated to the margins of symbolic systems and the “stinky dump” of otherness: “she hoists her thigh over back fences, / not down the street”; she’s “canny: keeps to the railway wall, compost heaps” (*PMP*, p. 148). The Bogie-wife survives through disguise, dissembling, and concealment. Jamie’s gleefully ludic juxtaposition of the Bogie-wife’s grotesque form and energies and the disguising codes of middle-class discourse, dress and demeanor with which she attempts a mimesis of femininity, inevitably point a greater parallel between her and a legion of duplicitous women: “she is charming when cornered,/ speaks a nice Scots,/ wears a fresh tee-shirt and attractive batik trousers” (*PMP*, p. 148). Unwilling perhaps even to consider the possibility of autonomous female power and desire, representatives from the masculine power-base deny her existence: “our nouveaux arrivistes; businessmen, journalists/ know her for a daft village story” (*PMP*, p. 148). The Bogie-wife’s subjectivity is thus subsumed within the oral babble of old wives’ tales, and exiled from the site of legitimate phallogocentric enunciation. Perversely, she is pushed further to the symbolic margins of subjectivity (“run out of town”) by women who mouth patristic laws of female exclusion and disempowerment as spells against her: “*This is private property! Ye’ve nae right!*”

The sharp tongues of these fearsome grannies bear the same serrated cutting edge as the ones described in Jamie’s “Arraheids”:

See thon raws o flint arraheids
in oor gret museums o antiquities

...

¹⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), pp. 318, 321. Henceforth Rabelais.

The museums of Scotland are wrang.
 They urnae arraheids
 but a show o grannies' tongues

...

chert tongues, that lee
 fur generations in the land
 like wicked chermis

...

wheesht...an you'll hear them,
 fur they cannae keep frae muttering
ye arenae here tae wonder,
whae dae ye think ye ur? (*QS*, p. 40)

A powerful dualism operates here, for though these female tongues seem to challenge the phallic logos enshrined in *history*, they nevertheless function as wicked charms against the ontological revisioning and revaluation that must precede emancipation. Cixous describes the tales "whispered ...by old grandmother ogresses, servants to their father-sons" that drag women into the service of male desire (Medusa, p. 260). The legacy of the collaborators is a pernicious discourse of reactionary paralysis and subordination: these scolds would bridle all their daughters.

The logical end of capitulation and the insidious power of the gender discourses that women inherit, absorb and transmit are laid bare in Jamie's "School Reunion." Far from positing a mystical bonding of women, the view from the Ladies Room is one of nightmarish bondage in which mothers and daughters are trapped within a specular economy whose sole guarantor is the male gaze. Judith Butler notes the inherent facticity of womanliness and argues that there is no real gender core, only repeated acts of impersonation, which are "compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."²⁰ One of the major questions posed here is, of course, who or what compels females to obey the regulatory cultural scripts that instruct them on how to become women? "School Reunion" acknowledges the formative pressures of heterosexual hegemony and the "myth kitty" of gender symbolizations, but more insistently illustrates the notion that the fiercest monitors and agents of women's performance may be women themselves:

²⁰Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Feminisms*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford, 1997), p. 285.

...*Come in, we're
almost
all here.*

Downstairs, women
who work in banks are dancing, handbags
piled like ashes at their feet.

They raise their arms
in the disco lights, bra straps droop.
those faces turn, eyes, the same
lipstick mouths...

In the Ladies/
Girls

A glass vase & twist of plastic fuchsia.

Laughter Hairspray
holds the air
smiles stale
fag ash grey
cubicle doors clang; my shoes are wrong
the tongue
shocks with blood
fuck off you

a pin scratches:

I want McKean
to shag me—Gemma
is a bitch whore slag tart
Our voices

rise and rise, breasts fall
toward pink-pastel basins,
as we take out lipsticks, lean
into mirrors look our mother's faces
rise to greet us
framed in paper rosebuds
from the opposite wall.

The child birls in the frosty playground,
her woolly hat, gloves flying on strings.

The text of a dream: wild earth
carpet
emulsion in peach blossom.

...

Linda willowy acrobat
divorce cartwheels, skirts
Expecting (again) cover her face

a mother's grip
can't you be more
ladylike, women
 beware
 gravity (*QS*, pp. 20-21).

The amicable premise of Jamie's title is clearly contested by the formal disjunctions and syntactical lacunae of the poem itself, for the *mise-en-page* functions as a spatial allegory of disruption, absence and loss. In the fragmented description of "willowy" Linda, the gaps opened by syntactic rupture are visual correlatives of silence and erasure. The explosive dynamism and athletic grace of girlhood are buried/covered in a blank lacuna that seems to symbolize the obliteration of both time and subjectivity. As wife and mother, Linda's existence has become utterly divorced from its original potential, subsumed and peripheral. Jamie leaves Estelle, aerialist and acrobat, vacillating on the brink but Linda takes the long drop and is lost.

Locked into a ghettoized site of instruction, behind prison-like clanging "grey cubicle doors," women paint on lifeless, undifferentiated masks of femininity ("the same lipstick mouths") as unreal, artificial and alienated from living nature as the synthetic peach-blossom pastels (bridesmaids' colors) of the Kestrel Hotel. One of the deeper ironies inherent in this mode of display where women seek to kill themselves into art forms is that mirrors act as an index of the scopic economy in which women are reduced to puny narcissism in an attempt to compensate, or mask through fetishism, the inferiority of their castrated state. As objects of exchange women are forced into distrust and rivalry, with the rupture of the primal bond between mother and daughter being a condition of the daughter's proper development into femininity. Irigaray asks how "this object of transaction [can] assert a right to pleasure without extricating itself from the established commercial system? How can this merchandise related to other goods on the market other than with aggressive jealousy?"²¹ Jamie's unease and ambivalence towards mothers whose complicity sustains gender asymmetry and the phallogocentric system of values is patent in her resistance to the admonition: "*can't you be more/ ladylike.*" The line shift deliberately creates a blank space after the word "more" that suggests a subtle interpellation of hunger and desire for boundless possibilities of being. Rejection of the muted nullity of ladylike behavior is also manifest in Jamie's heteroglossic deployment of contrastive idioms and scatological discourse: "*fuck off you*"—"I want McKean/ to shag me"—"*bitch whore slag tart.*" These are our voices but much of this female text is debased, antiphonal with the inverted hatred with which women police themselves and their sexuality.

²¹Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One," in *New French Feminisms*, p. 105. Henceforth Irigaray.

Gemma's lust is hardly expressed in terms that suggest a sensual exchange of erotic pleasure: she remains passive, McKean (presumably male, his emotional distance hinted at in the use of the patronymic) is invoked as the active performer in an act that may be as nasty, brutish and short as the word that describes it. In Irigaray's terms, Gemma prostitutes her body to a "desire that is not her own and that leaves her in her well-known state of dependency....if only he will 'take' her as the 'object' of *his* pleasure, she will not say what *she* wants" (Irigaray, p. 100).

Jamie's inclusive pronoun stresses her involvement in the fate she envisages and fears: "our mothers' faces / rise to greet us" in mirrors. These premonitory phantasms seem to rise with the same clawed grip as Plath's devouring hags: "From the mercury-backed glass / Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in."²² Framed in glass coffins, ironically strewn with rosebuds, clichéd textual tropes of virginity and mutability, these faces are pitiless cultural and genetic maps of the dumping ground where mothers now are and where daughters will follow:

When we're older than a mattress
on the dump, and shudder
in the living rooms of daughters
who're 60, who put on lipstick and
kindly lead us out

...

again we'll enter the Kestrel Hotel's
dim loud dance hall:
 as diners turn in the cool light,
mouth open, those appalled young eyes;
 we know whose names we will mutter & shout
 we are almost all here
as our daughters hush us. (*QS*, p. 23)

Freud has said that "reminiscence" is the symptomatic discursive mode of the hysteric.²³ Here, where the voices of breast-fallen, drooping, dying women whose voices "rise and rise" as they circle joylessly in a vortex of wasted potential, there is only reminiscence. The poem's pivotal core of desire and memory is the birling child whose joy is totally spontaneous and unconscious of itself. The rhythms of music and dance are allied with Kristeva's concepts

²²Sylvia Plath, "All the Dead Dears," in *Collected Poems* (London, 1981), p. 70. Henceforth Plath.

²³Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (1983-5, in collaboration with Freud), *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London, 1953-74), II, 7.

of the semiotic and the chora,²⁴ here the spinning bairn with “flying gloves,” dances suspended in an alternative “dream text” that is written by the body. The reach of this fantasy embraces a wild feminine jouissance which paradoxically evades the grip of the law of the father (inculcated by the mother) but also connotes a blissful ungendered, pre-oedipal state of unity. Within Jamie’s symbolic schema of female maturation, the child has not yet hit the true glass ceiling, the patriarchal mirror that initiates the beginning of alienation and duplicity as women labor to become eroticized objects of the male gaze, whilst also arousing horror at the bloody shame of their no thing-ness. The singing flesh of the ecstatic child denies Cartesian binarism, elides the gap between subject and object, incarnates her own pleasure. In this moment of being, the dancer and the dance are one. But this sunburst of kinetic power can only intensify the crepuscular terrors of Jamie’s things to come scenario, where we’ve turned into our mother and our daughters are 60. The fear mirrored and magnified in the appalled eyes of those who witness the demented declension of the old is devastating. Significantly, the daughters have become the agents of their mothers’ dispossession: the rest is an enforced, hushed silence. In “School Reunion” Jamie exposes the compounded shame and rage that daughters feel towards mothers crushed beneath the sullen weight of virtuous servitude: “a mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman.”²⁵ Sylvia Plath’s desire to recover an ennobled, autonomous subjectivity: “I have a self to recover, a queen” (“Stings,” Plath, p. 215) issues from this maimed subject position. Haunting the Scottish psyche is the tragic revenant of another shamed and mutilated queen.

The balance shifts in “The Queen of Sheba,” Jamie’s eponymous blast of the trumpet for Scotland’s daughters and a peerless manifesto for the recovery of the unfree, the wounded, the un-mothered and the dispossessed. Jamie conjures a champion, a queen, half-myth, half-legend, wholly exotic, a lustrous witch of the Levant, whose “bonny, wicked smile” invites disempowered women to bring down walls, smash through the looking glass and construct for themselves a new heaven and a new earth on the smoking rubble of Calvin’s kirkyaird:

²⁴In Kristevan theory the semiotic *Chora* (from the Greek for enclosed space, womb) relates to the mother’s body and the Pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic, non-gendered stage of child development. The *chora* is related to non-verbal signifying systems such as musicality, rhythm, babble, gesture, tears and laughter. See “Revolution in Poetic Language,” ed. Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, 1986).

²⁵Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London, 1977), p. 243.

Scotland, you have invoked her name
just once too often in your Presbyterian living rooms

...

She's had enough. She's come.
Whit, tae this dump? Yes!

...

See her lead those soft camels
widdershins round the kirk-yaird,
smiling
as she eats avocados with apostle spoons
she'll teach us how

...

Yes, we'd like to
clap the camels,
to smell the spice,
admire her hairy legs and
bonny wicked smile, we want to take
PhDs in Persian, be vice
to her president: we want
to help her

ask some Difficult Questions (*QS*, pp. 10-11).

The challenge that otherness presents to the symbolic order and to patriarchy is realized in Jamie's sign made sumptuous flesh. This fabulous eidolon of assured power and luxuriant sensuality ("admire her hairy legs") is the rich antithesis of the ashen specters in the ladies' room. To the skinny girls of the Curriehill Road whose aspirations have been capped from birth ("be cliver like yer faither / but no too cliver, no *above yersel*"). Sheba is the fantasy mother, whose "scarcely cover[ed]...gorgeous breasts" promise voluptuous plenitude. This nurturant mother sets no limits on the visionary parameters or transformative powers of the imaginary and will make the "bottled dreams" of her wee lassies "look like *sweeties*." Under Sheba's empowering tutelage, the genie, the genius of these girls can fly free to shape a multiplicity of new figurations of desire ("*all that she desires, whatever she asks*"). Once out of the bottle the real dreamwork can begin.

I began by considering the trope of woman as an outworlder, a rim dweller, persona non grata in the kingdom of the symbolic. Jamie's own alien status enables her production of extraordinary and varied poetic representations of curtailed, covert, split, occult, anathematized, even monstrous female subjectivities. Sheba substantiates the trope of otherness and excess but defies the anomalous liminality of her positioning by refusing either to be contained or excluded by the dominant order. The Bible, ur-text of gender asymmetry cannot hold her down; the standing stones of phallocracy: the "Masons, the eld-

ers, the police" (*QS*, p. 10), fall before her. Hers is no fly-by-night incursion into the kirk-yaird, the sacred site of hegemonic inculcation. Stepping "widdershins" on culture's holy ground, Sheba has come to democratize the hieratic elite. She dances, in Emily Dickinson's words, "like a bomb abroad"²⁶ and arrogates the right to have "the keys/ to the National Library" (*QS*, p. 10) to enter the Bastille of symbolizations and to explode the phallogocentric text from within. But this is not revolution, even less is it devolution. The point as Jamie makes it is not to re-iterate or re-inscribe a reversed hierarchy, but to unpick the locked binarisms that encode and enshrine our hatred of Otherness. Following Bakhtin's assertion that laughter "demolishes fear and piety before an object...thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (Bakhtin, p. 23), Jamie sets the example and invites us to revisit, interrogate, and revision what we most fear in others and in ourselves. We only have to look straight on to see that, like the Medusa of Cixous, Sheba the "m/Other" is not deadly, is not abject, is not evil. She's brave, she's beautiful, and she's laughing (Medusa, p. 255). The way to a truly autonomous region begins with difficult questions. Jamie's triumphant queen inspires a thousand girls, and more, with the desire and the courage to find their own answers:

she's shouting for our wisest man
to test her mettle:

Scour Scotland for a Solomon!

Sure enough: from the back of the crowd
someone growls:

whae do you think y'ur?

and a thousand laughing girls and she
draw our hot breath
and shout:

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA! (*QS*, p. 11)

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²⁶ "The Soul has Bandaged Moments," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London, 1975), p.250