GENDER ON PAPER: GENDER PERFORMANCES IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S

POETRY 1650-PRESENT

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Gender on paper is an act; it is performed. Using Judith Butler's definition of gender as a basis for an analysis of how gender is constructed, I look at the "repeated acts" of particular language usage in poems written by American "women" and interrogate the ways poems become gendered performances within social contexts. I posit that American women poets use gender performances in their poems to transform ideas of womanhood, to redefine female gender roles, and to reinforce normative gender roles. The dissertation explores poems which center on particular subject matter: writing, marriage, motherhood, and madness. I begin with a theoretical introduction and then move to the second chapter in which I illustrate the connection between women, their bodies, their social construction, and language. By considering the performance of

gender next to the performance of genre, I argue that womanhood, femininity, and poetry are tightly related both in feminist theory and in American history. It is through their poetry that these poets have begun to define themselves both in language and outside of the Law. Chapter three argues that poets equate femininity with Luce Irgiaray's concept of the Masquerade and then either perform that femininity or use mindful mimicry to undermine it. Using Julia Kristeva's connections between the maternal body and poetic language, chapter four argues that poets use semiotic language to write against the abjection of the maternal and to offer a possibility of a non-rejected mother. In chapter five, I argue that by employing the language of madness some women poets reveal the traditions of hysteria as a performance and offer in its place a performativity which opens the possibility of woman's subjectivity which is outside of the Law.

Attempting to find an intersection between Kristeva and Butler, my argument shows that women poets find themselves in a unique position and are capable of a particular kind of action through their poetry. As females, women poets have been sexed in the Symbolic by rejection of their mother/self and have taken up language as the substitute for this rejection (or lack). However, since this rejection is not a complete rejection of the mother, some connection still exists between the mother/self and the poet. Therefore, when the woman poet engages semiotic disruptions, she engages with herself outside of the Symbolic. At the same time, she can never escape the social norms of her time and place, and when she performs gender with her poetry, she re-inscribes, deconstructs, or reveals those social norms. Therefore, women poets have unique positions in language and in the socio-political arena that affords them the potential to change the social norms and the Symbolic law.

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Style Manual Used: *Modern Language Association Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* 6th edition

Computer Software Used: Microsoft Word

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Playing Gender

I.
Lying is done with words, and also with silence.
---Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying"

I begin with I, with I
no she no he, with I
I begin this poem there: in the space, in the silence,
the beginning rests in the space
the space in this poem begins
with I, where I begin.
In the space, in the silence, I open
my mouth
I open and speak, I open
and turn to the past, to the future, I open
I turn, I speak, I begin this poem,
open my mouth and speak
in the opening, the beginning,
tongue curls, throat vibrates,
the I speaks
no he no she
I begin with sounds, then words.

II.
The collaborative space is larger and more fertile for me than writing alone.
---Mei-mei Berssenbrugge "By Correspondence"

You, not he not she, you listener
open your mouth to answer, you begin
our dialogue from gray, from pause,
from you.
You speak in time in time in time in,
and I from space listen
to your enunciation echo
from ripples where lines crinkle
into syllables, you fill the clock beats
with crinkled space with tonal shifts

with refusal of silence
and you speak your part

in the conversation with eloquence
you speak
no he
no she

III.
To reclaim "history," women poets have re-defined it by
breaking down the barriers between the "public" and the
"private," the "political" and the "personal" –they have
historicized the personal and personalized the historical.
---Susan S. Friedman, "When a 'Long' Poem is a 'Big' Poem"

Walls around history and you
and I between walls
and history jumps between
us as we talk and history
hangs in those walls and
we talk without walls
inside history and a he flies
by on a bicycle on a raft
between walls a she flies by
in an airplane in a kite
and I am between
walls and you are between
walls and I pretend to speak
and he on the bike says you sound
like her.
You look at me you
look across the space time movement
of words you look at me
ask who he is
you ask how puppets look
between walls

IV.
It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience.
---Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*

In front, in the poem,
on the stage, I am she. She She She

On the stage she talks about
houses and hair and water and fertile soil
and goddess and mothers and children
and food and style and bras and menstruation

and moon and love and love and pain
As she I struggle
with the missing link between mean and say
the inability to capture language.

And then, I am he. He traveling down
I-10 to the junction of entropy and villanelle
to the pinpointed logistic experiment
a tangled mass of rebar and concrete
that masquerades as a footing
deep below the bedrock of a collapsed
building.

I, now he now she, return to I
to the beginning of I where no performance
exists, return to silence
where no performance speaks
and the silence performs.

V.
The poem doesn't hurry or slow because of whim, after all, but because of what the silence within or without demands, silence from whom it is, in effect won.

---Jorie Graham "Some Notes on Silence"

We lie in silence
performing;
we write history
in our skins, in walls,
in he (that can be)
in she (that can be)

you's and I's
open and turn

---Katherine D. Perry

CHAPTER ONE

Figuring Gender, Performance, and Performatives

> When I learned the meaning of 'I' and 'me' and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me.
>
> ~Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*

> What is the gender on paper. A fatigue in the cold, fear of finishing. And doesn't it make a difference to me, reading this book now, to know that you are going to read the same book afterwards, in the same copy, these selfsame words – and would that difference made be different if you were reading your own copy of the book at the same time that I was reading mine.
>
> ~Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*

One of the earliest stories I remember researching was told to me in my fourth-grade, Alabama history textbook. The story was of Helen Keller (1880-1968) and Anne Sullivan (1866-1936) and Keller's "miraculous" acquisition of language that transformed her from animal to lady. I was so enthralled with the story that I checked out both books on Keller that my small-town library held, and every year I watched the television showings of the 1979 movie *The Miracle Worker* with Patty Duke and Melissa Gilbert. In the film version, Gilbert's Keller storms around the dining table eating food greedily from her parents' plates while Duke's Sullivan staunchly refuses to allow such crude behavior from a human child. But it was the water pump scene that hypnotized me then and intrigues me still today. As Sullivan pumps water over seven-year-old Keller's hands, she spells w-a-t-e-r in sign language into Keller's palm over and over again. Each

time I view this scene, I am reminded that this is how Keller understood language for the first time and that in this moment of recognition, her poor behavior changed into that of a Victorian lady. In *The Story of My Life*, Keller recalls that moment:

> Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. (27)

In the film, it is through this revelation of the word *water* that Keller can abandon her animal-like behavior and throw herself whole-heartedly into learning. Indeed the narrative, no matter who tells it, includes an equation between language and acceptable feminine behavior. Keller says in her autobiography that even before Sullivan came, she wanted to express herself but, she said, "The few signs I used became less and less adequate, and my failures to make myself understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion" (22). Without language we believe ourselves and our offspring to be wild, passionate, and unruly creatures.

When I was 10 years old, I did not think to delve into this relationship between language and gender, but it now seems important to return to the story of Helen Keller's life and ask: How do language and gender function in our culture? Why did/does this story of a blind and deaf girl who learned language in the late 19th century captivate me

and as well as most of our nation (Helen Keller is featured on the 2003 Alabama quarter)? How does the metaphor of knowledge as light become complicated if we re-read this story through a feminist and/or psychoanalytic lens? And finally, to return to my original question, what is gender and how are gender and language connected?

To understand those connections, I must first explore the societal definitions of gender. The debate concerning our understanding of gender and sex is central to many current questions in feminist thought. For much of American culture "gender" is a euphemism for "sex;" it is merely another either/or tick box on applications and forms forcing us to define our identities in terms of binary social norms. In these cases, "gender" is or has a direct correlation with the "sex" of the person and is understood as biological or following from the outward manifestations of the biological sex. While many people will typically respond "male" or "female" when asked their gender, some understand a slight difference between "gender" and "sex." For those, "gender" is determined by the cultural behavior of a person (i.e. "masculine" or "feminine" traits) while "sex" is determined by the chromosomes or genitalia of that person (i.e. "male" or "female"). For this group, both gender and sex are easily defined and observed in human subjects, and a correlation between gender and sex is still expected. If this correlation fails (i.e. if a male exhibits feminine traits), then his/her behavior is consider abnormal, and the accused person is punished with social and sometimes legal laws. These understandings of gender and sex rely on a culturally accepted set of social behavioral rules that dictate given behavior as gendered. American culture, for example, marks the wearing of "skirts" or garments that wrap around the bottom half of the body in a circle "feminine" while Scottish, Japanese, and other cultures do not. When asked their gender,

this skirt-wearing group will likely respond "masculine" or "feminine" depending on their cultural background.

But, while some see sex as biological and gender as cultural, Judith Butler (b. 1956) has questioned this distinction. According to her, both biological and cultural views of sex/gender are constructions. This idea brings us back to the original group mentioned above where gender is a polite term for sex. Theoretically speaking, Butler does not align herself with this group that conflates the terms "sex" and "gender," but her ideas eventually become similar to theirs. While Butler wants a complete revision of the way we understand both gender and sex, her ideas follow in a long history of debate about the human self and how that self comes to be what it is.

To understand how we have come full circle, I must return to the early thinkers on human identity. For philosophers since Plato, the ability of humans to know themselves has been called into question; but since the nineteenth century, the debate has focused around subjects with unconscious desires and drives, and culture is viewed as a system of forces that shapes bodies, behaviors, and subjectivity.[1] This socially constructed subject has replaced the concept of self and caused such complex distinctions between gender and sex that the stability of the categories of gender and sex themselves have come into question. This new way of thinking has opened the possibility that there are no connections between gender and sex. This marks the foundation of gender studies and, in many cases, feminist theories; it calls into question not only the relationship between biology and culture, but also the origins of "sex" and "gender." When splitting gender

[1] Keller's (born in 1880) autobiography, *The Story of My Life,* was published in 1903. Freud's publications stretch from 1893 to 1939.

from sex (and even Butler would agree that we did make that split), and considering how we are sexed and gendered, we interrogate our understanding of bodies and the actions of those bodies. This interrogation leads us to question the assumption that sex and gender are simple binary categories: male/masculine or female/feminine, and begs us to question the biological and cultural stability of such categories. To understand these distinctions fully, we must begin with our concepts of identity, subjectivity, and the human psyche.

Because I am particularly interested in language and literature, many of the theories I depend on here will begin with Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) and his psychoanalytic model. Building on Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) psychoanalytic model, Lacan revises the sexing of humans by reconsidering femininity and language. Lacan returns to Freud's concept of the unconscious (inaccessible drives and forces) and emphasizes that the unconscious, due to its inaccessibility, subverts any stable subjectivity. Using linguistic theory, Lacan claims that the unconscious works like language by attempting to substitute a signifier for an inaccessible signified creating a string of metaphors (substitution) and metonyms (displacement) to create meaning. He emphasizes language as the symbolic structure through which subjects are formed. This Symbolic differs from the previous psychosexual phases of development, which Lacan named the Real (the earliest, unknowable phase where the child knows no lack and no separation of itself from the world around it) and the Imaginary (the phase marked by passage from Real to Symbolic where the child creates a false image of itself as whole; the Imaginary continues to influence subjects in the Symbolic).

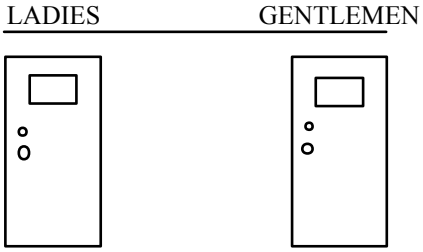
In his essay "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan says that the woman is the Phallus. In his psychoanalytic model, each child must take up a sexual identity in relation to the Phallus. This relationship, along with sexual identity, is given with the child's acquisition of language. The girl child becomes the Phallus while the boy child attempts to have the Phallus. But, even though sexual identity is thus given in relation to the Phallus, it is not a subject position; it is ultimately the signifier of signifiers. Lacan says:

> For the Phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier. (285)

This signifier of signifiers sexes the child. So, according to Lacan, as master signifier the Phallus is what marks the both subjects (but my interest here is in the female) entry into the symbolic. The development of the subject, according to Lacanian theory, is based in a fiction which is apparent in the mirror stage (during the imaginary stage) when the child perceives (misrecognizes or *méconnaissance*) its reflection to be a whole, functioning being but internally feels its own lack of motor skills and unmet desires. The movement into language, where the child uses the pronoun "I" but still understands his/her self to be not whole and recognizes the use of the pronoun by others (therefore a slippery correlation between signifier and signified) helps the child to see the Phallus as a fraud. As the master signifier, the Phallus is the signifier by which the sexes align themselves. As in the Oedipus complex, it is the child's relative position to the phallus (or what Freud

called the "father") that determines its sex. Biology, then, does not dictate sex or sexuality, as subjects with any chromosomal, hormonal, or genital body parts can take up any position in relation to the Phallus.

Language is the means through which the child attempts to express his/her desires/lack. However, language can never fulfill or express the lack, and despite understanding this, the child only has language to attempt to fulfill his/her desires. Therefore, it is through the child's relationship to the phallus (to language) that s/he is sexed and this sexuality is not related to his/her emotional or sexual needs. Sexual difference, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is only a function of language. Lacan used the following image to explain the linguistic connections of his theory of sexual difference (and Lacan draws his relationship from Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) diagrams of signifier and signified):



Children must choose a door in order to gain entry into the Symbolic order. He tells the story of two children on a train who pull into a station where they see the image above through the train window. The girl says, "We are at Gentlemen" and the boy says, "No, we are at Ladies." This metaphor shows that children are sexed in relation to the other, and they must take a sexed position to gain entry. Sex, then, is an arbitrary signifier through which subjects are formed. In order to acquire a subject position from which to speak, the child must assume the Name-of-the-Father and become either the "I"

that desires within the symbolic order (for the boy child) or the "I" (which is not really an "I") that is desired within the symbolic order (for the girl child).

Lacan's theory of sex and sexuality opens to feminist possibilities for understanding "woman" and the feminine in different ways. It is important to note here that Judith Butler's ideas about gender resist the use of femininity and masculinity as substitutions for the word gender because they reinforce a binary that she wishes to move away from. She uses, instead, gender, as a term that she hopes will make a path for the many gendered identities that might be possible if we "undo" the binary of feminine/masculine. I use both "femininity" and "gender" in this paper, but not interchangeably. "Femininity" refers to the phallocentric reflection of men's desires that has historically been mistaken for woman. "Woman" refers to the unknown and potential being outside of the exchange economy that has her own subjectivity. "Gender" refers to a possibility of performances that would include masculinity and femininity as well as any number of combinations of the two or the possibility of an undefined other that we have yet to conceptualize.

For Luce Irigaray (b.1930), Freudian and Lacanian theories are tools to understanding the phallocentrism of psychoanalysis. She finds that the asexual (Lacan) or bisexual (Freud) infant is really a masculine being and that women have been merely not-men. She theorizes a space for woman wherein and from which women can speak, and therefore, a place for two sexes (man and woman) where the feminine is not defined phallocentric relationship to man. Irigaray finds that the mother-daughter relationship offers a language alternative to and outside of the phallocentric language theorized by Freud and Lacan (wherein the child must take the father's name and language in order to

speak). "Woman," as used in our culture, is a construction of man, and Irigaray sees the question "what is woman?" as leading to the wrong answer. For Irigaray, then, we should attempt to envision sexual difference with a place for the feminine. Her concept of *parler-femme*, to speak (as) woman, advocates that women find ways to speak and to speak themselves. In *This Sex Which is Not One,* Irigaray argues that women "are women already" (211), but we must let go of the definitions and categories of femininity placed upon us by patriarchy. To speak, she claims, we must speak by "stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there is will not be enough" (213). To create woman outside of patriarchy, women must find their own voices and use them.

Similarly for Hélène Cixous (b. 1937), the female body and female sexuality is not represented within the symbolic order. Cixous advocates *l'écriture féminine*, writing woman, where women would use a feminine language to write themselves into existence. According to Cixous' reading of Lacan, language is phallo(go)centric (patriarchal and privileging the logos), and female sexuality does not exist within this system. Because poetry employs freer associations than fiction, Cixous places *l'ecriture feminine* in poetry rather than prose. Poetry's use of ambiguous association is closer to the unconscious and disrupts the phallogocentric patterns of language ("Laugh of the Medusa" 350). For women to find their *jouissance*,[2] Cixous suggests they must explore outside of the Symbolic, but she is also careful to resist prescribing a feminine language. In the opening sentence of Cixous' famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," questions what

[2] French word (in opposition to *plaisir)* which means something that gives the subject a way out of its normative subjectivity through transcendent bliss whether that bliss or orgasmic rapture be found in texts, films, works of art or sexual spheres. It is also the state of wholeness that Lacan says the child experiences in its relationship with the mother prior to the entry of the Father.

women's writing "*will do*" (347). She posits that language is active, and that for woman to find herself, she must write herself because language and history is phallogocentric and phallocentric. She has heretofore been written upon, now she must write herself. In this dissertation, I will ask if the poets are in fact writing woman, which is to say a woman beyond the phallogocentric patterns of language, or if they are simply reproducing the language of their forefathers and participating in the continued covering over of woman.

Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) understands language and women slightly differently than Cixous or Irigaray. When answering the question what is woman, Kristeva says that she is a subject in process and is not definable. Language, according to Kristeva, has two distinct phases: the semiotic (not to be confused with the study of signs) and the symbolic (not to be confused with Lacanian Symbolic Order). The semiotic is dominated by the maternal body and is feminine. The symbolic is the systems of rules, laws, and languages dominated by the repression of the semiotic in order to achieve social order. But Kristeva is careful not to directly connect women and the semiotic, because she believes that it is not any more accessible to women than to men. The semiotic, because it is always present underneath the symbolic, causes ruptures and dissonance in the symbolic. This semiotic language, according to Kristeva, can be observed in poetry and in other art forms. By illustrating how poets use rhythms and tones and other non-denotative ways of making meaning, Kristeva's argues that the semiotic is capable of creating ruptures within language. I believe that this theory opens new ways in thinking about women and their relationship to poetic language despite Kristeva's insistence that women have no more connection to the semiotic than men. In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Kristeva theorizes that through poetic language we might see "the penetration

of the socio-symbolic by *jouissance*" (80). She links the social and the symbolic and argues that poetry is "a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself" (81). Therefore, poetic language, through its employment of both semiotic and symbolic functions of language, reveals the poet's potential to make meaning outside of the Lacanian Symbolic Law (where humans are sexed). Poetic language, then, is one of the few ways that women can rupture the Symbolic order. This potential is rooted in the mother-child relationship before language (the Symbolic) splits it, when the mother uses rhythms and tones to communicate to the child. The use of the semiotic language in poetic language is communication with tools outside of the Symbolic, and because these tools lie outside of the Symbolic Law, they disrupt it. These movements outside of the Law can make small changes in the Symbolic, but those changes occur slowly.

It is this slow rate of change that leads to Butler's frustration with Kristevan and Lacanian theory. This frustration leads Butler to work with social norms rather than with Symbolic Law because she sees the opportunity to make changes in the patriarchal system more quickly through subversion of social norms. She argues against Kristeva's equation of symbolic and social anthropology and says that social norms are different from the Symbolic law. Preferring Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) concept of social norms to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (b. 1908) anthropology and Lacan's theories of Symbolic law, Butler argues that gender is a performed social norm and is, therefore, separate from sex and sexuality. Butler claims that gender is "a regulatory norm" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 53), and that while these norms are produced by actions, they cannot be reduced to individual actions (52). In her book *Gender Trouble*, she defines gender as "the

repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). Butler's phrase, "highly rigid regulatory frame," reveals her belief that gender is a construction of cultural and/or social norms. Butler's now famous example of drag is evidence for her claim that gender performatives (actions) can be outside of the social norms, and these performatives move the social norm because humans have a tendency to normalize alternate behaviors. If norms are produced, for example, by male subjects dressing (acting) in particular styles of pants and tops, or "the repeated stylization," then dressing (acting) alternatively will change the norms because the surrounding culture will "normalize" that alternative, thereby offering a different option for action (43-44). Actions cannot be outside of the Symbolic law, according to Butler, so it is only through normalization of actions that these performances can make changes. Culture, then, is both part of and a result of the gendering process, and while individuals are capable of action, those actions are regulated by social norms.

The purpose of this study is to explore how theories of language usage interact with the theories developed by Kristeva about poetic and semiotic language. I want to examine further the relationship between gender performance and signification and trace the uses of gender norms in poetry which can reveal the connections between semiotic language and gendered social norms. Specifically, the connections between psychoanalytic theories and social constructivist theories help us to better understand how poets employ gender in their work. By considering how social norms change over time, space, and geography, I hope to map some of the ways that American women poets

have explored the way language can create, reinforce, and subvert our understandings of "gender."

In building a definition of gender and how to subvert it, Butler argues that it is the repetition of these "stylizations" that turns individual actions into norms and eventually into a conception of gender that appears to be "naturalized." In *Undoing Gender,* she argues:

> Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. Indeed, it may be that the very apparatus that seeks to install the norm also works to undermine that very installation, that the installation is, as it were, definitionally incomplete. To keep the term "gender" apart from both masculinity and femininity is to safeguard a theoretical perspective by which one might offer an account of how the binary of masculine and feminine comes to exhaust the semantic field of gender. (42)

Butler attempts to separate the binary categories of masculine and feminine from gender so that a larger group of categories, or even a resistance to all categories, will remain possible. For her, the categories of masculine, feminine, and other gender "performances" are not natural outgrowths of human existence, and they are unrelated to a human's sex category. Social norms create these gender categories, and, therefore, they are the means through which gender is both constructed and deconstructed. It is through the performance of gender that we begin to understand gendered bodies and texts.

How, then, do we understand the connection between gender performatives and language performatives? According to Butler, gender is performative; it has no link to sex or to sexed bodies at all. In *Gender Trouble,* she argues that sex has no causal or natural relationship to gender identity or even to the anatomical body. She says that both sex and gender are "regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (44). In her discussion of drag as a subversive act, she argues that drag can illuminate disconnection. She says:

> The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. (175)

To further illuminate this connection, I begin with J.L. Austin (1911-1960) and his groundbreaking work on the performative quality of language, *How to Do Things with Words.* Austin begins by distinguishing constatives from performatives. A constative, he argues, is an utterance that describes or reports something while a performative is a contractual or declaratory utterance. To be a performative, the utterance must be spoken during particular socially acceptable circumstances and must be voiced with intention.

This means that drama, soliloquy, and poetry cannot be performative because they are understood, in their acceptable circumstances, to be non-serious and non-intentional. Austin says that in these cases where intention and circumstances are correct, "to *say* something is to *do* something" (12).[3] In other words, in some cases, when we speak, we act. His most relevant example to this study is marriage. He says:

> One of our examples was, for instance, the utterance 'I do' (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), as uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony. Here we should say that in saying these words we are *doing* something – namely, marrying, rather than *reporting* something, namely *that* we are marrying. And the act of marrying, like, say, the act of betting, is at least *preferably* (though still not *accurately*) to be described as *saying certain words*, rather than as performing a different, inward and spiritual, action of which these words are merely the outward and audible sign. (12-13)

Here Austin illustrates the way language can be action rather than description. The case of marriage calls into question his insistence on intention for an utterance to become performative because it illustrates that no matter what the internal feelings or thinking of the person speaking, it is the spoken words, the performative act, within a particular cultural ceremony that contracts the marriage. It does not matter if a bride is screaming

[3] In his article "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida points to the problems of Austin's definitions and declares some writing to be performative: particularly signatures. Derrida deconstructs Austin by pointing to the slippage in intention and convention. He shows that because the convention requires an utterance already in existence that is transferred to another time and place, that speech act cannot be defined. See Jacques Derrida, "Sign Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 172-197 and Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1982) 108-115.

inside that she does not want to marry the groom; if she says, "I do," the social and legal contract is in place. She is considered willing and is married.

Butler, building on Austin's work on performatives, argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender is "*a corporeal style,* an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (177). Just as Austin did before her, Butler considers the possibility of an inner gender (a "true" or "real" gender) that might be different from the performed bodily acts. However, she rejects such a notion: "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but ... the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (181). The bodily acts, then, according to Butler, are gender and become gendered. She says, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (173). While it may seem contradictory to her statements about the potential ontological being, I do not believe that she means here that there is no ontological being, but rather she is arguing that there is no ontological status to gender. Femininity is one gender performance, as is masculinity or drag. For Butler, gender is not essential and is certainly not attached to sex or being. This means that the performances of masculinity and femininity, as well as other possible combinations, can be performed by a variety of anatomies.

In many ways, Butler suggests that gender performance can be similar to a performative utterance like the marriage utterance, "I do" if it is repeatedly done with intention. For the purposes of this study, I will distinguish between a performance and a performative. A performance is an action which reproduces the gender norms, and a performative calls such performances into question by intentionally calling attention to

the performance itself (as in drag). Butler, in her discussion of such actions, points out that gender performatives always have punitive consequences and are a part of a ritual social drama. Butler does, however, suggest that a gender performative is different from a performative utterance in at least one important way. She argues, "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (178). Gender, then, is dependent upon its social construction within and over time:

> This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. (178)

Butler argues that while individuals enact these performatives, it is the public, repeated, and collective acts that become gender that constitute gender norms. Therefore, in order to make gender trouble, a collective act of subversion is necessary. And while the writing of a poem is a solitary act, the acceptance of poems by a readership, the joining of several poems in similar performatives, and the casting off of old gender performances by readers might, in my estimation, come together to form collective acts.

Using these definitions of "constructed" genders, gender performances, and social norms, I will look at the "repeated acts" of particular language usage in poems written by American women and argue that they are acts of gender. I use these gender performances (and performatives) as ways to expose possibilities of subversion and re-inscription of social norms in particular historical/social contexts. I show that, in many cases, women perform various genders in order to subvert and to destabilize the prescribed social norms

while others uphold the norms of their day. While subversion seems to be preferred in Butler's work, it is impossible to understand how gender actually performs without considering "straight" performances as well. While it seems reasonable to assume that subversion can become the path toward a greater openness by societies for all types of genders, I choose to explore women's poems that perform in both subversive and non-subversive ways. When people/poets use language to disengage gender roles through disobedience of social norms, they become agents of social change.

Because my argument, however, depends upon Kristeva's definitions of poetic language, this project shows that women poets find themselves in a unique position and are capable of a particular kind of action through their poetry. As females, women poets have been sexed in the Symbolic by rejection of their mother/self and have taken up language as the substitute for this rejection (or lack). However, since semiotics is part of poetry, this rejection is not a complete rejection of the mother, and there still exists some connection between the rejected mother/self and the poet herself. Therefore, when the woman poet engages semiotics, she engages herself outside of the Symbolic. At the same time, she engages the social norms of her time and place, and when she performs gender with her poetry, she re-inscribes, deconstructs, or reveals those social norms. As a result, women poets have a unique position in language and in the socio-political arena that affords them the capability to change the social norms and the Symbolic law through subversion.

Gender, then, is an act. It is performed. Writing, too, is a gendered performance. Gender performance occurs in the where and when of the text's occurrence, and that occurrence takes place at the intersection of the author's writing and the reader's

reception of that writing. When words are poems and poems shape this intersection between reader and writer, gender on paper becomes a textual representation of the social norms and a potential rupture of the semiotic into the symbolic. Through gender performance in language, American women poets use their poems to support or transform ideas of womanhood, to emphasize or redefine gender roles, and to reinforce or deconstruct normative gender roles. This study explores the boundaries and charts the movement of particular texts, these performances on paper, created by American women poets and their readers. To accomplish this, I apply historical, formal, and psychoanalytic approaches to poems written between 1650 and 2004.

This study divides into five chapters. The chapters following the introduction will examine poems that employ, in turn, themes of writing, marriage, maternity, and madness. The second chapter, on writing, interrogates gender more broadly and explores how it intersects with race, class, and sexuality in American poetry and within these themes. The following poems are included: Elizabeth Bishop's (1911-1979) "One Art," Jane Turell's (1708-1735) "To My Muse, December 29, 1725," Gertrude Stein's (1874-1946) "Patriarchal Poetry," Sharon Olds' (b. 1942) "Language of the Brag," Ntozake Shange's (b.1948) "advice," and Adrienne Rich's (b. 1929) "Two Arts." This chapter shows that while writing was considered part of the masculine sphere, women, from the colonial period to the present, have called that notion in to question by writing poetry and by writing poems that discuss the task of writing with their readers. For example, Shange's poem "advice" tells her audience that the legitimizing of poetry is a farce, while Bishop's poem uses one parenthetical phrase "(*Write* it!)" to move tragic losses to a productive poetry. By using the villanelle, Bishop's engages her European poetic

tradition, and then, by talking about art as not only mastery but also loss, she undercuts that history and asks readers to write without what is lost. Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry" takes the connection between the poetic masters and patriarchy and rips it apart by using sometimes unintelligible syntax, pounding repetitions, and sound play that deconstructs much of America's poetry inheritance. Finally, Rich's poems reinforce what she sees as a feminine poetic tradition in America that began with our first major poet: Bradstreet. The question most pertinent to this chapter is: what part does gender play in the poetic traditions of America? I confirm that America does have one or more feminine poetic traditions, and then I investigate how the feminine has been defined and changed over the past 350 years in order to understand how gender and poetry have intersected. In addition, I argue that women of different religions, races, class structures, and sexualities perform genders differently and they perform those genders differently because their gender performances place them in different relationships with their surrounding culture.

In the third chapter, I include the following poems on marriage: Anne Bradstreet's (1612-1672) "To My Dear and Loving Husband," Alice Cary's (1820-1871) "The Bridal Veil," Marianne Moore's (1887-1972) "Marriage," Lorine Niedecker's (1903-1970) poem "I married," and June Jordan's (1936-2002) "The Wedding." Using poems that cut across seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and that represent women of several races, sexualities, and classes, I explore a range of gender performances and performatives and show how those performances intersect with the historical and cultural forces shaping the poem, the formal elements of the poem, and the ways the poet constructs or deconstructs dominant ideological views of marriage in her time period. While we might expect a seemingly linear movement across time from

loving housewife to lesbian outsider, on closer examination, these poems exhibit a more complicated relationship between American women and marriage, and a far less progressive view of history. Jordan holds a particular reverence for the institution while Cary and Niedecker seem to mock it. Jordan's poem equals Bradstreet's in its strong adherence to metrical form, and Moore's poem uses disparate voices to achieve a complicated blend of gender performances. Each poem performs one or more peculiar gender identity(ies), subject position(s), and relationship(s) to the surrounding culture. In comparison, the poems reveal a multi-layered and intricate association between American femininity and marriage.

Chapter four explores maternity and loss and begins with Ai's (b. 1947) "Abortion" which takes the voice of a man whose partner has had an abortion. This change of the expected perspective complicates the typical arguments about abortion because we have no insight into the reasons for the woman's choice. Ai's poem contains a dead fetus, but the father/speaker is not concerned with the soul of that child. Instead, he worried about his partner and the life he has built with the child's mother. Another poem with explores the loss of a child is Lydia Huntley Sigourney's (1791-1865) "Death of an Infant" which employs a third person voice that describes a visit by a personified death that kills the mother's child. As in Ai's poem, readers are not asked to sympathize with the mother but to instead consider the pain of loss of a child – wanted or not – from a more objective viewpoint. However, Sigourney's poem explores a common problem for nineteenth century American women: high infant mortality rates, just as Ai's poem explores a common problem for twentieth century women: abortion. In fact, one might argue that it is the waning of the nineteenth-century problem that leads to the twentieth

century problem. Sigourney, in her treatment of this common occurrence, employs several of the typical explanations that people use to understand such tragedies: the child becomes angelic and moves to an afterlife. Still another poem about children and loss is Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) poem "Child," which uses a first-person voice and addresses the child. While the gender of the speaker is not explicit, Plath's history of first person poetry probably allows most readers to assume the speaker is female, if not Plath herself. If we adhere to that assumption, the poem explores both the joys and stresses of motherhood. While the poem begins with the beauty of the child, it ends with "wringing of hands" and a "dark ceiling," leaving readers with a sense of foreboding. Finally, in Martha Brewster's (1710-1759) poem "A Letter to my Daughter Ruby Bliss" the speaker employs first person and identifies herself as the mother both in the title and in the body of the poem. Unlike the other poems, Brewster's poem uses rhyming couplets, and this adherence to form reflects the adherence to expected sentiments. She describes a loving and supportive relationship between mother and daughter with the only pain/loss coming from the separation between them. Again, the range of thematic and formal elements in these poems reveals several gender performances or performatives. Among others, I explore the following questions: How does formal rhyme and rhythm betray a message about maternity and connect maternity to the semiotic? How does point of view complicate reader's understanding of the relationship between a poet and her poem? How do we understand gender when a poet performs in a masculine voice?

Chapter five includes poems written about madness. In this chapter, I explore the connections between women, poetry, and madness, particularly within the psychoanalytic model. Using the play of ambiguity, the five poems explore the language of madness and

draw connections between women and that madness: Anne Bradstreet's (1612 –1672) "Upon Some Distemper of Body," Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's (1825-1911) "The Slave Mother," Joy Harjo's (b. 1951) "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," Emily Dickinson's (1830-1886) number 106 ("I felt a cleavage in my mind"), Anne Sexton's (1928–1974) "For the Year of the Insane," and Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) "Lesbos." In this fifth chapter, I focus on the physical body and how it is written as hysterical and mad. This connection between the body and madness connects this chapter with the previous chapter on motherhood and asks questions: Why are women so often connected to madness? How is madness (which is outside of logic) written? How does this written madness mirror the written woman (who, according to Irigaray, has not been written), and in particular, how are both written in poetry? Why are women writing poetry about madness?

This gendered position of poetic writing becomes evident in the poet's relationship with writing and with her poetry. When the land that is now considered the United States of America was first colonized by Europeans, writing was considered a masculine task. Bradstreet famously points to comments that she would be better suited to sewing than writing, and this type of sentiment can even be found today in the types of subjects that are expected from women poets. However, when American women write about writing, they tackle these expectations directly and call into question the underlying assumptions about how women should think, act, write, and perform their gender.

This study explores the relationship between women and their languages. For many feminists, a debate continues about whether a "women's language" exists. I hope to avoid the conflict that Gilbert and Gubar see in linguistic studies that keeps us from

knowing if "women speak a distinctive language or whether they are perceived to speak such a language" (Gilbert 229-30). If we see women's speech or women's languages as linguistic categories and as evidence of gender norms that women can perform, then the question that Gilbert and Gubar raise becomes irrelevant, and, in addition, no connection can be drawn directly between sex and gender. Yet my reading and use of Kristeva's theory of poetic language applied to women poets suggests that female poets have a unique use of language. While the two approaches may seem contradictory, it is my contention that it is this exact contradiction that women poets must inhabit. A woman poet is expected to write a women's language and to conform to social norms created for her by patriarchy. When a woman poet writes, she writes back (to the norms and patriarchy) and she writes herself (the semiotic, non-rejected mother). In my readings of the poems, then, I incorporate both linguistic metalanguages of gender and language (social disruptions) and formal elements of the texts (semiotic disruptions) to consider how both social gender constructions and psychoanalytic language functions play out (or are performed) in poems.

In many ways, this study reveals more about me than it reveals about the poems or the poets studied here. While I hope that I open up new ways to read poetry (and not only American women's poetry), it seems that many of my choices are driven by my own idiosyncratic interests. I am obsessed with studying the ways that gender functions in our culture, with understanding the ways that women construct their genders in public arenas, and with understanding how poetry engages language. With this dissertation, I explore how American women have used poetic language to create, reinforce, and deconstruct gender. To a large degree, I unpack gender norms in language and the changing

definitions of gender as they appear historically so that we may better understand the relationship between poetry and gender performance.

In returning to my original anecdote, and my original question, it seems that my encounter with and my understanding of Helen Keller came primarily through language. She was dead long before I was born, but her life and words reached me in numerous books. But, in many ways, this encounter is no different than any encounter I have with any human being. She (like all of us) was sexed in language, and it was her belief (like that of many) that language saved her from the treachery of uncivilized behavior. Keller, like all of the women poets that I will explore in this dissertation, is the embodiment of the intersection of psychoanalytic language theories and social constructivist theories. It is through the lived experiences of women and through the language that they employ, that an understanding of gender may be discovered.

stories (Eurydice)

I hear a poem about fishing.
I hear metaphors that tell me/listener/woman:
you catch me, weave me into your net
by surrounding/flooding/overpowering me. Your line reels
me to the sandbar, a smile crooks on your face.
Hook in my mouth, I touch air: hazy world
where sun burns scales,
where oxygen steals breath.

I am mounted/plaque/trophy to your wall
and represent the brilliance of your skill/art/mastery.

That is the story you tell: death of your beauty/love/woman.

This is the story I hear/believe/create, the one we/fish/living tell:

A sparkle came; metal sings its melodies.
Fascinated, she follows the notes, nudging
with caution barbed hooks. As it moves, she follows,
closer and closer to the surface, where the world ends, where
the world begins. Just as she realizes that changing
worlds means death, the lure vanishes, as if jerked
from the water, as if the gods snatched
it from her jaws. (she moved on)

Other stories fill the gaps, stories of women biting,
of a world of heat and light. These distant tales/poems/stories
become the topics of our lives, and questionable. We know
that she would never bite/swallow/take that lure.
We know that others/gods/fishermen
tell those stories. She swims beyond lures,
beyond glances, beyond transformation.

---Katherine D. Perry

CHAPTER TWO

Poetic Woman: Women Writing (Women (Writing))

> What is the gender on paper. A fatigue in the cold, fear of finishing. And doesn't it make a difference to me, reading this book now, to know that you are going to read the same book afterwards, in the same copy, these selfsame words – and would that difference made be different if you were reading your own copy of the book at the same time that I was reading mine.
>
> ~Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*

> I am a GEN { der / re } made by the writing; I am a GEN { re / der } read in the writing.
>
> ~Rachel Blau Duplessis, *The Pink Guitar*

When American women write poems they either employ performance or performativity. When they employ performance, they have their narrator perform femininity in ways that uphold the gender roles of their eras. When they employ performativity, they are able to both perform femininity and call it into question by revealing the performance to the reader. In this opening chapter, I demonstrate this theory by showing that in six poems which take poetry writing as their subject, the poets choose to employ performativity. In addition, I will consider how the performativity of femininity (that is, a performance of femininity which reveals and questions the performance itself) reveals the connections between gender and genre.

This intersection of gender and genre encompasses one of the major questions of feminist theory in the past thirty years: Is there a "women's language?" The questions

that I will explore, however, are slightly more specific: Beyond the signature (or authorship), is there a women's poetry? If so, is it identifiable? Does poetic language reveal "woman" in a way that other writing cannot? In answering these questions, I will endeavor to show that there is an identifiable woman's language and woman's poetry. I will connect poetic language to the female body, and I will argue that when women use poetic language, particularly *écriture féminine*, they have the potential to reveal woman in ways that are not seen anywhere else in the Symbolic order.

This chapter takes the subject matter of the poems as the major organizing principle. I explore several poems written by American women which take writing as their subject. I will consider the following six poems: Elizabeth Bishop's (1911-1979) "One Art," Sharon Olds' (b. 1942) "Language of the Brag," Jane Turell's (1708-1735) "To My Muse, December 29, 1725," Ntozake Shange's (b.1948) "Advice," Gertrude Stein's (1874-1946) "Patriarchal Poetry," and Adrienne Rich's (b. 1929) "Two Arts." Each of these poems not only confronts the process of writing as the subject of the poem, but each also takes the female writer as part of that subject by foregrounding the importance of gender (either overtly or subtly) in the writing process. While many, many women have written poems about writing, these poems are purposefully chosen to represent a range of female experience, including time period, race, religion, sexuality, and class. By highlighting these differences in my choices, I will show that the concerns surrounding gender performance transcend these divisions: American women of varying backgrounds, time periods, and writing styles find themselves struggling with gender when they write poems. In addition, I have chosen Rich's and Bishop's poems because Rich's poem seems to "talk back" to Bishop's.

Because these poems utilize performativity, I argue that when writing about poetry writing, American women writers are likely to call the performance of femininity into question. In addition, these particular six poems lead me to the conclusion that gender, at least within the framework of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, is linked to the genre of poetry. I argue that in order to enter the Symbolic, women must reject the mother and become her (at least within the psychoanalytic model), and because of this, women have a unique relationship to poetic language. This relationship, while rarely discussed, has shaped our understanding of women's poetry for centuries. With the assistance of Helene Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* and Luce Irigaray's concept of *parler-femme*, I will argue that women write/speak their bodies, their sexual pleasure, and, in short, their subjectivity outside of the patriarchy with poetic language. I also argue that women have found, within the last hundred years, that poetry is an avenue both into themselves and into the Symbolic order. For it is through the writing of poetry that American women poets have begun to understand themselves as female and as women. Through their consideration of their own act of writing in the poems, these poets have consciously written themselves onto the page thereby inscribing what it means to be woman and to be poet.

The question most pertinent to this chapter will be: what role does gender play in the poetic traditions of America? The answer, it seems, is that gender is both a fundamental building block for writers and a crucial performance on which meaning depends. For female writers, the performance of femininity both inserts their work into the traditions of feminine performances and potentially calls into question (through the use of performativity) the constraints of those traditional performances. America does

have one or more some feminine poetic traditions, and these writers reveal how the feminine has been defined and changed over the past 350 years. In addition, I argue that women of different religions, races, class structures, and sexualities perform genders differently from one another because their specific gender performances are shaped by their different relationships with their surrounding cultures.

Poetic Language and Julia Kristeva

For Julia Kristeva, poetic language offers a crucial opportunity to sense the semiotic within the Symbolic order. In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Kristeva defines poetic language as a signifying process through which we might see "the penetration of the socio-symbolic by jouissance" (Kristeva 80). In her consideration of the link between the social and the Symbolic, she argues that poetry is "a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself" (81). Therefore, poetic language, through its employment of both semiotic and symbolic functions of language, enables the poets to make meaning outside of the Lacanian Symbolic Law. Poetic language then, along with pregnancy, is one of the few ways that women can rupture the Symbolic order. This potential is rooted in the mother-child relationship; through the use of semiotic rhythms and tones, semiotic language and poetic language communicate with tools outside of the Symbolic, and because these tools lie outside of the Symbolic Law, they disrupt it.

This chapter shows that these women poets find themselves in a unique crossroads of pleasure and pain outside of the Symbolic, and they are capable of a particular kind of action through their poetry because of this positioning. As females, women poets have been sexed in the Symbolic by the rejection of their own mother/self

and have taken up language as the substitute for this rejection (or lack). However, since semiotics is part of poetry, this rejection is not a complete rejection of the mother, and there still exists some connection between the rejected mother/self and the poet herself. Therefore, when the woman poet engages semiotics, she engages herself outside of the Symbolic. At the same time, because she is producing poetic language within the symbolic order and its constraints, she engages the social norms of her time and place, and when her poetry performs gender, she re-inscribes, deconstructs, or calls to light those social norms. Women are constrained by their gender identities, especially in terms of language. If the Symbolic is men's language, women must subvert that language in order to find their own identities. As a result, women poets have a unique position in language and in the socio-political arena that affords them the capability to both change the social norms and change the Symbolic law because women's poetry is capable of a kind of subversion. It is this crossroad, where women poets find themselves between the Symbolic law and the social norms that I explore.

Women poets are expected to write a language and to conform to social norms created for them by patriarchy. This language, as I will show Irigaray and Cixous to claim, has been traditionally male. For women to write themselves, they must find their own language: women's language. In this women's language, when women write, they write back (to the norms and patriarchy), and they must write themselves (the semiotic, non-rejected mother). In this final chapter, I will move my focus toward the poet's use of her own writing within her poetry. I will explore several poems which take as their subject the writing of poetry, and I will then consider the question: what is a woman poet

and how does she differ from a poet or, more accurately, a man poet? What does it mean to write like a woman?

Writing Like a Woman and Peggy Kamuf

Peggy Kamuf argues in "Writing Like a Woman" that theories that hold that women's writing is "writing signed by women" (286) are dubious at best and incorrect at worst. We cannot simply say that women write like women. Writing like a woman implies a style (a performance) that is feminine. Therefore, a man can write like a woman and a woman can write like a man. To cement her point, Kamuf uses the case of *The Portuguese Letters* because the authorship of the text is unknown. Through this text, Kamuf shows that readers do have expectations and cultural assumptions of style from male and female writers. The long standing argument about the gender of the author of *The Portuguese Letters* has also revealed cultural assumptions about "fiction" and "authentic letters" (298) as well as the relationship of women authors to the traditions in writing of stylized language. It has been assumed by many critics that women authors would not know and/or be able to reproduce such complicated traditions of intricate style. This means, in Kamuf's argument, that, "Reading a text as written by a woman will be reading it *as if* it had no (determined) father, *as if,* in other words, it were illegitimate, recognized by its mother who can only give it a borrowed name" (298). So, to say "a woman writing as a woman" is to invoke a simile in which "the repetition of the 'identical' term splits that identity, making room for a slight shift, spacing out the differential meaning which has always been at work in the single term" (298).

For my argument, this "slight shift" also opens the possibility of moving from performance to performativity. If a woman writer writes as a woman, she performs her

femininity in conventional ways. However, if she performs in such a way as to draw attention to that performance, she enacts the performative and begins to call into question both the traditions of writing and of the gender performances connected to those traditions. In addition, if to write as a woman is to perform a fatherless text, then again, as with the performatives I have described in the three previous chapters, women's writing contains the possibility of working outside of the Law of the Father.

In psychoanalytic theory, if language is the property of the Symbolic and is taken up as a replacement of the mother and is the medium through which we are sexed, then language and sex are always linked. This leads many feminists to explore that connection and to wonder how language and gender are connected. We might ask: Where is a woman in writing? How does a woman, who has been only other, who has had to use the phallogocentric language, express herself? The answer arrived at by many feminists is found in the body: we must write ourselves into history.

Écriture Féminine and Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous calls for women to write themselves through the body. This concept, known as *écriture féminine,* or feminine writing, assumes the ability of language to create subjectivity. In her essay, "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous explores the idea of performative language and to the idea that language is capable of doing, creating, performing, enacting. She says:

> I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies -- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must

> put herself into the text -- as into the world and into history -- by her own movement. (347)

Here Cixous illustrates her beliefs that until women have created themselves in language, they will not exist in the world or history. Language, then, is the only way for women to claim their subjectivity. This writing that Cixous is calling for is a writing that should be done by women for women in order for women to "break out of the snare of silence" (351).

Cixous also claims that women poets are most likely to rupture the history of reason: "Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women" (350). Because poetry can utilize the unconscious processes, it harbors much of what has been repressed. Women, like the unconscious, have been repressed. In order to enter language, she says:

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end." (355)

It is the body, then, that is both the creator and the created in this *écriture féminine.* For when woman writes, she writes with her body. But it is only through the writing that she may fully inhabit her own body and not the body prescribed by men.

When Cixous wrote "The Laugh of the Medusa" in 1975, she believed that most writing by women was "in no way different from male writing, and which either obscure[d] women or reproduce[d] the classic representation of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc)" (349). For woman to employ *écriture féminine*, she must inscribe femininity by liberating herself from this classic representation. I will show, by exploring poems about writing, that Cixous is correct in her assessment of how woman must write herself. I will explore one poet, possibly one of the exceptions Cixous discusses, Gertrude Stein, whose poem was written before 1975 and still manages to overturn the classic representation of women. I argue that through the writing of poems about writing poems, these American women have created either reproductions of classic women or have created what Cixous calls "New Women" (349) by forging paths in literature for kinds of femininity never before considered.

Parler-Femme and Luce Irigaray

Irigaray explores a strikingly similar concept which she calls *parler-femme.* She calls on women to speak their own unscripted language in order to define themselves outside of the patriarchal language. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray claims that if women continue to speak the "same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again" (205). Just as Cixous did, she argues that "men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes" (205). Instead of continuing to speak just like men, she suggests that women "take back some part of our mouth to speak with" (208), to consider our own bodies and to speak through them. She argues that our bodies are not lacking; she says "We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the

other" (209). Women's pleasure is "always in motion" (210). We must speak this pleasure: "we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced ..." (212). It is *parler-femme* that will produce woman as a fluid being, always in motion, multiple, and not reflection of men.

Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art"

I will begin with, arguably, the most famous of the poems in this chapter and quite possibly the most widely read poem within the entire dissertation: Elizabeth Bishop's (1911-1979) "One Art." This poem was published in her final volume *Geography III* during the year in which the United States of America celebrated its bicentennial anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and only one year after Cixous' "Laugh of the Medusa." *Geography III* won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was Bishop's last book of poetry published before her death. One reason for the popularity of this poem is that it is a brilliant example of a modern villanelle which utilizes strict form and occasionally breaks that form in order to illustrate the subject matter itself: the "art of losing." I begin with this poem for several reasons: as all of the poems in this chapter deal with poetry as an art form, it seems appropriate to begin with the poem that discusses poetry writing while using the strictest and most intricate of forms (at least of those chosen here), the villanelle. Through her use of the villanelle, Bishop's poem interweaves sexuality and personal relationships with the experience of writing poetry.

The most critically discussed aspects of "One Art" are the strong biographical links between the poem and Bishop's life and her choice of the villanelle form. I would

like to begin my reading by focusing on the villanelle. As the popularity of formal poetic forms waned in the twentieth century, fewer and fewer villanelles were written. In fact, even Bishop did not begin this poem as a villanelle.[4] Instead, she began in free verse and revised until she found and perfected the villanelle for this poem. Bishop brilliantly negotiates between the form and the subject matter, letting the interplay of form and subject shape the final words she presents. It is this interplay, the connection between poetic language and the artist that the poems in this chapter interrogate. Bishop finds that in losing, in letting go, art can still be found.

She begins the poem:

> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (178)

The poem seems to start in third person: it employs a detached and unemotional voice that seems distant from its subject matter. Because villanelles have no prescribed meter or line length, Bishop's poem distinguishes itself from older villanelles by using more conversational language and by refusing to capitalize the beginning letter of each line. In addition to less formal language, readers are eased into their introduction to the "art of losing" piece by piece. The first stanza contains no particular kinds of loss and instead opens with the general statement "so many things."

The second and third stanzas, however, turn from the detached third person to an implied second person and an imperative sentence structure:

[4] Brett Candlish Millier's essay "Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art'" discusses the seventeen drafts of the poem and the sharpening of the language. The poem was not originally a villanelle, but progressed into the rhymes and rhythms as Bishop honed her ideas.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster. (lines 4-9)

Along with the voice change, Bishop's narrator also begins listing losable things: "keys," "hours," "places," "names," and "where it was you meant to travel." This involves the reader with Bishop's subject on two different levels. First, the speaker directs readers to "lose something every day" and to "practice losing farther, losing faster." In reading these commands, readers find that they too have found that losing both "isn't hard to master" and won't "bring disaster." Second, Bishop's listing of particular items that most people relate to helps her to involve her readers even further by requiring them to imagine specific items that they may have or may eventually lose.

Then, once she has her reader feeling comfortable with the poem and with the idea that losing isn't disastrous, she unleashes the fourth and fifth stanzas:

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster. (lines 10-15)

In line ten, Bishop inserts a first person narrator into the poem and a personal item, the loss of "mother's watch."[5] Because of the previous nine lines of set up, readers sympathize with the speaker rather than reading the poems as a distanced confession. In addition, the gender of the speaker as feminine is reinforced here (I believe this speaker to be both feminine and female) as most males would not be heir to their mother's watches and even fewer would admit the loss of such an object if they did have it. This relationship between reader and speaker builds with the addition of the "three loved houses" that the speaker describes losing in line eleven by playing on the emotional ties that many Americans have to their homes and the frequency with which we leave them. So that when we come to the seemingly hyperbolic items in lines thirteen and fourteen, the reader trusts the speaker enough to believe her when she says that she has "lost two cities" (line 13), "two rivers," and "a continent" (line 14). The immensity of these losses necessarily distinguishes them from the watch which was merely misplaced. For how can one misplace a river or continent? Bishop's narrator suggests to her readers that losing is misplacement, failure, moving away, and even relationship collapse.[6]

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[5] In her book *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, Susan McCabe, using Lacanian and Freudian definitions of loss, reminds us that the primal loss (loss of the mother) and the acquiring of language happen simultaneously, thereby indelibly linking loss and language. Yet the mother-child relationship is different for the female child than for the male child. McCabe states, "The female may indeed, come to the symbolic via an alternate route—her language a different relation to loss. For the girl child, the ruptured primordial relationship may appear less final, and her gender role less reified than the boy's in his identification with his father" (32). She also states, "If language is joined inseparably with the recognition of loss, females come to that language doubly exiled from the dominant sign system. Nevertheless, identification with the mother makes for a potentially more pluralistic and multiple self" (32). With this reading, we might consider how it is that Bishop is able to perform a more pluralistic self. I will explain how I believe she achieves such a performance when I get to my explanation of the final stanza.

[6] McCabe says that while "One Art" resists a biographical reading, it is difficult to separate Bishop's life from the loss described in the poem. Like Millier (see note 6), she documents Bishop's life (dead father, insane mother, and deaths of domestic partners) and argues that these are the losses described in the poem.

Loss itself is the core in this poem. And while Bishop's narrator discusses the minor and major losses of her life, Bishop slips in a statement about woman and her body: the female body is always already lost. This becomes evident in the fourth stanza when the narrator begins to mention the body and where we get the first personal item and the insertion of the personal pronoun "I." The narrator asks the reader to "look" at the loss of her houses, but she refuses to offer her own body to "look" at. We might even read the houses in this poem as stand-ins for the female body (the vessels of life), yet even as they stand in for the body, it is the absence of even the houses that the narrator points out as if to call attention, not only to the lost houses, but to the absence of her own body in the poem. Even the lover, the one to be lost, only appears in "a gesture" and a voice that we cannot hear. Again, the reader is shown a ghost, a specter of what might have been there, of what is missing. She is absent; she is missing.

But Bishop will not leave her trusting reader with empty hands. It is the final stanza that gives this poem the brilliant reputation it enjoys:

> --Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster. (lines 16-19)

Again, Bishop's narrator changes voice. She uses second person and first person, and this time the *you* is not implied, it is stated outright. This indicates that the poem is now directed toward a specific person (it is unclear, perhaps purposefully, if this was the

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I have also resisted a completely biographical reading although Bishop did live in South for many years America (thereby losing two continents: North America and then South America) and many have equated the "you" in the final stanza with Alice Methfessel.

addressee all along or if this is a shift in address), not a general you-the-reader because she includes in parentheses "the joking voice, a gesture / I love" (lines 16-17) which tells us that this is a particular person.[7] It also marks an additional departure of voice as readers can detect a split between the voice the speaker is using and a secondary voice that reads almost like an inner voice which says on paper what one might normally only think silently. This is reinforced in the additional, and often discussed, parenthetical phrase in the final line: "(*Write* it!)" Not only does the phrase read as a command that the speaker gives to herself, but it also contains the only italicized word in the poem. For the first time in the poem, readers begin to see that losing might actually be hard to master, even if the speaker claims that it is not because the italics suggests a strain, an emphasis, that marks an inner conflict.[8] As the phrase and the addition of a second "like" is an interruption into the expected refrained line "though it may look like disaster," the insertion becomes a kind of wedge into both the mind of the speaker and into the form of the poem itself. By employing this insertion, Bishop argues that while the villanelle, like losing, isn't hard to master, it is only in the breakdown (or breakthrough) that readers begin to see the woman who speaks in the poem. In addition, the final line of this poem reveals a woman despite her absence throughout the poem. The parenthetical phrase (and

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[7] In her book, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop,* Anne Colwell convincingly argues that the parenthetical insertions in "One Art" in lines 16, 17, and 19 offer readers a glimpse into the mind of the speaker. Particularly the phrase in the closing line which Colwell claims, "opens a gap in the fabric of the poem so that the reader sees through to the supreme moment of the speaker's tension, the moment in which she is equally repelled and overwhelmed by the truth" (180).

[8] Susan McCabe (see note 7) also comments on the parenthetical addition, "(*Write* it!)," in the final line: "Writing reveals a doubleness: Bishop wants language to gain mastery, but writing brings us back to the recognition of displacement and loss. Rhyming, dashing, parenthesizing, joking—all these are activities meant to contain but in emphatic practice remind only how such strategies finally fail. They can lead to renunciation not by making 'disaster' into reified form but by accepting it as process and reenactment" (30).

it is important to note that the references to the lover's body are also presented in the only other parenthetical phrase in the poem) "*Write* it!" clues readers (or at least pretends to) into the poet herself as she composes the poem. Bishop reveals the physical difficulty of writing these particular words, of admitting loss, of living through such a loss. She reinforces this with the change of this refrain to "though it may look like..." Again readers are asked to see, to visually imagine the disaster that the speaker seems to have become as she endures and claims to overcome. Bishop suggests that the female body, in this poem, like the villanelle in which is presented, may be different than it appears. In addition, the emphasis on the physical act of writing, calls the readers full attention to the female body, to the pain of producing such a poem, and to the peculiar position of the woman poet within the traditions of Western poetry. Bishop forces us to ask, how does a woman poet write herself, her body, into a villanelle? Our answer comes in the final line: in the struggle between the expected form (the performance of the feminine) and the self. Here, Bishop reveals her own struggle with *écriture féminine,* her own struggle to write woman.

But Bishop's poem does not simply align poetic form with patriarchy. Instead, the poem seems to be a meditation on the difficulty of writing, particularly for a woman. By choosing to write her poem in a strictly interweaving form like the villanelle, she has chosen to employ a poetic art form that, for many, is quite difficult to master: just as losing is. She then expertly performs that art until the final line where she then inserts an unexpected phrase which some have called form breaking.[9] But I do not see this as a

[9] Anne Colwell, like Millier (see note 6), also studies the seventeen drafts of the poem in Vassar's library to conclude that the poem moved from free verse into form as a way of controlling and shaping loss into

failed villanelle. Instead, I think the brilliance of the poem is that Bishop both holds together the villanelle and still manages to insert the inner voice. She is able to achieve performativity by performing the expected form and then calling attention to this performance by disrupting it. Certainly this final line disrupts the form, but the form does not collapse with the rupture. On the contrary, Bishop is able to illuminate the difficulty of writing, of creating art, while accomplishing it. The rupture is a Kristevan semiotic rupture in the Symbolic order revealing the hidden feminine. This use of poetic language allows Bishop to insert woman and her body into the text, and, I argue, to write her there. For by inserting a second voice, Bishop reveals the performance of femininity by showing that an alternative poetic voice exists. In this way, she engages in performativity and calls the initial performances (the poetic form and the compliant feminine) into question. In this way, she achieves *écriture féminine* or *parler-femme*.

Jane Turell's "To My Muse, December 29, 1725"

Like Bishop's villanelle, Jane Turell's (1708-1735) poem, "To My Muse, December 29, 1725" is a strictly structured poem. However, unlike Bishop's poem where the form itself comes into question, Turell's poem seems to comply with the form and with the style of popular poetry writing of the 18th century in America. The couplet dominated the poetry of the early American period, and this poem is no exception to that rule. Turell's poem contains eleven rhyming couplets, and while they are not heroic couplets, they do adhere to strict two line units in which each couplet is self-contained

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what Colwell calls a "failed villanelle" (180) because "the form itself is lost; it collapses, superbly into the gaps rent by the motion of the speaker's mind beneath and within the form, the tension between feeling and form" (180).

with either one or two sentences which correspond neatly with the line breaks. Her poem, then, is an outstanding example of the kind of poetry that was admired during Turell's lifetime.

Turell is by far the least known poet of the poets in this chapter, in fact she is little known at all.[10] Her only published poems are poems embedded in Ebenezer Turell's (1702-1778), her husband's, *Memoirs* which was actually published under Jane's father's name, Benjamin Coleman, a Boston minister.[11] Yet it is precisely because her poetry is so typical of the period and so unknown that I include her in this chapter. While Turell is enjoying a rediscovery thanks to the push of feminist critics, her poetry is, while good, a prime example of typical women's poetry before the American Revolution. I believe that it is poetry of this sort that demonstrates what Cixous points to when she claims that most women writers simply write like men. Yet, while Turell's form is similar to that of the men around her, her subject matter is quite different. According to Margaret J.M. Ezell, in her book *Writing Women's Literary History*, women poets in the eighteenth century attempted to reach "a type of androgyny," they wanted "not to be perceived as a 'woman writer,' but simply as a 'writer'" (72). So, Turell's choice to write her invocation of the Muse from a woman's perspective disrupts this expected androgynous performance of gender. The poem reads:

Come Gentle *Muse*, and once more lend thine aid,

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[10] In his introduction to *Poems of Jane Turell and Martha Brewster,* Kenneth A. Requa tells us that because Turell was not a public figure, it is easy to overlook her poetry (vi).

[11] The book was a two part book, the first part of which contained two of Coleman's sermons. The second part, which had its own title page, contained Ebenezer's memoir. Turell's poems are part of the memoir. The entire book was entitled *Reliquiae Turellae, et Lachrymae Paternae. The Father's Tears over his Daughter's Remains. Two Sermons to which are added, Some large Memoirs of her Life and Death by her Consort, the Reverend Mr. Ebenezer Turell, M.A. Pastor of the Church in Medford.* (Requa vii)

bring thy Succour to a humble Maid!

How often dost thou liberally dispense

To our dull Breast thy quick'ning Influence!

By thee inspir'd, I'll cheerful tune my Voice,

And Love and Sacred Friendship make my Choice.

In my pleas'd Bosom you can freely poor,

A greater Treasure than *Fates Golden Shower.*

Come now, *fair Muse,* and fill my empty Mind,

With rich Idea's, great and unconfin'd.

Instruct me in those secret Arts that lie

Unseen to all but to a *Poet's Eye.*

let me burn with *Sappho's* noble Fire.

But not like her for faithless Man expire.

And let me rival great *Orinda's* Fame,

Or like sweet *Philomela's* be my Name.

Go lead the way, my Muse, nor must you stop,

'Till we have gain'd *Parnassus* shady Top:

'Till I have view'd those fragrant soft Retreats,

Those Fields of Bliss, the Muses sacred Seats.

I'll then devote thee to fair *Virtues* Fame,

And so be worthy of a *Poet's* Name.

Her poem is addressed to the Muse, and in it the speaker asks for help in writing a poem, so that she can "so be worthy of a *Poet's* Name" (line 22). Throughout the poem

the speaker alludes to many women in literary history drawn mostly from classical sources. First she talks about the "*Fates Golden Shower*" (line 8) which is probably an allusion to Greek mythology where Zeus appears to Danaë as a golden shower and impregnates her with Perseus. Then she invokes "Sappho," called The Tenth Muse by Plato, who the speaker wants to write like but "not like her for faithless Man expire" (line 14). This exception seems to refer to the legend that Sappho jumped off a cliff killing herself for Phaon and in Turell's poem warns readers to be wary of faithless men and any passionate attachments to them. Perhaps it is important to note that the speaker here wants to write passionately, but she does not want to let men ruin those passions. The poem also discusses the "Orinda's Fame" (line 15) which refers to the pen name of Katherine Fowler Philips (1632-1664) who also wrote poetry.[12] She alludes to "*Philomela*" (line 16) who was a Greek mythological figure who was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. He cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling of his crime, but she weaves a tapestry that tells the story to her sister who then kills her son and feeds him to his father. All three characters become birds. In addition to all of these women, Turell also refers to "Parnassus" (line 18) which is the mountain above Delphi that was home to the muses. It is known as the home of poetry and literature. While most of these allusions are either to real women or mythological women, the use of classical allusions seems both a technique to make this poem "legitimate" within the male dominated field of poetry, to write as the male poets have written, and to tell the stories and histories of women. Employing both what is expected of her and also separating herself out as a

[12] Ezell notes that Abraham Crowley praises Katherine Philips by saluting "her 'well-knit sense' and her 'manly' poetics, which compete successfully with the male poet's best efforts" (74). She was, according to Ezell, the "exemplary androgynous author" (77). See *Writing Women's Literary History* by Margaret J.M. Ezell.

woman, Turell is able to both employ the performance expected of her and to call attention to that performance.

In this way, then, Turell is before her time. She begins her poem by invoking the muse, which seems to follow a long patriarchal pattern of male poets equating their creativity with the sexuality of a female Muse. Turell continues in this tradition in her treatment of her Muse to whom she calls: "Come now, *fair Muse,*" (line 9). Turell asks the Muse for "aid" (line 1), "Succour" (line 2), and to "fill my empty Mind" (line 9). So like the male writers before her, Turell treats her Muse both as an object and as the unknown or "dark continent" as Cixous notes that women have been called (354), through which the inspiration of poetry might come. Rather than understanding herself (or her speaker) as a woman who might produce her own inspiration, Turell relies on the patriarchal poetic traditions that precede her to legitimize her. If read in this light, her poem, then, becomes the kind of writing that Cixous refers to when she says that most women's writing is not distinguishable from men's writing. However, Turell provides a second way to read this poem.

By presenting several important women in connection with the tradition of writing, Turell allows both her speaker and herself to be read as feminine. This, according to Ezell, would have been out of fashion in eighteenth-century literary circles. For, according to Ezell, it is not until after 1800 that women's writing careers will be marked in any way as "different" from that of men's (92). Therefore, for Turell, the inclusion of a woman-centered literary history in her poem is a rupture in the performance of the expectations femininity. Simply by revealing her femininity, she is disrupting the expected performance. However, in addition to that disruption, Turell's

invocation of the Muse by a female writer calls the relationship between writer and inspiration (muse) into question. Because she uses the same language (as discussed in the previous paragraph) as her male counterparts to talk about her muse while still maintaining her femininity, Turell opens the possibility of homosexual overtones, of a mother-daughter power outside of patriarchy, and of a female creativity that might escape Zeus, Sappho's Phaon, or Philomela's Tereus. It is through this disruption of the expected that Turell is able to write woman, *écriture féminine, parler-femme*, far before the concepts were voiced. And it is only because she adheres so completely in every other way (rhyme, rhythm, and diction) that she is able to achieve performativity with this early eighteenth-century poem.

The conclusion of the poem cements my reading. The series of eleven rhyming couplets concludes with a final couplet which echoes the eighth couplet by using the same set of end words: "Fame and Name." The ending couplet, "I'll then devote thee to fair Virtues Fame, / And so be worthy of a Poet's Name" (lines 21 and 22) seem to be attempting to legitimize the female poet, to give her a name equal to that of the other poets that precede her. While Turell may have set out to make herself part of the patriarchy, she unravels it. To even become part of the patriarchy, of course, was a huge leap for an eighteenth-century woman, yet she is able to surpass it. Women like Turell and Bradstreet attempted to join the ranks of "poet" by learning to master the patriarchal language of the day and slipped their own poetry into such circles by masking their intelligence and ingenuity in the clothes of the accepted rhythms and rhymes of the day. By revealing the woman behind this mask, Turell illustrates the power of the performative and is able to write woman into poetic history.

Gertrude Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry"

When Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) wrote "Patriarchal Poetry" in 1927 (published posthumously in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces 1913-1927* (1953)), she directly addressed the poetic tradition during these years in which women poets found themselves chained to the dominance of patriarchy. Stein, a Jewish woman, a lesbian woman, and an American living in Paris, wrote poetry and prose that engaged in the ideals of the modernist literary and art movements of the early twentieth century: she questioned the traditions that preceded her, she focused on the making of meaning, and she experimented with the play of free verse. Because this poem is over forty-pages long and is over 1,000 lines, I cannot unpack every line or even every thematic element of the poem. Instead, I will focus on the poem's characterization of poetry as patriarchal and the speaker's attempt to escape that patriarchy while writing a poem. While Stein may not have been the first poet to believe it, I posit that she is the first American woman poet to name poetry a patriarchal system. It is also the first poem in this study that has been called a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem, or at least a major precursor to that movement.[13]

Written between the two World Wars and while Stein was living in Paris, "Patriarchal Poetry" is a long prose poem that many critics have either ignored or called incomprehensible.[14] Yet, a poem like "Patriarchal Poetry" seems to be precisely what

[13] In *My Emily Dickinson*, Susan Howe writes, "Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose" (11) She goes on to say, "Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein also conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying's assertion? In very different ways the countermovement of these two women's work penetrates to the indefinite limits of written communication" (11-12).

[14] Again Howe says (see note 13), "to this day canonical criticism from Harold Bloom to Hugh Kenner persists in dropping [Stein's and Dickinson's] names and ignoring their work" (11). She goes on to note that even Cixous "ignores Stein, whose *Three Lives* published in 1908, and *The Making of Americans*

Cixous calls for: Stein addresses the very problem of language using language itself. She abandons all traditional poetic formal constructions and employs paragraph structure which looks, at first glance, like prose. Yet her language is far from prose; Stein uses repetition incessantly, making the poem sound, when read aloud, much like babbling. Yet, it is not babble. The constancy and lengths of the repetitions forces the reader to first make meaning from the words as they might be in ordinary daily language, then to hear the sounds removed from their connotative definitions, and finally to attempt to redefine those words within the context of the poem.[15] Stein is able to accomplish this because she is insistent with her repetitions, because she refuses to allow the reader to rely on their logic to make meanings. And in achieving this, she inserts herself into the history of poetry by writing a poem which calls that history into question, by calling the meanings of words and the methods of poetry into question. The poem begins:

> As long as it took, fasten it back to a place where, after all, he would be carried away, he would be carried away as long as it took fasten it back to a place where he would be carried away as long as it took.
>
> For before let it before to be before spell to be before to be before to have to be to be for before to be tell to be to having held to

written between 1907 and 1911, had already carried their author beyond any book before *Ulysses* and after" (12).

[15] In her book *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*, Karen Ford says of Stein's work, "Repetition plays a key role in making words appear devoid of meaning. To many readers, the incessant repetitions knock the sense out of words, as it were, making them numb and inexpressive. For Stein, however, the experience of writing the portraits was enlivening and highly expressive. Ironically, as readers lost touch with her words, she felt she had gotten a hold of them." (92). Ford, I think, underestimates Stein's readers but makes valid points about the difficulty of reading Stein's repetitions. While many may give up on finding meaning, Stein's increasing readership shows that many more have found her language engaging.

be to be for before to call to be for to be before to till until to be till before to be for before to be until to be for before to for to be for before will for before to be shall to be to be for to be for to be before still to be will before to be before for to be to be for before to be before such to be for to be much before to be for before will be for to be for before to be well to be well before to be before for before might while to be might before to be might while to be might before while to be might to be while before for might to be for before to for while to be while for before while before to for which as for before had for before had for before to for to before.

Hire hire let it have to have to hire representative to hire to representative to representative hire to representative to hire wire to representative to hire representative to hire.

There never was a mistake in addition. (567)

Even reading this short excerpt quickly shows why this poem is ignored by critics. It seems to be difficult at best and nonsensical at worst when read without due consideration. But I would argue that while it may be both difficult and nonsense, it is not without meaning and message. That this poem has meaning without following traditional denotative and syntactical constructions is precisely Stein's message in "Patriarchal Poetry": we do not have to follow logic, history, or even syntax in order to make meaning. Take, for instance, the opening paragraph. While the clause, "as long as it took" seems to float unattached to any grammatical function, when taken as a whole, the paragraph suggests that while it may take a long time, we (or someone) must return to

the origins, to the beginnings; no matter how long it takes us to do it, we must do it because when we do "he will be carried away." With a title like "Patriarchal Poetry," we must assume that the "he" here is somehow related to the patriarch, the man who passed himself down as authority, and in particular, the man who has remained dominant in the history of poetry. And while this reading makes sense to me, the beauty of Stein's language is that I cannot pin it to my meaning only. I must, as a reader, be willing to entertain alternate meanings, for the disruption in the syntax requires me to consider other interpretations. This, even in this opening paragraph, makes Stein's poem dramatically different from the poetry that preceded hers. She both takes as her subject the problem of patriarchal poetry and completely undoes that same poetry with her poem.

Another remarkable feature of this poem is that Stein never directly states that patriarchal poetry is logical, syntactical, and connotative. Yet, she manages to relay that message as well. A few pages into the poem she writes:

> Patriarchal in investigation and renewing of an intermediate rectification of the initial boundary between cows and fishes. Both are admittedly not inferior in which case they may be obtained as the result of organisation industry concentration assistance and matter of fact and by this this is their chance and to appear and to reunite as to their date and their estate. They have been in no need of stretches stretches of their especial and apart and here now. (571-572)

Here Stein connects patriarchy and "investigation," "rectification," and categorizations such as the "boundary between cows and fish." She also delves into the process of such categorizations when she says, "the result of organisation industry concentration

assistance and matter of fact." The lack of commas to separate the list of results suggests both that they are all equal and necessary parts of the process and that her discussion of them is irreverent: that she holds disdain for the rules of punctuation and the subject matter itself. But it is her final sentence in this paragraph that is the most puzzling and telling. In stating, "They have been in no need of stretches," Stein tells her readers that in patriarchal poetry and in patriarchy, the boundaries of classification have not needed to be stretched or questioned or mutated.[16] And in pointing out this about patriarchy, Stein moves her language into the performative; she calls into question the very nature of patriarchy.

While it seems clear that Stein is using performative language to call patriarchy into question, it may, at first, seem less obvious how she performs gender. Yet, she does perform femininity and call that performance into question. While the first seven pages of the poem suggest that there is a narrator, Stein employs third person only until the eighth page where she begins to play with pronouns and inserts an "I" into the poem:

> Next to vast which is why do I be behind the chair because of a chimney fire and higher why do I beside belie what is it when is it which is it well all to be tell all to be well all to be never do do the

[16] It is interesting to note that in *Stein, Bishop, and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War & Place*, Margaret Dickie argues, "Although the term 'patriarchal' may concentrate certain specific political meanings for feminist critics in the 1990s, Stein did not appear to understand the word in the same way. For her, patriarchal does not seem to be one part of a binary opposition; rather, it is an all-inclusive. Patriarchal poetry is not, in Stein's mind, poetry written by or for the patriarchy; it may be rather poetry as the originator and generator of meaning" (55). I am arguing that both definitions that Dickie presents here are evident in Stein's poem. They are, in fact, entwined. For patriarchal poetry is both the originator of meaning and one part of the binary. In my reading, Stein is pointing out and unraveling the history of poetry (which is patriarchal). Dickie argues that Stein is attempting to find her place within patriarchal poetry with her poem (I). I disagree, and am arguing here that Stein is attempting to break apart patriarchal poetry so that she (and others) can form their own poetry outside of patriarchy.

difference between effort and be in be in within be mine be in be within be within in. (575)

Here the reader must consider who is speaking. The narrator, by finally using the first person voice, inserts a speaker (and I argue she is a woman speaker) into the poem as a subject and confronts our notions of who writes poetry. Here, the narrator admits that she is "behind the chair" and that she "belie[s] what is it when is it which is it..." Again, despite the difficulty of Stein's language, readers can gather that the speaker has contradicted "it" which points to patriarchal poetry (but still remains movable, as Stein is careful to protect her ambiguities). But is the "I" in this poem female? It is unclear. Like many of the pronouns in this poem, Stein keeps the "I" slippery: nothing anywhere in the poem actually makes a firm connection between the narrator and the narrator's sex. I posit that Stein purposefully keeps her narrator, not androgynous, but indeterminate. Even, however, with this indeterminacy, I believe that the narrator is "she." For only a woman poet has access to this indeterminacy; only the woman poet occupies a subject position that allows her to be both inside and outside, both male and female without having to sacrifice one for the other. This is the genius of Stein's poem. Only one both inside and outside of the patriarchy can reveal the ability to be both in and out of it. Later in the poem, the narrator asks that a woman (or at least "she") be given allowance. She says:

Let her be to be to be to be let her be to be to be let her to be let her to be let her be to be when is it that they are shy.

Very well to try.

Let her be that is to be let her be that is to be let her be let her

try.

Let her be let her be let her be to be to be shy let her be to be let her be to be let her try.

Let her try.

Let her be let her be let her be let her be to be to be let her be let her try.

To be shy.

Let her be.

Let her try.

Let her be let her let her let her be let her be let her be let her be shy let her be let her be let her try.

Let her try.

Let her be.

Let her be shy.

Let her be.

Let her be let her be let her let her try.

Let her try to be let her try to be let her be shy let her try to be let her try to be let her be let her be let her try.

Let her be shy. Let her try. Let her try. Let her be

Let her let her be shy. Let her try.

Let her be.

Let her let her be shy.

Let her be let her let her be shy Let her let her let her let her

try.

Let her try.

Let her try.

Let her try.

Let her be.

Let her be let her.

Let her try.

Let her be let her.

Let her be let her let her try.

Let her try.

Let her

Let her try.

Let her be shy.

Let her (580-581)

In this series, we see that Stein's narrator attempts to command readers into action, into allowing women to try, to be. Stein seems to comprehend that woman has been prescribed and that in order for her to become, she must attempt to do so in her own ways: ways which cannot yet be described. Therefore, woman must try. However, Stein also includes that we should "let her be shy" which could be a typical feminine attribute. Not only does this play with the sound of these lines by incorporating a single syllable exact rhyme of "try" and "shy," it also allows Stein's narrator to both insert a typical feminine performance and to counterbalance that performance with the more open ended "let her be." In philosophical terms, the ontological question of being (historically

and especially when Stein was writing in the early twentieth century) was a question only asked and answered for men. Stein calls our attention to this by telling us to let a woman be, but noting, by avoiding prescription, that we do not know what that could be unless we fit her into the old categories of femininity.

In addition, Stein negotiates the body in this poem by considering how a woman's body appears in poetic language. Stein first asks, "What is the difference between a glass pen and a pen" (586). Without really answering her own question, she closes that idea by saying, "To smile at the difference between a glass pen and a pen is what he did" (586). Here she suggests that the nameless and shapeless "he" that becomes synonymous with patriarchal poets as this poem progresses does not answer this question either but instead exhibits his smugness as he believes he has the answer. Then, Stein's narrator asks, "What is the difference between a fig and an apple" (589). This time, she gives a sort of answer when she follows the question with, "One comes before the other" (589). Then, over twenty pages into the poem, Stein's narrator asks, "What is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith" (591). She answers:

> There is no difference between Elizabeth and Edith that she knows. What is the difference. She knows. There is no difference as she knows. What is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith that she knows. There is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith which she knows. There is she knows a difference between Elizabeth and Edith which she knows. Elizabeth and Edith as she knows. (591)

Here the word play moves the reader away from the actual difference between the two, and instead requires a focus on the concept of knowledge and our understanding of difference within language. Readers are only left with the idea that "she knows" the difference. Yet, Stein will revisit this theme again within the poem. She says:

> What is the difference between Mary and May. What is the difference between May and day. What is the difference between day and daughter what is the difference between daughter and there what is the difference between there and day-light what is the difference between day-light and let what is the difference between let and letting what is the difference between letting and to see what is the difference between to see immediately patriarchal poetry and rejoice. (599)

She begins with the distinction between women but quickly moves to a distinction between words from which the reader begins to see that women are constituted in language. Each being, like each word, has been connected to a particular definition; yet Stein is also calls her reader's attention to the slippage in definitions, of the inadequacies of patriarchal language to define women. Once we "to see" this difference, unlike the "he" in the early question about pens and glass pens, we are not to sit smugly and smile at our own knowledge. Instead, we are to write ourselves, to undo our definitions in patriarchal poetry, and to speak ourselves into existence.

Stein's final move is to call our attention to the problem of trying to undo patriarchal poetry. The narrator says:

> Patriarchal Poetry does not make it never made it will not have been making it: be that way in their behalf.

Patriarchal Poetry insistance. (sic)

Insist.

Patriarchal Poetry insist insistance.

Patriarchal Poetry which is which is it.

Patriarchal Poetry and left it left it by left it by left it. Pa-

Patriarchal Poetry what is the difference patriarchal Poetry.

Patriarchal Poetry.

Not patriarchal poetry all at a time. To find patriarchal poetry about.

Patriarchal Poetry is named patriarchal poetry.

If patriarchal poetry is nearly by nearly means it to be to be

so.

Patriarchal Poetry and for them then. Patriarchal Poetry did he leave his son. Patriarchal poetry Gabrielle did her share. Patriarchal poetry it is curious.

Patriarchal poetry please place better. Patriarchal poetry in come I mean I mean. (605)

The insistence seems to overwhelm the speaker here; she seems to reach despair in attempting to throw it off. Yet, "Gabrielle did her share." Stein points to the problems, the pervasive nature of the patriarchy of poetry, and yet this poem exists. As with many of the poets in this dissertation, Stein is able to simply illustrate the cracks in the system by revealing her own gender performance. This, however, is a huge feat. This is the new woman, the un-prescribed woman, the becoming woman,

that Cixous and Irigaray call for. This is Stein's insertion of herself as woman into the text.

Sharon Olds "The Language of the Brag"

Sharon Olds' (b. 1942) poem "The Language of the Brag" was published in her first volume of poetry *Satan Says* (1980). This 35-line free-verse poem which takes as its subject much of the American poetry that preceded it, including calling Whitman and Ginsberg by name, and both calls into question the use of childbirth as a metaphor for writing in such poetry when written by men. This poem employs that same metaphor and yet still calls attention to the additional potential of this metaphor when employed by a woman who has actually given birth. Like Stein, Olds rattles the bars of poetic history and asks her readers to consider how a woman's writing might be different, and in doing so, utilizes performative language that writes woman into the poem.

I argue that the speaker is female. In this poem, the physical description of the narrator reveals her sex as female. However, the performance of femininity is more complicated. By opening with strong phallic images, a "knife throw" (line 1), a "blade piercing the bark deep" (line 5), and the "vibrating like the cock" (line 6), Olds' opening stanza requires that readers begin their reading immersed in the masculine symbols that typify American poetry and that they associate those symbols with sharpness and danger of a knife blade. Olds' opening stanza mimics the poems preceding her own, showing that she is capable of using the formal elements and symbolism of her poetic forefathers. In a way, then, she performs this stanza with a more masculine voice. She accomplishes this by using traditional poetic elements like the repetition in "I have wanted" in lines one and two; heavy assonance of the "o" sound in "throw" (line 1), "crowd" (line 4),

"posture" (line 3), "strong" (line 2), "slowly" (line 6), and "cock" (line 6); the alliteration of "something" and "center" in line 4, "blade" and "bark" in line 5, and "haft" and "heavily" in line 6; and the traditional pauses at line endings employing three commas and one full stop in this single stanza. All of these traditional poetic elements along with the message of the opening stanza leave the reader sure that Olds strives to join the history of poetry: that she has, at least in the past, employed the same phallic metaphors that have preceded her. But she will quickly overturn these opening six lines.

While the first line of the second stanza follows the patterns of the first stanza, "I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body," Olds begins to slowly unravel these masculine features. The "I have wanted" of the first, second, and seventh lines becomes "I have stood by" in the tenth line, and even this inclusion of the "I" is moved from the front of that line to the middle. This revision of the form not only complicates the gender performance of the poem and the formal constructions of the lines by moving the force of the line from beginning to middle, it also brings to the foreground the roles that women (poets) have played in the poems of masculine America. Women have "stood by" and "watched the boys play" (lines 10 and 11). In addition, Olds alliteration and sound patterns foreground the "s" sound ("some," "use," "some," "heroism," "self," "stood," "sandlot," and "boys"):

> I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,
> some heroism, some American achievement
> beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,
> magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot
> and watched the boys play. (lines 7-11)

This repeated sound creates a hissing of sorts, a kind of disapproval with the role that women (and, importantly, the speaker herself) have played. The phallic symbols of the first stanza are paralleled in the second stanza with the concepts of "epic" (line 7), "heroism" (line 8), "magnetic and tensile" (line 10), and "the boys play" (line 11), to suggest that the epic, along with "American achievement" (line 8) is the game of the boys, the phallic domination of men's language over "my excellent body" (line 7) which is a woman's body. It also suggests the patriarchal tradition itself, where epics are the way in which heroism is celebrated and passed down: a tradition by and for men.

Finally, by the third and fourth stanza, however, a woman's body – a pregnant woman's body, no less, -- appears and takes center stage:

> I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire
> and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around
> my belly big with cowardice and safety,
> my stool black with iron pills,
> my huge breasts oozing mucus,
> my legs swelling, my hands swelling,
> my face swelling and darkening, my hair
> falling out, my inner sex
> stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife.
> I have lain down. (lines 12-21)

The body appears throughout this stanza in "my belly big" (line 14), "my stool black with iron pills" (line 15), "my huge breasts oozing mucus" (line 16), "my legs swelling, my hands swelling," (line 17), "my face swelling and darkening" (line 18), "my hair / falling

out" (line 18-19), "my inner sex / stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife" (line 19-20). Again Olds relies on the repetition of the "s" sounds, but as with the end of the second stanza, the line breaks in the fourth stanza are less predictable; some phrases are sliced in half (as in "my hair / falling out" in lines 18 and 19) leaving readers with a momentary pause at the ends of her lines but still pushing them through the birthing process. In addition, Olds removes all punctuation except for the final end stop in lines 22 through 28 which seems to add to the sense of urgency that a laboring mother feels. According to Olds' narrator, for male writers like Ginsberg and Whitman, childbirth can only be a metaphor for poetry writing. While for Olds and her narrator, a poem about the childbirth and the creation of a "new person" (lines 25, 26, and 27) can be both about the reality of childbirth and about the writing of poetry. This is reinforced by her attention to the bodily fluids (sweat, feces, water, blood) which calls the reader's attention to the messiness and pain of labor. The dual ability of the woman writer to consider both is particularly acute in line 28 when the narrator mentions the "language of blood" which both reminds readers of the dangers of delivery and the psychoanalytic implications of the semiotic language between mother and child.[17]

[17] In her essay, "'Some epic use for my excellent body': Redefining Childbirth as Heroic in *Beloved* and 'The Language of the Brag," Ellen Argyros says, "Olds' emphasis is on the relationship between the woman and her body, and the newfound confidence she has in it and in herself after she has given birth. The excretions of the body are viewed as signs of her ennobling pain, and death is present not as a real threat but only as a means of helping to valorize the act. Childbirth becomes transfigured from a natural act to an act requiring Homeric courage. Olds uses all this chest-thumping about the trials of pregnancy and childbirth as a way to jockey for power within a male tradition and as a way to taunt the likes of Whitman and Ginsberg for their comparative lack of fecundity" (148). However, I do not agree that Olds is attempting to transform childbirth into a Homeric act of courage. On the contrary, Olds seems to point out that Whitman and Ginsberg have attempted to make that leap, have participated in this "chest thumping," she has done the actual childbirth, and it was dirty, disgusting, and painful. It was not Homeric or heroic; the real thing is, however, worthy of comparison to their heroics. It is worthy of being "right here with the others" (line 35).

In this fourth stanza, there is also an important change in the performance of the feminine. The body described here finally acts: "I have lain down and sweated and shaken / and passed blood and feces and water and / slowly alone in the center of a circle I have / passed the new person out" (lines 22-25). Rather than being a body to be acted upon, this pushing out of a new person becomes the central action, the core of both meaning making and existence. Then Olds' narrator drops the final shoe:

> I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
> Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
> I and the other women this exceptional
> act with the exceptional heroic body,
> this giving birth, this glistening verb,
> and I am putting my proud American boast
> right here with the others. (lines 29-35)

Finally, the feminine "I" in this poem turns to the masculine "I's" which preceded her: Whitman and Ginsberg, and tells them that she has done "this giving birth" with her "exceptional heroic body" (line 32) which they asked for, which they wrote about, and, in addition and unlike them, she is writing her poem, "I am putting my proud American boast"(line 34) "right here with the others" (line 35). Olds' narrator consciously inserts herself into history of poetry. She looks unflinchingly at her body and chooses to write it both into this poem, and into the conversation between poems which we call poetic tradition. In addition, she favors her body (and feminine traditions) over that of her male

predecessors.[18] In her poem, childbirth becomes more than the metaphor: it is both metaphor and reality. Therefore, her poem is able to do more than their poems. Even if Ginsberg and Whitman are, arguably, less masculine or more feminine than some male poets, they were still only able to consider childbirth as a metaphor not as the actual giving birth to a child. Olds points out that as male poets, they cannot think of it any other way: they cannot perform the physical act, so childbirth must always be a metaphor, and a metaphor only, for them.

But Olds also calls the readers attention to her ability to perform both the poetic language of her male predecessors and the language of the feminine. She begins with content and form that follows the expected traditions of masculine poetry. Then, through her descriptions of childbirth and the descriptions of a pregnant body, Olds performs a feminine poetry. Because she is able to accomplish both performances within a single poem, I argue that this poem achieves performativity. Olds reveals that masculine and feminine languages are performances. Therefore, through her ability to perform multiple gender positions, Olds reveals the performance of gender and calls it into question.

Ntozake Shange's "advice"

Ntozake Shange (b. 1948) has been categorized as being part of the Black Arts movement[19] and may be most famous for her poetic play *For Colored Girls Who Have*

[18] Argyros (see note 18 above) says, "Olds uses her own ability to bear children as a way of differentiating herself from Whitman and Ginsberg and implying that she is like them—only better—because she can generate both children and poems, both physical and symbolic immortality. Childbirth becomes rewritten as a privileged, heroic rite of passage that women engage in voluntarily, even defiantly" (145).

[19] For an excellent overview of Shange's place and part in the Black Arts movement, see Cheryl Clarke's book, *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement.* Clarke notes that Shange often performed her poetry with musicians and held a "militant reverence for the new music" of her time period (95). Clarke also posits that women poets of the 1970s Black Arts movement did "the work of radically expanding and redefining the American literary canon with a multitude of discursive, subversive projects

Considered Suicide When Even the Rainbow is Enuf (1977).[20] But her poetry, which like her "choreopoem" employs the use of vernacular language,[21] is equally powerful. In her poem "advice," from *Nappy Edges* (1978), her narrator describes the advice given to her by "people" about poetry writing. Several clues within this poem suggest that the speaker is a woman. The most convincing are lines 34 and 36 in which she says that she will "be jane doe & medea in one body/," and then she says, "i am goin to be ol & grey wizened & wise as aunt mamie." This identification with female names and figures, and the lack of such identifications with male figures indicate a female speaker, or at least one attempting to perform femininity. I will, therefore, call the speaker a she throughout my analysis. I will also assume, for less convincing reasons that I will discuss later, that she is an African-American woman.

Shange has her speaker open the poem by saying, "people keep telling me to put my feet on the ground" (line 1) as if writing poems (as we will discover in the following lines) is the opposite of grounding. Immediately, Shange's refusal to use the capitalization and punctuation of Standard English marks the poem in several ways: it is

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that positioned black women as subjects" (22). While Clarke's work focuses on Shange's "choreopoem," I believe that these statements can apply to her poem "advice" as well.

[20] While much critical work has been done on Shange's play or "choreopoem" and her fiction, relatively little has been published on her poetry. For additional criticism (also see note 13 for Clarke's work) on her drama and fiction, see Houston A. Baker's book *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writings.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991. and Harryette Mullen's article "'Artistic Expression Was Flowing Everywhere': Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s" in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 4.2 (Summer 2004): 205-241.

[21] In her book on vernacular culture, *Performing the Word: African-American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, Fahamisha Patricia Brown argues that African-American poets "[engage] the written language in oral terms" (26). She goes on to state that the use of vernacular language in poetry "is not, then, merely a matter of variants in pronunciation and accent alone, but of distinct intonations, durations, and pitches, as well as rhythms—all components of the realm of music. To achieve the particular expressive effects required by a situation, a speaker might commonly add or subtract syllables" (64). This use of musical features in a poem, of course, hovers around jazz and blues where improvisation is central. Brown suggests that to use improvisation in a written text, writers employ "punctuation or its absence" (73). Considering these characteristics of vernacular poetry, I argue that Shange's poem is a vernacular poem.

vernacular, it is rebellious, and it is meant to seem improvisational. In addition, the immediate focus on a continuing conversation in "people keep telling me..." lets readers consider of the tradition of vernacular and oral culture, particularly in African-American poetry. Readers are then asked to "hear" this poem as they read the next line, "i get mad & scream/ there is no ground" (line 2). Here the oral response that the speaker describes and the use of the ampersand continue the rebellion of the speaker again the Standard English that poetry readers expect, and they are led, instead, to consider what other traditions might be performed. After marking her speaker with these (African American and oral) cultures and histories, Shange spends the entire poem setting up a performance in which art and common sense are portrayed as opposites, and then, she sets her speaker outside of that world, unable to understand why poetry and profession (and we might begin to consider if that binary implies vernacular and Standard English in which most of poetry has been written) must be mutually exclusive. She says:

> what in the hell is goin on?
>
> did somebody roll over the library witta atomic truck
> did hitler really burn all the books/ it's true
> nobody in the united states can read or understand
> english anymore/ i must have been the last survivor of
> a crew from mars/ this is where someone in brown cacky comes
> to arrest me & green x-ray lights come outta my eyes & i
> can leap over skyscrapers & fly into the night/ i can be
> sure no one will find me cuz i am invisible to

ordinary human beings in the u.s.a./ ... (129)

She, the speaker marked by her vernacular language, her improvisation, her rebellion from the history of poetry, is "invisible to / ordinary human beings in the u.s.a/ " (lines 18 and 19). Shange points out the invisibility of her speaker's position in American culture.

Like all of the speakers created by women poets in this chapter, Shange's speaker points to the undetectable place of women, and more specifically, African-American women, within the literary canon. She reinforces her ideas with her use of free verse, vernacular language, ampersands, absent capitalizations, and slashes within lines to call the poetic line into question. These slashes, employed in 23 of the 31 lines and totaling 33 slash marks, force the reader, more than any other of her techniques in the poem, to reconsider the poetic form. When reproducing lines of poetry within prose, we substitute a slash mark for a line break, as I did in the previous paragraph. However, the second slash mark (after u.s.a) within my quote is from Shange's original text and does not represent a line break in the actual poem. When reading the poem, we must decide how to read those slash marks. While some of the marks seem to act as a caesura, to call for a pause in the oral and silent reading, others seem to be arrows that point to the ambiguity created by a phrase if we were to pause. For example in line six, Shange says, "i make words/ cartwheel & summersault down pages." In this line, if we remove the slash, the second part of the line simply reads as the object of the sentence. Yet with the slash, an emphasis is created on "i make words" even while the object continues to exist. This same effect could have been gained by breaking the line between "words" and "cartwheel," yet Shange prefers to have the entire sentence on one line and broken by the slash. This causes us to ask ourselves why, in each line the slash appears, does Shange

choose this odd (if not irreverent) use of punctuation. I believe that she attempts to foreground and preserve as much ambiguity as possible. The most ardent example of this is in the final line where she says, "however/ did you capture language/ is a free thing." Here the slash after language indicates that the word language needs to be linked with both the idea: "however did you capture language" and "language is a free thing." And, in addition, the slashes help her to reproduce oral vernacular because oral language contains no end stops, commas, or line breaks by breaking away from traditional punctuation. This use of oral conventions calls to mind Irigaray's concept of *parler-femme* more so than Cixous' *écriture féminine.* By using language that breaks conventions while calling our attention to the language that has been captured by patriarchy, Shange employs the performative and both speaks and writes herself through the use of that poetic language which ruptures the Symbolic.

To reinforce this conversational and vernacular language, Shange also has her speaker ask questions directly to the reader and use 2nd person throughout the poem making it read like an address directly to the reader. This places the responsibility of the falling apart of (or "capture" of language in line 44) language on the reader. She says:

> ... / i'ma let you
> run wild/ & leave a poem or two with king kong
> in his aeroplane to drop pieces of poems
> so you all will haveta come together/ just to figure out/
> how you got so far away/ so far away from words (lines 39-43)

The "yous" in these lines seem to be the readers who are to be punished for allowing language and poetry to become something we are separated from. Our punishment will be pieces of poems, not whole ones, which we will not be able to decipher without help from one another.

Shange's message, then, is that language cannot be tied down, that poetry is not the opposite of grounding, that writing poems has as much value (even in a society that refuses to recognize it) as building tunnels and feeding children. Even more important for this study, is that Shange delivers this message using an African-American woman's voice. This allows readers to consider how these identity categories relate to poetry writing. It is particularly important to remember that this poem was written near the mid 1970s, because Shange's use of vernacular and non-Standard English was cutting edge then. In fact, it is this part of her performance that makes this poem so important in my overall argument. For it is through her use of the oral, vernacular, and music traditions that Shange is able to call into question whether African-American women poets have ever (at least until that point) had a tradition of their own. Poets like Phillis Wheatley and Georgia Douglas Johnson certainly wrote powerful poems that spoke for the rights of women or the rights of people of African heritage. But did they actually write of the peculiar situation in which an African-American woman finds herself? While Frances Harper was able to call the performance of femininity into question, one might ask if the performance that she offers has taken into consideration the "double bind" of being both African American and woman. In this poem, Shange's speaker insists on being both and insists that the culture at large cannot see her.

Yet she is there, speaking. In this way, Shange is writing woman into the text. She forces readers to reconcile the language, to understand her identity and position, and to consider how poetry comes to have meaning within that situation. The poem, then, becomes performative by calling attention to its performance.

Adrienne Rich's "Two Arts"

Finally**,** I turn to Adrienne Rich (b.1929) and the final poem of this chapter. The poem, "Two Arts," illustrates the importance of employing both historical and psychoanalytic readings. The title of the poem immediately suggests that this poem is a response to Bishop's poem "One Art" and points to the possibility that artists have two ways to create a work: for poets, two different languages are available to them. Read in that light, the famously homosexual poet, Rich, offers us a poem in which both the formed poem (the finished and sold sculpture like the published villanelle) and the comments on the earlier draft (like the unpublished other sixteen versions of Bishop's poem) reveal all of the struggles and tensions involved in chipping away at the statue/poem and the revision process. Both, Rich suggests, are arts. Both must be done. Yet I suggest that Rich offers us an additional reading of these two types of art: a feminine and a masculine performance of language.

"Two Arts," published in Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), is a poem in two parts. The first part describes the revision process where the poem/artifact is "redone ... by daylight" (lines 1 and 9) which, I suggest, is the masculine performance which is marked by the use of Symbolic language. Rich's narrator compares the writing of the poem to the carving of a sculpture of a human form in rock. The first draft, or the first form created, is done during the night: "All night I'd worked to illuminate the skull"

(line 5) and I posit that this is the feminine writing, the use of semiotic language. It is only after the chipping away that occurs in daylight, the reshaping of semiotic language with Symbolic language, that the artist "can submit you to the arts administrator / and the council of patrons / who could never take your measure." (lines 10-12). The first part is first person and describes the filing down of the sharp edges in order to make a sellable object: one the patrons will pay for. Unlike Shange's poem, there is little to confirm the gender of this speaker. Yet, I will again read her as feminine for four reasons. First, there are hints of traditional domesticity and femininity in the poem: the slivers pile up "like petals" (line 4), and "I brush you off my apron" (line 17). Second, because the poem does seem to be a response to Bishop, it is hard to imagine that Rich would choose a masculine performance in which to respond to her. Third, if Rich's separation of two types of art references the differences in masculine and feminine language, her eventual siding with the feminine, or unshaped, art seems to indicate her preference for the feminine performance. However, it is telling that the speaker here is more androgynous than many of the poems discussed in this chapter.

Yet, there is a more convincing argument that feminizes this speaker. When reading this poem, we are reminded Rich's much earlier poem "The Diamond Cutters" (1955) in which she discusses the artistic process through the metaphor of diamond cutting. As in "Two Arts," in this earlier poem Rich compares the uncut stone to the chiseled diamond. However, "The Diamond Cutters" advises "Be proud, when you have set / The final spoke of flame / In that prismatic wheel" (lines 33-35) which privileges the shaped stone over the unpolished rock from the mines in Africa. It is telling that Rich uses Africa as the source of the stone. As this poem was published in 1955, it pre-dates

Edward Said and post colonial theory by twenty years or more. Therefore, like much of dominant American culture's view of Africa in the 1950s, Rich's poem betrays a feminization of the continent and a strong tendency to see Africa as a primal human consciousness. Both Irigaray and Cixous build upon this connection between women and Africa. In *This Sex Which is not One,* Irigaray points to Freud's assertion that women's sexuality is "the dark continent" (48), and she goes on to show how women's sexuality is outside of and unknown within the psychoanalytic model of development. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous also compares women to Africa. She says that women are "taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous" (349). For both Cixous and Irigaray, it is this placement of women, like Africa, outside of male understanding that causes their invocation of women to write and speak themselves into existence. Rich's use of Africa in "The Diamond Cutters," and the similarities of the content of "Two Arts" with this much earlier poem suggest that Rich is revising her own earlier ideas. In this way, the speaker in "Two Arts," like Africa itself in "The Diamond Cutters" is feminized.

Rich's poem, pre-dating Irigaray and Cixous, illustrates the common connection between women and Africa because of their secondary status to men and Europe. Wrapped up in this ideology, the message in "Two Arts," is the theory that Rich's narrators put forth: the theory that initial creativity, the beautiful but unpolished stone, is feminine and in need of refinement. But unlike "Two Arts," "The Diamond Cutters," with its near-perfect iambs and occasional end rhymes, is itself a shaped stone, cut perfectly to "Shine on the false and the true" (line 38) and a shining example of beauties

of symbolic language and masculine performance. In this poem, Rich's narrator prefers the craftsmanship, the shaping of the words, the symbolic and patriarchal art forms.

But 46 years later, Rich has re-written this idea with a new preference. In "Two Arts," she begins with the polished product: the symbolic language, the masculine performance. The art object (both in terms of story and grammar, the *you* in the first part is the art object) is "fluent and robed at last" (line 14), with "all your origins countered" (line 15). The artist then "wrap[s] you in pure white sheets to mail you" (line16). These lines suggest that the art object must be covered, "robed" and in "white sheets" to be sent out into the world. The original rendering, the rough but "pure electric" (line 6), while "puls[ing] like a star" (line 6) will not be acceptable to audiences, and certainly not to editors or collectors and "arts administrators" (line 10), that make decisions about what art is shown and consumed by the public. For consumption to take place, "all your origins [are] countered." (line 15). This suggests that not only is the speaker performing femininity, but the art object is as well. Rich posits that woman's inspiration, the constant source of inspiration of and the form of art (like Africa in her earlier poem), must have her origins countered, must be covered, and must be judged by administrators. Therefore the speaker here must both perform her own femininity for all to see, but must also have her artistic performances set before the world for judgment. Thus, this poem "Two Arts" becomes much like the art object described in this first section, and Rich is like the speaker (and maybe she is arguing that Bishop is as well) making her poem, her performance, acceptable to the culture.

However, part two of this poem suggests that there is another alternative. Unlike in the first section, this section is written in second person, and there is no "I" artist. In

addition, it is even less clear about the masculinity/femininity of this speaker, and I will only hesitantly call this second speaker a she and that is because Rich, the speaker of the first section, and Bishop are all women. Rather than being the artist, the speaker in this second section talks to the reader as if the reader is an artist, and she gives advice to that artist. She says, "Raise it up there and it will / loom, the gaunt original thing / gristle and membrane of your life" (lines 19-21). Rather than cover and robe this piece as was done in the first section, the speaker suggests it be shown as is: "mortared with shells of trilobites," (line 22) "between the cracks of lightning," (lines 23-24) "pieced together by starlight" (line 26). Rich's narrator then gives a series of descriptions of the supports for the object, "the flying buttresses you gave it" (line 27): "hulk of mist, rafter of air, suspension bridge of mica / helm of sweat and dew" (lines 28-29). Here the construction support is made from non-supportive or impossible materials: "mist," "air," "mica," "sweat and dew." This art object, unlike the one presented in the first section, is dangerously close to collapse. Yet the closing lines of the poem, "but you have to raise it up there, you / have a brutal thing to do" (lines 30-31) suggest that even though the art object may crumble, it must be shown. This section of the poem argues that while it may be difficult for women to present their art in the ways they want it presented, it must be done.

How then do the two parts interact? What is Rich's purpose of putting together these two seemingly opposing views of the art object? Why the change in voice? The speaker seems to say, while I did not send out my art object (in section one) in its glory, I treated it more carefully, dressing it for the occasion; you must send yours out as is. Yet we know that Bishop did not send hers out unpolished either. Who then, we must ask, is

the you to whom Rich speaks? I posit that it is the woman poet, it is the promise of the next generation of women who will follow Rich. Rich, like Cixous (who also employs a second-person stance in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa"), asks women poets to write in less "Patriarchal" ways (in the sense that Stein has revealed to us). She commands that women poets abandon the "fluent and robed" art that American women poets have had to perform since Anne Bradstreet and Jane Turell. Rich calls for a poem put together with "hulk of mist, rafter of air, suspension bridge of mica / helm of sweat and dew" (lines 28 and 29).

The brilliance of Rich's poem is that she shows us both the performance of femininity (the cloaking of the poem in a gendered performance) and the performative through which the performance of femininity is revealed. Rich shows us that the dressing of the art for consumption, like the dressing of a body, can hinder the experience of that art. Rich suggests, then, that there is a being that exists before it is gendered.

Conclusion

In each of these five poems, the poet has used her narrator to perform a femininity in which the performance is both revealed and questioned. Even in the eighteenth century, it seems, American women writers were aware of their gender roles and the performance of those roles, even if the language I am using here to analyze these performances was not yet used. These five poets, then, show us that when writing about writing, it is the questioning of historical precedent through the mimicry of performances of femininity that allows them to employ *écriture féminine* and *parler-femme*. Through the performative, women poets are beginning to question the history of poetry, to insert themselves into that history, and to create a woman within language that was previously

unavailable to her. She is resisting the definitions prescribed to her and creating new ones herself.

Daddy Gave Me Away

over an all-you-can-eat
buffet, a Gravely lawn mower --
my only dowry.

So I moved from daddy's home
to his shiny new kitchen,
where I learned to cook
country fried steak
for a husband's fattening stomach,
and washed dirty work
uniforms to kill the smell
of grease and soured sweat.

I learned the recipes
by heart at first, and then
gradually learned to dash
in spices for interest,
praying for a secret ingredient,
for some perfect seasoning
to make the deal my daddy made
work, to make my life bearable.

At 17, I knew nothing of the trade,
but time and heat gave rise
to a woman, and she left him,
his kitchen, stomach, mower,
and daddy too.

No, no, daddy, I'm not through,
If God made man from dust,
I can do better.

---Katherine D. Perry

CHAPTER THREE

Under Contract: Marriage, Language, and Gender Performance

> In any case, *two men* will come to an agreement whereby the woman passes from one "house" to another and joins another "family circle."
>
> ~Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*

This third chapter presents readings of five poems, written by five different American women poets, which take marriage as their subject matter: Anne Bradstreet's "A Letter to her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment" (1678), Alice Cary's "The Bridal Veil" (1866), Marianne Moore's "Marriage" (1923), Lorine Niedecker's "I married" (1968), and June Jordan's "The Wedding" (1977). Using Judith Butler's arguments on gender performance and Luce Irigaray's theory of the Masquerade, I argue that all five poems are gender performances and that several are also gender performatives. They are poems that explore the marriage contract and/or the wedding ceremony as Masquerade. While several of the poems in this chapter were written before these feminist theories existed, I will not argue that the poems are using the theory to explore marriage. Instead, I will investigate the ways in which poems written by American women poets, like the feminist theories of gender performance, reveal the performative nature of gender identity that Butler has described. These poems demonstrate that marriage and women's roles within marriage are consciously or

unconsciously performed as a part of the "Masquerade" of femininity, which I will soon define.

I have purposefully chosen poems written during a wide range of time periods and written by women of different religious backgrounds, geographical locations, sexualities, and races in order to show that these gender performances reveal similarities in femininity across such expected divisions. These five poems, then, are representative of gender performance in many facets of American culture which, some may argue, highlights a peculiar quality of being American: diversity. Within this diversity, however, it seems that when writing about marriage, American women poets perform the Masquerade of femininity. In fact, the popularity of marriage as a subject matter for American women poets suggests that the roles of women within Western culture and within the institution of marriage hold great resonance for women within American culture. The commonalities between poems and in the ways these five women portray the contract of marriage in their poems demonstrate that, for women, marriage is, within a patriarchal system, largely a performed identity. It is my claim that these five poems explore marriage as (and through) performances of femininity and that each poem offers particular insights into the language/bodily performance of women within the marriage act. However, while all five poems are performances of femininity, only three are performative: Cary's "The Bridal Veil," Moore's "Marriage," and Niedecker's "I married." As I explained in the introduction, to be performative, the poem must not only perform gender, but must also perform it with an intention that ultimately reveals the performance. It is important to note, however, that it is not the author's *s* intention that I am discussing; it is the effect of the poem/performance itself that becomes relevant here.

In the cases of Cary, Moore, and Niedecker, the poems become performative because they (the poems) undercut the system they discuss: the system in which a particular kind of femininity is the accepted gender performance.

To define and articulate gender performance, marriage, and Masquerade, I begin with a consideration of marriage and the way marriage has been investigated within feminist theory. Marriage can be, of course, a legal, social, religious, sexual, and even romantic contract, but, by all accounts, it is a vow or contract that joins two people in at least one of the above ways. By the twentieth century in Western cultures, the institution and ceremony of marriage can be seen to be a form of kinship, a legal contract, and, to use the Irigaray's term, a part of the "Masquerade" of femininity. To fully understand kinship and its impact on gender performance, we first look to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his 1949 work, *Elementary Structures of Kinship,* and then to Butler's work, *Gender Trouble.*[22] Lévi-Strauss argues that in the formations of kinship surrounding marriage, woman is the exchange object between men. When marriage arrangements are made, generally between the father of the bride and the groom, the woman's value is her body, her sexuality (and/or virginity), and her ability to perform other such duties (housekeeping, childrearing, etc). She is a "bride" given as a gift – the sign of a value. A relation of kinship is established when a woman is given by a man as a

[22]Butler revises some of her ideas on kinship in her newest book, *Undoing Gender*. She spends an entire chapter considering the accepted connection between marriage and kinship, and asks the question in the title of the chapter, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" By illustrating that Lévi-Strauss' writings on kinship and marriage presume a heterosexuality, Butler asks if we are now are in a kind of post-kinship where families might include those that look and behave differently from the heterosexual model (118-119). This, of course, speaks to the present debates in Western cultures over same sex marriage and parenting. However, the most recent poem in this chapter was published in 1977, and while the homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual debate was important for its author, June Jordan, I argue that in terms of the poetry considered in this chapter, all five of these poems begin from the presumption of heterosexuality.

bride to another man (49-50). Lévi-Strauss' anthropological work investigates these institutions of marriage in a wide range of human cultures. While the method of this exchange may vary from culture to culture, women universally prove to be objects of exchange between men. No matter how the exchanges of women take place (sometimes the exchanges are even made by abduction), compensations for the exchanges nearly always accompany the marriage. From his studies of "primitive cultures" of the Pacific Islands and the North-west Pacific coast of Alaska and British Columbia, Lévi-Strauss draws some conclusions about Tikopia and Polynesian cultures. He says:

> [I]t must be noted that the 'compensation' (*te malai)*, which initiates the matrimonial exchanges, represents an indemnity for the bride's abduction. Even marriage by capture does not contradict the rule of reciprocity. Rather it is one of the possible legal ways of putting it into practice. The bride's abduction dramatically expresses the obligation upon any group holding girls to give them up. (65)

In order to explain how women function in such an exchange, Lévi-Strauss argues that all compensations and gifts are reciprocal in social cultures, and woman is the ultimate object of exchange. He goes on to say, "For the woman herself is nothing other than one of these gifts, the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts" (65). In the marriage market, woman is a commodity, an object to be exchanged. In her book *This Sex Which is Not One,* Luce Irigaray expands upon Lévi-Strauss' work and explores the role of woman as a commodity. She says, "—just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. [H]er value-invested form

amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body" (187). For Irigaray, woman is not only an object of exchange; she is also only a reflection of the man's desires. Her body is written and written upon by the patriarchal marriage market. Indeed, following Irigaray, this chapter explores women's bodies as articulated in these various poems and will show that these bodies have been written by the desires of men, even in the poetry of women.

At the end of his book, Lévi-Strauss makes a striking argument connecting women to language. He argues that the exchange of women is the necessary pre-condition for the laws of the universal incest taboo. This taboo is another universal that Lévi-Strauss finds among cultures, and it leads him to his most compelling universal: that of language usage. All cultures, according to Lévi-Strauss, exchange women, prohibit incest, and use language. After illustrating this in many geographic areas, Lévi-Strauss shows that incest taboos are similar to taboos concerning language misuse (e.g. men should not sleep with their mothers or sisters, and should not make fun of monkeys, should not talk while the cicadas sing). He finally asks, "What does this mean, except that women themselves are treated as signs, which are *misused* when not put to the use reserved to signs, which is to be communicated?" (495-496). Women are a form of language, the use of which is subject to the regulations of the group. This use of women, he claims, develops as the use of language develops within a culture. He says, "The emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged" (496). But Lévi-Strauss does find one difference between women and language; he says, "Woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is

defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs" (496). He claims that women, while treated like words to be exchanged, do have an ontological being beyond their exchange value: they too use language. But his final pronouncement on the exchange of women is that women operate both in the way that language operates and also as exchange value. He notes, "In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained at once a sign and a value" (496). Woman can be appropriated but her language can not. For women poets then, language becomes a means through which the trading of her body can be questioned and revealed.

Like Lévi-Strauss, Irigaray points out additional connections between women and language. She considers the patriarchal system that has set up the marriage market and investigates the effects it has had upon women:

> The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The 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, according to a rule known as the incest taboo. (*This Sex* 170)

Here, however, she is referring to the Lacanian model of psychoanalytic theory discussed in the previous chapter, where children take up the symbolic (language) as a condition of entering the Law of the Father. This Law, says Irigaray, is patriarchal and is dependent upon the exchange of women. It is this Law that she calls into question because women have no place within it. There is no woman in the phallic economy. She has no pleasure

in the market and/or phallic economy. She, in fact, has no desire or sexuality of her own. She only has the social roles or gender performances assigned to her by men, or femininity. Irigaray says:

> *Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women.* The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's "activity"; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself…*Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure.* (*This Sex* 186-187)

She has no subject position, and she is relegated to perform one of the roles set up for her by the demands of the male's desires. We, therefore, do not know what woman is. Instead we have a Masquerade of femininity that veils her. But Irigaray also asks that we attempt to discover the woman beyond the Masquerade, or outside of the market, when she asks her now famous question, "*But what if these "commodities" refused to go to "market"?* What if they maintained "another" kind of commerce, among themselves?" (196). In a society whose laws provide for the "exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires" (171) through the exchange of women, Irigaray asks what might happen if women refused to participate. Would we find the woman beneath the veil? Would the Masquerade fall apart? As is typical for Irigaray, she refuses to answer such questions so as to avoid prescribing what woman might be. To do so, she argues, would be to subject

woman again to a series of definitions not of her own making. Irigaray is asking us to disrupt "femininity," just as Butler asks us to disrupt gender performance.

In *Gender Trouble,* Butler points out that Lévi-Strauss' structuralist assumptions lead him to his problematic argument that the law (incest taboo) is universal and without cultural context. For Butler, structuralism fails because within it "the *totality* and *closure* of language is both presumed and contested" (51). She calls into question a law without cultural construction. Even though the incest taboo is universal, human development happens within particular historical and geographical locations.

Gender Trouble builds on the 1975 article, "Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in which Gayle Rubin (b. 1949) reconsiders the implications of Lévi-Strauss' structuralist work for women. She argues that while Lévi-Strauss and Frederick Engels (1820-1895) explored human marriage practices and the procedures surrounding the exchange of women, they both failed to ask important questions that will reveal the political economy of what she calls the "sex/gender system:"

> Is woman traded for woman, or is there an equivalent? Is this equivalent only for women, or can it be turned into something else? If it can be turned into something else, is it turned into political power or wealth? On the other hand, can bridewealth be obtained only in marital exchange, or can it be obtained from elsewhere? Can women be accumulated through amassing wealth? Can wealth be accumulated by disposing of women? Is a marriage system part of stratification? (207)

Rubin suggests that until theorists rewrite their texts and answer these questions, we will not completely understand the traffic of women and the full range of politics surrounding those exchanges. Rubin calls for a "revolution in kinship" where "men [do] not have overriding rights in women" (199). To accomplish this revolution, we would need an "elimination of the social system which creates sexism and gender" (204). She identifies those sexist social systems as the incest taboo, heterosexual compulsion, and the subsequent exchange of women. But Butler is not satisfied with Rubin's revolution either; she notes that Rubin's dream for a world without the incest taboo is a "utopian stage in infantile development, a 'before' the law which promises to reemerge 'after' the demise or dispersal of that law" (*Gender Trouble* 96).

Using the work of Michel Foucault, Butler argues that the taboo functions *within* culture, and that the cultural context of the law both creates and forbids the desire for the mother, and, therefore, there can be no original or pre-law sexuality (97). Bisexuality or homosexuality, Butler posits, is not "outside" of the Symbolic but is a construction of it (98). Given these arguments, the relationship between women and language becomes more complicated. To unravel it, we must understand how language functions in relation to sexual identity. Therefore, we turn to Jacques Lacan, and in particular, his theory of the Phallus. While Butler and Irigaray find other interpretations for women's subjectivity, Lacan argues that this entry into the symbolic requires a sacrifice of her *jouissance* and she must instead take up a Masquerade. He explains it as such:

> Paradoxical as this formulation may seem, I am saying that it is in order to be the Phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes

> in the Masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love. (289-290)

What, then, does the woman sacrifice/reject when she performs the Masquerade? What constitutes "all her attributes"? Lacan's answer is not clear, but this is a question taken up by Butler in *Gender Trouble* and by Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One.* Butler argues that if woman *is* the Phallus, then she is reduced to mere appearance of being. However, Butler says, if she is masquerading, then there may be an ontological being prior to the Masquerade. Butler says that the former reading gives us "the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances" (60). The latter "might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy" (60). Butler then suggests that we might read both possibilities without finding them mutually exclusive. She argues:

> Femininity becomes a mask that dominates/resolves a masculine identification, for a masculine identification would, within the presumed heterosexual matrix of desire, produce a desire for a female object, the Phallus; hence, the donning of femininity as mask may reveal a refusal of a female homosexuality and, at the same time, the hyperbolic incorporation of that female Other who is refused – an odd melancholic and negative narcissism that results from the psychic inculcation of compulsory heterosexuality. (68)

The Masquerade, for Butler, both reveals and refuses. This Masquerade also, and more importantly for Butler's argument, involves the covering over of female homosexuality because woman in the Symbolic is only ever defined by male desire. If we return with this concept of the Masquerade to Lévi-Strauss' argument, we find that what he calls woman (sign and value) is the Masquerade.

By comparing Butler's Masquerade to Lévi-Strauss' woman, we can see that it is the woman's position in relation to the Phallus that puts her onto the marriage market. It is the phallocentric system of exchanges between men that requires women perform the Masquerade. Therefore, women within phallocentric cultures are required to perform the Masquerade of femininity in order to fulfill their role as commodities of/for male desire. In the poems I will discuss this requirement is highlighted by the range of poets who choose to write about heterosexual marriage: heterosexual women, lesbian women, and bisexual women. Even women who choose not to participate in the marriage market write the Masquerade. Because woman's sexual identity is acquired through her relational position to the Phallus, her sexuality, that is, a sexuality outside a phallocentric economy, is not relevant to her performance of the Masquerade. Woman is the Masquerade. She must perform.

For Irigaray, womanliness does not exist prior to the Symbolic. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray famously argues, "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (23). She points out that psychoanalytic models of human development have understood the development of female sexuality in terms of the male (biology and discourse): the female child has a castration complex and her desire for the mother is defined in heterosexual terms. While

Irigaray sees no pre-Symbolic woman, she does understand, as Lacan does, a feminine pleasure, *jouissance,* outside of the Symbolic in the relationship between mother and child that must be relinquished in eroticism which is not regulated by male desire. Therefore, womanliness is Masquerade, and we can never know this pre-Symbolic elsewhere. She argues, "feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure" (77). In order not to fall back into the "feminine within a logic that maintains its repression," Irigaray advocates "repeating/interpreting" mimicry of the feminine defined as lack that will lead to a "disruptive excess" and a jamming of the logical machinery (78). Irigaray posits that to expose the Masquerade of femininity, we must consciously (with intention) mimic it. This, however, will not produce a pre-Symbolic woman; it will instead open the possibilities for a critique of the political economy (85).

Following Lacan, Irigaray draws her Masquerade from a concept central in the work of other feminist theorists. Joan Riviere's (1883-1962)1927 lecture "Womanliness as a Masquerade," claims that women perform a version of femininity that is required by the culture's masculinity, and that this Masquerade is femininity. In her description of the "overtly masculine type of woman," a professional woman who also performs a maternal and housewife role, Riviere says:

> Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and

> ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "Masquerade." My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. The capacity for womanliness was there in this woman—and one might even say it exists in the most completely homosexual woman—but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development, and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment. (131)

Riviere's separates womanliness or femininity from sexuality, noting that femininity exists too in the homosexual woman. While queer theorists may have much more to say about this claim, what is important for my study is her argument that womanliness and Masquerade are the same; one does not produce the other. This suggests, as Butler argues, that gender *is* always already performative.

Irigaray continues the question of woman and her relation to the Masquerade in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman.* In this book, Irigaray attempts to understand what woman could be if she were not only the Other to man and if she were not defined solely as a reflection of his desire. She investigates marriage and family, and uses metaphors such as the veil, and the cave/womb to explore the patriarchal nature of philosophy, history, and language and the relegation of women in those fields to her body and to Masquerade. In considering the myth of Oedipus and Sigmund Freud's use of that myth in his Oedipus complex, Irigaray considers the development of femininity within

the Oedipus myth and concludes that in order for femininity to exist, woman (her sexual organ and her subjectivity) must be metaphorically veiled. She posits:

> All he [Oedipus] has given up is the desire for a woman, for a woman's sex/organ because in any case *that had no value*. His "super-ego," teeming with ideals and moral rules and self-reflective and self-representative gazes, will have taken woman away from him in exchange for an idea of woman, "femininity." The metaphorical veil of eternal female covers up the sex/organ seen as castrated. (*Speculum* 82)

Because woman's identity as woman is always defined as lack in a psychoanalytic paradigm, Irigaray explores "woman" as the ontological being that exists prior to, or beneath, the veiling. In the development of subjects in psychoanalytic theory, female children must give up their *jouissance* and veil that pleasure with the reflection of male desire. The primary desire of children is for their mother. In "normal" development for male children, that desire for a female love object lasts the duration of their lifetime, but for female children, the desire must be relinquished for the heterosexual desire for the father. This change in desire must come from a change in object that follows from a devaluation of the mother and therefore herself (31). Woman then, can only define her body in terms of masculine (heterosexual) desires. Her body has been written for her in the phallogocentric Symbolic, and her pleasure, her *jouissance*, written over. For Lévi-Strauss, while "woman" is a sign, she is also more than a sign. For Irigaray, we do not yet know what other – "woman" is. However complicated they are, understanding these ideas next to each other is necessary in order to understand the relationship between gender and the Masquerade.

This relationship between gender and the Masquerade reveals itself in each of the poems I discuss in this chapter in that the speaker performs gender through language (a set of signifiers) that produces the Masquerade. Because our relationship to language, according to Lacan, is tied to our sex or position in relation to the phallus, language is always gendered. For Lacan, there is no language outside of a sexual identity and no sexual identity outside language. As each poem is a language act, it is also produced by a gendered poet and within a gendered context. In reading these poems I find that women's relationships to the marriage economy becomes evident in the way they perform their femininity in poetry. Marriage, as a crucial step in the sex/gender economy, requires that women perform the Masquerade, and language, necessarily, reveals our sex (relationship with the phallus). Language, then, becomes the method through which the Masquerade is performed or mimed.

Irigaray further cements the relationship between language, Masquerade, and the marriage economy in *Speculum of the Other Woman.* She discusses marriage as it relates to property rights. She begins with Frederick Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* and his study on marriage in which he states that when a woman married, "The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production" (127). From this Irigaray concludes, "Only with the advent of the *patriarchal family* and more particularly with the *monogamous individual family* does housekeeping lose its social character and limit itself to 'private service'" (121). In the exchange of marriage, the husband possesses woman because he is the "head of the family" (121). But through this marriage contract, the woman loses her legal rights because, while the marriage contract "will often have been *implicitly a work contract,"*

the law does not recognize it as a work contract, therefore, she is deprived of benefits such as "salary, work hours, vacations, etc." (121). Irigaray goes on to argue that not only is the woman unprotected legally, but also that the marriage contract is actually a disguised "*purchase agreement for the body and sex of the wife"* (121). A wife becomes a lifetime slave (sexual and otherwise) to the husband. This disturbing and dangerous contract is made between the father of the bride and the husband, and through the contract, the woman's virginity is "figured as a value over and above the dowry, in exchange for a certain capacity for work and a certain guarantee of potency demanded of the future husband" (122). In the marriage economy, according to Irigaray, women are exchanged as enslaved persons. They are without rights and protection. Like enslaved people, they have no participation in the contract of enslavement.

What is clear, however, is that the marriage contract is the driving force of an economy that defines, regulates, and enslaves women. This economy produces a continuously performed, as Butler makes clear, enforced Masquerade. This Masquerade is a gender performance of femininity.

For the five poems discussed in this chapter, I ask if the poets are in fact writing woman, which is to say a woman beyond the Masquerade, or if they are simply reproducing the phallocentric language of their forefathers and participating in the continued veiling and exchange of woman. To use phallocentric language without miming or intention is to Masquerade as woman. Understanding the Masquerade in this manner allows me to consider linguistic and gendered utterances as performances and, in a few cases, as performative.

I will also consider whether the performances are mimicry. According to Irigaray, to undertake mimicry, "one must assume the feminine role deliberately" (*This Sex* 76). To do so will help woman discover her erasure in phallocentric discourse without becoming reduced to that discourse. She argues that for woman, mimesis:

> means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of "matter," but also of "sexual pleasure." (*This Sex* 76)

For women to make changes in the social norms by mimicry, women can, as a whole, change their stylized usage or find a woman's writing. In these poems, I consider the ways that the poets employ formal elements and compare that usage to the social norms of poetry in the author's time period. In this comparison, I show that all five poems seem to follow phallocentric poetic patterns, yet in some cases the poet achieves a mimesis, which opens the door for a woman's writing. In these cases, I argue that the poet articulates woman's role performatively. In addition to these performatives, I also consider the gender performances made apparent in the speakers and/or characters of each poem and the ways in which the poet has constructed those characters as gendered.

In my readings, these five poems perform gender as though there is not a poet behind the poem. This does not mean that I think that a poem constructs itself, but it means that like the Masquerade, the poem keeps me from knowing the poet. As readers with no personal knowledge of the poet, we only know the poem as it performs itself. Yet, I am not offering a New Critical reading of the texts: the historical context is extremely important. I am only attempting to distance the gender performance of the poem from that of the poet herself. Therefore, the poet is like the ontological being that cannot be known independent of her performance. The poem, however, is the performance, the act of identity. The five poems I will discuss here employ five different stylized usages of language, and each is a gender performance. In addition, each poet has taken as her subject marriage and the market economy. I will show that through a particular stylized speech act, each poet makes a comment on the economy in which women are exchanged. Although I make comparisons between poems, I discuss each poem separately, and I begin each discussion with the content of the poem to show how this content explores the gender performativity with regards to marriage. I follow my interpretations of the content with a discussion of the formal elements of the poems. In these discussions, I show how the poet's uses of meter, rhyme, and form (stanzas, white space, and line breaks) might also be interpreted to show or reinforce the gender performance of the poem.

Anne Bradstreet's "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment"

I begin with Anne Dudley Bradstreet (1612-1672), the poet usually considered America's first poet. Without knowing it, Bradstreet would begin many of the poetic traditions that American poets followed for centuries after her. Her poem, "A Letter to

Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment" was published posthumously in 1678 in *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning*, and in it, Bradstreet's gender performance is shaped by a traditional connection between femininity, wifehood, and the physical body. Bradstreet's speaker's Masquerade connects her femininity to the physical body and takes on the role of the earthy, fleshy, wife expected of a Puritan household.

Yet Bradstreet's work remains complex and ambiguous. "A Letter to her Husband" opens with the lines: "My head, my heart, my eyes, my life, nay, more, / My joy, my magazine of earthly store," (226). The opening line has at least two meanings: first, if we read it as part of the address, the speaker seems to label her husband as the important physical parts of her own body (my head, heart, eyes, life), as if he is her ability to think, feel, see, and have a soul; he is only her body, and she has no body of her own. Second, if we read the opening lines as a dramatic monologue or pondering of her loneliness, the speaker makes a direct connection between herself and the body. In the second reading, we might understand the opening two lines as a sort of list of what parts of her are distraught or pining for the return of the husband. In either case, Bradstreet both aligns her speaker with a body, identifying her with the fleshy matter of existence, and gives her husband the ownership of and control over those parts. This deferral to her husband is typical of Puritan family structure, where the family was the center of social organization, and husbands held the decisive power of the family. It is also typical of the marriage economy described by Lévi-Strauss. Therefore, even in the opening lines of this poem, the woman speaker experiences herself through the power of her husband and

defines herself as his wife. Moreover, her emotions and thoughts are designed and shaped by his presence or absence.

Later, in line seven, the speaker uses the metaphor of the Earth to describe her speaker, "I like the Earth this season, mourn in black." Therefore, by line eight, Bradstreet has invoked two predictable and typical feminine metaphors and two performances for the wife: the body and the earth. These fleshy, and somewhat secular, allusions would not have been problematic for Puritans because both the body and the earth were considered God's creations to be controlled and used by men. It does, however, illustrate the long-standing connection between women and the body and the earth. Indeed, Bradstreet compounds this physical (earth and body) theme another step and enters the world of astrology. She says, "My sun is gone so far in's zodiac" (line 8), and later in the poem refers to "Capricorn" (line 12) and "Cancer" (line 21).[23]

Bradstreet's use of the zodiac and tropics reinforces my reading of her poem as equating femininity and the body. She employs the signs as metaphors for parts of the body and as a type of cartography: Capricorn is the knees and represents the south where

[23] While it may seem strange to contemporary readers for a Puritan to invoke astrology and/or these circle of latitudes, we must remember that astrology was part of the folk and agrarian culture, and Bradstreet's use of the zodiac signs and/or tropics corresponds with her speaker's relegation as the wife to the body and to earth and its tenants. In his influential book *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement,* David D. Hall argues, "We do better if we perceive an accommodation between magic and religion than if we regard magic as somehow the substance of a different tradition" (7). And according to Keith Cerniglia, the English version of the seventeenth-century Almanac contained a figure called the "Zodiac Man" that "depicted various parts of the body as correspondent to astrological readings" (par. 8). In addition, Cerniglia finds that Almanacs published as early as 1639 in New England contained a version of the Zodiac Man called "homo signorum, the Man of Signs, moon's man, the 'naked man' or 'anatomy,'" and that "even readers with only crude literacy skills could use the 'Zodiac Man' to connect parts of the body with signs of the horoscope or prescribe cures for nagging diseases" (par. 25). Cerniglia's also claims that Joseph Dudley, Bradstreet's father, was among the men known to make "early exertions to expose the public to the tenets of traditional Copernican astrology" (par. 29). Men like Dudley used strict Newtonian almanacs to explain both God's providence and the bodies of earth subjected to natural laws. Puritans apparently did not see these two ideas as disparate (par. 28). And if men such as Dudley had almanacs in his library, Bradstreet had access to them, at least in her childhood.

the husband travels, and Cancer is the heart or breast and represents Ipswich, where the speaker remains without him. Subject to natural law and God's law, these two astrological and tropical signs are considered opposites: the Tropic of Capricorn is the southern most tropic where the sun can be seen overhead, is connected to the winter solstice, and is the gate to death, while the Tropic of Cancer is the northern-most tropic where the sun can be seen overhead, is connected to the summer solstice, and is the gate to life. Because the two signs/tropics represent the southerly (Capricorn) and northerly (Cancer) routes of the sun, Bradstreet's use of them as divisions reinforces her male/female binary which she sets up in equation with the binaries of life/death and south/north. In line twelve, the speaker asks her husband to "Return; return, sweet Sol, from Capricorn," calling him the sun and asking him to return from the southern "Capricorn" to her in the north. She then promises him exuberant welcome when he returns to her:

> But when thou northward to me shalt return,
> I wish my Sun may never set, but burn
> Within the Cancer of my glowing breast,
> The welcome house of him my dearest guest. (lines 19-22)

The speaker's equation of the sun to her husband (he is the "Sun" she wishes would never set) makes him the center of her life just as the sun is the star of our solar system. This metaphor reveals Bradstreet's placement of the feminine as secondary or other to the husband's subjectivity. Her use of metaphors to describe her speaker's longing for the husband's return reinforces the lack that is woman. This employment of binaries shows Bradstreet's poem to perform the expected femininity of her day.

Bradstreet also uses references to sexual encounters to connect her speaker with the flesh (or body), and while this is a less expected use (from a Puritan woman) of the feminine, it is another support of the Masquerade of femininity in which Bradstreet relegates woman to her body without allowing her to express her own desires. The sexual desire in this poem is a reflection of the husband's desire. Bradstreet says in lines ten and eleven, "His warmth such frigid colds did cause to melt. / My chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn," offering a reference to sexual arousal. When her narrator refers to birthing her husband's children, she says, "In this dead time, alas, what can I more / Than those fruits which through thy heat I bore?" (lines 13 and 14) indicating that when she sees her children she remembers his sexual passion that led to their conception. Both expressions indicate that the couple has a passionate sex life, yet both encounters describe him as the passionate or heated one ("his warmth" and "thy heat") compared to her northern frigidity.

In imagining her husband's return, she hopes "I wish my Sun may never set, but burn / Within the Cancer of my glowing breast, / The welcome house of him my dearest guest" (lines 20-22). These three lines interweave several of the running metaphors of the poem: the wife is the Earth; she is north (Cancer) and gateway to life; and she is attending the home—and her body—in expectation of his return and for him.[24] In his "Epistle to the Reader" which appeared in the published book, John Woodbridge, Bradstreet's brother-in-law who took her manuscript to England, says that a woman of Bradstreet's time period, like Bradstreet herself, should be composed of "gracious

[24] For further explanation of the Christian imagery in this poem, see Rosamund Rosenmeier's article "'Divine Translation': A Contribution to the Study of Anne Bradstreet's Method in the Marriage Poems," in which she argues that both the house and the sun are "pre-figurative images of Christ" (126).

demeanour, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete (sic) managing of her family occasions" (Bradstreet 3). Much of this poem upholds those standards of femininity, and while her sexual language might seem out of place, it is only a reflection of his, the husband's, desire, not her own. Yet while sexuality is not counter to Godliness, the speaker must be wary of overstating her adoration for her husband. William Scheick argues that Bradstreet is only in danger of offending her audience or her God if she shows that her speaker's love for her husband casts shadows on her love for God (Scheick par. 43). Because God is nearly absent from this poem, other than biblical allusions to the marriage contract in the final lines, this poem performs a femininity that is more interested in warming her "limbs" with her husband's love than with God's.[25] In this case, this poem may have been marginally offensive to seventeenth-century readers and this possible offense might explain why Bradstreet did not choose to include it in her own version of the manuscript.

To understand the poem fully, we must also consider its formal construction and features. Bradstreet's use of meter and rhyme bolsters her connections between femininity and the physical body. Unlike many of the other personal poems written after the publication of *The Tenth Muse* which employ abab or abcb rhyme schemes[26], the

[25] Scheick's article "Logonomic Conflict in Anne Bradstreet's 'A Letter to Her Husband'" gives a complicated reading of this poem that culminates in his argument that her addition of the biblical ending to a secular poem distorts the poem by violating its narrative. He argues that this violation reveals Bradstreet's struggle with authority (Scheick par. 45). On the other hand, in her article "Anne Bradstreet and Performativity," Carrie Galloway Blackstock argues that in this poem, Bradstreet does indeed show her preference to live with her husband over death and reunion with God. Bradstreet's body is not a temple for God, but a dwelling for only two: her husband and herself (239-240).

[26] Critics like Beth M. Doriani have convincingly linked these poems to the *Bay Psalm Book* (52) and its abab or abcb rhyme schemes (56). See her article, "'Then Have I…Said with David": Anne Bradstreet's

poem contains twenty-six lines of rhyming couplets. Like many of those poems, this one does employ iambic meter, and in this poem, she uses pentameter lines. Most of the couplets use perfect end-rhymes, and the poem has no stanza breaks. By using couplets and a lack of stanza breaks, Bradstreet underscores the sense of unity between the husband and wife; the coupling, the earthly and/or physical relationship between husband and wife, is the defining feature of both the formal aspects of the poem and the life of the wife who speaks. Because iambic pentameter was the reigning meter of her time, Bradstreet's use of it suggests her compliance with the institutions of her time period. Kenneth Requa points out that while most of Bradstreet's private poems employ more diverse meters and rhythms, all but four of her public poems (over 6,000 lines of poetry) "imitative" because they employ iambic pentameter couplets (11). This suggests that while this poem is considered one of her private poems because of its subject matter, it employs the formal poetic techniques of her public poetry. Her marriage, then, and her Masquerade of femininity were, to some degree, part of her public persona. As the fashions within poetic meter change, so poems change to meet those fashions. Each poem represented in this chapter remains true to the "meter-of-the-day."[27] This might lead us to consider why it is that these poets choose, in these poems about marriage, to write in the dominant meter of the day, iambic pentameter in Bradstreet's case. I posit that when writing about an institution as patriarchal and dominant as the marriage institution, women like Bradstreet found that to employ iambic pentameter (or other

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Andover Manuscript Poems and the Influence of the Psalm Tradition." in *Early American Literature* 24:1 (Mar 1989): 52-69.

[27] In her book, *Ghost in the Meter,* Anne Finch notes, "[Emily] Dickinson is the only canonical female poet before the turn of the [20th] century who completely resisted the authority of the five-foot iambic line" (20).

dominant meter) reinforces the formal and patriarchal institutions of both prosody and marriage. In the case of this particular poem, Bradstreet's formal deployment matches the content of the poem – she performs the Masquerade with no critique. Some of the other poems in this chapter, however, do engage in a critique of these institutions.

In Bradstreet's poem, the reader is given the expected view of marriage (femininity as Masquerade) and this view is reinforced by the overall fulfillment of the expected meter[28]. While Bradstreet does disrupt her pentameter and her iambic feet in several ways, it is important to note that these are all considered acceptable substitutions and do not change the overall prosody of the poem. Very early in the poem, she establishes a five-foot line, and a series of rhymed couplets. This use of perfect end rhymes reinforces the domestic and earthy roles of woman within the institutions of poetry and the Law. The disruption comes in Bradstreet's final lines which follow a different metrical pattern. The final two lines are only eight syllables each, and the twenty-fifth line (the second to last line) breaks the iambic pattern:

FLESH of / thy FLESH, / BONE of / thy BONE

As I have noted in the above typeface, I read this tetrameter line as alternating trochaic and iambic feet. By breaking the expected line length, Bradstreet calls the reader's attention to the lines because they are different from the rest of the poem. Because the content of this line is an echo of the biblical verse (Genesis 2:23), Bradstreet's break of rhythm might be blamed on the rhythm of the original text. But even if the line's rhythm

[28] According to Wendy Martin, in her article "Anne Bradstreet's Poetry: A Study of Subversive Poetry," Puritan customs "defined marriage as a partnership for producing young Christians in which responsibilities were made explicit" (25). She argues that children were merely to continue the Christian faith and love relationships would have been seen as a threat to the relationship between the mother or father and God.

is similar to the biblical line, Bradstreet has rearranged her line to be different from the biblical line where Adam says, "This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Bradstreet's speaker/wife echoes back the words Adam speaks about Eve. This reflection of the male voice as her own voice underscores the lack of subjectivity of the female and illustrates her internalization of his possession of her. In addition, her final line, which returns to iambic rhythm, reinforces this possession, "I here, thou there, yet but both one." Her closing echo of the marriage vow and the biblical echoes of such unions reaffirm the speaker's belief that the two, when married, become one. While the narrator attempts to hold onto some autonomy with "I here, thou there," those attempts ultimately melt into the collapse of the two individuals into one. In Bradstreet's time period, this collapse had real consequences: the bride gave up her name, her voting rights, and her right to own property. In the conclusion of this poem, then, the speaker performs the expected femininity. The Masquerade is complete: through the bonds of marriage, she is a reflection of his desire.

By embodying the reflection of the husband's desire, the wife in this poem performs the Masquerade. This Masquerade is the performance of gender: it is femininity. The wife of Bradstreet's poem is part of the husband and, at least in this poem, is both relegated to the body and is melded with the husband to become the "flesh of thy flesh." Bradstreet's choice of couplets, of course, echoes these sentiments within the poem and draws parallel between the bonds of the couple and the strong exact rhymes of the couplet form. Therefore, while Bradstreet's poem and performance of the feminine reinforces the binary system of man/woman, master/servant, mind/body, it also manages to insert a sexualized body. This insertion is both remarkable and important in a

feminist reading of Bradstreet's poem. Yet, while Bradstreet resists her Puritan culture by sexualizing the female body, she also follows a longer tradition with aligns the female body with a sinful nature. It is this alignment, along with her use of conventional meters and metaphors that lead me to believe that this poem performs and reinforces a conventional femininity.

Alice Cary's "The Bridal Veil"

Nearly two hundred years later, poets like Alice Cary (1820-1871) no longer have to apologize for their poetry as Bradstreet was required to do, but they can instead celebrate it and can even find monetary support by writing it. Let us consider, then, one of Cary's poems concerning marriage. In her poem "The Bridal Veil," published in *Ballads, Lyrics, and Hymns* in 1866, she chooses to employ the voice of a bride even though unlike Bradstreet, she remained single her entire life. This suggests that even while marriage was not a personal choice for her, Cary writes about it because of the social significance of marriage within American culture. "The Bridal Veil" is addressed to the groom and begins:

> We're married, they say, and you think you have won me, --
> Well, take this white veil from my head, and look on me
> Here's matter to vex you, and matter to grieve you,
> Here's doubt to distrust you, and faith to believe you,
> I am all as you see, common earth, common dew;
> Be wary, and mould me to roses, not rue! (Cary 143)

The opening line immediately throws the validity of the institution of marriage into question with the phrase "they say." Cary's speaker is the bride, yet it is not *her* agreement to the marriage, her performative words "I do," that makes it contractual; it is the words from the pronoun "they" with an unclear referent of, most likely a local judge, witnesses, and/or clergyman that enacted the contract of marriage. Cary seems to understand, then, as does her bride speaker, the public nature of the marriage contract and the predicament of women within this system (which is controlled by men) and the laws made by those men. But this bride does not present herself as a victim of these laws, even while she is subject to them. She immediately undercuts the knowledge and authority of her husband (and therefore the law) in the next lines by contradicting what he thinks, that he "won" her, with her list of her own body, ideas, and advice on how he should treat her. She first commands that the wedding veil (the literal and figurative object that conceals subjectivity for the woman while creating "womanhood" and femininity) not only be lifted but also be removed. She seeks to show her full and complete self, and for him to then look at that self rather than the veiled woman. The speaker locates herself "here," under the veil, a place from which she speaks with "matter to vex" and "matter to grieve." This line (line three) is telling too of how Cary's bride understands the body into which she is relegated: vexing and grief causing. This grief might be because the groom has found that he did not "win" his bride, or it could be that Cary is making a statement about the sinfulness or problem with the flesh. It is difficult to discern here, but when in line four Cary suggests that this bride's body is both to distrust and to have faith in this union, the latter reading fits a bit better. The body is to

be distrusted; it might be both steadfast and unreliable. This is why the bride gives herself over to the groom to be molded: "to roses, not rue!" (line 6).

This first stanza then, begins with a misleading first line for today's readers. We would expect, in a contemporary poem, that this poem would problematize the institution of marriage and the woman's restrictions within that institution. However, Cary and her original readers were living in the nineteenth century, and her struggles with the "cult of true womanhood"[29] become evident in the way she performs the femininity of this bride. Cary's narrator attempts to wear the veil, to marry, and to become the expected nineteenth century woman.[30] Cary's poem, in its attempts to portray this struggle, also struggles with the expected literary style of the day: sentimentality.[31] This struggle is evident in several places within the poem. Cary seems to attempt to create a character that becomes the "Angel in the House," yet there are lines throughout the poem that, like the opening line, disrupt that image of angelic womanhood.

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[29] According to Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg in their book *Domestic Revolutions,* nineteenth century America saw several significant shifts in women's roles and marriage customs. Whereas eighteenth-century women had been considered devious, emotionally inconsistent, sexually voracious, and mentally and physically inferior, the early nineteenth century found the "cult of true womanhood" championing women as pious, submissive, pure, and domestic (55). As the concept of marriage moved from a financial transaction between families to a deliberate act of partnership between two people, some women became open about their anxiety over entering womanhood (what Mintz and Kellogg call "marriage trauma"), and "a growing number of women elected to remain single" (Mintz 56-57). So while most women became *femme coverts,* turning over their property and legal rights to their husbands when they married, a few, like Cary, chose to remain single and keep their property and rights.

[30] In her book *Poets in the Public Sphere,* Paula Bernat Bennett discusses the Romanticist roots of "literary sentimentality," and the differences between what was at stake for women in the nineteenth century and what men celebrated in such domesticity. She says, "Badly put, for men, female domesticity meant getting served; for women, serving" (22). She goes on to posit that when women writers tried to embrace "literary sentimentality" their poems "became riddled … with precisely the kinds of self-contradictions and inner divisions" that critics have blamed them for (27).

[31] Bennett (see note 31) speaks specifically of critics like Cheryl Walker and Yopie Prins who fault writers like Cary for being too sentimental. Bennett's book examines "individual women writers [that] resisted the pull of genteel conventions in order to construct subjectivities of their own" (27). She sees Cary as one of those writers. However, does that imply that a reaction is a "better" subjectivity than using the prevailing conventions? It seems that in her attempt to rescue writers like Cary, she has again prioritized one type of writing and writer over another, even though she claims to reject the criticisms of Walker and Prins for these same mistakes.

In the second stanza, Cary's narrator says:

> Ah! shake out the filmy thing, fold after fold,
>
> And see if you have me to keep and to hold,--
>
> Look close on my heart--see the worst of its sinning,--
>
> It is not yours to-day for the yesterday's winning--
>
> The past is not mine--I am too proud to borrow--
>
> You must grow to new heights if I love you to-morrow. (lines 7-12)

The narrator returns to the controlling metaphor of the poem: the veil. The bride says, "Ah! shake out the filmy thing, fold after fold" (line 7). This bridal veil, this "filmy thing," is metaphor for both the marriage ceremony and for the cover that becomes the Masquerade; the object becomes, then, an aged and "filmy" that has been passed down from woman to woman with the traditions that surround marriage rites. If we read the veil as a metaphor for the Masquerade, it becomes the symbol of the bride's femininity or gender performance. In that case, the veil hides the bride in the same way as the phallocentric system hides the woman. It becomes a symbol for the gender performance where femininity is a reflection of the groom's desire. Cary's adjective "filmy" moves our attention away from the pure and virginal associations of brides and weddings and toward a less reverential look at the avenue the bride must follow.

Yet this bride shows a mocking disdain for the veil (and/or the performance), even while Cary uses dominant rhymes and meters of the nineteenth century to have her bride speak her scorn. Marriage, like the bridal veil, is a tradition, but when a woman enters that tradition her subjectivity easily disappears into the tradition as an object of exchange in a kinship system. Cary's speaker, however, allows readers to watch as this

tradition consumes the woman who becomes the bride. By doing so, Cary draws attention to the process through which women move from possible subjects to objects.

In places, Cary also gives the bride an eighteenth-century feminine consciousness in relation to her physical body. In line nine, she equates the body with sin when she says, "Look close on my heart –see the worst of its sinning." The third stanza continues:

> We're married! I'm plighted to hold up your praises,
> As the turf at your feet does its handful of daises:
> That way lies my honor, -- my pathway of pride,
> But, mark you, if greener grass grow either side,
> I shall know it, and keeping in body with you,
> Shall walk in my spirit with feet on the dew! (lines 13-18)

When in line thirteen she says, "We're married! I'm plighted to hold up your praises," the narrator reinforces the religious traditions of wives becoming one with their husbands and being obligated to support their husbands regardless of their faults. But she most directly enacts and undercuts the nineteenth-century genteel when she says, "I have wings flattened down and hid under my veil" (line 20). At this turn, the bride seems to become the Angel, to accept the performance, which she seemed to be railing against in the opening line of the poem. Yet, the wings are "flattened down." This revision of the Angel suggests that the woman's ability to fly has been dampened – her wings have been clipped, so to speak, by the veil/Masquerade. This line also follows the second stanzas opening line "We're married!" (line 19) which echoes the opening line but leaves out the "they say" on which the opening line teeters. By this point in the poem, the speaker of

the poem is torn between the marriage and the "cult of true womanhood" that was expected to follow the wedding ceremony and her own freedom.

In the fourth stanza, this "Angel" goes on to defy her husband, not bow to him:

> We're married! Oh pray that our love do not fail!
> I have wings flattened down and hid under my veil:
> They are subtle as light--you can never undo them,
> And swift in their flight--you can never pursue them,
> And spite of all clasping, and spite of all bands,
> I can slip like a shadow, a dream, from your hands. (lines19-24)

When she discusses her wings, she tells him that he "can never undo them" (line 21) and that "in their flight – [he] can never pursue them" (line 22). While the speaker is a bride, she makes known her own abilities and the inabilities of the groom to hinder her. Cary ends this condemning stanza with, "I can slip like a shadow, a dream, from your hands" (line 24) thereby making a sort of ultimate warning to him of her capacity to move away from him at any moment. While Cary chooses to use the language and symbolism of Angel in the House as part of her bride's physicality, she skillfully calls into questions the cultural foundations surrounding that myth and the institution of marriage that lead to the veil and Masquerade. She requires her readers to contemplate that if woman is an angel, the freedom of those wings has been overlooked. All the bride – or any bride – needs do is to use them, but instead, she must be molded by her husband.

This molding occurs in the final stanza where Cary seems to reassure readers that all is well with the femininity of the bride. She tells the groom:

> Nay, call me not cruel, and fear not to take me

I am yours for my life-time, to be what you make me, --

To wear my white veil for a sign, or a cover,

As you shall be proven my lord, or my lover;

A cover for peace that is dead, or a token

Of bliss that can never be written or spoken. (Cary 144)

In these final lines, the bride decides that she is willing to wear the veil, to become what the groom wants to see and become his "wife." Cary's bride decides to perform the Masquerade (femininity) even as she questions that Masquerade and fervor by showing her ability to hold onto her womanliness. She holds onto the ambivalence about her position under the veil, "a cover for peace that is dead" (line29) or as "a token / of bliss that can never be written or spoken" (lines 29 and 30).

With this ambivalence, Cary creates a bride that struggles to make sense of marriage, gender performance, and the place of women in American culture. She is aware that she is a woman beneath the veil, but she agrees to wear the veil and to play the role. This revision is highlighted in the formal use of stanzas, meter, rhyme, and consonance in the poem. While Finch tells us that no canonical poets before the twentieth century completely broke the iambic pentameter line, this poem of Cary's does so. That is not to argue that Cary's poetry overall resisted the iambic pentameter line, but this example shows that occasionally some of her individual poems did break away from it. In addition, Finch also notes that the dactyl was one of the dominant nineteenth-century meters and "Bridal Veil" is most easily be read as using dactyls as the dominant foot. Cary's poem is thirty Alexandrine (twelve syllable) lines broken into five sestets. Each stanza contains three couplets, which, like Bradstreet's couplets, reinforces the

sense of the coupling of marriage between two people. The poem's meter might be read as using a regular, five, strong-stress line consisting of either an iamb and three anapests with an extra syllable at the end or as three dactyls and a trochee with an extra syllable at the beginning:

We're MAR / ried, they SAY, / and you THINK / you have WON / me –

or

We're / MARried, they / SAY, and you / THINK you have / WON me –

I prefer the first reading for several reasons. The opening iamb gives the reader a sense of security with the line and the extra syllable at the end is easily "forgiven" as an additional (and unimportant) unstressed syllable. However, because the dactyl was also one of the dominant feet of the day, it may be that Cary's audience would have preferred the "forgiven" unstressed syllable to be the beginning syllable. As was true with Bradstreet's poem, reading this metric code as part of the historical background of the poem suggests that either Cary rejected (in the first line above) or used (in the second line above) the dominant literary-historical code of her day.[32] Because the content of the poem seems to undercut the traditions of the day, it follows that the lines be broken this way so that they can be read as a rejection of both of the meters of the day: the iambic and the dactylic.

But hers is not a complete rejection of formal features; of the five poems in this chapter, Cary employs more traditional poetic features than any other. She uses regular stanzas, giving the reader a predictable set of breaks for pause and reflection. She

[32] In *The Body of Poetry,* Finch reminds us, "The metrical code is best understood as a literary-historical rather than a prosodic argument" (146).

employs exact repetition with overt placement in her three lines (1, 13, and 19) which begin "We're married." This again gives the reader a signpost at the beginning of three of the stanzas as well as reminder of the importance of that declaration to the meaning of the poem. The lines are also tightly woven together with the use of internal rhymes (lines 10, 21, and 22) and consonance (the y's in line 10, the f's in line 14, and the p's in line 15). These techniques have a similar function to the use of the couplet: the "marriage" of sounds pulls the words and lines into a kind of reflective pattern. For example, when reading "if greener grass grow either side" (line 16), we group the "g" sounds together and consider them as not only each individual word but also as a kind of working composite. This pattern, I posit, is similar to Irigaray's idea of mimicry: sounds echo or reflect back to previous sounds. This might also explain the unstressed, rhyming syllables at the end. This type of rhyme was once called a "feminine" rhyme because the rhyme fell on the "weaker" unstressed syllable. Cary ends all but seven of her lines with an unstressed rhyming syllable. Because the pattern is so regular in this poem, Cary gives the poem an overall "feminine" rhyming pattern. Because it is the bride who speaks, Cary's use of "feminine" rhymes adds yet another layer to the gender performance of the poem: the poem follows a "feminine" rhyme scheme.

This poem, with its rejection of the iamb and possible rejection of the dactyl and with its "feminine" rhyming pattern, both rejects and accepts the bride as a Masquerade and the woman as a veiled object. Her bride consciously considers (and she even confronts her spouse with) the lifetime commitment to the gender performance and to the "lord" that the groom will become. The veiling of the bride and the Masquerade of femininity must take place for this transformation to happen. While Cary couches these

realities in formal lyrics and in a compliant conclusion, she has nevertheless confronted her readers with the performance of a woman who thinks about her choices. Avoiding the image of a naïve blushing bride, Cary revises the "true woman" of the nineteenth century by exposing gender as a performance.

Marianne Moore's "Marriage"

The third poem I will discuss is Marianne Moore's (1887-1972) "Marriage," published in *Manikin* in 1923. Moore, like Cary, chose never to marry, and according to her lines in the poem "Marriage," this lifetime singleness was quite a feat, as marriage requires "all one's criminal ingenuity / to avoid!" (lines 16-17). Moore's speaker, unlike Cary's, holds an open contempt for the marriage market, and her poem seems to question the institution more than any of the other four poems considered in this chapter. Yet, the ingenuity (to stay single) that she describes is "criminal" which positions it outside of the law. Moore seems to understand the nature of the marriage economy, and is willing to interrogate it openly. To achieve this interrogation without alienating her audience, she employs a complicated play between the narrative message of the poem and the voices of the poem by incorporating extensive footnotes. "Marriage" is her longest and most heavily footnoted poem (forty-one notes in total), so the reader has to flip pages to figure out who said what. The poem utilizes multiple, unnamed voices including numerous quotations that are only identified in the notes. In the first note in the 1935 version of "Marriage" (this note does not appear in the 1925 publication in *Observations*[33]),

[33] The two versions are different in several ways. Some minor punctuation changes were made, and occasionally a few words were removed and line breaks changed in Moore's 1935 revision. Moore also annotates more often and with more detail: frequently adding necessary bibliographic information. Therefore, I am reading the 1935 version of the poem. Yet, she also excluded some of her notes in the

Moore's gives her explanation of this 286-line poem's strange collage of ideas and voices: "Statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly" (*Collected Poems* 271). In this note, Moore suggests that the work is a found poem of sorts including quotes "arranged" and sculpted into an interrogation of the marriage "enterprise" (line 2).

"Marriage" opens with an eight-line clause in which Moore seems to employ a third person voice that interrogates the institution of marriage:

> This institution,
> perhaps one should say enterprise
> out of respect for which
> one says one need not change one's mind
> about a thing one has believed in,
> requiring public promises
> of one's intention
> to fulfill a private obligation: (*Complete Poems* 66)

In these opening lines, marriage is a distant institution and has little or no relationship to the speaker of the poem. Moore's controlled opening voice sounds similar to paragraphs from an anthropology book like *The Elementary Structures of Kinship,* and her speaker points out the public/private tensions apparent in the public wedding ceremony and the legal documents that define the private relationship between two people. With such an anthropological tone, we are forced to ask, who is this speaker? Lines such as three and

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1935 revision that have proved helpful in my reading. In those cases, I have chosen to discuss notes from the 1925 version in *Observations*, and I will note when I am including text from that volume.

four, in fact, suggest that Moore has deliberately removed her speaker. Her repeated use of "one" overemphasizes the third person voice, particularly in line four when she uses "one" three times in a single line. The speaker may be read as a jilted lover who tries so hard to speak without emotional attachment that s/he overplays the third person voice and draws our attention to it. This repetition not only draws our attention to her deliberate use of third person, it also affects both an androgynous voice and a voice emotionally distant (although it is a constructed distance) from the poet's subject matter: marriage. Moore utilizes business-like terms, such as "institution," "enterprise," "intention," and "obligation," throughout this section, and she removes all connection of marriage to love matches or "happily ever after" tales, thereby revealing the marriage institution as a market phenomenon. Moore's speaker, then, becomes a sort of market analyst rather than an involved participant. In addition, Moore's attempts to remain uninvolved are meant to give the poem a clinical, logical, and sterile ambiance.

Moore, however, abruptly changes course in lines nine and ten: "I wonder what Adam and Eve / think of it by this time." Here she inserts a first person narrator, a reference to temporal movement, and an allusion to the Judeo-Christian first couple: Adam and Eve. She moves readers away from the previous all-business assurances and toward a contemplating exploration of the concept of marriage over ages of time. With the insertion of Adam and Eve, she also assures readers of an interrogation of the history of heterosexuality, which is, of course, hopelessly embedded in the history of marriage. Remarkably, within only ten lines of this long poem, Moore employs what we can read as

two voices.[34] The first voice is an androgynous speaker that leans toward what would have been considered prototypical masculinity in the 1920s: a man conducting business. The second is a more spiritual and less distant "I" that readers tend to associate, for better or worse, with Moore herself. Yet even the second voice remains androgynous. Nothing in this poem suggests an expected femininity: there are no dove metaphors or undying devotions to husbands. Instead this speaker continues the scientific tone with which the poem opens. It is this second speaker, androgynous and only leaning toward feminine because the poet is female, who introduces the myriad quotes and allusions that will come. Because the clinical tone might be read as a "masculine" performance, readers are left to wonder about the gender performances of this poem. How do we read the gender(s) of the speaker(s)? Even if we associate the speaker with Moore herself, according to the footnotes, of the forty-one quotations in the poem and its notes, only four of the these quotes are from women. The predominantly male voices Moore cites in her notes were many of the dominant voices of poetry, science, literature, philosophy, religion, and even the domestic sphere in American (and western European) culture. For Moore, these voices were the creators and protectors of the institution of marriage and the institution of poetry. While all of this might suggest a "masculine" voice for this poem, I posit instead that Moore uses these quotations from men and the few from women to complicate gender. Moore is not attempting to reinforce the male/female or masculine/feminine binaries; she is indeed problematizing gender all together.

[34] It is, of course, possible to read the first eight lines as first person as well, although we would then need to consider why a first person voice would choose the overuse of the pronoun "one."

Moore's gender performance, then, is purposefully complicated. Her speakers play as many roles as they can: one embodies the dead white men that came before her, others argue vehemently against them, and one provides a narrator's voice that is aloof and seemingly unmoved. She accomplishes this balancing act with quotations, footnotes, and her elaborate narrative structure (voices within voices within a framework structure). Moore chooses not to follow the traditions of either her foremothers or forefathers of poetry. She does not perform the femininity expected of her, yet she does not simply reproduce a masculine performance either. Instead, she appropriates the masculine voice and exposes the problems that the heterosexual compulsion creates. Because employment of these male voices becomes nearly incomprehensible by the end of the poem, we read the masculine voices as bordering on absurd with their grandiose statements and self-importance:

> which says: "I have encountered it
> among those unpretentious
> proteges of wisdom,
> where seeming to parade
> as the debater and the Roman,
> the statesmenship
> of an archaic Daniel Webster
> persists to their simplicity of temper
> as the essence of the matter:
>
> 'Liberty and union

now and forever';

the Book on the writing table;

the hand in the breast pocket." (*Collected Poems* 69-70)

This absurdity creates the foundation for Moore to present a critique of masculinity. While Moore may as I will show in the following paragraphs appropriate a masculine performance to express her desire for woman, the poem's overall effect exposes readers to a ridiculed and ultimately ineffectual masculinity. But it is not only masculinity that she critiques; Moore's performance of femininity also reveals her dissatisfaction with gendered performances. When she chooses to employ femininity as a performance, she exposes and critiques the Masquerade.

Moore's poem moves through an interrogation of marriage by using Adam and Eve as an example of a wedded couple. After her opening comments and the introduction of all of Moore's doubts about human knowledge, she ends her overture with the famous lines: "Psychology which explains everything / explains nothing / and we are still in doubt" (lines 18-20). From this doubt, the narrator turns to a discussion of the beauty of Eve and Adam[35] and attempts to perform the traditional roles of feminine and masculine to explain their attraction to each other.

[35] Her Eve is more beautiful than her Adam. According to Bergman, "Marriage" reveals Moore's preference or more "intense response" to women over men (249). Adam is beautiful "also" – almost dismissively, or as an afterthought to Eve whose beauty eclipses his. In addition, Adam is described as "something feline, / something colubrine," and this, again, according to Bergman suggests that Moore's belief that it is man that is snake and catlike, not women. He suggests Moore's sexual attraction for Bryher contribute this glorification of Eve and explains Moore's comments that marriage requires "criminal ingenuity / to avoid!" (250). See David Bergman, "Marianne Moore and the Problem of "Marriage"," *American Literature* 60.2 (1988).

Eve's beauty is both traditionally feminine and progressive: she is "so handsome / she gave me a start" (lines 23-24), and she is "able to write simultaneously / in three languages – / English, German and French / and talk in the meantime" (lines 25-28). In these lines, Moore gives readers Eve's expected feminine performance of a prized commodity, but the speaker also attaches some unexpected values to that beauty: she is "handsome," she writes and speaks in three languages, and she states that she "should like to be alone" (line 31). The speaker then bemoans the fact that the experience of this kind of beauty, of a more complicated feminine subject, "tears one to pieces" (line 39) and "is poison" (line 41). The speaker contemplates that a woman can only be the product of a thought experiment as it "can never be more / than an interesting possibility" (lines 45-46). Moore's insights on the pain and unlikelihood of her thought experiment reveal that she understands the expected role of women as exchange value, not as having subjectivity. This complaint exposes the Masquerade as a performance that requires that woman cannot be alone and that the only proper performance for her is the reflection of the male desire.

If the speaker is feminine, Moore's speaker also exhibits a homosexual desire for Eve when she describes the possibility of a female subject. According to the footnotes, the speaker quotes Puritan devotional writer Richard Baxter (1651-1691) from "The Saints' Everlasting Rest; Lippincott 1909":

> "that strange paradise
> unlike flesh, gold, or stately buildings
> the choicest piece of my life:
> heart rising,

in its estate of peace

as a boat rises

with the rising of the water;" (lines 48-54)

The quote from a male voice and the adoration for Eve in these lines seems to reinforce Moore's masculine performance because she inhabits the patriarchal objectification of Eve. However, if we can conceive of a feminine performance that appropriates this masculine voice, Moore has successfully troubled the gendered performances and has called into question our associations of masculinity and femininity. This also reminds readers of the problems caused by both the history of heterosexual compulsion and the history of marriage. By employing an androgynous speaker, Moore consistently forces us to consider how marriage has constricted gender roles and sexualities. Moore then moves to a discussion of Adam who "has beauty also" (line 60) because he is the center of everything: "to whom, from whom, / without whom nothing – Adam" (lines 62-63). She uses 88 lines of quotations to describe Adam, and she both undercuts him and endows him. Adam "stumbles over marriage" (line 123) and is "unfathered by a woman" (line 128). While she calls him beautiful, he is bumbling. And because he had no mother, he has no lack (psychoanalytically speaking) and his reasons for marriage are "as a fine art, as an experiment, / a duty or as merely recreation" (lines 155 and 156). Adam, in Moore's summation, is an idiot, and (of course?) he is the ultimate patriarch. Again, Moore uncovers the problem of the gender performance: Adam is resigned to masculinity just as Eve is to femininity.

For my study of gender performance, the most informative section of the poem is the series of "he says," "she says" comments that give this poem several gender performances. In this section, Moore steps into a wide range of gendered voices. Although the conversation begins with Adam, I would like to begin with Eve and Moore's uses of quotations because Moore allows Eve to be expressed with a variety of gender performances. In Eve's first answer to Adam's accusation of women's "poison":

> She says, "Men are monopolists
> of 'stars, garters, buttons
> and other shining baubles'
> unfit to be the guardians
> of another person's happiness." (*Complete Poems* 67)

The quote, according to Moore's notes, is from Miss M. Carey Thomas's address at Mount Holyoke, 1921. In the longer quote given in the notes, Miss Thomas accuses men of preserving themselves through meaningless trinkets: "stately funerals, splendid monuments, memorial statues, memberships in academies, medals, titles, [and] honorary degrees" as means of recognizing "fellow-craftsmen" (*Complete Poems* 272). By using a quotation and then annotating it, Moore focuses our attention on Eve's words as a performance. This performance, however, does not follow the expected Masquerade but rather this quote reveals Eve's (and Thomas') knowledge of that Masquerade. Men's collecting of trinkets, according to Eve, makes them unfit to play the culturally expected role of husband who guards his spouse. If we add women to the list of trinkets that men collect, we see that men control the exchange of women as they do every other commodity. And in this economy, they are unfit to be "head of household." They do not

understand how to take care of or guard their property when that property is an ontological being because they are too fixated on objects to understand the happiness of that person. So while Eve has a history of a particular gender performance[36] in our culture, and while Thomas is given a title that becomes a gender performance (Miss), Moore complicates an easy reading of both women by revealing the woman hidden by the Masquerade. Her revelation of the inappropriateness of the husband's role in the marriage institution calls attention to "another person's unhappiness" and forces readers to consider the possibility that it is this unhappiness that "femininity" is based upon. If this gender performance is based on the unhappiness of the Masquerade, then the implications of the note for line 109 comes to the forefront:

> "He dares not clap his hands
> to make it go on
> lest it should fly off;
> if he does nothing, it will sleep;
> if he cries out, it will not understand." (lines 109-113)

According to Moore's note for line 109 in the 1925 collection, *Observations*, in his work "Feminine Influence on the poets" (1910), Edward Thomas says:

> To us the central experience is everything – the strong unhappy king, looking out of the prison window and seeing the golden-haired maiden in rich attire trimmed with pearls, rubies, emeralds and sapphires, a chaplet

[36] Eve is the quintessential Masquerade. According to the myth, she is created from Adam by God to become his wife/helpmate. She is the embodiment too of the connection of women to the body because it is she that takes from the tree of knowledge revealing their (Adam and Eve's) nakedness to them. It is also this "sin" that brings the pain of childbirth on her as punishment. In addition, it is the story of Eve that perpetuates the patriarchal structure of Christian societies.

> of red, white and blue feathers on her head, a heart-shaped ruby on a chain of fine gold hanging over her white throat, her dress looped up carelessly to walk in that fresh morning of nightingales in the new-leaved thickets – her little dog with his bells at her side. (*Observations* 103)

Moore's note here suggests that it is the gendered performance (hair color, jewels, and clothing) that the unhappy king sees as his savior. The muse (or the woman) that will save him from his prison is silent. The king sees only the Masquerade. This might be the beauty of the silence of women that Moore speaks of when she says in the note to line 202, "silence of women … poetry set to music" (*Collected Poems* 272).

While all of Moore's quotations within Adam's speeches are quotations attributed to men, Eve's speeches contain quotations from both women and men. Moore uses direct dialogue for both speakers, and in addition, she weaves the words of others into the words of the narrator, Adam, and Eve. This suggests two things about Moore's portrayal of the masculine and the feminine in this poem. While Moore's portrayal of Adam is fixed in male voices, Eve is allowed more flexibility to slide between male and female voices: she is allowed to cross-dress. Eve's voice, the expected feminine, speaks through many quotations that are attributed to men in Moore's notes. Therefore, Moore allows her feminine voice (Eve) to move between quotations from male and female speakers, but the masculine voice (Adam) only quotes male speakers. Meanwhile, the narrator continues throughout the poem to perform androgyny. S/he finds, in the end, that s/he cannot identify with Eve or with Adam. S/he says:

> What can one do for them—
>
> these savages

condemned to disaffect

all those who are not visionaries

alert to undertake the silly task

of making people noble? (lines 249-254)

S/he calls Adam and Eve "savages" that marriage attempts to make "noble," but while culture tells its members that marriage will legitimize them or to at least make them noble savages, Moore's narrator suggests that this is "silly." S/he continues employing quotations through the end of the poem, but ends on an image of orator Daniel Webster with "the book on the writing-table; / the hand in the breast-pocket" (lines 292-293) and Webster's quote: "Liberty and union / now and forever;" (lines 290-291). These final two lines contain two series of juxtapositions that are similar to Moore's juxtaposition of Adam and Eve. The comparisons echo the earlier lines where the narrator discusses "that striking grasp of opposites" (line 264) that marriage attempts to include into a whole. Moore's method seems to be to employ the androgynous speaker to reveal and dismantle the fiction of the "two becoming one" in marriage. She does not reconcile the apparent gulf she sees between liberty and union, and she does not ever fix the narrator into a gender role. Moore's insistence on androgyny in the narrator and her allowance of Eve's movement between male and female voices situates Moore's characters outside the prescribed gender norms – even those of the "progressive" 1920s. In using these performances to discuss the institution of marriage, she complicates not only marriage, but also the way men and women in America relate to that institution.

A reading of the formal features of this poem supports Moore's complications of marriage and gender. Moore uses the newly-popular free verse of her time period, and she forsakes all regular rhyme and meter. This makes her very much like Bradstreet and Cary because she writes within the style of her day, but it also makes her poem difficult to decipher in terms of poetic formalism. Save a few odd iambic lines, the poem scans without any regular meter. It may be that this is yet another thumbing of the nose of Moore's toward the institution of marriage, but that seems difficult to substantiate because she is actually using the dominant meter (or lack thereof) of the day: free verse. What seems more telling, however, is the lack of rhymes, internal or otherwise or stanza breaks. Again, because of the dominance of unrhymed poetry in the 1920s, it is difficult to be certain, yet this lack of pairings or groupings (in the case of stanza breaks) suggests that those would be unnatural or forced unions – like marriage. Moore's contempt in this poem for obligatory performances suggests a turn, at least for twentieth century women, away from the Masquerade of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. However, her use of the traditional representatives of masculinity and femininity, Adam and Eve, and her alignment with the poetic trends of the day seems to make such a clear resistance reading problematic. But in "Marriage," Moore employs free verse and Adam and Eve as traditional masculinity and femininity to reveal the problem of those performances and the constraints inherent in them. Moore's poem suggests that if masculinity and femininity are acknowledged as performances then the possibilities of multiplicities of gender will begin. Moore's poem, then, becomes performative because it intentionally uses gendered performances to make changes in the way readers understand those performances.

Lorine Niedecker's "I Married"

Born in Wisconsin, Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) published relatively little until the last few years of her life. She is the least "known" poet in this chapter, but critics have recently given her more attention. No matter how little her name is known, she wrote prolifically. "I Married" was written in 1967, and was published in *Origins* in 1968 (Niedecker 433). Like most of her poems, it was published in book form after her death.[37] Much of Niedecker's work is sharp and condensed almost like haiku. Her poetry is personal, yet it contains awareness of its political and social surroundings.

This haiku-type form is evident in "I Married," as is her attraction to the political climate of 1967 America. The poem, using a first person voice, tells of a woman who marries in an attempt to find refuge from the ills of the world. The poem begins:

I married

in the world's black night
for warmth
if not repose.
At the close –
someone.

I hid with him

[37] See Jenny Penberthy's thorough work *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002). Penberthy painstakingly notes the publication history of most of Niedecker's body of work. According to Penberthy, Niedecker's early poems were partly object-based, partly abstract-based and surreal (4), and partly folk and political (5) until the 1950s when she found her own poetics fusing her influences with her own poetic force (7).

from the long range guns.

We lay leg

in the cupboard, head

in closet. (Niedecker 228)

Niedecker fashions a narrator keenly aware of the darkness of the world during the 1960s: in the "long range guns" (line 8), readers imagine the Cuban missile crisis, an assassinated American President, and a raging and controversial Vietnam conflict. The married couple's attempts to hide from these atrocities are comically futile and corpse-like: "leg / in the cupboard, head / in closet" (lines 9-11). This futility is reinforced throughout the poem, which opens with the bleak idea that the world's night is "black" (line 2), and the speaker has married "for warmth / if not repose" (lines 3-4) in a contrast to that blackness. She believes that marriage, despite the horrors of the world, offers some alternative to that bleak post-atomic, cold-war chill, even if the attempts to find shelter from the horror is a absurd.

Niedecker then unravels even that small ray of hope with the second half of the poem:

A slit of light

at no bird dawn—

Untaught

I thought

he drank

too much.

I say

I married

and lived unburied.

I thought— (Niedecker 228)

In the desolate "no bird dawn" (line 13), we are left with little else to imagine than a nuclear wasteland with only a "slit of light" (line 12). But even that single light becomes deadly as she describes it as a "slit" rather than a ray or beam which not only minimizes the light, it also sexualizes it as feminine. Then she gives us the damaging blow to the safety and security that marriage had promised her: "he drank / too much" (lines 16-17). The husband becomes dangerous too, like the guns, the no bird dawn, and the world's black night. The final lines suggest several disturbing possibilities. One of those possibilities is that the speaker married, and lived a life outside of the mire of human existence. But the final line "I thought" (line 21) sheds doubt on that "unburied" (line 20) or free life, leaving readers with a sense of despair or of the undead.[38] In this reading, the "I thought" could be an affirmation of the conscious abilities of the speaker, or it might be an element of doubt cast over the reality of her life.[39] In addition, the "I

[38] Another possible reading of the "unburied," as has been suggested by Elizabeth Willis in her article "Possessing Possession," is a type of gothic or un-dead life, where the speaker is neither alive nor dead but a zombie-like character. See "Possessing Possession: Lorine Niedecker, Folk, and the Allegory of Making," *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics* 9 (2001) Available: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/niedecker/willi.html9.

[39] Again, Willis (see note 38) reads this line as such:

> The whole [poem] is turned around one last time with the final line "I thought," introducing the possibility that the entire poem may be read as a fiction, or merely attributable to subjective emotional processing, or even as the product of paranoia. The accuracy of the poem's content is called into question by pointing to the slippery nature of reality and consciousness itself, and so

thought" that concludes this poem must be considered much as we considered Cary's "they say." It sheds light on the tension between the woman and the institution in which she finds herself: marriage.

Yet the woman in "I married" is looking for personal comfort and for a culture in which she might feel comfort. She is looking for a shelter from the dangers (like the atomic bomb) that American culture brought on itself. Rather than find this comfort, she is at odds with the entire world around her: her culture, her country, her husband, and her own life. The formal features of the poem, indeed, reinforce this imbalance between the speaker and her culture. She repeats the title "I married" twice in the poem, both times in the three-syllable line that starts and ends the poem's three-line groupings. This repetition, especially in a poem of this succinctness, resonates so loudly that the line comes to take on a nearly desperate tone in its final usage, as if the speaker is both urgent to make readers understand the importance of the marriage and is abusing herself with the self-reminder of the marriage.

This wife married to avoid aloneness or so, that at the end, "someone" (line 6) would be there. But the final line casts that contemplative doubt on this bond. Readers are left doubting the bond, the institution, and narrator's relationship to her marriage. It is this ambivalence between a wife's life and her culture that appears in the construction of the woman in the poem "I married." Using spare language, this speaker captures the fear of destruction prevalent in Niedecker's culture. The short, sixteen-line poem uses no

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the claustrophobic physical space of the poem can be explained as a phantasm, a problem of perspective or of mind, of being too self-absorbed—a quality that would grate against her midwestern pragmatism as well as her objectivist poetics.

See "Possessing Possession: Lorine Niedecker, Folk, and the Allegory of Making," *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics* 9 (2001) Available: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/niedecker/willi.html9.

more than three stresses per line. The poem seems to echo Japanese syllabic poetry, but the syllable counts are not regular. The opening and closing three lines approach haiku form with 3 / 5 / 2 syllables, but the loss of the extra syllable in each show that she is not actually writing haiku. She does, however, employ several other techniques that enhance this reading of her poem. She employs end-rhyming couplets, like Cary and Bradstreet, in an attempt to reinforce poetic and marriage traditions. But Niedecker's end-rhymes are much different from Bradstreet's or Cary's. First, she only uses three sets of couplets in this entire poem. But also, the lines that rhyme are indented or offset, we might say, from the other lines of the poem as if to draw reader's attention to the rhyme and to the difference between the rhyming and unrhymed lines. So even if Niedecker's speaker is worn down by, or desperate in, the marriage, she reinforces the marriage with two sets of perfect end- rhymed lines that are indented from the margin. The first set, lines four and five, say, "if not repose, / at the close—." Within their context, the lines explain why the speaker married: so that she might find warmth, relief, and to be with someone at the end of her life. Yet, if we read them out of their context, the lines suggest another, nearly opposite, meaning: that there will be no rest at the end. Niedecker masterfully inserts the negative of her message within the message itself and then highlights that negative with the use of the perfect end rhyme. By the end of the poem, this marriage is openly in question, and the second set of rhymed lines both reinforces and calls into question that message. She says, "I married / and lived unburied." The lines alone suggest that the marriage freed her, that she was able to shed any Masquerade and live "unburied" by it. However, the follow closing line of the poem again crosses this idea the way that the "they say" did in Cary's poem. Niedecker says, "I thought—" closing the poem with an

uncertainty and a suggestion that maybe she was not as unburied as she thought she was or that she believed in the false promise of freedom in marriage.

This formal tension in the poem reinforces the tension Niedecker sets up in the speaker's relationship to her culture and her husband, and the poetic language in this poem reveals the poet's attempt to disrupt the social norms of marriage in the 1960s. While culture claimed to be demolishing the norms of marriage and opening into freedom of sexual relationships, women still married to find safety or comfort and to legitimize themselves within the culture. But this speaker, unlike any of the speakers of the previous three poems, has agency. She marries, hides, says, and thinks (even if wrongly). This sets Niedecker's wife/bride apart from the others. Even so, several of Niedecker's choices, like the use of the prevailing free verse of her time period, undercut this agency. In the end, Niedecker presents us with a woman that is unknown. If she is attempting to lift the veil, to move beyond the Masquerade, she seems to find that she doesn't know what is beneath or beyond that performance. This opening, or envelope, is suggested by several of the formal and spatial features of the poem as well as the content. The speaker uses concepts like "closet," "cupboard," "black night," and "unburied" to suggest vessels or openings that could be filled. Niedecker reinforces this concept with the use of white space on the page, dashes, and an ellipsis. By indenting six of her lines without stanza breaks before or after, she creates three pockets of white space. The reader is forced to consider why the space is there and why she did not fill it with the indented lines. Finally, the closing line of the poem ends with a dash, which reads as an opening to a new thought that does not get written in the poem. We know that the speaker thinks and that her thinking seems to be contrary to living unburied. Yet, we are not told what she

thinks. These three openings seem to me to be the most important parts of the poem. For if Niedecker understands that gender is a Masquerade, she still does not (and as Irigaray has suggested, none of us do) know what woman is. Niedecker's poem, like Moore's and Cary's, reveals the Masquerade as a performance. This makes her poem performative. While she does not prescribe woman for us, she exposes the Masquerade for us.

June Jordan's "The Wedding"

The final poem that I will discuss in this chapter is authored by June Jordan (1936-2002), and it deals with the marriage topic in a way that the other four do not: Jordan intentionally brings our attention to the race and class of the characters within her story. Of course, race and class are present in the other four poems as well, but as those poets treat race and class as invisible, readers (especially white, middle-class readers) are likely to imagine white, middle-class characters and values. But Jordan often argued that the personal could not be separated from the political, and she constructs her characters so that readers are required to consider the under-represented groups of people within American culture.[40] Her book *Things That I Do in the Dark* (1977) contains "The Wedding" and explores many of Jordan's connections between the personal and the political.[41] The poem appears in the second section of the book "Directed by Desire," and it is dated as written in 1967, the same year as Niedecker's poem "I married."

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[40] In her foreword to *Haruko Love Poems* (1994), in which Jordan reprints the two poems, Adrienne Rich asked this question in response to her reading of the collection, "We are left with the question, Why should feelings of love appear politically ridiculous, why would we ever assume that private love can have no public meaning, or must inevitably be "driven back?" June Jordan's love poems make clear that fragmentation and self-denial are impediments both to love and to revolutionary life." (Rich x)

[41] I am hesitant to categorize this poem as either political or personal as it seems to straddle those conventions. Yet, from its title, many would categorize it as personal or one of her love poems. Peter

"The Wedding" is a short, narrative poem told in a third-person voice and tells a story of the wedding ceremony of Tyrone and Dizzella. Because it is told in third person, the performance is slightly different than the four poems I have discussed thus far. However, like Moore's "Marriage," Jordan's poem contains male and female characters or performances. Even with the powerful social commentary about the problems of marriage for working-class, African-American young people, Jordan's poem falls short of performative because the characters, and particularly Dizzella, perform the expected gender roles and nothing in Jordan's poem suggests a mimicry of those performances.

Jordan opens the poem by giving readers a temporal immediacy and a sense of who has and who does not have agency in the story. Jordan also presents us with quite a bit of additional information about Tyrone and Dizzella even before she tells us the bride's name. She says:

> Tyrone married her this afternoon
> and smiling as he took the aisle
> and her slightly rough hand. (Jordan 46)

We learn that Tyrone was smiling, if not happy, to participate in the marriage, that they had some form of ceremony that included a church aisle (this will be confirmed later in the poem), and that the bride has had to work with her hands thus making them "slightly rough" (line 3). Tyrone's apparent happiness is understandable, as his acquisition of Dizzella means that he has obtained her value. Their wedding ceremony is part of the

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Erickson's article "The Love Poetry of June Jordan" seems to ignore the possibility that many of her poems resist single categories. He claims that in her love poetry, "the poet indulges her erotic longing" by "setting aside political concerns" (223). While undoubtedly Erickson's hope is to draw attention to the more erotic side of Jordan poetry, he does so at the expense of the political capabilities of that same poetry.

contract, and in this ceremony rests the implication that Austin discusses as the social ritual necessary for their vows to become performatives: when they pronounce the words "I do," each will be changed into the bride and groom and all of the roles expected of those players will be expected of them. Her "rough" hands highlight Dizzella's working-class background, but this line does more than foreground her class situation. Dizzella's ability to work makes her more valuable in the home, and this mention of her hands reminds us of the housework that she will probably be performing for Tyrone. In this light, Tyrone's smile might seem more like one from the fabled canary-eating cat than from a nervous groom, and it reminds us of how much the groom gains in the marriage.

In the following lines, Jordan describes Dizzella and the ceremony to exchange vow, but it is important to note that there is no giving away of the bride or prayer. While much of this poem upholds the traditions of marriage, Jordan is careful to build a modern ceremony in which religion and parents play background roles. But Jordan has not dismissed these institutions all together: a minister still performs the ceremony. Jordan continues:

> Dizzella listened to the minister
> staring at his wrist and twice
> forgetting her name:
> Do you promise to obey?
> Will you honor humility and love
> as poor as you are? (Jordan 46)

Here we learn, not only her name, but also that the male minister does not remember her name. This suggests that he is either Tyrone's minister or that he is unknown to both Tyrone and Dizzella. It seems likely that this may be Tyrone's church and minister because Tyrone's smiling hints that his comfort level is higher than hers, and if this is his church, Dizzella is indeed, as Lévi-Strauss suggested, cementing the relationship between men. In this case, she strengthens the bond between Tyrone and the minister by giving them cause to come together for this ceremony. By her entrance into this marriage, Dizzella enters Tyrone's life and church and becomes Tyrone's property. Even her vows suggest a traditional patriarchal relationship between husband and wife: she promises to "obey," to "honor humility," and to "love." While readers probably expect the patriarchal vows, we may not expect the "as poor as you are" that Jordan adds to stress the class and cultural implications of this marriage. This addition of class hardships to the already agency-less performance of the Masquerade that Dizzella must perform to enter the marriage, makes her story more disturbing. Yet, the poem does not seem to offer any alternatives for Dizzella. She is a reflection of Tyrone's desire.

Dizzella's Masquerade is made poignant by Jordan's choice to give her no action other than to listen. Tyrone marries her, and Tyrone takes her hand. Dizzella does not even respond to the questions posed to her; she does not even say, "I do." The one action she might carry out is left ambiguous by Jordan's syntax. In line twelve someone trembles, although it might be read as either Tyrone or Dizzella. Jordan follows this up:

> Tyrone stood small but next
> to her person
> trembling. Tyrone stood

straight and bony

black alone with one key

in his pocket (Jordan 46)

Jordan uses these lines to develop Tyrone's character, not Dizzella's. He is small, straight, bony, black, and alone. His aloneness is important to the overall message of Jordan's poem because it creates sympathy for him and creates an understanding for his desire to gain Dizzella (and fight off the loneliness) in this ceremony. Other than the minister, Jordan does not give Tyrone any kinship system, family or otherwise. He is alone in his endeavor to marry Dizzella. But, while Tyrone is alone in his endeavor and we may feel some sense of pity or sympathy, Jordan does give him agency. He marries, smiles, and stands. In addition, he has one key in his pocket. This is much more than Dizzella has. In considering this key, we might imagine a small apartment where the newlyweds will share their new life together or perhaps an automobile that will drive them away to some new life of promise. But this lone key seems to carry several additional implications. It may be a direct phallic symbol for Tyrone. It might be that the key is a metaphor for Dizzella herself, and she is the one possession that will save his life. But it may also be the case, and certainly this reading is most provocative, that the key is what locks/binds Dizzella to him. The key is the marriage itself, the instrument by which her value is passed (and locked) to him.

By reading the key, Tyrone, and the ministers as jailers of sorts, I find that the key imprisons Dizzella and calls the readers attention to the institution of marriage into question by comparing it to imprisonment. Jordan reinforces her interrogation by then inserting lines 16-18 which say literally what is unspoken in each of the previous poems I

have read in this chapter: "By marrying today / they made themselves a man / and woman / answered friends or unknown" (Jordan 46). The marriage contract is for these two, and for every two people entering it, a legitimizing of them as humans, as American citizens, and as men and women. Notice, however, that Jordan, unlike Cary or Niedecker, never adds the "I thought" or "they say" to call this institution into question. Even the addition of the race and class of these two young people fails to really bring either the masculine or feminine performances into question.

The poem ends by singling out the two characters as "Tyrone / and his Dizzella / brave enough / but only two" (Jordan 47). They are brave because they enter the contract alone and penniless in the "indifferent" (line 24) Beaulah Baptist church. They are brave because they are attempting to live their love despite their (or at least Tyrone's) blackness in a predominantly white culture in a religion founded by whites. Yet Jordan does not paint a rosy ending, they are "only two" in a world of many. The odds aren't good. The divorce rate is rising. Yet she seems to posit that marriage might be a place where these two will find some resistance to the surrounding culture. Completely opposite of Niedecker's poem, Jordan's poem seems to offer marriage as a place of convalescence from the world. She does not question the Masquerade that Dizzella must perform.

Instead, Jordan reinforces several gender performances in this poem. The minister is male, incompetent, and wealthy (he drives a Cadillac). This is similar to Moore's performance of Adam as both successful and bumbling. The minister's wealth is in contrast to Tyrone and Dizzella who are poor and/or working-class young people. The minister's separation from Tyrone and Dizzella reinforces that they must go to the cultural powers to gain any legitimatization. However, their ceremony is missing a

crucial ingredient: witnesses. This goes against what Austin tells us is required for the marriage ceremony to be bonding. The conventions and the legal forms require that someone other than the participant witness the wedding. Is this, then, a legitimate wedding? In many ways, Jordan has attempted to make the wedding subversive: Tyrone's and Dizzella's own working-class non-white culture(s) are absent. There are no wedding gifts; no one throws rice; even the narrator of the poem is conspicuously absent. Jordan seems to put her characters out as solitary examples of how difficult even the marriage contract is when citizenship is intertwined with a racist/sexist/classist culture. Yet, Tyrone and Dizzella have not forged new gender performances for themselves; they have chosen the traditional masculine and feminine roles expected of them as groom and bride.

Any subversive reading we might have of this marriage is undercut in Jordan's poem by her choice to employ free verse. As I noted earlier, Jordan, like all five of these poets, employs the dominant poetic tradition of her time: free verse. Jordan's free verse, like Niedecker's is arranged in short lines. However, Jordan does not use white space in the same way Niedecker does, but instead creates one long column of text like Moore. Like Tyrone and Dizzella who want to escape the society around them but know no way to do it, Jordan attempts to write a subversive story but follows the traditional path of non-metered verse in the same way that Tyrone and Dizzella get married. In addition, they have gone to the church to have their ceremony thereby adding the religious traditions to the legal ones. In fact, to draw attention to the religious nature of their act, the only repetition that Jordan uses in the entire thirty-line poem is "Beaulah Baptist." Jordan does include a few near rhymes or slant rhymes at her line endings in lines 13 and

14, lines 17 and 18, and lines 21 and 22. The most notable of these three sets is the middle which are the lines I discussed earlier: "they made themselves a man / and woman." The rhyme is almost a repetition (as is "Baptist" in lines 21 and 22), but these two lines carry a particular punch in this poem. By performing the act itself, Tyrone and Dizzella are making themselves "a man and woman." They are becoming legitimate. But Jordan is making this legitimacy more complicated than we might at first realize. There are two ways to read this phrase. In one reading, notice that Tyrone becomes "a man" while Dizzella becomes "woman." She is not "a" woman, but is instead a concept of "woman" or womanliness. Or, we might read "a man and woman" as if "man and woman" creates one single identity. In that reading, the pronoun "a" refers to the unit of "man and woman" which suggests that both Tyrone and Dizzella will draw their identity from the marriage institution. Either way, Dizzella has no subjectivity of her own; it is only through her marriage to Tyrone that she is anything at all. Because this is one of the few rhyming line pairs in the poem, and that the rhyming words are man and woman, I posit that Jordan is drawing our attention to the cultural importance of marriage both for this particular couple, and for our culture itself. And in drawing our attention to it, she reinforces its importance in the poem and in culture.

Conclusion

Of these five poems, only three employ strict formal patterns: Bradstreet's "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment," Cary's "Bridal Veil," and Niedecker's "I married."[42] For Bradstreet, Cary, and Niedecker, the prosody, the rhyme,

[42] While some might argue against Niedecker's inclusion with Cary and Bradstreet here, I categorize her poem as formal based upon Anne Finch's definition of formal poetry in her book *Body of Poetry*.

the repetitions, the spaces on the page, and the punctuation are foregrounded in the poem's meaning. The other two poems, Moore's "Marriage" and Jordan's "The Wedding," mostly participate in the anti-formalism movements of their time periods. It seems, then, that Finch's "prosodic argument" (146) can be made about all five poems. Just as marriage was/is a dominant patriarchal force in the lives of women in all of these time periods, so was a particular poetic meter. In each of these five cases, a woman poet wrote a poem about marriage and used the dominant formal techniques of her day to do so.

If we are to return to Irigaray, and if we consider the idea that femininity is a Masquerade and a reflection of the patriarchal systems, we must consider how each of these poems participate in or reject that Masquerade. If woman (or gender) is like language (remember Lévi-Strauss' argument about taboo, women, and language), then gender performance can be used within or outside of the dominant social norms. This is how Butler builds her case for gender trouble: by advocating the use of performances (performatives) which are outside of the social norm. We must consider, then, whether these poems are performances within the appropriate poetic formal code of the day. All five do, at least from a formal standpoint.[43] This suggests that this formal aspect of the poem is a performance, working with or against the content of the poem. Without delving too much into the idea of the body's rhythms, which I will explore in the next chapter using the theories of Julia Kristeva, I would like to consider how a poem might

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According to Finch, "a formal poem is a poem that foregrounds the artificial and rhetorical nature of poetic language by means of conspicuously repeated patterns" (90-91).

[43] According to Finch, the metrical code of a poem "can function like language, carrying different information at different points within a poem" (12). Finch also suggests that the metrical code of a poem might illuminate the "essence and raison d'etre of poetry: the mysterious connections between speech patterns, the body's memory of rhythm, and the individual and cultural unconscious" (12).

mark a crossroad between the personal, the historical, and the cultural. If a poet writes within the metrical code of her day, and writes an accepted poem (or at least published) about the institution of marriage which has enslaved women of Western culture for thousands of years, and writes this poem from some unknown personal interest, then the poem is a set of signs that acts as a sort of Masquerade or veil: an expected performance which hides underneath it a woman. As a performance, the poem enters the poetry market just as a bride enters the marriage market.

That is not to argue that these poems promote complicity in the marriage market. On the contrary, if the Masquerade is mimed, if the poems are miming the mime, then don't they, at least to some degree, call our attention to the problems for marriage, the market, language, and finally for that unknown woman beneath the veil? Even if Bradstreet and Jordan do not attempt to mime their Masquerade, reading them beside the other three draws our attention to the Masquerade present in the poem. In reading these five poems through the lens of gender performance, we cannot help but find our attention drawn to the confines of the Masquerade of femininity, a Masquerade particularly present in and crucial to the institution of marriage.

Before Explained From After

Her belly flattens on cement,
no growing thing inside opens a beat inside her.
She drums fists in a wild pattern of down strokes
like a tantrum that waited thirty years to unravel.
So she pounds until her pinky-finger knuckles
open to the bones, open to the world, to dump
a rhythm into the aggregate locked inside binder.

She holds other things tightly,
listening for the thumping of heartbeats to echo
that moment before the world called her out,
the movement of two women locked together
in saline: place before explained from after.
It breaks like flesh of a finger, pours yearning
into the crevices like red dye #40 seeping.

Her belly flattens on cement,
she sucks it in tightly to lift it up.

---Katherine D. Perry

CHAPTER FOUR

The Maternal Function: Where Lines Are Born(e)

> As her sons have seen her: the mother in patriarchy: controlling, erotic, castrating, heart-suffering, guilt-ridden, and guilt-provoking; a marble brow, a huge breast, an avid cave; between her legs snakes, swampgrass, or teeth; on her lap a helpless infant or a martyred son. She exists for one purpose: to bear and nourish the son.
>
> ~Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

This fourth chapter is a study of four poems that take motherhood as their subject: Ai's "Abortion" (1973), Lydia Huntley Sigourney's "Death of an Infant" (1827), Sylvia Plath's "Child" (1963), and Martha Brewster's "A Letter to my Daughter Ruby Bliss" (1757). Unlike in chapter two where the poems are ordered chronologically, this chapter is better served by ordering the poems by subject matter: two poems about dead children and two about living children. However, I will begin chapter three with a gloss of feminist theories concerning motherhood and the maternal function in order to lay the necessary groundwork for understanding my readings, and then I will move into readings of the poetry. This chapter seeks to explore the relationship between the maternal function and poetic language and the pain and loss that accompany maternity.

The "appropriate" role of the maternal functions (pregnancy, birthing, feeding, nurturing, and/or parenting) is still debated in both American culture and feminist theory. For many Americans, the battle lines continue to be drawn (among other things) about a woman's choice to carry or abort, about adoption rights and the termination of legal

adoption decisions, about choosing to parent a child and continuing with an additional career, and, among many other heated debates, about the roles of mothers in family social structures. In feminist discussions, the maternal function continues to be theorized in conversations about the rejection of the Cartesian mind-body split, questions as to how the body and language intersect, and how sexual difference matters in/to discourse. Julia Kristeva's Lacanian-based psychoanalytic ideas about the maternal function are some of the most debated theories because they attempt to de-center the father as the force propelling an infant into the Symbolic (language) and subjectivity, claiming, rather, that the maternal body (pregnant woman) negotiates between the pre-Symbolic (semiotic) and the Symbolic order. In contrast, feminists like Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler have accused Kristeva of equating (and reducing) the feminine with (to) the maternal body, thereby equating pregnancy with an essentialist concept of womanhood. Some of these feminists have argued that motherhood should not be equated with the feminine because many women do not choose to become mothers. On any front, the debates are not simple ones because, for both theory and culture, the meanings and implications of the maternal function intersect with how women live their lives.

To understand Kristeva's argument, we must begin with her model of subjectivity, which begins, not at birth, but during pregnancy. During that phase of fetal development, the maternal (or mother's) body is two-in-one because the mother is both herself and the fetus she carries. The fetus/mother relationship requires communication without language, and Kristeva calls this language semiotic language (le sémiotique). She defines the semiotic as the organization of drives in the body that manifests itself in language; it is in opposition to or outside of the Symbolic (le symbolique). The maternal

body is, therefore, subject to the Symbolic laws of her culture and language, but that body simultaneously builds a semiotic signification line (literally the umbilical cord, which carries nutrition and communication) with the fetus that is outside of the command of the Symbolic. This occurs because the communication does not require phallic language, which is the only language operable in the Symbolic. Kristeva argues that the semiotic phase continues after the birth of the child until the child enters the Symbolic and is sexed through language which is ordered by the phallus. Following a Lacanian model, Kristeva posits that when the child enters the mirror stage, it recognizes the distinction between subject and object, between "I" and "you," and therefore, begins to construct a subjectivity.

Kristeva's departure from Lacan comes primarily in her understanding of the existence of the semiotic and its necessary functional relationship with the Symbolic. This function of the bodily drives of the semiotic allows Kristeva to reinsert the maternal body into language, whereas in Lacanian theory, the maternal body is abjected by the child and lost. It is her insistence that the maternal body, and later the maternal function, transmits the semiotic that allows her to integrate language into the body, and this inclusion makes the maternal function primary in the development of subjectivity rather than something abject (which results in the undefined and unreachable elsewhere in Lacan's psychoanalysis). This maternal body, according to Kristeva, functions as all of our bodies function: it carries within it a semiotic repressed by Symbolic language. This revises Lacanian theory by considering the semiotic repression, like the unconscious, as an always present part of the signification process in the Symbolic. Every subject, then,

is two-in-one, conversant in both semiotic and Symbolic language, and all of our attempts to make meaning rely on the repression of the semiotic by the Symbolic.

The maternal function is primary in Kristeva's theory of the signification process, but, she is careful not to argue that the maternal body or *chora*[44] is the same as the maternal function. According to Kristeva, the maternal function includes the pregnant body (but is not limited to that body) and encompasses all semiotic (pre-Symbolic signification) communication between caregiver and child. The child's entrance into the Symbolic requires the repression of the semiotic, but the semiotic remains present, albeit repressed, beyond the threshold where the child enters language. Kristeva argues that both men and women can (and do) perform the maternal function and experience and/or impart the semiotic because once the child is born, a primary caregiver can be male or female. The process of nurturing during this pre-language phase of development depends on semiotic, not Symbolic language. No matter who performs the maternal function, it is this function that facilitates the child's primary significations. This primacy in the making of meaning inserts the maternal function prior to the Symbolic, and allows for signification outside of the Symbolic order. As a consequence, in order for a child to enter the Symbolic (language/Law of the Father) and to distinguish between subject (self) and object (maternal), s/he must both repress the semiotic and the maternal function and continue to carry them.

[44] Kristeva borrows Plato's term in *Timaeus* to express the place (usually interpreted as the womb) where "the subject is both generated and negated" (*Revolution* 28). It is "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (25). Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia U P, 1984).

In Kristevan theory, all speaking subjects rely on this negotiation of the repressed maternal function (semiotic) and the Symbolic to participate in the signification process. The repressed semiotic contains the drives and energies that were imprinted on the pre-conscious during pregnancy, and those drives and energies rupture the Symbolic through poetic language. The semiotic (and poetic language), then, is similar to *jouissance* as it too is outside of the Symbolic order. For Lacan, *la jouissance* of women is beyond the Phallus, and therefore cannot be signified. For feminists like Irigaray and Kristeva, *jouissance* is not beyond signification but is that which has been left out or ignored by the phallic system because, for Lacan, anything outside of the phallic system is indefinable, unreachable, and therefore, to some degree, a threat to the system itself. In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Kristeva defines poetic language as a signifying process through which we might see "the penetration of the socio-symbolic by jouissance" (80). Poetic language, then, might be defined as the semiotic and the *jouissance* that is both within and that which disrupts Symbolic language. Kristeva links the social and the Symbolic and argues that art/poetry is "a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself" (81). Therefore, poetic language, through its employment of both semiotic and Symbolic functions of language, reveals the poet's potential to make meaning outside of the Symbolic Law. This potential for rupture is rooted in the mother-child relationship before language (the Symbolic) splits it and repression occurs.

Even if poetic language offers the possibility of rupture in the Symbolic, the semiotic does remain, for the most part, repressed. According to Kristeva, the repression of the semiotic by the child when s/he enters the Symbolic causes the abjection of the

maternal body. The abject is a discarded or expelled part of the subject. Kristeva uses examples such as feces, vomit, and the skin on the top of milk to show that the abject is a both a part of the expeller and separate from him/her. The abject is the edge. In *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva explains that the maternal body is both worshiped and abject; the abject is the border, the splitting. When considering images of the maternal (usually images of Mary), Kristeva shows that while the maternal body may be represented as beautiful, her image is also tied to "suffering, illness, and sacrifice" (158). According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the maternal body is the object that must be rejected and sublimated in order for the child to take its place in the Symbolic order. The abject (maternal body, defecation, or otherwise) is neither subject nor object; it is that which is jettisoned. It is both part of the self and the expelled self. Moreover, because the abject can occur within a single subject, it is ambiguity. Because the abject is both part and outside of a subject, where it belongs becomes ambiguous. It is through this ambiguity that "borderline subjects and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse" (*Powers of Horror* 7). In other words, if the abject maternal body speaks, his/her language patterns are capable, like poetic language, of rupturing Symbolic language.

The plight of the abject maternal body is evident in Western (Christian) culture's placement of Mary, the mother of Christ, as a virgin. Her categorization as a virgin allows her only pleasures to come from giving birth to the boy child and then in the grieving of his death. This categorization by the phallic system prevents any *jouissance* outside of the phallus and controls (or attempts to control) the maternal. Yet, the abject

maternal offers us the possibility of an elsewhere inside of the Symbolic as opposed to an already outside.

This boundary, or elsewhere, opens several possibilities for understanding both the maternal function and the importance of the semiotic. In *Desire in Language,* Kristeva argues that the maternal body is "a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" (238). Because the mother/child relationship during pregnancy operates within the semiotic, and the maternal body itself is subject to the socio-symbolic-linguistic contract of her group, "the maternal body is a place of splitting" (238). She becomes the elsewhere or what Kristeva calls the "enceinte"[45] and her *jouissance* is an imprint on the child's pre-conscious (241). It is through her theory of the maternal body that Kristeva brings the material body back into the Symbolic by showing that drives appear in/through language and by charting the development of the pre-Symbolic child as being subjected to the Symbolic and semiotic through the maternal body.

Kristeva's use of the maternal function illuminates the connection between the biological body and the feminine, and this connection tends to make reproductive biology essential.[46] Indeed, even in the above explanation, it becomes difficult to discuss the maternal function and maternal body without resorting to feminine pronouns and discussions of "motherhood." In many cases, Kristeva seems to conflate the feminine

[45] "Enceinte" is the French word that means the wall around a town and "femme enceinte" means pregnant woman.

[46] For a helpful overview and categorization of Kristeva's place in many feminist theories, see Kelly Oliver's introduction in *Reading Kristeva* in which she argues that the wide range of responses to Kristeva's work suggests that much of her work is open to interpretation precisely because Kristeva's discourse "breaks the law of noncontradiction upon which traditional notions of identity are built" (1). Oliver posits that these arguments over the interpretations of Kristeva's work make her work both difficult and exciting (2). Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1993).

and the maternal function even beyond that of the maternal body. For example, in *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva equates the maternal with the feminine, and says, "it goes without saying that menstrual blood signifies sexual difference" (71). In addition to this equation, the political ramifications of Kristeva's theories seem to lead to a necessary repression of the feminine. In "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," Judith Butler interrogates the cultural implications of Kristeva's maternal body and criticizes the alignment of the semiotic with pre-culture, with the maternal, because this theory requires that the semiotic stay repressed under the Symbolic or paternal law. Butler questions if the semiotic, the maternal body, and the abject are ever outside of the Law and if Kristeva's theories can ever allow for a complete dismantling of that Law; in fact, Butler argues, if we follow Foucault's model, Kristeva's maternal body may be a necessary part and product of the paternal law and not actually outside of it at all.[47] However, it seems that Kristeva would argue that we do not yet know all of the possibilities of the disruption of the Symbolic, and that by recognizing those disruptions and the "outside" of poetic language and the feminine, we have the possibility of a new, not yet named discourse. While this debate between Butler and Kristeva is not easily reconciled, we might begin an understanding of the maternal by examining poems using a Kristevan lens. Through this lens, we see women poets disrupting the Symbolic in two ways: first, they employ poetic language which expresses semiotic language with tones and rhythms, and second, they articulate the semiotic primary influence of the maternal function through their

[47] Butler is making an argument about the political implications of Kristeva's work in culture based on Foucault's model of culture. In addition, Butler points out the problematic implications of Kristeva's theories for homosexual women because of the heterosexual model on which Kristeva bases her theory (namely Lacanian). Judith Butler, "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993).

investigation of motherhood. The poets examined in this chapter make suggestions as to where the maternal function, not only the maternal body, operates: outside of the Symbolic. Yet I will also explore the cultural implications of these poems and their interrogation of the maternal function; even if Butler and Kristeva cannot find common ground, their theories have both found their way into my understanding of gender and genre and enable a productive reading of these texts.

This chapter, then, is concerned with this intersection of genre and gender and the inscription of the maternal function within and on gender and genre. Each poem examined here is written by an American woman, and each poem, though drawn from different cultural and historical moments, is a record of that socially constructed time and place. Using poetic language, these women poets uphold and/or interrogate gender, and this language reveals two discourses of bodies – both the body in and produced by language, as well as the language of the body. The representation of this body itself, which is, in some of these poems, the maternal body, allows us to speculate, not only about the gender roles of American women but also about the widely held connections made by poets (male and female) between writing and childrearing (creation and birth). The chapter will illuminate connections between poetry and our understanding of the psychoanalytic process of becoming subjects.

The becoming of poems, like subjects, has been explored for centuries in poetic language. The metaphor of poem as child is ubiquitous in Western poetry indicating that poets (both men and women) understand artistic creation to leave artists abject after the creation process just as child development does. However, in these four poems, the maternal function is not a metaphor for artistic creation, but is instead a direct

interrogation of the maternal function itself and its abjection. I argue that through poetic language (which is a potential semiotic rupture in the Symbolic), we find astute representations of the maternal function (also semiotic within the Symbolic) in which women poets are willing to inquire into the social roles of maternity and the psychoanalytic implications of those roles. The performance of the maternal function within poetry allows these women to consider and reconsider their gender.

I begin this examination of the maternal function with studies of two poems about the loss of children because of death. Both poems focus on the maternal function by highlighting the absence of a child rather than its presence. This ultimate negation is handled in two ways. In the poem, "Abortion" (1973), Ai's speaker is a male voice whose partner has had an abortion. This change of the expected perspective from mother to father complicates the typical social arguments about abortion in two ways. First, readers are separated from the woman's choice by an outsider, albeit the father, and Ai gives us few insights into the reasons for the woman's choice. Second, the maternal function demonstrated in this poem is male, but a male character performed by a woman. Ai's poem contains the body of the dead fetus, but the father is not concerned with the soul of that child, only the physical loss of its presence/body. In addition, he worries about his partner and the destruction of a domestic life he has built with her. By contrast, Lydia Huntley Sigourney's "Death of an Infant" (1827) employs a third person (non-sexed) voice that describes a visit by a personified death that kills the child. Unlike Ai's poem where readers are not asked to sympathize with the mother, Sigourney's poem asks readers to consider the mother's pain when losing a child to Death. Sigourney's poem, then, explores a common problem for nineteenth century American women: high infant

mortality rates. She employs the most obvious of the typical explanations that people use(d) to understand such tragedies: the child becomes angelic and moves to an afterlife. The child is perfected in death while the mother, without her maternal function, remains empty and flawed. Through a contemporary psychoanalytic lens, this poem suggests that a male figure, like death, kills the semiotic relationship between the mother and child.

The second half of this chapter examines poems in which the children are living. These two poems contain more expected, or conventional, aspects of maternal functions and both contain mother/speakers addressing their children. The first, Sylvia Plath's poem "Child," (written in 1963) uses a first-person voice and addresses a child that seems to be physically present. The poem explores both the joys and stresses of motherhood, and it interrogates the complexities of the maternal function in actually raising children. While the poem begins with the beauty of the child, it ends with "wringing of hands" and the "dark ceiling" that impedes that beauty; this, I will show, leaves readers with a sense of foreboding that comes from the mother's negotiation of the child's move from the semiotic to the Symbolic. The final poem, Martha Brewster's "A Letter to my Daughter Ruby Bliss" (1757), employs a first-person speaker who identifies herself as the mother both in the title of the poem and within the body of the poem. Unlike any of the other poems discussed above, Brewster's poem uses strict end rhymes (rhyming couplets), and this adherence to form reflects the adherence to expected 18th century sentiments of women toward the maternal function. She describes a loving and supportive relationship between mother and daughter with the only pains coming from a separation between them. The mother Brewster performs highlights the dual nature of mother as both angelic and abject.

Interestingly, the range of thematic and formal elements in these poems fosters several gender performances which reveal a relationship between gender and genre and how female poets use genre to explore gender. Among others, I will explore the following questions: How does formal rhyme and rhythm reveal a poet's social obligation and adherence to the expected maternal function? How does point of view complicate reader's understanding of the relationship between a poet and her poem and between the gender identities of the poet and the speaker? How do we understand gender when a poet performs in a masculine voice? How has American culture tied woman to the maternal, and how has that connection affected Western women?

Ai's "Abortion"

Ai (born 1947 as Florence Anthony)[48] is an American woman who identifies herself as part Japanese, Choctaw-Chickasaw, Black, Irish, Southern Cheyenne, and Comanche. Perhaps because of her mixed heritage, some might call Ai quintessentially American, but her poetry is far from mainstream (if any poetry can still be considered mainstream). Ai's poems challenge the hegemonic structure of contemporary American culture by giving voice to the underprivileged, the criminal, and the purposefully forgotten. Ai's early poetry, written in the early 1970s, is also rooted in the heated debates that surrounded the sexual revolution and changing family structures.[49] Her poetry disrupts wealthy American culture and the privileged educated elite that typically reads poetry by its insertion of voices that have tended to remain unheard or ignored.

[48] "Ai" is the Japanese word for "love."
[49] For more information on the sexual revolution and the state of the family in the 1970s, see Kellogg and Mintz's book *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*.

In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Ai confirms that her poems are dramatic monologues that allow her to become "someone else without actually being that person" (Ai, *Ai Interview)*. Later in the interview, Ai speaks harshly of readers and critics who insist on reading her poems as autobiographical and tries again to convince readers that her poems are conscious performances of the lives of other men and women.[50] And while these voices may not be autobiographical voices, each poem was created during a specific time period and under particular political and social circumstances in which Ai found herself. As the second poem in her book, *Cruelty*, "Abortion" was published during 1973, the same year as the January 22 decision of *Roe vs. Wade* was handed down. The poem was most likely written and/or edited during the previous two plus years that the landmark case was being argued and deliberated. Like most of Ai's poems, each poem in this volume speaks in a voice typically unheard in poetry: murderers, housekeepers, child molesters, victims of violence, prostitutes, and thieves; in short she gives voice to the poor, dead, and forgotten. Ai's poems are somber and ruthless, rarely offering the reader a moment to smile or even breathe. Her unblinking look at the rarely discussed people of Western society forces readers to reconsider their definition of cruelty and the viability of their comfortable world.

"Abortion" is no exception. The ten-line poem/monologue forces readers to consider the complicated choice of a woman in poverty whose partner may want to have a child. "Abortion" is spoken by the male partner of a woman who has had an abortion:

Coming home, I find you still in bed,

[50] See this 1999 PBS interview online at the Modern American Poetry website: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ai/pbsinterview.htm

but when I pull back the blanket,

I see your stomach is flat as an iron.

You've done it, as you warned me you would

and left the fetus wrapped in wax paper

for me to look at. My son.

Woman, loving you no matter what you do,

what can I say, except that I've heard

the poor have no children, just small people

and there is room only for one man in this house. (Ai, *Cruelty* 2)

This monologue, addressed to the "woman" (line 7) partner, is constructed in Ai's typical simple present tense syntax which keeps the speaker and the reader fixed (or trapped) in the social construction of his/her life.[51] The plainness of the language, the simplicity of terminology, and the simple subject-verb sentence construction reinforces the speaker's claim that they are living in poverty (line 9) and underscores his shock and mourning at the situation in which he finds himself. His situation is constructed around him and he has no ability to change that construction.

This construction includes a domestic surrounding, and the poem is riddled with domesticity and bodies. Domestic objects appear throughout the poem: "home," "bed" (line 1), "blanket" (line 2), "iron" (line 3), "wax paper" (line 4), "room," and "house"

[51] For an excellent discussion of Ai's use of present tense, see Claudia Ingram's "Writing the Crises." Ingram argues that the use of present tense "contributes to the impression that this language is not going anywhere – that it is neither reaching an addressee nor transcending the circumstances that it describes"(177). The speaker cannot reach transcendence because the events are too painful: the language reinforces the sense that the speaker and the addressee are trapped in their social and environmental circumstance. Claudia Ingram, "Writing the Crises: The Deployment of Abjection in Ai's Dramatic Monologues," *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 8:2 (1997).

(line 10). Bodies, both active and inactive, also fill the poem: "you still in bed" (line 1), "I pull back the blanket" (line 2), "your stomach" (line 3), "the fetus" (line 5), "My son" (line 6), "Woman" (line 7), and the hard hitting final line, "room only for one man in this house." Therefore, while the speaker of this poem is male, his voice is racked with the domesticity of the world and bodies of his partner and son around him. He mentions his own body in the final line and mentions his dead son's (which could be read as some sort of clipped extension of both parents' bodies), but the mother's body is woven through the entire poem. This focus on her body and the domestic objects of the house reminds readers that even though the speaker is masculine, he, like most women, is trapped in a social construction that is not of his making: a domestic trap.

By surrounding the father in such ways, Ai creates a character that has an uneven footing (and is possibly even feminized) in his own world. He seems unbalanced and broken, and this sense is bolstered by his comment about the poverty in this house. The final three lines of the poem explain the calm reaction of the father to the horror of his situation: "I've heard / the poor have no children, just small people / and there is room only for one man in this house." As a way to explain his partner's actions, the speaker recalls being told that parents in poverty only have small adults, not children. He then finds resolution in the loss of his child with a self-reminder that he will remain the "man of the house." While this may seem like a strange comfort for the loss of a child, this final line calls our attention to the oedipal competition between father and son and suggests that because of this abortion the speaker will not have to compete with the child for his partner's affections. This line also reminds the readers that poor people live in cramped quarters and that additionally, metaphorically speaking of a house as a life or

social construction of a life, poverty shrinks the "house" to a size only big enough for one man. This suggests that the psychoanalytic model is slightly different in situations of poverty because a child born into poverty can have no semiotic (or Real stage), but instead must be born into the Symbolic phase as a "small person." This means that a father would have to immediately, upon the birth of the child, enter into competition with the "small person" for the one space in the house allotted for a man.

Ai's complicated statement about the maternal function is illuminated if we consider how the mother is represented in this poem. Female agency and subjectivity are particularly interesting in this poem. When first we read, "You've done it, as you warned me you would" (line 4), the male speaker seems to suggest maternal agency that is lacking in the paternal role: namely, to choose whether to give birth or abort the fetus. Yet, the notion that there can be no children in this house suggests that this woman would have no maternal function, in the Kristevan sense, other than to birth the child into the Symbolic. While we might argue that she would have a semiotic relationship with the fetus during pregnancy, the father suggests that the mother has no negotiation of the pre-Symbolic because there can never be a "child" only a "small person." If this is the case, then the mother's semiotic relationship with that being is missing. In such a world, where "there is room only for one man," the mother must choose between son and husband. And while it seems that even this gives her options, it would be difficult for any woman to choose the son who will abject her. This means that while the father sees his partner as having more control and options, Ai's portrayal of the maternal in this poem leaves her with as few choices as the father. In the end, they are both trapped in the poverty that surrounds them and without a child.

Yet it is the father who speaks, even if he speaks from a place without agency. It is the father who remains "man of the house." The fetus which she has wrapped in "wax paper" like a sandwich for him to ingest is the body expelled from the house. The fetus is the abject; it is both inside and outside of the mother and the house. Through the abjection of the fetus, the father retains his status and his function as the Law. This revision of the psychoanalytic model again suggests that within a model of poverty, a man must not only abject his mother to take his position in the phallic economy, but his partner must abject his son in order for him to retain that position. If she had not had the abortion performed, the father would have been susceptible to an overthrow of the Law by the son. Poverty, then, disrupts the entire psychoanalytic model by destroying the maternal function. If that primary negotiation is destroyed, the entire economy follows.

Ai's poem disrupts the Symbolic in several ways. Through her poetic language, she inserts tones and rhythms that signify outside of Symbolic language. While the poem is strictly free verse, Ai employs assonance, consonance, and alliteration, even within her simplistic syntax to hold the poem together. For instance, the repetition of the "b" sounds in line two, "but when I pull back the blanket," underscore a sense of comfort and softness which again reminds readers of the domesticity of this poem. By using a semiotic language, where sounds can convey meanings outside of the Symbolic, Ai calls our attention, albeit subtly, to the complexity of the signification process. She also employs internal rhyme and iambic rhythm to set lines, like line seven, apart from the rest of the poem: "Woman, loving you no matter what you do." By setting this line apart from the others, Ai elevates it and calls attention to the importance of the partner to this speaker, even through his pain. Again, Ai makes use of poetic language, and in doing so,

communicates several of her ideas through semiotic language. It is through these disruptions of Symbolic language with poetic language that Ai inserts the semiotic into the Symbolic. This poem, then, disrupts the Symbolic on several levels. First, through poetic language with disrupts the Symbolic with semiotic language, and second, through Ai's consideration of how poverty disrupts the psychoanalytic model of development.

Lydia Huntley Signourney's "Death of an Infant"

Lydia Huntley Sigourney (1791-1865) was one of the most famous poets of the early ninteenth century and has been noted by critics for her sentimentality.[52] As one of her most celebrated poems about death, "Death of an Infant" appeared regularly in many of the popular newspapers and magazines of the day, and her poetry was widely read by American women. She married in 1819 and left her job teaching school to become wife and mother to her husband's three children and the two children they had together (Walker 1). While Sigourney astutely negotiated the demands of her family and her writing, these negotiations did not always leave her husband, Charles Sigourney, pleased with her writing profession. In fact, he went as far as to censure her in a twelve-page, 1827 letter in which he said to her, "Were you *less of a poet*, how much *more valuable* would you be as a wife."[53] As shocking as this statement is to contemporary readers, it is

[52]Sentimentality has been a curse aimed at many nineteenth-century women poets. However, since Jane Tompkins' book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860,* many feminists have reconsidered the use of sentimentality during the nineteenth century. Tompkins points out that much of what has been called sentimental allowed women to gain political power. This notion is supported by nineteenth century scholar Cheryl Walker. In her anthology *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, Walker notes that Sigourney actively worked for social and political causes and that she was "much more interested in the world than her own emotions" (2). Cheryl Walker, *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1992).

[53] Original letters quoted in Melissa Ladd Teed, "A Passion for Distinction: Lydia Huntley Sigourney and the Creation of a Literary Reputation," *The New England Quarterly* 77.11 (2004).

even more so when we consider that the Sigourney family greatly needed the income that she earned with her writing.

As Charles Sigourney argued that duties of wife and poet were incompatible, Lydia Sigourney typically wrote poems that centered on the demands and joys of domestic life. It was during the same year that her husband condemned her poet status in the 1827 letter that one of Sigourney's most enduring (and anthologized) poem, "Death of an Infant," was published in *Poems* (Haight 79). The poem describes the taking of an infant by a personified Death, a topic that would have been painfully familiar to many nineteenth-century, European-American women as the infant mortality rate was higher than 27%.[54] But the nineteenth century was also a time period in which European-American women were beginning to take more control over their reproductive life. Birthrates were beginning to drop largely because women began practicing birth control, and most families were shrinking from seven or eight children to five or six.[55] Even if women were having fewer children, the popularity of Sigourney's "Death of an Infant" attests both to the power of her writing and to the importance of the subject matter to American women in the early nineteenth century:

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[54] While no real statistics exist for the time periods before 1870, we do know that in 1870 the infant mortality rate was about 275 deaths per 1000 children born. See Daniel P McVeigh, *Public Health and Technology During the 19th Century*, 2002, Available: http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/bluetelephone/html/health.html, September 22 2005. And because the infant mortality rate has decreased by 90 percent since 1900, there is reason to believe that in the 1830s the infant mortality rate might have been higher than in 1870. See Megan Malugani, *Great Achievements: How Public Health Has Changed over the Century*, 1999, Available: http://www.nurseweek.com/features/99-12/public.html, September 23 2005.

[55] Mintz and Kellogg attribute this active use of known birth control methods to two things: 1) the increasing awareness (and possible shift) that children were not assets but liabilities that had to be taken care of and educated, and 2) the changing attitudes of families from chattel children toward child rearing and development. It seemed that as the emphasis on nurturing and parental guidance increased, family sizes decreased. See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988) 51-52 .

Death found strange beauty on that cherub brow,
And dash'd it out. There was a tint of rose
On cheek and lip;—he touch'd the veins with ice,
And the rose faded.—Forth from those blue eyes
There spoke a wishful tenderness,—a doubt
Whether to grieve or sleep, which Innocence
Alone can wear. With ruthless haste he bound
The silken fringes of the curtaining lids
For ever. There had been a murmuring sound
With which the babe would claim its mother's ear,
Charming her even to tears. The spoiler set
His seal of silence. But there beam'd a smile
So fix'd and holy from that marble brow,—
Death gazed and left it there;—he dared not steal
The signet-ring of Heaven. (Sigourney 6)

In this fifteen-line poem, a removed narrator tells the story of personified Death taking the soul of the infant leaving only its body frozen with a smile "fix'd and holy from that marble brow" (line 13). The infant is non-sexed; it is still pre-Symbolic, and the semiotic relationship between mother and infant is explored in surprising detail. The narrator tells us that the child speaks with its eyes, "Forth from those blue eyes / There spoke a wishful tenderness" (lines 4 and 5) and with pre-Symbolic sounds, "There had been a murmuring sound / With which the babe would claim its mother's ear, / Charming her even to tears" (lines 9-11). This semiotic relationship is interrupted by Death.

Death, a male character, enters this semiotic relationship between mother and child and breaks it the way the Law of the Father breaks the mother-child dyad in the psychoanalytic model of development. Following such a reading of this poem, Death ushers the infant into the Symbolic by breaking the semiotic relationship (that the opening line describes as "strange beauty") and replacing it with language. Ironically, the narrator describes this admittance into language as "His seal of silence" (line 12). This line suggests that the Symbolic, not the pre-Symbolic, is silence. To make sense of this, we must recall the voice of the narrator. While Sigourney does not explicitly sex her narrator, because Sigourney is female and because the publication of this poem appeared over and over in women's magazines, we might begin to assume that the poem's voice is feminine.

If the narrator's voice is feminine, the poem reads as information, advice, or communication from one female to another. Women, then, understood the bond between mother and child to encompass the semiotic relationship. Death, then, interrupts and silences that relationship, both literally (the ending of the physical life) and metaphorically (the ending of the semiotic relationship). This implies, as Jane Tompkins suggests, that women were aware of the importance of the semiotic relationship they fostered with their children, and a poem like Sigourney's might be read as an awareness of the political power of this relationship.

This kind of political awareness comes to light in the final four lines of the poem: "But there beam'd a smile / So fix'd and holy from that marble brow, – / Death gazed and left it there; -- he dared not steal / The signet-ring of Heaven" (lines12-15). Here the narrator describes a smile on the infant's face that is so "fix'd and holy" that Death leaves

it there because he doesn't dare "steal the signet-ring of Heaven." The smile, then, is some trace of the semiotic relationship between mother and child, and Death doesn't "dare" take that away. In addition, that relationship is the "signet-ring of Heaven." The semiotic, then, is the seal of authenticity for Heaven; it is divinely ordained. Like Kristeva's theory, this poem suggests that the semiotic mother-child relationship is primary, and the maternal function negotiates both the semiotic and the transition to the Symbolic.

Another interesting point, however, is that other than being the receiver of the child's semiotic communications, the mother seems to be largely absent in this poem. But while her body is absent, it is her voice, through the poetic language, that keeps her present. The poem might be called a sonnet except for a lack of strict iambic pentameter, an additional seven-syllable line, and a lack of end rhymes. Poetic language then, rather than representing the presence of a maternal being in the content of the poem, represents the semiotic force in language. A closer look at the poetic rhythms and rhymes of this poem suggest an even more significant interpretation of "poetic language." This blank verse poem, published in 1827, is nearly thirty years older than Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* when the even more unconventional free verse is introduced into the poetic tradition. In addition, while the syllabic count of these lines adheres to a strict ten-syllable line, several lines fall into free verse patterns: in lines one and four, in particular, Sigourney abandons a regular metric pattern. Yet the popularity of this poem among women readers suggests that readers were attracted to a freer verse long before they encountered Whitman. Sigourney relies on alliteration, assonance, and consonance to hold the poem together phonetically rather than on rhyming words at line endings to

shape the poem. This suggests a different kind of signification, a poetic language outside of even the typical poetic language that Sigourney employed to tell the story of the ushering of infants from the semiotic to the Symbolic – from their mothers to Death, or from their mothers to the Father. But, as Kristeva has suggested to us, even if the mother must be rejected, even if she must be left out of the poem, it is her signet-ring, her semiotic relationship with the child, on which all signification is built. It seems to be no accident that the additional seven-syllable line "tacked" to the end of this "sonnet" is "The signet-ring of Heaven." This perfect (perfect in that Christian reading of the number seven) line is the maternal.

Sylvia Plath's "Child"

Even though Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was married to a British man and lived in the United Kingdom, her understanding of family dynamics was rooted in her American upbringing. By the 1960s, American culture was rebelling against and suffering from the Ozzie and Harriet image of the perfect American family where the father was the breadwinner, the mother was the homemaker happily nurturing her children. Since World War II, birthrates had plummeted and divorce rates soared (Mintz and Kellogg 203). Before her suicide in early February of 1963, Plath endured a furious writing spree. One of the poems written in January of 1963 was "Child" which was published in *Winter Trees* (edited by Ted Hughes) in 1971. And while it may well be that "Child" is a "confessional poem,"[56] few can argue that in her poetry Plath's sense of story, poetries,

[56] The label "confessional" was first placed on Robert Lowell's 1959 book *Life Studies* by M.L. Rosenthal. In his review in *The Nation,* he says, "The use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day." See M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *The Nation* 189.8 (1959). Rosenthal pointed to elements in the poems which revealed personal details of Lowell's life that would normally be hidden except in a confessional (as with a priest). The label has come to mean poetry in which the "I" of the poem

and drama came before her allegiance to telling her biographical details despite how wedded readers are to her biography.

Even while understanding this tendency to turn all of Plath's poems into confessions, it is difficult not to connect the "I" with Plath herself. If I acquiesce to that urge, the "I" is female and mother to the child she addresses. The child, however, remains unsexed. Again, as with Sigourney's poem, this signals that the child is still operating in the semiotic because it has not yet been sexed by the Symbolic. The poem celebrates the beauty of the child in this early phase and mourns the expected loss of the semiotic:

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
> I want to fill it with color and ducks,
> The zoo of the new
>
> Whose name you meditate --
> April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
> Little
>
> Stalk without wrinkle,
> Pool in which images
> Should be grand and classical

---

is or is like the actual poet and has been used to describe American poets like Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, W.D. Snodgrass, and Sylvia Plath. According to Diane Wood Middlebrook in *The Columbia History of American Poetry,* confessional poems are "the public avowal of a point of view, as in the confession of faith. The faith affirmed in confessional poetry is Freudian, secular, and critical" (648).

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star. (Plath)

Plath's speaker addresses her child whom she characterizes as having a "clear eye" (line 1) like a "pool" (line 8) that she wishes to fill with images "grand and classical" (line 9). The child is on the cusp of entering the Symbolic, where he/she will learn to name his/her surroundings, and Plath associates the Symbolic with the classical structures in our culture. This is particularly evident in lines 3 and 4 where the speaker says that she wants to fill the child's "clear eye" with "The zoo of the new / Whose name you meditate." The child, not yet able to articulate (pre-Symbolic), is now meditating language and is on the cusp of adopting the use of it.

Possibly more arresting is the relationship that Plath's speaker sets up between the "grand and classical" images of the Symbolic that the child is nearing and the "dark / Ceiling without a star" (lines 11 and 12) image of the semiotic space the maternal function inhabits. In the final stanza, the speaker turns to his/her own loneliness, her own abjection and clearly sends her child the message to take up the Symbolic, to abandon "this troublous / Wringing of hands" (lines 10 and 11). This apparent anxiety, represented by the "wringing of hands," signals an awareness of the maternal function and its abjection by the speaker, and she does not want to pass this anxiety to the child. She attempts to perform this overseeing of the change without letting the child know of her sacrifice. While the mother is overseeing the child's move from semiotic to Symbolic, she is also must be aware of the abjection that will take place when the child transitions. The narrator seems to characterize herself, not just the semiotic, as a bundle

of darkness and pain – a lightless abyss that must be thrown aside and overcome for the child's advancement into the Symbolic. This suggests that the narrator, while understanding the phallic system, willingly participates in her own abjection.

Even if this is so, Plath complicates her testimony with her use of poetic language. On the surface, Plath seems to disregard poetic form: the poem is free verse. But there are four regular three-line stanzas, several occasions of assonance (for example, dark and star in lines 11 and 12), slightly more uses of consonance (for example, the use of p's in April snowdrop, Indian pipe in line 5, and the use of l's in wrinkle and classical in lines 7 and 9), and finally Plath employs several internal rhymes (for example, zoo, new, and you in lines 3 and 4). Therefore, while the poem seems to indicate that the speaker willingly sends her child to the Symbolic, Plath's use of sound patterns disrupts the laws into which she sends the child by addressing it with poetic language which disrupts the Symbolic order. Plath plays with sounds and rhythm patterns on which the semiotic communication is based, and thereby, she ruptures the Symbolic structure to speak to the child through the "darkness" of the semiotic.

The poem, then, is the mother/speaker's negotiation of the semiotic and Symbolic for her child. She not only ushers the child through this change, she is also aware of her role in the process and mourns the loss of her semiotic stage with the child. However, she also continues to use her own semiotic experience through poetic language, and it is this usage that reminds readers, herself, the child, and the Symbolic order of the primary role of the maternal function in the child's development.

Martha Brewster's "A Letter To My Daughter Ruby Bliss"

Little is known about the life of Martha Brewster (1710-after 1759) other than what is found in her poems and in public records. She lived most of her life in several different places just outside of present day Lebanon, Connecticut. Unlike her predecessor Anne Bradstreet, Brewster did not have a wealthy or political family and therefore did not have access to the educational benefits of such power. However, her father, who was a farmer, was known to have a small library.[57] Brewster certainly had access to the works of Michael Wigglesworth and Anne Bradstreet, as many of her poems draw from the imagery and form of those poets. Like Bradstreet, Brewster's published book contains a preface which apologizes for her "bold attempt" in poetry which she describes as "insipid, wanting Eloquence" (Brewster 2). Brewster's poems explore acceptable feminine subjects: religion, children, husband, weddings, and home. In reading Brewster's 1757 collection, *Poems on Divers Subjects*, it seems clear that Brewster is conscious of representing herself in her poetry as a proper woman.[58]

It is important, then, to consider what constituted a "properly behaved woman" in 1757. Early colonial families had relied heavily on family ties in England and intermarriages to cement power structures and economic relationships (Mintz 5), and, the household, not the individual, was the "fundamental unit of society" (Mintz 6). For those early New England families, patriarchy was the stronghold of culture, and children who cursed or struck their fathers could be put to death in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and

[57] For further biographical information on Brewster, see Kenneth A. Requa's introduction to her work in the facsimile reprint of *Poems on Divers Subjects*.

[58] Kenneth A. Requa suggests, that Brewster "presents herself as a properly behaved woman who happened to write a few poems" (Requa xx).

New Hampshire (9). The ideal woman was seemingly delicate and modest, but she was also protected by Colonial laws (10). Until marriage, a single woman could conduct business, and with marriage those rights were assumed by her husband ("coverture").

But in the eighteenth century, as life expectancy and population grew, major shifts began to change the family unit from what it had been in Puritan culture. The relationship between parents and children and husband and wife evolved from economic into more emotional relationships (23). This emotional relationship between mother and daughter is evident in Brewster's poem "A Letter to my Daughter Ruby Bliss." As Brewster was, in fact, the mother of a daughter Ruby (born in 1733) who married Henry Bliss in 1749 and moved to Longmeadow, Massachusetts (Requa xiv), it is difficult not to read the poem as an actual piece of Brewster's biography. In addition, as artifice would not have been deemed "appropriate" for a woman of Brewster's time and place, it seems likely that, as with most of her poems, many of the emotions expressed in her verse were either how she actually felt or how she would like her readers to believe she felt. In this particular poem, her daughter is not a mere worker missing from the family home, but, because of her absence, represents a missing emotional link for the mother. This emotional bond was certainly expected in Brewster's community. The poem begins:

> My only Daughter Dear, my Hearts Delight,
> Since cruel Distance keeps thee from my Sight:
> I breathe forth Sighs into the empty Air,
> My best Desires pursue thee ev'ry where. (Brewster 30)

The opening line proclaims her child to be her "Hearts Delight" and also hints to a special emotional relationship between mother and daughter by stating that Ruby Bliss's absence is particularly "cruel" because she is the mother's "only Daughter."

A deep emotional bond between mother and daughter is explored further, and throughout the entire poem, as Brewster emphasizes the feminine aspects of both herself and her daughter. In describing herself she emphasizes her passionate and sympathizing tendencies:

> My ardent Love can reach thee where thou art,
> And mingle with thy sympathizing Heart.
> My Breast a Magazine of tend'rest Passions,
> Pregnant with Grief, seeks Vent in sev'ral Fashions: (lines 5-8)

In addition to the emotional aspect of these lines, the phrases Brewster employs with "My Breast a Magazine" and "Pregnant with Grief" reinforce the presence of the female body in this poem. Brewster also describes in detail her speaker's weeping:

> Sometimes the optick Fountains up do break,
> And liquid Salts do deluge o'er my Cheek:
> Each Filial due Performance strikes my Heart,
> And mournful Pleasure shoots through ev'ry Part: (lines 9-12)

Again, this physical description of her cries focuses on the body rather than on the spiritual pain. She reminds us of the "liquid Salts...o'er my Cheek" rather than her reason for crying. This alignment of the speaker with the traditional feminine attributes allows Brewster to escape any criticism of her readers that would say that she attempts to step outside of the feminine spheres of influence. Rather than presenting her speaker as

reasoning, Brewster allows her body and emotions to navigate her problem. She also considers the traditionally feminine attributes of Ruby Bliss in this poem. Bliss, like her mother, is described through her emotional state:

> Sometimes your Joys, and prosp'rous State I doat,
> But grim Distrust soon rifles my Repose,
> Presents you Sick, Bereav'd and full of Woes: (lines 14-16)

In addition to the importance of "Joys" and "Woes," Brewster makes a change in these lines that she will make again at the end of the poem. She moves from referring to her daughter with the more familiar diction terms "thee" and "thou" to referring to her with the higher diction of with "you" and "your." This suggests the loss of a intimacy between mother and daughter that existed in the earlier lines of the poem. This intimacy comes when the mother speaks of her daughter's emotional extremes, and the timing suggests an emotional bond that is lost when they are apart. The bond between mother and daughter would have been understood as an accepted part of both the actual relationship and a suitable subject for a woman poet.

Some critics, like Kenneth Requa, suggest that Brewster's poetry was "old fashioned" in that she did not really follow the popular formal features of the poetry famous in her own time period, but typically wrote in forms more popular in the seventeenth century possibly because of the libraries available to her, or possibly because of her personal preference for puns, wordplay, and anagrams (xvii). The formal features of this poem seem to uphold those ideas in that the poem strictly adheres to the heroic couplet (rhyming iambic pentameter) form nearly all of which are closed (ending syntactically at the end of lines). The few lines that are enjambed are broken by commas.

The heroic couplet form was so extremely popular that some scholars have suggested that the heroic couplet became a hegemonic force[59] in British and American poetry. Brewster's choice of this form, then, suggests her submission to the Law of the Father, both in the necessity of losing her daughter to the phallic economy and to express her feelings about that loss in hegemonic poetic forms.

Yet Brewster is not always as obedient as the surface would suggest. First of all, her story is not an epic, and heroic couplets were many times reserved for the telling of epic tales. Second, while most of the poem employs perfect iambic feet, lines 2, 13, 39, 31, 33, and 36 break the iambic pattern. Most of these lines are verses in which Brewster either attempts to describe the extreme pain she feels because of the separation or to worship the God that would separate the mother and child. This means that when Brewster was writing about those particular subjects, she found that iambic pentameter was not the best way to express herself either because those emotions would not confine themselves to that rhythmic pattern or because she wanted to disrupt her reader's rhythm in order to call attention to the emotional complications of her sentiments.

Brewster speaker, the abject mother, also seems to feel free to express her sadness about the loss of her child. Interestingly, of the four poems explored in this chapter, this is the only one where the child is marked female. This suggests that the mother-daughter relationship is different from that of the mother-son relationship, and that the mother is freer to express her pain in losing the female child to the Symbolic because in the

[59] See J. Paul Hunter, "The Heroic Couplet: Its Rhyme and Reason," *Ideas: From the National Humanities Center* 4.1 (1996). Hunter suggests that the heroic couplet "dominated poetry like a tyrant. If forms can be hegemonic--and all but prevent meaningful departures--the couplet was such a form; never has any single poetic form before or since dominated the English language (or any other language I know about) so insistently and so thoroughly." This suggests that Brewster's use of the form is yet another illustration of her subservience to patriarchal structures.

heterosexual model, the girl child poses no threat to the father or the Law of the Father. The Law of the Father, then, while removing the child from the semiotic, does not repress the semiotic bond. Yet it is this Law that causes the pain of absence. In this poem, Brewster addresses God who she describes as having "pruned" her of her child:

> Glorious Landlord! Thou hast pruned me,
> Then Grant me Grace, to bear much Fruit to Thee.
> My pleasant Branch, which thou hast Grafted, Lord,
> Make her the charge of Angels, and afford,
> Thy special Benediction while Alive,
> Then to some Glorious Mansion her Receive;
> But while she's Station'd here, let her obtain,
> Suck precious Fruit as shall embalm her Name:
> Let Bud, and Branch, and Tree securely stand,
> Drest by the Culture of thy Gracious Hand: (lines 18-27)

Line 18 marks a change of addressee from Ruby Bliss to God. In these lines, Brewster turns away from addressing her daughter and asks God to keep Ruby Bliss healthy and protected even while she is separated from the protection of her mother. The pruning of the mother "tree" of her "Branch" and the "grafting" her to another (husband or to God in death) suggests Brewster's understanding of the importance of Ruby's entrance into the Symbolic, but her mourning of the pain and loss that the pruning caused. Like the Law of the Father, God separates the child from her mother and this separation propels the daughter into the phallic economy where she will marry and have her own children.

When imagining the death of Ruby Bliss, Brewster is careful not to betray her religious convictions in which she considers death a blessing and a relief from an earthly life. As with Sigourney's poem, Brewster's poem also suggests a kind of Symbolic heaven where the child is rewarded for her entry into heaven with "some Glorious Mansion" (line 23) and fulfillment. Yet, the speaker holds on to the earthly child (the semiotic), by asking that three generations be held together with God's blessings, "Let Bud, and Branch, and Tree securely stand, / Drest by the Culture of thy Gracious Hand:" (lines 26-27). Most poignantly, Brewster asks, not only that they be allowed to stand together (in the semiotic), but also that this be "dressed in the culture" of the God, the Symbolic. In other words, she asked that she be allowed to keep her semiotic relationship within the Symbolic.

This idea opens an interesting interpretation of how both religion and the Symbolic order works. It is clear that the speaker is a pious woman, and she worships her Christian God. It is also clear that she values the strong connection built between herself and Ruby Bliss. Yet, it is marriage and death – both systems upheld in the religious system as necessary and positive – that cause the cleft between mother and daughter. But it is this system that Brewster worships, and it is this system that causes her grief. It is her worship of God, then, that causes the confusion in her emotional state that becomes apparent in the final lines of the poem where twice more she changes the addressee of the poem.

The poem concludes with the following six lines in which the speaker addresses her own heart for two lines and then Ruby Bliss again in the final four lines:

Chear up my drooping Heart, shake of thy Woes,

Tho' cruel Distance means to Interpose.

There is a Place where we may Daily meet,

With joint Request, before the Mercy feat;

In hopes of which your tender Mother fests,

Until your Countenance her Eyes shall Bless. (lines 35-40)

The speaker begins with a self consolation, a plea to let go of the pain of the separation. This need to cast away her grieving must be connected to her reverence for the God that has caused the separation, even as she calls the distance "cruel." Finally, the mother returns to her daughter and suggests "a Place where we may Daily meet" to counteract the separation. While this suggestion is a much more open request than we have seen in those between mothers and sons, it is still conflicted. This uncertainty is highlighted by two changes in Brewster's final two lines. She moves from referring to herself in the first person to referring to herself in the third person, and she rises from the familiar and forms of second person (thee and thou) to the elevated forms of addressing her daughter ("your" in lines 39 and 40) for a second time. These changes suggest that the speaker, aware that she must dampen her own emotions, safely separates herself from those emotions by distancing herself from the speaker of the poem. This separation, like the separation caused by the insertion of the Symbolic into the semiotic, means that Brewster should address her daughter with elevated terms because unregulated relationship is over. This separation leaves the speaker/mother abjected. The maternal function which fostered the semiotic relationship and mourned the loss of that relationship is now the left over, the abject.

Conclusion

In each of these four poems written by American women authors, the poem's speaker represents the maternal function as a place of dire pain. In three of the four poems (Sigourney's, Plath's, and Brewster's), it is the mother/maternal function who speaks. Those mothers speak with full knowledge of their current or future abjection by the child, or more accurately, the abjection that the child is required to make to move into the Symbolic. This maternal knowledge of abjection shows readers that even while the semiotic is repressed by the Symbolic, women poets are able to access and process the pain of that repression through poetic language.

For Kristeva, poetic language offers a crucial means through which to express the semiotic within the Symbolic order. In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Kristeva defines poetic language as a signifying process through which we might see "the penetration of the socio-Symbolic by jouissance"(80). She links the social and the Symbolic and argues that poetry is "a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself" (81). Therefore, poetic language, through its employment of both semiotic and Symbolic functions of language, reveals the poet's potential to make meaning outside of the Lacanian Symbolic law. Poetic language then, along with pregnancy, is one of the few ways that subjects can rupture the Symbolic order. This potential is rooted in the mother-child relationship; through the use of semiotic rhythms and tones, semiotic language and poetic language communicate with tools outside of the Symbolic, and because these tools lie outside of the Symbolic Law, they disrupt it.

I argue that these four women use poetic language and their exploration of the maternal function to maneuver themselves into a place outside of the Symbolic, and,

through this positioning, they are capable of action in language. As females, women poets have been sexed in the Symbolic by the rejection of their own mother/self and have taken up language as the substitute for this rejection (or lack). However, because they are females and identify with their mothers, they cannot completely reject their mothers, and, therefore, some connection still exists between the rejected mothers/selves and the poets themselves. Both this connection between mother and self and poetic language, built in the semiotic relationship between mother and child, are outside of the Symbolic. Therefore, when a woman poet uses poetic language, she engages herself outside of the Symbolic. Like a pregnant woman, she negotiates the connotative, ordered, and grammatical signification along with the rhythmic, motion, and tonal significations of language.

A woman poet, then, who writes a poem in which the abjection of maternal function is discussed, writes a poem (semiotic disruption) that interrogates the Symbolic order in that it, at its most mild, expresses the pain of that abjection, and at its most severe, refuses the abjection. The most startling finding in these four poems is that it is the earliest poem, Brewster's 1757 poem "A Letter to my Daughter Ruby Bliss," that comes closest to refusing the abjection. It is also worth noting, and is significant that this is the only poem of the four in which the child is marked female. Brewster's speaker, probably a version of Brewster herself, concludes her poem with a wish for the reunion of herself with her daughter. We might conclude that because the child is a daughter, the mother can openly express her pain because the mother-daughter relationship poses less threat to the Law. This, of course, underscores the heterosexual compulsion of the

psychoanalytic model and reminds us of Kristeva's call for a new discourse to discuss this relationship between mother and daughter.

Ai's poem, "Abortion," also sexes the child, but her child is male and is dead. This poem, the youngest of the poems discussed here (1973), is also the only poem spoken in a voice marked male. Because the speaker is the father of the child, he is aligned with the Law and becomes the representation of the Law. And, because the child is dead, this father must also consider the pain of losing a child, not because the child must give up the semiotic to take the Symbolic, but because the phallic system will not allow the psychoanalytic development of a child under certain circumstances (in this case, a mother chooses not to birth a child into poverty and cuts the semiotic relationship through abortion). The maternal function is overpowered by poverty, and this leaves both mother and father childless. Yet Ai's performance of this male speaker, because it is poetic language, is still a disruption of the Symbolic.

Both Sigourney's "Death of an Infant" (1827) and Plath's "Child" (1963) contain unsexed children that I have read to be pre-Symbolic. Both speakers are anonymous, but because of the readership and historical understandings of the poets work might be cautiously understood as feminine speakers. In these two poems, the speakers lament the movement of the child from the semiotic to the Symbolic, so much so that they refuse to speak the sex of the child. In Plath's poem, the speaker also bemoans the abjection of the mother that is sure to follow. Both of these poems rely heavily on rhythm and tone to shape the poem, even though one is free verse and the other adheres to heroic couplets, and both poems disrupt the Symbolic both with the use of poetic language and by drawing the reader's attention to their hesitancy about the child's entrance into the

Symbolic. This hesitancy marks an understanding of the maternal function's role in ushering the child into the Symbolic and the primary function of the semiotic in formation of the subject.

As these poets explore the maternal functions, they must also engage the social norms of their time and place. In each of these poems, when poetic language performs gender, it both deconstructs and calls to light those social norms. As Ai's male speaker discusses the loss of his son, he calls into question the general public's acceptance of poverty in America and requires readers to consider the consequences of that poverty on the maternal function and the paternal function insofar as it disrupts the Law. In Sigourney's poem, "Death of an Infant," readers are forced to reconcile their attitudes toward God and/or the Symbolic with the sadness of the loss of an infant to that God and/or the Symbolic. In "A Letter to My Daughter Ruby Bliss," readers must consider the harshness of the phallic economy which moves daughters from the semiotic to the Symbolic and then marries them off so that they will perpetuate the system. Finally, Plath's poem "Child" interrogates the system in which mother's are the instrument of their abjection. The speaker in Plath's poem wants to see the child enter the Symbolic, but this change requires that she hide away the pain associated with that change. In each poem, these women poets have created a unique position in language and in the socio-political arena that affords them the capability to call our attention to both the social norms and the Symbolic law.

For these four American women poets, to perform the maternal function is to perform the role most aligned with the feminine: maternity. Yet, for each, this performed social role is a painful representation of the abjection of woman. In any era,

despite the seemingly changing accepted roles of women within American culture, the popularity of each of these poems indicates not only an understanding and internalization by these poets of the maternal function, but it also indicates a wider acceptance of both the mother's abjection and her primary role in the semiotic phase of development.

A certain set of dangers are folded into this type of reading, and possibly in psychoanalytic readings themselves. A reading of the maternal function within poetic language dances along the edge of re-inscription of the traditional feminine roles for women. For even if a semiotic relationship is primary, it is also always abject. This seems to ask women to offer up her body for the sacrifice. Yet, when we study the maternal function within poetic language, particularly a poetic language created by women, semiotic language becomes more than primary, it endures. For if a woman can write the semiotic through her poetic language, she can reconnect both with her own mother and with her children. Moreover, she connects to the semiotic in all of her readers as well. These connections suggest that in interrogating the maternal function through poetry, the woman poet escapes the re-inscription of a limited view of femininity because she utilizes genre to make those assessments. Thereby, using genre to examine gender, she forces herself and her readers outside of the phallic economy to consider what a non-rejected maternal might become. Because she is expected to be abject, a women poet is expected to write in with languages conforming to social norms created for them by the Symbolic. When she writes poetry, she writes back (to/against the norms and patriarchy), and she writes herself (the semiotic, non-rejected mother).

Difference/Equivalence

Voices: *Talk about God, your beloved children,*
tell us only of enduring pain, of foregoing gains,
take out that line that wonders too much,
remove bravery, pleasure, assurance, lust
Talk about my God, my life, my children.

the beat of centuries; histories heat stories:
separation, incarceration, captive relaxation
drones in metallic tones
like oil colors on mud and toil churns
southern summer asphalt puddles
hands: boards, leather, demands
everything settles, separates, signifies

but what does the talk of fathers say
of my body of my talk of my words of my _____
what does the talk of mothers whisper

scratch of instrument on parchment creak of elbow
like the screech of metal-hinged shackles straining
the grating of two like elements

equivalence

in the tightening of time-circle in a whitening of faces
in our thinning, spinning, pressure mounting
_____ draws up lines like veins
needle weighs against skin giving way
outside goes in; inside comes out:

balance teeters in crooked feet
under resting sheets
over testing each and every moment: color

and i enter in that moment
fighting against and for, for and against
i consider myself woman: body
i can hold with my fingers when color blurs

difference

poetry = madness=woman=____

---Katherine D. Perry

CHAPTER FIVE

Beyond Hysteria: Women, Poetry, Madness

Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a chain
~Emily Dickinson, "Much Madness is Divinest Sense"

In the previous two chapters, I explored marriage and the maternal as performances of femininity. In this chapter, I will consider "madness" as another performance of femininity, and I will, again, consider the subversive possibilities of performatives employed by American women poets. In addition, I will consider how a woman's body is written for her (by phallogocentric language) and/or by her (*l'écriture féminine*) within poetry. If, as I argued in chapter three, the ontological woman exists prior to the performance of femininity, then in this chapter, I will seek to understand the poetic representation of madness as the point at which that performance intersects with woman. For it is when a woman resists the expected performances (maternity or the Masquerade) that she is said to be mad. But when women write using the language of madness, rather than performing hysteria by writing *about* madness, they employ the site of the female body, the temporal and positional female body, to represent that madness. This body creates fever, tremors, depression, mania, and even voices that, like poetic language used to represent that body, offer insights into the veiled woman. Through poetry, and through the language of the semiotic and the representation of the female body, women can write themselves by employing the language of madness. I argue that

it is through this self-inscription that women escape the performances of femininity prescribed for them by patriarchy and can begin to define themselves.

First, however, I need to build a working definition of madness. In her book *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness,* Jane M. Ussher justifies her use of the term "madness" rather than insanity, schizophrenia, or depression. She says:

> To use the term 'madness' is to recognize the meaning attached to the perception of illness or dysfunction in the psychological domain – the stigma attached – and to avoid entering into the discourse of the experts wherein these different classificatory systems are deemed to exist as entities in themselves, as illnesses which *cause* the disturbance in function in the first place. (11)

Like Ussher, I employ the term *madness* and do not confine myself to specific clinical diagnoses so that I can explore psychiatric knowledge while refusing to confine specific women to specific illnesses. This means that many of the well known psychiatric diagnoses from hysteria to manic-depression and from anorexia to melancholia are encompassed in the term *madness*, but many of the social labels from irrational to lunatic and from witch to spinster are included as well. Using the term *madness* allows me to incorporate all of these types of "insanity" and look beyond any single category of these illnesses, so that I might investigate in a broader sense what madness means for women and how the language of madness, when used in poetry, might reveal the performance of femininty. I am not interested in, at least here, actual insanity which is, by most accounts, crippling rather than subversive.

Yet the language of madness is tied to the cultural understanding of mental illnesses. Ussher claims that, in our culture, "Madness acts as a signifier, clearly positioning women as the Other," and it "acts to position 'woman' within society, within discourse" (11). Madness, then, is a performance, a signifier, of femininity in which women are Other within the masculine social structures of Western culture. This means that the symptoms assigned to madness within our culture mark a woman as ill or Other when those same symptoms if experienced within a Shamanic culture, would mark her (and celebrate her) as a guru (12). In other words, a woman in Minneapolis who hears voices telling her that the sky is falling might be medicated or hospitalized where that same woman in a Shamanic culture in an isolated religious group in rural Minnesota might be revered as a sage.[60]

My challenge in this final chapter is to investigate poems that speak *about* madness and to find if and where those poems become languages *of* madness as Shoshana Felman delineates (18). In her essay "Women and Madness," Felman argues that madness is:

> a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking behavior is itself part of

[60] Also see Denise Russell's book *Women, Madness, Medicine.* Considering the symptoms of schizophrenia, she considers South American, Japanese, and South African cultures in which hearing voices or emphatically believing what others reject is considered Shamanic and makes a person highly valued rather than lessening their value in the culture (as it does in the West) (150-151). This separates her from others because schizophrenia is generally considered "real madness" whereas depression, hysteria, or PMS might be categorized as constraints placed on women by patriarchal culture. For Russell, even the "major" "illnesses" are in question. She calls into question pharmaceutical companies and their selling methods (she notes that companies in the United States spend $6,000 to $8,000 per doctor on drug promotion) (155) along with the ideology that teaches women to become complicit in the psychiatric diagnosis in exchange for lowered expectations (155-156).

> female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioral pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such. (22)

Felman argues that if madness (and woman) is outside of reason and phallogocentric language, woman has the challenge of re-defining herself without reason and phallogocentric language. She describes this challenge thusly:

> If, in our culture, the woman is by definition associated with madness, her problem is how to break out of this (cultural) imposition of madness *without* taking up the critical and therapeutic position of reason: how to avoid speaking both as *mad* and as *not mad.* The challenge facing the women today is nothing less than to 'reinvent' language, to *re-learn how to speak*: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning. (40)

In her book *Writing and Madness,* Felman points to Michel Foucault's[61] claim that madness is a lack of language or a repressed language in order to argue that woman finds herself in a difficult position when she attempts to use language to discuss madness (14). Yet, it seems to be that it is through literature that the possibilities for expressing madness and for understanding of madness have survived. If madness is the repression of or silencing of language, in the same way that women and their bodies are repressed or

[61]Foucault's book *Madness and Civilization* is considered by many feminist theorists to be ground-breaking for our understanding of madness within Western culture. He argues that madness is no longer about unreasonable or irrational behavior, but that it is a method for ejecting those useless in the labor market (58). Confinement of the mad person becomes a method to avoid shame (66) but also a method of glorifying the animalistic nature of madness (78). He points out that while fifteenth and sixteenth century western cultures saw a productive relationship between wise man and fool (think *King Lear)*, by the eighteenth century that had been severed by the implementation of medicinal institutionalization and a belief that madmen were outside of reason (and should be kept outside of culture) (x).

silence by patriarchy and reason, and in the same way that semiotic and poetic language is repressed by the symbolic,[62] then this chapter is an attempt to illuminate both the connections between women, madness, and poetry and to query if women's poetry might possibly be one of the languages *of* madness.[63]

In my investigation of the performance of hysteria and the language of madness, I will consider six poems by American women that take as their subjects the physical manifestations and consequences of the symptoms that society has called "madness." Three of the poems, I will argue, are poems which present performances of the expected/prescribed madwoman. The other three present performative poems which reveal the performance of the expected irrational feminine and offer a performance of the language of madness that remains suspended outside expected performances through the poet's usage of ambiguity and slippage in her subject matter and language. Surprisingly, the poems do not fall into the categories we might expect. Of the six poems, three are by poets who have rarely been connected with madness, and two of those three poems use performative language to call attention to the difficulty of communicating madness. However, of the three poems from poets who have been widely discussed in connection

[62] Early psychoanalytic theorist like Melanie Klein explained mental illnesses in terms of child development. In her 1938 article "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," she argues that when the child is weaned (before, during, and after weaning) it goes through a kind of depression which she calls the depressive position (252). This position is mourning through which the child learns to deal with the loss of the mother. Klein argues that mourning over losses later in life are not only similar to the depressive position, but the successful release of the lost object in later life depends upon a successful development through this depressive position (262). She also argues that because the depressive position is followed by a manic position in which the child's ego develops defenses against the lost mother, the ego-organization that occurs in this early phase of development is similar to manic-depressive illness (256). Patients with manic-depressive illness, according to Klein, are incapable of successfully overcoming the infantile depressive position (276).

[63] This is also a distinction made by other feminists which continues to pose problems for women and language. For to speak in the "master's language" is to always be inside of and defined by that language. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray points out that within the logical phallogocentric discourse, "to speak *of* or *about* woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition" (78).

with madness, both in their personal lives and in their poetic subject matter, two perform the expected role of the madwoman.

Beginning with the three poems from poets not usually connected with madness, "Upon Some Distemper of the Body" (1678) by Anne Bradstreet, "The Slave Mother" (1854) by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, and "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" (1983) by Joy Harjo, my discussion will center on how the rejection of maternity and uneasiness with other feminine performances results in a kind of physical and societal madness. The discussion of these first three poems will also explore the performance of race and its intersection with the performance of gender. I will then consider how performances of race, gender, and madness intersect, and how healing or resolution is presented by the poem. The second set of poems contains works written by women who are arguably the most famous American poets connected to madness, "I felt a cleavage in my mind" (circa 1865) by Emily Dickinson, "For the Year of the Insane" (1966) by Anne Sexton, and "Lesbos" (1962) by Sylvia Plath. While it is interesting that these three poets are all white, middle class, and "mad" by many definitions, my discussion will not focus on the mental health history of the poets themselves. Instead, my discussion of these poems will center on the poet's choice to present either the traditional performance of the madwoman or the performative that reveals a subversion of that traditional performance through a language of madness. The discussion in this section will follow the connections between the cultural mediation of women's bodies and the racial, sexual, and socio-economic positions of those mediated bodies. In the end, I show that three of the six poets presented in this chapter communicate madness by miming a performed mediated body and by using bodily ailments, pains, and traditional

healing methods to effectively speak and to speak with a language *of* madness while the other three replicate the long standing mediated performances of the feminine which consequently signifies a phantom, hysterical body. My claim is that some poets (but not all, and these poets are not always the poets we associate with madness) are able to speak and speak *of* madness, and that by using poetic language (rhythms, tones, meters, and metaphors), their poems illustrate the connections between the performative and subversive language of madness. Finally, I will investigate questions such as: What are the implications of wellness for women whose madness is connected with cultural or gender revolutions and subversion? How do formal poetic features relate to a mad (and well) body? And, when is a poem's performance of femininity related to or part of the construction of a mad (or well) body?

Women, Bodies, and Madness

I begin with the claim of a cultural connection between women and madness. According to Ussher, a central component associating madness with femininity and with the female body is the continued association between female sexuality and deviancy, construed as madness (71). But Ussher is not the originator of this idea. Phyllis Chesler's groundbreaking work, *Women and Madness* (1972), thoroughly investigates the connections between women and madness. She argues that women are directly connected to self-sacrifice through their bodies (maternal bodies), and are thereby "impaled on the cross of self-sacrifice" (71). It is this self-sacrifice and devaluation of women that Chesler believes drives women into clinical madness, and it is this self-sacrifice in Western culture that leads Chesler to posit that an Amazon-like culture where

women control their own bodies (reproduction, sexuality, pleasure, and work) is the path away from patriarchy and patriarchal institutions. She notes:

> Such madness is essentially an intense experience of female biological, sexual, and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency. The search often involves "delusions" or displays of physical aggression, grandeur, sexuality, and emotionality—all traits which would probably be more acceptable in female-dominated cultures. Such traits in women are feared and punished in patriarchal mental asylums. (71)

While Chesler's arguments about the importance of social construction are helpful in understanding the social implications of madness, it is her insistence on the connection between women and their bodies that I want to underscore. Our contemporary cultural understanding of madness utilizes a wide use of medicinal treatment, which clearly places mental illnesses within the body and shows that our current understanding of madness is chemically and neurologically based. However, even while madness is considered a bodily disease, most psychiatrists continue to rely upon the "talking cures" even if they have others (therapists, psychologists, and other counselors) perform the work. This implies that the medical community still considers madness as part of a mental deficiency (mind not body) and/or that language and speaking can be part of a physical (bodily) cure. Either way, these therapies represent methods of enhancing the physical treatments of pharmacology by teaching patients (usually women) to control their "base" bodily urges through reasoning and scientific thinking. Because current medical groups insists that madness is hereditary, biological, and chemical, and that it is also controllable with mental rigor and discipline, it may be that our current culture is in

transition: we are subject to a long history of the repression of the body by rationality in the Cartesian mind/body split, yet we want to understand the body and its neurological functions.

According to Susan Bordo, in her essay "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight from the Feminine," this split is inherited from René Descartes and his seventeenth-century insistence that organic knowledge and the body should remain separate and governed by scientific knowledge. In Descartes' mind/body separation, the body is an object to be ruled by reason. If madness is located in the body and (therefore) associated with the feminine, it too becomes subject to masculine reason's rule. This "flight from the feminine," Bordo argues, puts the spiritual (God/father/male) in opposition to the corporeal (Earth/mother/female), and sets up the latter as the "it" to be studied and controlled by science (108). In *Meditations,* Descartes says:

> And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons, devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant. (59)

For Descartes, then, to be mad is to have a disturbance of the brain (the "cerebella"). It is a bodily problem that must be overcome or brought under control by reason, a non-bodily, transcendent faculty. Bordo equates Descartes' organic knowledge (body and reproduction) with the feminine that his scientific knowledge (rationality and medicine) seeks to control. The result of these seventeenth-century beliefs was a wide-spread cultural separation of mind and body, which still holds weight in American mental health industry. As I pointed out above, much of contemporary psychiatry and psychology attempts to "control" the irregularities of the body with medicinal and behavioral therapies.[64] If madness is in the brain/body (consisting of tissues and a series of synaptic explosions), our culture continues to privilege reason and transcendence over the brain/body, especially when the body is female.

This mind/body split is also crucial to Luce Irigaray and her claim that woman is elsewhere. In her book *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray points out that woman's sexual pleasure "has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations" (77). Female pleasure must remain "elsewhere" because to know and understand it would threaten the phallic structure of our culture. She argues:

> Mother-matter-nature must go on forever nourishing speculation. But this re-source is also rejected as the waste of reflection, cast outside as what resists it: as madness. Besides the ambivalence that the nourishing phallic

[64]In *Women and Madness,* Phyllis Chesler gives evidence to show that women patients are more likely to be diagnosed as insane. Within the clinical world, she says, "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms of her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable" (104). Therefore, women find themselves in positions where they must both control their bodies by becoming the less desirable position of female which is many times associated with madness.

> mother attracts to herself, this function leaves woman's sexual pleasure aside. (77)

Women, their bodies, and their sexual pleasure, then, are like madness: their self-definitions are outside of the Law. Irigaray advocates ambivalence and blurring as methods for women's self-definition. She says:

> It is useless, then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expected to surprise them. They have returned within themselves. (29)

For Irigaray then, for women to escape the control of the masculine/rationality, they must claim their position as "already elsewhere" and refuse to allow their definition to be made within the Law. This will, Irigaray claims, clog the machinery of phallogocentrism and open the possibility for women and their bodies to be written by women, not inscribed for them by the Law. It is this distinction, the distinction between inscribed definitions (by phallogocentrism) and self-definition (by women), that marks the difference between performances of the traditional madwoman or hysteric and performativity and the language of madness in the poems I discuss in this chapter. When a woman performs the inscribed definition of madness, she reinforces the traditional femininity as defined by patriarchy. But if she explores madness through performative language of madness, she opens the possibility of subverting the patriarchy by calling attention to the traditional performance.

To further keep a handle on how I categorize the language of madness and the body in this chapter and in the poetry, I have divided my discussion into three categories

of performances: medical, hysterical, and organic. A medical performance is the feminine body performed by women as I have described in chapters three and four: the body controlled by the Symbolic. The Masquerade and motherhood/maternity are social performances of the feminine that define and control women's bodies. The medical body is not subversive or mimetic because, as I discussed in earlier chapters, it is a performance inscribed by the Law. The Law mediates a woman's body and this mediation occurs through the control and definitions imposed on it by patriarchy and scientific knowledge. In this chapter, I will call this mediated body the medical body because it is medicine and scientific knowledge that reigns over this performance of the woman's body. The maternal body, while holding the potential for semiotic and poetic language, as explored in chapter four, is a medical body because maternity and motherhood have been taken over and controlled by medicine and science. In addition, if a woman refuses maternity, she becomes reclassified as a hysteric, and her body is deemed hysterical.

This hysterical body, on the other hand, is only a phantom body. It is a body that many feminist critics have studied and have claimed as subversive because it rejects the maternal and the Masquerade. Yet if we look closely at the work done on the hysteric, we find that the actual body is absent in those works. Consequently, hysteria becomes another prescribed body through which the Masquerade and motherhood are abandoned for madness, yet the physical body remains absent. The woman's transcendence of the body into hysteria leaves her disembodied and trapped in yet another prescribed performance. In the end, the Law prescribes this hysterical body just as it prescribes the medical body. The woman is still a phantom, because the hysterical body is reduced

(beginning with Freud) to the womb. Hysteria becomes yet another performance of femininity. It is, however, different than Masquerade or motherhood, because those expected roles are forgiven (by the Law) when the role of hysteric is taken up.

The role of the hysteric and hysteria in our culture is drawn from a long history, and the female body has been linked to hysteria from its inception. Many link the roots of hysteria as far back as Hippocrates and Plato.[65] Because it is derived from the Greek word *hystera* which means "belonging to the womb," *hysteric* and *hysteria* have been consistently connected to the female body (particularly the womb). Irigaray points out this connection in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*.[66] She shows that in Plato's allegory of the cave, the cave, like the womb (hystera), is the "displaced, transposed, transferred, metaphorized, [that] always already holds [men] captive" (245). It is the cave (the womb) that the philosopher/king seeks to escape in order to find Truth. A female, then, in this myth, becomes merely the womb through which the philosopher/king might find his enlightenment. And even in psychoanalysis, hysteria is still seen in this way throughout most of the twentieth century. In 1883, Freud and Josef Breuer published *Studies on Hysteria* which included case studies of five women and a theoretical explanation.[67] While Freud did not discount cases of hysteria in men, he primarily published cases studies of women patients, thereby continuing the long

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[65] For an excellent catalog of the history or "herstory" of hysteria, see *Hysteria Beyond Freud* by Sander Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G.S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. In the first chapter, King complicates the much assumed connection between modern hysteria and Hippocrates. She sees hysteria as a moving disease, a name that could cover many illnesses, that was meant to label women as sick and was then limited to a fixed disease in the nineteenth century.

[66] Her chapter labeled "Plato's Hysteria" uses word play and puns to illustrate the philosophical underpinnings to Western understanding of women and their bodies.

[67] This book is believed by many to be one of the beginning texts that led to the practice of psychoanalysis. For an excellent overview of Freud's early work with women patients, see Jennifer L. Pierce's article "The Relation Between Emotion Work and Hysteria: a Feminist Reinterpretation of Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*" in *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): 255-270.

standing connection between hysteria (and ultimately madness) and women. In addition, Freud and other early psychoanalysts connected hysteria to white, middle-class women, and this is yet another long standing connection that has remained intact. While many feminist theorists have drawn connections between women, their bodies, and hysteria, most continue to hold up a separation between the mind and the body. Freud maintains that failure to adhere to the normative development of the Law results in hysteria, and while Freud maintains that hysteria is not linked by biology to woman, the slippage and the root meanings of "hysteria" connects hysteria to the feminine and to the body. Therefore, in terms of the Law, hysteria is yet another feminine role that women can perform, and that hysteric's body, while separated by Freud and others from the medical (or controlled) body, remains a body written by the Law.

In her article "Gut Feminism," Elizabeth A. Wilson discusses the biological implications of hysteria and points out Freud's 1893 paper in which he distinguishes between hysterical and organic paralyses. Wilson points to that Freud disassociates hysteria from the organic body when he argues that the cortex in hysterical patients is undamaged but that the "ideas about the body have undergone some kind of alteration" (68). This separation between psyche and body led Freud and the many feminists who would follow psychoanalysis to "think of bodily transformation ideationally and symbolically, without reference to biological constraints" (69). Wilson employs examples of bulimic patients to show the interdependent relationships between the organic body and the psyche, and then she uses these examples to question the division that psychoanalysis has created between mind and body. She argues that this re-reading of Freud's 1893 paper might open up new ways for feminists to consider the

psychosomatic event of hysteria. As she does in her book, *Psychosomatic*, in this article, Wilson offers an integrated approach to mind and body when considering the hysteric. "Hysteria," she argues, "is one particular mode of biological writing" (78). This offers the possibility of bodily representation within language.

I want to separate the traditional disembodied hysteria from the bodily hysteria Wilson describes, not because they are not related, but because we have understood them differently for so many years. In order to begin to integrate the mind and body, we must begin to see how and where those divisions have taken place and where those divisions are beginning to dissolve. I argue that until the body is included in our understanding of madness, hysteria will remain a representation of the voiceless woman and phantasmic body. However, if we begin to understand madness as the interplay between neurology, psyche, and biology, we may find a language of madness and a female body. Since we are still in the transition phase of our understanding, however, I will use two terms that Wilson employs to denote the differences between the two: I will use hysteria to describe the disembodied and purely psychological representation of madness, and I will use organic to describe the language of madness which is represented as an integrated relationship between psyche and body.

So, a language of madness exists in the organic. The language of madness, like madness itself, begins within the body, in the actual neurological body, and is without a prescribed norm. It is outside of the Law. Therefore, the organic embodies the elsewhere (in the way Irigaray understands it); the organic body is the refusal of feminine performances (including hysteria), and it results in a revelation of those performances through poetic language. While both the hysteric and the medical bodies are inscribed by

the Law, the organic body escapes that inscription. Yet, we might still conceive of the organic body that is still socially constructed, while not inscribed by the Law of the Father. Judith Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter,* "To posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition" (30). This constructed but not inscribed body, the organic body, is the site of the language of madness. This body is neither medical nor hysteric. This organic body reveals the performances of femininity inherent in the hysteric and medical bodies both by refusing to be either and by using performativity to reveal the restraints of feminine performances.

It is the distinction between the performance and the performative that creates a possibility to recognize the separation between the medical and hysteric bodies and the organic body. If we recognize this organic body and the refusals of feminine performances, we will also open the possibilities of the differences inherent in racial bodies, sexual bodies, or neurological brain patterns that might also separate women's bodies from the expected societal gendered bodies. We can begin to understand the unmediated and/or organic woman/body as mad because that body exists within cultures that burn it if it disobeys, enslave it by racial categories, or hospitalize it for vocalizing dissatisfaction. And finally, this chapter asks the basic question: if madness is unmediated and outside the Law, can women speak the language of madness?

This question is addressed by Marta Caminero-Santangelo in her book, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: or Why Insanity Isn't Subversive.* She argues that madness (a term she uses interchangeably with insanity) cannot be a subversion technique of writers because it is instead a silencing tool. Caminero-Santangelo defines madness as the

inability to differentiate self from other and argues that this inability preempts a woman's subjectivity and her ability to form collective resistance because it is non-communicative (179). Her claims that madwomen cannot speak are based on the argument that feminist theories of repressed languages, such as Julia Kristeva's semiotic and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's speaking in tongues, are descriptions of pre-linguistic methods and, therefore, those methods must be non-communicative (133). This leads her to hypothesize that madness is not (and cannot be) liberating, but it is, instead, a restraint placed on women by white patriarchy to keep them from communicating, and thereby to keep them from communal resistance. Contrary to Caminero-Santangelo's arguments, I align myself with Kristeva and Henderson and posit that the mad/organic body, unlike the hysterical body (which I believe Caminero-Santangelo describes), achieves communication through the performative and through mimicry. With the use of mimicry and by employing poetic language which is built upon ambiguity and slippage of signifiers, organic bodies can call patriarchal language into question. This ambiguity, like the organic body, refuses to remain contained within the expected categories and meanings, and instead insists upon the recognition of slippage within the language itself just as the organic body reveals the expected performances of femininity.

In her book *Black Sun,* Kristeva claims that in some writings about madness (or specifically melancholia in this work), not only does language come from that madness, but it also has restorative potential. In this book, Kristeva builds on classic psychoanalytic theories and defines melancholia as the "impossible mourning for the maternal object" (9). This melancholia "conceals aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of

mourning" (11). Therefore, the sufferer both loves and hates the lost object and his/herself. In her discussion of Gérard de Nerval's poem "El Disdichado" she claims that Nerval is able to "[conjure] up (as in analysis) archaic psychic experiences that few people reach through their conscious speech" (170). This conjuring, Kristeva claims, is achieved through, "its key position in the organization and disorganization of psychic space, at the limits of affect and meaning, of biology and language, of asymbolia and breathtakingly rapid or eclipsed significance" (170). Through this language that perches itself at the seemingly impossible intersections of opposites (and ambivalence), poets are able to represent madness in their poetry. By doing so, Kristeva claims, they are "provided an antidote to depression, a temporary salvation" (170) by representing in language the death drive. And these representations of madness are intelligible to the "ordinary" reader, according to Kristeva. Speaking of the repetitious and monotonous prosody in "El Disdichado" she claims, "But the sonnet can also be read by ordinary readers who know nothing about such referents, if they will simply allow themselves to be caught up in the phonic and rhythmic coherence, which at the same time limits and permits the free associations inspired by each word or name" (162). This communication, she states, is yet another triumph over melancholia, for by writing the poem, the poet becomes both "subordinate to it [melancholia] and … elsewhere" (145). Therefore, for Kristeva, not only can madness be represented in language, it can be relieved through language. In Kristeva's argument, it is the poem that creates the elsewhere of the organic body. I maintain that it is the writing of the language of madness that separates the hysterical body from the organic body.

While the history of bodily repression is crucial to my approach to madness, it is my hope that this chapter will call that repression and mind/body split into question. Following Wilson's ideas in her book, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body,* I posit that it is possible to consider the many systems of the body (neurological, emotional, cognitive) as interconnected rather than a few systems (cognitive and emotional) in which one rules the other (mind over body or vice versa). Wilson calls for new scientific and feminist theoretical thinking in which hierarchal structures of our understanding of human systems (evolution and social determinism) is replaced with an interfacing set of systems which utilize modularity and connectivity rather than hierarchy (94). Wilson points out that the body has been excluded[68] from the analysis of many feminist theorists when it pertains to the discussion of madness. In an attempt to "extend the somatic beginnings of psychoanalysis back further than hysteria," she argues that it is not just the hysterical body that can be analyzed in feminisms, but also the neurological system (1). She looks to Freud's 1878 work on the spinal cord of the lamprey (petromyzon) and this work's implications for all other vertebrae systems. Wilson claims that feminists like Elaine Showalter[69] have retreated from biology even when they are theorizing the hysterical body (5). Rather than consider the biological implications of the hysteric's symptoms, Wilson claims that Showalter is "immersed in sensationalism" and "confined in her one-dimensional narrative of victimization" (6). She argues that even

[68]This exclusion may, in fact, be part of the repression of or flight from the feminine. On the other hand, it may be that the studies of madness have been focused on madness as a metaphor rather than the actual bodily symptoms of madness.

[69] In her 1985 book, *The Female Malady,* Showalter gives an exhaustive look at madness in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While she includes a fascinating group of portraits of patients and doctors, Showalter completely omits the bodily impact of insanity. She calls her study a "feminist history of psychiatry and a cultural history of madness as a female malady" (5).

theorists such as Monique David-Ménard, while offering more complex readings of hysteria, continue to rely on a separation of mind and body by explaining hysteria as an interaction between psychological and physiological elements (7).

I use Wilson's method of thinking to understand the role of the neurological body alongside of cognition in my analysis of madness, of the poems, and of women. In the poems discussed here, the performance of madness is located in the performed body and is described in terms of the physical body, emotion, and social position. Therefore, I intend to include in my analysis the social causes and impacts of madness (which are still as important as they were when Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar[70] pointed them out) as well as the physical symptoms and effects of madness. I hope that this chapter will add a new facet, the organic body, to the previous discussions of the hysterical body in literature by including the physical body as the location of madness. This discussion, I hope, will become more fruitful when I consider bodily madness beside the many gendered performances of the female body. The female body is still, as I have discussed above, a socially constructed object.

Anne Bradstreet's "Prologue" as an Introduction

I would like to briefly return to America's poetic foremother, Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) whose poems set the stage for all American women's poetry that will follow them. I return to seventeenth-century, British-colonial, Puritan culture where a woman's expected self-sacrifice meant not only child bearing but also living in the wilderness and under the patriarchy of a husband who not only ruled his home but, in Bradstreet's case,

[70]It is my hope that this chapter is not at odds with ground-breaking works such as *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Instead, I hope that I can build on Gilbert's and Gubar's work by reexamining the body, particularly in the work of Emily Dickinson which they discuss in chapter 16. The work of *Madwoman* was primarily focused on the authors, not their works. I am focused here on Dickinson's poetry, not her life.

was also a governmental leader. While madness was a common topic for philosophers in the seventeenth century, few women spoke on the subject of madness, or if they did, few of their ideas have survived. Yet some expressions on madness can be found. In her famous poem "The Prologue," Bradstreet says:

> Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure:
> A weak or wounded brain admits no cure.
>
> I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
> Who says my hand a needle better fits,
> A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
> For such despite they cast on female wits:
> If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
> They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance. (*The Works* 16).

It is this poem by Bradstreet that is frequently cited by critics (in particular her line, "my hand a needle better fits") in order to illustrate how American women's poetry was received prior to the twentieth century. But it is the less famous set of lines, "Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure: / A weak or wounded brain admits no cure," that resonate for my purposes. These lines, which consider the power of art, also open a line of questioning about healthy and/or ill brains and the connection between that illness and femininity. Because this poem is, on the whole, a defense of woman as poet, Bradstreet sets up the "weak" and "wounded" as the feminine, as the traditional performance of the feminine. Bradstreet claims that "art can do much," but also says that art cannot heal her "weak or wounded brain" because it "admits no cure." Therefore, for Bradstreet, even

the writing of poetry cannot save women from madness. She is too far gone. Even so, while the poem begins with performance of the hysterical body, the remainder of the poem (with its impressive wit, form, and structure) resists this view of women poets as feeble and admirably shows Bradstreet's brain to be both strong and healthy. For while she says that her "hand a needle better fits," each well crafted line undercuts this popular opinion and reveals that a woman can be a strong poet. How then, did Bradstreet and her society come to understand women poet's brains as sickly? This notion seems to find its root in the Cartesian view of the body, particularly the female body. And it is this mind/body split that Bradstreet and every American woman poet that follows her must write against in order to write herself.

Bradstreet's famous "Prologue" offers our first glimpse of the performed hysteric in American poetry. For while Bradstreet produces a well constructed and poetically admirable poem, she still performs the hysterical woman by acknowledging herself as "weak," "wounded," and "obnoxious." This holds true in many of her poems and is evident in her poem "Upon Some Distemper of the Body" which discusses the physical elements of madness.

Anne Bradstreet's "Upon Some Distemper of the Body"

Bradstreet's publisher, John Foster, and her husband, Simon Bradstreet, published "Upon Some Distemper of the Body" (as well as the poem discussed in chapter two) posthumously in the 1678 edition of *Several Poems.* In this poem, Bradstreet's descriptions of malady parallel many of our contemporary definitions of hysteria, and so it follows that this poem ultimately presents the quintessential representation of the hysterical woman. Her heart is "replete with woes / and wasting pains" (line 1). She

cannot sleep in her "wakeful bed" (line 2), and she cries until she cannot cry anymore (line 6). While Bradstreet would not share our contemporary understanding of hysteria, she certainly describes an inner turmoil that we recognize as having strong ties to femininity and hysteria. While the seventeenth century New England culture was different from our own, Bradstreet would have been well aware of cases such as that of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643): her trial, confinement, banishment, and eventual death for her refusal to recant her Antinomian teachings.[71] This poem demonstrates some of the fear that many women of Bradstreet's time period probably felt: women must perform their expected roles or they might be sent to the woods to die.

Perhaps, then, it is this inability to perform the proper gender performance that characterizes Bradstreet's "distemper" in the opening lines of this poem. We see that Bradstreet describes a woman who is unable to take her expected place in the Puritan society, and woman who is, therefore, mad. Even if Bradstreet's understanding of hysteria differs slightly from ours, Bradstreet clearly attempts to connect this illness to the female body which must be tamed and controlled. While it at first seems that the organic body is important in this poem, Bradstreet ultimately reveals the dominance of the male-proscribed, female body by scribing a body which gives way to the metaphor of the body as vessel rather than revealing the actual body. While Bradstreet attempts to show the turmoil through the physical body, in the end it is a spiritual turmoil that the poem presents, and it is her spiritual (and masculine) leader, God, who solves the

[71] In his book *Madness and Civilization,* Foucault argues that seventeenth century cultures (especially European cultures) began confining mad citizens because of their idleness, their inability to labor, their lack of reason, and their uselessness (58). Confinement and banishment, then, were real possibilities for women who did not perform the expected feminine roles and bow down to the rational (and powerful) men of the day.

problem for her: the hysterical body becomes the problem to be solved through spiritual discipline and masculine proscription. It is important to note that Bradstreet's speaker, at least at the opening of this poem, seems to struggle with the body and how to deal with it. It is, perhaps, this struggle which is eventually open doors for later women poets to actually insert the organic body into their poetry.

Yet some critics have argued that there is not even a hysterical body in this poem; they suggest that the body in this poem is a reflection of the turmoil of the mind.[72] I believe, however, that the speaker in this poem exhibits a body which has the symptoms of hysteria, and she presents a body marked with hysteria. Evidence of this hysteria is found in several of the poem's lines: the speaker is sleepless ("wakeful" in line 3), crying ("bedrenched with tears" in line 4), in pain (line 2 and 11), mournful (line 4), and in misery (line 8). But even as Bradstreet attempts to present a hysteric, the body never really appears in this poem. She focuses on the outside manifestations of the symptoms and the emotional impact of those symptoms rather that on the body which is wracked by

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[72] In her article, "Negotiating Theology and Gynecology," Jean Marie Lutes says that the poem: "expresses a torment that seems better described as a distemper of the mind: 'in anguish of my heart replete with woes, / And wasting pains, which best my body knows, / In tossing slumbers on my wakeful bed, / Bedrenched with tears that flowed from mournful head'" (223). She goes on to say, "The problem is not physical, but mental. Her sorrow, frustration, and despair caused the pains, which she tells us her body knows best – a phrase that could imply that others cannot understand the nature of her affliction. The speaker looks up to the God "who sendeth help to those in misery" and is rewarded when God eases "my Soul of woe, my flesh of pain." The connection is clear; the soul is suffering, so the body suffers with it. By placing her suffering in this context, that of the soul in turmoil, Bradstreet puts her illness on the same plan as that of any other Puritan, man or woman. Although her bed is drenched with tears, her weeping is not that of a hysterical woman but of a sinful person struggling for grace. Any hysteria in this poem arises from sinfulness, not from the womb" (321-322). Even if Lute and I disagree about the hysteria in this poem, we do agree that the body is a phantom body, a reflection. Arguing that this poem is not about a hysterical woman, Lutes believes that the speaker's mind is intact in this poem and that there is no hysteria, not even a phantom body, but only a spiritual ache of the soul that is eased by the entrance of God. See "Negotiating Theology and Gynecology" Anne Bradstreet's Representations of the Female Body." *Signs* 22:2 (Winter 1997): 309-340.

the pain and agony. While we begin in line one, "In anguish of my heart replete with woes," with the mention of a heart, by the final lines Bradstreet outward and on metaphors of the soul, "[God] brought me to the shore from troubled main" (line 12). This hinting at a body without actually writing it into the poem means that Bradstreet presents a phantom body.

The phantom body is created with her speaker's frequent use of the body, not as a body, but as a metaphor. Bradstreet creates her performance of the hysteric with her use of the controlling metaphor of a ship in a storm: "tossing" (line 3), "bedrenched" (line 4), "chased away those clouds" (line 9), "my anchor cast" (line 10), and "brought me to the shore from troubled main" (line 12). This use of the ship allows Bradstreet's speaker to discuss the physical conditions of her body while holding onto the implication that the body, like a ship, is a vessel for carrying cargo (children and/or soul). More importantly, it also reinforces that the ship (the feminine) is to be controlled both by the storm (the hysteria) and by God (masculine/reason). In lines nine and ten, the speaker says, "He chased away those clouds and let me see / My anchor cast i' th' vale with safety." It is only through this masculine control that she is saved from crashing and from her madness. In order to return the speaker to the expected performances of the feminine (motherhood and wife), God has to remove her from the storm of the hysteria and return her to the shore of expected behavior where she is safe and contented. She says, "He eased my soul of woe, my flesh of pain, / and brought me to the shore from troubled main" (lines 11-12).

If the female speaker is a ship/vessel, then God guides her as a captain steers a ship. When she looks "up unto his throne on high" (line 7), God sends "help to those in

misery" (line 8) by chasing "away those clouds" (line 9) and showing her that anchor was "cast i'th' vale with safety" (line 10) all along. God eases her "soul of woe, [her] flesh of pain" (line 11) and brings her back "to the shore" (line 12). Like Cartesian reasoning, God is able to keep the hysteria under control and keep her away from the passion/pain of the body that cannot be trusted to be true and rational. Therefore, Bradstreet never conceives of an organic body, which might fall outside of the rule of God/patriarchy. Instead, she performs the expected hysterical (and phantom) body, which is kept in control by reason. This ruling reason ultimately returns her to the medical body where she will perform her femininity as mother and wife, as the vessel that she is.[73]

In addition, the formal composition of this poem also suggests a system of controls that keep the poet within the expected poetic performances. This poem contains six rhyming couplets of perfect iambic pentameter, which was the dominant meter and rhyme scheme of the seventeenth century. In fact, most of Bradstreet's poems follow this heroic couplet format. By using this form that was both the dominant form of her time period and the dominant form in her own repertoire, Bradstreet begins the tradition of American women's poetry by offering readers a performance of femininity which sustains the expectations of her readers. This replaying the performance of the expected feminine hysteric leaves today's readers with the understanding that no organic body exists for women; there is only a phantom body. In addition, as a colonist in the New World, Bradstreet's poem underscores the importance of keeping bodies under control:

[73] In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray describes woman as a container. Her body is a vessel for the child (womb), the man (vagina), and herself (she contains herself) (41). Freud's child development requires that the girl child refuse her mother/self and thereby refuse the third part of the vessel. Irigaray also quotes Aristotle's view that a vessel cannot be what is inside it (43), and she points out that a woman's body (and particularly her sexual organs) is both inside and outside (47).

women, natives, even the land itself. Organic bodies threatened the colonial way of life and had to be shaped and medicated in order for the colonial experiment to work.

This controlling of bodies, as Foucault suggests, marks the prevalence of the Calvinistic work ethic in Western culture and the importance of keeping labor as part of the normal life. Bradstreet's poem reveals the ongoing movement away from classical ideas of madness, in which the gods send such ailments to humans, and towards a new ideology in which a normal citizen is a productive citizen and a mad citizen is non-productive. While Bradstreet reveals the phantom nature of the proscribed woman's body, she also reveals the struggles of a new culture which is striving to succeed with old ideas in new places. The threat of further confinement, then, in poetic form, in feminine performance, and in sanity keeps Bradstreet's performance safely away from performatives or organic bodies. Bradstreet does not write in a language of madness because her struggle is to escape such a language. Languages of madness, like Hutchinson's, while potentially freeing, were explosive and dangerous. Such a language held very real punishments. Instead, Bradstreet performs the hysteric by employing a phantom body. She eventually returns her speaker to the medical body where an expected performance of the feminine is reinforced.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Slave Mother"

By the nineteenth-century, however, America had moved from the problems of the colony to the problems of being a sovereign nation. Many writers openly attacked the American governmental policies, as did nineteenth-century poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) who published her poem "The Slave Mother" in the 1854 collection *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects.* Unlike Bradstreet who was born into the European

ruling class, Harper was an African-American woman born to liberated parents in Maryland, and she was widely known for her abolitionist and political writings. Harper's poem "The Slave Mother" takes as its subject the forced separation of a son from his enslaved mother in order for an unnamed slave owner to sell that son at auction. I argue that this poem offers its readers a type of madness rarely addressed by poets before the twentieth century or by European-American poets.[74] Harper employs the language of madness as she tells the story of an enslaved woman, and in doing so, she posits that the madness that such a mother exhibits is rooted in her social construction as an enslaved African-American woman, and that construction is rooted in and continually tied to her organic body.

In her ground-breaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense J. Spillers argues that while African-American women have been called matriarchs, they are not. Instead, the institution of slavery and the European-American males that ran that slavery system stripped enslaved African-American women of their maternity and mothering and stripped African-American males of their paternity. In addition, Spillers argues, the

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[74] According to Andrew Scull, in his book *Social Order/Mental Disorder: Anglo-American Psychiatry in Historical Perspective*, the nineteenth century attitudes toward madness and mental illness changed from previous centuries in one important way: doctors began to believe that they could improve or even cure mental illness. This change, according to Scull, came about because of the general social change in which citizens began to feel control over their environments: "a growing and quite novel sense that man is the master of his destiny and not the helpless victim of fate" (92). This change in world view, coupled with a push of medical exploration, culminated in the American asylums seeking of treatments for their inmates and the prevalent use of medicinal therapies like opium and morphine (Scull 106). Eventually, these asylums became retreats for the upper classes where they were kept separated from the paupers and working classes (114). I believe that these two ideological changes in the treatment of madness serve as strong undercurrents of Harper's poem: that mental illness is correctable and that classification and segregation of patients should/could be based on class (and race). In addition, it is important to note here that according to Foucault, that passion is "no longer simply one of the causes –however powerful—of madness; rather it forms the very basis for its very possibility" (*Madness and Civilization* 88). Thus, the connection between passions and madness, by the nineteenth century, were firmly rooted in medical and popular understanding.

European-American males that fathered many children with enslaved African-American females through rape did not engage or acknowledge those children as their own. Therefore, enslaved African-American women's bodies were caught between cultures like the bodies on the slave ships during the middle passage. Spillers claims that this peculiar social position removed the Law of the Father from enslaved African-American women's lives and left a culture in which "only the female stands in the *flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in [Spiller's] view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender" (278). In other words, the enslaved African-American woman's body is a site for the disruption of gender and the Law. By choosing to tell the story of such a woman, Harper is able to insert her character's gender performance into that troubling position and to use the language of madness to perform a cultural madness and an organic body that was easily recognizable to her contemporary audience and is also recognized by today's readers.

Harper presents a character who is, because of her position in the cultural hierarchy, mad. In her essay "Racial Hysteria: Female Pathology and Race Politics in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and W.D. Howells's *An Imperative Duty*." Michele Birnbaum echoes Spillers ideas and argues that in her novel *Iola Leroy,* Harper uses an "ingenious manipulation of the dominant languages of realism" to "explore the sexual politics of race" through a hysterical figure (7-8). Birnbaum points out that while hysteria was generally considered a white middle-class disease, Harper's "racialized notion of hysteria" reveals the displacement of African-American womanhood in the

nineteenth century by making the "tragic mulatto" a hysteric and medical oddity (8).[75] This is true of the woman in "The Slave Mother" as well. While Harper seems to portray the mother as hysterical, she also calls the reader's attention to the consequences of the social positions prescribed for women and African Americans in American slavery culture. In "The Slave Mother," Harper also reveals the (white) medical community's erasure of African-American women which denied their direct connection to hysteria, thereby showing that the supposed hysterical body of white-middle-class culture is a phantom. This forces the reader to consider the relationship of African-American women to madness and to consider their organic bodies as both part of and the cause of their madness.

Using the language of madness, Harper portrays this mother as mad. She "shrieks" (lines 1 and 37), and is described as having "wildness" (lines 2 and 28) which points to a lack of reason and a connection between passion and madness. Like Bradstreet, Harper employs the storm metaphor for the mother's turmoil, "As if a storm of agony / Were sweeping through the brain" (lines 11 and 12). But unlike in Bradstreet's poem, Harper's storm/madness is located inside of the woman's body. The storm, then, is the metaphor for the bodily functions rather than vice versa. As the poem continues, the descriptions of her madness are all constructed through physical images of her body. Her hands are "sadly clasped" (line 5); she is "pale with fear" (line 13); her

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[75] Birnbaum makes a convincing argument by pointing out the oxymoron of African-American womanhood in the late nineteenth century. Hysteria functioned as a "condition *for* womanhood and modernity in Victorian America" and as a "clinical color-line between the more or less 'civilized'" (8). Harper's novel, Birnbaum claims, plays with "the racialized notion of hysteria (and womanhood) as white and more generally with public anxiety about racial contagion in women" (8).

body is "that fragile form" (line 7); and she has a "bowed and feeble head" (line 6). All four of these descriptions, while certainly indicating illness, additionally echo the expected femininity of nineteenth-century true cult of womanhood: prayer position of the hands, pale skin, fragile, and humble. So while Harper offers readers a madness born of social factors, she also makes strong connections between woman and madness through her choices of bodily descriptions and the ties to expected femininity. But because this woman is both African American and enslaved, she cannot possibly (in the eyes of nineteenth century readers) represent womanhood or even the hysteric. She is, therefore, mad or outside of the Law. Yet, Harper employs the language of madness by keeping her emphasis on these bodily descriptions, and she presents an organic body in this poem: not a prescribed performance of white hysteria, but a woman's body, an African-American enslaved woman's body, responding to the world around her.

One might argue that this poem is simply a poem which explores the grief of a mother who has lost her child. However, Harper's use of hyperbole and excess quickly leads readers away from such a reading and instead hark back to Foucault's understanding of the strong connection between passion and madness. While the final lines, "her heart / is breaking in despair" (lines 39-40) remind us of the passionate grief that this mother experiences, my psychoanalytic reading of this character as mad rather than only grieving is based in several lines. First, in the opening stanza, the speaker says:

> …It [the shriek] rose
> So wildly on the air
> It seemed as if a burden'd heart
> Was breaking in despair. (lines 1-4)

It is the "seemed" that interests me most in this stanza because it marks a doubt or a question whether everything is truly as it seems. Through the insertion of "seemed," Harper suggests that there may be more here than what "seems" to be: this is not just a "burden'd heart" but a woman wracked by the social structures over which she has no control. Then, in line 32, the speaker cries, "Oh Father! must they part?" The capitalization of "Father" turns this addressee into a divine being. This divinity parallels the Law of the Father (because the Christian God is the ultimate Law) and suggests that this poem might benefit from a psychoanalytic reading. In choosing this reading, I find that the mother does seem to be portrayed as ill beyond mere grief. She is not reasonable, for how can she be? She is at the mercy of the system around her. However, she is also outside of the Law because she is African-American, she is enslaved, and she is no longer maternal. So, while the medical community of the nineteenth century claims that madness is curable, this woman is outside of that system (the Law) while still subject to it wrath. Harper's language of madness suggests that if madness is curable, it is also causable. Here the speaker points out that it is this same system of patriarchy which claims to cure social illnesses which causes the madness performed in this poem.

In addition, Harper performs the mother's loss of her child through/with an organic body. Unlike the poems in chapter four whose characters lose children to death or to the normal process of maturation, the woman in this poem experiences a loss which has no place in the psychoanalytic development of subjectivity. She, therefore, is not experiencing the typical abjection which all mothers feel; she is denied any bond with her son whatsoever. The phrase, "He is not hers" is repeated three times (lines 17, 19, and

21). Despite the fact that "her blood / Is coursing through his veins!" she must refuse him because slavery/society takes him. Her heart is "burden'd" (line 3), "breaking in despair" (line 4), and again, "breaking heart" (line 24). She is then left with only one option; she must refuse motherhood, that performance of femininity, because it has been ripped from her. She is left with only her body: no expected feminine performance can exist for her. She is left only with the scars and pain which mark her physical body. This is the organic body; this is madness (not hysteria) because Harper's woman cannot, within her social constraints, perform either the Masquerade or the maternal.

We can read and understand this madness because Harper uses a language of madness which constructs madness within her character. This language of madness is built using formal elements to reinforce it. According to Hildegard Hoeller, in her essay "Self-reliant Women in Frances Harper's Writings," in "The Slave Mother, " "Harper's poetic "I," like Whitman's, is all-embracing, sympathetic, radically democratic" (210). Harper employs a ballad stanza, making her 40-line poem contain ten quatrains that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter and rhyming a b c b. Her ballad stanzas, in addition to following the narrative poetic tradition, divide into two types: the four-foot lines (not rhyming) and the three-foot lines (rhyming). This split (which we will later see that Dickinson employs as well) echoes the splitting of the woman from her child and/or the woman from her sanity. The splitting, a horrific physical act in this poem, is both the cause (the outside world reaching in to disrupt her motherhood) and the effect (she is African-American and enslaved) of her organic body. While the ballad is a traditional poetic form, Harper's use of it to describe the shocking reality of the body and life of an enslaved woman and her son, undercuts the expected nursery rhyme or

entertaining story that might be expected by readers. This disruption of the expected, again, reinforces the disruption of the performance of femininity and calls attention to the expected performances that Harper chooses to bypass (light ballad verse, hysteria). Because of her inability to perform either maternity or hysteria, this "slave mother" inhabits an organic body and employs the language of madness.

Joy Harjo's "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window"

Like Harper, Joy Harjo (b. 1951) chooses to employ the story of a non-white character to illustrate the language of madness. Her 66-line poem was published in her 1983 volume *She Had Some Horses*. While "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is an innovative poem in its use of long lines and repetition, it follows the typical standards of late twentieth-century, American verse by employing free verse and omitting fixed rhyming patterns. But it is through the use of ambiguity and a Native-American character that Harjo creates an organic body in her poem.

This poem, like Harper's, employs third person narration. Both Harper and Harjo are descendants of oral traditions (African-American and Native-American, respectively) and choose to write their poems in third person as if storytelling. It seems that the use of "I," at least in the poems I've chosen here, is chosen only by European-American writers. This suggests that subjectivity is tenuous for Harper and Harjo. In Harjo's poem, the speaker tells readers the story of the woman who hangs from the thirteenth floor from afar, yet the story seems to be told without the narrator having an emotional attachment to her and without the character sharing her experiences first hand.

While the speaker is distant from the character, her body is represented as both present and at odds with the societal expected versions of a feminine body. She bumps

against the constructions of the world, but she is separate (and outside) of it. In lines two and three, we see her "hands pressed white against the / concrete molding of the building." Not only is she a separate entity from the moldings of the building, the constructions of society, we see her as she strains against that construction until her hands are white from the ongoing struggle. Harjo's brilliance in this poem is her ability to layer meanings on top of meanings; for as the white hands force us to visualize the actual woman's body pressed in an impossible situation, and as they simultaneously show us the difficulty of her struggle to the point of physical exhaustion, Harjo also inserts the notion of race and the possibility that this woman could fall into whiteness, or sameness, if she were to lose her struggle. I posit that this whiteness represents the hysterical body which has been set up by writers like Anne Bradstreet and the use of expected performances in poems such as "Upon Some Distemper of Body." In that performance of hysteria, Bradstreet reproduces the given responses to societal expectations of women in poetry is to perform either the medical or the hysterical body. Harjo, however, alerts us to this expectation without succumbing to it. Her character continues to struggle. This struggle reveals the language of madness.

The woman in "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" cannot produce the expected performances: maternity, wifedom, or hysteric. Instead she is hovering between roles and dangling from the window ledge. She is the elsewhere. Yet, she is also a mother. The narrator tells us, "She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos, / and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest" (lines 10-11). Her children have names, even if she does not. The children are specified while she is the general woman, nameless, the embodiment of every woman as she hangs from the window ledge.

She is in danger of becoming her role as a mother, just as so many other women do. Other lines of the poem indicate that she is not alone in this danger: "She sees / other women hanging from many-floored windows / counting their lives in the palms of their hands / and in the palms of their children's hands" (lines 24-27). And, to keep matters complicated, Harjo is not deprecating of the maternal role either. Later in the poem, the narrator describes moments in which the woman wants to continue to have additional children, "That's when she wants / to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able / to fall back into dreams" (lines 38-40). Yet Harjo has set this role of motherhood up as only one possibility, and because she has offered other options, the motherhood in this poem becomes a performance that the woman can choose or choose not to perform.

But it is the body of the woman, mother or not, that is central to this poem. Images of the body fill this poem. Her "belly is soft from / her children's births" (lines 29-30), "she is dangling" (line 32), she "hears voices" (line 33), "she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her / own skin, her own thread of indecision" (lines 47-48), and "her teeth break off at the edges" (line 58). But the narrator tells us, through Harjo's construction of this story of a suicidal woman, that this woman does not know and cannot tell her own story. In line seven, the narrator says, "She thinks falling will set her free." As with poems in earlier chapters, this line implies that while the character believes one thing to be true, another is possibly – and more probably—true. Falling will not set her free. Death is not freedom. But the narrator's utterance of this proclamation suggests that there may be something else that will set her free, that freedom (from the Law) is not impossibility.

Harjo is careful not to prescribe this freedom, although the language of madness seems a likely possibility. Language becomes an important struggle in this poem. The woman does a lot of thinking:

> She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy.
> She thinks of her father and of her mother.
> She thinks of all the women she has been, of all
> the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and
> of the Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines.
> she thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms.
> Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars.
> She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelinesses that have folded
> her up like death, discordant, without logical and
> beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges. (lines 49-58)

But even while she thinks about these many things, she does not speak. "She would speak" (line 59), but she does not. She rejects the language that is available to her; so while she could use that language, she saves her strength by choosing not to. Instead of speaking, she acts: she is "hanging" throughout the poem and is "Crying for / the lost beauty of her own life" (lines 60-61). And while her actions force us to consider her body and to remember that her body is the situation where she hangs from a window, where she grieves, where she remains silent, we also know that she might one day use that body to find a language outside of the Law. Readers hope that one day she might speak. Harjo reminds us that there is a possibility that the organic body can speak.

In the mean time, the narrator sets up a series of ambiguous possibilities for the woman: "she is her mother's daughter and her father's son" (line 12), "she is several pieces between the two husbands / she has had" (lines 13-14), and "she thinks of all the women she has been, of all / the men" (line 51-52). She is and she has performed many roles. In the closing line of the poem, the narrator offers readers two endings without resolution:

> She think she remembers listening to her own life
> break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
> window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
> climbs back up to claim herself again. (lines 63-66)

Here, Harjo informs us that for this woman to remain outside of the prescribed bodies: medical (where she climbs back up and becomes the loving and self-sacrificing mother) or the hysterical (where she drops and kills herself in one crazed act), she must know the two performances and refuse to choose either of them. The woman in this story does not achieve a language for herself, yet Harjo does. Harjo is able to show the expected performances, refuse them, and still to speak from outside. This is the language of madness. She is able to construct a performative language that reveals the medical and hysterical bodies while refusing to become complicit in those performances. Her refusal to even choose an ending for her character underscores this language of madness with a strong sense of ambiguity and possibilities. This poem, then, while seeming to be about a madwoman attempting suicide, illustrates the complexity of the language of madness and the organic body for women in our culture. In order to self-define, women have to step

outside of the prescribed possibilities and find their own way into language and their bodies.

Emily Dickinson's 106 or "I felt a cleavage in my mind"

Unlike Harjo, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was unable to find such a performative in her poetry. Her eight-line poem, "I felt a cleavage in my mind," discusses the mind as thought processes and uses the brain as a physical metaphor for those thoughts. Like Bradstreet's poem, Dickinson's poem presents the body as a metaphor for reason and the rational thinking process; Dickinson accomplishes this by using the brain as a metonym for the body. Even when that brain splits and the narrator's thoughts become disconnected "like balls upon a floor" (line 8), the body itself is no more than a ball of string with the potential to be shaped into something useful. This poem, like Bradstreet's poem, uses the Cartesian mind/body split to perform the hysterical body – the phantom body, rather than to consider how the body might speak from this "split" (line 2) position.

But Dickinson has been trumpeted by many feminist theorists as a writer who used madness to her advantage: as a way to escape being a woman.[76] This attempt to deny her femaleness seems, on one level, to match the refusal of Harjo's woman in the above poem; yet while this may be true of Dickinson as a person, I find that it is not true of the speakers in her poems.[77] In this particular poem, "I felt a cleavage in my mind,"

[76] In their chapter on Dickinson in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Dickinson fashioned herself into an oddity, wearing a "child mask" (591) in order to embrace her art but soon found that mask to imprison her in her father's house. They argue that, "she must have decided that to begin with she could try to solve the problem of being a woman by refusing to admit that she was a woman" (591).
[77] Gilbert and Gubar maintain that Dickinson was "working in a genre that has been traditionally the most Satanically assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women: lyric poetry" (582). They argue that even working with lyric poetry makes Dickinson's work a little crazy. I think that we must

Dickinson's speaker performs the hysterical body without hesitation or reservation.[78] The poem reads as follows:

I felt a cleavage in my mind
As if my brain had split;
I tried to match it, seam by seam,
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind I strove to join
Unto the thought before,
But sequence ravelled out of reach
Like balls upon a floor.

By inhabiting the stereotypical symptoms and habits of the hysteric, the speaker, even if she attempts to escape the constraints placed on women as writers, chooses to take on the constraints placed on the female hysteric. The woman in Dickinson's poem becomes a hysteric, and any other body Dickinson might have presented becomes merely a mirrored reflection of the performance of hysteria. Dickinson kicks the organic body to the curb and replays a Cartesian mind/body split when her woman speaker takes up the non-

look to the poems themselves before we assign them the label of madness, particularly if we understand madness as liberating. I'm not convinced that she was liberated.

[78] Again, Gilbert and Gubar note: "It [106] is far more frank [than "I felt a Funeral in my Brain"] in its admission that madness is its true subject, and that psychic fragmentation—an inability to connect one self with another—is the cause of this madness. Here, too, Dickinson's use of both spatial and temporal terminology most openly confronts the split because she perceives herself as having several simultaneous personalities, which do not 'fit' or 'match' each other. But she is also split because she cannot join past and present thoughts: 'that person' that she was and 'this One' does not 'feel the same--.' Like Catherine Earnshaw Linton, she does not recognize her original self in the mirror of her own life. No longer what she was, she cannot act the part of the person she supposedly is." (628)

maternal, non-logical, hysterical woman[79] Dickinson highlights the splitting of the brain (line 2) and does not explore the possibilities of a woman thinking.

To reinforce this traditional role of the hysteric, Dickinson re-creates a split within her poem in both content and form. The woman speaker in this poem refuses to present an actual body and instead uses the body as a metaphor. In addition, Dickinson couches her use of the brain/body within the feminine metaphor of sewing in order to make sure that the body is not too closely associated with the brain, even if that brain is splitting. This rigid adherence to the mind/body split reveals Dickinson's unease with connecting women poets with their bodies. Her speaker says, "I tried to match it, seam by seam, / But could not make them fit" (lines 3 and 4). Her brain is a bad seamstress because she "could not make them [the seams] fit" (line 4). Then, at the poem's close, she says, "sequence ravelled out of reach / Like balls upon a floor" (lines 7 and 8). "Sequence" or rationality/reason is "raveled out of reach" (line 7), and in the final line, the speaker's ability to control her thought processes falls away "like balls upon a floor" (line 8). Since sewing metaphors control this poem, this final line points to balls of yarn or thread. Dickinson's use of domestic metaphors reinforces the performance of the expected feminine, the hysteric, in this poem. While the poem opens with a glimmer of hope that the organic body will appear, by the third line, Dickinson has retreated from that hope by immersing her lines in the expected sewing metaphor and abandoning the organic body. Readers are left with the message that a woman cannot think as well as she sews, even when she sews badly.

[79] Gilbert and Gubar go on to point out that "The chasm in being that Dickinson perceives turns out, then, to be her own life, and specifically the female body in which she is helplessly (but turbulently) embedded" (630-631). They argue that Dickinson created and believed in a self that is trapped inside of the physical body awaiting unification of the selves in death when the body was left behind.

As with Harper's poem, this inability to bring it all together (seams, thoughts, or even lines of poetry), "sequence ravelled out of reach" (line 7) is echoed through Dickinson's use of ballad stanzas. The poem is only eight lines long, which makes it a bit short for a narrative poem, but it closely follows the a b c b rhyme scheme and the tetrameter/trimeter iambic meter of the ballad. Unlike Harper, however, Dickinson fulfills the nursery rhyme expectation of the short ballad form. This short and light story of the difficulties in thinking is overrun with assonance ("As if my brain had") consonance ("match it, seam by seam"), and internal rhyme ("split; / I tried to match it"), which adds to the poem's adherence to the traditions of poetic form, but it also undercuts Dickinson's message that she cannot "string" two thoughts together. Like Bradstreet in "The Prologue," Dickinson does well what she says she cannot do: be a female writer/thinker. Instead the speaker settles in without a body and with her brain as the metaphor "balls upon the floor" (line 8).

Yet the speaker simultaneously refuses to explore the possibilities of her use of language in her insistence on performing the expected. The rhyme and meter of this poem are perfect, and character performs her femininity just as perfectly. She is without reason, and she is just as certainly without any inkling of an ability to break free of the trappings of gendered roles: namely, men as reasonable and women as irrational. The speaker's position, then, remains that of the hysteric. She performs her femininity by claiming to be unable to control her thoughts/brain/body. And even the body that she cannot control is merely present in the poem in a metaphor. By performing the hysteric, Dickinson upholds the mind/body split, like she employs the duality of meters in her poetic style. Her inability to rejoin the two, as the speaker in this poem cannot, reveals

the performance of the classic hysteric. Dickinson performs the "illness" with a phantom body; she nods to a body that, for her, does not exist.

Anne Sexton's "For the Year of the Insane"

"For the Year of the Insane," published in Anne Sexton's (1928-1974) volume *Live or Die* (1966), is noted (within the text) as having been written in August of 1963. This 79-line poem is a prayer to Mary. Like Bradstreet, Sexton calls on a higher, spiritual power to help her through her illness. However, unlike Bradstreet's God, Sexton's deity is female. She opens her poem by calling Mary a "fragile mother," the mother of the Christ, and by calling herself an "unbeliever" (line 6). Kristeva's essay, "Stabat Mater" is useful for understanding the position of Mary within Western culture and within psychoanalytic theory. In this essay, Kristeva argues that the Christian belief in the virgin mother, among other things, alienates ordinary women from their bodies by requiring that the only way to achieve the status of the "Unique Woman" (like Mary) is to become either a nun or a martyr, both of which are within "the uttermost sphere of sublimation" (149). While Christ is made human through his mother, Mary's humanity is not always clear (134). According to Kristeva's argument, Christianity sublimates femininity under the Maternal (135), and the Virgin mother becomes a way of "coping with female paranoia" (148). Kristeva also argues that the Virgin "attaches a positive value to suffering – the sob: and she encourages replacement of the sexual body by the ear of understanding" (148). Sexton's poem illustrates several of these problems. The speaker has a sense of uneasiness with her body and its capacity to act which surfaces when she calls her body "useless" (line 38); she says, "It has given up" (line 40). Sexton, like Bradstreet and Dickinson, also reveals a mind/body separation with this line by

showing that the body is given up, but a consciousness still writes or thinks. This leads the reader to question the speaker of the poem, and to conclude that the speaker must be a woman divided from her body. I argue that because it is split from the consciousness, the body Sexton describes must be phantasmic. In lines 68 and 69, Sexton says, "I see myself as one would see another. / I have been cut into." This acknowledgement of the separation of her thoughts and her body does not, as we might hope, critique the separation. Instead, Sexton plays the hysteric body to its fullest implications: she is the self-sacrificing woman and the woman who cannot escape her attic or "the wrong house" (line 79). Like the Virgin that Kristeva describes, the woman in Sexton's poem values her suffering.

This tension between the mind and the body runs throughout the poem. While a voice speaks, the speaker constantly reminds the reader of the problem of speaking. She says, "Now I have entered the year without words/ I note the queer entrance and the exact voltage" (line 43-44). Foucault argues, in *Madness and Civilization,* that madness can no longer communicate with reason; there is no longer a common language because it was broken in the late eighteenth century with the invention of mental illness (x). He argues that this invention, "affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation [between reason and madness] as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made" (x). For Sexton too, mental illness is the "year without words." Mary does not speak – she cannot. Nor can the speaker in this poem, or so she claims, yet she writes: "Word for word, I stumble" (line 18). Like Dickinson and Bradstreet, Sexton claims not to be able to speak, to write coherently, or to have talent.

Yet the poem not only is written, it is published and is well written. Sexton also suggests, however, that her words are ones chosen from those taught to her and nearly lost in her memory when she says, "There are no words here except the half-learned, / the Hail Mary and the full of grace" (lines 41-42). The speaker proposes that she has no original thoughts or no language other than the phallic language of her father from the opening line of the Hail Mary Prayer. This claim suggests that Sexton's speaker understands that to seek a woman's language is to seek the language of madness, and that language, according to Foucault is only "stammered, imperfect words."

It seems possible, then, that Sexton will achieve an employment of the broken, stammerings of madness until we investigate the actual language of the poem. For unlike Bradstreet and Dickinson, Sexton has revealed the problems of phallic language thereby exposing the machinery of patriarchy. However, rather than inhabit that language of madness, Sexton chooses to remain confined to the maternal and to remain either silent or reasonable. Sexton ends the poem:

> O Mary, open your eyelids.
> I am in the domain of silence,
> the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.
> There is blood here.
> and I haven't eaten it.
> O mother of the womb,
> did I come for blood alone?
> O little mother,
> I am in my own mind.

I am locked in the wrong house. (lines 70-79)

Because line 79 immediately follows, "I am in my own mind," the mind and house are tied together, and the being that speaks is the mind which is locked inside of the house. The wrong house, then, is a metaphor for the maternal body, which, like the hysterical body, is governed by the Law.[80] She claims to be "submerged in [her] own past / and [her] own madness" (lines 12-13), so that it is merely the performance of hysteria that is put forward. She is not able to speak her own thoughts. She says, "I do not speak" (line 62). But because she is speaking, we must interpret this claim as an inability to speak her own language and an inability to find a language of madness.

Sexton's speaker also suggests that her purpose is not to speak, as Mary does not speak (the speaker says to Mary in line three "I do not know your words"), when she says, "I am in the domain of silence, / the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper" (lines 71-72). A woman's purpose is something other than speech: "Without words they exist" (line 45). Sexton says, "Without words one may touch bread / and be handed bread / and make no sound." (lines 46-48). Women are bread, the sacrifice, and the body of Christ. She is expected to not only take the sacrifice, but to be the sacrifice, to be the body and blood. In the end, her blood is mingled with Mary's blood, motherhood, and the womb. In not wanting to be the sacrificial lamb, she is rejecting her motherhood, but she cannot

[80] In her essay "Depression, Shame, and Reparation: the Case of Anne Sexton," Hilary Clark says, "The case of Anne Sexton confirms the link between feminine depression, shame, and inadequate parenting. And it shows particularly clearly the role of art in reconstructing the lost mother, or at least in making sense of maternal shame" (194). Clark claims that Kristeva is correct in her assertions that the writing of poetry can repair the damage of madness, even when the poet eventually succumbs to her illness. She says, "Art makes sense of loss and shame. Although, for Sexton, poetry could not finally counter an intense drive toward death, her case demonstrates that creativity can, at least for a time, enable the shamed self to mourn loss and to restore the loved object—and in doing so, to be whole again" (204). However, while this sense of loss and shame may have some use for Sexton as a poet, the speaker in this poem claims to be unable to speak.

reject it if she wishes to speak – she is locked into the wrong house. To speak, she believes that she must speak the prayers, the languages of the Father.

And because she cannot speak of her own body, the body in this poem is a phantom body. It is, like Bradstreet's vessel, a means for reciting prayers, for counting the rosary beads, and to offer itself as a sacrifice. In lines five and seven she describes the rosary in her hand, hard in her fingers. The prayer is connected to the physical act of counting the beads – it may well be the counting of the beads, yet the body that does the counting and praying is absent. The speaker tells us that her body is lifeless when she says, "I lie on the floor, / Only my hands are alive" (lines 15-16). But the speaker both acknowledges and questions herself when she asks of Mary:

> There is blood here.
>
> and I haven't eaten it.
>
> O mother of the womb,
>
> did I come for blood alone? (lines 73-76)

While Sexton clearly attempts to call the position of motherhood, both earthly and divine, into question in this poem, she ultimately fails to speak her own body, her own madness, and instead re-inscribes the hysterical woman, bodiless and performing the illness expected of her.

This is also true of the formal elements of the poem, which is a free verse poem with a significant amount of repetition. Many times the repetition is in one or two words: "hear me, hear me now" (line 2), "sick, sick in the summer heat" (line 23), "closer and closer" (line 30), and "Without words they exist. / Without words one may touch bread" (lines 45-46). The repetition follows the patterns of repeated prayers, like Hail Mary

prayers, which makes these repetitions part of the connection Sexton makes between memorized language and her poetic language. There is no discernable metric pattern, no end rhymes, and very few internal rhymes. In fact, there is little, other than line breaks and repetitions which most would call formal poetic language. With the repetition of the "O" as the opening for many of the lines, the poem reads like a personal prayer, and in that way, it does conform to the standards of confessional poetry. She uses the first person, portrays the speaker in an unflattering light, and openly discusses her illness and struggles to survive. So while Sexton skirts much of the traditional poetic language, she does employ the typical features of confessional poetry and many of the features popular in poetry from the 1960s. In the end, the poem really does read like a prayer. It is a prayer to Mary, to the Virgin mother, to grant her return to the rational/reasonable world. Sexton's speaker, then, performs a hysteric who desires to return to the masculine reasonability which will lead her (back?) to the production of poetry – of Symbolic language. These are descriptions of the real choices for women: hysteria, male identified, or silence. Sexton, while revealing the limits of these choices, is unable to imagine a language of madness or any possibility for women outside of the Symbolic. And so, while Sexton exposes the problems of language for women under the Law, she ultimately relies of the hysteric and the patterns of prayers and confessional poetry to re-enforce women as hysterical.

Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos"

Unlike Sexton's poem, the final poem I will discuss in this chapter manages to find an organic body and a language of madness. "Lesbos" is a poem that was written in 1962 by Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and was published in her posthumous volume *Ariel* in

1965. Like Harper and Harjo, Plath offers readers a commentary on several expected performances of femininity: domesticity, wife of an adulterer, mother, and hysteric without re-inscribing those performances.

She presents each performance by miming it, thereby critiquing the performance and revealing the patriarchal machinery that requires those same performances. For example, she begins the poem by presenting the readers with the problems of domesticity: "Viciousness in the kitchen!" (line 1). While the speaker continues to work in the kitchen, she does so with cautiousness for the "potatoes hiss" (line 2), the "fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine" (line 4), and "the smog of cooking, the smog of hell" (line 35). By showing that there is danger in the domestic performance, and even more importantly, that the speaker understands the danger of the domestic performance, Plath reveals the home and the domestic performance as physically toxic for the performer rather than comforting or protective. The focus, rather than being on the children that the cooking will feed, shifts to the woman in the kitchen and the physical repercussions of the kitchen on her body.

Plath also presents other critical views of the performance of motherhood. When discussing her own motherhood and children, the speaker says, "Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap" (line 33) and "I am packing the babies, / I am packing the sick cats" (lines 69-70). In both of these examples, Plath's speaker presents jarring views of maternal performances because she, again, refuses to accept the self-sacrificial role. Instead of obediently and happily performing her maternal duties, the speaker complains about the smell of dirty diapers and compares her children to sick cats. In addition, she accuses the other woman (the addressee) of also rejecting her performance of

motherhood. The speaker says, "You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio / Clear of voices and history, the staticky / Noise of the new" (lines 17-19), and "You say I should drown the kittens / You say I should drown my girl" (line 20-21). She accuses the addressee of not only refusing to have her own children, but of hating her (the speaker's) daughter. In talking about this daughter, she says of the addressee, "You say you can't stand her, / The bastard's a girl" (lines 15-16). While this reminds readers that a conscious rejection of the maternal role is possible, it is also an accusation that blames the loss of mother-daughter bonding, of female cohesion, on the addressee's rejection of the female child. This rejection reflects the psychoanalytic rejection of the mother by the child, and reminds us that within the phallic system, women are doomed to reject themselves.

But Plath is not advocating such a rejection. Instead she is calling it into question by her use of mimicry. Not only does she mime each individual performance of femininity, Plath also calls her reader's attentions to the plasticity of these performances by describing the physical room in which this scene takes place as having "coy paper strips for doors" (line 5) and "stage curtains" (line 6). These descriptions present the room (and house) in this poem as a stage or set rather than a living space. The characters then, become actors, and readers begin to understand that things are not as they seem. This acting forces the readers to see the characters as mimed performances of the feminine. Plath, however, does not entirely blame patriarchy for the perpetuation of the performance, but instead she calls women into question for their continued acceptance of the performance. She says to the addressee, "You acted, acted for the thrill" (line 43). Therefore, she suggests, some women perform because they enjoy the act of

performance. Nonetheless, this speaker resists the performance of femininity by knowingly performing the mime and thereby critiquing the performance. Plath's poem is performative rather than another performance of femininity. The women perform the mime; the poem reveals that performance.

In addition, in order to escape a re-inscription of the hysteric, Plath ties the speaker to the physical in this poem. She presents an organic body in this poem, not just a hysterical body. The bodies in this poem are outside of the Law but still are affected by their social existence. The speaker reminds us of this when she says, "You are ill / The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you T.B." (lines 38-39), and "I am still raw" (line 89). The negative affects of the sun and wind, like the effects of the domestic sphere are portrayed as dangerous. The bodies in this poem are constantly under siege by the world. In order to mime the hysteric, Plath employs psychiatric language throughout the poem. She says, "And I, love, am a pathological liar" (line 7). She also calls her daughter mad when she says: "She is a schizophrenic" (line 10) and "She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two" (line 22). Then she employs the language of the hysterical woman when she says, "I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill" (line 34), in order to offer it up as yet another feminine performance. But Plath refuses to stop with a hysterical woman. She keeps her speaker organic. She must cope with real effects: ulcers, stenches, and rawness. She employs the language of madness and she explores the organic body.

In addition, as in Harper's and Harjo's poems, the physical body is racialized in Plath's poem. The performance of the hysterical body is revealed by a language which considers the racial implications of hysteria with lines such as "And then grew normal, hard and apart and white" (lines 57-58). The line is a description of the moon, which is

an obvious metaphor for a woman as it is a "sick animal" (lines 54-55) that "dragged its blood bag…up over the harbor lights" (lines 54 and 56). This moon is "normal," according to Plath's speaker, when it is alone and hard and white. This becomes more poignant a few lines down when she says:

> The scale-sheen on the sand scared me to death.
> We kept picking up handfuls, loving it,
> Working it like dough, a mulatto body,
> The silk grits. (lines 59-62)

Here Plath compares the hard and fixed position of whiteness to malleable position of the mulatto. While Plath (and probably both the speaker and addressee) is white, she offers readers this view of the mulatto woman as a comparison. By doing so, she points out the rigid positions available within the Law for women and, exoticizing or not, she offers madness and non-whiteness as possible escape routes. This race-awareness within the poem requires that readers confront the notion that the positions of mother, wife, and hysteric have been kept static and under controls by the Law of the Father. It is the system of controls that the poem seeks to reveal. Like Harper, Plath attempts to mime the performance of hysteria in order to unveil the social restraints placed on women. This performative poem then presents an organic body and madness through mimicry.

Like Harjo and Harper, Plath also chooses to position her speaker in a role that is always already outside of the Law. This poem's speaker addresses another woman, and the title of the poem, "Lesbos," invokes a Sapphic tradition through which Plath inserts her speaker and her poem into the long history of women's poetry and women's relationships with each other. Through this invocation, Plath, like Harper and Harjo,

chooses a performance for her poem which is quite possibly that of a homosexual woman. In this case, Plath presents a lesbian woman to require that her readers consider the sexual and emotional relationships between women. While for some readers the addressee of this poem is another persona of Plath's speaker,[81] I posit that Plath intends the addressee to be ambiguous (to be any and all of these options), and understanding the solidity of that ambiguity is central to understanding the poem. In order to escape yet another prescribed role for her speaker, Plath cements an ambiguity for her so that no inscription can remove her from the organic body and the language of madness which Plath writes for her. Whatever the role of the addressee, the speaker in this poem addresses another woman who is both loved and hated by the speaker.

Rather than prescribe their relationship, Plath requires that her readers look at two women and at the interaction between them as having several possibilities simultaneously. She says, "the smog of hell / Floats our heads, two venomous opposites, / Our bones, our hair" (lines 35-37). It is the many possible relationships between the two women, and in particular their possible lesbian relationship after having shown the problems of mother-daughter relationships under the Law and traditional performances of femininity, which the title conjures. This makes this poem unique from the others I have discussed in this chapter. Plath attempts to rework the mother-daughter relationship, and to find other possibilities for women in community which hysteria has nearly erased, by inserting a lesbian relationship into this poem. This insertion calls those performances of femininity that are dictated by the Law of the Father into question. This possible relationship between women is madness because it is unregulated by patriarchy.

[81] And for some readers she is like Asissa, or another of the husband's (or Ted Hughes') lovers.

Plath's use of ambiguity and intertexutality makes her performative muddy.[82] Because we cannot pin her speaker to a particular performance or role, we find that we are unsure if we can trust the speaker or her language. We see that the speaker is at odds with her language, with the Law, and that she is searching for ways to express herself that are outside of the Law. She says, "You peer from the door, / Sad hag. 'Every woman is a whore. / I can't communicate'" (lines 82-84). Here we see the addressee speak her difficulty in speech. This tension between the language user and the language system reveals the complexity of the relationship between women poets and poetry. "Lesbos" is a poem that explores this complexity through a revelation of the expectations of performances of femininity. This poem reveals, through its use of the language of madness, the structure of language itself and the confines of gender performances within language.

And, of course, it is not only in the subject matter that Plath accomplishes this tension. She also works against the expectations of her contemporary poets by employing end rhymes in a climate where free verse dominated the field. While the pattern of her rhymes is not static or predictable, at least forty of the ninety-two lines end in rhymes. This departure underscores the central tensions in this poem: whether the speaker can express or communicate her madness. As Sexton's speaker does in her poem, Plath's speaker struggles with the ability to speak about madness. She says:

> Now I am silent, hate
>
> Up to my neck

[82] According to Andrea Gerbig and Anja Müller-Wood in their article "Trapped in Language: Aspects of Ambiguity and Intertextuality in Selected Poetry and Prose by Sylvia Plath," Plath's use of ambiguity and intertextuality reveals a tension between "language user and language system" (77).

Thick, Thick

I do not speak. (line 64- 67)

The speaker tells us that if she hates the other woman (the lover of her husband, the mother-daughter, or her own lover or self), then she must also hate her self. This rejection of the self chokes off her ability to communicate. As mentioned above, the addressee goes on to say, "Every woman's a whore. / I can't communicate" (lines 83-84). Again the self-hatred (women = whores) closes down any possibility of communications. Yet this poem does not close down those lines. This refusal to close down possibilities is reflected in Plath's refusal to name the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. The suggestions within the poem open possibilities rather than confining them. She uses the ambiguity of this relationship to enhance the performative. This is yet another refusal of prescribed performances.

By employing the techniques of mimicry, Plath is able to use the language of madness to show the shaping of both language and women that happens under patriarchy.[83] Rather than giving into those forces that say that, "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair" (line 29), the speaker reveals that expectation along with the expectations of language and woman-on-woman relationships to call those expectations into question. Because a body appears in this poem and the body presented does not fit the hysterical or medical body profile, it is organic. It becomes the possibility of what woman might be.

[83] In her article "The Ethics of Foucauldian Poetics: Women's Selves," Shira Wolosky argues, "American women's poetry provides a dramatic space in which disciplinary forces in society are not only inscribed on the bodies of women but are registered in the linguistic body of their texts. Language is itself represented as a formative force, whose shaping power, however, in being so exposed, may also be recognized and redirected." (492-493)

Conclusion

It is this possibility of subjectivity outside of the Law that the poems by Plath, Harjo, and Harper explore. That is not to say that Dickinson, Sexton, and Bradstreet are not interested in madness or even definitions of woman that come from elsewhere. But in their representations of women within these poems, Dickinson, Sexton, and Bradstreet do not use their poetic language as performativity. Instead, they draw portraits of hysterical women that reinforce the silent and conforming expectations of the Law of the Father. Plath, Harjo, and Harper, on the other hand, work diligently to mimic those same hysterics, to reveal the hysteric as a performance, and to offer a language of madness. Yet, while they subvert the Law, they present bodies that are still socially constructed as women, and who are struggling with the materiality of the female body. Butler says, "in order for feminism to proceed as a critical practice, it must ground itself in the sexed specificity of the female body" (*Bodies that Matter* 28).

Plath, Harjo, and Harper ground their works in the female body by including the organic body and resisting the mind/body split in their poems. They also accomplish performativity through their use of ambiguity to help resist pre-scribing the elsewhere of madness. Their use of ambiguity opens possibilities for yet unwritten bodies and offers both a language of madness and a language of woman. It is ambiguity in thought patterns that contemporary psychiatrists are connecting to mad patients and creativity.

In his article, "Bipolar Illness, Creativity, and Treatment," Albert Rothenberg, faculty in psychiatry at Harvard University, argues that while studies linking creativity and bipolar disorder contain serious flaws, the interrelationships between creative persons and those with mental illness need definition and explanation. He finds that

interrelationship to be two processes in methodological thinking patterns. The first process that seems to be similar in creative and mentally ill persons is the janusian process "(the name derives from the Roman god Janus whose multiple faces looked simultaneously in 4 – 6 opposite directions) consists of *actively conceiving multiple opposites or antitheses simultaneously*. During the course of the creative process, opposite or antithetical ideas, concepts, or propositions are consciously conceptualized as *simultaneously* co-existing" (135-136). The second process is the homospatial process. It "(the name derives from the Greek, *homiois,* meaning the same) consists of *actively conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities.* In this process, concrete entities such as rivers, houses, human faces, as well as sound patterns and written words, are superimposed, interposed, or otherwise brought together in the mind and totally fill its perceptual space – the subjective or imaginary space experienced in consciousness" (136). To conceive of two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, is to think unreasonably.

So it seems that creative thinking, poetic language, and madness have an intersecting component in ambiguity. If this is so, it is this ambiguity, as seen in the three poems by Plath, Harjo, and Harper that signifies madness. Madness, and the language of madness, offers us possibilities through which we might discover woman.

CHAPTER SIX

Between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan

When reading or watching the stories of Helen Keller, I have imagined myself as both Helen, with one hand under the stream of water and one hand around the hand of my teaching spelling the word W-A-T-E-R, and Anne with my fingers frantically spelling *water* in sign language as I attempt to teach language to a visually and hearing impaired child. I imagine myself as being tamed by language, as suddenly understanding the world because of acquisition of English. I also imagine that I can open the minds of others with language. These two things, the love of language as an opportunity to communicate and the love of language as a tool of instruction, are in constant tension in my life. In this dissertation, I have attempted to illustrate this tension with the inclusion of my own poems at the beginnings of each chapter. These poems, while addressing the issues in each chapter, are my own Helen-like version of those issues: creative impulses that hover around the concepts and communications that become slippages refusing to be defined.

Yet, in most ways, I have grown to be more like Anne Sullivan: particularly in vocation and in lack of disability. However, I cannot simply cut away my own poetry. I am unwilling to speak only in the academic language allotted to me on the subject of American women's poetry. Poetic language is a tool that I am, however clumsily, practiced in using. Therefore, it must speak here. Whether my poems are performative or traditional performances of the feminine, I cannot say. That will be for another to

judge. What I must say is that they are a crucial part of my own understanding of writing, marriage, maternity, and madness. Therefore, they are essential to this dissertation.

Only one of the original poems presented here was written for this dissertation, all of the others (and I shall not say which is which) were written prior to the writing of most of this study. It seems to me, then, upon reflection, that many of these topics have been swirling around in my brain for quite some time. And I do not believe that I have found all of the answers that I am searching for. What is a woman's language? How do women poets employ such a thing? These are questions I expect to be considering for many years to come. The following poem was written during a poetry writing class I taught in a maximum security women's prison in Alabama.

On the Inside

for the women in the Poetry Class at Tutwiler Prison, Spring 2004

I had only known this inside:
the prison constructed by men:
places made to send me away;
steel disguised by clever words,
attention diverted by pointing
out elegance in that bar's curve
or the intricate designs carved
into this bar's notched artistry

I've spent fifteen years learning to see the cage put around me to surround

But until I felt the beating,
until the first moment I stood before you
my muscle clanging inside my ribcage,

I did not know: we are sisters

I did not know:
visible bars swing on hinges:

their black paint scraped away
by someone pleading for release,
by years of hands sliding in/out
after a buzzer voice screams
down a long bricked corridor,
by my fingernail when it scratches the surface
when my palms pull a gate open or shut
fingers wrapped tightly around the rubber
that tries to insulate me from the cold flaking reality
until this:

these bars
these walls
built by men
to keep us in
to keep us out
these dividers
no longer
interest me.

You do.

Final Conclusions and Questions

In the end, I have found that it is the poetry itself and the women who create those poems that still hold most of my interest. While I want to know and understand the systems in place that make us who we are, it is the poetry that keeps me moving. It is the words themselves, the W-A-T-E-R moments of my existence that bring me to my work day after day. In this dissertation, as a whole, I have explored American women's poetry on four subjects. I began with a chapter which surveys feminist theories of women and language and includes a summary of Judith Butler's ideas on performance and Jacques Lacan's theories of subjectivity. This introduction explains the psychoanalytic model, feminist responses to that model, and the discussions about women's language. I have

shown that while it is through language that human beings are sexed, under the right conditions, poetic language can be performative and can potentially signify outside of the Symbolic.

In the second chapter, I survey poems written about the process of writing by Elizabeth Bishop, Jane Turell, Gertrude Stein, Sharon Olds, Ntosake Shange, and Adrienne Rich. I argue that these six poems reveal that women have, even for hundreds of years, been employing the kind of writing that Hélène Cixous clarifies *écriture féminine* and Luce Irigaray as *parler-femme*. These poems illustrate that women poets see themselves as part of a history/herstory of poetry outside of the traditional patriarchal constraints of poetry and have employed poetic language in order to write themselves into language.

My third chapter investigates poems about marriage written by Anne Bradstreet, Alice Cary, Marianne Moore, Lorine Niedecker, and June Jordan. Building upon Irigaray's theories of the Masquerade, I have shown that by miming the Masquerade, these poets resist the marriage market and call attention to the veiling of women through that market. By engaging in the performative, these poets reveal the Masquerade and the confinement it engenders.

In chapter four, I look at maternity poems written by Ai, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Sylvia Plath, and Martha Brewster to show that maternity, like the Masquerade has been a traditional performance of femininity in American culture. These poets, however, reveal that performance and show that the maternal function is actual a place of abjection and pain for women within the Symbolic. However, the maternal

function can offer a place outside of the Symbolic – through the semiotic disruption of poetic language.

In the fifth chapter, I explore poems which take madness as their subject. I illustrate that through poems by Anne Bradstreet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Joy Harjo, Emily Dickinson, Ann Sexton, and Sylvia Plath that hysteria, like maternity and Masquerade, has been prescribed as a feminine performance. Poets like Bradstreet, Dickinson, and Sexton perform that hysteria by presenting a body which follows the conventions of femininity. However, Harper, Harjo, and Plath present an organic body through a language of madness which is outside of the Symbolic. This language of madness presents a performative language that calls into question the connections between femininity and hysteria and presents the language of madness as subversion by speaking (*parler-femme*) madness rather than speaking *about* it.

As a whole, this dissertation argues that American women poets, through their performative use of poetic language have achieved *écriture féminine*. They have found ways to disrupt the Symbolic and thereby have created a speaking woman. Poetic language, because of its connection with the semiotic and with the maternal body, is one place that woman can seek to create new definitions and languages of woman.

* * *

In her book, *Undoing Gender,* Judith Butler asks readers to consider the state of feminism in the new millennium. She acknowledges that feminism finds itself in a political arena in which it is criticized, it criticizes itself, and it is not monolithic. Yet, rather than attempting to find a "unifying feminist theory," Butler asks us to question the foundations and outcomes of feminist theories. With this in mind, I would like to

consider the question: What feminist questions are addressed by these American women poets and how is this dissertation part of feminism in the new millennium?

When women poets write in America, they engage with readers on political, social, cultural, and personal levels. Yet, the question remains, how is poetry political? I believe that poetry participates in the formation and reinforcement of gender just as it participates in the formation and reinforcement of genre. This leads me to an important question raised by this dissertation: how is the relationship between genre and gender linked both etymologically and ideologically? Poetic language is a remnant of the very base of female communication: the language of the mother to the unborn child. The French word *genre* [84] still means both what in English we call gender and what we call genre. It is, at least until recently, a word which connotes a category or section of a class or sort. Yet in English, we have split these two words away from each other. The writing of this dissertation has led me to a point where I would like to set the two terms next to each other again and consider: gender and genre.

To figure out the connection between gender and genre, I would like to return to traditional poetic form. If a poem is written in the dominant "form" of the day (even if that form is free verse) or if a poem uses a well worn and familiar form, like a woman

[84] In the beginning of her article "Derrida and gender: the other sexual difference," Peggy Kamuf offers some insight into the connections between gender and genre. The article, as a whole, is not centered on the linguistic connection or disconnections of the terms *gender* and *genre*. However, it is her distinctions that are relevant for my chapter. According to Kamuf, in Derrida's language, French, *genre* did not come to mean *gender* until the American feminists attempted to collapse the separation between gender and sex. *Sexe,* Kamuf argues has been the closest French word to the English word gender. In English, the words sex and gender were separated originally to try to distinguish biological characteristics from cultural (respectively) ones. Kamuf points out that while Butler collapses the difference between the two, "within a certain discourse" (84), she is not making arguments about the language (English in this case) in which the distinction still exists between sex and gender (84). Butler's argument, Kamuf believes, relies on the distinction in order to illustrate the collapse. It was this article which brought my attention to the linguistic kinship between gender and genre.

choosing to use a well worn and familiar gender role, the poem (and/or the woman) reinforces that gender/genre. But if we begin to question the forms that precede us: if we stretch them, contort them, or work against them, then in both gender and genre we make changes in the culture.

A fashionable rhyme scheme, then, like a fashionable cocktail dress, may change in hem length or waistline; what is constant among women poets is that some wear the fashions of last year, some wear the fashions of decades previous, some wear the current trends, and some (only a very few) push the trends that have not yet (and may never) come into vogue. These women/poets are the performative poets; these are the writers of poems that have, at least in potential, the ability to write Cixous' "new woman" into existence.

This performative, then, is precisely what Butler calls for when she calls for us to make gender trouble. Only here, I have illustrated how gender trouble can be made in written language. By engaging poetic language, by employing the semiotic language of mother/child, pre-symbolic, women poets reveal and disrupt the gender/genre norms of the culture surrounding them. America, then, as it moves from trend to trend, has been in a constant state of upheaval. If we acknowledge the progress made by our foremothers in the poetry of past centuries, and if we continue to track the changes made by our contemporary poets, we will see that not only is the face of American poetry dynamic, but the body is as well.

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