

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kerin G. Rose for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Women Studies presented on June 26, 1997. Title: In the Words of a Woman.

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Abstract approved: _____
Lisa Ede

I am a woman who writes. I am a writer who is a woman. In the Words of a Woman is an exploration of how these two facts of my life merge and influence each other. It is a work written to mediate between the supposed dichotomies of creative and critical, personal and academic, imaginative and scholarly. My desire is that this text will serve as autobiography, critical inquiry, creative response, and credo. The form of this thesis dances between prose and poetry. I have thoughts that need to be expressed sometimes in one form, sometimes in the other, and sometimes in the interplay of the two. As a collection of essays, I have brought together works that are primarily concerned with my story as a woman and a writer with essays that articulate my engagement in other women's writing. Within and between the prose pieces, I have included poems that touch on the same topics, giving different shadings to these themes. This text is a May Day dance, a joyous enactment of a performance long in the creating and rehearsing, not without struggles and challenges, but I hope for the reader a pleasure to participate in.

In the Words of a Woman

by

Kerin G. Rose

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In the Words of a Woman

Prelude

Over there. Look out across the well plowed furrows and carefully tended plots. There, in the far corner of the back forty acres. That tangle of brambles and briars surrounds a wild garden, a voluptuous disarray of irises and anemones, ranunculus and ripening melons, sprawling swaths of grass. There, that is my place of retreat, the source of my creative imagination – what I think of as *l'écriture féminine*. Dark and mysterious, it is filled with the heady fumes of innovation, the sweet scent of resistance. It is a place where women lie nakedly entwined, listening, drinking in their sisters' spoken breaths, caressing themselves with their written words. It is erotic, wanton, pristine, vibrant, sensual, ecstatic. It is hidden, disputed, nowhere, everywhere, within, and yet to be revealed. I invite you to join me there.

I am a woman who writes. I am a writer who is a woman. These are two facts of my life that I resist separating. Consequently, my writing often focuses on the intersections of these two identities and how each is influenced by the other. There are three strands that bind themselves together in my writing and my inner life: sexuality, spirituality, creativity. These are the themes I see running through my work. This document is the map of my journey into a clearer understanding of my creative self. It is an exploration of the different facets of my relationship to words, both the words I write and the words of other

women whom I read. This journey has also been a struggle for form, an on-going attempt to create for my words a structure that will most truly carry my intent.

I don't think of myself as a literary critic or as a critical theorist, but rather as a creative artist. Although university course work has required me to read and write in the modes of criticism and theory, I find even at my most analytical I am inclined to lapse into poetic association, what one instructor termed "arguing by metaphor." I am happiest with intellectual work when it contains an element of the imaginative, most at ease with academic pursuits when I feel invested in them at a personal level. At the core of this approach is a commitment to feminist theory and the academic feminist project of reshaping the academy into a place of greater inclusion for women's values, words, and life experiences.

My writing and the approaches I choose to take to others' writing has been most strongly influenced by my reading the works of creative artists. The writers I hold as my literary mentors include Margaret Atwood, Ursula LeGuin, Doris Lessing, and Denise Levertov. Atwood and Lessing inspire me with their blending of the mundane and the fantastical, their willingness to look at the layers of truth below surface realities. LeGuin's *Earthsea Trilogy* startled me into realizing at twenty that I still wanted to be a writer as much as I had when I was nine. Her work continues to be a compass to me, a lighthouse to guide me back to the harbor of my own deepest desires. Denise Levertov, whose poetry

has provided me with both model for my work and words to live my life by, is probably the most influential of all. I find one of my central concerns as a writer is the question of form, of how to define the form a work wants to take or will be most effective in expressing. Levertov's "Statement on Poetics" has been my standard for how to approach the relationship of content to form in all of my writing:

I believe content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only *in* form. Like everything living, it is a mystery. The revelation of form itself can be a deep joy; yet I think form as *means* should never obtrude, whether from intention or carelessness, between the reader and the essential force of the poem, it must be so fused with that force (412).

A work feels whole to me when it has attained such an inseparable fusion of form and content.

The fusion of breath and body, body and word, word and woman is what attracts me to the theoretical writings of Helene Cixous. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous defines a distinctly feminine writing. *L'écriture féminine* is written by women reclaiming our bodies, bringing to the page what has been culturally repressed, shamed, and silenced. Cixous' insistence that a woman can write herself into being only by writing in forms true to the rhythms and patterns of being a woman sits true with me. I feel a deep affinity to the cycles of life in a woman's body. I bleed and I conceive. My metaphors for my writing are often metaphors of sexuality. I return again and again to Cixous' phrase, "By writing herself, woman will return to the body" (337). I gain courage from her assertion, "Almost everything is yet to be written by women about

femininity: about their sexuality. . . " (342). My experiences of creativity are closely aligned to my experiences of sexuality. There are struggles between union and autonomy involved in both modes of expression. I find myself attempting to resolve these struggles in the process of writing and allowing them to be embedded in a finished piece.

This emphasis on the body and sexuality is not, however, one that floats serenely on the surface of all feminist thinking. Many women object, with justifiable concern, that such a focus can lead into essentialist assumptions that equate biology with destiny. Feminist studies in literature, as in other disciplines, engages a full spectrum of theories and methodologies. Feminist studies also has its conflict and tensions, its proponents of different schools of thought, its irreconcilable differences. The gardens of feminism that give nurturance are as susceptible as any other garden to the plagues of brambles and thorns, days of intemperate weather, and seasons of discord. In an ideal world, the bonds of sisterhood would be strong enough to embrace and celebrate diversity without threat or competition among the varying factions. We do not live in an ideal world, though. Still, I see in much of feminist discourse a willingness to hold out the possibility that contraries can coexist, that as women among women we can agree to disagree. I am also inclined to be an idealist, to believe that we can find ways to bring together what has been separated. I see the effort to combine what might otherwise be mutually exclusive as a worthy goal.

As a thesis document, this manuscript combines creative and critical expressive forms, guided by my feminist practice as a woman-centered approach to life and literature. I write about myself as a woman writer and about my relationships to the work of other women writers. In doing this, I make no claims that I can write myself into some monolithic identity of *Woman* that captures the experience of every born female. Other women, other feminists speak to other issues: race, economics, social class. Other women experience their sexuality differently than I experience mine. I write about the personal, not to make it universal, but because I believe that the collective truths of womanhood are revealed in the communal tellings of our individual stories. I am situated as a white female in America. At the age of forty, I've felt free to make the bold pronouncement that I am "no longer a heterosexual woman," though I haven't sorted out exactly what that means to me yet. I have chosen to live on the fringes of the mainstream and minimize my participation in our consumer culture out of a philosophical commitment, not because of the constraints of poverty or prejudice. The primary concerns that I have faced, my longings and joys, mysteries and disappointments, have centered around the physical experiences of being in a woman's body.

My writing reflects this. I do not pretend to be a disembodied intellect. I do not don the mask of objectivity. This is, in itself, a political stance, a refusal to separate the personal and public, the academic and the passionate, the read material from the felt response, or the written word from the lived experience.

At its best, my learning -- my reading and writing and creative efforts -- is a profoundly erotic activity. I use erotic here in the larger sense that Audre Lorde offers in "The Uses of the Erotic":

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves (54).

It is a love affair with and in words that I offer you. Language is my medium for passion, my heart and my hopes in a handful of pages.

My work dances between the forms of prose and poetry. My thoughts need to be written sometimes in one form, sometimes in another, and sometimes in the interplay of the two. I am bringing together essays that are primarily concerned with my own story as a writer with essays that articulate my engagement with other women's texts. I am at once my own subject and the narrative voice exploring the subjects and subjectivities of other women who write. Dancing within and between the prose pieces are poems that touch on the same topics, giving different shadings to these themes. The form that emerges from this dance is one that has been performed by other writers as divergent as Boethius, Vladimir Nabakov, and Gloria Anzaldua. This text is a May Day dance, a joyous enactment of a performance long in the creating and rehearsing, not without its difficulties and challenges. The work of writing, the drafts and revisions and days at the keyboard, is a struggle in solitude at times characterized by excruciating loneliness, haunted by doubt. But when I come

to the finished piece, I return to my initial sense of ecstatic wonderment, the idyllic garden of words that soothe and inspire. My hope is that I have designed a dance that the reader can delight to join in.

Imaginatively there is a place where we begin, where all the strands are held separate. The text awaits and the reader has yet to take the first steps into its patterns. Because a text exists in time as a sequence of pages, there is also a place where we end, where the strands are crossed and recrossed inextricably. But it is the dance of weaving that is most important, the moving under and over, into and out of the circle we dance around each other as reader and writer. The poems are those moments of brief pause where we stand face to face before passing on to the next sequence of steps. I want them to speak for themselves, to greet you with an element of surprise. The essays are the larger pattern, the colors and lengths of fabric to be woven. I would like to introduce them briefly here, so that when you take them up it is with a touch of familiarity, recognizing their texture and feeling.

I have grouped the essays into three sections. Part One is composed of two pieces that are inward explorations, examinations of my perceptions of life as a writer, and experimental in form. "Woman: Womb and Word" is the most exclusively autobiographical of all the essays. It is a literacy narrative, an intimate account of my life as a writer and my writing as the medium of my intimacy. I think of it as a "poessay," in that it contains poetic text within the prose essay. It serves me as a touchstone for who I am and how I write, what

my commitments to myself and my work are. It is followed by "Cornstalks and Tea Bags," a close reading of Linda Hogan's essay "Hearing Voices."

Because Hogan's text is itself so richly poetic, I read and write about it with heightened attention to the voices and poems I hear as the subtext to her main discussion. This too takes the form of a poessay, integrating poems that I developed out of her essay into my essay.

Part Two brings me into a more academic relationship with writing. The two essays there are critical responses to creative works. They address my experiences as a reader, the questions and issues I gravitate towards when interacting with a text. "Dark Moon Rising" originated in my attempt to fill the silence I was troubled by in a course I took on Drama in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Unconvinced that there were no women who wrote plays during these eras, as suggested by their absence in the class syllabus, I kept asking questions until I found Elizabeth Cary's play The Tragedie of Mariam. My essay discusses the psychological archetypes of the feminine in Cary's characters Mariam and Salome. It concludes with poems that depict aspects of the Dark Goddess, a "negative" feminine archetype, as I have known her. The second piece, "Usurping the Phallus," considers Leslie Feinberg's novel about Butch-Femme lesbian culture, Stone Butch Blues. Reading Feinberg's work, I was most struck by the symbolic significance of the sexual practices she describes. My essay looks at the metaphor of the dildo as it exteriorizes the negotiation of power in intimate relationships.

Part Three brings me back to my personal history as a writer. It engages with two poems by Denise Levertov, examining how they define the interaction between creative self and the source of creative inspiration. This final essay, "Dancing in Words," begins as an autobiographical musing on my childhood dreams of becoming a dancer. It then enters into a discussion of the dance between poet and Muse in the Levertov poems that brings me to consider how I have chosen to dance not on a stage but rather in the words of poetry. I also look more closely at how my commitment to living and writing from a woman-identified position affects my sexuality. I see myself moving to a different place along the "lesbian continuum" that Adrienne Rich proposed as a schema for female identity. Sexuality as process emerges out of writing as process, each influencing the other in subtle and satisfying ways.

The ground on which we weave this May Day dance is ground that has been opened and made accessible by the many women who work in feminist scholarship. I can do the writing I do because of the writing others have done. Feminists in and out of the academy are rethinking, rewriting, remaking what we call the Arts and Sciences. In disciplines as varied as history, literature, sociology, film, science, and psychology women are redefining the content and format of their areas of study. Women are remaking culture. That the personal is political is one of the cornerstones of contemporary feminist thinking. This claim has infused much of the feminist academic work I know with a sense of liveliness and personal voice that is exhilarating.

Reading the work of bell hooks, Nancy K. Miller, and Evelyn Fox Keller has helped me to have the courage to invest my writing with the kind of heartfelt passion I find in theirs. Teresa de Lauretis and Tania Modleski, in their often radical reinterpretation of cultural meanings, have provided me with a model for looking at the world around me, for reconsidering how and why we are shaped by our media. Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig have made it possible for me to think of my sexuality in terms of ever widening circles and to think of those circles as subject for my writing. The May Pole itself, once undoubtedly erected as a focal place for a pagan ritual of phallic worship, is metaphorically the fundamental conviction that I see as central to all feminist thinking: that women matter; that women's words need to be heard; that women are historically an oppressed class and that it is time to change the distribution of power between the sexes.

In the Words of a Woman is a work that mediates between the supposed dichotomies of creative and critical, personal and academic, imaginative and scholarly. My desire is that this text will serve as autobiography, credo, critical inquiry, and creative response. The journey of writing it has taken me into and out of and back through the halls of academia and the pathways of the feminine psyche. It is Ariadne's twine leading me safely out of the labyrinth where women's voices have been muted to barely whispered echoes. Into the open air I emerge, onto the blank page, the possibilities of chaos. I scatter fragments of my musings, moments in my awakening imagination. At midnight,

against a moon drenched sky, they gather stars. They are the tokens I leave behind to mark my passing, a map to indicate where I've been, an invitation to others to travel with me.

Fragments

I painted the scenes of my life
on a mirror
watching myself as I worked
until one day, my attention
so absorbed by the visions
of what I'd done,
I walked into the mirror
and it fell

shattering itself

my life

into uncountable

fragments.

It's difficult now for me
to assemble them.
I'm afraid of cutting myself
on their jagged edges.
But I sit tentatively picking up
one here, another there
and offer them for you
to look into.

They're the shards
of who I am,
the past I created.
They're on a mirror:
if you look carefully
you can see
yourself in them too.

PART ONE

Woman: Womb and Word

*I have wept these words
bled these words
from my heart
from my womb.*

My writing is deeply connected with my womanhood, my sexual self. Times when I have been most successful in composing, I have experienced a release of tension and physical pleasure I can only compare to orgasm. I think of my writings as my children, though few of them have survived infancy. Many have never even come to full term, but have been miscarried early in their development. When I remember my childhood aspirations to be a writer, I feel that I have aborted my writing career, terminating a creative pregnancy rather than taking myself through the discomforts and responsibilities such a child would demand of me.

For most of my adult life I have been an infertile writer. The two times when I was most productive, most able to conceive an idea and give birth to it in a tangible form, were in the early '80's and again in the early '90's. In 1977 I decided to take a break from my studies at UCSD, start a family, and experience full-time motherhood. I found myself in 1980, the 24-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter, not wanting to have another baby, but wondering, *Now what?* Needing a direction for my artistic ambitions and a way

to define myself beyond my maternal identity, I took a correspondence course from The Institute of Children's Literature: "Writing for Children and Teenagers." This got me started thinking about my writing seriously as I learned about the markets for children's literature and worked on stories with specific markets in mind. I was able to return to UCSD in 1981 and that spring term took a beginning short fiction course.

Most of what I was writing was fantasy, inspired by my own reading of Ursula LeGuin, Anne MacCaffrey, Mary Stewart, Lloyd Alexander, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien. I was ecstatic when one of the first stories I'd written was accepted by the children's magazine cricket the first time I submitted it. They accepted a longer story after I'd submitted it three times, rewriting it extensively twice. During the years from 1981 to 1983, I also sent out a bulk of manuscripts to the adult markets, none of which met with any favorable response. At least once I received quite an insulting rejection. These were my stillborn children; I loved them, but they didn't have the strength to survive independently of me.

Neither did I have the strength to survive the agony of rejections or the self-discipline to keep producing new stories despite the rejections. I was discouraged by the sight of my desk littered with the corpses of unacceptable manuscripts, some of them accompanied by death certificates from multiple sources. I felt that I'd used up my capacity to create stories, and decided to go into teaching instead. I took Montessori training and taught young children for

a few years, then got my secondary credential in English and accepted a position at a high school in a small town on the Mendocino coast.

I didn't return to creative writing until 1990 when I relocated from Northern California to Oregon. That summer my daughter decided to live with her father and his new partner full time, moving a three hours drive away from where we had maintained joint custody arrangements for the past year and a half. I was stunned and desperately needed to feel that I was making changes and choices in my own life, not just passively watching the devastation of my losses. I resigned an assignment teaching first grade, packed up my belongings, and moved to Ashland where I found work as a Special Education Assistant and committed myself to the task of finding my voice, giving birth to my writing as a means of self discovery.

Voicing Silence

When I hear my own voice
will I listen?
After the arguing, the analysis,
the chatter rattling round
in my mind, when the still
silent voice that is mine
has gained enough strength
to speak,
will I know it?
If, like Cassandra, she speaks
a truth that burns,
that lights corners safer kept dark,
will I have the courage
to hear and see?
Or is it that she waits
in the silence of wisdom
sheltering her words
until I have the strength
to receive them?

Out of my two years in Ashland emerged a series of poems very close to the core of my inner life. Several of them were published in a local arts paper. I continue to work on my poetry-making sporadically and have read from them in a variety of settings. This body of poetry represents a reemergence of the writer in me, a toddler now, walking in the words unsteadily at times, falling often and sometimes giving way to fits of frustration and temper tantrums.

And yes, there is a third, more recent period in which my writing flourished, a confusing, disruptive time I am only beginning to be able to understand. In the fall of 1993 I fell in love with a man I lived eighty miles from. So I wrote to him. I painted a card and spoke in it of the delights of our first lovemaking. I sent him a letter clarifying my need for intimacy to be held within agreements of exclusivity. I mailed him a collage with the cryptic words, "We who once were shall be again." When he planned to bring his 6 and 11 year old daughters to visit, I sent them copies of my cricket stories to read on the way.

We consecrated our union under the stars, beside the river, in the words I spent hours composing and decorating. I read him Blake and Rumi, Gibran and Rilke. I hand lettered copies of my favorite poems for him. I poured forth my soul on paper, and he saved my words. Peter gathered all the things I sent him into a large album, creating a beautiful book of my writing which came to symbolize the purity and passion of my love, our hopes for a shared future when we could look through it and remember the tenderness with which we'd

begun. I felt that this was the love I'd been waiting for, the love I'd known before, the love that could rekindle the banked coals of my creative fires, reanimate my imagination.

Ancient Memories

3 a. m.
 I am awake, remembering.
 Moonlight washes the meadow,
 makes me restless.
 When I scratch my head
 grains of sand catch under my fingernails.
 I laugh.
 We made love on the riverbank.

I rise,
 light seven candles to write by,
 put on the shirt you left
 hanging by my door.

Do you know I am forever changed
 by your touch?
 This new familiarity,
 being with you again,
 affects my very pulse.
 Lost knowledge resurfaces
 as the times of once were
 and shall be
 merge
 held within the ever-present
 we are.

Woven through this bright tapestry of poetic love are the darker strands of deceit and betrayal, the shadow side of our relationship. I wasn't the only woman sending tokens of affection to Peter. During the year and a half that we were lovers I kept stumbling onto his secondary collection of women's words, notes and cards that ranged in emotional content from the mildly flirtatious to

the deeply passionate. I reacted at first by simply destroying a card that had come in the mail before Peter knew about it, hoping to prevent an initial attraction from becoming a threat to our romance. I eventually confessed; he forgave me, and it seemed we'd made a significant crossing in defining our commitments to each other.

But there were more letters, hidden from me to later surface where I couldn't avoid finding them. I grew less controlled in my reactions with each discovery. I experienced a deep sense of betrayal as I learned of these other "correspondence courtships." I had embodied my love and trust in the written word, and to realize that what to me was so precious, so unique, was in Peter's emotional life a fairly common occurrence defiled the sacredness it represented to me. My sense of my own value as a woman, as a writer, was called into question by Peter's inability, or unwillingness, to place the words I offered him and the emotions they held into an exclusive category.

It was when I found a letter he had written to another woman, telling her how he was longing for a partner, hoping that she would fall in love with him and his lifestyle, extending his words to her as a token of his "vulnerability and openness," that something in me snapped. The dam which holds back our most primitive impulses had been slowly eroding until, with a rush of unrestrained furor, it collapsed. I grabbed everything I had ever received from, written to, or made for Peter and built a fire in the woodstove. I tore out the pages of the book he had made from my poems, letters, and collages and, like Medea

destroying the spiritual children of our union, fed them one at a time to the flame. Not satisfied with this, I emptied the wallet he'd forgotten to take with him and burned his driver's license, library card, and whatever else it contained. Then I looked for his passport and burned it.

Burnt Offerings

Because you could not
truth tell
or
promise keep,
I burned the words
you gave to me.
A fragile facade
your magician's illusions
disillusioned I saw
emptied to ashes.

Because I found
your hidden archives
cataloging love
you encouraged from others
I burned the words
I gave to you.
Those shimmering gifts
returned to the flame
purified of the taint
from your pathetic collection.

Because you received my nakedness
behind your walls
of deceitful evasion
witnessed my pain,
as I struggled toward Truth,
I burned the words
giving your identity.

You never were
who you pretended to be.

I am still trying to understand the violence and destructiveness these events evoked in me. I know that the degree to which I felt my love was betrayed, my trust violated, is related to the degree to which I embodied my love and trust in the written word. In moments of clarity, I can see that the trust which I most need to cultivate is my own trust in my writing abilities. I have throughout my life violated the optimistic confidence of my nine-year-old self who, when asked what she was going to be when she grew up, answered unhesitatingly, "A writer." It is time for me to claim my identity as a writer as intrinsic to who I am, an identity I believe in strongly enough to maintain even when confronted with rejection slips or unfaithful lovers or the demons of self-doubt.

I entered graduate school at the age of thirty-nine for much the same reasons another woman might seek out a fertility clinic. My unarticulated hope has been that the "artificial insemination" of assigned writing projects will help me get back in touch with my natural creative cycles. I am not willing to continue as a barren writer. Artistic fertility has its rhythms of increased and diminished fruitfulness; I feel strongly impelled to move my writing into a new phase of fecundity. As I approach the end of my sexually reproductive years, the urge to bring forth new life wells up within me as an imperative I must respond to, not by conceiving more children, but by dedicating that energy to the care and nurturance needed to bring my gifts and talents as a writer to their own maturity and independence.

on writing

sometimes
the words have a life
of their own

when my attention
is elsewhere
they gather, whisper,
shape soft shadows
in their passing

I am startled
to find them
later
waiting for me
amused

as though they wondered
where
I had been.

Corn Stalks and Tea Bags

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower. . . .

from "Auguries of Innocence," William Blake

A woman who talks to corn, who listens to what the corn has to say to her, where have I read about this woman before? I asked myself. I was holding Evelyn Fox Keller's book Gender and Science wondering where else I had read about Barbara McClintock's work with corn plants. Amidst the stacks of articles, journals, books, and poems cluttering my floor I knew there was another reference to this remarkable woman's remarkable science. When I did mentally locate the source, Linda Hogan's essay "Hearing Voices," I realized that Hogan's writing had impressed me deeply; her words had stayed with me, stirred in me the place that recognizes truth and connections. I knew I didn't just happen to key into McClintock's reappearance in my reading, but that there was a quality about both her work and "Hearing Voices" that is strongly related to my own way of knowing the world.

As I listen more attentively to Hogan's essay, I hear in it a language that speaks for a unique way of experiencing life and our relationship to it. I would subtitle "Hearing Voices" as "A Poetic Guide to Practical Mysticism." This work serves to make accessible the abstract concepts of mystical experience in such a way that a window opens into those experiences, inviting the reader to enter a world where " . . . something small turns into an image that is large and strong with resonance, where the ordinary becomes beautiful" (81). Intertwined

with the prose narrative is a poetic structure that makes it possible for the reader to encounter a way of thinking that holds contraries, a way of seeing beyond the surface of physical realities, and a way of hearing a language more ancient and more pervasive than any human language. Hogan's essay speaks to me as a poetic piece, and I have chosen to respond to the essay as a poem, to explore where the language moves from the practical to the mystical. I also have attempted to find the poems within the text, and the poem within me that is evoked by the text.

Poems, at their best, fuse the elements of form and content so that what the poet says becomes inseparable from how she says it. I see this principle at work throughout "Hearing Voices." The essay's form is like a picture held in a frame cut from the stalks of two different corn plants. Beginning with the anecdote of Barbara McClintock, Hogan introduces her readers to a scientist who, when she received the Nobel Prize for her work in genetics, credited the corn plants for the stories they told her. The voices McClintock heard communicated information that received the attention of the world's scientific community. At least part of the power of McClintock's statement about the source of her information derives from the context in which she made it known. She risked the ridicule and dismissal of a community dominated by reason and logic to relate an experimental approach that was neither. Hogan acknowledges, "It is important to the continuance of life that she told the truth of her method. . . ." (78). By choosing to open her essay with McClintock's

relationship to her study subjects, her knowing them “from the inside,” Hogan brings us to a realization that the methods of scientist, healer, and mystic may be more closely related than usually admitted.

Hogan closes the essay with another story of corn -- a story she received not as a part of the general cultural milieu, but from her most personal world, her identity as a Native American. It is the story of a corn plant growing in a room in the earth in the center of a canyon and the story it has to tell. In its solitude, in its miraculous survival, “with no water, no person to care for it, no overturning of the soil,” (81) this corn plant becomes symbolic of the spirit of a whole people who have been continually displaced, denied, “dealt into silence” (80) by the surrounding social environment. The corn stalk in the kiva speaks the history of these people, the unbroken interdependence of history and place, consciousness and geographical location. “Hearing Voices” begins and ends with the voices of corn, the importance of the stories they have to tell.

Hogan tells these two “framing” stories in words that evoke strong, poetic images. Out of these words grows another corn story, a poem growing within the prose. By attending closely to Hogan’s diction, separating out phrases that have a clear, lyrical quality, I was able to create a “found” poem taken directly from the text of “Hearing Voices.” “Corn Story,” the poem below, is in effect a condensed version of the larger paragraphs which narrate the two prose corn stories. Part of the genius of “Hearing Voices” is that while the conscious mind reads it as an essay, the unconscious mind receives the

cadences and reflections of a poem, a sort of canticle or chant which mingles with the primary voice.

Corn Story

The daily green journeys of growth,
the true language of inner life:
corn and woman
speaking to one another,
in touch with the mystery.

Corn grows with the songs and prayers:
our strength,
 our knowing,
 our sustenance.

The voices of the corn:
 a language that wants
to bring back
 together
what the other words have torn
 apart,
 the sacredness of life.

One corn plant
 growing
 out of the holy place.

Between these images of corn, Linda Hogan places the portrait of herself as a writer, her relationship to and beliefs about language. Just as McClintock has humbly listened to the corn for answers to her questions about the subtlest changes in its genetics, just as her sister hears the corn in Chaco Canyon telling the details of the ancestral memory, so does Hogan hear a language that moves with ease between microcosm and macrocosm, past and future, personal and political. It is life which she seeks to embody in words, not a fixed concept or an abstract ideal. Poetry is more than a literary form, “. . . it

is life resonating" (79). Her language is infused with a sense of reverence for an animating presence which she must listen to and speak from if her writing is to be honest. She uses the phrases "the true language of inner life," (77) "this intuitive and common language," (78) and the "language of life speaking through us about the sacredness of life," (78) to define the source of her writing. The vibrancy of life itself speaks to us throughout the entire essay.

This feeling of vibrant immediacy is especially evident when Hogan enters the domain of atomic physics. She takes us to the most distant bodies we know, the stars, and tells us of the scientific theories, the stories, that place the origin of our bodies in those far removed points of light. How can we imagine distance or separation across either time or space when our very atoms have been circulating throughout the universe for an eternity? She places before us a poetic science that views all matter as constantly changing and rearranging, and links it to writing that ". . . is insistent on . . . telling the story about what happened when we were cosmic dust, what it means to be stars listening to our human atoms" (79).

Like the scattering of stars across the sky, or the atoms within our body, there are lines of poetry scattered across the pages of Linda Hogan's essay. They constellate around central nuclei and bond together to form a chorus of voices sung in harmonious counterpoint to one another. In composing "Star Songs," below, I again used phrases taken directly from "Hearing Voices" to create a found poem. Though I ranged more widely through the whole text

than I did in composing "Corn Story," the words are Hogan's words, gathered together into a poem.

Star Songs

Atoms that were stars
soothsay
our living breathing
bodies.

Stars we once were
proclaim
the living breathing
word.

Human atoms
witness:
stars listen,
speak life.

Cosmic dust,
testimony,
inner earth
merges our borders.

Snow crystals:
prayer
of poetry and vision
strong with resonance.

Ancient ones
offer up a tongue
acts of magic
poets, prophets, scientists.

"Corn Story" and "Star Songs" are dew drops on the web of Hogan's essay. By shifting my perspective slightly, seeing the slant of light on the web from a different angle, I am able to glimpse more clearly the rainbows and fleeting images that first called my attention to it. The miracle of Hogan's

writing is that it can expand into an essay and contract into a poem within the same text. It contains a wealth of gifts and treasures, given more fully with each reading.

One of the most valuable of these gifts is her sensitivity to the complex lines of connection that hold together the web of human experience. For all its ethereal beauty, Hogan's language at the same time embraces the immediate, ugly aspects of our world. She can listen to the wind from Chernobyl as it speaks the dangers of nuclear power. She pays attention to a friend's father who wonders why American foreign policy supports warfare rather than feeding the hungry. She repeats the words of Betty William who demanded of her neighbors, "What kind of people have we become that we would allow children to be killed on our streets?" (80).

Because Hogan is able to speak equally to the poetic and the practical, the personal and the political, her voice succeeds in demonstrating how language arises out of the interconnectedness of all life. She offers us first the stories of mythology as "the true language of inner life." She reminds us of the rich, time-honored traditions in which nature, the landscape, plants, and animals spoke to and guided humanity. She then depicts how "This intuitive and common language," operates in current events: "In the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the wind told the story that was being suppressed by the people" (78). She confronts her own recognition of the privilege of writing in a world where other women go without food or shelter. As an example of how writing is

“illegitimately insistent on going its own way” (79), she shows us the conflict in Ireland and the crazy wisdom that set into motion petitions for peace signed by sixteen thousand people. These are our living mythologies, the moments where language and “the sacredness of life” intersect to support and defend one another, to bring our human awareness into a greater consciousness.

“Hearing Voices” asks us to listen to those voices, to let them enter into our beings and influence who we are. It is about allowing ourselves to be changed by what we hear, “about a new way of living, of being in the world” (79). When I listen with this level of willingness, I hear a poem of my own responding to Hogan’s words. While “Corn Story” and “Star Songs” are the poems that I have created from the phrases of Hogan’s essay, “Echoes,” below, is the poem that “Hearing Voices” created from me. “Echoes” is what I hear as the subtext of the essay, how my poetic self receives and reshapes this other poet’s words and ideas.

Echoes

Listen.
There are voices
all around us
waiting to be heard.
Be silent and listen.
Stones speak
trees sing
the corn tells a tale
from deep within the earth.

Stop hurrying
stop dissecting
and inspecting
inquiring, requiring,
exploiting, importing,

manipulating and
trying to control.
Stop and listen.

Hear the wailing
of a wind heavy
with the poisonous price
of our well-lit homes.
Hear the anguish
of a people torn
from their lives
torn from their land.
Hear the blood
pooled beneath
children's corpses crying
"How could this happen?"

Hear the chime
of snow crystals
the wondrous magic
stars on earth.
Listen. Be silent.
Hear from within.

Life speaks to us,
through us.
The voice that laughs
that cries
that whispers tendernesses
or bellows rage
is our voice.

Spoken in heart,
and plant,
sister and brother,
animal and emptiness,
it is the still voice
that echoes,
speaking our oneness.

I titled this essay "Corn Stalks and Tea Bags" because, just as the
reappearance of McClintock's corn stalks led me back into "Hearing Voices," so

did the appearance of a series of tea bags lead me out of it with the awareness of how its premises operate in my life. During a class, a friend-who-is-becoming (How else do I describe that tenuous moment when I recognize that someone is reaching out to me, that there is an unspoken understanding that we will become friends?) left me a note that read, "A woman is like a tea bag: you never know her strength until she's in hot water." I'd never heard the expression before, and was touched that Paula had taken the time to pass it along to me, that she had realized I would appreciate it. As I worked on ideas for this essay over the weekend, the same words appeared on two of my own tea bags. In Monday morning's yoga class another woman friend was wearing a T-shirt dominated by the image of a huge tea bag being dunked into a cup of steaming water, captioned by the now familiar adage. Hogan's writing affirms for me that these "coincidences" have an integrity that transcends random chance. I am willing to celebrate them as acts of magic and to acknowledge that I live in a reality where "...acts of magic happen all the time" (81). Inspiration in corn stalks, sisterhood in tea bags, "a world in a grain of sand," these are the auguries of innocence all around us, waiting for when we are ready to receive them.

stones speaking

stones
transported impossible distances
to chant the litany
of the year's cycle
celestial procession
made archway
doorway, window
out
to the only imagined
in
to the such greater mystery
human heart
cut between beats
to lay weeping blood
on the altar
to assure the sun
your children have not
forsaken you

stones
incised with messages
words to solace
weary gods
guardians whose bulk
and certainty
are place against
time's remorseless current
battering their mass until they too crumble,
though generations beyond
those whose supplications
raised them,
dust at last

stones
tumbled in the tides
smooth worn
rounded
resistance flung
sparkling on the beaches —
so many grains
of rebellion
insolently reflecting
day's last light —

stones tossed clacking
from wave to wave
pulled rattling back
into the sea's harsh pulse

stones
moss-softened
gathered by hand
stacked into walls
of fence and home
to tell of boundaries
dividings
tales of field and hearth
and the journeys between
blurred edges blending
crumbling into memory
stones of shelter
stones of the path

stones speaking

stones

PART TWO

Segue

Quite a different voice speaks in these next two essays. Here is the radical feminist, the woman who likes to shock, who wants to shake up the accepted paradigms of reality and see what new patterns might emerge. "Dark Moon Rising" and "Usurping the Phallus" are academic discussions more than personal explorations, but they both examine the topics of female desire and erotic expression -- topics in which I have a strong personal interest. The essays are readings of works written by two other women: Elizabeth Cary's The Tragedy of Mariam and Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues. Separated in time by nearly four hundred years, the play and the novel share the common ground of forbidden sexuality. Both present their readers with images of women expressing themselves sexually in ways not sanctioned by the dominant culture, in ways that challenge the roles assigned to women and that press against the boundaries inscribed on female behavior.

My reading of The Tragedy of Mariam draws on critical work done by feminist literary scholars in the last decade as well as on feminist reinterpretations of Jungian psychology. As such, I explore the play not only as a literary text, but also as a representation of the inner drama, the story of the feminine psyche and the struggle for individuation. Part of this exploration involves interpreting the characters of Salome and Mariam as opposing forces

of the feminine anima. The term "anima" is one that Jung originally used to describe the aspect of men's psychology that carries the feminine characteristics of soul. Since Jung's death, "anima" has taken on a broader definition both within psychoanalysis as well other areas of study that draw on psychoanalytical theory. Feminists, in particular, have resisted the binary of physical male/feminine soul, physical female/masculine soul of Jung's anima/animus schema. My thinking about the feminine anima comes from readings over the last twenty years that include the writings of Jung, Erich Neumann, Jean Shinoda Bolen, James Hillman, Linda Schierse Leonard, and Demetra George. Each uses "anima" in slightly different ways. Later thinkers refer back to Jung, while at the same time refining and enriching his use of the term with their unique viewpoints.

I place the term "feminine anima" as the site within a woman's psyche where archetypal patterns arise and are enacted. The anima is a force of both creation and destruction, like the ancient Hindu goddess Kali. As archetype, the anima is symbolized by a presence and a shadow. Both the nurturing mother and the devouring mother are anima projections. It is in the acceptance self as spectrum, dark and light, that a woman comes into a fully realized identity. As I have tried to make sense of my own inner life and the figures from myth and folklore that I recognize as parts of myself, I've developed a keen felt experience of some of the archetypal identities that define who I am.

When I speak of a woman's anima, then, I am speaking of an aspect of the psyche that I have come to an intellectual understanding of through my imaginative engagement in dreams, art, and witnessing the times my conscious behavior has been transformed by unconscious impulses. Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht, in their introduction to Feminist Archetypal Theory, suggest that "if we regard the archetype not as an image whose content is frozen but . . . as a tendency to form and re-form images in relation to certain kinds of repeated experience, then the concept could serve to clarify distinctively female concerns that have persisted throughout human history" (13-14). It is this regard for archetype as a shifting set of formations that allows me to approach a play written in Renaissance England with questions about its depiction of anima material.

Just as feminist reinterpretations of Jungian psychoanalysis underlie my reading of Cary's work, so does a feminist resistance to Freudian assertions regarding female sexuality inform my reading of Feinberg's. "Usurping the Phallus" is at least partially a refutation of Freud, an everlasting no to Freud's image of the little girl who is forever forlorn that her genitalia is inferior to her father's. This essay also speaks out of the concerns of feminist sociology and enters into a discussion of the sexual history of the society it portrays. Stone Butch Blues gives its readers an entree into a culture that might otherwise remain unknown: the Butch-Femme working class lesbians of Buffalo, New York in the 60's and 70's. What interested me most about this novel, what I

chose to write about in my essay, is how the specific sexual practices of this group of women offer an opportunity to reconsider the symbolic valences of vaginal penetration. My essay is about sex as metaphor, about the issues of power, control, and dominance that are enacted in sexuality. While I am writing about Butch-Femme role playing and the physical use of a dildo as part of this culture's sexual expression, I am also searching for the philosophical and political implications of this practice.

I was introduced to the language of feminist sociology and some of the ways of thinking unique to this discipline through my work in Women Studies courses. "Usurping the Phallus" shows this influence. It has a tone and texture different from my other writing, and it is a difference that pleases me. There is an element of the rebellious daughter refusing to accept the interpretations of Father Freud that informs my discussion of penis envy and castration anxiety. I like having the opportunity to reinterpret these terms as manifestations of men's fears of women's sexual power. That Freud and his followers would consider lesbian sexuality abnormal follows from their fears about women's autonomy. Women who choose women as partners are removing themselves from the pool of women made available to men. Lesbians do threaten the very structures of patriarchy. They are undeniably a refutation that women find contentment only in their reproductive roles of mother and by extension wife. This essay allows me to look into an all-woman world and imagine how erotic passion can be expressed between women.

I find myself asking as a critic what it means for a woman to penetrate another woman even as I am asking as a woman what will it mean to me to say, "I am a lesbian." With that question is a whole package of larger, social questions. Is a lesbian a woman who expresses herself sexually with other women? If so, I'm not a lesbian yet, or I'm a virgin lesbian, or I'm a celibate lesbian. Is a lesbian a woman whose primary emotional attachments are to other women? If so, I've been a lesbian through two marriages and assorted sexual relationships with men. Is a lesbian a woman who is committed to the well-being of all women, who prefers the company of women, who wants nothing of the culturally assigned role of femininity as weak, passive, subservient to men? In that case, I am, have been, and will continue to be unabashedly a lesbian.

Having to sort through these questions makes me feel awkward and tentative, like a young adolescent. I see myself moving into a new way of being, developing out of how I have always been. Some days it seems that the only component missing in my fully embracing a lesbian identity is that of sexual involvement with another woman. Some days it seems that once I've fully embraced a lesbian identity for myself, I will be ready to meet another woman as a lover. Some days it seems that I'm in the midst of a continuing process and the details will sort themselves out with time. At this point my relationship to a lesbian identity is primarily an intellectual one, a political stance rather than a sexual orientation. It is at once ironic and inevitable that

my most explicitly sexual essay is my most academic one. I imagine I will look back on "Usurping the Phallus" as being part of the process of coming into myself as a lesbian. I apparently am taking a route that begins with the intellectual and may eventually lead me into the physical realization of lesbian consciousness.

Dark Moon Rising
Reading the Psychology of The Tragedy of Mariam

In Mind

*There's in my mind a woman
of innocence, unadorned but*

*fair-featured, and smelling of
apples or grass. She wears*

*a utopian smock or shift, her hair
is light brown and smooth, and she*

*is kind and very clean without
ostentation --*

*but she has
no imagination.*

*And there's a
turbulent moon-ridden girl*

*or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rags, feathers*

*and torn taffeta,
who knows strange songs --*

but she is not kind.

Denise Levertov

As a contemporary poet, Denise Levertov is able to address the tension between the opposing poles of the feminine psyche, and to speak of that conflict as existing within a single narrative voice. Her poetic persona can say "I am possessed of qualities both innocent and turbulent, kind and unkind, simple and complex, domestically virtuous and wildly imaginative." I recognize myself in this poem, see the conflicting sub-personalities that I try to live

between, or that I am defined in their constantly shifting dynamics. At times the "woman of innocence" threatens suffocation to the "turbulent moon-ridden girl." In different circumstances, the "opals and rags, feathers/and torn taffeta" so clutter my emotional life that I search frantically for "a utopian smock or shift." I value both my capacity to be "kind and very clean without/ostentation" and my perception of myself as a woman "who knows strange songs." I would not trade off kindness for imagination, nor imagination for kindness. Yet there are parts of me who have one and not the other, parts I nonetheless cherish and rely on.

My sense of my inner life as a multiplicity of selves has been influenced by modern archetypal psychology. When I write, I can consciously draw on these archetypal figures that I know as parts of myself. For a woman writing in the Renaissance such a direct claim may not have been possible for her to assert in her writing, or even to identify in her inner life. But the same tensions that I recognize in Levertov's poem are what I find most interesting in the characters of Mariam and Salome in Elizabeth Cary's The Tragedy of Mariam. As a drama of the psyche, this play portrays Mariam and Salome as the opposing poles of the feminine anima. They are self and shadow, each a presence that would negate the other. While Mariam stands "unadorned but/fair-featured, and smelling of/apples or grass," the Good Wife, the Virtuous Woman, Salome "is not kind," the Sensualist, the Woman of Passion. I will give more attention to Salome here because I find it especially significant that a

woman in her early twenties, writing against the backdrop of a culture that equated female virtue with “silence, obedience, and chastity” was able to so boldly enliven as compelling a character as Salome – the antithesis of the socially sanctioned ideal.

English Renaissance drama presents a remarkable array of female characters who pose an interesting dilemma for the modern reader. Before we can make any observations about the nature of woman represented by these characters, we must remember that most of them exist only as the literary constructs of male imaginations. Lisa Jardine cautions in Still Harping on Daughters:

When the critic tells us that the Jacobean dramatist shows peculiar insight into female character, and even into female psychology, we should pause for a moment. What he or she means is that a convincing portrayal of female psychology is given *from a distinctively male viewpoint* . . . the female character traits to which the critics give such enthusiastic support are almost without exception morally reprehensible: cunning, duplicity, sexual rapaciousness, ‘change-ableness,’ being other than they seem, untrustworthiness and general secretiveness. (69-70)

Why would a modern critic support the depiction of predominantly negative qualities as an accurate “discernment of the minds of women”? (Jardine, 69, quoting U. Ellis Fermor). Clearly, Jardine would not.

Of course “morally reprehensible” may be a relative term. In delineating appropriate education for women, the Renaissance humanist Thomas Salter emphasized the need for female students “. . .to acquire the virtues of chastity,

piety, and humility," to learn to be "modest and temperate, and given to truthfulness, courtesy, and discretion in speech." He insists that

philosophy, poetry, and rhetoric are inappropriate studies for a woman who would be thought chaste and modest, as these studies may lure one away from simple Christian truths and promote a dangerous, even wanton, self-expression. . . . Even reading per se may put the feminine soul at risk (Holm, p. 200-201).

If feminine virtue, as defined by men, necessitates such severe constraints might it not seem more admirable to defy these constraints, even at the price of being judged evil? Could we reframe "morally reprehensible" to indicate resistance to such externally imposed standards? Might we not recast what a male dominated culture considers negative female behavior as, in fact, positive qualities of womanly power? This brings me to the question: How would a female dramatist, "a distinctively (fe)male viewpoint," have portrayed the psychology of her female characters?

Published in 1613, Elizabeth Cary's play gives us a unique opportunity to consider female character and psychology in Renaissance drama from the point of view of a woman writer. I intend to consider Cary's portrayals of Mariam and Salome to inquire into some of the ways in which a woman dramatist shapes the anima shadows and projections carried by her female characters. Does a different schism between good and evil emerge from the pages of a woman writing about women? Does a woman's relationship to herself, as a woman, give her a distinct perspective on the dark aspects of the feminine psyche?

In The Tragedy of Mariam, Elizabeth Cary presents a portrait of a mature feminine consciousness struggling against an oppressive patriarchal environment. Twice, Herod has departed for Rome, leaving instructions that should he die, Mariam is to be killed as well. When Mariam learns of his attempt to bind her life so inexorably to his, she is understandably appalled and begins to reclaim her heart from his affections. Mariam is, in this respect, a woman defining her sexuality in defiance of her husband's claims on her. Her revolutionary act is to declare:

I will not to his love be reconcil'd,
With solemn vows I have forsworn his bed (III,iii,133-4),

to which Sohemus responds, all too accurately,

Unbridled speech is Mariam's worst disgrace
And will endanger her without desert (183-4).

Although Mariam has not transgressed against her marriage vows, because she speaks publicly, Herod makes the assumption, "she's unchaste/Her mouth will ope to ev'ry stranger's ear" (IV,vii,433-4). Here, Herod is calling on the commonly held Renaissance notion that a woman who opened her mouth to speak in public (and "public" was often defined as anyone outside of her immediate household) was comparable to the promiscuous woman who opened her vagina to any man other than her husband. Loquaciousness in a woman was considered to be a precursor and indicator of lustfulness (Rose, 12).

Not sexually, but verbally promiscuous, Mariam is innocent of adultery but guilty of talking too much. Further, she is guilty of talking too honestly, of refusing to dissemble. She realizes that she can continue to live as wife to Herod only if she lives a lie. In her speech to Sohemus she acknowledges that “feminine wiles” would serve her as protection from her tyrannical husband, but she makes a stand against such hypocrisy.

I know I could enchain him with a smile:
And lead him captive with a gentle word,
I scorn my look should ever man beguile,
Or other speech than meaning to afford (163-6).

This is an extremely dangerous stance for Mariam to take. But, as Margaret Ferguson notes, “Transgressive speech, defined as non-hypocritical speech. . . is not, however the whole problem: Mariam also contributes to her downfall by refusing to sleep with Herod. She censors the wrong thing: his phallus rather than her tongue” (Ferguson, 242). Herod interprets Mariam’s decision to abstain from sexual relations with him as further evidence of her adulterous nature and orders her death.

While Mariam eschews the tactics of her oppressors, trying vainly to live within a tyrannical system and still maintain the patriarchy’s values for feminine morality, Elizabeth Cary’s Salome has no such scruples. I find Salome a fascinating character. She may be a scheming, murderous harridan according to Constabarus, but faced with the realities of a world ruled by despotic tyranny, she has learned not only how to survive, but further how to have her will be done. Salome appropriates the dominant masculine culture’s values for

her own purposes. When she can't do that she decides to act in direct defiance of the law and set a new precedent.

Unlike Mariam, Salome refuses to be a sacrificial lamb slaughtered on the altar of patriarchal self-preservation. Looking at her as a representation of the feminine psyche, from a distinctively feminine viewpoint, her "evilness" may be interpreted as a refusal to repress initiative, sexuality, and vital energy.

When we are able to contact the genuine nature of the Dark Goddess within us, we feel as if we are in our power. We are strong, assertive, psychic, prophetic, creative, sexual, unrestrained, and free. Her fiery darkness is the power of the womb, exertive, active, and transformative. Patriarchal culture rejects these aspects of a woman's nature that arise from her red energy of the dark moon, sensing them as dangerous to male domination, and thus labels them as unfeminine (George, 227, emphasis added).

Were the channels clear for these forces of the female psyche to move in the world, Salome's mode of operating might be very different indeed.

In their Introduction to the 1994 edition of The Tragedy of Mariam, Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson note that Salome,

frankly claiming for women the prerogatives of divorce and asserting the preeminence of will over law and tradition, . . . crosses millennia of boundaries, and like Alexander cutting the Gordian knot suggest a strikingly direct alternative to Mariam's careful (and finally unsuccessful) negotiation of conflicting imperatives. Salome is . . . the active double of Mariam's passive resistance to patriarchal power and to definition by the male (39-40).

Unlike her literary sisters, from Eve to Lady Macbeth, Salome's lustfulness and manipulations go unchecked, unpunished, unrepented. She refuses to submit to patriarchal restraints on her behavior, wielding its

determinants to her own advantage. I would argue that Salome can be read as a woman writer's projection of the anima's vitality. Salome is an archetype of the feminine psyche's activating principle in a culture antagonistic to its existence. She embodies the anger and resentment of suppressed female aggression and enacts a deeply embedded revenge fantasy few women, in Renaissance or contemporary society, would be willing to consciously admit they harbor.

In *Salome*, Elizabeth Cary has created a female character unwilling to tender any degree of self-sacrifice. She openly claims the right to express herself sexually. Refusing to be constrained by reputation or honor, she asserts her right to take and dismiss lovers (albeit still within the sanctioned institution of marriage) as she chooses. Although Moses' Law does not give women the privilege of divorce, Salome does not let that stand in her way. When she tires of Josephus and is attracted to Constabarus, Salome secures her freedom by informing Herod of Josephus' "treachery." Adding to this the insinuation that Josephus and Mariam have been adulterously involved with each other, Salome guarantees that Herod will have Josephus put to death. She thus releases herself from the unwanted marital bond and avoids the fate of playing a role to which she is particularly ill suited -- "I to him had liv'd a sober wife" (288). When faced with a choice between her husband's well-being and her own, Salome chooses her own.

Later, when she tires of Constabarus and desires Silleus, believing that Herod is dead, she dares to challenge the law itself.

I'll be the custom-breaker: and begin
To show my sex the way to freedom's door,
And with an off'ring will I purge my sin;
The law was made for none but who are poor (309-12).

To assert herself as "custom-breaker," she takes a much greater personal risk than she does in manipulating her husband's execution.

Unlike Mariam, Salome aims her will at effecting political change, and is for this reason perceived to be much more formidable a threat to the ideology that feminizes passivity. Fittingly, it is her husband who utters the familiar doomsday predictions symptomatic of threatened male privilege:

Are Hebrew women now transform'd to men?
Why do you not as well our battels fight,
And weare our armour? Suffer this, and then
Let all the world be topsie turved quite (ll. 435-39)
(Straznicky, 127).

Plotting to have her husband killed is one thing; divorcing him is quite another. Constabarus was less appalled by the murder which placed him in Josephus' stead, than by Salome's proposal to divorce him. To allow her such an action would disrupt the whole social order.

Ultimately, Salome fancies Silleus more than the status of social reformer (and its attendant dangers; it remains doubtful that she would have proceeded unhindered in her divorce.) When Herod's return is announced, she displays uninhibited joy, realizing "... she is able to pursue an easier, if even more sinister, path to her freedom" (Travitsky, 191).

Now Salome of happiness may boast.
I shall enjoy the comfort of my life.

Joy, heart, for Constabarus shall be slain.
 Smile, cheeks, the fair Silleus shall be mine (III,ii,53-9).

She also sees in Herod's return an opportunity for her to free herself from another source of aggravation -- Mariam.

Within the dramatic action of the play, Elizabeth Cary develops an overt rivalry between these two characters. Herod's wife and sister, whom he merges through a "slip of the tongue" in Act IV, ii, 84-5, compete for his attention, and cannot coexist peacefully. The only time these two women appear in the play together, the tone of the scene is one of petty nastiness and jealous rivalry. For all of Mariam's self-righteous insistence on her virtue, she is not above trading insults with Salome.

Granted, Salome starts it with her comment to Alexandra,

If noble Herod still remain'd in life:
 Your daughter's betters far, I dare maintain,
 Might have rejoic'd to be my brother's wife. (I,iii, 221-2)

Mariam, however, enters whole-heartedly into the verbal fray by attacking Salome's and Herod's heritage:

My birth thy baser birth so far excell'd
 I had to both of you the princess been.
 Thou parti-Jew and parti-Edomite,
 Thou mongrel: issu'd from rejected race. (233-6)

Salome dismisses these insults; she's heard it all before.

Still twit you me with nothing but my birth,
 What odds betwixt your ancestors and mine?
 Both born of Adam, both were made of earth,
 And both did come from holy Abraham's line. (239-42)

Not satisfied to let the argument go, Mariam comes round on a different tack, unable to resist specifying Salome's degenerate behavior.

I favour thee when nothing else I say,
With thy black acts I'll not pollute my breath:
Else to thy charge I might full justly lay
A shameful life, besides a husband's death. (243-6)

Again Salome undercuts Mariam's accusations with a pragmatic response.

'Tis true indeed, I did the plots reveal
That pass'd betwixt your favourites and you:
I meant not, I, a traitor to conceal. (247-9)

The pattern of parry and retort in this linguistic duel is one of 4-4-4-8, 4-4-4-8; that is, Salome speaks four lines; Mariam responds with four; Salome counters with four more; and Mariam runs on with eight. While Mariam becomes more aggressive in her condemnation of Salome, Salome maintains a blasé indifference to her accusations. It is imaginably only Alexandra's

Come, Mariam, let us go; it is not boot
To let the head contend against the foot, (259-60)

that puts an end to Mariam's increasing ire and prevents the scene from degenerating into one of direct physical attack.

It is no wonder to Cary's reader, then, that when Herod inclines toward rhapsodizing over Mariam's speech, Salome strikes an attitude of deflating contempt.

Herod: But have you heard her speak?
Salome: You know I have.
Herod: And were you not amaz'd?
Salome: No, not a whit (IV, vii, 425-6).

The whole exchange, in which Salome prompts Herod to resolve in killing Mariam, is a brilliant depiction of Salome's own abilities to "amaze" through her use of language. While Herod agonizes over whether, and the means by which, Mariam should be executed, Salome proposes simple, one-line solutions:

Why, let her be beheaded.
 Why, drown her then.
 Then let the fire devour her. (361, 371, 377)

When Herod wavers and decides he must see Mariam one last time before her execution, Salome insidiously agrees.

You had as good resolve to save her now,
 I'll stay her death; 'tis well determin'd:
 For sure she never more will break her vow,
 Sohemus and Josephus both are dead. (501-4)

This arouses Herod's greatest fear--that he will again be seduced by the spell of Mariam's beauty and wit, overcome by her power, and she will "again" betray him, as he is convinced she already has with Josephus and Sohemus.

Compared to the bulk of lines given to Herod in the scene, Salome doesn't have to say much, to say exactly what she needs to accomplish her goal -- Mariam's death.

I would suggest that within the psychology of The Tragedy of Mariam, Mariam and Salome represent opposing forces of the anima that cannot be reconciled. Such a reading would posit Mariam as the "shadow self," whose insistence on the values of chastity, modesty, and finally silence (in that she meets her death with minimal comment) threatens the vital force of sexual

spontaneity that Salome symbolizes. Conversely, if Salome is read as the shadow, her only means of survival is to neutralize the ineffectual positive anima. There is no place for psychic integration.

If Elizabeth Cary's play is The Tragedy of Mariam, it might also be said to be The Triumph of Salome. The ambivalent attraction and repulsion Salome exerts over the reader's imagination is perhaps an unconscious recognition of the virtual impossibility for female aggression to be given any positive expression in a male dominated culture. I am not proposing Salome as a role model for female behavior. I'm not even totally comfortable admitting my admiration for her. She is, after all, the instigator of four deaths. But at least she *does something* and manages not to become another victim of patriarchal abuse, chewed up, spit out, and left to die on the shores of masculine brutality.

Salome evokes in me much the same response as a scene in the film Thelma and Louise. I am both exhilarated and horrified by their use of violence against the trucker who has been so verbally assaultive towards them.

Philosophically, I can't advocate the use of violence for any purpose.

Nonetheless, I can't help admiring how these women unequivocally get across the message that they won't acquiesce to a man's attempts to assert his power over them. Tellingly, Thelma and Louise opt for suicide at the end of their story, rather than submit themselves to male authority. Salome at least lives.

For a writer to create female characters who embody both positive and negative anima material, she must imagine beyond the constraints of cultural

definitions of womanhood and into her own psyche's truths. Likewise, for a woman to create herself as an integrated consciousness, she must seek a balance between the dark and light aspects of anima expression, not sacrificing one to the other.

. . . we often experience [the Dark Goddess] as a tempest. She wells up from deep inside of us in a frenzy of hysteria that in ancient times we would have honored as a shamanic visitation. But to the extent that we have forgotten her intrinsic nature, we see her as actively destroying all of our life structures and relationships that are based on our acceptance of the patriarchal "nice, submissive, and pleasing" feminine image. Or if we are successful in holding back and suppressing this monumental red energy peaking inside of us, we will experience the Dark Goddess as the depression, despair, and unbearable pain of the bleakness, subjugation, and meaninglessness of our lives (George, 228).

Elizabeth Cary seems to have confronted just such despair within her own life. She was prone to periods of depression, the worst episodes occurring during her second and fourth pregnancies when she was in "so deep a melancholy that she lost the perfect use of her reason, and was in much danger of her life" (*Lady Falkland, Her Life*, 195). And, when she separated herself from her husband, she asserted her right to define herself beyond the orthodox confines of marriage. In both life and letters, Elizabeth Cary offers us a glimpse of a Renaissance woman struggling to express the totality of her being against a culture that had little tolerance for images outside the constructs of "the patriarchal 'nice, submissive, and pleasing' feminine image." Her writing and her biography bear witness to both the difficulty and the courage of that struggle.

In my life also, I have witnessed this struggle of the Dark Moon self to be realized. I have watched myself confront father, husband, lover, and my artistic life with a burden of repressed anima material none of us recognized or knew how to work with. I've experienced the rages and depressions of not honoring the promptings of the Dark Goddess. Living as a woman, without acceptance of the "dark" aspects of femininity, exacts a desperate price on the soul. Coming to terms with these qualities, and finding ways to manifest them in the world that are healing, compassionate, and loving is a difficult path. I want to close this essay with a series of poems that capture moments of my inner journey when I have most directly addressed the complexities of a feminine psyche (mine) from a distinctively feminine point of view (also mine).

Written over a span of eight years, these poems represent my process of coming to increasing acceptance of my own dark moon rising. "a void" arises from the depth of loneliness and fear of what my loneliness might reveal. It is my initial recognition of the "mother who eats" presence within myself. "Sister Self" defines my struggle with depressions and the anger that frequently gnaws at the edges of despair. "She Speaks" allows the "not kind" one to voice her perceptions, allows me the chance to let this self come forward and speak without the fear of her consuming me. The last poem, "Among the Faces," brings me to a place of integration, where I am able to locate myself as coexisting with seeming contradictions. It was given to me in the early morning, waking me in my VW van parked off Highway One above San Simeon

California. I had left a two-day Kali ritual in Laguna Beach and was returning to Oregon to begin graduate studies. It is a gift that was given to me as I was rested between earth and ocean, between moonset and sunrise, between who I was and who I am becoming. It is a gift of words that is a glimpse at the gift of soul I received in that time and place.

a void

a void
lonely one
yearning solitary
only lonely
caught in the aching
emptiness
soul-hunger devouring
mother who smothers,
strangles, consumes
mother who eats
beware the other
the She who steals
in the night

a void
emotional black hole
rip in the fabric of soul
decaying into itself
hunger
She who reaches
clawed fingers
flesh torn
from bone
to cram Her gaping mouth
with these bleeding
remnants
human heart

a void
burden of pain
beyond bearing
beyond sharing
doubled over
in agony
hag haunted
only lonely
unavoidable
mother who murders
and births and
murders again
a void

Sister Self

The shadow sister is here again:
the dark self who comes unbidden
unwelcomed eclipse of my inner light.
I shrink from her darkness
struggling at first to restrain her
like the crescent moon, thinning, waning,
until I fade to not even pale reflection
of who I would be, dimmed to coldness

while she wanders through the shape
of my days, a wraith eating cold ashes.
I am heavy with the burden
of her desolation.

She sees and spreads angry silence,
gathering between her fingers
steel strands of rejection, weaving
her shroud, her armor, her trousseau.

She turns to me the other face
of who I am in moments of unwatchfulness.

The era is gone when she would have been bound
and set aflame, suffocated
in the smoking stench of her own flesh
when I too, my tears insufficient
against the fires of purgation,
would have burned, consumed
by the depths of her rage.

I am no safer for all of that:
I fear her, hate her, pity her,
have not yet found within me
the grace or strength to forgive
or accept or love her;
and so we continue the battle
to live my life.

She Speaks

I am flame:
brilliant, flickering,
angry.
Now warming.
Now destroying.
I laugh at the circle of stones
you build to enclose me.

Enclose me?

I dance where I please.
You who think you have tamed me,
made me safe to hold in your hearths,
mistake me.
I am not to be confined
not to be contained.
I am the element of your hidden fear.
You think I keep the beast at bay?
I am the beast,
tearing at your throat
rampaging through your dreams.

I am not to be held
or checked
or guarded.
You only dare to call me yours
because you know me not.

Among the Faces
for Ma Kali

I am the calm at the center of the storm;
and I am the storm that rages.
I am desire's unquenchable thirst;
and I am the drink that quenches.
Mine is the hand that fills the cup;
and mine is the hand that empties.
I am the fullness of satisfied need;
and I am the void of yearning.
I am the voice that speaks in the silence.
And I am the unspoken word.
I am the blood that seeps from the wound;
and I am the healing ungent.
I am the blinding flash of destruction;
and I am the dark of conception.

I was before and I shall be after
and I am the time in between.
I am the sleep and I am the waking
and I am the dreamer's dream.

Usurping the Phallus Pleasure, Penetration, and Power

What does it mean for a woman to be penetrated? What does it mean for a woman to penetrate her female lover? In this forbidden act, the physiology of desire intersects with the semiotics of sexuality -- the practices of erotic expression collide with the political realm of phallic symbology. Within the butch-femme lesbian culture, when a butch woman uses a dildo to enter her femme partner's vagina, she is both acknowledging the pleasure a woman takes in being penetrated and usurping a prerogative that the general society holds as the exclusive domain of men, a prerogative inevitably associated with masculine power. Before confronting this dynamic in the context of a fictional work, I admittedly found the idea of a woman wearing a dildo to make love to another woman not only shocking but unsettling. My notions of lesbian sexuality, of feminist sexuality, were affronted by the thought that one woman would take on a male role and take up a surrogate penis.

The strength of my discomfort with this possibility led me to reevaluate it with greater attention. I began to consider the metaphorical levels that such a usurpation of male prerogative indicates. Sex, I would propose, is never "just sex." It is always a complicated blending of personal, emotional, physical, cultural, and philosophical components that we generally take for granted and pay little attention to. When a woman straps on a dildo and uses it to make love to another woman, however, some of our inattentive complacency is

shattered. In this act, the butch woman strips away much of the facade and unconscious assumptions that surround our perceptions of sexual intercourse. She gives us an opportunity to consider more deeply the implications of such intimacies between two bodies.

In her novel, Stone Butch Blues, Leslie Feinberg portrays a young woman growing into a butch lesbian identity, constructing her sexuality around a nucleus of symbols that are culturally coded as masculine. The most potent, graphic, and paradigmatically challenging of these acts is Jess' taking up of the phallus. Jess is mentored in the expected manifestations of butch identity by an older woman, Butch Al. She is taught, lesson by lesson, how to be a butch: how to dress, how to wear her hair, how to toughen up and swagger and hold her ground, and finally how to express herself sexually with a femme. In a poignant scene that Jess describes as "our butch 'father to son' talk," Al literally presents the phallus to Jess. Metaphorically, the father gifts the son with a penis and the knowledge of its uses.

One night at the kitchen table Al pulled out a cardboard box and handed it over to me to open. Inside was a rubber dildo. I was shocked.

"You know what that is?" she asked me.

"Sure," I said.

"You know what to do with it?"

"Sure," I lied (30).

The truth is, of course, that the adolescent Jess has no idea what or how she will be expected to perform in the role of butch lover. Significantly, although it is Butch Al who imparts to her the mechanics of sexuality, it is Al's

lover Jacqueline who addresses the emotional and psychological dimensions. Jacqueline has the tenderness and the courage to communicate to Jess how the phallic dildo carries with it the potential for satisfaction as well as a symbolic field of associations with rape, violation, and dominance.

Jacqueline took the rubber cock from my hands. Had I been holding it all this time? She placed it carefully on my thigh. My body temperature rose. She began to touch it gently, like it was something really beautiful.

"You know, you could make a woman feel real good with this thing. Maybe better than she ever felt in her life." She stopped stroking the dildo. "Or you could really hurt her, and remind her of all the ways she's ever been hurt in her life. You got to think about that every time you strap this on. Then you'll be a good lover" (31).

Jacqueline reminds Jess that few women have escaped being the recipient of some form of sexual abuse, from incest to rape to unwanted touch and comments from strangers. These abuses represent one of the forms by which patriarchy maintains itself, one of the ways in which men assert and maintain their dominance over women. While Jess will not become a man when she claims the prerogative to possession of the phallic dildo, she must yet remain sensitive to the damages and fears any of her lovers carry in relation to penetration and the penis.

Although these scenes seem, at first glance, to typify the stereotyping of sex roles, I find that underneath them is an unspoken suggestion of a radical reconfiguration of a woman's relationship to the phallus. Butch-femme sexuality, as portrayed here, is not simply a replication of heterosexual intercourse with one woman playing the man. Rather, there is a subtler and

possibly liberating quality that emerges from the imagery. Jacqueline and Jess, for this moment, share the phallus between them. It is not Jess' penis that Jacqueline strokes, but rather a dildo, an instrument that she communicates to Jess can become a medium to touch another woman, to arouse and satisfy her passion. Jess will not receive direct physical pleasure from having her dildo touched, but from the pleasure she can give to her lover through its use. The term "stone butch" developed to describe a woman who only took pleasure in pleasuring her lover and did not want to be touched herself. This was not always perceived as a positive dynamic and Jess receives encouragement from another femme that she can allow herself to receive pleasure. During her first sexual encounter, Angie tells her directly, "It's OK if you find a femme you can trust in bed and you want to say that you need something, or you want to be touched" (73).

What these women are engaging in physically has profound implications for our understanding of female sexual psychology. Teresa de Lauretis' work The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire includes a pertinent discussion of Freudian theory relating to "castration anxiety" and "penis envy" and how those concepts are reflected in cultural definitions of masculine and feminine. For de Lauretis, the practice of using a dildo is not a woman's compensation for the female body's lack of a penis. On the contrary, she cites Diane Hamer who interprets this behavior as a "psychic refusal of the

'truth' of women's castration" (30). Further quoting Hamer, de Lauretis highlights the subversive nature of butch-femme sexuality:

. . . lesbianism is less a claim to phallic possession (although it may be this too) than it is a refusal of the meanings attached to castration. As such it is a refusal of any easy or straightforward allocation of masculine and feminine positions around the phallus. Instead, it suggests a much more fluid and flexible relationship to the positions around which desire is organized (31).

There is a scene in the film Claire of the Moon, in which the lead character Claire challenges a lesbian acquaintance about the need for lesbian lovers to have a dildo. The lesbian responds that this practice isn't about needing a man; it's about penetration, asserting that penetration feels good. Lesbian desire is not some misplaced desire to be sexually involved with a man, but a desire for the freedom and autonomy of a female based sexuality.

And desire, as many women have noted, can indeed be organized around penetration – the desire to be penetrated and the desire to penetrate. Jan Brown candidly expresses her experiences in "Sex, lies, and penetration: A butch finally 'fesses up':

There really is, in fact, no equality in penetration.

When we fuck, we possess. When we are fucked, we become the possession. For some, the only time in our lives we can give up control or achieve total control is as we are taken or as we take (Nestle, 411).

The giving up and taking over of control seems to be a fundamental issue of sexual encounters. It is also one of the primary defining components of the politics of male dominance. Men have, seize, and/or keep control. Women are

denied, forced to give over, and/or expected to remain without control. Men possess. Women are possessed. These are the existent social/psychic schema that underly heterosexual relationships and are either unconsciously accepted or consciously negotiated in any given relationship between a man and a woman.

But in a relationship between two women, who is to be the possessor and who the possessed? Lesbian relationships may offer the possibility of redefining female sexuality without the burden of a history of one partner belonging to the gender traditionally exploited by the other. If, within a relationship, the desire to possess or be possessed remains fluid, so that each partner has the opportunity to fulfill both desires, perhaps a new definition of equality can be formulated. There is a further level of possession that I'd like to consider as well, what I would term vulvacentric. If we interpret the vagina as the possessor, once penetrated the woman draws her lover into herself, holds the phallus, and asserts rather than relinquishes control.

Jess' initial sexual encounter with Angie is clearly not one in which she, as the bearer of the phallus, is in total control, but more truly one in which she submits herself to the needs and directions of the other woman.

No amount of advice I'd ever received from the older butches, however, prepared me for the moment when I knelt between Angie's legs and had no idea of what to do. "Wait," she said, pressing her fingertips against my thighs, "Let me." She gently guided the cock inside of herself. "Wait," she repeated, "don't push. Be gentle. Let me get used to you inside of me before you move" (72).

At this point Angie does not realize that Jess has never been with a woman before. She is not acting as a first lover, teaching Jess how to enter a woman. She is speaking only as a woman who claims her right to define how her lover enters her, asserting her role in choosing when and how she is penetrated.

To return to the matters of “penis envy” and “castration anxiety,” I’d like to pose the question as to whose envy and anxiety are actually being exhibited in these phrases. Penis envy? What, for a woman, is there to envy? Although we live in a culture that reverences the phallus as an emblem of power, that has created patriarchy as the social order defined by the rule of the phallus — sword, lance, staff, gun, missile, and the erect penis — obtaining a phallus is a relatively simple task. *Any* body can have one. Walk into your local specialty store, pick out a suitable dildo, and regardless of your chromosomal make up, you can be the proud carrier of a 24 hour a day indefatigable hard on. Several decades after Freud’s analysis of women’s supposed penis envy, Valerie Solanis had the audacity to assert that “being an incomplete female, the male spends his life attempting to complete himself, to become female. . . . Women in other words, don’t have penis envy; men have pussy envy” (from the SCUM Manifesto). There is arguably a primitive fear and jealousy of woman’s capacity to bear, birth, and nurture a new life with her body that underlies much of the misogyny that characterizes our modern societies.

It is also notably puzzling that Freud would have developed the idea that women experience castration anxiety. Women’s genitalia is not subjected to

circumcision and castration (at least in Western cultures). A woman who owns a dildo as part of her sexual life has a vastly different relationship to it than a man does to his penis. Barbara Smith, in "The Dance of Masks," turns the mirror of castration anxiety back on the structures of patriarchy:

A dildo is not a penis, but it is a mask. . . . I can wear my cock and admire it in the mirror, like the satyr and the mask and the mirror of revelation. I can fuck my lover with my cock mask, I can take it off and fuck myself with it, or she can fuck me with it. Or I can put it away and forget about it. Tell me, how many men can castrate themselves, bugger themselves with their own cocks, fellate their own cocks attached to someone else's body, take their cocks off, put them in a drawer and forget them -- all that and not bleed to death? (Nestle, 430).

A woman like that is a slap in the face to a male dominated, castration anxiety riddled society. A woman like that challenges the very categories of masculine and feminine. "A woman like that is not a woman, quite" (from "Her Kind," Anne Sexton).

It is men who are subject to castration. The anxiety that one might be rendered penisless, and thus like a woman, is a uniquely male anxiety. I have often wondered if the fear and loathing male culture expresses towards a woman's menstrual bleeding is not exactly the terror a man undergoes at the image of having his penis cut off and bleeding to death from the site of the wound. A menstruating woman is not a wounded man; she is a healthy woman. Yet, in many traditions she is treated as an outcast, a danger, a phenomenon not to be considered.

The lesbian, and especially the butch lesbian, is also generally regarded as a phenomenon not to be considered, so far beyond the bounds of "normal" behavior that she is rendered invisible. Although Feinberg is writing fiction, not sociology, her work takes her reader into a specific social context not otherwise known or even seen. Stone Butch Blues is about the lives of blue collar lesbians in Buffalo New York in the 60s and early 70s. While it has implications for all readers, male or female, hetero/homo/bi/transsexual, it focuses primarily on the butch-femme bar culture in one particular place during one particular time period. Another work, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis looks at the same culture during the 40s and 50s from a sociologist's point of view. Kennedy and Davis interviewed the women who lived this lifestyle and wrote their analysis out of the words of dozens of butches and femmes who were the real life precursors of Feinberg's fictional cast of characters. To Feinberg's credit, it is easy to recognize where the patterns of behavior she depicts in her novel were established in the factual accounts of the decades preceding her narrative.

Kennedy and Davis describe many aspects of the complex butch-femme social milieu, but for the purposes of this discussion I am only going to include their analysis of sexual norms. Clearly, lesbian identity encompasses the whole of one's self and is not limited to what one does in the bedroom and with whom. Based on their conversations with the butch and femme women they contacted, Kennedy and Davis summarize:

The key to understanding the butch-fem erotic system is to grasp that it both imitates and transforms heterosexual patterns . . . gendered lesbian eroticism was rooted in the similarity of two female bodies, and as such was not governed by the demands and rhythms of the penis. . . . The active or "masculine" partner was associated with the giving of pleasure, a service usually assumed to be "feminine" . . . (192).

They also point to a transitional time within the community when the use of the dildo may have been assumed by the culture at large, but was not a commonly adopted practice.

In the heterosexual world of this period, the penis was so central that sex could not be imagined without it. As a consequence, lesbians were stereotyped as unable to function sexually without using the dildo. But since butches were masculine not male, lesbian sexual culture was built on altogether different premises. Butch-fem couples achieved sexual fulfillment through fully exploring the woman's body, and the dildo, if used at all, was a sex toy for enhancing pleasure. Butches did not ostracize those who used the dildo, but most thought it was unnecessary. When penetration was wanted, they used their hands (227-8).

I am inclined to interpret the acceptance of the dildo as integral to butch identity portrayed in Stone Butch Blues as a more secure establishment of lesbian sexuality. As the decades progressed, these women felt more at ease in claiming the phallus as their own, usurping the symbolic power that otherwise remained the exclusive domain of men.

That a young butch would receive her initiation into sexuality from an older butch was a tradition established in the 1950's. The scene between Jess and Butch Al was one that has a historical precedent.

By the late 1950's many butches received their instruction [in sexual performance] from other butches, particularly if they were young and just entering the community. . . . it was not uncommon

for someone to have her first affair with a butch and learn from the experience that she wanted to be butch herself (Kennedy and Davis, 217).

While it may have been acceptable for a woman to have an initial affair with a butch woman and then take on the butch identity herself, many of the lesbians interviewed in Kennedy and Davis's study expressed discomfort with women who changed their established identity. Particularly for the butch who saw herself as strong and aggressive, the notion of one of her former femme lovers switching to the butch role was a threat to her right to claim masculine characteristics. Women who switched roles or played both butch and femme indiscriminately

. . . disrupted the butch-fem social order. Those who maintained their roles felt that their own identities and reputations were threatened.

Sandy: "I knew women who didn't know their role. I was with some when they were fems. When they came out butch, I didn't want anyone to get the idea that I rolled over" (217).

This discomfort with the crossing of role boundaries indicates how strong the oppositions of male and female appropriate behaviors are even within relationships that challenge those very categories.

So too does Jess finally have to confront how much she can encompass in her definition of butch woman. Her initial reaction to learning about her friends' butch-butth relationship is one of stunned disbelief, an unexamined rejection of the possibility that these women have found a new way of loving each other, one that transcends rigid role assignments. Jess rejects Frankie, refuses to accept that Frankie can be in love with a butch and remain herself a

butch. The scene is a painful confrontation between two women struggling with the identities they had formerly accepted as part of their cultural status quo.

Frankie looked stunned. "What's your fuckin' problem with me? Are you really gonna cut another butch loose just because you can't deal with who turns me on?"

. . . "What makes you think you're still a butch?" I asked her sarcastically.

Her smile was cruel and defensive. "What makes you think you're still a butch?" she countered (206).

This rift between Jess and Frankie isn't healed until years later when Jess has walked the fire of her own transgendered nature. Not until she can lie back in the loving arms of a woman named Ruth who was born a man named Robbie, does Jess come to a place where she can begin to accept herself and her friends as who they are beyond labels, roles, gender, or sexual identities.

Through the course of Stone Butch Blues, Leslie Feinberg takes her character Jess from a concern about who penetrates whom and how to an awakening consciousness of the ever shifting complexity of human sexual expression. However it is configured —between two women, two men, or a man and a woman — penetration offers the pleasures of satisfied desire coexistent with the powers of control and potential violence. Sallie Tisdale addresses this dual edge in her book Talk Dirty to Me. In attempting to deconstruct and examine the language of sexuality, Tisdale invites her readers into cultural closets where some of our darkest fears and secrets have been kept hidden.

. . . the word that interests me because it feels so intense and deeply private and so rarely used, is penetration. "Penetration" is both soft and hard; penetration can mean vagina, mouth, or ass; it can ask for penis, tongue, finger, dildo, hand. Cucumber. Nipple. Heart. Soul (257).

The potential for violence in sex doesn't begin with images or even ideas, and it isn't limited to one gender or another: It's in our bodies, in our *shapes*. The act of sex itself has an edge of thrill completely apart from the erotic; sex flirts with death directly, inescapably, simply by letting another person so near. A wished-for touch can become a dreadful violation without warning -- even without anything happening except in one participant's mind. The penis can be a weapon, but so can a hand, a tongue; more than weapons, we are laden with much that can be harmed, the receptacles of the body: vagina, anus, mouth, and skin. When I close my eyes, I take a great risk (260).

Male or female, heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual, with a partner of the same or the opposite sex, we do all indeed take a risk when we close our eyes and let another human being close enough to touch us.

As I noted in the beginning, it occurs to me that sex is never just sex. Physically, it is a source of both potential pleasure and pain. Symbolically, it is an icon of the basic human need to form bonds with one another, of the possibility of union between self and other. Politically, it is the arena where power struggles may be played out and resolved or confirmed. Esoterically, it is the edge between the human and the divine, the gateway between life and death, the crying out of the soul for recognition. And for me, personally, sex is both a metaphor for my creativity and an inseparable aspect of my creative work. Sex entails the risks of vulnerability, nakedness, and trust as well as the risks of strength, fulfillment, and acceptance. It is one of our most powerful ways of being human, bringing us to the very core of who we are.

Sexual Metaphysics

Let me taste the uncombed honey
of your nakedness
Touch with my tongue
the sweet salt of your belly and thigh.
I would drink my fill of you
breathe you in like steam rising
from damp rich earth startled by sudden sunlight.
Do you know what it means to me
to take you into my body?
to open up and hold you within me?
I am absorbed by the need
the aching want of union.
I had thought that I would feel
the merging of you into me
but I am obliterated, diffused
until the stars wander the distances
between bones and sinews,
what had seemed so solid.
It is your touch only that contains me
your body becomes the boundary
of my knowing where I begin or end.
This small hollow at the center of my being

Womb

aroused, expands, empties me into the void
where time has yet to be conceived
and I am rocked in the primal sea.

PART THREE

Interlude

This last section is composed of an essay that blends aspects of the ones that proceed it and the final coda of a poem. "Dancing in Words" comes back around to my development as a writer and gives close readings of two poems by Denise Levertov. It also serves as a conclusion to the work as a whole. I look at the ways in which the separate pieces have been woven together and bring attention to some of the underlying themes. This essay moves from the dance in words between poet and Muse to the dance between writer and reader. It is autobiographical criticism and analytical autobiography. The inquiry I make in my closing essay is one that requires me to consider questions of my reading and writing as personal and professional activities. This inquiry includes considering how my sexuality responds to and takes definition from academic pursuits as well as lived experiences. The poem that follows, "Credo," gives me an exit line that affirms the demands and delights of my chosen art. I place it at the end as a reminder that every ending is a beginning. My commitment to the ecstatic potential of the word thus frames this project, has kept me working on it through the decidedly less than ecstatic times of just getting the words out, points me towards what I strive for in my next writing endeavor.

Dancing in Words

What designs the dance of how you express yourself?
~ Ram Dass

A nine-year-old girl stands at the barre, her left hand resting on it lightly as she stretches her right foot forward in a battement tendu. She is aware of the others standing there with her, and of their reflected images in the mirror, all properly attired in black leotards, pink tights, and black shoes. Finishing their set of tendus in fifth position, they plie, eleve, and tourne to begin the same sequence on the left side. Over the piano music, their teacher's voice cues them, "And five, six, seven and eight." The scene is hazy, has the quality of a daydream.

Dissolve to a scene of the same nine-year-old girl in her bedroom in rural Southern California. She's wearing shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Her hand is on the back of a chair and she tries to follow the instructions of the book opened up on its seat. Carefully she studies the drawings in First Positions in Ballet, reads the text describing the movements required, and scrutinizes herself in the closet mirror in an effort to conform her body's poses to those in the book.

I was that nine-year-old, serious enough about my commitment to dance to practice on my own for an hour or two every day, but not convincing enough to persuade my parents to arrange for me to take lessons. I read myself into the world of dance years before I was able to reconcile the conflict between my

youthful ambitions and my parent's unwillingness to inconvenience themselves. Dancing and literacy come together in my life as a woman, poet, and scholar in some startling ways. I have danced in and with and because of words, both literally and metaphorically, at least since I was nine.

Let me begin, then, with a tale of the budding ballerina I once imagined myself to be. Or, more accurately, the frustrated dancer who had to wheedle and beg her parents for two years before they would agree to pay for and transport me to and from dance classes. During those two years I continued to read everything I could find about ballet as technique, art, lifestyle, and story. I came to dance through books. I don't remember when I first actually saw a ballet performed, but I do remember repeatedly borrowing from the Bookmobile a large, lavishly illustrated book that told the stories of the classical ballets. I was enamored of the characters and events of Coppelia, Swan Lake, Giselle, and Petroushka. We had several albums of classical music that I would dance around my room to. In the late sixties, I could hum the themes from a number of Tchaicovsky suites and Rachmoninov concerti, but I'd never heard of The Beatles.

At some point, I decided that if I couldn't be in dance classes, at least I could write my own ballet. I devised a fantastical narrative about a group of nymphs who lived in a lake, and proceeded to design sets and sketch costumes. I had a small composition book I kept my notes and drawings in and I became more and more absorbed in the fictive world I was creating. I

withdrew into the process of composing my own ballet, it seems to me now, at least partially out of a need to compensate for my frustrated ambitions -- and at least partially out of resistance to what at the time felt like my parents's tyrannical thwarting of what was my heart's deepest desire. I remember sitting at the dinner table refusing to participate in family conversation because I was imagining scenes from my script.

Later, when I had reached that first pinnacle of the aspiring ballerina and was working on pointe, I began to realize that my desire to dance professionally was not as strong as what I would now describe as a healthy desire to avoid pain. My romance with the dance was one more literary than physical in nature, not ultimately to be consummated in the body. As an adult, reading Gelsey Kirkland's autobiographical Dancing On My Grave, a disturbing account of the demands exacted on her body in her training and work as a professional dancer, I was confirmed in the rightness of my decision to hang up my toe shoes. Kirkland's horrifying portrait of a woman reshaping her body with silicone injections and negating her pain threshold with cocaine was not one I cared to see myself painted into. I have known dancers who, though not at the same level as Kirkland, still accepted as a given that they would have to rely on large doses of ibuprofen and codeine to maintain the rehearsal and performance schedules required of them during a season.

At times I have experienced a certain nostalgic resentment that I never received encouragement to pursue a dance career. In general, though, I have

to admit that I would never have been willing to make the physical sacrifices demanded of professional dancers. All the encouragement in the world couldn't convince me to subject myself to the ongoing tortures that seem to be a normalized pattern in the dance world. I have chosen, rather, to express myself artistically through the medium of words, primarily as a poet. Even as I write this, though, I realize that poetry, too, is not without its disciplines and pains, though they are of the mind, heart, and soul rather than of the body.

While I open In the Words of a Woman with a utopian vision of a garden as the source of my creative imagination, my writing life has not been one of unimpeded frolic. Neither has it been a perfectly realized union of inspiration and creation. Reality, I've noticed, has an irrepressible urge to blend pleasure with pain, to mix ecstatic moments into mundane stretches of daily life with wise frugality. I bring up the ideal image first because it is in the ideal that I find the initiative to come to terms with the real. I can't maintain a constant level of ecstasy in my writing. But it is in knowing that those moments are achievable that I find the strength to do the work at all. Just as the letting down of boundaries in sexual intimacies involves risk, so does the opening up to creative forces have its risks. There is a psychic vulnerability involved in the writing process that can seem as threatening as any physical danger.

Denise Levertov's poem "The Goddess" first brought to my awareness the potential violence and inherent risks in the act of creating art in words. She gave me an image of the relationship of poet and Muse that shattered all my

previously held Romantic ideals of the ease with which poems are born -- Keats's assurance that the words should come as easily as leaves to a tree or not at all. "The Goddess" examines the relationship between poet and Muse in terms that leave no doubt that it is not always one of coy flirtation or satisfied desires, that the Muse, at least for this woman writer, makes exacting demands and doesn't hesitate to exert the full force of her power.

The Goddess

She is whose lipservice
I passed my time,
whose name I knew, but not her face,
came upon me where I lay in Lie Castle!

flung me across the room, and
room after room (hitting the walls, re-
bounding -- to the last
sticky wall -- wrenching away from it
pulled hair out!)
till I lay
outside the outer walls!

There in cold air
lying still where her hand had thrown me,
I tasted the mud that splattered my lips:
the seeds of a forest were in it,
asleep and growing! I tasted
her power!

The silence was answering my silence,
a forest was pushing itself
out of sleep between my submerged fingers.

I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue
of day that shone already among stars
in the water-mirror of low ground,
and a wind rising ruffled the lights:
she passed near me returning from the encounter,
she who had plucked me from the close rooms,

without whom nothing
 flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,
 without whom nothing
 speaks in its own tongue, but returns
 lie for lie!

Levertov's poem describes the dance between writer and creative source in harsh images. This is not a minuet or a coy waltz that is being performed. The poet is not attempting to seduce the Muse through a demonstration of virtuosity or dazzle her into joining a carefully choreographed pas de deux. Rather, what is depicted is a primitive rite of fertility, closest in my imagination to the apache dances of French cabarets. The Goddess dances the poetic speaker out of her complacency and into direct contact with the forces of nature.

The opening lines define the poem's characters and their relationship to each other. Levertov's choice of the word "lipservice" to describe how the speaker passes her time is rich in multiple meanings and connotations. At its most facile, "lipservice" is associated with idle chatter that does not bear out in the speaker's behavior -- to pay lipservice to something is to make promises one has no intention of keeping. "Lipservice" also, however, carries allusions to prayer and prophesying. It is the service of the word, performed by the priestess in the temple, the oracular declamation of divine will. It is with the lips that the goddess is served. But to take up this service falsely, to position oneself not in the temple, but in "Lie Castle" is a dangerous act, a blasphemy that the Goddess has no hesitation in correcting.

Even though the speaker begins the poem in a place of privilege, a castle, it is by her own definition a lie. While a castle is a physical construct, a lie is specifically a verbal construct. To situate herself in "Lie Castle," the speaker is making a statement not about physical location but about the quality of her words, about the truthfulness of the poems she writes. What she has surrounded herself with is a series of rooms/poems that, while they may be artfully contrived, are either empty or contain falsehoods. The violence of the second stanza confronts us with the intensity of the Goddess's reaction to such constructions and the necessity for the poet to move beyond them to relocate herself "outside the outer walls." If she has previously been content to occupy her time in these rooms, the Goddess asserts that this is no longer possible. She is "flung across the room. . ./. . .re-/bounding -- to the last/sticky wall --." Inertia is not an option here. If she will serve the Goddess, she must leave her established structures and enter into the unknown.

Significantly, the remaining five stanzas are experienced through the mouth and the hand. The Goddess uses her hand to write what the speaker must learn to tell, but is never depicted as giving any direct command. "There in cold air/lying still where her hand had thrown me,/I tasted the mud that splattered my lips." It is the speaker's experience of visceral, oral, contact with the mud that awakens her transcendent consciousness. "I tasted/her power!" Certainly, in being thrown through the rooms of the castle, the poet has felt "her

power" as raw initiating energy. Once she is out of the castle, the power becomes a more benign force, one that she can directly ingest and herself speak. "I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue."

The speaker is also a writer, and not only is her capacity for speech reawakened by this encounter but also her ability to shape from silence words on paper. "The silence was answering my silence,/a forest was pushing itself/out of sleep between my submerged fingers." Just as the mud on her lips allows her to taste the truth of the Goddess's power, so does the humus into which she has sunk her fingers revitalize her connection to the immediacy of life. Because her fingers are in the ground, the forest is able to push itself out of sleep. Because her fingers are in the ground, she recognizes and can describe the awakening of the forest. It is after all, her fingers that have recorded this experience, her hand that has made the poem.

Having entered into this complex system of growth, "of day that shone already among stars/in the water-mirror of low ground," the poem resolves itself on a gentler tone that still affirms the demand for honesty. The speaker watches as the Goddess leaves her with her gifts bestowed. There is in the closing lines a sense of gratitude and acquired wisdom made possible by the encounter. A new poetic voice emerges from the text, one who has passed through a spiritual crisis and offers the insights gained in that passage:

she passed near me returning from the encounter,
she who had plucked me from the close rooms,

without whom nothing
flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,

without whom nothing
 speaks in its own tongue, but returns
 lie for lie!

This is the poetic voice who later was able to write herself into a more equitable, more erotically satisfying, relationship with the Muse. Levertov's poem "Song for Ishtar" represents another turning in her artistic life, a passionate union with the creative force that is based on her own refusal to be overwhelmed by inspiration, but rather to meet it as an equal partner. It is a direct refutation of Robert Graves' presumptuous assertion in The White Goddess that while a woman might serve as an image of the Muse for a male poet, she would not be able to realize herself as a poet, as the Muse's lover. That a feminine Muse might readily seek a female lover seems to have escaped Graves, but not Levertov.

Song for Ishtar

The moon is a sow
 and grunts in my throat
 Her great shining shines through me
 so the mud of my hollow gleams
 and breaks in silver bubbles.

She is a sow
 and I a pig and a poet.

When she opens her white lips
 to devour me I bite back
 and laughter rocks the moon.

In the black of desire
 we rock and grunt, grunt and
 shine

This is a dance of mutual satisfaction, desire expressed and received, reciprocated and held sacred. The threat of absorption into the mother (sows are known to sometimes eat their pigs) is met in kind, "I bite back," so that the poet is able to realize union with the Muse without annihilation of self. And it is a union of orality, of opened mouths, appropriate to its allusions to the ancient sow goddesses and the bards who sang their praises. The final lines, give to the image of female poet and Muse a powerfully erotic realization: "In the black of desire/we rock and grunt, grunt and/shine." There is a promise of fecundity, of poetic conception and generation.

As a poet, I have also had occasion to feel that the moon was shining through me, impregnating my creative self with the seeds of inspiration. And, I have had times when I felt that bringing forth a poem was a battle for my survival. Once, walking through Lithia Park in Ashland, I was struck by the thought that the series of poems I had been working on had been torn word by word from the very fabric of my soul. The answering thought was that the poems were, rather, the making of my soul, each line a stitch in the garment of spirit. The truth, perhaps, both. I at once unmake and remake myself in the creative process. Having written a poem or an essay, I am less who I was and more who I shall be. I strive to create works that are simple enough in their form to contain the complexities of their process – to make the writing of them a crucible for burning away the unneeded dross so that what remains is of intrinsic worth, precious for its undiluted substance.

"The Goddess" and "Song for Ishtar" bring up questions for me about how I live my life as a woman and as a writer. They are about passionate engagement in the creative act, about embracing creativity as a lover. Writing, revising, and putting together the essays and poems of In the Words of a Woman has been about this experience as well. I have had the opportunity to reexamine my relationship to my writing and my sexuality and to ask myself where I can find the spiritual center in both. The journey of this undertaking has not been one of linear progression, but rather a spiraling path that leads me back to familiar ground from different perspectives. I conclude with the satisfaction of having completed the May Day dance. The text exists as an integrated whole that is the weaving together of its separate parts. As we stop dancing, we drop the strands and regard the patterns they have made. Before I leave, let me briefly touch each of the essays once more, feel again their textures and tones.

"Woman: Womb and Word" was the first essay I wrote my first term of graduate studies. It carries an emotional rawness that I needed to write myself through. Its composition was a healing and a clarification and a promise to myself. "Cornstalks and Tea Bags" brought me back into touch with my basic faith that words can be signposts to the numinous. As a writer, I consider the word as my primary material, the original source from which all else has been created. In the act of writing I am given the possibility of entering into the realm

of spirit. I learn and reveal the realities beyond what I perceive with my physical senses, and I call into being what has yet to be created.

"Dark Moon Rising" is one manifestation of nearly a year's research on the life and work of Elizabeth Cary. Her story and the fact that her story was entirely absent from my formal education has impacted significantly on my imagination. Her spirit touched me through The Tragedy of Mariam and quickened in me a desire to write about her, to make her known to others. Telling Cary's story also enlivened my feminist commitments. I don't live my life as a radical feminist lesbian separatist, but in the inner drama of my psyche there undeniably is just such a character. "Usurping the Phallus" gives this persona the opportunity to read a controversial text from a radical perspective and bring in the voices of other radical lesbians. In doing so, I came to a better understanding of myself and other women who've made choices significantly unlike the ones I've made. I like this radical self, and while I may not want (or be ready) to wear her in the world on a daily basis, I'm glad I've gotten to know her better.

Maybe my reading and writing and life are about trying on a variety of masks, accepting a shifting set of identities that emerge and recede with the flow of time and circumstance. Maybe they are about stripping away all the masks until I come to the center of myself and stand nakedly in my words, in the world, with no barriers between self and other. Maybe they are about both. I have to try on the mask, recognize myself in the other, the other in myself,

before I can identify where the mask ends and I begin. Maybe the central self is a multiplicity of masks, a turning of faces that complete the whole. I search for the center of an authentic self even while I realize there may be no center, no single self more authentic than any other. My overarching goal is to respond to each moment as authentically as I can. I read and I write to explore possibilities. I live in the world with greater appreciation for the people and events I encounter because of the words I read and write.

The words and the woman make each other. I return to the homoerotic tone of Levertov's "Song for Ishtar," and embrace the pleasure the image of poet and Muse as lovers evokes for me. There is something more than the purely academic or artistic about my interest in women's words and the weavings of sexuality, spirituality, and creativity. I take another step towards understanding the implications for my interest in the connections between female sexuality and artistic creativity -- the shadings this interest may provide in my own erotic life. To say that I am committed to women's writing, and to the erotic elements contained within women's words, carries me farther into an exploration of what it might mean for me to reconfigure my sexual identity. I discover myself being increasingly drawn to lesbian voices, both personally/politically and academically/aesthetically. I may be ready to move from a scholarly interest in how female sexuality and women's writing are interconnected, loving women as they have embodied themselves in words, into loving another woman as an embodied being.

It is a journey of exploration I see myself engaging in through what I read and write. I watch the process and wonder how and when it will emerge in my other ways of expressing myself in the world. It is an unfolding of identities I have initiated in tenderness and in rage. There is a force of anger as the agent of change that compels me to move forward in my development, to destroy old forms that no longer serve, to create new dreams from the ashes of my disappointments. Within this process sounds the call to apply my desire to write to the rescripting of my life, reading and writing myself into a whole new way of being, choreographing a new dance. I have begun to interpret "lesbian consciousness" as possibly the next stage in my journey as a woman and as a writer, the next sequence of steps in the dance of my life.

Credo

Be the naked word.
Be here in the world
with passion
with wildness.
Be the audacity,
the unabashed daring
to say I am.

Be the wildness
that runs in the woods
in moonlight,
the wetness
opening, the nakedness
welcoming the lover,
the kiss, the caress,
the murmured touch,
the tasted word.

Be the hungry one,
the abandoned self,
passion's flame.
Taste the fires
of inspiration.
Hold
the burning seed
on your
silent tongue.

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