

Bedford's If with a Beating Heart, Harris's Lover, and Farmer's The Seal Woman are all texts which represent significant transgressions of traditional presentations of women in literature. They explore the landscapes of activity versus passivity and fullness against lacking, involved in what it is to be a woman, as well as the dubious need for men, as outlined in the thoughts of Chow and Gatens. The expositions found in the novels, however, suggest that fullness as an individual heroic character is, as a concept, hard to pin on female or male. A guilt akin to original sin seems to prevent direct acceptance of fullness within self, and only through relationships, rituals and community can the quest for this wholeness begin to succeed. The works contain many examples of women acting as primarily individual agents who find the rarefied atmosphere just as toxic and prone to cause illusions as do the males who follow that path. Chow's comment opens the question of whether heroic individualism is something of a phallogentric construct in its disregard for the effect such behaviour has on other people. Finding a way in which the necessary transgression of a woman who is herself, rather than someone's mother or lover or sister, can occur, while still resonating meaningfully with the vertical strata of family, mythology and posterity, is the lens I wish to turn upon these works. I will then take up Gatens's challenge and ask what these novels decide about what use the male might happen to be. As children's books and rhymes are a common feature of these books I will be assisted somewhat by quotations from one of my daughters' favourite books, Sheila Rae, The Brave.

Sheila Rae wasn't afraid of anything...She stepped on every crack. She walked backwards with her eyes closed. She growled at stray dogs, and bared her teeth at stray cats (Henkes 1, 11-2)

Jean Bedford's If with a Beating Heart, is the superficially most innocuous of the three novels as it is set within the sheltered confines of historical fiction, yet contains a most radical protagonist in Madame Clairmont with respect to the active role of women. It is her desires which drive the novel, her thirst for knowledge, fame, sexuality, motherhood, and finally peace and quiet. She makes the choices, cops the knocks and lives with the consequences, and if she chooses life and obscurity as an historical footnote to meteoric early death, it is by no means certain that the romantic option is here privileged.

Bedford's subject matter lends itself to an active view of women. Even the bit players, like Claire's mother must have her children's books, "something of her own to boast of" (17). For the others in the family, it is expected that they will be cultured, well read, and intelligent. The notion that the knowledge of a polymath could be attained and lead to perfection was held by all her family (201). While she understands in her dotage that such knowledge is both unattainable and what is gathered is only of use when it becomes meaningful through experience, she does become for Collings the source of knowledge and so becomes a focus of power in the second narrative. She is experienced, travelled, a drug taker and knows all his idols and becomes for him a source of

some intimidation because she controls the flow of such information. She is the controlling partner in the relationship with Collings, by delaying his gratification and denying him what he seeks.

Bedford chooses a heroine who keeps daunting company. But from her intellectual background at home to her scandalous association with Shelley and Byron, she will not simply be told her place. Byron, whose awesome ego and infamous affairs are a commonplace, becomes in this work the successful target of a seduction which, for all Clair's ardor, is coldly calculated in its initiation. This drags on into a frustrating and enervating relationship for Byron. A Byron who should be always in control and breaks hearts where he likes is reduced to moaning "I do not choose you" (137). The fact that he leaves their relationship up to her, "You may leave at any time" (135), is in the circumstances of their relative social standings an admission of defeat from Byron. Her desire to possess him through her emerging sexuality and her willingness to meet him on his territory, that of the "farts, the mingling of our juices, and shit" (111) makes her more alive than Byron is comfortable with and leaves him to oscillate between the impersonal violence of the buggery to the tenderness and remorse afterwards (137). Only Claire's biological limitations force Byron's hand when her pregnancy shocks him out of his acceptance of power she has developed over him. Her perhaps naive comment that she would rather be one of his male friends exemplifies the difficulties Claire is having being a woman whom no-one takes seriously. She wants both Byron and Shelley in romantic and sexual ways as a woman, but

also wants their acceptance in ways that she sees they give only to their male friends.

Mary and Claire provide an instructive contrast in the ways of being an active partner. For all his attempts to break with tradition, Shelley sees his needs best served by Mary rather than Claire. Shelley and Claire are “twin souls” (28) but Mary provides the complementary personality into which he could “plunge his red-hot restlessness” (30). Mary is a more traditional character yet remains a creative force. She is happy to be Shelley’s mate, Claire wants to be someone herself. Mary once she bears children becomes “matronly” and has “dignity” (127) while Claire during her time with Byron becomes a sexual being with a force that Mary recognises as lacking in herself (128). It is Mary’s thoughts that are being reported by the narrator at this point and the eroticism of the reporting suggests Mary and Claire might be complementary souls as well. Mary and Shelley work because Mary will cover for Shelley’s excesses. Byron and Claire won’t work because neither will give in to seeing the others needs.

Chow’s observation of the disturbing nature to nonfeminist thinkers of women who give of themselves rather than just being part of the source of the group identity is exemplified by Bedford’s ambivalent portrayal of Claire’s disquieting though meteoric youth. Her overdose and the death of her cohorts suggest that to sustain such giving is not just transgressive but carries a cost to female or male who steps outside the support and succour of their social

sphere. Claire chooses not to join them in their suicide and while that leaves regrets, she does achieve quiet, regularity and longevity.

She also achieves a reconciliation of sorts between ideals and life through the tools of forgetting and downsizing:

Perhaps I have *forgotten* Mr. Collings. Perhaps I loved Shelley and he loved me and we had a child and she died, and my sister came to hate me, and *I have simply forgotten*. Perhaps I felt that if I did not forget I would die (202-3).

What emerged from the shards and tatters of my existence until then was something altogether smaller and less ambitious, as if several essential pieces had been lost irrevocably in the sweeping up. I settled for being anonymously safe, like other people (208).

Due to her youth there is an element of growing up involved in Claire's realisation that you can neither do nor know everything, and that choosing the path of love without consideration of consequences hurts everyone. The dying Claire's soliloquy on truth comments on the possibility of fullness in any life:

We are not whole and contained, not any of us, we are what we do and what we make of ourselves, the sum of our struggles to create unity out of chaos (209).

Gatens's commentary on Irigaray and Freud's ideas on body image take it for granted that such a thing as fullness can exist in mortal humans. Bedford suggests that it is not a matter of male nor female, but that all have fallen short of the gods, all are unable to integrate the demands of ideals and practicalities, individual aspirations and community responsibility. To be driven, to know your destiny and to follow it to the exclusion of demands of

family, community, friends and practicality is to assume an inflexible omnipotence which, unable to respond to real life, ends in all this sadness. Bedford's major female characters, Mary and Claire, have to have a firmer grasp of pragmatism to leaven their flight of ideas, they have more to lose. Not astonishingly, they are more able to keep the sense of proportion that sees the compromises necessary to achieve an alternative to an early grave. Social and biological pressures make a woman testing the bounds of individual action more problematic than for a man, but often here it is more an issue of class, as Byron and Shelley have access to independent wealth and status to a degree unavailable to Mary and Claire. Outside the leisured classes the consequences of anyone having the time for the risk of such individual action is either unthinkable or causes immediate and unremarked demise. Claire, by not only negotiating the shock of having to leave the charmed life of indulgence and pursuit of fame, but also getting her mind around the tragic notion of working for a living, is in her milieu truly transgressive.

To have lived without guilt for your past; that would indicate a confidence and fearlessness in the active role. Claire's burden of original sin is for two incompatible failings in her life. She is genuinely upset that she treated people badly in her quest for Byron and in her feud with Mary, and her hiding of parts of her journal indicate a degree of shame for her behaviour. But these are necessary corollaries to her ambition, so it is striking that she regrets not having stayed the distance of her young life, as if she too should have crashed through to incandescent fame, or died young like the rest. She hasn't sorted things out even as she awaits death, because there is no answer to her dilemma.

She can warn her young amanuensis that “their sort of love destroyed people” (8) while quite happily intruding into the young man’s life in a way which encourages him to explore his passions more fully. The all or nothing life experience of Claire Clairmont is found to be unsatisfactory on both sides, so the middle proposition, unavailable to Claire who has rather successfully burned her bridges, does suggest that if a way could be found to have individual aspirations and opportunities without the necessity to disavow significant family and cultural experience, this would approach the ideal. What should be then disturbing is not that women characters give of themselves, but that there is inequality in the opportunity to do so between the sexes. The importance of family and cultural spaces, traditionally feminine areas of interest, has not been given sufficient weight in the heroically based tales, these Romantic poets included.

It suddenly occurred to Sheila Rae that nothing looked familiar. Sheila Rae heard frightening noises. They sounded worse than thunder. She thought horrible thoughts. They were worse than anything she had imagined. “I am brave,” Sheila Rae tried to convince herself. “I am fearless.” (Henkes 15-7)

Claire the governess keeps a “scrupulous record”(157) of her menses. Farmer’s Dagmar notices their comings and goings and tastes and smells. She has already lived the life of the complementary wife to Finn and the novel tracks a less meteoric form of active life, following the emotional journey in which she develops autonomy and creates her own meaning. The avenues she

uses for this are the very vehicles Chow seems to suggest are limiting to women, “the conduits and vehicles that facilitate social relations and enable group identity.” These are the cultural spaces inhabited by routine, preparing and sharing meals, mythologies, children’s stories and getting back the child’s delight in nature.

Suffering from a prolonged grief reaction and depression which has paralysed her functioning, Dagmar is forced to start life again. To achieve the action of relaunching, she strips life down to basics and then recreates herself. The first resource she uses is Finn’s family at Yuletide she attends “a big family gathering, and safety in numbers, I thought. So it proved” (20). Then friends at home and abroad, a network of support unsought, gives her the time and distance she needs. Away from the site of her loss she is able to enter the water of which she was terrified at Kattegat (7,34).

The basic routine of food gathering, preparation and sharing has for her the largely lost sacramental role of bonding her into a new community. Even the simple appreciation of bounty in fruit becomes religious, loaded with images from mythology: crosses, eggs, spearheads (50). The rhythms of her body and her appreciation of the recovery of her menses, culminates in the sharing of the idea of menses as sacrament between women (288). Her rhythms merge with that of nature, her desolation matches the decay of dying seals all over the world and part of her task is bringing herself closer to nature, leading to her entering the womb of the earth, the “eggshell” (250) of Wombat cave and re-emerging baptised by the world. Passing on story to children and

wanting to connect with them, instead of seeing the world as too bleak a place to bring children into, is an affirmation seen in her attempts to read and write for Lyn.

All these activities which drive the emotional course of Dagmar's transformation are derived from relationships, community and nature rather than a single minded pursuit of individual goals. Yet through these processes, Farmer has Dagmar achieve an individual fullness. She learns not to fear death as Martin does and expiates her guilt over the abortion and, her depression lifted, can plan for a future. It is a future which is undoubtedly hers, unburdened of the "treadmill of love" (220) and obligation to any particular man, which had constricted her with Finn and annoyed her with Martin and his harem.

Acquisition of new knowledge about the mythologies of the world is a passion for Dagmar until she has absorbed her fill and it is no longer needed. But she not only learns about myths, but distills, possesses and claims a mythology for her own. The introduction of the Grail myth and the curse upon the waste land (23) allows Farmer to posit Dagmar as a new Sir Perceval who will ask "Whom does the grail serve?" and not only redeem her personal wasteland but answer that it is she. She will be both goddess and Shaman, she will comb her own hair (69). In the central myth she writes to Lyn, "Saelfruen", which echoes in its varied media and versions throughout the book, Dagmar gives to the girl child the truth of her life. It is a life in which she is trapped by one who loves her but who must keep her in a barren life in

which she cannot be herself. The seal woman is however more assertive than Dagmar leaving before the death of her fisherman, not needing his death to liberate her.

When her classmate Wendell stole her jump rope during recess, Sheila Rae tied him up until the bell rang (Henkes 5).

If in The Seal Woman prosaic narrative moves synchronously with deeply mythic rhythms, in Lover all bets are off. The dislocation of the style signals the disruption of history and the creation of a whole new world in which the operatic lives are lived out. On this landscape menses come and go, certain death doesn't occur, lineage is blurred and clocks seem to run in both directions in a dizzying succession of flashbacks and forwards.

The interplay between individual aspiration and community memory becomes remade in a radical way when the whole community behaves like an individual. It is as if the young Claire's aspiration for life at all costs in Bedford's novel was undertaken by a whole community of friends, lovers and family, such that the quest for "normality" becomes subversive. Flynn's wants not only thoughtful solitude (8), but her brain in a bucket (110) so she can be separate from the sensual world in which she is immersed. It is clear however that the world outside the community is no solution for Flynn. Her original sin is to have a body at all and to enjoy its pleasures.

Veronica has a children's story to pass on her truths of the violence of men and the dangers of sexual transgression in the real world. Eerily it is on her way to show Princess Elizabeth and Margaret-Rose the seals that the story essentially of the family's genesis occurs (33-6). It appears likely that this is a form of community myth being passed on from Veronica to Rose and Rose-

lima. The beheading of the lover, husband and wife by Theophilus's train wreck is presaged by the reference to the unsavoury story of Judith in which "sex, booze, jealousy, lust and violence,"(34) contribute to Holofernes decapitation by the rather unscrupulous Jewish maiden. The moral is that men are definitely stupid and that they are violent when the women they try to possess wish to be liberated. The need to be separate from this world is emphasised.

The whole idea of creating forgeries which includes the paintings and the lesbian life-style, comments on the idea of fullness. If it is no longer male and female as complete or incomplete, but take the body and do with it what you like then shades of difference become thinkable. If straights are the original and dykes the more artistically complete forgery, the implication is this model of different but mutually accepting sexual groups could also be applied between the sexes. This does not occur in Lover because the only interesting male character is Harold Horoscope.

Gaten's question of the dilemma of the male body if women claim their full body image is in these books really only a problem to the extent that men try to prevent the female agenda. The biologically male characters in Lover are all violent, doomed characters whose only creative function is to act as inseminators for Daisy. The depictions of men as rapists and killers and bigamists represents the world that the novel has tried to escape. A "nice" man, should such a thing exist, is irrelevant because such a beast, having been

included out because of the behaviour of his fellow males, would not want to interfere with the legitimate aspirations of these women.

The men in The Seal Woman are relevant to the extent that they try to possess Dagmar. Finn and Janni equate sex with ownership. Martin practices a deceit that necessarily declines that notion, but adds the extraordinary conceit that he somehow must be an agent of healing for his sex partners. Dagmar's solution to the problem of the male is to no longer be obligated, and to reduce men to instruments of pleasure and insemination, to be tolerated on her terms. She is full and man is a virtual irrelevance.

Only in If With a Beating Heart are the male characters given a positive sheen, and here only because they represent for Claire the romantic ideal she misses. Having chosen more interesting male characters, Bedford is able to use them as a measure to illuminate Claire's achievement. Unlike Harris who, by banishing men so completely that women are the only serious protagonists leaves herself open to the charge that women need men excluded to be the source of action, Bedford writes outside such a utopia and gives her protagonist a greater challenge. If nothing else then, Bedford shows that men can be a useful plot device.

For the traditional male hero, children's stories do not loom large. Famously the product of women with three names, they encapsulate a concern for transmitting the truth of the lives which have made up a community to those who will be the community. Dagmar's story for Lyn is an example of one that tries to convey that the era in which women were possessions and men led a charmed existence because of that fact is history. Now, unless men allow the female body to be full, they become an irrelevance, as they will simply be ignored. Unable to procreate without active female participation, men are in the position that modern reproductive technology makes Lover's utopian male free fantasy conceivable regardless of sexual orientation. If men are to be tolerated the relationship must be structured such that both sexes are able to be involved in both the production of meaning and in the bearing of the meanings sacred to their ancestors to the children of the community. In this way Claire's dilemma of being left in a sterile role as governess in contrast to the wildness of her youth need not occur, as she could find either the space to become self-sufficient as does Dagmar, or a community which supports her wildness with, for example, Samaria and Veronica. These works are transgressive because our culture has not yet assimilated the inevitability of these changes. That beautiful children's books like Sheila Rae, The Brave which have transgressive female protagonists and can be written even by a man is a start.

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