

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE DRUNK MAN

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The composer Hans Werner Henze once remarked that 'it would be really tedious if, in the course of time, the whole of dramatic literature was turned into operas' (Henze 1982, p.100). It would be equally tedious were they all to be converted into feminist texts. Feminist theory is not some kind of mincing machine which material can be fed into indiscriminately, so as to produce undifferentiated affirmations of a series of preexisting ideological tenets. There are texts that are resistant to being read from a woman's position, which cannot be incorporated into the feminist critical project, and MacDiarmid's **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle** may well be one of these.

Is this a valid basis for consigning it to oblivion in the 1990s? If one can speak of a behaviour of texts, then it is intensely pluralistic. They ask to be read in a multitude of different ways. They wish to reach the widest possible audience and are willing to undergo endless transformations in order to do so. The range of feasible readings will inevitably vary from text to text. Establishing the cluster of potential readings of a particular text at a given cultural moment is a crucial way of understanding our relationship to it.

If **A Drunk Man** is not immediately amenable to being read by or for women, this does not make it a pernicious text. The gender representations of writers such as Soutar, Gunn or McIlvanney, all of whom have their places within whatever canon of modern Scottish writing may have been provisionally agreed on or imposed, are much more so. This is because the writing of all three has a seductive quality. Their ideologies of masculine and feminine are presented in a harmonious setting (with in McIlvanney's case a

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strongly nostalgic colouring) as viable and aesthetically attractive solutions to the problem of gender relations. They do not see these as being in crisis or in need of resolution or further transformation.

Soutar's allocation of childrearing and philosophy to mutually exclusive domains is deeply traditional, with a characteristically couthy touch that camouflages its oppressive rationale:

A man's thocht like a nameless bird
Steers atween stern and stern:
But the thocht o' a woman bides far ben
As she boos abüne her bairn.

She wudna gie the wecht o' her breist
For a' that men nicht hae;
And the soundin' o' their thocht gangs by
Like the whish o' windlestrae. (Soutar 1988, p.226)

Gunn gives his polarised gender utopia a Gaelic vesture, and has it masquerade, in a way that is again characteristic of him, as a feature of the essential Highland experience:

The women were the more persistent and fruitful workers, and found the males frequently in their way. Many of the tasks about a house they would not let a man perform - even if he had wanted to, which, of course, he did not. In this matter of work there was so strong a custom that if a man did a woman's work, where a woman was fit to do it, the feeling of shamed surprise would be felt stronger by the woman than by the man. The system worked very well, for the man in his sphere and the woman in hers were each equally governing and indispensable. Thus the difference between a man and a woman was emphasised and each carried clear before the other the characteristics and mystery of the male and female sex. (Gunn 1977, p.65)

Gunn gives the division of labour an absolute value and presents it not as merely one of many historical formulations of gender, but as intensely attractive and desirable in the very different context of the 1930s.

This is a useful background against which to read **A Drunk Man**, for it shows up MacDiarmid's strengths. It is sufficient to recall one of the poem's most haunting images, of the male speaker crucified to his own erect phallus, to realise that its representation of gender politics is not idealised and transhistorical but pained, urgent, and demanding of change.

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A Drunk Man is not a pernicious text. It speaks about women, but does not purport to speak for them. It does not usurp feminine discursive space. The male speaker mostly does not conceive of himself, in line with the male, heterosexual, white, Western tradition, as a generic human being, a norm from which other identities deviate and in terms of which they can be defined. It would be useful to discuss how far MacDiarmid's awareness of his marginality as a Scot has provoked this sensitivity to the partial nature of his male perception of reality.

The Drunk Man is self-confessedly a man in crisis. He acknowledges not only the possibility, but the necessity of feminine discourse, and at least twice, rather pathetically, attempts to incorporate it in his text. This is how I interpret the closing lines:

O I ha'e Silence left
- 'And weel ye nicht, '
Sae Jean'll say, 'efter sic a nicht! '

(All quotes are from MacDiarmid 1987; for glossary, see page 125 above).

They underline the fact that Jean cannot actually speak in this poem, while accepting that the appropriate strategy for eliciting that speech, as far as the male subject is concerned, is silence.

MacDiarmid's growing unpopularity, in the current intellectual climate, is an interesting phenomenon. There are many possible explanations of it. As a symptom of growing confidence in the cultural debate in Scotland it is undoubtedly positive. On the other hand, MacDiarmid is a difficult poet, and many readers are simply not willing to put in the work necessary if we are to cooperate with his texts and elicit meaning from them. Moreover, our increasing distance from Modernism sets a barrier of taste between us and his work of the 1920s.

Interrogation of MacDiarmid's texts, in particular from a feminist or gender viewpoint, is likely to reveal that the riches they offer us have not yet been fully exhausted. There are more fruitful ways of contesting the MacDiarmid cult. The cover of **Chapman 69-70**, a double issue celebrating the MacDiarmid centenary, portrayed the icon in classic terms: the great shock of white hair, fag slanting from the lips, in one hand a glass of whisky, the other grasping a thistle. All the shibboleths are there. An unwary reader might think this presaged a concerted attack on the MacDiarmid cult in the course of the issue. Unfortunately, it does not.

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That image of MacDiarmid, still dominant, is based on the 1925 and 1926 texts, viewed from a Modernist perspective largely inherited from English literary studies, and within a narrow, insecurely masculine, Scots-language biased nationalism which is in sore need of updating. A more constructive way of destabilising MacDiarmid would be to revise this image by reading beyond **A Drunk Man**, through the political poetry of the early 1930s to **In Memoriam James Joyce**.

A Drunk Man is a contradictory text. It assumes positions then reneges on them. Take, for instance, its attitude to self-identity:

And let the lesson be - to be yersel's,
Ye needna fash gin it's to be ocht else.
To be yersel's - and to mak' that worth bein'.
Nae harder job to mortals has been gi'en. (743ff.)

A thousand lines further on, the goal is still 'To be yoursel', whatever that may be' (1716), though in the interim we have read that 'Nae void can fleg me hauf as much/ As bein' mysel' (1434-35). But soon the Drunk Man is aiming at a place 'Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft,/ And still the form is mine' (1961-62). He admits that

Nae mair I see
As aince I saw
Mysel' in the thistle
Harth and haw! (2280ff)

and ends by proclaiming proudly that 'Impersonality sall blaw/ Through me as 'twere a bluffert o' snaw' (2548-49).

It would be a mistake to expect any greater consistency where issues of gender and sexuality are concerned. There are, to my knowledge, three orgasms in the poem. The first comes in the course of a sustained 'polyphonic' passage (571-635) on sexuality, with constant changes in voice and in the position of the speaker. The identification of the thistle with the phallus is unmistakable:

I'se warrant Jean 'ud no' be lang
In findin' whence this thistle sprang.

Mebbe it's juist because I'm no'
Beddit wi' her that gars it grow!

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For the Drunk Man lovemaking involves exposure, the stripping away not just of clothing but of skin, so that the other person, in this case a woman, sees beneath to sinews and veins. It is a kind of flaying. What is revealed is disgusting, and his orgasm is tinged with pain. Notice 'miseries' and the Scots word 'nesh', indicating a heightened sensitivity on the border between pleasure and pain:

A luvin' wumman is a licht
That shows a man his waefu' plicht,
Bleezin' steady on ilka bane,
Wrigglin' sinnen an' twinin' vein,
Or fleerin' quick and gane again,
And the mair scunnersome the sicht
The mair for love and licht he's fain
Till clear and chitterin' and nesh
Move a' the miseries o' his flesh...

Now comes a dialogue in which MacDiarmid attempts to let the woman speak. There is an image of reciprocal penetration, a penetration of eyes and gazes. The Drunk Man is amazed that his lover is not disgusted by what she sees. She replies that if he could see through her gaze, penetrate her seeing, he would discover something still more repulsive:

O lass, wha see'est me
As I daur hardly see,
I marvel that your bonny een
Are as they hadna seen.

Through a' my self-respect
They see the truth abject
*- Gin you could pierce their blindin' licht
You'd see a fouler sicht!...*

A woman's voice again intervenes in the ballad which follows. MacDiarmid breaks down the traditional division between the two mutually exclusive representations of woman, as virgin and whore. The situation would appear to be the classic one where the groom discovers on the wedding night that his wife is not inviolate. But we are specifically told that

Wha didna need her maidenheid
Has wrocht his purpose fell...

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And left, as it were on a corpse,
Your maidenheid to me?

Apparently this bride is still a virgin, although her womb contains the seed of a multiplicity of men:

*The seed o' a' the men that in
My virgin womb ha'e met...*

Woman speaks out to wreck man's dream of female innocence, denying that it has been or can ever be a reality. The passage may require an esoteric interpretation. Its destruction of inherited stereotypes is unmistakable.

MacDiarmid consciously borrows stereotypes from Burns' **Tam O'Shanter**, an enormously influential poem for Scottish perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman, particularly if you are married. When the Drunk Man shouts

'Cutty, gin you've mair to strip,
Aff wi't, lass - and let it rip!' ... (839-40)

the association of lovemaking and flaying is reinforced. Just before, there is a striking image which also occurs in Soutar's work (Soutar 1988, p.24):

Auld bag o' tricks, ye needna come
And think to stap me in your womb.

You needna fash to rax and strain.
Carline, I'll no' be born again

In ony brat you can produce.
Carline, gi'e owre - O what's the use?

You pay nae heed but plop me in,
Syne shove me oot, and winna be din

- Owre and owre, the same auld trick,
Cratur without climacteric!... (821ff.)

The active/passive connotations of penetration are reversed. Here the woman is active, while the man submits to her relentless lovemaking. She is not just taking in his penis. The womb is identified with the tomb. Men emerge from the female body at birth and re-enter it during intercourse, and as the progeny through which the male line is continued. Womb envy is balanced by a womb fear which perceives the female body as a place of obligatory passage,

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of death and imprisonment. Man resents passing through it in order to continue his existence in the only way possible. The womb is a void, an emptiness which dissolves identity just as the tomb does.

The second orgasm repeats the ambivalent connotations of pleasure and pain which were evident in the first:

Bite into me forever mair and lift
Me clear o' chaos in a great relief
Till, like this thistle in the munelicht growin',
I brak in roses owre a hedge o' grief... (929ff.)

Notice words like 'bite', 'brak' and 'grief', and the development of the imagery, with the thistle as phallus and the roses (the thistle's flowers) the sperm produced in orgasm. Some of the poem's most objectionable gender formulations follow. When MacDiarmid writes that 'nae Scot wi' a wumman lies,/ But I am he' (961-2) he neatly excludes women from Scottish nationality. A Scot is someone who makes love to a woman. 'A'thing wi' which a man/ Can intromit's a wumman' (965-6) - anything a man can have fruitful intercourse with is assimilated to womankind. Indeed,

... Jean's nae mair my wife
Than whisky is at times,
Or munelicht or a thistle
Or kittle thochts or rhymes. (969ff.)

The Drunk Man proclaims confidently that 'I am like Burns, and ony wench/ Can ser' me for a time', then contradicts himself:

I'm no' like Burns, and weel I ken,
Tho' ony wench can ser',
It's no through mony but through yin
That ony man wuns fer... (937ff.)

If anything can be recovered from this section, it is the conviction that intercourse is not primarily about procreation, but is rather a means for self-discovery and mutual knowing:

I dinna say that bairns alane
Are true love's task - a sairer task
Is aiblins to create oorsels
As we can be - it's that I ask. (953ff.)

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And the conclusion is very carefully formulated. Woman is not there first and foremost as an instrument of man's development. She is there for herself and only secondarily as his helpmate:

Use, then, my lust for whisky and for thee,
Your function but to be and let me be
And see and let me see. (976ff.)

Earlier in the poem the Drunk Man has linked sexual and spiritual experience:

Said my body to my mind,
'I've been started whiles to find,
When Jean has been in bed wi' me,
A kind o' Christianity!' (571ff.)

So it should not come as a surprise when the thistle, as well as a phallus, becomes a cross on which the Drunk Man is crucified:

And still the idiot nails itsel'
To its ain crucifix,
While here a rose and there a rose
Jaups oot abune the pricks...

The bitter taste is on my tongue,
I chowl my chafts, and pray
'Let God forsake me noo and no'
Staund connoisseur-like tae! '... (1203ff.)

The striking thing is that Christianity is further integrated into patternings of gender and sexuality in the poem by being denoted as a woman-hating religion. MacDiarmid does this by referring to two moments in the history of Christianity: the physical examination of those accused of witchcraft, and Christ's words to his mother at the wedding feast of Cana when she interrupted his discussion because the hosts had run out of wine:

- My mither's womb that reins me still
Until I tae can prick the witch
And 'Wumman ' cry wi' Christ at last,
'Then what hast thou to do wi' me?' (1357ff.)

He iterates his sense of the womb as a restriction, something that confines, then appropriates Christ's language to state a very powerful estrangement from womankind. The masculine has nothing whatever to do with the

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feminine, which is a distraction, a troublesome irrelevance. The words express repudiation, disowning.

Having got on to Christianity, MacDiarmid now presents a creation myth which is also a retelling of Christ's nativity in remarkably crude terms (1361-72). Flesh and soul come together in a 'dog-hank', or a pair of mating dogs where the male is unable to extract the penis. The passage is built up on a series of oppositions: dog and bitch, flesh and soul, slut and patriarch, fire and clay, light and, presumably, muck. In earlier depictions of lovemaking MacDiarmid had highlighted the element of pain. Here he focuses on defilement, and it is reasonable to deduce that, if the male is divine, then the female is the impure matter with which it has intercourse. The last couplet recasts the Virgin Mary as a prostitute who was, perhaps, so drunk that she cannot be sure whether she had three clients last night or just one:

A drucken hizzie gane to bed
Wi' three-in-ane and ane-in-three.

How this stuff got into print in 1926 is still a mystery. Was the Church of Scotland really caught off its guard? Or was it indifferent to texts appearing in a stigmatised, marginal medium such as Scots?

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle is a poem of contrasts. The utter debasement of the feminine is countered, some 700 lines later, by what is almost a sustained hymn or prayer to the speaker's wife Jean (2024-55). An appropriate parallel here is Marian poetry, religious poetry addressing the Virgin Mary, directed by a male speaker to an infinitely powerful female entity, powerful either in her own right or because she can intercede with a patriarchal God. It fits into a tradition which includes the closing canzone of Petrarch's **Canzoniere**, 'Vergine bella, che di sol vestita', the final scene of Goethe's *Faust Part II*, and the musical setting of the latter as the second movement of Mahler's **Eighth Symphony**, with the Mater Gloriosa swinging into sight overhead and Gretchen ready to welcome Faust's soul amidst the angels as the 'Ewig Weibliche', the Eternal Feminine, draws everyone in the right direction. There is a significant altering of focus in that MacDiarmid addresses a woman who is not mother or virgin but a sexual partner who helps him most by making love with him:

*I'm faced wi' aspects o' mysel'
At last wha's portent nocht can tell,
Save that sheer licht o' life that when
we're joint
Loups through me like a fire a' else t' aroint.*

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If this passage adumbrates a new female divinity, it is no longer a virginal one, and therefore no longer Christian. According to the Drunk Man, the woman he addresses has the power to release him from the Christian cross to which he is nailed, presumably also the cross of gender polarity and estrangement from the feminine:

*Be in this fibre like an eye,
And ilka turn and twist descry,
Hoo here a leaf, a spine, a rose - or as
The purpose o' the poo'er that brings 't to pass.*

*Syne liberate me frae this tree,
As wha had there imprisoned me,
The end achieved - or show me at the least
Mair meanin' in't, and hope o' bein' released.*

Christ asks the Virgin Mary, no longer a virgin, to get him down off the cross. The Drunk Man asks his female partner to free him from the phallus to which he is tied as he cannot break the bonds that link him to it himself. Notice how 'wha had there imprisoned me' implicates her in the gender polarity which has distorted them both.

The third orgasm arrives at the end of the poem (2659- 70). It is a kind of galactic spraying, where the speaker's ejaculated sperm daubs the whole of the firmament:

*The stars like thistle's roses floo'er
The sterile growth o' Space ootour...*

The next quatrain, with its vision of chilling emptiness, assimilates post-ejaculation to post-poem. The orgasm is masturbatory, and as his sperm has deserted the Drunk Man and left him empty, so MacDiarmid has completed his enterprise, has allowed his creative idea to find material form and so abandon him:

*O fain I'd keep my hert entire,
Fain hain the licht o' my desire,
But ech! the shinin' streams ascend,
And leave me empty at the end.*

Detumescence follows erection and the extended poem ends in silence. The imagery of creativity is uncompromisingly masculine:

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For aince it's toomed my hert and brain,
The thistle needs maun fa' again.
- But a' its growth 'll never fill
The hole it's turned my life intill!...

The horror of the void returns. This image of emptiness is all the poem offers to balance its pervasive phallic imagery of presence and arousal. It does not seem unfair to say that the void is connoted as feminine, as womb and tomb and genitalia. In Lacanian terms, patriarchal discourse sees the feminine as a non-place, an in-existent position from which speech is not possible. It is not the only time the speaker of the poem finds himself confronted with the necessity of a feminine which for him can only be a nothingness:

*Thistleless fule,
You'll ha'e nocht left
But the hole frae which
Life's struggle is reft!... (529ff.)*

If the thistle, which stands for Scotland, is a phallus, then Scotland has little chance of accommodating the feminine in its self-image. My reading of gender and sexual issues in **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle** has, I hope, been rigorously faithful to the text, respecting its contradictions and refraining from any attempt to constrict it to a single point of view or insight. It is not a poem that women or many men will read comfortably. But we do not bring the discomfort to the poem. It is there in the speaker and in the writing poet. He actively invites us to share in his discomfort.

This is why this most canonical and canonised of texts, for all its self-conscious maleness and desperation, has much to offer any exploration of how gender and sexuality are configured in the literatures of Scotland. I suspect it will have a role to play in whatever culture we construct for Scotland in the remaining years of this century.

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