

FLYTING WITH 'A DRUNK MAN'

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The problems for me as a feminist with **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle** are the extent to which the poem displays male centredness, male sexual imagery and male assumptions. I can read it and be impressed by its breadth of reference and its ambition; I can read it and be entertained and swept along by its sounds and verve and humour. But each time I read it, I am also irritated by a sense of exclusion; by its unshakable assumption that to be Scottish is to be male. If you're female, you're outside as usual; you're Jean the wife at home with a shifting role in your drunk man's perspectives; you're the moon, the muse, the beautiful other, the threatening other, the child bearer. But you're *not* part of the centre, you're not in there thinking along with MacDiarmid, grappling with rage at misplaced patriotism, life, death, eternity. He's got you firmly placed elsewhere. Man's role is at the centre, your role is out there somewhere else.

To show what I mean, here are a few examples of the central male. First, the Drunk Man's self-identification with Scotland (all references to MacDiarmid 1987; for glossary, see page 125 above):

My ain soul looks me in the face, as 'twere
And mair than my ain soul - my nation's soul! (335)

These are the thistle's characters,
To argie there's nae need.
Hoo weel my verse embodies
The thistle you can read!
-But will a Scotsman never
Frae this vile growth be freed? (1225)

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Hauf his soul a Scot maun use
Indulgin' in illusions,
And hauf in gettin' rid o' them
And comin' to conclusions
Wi' the demoralisin' Dearth
O' onything worthwhile on Earth...(2389)

As frae the grun sae thocht frae men springs oot (2401)

Man's mind is in God's image made (2434)

Whatever Scotland is to me,
Be it aye pairt o' a' men see
O' Earth and o' Eternity (2521)

A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o' his people's doom
And dee to brak' their livin' tomb.(2638)

Any woman reading literature of the past has to contend with a sense of otherness. We learn to identify with the 'I' whether it's male or female. We make huge imaginative leaps so that we too can experience excitement, intellectual or otherwise; so that we too can see the Muse as other, not us; we can be the hero grappling with terrors, threatened by the conventionality of home life. We have to have our own Caledonian antiszyzygy, where one part of us spins off with the hero, empathising and identifying, while the other irritably stamps the foot and says 'Hang *on* a minute. *I'm* the Jean, the Muse, I'm drawn by his eyes, his words, seen from the outside, *I'm* not included in *his* "I".'

To illustrate this, let's take some of these 'other' images and see where they put us women, in relation to the male 'I':

That's it! It isna me that's fou' at a',
But the fu' mune, the doited jade, that's led
Me fer agley, or 'mogrified the world.
-For a' I ken I'm safe in my ain bed.

Jean ! Jean ! Gin *she's* no' here it's no *oor* bed,
Or else I'm dreamin' deep and canna wauken.(97)

There's the 'silken leddy' floating through the drink fumes of the all-male environment of the public house:

And ilka evenin', derf and serious
(Jean ettles nocht o' this, puir lass),

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In liquor, raw yet still mysterious,
A'e freends aye mirrored in my glass.

Ahint the sheenin' coonter gruff
Thrang barmen ding the tumblers down;
'In vino veritas' cry rough
and reid-een'd fules that in it droon.

But ilka evenin' fey and fremt
(Is it a dream nae wauk'nin' proves?)
As to a trystin-place undreamt,
A silken leddy darkly moves.

Slowly gangs she by the drunken anes
And lanely by the winnock sits;
Frae'r robes, atour the sunken anes,
A rooky dwamin' perfume flits.

Her gleamin' silks, the taperin'
O' her ringed fingers, and her feathers
Move dimly like a dream wi'in,
While endless faith aboot them gethers.

I seek, in this captivity,
To pierce the veils that darklin' fa'
-See white clints slidin' to the sea,
And hear the horns o' Elfland blaw.(185)

This part of the poem, taken from Alexander Blok, with its magic reflections, its folk echoes of Elfland, of Thomas the Rhymer, is followed by a stanza with the images of the whole poem distilled in it:

The munelicht's like a lookin'-glass
The thistle's like mysel',
But whaur ye've gane, my bonnie lass,
Is mair than I can tell.(221)

Here we have the mysterious muse floating by, untouchable like the moon, woman as beauty and mystery. But then, the Drunk Man brings in the echo of another age-old male theme: the responsibility of women for constraining men, for being their conscience (constraint equals constriction equals torment). Another Blok poem, 'The Unknown Woman', becomes 'The Unknown Goddess':

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Deid dreams ha'e beaten me and a face unkent
And generations that I thocht unborn
Hail the strange Goddess frae my hert's-hert torn! (250)

The Drunk Man turns on her:

Or dost thou mak' a thistle o' me, wumman? But for thee
I were as happy as the munelicht, withoot care,
But thocht o' thee-o' thy contempt and ire-
Turns hauf the warld into the youky thistle there,

Feedin' on the munelicht and transformin' it
To this wanrestfu' growth that winna let me be.
The munelicht is the freedom that I'd ha'e
But for this curs'd Conscience thou has set in me.(253)

This muse is a prickly muse who is troubling and tormenting. She inspires this next stanza which is written from an unshakeable belief in man the thinker and irresistibly brings to mind male despair at all that useless sperm sent off in every orgasm, wasted and overflowing:

For ilka thing a man can be or think or dae
Aye leaves a million mair unbeen, unthocht, undune,
Till his puir warped performance is,
To a' that micht ha' been, a thistle to the mune. (269)

Perhaps it is unfair to connect MacDiarmid's million unthocht things to man's unused sperm, but it brings me neatly to one of the most consistent image patterns of the poem - male sexual imagery. It would take too long and be too tedious to pick out every example, but here are some, along with the reminder that male sexuality has all too easily been identified with creativity - not specifically *male* creativity, but creativity in general. It's a kind of womb envy: 'we men may not be able to create babies, but by god we'll create the creativity and you potentially fecund women can *keep out*. '.

-Jean kens the set o' my bluid owre weel,
And lauchs to see me in the creel,
O' my courage-bag confined...

I wish I kent the physical basis
O' a' life's seemin' airs and graces.

It's queer the thochts a kittled cull
Can lowse or splairgin' glit annul.

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Man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined
In ways that he can ne'er unwind.

A wumman whiles a bawaw g'ies
That clean abaws him gin he sees.

Or wi' a movement o' a leg
Shows'm his mind is juist a geg. (578)

Here we've got woman enslaving and despising man who is completely entwined in his own entrails and physicality. It's followed by a reference to woman as superior force of clarity:

I'se warrent Jean 'ud no' be lang
In findin' whence this thistle sprang (591)

and moves into the transmogrification of thistle into penis:

Mebbe it's juist because I'm no'
Beddit wi' her that gars it grow!... (593)

before it shifts back to woman as illumination:

A luvin' wumman is a licht
That shows a man his waefu' plicht
Bleezin' steady on ilka bane. (595)

There is one section which is awash with semen:

My belly on the gantrees there
The spigot frae my cullage
And wow but how the fizzin' yill
In spilth increased the ullage!

I was an anxious barrel, lad,
When first they tapped my bung.
They whistled me up, yet thro' the lift
My freaths like rainbows swung.

Waesucks, a pride for ony bar,
The boast o' barleyhood,
Like Noah's Ark abune the faem
Maun float, a gantin cude.

For I was thrawn fu' cock owre sune,
And wi' a single jaw

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I made the pub a blindin' swelth,
And how'd the world awa'!... (845)

A later passage which most explicitly states the idea of the waste of unused sperm -

The wasted seam that dries like stairch
And pooders aff, that nicht ha' been
A warld o' men and syne o' Gods (1260)

- ends with

As a' Earth's magic frae a spirt
In shame and secrecy, o' dirt! (1270)

Man is both earth bound and heaven bound through his sexuality - it represents all that might have been in the world of men and Gods. No place for me or other women there.

The specifics of male sexual imagery bring me to other central themes of the poem: Burns, the creative impulse, maleness, drunkenness, and 'Scottishness'. MacDiarmid has an ambivalent view of Burns. He's a misplaced national icon who provides a focus for the once-a-year nationalists that MacDiarmid satirises at the beginning of the poem:

No wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote
But misapplied is a'body's property. (41)

He follows this with a list of racist stereotypes whom he accuses of corrupting the pure Burns. Yet he himself iconises Burns:

Rabbie, wad'st thou wert here - the warld hath need,
And Scotland mair sae, o' the likes o' thee!
The whisky that aince moved your lyre's become
A laxative for a' loquacity. (61)

He ties him up with Christ. Christ, the Drunk Man, Burns, and the hero figure are at times interchangeable:

A greater Christ, a greater Burns, may come. (117)

I'll look at one extended part where MacDiarmid uses Burns to symbolize some central male figure, the hero passing by, carelessly using women. The Drunk Man is torn between admiration and resentment, both emulating and rejecting this ideal. He starts with the predatory male, then worries away at the complexities of his feelings for his wife and women while still

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identifying himself as the representative man or Scot. He ends up back with the predatory male:

I am like Burns, and ony wench
Can ser' me for a time.
Licht's in them a' - in some a sun,
In some the merest skime.

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....(933)

And nae Scot wi' a wumman lies,
But I am he and ken as 'twere
A stage I've passed as he maun pass't,
Gin he grows up, his way wi' her!...

A'thing wi' which a man
Can intromit's a wumman,
And can, and s'ud, become
As intimate and human.

And Jean's nae mair my wife
Than whisky is at times
Or munelicht or a thistle
Or kittle thochts or rhymes.

He's no a man ava',
And lacks a proper pride,
Gin less than a' the world
Can ser' him for a bride!...

Use, then, my lust for whisky and for thee,
Your function but to be and let me be
And see and let me see. (961)

Burns and his annual Scotch mytherie-fest carry difficult tensions for Scotswomen. The celebration of his birthday is still primarily a male one. He's become a kind of fantasy Scottish male. The rampant male celebrated through drinking and sexual conquest is a dangerous concept for women. I'm referring here to the real, violent danger that comes from male refusals to control themselves, to take responsibility for their own actions, using drink as an excuse for liberation from social constraints, an excuse for bad behaviour. Drunken violence seeks out the weaker (it's rarely visited on six

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foot six rugby players) over whom to impose its power. And this misused power often means sexual violence against women, whether wives, friends, acquaintances, blood relatives, children or strangers. Often drink is used as an untenable excuse for the action. This violence which surrounds and affects us all, perhaps less hidden now than it used to be, is at the heart of why I find the central images of the predatory Burns' figure and much of the Drunk Man's maleness so disturbing. My awareness of it comes particularly from fifteen years of work with the Rape Crisis Centre in Edinburgh, seeing the individual effects which stem from this Scottish glorification of drink and predatoriness, of the male as the norm, and the female as the other, set there to *serve* men.

I'm not claiming that MacDiarmid is consciously glorifying male violence in **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle**. He isn't. But the stereotypes of women he uses contain that implicit denigration which combines with the explicit glorification of the creative and liberating capacity of drink to contribute to the kind of society where male sexual violence and abuse of power is condoned or permissible *because* it is a male centred society.

In further illustration of those stereotypes and attitudes, there is one section which combines the casting off of women, ambivalence about women, and images of women as slut and/or the virgin Mary, with man as Christ, and the trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as penis and testicles:

- 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?' (1357)

Faither in Heaven, what gar'd ye tak'
A village slut to mither me
Your mongrel o' the fire and clay?
The trollop and the Deity share

My writhen form as tho' I were
A picture o' the time they had
When Licht rejoiced to file itsel'
And Earth upshuddered like a star.

A drunken hizzie gane to bed
Wi' three-in-ane and ane-in-three. (1363)

He continues with an invocation to drink which concludes with

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Yet but fer drink and drink's effects
The yeast o' God that barms in us
We nicht as weel no' be alive. (1401)

Or there is the earlier glorification of drink itself in the section where MacDiarmid rails against the proper Scots bourgeoisie, timid and despised members of St. Andrew's societies, and where drunkenness equals openness and intellectual adventurousness:

Wad I were them - they've chosen a better pairt,
The couthie cratur, than the ane I've ta'en,
Tyauvin' wi' this root-hewn Scottis saul;
A fer, fer better pairt - except for men.

Nae doot they're sober, as a Scot ne'er was,
Each tethered to a punctual-snorin' missus,
Whilst I, puir fule, owre continents unkent,
And wine-dark oceans wander like Ulysses...(393)

Here real men drink, real men wrestle with the root-hewn 'Scottis saul', and real men get to rove the wine-dark oceans.

There isn't the space here to look at the interweaving of references to Burns' 'Tam o' Shanter' and their resonances. But the unthinking acceptance of the stereotype of the nagging wife found there is used by MacDiarmid as a hook for the poem, with Jean as reference point and counter-point to the Drunk Man. We find examples of this from near the beginning:

Water! Water! There was owre muckle o't
In yonder whisky, sae I'm in deep water
(And gin I could wun home I'd be in het,
For even Jean maun natter, natter, natter)...(161)

to near the end:

But aince Jean kens what I've been through
The night, I dinna doot it,
She'll ope her airms in welcome true,
And clack nae mair about it...(2655)

And finally he has his conclusion conform to the idea that women will claim the last word:

O I ha'e Silence left,
- 'And weel ye nicht,'
Sae Jean'll say, 'eften sic a nicht!' (2683)

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This reductive conclusion in itself is a part of that view of women as repositories of practical, good sense, harnessing the philosophic adventuring or drunken meanderings of the drunk male. A more recent commentary on this is Matthew Fitt's 'Kate o' Shanter's Tale' which makes a fine ironic counterpoint to MacDiarmid's **Drunk Man** (Fitt 1991).

MacDiarmid represents a kind of Scottish hero, icon for the male intelligentsia, the member of two political parties, thrown out of each for his devotion to the other. This is the argumentative male hero who will 'aye be whaur / Extremes meet'(141), to whom

A man's a clean contrairy sicht
Turned this way in-ooutside. (229)

Liz Lochhead has described MacDiarmid as making 'such a *male* Scottish noise: a combative, argumentative, terrier-like, type of verse.' She reads **A Drunk Man** with 'amusement and irony as a great expression of that same macho tradition' (Lochhead 1992).

The problem is that MacDiarmid takes on a mantle which he assumes is all-encompassing but which cannot be. As Norman MacCaig said to him in 1964, 'You've written a lot, but not a literature.' (Buthlay 1968). If you have a society where women are becoming, however slowly, less peripheralised, more equal, a poem like **A Drunk Man**, which rests totally on the idea of man as centre, becomes historically interesting or curious, rather than contemporarily relevant.

I've been responding as a feminist to the poem, but I'm not unaware of other exclusion zones in it. MacDiarmid's elitism and intense intellectualism makes him an uncomfortable hero-figure for men too. He cannot be a representative Scot for our time. He cannot be blanderised like Burns when you look at what he is dealing with in **A Drunk Man**. He is not only excluding women but a large part of the other half of the population too. Perhaps his true place is in a university setting where he can be seen as part of a historic movement, and as a fascinating, if not necessarily influential, part of a literary tradition. But can he ultimately be, for most of us, any part of real life? Insofar as **A Drunk Man** *is* part of real life, it represents a tradition which is dangerously anti-women. And its glorification of this negative, male tradition is well worth rejecting.

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