

THE UGLY SISTER TALKS BACK: EAVAN BOLAND'S (RE)VISIONS OF IRELAND

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Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.... It exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes "merely" of the private self. (Ostriker 317)

In case anyone should think from the feminist critical interest in revisionist mythmaking that it is necessarily a feminist activity, Alice Ostriker reminds us that Shelley, Keats, Yeats, Pound, and Eliot used it long before Eavan Boland ever did. What is feminist in "The Gorgon's Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" can however only be understood through an appreciation of the particular use which Boland makes of revisionist mythmaking. This essay demonstrates how to recognize revisionist writing, read revision against the backdrop of original myth, and ascertain its function within the text. In conclusion, Boland's poems will be shown to present a view of the world which radically differs from the one which is commonly associated with the myths that she employs. They will also be shown to reflect new views of nationhood in response to socio-economic changes in the "new Ireland."

The obvious question then is: "Why use myths at all if they are false?" Elaine Showalter explains that "male writers can forget or mute half of their parentage" because the "dominant culture need not consider the muted" (Showalter 265). Women writers are a different sort. They may, in the words of Virginia Woolf, think "back through" their mothers but they also unavoidably think back through their fathers as well (Showalter 265). The presence of myth in "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" can be read as attesting to the dominance of the latter. However, this is not to say that Boland is

promoting a patriarchal order any more than belief in the myths contained in these poems. Thus in "The Gorgon Child," Medusa is presented as a powerful but not destructive figure and, in "Ode to Suburbia," Cinderella's sister is ugly but not subjected to ridicule. In both poems, Boland directs us to look upon female images which we have been told to turn away from traditionally because they are said to be either evil or unworthy. Central to the construct of both texts is a repossession of myths in order to poetically reconstruct a female view of the world.

In an essay entitled "Imagining Ireland," Boland speaks of the special difficulties for herself as a woman writer. "It is much easier to make your identity and, if you are a poet, your poetry, from the past and not the present," she writes (Boland 21). The problem with the present is that it does not fit anything in the past or what Boland says she "had come to think of as a national literature and a national identity," although her life as a young mother in Ireland's new suburbia "would have been recognizable to any woman" (Boland 21, 20). In "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" she treats subjects which are conventionally regarded as especially recognizable to women: childbirth, motherhood, and domesticity. Through Boland's revision of myths, however, a *breaking* with conventions is implied from the start in the particular form these treatments take.

Feeling an increased dissatisfaction with "conventional interpretations" and a lack of connection between her personal experience (particularly of motherhood) and its depiction in poetry led Boland to conclude that "being a woman, I had entered into a life for which poetry has no name" (Boland 21). Similarly, Boland sees the continued rural mythmaking of Ireland as being out of touch with the emergence of suburbia whose exclusion on any literary map "must call the very act of cartography into question" (Boland 22). As if to redress these imbalances, female experience and urban living are the subjects of "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia." An urgency to communicate truths just understood, a distinctive feature of much twentieth-century women's identity writing, takes the form of a mother telling her daughter about her birth—and mother's consequent new sense of self—in "The Gorgon Child" (Gardiner 184). In "Ode to Suburbia," Boland personifies suburbia as Cinderella's "ugly sister" to give this uncharted place both a literary and literal form.

1. Motherhood

In "The Gorgon Child," female identity is presented as something to be understood through physical experience, the act of giving birth being directly equated with the birth of new consciousness for the mother. Boland depicts this mental journeying through images of physical separation from the child. In contrast to many depictions of the woman as motherland (for example in Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union" a woman during childbirth is envisaged by the male speaker as taking on the very shape of Ireland's landscape), there is no such elevation of the mother figure in this poem. When Boland has her speaker say to the child "As you are my horizon,/I your earth," there is no obvious political or national dimension rather it reinforces all previous images of separation and return which prepare us for the final revelation of the speaker "how by separations/love survives/its own stone hour,/its gorgon birth."

Divided into two parts, the poem depicts the birth of a child and the mother's new found knowledge as a result. While images of transformation make up an integral part of the poem, the power associated with the child differs from that of the traditionally destructive Medusa who turns men to stone. Nonetheless, the focus on separation lends a violence to the depiction of childbirth in part one which culminates in the mother's realization ("the bitter truth/that giving birth/was our division").

Boland revises the myth of Medusa in two principal ways. A woman, not a man, is looking at it. The act of doing so is constructive rather than destructive because knowledge is gained rather than life lost. In this poem, there is also a break with the tradition in which the women featured in the work of male Irish writers had, according to Boland, been "passive, decorative, (and) raised to an emblematic status" (Kibert 606). First, the mother figure is not silent but the speaker in the poem. Second, she is depicted as active during the birth. The presence of the active voice throughout the poem never allows us to think that this woman is a passive figure. The pattern is set for the poem's seventeen stanzas in these initial lines:

I wove under the lights
my lace of sweat.
Lifted, I looked down
at the snaky wet
my legs beheaded,
the slick, forked tongues
of your head
and for a glance

I petrified with the season.

Even after first gazing at her newborn daughter (“the gorgon child” of the title), there is no aspect of passivity in the mother’s transformation. Boland writes: “I lay back/to a cluck of nuns,/to a stone knowing.” The words “stone knowing” suggest *hard truth* or *cold fact* with no hint of evil but every indication that this revelation, based as it is on experience, is based in reality, not fabrication.

The second part of the poem concerns the early days of motherhood once the speaker and child have gone home from the hospital. A night feeding is the subject of these stanzas in which the focus moves from separation (in part one) to return. The significance of the mother’s speaking for herself is that it achieves a personalization of experience which becomes universalized through Boland’s use of everyday details, such as the image of “The milkman [who] hums away/to his doorsteps,/his empties.” The other effect of Boland’s use of domestic imagery is a grounding of the speaker’s experience in a suburban reality which is never extended to any form of national significance. “Separation” and “return” or “*reunion*” are never equated with the Irish state, its division into north and south, or unification.

A refusal to employ domestic imagery for national ends is in keeping with Boland’s handling of nature images in the opening stanza where she writes:

It was the dark month
when ice delivers from the earth
crocus by quick crocus
snow’s afterbirth.

Nature here is not nationally metaphorical, as it might be in a poem of national rebirth, but rather physiologically so. It points to the individual woman’s body, not the body politic.

The words “delivers” and “afterbirth” serve to introduce the birth scene which follows. Additionally, nature is shown to govern our sense of time. According to what grows (i.e. crocuses) we know the month. This formulation foreshadows how what grows in a woman’s body alters her vision of the world thereby governing her sense of herself in relation to it. With motherhood, the woman becomes a producer literally of life and an intimate of life’s order. Not only is she presented as physically active but also mentally engaged in understanding the meaning of the event. What motherhood reveals to the speaker is that a woman is not merely a vessel to carry and be emptied of life. She has the capacity for creating new bonds as well through nurturing. Although she is a part of the nursery world of “bears and rag dolls,” the speaker sees herself as distinct from simply

decorative things. The lines “we flesh/to warm fact” refer to the active joining again of mother and child in the shadows and that being flesh makes them powerful beyond mere objects.

It is important to note that the repeated use of “we” by Boland’s speaker in the second part of the poem expresses not only the bond between mother and child but also between two women. For the title “The Gorgon Child” suggests from the start that a daughter is born and is the “you” being addressed throughout the poem. The specific gender of the child is significant on two counts. First, the mother’s lack of passivity is matched by the powerful image of the newborn daughter emerging from the womb like a mythological being with the power to turn onlookers to stone. Women are thus presented as being naturally strong, leaving open to question traditional conceptions of women’s innate passivity and feebleness and directly contrasting late nineteenth-century nationalist representations of Ireland as a woman in bondage. Second, since the speaker imparts her knowledge of specifically female experience to another female, Boland can be said to be reworking the gorgon myth as a piece of women’s oral history. If revision is understood as rewriting, then Boland’s empowering of her female figures suggests a rewriting of history both personal and national in which the image of Ireland as a helpless woman is called into question.

The predominantly female setting of the poem has important implications as well. In contrast to a male figure “delivering” the woman of a child, the only attendants at the birth are nuns. The inclusiveness of this intimately female world is hardly disturbed by the milkman who remains literally an outsider, permitted to venture only as far the doorstep of the speaker’s home. Unlike the nuns who are regarded by the speaker as “knowing” what she would also learn from giving birth, the milkman is characterized by his empty bottles. The latter suggest a lack or absence (i.e. of knowledge) in contrast to the “fullness” of the speaker, which may be represented by a woman’s ability to lactate. The milkman’s humming suggests wordless songs or tunes. In contrast to the speaker whose sole purpose is to convey a message of significance, the milkman’s sounds are essentially devoid of meaning. These juxtapositions and the dominance of female figures in the text amount to a reversal of the peripherizing of women or their subjugation as objects of idealization.

In “The Gorgon Child,” we find perhaps the two most recurrent features in women’s writing which treats the subject of gender difference. These are the *connection* between the body and identity and the significance of the mother/daughter relationship. In her essay

“On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” Judith Kegan Gardiner observes that such texts “inevitably return to the special nature of the mother-daughter bond” and that the “current proliferating literature about motherhood stresses that the daughter’s identification with and separation from the mother is crucial to the daughter’s mature female identity” (Gardiner 186). Where “The Gorgon Child” diverges from the rest is the way in which Boland has the daughter give knowledge to the mother, another reversal in addition to her reworking of the gorgon myth from a destructive to a constructive force.

Boland’s choice of title additionally directs us to think in terms of the origin of identities. Although the figure of the Medusa is commonly reduced to the snake headed image which Perseus beheads and is fixed to Athene’s shield, the word “child” reminds us that this gorgon was not born monstrous but made so. As the only mortal born to Phorcys and Cato, she was beautiful and loved by Poseidon. But this incurred Athene’s wrath, which resulted in Medusa’s being transformed into the shape more often associated with her name. Thus the title alone alludes to the concept that identities are born and made. A child is made but so is the mother remade in the process. Similarly, a nation is made and remade through history and myth making.

The vision of the world as a series of metaphorical departures and returns is rendered through images of its physical occurrence during childbirth. Allusions to Medusa’s snake-like head make for an unflinchingly vivid picture of a new born infant “slick” with blood and embryonic fluid. The sheer violence of delivery is conveyed by the paralleling of the mother with Perseus and the pushing of the child in the world and a beheading. While the latter signifies death, the birth scene is no less momentous for signifying life when Boland writes “and for a glance/l petrified with the season.”

In the final lines, the speaker concludes “from now our meetings/ would be mere re-unions,” once again reaffirming that sense of strength and gain over loss which runs throughout the poem. Instead of sentimentality, a strength and matter of fact tone resounds particularly in this first section which declares that knowledge is power. This is yet another example of revising male notions in that it tellingly inverts the Foucaultian message that “power and knowledge directly imply one another” and that power produces truth (Foucault 175, 205).

To conclude that “The Gorgon Child” is a piece of feminist writing on the principle that “describing experience typical of women is a feminist act” is too much grounded in 1970s’ notions of

consciousness-raising to satisfy many feminist critics today (Moi 207). To quote one:

To believe that common female experience in itself gives rise to a feminist analysis of women's situation, is to be at once politically naive and theoretically unaware. The fact of having the same experience as somebody else in no way guarantees a common political front.... The millions of soldiers who suffered in the trenches during the First World War did not all turn pacifist—or socialist or militarist—afterwards. (Moi 207)

Even the entry on Boland in a popularizing volume like the *Pocket History of Irish Literature* (1997) distinguishes between feminine (subject matter) and feminist (treatment) in her poetry:

The poems of Eavan Boland (b 1945) are written from a self-consciously feminine, often deliberately feminist point of view. They explore the possibility of creating a new woman's pastoral; she thinks that women are deprived without their own cultural rituals, that there is an alienation from cultural roots in modern Irish urban society. (Jeffares 152)

Emphasis on the physiological is regarded by this male critic as “feminine” and he goes on to cite Boland's use of “previously taboo-in-print-outside-women's-journals words (such) as masturbation and menstruation” (Jeffares 152). A resentfulness toward men as evinced in the poem “Mastectomy” combined with its physiological subject matter is given as an example of her “feminism” (Jeffares 152).

Such differentiating between the “feminine” and the “feminist” as the difference between subject matter and its treatment is integral to an understanding of the function of revisionist mythmaking in Boland's poetry. As “The Gorgon Child” illustrates, old myths can be used to convey new messages. They are not the exclusive domain of male writers, nor do women writers have to employ them according to their example.

In her essay, “A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition,” Boland contends that Irish literature has traditionally edited out the reality of womanhood (Kiberd 606). As we observe in “The Gorgon Child,” hard realities are very much “the stuff” of her writing. Here as in other revisions (such as “The Women Turns Herself into a Fish,” a reworking of Yeat's “The Song of Wandering Aengus”) Boland would seem to be redressing what Declan Kiberd calls “the fusion of the feminine and the national in previous Irish poetry (which) seemed to simplify both in ways that were unacceptable” to her (Kiberd 606).

Boland is certainly not alone in her efforts to reconstruct both a

female and a national identity (Belfast-born Medbh McGuckian and the Irish language poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill are equally notable in this regard). Neither is this the mission solely of contemporary Irish woman writers. In American literature, for example, a deliberate confrontation of the selflessness of the “mammy,” which had epitomized womanhood and African American identity for so long, has given rise to a proliferation of new constructions by African American women writers (Davies 135). But what Boland has in common with writers who question or seek to redefine images of women in literary texts is a necessary plurality (directly presenting women’s experiences and simultaneously borrowing from male myths to do so) because there is no exclusively feminist or female space from which she can speak (Moi 205). The revision of myth in “The Gorgon Child” is a perfect example of the reappropriation of male “space” for female ends.

2. Suburbia

The first intimation that “Ode to Suburbia” is a piece of feminist revisionist mythmaking comes in the opening stanza where Boland writes:

Six o’clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister
Your dark, your housewives starting to nose
Out each other’s day, the claustrophobia
Of your back gardens varicose
With shrubs make an ugly sister
Of you suburbia.

Comparable to the opening of “The Gorgon Child,” Boland immediately overturns commonly accepted assumptions that ugliness is to be equated with evil or, at the least, that a woman who is ugly is undeserving of attention. What is made apparent from the title and opening lines of the poem, is that suburbia is the focus of attention although there is no doubting that she is not beautiful.

By describing the back gardens as “varicose” with shrubbery, Boland evokes an image of the backs of women’s legs which are marred by varicose veins. In the third stanza, this image is further extended to the whole of the woman’s body

You swelled so that when you tried
The silver slipper on your foot
It pinched your instep and the common
Hurt which touched you made
You human.

The expansion of the suburbs is thus equated with pathological

growth such as the abnormal dilation of veins or the effects of oedema which is a common complication of pregnancy. While neither exclusively effects women, both are generally associated with female ageing or pregnancy and detract from conventional ideals of beauty such as faultless skin and slenderness.

In spite of these features, Boland does not ask us to conclude that her subject is abhorrent because it is not outwardly attractive. On the contrary, imperfections make this subject more human than its unnamed opposite, Cinderella. Whereas in the classic fairytale, it is a moment of cruel hilarity when the ugly sisters try and fail to fit their feet into the glass slipper proffered by the prince, in Boland's revision, the words "the common/Hurt which touched you made/You human" make this scene invoke our compassion. By inference, Cinderella (with whom we are conventionally meant to identify) is less human, more removed from reality, than her ugly sister. One reason for this is the impossibility that Cinderella's beauty would be so undiminished and bear no marks in spite of her hardships. The other concerns her fantastic rescue.

Boland's picture of suburbia is thus presented from the start as being one which we can trust to be true. Warts and all, it will be a true portrait. Even the regularity of each six line stanza seems to reinforce a sense of solidity as opposed to fantasy. This is further supported by the recurring juxtaposition of the ugly sister with Cinderella in order to give meaning to the former in lines such as these:

No creatures of your streets will feel the touch
Of a wand turning the wet sinews
Of fruit suddenly to a coach,
While this rat without leather reins
Or a whip or britches continues
Sliming your drains.

No magic here.

As in "The Gorgon Child," the implication is that women's lives cannot be told through images which are any more purely female than the language of their making. Like Caliban, the feminist writer finds her power in turning the master's language back upon itself. The fairy tale of Cinderella is employed as a text to contrast with and give substance to a reality which otherwise could not be communicated. On the basis of what it is not, suburbia takes its shape. From the first three stanzas, we learn that suburbia is not beautiful. From the fourth and fifth stanzas, we are led to understand that this is not a place from the realms of fantasy.

Yet, what is also clear from the final two stanzas is that suburbia is not without significance. The last image is consistent with the minutiae on which the poem has been based (“A dish, a brush, ash/ The gape of a fish” etc.). Yet in a change from the listing of detail in earlier stanzas, the image of a housecat is more fully developed and takes up two stanzas. This change coincides with an almost camera-like spanning first of exteriors (“back gardens,” “windows,” “streets”), then interiors (“in every house,” “beside the coals”). Along this route, we are told of suburbia’s “mystery” and “powers,” which small details “defined.” The figure of a housecat is thus linked to suburbia in a way that previous images had not been.

Appreciate the cat’s existence, Boland suggests, and we can comprehend all that suburbia is. By implication, Boland implies that suburbia is overlooked and wrongly underestimated. This comes from the correlation of the cat’s existence with a suburban reality. Both appear to be harmless if not powerless, decorative, and on the peripheries of the centers of power. Yet the effect of the final image of the cat catching a mouse is to challenge these suppositions. This is no mere decorative pet but a beast with the power and will to crush the life from another. This image is in keeping with the picture of suburbia encroaching on “The shy countryside” which is “fooled” by its “plainness.” The effect of these lines and the allusions to Cinderella’s “ugly sister” amounts to a revisionist view of our perceptions of geographic space. The inference is that cities and countryside may have traditionally drawn the most attention, but that suburbia is just as deserving although the criteria for evaluating it may be different. It may be lacking in beauty or history, but it is rich for being the space in which so many people live their lives.

Boland’s depiction of suburbia leads us to revise conventional assumptions about space much as many feminist critics have asked us to read women’s texts differently from those written by men. Ireland’s new suburbs may not have the historical significance of the General Post Office in Dublin, scene of the 1916 Easter Rising, or even those landscapes in Connemara still barren it would seem as an eternal reminder of the Great Famine. Yet by making suburbia the subject of this poem and others, Boland is challenging the exclusion of “ordinary” over “extraordinary” subject matter as worth writing about or indeed reading. Concurrently, Boland is challenging the dominance of symbolically female experience (as it is presented in Heaney’s “Act of Union” for example) over authentically female experience in much Irish literature.

In conclusion, the very existence of “The Gorgon Child” and

“Ode to Suburbia” should make us reevaluate common assumptions about the connection between subject matter and the literary worth of a text. The fact is that a conflict between what may be perceived as male and female values did not cease when Virginia Woolf first pointed out its bearing on literary valuations. Summing up the way differing (male) life values become literary values, Woolf writes:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (Woolf 80)

If, as many feminists argue, “the automatic devaluation of women’s experience and consequent attitudes, values, and judgements springs from an automatic devaluation of women per se,” these revisions of the gorgon myth and “Cinderella” can also be read as revisions of a world order (Russ 41). Whether or not we choose to accept the view presented in these poems, their revaluation of “female” subject matter through the revision of myth reminds us that perceptions of women outside literature still influence what is written, how it is written, and how we read.

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