

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER THROUGH EMBARRASSMENT, SHAME AND GUILT IN THE
POETRY OF SELIMA HILL**

LUCY WINROW

School of Arts and Media

University of Salford, Salford, UK

Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements of
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, October 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER TITLE	PAGE
Title Page	i
Table of Contents	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction	
1.1 Hill's Writing	1
1.2 Hill's Career	9
1.3 Literature Review	11
1.4 Theoretical Framework	19
1.5 Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk	29
1.6 Structure of Thesis	31
Chapter 1: The Family	
2.1 Motherhood	33
2.2 Fathers	60
2.3 Childhood	66
Chapter 2: Sex, Love and Desire	
3.1 Early Depictions of Male-Female Relationships	76
3.2 Emerging Identities	86
3.3 Domestic Violence	102
Chapter 3: Institutional Life	
4.1 The Psychiatric Ward	128
4.2 The Maternity Ward	148
4.3 The Burns Unit	163
4.4 Out-Patients	167
4.5 Catholicism	171
Chapter 4: Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk	
5.1 Sharon Olds	190
5.2 Geraldine Monk	224
Conclusions	266
Appendices	269
Bibliography	294

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the incredible support and guidance given to me by my supervisor Dr. Scott Thurston.

Secondly I would like to thank Selima Hill who replied to my letters and very kindly agreed to meet me for an interview in September 2010.

Finally, I am indebted to the University of Salford for granting me a full tuition fee waiver, without which I would have been unable to undertake this research project.

ABSTRACT

This thesis combines close poetry readings and theoretical material in an inquiry into the construction of gender through embarrassment, shame and guilt in the work of British poet Selima Hill. The introduction establishes the theoretical framework for the thesis which is informed by Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* regarding the performativity of gender. It is asserted that gender is constructed under the shaping influence of embarrassment, shame and guilt within intimate relationships, and underpinned by physical and emotional (silent) violence.

The main body of the thesis is divided into four chapters: Chapter One looks at Hill's negotiation of parental roles within the family, the 'silent violence' inherent in intimate relationships and locates childhood as a time of malleability in relation to gender (reflected in the recurring image of the burnt baby as an embodiment of shame and guilt). Chapter Two deals with heterosexual relationships and the operation of desire and violence within Hill's poetic landscapes; her female characters are depicted in a way that seeks to undermine the structures and conventions of representing female desire. Chapter Three covers the function of cultural institutions such as hospitals and the Church; in Hill's work they become symbols of a controlling patriarchal society serving to produce, shape and perpetuate gender roles through evoking embarrassment, shame and guilt. In the final chapter, the theoretical framework is mapped onto the work of American poet Sharon Olds and British innovative poet, Geraldine Monk. This offers a fresh perspective on these writers whose work illuminates the themes raised in previous chapters and demonstrates the viability of the theoretical framework. The argument of this thesis culminates in considering the frequently overlooked positive effects of embarrassment in relation to gender formation, with a potentially cathartic and transformative influence on the reader.

INTRODUCTION

1. HILL'S WRITING

The unusual nature of the reception of Hill's work became clearly apparent to me when I first saw her read on National Poetry Day at the Southbank Centre in London in October 2009. This was one of the biggest poetry events held nationally that year, which saw Hill share the stage with high-profile poets such as Carol Ann-Duffy and Roger McGough. Instead of confirming Hill's place amongst them, the event served to highlight the curious position which she occupies of a highly successful but not famous poet. The compère for the event incorrectly pronounced Hill's name each time she introduced her, despite Hill's name being projected onto an enormous screen. Hill's reading appeared to make some audience members feel uncomfortable and they responded with nervous laughter, looks of confusion and embarrassment. Hill too looked nervous onstage and seemed to be distracted on a number of occasions by the loud, forced laughter of the compère from the wings, which appeared to show little connection to the subject matter of the poems. This bizarre experience confirmed my suspicions that although Hill must have a strong following, there are difficulties in engaging with her poetry.

Hill's poetry addresses uncomfortable subjects such as mental illness, child abuse, emotional, physical and sexual violence and matrophobia. Interactions take place within relationships between family members, lovers and doctors on psychiatric and maternity wards. These topics have the capacity to embarrass the reader but it will also be shown that these intimate relationships have the greatest potential to evoke shame and guilt in the event of self-recognition, in particular as Hill locates them as a source of tension for gender-identity formation where these emotions can be influential with a shaping effect. Hill deconstructs conventional notions of gender identity by showing how these emotions tear her characters apart, revealing gender identity to be multifaceted and not narrow or fixed. The self-recognition that comes with embarrassment can threaten the assumptions that an individual makes about their gender identity, which is painful for Hill's characters and her readers. In revealing the tensions inherent in identity formation, Hill dramatises the social

policing of gender identity and offers the possibility of transformation through assembling a new gender identity from the fragments of a deconstructed self.

While Hill does not fall neatly into the category of 'confessional poet', there are many themes which overlap with biographical information on Hill which she has made public. Most notable is perhaps the powerful image of the burnt baby which is repeatedly returned to across the collections. This refers to an incident when Hill was trapped in a house fire as a baby and badly burnt, leading to a year-long hospital stay. In my interview with Hill she describes this experience:

[I had] this feeling of being branded, acted upon, institutionalised, abused, insulted – first by my poor mother in whose 'care' I was burnt (so it obviously affected her relationship to me – badly!) secondly by my father. I was marked physically as someone not pretty enough, not demure enough, not good enough, not female enough.¹

Already there are emerging implications for a child's future sense of shame, guilt and embarrassment, as well as potential effects on gender identity, as a result of the intensely intimate relationship of parent and child. This incident becomes a metaphor in Hill's work for the way in which intimate relationships can shape and brand identity, like the transformational capacity of fire. It must be noted that her first two collections were of a more confessional nature, including many lyric poems documenting childhood and later, marriage. However, the poetry should not be read as unproblematic evidence for the psychological state of the writer, rather such information can ideally inform and shed light on their work.

Hill's frame of reference is also more general in her early work with far-flung settings littered with historical figures, as in the poems 'Lady of Qilakitsoq' and 'Ulrike Meinhof'. It is by the third collection *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness*² (*The Accumulation*) that Hill's writing begins to become more experimental in terms of poetic voice, with references drawn from a private, seemingly more personal place. The writing also seems to take on a purpose in terms of direction and vision in the exploration of certain themes. Typically she writes in free verse with a narrative running through each collection, allowing poems to be

¹ Selima Hill postal interview, March 2010, p. 275.

² Selima Hill, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989)

read individually or in sequence to form a story or extended exploration of a topic. The poems are often short or in the case of *The Accumulation*, an extended sequence in which images and themes return repeatedly. This approach allows Hill to present some of the difficulties and complexities inherent in attempting to negotiate gender identity, something which – in Judith Butler’s terms – emerges as a result of the stylised repetition of acts over time. The sporadic breaks and rare use of rhyme and metre in *The Accumulation*, creates a self-conscious and problematic speaking voice, with a defamiliarising effect. This is heightened by Hill’s surreal style of writing which consists of startling links between tenor and vehicle. Hill’s writing is dense with imagery and metaphor, forcing the reader to confront clichéd notions of gender and the potential for alternative constructions. Her impact lies in pushing the distance between tenor and vehicle to extremes while maintaining an authenticity of experience. Vicki Bertram writes in *Gendering Poetry* of the power of metaphor to change the way we view the world, arguing that this is especially powerful in poetry. An example from Hill’s work includes the poem ‘Gold Snails’:

Women are like gardens where gold snails
are walking back and forth in the rain
and as they walk their curious long feet
are feeling for a surface to console them.³

This poem also provides an example of the multitude of animals that populate Hill’s work; snails are repeatedly associated with male figures throughout this collection. The unnerving ‘long feet’ and how they cover the woman’s body signify a draining and dependant one-way relationship in which the woman is passive and expected to provide comfort, despite seeking it themselves. In particular, Hill uses animals in order to encourage fresh perspectives as well as to conceal the identity of the real-life inspirations for some of the poems. Hill has described how in her early work, if she wished to write about someone – particularly if she had something disparaging to say – she would turn them into an animal in order to provide some distance to allow her to explore difficult subjects: “[by] turning my Aunt into a bison or whatever...turning people into animals so that I can take the bull by the horns as it were.”⁴ This transformation also serves to disrupt gendered associations with the

³ Selima Hill, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), p. 27.

⁴ Selima Hill Exeter interview with Lucy Winrow, September 2010, p. 292.

human body. Hill uses animals to ironically mock cultural notions of gender such as the cow, typically used to refer to a stubborn, spiteful woman; in her work the cow is in fact associated with peace and silence, an escape from gendered expectations. Animals are also used as a stylistic technique as the characteristics and physical form of certain animals help to create atmosphere: “the animals in my work, they’re all hopping and crashing about, to try and put the energy into the feeling that I have for the reader.”⁵

The animals that literally and figuratively populate the pages of Hill’s poetry are reflected in her eye-catching book covers, the majority display a photograph of an animal which is chosen by Hill. On the cover of *Bunny* is a stiffly posed rabbit, suggestive of the young female protagonist who in the presence of the predatory lodger becomes a ‘deep frozen rabbit’. A large kangaroo buck with genitalia on show glares from the cover of *Red Roses*, a collection that deals with aggressive male sexual expression. The close-up of a startled bull’s eye adorns the cover of *A Little Book of Meat*, set on a cattle farm which is home to the female protagonist who is one day visited by a travelling slaughterman. The image hints at the violence that takes place within this setting but also the protagonist’s terror regarding the introduction of a man into her life. To be turned into an animal or to wear an animal’s skin also has clear links to the way in which dresses operate in Hill; to transform the body and the associations and expectations placed upon it whilst suggesting the layered or plural nature of identity as something which can be assumed, cast aside or forced upon an individual. Hill’s only book with a human on the front – *The Hat* – bears the image of a woman in a voluminous silver dress. The dress not only looks uncomfortable and difficult to walk in (evocative of constrictive feminine performances) but the metallic colour and fluted shape looks like a fish. Further, Hill’s recent Selected Poems collection *Gloria* features a brown cloth donkey costume worn by two faceless individuals, displaying the transforming and concealing nature of costume.

The emotion of desire operates with identity-shaping force within Hill’s poetic landscape, as explored in the poem ‘Desire’s a Desire’ in which the narrator describes the many different

⁵ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 293.

ways in which desire acts out upon her body: “it nuzzles my plucked armpits like fat dogs; | it plays me | like a piano being played.”⁶ The narrator concludes:

my skin is white.
I neither eat or sleep.
My only desire’s a desire
to be free from desire.⁷

The poem leads us through the protagonist’s visceral, corporeal experience where she is aware of a force beyond herself that is attempting to influence or change her. The final lines are startling for the sudden realisation that she is not a blank sheet of white skin waiting to be inscribed but is somehow also the puppet-master behind these events and helplessly hopeless to stop them. This ‘female’ desire is especially dangerous when it is shaped by male fantasy.

Another striking feature of Hill’s work is the repeated religious imagery and references, with ‘God’ as the implied addressee for a number of the poems as the protagonists implore ‘Oh God’ or ‘You, Lord’. The poems are also filled with nuns, monks and angels. This preoccupation is part of Hill’s overall exploration of the influence of institutions but also based on her own experiences when her parents sent her to a Catholic Convent at a young age. There are also musings here on the origins of creation and the role of the Church in the oppression of women. Marina Warner’s account of the cultural history of the Virgin Mary in *Alone of All Her Sex*⁸ is enlightening when thinking about the Christian themes and imagery that comprise an important aspect of Hill’s negotiation of gender; femininity in particular. Similarly, Geraldine Heng’s essay dealing with thirteenth-century ‘confession manuals’⁹ leads one to make interesting links between Hill’s recurring images of dresses made from uncomfortable and unpleasant materials such as thistles or porcupines, and garments of penance designed to promote purity through bodily suffering.

⁶ Selima Hill, *A Little Book of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p. 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 1983)

⁹ *The Cambridge Companion of Feminist Literary Theory*, Edited by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Hill applies the notion of 'silent' or psychological violence to writing about intimate relationships, using descriptions of physical violence in an attempt to provide a more effective account of how concealed, devastating and identity-changing emotional abuse can be. She derives a complex understanding of violence from her family life:

The violence in our family wasn't overt, it was aggressive silence, violent silence, so as a writer I think I've taken it upon myself to articulate that silence which was violent although my family might not agree that it was.¹⁰

Violence in various forms features heavily in Hill's poetry, particularly sexual relationships as in *Red Roses*: "they ram themselves with thumps between our thighs | and pour with sweat, like tipped-up Golden Syrup tins"¹¹ or between a predatory adult and a non-consenting child as in *Bunny*:

his lips' fat red
is kissing her nipples
as if they were poor little songbirds
being kissed by a man with a plucking-machine for a head.¹²

Such an interaction is typical of Hill's treatment of childhood and adolescence, which she locates as a point of danger where the adult world is either active or complicit in abuse and ultimately, she links this to the shaping of gender and sexual identity.

It is useful to consider critical material that deals with earlier historical periods and different genres when thinking about descriptions of women's bodies in Hill's work, such as Helena Michie's *The Flesh Made Word*.¹³ This book discusses literary and cultural depictions of women's bodies in the Victorian era, linking, for example, appetite, dress and hair with notions of femininity. These issues arise throughout Hill's work and a study such as Michie's helps us to locate Hill within a long history of representations of women's bodies. The *Flesh Made Word* is also relevant for its discussion of the fragmentation and fetishisation of women's body parts in text, which leads on to a final point for consideration in this section. Hill's work can also be aligned with *l'écriture féminine* writers in her quest for 'authentic'

¹⁰ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 282.

¹¹ Selima Hill, *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 27.

¹² Selima Hill, *Bunny* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), p. 53.

¹³ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

female expression; the way in which she writes the female body and utilises a fragmented poetic voice. Hill's writing is littered with female body parts as well as female conditions such as pregnancy and menstruation. In *The Accumulation* for example, the protagonist repeatedly refers to unexplained bleeding such as 'my socks are blood-soaked' and 'I think I'm bleeding' evoking the uncontrollable nature of the female body that does not respect limits or boundaries. *L'écriture féminine* was first developed as a concept by Hélène Cixous in her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa'¹⁴ (1975) and taken up by other French feminists, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva in particular. It is characterised by an interest in the female body and difference within language and text. Cixous calls for women to 'write' their bodies after a long literary tradition of being written and imagined by men: "we have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty."¹⁵ These lines encapsulate the shaping influence of shame on gender, which manifests in a form of violence on the body. Cixous seeks to challenge this tradition, imploring women to write in opposition "to the laws of cultural cowardice and habit" which involves "the need [...] not to make things pretty, not to make things clean, when they are not."¹⁶ The purpose of this approach to writing is not to obliterate the other but to come to understand and respect the self. Cixous also stresses the importance of writing that does not steer clear of difficult subjects, an aspect which has become synonymous with Hill's poetry. Cixous calls attention to the cathartic nature of shared experience and the liberatory potential for constrained and constricted gender identities, wracked with shame and guilt. She views feminine and masculine as mere markers which can be exchanged for others, however "they would become just as closed, just as immobile and petrifying as the words 'masculine' and 'feminine' and would lay down the law to us. And so? There is nothing to be done, except to shake them all the time."¹⁷ Hill's representation of gender identity is mobile and multi-faceted, deconstructing or

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. 'The Laugh of the Medusa' *Chicago Journals*, Volume 1, No. 4 (1976), 875-93.

¹⁵ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), p. 94.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, 'The Last Painting or the Portrait of God' in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, trans. by Sarah Cornell, Susan Sellers and Deborah Jenson (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 104-31, p.118.

¹⁷ 'Extreme Fidelity', in Susan Sellers (ed.), *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 15.

'shaking' pre-conceived notions of femininity and masculinity through tackling taboo and embarrassing subjects. Some of the criticism that has been directed towards *l'écriture féminine* modes of writing argues that it is somewhat reductionist in terms of gender, for example Cixous's claims that a woman's capacity to give birth makes it easier to accept disruptions to the self that an encounter with the 'other' can bring. However Cixous acknowledges that all viewpoints should be expressed within writing as long as masculinity is dislodged from a position of gender-neutrality and universal norm.

The discussion on the plurality of gender representations in Hill's work is also enriched by considering Bertram's argument in *Gendering Poetry* where she links the dramatic monologue and the idea of 'thrown voices' with the idea of multiple personas, citing Hill and Carol Ann Duffy amongst others. She asks "does the use of multiple personae offer an escape from self, self-exposure and self-consciousness?"¹⁸ Bertram concludes that the lyric 'I' will always be problematic for female poets in that there is still resistance to accepting a woman's voice as representative. These questions will be considered in relation to Hill, keeping in mind that the poet's controlling voice always lies behind the dramatic monologue. The use of different poetic voices and identities may, at least, help Hill to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with female confession (in particular the image of the 'whiny' female poet which Hill profoundly rejects). As she explains to Lidia Vianu:

The sister, lover, lodger etc. are my ways of writing about myself. The only energy we have is the energy of our own lives. But sometimes autobiography is not true enough. In order to be ruthlessly accurate (which is my aim) it is sometimes necessary to fictionalise: in this way I feel free.¹⁹

By embarrassing her reader – both male and female – and exposing gendered identity as plural and conflicted, the powerful emotions provoked allow Hill's writing to take on and represent the fears behind self-assembled gender identity. The themes that have been discussed here can be pulled together to imagine transformation via the assembly of new identities within poetry. In demonstrating the complex and at times constraining nature of gender roles, reinforced by the presence of controlling and punishing institutions,

¹⁸ Vicki Bertram, *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Sexual Politics* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2005), p. 82.

¹⁹ Lidia Vianu, *Sometimes Autobiography Is Not True Enough* (2006) Available at: http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/selima_hill.htm (Accessed: 27 October 2009)

embarrassment, shame and guilt will be shown to shape those relationships, bringing the construction and validity of these identities into question. The self-recognition that a reader may experience in relation to their own gender identity may offer a shared catharsis and the possibility for transformation in this respect.

2. HILL'S CAREER

Born in London in 1945 into a family of painters, Selima Hill grew up in rural England and Wales in a household which she has described as placing a heavy emphasis on academia.²⁰ After attending boarding school, she went on to study Moral Sciences at Cambridge University. Her subsequent struggles with mental health led to a breakdown after leaving University and a year long stay in hospital. During my interview with Hill, she explained how her experiences of institutions have had a shaping and lasting effect on her work:

I confess I'm still like a teenager who rages against authority (including that of my own sons!) – having been 'institutionalised' all my life by daughterhood, boarding school from which I was expelled, by marriage, by university, by being sectioned and sent to live in psychiatric hospitals, the burns hospital, by prison (for 'civil disobedience' at Aldermaston). I've learnt that nobody gives you power – you just have to take it!²¹

Hill's first full-length collection *Saying Hello at the Station*²² was published in 1984 and she has since produced a further fifteen books which include two Selected Poems, a Michael Marks Award-winning pamphlet *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints*²³ and (most recently) *People Who Like Meatballs*²⁴ (2012). An indication of Hill's standing is that her work is included on the GCSE English syllabus, ensuring that she is being written into British culture. In addition to this, she has worked on numerous collaborations with the British Council, BBC, English National Opera, Channel Four etc. Despite Hill's publishing record, there is a lack of extended critical writing on her work; her poetry has been taken up by critics on three occasions, each time forming part of a single chapter alongside other poets, within

²⁰ Carol Ann Duffy, Carol Rumens, Fleur Adcock and Selima Hill, *The Poetry Quartets 2: v. 2* [Audio Book] (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998)

²¹ Selima Hill postal interview, p. 274.

²² Selima Hill, *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984)

²³ Selima Hill, *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints* (Birmingham: Flarestack Poets, 2009)

²⁴ Selima Hill, *People Who Like Meatballs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2012)

books of a more general theme.²⁵ When I first discovered Hill's work over ten years ago, I was struck then by her neglected status. I intend to redress this situation in this thesis and so acknowledge her position of key significance within British poetry, for courageously tackling difficult subject matter and for her originality.

Another contributing factor to Hill's low public profile may be her private personality; she rarely performs her work or gives interviews. My motivation behind seeking to interview Hill stemmed from an awareness of the lack of in-depth interviews but also the desire to enrich and expand my understanding of and engagement with her poetry and approach to writing. At this time, I had made significant progress with my research and the interview – I hoped – would serve to both consolidate and extend my argument in relation to embarrassment, shame and guilt in Hill's work. I first approached Hill through her publisher Bloodaxe and after sending several letters back and forth via the press, Hill provided me with her home address and we continued to write. Initially, she was hesitant and somewhat reluctant to be interviewed but agreed to answer a questionnaire via post. Her reply consisted of a five page hand-written response to my questions which was strikingly open. I was especially interested in her admission that "it's true shame is my big thing. Women are motivated by shame and guilt. I am, anyway."²⁶ I continued to correspond with Hill, especially in relation to the issues raised during the questionnaire and nearly a year on from my initial inquiry, she agreed to meet me for a face-to-face interview near her home in Exeter. This meeting lasted for two hours and during this time I asked her a series of questions which I had devised in the weeks prior. I focussed on issues of style and theme but more specifically, followed up on points raised in the questionnaire response, including the function of institutional settings such as the church and hospitals, and the notion of 'silent' or emotional violence within the family. I transcribed the dictaphone recording of our conversation, which I punctuated and edited to exclude certain aspects which I deemed too personal and not crucial to my argument. I carefully read and annotated this document which I then used as a taking off point for further reading, written pieces and conference

²⁵ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British & Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1997); Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels: Essays On Modern Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2005); *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry*, ed. Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

²⁶ Selima Hill postal interview, p. 273.

papers. I will draw upon the questionnaire and face-to-face interview material throughout this thesis and it is included in full in the appendix.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The reasons behind the lack of substantial critical writing on Hill and the way in which she has been apparently overlooked are difficult to pinpoint definitively. An explanation may lie in her engagement with embarrassing and taboo subjects and a poetic style that incorporates unusual imagery, repeated throughout her oeuvre with increasing resonance; for a new reader certain references may therefore seem arbitrary or disconnected. Hill's position as a poet predominantly published by mainstream publisher Bloodaxe while her work displays experimental aspects may mean that her writing does not clearly appeal to readers of mainstream or avant-garde poetry. However she continues to publish regularly, clearly sells books and is regularly nominated for awards; she is successful but not as well-known as her contemporaries.

Critical Responses to Hill's Work

The first critical study to emerge was Sean O'Brien's *The Deregulated Muse* in which he offers an interesting perspective on Hill's work, making observations on his gendered response and describing Hill as "one of the least *embarrassed* poets ever to have found publication."²⁷ Although O'Brien does not expand upon this point here, this remark was a crucial starting point for thinking about gender and embarrassment in this thesis. In likening Hill to Jo Shapcott, O'Brien argues that there is a sense that both writers do not ask the reader to agree with the validity of what they are seeing/reading: "this is not a mannerly, negotiated surrealism, but something like English expressionism."²⁸ It is this approach – focussing on the intangible inner-world of the writer – that O'Brien feels may account for the exasperation initially experienced by some male readers who "face the possibility that their vocabulary is simply not equipped for the job."²⁹ However, he does not suggest how female readers could be similarly affected; male and female readers alike could potentially

²⁷ *The Deregulated Muse*, p. 257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

be made to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by Hill's work. O'Brien quotes Professor Martin Stannard's comments on Hill's *A Little Book of Meat* as an example of the reaction he describes: "what I do know is, if you took all the similes out of it you'd have bugger all left. The book bulges with them. There's hardly a poem unburdened by them [...] Subject these poems to close scrutiny, and they show up as thin and unrewarding as gruel."³⁰ O'Brien asserts that it is tempting for a critic to fall back on the well-worn attack that the work is trivial, noting how Stannard weakens his stance by calling to his readership "come on lads!" assuming a division in response between the sexes and so invalidating his commentary on Hill's work. O'Brien attributes Stannard's frustration with Hill's work to its apparent refusal to satisfy objectives external to its purpose: "take it or leave it, Hill's work seems to suggest."³¹ This may also account for the difficulty O'Brien believes some readers may experience more generally when approaching Hill; if there is an implied onus on the reader to decipher her 'code' – and this is too much effort – the feeling is that this may not be the audience that she is attempting to connect with in the first place.

Bertram's arguments in *Gendering Poetry* offer an insight into O'Brien's observations on Hill's poetry. While Bertram does not view a consideration of gender as essential to understanding a piece of work, she feels that it is often overlooked and potentially enlightening: "poems offer evidence about masculine and feminine subjectivities, and may attempt to interrogate or change such constructions."³² This approach can be aligned with O'Brien regarding the male reader on Shapcott and Hill: "the reader – perhaps especially the male reader – has to learn that the poems' excursions are not dependent on reference back to a place of interpretive safety"³³ (as evidenced in Stannard's "come on lads!"). This links to discussions on *l'écriture féminine* and the notion that the poetic 'I' is always assumed to refer back to universal, masculine norms. However, Bertram calls attention to Rachel DuPlessis's concept of 'evenhandedness' when analysing poetry, citing DuPlessis: "[i]f we do not use the same tools to discuss writing by both genders, we still secretly "universalise"

³⁰ Ibid., p. 258.

³¹ Ibid., p. 259.

³² *Gendering Poetry*, p. 30.

³³ *The Deregulated Muse*, p. 256.

male writing or uncritically overvalue writing by women.”³⁴ A balance must be struck therefore whereby equal consideration is afforded to the assessment of whether a writer – male or female – actively takes a stance in their work in relation to the renegotiation of gender.

Deryn Rees-Jones offers the most substantial critique of Hill’s work to date in her 2005 book *Consorting With Angels: Essays On Modern Women Poets*. She views Hill’s comments about having a male brain in a female body³⁵ as vastly important to understanding her work, as Hill’s sense of herself as a poet is gendered. Rees-Jones attributes the oft-commented on tension running through Hill’s work to an ongoing struggle between the “poetic ‘I’ and its relation to her [Hill’s] own bodily self.”³⁶ Rees-Jones links Hill’s approach to the female body with her use of surrealism, manifesting “increasingly through the construction of selves through extended narratives and through an endless replication of dream images which are set up to display and shield the psyche.”³⁷ This refers to the way in which Hill writes from multiple-narrator and cross-gender standpoints while exploring the same issue. A surrealist approach, Rees-Jones argues, allows Hill to consider the plural aspect of identity as well as negotiating difficult emotions and taboo subject matter from a position of relative safety: “importantly for the woman poet, [it] seems to offer a coded place from which to work.”³⁸

Rees-Jones also identifies how Hill’s attitude towards masculine figures has changed in her work over time with her first two collections focusing on anxieties with her writing and male judgements.³⁹ Rees-Jones observes that Hill comes to write more explicitly about the female body; from menstrual blood to sexual encounters. This change also signals a shift in style from relatively self-contained lyric poems with concrete literary and cultural frames of reference to a more fragmented, stream-of-consciousness approach.

³⁴ *Gendering Poetry*, p. 30.

³⁵ *The Poetry Quartets 2: v. 2* [Audio Book]

³⁶ *Consorting With Angels*, p. 165.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁹ It is around this time that Hill described (in *The Poetry Quartets*) being aware of impressing male editors and only later did her writing style change as she wrote ‘with her body and from the heart’ upon connecting with other women writers.

In relation to *Violet*, Rees-Jones argues that Hill uses a number of guises from sister to ex-husband and his girlfriend to explore the taboos of the female body and represent women's experiences which are often unspoken or ignored. Further, she suggests that Hill adopts these perspectives in order to question herself and those around her, with the potential to reconstruct identity: "the short fragmentary poems offer glimpses of the coming into being of a new self."⁴⁰ Rees-Jones believes that the focus on feminine experience can make some male readers feel awkward and uncomfortable, citing Sean O'Brien's description of Hill as "one of the least *embarrassed* poets ever to have found publication." This leads Rees-Jones to ask a crucial question: "exactly who is embarrassed and why?"⁴¹ She does not elaborate on these questions and once more, the focus appears to be on the response of the male reader to Hill's poetry as opposed to both genders. However, she does allude to Hill's "taboo-breaking" as a method of identifying "a shared trauma, both real and metaphorical"⁴² with implied universal relevance. Rees-Jones concludes by comparing Hill's "dramatised confessions"⁴³ to Sylvia Plath,⁴⁴ speaking

from a fragmented and sometimes chaotic consciousness [...] Their [the poems] consciousness is always exploratory and evolving, the "truth" they speak creating a space for the shared catharsis of suffering.⁴⁵

Rees-Jones returns to her earlier observation regarding the fragmentation that characterises Hill's poetry, reiterating the consideration behind its apparent spontaneity. The notion of Hill's writing as cathartic is a problematic one given that her work could be said to make her readership feel uncomfortable, although this is part of the process.

⁴⁰ *Consorting with Angels*, p. 171.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Of all the writers who have been likened to Hill, comparisons to Sylvia Plath have perhaps been the most persistent. Rees-Jones's observations regarding her "dramatic confessional style" reminiscent of Plath have been touched upon, while Fiona Sampson has described Hill as "arguably the most distinctive truth teller to emerge in British poetry since Sylvia Plath." Jules Smith also comments on the fact that "Her combination of psychological intensity and humorous whimsy has led to comparisons with Sylvia Plath or Stevie Smith." The reasons for such an alignment are apparent by their shared themes of depression, difficult father-daughter relationships, time spent in hospitals, marital problems and the quest for an authentic selfhood along with an examination of gender roles within Western society. Both writers use dark and sometimes dense imagery which seems to draw upon a private, complex well of information, setting many of their poems within ordinary scenes of domesticity which they invest with powerful meaning. However, Hill differs not least for her tendency to write in stream-of-consciousness style sequences comprised of short free verse poems, linked by an assumed narrator with a narrative thread running throughout.

⁴⁵ *Consorting With Angels*, p. 172.

Ian Gregson discusses feminine caricature in the work of Selima Hill alongside Edith Sitwell, Stevie Smith and Jo Shapcott in a chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry*. He links what he describes in Smith to an experimental and heightened poetic sound which is confrontational in veering from playful to angry and at times "self-consciously childish."⁴⁶ He argues that the charge of 'childishness' has been levelled at Hill on a number of occasions and continues to sound dismissive. However there is a purpose behind this style of writing, to create a certain effect, and here he suggests that Smith has gone on to influence more recent poets in the creation of a notably feminine postmodernism:

The silliness and the shrillness of the music of Sitwell and Smith – which turns feminine self-parody into satire of masculine assumptions of its own rational authority, and derisive questioning of masculine dismissiveness towards what it regards as feminine inchoateness – prepares the way for the dancing and demented cows of Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill, the uproarious sing-song of their flaky carnival.⁴⁷

Despite drawing attention to the purpose behind this approach, in using terms such as 'demented' and 'flaky' this is a somewhat barbed critique. It must be noted that once again, as with O'Brien and Rees-Jones's accounts, that there is an emphasis on how male readers may view such depictions of femininity. Gregson cites Sitwell (a writer whom he aligns with Hill) as an illustration of a writer who uses language to articulate the body, consciously evoking the pre-linguistic.

One way in which this is achieved by these writers according to Gregson is the caricature of the female in a confrontational, crude style designed to provoke powerful human emotions such as fear and anger, with little sympathy for the object of the writing. However, while Hill's depictions of masculinity and femininity can evoke strong emotional responses – particularly in relation to violent imagery – the self-recognition a reader may experience as a result could elicit some form of pity or empathy. Gregson makes a link between the use of animals in Smith's work – which operates metaphorically with no attempt to appear real, to that in Hill and Shapcott. To enforce this point, he cites similar observations made by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle's observations on Hill and Shapcott in *A History of Twentieth-*

⁴⁶ *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Century British Women's Poetry:⁴⁸ "they often transcend the limits of human interaction, especially the confines of a recognisable dialogue of genders, through the personae of vegetables, animals or cartoon characters."⁴⁹ Crucially, Gregson claims, these overstated gender performances and vivid simplifications are about the creation of the poet's own language as opposed to the dominant masculine discourse on representations of gender and the body.

Gregson also connects Shapcott's 'mad cow' poems and Hill's cow poems in which the word 'cow' is used subversively to play with gender stereotypes of female as irrational and bodily. However, in many of Hill's poems there is arguably less irony present, for example in 'Cow' the speaker begins "I want to be a cow" and continues "I want to feel free to feel calm. | I want to be a cow who never knows | the kind of love you 'fall in love with' with."⁵⁰ Gregson differentiates between Hill and Shapcott however in saying that for Hill "the semiotic intervenes most insistently through the disruptive, but also exhilarating, impact of desire."⁵¹ As evidence he points towards Hill's *Portrait of my Lover as a Horse* which is a sequence of short poems in which a male is transformed into numerous animals and objects. Gregson also cites the poem 'Don't Let's Talk About Being in Love' from *A Little Book of Meat* for its vivid depiction of "womb-like enclosedness (blunted pouches, a dome of glass, dripping tunnels) and phallic pointiness (fingers, beaks)."⁵² He remarks how the final lines – in which the glass caves in "and water comes pouring in with a rush of fishes | going slurpetty-slurpetty-slurp with their low-slung mouths"⁵³ – signals the articulation of desire as "a collapse into mere noise."⁵⁴ Gregson believes that such a technique is typical of a feminine postmodernism, a mode of writing that addresses the "problems of articulating the bodily and the inarticulate" and solves these "by invoking the semiotic and the caricatural."⁵⁵ This

⁴⁸ Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

⁴⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 50.

⁵¹ *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry*, p. 21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

raises a crucial point in relation to Hill's negotiation of desire within her poetry as a powerful and complex force over an individual's autonomy.

The Cultural Reception of Hill's work

In order to give an indication of how Hill has been received in the wider culture, there are many examples of dismissive reviews of her work, for example Peter Peggall wrote in *The Telegraph* last year of "the quirky, stubborn, slightly bonkers Selima Hill."⁵⁶ While this remark and others like it may also express admiration for her work, there seems to be a reluctance to take it seriously.

There are those who have found Hill's work to be lacking in substance; in *Lord Gnomes Literary Companion*, Francis Wheen dismisses her as "a fashionable hypee of the day."⁵⁷ Discussing Hill, Peter Childs⁵⁸ refers to Spiers⁵⁹ and his views on the current poetical climate as an age so self-conscious and self-aware that it only seems able to remark upon its lack of anything to say. Spiers includes Hill in this category of whimsical writers, favouring instead those who he believes have "a more genuine sense of place and displacement."⁶⁰ Philip Gross reviewing *A Little Book Of Meat* describes Hill's work as "the slippery jungle of sharp observation, whimsical reference and direct feeling"⁶¹ suggesting that he too has some doubts over the credibility of her poetic voice. In this collection, Hill mentions Flannery O'Connor in her acknowledgements whose life as a young woman living with her mother on a farm mirrors at least in part, that of the protagonist's. Gross asserts that this complicates matters and casts doubt on the authenticity of the work: "there's a mask behind a mask, and behind that, Selima Hill."⁶² Commenting on how Hill's poetry appears to be densely packed with simile, he believes this creates the following effect: "the thing being made

⁵⁶ Peter Peggall, 'Save us from melodramatic thespians reading poetry'. Available at: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/peterpeggallbooks/100062062/save-us-from-melodramatic-thespians-reading-poetry/> (Accessed: 30 March 2012)

⁵⁷ Francis Wheen, *Lord Gnome's Literary Companion* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 263.

⁵⁸ Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century In Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999)

⁵⁹ 1996: 155.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶¹ Philip Gross, 'Wriggling On A Pin', *Poetry Review*, Volume 83, No 4(Winter 1993/94), 57-58 (p. 57).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

strange is not a *thing* at all, but a feeling.”⁶³ Although this sounds rather vague, it reflects Hill’s attempts to convey the feeling of an experience to her reader.

In an article for the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) Jane Yeh reviews *Red Roses* which she describes as “a bleak, cartoonish world in which men and women exist in permanent opposition”⁶⁴ echoing Gregson’s remarks regarding exaggeration as a stylistic device in Hill’s work. Whilst accepting Hill’s reputation for being ‘odd and original’, Yeh argues that “in too many places she achieves only a forced surrealism” and that “the poems are so short that they come to an end before making anything intelligible of these images.”⁶⁵ These remarks seem to fall into a similar pattern of others who dismiss Hill’s writing, seemingly deterred by what initially appears to be dense and peculiar imagery. Kevan Johnson, also writing for the *TLS*, initially praises Hill in his review of *Violet*: “she effectively demolishes the romantic polarity between child and adult, establishing adolescence as the key stage.”⁶⁶ Certainly, this in-between stage is important to Hill as it is a period of formation and instability; a period which her negotiations of gender identity would suggest we never ‘grow out’ of and it can always be recalled and returned to. However, Johnson argues: “there are many poems here which are no more than vague sketches, biographical notes in which her hard-won poignancy is sacrificed for immediate effect.”⁶⁷ Whilst he praises Hill as a “marvellously indiscreet writer, a dancer on dangerous ground”⁶⁸ there are echoes of previous criticisms that credit her originality in many cases, while questioning the value and depth of the work. Michael Milburn reviews Hill’s Selected Poems collection *Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs*⁶⁹ for *Harvard Review*; whilst acknowledging her “extravagant repertoire of pristine and biting images,” he finds them to be disconnected at times (in *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness*) and in keeping with other responses to Hill’s work, frustrating: “I find its herky-jerky images and constantly-changing gaze annoying.”⁷⁰ While this is a reflection of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶⁴ Jane Yeh, ‘Poetry Books – In Brief’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 February (2007), 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁶ Kevan Johnson, ‘Dangerous Dancing’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 August (1997), 26.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁹ Selima Hill, *Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994)

⁷⁰ Michael Milburn, ‘*Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs* by Selima Hill’, *Harvard Review*, No. 9 (Fall, 1995), pp. 177-178.

the journalistic nature of such pieces, these articles serve as an introduction to Hill for many readers and may discourage engagement with the work.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In essence, the theoretical framework in this thesis is concerned with the shaping of gender identity through embarrassment and the related emotions of shame and guilt, within literature. This will be examined in the context of intimacy in various forms and a discussion of the identity shaping violence that can exist within intimate relationships and institutional settings. It is argued that engagement with these issues affects a potential reader or viewer of such work, resulting in a defamiliarisation of gendered identity, the potential for embarrassment, and the dismantling of the gendered self with the possibility for transformation.

GENDER IDENTITY

The theoretical approach in this thesis is informed by Judith Butler's arguments in *Gender Trouble*⁷¹, central to which is Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one."⁷² This refers to cultural constraints that exist, compelling women to perform certain acts and behaviours which are deemed socially acceptable in order to achieve a female identity. This process manifests itself as a daily struggle to rebuild identity, locating masculinity and femininity as a source of tension and focus. Butler argues that there are two forms of acceptable gender within society; masculine and feminine, creating a binary relationship. An oppressive regime of exclusion of those identities deemed illegitimate is vital to the production of the binary, in order for it to emerge as inevitable and necessary. As Butler argues:

Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.⁷³

The repetition Butler believes is inherent to this process must presumably be also engaged when attempting to deconstruct naturalised gender roles. Further, a weakness is revealed in

⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge Classics, 2006)

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

its construction, demonstrating that gender is not fixed: it must be performed to be believed. Butler uses Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*⁷⁴ which discusses the expulsion of the abject (such as the expulsion of excrement from the body) comparing it to the treatment of identities that do not fit neatly into the binary. Butler proposes an alternative to the problematic way in which identities are organised and produced:

This radical formulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different genders, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two.⁷⁵

It may be that by changing or stopping the performances attributed to gender creating its naturalised appearance, a new or more encompassing approach could be developed. A crucial question emerges for Butler: "what kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?"⁷⁶ I will argue that the reinforcement of gender identity through punishment can be linked to the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt. Further, that poetry allows for the exploration of these uncomfortable feelings which can reveal how gender identity is constructed but also how it is undone, therefore undermining its naturalised appearance and opening up possibilities for challenging pre-conceived notions of gender. This process operates in practice also, stemming from the self-recognition of the reader when gender is presented as complex and fragmented, offering the possibility for transformation beyond rigid gender roles. As a binary social construct, gender is a source of well-documented suffering for women who struggle or fail to occupy a feminine position – as well as for gay, lesbian and transgender people who are ignored or invalidated altogether. If gender can be described as a social overlay to sexed bodies, a 'new' overlay has the potential to provide the flexibility to accept all bodies, identities and desires, which may diminish the importance or need for such thinking. I am arguing that embarrassment provides a new way of looking at gender, exposing its plural and conflicted nature as well as the possibility of loosening its constraints.

This understanding of gender formation based on Butler's argument of performativity and the transformative potential of repetition is complimented by Erika Fischer-Lichte's

⁷⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

⁷⁵ *Gender Trouble.*, p. 152.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

discussions on performance in a theatrical and performing arts context in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*.⁷⁷ She describes how a performance has the capacity to destabilise or collapse dichotomous pairs such as mind/body, subject/object and signifier/signified: “[they] lose their polarity and clear definition in performance; once set in motion they begin to oscillate.”⁷⁸ Fischer-Lichte’s concept of the autopoietic feedback loop is used to describe this process whereby actors and spectators respond to and feed off one another in a way that mutually informs a performance, thereby unsettling the subject/object binary (this account of performance well reflects the earlier description of Hill’s poetry reading in London.) It is Fischer-Lichte’s assertion that the autopoietic feedback loop places an audience into a state of ‘betwixt and between’ with transformative potential:

While borders are thought of as partitionary lines which include something and exclude the rest, the threshold is imagined as a liminal space in which anything is possible. While borders create clear divisions, thresholds mark a space of possibilities, empowerment and metamorphosis.⁷⁹

Despite its original application to performance art, this argument is incredibly useful when thinking about the gender positions depicted in Hill’s poetry, how they might situate or unsettle an audience (reading or listening/viewing) and its transformative potential for overcoming rigid and unhelpful binary notions of gender.

An area which has completely disrupted thinking on gender is that of intersex. John Money’s pioneering work in field area provides useful insight into the construction of gender. Intersex bodies that are surgically altered and socialised in order to fit an assigned gender role, draw attention to the constructed nature of gender; they overtly reflect the naturalised way in which women alter their bodies (through hair removal, clothing, make up and cosmetic surgery etc) to appear feminine in order to embody the narrow requirements for legitimacy within the heterosexual binary. The apparently unclear ‘signposts’ upon the body of an intersex person – who may have genital ambiguity in having both male and female biological characteristics – brings into question the way in which all bodies are

⁷⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008)

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

categorised and the notion of biological destiny in relation to the oppression of women. Further, Money argues that there is 'sexual neutrality' at birth:

In place of a theory of instinctive masculinity or femininity which is innate, the evidence of hermaphroditism lends support to a conception that psychologically, sexuality is undifferentiated at birth and that it becomes differentiated as masculine or feminine in the course of the various experiences of growing up.⁸⁰

Within Western society, binary sex categories determine that characteristics be assigned and assumed of an individual, based purely on their biological appearance. In Money's terms, this occurs as a process of socialisation with clear links to upbringing and shaping familial influences. Money's theory of gender plasticity, I believe, represents a stage where identity is vulnerable to being shaped along dichotomous gender lines – by embarrassment, shame and guilt – within the intimate relationships of the family unit.

EMBARRASSMENT, SHAME AND GUILT

Sean O'Brien's statement that Hill is "one of the least embarrassed poets to have found publication"⁸¹ represents an occasion to consider what embarrassment means and who is embarrassed in this context. I will argue that embarrassment functions as part of the formation of gender identities and that intentional embarrassment acts as a form of challenge to a reader. In sociologist William F. Sharkey's essay 'Who Embarrasses Whom?' in *Interpersonal Communication*⁸² he defines embarrassment as something that is social by necessity in that other people are present. It can also be the "subjective experience of anxiety or fear that one's behaviours will be negatively sanctioned or others will have a lower evaluation on the role being"⁸³ ('role being' being Sharkey's term for the individual in question) similar to the way in which 'inappropriate' behaviour and identities are punished within the rules of the heterosexual binary. The influence and intensity of such interactions are likely to increase the more intimate the nature of the relationship. Sharkey adds embarrassment stems from the fear "of a discrepancy between a person's presented self

⁸⁰ Money J, Hampson JG, Hampson JL, 'An examination of some basic sexual concepts: The evidence of human hermaphroditism' *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* 97 (1955), 301-319 (p.308).

⁸¹ *The Deregulated Muse*, p. 257.

⁸² Pamela J. Kalbfleisch, *Interpersonal Communication: Evolving Interpersonal Relationships* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), p. 148.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

and one's desired presentational self"⁸⁴ and it is in this gap that gender comes to be policed and formed.

In terms of how this process may affect a reader, Sharkey's work on intentional embarrassment suggests a highly effective method of challenging beliefs about gender roles. He points out that, on the whole, embarrassment is perceived to be an anti-social behaviour because it violates taken-for-granted rules of interaction. However, violations of expectations may be allowable as long as positive valued actions accompany or follow the violation, thereby compensating for it. Sharkey adds that the intentional embarrassment of another can "cause a momentary degree of uncertainty that may prove to have a positive relational outcome."⁸⁵ I will argue that embarrassment destabilises beliefs enough in order to chip away at the constraints on the body and the highly ordered rules through which society sees gender. Christopher Ricks raises the notion of art as a valuable medium in enabling us to deal with embarrassment in *Keats and Embarrassment*.⁸⁶ He argues that art

helps us to deal with embarrassment, not by abolishing or ignoring it, but by recognising, refining, and putting it to good human purposes; art, in its unique combination of the private and the public, offers us a unique kind of human relationship freed from the possibility, which is incident to other human relationships, of an embarrassment that clogs, paralyses or coarsens.⁸⁷

Ricks too acknowledges the potential for an individual to learn and grow from the experience of embarrassment which he crucially relates to art, and poetry specifically. In everyday situations, embarrassment is hastily concealed and suppressed. However, the act of reading – or indeed hearing – poetry may mean that the reader/listener 'sits' with these emotions for longer than they might otherwise. The self-recognition within embarrassment has implications for gender construction as it can threaten the presumptions an individual projects onto their identity. In fact, a healthy sense of identity depends paradoxically on the risk of openness and not self protection (which has clear links to intimacy) and, as Ricks asserts, art refuses to hide or ignore these difficult feelings.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 147.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 157.

⁸⁶ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

In *Interaction Ritual*⁸⁸ Erving Goffman also asserts that experiencing embarrassment, while unpleasant, can have some positive consequences. He suggests that an interaction consists of projecting and accepting appropriate selves and embarrassment occurs when this is disrupted: “the person who falls short may everywhere find himself inadvertently trapped into making implicit identity-claims which he cannot fulfil.”⁸⁹ If we reframe this argument in terms of gender, this account reflects the distress many encounter when attempting to reconcile the plural and conflicting aspects of identity with the social expectation that they fulfil a rigid role within a dichotomous gender system. Goffman describes the subtle violence inherent in this process:

Because of possessing multiple selves the individual may find he is required both to be present and to not be present on certain occasions. Embarrassment ensues: the individual finds himself being torn apart, however gently. Corresponding to the oscillation of his conduct is the oscillation of his self.⁹⁰

I would argue that if embarrassment threatens a person’s projected gender identity, the discomfort serves as a reminder as to its performative nature. While embarrassment is defined as a public emotion, triggered by a sudden or unexpected awareness of another person or persons, this could be a literal or imagined presence. The key feeling is one of being judged or being un-prepared to face the scenario in question, having failed to gather oneself together into the acceptable identity package which one wishes to present to the world. The unbearable prickling of embarrassment is indicative of the torn-apart self. This manifests itself in an automatic and unavoidable disassembly of identity, revealing its constructed nature and the fact that that individual has chosen to have a certain aspect of their identity take precedence over any others. The more closed off and reliant on this identity that the individual is, the more painful this experience may be. The speed at which they re-assemble may be linked to the degree of reliance upon this identity role as daily survival. Art provides the opportunity for self-reflection and discovery that comes from embarrassment, whether this be termed intentional embarrassment or even a consenting agreement to embarrassment, perhaps by choosing to engage with such work.

⁸⁸ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Random House, 1982)

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

While closely bound to embarrassment, shame and guilt are arguably much more private emotions. They may not have the immediacy of embarrassment with its ruffling of identity's surface; however the effects of shame and guilt are perhaps much more deeply rooted and long lasting and may not be immediately felt. They could be said to represent a slow and sedimented 'eating away at' identity and are less easy to recover from than embarrassment. This has implications too when considering the way in which these subtle differences operate in the construction of identity and how the potency of these emotions is intensified within intimate relationships. In *Shame and Guilt*⁹¹ Tangney and Dearing examine the difference between these two emotions and their effect within personal, intimate relationships. The authors believe that guilt can be a healthy feeling in that it is less ego threatening because "the object of concern is a specific behaviour, not the global self."⁹² Although it may be uncomfortable, guilt can lead to a new understanding of something or a positive change in behaviour. To put this in terms of poetry, it may be that a reader could identify feeling guilty about something when a difficult subject or emotion is explored. Here there is the opportunity for cathartic healing and the discovery that others have suffered in a same way, that the unspoken has been spoken. What might previously have been a solitary and shameful experience is thus transformed. According to Tangney and Dearing, shame is a much more destructive emotion than guilt; those experiencing shame may use defensive anger to hold off the discomfort of engaging with a painful sense of self. Such shame-based anger causes serious problems within interpersonal relationships⁹³ and can be perpetuated through generations of parenting. Tangney and Dearing argue that in the home environment where family members' reactions are ignored, disconnected and belittled: "such an environment only serves to turn up the emotional volume – particularly negative emotions such as anger, shame, and loneliness."⁹⁴ These behaviours are integral to intimate relationships. During motherhood there is a loss of control and physical boundaries, boundaries which through their very crossing create an intimate relationship. A mother is required to let down those walls for her child who relies fully on her physically and emotionally, both for sustenance and for physical contact and affection. However given the

⁹¹ June P. Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004)

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

plural aspects of identity, motherhood – and by association femininity – is a source of anxiety whereby tension is placed upon the seams of identity with the potential for feelings of resentment between mother and child.

Embarrassment, shame and guilt can all operate in subtly different yet very powerful ways to shape identity. Embarrassment has a strong shaping function within any given society as it helps to keep people on what is perceived to be the correct identity path. It ensures that an individual's behaviour conforms outwardly to a certain standard. Depending on the size of the discrepancy between a person's inner self and their presented outer self and the way in which this is handled within intimate relationships, the greater the capacity for the residual and potentially destructive emotions of shame and guilt, beyond the initial embarrassment. This thesis explores how the complex relationship between these emotions has an enormous influence on the shaping of gender identity within Hill's poetry. Further, it considers how embarrassment, shame and guilt are at their most powerful within the intimate relationships she depicts, where emotions have the capacity to inflict violence on others or act as a form of self-harm.

INTIMACY

In this context, intimacy refers to intimate relationships and settings in which the individuals concerned share proximity and therefore unavoidably influence each other in terms of identity. For my purposes, this covers the intimate relationships of the family, of sexual partnerships and the forced intimacy of institutions. In order for gendered roles to be upheld there are repercussions for those who fail to comply, meaning that societal opinion can influence the most personal and intimate issue of all; identity. This could be literal or it may be an imagined awareness of an 'all-seeing eye'. I will argue that such environments present identity at its most vulnerable and most at risk from challenge, ultimately showing the effect that intimacy can have on shaping identity. This involves a consideration of the identity positions of femininity and masculinity with the sub themes of mother, daughter, father and son; it can be shown how institutional settings are bound to these identities in a way that can ultimately shape them.

These ideas in relation to identity shaping are enriched by looking at some of the research on early development. In *Why Love Matters*⁹⁵ Sue Gerhardt looks at the effects a baby's environment can have on its development. She explains how our minds and emotions become organised through interaction with others (conventionally the mother or father): "this means that the unseen forces which shape our emotional responses through life, are not primarily our biological urges, but the patterns of emotional experience with other people, most powerfully set up in infancy."⁹⁶ A baby is an interactive project, requiring human input as it coordinates with those around it in a way that shapes its future personality. Gerhardt gives the example of babies of depressed mothers who adjust to low stimulation, whereas well-managed babies come to expect a world that is responsive to feelings and helps to "bring intense states back to a comfortable level."⁹⁷ Hill's extensive negotiation of mother-daughter relationships in her poetry demonstrates patterns of shame and guilt passed from mother to daughter, serving to construct femininity, particularly in relation to the image of the burnt baby. Gerhardt's arguments in relation to the shaping influence of early relationships and how this functions within this theoretical framework of embarrassment, shame and guilt may also illuminate discussions on mother-daughter relationships and gender elsewhere in literature.

Stephanie Dowrick states in *Intimacy and Solitude*⁹⁸ that an intimate relationship can mean "tuning into someone else's reality, and risking *being changed by the experience*."⁹⁹ She believes that a healthy relationship requires a balance of intimacy and solitude. However in terms of mother and child, enforced solitude can be terrifying for a dependent baby with its sense that its needs can only be satisfied by something outside of itself. This form of intimate relationship becomes a source of tension, tapping into an important fear: being so close to someone can mean a loss of the self for the mother and evokes the fear of abandonment for the baby. Dowrick comments how "this feeling of one self being muddled up with another – a feeling often experienced as irritation, claustrophobia, boredom, frustration, anger – is a complicating but often unrecognised force in intimate

⁹⁵ Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Stephanie Dowrick, *Intimacy and Solitude* (London: The Women's Press, 1995)

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

relationships.”¹⁰⁰ This insidious force is characterised as ‘silent violence’ within this thesis, reflected in Hill’s mother figures whose frustration with, or lack of interest in the maternal role sees them physically and emotionally harm their children. However, it is often the mother who is expected to teach and uphold impossibly high values which, Dowrick argues, may mean that they are mistrusted and loathed. Such notions force us to consider how unevenly the burden of real and idealised parenting and intimacy is presently shared, adding to the complicated female identity.

The tensions that exist for women who become mothers in contemporary society stems from the fear of failing to come across as a good woman and a good mother (in fact, the two are often synonymous). However, in applying the theories on intimacy contained in *Intimacy and Solitude*, some of the reasons for these feelings become clear. If one is required to tune into another’s reality “you risk being *who you are*, and risk facing who the other person is *in their entirety* – not just in those parts which are socially acceptable or ‘useful’ to you.”¹⁰¹ The good mother is one who is tuned-in to her child’s every need, however the relationship becomes problematic when the mother seeks reprieve from this intense intimacy, as we are told that to withdraw from the baby could be damaging. The link between intimate relationships and the formation and shaping of identity is extended in this thesis to consider the role of institutions in Hill’s work; psychiatric hospitals, maternity wards and the Catholic Church represent forced intimacy, and a more explicit and tangible example of societal policing of gender than more covert manifestations within familial and sexual relationships.

VIOLENCE

The concept of violence links to identity in a number of ways. Violence within everyday scenes of human interaction – between lovers or within the family – functions to defamiliarise these relationships, thus unsettling our understanding of them and forcing us to see identity in a new light, prompting unexpected realisations. Art forms such as poetry provide an ideal medium through which to explore the depth and immediacy of this process. Violence in its various forms also pulls apart pre-conceived notions of identity and offers the possibility for transformation arising from the difficult emotions provoked and the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 196.

self-recognition therein. To put this in terms of intimate relationships, they may be close and at times loving but they can also be damaging.

Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*¹⁰² focuses on the way in which individuals are assigned fixed places in pre-determined segments on this basis of religion or nationality in a way that eclipses other identities and generates hatred. The issues discussed can also be transposed onto a discussion of gender identity. Sen suggests that violence is promoted by a sense of inevitability regarding the notion of a unique identity that we are supposed to have and which appears to make extensive, and at times disagreeable demands upon us. The 'illusion of destiny' when it comes to a singular identity may compel an individual to suffer through forced performance if they refuse to conform, although it must be noted that not all individuals are coerced into performance and do so unwillingly or unthinkingly. Sen argues that many conflicts in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity; a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be used as a weapon to brutalise another. In Hill's poetry, men and women are seen to violently perform masculine and feminine roles of husband and mother, respectively. Their dedication to these roles suggests their inevitability; however this is brought into question by the destruction they cause.

The identity theories developed in this thesis may also open up fresh interpretations of literature beyond Hill's work; by tracing the operation of the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt in literary depictions of intimate relationships – as well as the emotional and physical violence that underpins them (violence with a stranger could be termed 'forced' intimacy) – there is the potential for developing enlightening ways of thinking about how gender identities come to be formed, stabilised or undermined.

5. SHARON OLDS AND GERALDINE MONK

This section deals with the idea of mapping the theoretical framework onto the work of other writers and the reasons behind the choice to consider the poetry of Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk in this light. Such is Sylvia Plath's reputation as a poet that there is often a

¹⁰² Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2006)

strong temptation to link contemporary women poets back to her in some way. However, this should be resisted and Hill herself disavows this link.¹⁰³ Hill is often compared to Plath, due to both writers having been hospitalised for mental illness and for writing about their experiences, or writers such as Stevie Smith for sharing an apparently ‘whimsical’ style. These lazy associations dismiss Hill from serious critical discussion. In electing to read the work of Sharon Olds (b. 1942) and Geraldine Monk (b.1952) alongside Hill (b.1945), I felt that this combination would offer a fresh perspective on Hill’s writing and offer a new angle on Olds and Monk. They are writers of the same generation; all describe having intensely religious upbringings; they have been exploring gender for over thirty years of published writing and their work reflects the social and cultural changes they have witnessed during this time. However differences in background and style add an interesting dimension. Olds is a widely-known American writer and ex-poet laureate for New York. Monk’s position is that of an experimental British writer with a lower profile than Olds, published in the small presses. She is however a prominent figure in this scene which makes her position somewhat the reverse of Hill’s, who shuns publicity. Olds is an ideal candidate for a discussion on embarrassment in poetry due to her controversial confessional style, covering such issues as her family life as a child, her own family as an adult, her sexual experiences and interactions within intimate settings in unflinching detail; Monk brings an innovative and disruptive approach to language that reflects the plural and complex nature of gender identity.

Linda A. Kinnahan links Monk with a number of experimental writers working today who “have committed themselves to excavating language in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown.”¹⁰⁴ In breaking down words into letters and sounds, separating them with forward slashes Monk disorganises meaning but may also cause the speaking voice to

¹⁰³ The link to Plath is something which Hill has sought to distance herself from on a number of occasions, namely for the reason that she feels the image associated with her of hysterical, suicidal poetess can discredit a female writer’s work: “Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton – they failed as women, in that they took their lives. I hate the identity of being a woman poet because of them! Who wants to be seen as hysterical, spoilt, bad-tempered, devious, mean, whingey?” These comments are interesting from the perspective of providing an insight into Hill’s approach to writing and her experiences of negotiating the world as a woman and a writer. This does not mean that similarities between the two should be dismissed; rather they represent an alternative line of inquiry.

¹⁰⁴ *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women’s Poetry*, p. 166.

stutter or hesitate. Monk disrupts historical narratives in the case of the Pendle Witches and Mary Queen of Scots, with wider implications for women in general. In attempting to speak for and reconstruct the experiences of women condemned to strict gender roles, held in place by various institutions, the family and social attitudes, Olds and Monk deal in uncomfortable subjects such as mental distress, emotional, sexual and physical violence and the associated feelings of embarrassment, shame and guilt. These aspects place them in the company of Hill; using different approaches, these writers will be shown to highlight unrealistic and undesirable gender binaries by re-imagining a space where female autonomy is achieved through linguistic ingenuity. There will also be contemplation of the impact on the reader of embarrassment theories on the construction of gender in practice.

6. STRUCTURE OF THESIS

The following chapters each draw upon the theoretical framework outlined above. Chapter One looks at 'The Family: Motherhood, Fatherhood, Childhood' focussing on the roles of both mother and father within the family, the 'silent violence' inherent in intimate relationships as well as locating childhood as a time of malleability in relation to gender identity. It also considers the notion that far from being innate, gender identity is something which is developed within the family and the symbolic systems set in motion by the mother and father or their symbolic equivalents. This chapter also deals with mothers, given the extent to which this role is explored and repeatedly returned to in Hill's work and the recurring image of the burnt baby with its associated feelings of shame and guilt. Chapter Two 'Sex, Love and Desire' deals with heterosexual relationships and the operation of desire within Hill's poetic landscapes, where many of her female characters are depicted in a way that seeks to undermine the structures and conventions of representing female desire. This chapter covers the pleasure and discomfort evoked through desire, how it functions in the shaping of gender identities and the real and imagined violence of these intimate relations. Chapter Three 'Institutional Life: Church, School, Hospitals' will cover Hill's extensive work on experiences of mental illness and psychiatric wards and on maternity wards. These scenes are populated with male doctors who are God-like figures and symbolic of a controlling patriarchal society in which institutions play a part in the production, shaping

and perpetuation of gender roles. I will also examine the numerous religious references and imagery throughout Hill's work, including the various ways in which religious ideas serve to police and restrict femininity in Hill's poetry. The final chapter will deal with the negotiation of gender identity in the poetry of Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk. This will be followed by my conclusions and appendices which include my correspondence and face-to-face interview with Hill.

CHAPTER 1

THE FAMILY: MOTHERHOOD, FATHERHOOD AND CHILDHOOD

Painful familial relationships have long been a preoccupation within Hill's work. The family home allows for a degree of privacy in which socially constructed attitudes towards gender are played out on a personal level of intimate relationships between parents, children and siblings. It is within this environment – away from the potentially mediating effect of the public gaze, with opportunities for embarrassment – that family members feel liberated to belittle, control and abuse one another; the 'emotional volumes' are fully turned up. Traditional constructions of gender are perpetuated in Hill's work in a way that many readers will recognise in their own lives; however she lifts these behaviours out of the ordinary through the defamiliarising effect of descriptions of shame-fuelled extreme violence and abuse, or the distancing effect of irony to deflect embarrassment. These images of excess force the reader to take a position in relation to them and, in Fischer-Lichte's terms, there is an inevitable oscillation between the poetry and the reader's experience; for example, they may identify with the aggression of frustrated mothers, the guilt of childless women, the emotionally distant fathers or the child damaged by messages of shame and guilt. Guilt is palpable yet more subtle in the poems, often existing 'between the lines' as a reminder of the added pressure and failure that parenthood brings to 'do' one's gender correctly. Hill explores how notions of femininity and masculinity are developed within the family, based on symbolic systems initiated by the mother and father and held in place by the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt. Hill also writes about the forms of violence inflicted by and upon family members whose actions and words cloak unspoken shame, a force powerfully capable of shaping gender identity to which the malleable child is most vulnerable.

1. MOTHERHOOD

The subject of motherhood is a recurring theme for Hill and has come to dominate her work. Her last three full-length collections – *The Hat*, *Fruitcake* and *People Who Like Meatballs* – are dedicated to exploring aspects of motherhood. She focuses on the capacity of this role to define, nurture, hurt and grieve, epitomised by the persistent image of the

burnt baby. Fire becomes a metaphor for the way in which Hill's characters are consumed or branded by desire; both their own and those with whom they share intimate relationships. In 'The Day the Cows Got Out' – the first poem in Hill's *The Hat* – an elusive speaker describes a chaotic farmyard scene in which a rescued baby has been badly burnt in a fire in one of the buildings. The title serves to draw interest away from these events, trivialising the tragedy and generating a defamiliarising tone of detachment. There are intense expressions of regret and self-loathing, in parentheses to emphasise this shameful admission: "(there shouldn't have been a baby in the first place – | it's far too late for that sort of thing...)." ¹ This suggests that the baby has always been looked upon unfavourably; a view which could be the mother's or the baby's (with hindsight), as a result of internalising her mother's response to the incident. The baby's injuries are recounted with morbid fascination:

Oh dear, the baby's face is falling off
and her clothes are stuck to her skin, I'm afraid,
and all the tweezers in the world, Mother,
will never get them tweezered out again. ²

This description serves to show the way in which identity is formed within intimate relationships where actions and words become embedded in the psyche. The repellent description forces the reader and the addressee 'Mother' to confront the incident and compels the latter to endure guilt over what has happened. The protagonist has the painful life-long task of attempting to 'tweeze' out these shameful embedded parts as an attempt at self-understanding and recovery. The poem culminates when the rejected baby is passed on to a wet nurse:

Easy does it, nurse, easy does it.
Drip that milk.
Bastard!
Easy does it. ³

The exclamation 'Bastard!' carries great force, setting the tone for a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship; just as the baby is physically burnt, the mind is similarly branded by the experience. Already there are emerging implications for the protagonist's future sense

¹ Selima Hill, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

of shame, guilt and embarrassment as well as potential effects on gender formation – something which Hill describes identifying with⁴ – as a result of the intensely intimate relationship of parent and child.

A link can be made here with Robert Southwell's poem 'The Burning Babe.'⁵ Southwell was arrested, tortured and imprisoned in 1592 when it was illegal to be a Catholic priest; the poems he wrote during this time demonstrate his perception that God existed and had a part in all things.⁶ The unsettling image of a burning baby appears to the poem's protagonist on a "hoary winter's night."⁷ Like Hill, Southwell draws out the repellent nature of this image – a baby being typically linked to innocence and helpless dependence – forcing the reader to confront its inexplicable bodily suffering; the baby is "scorched with excessive heat, such floods of tears did shed."⁸ While the baby is an image of Christ, it can be read as a metaphor for the way in which powerful emotions inflict a form of violence within intimate relationships. Southwell's 'baby' is branded by fire-like desire: "love is the fire, and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scorns."⁹ The process of being burnt leaves behind residual shame, an identity-shaping emotion identified in within Hill's work. The baby has no agency over his body which is solely for use by others and takes a new meaning beyond the physical: "the metal in this furnace wrought are men's defiled souls, | For which, as now on fire I am to work them to their good, | So will I melt into a bath to wash them in my blood."¹⁰ The baby suffers and is made to suffer in order that men may be purged of their sins; this is necessitated by his metaphorical death as to 'melt' describes the dissolution of the self. Although the image of the burnt baby appears most frequently in mother-daughter relationships within Hill, it similarly represents a loss of identity, with implications more

⁴ Regarding her own accident, Hill remarked during the Exeter interview: "I was marked physically as someone not pretty enough, not demure enough, not good enough, not female enough."

⁵ 'The Burning Babe' by Robert Southwell. Available at: <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/burningbabe.htm> (Accessed: 13 February 2013)

⁶ The existence of a God and ponderings related to religion are also characteristic of Hill's poetry which is elaborated on in Chapter Three.

⁷ 'The Burning Babe'.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

generally for understanding the dynamics of intimate relationships and the construction of gender throughout her work.

The ambivalent figure of mother – associated with love, mistrust and fear – is further complicated by Hill’s position of “one of the least embarrassed poets” for how she negotiates this subject. Hill told Lidia Vianu in an interview: “when I meet real people face to face I feel trapped – as if I am a bad person. Ugly. Dirty. Inadequate.”¹¹ This offers an interesting contrast between her lack of inhibitions as a poet and her painful sense of self during interactions and the production of such forthright work. In my interview with Hill she claims to not care about the reader at all, writing quickly to keep ahead of ‘the censor’ and she feels lucky:

to have found the space (i.e. the white page) in which I can say what I want to say, which may not be demure and nice, but may be ruthless, cold hearted, brutal.¹²

Hill strives to avoid compromising the raw aspect her work by toning it down in order to make it more easily digestible. However, some awareness – and perhaps anxiety – regarding the way in which this particular area of her work is perceived seems to have crept in. During my interview with Hill she was sure to point out that her poems about distant, emotionless mothers were not based on her own experiences as a mother. Further, in her most recent collection *People Who Like Meatballs*, for the first time Hill included a note at the back of the book: “I would like to add that the sequence ‘Into my mother’s Snow-Encrusted Lap’ is not about my own mother. Far from it.” This suggests that a great deal of underlying tension exists for writers approaching this subject and this thesis seeks to identify these tensions within poetry.

In 1976, Adrienne Rich documented her own anxieties as a mother and a writer in *Of Woman Born*. She describes finding her experience of motherhood suffocating; whenever she drifted into herself, her child seemed to sense that and want attention. She did not feel in control of her body, attributing this to the way in which, during pregnancy, a woman is

¹¹ Lidia Vianu, *Sometimes Autobiography Is Not True Enough* (2006) Available at: http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/selima_hill.htm (Accessed: 27 October 2009)

¹² Selima Hill postal interview, p. 270.

judged in terms of how she is treating her body and the “great deal of medical intrusion”¹³ she must endure. It was only when writing that Rich felt she had her own space to be “no one’s mother,”¹⁴ offering some respite from the pressures of a society which in her experience reduced women to “either a brood animal or an old maid/dyke.”¹⁵ Rich believes that this oppression of the female body equals the oppression of the female mind and the way in which the role of the mother is mythologised within society is an unrealistic ideal.

Moyra Davey’s *The Mother Reader*¹⁶ is a more recent attempt to highlight how creative women have struggled with the notion of mother as selfless and serene caregiver. Davey’s motivation was based on there being relatively little published material on the inner discourse of the mother and she wanted to show a side to pregnancy and motherhood that is rarely commented upon, gathering together stories, essays and memoirs telling first hand of mothers’ experiences. While one contributor saw an advantage for the mother as artist, her role placing her in “immediate and inescapable contact with sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption,¹⁷” the majority spoke of an overwhelming tension resulting from this dual role. Many agreed that a great deal of guilt surrounded the tension between the mother’s creative self and the child’s needs; for one writer: “calculated coldness is the best mood”¹⁸ for writing. Lessing describes feeling “desperate, trapped, but behaving beautifully, doing everything I should, though I was exhausted because of the child.”¹⁹ On the birth of her son, Sylvia Plath commented “I felt no surge of love. I wasn’t sure I liked him.”²⁰ These sources suggest intense pangs of guilt over not being a good enough mother, and the burden of loneliness in parenting. Such feeling may incite powerless-feeling women to use motherhood as a channel for their frustrations, seen in a baby being deliberately left to cry or a child “dragged by the arm across the room to be washed, the child cajoled, bullied, and bribed into taking “one more bite” of a detested food.”²¹ Yet for the baby who

¹³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), p. 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Moyra Davey, *The Mother Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

gains “her first sense of her own existence from the mother’s responsive gestures and expressions”²² this intimate relationship has huge implications for its later life and – it will be shown – for its emerging gendered identity. The ‘bullying’ described here characterises mother-daughter relationships in Hill’s poetry: In ‘We’re Here to Look Our Best’ taken from *Red Roses*:

We’re here to look our best *and we do*.
We look our best even though it hurts.
It hurts so much it makes our hair fall out!
We shake with rage,
we grip the bars of buggies
and grip the tiny shoulders of thin children
we button up ferociously in coats.
Motherhood itself is like a coat!
Mothers have to wear them all the time,
even here, along this burning bench
that echoes with interminable sobbing.²³

This poem highlights the intense pressure the protagonist feels as a mother, to hold everything together; mothers must look attractive and behave correctly at all times. Obeying these unreasonable demands takes its toll, causing physical pain and even alopecia, thus making them appear more unattractive, implying that the more they try, the more they fail in their task. The mothers take their frustration out on their weak, defenceless children, blaming them for the misery in their lives. The poem shows feelings of resentment and anger beneath the veneer of a figure that by societal standards should typically be gentle and caring. Like a mask, coats are used to assume an identity of the ‘perfect’ mother and conceal the reality beneath, linking to the function of dresses in Hill’s work. That the women are required to wear coats all the times connotes a punishment; in veering from being aggressive adults to sobbing children, they are caught between how they feel and how they are expected to behave with nowhere to go. The ‘bars of buggies’ evoke the bars of a prison cell that the women grip and look out from helplessly. Finally, the ‘burning bench’ evokes Hill’s metaphor of fire to represent emotional damage inflicted by others or on oneself.

²² Ibid., p. 94.

²³ Selima Hill, *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 35.

Hill's depictions of the mother and child relationship, the maternal body and the artist as mother can all be linked to theories of shame and embarrassment – emotions which ultimately contribute to shaping gender. Hill's poetry offers some alternative viewpoints of women as mothers to those traditionally considered as acceptable in Western society and as portrayed in popular culture. She shows that multiple attitudes can exist within the same person, at times contradictory, demonstrating the complicated nature of the role of mother and the mother-daughter relationship.

Hill's early poems on mothers are noticeably different in style to later works.²⁴ 'Below Hekla' is taken from her debut collection and describes a young woman who has travelled to look after a large camp of children – possibly orphans. The protagonist's mothering instincts appear natural and simple: "I am twenty-five mothers. | I lead my children in a line."²⁵ She performs chores such as washing "the pearly plates under the tap."²⁶ A subtle suggestion of patriarchal control enters the scene: "the father watches me | from his dark door."²⁷ Hill's poems from this time are often describe teenage struggles: 'Dewpond and Black Drainpipes' looks at a girl's difficult relationship with her mother who has sent her on an "Archaeology Week" to distract her from bad behaviour. The plan backfires however as the protagonist who is "too shy to go to the pub"²⁸ at first, ends up meeting and falling in love with a boy. The poem ends on a dark note: "later, my mother blamed herself | for what happened. *The Romans* | *didn't even interest her*, she said."²⁹ The reader is left with the unsettling feeling of not knowing if this is a trivial incident to which the mother has overreacted or a serious incident which was glossed over. However, this reflects Hill's strategy as a writer, which is to withhold narrative resolution in order to unsettle and defamiliarise events.

There are some rare tender depictions of this relationship as in 'The Flowers' when a mother marvels at her daughter's capacity for acceptance as they tend her grandfather's

²⁴ This may be due to her growing confidence as a writer, which she explained during the Exeter interview, connecting with other female writers or due to feeling more able to 'be herself' after the death of her parents.

²⁵ Selima Hill, *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

grave. The daughter is efficient and matter-of-fact in clearing a space, scraping “the moss from the stone, | so you could see whose grave | she had been caring for.”³⁰ As they leave, the speaker finds it hard “not knowing how to leave him | how to say goodbye”³¹ perhaps because this is her own father. Her daughter’s simple words seem to strike a chord however: “*come on, | my daughter said, It’s finished now.*”³² They leave together down a lane on their bicycles “moving apart | and coming together again, | in and out of ruts”³³ symbolic of life and their relationship with its ups and downs.

While writers such as Angela Carter may subvert gender norms through playfully parodying female figures, Hill’s characters repeatedly show that in everyday situations, women attempt to mimic the expectations of the female gender but give themselves away. In Hill’s sequence ‘Chicken Feathers’ the protagonist’s mother behaves in the maternal fashion which is expected of her: “she comes to collect me from school | on time, silent”³⁴ and having cooked, “she passes me my creamy bowl.”³⁵ However Hill reveals the truth behind this façade with alarming subtlety, the mother’s eyes are like “distant stars”³⁶ and her “hands are cold as roots.”³⁷ The mother is not invested in playing this role; her mind is elsewhere and her body appears to reject the role too, betraying these feelings. Later in the sequence the protagonist coolly observes her mother’s response to her husband’s (and the protagonist’s father’s) death: “it wasn’t grief. | *Come and sit down* she said, | *And have your tea*”³⁸ cementing the image of her mother as emotionally vacant, determined to go through the motions to avoid intimacy. This behaviour reflects the difficulty of intimacy which may not come naturally to those who have been raised in a similar environment. That night the daughter kisses her mother “for the first time that I can remember; | though I must have kissed her before, | as all daughters kiss their mothers.”³⁹ This establishes a ‘norm’ for

³⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

³¹ Ibid., p. 39.

³² Ibid., p. 39.

³³ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

mother-daughter relationships in Hill's work and finds this particular one to be lacking, evoking sadness in the reader that this affection is such a rare occurrence.

The sequence ends, with a sense of completeness, with the death of the mother. As the protagonist kneels at her grave she begins to feel that they may understand each other at last and when the protagonist needs some consolation she decides to picture her mother standing on a hill in the sunlight:

lifting her hand to wave to me;
or is she brushing away the feathers
that drift like dreams into her hair
and tickle her cheek, till she smiles.⁴⁰

The protagonist is comforted to know that her mother is content and at rest but even in this idealised image of her making, she still senses that her mother will always be in her own world and inaccessible to her.

In Hill's second collection *My Darling Camel* we are introduced to the image of the burnt baby for the first time. In 'The Sea-Shore House' the female speaker shies away from connecting emotionally with her mother whose attempts are received as physical violence:

[my body] begging, begging to be left untouched
because she's bruising me:
may all her slow attempts
at getting close to me
fly off into the sound of waves
like birds with rock-grey wings!⁴¹

The speaker is intensely uncomfortable with her mother's attempts at intimacy. The reason why she rejects and wishes to obliterate her mother's advances is uncovered in the third stanza, which refers an incident where she was burnt for which she blames her mother:

I wear a scarf myself sometimes, I know,
to hide the scar
my mother made
I do not want to show:
my mother is afraid of love
and I, her silver-skinned

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴¹ Selima Hill, *My Darling Camel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p. 29.

burnt only daughter –
tissue-head, peculiar, queen of pain.⁴²

The title in the last line serves to exacerbate and draw attention to the shame that the speaker experiences regarding her appearance. The physical scar comes to represent the mother-daughter relationship and the silent violence they inflict on one another. That her mother is 'afraid of love' is a key statement, demonstrating the difficulty of intimacy and addressing the shame that mothers in particular may experience, if maternal feelings do not come naturally. The final stanza reveals an increasingly complex aspect to their relationship and suffering as the speaker admits: "I cry for kisses like she cries for shame."⁴³ They have reached an impasse where both crave intimacy but are unable to overcome the obstacles of shame and guilt.

In Hill's third collection *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness*⁴⁴ – including a sequence of long free verse poems documenting the experiences of a new mother – she becomes more exploratory in her representations of attitudes to pregnancy and mothering, effectively defamiliarising conventional motherhood. The protagonist's pregnant state fills her with guilt, as if it is something to be ashamed of and regret regarding her loss of sexual agency: "being pregnant makes me feel dishonest. | Now I sleep with foreign men in dreams."⁴⁵ Chapter 2 'Sons' deals with the aftermath of the birth as she tries to calm her resulting worries: "it's silly to be frightened,"⁴⁶ but her tone is robotic in her accepting a role that does not appear to come naturally: "I am the Mother from the Baby Ward."⁴⁷ Her body is hostile and works against her: "my breasts are rocks of milk. | They found the razor."⁴⁸ She focuses on pain and the unfamiliarity of her body rather than any joy over the birth of a baby. The razor introduces thoughts of violence and possibly self-harm into a scene which one might expect to be gentle and loving. The protagonist feels disconnected from herself and the baby: "he's screaming for the breast from which he's torn,"⁴⁹ such expressions

⁴² Ibid., p. 29.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁴ Selima Hill, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989)

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

demonstrating the societal pressure for intimacy at all times and how the baby's parting from his mother's body is equated with violent rejection. Any affinity the protagonist feels with other mothers is the stark realisation that they are a selfless, faceless mass, disregarding their own feelings and serving others: "we never feel cold. | We are the Mothers."⁵⁰

The tensions that exist for women who become mothers in contemporary society are evident in Hill's poems where many of her characters experience the fear of failing to come across as a good woman and a good mother (the two are often synonymous) according to social standards. In *The Accumulation* the protagonist's desperate attempts to maintain an appearance of cohesive, acceptable femininity are exposed as fraudulent under the suspicious and undermining gaze of the nurses: "the sister says I don't look like a mother."⁵¹ Her mental struggle to handle her baby manifests in him often physically slipping away from her: "he fell out of his angulated buggy" and "he keeps on falling off the bed;"⁵² incidents which mothers are often ashamed to admit to. Drawing on Dowrick's arguments in *Intimacy and Solitude*,⁵³ this tension stems from struggling to balance tuning into the child's every need and satisfying overbearing social expectations regarding acceptable levels of intimacy. This requires Hill's protagonist to submit bodily and mentally, potentially risking who she believes herself to be, beyond and before becoming a mother. The loss of self and loss of identity that can occur for a new mother is given a voice in Hill's poems.

The protagonist in *The Accumulation* associates her sexual organs and capacity to give birth with violence and rejection: "my uterus felt like a sunlit knife"⁵⁴ as well as subverting stereotypical descriptions of a woman's body as soft or curvy. In a key statement, she observes how womanhood and motherhood seem intertwined: "whenever a child is born, a woman is wasted. | We do not quite belong to ourselves."⁵⁵ It is as if there is a clear choice for women to make and they cannot have a productive, creative, self-fulfilling life *and* have a baby. However, Hill deliberately contradicts the viability of the latter option with her

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵² Ibid., p. 18.

⁵³ Stephanie Dowrick, *Intimacy and Solitude* (London: The Women's Press, 1995)

⁵⁴ *The Accumulation* p. 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

accounts of troubled mother-daughter relationships, demonstrating the narrow construction of femininity. Mothers in Hill will always be answerable to someone else. The protagonist concludes (echoing some of the writers in *The Mother Reader*): “the writer’s instinct is essentially heartless.”⁵⁶ The protagonist’s indifferent tone in the line “the wa-wa babies burst into floods of tears”⁵⁷ shows that in order to maintain boundaries she must sometimes ignore the pleas of the baby and be indifferent to its needs. Hill’s unflinching descriptions of the maternal body link to the treatment of the body in Victorian literature, where body parts such as hands, feet and curls came to represent the unnameable whole.⁵⁸ Hill’s work features parts of the body throughout such as breasts, uterus and vagina in addition to female conditions such as pregnancy, menstruation or miscarriage. Hill represents the anxiety attached to these parts as well as feelings of disconnection. In naming the parts that are sexualised and embarrassing, Hill paints a more complex picture of a woman’s body.

In Hill’s poetry, the mother-daughter relationship becomes more problematic as the child grows and becomes aware of its own sense of shame and guilt which is informed by and interacts with the mother’s sense of shame and guilt. As Tangney and Dearing⁵⁹ maintain, feelings of guilt can be healthy if they allow an individual to undergo a “critical evaluation of the self”⁶⁰ enabling them to make positive changes to their behaviour. However, shame – the more ubiquitous emotion in Hill’s poems on mothers and children – is a destructive and silent force within intimate relationships, where protagonists resort to shame based anger in order to preserve their self esteem and fragile gender identities.

Traditionally, a mother’s influence is restricted to the home and her children. A number of Hill’s poems look at the tension that arises when a female protagonist rebels against a mother’s control and challenges the vision her mother has for her as a submissive, feminine woman. The poem ‘I Want to Run Away’ in *A Little Book of Meat*⁶¹ addresses a daughter

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁸ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

⁵⁹ J.P. Tangney and R.L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004)

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

⁶¹ Selima Hill, *A Little Book of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993)

who, aware of her mother's disapproval, wishes to run away to the woods with her "disfigured face exposed."⁶² There is a great deal of shame in this statement; paradoxically it is only through running away or hiding that she can truly be exposed as herself, demonstrating a complex relationship to identity. Chillingly, the protagonist states that if a search party were sent to find her, her mother would tell them that her daughter is "armed, and to shoot."⁶³ The protagonist recalls a story in which a mother kept her daughter imprisoned, and proceeds to mock how other girls submit to their mothers: "*Mother, | do it to me please. Mother, do it to me.*"⁶⁴ There is a possible sexual undercurrent to these lines; incest is a recurring metaphor in Hill's work for difficulties in giving and receiving intimacy within the family (this is expanded on later). The protagonist could also be viewed as pleading with her own mother in these lines, reflecting the complex nature of abuse in Hill's poetry in which the victim appears to be complicit. It becomes clear that the source of tension between these characters arises from the mother's attempts to enforce, and her daughter's rejection of, a rigid gender role. Despite the protagonist's defiance, failing to conform fills her with shame, especially when in order to gain any approval from her mother, she must act "dumb:" "the more half-witted I am, | the more she likes it."⁶⁵ The poem ends bitterly as the protagonist appears to give in to an inevitable relationship dynamic motivated by the silent violence of shame: "*stuff me under the floorboards. Crack my knees. | And if I am not to your liking, | shoot me please.*"⁶⁶ The hyperbolic language could also be read as irony; Hill often uses exaggeration in order to bring unspoken emotions to light and open them up for scrutiny. It also forces the reader to occupy a position in relation to the mother or daughter with the potential for self-discovery.

Maternal figures are also defamiliarised in 'The Fact Is That's It's Everywhere' taken from *Red Roses* where mothers ruthlessly control expressions of sexuality. Desire is described as "an orange plain | where slender horses vanish in the heat"⁶⁷ and the screams of fallen riders "[vibrate] on the edge of pain and pleasure."⁶⁸ This heady scene signals both danger

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ *Red Roses*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

and excitement, something to be avoided at all costs: “we learn how not to move and not to breathe.”⁶⁹ The body must rigidly control itself for fear of implied repercussions: “we learn to nip the pleasure in its bud | like savage mothers with enormous teeth,”⁷⁰ suggesting a violent end to any stirrings of desire, perhaps even castration. Mothers are not gentle and submissive but aggressively enforcing behaviour deemed to be gender appropriate. However, the poem’s title would suggest that any attempts to thwart expressions of desire are futile as it is “everywhere like gas.”⁷¹ Any attempt to avoid it, like holding one’s breath, would result in death, thus highlighting the complex and contradictory nature of occupying a strict gendered position.

Hill’s 2008 collection *The Hat* brings many of these themes together, exploring the subject of mothers in more depth. Femininity and maternity continue to be conflicted and defamiliarised, for example in ‘Violence’ there are mothers “whose stiff nipples| ache for mouths,| and cast around for them violently.”⁷² This image is not of the traditionally nurturing mother but someone panicked and desperate, drawing attention to the notion that behind this gentle stereotype are uncomfortable and frightening feelings, and a fear of being viewed as cold and heartless if one fails to fully embody this role. This kind of smothering (mothering) has worrying implications for the child whom the woman is desperate to cling on to, seemingly at whatever cost, in order for her to project a socially correct image. The anxiety with which some mothers attempt to control their daughters is seen in ‘The Darkness of Her Meekness’:

She rages in the darkness of the meekness
in which they have installed her as in stalls
while in the lounge her mother and her sisters
further their spectacular depressions.⁷³

Here the implication is that a mother’s emotions are powerfully felt by her children (as discussed in *Why Love Matters*.⁷⁴) It also appears that only the women in this family are depressed (men are not mentioned), and it is the mother’s responsibility to prepare her

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷² *The Hat*, p. 44.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

daughters for a life as submissive, miserable women without offering an alternative. Being in 'stalls' also links back to Rich's remarks about the woman as brood animal. In 'The Sort of Neck People Want to Strangle' the speaker asks the mother about her daughter's "snowy neck"⁷⁵ (evoking purity and beauty) and whether she can see that it is "the sort of neck people want to strangle"⁷⁶ to which the mother unnervingly replies "yes, she can."⁷⁷ The threat that the mother poses to her daughter – albeit passively – may be the manifestation of jealousy or irritation over her lost youth, resentment over having had a child which has ruined her life, her daughter's insubordinate ways or all of these reasons. In the poem 'Her Wheezy Mother' the daughter's age is not disclosed but we are told that her mother is old and sick which gives rise to the unsettling feeling that she is an adult still being dressed by her mother. She "dresses her in dresses | made of thistles, artichokes and porcupines"⁷⁸; the reference to these materials suggests a contraption of torture. They represent a metaphor for how the mother ensures her daughter is 'fitted' for femininity, bound into womanhood, constrained and forced into a way of being for which suffering is necessary. In Hill, to be dressed by another is to have their views regarding gender identity thrust upon you.

In 'Bicycle' the protagonist describes being pressured by her mother to settle down with a man she can depend on: "her mother's found her someone she can *lean on* – | as if she were a bicycle!"⁷⁹ This image reinforces the notion of submissive femininity. Being depicted as a mute, inanimate object, in this case, something which can be ridden, makes her inherently submissive. The protagonist imagines being a "sparkly married bicycle | which wouldn't dream of being mainly throat; | which wouldn't dream of being eased open."⁸⁰ This takes the objectification of women's bodies one stage further; that she 'wouldn't dream' of such acts is irrelevant as as an inanimate object she is unable to voice her objections. The protagonist utterly rejects this notion of womanhood, suffering for the good of others and burying her own needs: "how dare she!"⁸¹

⁷⁵ *The Hat*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The 2009 collection *Fruitcake*⁸² is comprised of four sequences of poems looking at motherhood and extends Hill's exploration of this subject. The title raises some interesting ideas, echoing Alexander Portnoy's woes regarding his fiercely matriarchal family in *Portnoy's Complaint*:

[of his mother] 'Alex' you say to me all dressed up in my clip-on tie and my two-tone 'loafer' jacket, 'the way you cut your meat! The way you ate that baked potato without spilling! I could kiss you, I never saw such a little gentleman with his napkin in his little lap like that.' Fruitcake, Mother. Little fruitcake is what you saw – exactly what the training programme was designed to produce.⁸³

Germaine Greer argues that this example of male social conditioning within a Jewish family throws light on the construction of female identities more generally: "what happens to the Jewish boy who never manages to escape the tyranny of his mother is exactly what happens to every little girl whose upbringing is 'normal'. She is a female faggot."⁸⁴ Throughout Hill's work, daughters are dressed up, cajoled, nagged, intentionally embarrassed and literally or fugitively beaten into shape along narrow gendered lines. The first sequence in *Fruitcake*, 'Bougainvillea' explores love and having a mother. It revisits the image of the burnt baby and the barrier this creates both physically and emotionally between mother and child. In the first six poems we see the baby hospitalised for burns after an accident. The mother is notably absent at this time and the baby has been left to the mercy of the flies attracted to her wounds in 'For Ever': "they'll never get enough of me; | they whisper| they want my wounds | to weep for them for ever!"⁸⁵ When the mother does appear, she is on the periphery of her child's life:

I watch the distant outline
of my mother

who likes to keep herself
to herself.⁸⁶

The mother appears, understandably, to be in denial over both the existence of the child and the accident which appears to have taken place; the fly net covering the cot reinforces

⁸² Selima Hill, *Fruitcake* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2009)

⁸³ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 125.

⁸⁴ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 86.

⁸⁵ *Fruitcake*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the emotional distance between them. However, this minimal protection cannot fend off the silent violence inflicted by mother on daughter through emotional and physical rejection:

In my mother's blouse
my mother's breasts,

as cold as stone,
withhold my warm milk.⁸⁷

Again, the failure to breastfeed is equated with an unwillingness to bond with and nurture the baby along with a resistance to corporeal destiny. The baby's keen awareness of the body and the milk she has laid claim to provokes the mother's fears of losing her identity and control over her body. These thoughts are echoed in *Intimacy and Solitude* in which Dowrick cites a case study regarding a new mother who describes her hatred of breastfeeding as it made her feel like a cow: "terrified of their vacuity, their passivity."⁸⁸ Another mother explains how her labour was so painful that she was left with a lingering hatred for her baby who she would leave to cry at the bottom of a large garden. Dowrick attributes this reaction to the dependent baby who craves intimacy in her abandoned state and the mother for whom intimacy amounts to a frightening loss of self. This scenario rings true in Hill's poem 'Pram' in which the baby is now home from hospital and despite the burns: "[her mother] rolls me in a blanket| like a thumb| and props me in a pram| in the sun."⁸⁹ The mother does the bare minimum to protect the child, placing her out of sight, as if also to keep her out of mind. However, by placing her in the sun she magnifies the injured child's discomfort. At times this behaviour seems to stem from a struggle to cope rather than deliberate cruelty, producing feelings of shame and guilt over being unable to uphold the impossibly high standards expected of mothers. In 'Mole':

The panic-stricken mole
with hands like wood

who seems to be confused
by the light

that clatters through the plastic blinds

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁸ *Intimacy and Solitude*, p. 146.

⁸⁹ *Fruitcake*, p. 21.

like mussel shells

is actually
my panic-stricken mother!⁹⁰

The image of the mole in the light reflects how ill-equipped this new mother is: her clumsy ‘hands like wood’ makes intimacy, touch and tenderness difficult. As the protagonist grows older, she becomes increasingly aware of her mother’s neurotic temperament and begins to resent her for it:

The little things about our life together
make me feel sick – for example,

the way my mother likes to lay the table
(but nobody must ever know that).⁹¹

Any sympathy the daughter might have felt (retrospectively) for her mother’s panicked state, pales in response to her repeated neglect. However, she does experience shame as a result of confessing these feelings and conceals her admission, both in parenthesis and by swearing the reader to secrecy. In ‘Clock’ “my mother, | is as deaf as the clock| above the bed |of someone who is screaming,”⁹² suggesting that her mother still cannot connect with her growing daughter and continues to be emotionally unavailable, her silence speaking volumes. ‘Bedtime’ demonstrates how debilitating a fear of intimacy can be:

That my mother
can be loved

frightens me;
luckily

it frightens her too.⁹³

Within a society that values loving and nurturing women, such behaviour leads to loathing and mistrust. The mother’s shame and guilt regarding her lack of maternal instinct manifests itself in a fear of receiving intimate contact as well as giving it, a fear which she has passed on to her daughter who expresses relief (‘luckily’) that they can maintain their emotional

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁹² Ibid., p. 50.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 52.

distance. However, given the nature of their relationship and the space they share in living together, avoiding proximity is impossible; the two are bound together in a miserable situation by an unbreakable bond:

We're standing
back to back in the garden

like two penned ewes
who haven't got a flock.⁹⁴

The distance between them is compounded by their distance from everyone else as they are isolated and alienated by virtue of their emotional frigidity. As the speaker reaches adolescence, her mother's struggle to contain her and maintain a distance between them increases:

I used to be the size of a chicken
she used to feed with mashed scrambled egg

but now I am the size of a woman
and march about on thick hairy legs.⁹⁵

The daughter appears enormous and out of control, ready to crush her mother who is more frightened of her now than when she was a baby. 'Fresh Meat' demonstrates how the mother is also just as unprepared:

My mother
is afraid of everything

and when she is afraid of things
she hums

and when she hums
I grow enormous breasts

that make her bedroom
smell of fresh meat.⁹⁶

The speaker's matter-of-fact tone is also sinister and surreal, demonstrating intolerance and a lack of sympathy in relation to her mother's fears. The daughter's physical development alone prevents her mother from hiding in a comfort zone which comprises humming and

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

ignoring her. These lines herald the onset of puberty as a frightening and unstoppable force, propelling the speaker into the world of women, a place which horrifies and intimidates her mother. In 'Pleasure' her mother will not stop crying "as if it were her only real pleasure."⁹⁷ Without the will or strength to support her daughter, she also rejects thoughts of being comforted by her daughter, responding with implied violence: "her handkerchiefs | harden like fins."⁹⁸ The sequence ends with 'Her Hands Against Her Ears' in which the depth of the mother's isolation and rejection of her child is revealed:

How wrong I was
to think I could just stand there

and scream and shout
as loudly as I could –

I screamed and shouted at her till she died,
Her hands against her ears. End of story.⁹⁹

These unflinching lines show that until the very end, the protagonist is unable to get through to her mother or connect emotionally. The protagonist appears to cite her own behaviour as a contributing factor in the death and although her tone is apathetic 'End of story', her screaming and shouting could, strangely, be seen as an act of love. In Sue Gerhardt's terms, the speaker's difficulty in sympathising with her mother perhaps stemmed from never having been shown love herself, presumably reflecting her mother's own fate. In these poems Hill shows a side to motherhood that is rarely discussed or written about: the shame and difficulty mothers experience when they are unable to fully embody to the role. They also demonstrate how a baby's early sense of rejection can have long lasting effects as the child grows, especially in terms of their emerging gender identity.

The next sequence of poems in *Fruitcake* is 'Nylon' in which the protagonist is sent to live with her aunts because of the way she treats her mother:

they say I'm sick
but, sick or not, they say

the way I treat my mother's

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

inexcusable;

they say she's fine
but she's *not!*¹⁰⁰

Evoking the powerlessness of childhood, this sequence documents the suffering of the female protagonist on the receiving end of adults who use, reject and shame her. She moves to live 'in the South' with her Aunt Bobby who initially fills the protagonist's sad life with colour:

she wears
a cockatoo-print housecoat

and peep-toe mules
that smell of baby powder

and dances wild dances
on hot sand

with friends who drink like fish
and live on boats,

their skin brown and thick
as buccaneers;

well greased by Cyclax,
slapped on every night

in bedrooms overrun
by bouncy poodles¹⁰¹

This exciting, spontaneous lifestyle is a stark contrast to what the protagonist is used to. She revels in Bobby's attitude to sadness – giving her "sugar necklaces | to suck on"¹⁰² – and starts to think of herself less as "the girl | who makes her mother cry."¹⁰³ As a replacement mother figure, the protagonist appears eager to impress her Aunt and to be liked by her. In 'Small Children' the protagonist states that Bobby "doesn't like small children | one bit"¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

but believes she must like her “and actually she *does!* | it’s amazing!”¹⁰⁵ They spend their time together sunbathing with dogs and enjoying a life without rules. However, the protagonist soon learns that Bobby answers to no one. Not being a mother, the implication is that she need only selfishly please herself, despite the criticism of her friends:

They say
you can’t just leave her

but she can!
She leaves me in a boat

with a poodle
who spends the day

pretending he’s a lamb.¹⁰⁶

That Bobby can abandon her so thoughtlessly suggests that the protagonist exists as a fleeting novelty to Bobby and that there is no real maternal bond to be found. The way in which Bobby’s friends appear to pity the protagonist adds to her feelings of shame and insignificance. While the protagonist’s presence clearly had a huge impact on her own mother’s life, she is of no obvious consequence to Bobby’s. This isolating experience makes the speaker think of her mother whom she was initially pleased to leave behind. In ‘Dawn’ she is

dreaming of a woman
like my mother

who keeps on falling,
getting up and falling.¹⁰⁷

The new environment may have provided the protagonist with a fresh outlook, recognising for the first time how vulnerable her mother is and how she struggles to keep going. Despite the physical and emotional distance, there is evidence of a bond between them as the mother appears to her daughter (albeit in dreams) when she is feeling alone. In ‘Thinking About My Mother’ the speaker imagines her lying in bed “hour after hour” in the empty ward with no one to talk to: “we do not know | if she’s awake or dreaming; | and, if she’s

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

dreaming, | if she dreams of me.”¹⁰⁸ It is not clear why her mother has been hospitalised but the only referenced turmoil in her life is the difficulties with her daughter, offering another perspective on the complex identity of mothers.

The protagonist appears depressed and troubled during her stay with Bobby – hiding in the airing cupboard and crying herself to sleep – her Aunt “loves to do | what she loves to do | and what she doesn’t love | she doesn’t do!”¹⁰⁹ She has little patience with her niece and no interest in cheering her up, telling her “unhappiness | is just a waste of tissue-paper.”¹¹⁰ Her harsh and uncaring attitude defamiliarises conventional notions of femininity. She leaves her niece in a room surrounded by “a corps of tissue-paper | ballerinas,”¹¹¹ an image which suggests a bleak and devastated childhood with limited defences and a possible pun on ‘corpse’. The exciting and colourful house becomes as lonely as the home the protagonist used to share with her mother; a woman who would try to find “the loneliest place on earth.”¹¹² Hill presents two alternative modes of femininity here, both flawed. Bobby plays into the stereotype of the single, childless woman as vain and selfish, while the protagonist’s mother’s failure to cope with her daughter renders her defective.

The catalyst is unclear but the protagonist is required to move away once again, this time to live with her Aunts in ‘the North’, coinciding with Bobby’s waning interest in her. Bobby’s indulgent lifestyle continues regardless, as she and a friend “snug in tartan trews, | their lips as red as blood, | are going shopping”¹¹³ while her niece feels rejected twice over, the lipstick shade suggestive of silent violence. The sequence ends with the protagonist heading North on the train, destined for another form of emotional rejection, this time from her “cruel northern aunts” who represent another stereotype of cold and bitter spinsters:

too dark and cold for sweethearts,

inhabited by nothing
but the wind,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 137.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 138.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 139.

and, bent against the wind,
my northern aunts

who live on lumps of root
and boiled children.¹¹⁴

The outlook is gloomy for the protagonist who, in her short life has been unable to find a loving, nurturing presence. In three very different situations, we are presented with apparently uncaring women who have denied her emotions and invalidated her sense of self. Hill leaves us with a sense of the precarious task of attempting to situate oneself within a feminine identity which is so closely bound up in ideas of maternity; she captures something of the private, shameful thoughts of many who wonder if they too represent one of the repellent roles presented here.

Fruitcake's third sequence of poems 'Bunker Sacks' deals with a new protagonist and examines the shock of becoming a young mother who eventually kills her baby. This is the ultimate taboo and perhaps most extreme form of defamiliarisation in Hill's work on mothers. The protagonist is in denial over the birth and the sudden changes to her life, particularly her job and the associated freedom:

Mother's made a terrible mistake!
Let's hope this baby grows up nice and fast!
She wants – *she needs* – to get back to that office.
She needs her tidy desk and all her things¹¹⁵

Throughout the sequence, the child is referred to as 'it' or 'the baby' and we are unaware of its name or gender. The baby's presence irritates its mother as it spends "all day underneath one's feet, | rolling around on the floor dribbling and widdling."¹¹⁶ The protagonist is more preoccupied with her own physical suffering caused by the birth of the child: "busy in the scullery | holding ice against her rock-hard breasts."¹¹⁷ She seems to find the baby's natural joy to be deliberately malicious: "its mother's pain? Hilarious! hilarious!"¹¹⁸ The mother

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 160.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

expects adult emotion and understanding from the baby and seems annoyed and incredulous at its lack of competence:

First of all it needs to understand
that all it does is get in people's way
and nothing it can do will change a thing
and nobody will ever be its friend.¹¹⁹

Hill's defamiliarisation of conventional maternity is particularly effective here. Elsewhere in her work, mothers inflict emotional violence on their children through silence and omission. The mother in 'Bunker Sacks' is forthright in her rejection and hatred for her baby, committing deliberate acts of violence and neglect. Her attitude of indifference continues: "it's easy to abandon small children | that seem to be already bald and dead."¹²⁰ These lines become a chilling prediction of the child's future, illustrating the extent to which the protagonist has dehumanised her child; unnervingly, the helpless and dependant baby cannot object or convince her otherwise. When it cries there is no sympathy: "But no one comes. | What a shame! Everyone is sick!"¹²¹ As the baby learns to walk – often a moment for parental pride – it is bitterly ridiculed for trying: "off it wobbles, scraping its fat knees... | You're going to have to learn to *get up*, Baby!"¹²²

The protagonist begins to severely neglect her baby, leaving it in the boiling hot sun and the snow, leaving it to cry for hours, echoing the influence of intimacy and abandonment in the development of a child's sense of self (and shame). She also physically abuses the baby and is scornful of outside criticism:

Does this woman know or doesn't she
the simple word, the simple concept, *discipline*?
Whipping, thumping, whacking? Can't she see
you owe it to a baby! After all,
it's better to be dead than growing up whingeing.¹²³

These harrowing images build to the eventual death of the baby at the hands of its mother who gives herself permission to do so after deciding "if she wants to sin she can sin."¹²⁴ Her

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 165.

¹²² Ibid., p. 168.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 171.

initial response is to feel peaceful, however after spending the duration of the baby's short life resenting it, she experiences a pang of guilt before reverting to mocking it:

Before it died,
she heard the baby speak!
(although of course she couldn't have – I mean
that baby never learnt to say anything!)¹²⁵

She even tells the 'little body' that she will come back to bury it properly but never does. Shame and guilt begin to wear away her sanity and she is left feeling around her home at night for something warm "could someone be alive? I don't think so!"¹²⁶ The bunker sacks on which she sleeps "darken with black tears,"¹²⁷ the colour subtly suggesting sin. The final few pages of the sequence explore possible reasons for the protagonist's behaviour with repeated references to wearing dresses, including: "because they told her everyone would love her | she put it on – but nobody did love her!"¹²⁸ and the poem '63':

*Wear this dress, they said,
and we will love you,
this scratchy and asphyxiating dress.
Wear it, wear it, wear it, so she wore it.
They turned towards her but forgot her name.*¹²⁹

Again, Hill uses dresses as a metaphor for the way in which individuals assume or perform a gender role. Echoing Germaine Greer's remarks on the 'female fag', dresses for Hill could be viewed as a form of transvestism for her female characters. The fact that these characters are dressed by others (mothers, the lodger in *Bunny*) or forced into dresses "*wear it, wear it*" highlights how adopting traditional feminine roles is fraught with coercion. Moreover, wearing dresses in Hill's poetry is an unpleasant experience as they are often made from uncomfortable and abhorrent materials. For all the effort the protagonist in 'Bunker Sacks' channels into gaining approval through rigid adherence to gender norms, she is unloved and forgotten. Her frustration and mental instability may arise from struggling to live up to impossibly high societal standards and to still be considered a failure as a woman. Towards

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 175.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 177.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 182.

the end of the sequence, the protagonist suffers a graphic and unusual death, an implied punishment for her treatment of her child:

A lorryload of toddlers in gold trainers
is tethering her corpse to a tree.
Her yellow dress is weighed down by mud;
the yellow grass is weighed down by shit.
Like every mother that has ever lived,
she wants to look her best at all times!
If she's got to be a corpse, she begs them,
let her be a corpse dressed in pink¹³⁰

The brutal death mirrors the level of dignity she afforded her own child and is aptly carried out by an army of toddlers, an act of revenge on bad mothers everywhere. Once again the protagonist is clothed in a dress which, more than ever, feels symbolic of failed femininity; the mud and shit add to her degradation. In this unnerving scene, Hill uses her familiar ironic tone to mock clichéd notions of femininity as obsessed with appearance and the colour pink, even in the darkly comic context of being murdered. Presumably the request to be dressed in pink took place before death, although this has been pointedly ignored as she is dressed in yellow (associated with cowardly behaviour, perhaps).

In conclusion, Hill's intimate portraits of women and motherhood reveal the complex nature of identity and femininity. She effectively defamiliarises conventional depictions of motherhood with her brutal, unsentimental images and situations. She also sets up an argument between the different kinds of femininity, for example the mother versus the fun, childless aunt, inviting the reader to identify with them. In her portrayal of mother-child relationships, Hill demonstrates that a mother is also a human being with conflicting and sometimes unspeakable thoughts, that there are aspects to the role that do not come naturally. This is especially important in a society where it is taboo to express such thoughts, to be seen as failing to be a good woman/mother (the two being so closely bound). In writing about a variety of women with different personalities and issues, Hill lifts away the two-dimensional clichés based on the belief that a 'good' mother experiences purely nurturing feelings and an absolute willingness to sacrifice herself for her child. Further, she

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

shows that women also play a part in perpetuating restrictive gender roles; their embarrassment to speak out against them, the guilt over having done so which may serve to drive them back into negative feminine performance, and finally, the destructive shame associated with such a capitulation which is passed on to future generations.

2. FATHERS

In addressing the portrayal of fathers in Hill's work, Coppelia Kahn's *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* is illuminating regarding parental roles and gender formation. She suggests that a traditional maternal role as primary carer means that children rely on mothers for survival and so she comes to shape their sense of self. While Hill has demonstrated mothers to be often wholly unreliable, it seems logical to ask what impact this dynamic may have on gender, the masculinity or femininity of the child. Based on the premise that gender is less of a biological fact and more a social product, something which is learned and perpetuated by culture, Kahn believes that the more present mother and more absent father help to perpetuate normative gender roles. In Hill's poetry, domestic scenes are dominated by mothers with very few references to fathers who appear pointedly absent; however both parents become forces in the formation of a child's gendered identity.

In my interview with Hill, she describes how as a child, her understanding of herself as female felt flawed and inadequate due to her father's response to her burn injuries. In a similar way to the paternal figures within her work, feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment arise from more covert parent-child communications. Hill explains:

My father was an old man. He was over sixty when I was born so that wasn't much help, I had a sense of being suppressed. But the violence in our family wasn't overt, it was aggressive silence, violent silence.¹³¹

In contrast to mothers, Hill's fathers are far less visible and less vocal. They do not terrorise their daughters with uncomfortable dresses or seek to pair them off into sexually exploitative marriages. An early poem 'A Girl Called Owen' looks at a father-daughter relationship which is fraught with difficulty because the father would have preferred to have had a son:

¹³¹ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 282.

they couldn't call me
Owen after all –
the brilliant young man
I should have been.¹³²

The child learns from an early age that her brilliance or worth is attached to her gender; being female carries a burden of shame as, by implication, she is not good enough. This feeling is intensified by an implied withdrawal of love on the father's part which is bestowed upon a fictitious and unattainable figure called 'Owen': "my father, who loved no one, | did love him."¹³³ There is no mention of how this information is communicated to the daughter; it is a palpable and silent force that serves to challenge and undermine femininity. The father's 'inability' to love recalls the un-maternal mothers in the last section; in this instance, Hill may be drawing on the social shaming surrounding male expressions of emotion which – in the context of the poetry – manifests in an apparent disinterest in and rejection of, the child.

'The Holiday-Makers' Daughter' echoes this atmosphere of disapproval. The poem describes a family holiday during which the female protagonist has argued with her parents: "she's in one of her moods again."¹³⁴ Leaving her alone as they go out for the day, the mother tries to calm the situation whereas the father is seemingly enraged to the point of silence: "it doesn't matter, her mother had said, | but her father was red as a beetroot."¹³⁵ However behind this petty disagreement lies the suggestion of sexual abuse, a recurring theme within Hill's work. The narrator describes a priest called Father John: "he was fat, and holding his hand | was like holding a helping of trifle,"¹³⁶ a man who hides pennies in his habit and asks "the girls to find them."¹³⁷ Whether this information is known to her parents is not clear but she appears to feel let down by her father especially: "I need a father, she concludes."¹³⁸ The lack of understanding or sympathy she experiences may increase her feelings of shame and lead her to conclude that she is somehow to blame for her abuse. The father's anger

¹³² *My Darling Camel*, p. 35.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

might also suggest that this is something the protagonist should accept, or at least not talk about, as female. Only when left alone can she let down her defences and “uncurl in her new-found solitude | like paper flowers from Japan.”¹³⁹ Flowers have special meaning in Japan and are often said to articulate what cannot be spoken, in this case reflecting the protagonist’s difficulty in communicating with her father. In general, fathers in Hill are emotionless and stern but there are some rare allusions to physical violence as in ‘Mother Stone’:

My father was a tall man who approved of beating,
but my mother, like a mother stone,
preferred us to be sitting in a small room
lined with damson-coloured velvet
thinking quietly to ourselves.¹⁴⁰

The way in which the speaker phrases her father’s preference suggests that it is less connected to specific behaviour which requires punishment and more a blanket endorsement of violence, an inescapable fact for his child which overpowers the wishes of all family members. Despite the gendered differences in these traditional parenting styles with the mother’s more passive appeal for absolute silence and obedience, both approaches have the potential to damage and to shape the child, physically and emotionally.

In Hill’s 2001 collection *Bunny* the father figure is significantly both absent and pervasive. The book is comprised of seventy-two short poems, often in un-rhymed couplets and the setting is a large house¹⁴¹ in London during the 1960s. The protagonist is a teenage girl and the short poems appear like snapshots of memories of disturbing events that have taken place. Her parents are mysteriously absent and so she is left to be cared for by her aunts and a predatory lodger. However ‘Shoes’ describes “a row of shoes, | a man in silk pyjamas” and “an absent father and the father’s house”¹⁴² indicating that the house belongs to the father and that his presence lingers in both objects and memories. That the protagonist goes on to be sexually abused by the male lodger feels like a greater betrayal by the father who would traditionally be expected to protect his daughter. His apparition seems to fill

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁴¹ In the book’s acknowledgements Hill states: “I would also like to thank the present occupier of the house where most of this story takes place for their kind response to a letter from a perfect stranger.”

¹⁴² Selima Hill, *Bunny* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), p. 9.

every part of the house as if he is always watching in the background. At times the father becomes deliberately blurred with the figure of the abusive lodger, suggesting incest. As we learn more about this father-daughter relationship it becomes apparent that it is steeped in shame and guilt, manifesting in the recurring image of the burnt baby as in one of the few longer poems, 'Prawns De Jo':

Because she was wrong,
because it was all her fault right from the beginning,
because she was ashamed of even thinking about it,
and should never have been his daughter in the first place;
because she was ugly
and he was magnificent
and she was the scum of the earth,
it must never be mentioned:
the unforgettable smell of the singeing baby¹⁴³

The memory of this traumatic event remains all the more powerful for the silence that surrounds it and the absence of the father who has failed to accept his daughter. The protagonist's physical appearance appears to be the cause of her rejection, implying that a 'good' daughter must be pretty above all else. She lives with the shame of her impaired femininity in the face of masculine dominance and the guilt of having apparently caused this situation. Further, the hyperbolic language used to describe both father and daughter demonstrates how their identities form in relation to each other; one's magnificence exaggerates the other's debasement and vice versa. As is often the case in Hill's poetry, smell is used to describe an atmosphere of loaded silence.

The protagonist's lack of emotional attachment to the adults in her life appears to trigger a number of mental health issues, including possible anorexia: "she feels so proud to be so under-nourished."¹⁴⁴ In my interview with Hill I asked her about the link between malnourishment and femininity in her work to which she replied that it was about "rejecting what's given to you and thereby establishing your own independence."¹⁴⁵ Food is one of the few things that the protagonist has control over but frequently this serves to highlight the many things she is deprived of and her complete loss of control:

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 281.

Her only comfort is the word *vanilla*.
She says it again and again till she falls asleep

She's the only child on earth
who's not allowed ice-cream.¹⁴⁶

The protagonist recalls a memory in which her father rejects her once again, despite her worrying appearance – she does not want “to feed the tiny face | entangled in her hair like a bat”¹⁴⁷ – he asks her to leave without offering sympathy or understanding. There is a suggestion that he disapproves of his daughter and is therefore ashamed of her: “[the doorway] she darkened once. It was her father’s doorway. | He told her she must *never do it again*.”¹⁴⁸ The father’s rejection of his daughter is so emphatic that she only turns to him once; the doorway becomes a metaphor for intimate relationships, of allowing another to cross your threshold and symbolic of the inaccessible father figures in Hill’s work. These figures emanate disapproval with their real and emotional absence and their silence speaks volumes in condemning behaviour that deviates from traditional notions of femininity or in rejecting the women in their lives altogether. At certain points throughout *Bunny* there is a deliberate blurring between the lodger and the father which can be traced back to the 1994 poem ‘My Life With Men’ from *Aeroplanes of the World*:

The first man I attracted
was my father,
who people said was young:
how young he is!
But actually he wasn’t. He was old.
I told my little friends he was the lodger.¹⁴⁹

The father is clearly identified in Hill as the first reference point for a child in terms of masculinity and more specifically for a female child, whose understanding of herself as gendered happens in opposition to this figure. The ambiguous father/lodger figure can be read in a number of ways including evidence of familial incest, a metaphor for an emotionally distant father or the projection of a craving for intimacy with the absent father, onto a male non-family member. Hill deliberately complicates father-daughter relationships

¹⁴⁶ *Bunny*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁹ Selima Hill, *Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 100.

in order to demonstrate masculine difficulties with intimacy which are transferred to the child. When Hill returns to this image in *Bunny*, this dynamic is played out most obviously in 'Gallop Alopecia':

The lodger blamed the Gallop Alopecia
her aunt still nursed behind closed doors
on her;
and he didn't like the way she dropped her Ts
and he didn't like the skin on her heels
and the way she straightened her beautiful curly hair
and jumped on thistles
and didn't come home till bed-time¹⁵⁰

The lodger's perspective shifts from one of a sexual, predatory interest in the protagonist to typically fatherly concerns regarding behaviour and appearance, serving to unsettle previously established understandings of the relationship between them. Further, it must be noted that this parental role only comes to the fore when the protagonist no longer appears to be afraid of this figure; a separate approach is adopted by the lodger/father in a failed attempt to regain control over the protagonist.

In the majority of Hill's many poems set in the family home, there is no mention of a father whatsoever. When the rare possibility arises for a man to fill this vacancy – like the lodger in *Bunny* – within Hill's domestic settings, as in the sequence 'Bunker Sacks', the female child and her mother are repellent enough to scare them away: "these handsome men can't really be expected | to function in a houseful of cows."¹⁵¹ The environment is chaotic and unappealing with both mother and daughter shamed and reduced to being an animal. The men appear aloof and strong as opposed to the women who are desperate, insignificant and flawed by virtue of their sex, struggling to make themselves heard:

men who have no faults, dynamic men,
men who are so tall they can't quite hear,
far below them, shaky voices calling.¹⁵²

'The Ptarmigan Hunter' is a rare example of a Hill poem addressing fathers and sons, demonstrating the way in which gynophobia perpetuates female stereotypes. In the poem

¹⁵⁰ *Bunny*, p. 73.

¹⁵¹ *Fruitcake*, p. 163.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

an off-duty ranger finds “a young woman, freeze dried, | like coffee, under a rock.”¹⁵³ His response to this discovery is disturbing:

He cut off her black underclothes
and took them home to his father
who, being afraid of ghosts,
fed them into the Garbage Guzzler
he had just bought.¹⁵⁴

The woman is fetishised and degraded by having her underwear removed and as if death alone was insufficient to eliminate her, her remains are – with dark humour – fed into a waste disposal system. Having a father and son work together in this case is suggestive of a need for mutual male approval regarding the treatment of women, the notion of disturbing attitudes to gender being passed down from fathers to sons, as well as fear and superstition surrounding women.

Father figures are explored nowhere near as extensively as mothers in Hill and are most noticeable for their absence. However an extract from *The Accumulation* subtly suggests that fathers are not as impenetrable and unaffected as they appear to be: “my father wears a woolly cardigan | with lozenges of fear inside the pocket.”¹⁵⁵ As for mothers, the fear of intimacy and fear of failing to fulfil their gender role can lead fathers to inflict real and silent violence on family members. Indeed, Hill’s depictions of fathers will situate her readers differently, depending on their own gender positions; women may identify with feelings of disappointment and shame regarding femininity that emanate from the father, while men may face embarrassment over having such covert behaviour highlighted in a way that chimes guiltily with their own experiences.

3. CHILDHOOD

The discussion of mothers and fathers has gone some way to suggest representations of childhood within Hill’s work, locating parent-child relationships as a source of tension and

¹⁵³ *My Darling Camel*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁵ *The Accumulation* p. 23.

anxiety. Mothers rigidly control expressions of sexuality and transmit their own frustrations over the limitations of gender constructions onto their daughters, making them feel guilty and unloved. Fathers ignore, reject or abandon their daughters, instilling the belief that there is something inherently repellent and shameful regarding femininity. This treatment is uniformly applied to protagonists who fit neatly into a prescribed gender role and those that do not, suggesting that feelings of guilt and shame are inescapable. However, when child protagonists are not a part of one-parent families, they are often foisted onto others as if their existence is a burden, for example the wet nurse in *The Hat*, relatives in *Bunny* and *Fruitcake* or institutions such as psychiatric hospitals (see Chapter Three). Childhood is a key stage within Hill's work; a place which feels unsafe and confusing – often when clashing with the adult world – where burgeoning gender identity is pliant under the forces of the real or imagined physical and emotional violence of familial relationships. The stylistic idiosyncrasies of Hill's writing such as surreal imagery, dream-like timescales and the animals that populate her poems are particularly evocative when writing about childhood. Hill creates the illusion of seeing the world through a child's eyes, fuelled by fantasy and innocence.

Childlike innocence and ignorance over the societal expectations attached to gender are often shattered by sexual abuse in Hill's work. The adults charged with caring for these children belittle, ignore or choose not to believe incidents of such behaviour, pinpointing childhood as a vulnerable and dangerous stage. In 'A Voice in the Garden' from *Saying Hello at the Station* the young female protagonist is sexually abused by a neighbour, to which her parents appear oblivious. The neighbour takes her for regular swimming lessons: "Gerald's here! my mother called, | Are you ready? The taxi was waiting."¹⁵⁶ He sits so close to her that she can smell "soap and peppermint,"¹⁵⁷ suggestive of how cleanliness is associated with sin in several of Hill's poems, of something unspeakable, washed away or covered up. Once in the pool, the vulnerable protagonist battles with the water "like a kitten"¹⁵⁸ and as the neighbour watches her from the pool side she sees the "bright gold buttons"¹⁵⁹ of his jacket rise and fall. This motion subtly creates the image of oral sex or masturbation,

¹⁵⁶ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

especially when we are told that Gerald likes to suck boiled sweets (the lodger in *Bunny* also sucks boiled sweets) and offers them to “his young friends.”¹⁶⁰ His intentions appear increasingly disturbing as the speaker describes the day he decides to get into the pool with her: “his old grey body quaking | like a mollusc without its shell”¹⁶¹ evoking the repulsion she feels for him. As with other abusive characters in Hill’s poetry, his outwardly frail appearance conceals the fact that he is dangerous and predatory. Gerald’s hands float between the protagonist’s legs and he smiles; as the protagonist leaves the pool she describes “heated water trickled down my legs | as I wrapped my towel around me, like a shawl.”¹⁶² Violated and ashamed, she seeks to both comfort herself and hide from Gerald, the trickling water evoking involuntary urination from fright or more disturbingly, semen. In keeping with Hill’s treatment of these issues in later work, the event is ignored by the adults who should have offered protection. Despite the swimming lessons mysteriously coming to an end:

[Gerald] still came for tea on Sundays,
after his ‘little siesta’,
and sat down in the seat next to mine.¹⁶³

In an attempt to apparently buy the protagonist’s silence or continue abusing her, Gerald presses “a silver florin”¹⁶⁴ into her hand each week. She saves them in her drawer, never spending them and they come to represent a growing store of her guilt and anxiety. In keeping with the notion of sin, one day she decides to donate all the money to “The Little Sisters of the Poor | in Albert Street.”¹⁶⁵ This act demonstrates that this experience has informed the protagonist’s understanding of what it is to be a woman and that she must somehow be to blame for the way in which she has been treated. As the poem ends, she tries to hide from Gerald in the garden, however he is determined to find her “pushing his way | through the roses” and with chilling gaiety calling “*Yoo-hoo, Gerald’s here, yoo-hoo...*”¹⁶⁶ The implication being that nothing will change, no help will come and the abuse

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

will continue. There is also a subtle Biblical allusion to the Garden of Eden in this scene, hearkening back to early notions of masculinity and femininity.

This dynamic is explored in more detail in *Bunny* where the young female protagonist, under the care of her aunts, is left to be terrorised by the ambiguous lodger/father figure. The isolated and secretive life they share has few links to the world outside; like the neighbours, the reader only glimpses fragments of the unfolding events:

The neighbours and their elderly Retrievers
get used to seeing someone sitting there,

sometimes dressed in nothing but a nightie,
fiercely spooning milk from a tin.¹⁶⁷

While a good childhood could be said to involve a loving and secure home, a stable base from which the child can build their sense of self, the poem 'Home' depicts a very different and lonely reality: "the word *home* | echoes in her mouth | like *the dead* | echoes in the mouths of the living."¹⁶⁸ As the short poems start to build up a picture of the lodger, it is clear why the protagonist is filled with dread whilst at home. His presence builds up slowly within the house, as does the tension. In 'Cashmere', his statue-like appearance is described in minute detail:

Staring ahead like something biding its time
in a cashmere suit still smelling of marzipan

and the smell of the mushrooms her mother said smell of vanilla,
and tiny polished boots like hand-made beech-nuts,

he's waiting in the hall for her return¹⁶⁹

Hill uses smell as something primal and revealing of her characters. In these lines the lodger is so inconspicuous that he more a scent than a physical presence. Marzipan, vanilla and nuts evoke sweet and enticing scents which appeal to the desires of a child; particularly concerning given the lodger's intentions. He is almost a fixture within the house, silently biding his time until something terrible happens. As he grows in confidence, he asks the

¹⁶⁷ *Bunny*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

protagonist if she knows what the word “cock” means, in response “she looks ahead and simply starts walking | steadying the word like an egg.”¹⁷⁰ These lines demonstrate the violence that lies beneath language; the unseen shifting of power between two individuals and in Goffman’s terms the embarrassment causes the protagonist to be ‘torn apart’ internally while struggling to keep herself externally neutral. By using sexualised language, the lodger is subtly threatening, suggesting his intentions. Hill engineers an uncomfortable clash between sexual desire and the paternal love that the protagonist craves in a number of poems, for example in ‘Passion-Fruit’:

The passion fruit resembles
coloured bruises
rolled
into a ball you can suck.¹⁷¹

This short, direct poem illustrates how in this relationship of forced intimacy where the protagonist requires care and compassion, her vulnerability and pain is turned into something sexual to derive pleasure from. No longer is the lodger content to wait and, emboldened by the lack of attention paid to his behaviour by the aunts, the situation deteriorates into an atmosphere of dread and inevitability in ‘House’:

She sleeps in late
as if the house were hers

but it is his.
She should have been more careful.

She should have been more attentive
to his timing.

The fact that she was wrong
and he was right.¹⁷²

These ‘mistakes’ again suggest that any abuse suffered is the victim’s fault, further intensifying their shame which in turn begins to shape identity into a form deserving of this treatment. Further, the fact that the house is referred to as ‘his’ – and in an earlier poem it is described as the father’s house – adds weight to suspicions that lodger is a metaphor for

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 17.

father. In 'Taffeta' the protagonist is depicted as a submissive "deep frozen rabbit"¹⁷³ being dressed up like a doll "that didn't want a dress and wanted fur | and let itself be stripped and given sweets."¹⁷⁴ Hill uses dresses in her work to represent the projected desires of one individual onto another, the stripping adding to the sexualised context and the sweets (as opposed to silver florins on this occasion) a form payment for her submissiveness which by receiving, makes her complicit in her own abuse. The protagonist's feelings of helplessness are amplified by the fact that she has no one to turn to. She considers asking for help but concludes that she would not be believed: "she knew they'd never help her | if he hurt her."¹⁷⁵ Eventually the lodger does hurt her and although the details are never discussed, the aftermath is addressed in 'Budgie.'¹⁷⁶ Demonstrating her aunts' difficulties with intimacy, they wrap her up like a "clock," their silence on and distance from the matter adding to the damage caused. They wrap the protagonist in a blanket and give her a warm drink but the absence of emotional comfort and real understanding perpetuate the suggestion that this is somehow her fault. She is left alone in a room to cry until the doctor arrives. At this point, her character begins to change as she comes to realise that if help is not forthcoming she must take her own steps to protect herself from the lodger, seen in 'Balaclava':

Because she knows he likes her curly hair
she goes to bed

in a dampened balaclava
like some old ship

that's never going to make it
rocking itself to sleep inside a shed.¹⁷⁷

The protagonist is aware of how attracted the lodger is to her hair and shamefully covers up this part of her body as if she is somehow to blame. These lines are especially evocative of her isolation and loneliness; to describe a young girl as 'an old ship' speaks of her weathered innocence which the lodger has worn away. In rocking herself there are implications for her mental stability but also a suggestion that in the absence of any comfort or intimacy from

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

family, she is forced to console herself. Hair has a special meaning in Hill's work which she discussed during our interview, in particular the strong emotions brought out by unwanted attention to physical appearance:

When I was little everybody used to love my curly hair and the more they loved it the more I hated myself and them and anybody who mentioned my hair were automatically people that I hated!¹⁷⁸

In the poem 'Bulls' the protagonist goes one step further in attempting to repel the lodger: "she dips her hair into the orange fire | she is old enough now to be trusted never to light."¹⁷⁹ This act of self-harm ties in with the metaphor and image of the burnt baby and the way in which the desires of others brand and shape identity. Another coping method utilised by the protagonist is the comfort she draws from the animals that appear to float in and out of the narrative and speak to her. A sheep in her dreams seems to be offering her an escape route:

when she waves
the lovely sheep shouts down

Get me a boat and a suitcase
and so she does.¹⁸⁰

In 'Cows', the animals appear to support the protagonist, trampling over her aunt's tidy lawns and eating her hair that the lodger loves so much. The animals serve to disrupt the rules of the house, upsetting the adults and protecting the protagonist, who is also referred to as an animal, most often a rabbit, on a number of occasions. Although the protagonist is deeply affected by these events and struggles not to blame herself – "shame | like a white balloon"¹⁸¹ floats around the rooms of the house – her survival is empowering despite her suffering, demonstrating that notions of gender can be formed outside those constraints stiflingly enforced within family settings. The protagonist flatly refuses to conform to the desires of her ladylike aunts "with little dogs on leads, and tartan rugs"¹⁸² who would prefer

¹⁷⁸ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 279.

¹⁷⁹ *Bunny*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

her to wear their knitted boleros and consume “the classics, and a little wholesome food.”¹⁸³

‘The Bed’ from *A Little Book of Meat*, is another example of childlike innocence being converted by inappropriate sexual advances from adults. The opening line “this is the bed | that I became a woman in”¹⁸⁴ evokes Simone De Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,”¹⁸⁵ although in a different sense. In this poem, the assignment of gender identity takes place within a bedroom, typically linked with sleep, sex or birth and therefore somehow symbolic of female sexuality as passive or active. The poem proceeds to link becoming ‘feminine’ with desire and therefore pleasure and danger. The protagonist describes lying “naked on tepid sheets”¹⁸⁶ and this change is said to have taken place after her “grandmother’s scaly-fingered gardener | half-marched, half-crept in here and mended it [the bed] | like a man mends a cage in a zoo.”¹⁸⁷ Objectified as a caged animal, it would appear that it is a sexual act that has brought the protagonist’s gendered identity into being. The gardener’s contradictory approach (‘half-marched, half-crept’) evokes a confident, masculine stride that both announces and attempts to conceal itself, illustrative of the way in which hegemonic groups keep society in order through a combination of violence and deception.

In conclusion, by focussing on intimate relationships and domestic scenes Hill illustrates the way in which our sense of self is developed through affiliation with others. Crucially, the mother is the usual source of original identification and in raising the issue of matrophobia in her work, Hill shows the mother-child relationship to be fraught with tension and difficulty but also essential when examining the origins of gender identity and the way in which gender roles are perpetuated and struggled with from within and without. The intimacy of the child-parent relationship and the silent violence that operates within it, has a great capacity to influence and shape gender identity. These intimate, familiar scenes make for uncomfortable reading, evoking the shame-based anger of attempting to occupy a

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁸⁴ *A Little Book of Meat* p. 45.

¹⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 1.

¹⁸⁶ *A Little Book of Meat* p. 45.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

restrictive gender role, the guilt of unavoidable and perpetual failure at attempting to do so, and the daily embarrassment of interactions where constructed selves oscillate with those around them in a way that undermines and challenges. However, in Ricks' terms, the self-recognition that comes with embarrassment may threaten the presumptions the reader has projected onto their own identity. In turn, the complex and multi-faceted gender roles presented in Hill's work forces us to question the identities that we project and the ones that we feel pressure from society to fulfil, along with the way we allow our own desires – motivated by embarrassment, shame and guilt – to harm those with whom we share intimate relationships. Although painful, this experience can also be cathartic and liberating.

CHAPTER 2

SEX, LOVE AND DESIRE

Hill's poems on sex and heterosexual relationships help to build up an impression of her sophisticated negotiation of gender construction, beyond the childhood stage and family home. Focussing particularly on the role of desire as a powerful and identity-shaping force within intimate relationships, this chapter explores the real and imagined desire-fuelled violence of predominantly sadistic males and masochistic females. Expressions of sexuality are deformed and masked, serving to undermine conventional representations of feminine and masculine desire. In articulating relationships of this type, Hill may again force her readers to occupy certain positions such as the abusive male or the abused female, recalling any similarities to their own experiences of sexual relationships. The embarrassment of reading (or hearing if the poems are performed) such intimate, unvarnished detail will unsettle, possibly prompting the reader to experience guilt over their abusive behaviour or shame – on either side – for submitting to it. Hill's capacity to disrupt assumptions about feminine and masculine norms in her writing therefore opens up the possibility of alternative interpretations.

Close readings of Hill's poetry will draw upon, in particular, the theoretical arguments put forward in Judith Butler's *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*.¹ Hill's female characters are depicted in a way that seeks to subvert traditional structures of representing feminine desire comprised of female objects and male subjects and presenting female sexuality through the gaze of male eyes. Butler's work offers some important reflections on the subject of desire – drawing widely from philosophical theories – for how it operates within identity formation, a key concern in Hill's poetry. Butler explains how the self comes to be revealed through desire:

The subject is created through the experience of desire and is, in this sense, a non-natural self. The subject does not precede his desires and then glean from his desires a reflection of a ready-made self; on the contrary, the subject is essentially defined through what it desires. Through desiring a certain kind of object, the subject posits

¹ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (Columbia: New York, 1999)

itself unwittingly as a certain kind of being [...] the identity of the subject is to be found in the intentionality of its desire.²

This account of desire demonstrates the fluidity of identity as something which is continually remade; the notion of a non-natural self echoes Butler's theories on gender performativity and in the context of Hill's poems we see masculine and feminine desires locked into a symbiotic relationship in which each shapes the other and in turn, itself. A consideration of desire is essential to these interactions with its basis of subject and object; how we wish to be seen – the 'intentionality of desire' – and how we *are* seen will be shown to be controlled by the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt. This intimate phenomenon has natural implications for the shaping of gender identities. These issues will be explored in terms of Hill's early work (*Saying Hello at the Station* and *My Darling Camel*) which thematically and certainly stylistically stands apart from the rest of her oeuvre; this will be followed by a consideration of emerging gender identities within early sexual relationships, finally turning to real or imagined physical and emotional violence within domestic settings.

1. EARLY DEPICTIONS OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

There are a number of poems that characterise Hill's early work in how they draw upon imagery grounded in far-flung locations and myth. These influences enable Hill to defamiliarise conventional notions of femininity and masculinity – an effect which she later achieves while remaining in domestic settings through the introduction of violence and animals in particular – presenting familiar gendered behaviours afresh in a way that opens them up for reflection and discussion. 'The Diving Archaeologists' from Hill's debut collection *Saying Hello at the Station*, touches on sacrificial practices in ancient Mayan civilisation. A group of men trek through the jungle in search of the "Sacred Well of Sacrifice"³ guided by an old map belonging to the archbishop Diego de Landa.⁴ The men

² Ibid., p. 67.

³ Also known as Cenote Sagrado, a sinkhole into which victims were thrown as an offering to the rain god Chaac.

⁴ A controversial historical figure, Landa was a sixteenth century Spanish monk. Despite leaving a legacy of valuable writings on pre-Columbia Maya civilisation, he ordered a brutal inquisition in response to Roman Catholic practices of idol worship and suspected witchcraft. This resulted in imprisonments, wide-spread torture and the burning of thousands of Maya cult images and codices.

send for “Paterson the diver” to aid their investigation who is described in glamorous terms as “gathering sponges | off the Bahama Islands,”⁵ a chilling contrast to the sinkhole where human sacrifices took place. The narrator describes “bound virgins”⁶ thrown into the well watched “by singing priests at daybreak;”⁷ a detail which amplifies the victims’ helpless position. These women were sent to their deaths “to talk to the goddess | and reason with her underwater,”⁸ reflecting a deeply superstitious climate in which women are suspect. Hill juxtaposes these rituals with a present day diving team deployed to investigate the well. They find the “drowned women’s bones, and nodules | of yellow perfumed resin,”⁹ which were to be gifts for the goddess. Gynophobic sentiments and the need to dominate women’s bodies (even in death through the reclamation of bones) appear to run concurrently across the centuries. When the divers rise to the surface and bump their helmets on the boat making it rock, the native boys call out:

*El Amo! The Master!
In her anger, the goddess
has swallowed him,
and now she comes knocking,
as a warning – we must not
go down where the women hold
their secret meetings,
in the Well of Chichén Itzá.¹⁰*

This version of events, rather than offering a voice to these repressed and silenced figures, once again shrouds them in secrecy and mistrust based on the fear of women gaining autonomy by grouping together. The poem emphasises the role of religion and patriarchy throughout history in shaping social attitudes towards women and how they are treated; the boys’ superstitious awareness of the goddess’s anger is suggestive of feelings of guilt. Referencing early Spanish colonisation of Venezuela, ‘The Monkey Boys’ from *My Darling Camel* continues the association of masculinity with tyrannical behaviour stemming from an

⁵ Selima Hill, *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

assumption of ownership over bodies 'other' to their own. The men laugh as their cows eat the Panare¹¹ boys' salt:

they don't care
if there's no salt
swinging from the bow-wood tree
in Campa, Chanchamayo, by the silver river;
and anyway you will be dead,
your bodies wrapped
in green cane beds, tomorrow.¹²

In describing the colonisers' attitude towards the indigenous Venezuelans (reflected in the poem's reductive title) Hill draws attention to similarities between feminist post-colonial analyses of phallogocentric, supremacist ideology that oppresses its subjects. She foregrounds an intrusive male gaze which denies and hinders opportunities for identity formation through violence and the threat thereof. The reader is therefore invited to consider how these narratives might offer insight into more recognisable intimate relationships.

The subject matter of these poems allows for difficult emotions to be explored from a safe distance; however the majority of Hill's early poems on male-female relationships are based in familiar domestic scenes and their associated concerns. The tone of these poems is often inhibited in some way – as a deliberate textual strategy – suggestive of discontent and an inner struggle which manifests itself in a shame-fuelled reluctance to speak out. In 'Private View' a woman attends her husband's prize-winning exhibition, an event that leads her to reflect on her role as wife. She describes her anxiety over wearing new shoes and standing 'well', emphasising how her worth is closely linked to physical appearance. Snippets of conversations perpetuate the painter's¹³ reputation as an important, intriguing man: "*he's a very sensitive guy. | I'd really like to meet him. | Yes, he's obviously been through a lot.*"¹⁴ Italicising the lines demonstrates dialogue but also subtly implies the narrator's wry tone. She escapes to the back garden with its "pale and magnificent"¹⁵ evening sky, only to be

¹¹ Language spoken in Southern Venezuela.

¹² Selima Hill, *My Darling Camel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p. 52.

¹³ Hill's grandparents, parents and husband were all painters.

¹⁴ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

interrupted by a male guest who calls out that he is departing. His arrival disturbs the solitude and feels oddly intimate “[he] plunges into the cool air like a diver.”¹⁶ The poem ends with the ambiguous line “he doesn’t know | I am the wife of the man who won first prize.”¹⁷ This is suggestive of how her anonymity is a requirement in her role as a submissive and supportive wife but also how it allows her to share this moment with a stranger as an outlet for her passive resentment. ‘Joy’ describes the narrator’s romance with a painter (presumably an account of an early meeting between herself and her husband) who – in her eyes – is a vision of unattainable masculinity and freedom:

on his silver seven-speed bicycle –
looking so tall and pre-war
in his late father’s flying helmet
and his long brown coat, like wings.¹⁸

The pair meet in a studio where they drink tea as the painter works but this cosy ritual sours one day when “he brings his model with him.”¹⁹ The narrator’s bitter reaction evokes notions of feminine desire based on insecurity, competing for male attention through belittling rivals:

He swishes round her breast
with a stick of Burnt Siena
for the umpteenth time.
She looks like a Basking Shark.²⁰

This action allows the painter to dominate both women; he objectifies the model by painting her through his eyes, focusing on her breasts and appearing to relish the form of torture it becomes for the narrator. The incident effectively expresses the desires of both characters for what is left unspoken; the next time they meet he paints a cherry tree and it is as if the model never existed. Hill creates a multi-faceted portrait of masculine desire, shaped by the mother-son relationship, as we later see the painter:

He sits alone on his bed,
wrapped in the silk

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

peach-coloured happi-coat
his mother used to wear.²¹

The painter's attire becomes a gendered overlay that both disrupts and draws attention to the assumption of masculinity, making this once insouciant figure appear vulnerable and introspective. As he recalls a topless, red-haired woman, an erotically charged memory of his mother begins to stir:

His mother brushes his cheek
with the long red hair
she was so proud of,
and he covers her lips
with Violet...²²

Mother and son share a close if not incestuous bond (the ellipsis suggestively adds to the ambiguity), which told though the eyes of the narrator becomes an obstacle to intimacy and a source of tension within the painter's current relationship. He tells his mother "goodbye" after he wakes, implying that he dreams of her and also that she is his first thought. This makes him uncomfortable and is a source of shame; in a reversal of traditional gender roles, his mother's blatant sexuality (breasts, hair, lips) appears to overpower him and this time he is the object of feminine desire: "all the time, he whimpers, | *I'm trying to think of a way | of getting out of this.*"²³

In 'The Ram' a man guides the narrator to his home like a shepherd: "he jangles his keys in the rain | and I follow like a lamb"²⁴ perpetuating expectations of the dominant male and submissive female. The description of the narrator as a lamb is typical of elsewhere in Hill's oeuvre where female characters are called bunny, chicken, lamb etc, recalling the apparently innocent pet names sometimes given to women. The connotations of consumption these terms carry becomes particularly unsettling within sexual scenarios. As the male character undresses, his actions are loaded with masculinity as his coat "drops to the floor – THE RAMS, in felt, | arched across the hunky back"²⁵ and his "damp black

²¹ Ibid., p. 23.

²² Ibid., p. 23.

²³ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

Levi's"²⁶ evoke clinging to the body. However, the balance of power begins to shift (with added emphasis from the enjambed line) as the narrator explains "I lie on his bed and watch him | undress."²⁷ By putting the man, as opposed to a woman, on display such a performance becomes comical rather than erotic as he adjusts his "loaded modelling-pouch."²⁸ The mood changes as the narrator comprehends male and female desire as a construction; the man having left his socks on, which the narrator describes as "white as bridesmaids, | little daisies, driven snow"²⁹ and with that desire evaporates. With a possible pun on wane/Wayne,³⁰ there is implied societal disapproval over the failure to maintain expectations placed on masculinity: "John Wayne watches from the wall | beside a shelf-ful of pistols."³¹ Rather than being 'swept off her feet', the narrator thinks of her Grandmother:

How she used to shake her head,

when I stood by her bed on Sundays,
so proud in my soap-smelling
special frock, and say *Ah*,
*Bless your little cotton socks!*³²

This girlish, sexless image explodes the idea of masculinity, revealing the constructed quality of power roles, of masculine identity and the associations and meaning attached to everyday objects which store memories. It is this gap "between a person's presented self and one's desired presentational self"³³ where embarrassment operates; in presenting characters as they see themselves and how they are perceived through the gaze of others within intimate relationships, there arises the potential for discovery through self-recognition with regards to gender identity both for Hill's characters and her readers. In a final point, it is also worth thinking about how embarrassment operates in relation to the humour in the poem, particularly given the strong relationship between the two. In many of Hill's poems, sexual encounters are a source of deep anxiety and shame for her female

²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁰ This was originally spelt 'Wain' in *Saying Hello at the Station* which was later corrected to Wayne in Hill's *Selected Poems Gloria*.

³¹ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 32.

³² Ibid., p. 32.

³³ Pamela J. Kalbfleisch, *Interpersonal Communication: Evolving Interpersonal Relationships* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), p. 148.

characters. In 'The Ram', humour may be being used as a device to deflect the difficult emotions and embarrassment that arise in one such situation.

'The Sea-Water Hall' from *My Darling Camel* charts a distant and unhappy relationship between a man and woman as if they were fish in a tank:

a perfect naked man,
three inches tall,
is sitting by a rock-pool.
He's writing something in a book.³⁴

The man is a solitary figure absorbed in his writing and his partner appears irrelevant and peripheral to his life while remaining subservient to his needs:

When the keeper
drops a pinch of powder
from the sky, there's a lady
who runs up with a picnic plate
and catches as much as she can.³⁵

The isolated man and woman, along with the presence of 'greater being' in the form of the keeper has vaguely biblical undertones. The woman performs a traditionally feminine role with great anxiety, concerning herself with food and mothering behaviour: "*come on John, she says, | you really ought to eat something.*"³⁶ His well-being appears to override any concerns she may have for her own welfare. The fish tank metaphor uncovers tension within the couple's physical relationship, representing a barrier to intimacy; they are unable to kiss because the air is "too viscous for them."³⁷ Rather than dealing with the issue the man "climbs onto a ledge of rock | and stares at the painted ocean"³⁸ – a detached image of contemplative masculinity – demonstrating hopelessness in a world that is a constructed illusion, offering no guidance as to how to lead their lives. Their loneliness and alienation is amplified by the close proximity they share and the emotional distance between them. This is reflected in the stilted portrait of the woman who appears to experience guilt over these events being somehow linked to her physical appearance: "[she] fingers her neglected curls

³⁴ *My Darling Camel*, pp. 8-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

| and looks across at him.”³⁹ The poem concludes with little hope for any change or improvement:

If you do tap the side,
she won't look up.
It's triple-glazed.
She can only hear
the keeper's dry fingers
and the bubbles rising.⁴⁰

The couple are unable to communicate with each other or the world outside; trapped in their current situation, they seem destined to stay there. Once again, the reader is prompted to consider restrictive gender positions and to speculate how greater diversity and choice in this respect may offer release for all bodies. 'The Significance of Significance' also describes a disharmonious relationship. The female narrator is content “just loafing about by the river”⁴¹ while her partner obsesses with “plans, and plans about plans, and sex,”⁴² and as a result “she felt so lonely!”⁴³ She feels uneducated compared to her partner, concentrating on pleasing and serving him:

She cooked him cockles
in a thick orange sauce,
and bought him a suit-case –
'for the Great Man',⁴⁴

The capitalised words present man as a God-like figure and intensify the protagonist's feelings of inadequacy; her role is to cook and his is to explore the world. The fact that “their children were his books”⁴⁵ renders her thoroughly useless in this feminine configuration if he does not even need her for the purposes of procreation. Hill captures how exaggerated gender roles become when a relationship is failing; her female characters in particular attempt to solve these problems by performing a traditional feminine role all the more vigorously. In this poem, the significance of such dedication is that it assists the husband in his masculine performance and implicitly aids the creative process.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴² Ibid., p. 13.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

In 'Queenio' the poem's title derives from a popular 1950s school-yard game 'Queenie, Queenie, who's got the ball' in which the 'Queenie' must guess who possesses a ball from amongst a line of players with their hands behind their backs. Associations with childhood games are entirely unsettled by sexually explicit descriptions. The protagonist appears to be alone in a peach orchard which is representative of desire and the complexities thereof:

Sand the risen peach, swollen with lust,
introduce a finger-nail tentatively
under its congested lip;
the juice will coil down her wrists
and lonely open hips, restless,
engorged with maggots. *Please come home.*⁴⁶

The peach becomes a metaphor for female genitalia and possibly masturbation; this expression of female sexuality causes the body to become physically repellent. The protagonist's 'lonely' hips and pleas at the end of the first stanza suggest that desire is not something she is able to experience alone but requires the presence of an other. The orchard takes on characteristics of masculine desire: "peach-blossoms stiffen [...] eyed beetles wink and push like hounds | against her skin."⁴⁷ Her surroundings seem to swell about her and force upon her body. The environment appears knowing and complicit in the protagonist's confusion and discomfort regarding her outward experience of desire, as opposed to her inward expression of it: "the knee-deep fruit play Queenie | with her loving soul, stripped clean."⁴⁸ This process is all the more powerful for the subtlety with which it is conveyed as desire operates surreptitiously to undermine femininity: "lust has turned her hidden milk to bone."⁴⁹ Not only are identity options available to women presented as limited, female sexual expression appears to negate motherhood in these lines, removing the possibility of plurality. The gender claustrophobia this evokes is reinforced by the body, as the protagonist is left stranded by the experience and the shame and guilt it evokes: "shaky, untouchable, defiled by desire."⁵⁰ However, the dramatic final line conveys the complex and oppressive nature of desire: "they whisper *Queenio*. I said *Come here*."⁵¹ Hill

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 16.

represents femininity as masochistically involved in the subordination of women's bodies as her character actively encourages this act of defilement; this may be motivated by the fear of failing to be 'feminine', or an attempt to gain masculine approval. Conversely, 'Peggy' is concerned with masculine experiences of discommodious desire, associated with mothers once again. The narrator describes a man's romantic attachment to a llama: "he used to go for long walks | with the llama, Peggy."⁵² He brings the llama – sensuously described as "batting her big eye-lashes | like cream"⁵³ – to his mother's funeral, an implied representation of his feelings for his mother. However, we are told that "his mother died | to get away from them! | She suffered terribly."⁵⁴ This drastic step is apparently taken in response to the narrow range of acceptable feminine roles, constructed through male eyes; a source of anxiety and inhibition for both sexes. In this case, the man's adoration of his mother prevents him from desiring any other woman: "his mother was a gold statuette... | He wanted so much love, | that was the trouble."⁵⁵ His desires are displaced onto the llama, as a result of the limitations on his self-expression: "she was the only thing | he wanted in the end."⁵⁶

In Hill's work, women who fall short of feminine ideals are often punished; both sexes appear to accept that this is necessary if they are to engage in intimate relationships and alleviate their guilt for doing so: In '*Crepúsculo – Ibiza*' the narrator explains

And he was famous
for the way he handled girls.
He was like a butcher with a knife.
I followed him.⁵⁷

The admiration this man receives for his brutal treatment of women is universal; such behaviour forcefully asserts the superiority of masculinity and, in complying, women like the protagonist hope to find acceptance for performing their gender role correctly. The butcher simile evokes the dispensable nature of women who are socially 'reared' for a specific purpose, be that for sex or mothering. The 'butcher' toys with the protagonist: "he smiled,

⁵² Ibid., p. 16.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

and singed my hair | with his gold-plated | cigarette-lighter.”⁵⁸ The understated torture is carried out with a symbol of masculinity and wealth, designed to reinforce masculine control and feminine submissiveness. In targeting the protagonist’s appearance he thwarts her chances of progression along traditionally acceptable feminine lines. Fire emerges once more as a metaphor for the harm inflicted within intimate relationships. Finally, ‘The Hyacinth Man’ considers the effort made to style the body in order to lend a naturalised appearance to gender:

All afternoon eleven men
lift silver weights
above their heads,
and feel their bodies
tremble like water,
or fish that follow currents
in their sleep.⁵⁹

The notion of a fish following a current in its sleep mirrors the way in which gendered behaviour is often instinctively and blindly performed; in this instance masculinity is bound to a muscular physique and demonstrations of strength. As the gym owner appears with the keys “the athletes move like sails”⁶⁰ conforming to an unspoken hierarchy (of masculinity). Similarly in this poem, “small sunburnt women | stabbing each other | with stiletto heels”⁶¹ beautify and embellish their bodies in order to appeal to the male gaze. This behaviour represents a form of self-harm regarding the damage caused by striving for a tan, with a subtle allusion to the recurring metaphor of the burnt baby to convey emotional damage. These lines also reveal the violence involved in upholding a certain image through competing with other women in order to appear supremely feminine.

2. EMERGING IDENTITIES

From 1989⁶² onwards Hill’s work begins to be predominantly written in sequences, often comprised of short poems based around a central character such as an abandoned teenage

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶² *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* was first published in this year.

poems she is seen exploring her developing sexual identity through dressing up, revelling in the allure of feminine staples such as tactile fabrics, lingerie and high heels. In 'Pyjama-case' we see her pose on the rim of a bath "in a bra with cups the size of elastic pudding-basins,"⁶⁶ a description that defamiliarises and ridicules the garment emphasising how despite its non-essential nature, the bra is inextricably bound to the social history of women. The size serves to exaggerate the protagonist's under-developed body and vulnerability as well as foregrounding the bra as a symbol of coming of age, shaping the body and identity in turn. The atmosphere in this scene shifts radically in light of the fact that "the bathroom is panelled with mirrors like flattened eyes | in one of which he watches as she pouts."⁶⁷ While the scene begins humorously with the protagonist posturing as a woman (revealing how caricature becomes naturalised and authentic with repetition) this innocent play is overshadowed by the lodger's sinister desires, once again suggesting a threat. The mirror represents the male gaze and the complexity of desire in which the protagonist constructs her body through male eyes. In her work on Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood focuses on women's inability to escape the gaze's controlling power and the unavoidable fact that female existence involves being the target of voyeurism. This includes being objectified by another and in one's *own* eyes: "you are a woman inside a man watching a woman. You are your own voyeur."⁶⁸ The protagonist begins to learn the significance of her body within the heterosexual matrix and 'Lips' describes the danger of engaging in such behaviour:

She carries them discreetly
past the lodger

who crams them down her throat
like broken glass.⁶⁹

Demonstrating an awareness of the effect she has on the lodger, these ambiguous lines see the protagonist's modesty appear to verge on titillation; either way, the lodger responds with a violent initiation into heterosexual relationships. As the protagonist retreats the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁸ *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), p. 33.

⁶⁹ *Bunny*, p. 22.

lodger's advances, establishing traditional submissive female and dominant masculine behavioural roles, as in 'Vaseline':

He climbs the stairs
towards the frosty thighs

thumbs and fingers itch
to prime with Vaseline.⁷⁰

The frosty thighs evoke the objectification of body parts and recall the social shaming of women as frigid if they do not submit to sex. To prime conjures the image of a weapon with connotations of violence or a blank canvas, representative of masculine desires projected onto yielding female bodies. In 'Chicken' enjambment gives the impression that the lodger is cooking the protagonist in preparation for eating:

He's roasted her
a little gold chicken

whose crunchy breasts
he's skilfully removing

and laying on her plate
like roasted crocuses.⁷¹

The lodger acts his desires out on the bird as descriptions of enticing textures coupled with the reference to breasts is suggestive of sexual sadism. Cannibalism is the ultimate act of aggression, completely dominating and obliterating – but also a kind of integration of – the other person. In 'Boiled Sweets' the lodger is an oddly child-like figure eating sweets on the landing "that bleed their coloured syrups | into language | he doesn't know he doesn't understand."⁷² Rather than making his actions seem more forgivable, he appears all the more terrifying: if he does not understand he cannot be reasoned with. In 'How', boiled sweets are later associated with the protagonist's inability to process an unnamed traumatic event which is inevitably linked to the lodger: "jamming her brain with cherries like boiled sweets, | her eyes with boiled sweets that couldn't cry | but blazed like stained-glass

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷² Ibid., p. 48.

churches in the wilderness.”⁷³ Paralysed by shame, if the lodger cannot be held responsible for his actions then she – and by implication femininity – must be to blame. The image of the church hints at the involvement of religion in the abuse and silencing of women (this is explored in Chapter Three). ‘River’ suggests that the lodger’s mother or an equivalent maternal figure could rescue him from his desires and that he experiences, not guilt, but discomfort over his urges. By this logic, guilt should rest on the shoulders of women for allowing it to happen. His childish depiction unexpectedly appears to ask for sympathy from the reader and portrays a complex portrait of masculinity and desire: “having left him alone in the house with that look in his eye | as if he were yearning again for a mother’s arms | to come down and save him from what’s going to happen next.”⁷⁴ ‘Colonnades’ demonstrates how even when the protagonist has been terrorised and abused, she must perform in a typically feminine manner, offering the lodger comfort and forgiveness as he emerges as the victim in these events:

Because the sun is much too hot for him
and she is strong and he is skin and bone,

she picks him up without a word and carries him
to somewhere cool the sick like him call home.⁷⁵

There is a presumption that the aunts are oblivious to the lodger’s behaviour and that only the protagonist, by virtue of his treatment of her has “witnessed his altered blood.”⁷⁶ The emphasis on offering him understanding once more underlines female complicity and guilt in relation to the sexual abuse. Coppelia Kahn’s account of gender differences in ego formation may offer some insight into the heterosexual relationship dynamics seen in Hill:

Because of the lengthy identification with the mother, a girl’s ego boundaries are less firmly, less defensively established than a boy’s, and she experiences herself as less differentiated from, more continuous with and related to the external object world than a boy.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid., p. 66.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁷ *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 76.

This allows female identities to be more flexible and accommodating while masculinity relies on defensive emotional and physical violence in Hill, lest its constructed nature be revealed by anything other than dogmatic adherence (or at least it is this stereotype that Hill negotiates within her work, often with implied irony). Kahn's argument also implicates women as somehow responsible for and complicit in the suffering of men, a theme which becomes an increasing interest in Hill's work.

A Little Book of Meat also looks at emerging female sexuality and in so doing, offers versions of male sexuality. The protagonist is a sheltered woman who is almost thirty, living on a farm with her mother when she experiences the stirrings of sexual desire for the first time. Her life changes when a slaughterman calls one day: "something irresistible | lurched into my life, | something unknown, from nowhere."⁷⁸ This statement encapsulates the atmosphere of the book which explores desire as a sentimental fantasy with destructive emotions that lie beneath. The protagonist daydreams about the slaughterman without knowing anything about him, revealing how desire operates to construct a version of others: "I don't know if you've ever | waited for someone to smile at you | but if you have, you'll know how I'm feeling now."⁷⁹ However, romantic longing overlays more frightening corporeal thoughts: 'Don't Let's Talk About Being in Love' is infused with phallic and yonic symbolism as the narrator talks of "marsupials | whose little blunted pouches | I'd like to crawl inside, lips first"⁸⁰ and "[fingers] reaching into your private parts like beaks."⁸¹ The animal imagery defamiliarises sex, evoking the slippery and uncontrollable nature of desire which has no regard for boundaries, echoing Butler's theories in *Bodies that Matter* on the irrepressible return of bodies deemed to be unacceptable within the heterosexual matrix. Hill fuses the psychological and physical aspects of desire as her protagonist addresses the subject of love: "– as if LOVE were a dome of glass beneath a lake | entered through a maze of dripping tunnels | I hoped and prayed I'd never be found inside."⁸² Despite her preoccupation with the slaughterman, her infatuated state frightens her; the labyrinthine imagery is again evocative of female sexual organs, suggestive of penetration and stifling

⁷⁸ Selima Hill, *A Little Book of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p. 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

envelopment. The ‘dripping tunnels’ create a monstrous femininity which, to be ‘found’ inside is an ultimate fear of the protagonist; that she be equated with and reduced to her biology.

There are numerous examples throughout *A Little Book of Meat* of female sexuality as burdensome: something to be driven away or tolerated, never enjoyed. After seeing the slaughterman, the protagonist describes herself as someone:

who’s heavy with desire
like sacks of meat;

who gets to her feet, crashes about
like a two-legged escaped rhinoceros⁸³

While the chaotic scene captures the giddy, uncertain feeling of being in love, ‘sacks of meat’ introduces thoughts of death and formless, un-thinking bodies, establishing sex as a purely physical act. The protagonist’s behaviour is not demure or modest in keeping with traditional expectations placed on femininity; rather she is a clumsy anomaly incapable of functioning in the real world. The poem ends with the protagonist’s abrupt embarrassment: “I’m sorry. | Ignore me.”⁸⁴ Having lost autonomy over her body she is driven by something frightening, uncontrollable and unfamiliar; with her apology she internalises her shame and in turn perpetuates her gendered role. In ‘The Bed’⁸⁵ the protagonist describes her childhood bed as being the site of her sexual awakening, however just as she discovers desire she must let it go:

[I]sent my long gold clitoris to sea
between my legs, streamlined and sweet
like a barge
laden with sweetmeats and monkeys
bound for some distant land.⁸⁶

It seems unfathomable that this part of the protagonist must be sent away or repressed, particularly in light of the sumptuous imagery, appealing to the senses with its bright colours and descriptions of taste. While female sexuality is described in precious, valuable

⁸³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

terms it is unattainable in the world which the protagonist occupies; the poem concludes with the terrible realisation that as a woman, she must submit to the dominant economy of desire, as her own is untenable. The ambivalent feelings attached to female erotic experiences are described by Audre Lorde:

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.⁸⁷

This dynamic is central to Hill's exploration of desire and gender identity. On smelling the farmers outside her window, the protagonist describes "a smell of blood and milking and desire | I was suddenly a part of, and sunk in, | like necks in Startena."⁸⁸ Desire is described in corporeal terms, through violence (blood) and the maternal (milk), with the last line referring to bird feed designed to promote early development in game birds. Once again Hill uses animals to connote her protagonists' vulnerable position which, in this collection feels all the more poignant for her male interest being a slaughterman. In 'Sleepless Nights' the protagonist likens her longing for this man to "spending the night with no clothes on | in a Daimler full of chows | with the windows closed."⁸⁹ Even in her own fantasies, she is the helpless object of desire as the chaotic scene overwhelms and smothers her.

'North Carolina' considers how men and women are often defined in relation to each other as well as the absurdity and revelation that arise from attempting to do so:

Everything about you's a bit like me –
in the same way that North Carolina's a bit like Ribena
but rhymes with Vagina, which is nearly the same,
but much darker –
brutal and sweet like a disease⁹⁰

The protagonist's struggle to understand the peculiarities of masculinity appears to stem in part from her incredulity that two individuals of the same species could differ so much. Hill uses the bizarre and humorous comparison of an American state and a British soft drink to

⁸⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), p. 53.

⁸⁸ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 45.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

imply the protagonist's perceived inexplicable divergence between men and women. The discord is absolutely attributed to biological appearance, linking gender formation to the body. The vagina is described as an object of desire, an enticing and dangerous guilty pleasure for all who experience it. Femininity is loathsome by implication and shrouded in shame; its brutality may lie in its insidious enslavement of both sexes in Hill's work.

In the second stanza the protagonist seeks to reclaim her autonomy by asking the reader to "imagine a cloud. Imagine eating a cloud."⁹¹ The ineffable image hangs for a moment before taking a startling turn; she tells the male character "I have turned you into a cloud. | Prepare to be eaten."⁹² This violent act reverses the power roles seen elsewhere in Hill's work in which men metaphorically eat women in order to dominate them. Masculinity is erased but the process may also be viewed as female embodiment of masculinity in order to feel empowered or to construct a more rounded gender identity. This moment evokes the impasse encountered by traditionally masculine and feminine identities; while each theoretically assembles in relation to the other, in practice Hill's characters violently clash and struggle to co-exist within intimate relationships. Continuing her exploration of plural gender identities, Hill uses hyperbole and cliché to animate aspects of masculinity and femininity that have been overwritten or silenced. In 'What The Night Was Made For' the protagonist asks:

Can a very small grandmother,
even one accustomed to tinkering
with second-hand tractors,
carve up a large man at a wall sink
with the swiftly-rotating discs
of a cement-cutter,
and stow him in eighteen plastic rubbish sacks,
and leave no blood?⁹³

The figure described appears to embody the extremes of conventional femininity; both a mother and a grandmother, small, frail and vulnerable. However this image is disrupted initially when we learn of her mechanical skills and thoroughly defamiliarised by the events that follow. The protagonist links extreme violence with male and female interactions – as if

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹² Ibid., p. 19.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 25.

the latter cannot possibly take place without such horrors – seeming to question whether she is up to the task. Set on the family farm and referencing a ‘large man’ reminiscent of the slaughterman suggests a radical course of action should her relationship with him fail. The third stanza directly addresses her concern and consternation regarding masculinity: “and can a little nun-like daughter like me| be left alone| with a blood-splattered man like you?”⁹⁴ These lines further demonstrate how one gender cliché supports and cultivates the other. That she describes herself as a little daughter instead of a woman makes her appear more innocent and child-like, as if staving off this role; her immaturity emerges in ‘Leaving Mother’ when, despite being almost thirty, the protagonist asks the slaughterman: “do you think I’d leave the farm and Mother?”⁹⁵ The protagonist’s innocence is also equated with purity and implied virginity in relation to the ‘nun-like’ reference.

The protagonist expresses her frustrations over her relationship (real or imagined) with the slaughterman in ‘My Senior Peacock’ asking “why don’t you do the not-done thing occasionally, | and encourage *me*?”⁹⁶ The clear, succinct tone attracts attention amongst poems populated with violence and animals, constituting an honest appeal for harmony and equality within heterosexual relationships: “we could be friends| and talk to one another.”⁹⁷ However these sentiments are curtailed in ‘Tomatoes’ in which the protagonist’s paralysing anxiety regarding sex returns:

I am about to be made love to
for the first time;
I am about to be crushed
like a bagful of dusty biscuits
under a rolling-pin.⁹⁸

The fear of anticipating this moment leads to an imagined power imbalance in which one lover obliterates the other, in this case replacing the protagonist with a gendered overlay of satirically submissive femininity. To write about intimate heterosexual relationships with such frankness and apparent disregard for embarrassment over how her work may be

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

received, is one of the ways in which Hill forces her reader to view stagnant gender economies afresh. It becomes a practical example of Denise Riley's proposal in *Am I That Name?*: "a category may be at least conceptually shaken if it is challenged and refurbished, instead of only being perversely strengthened by repetition."⁹⁹ Later in the poem, Hill's protagonist leaves the distressing scenes of her imagination for the solace of "the deserted yard"¹⁰⁰ but cannot dismiss these thoughts:

All I will hear is the zoo,
and zoo noises:
caged animals' unseemly
scratches and grunts.¹⁰¹

Hill juxtaposes humans and animals, as she does throughout her work, in order to foreground and defamiliarise gendered characteristics. This final stanza is one of a number of references throughout *A Little Book of Meat* to zoos and farmyard animals. The cages metaphorically represent the way in which her characters are contained by narrowly constructed gender identities and locked into unhealthy behaviour patterns. There is an element of disgust that humans can be reduced to animalistic urges and reflection on the origins of gender as social or biological, given the way in which feminine and masculine characteristics often appear so connatural in other animals.

'How Many Men' obscures traditional portraits of masculinity to the point that it appears quite alien in relation to femininity or indeed human behaviour. The diverse similes used to describe men include: "as mysterious | as a clipped crop circle," "cold as frozen bananas" and "eerie as a tunnel | barges have to go through."¹⁰² These descriptions again evoke phallic and yonic symbols with the suggestion of penetration and engulfment, as if sex is ingrained into any male-female interaction. Despite being bewildered and intimidated by this cold and mysterious man (another clichéd masculine trait), the protagonist blindly claims "you, my hero shaped hero, | you, my indifferent bear."¹⁰³ In order for him to appear heroic and guiding, the protagonist must make herself appear vulnerable and weak, to

⁹⁹ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 113.

¹⁰⁰ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 28.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

appeal to him. There is also a suggestion of male biological destiny, as if the male shape – the body alone – determines that men be heroes. The protagonist is conflicted as, while she clings to the slaughterman for comfort, she is aware of his apathy. However, in this configuration of heterosexual relationships, this is all that is on offer and must be pursued. Hill described this feeling in interview, how her protagonist is “desperate about feeling desperate, because she doesn’t really want to be noticed anyway or she’s always noticed in the wrong way.”¹⁰⁴ Hill’s characters call attention to the often limited options available to gendered identities.

The way in which identity comes to be shaped is considered in ‘The Convent of Sleep’ where clear notions of good and bad are laid down: “if you are a good, calm person, | you join the convent of sleep,”¹⁰⁵ thus associating a demure, passive and typically feminine demeanour with holiness. However, by implication the protagonist falls into a category of failed femininity:

but if you are a worrier and a fantasiser,
you roam about the borders of your dream-world
getting into all sorts of trouble,
and drawing the wrath of people¹⁰⁶

These observations link to embarrassment theory, whereby an individual is negatively sanctioned for socially unacceptable behaviour. The protagonist’s actions appear improper in this case based on the fact that she is a woman. As she wanders the borders of the dream world, they come to symbolise the borders of her gender. Being rewarded or punished for how one conducts oneself within intimate relationships and wider society, evokes shame and guilt which act as a shaping force upon gender formation.

The protagonist is aware that not all women view gender identity as narrow or restrictive which makes the task of challenging it even harder. Her tone is often overwhelmed (referring to herself as a ‘little nun-like daughter’) but on occasion she appears strong and defiant as seen in the poem ‘Do It Again’:

all we’re allowed’s anxiety like fishbones

¹⁰⁴ Selima Hill Exeter interview, September 2010, p. 284.

¹⁰⁵ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

lodged in our throats
as beauty parlours hum;
all we're allowed is having pretty faces
and cold and glittery hearts like water-ices.
Mine's more like a centrally-heated boiler-room,
evil and warm;
like kidneys on a plate.¹⁰⁷

A great deal of anxiety is attached to fulfilling the female role, a tension between what is expected and what is felt. The protagonist articulates her disdain for beauty obsessed women with 'hearts like water-ices' and seeks to dissolve – literally and metaphorically – such narrow constructions of femininity with her own 'evil and warm' heart. Significantly, the kidney is not gendered, demonstrating how for the protagonist, there is no connection to be made between gender and the body. This version of anomalous femininity emanates feelings of shame over being 'evil' but is balanced with a sense of empowerment at speaking out, as well as irony regarding the vilification of women for attempting to do so. Those who feel unable to speak out may experience a prickle of embarrassment and self-recognition. This attitude of intense hatred towards the 'typical' female that society expects is also echoed in *The Accumulation Of Small Acts Of Kindness*, "Hepburn – 'fragile, feminine' – please die."¹⁰⁸

In 'Cow', Hill subverts the poem's title as a typical insult towards women in order to resolutely express the protagonist's desire to avoid and escape the interactions that take place between men and women and the expectations placed on gendered bodies:

I want to be a cow
and not my mother's daughter.
I want to be a cow
and not in love with you.¹⁰⁹

In order to feel free she desires a simple life where nothing can be asked of her: "a hammock of soupy milk | whose floating and rocking and dribbling's undisturbed | by the echoes of hooves to the city."¹¹⁰ The unwieldy and leaking body is suggestive of a woman's body that cannot be controlled or contained, although in this relaxed scenario there is no

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰⁸ Selima Hill, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 50.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

shame in this. The protagonist celebrates the cow's life: "she doesn't do housework or worry about her appearance"¹¹¹ and pleads to be left alone: "don't come looking for me."¹¹² The final lines seem to recall Riley's assertions in *Am I That Name?* where naming something calls it into being: "I'm going to be a cow | and you won't know me."¹¹³ Only through anonymity and shape-shifting does the protagonist feel distanced from the pressures of femininity.

However, desire is clearly recognised throughout *A Little Book of Meat* as a powerful and complex force governing an individual's autonomy. The tension it generates builds into 'Desire's a Desire', a poem which describes a visceral, bodily experience which brings to the protagonist's attention an awareness of desire as an energy beyond herself with the capacity to influence or change her: "it taunts me | like the muzzle of a gun."¹¹⁴ Apparently set in a hospital with references to "cold green sheets," "that smell of starch" and "the gentle manners | of my only nurse"¹¹⁵ the poem feeds into themes elsewhere in Hill of the forced intimacy of institutional settings and the role they play in the shaping of gender identity (institutional settings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). The institutional setting has wider implications for patriarchal powers behind a powerful gaze that makes the protagonist squirm:

it tattoos my shins;
it itches my thighs
like rampant vaginal flora;
it tickles my cheeks¹¹⁶

Hill details the many different ways in which desire violently and intrusively makes its mark on the body from without and within, the 'rampant vaginal flora' appearing to consume and erase this area. The imagery is sexually suggestive: "it sinks into my soul like chilled honey | packed into the depths of treacherous wounds."¹¹⁷ The sweetness and viscosity of honey calls to mind how desire entices but is also difficult to elude or separate oneself from, with

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 50.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

‘treacherous wounds’ sparking mistrust surrounding female genitalia and sexuality. Butler describes how the self acquires its structure under the gaze of the Other: “the Other’s look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it.”¹¹⁸ The implication is that the slaughterman has set these events in motion, in directing his ‘look’ towards the protagonist or prompting her to see herself through his eyes. She simply states “my skin is white | I neither eat nor sleep”¹¹⁹ suggesting a virginal, blank body onto which desires are projected and notions of femininity linked to small appetites and restlessness. Given the link between desire and appetite, that the protagonist does not eat is also indicative of self-denial of her own desires. Hill continues her description of the impact of desire: “it nuzzles my plucked armpits like fat dogs,”¹²⁰ adding to the plethora of unpleasant sensations but also signifying the female body as a site of cultural inscription regarding attitudes towards body hair. Her body is literally walked all over “like a piano being played | by regimented fingers,”¹²¹ with suggestions of compliance, that her body is an instrument specifically built for this purpose and also by “geese at dawn,”¹²² continuing the domination. The manipulative and pervasive aspect of desire is described by Butler: “because philosophers cannot obliterate desire, they must formulate strategies to silence or control it; in either case, they must, in spite of themselves, desire to do something about desire.”¹²³ This circular quality is captured in the final two lines of Hill’s poem, echoing the trapped sensation experienced by certain identities within the society they occupy: “my only desire’s a desire | to be free from desire.”¹²⁴ Although the protagonist appears to passively give herself up to desire, articulating these emotions acts as a form of plea to be free from it. The motivation behind such protests is clearly linked to gender and so Hill draws attention to the outright violence required to sustain the delusion of naturalised masculinity and femininity. She reveals the fallacy of naturalised gender identities through the exploration of desire, revealing women’s conflicted relationships and the ways in which they are produced as ‘feminine’ subjects. The

¹¹⁸ *Subjects of Desire*, p. 141.

¹¹⁹ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 59.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²³ *Subjects of Desire* p. 2.

¹²⁴ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 59.

protagonist's palpable discomfort over expressing her own desires, from the perspective of object, identifies shame as an underpinning force in this process.

As *A Little Book of Meat* comes to a close it appears that the relations between the protagonist and the slaughterman may have been a figment of her imagination. In 'Much Against Everyone's Advice' she states "I have decided to tell you everything | – poor worm"¹²⁵ suggesting that to make him aware of her desires would burden him. However in 'Me' she ponders what might have been if 'the man' had noticed her and in so doing, describes her view of her own appearance:

If the man mending fences
had seen the big familiar girl with bloodshot eyes
heading across the pasture
towards the woods;
if her skin was yellow and blotched,
and something was wrong with her legs¹²⁶

The disparaging depiction is neither typically pretty nor elegant and by implication unfeminine which one might expect to be a source of embarrassment or shame for the protagonist, particularly in this context. This may be how she sees herself or how she believes others view her, however the title 'Me' and the matter-of-fact tone suggests self-acceptance and even defiance. She clearly and honestly confesses her intentions to the imagined addressee: "it was me. | And where was I going, | and why was I going there."¹²⁷ The poem, comprised of several long sentences in enjambed lines, builds up to the final explanatory word; "You."¹²⁸ Regardless of the accuracy of events, the protagonist has emerged from the experience having reached a realisation that initially offers hope for those identities locked into toxic intimate relationships. There appears to be a level of contentment to be found in refusing to engage in certain gendered performances designed to appeal to the desires of others. However this sense of freedom is diminished somewhat by the implication that no one would accept her in her 'natural' state; she retreats into a familiar world where the temptations of desire are removed: "I want to be alone with my duck, | who won the hearts of the nation's good-natured women | with his little irregular

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

snuffles.”¹²⁹ The male duck with his perceived easy-going and accepting character is the safest version of masculinity she can endure. The final poem opens with the statement “peace of mind is the correct answer”¹³⁰ followed by a list of things which are preferable to the experiences documented throughout *A Little Book of Meat*, including ““Banjo, my cherry-red Santa Gertrudis bull with big white eyes | and chubby lips,” “*The Body of Christ*” and “Mother, like butter.”¹³¹ These alternatives are clearly no solution and do not eradicate desire but rather divert or distract it. The animals on the farm do not judge the protagonist as humans (and specifically men) might; her mother’s presence offers security – an alternative perspective to abusive mother-daughter relationships elsewhere in the oeuvre – allowing the protagonist to remain child-like and delay engaging with the difficulties linked to ‘becoming a woman’. Religion provides the protagonist with guidance as to how to negotiate and ultimately abstain from being seduced by desire. One last point to make is on the use of setting which is especially effective in this collection (but see also the lonely, unfamiliar houses in *Bunny* and *Fruitcake*, the kitchens and bedrooms of *Violet* and *Red Roses* or the hospital in *Lou-Lou*). An aspect of writing sequences of poems based in a fixed setting is that Hill creates what Fischer-Lichte describes (in relation to performance art) as ‘atmospheric space’:

The bunker, the street car depot, the former grand hotel – from each of these emanates a very specific atmosphere. Spatiality results not just from the specific special uses of the actors and spectators but also from the particular atmospheres these places exude.¹³²

Similarly, although the farmyard setting in *A Little Book of Meat* is a literary, fictional setting, Hill’s vivid descriptions of the land, the farm animals and the farm machinery in particular, infuse the poems’ events and her character’s actions with a greater sense of foreboding.

3. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

As Hill’s characters become more familiar with the expectations and rituals of heterosexual relationships, instances of violence increase. Butler explains how

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 64.

¹³² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 114.

Desire becomes a way in which we impulsively situate ourselves in the world: it is the primary act, an act incessantly performed by which we define ourselves in situation. In effect, desire is the building of ourselves that we perform daily, and only rarely under the aegis of reflective thought.¹³³

Within domestic settings and marriages in Hill, gendered performances are undertaken with increasing urgency and gusto. However, representations of violence defamiliarise these scenes, offering the reader an alternative position from which to reflect upon them and consider if any hope can be derived. Hill's 1997 collection *Violet* is divided into two halves; 'My Sister's Sister' and 'My Husband's Wife' and is comprised of eighty-five, mostly short free-verse poems. The first half depicts the lives of two sisters growing up together. It is not clear if this is intended to be a real or imaginary sister which the female narrator describes. However it allows for an alternative ego to be established through which to explore the female body and experiences – in a similar way to the second half which considers the ex-husband and his lover – at a distance from the more exposing lyrical style of early collections. This chapter will focus on the second half for how it negotiates the breakdown of a marriage following an affair. The opening poem 'Why I Left You' cites an evening of forced sex as the breaking point of the marriage:

When you had quite finished
dragging me across your bed
like a band of swaggering late-night removal men
dragging a piano¹³⁴

It is not a marital bed that they share but *his* bed as if anything that takes place there is on the husband's terms. The protagonist is described and treated as an inanimate object, incapable of objecting and, in a link to *A Little Book of Meat*, the piano metaphor again evokes a complete absence of autonomy; the body is played by others but cannot play itself. To describe her husband as a 'band' of men intensifies the destructive act, happening multiple times or carried out by multiple men. In the aftermath, she leaves the room to contemplate her position: "you stand in the garden at night | with blood getting crisp on your thighs."¹³⁵ This image appears oddly calming for the protagonist, despite the violent

¹³³ *Subjects of Desire*, p. 97.

¹³⁴ Selima Hill, *Violet* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1997), p. 35.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

connotations, as drying blood signals the end of an ordeal (for now). An omniscient voice appears to speak to and advise her:

and feel the stars spiralling right down
out of the sky into your ears,
burrowing down inside your ears
like drip-fed needles
saying *Get out. Now.*
By 'you' I mean me.
One of us had to:
*I did.*¹³⁶

'By 'you' I mean me' suggests that up to this point, the only desires expressed were the husband's and for the first time, the protagonist is taking control. These 'drip-fed' thoughts may have been percolating for some time until they can no longer be ignored; something terrible would happen otherwise. The separation is cathartic for the protagonist who feels at last that she can confidently and without cynicism express her desire for a lover on her terms in 'Please Can I Have a Man':

who makes me creamy curries from fresh lemon-grass,
who walks like Belmondo in *A Bout de Souffle*;
who sticks all my carefully-selected postcards –
sent from exotic cities
he doesn't expect to come with me to,
but would if I asked, which I will do –
with nobody else's, up on his bedroom wall¹³⁷

The gushing, excited tone generates passion, humour and an enthusiasm that was completely lacking in the opening poem. In this idealised love affair domestic duties are shared and the protagonist exercises her absolute freedom. In a reference to her ex-husband, her perfect man would know "that piling himself on top of me | like a duvet stuffed with library books and shopping bags | is all too easy."¹³⁸ Describing herself as a "freshly-scrubbed piglet,"¹³⁹ she would prefer instead that he "opens his arms like a trough for me to dive into."¹⁴⁰ This dynamic discards the idea of the carefully constructed female

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

form, designed to be pretty and appeal to men and reverses sexual roles; the man receives the woman and she in turn penetrates him.

It quickly becomes apparent that her husband's affair was the catalyst of the marital breakdown: "I came home from work | to find my kitchen had been completely taken over | by two strangers."¹⁴¹ The husband too becomes a stranger through his emotional betrayal, which is violently depicted:

And she is the blood
and you are the blood-stained patient
who's coughed her up
in the flightpaths of my joy.¹⁴²

This account of the devastation caused is reflective of the way in which patriarchal views may condition women to compete with and rally against one another in order to perpetuate female disempowerment. The husband is 'sick' and by implication less culpable while the mistress is cited as the primary obstruction to happiness. The protagonist's shame over her submissive response to these events is palpable; she cleans up the 'blood' they leave with "clattering buckets | like a complete idiot."¹⁴³ In 'Nuage Argente' the protagonist describes the lovers:

sucking each other to bits
like two chunks of chopped fish
made fat from feeding on the blood and tears
of other people's partners
and your own.¹⁴⁴

Desire appears at its most vicious when presented metaphorically as violence fuelled by violence, which may ultimately end in self-destruction. Further, emotional distress is fetishised and unsettled. Violence increasingly becomes a stylistic device within Hill's poetry to represent the silent power games that take place within intimate relationships whereby power is subject to subtle shifts and emotional damage is inflicted covertly. Hill elaborated on this aspect to her work during the Exeter interview:

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

I think maybe I hype up the violence in order to try and help people understand where I'm coming from emotionally. So I can talk about blood and hair much more easily than I can talk about abstract things like anger or fear, or more subtle things. It can be hard to write without sounding like you are whinging which I don't want to do.¹⁴⁵

Hill considers misogyny from a fresh perspective through the protagonist's attitude towards the mistress. The protagonist's murderous desires become preoccupied with numerous ways of eliminating her rival. On finding her turquoise scarf, she takes a pair of scissors to it: "[I] split her little turquoise jungles open | and sent her parrots screeching to the door."¹⁴⁶ The protagonist's desire for revenge takes a darker turn in 'The World's Entire Wasp Population' where her anger regarding the adultery is projected onto the mistress's body – an act of revenge which, crucially, she would like her husband to carry out:

I'd like you to smear this feeling
all over and into her naked body like jam
and invite the world's entire wasp population,
the sick, the halt, the fuzzy,
to enjoy her.¹⁴⁷

The perverse pleasure this fantasy affords her may derive in part from relishing for once the domination of a body other than her own. The protagonist's disgust over the mistress's actions evokes Lorde's observations on the way in which female expressions of desire are socially vilified. In 'How to Kill a Wolf' two versions of femininity are juxtaposed, firstly the protagonist: "being a wife is being good like me | she doesn't lodge herself | in other people's ears"¹⁴⁸ versus the mistress whom the protagonist imagines following to "hotel dining rooms."¹⁴⁹ Again, the notion of gendered good and bad behaviour is raised and impliedly underpinned by shame; the protagonist's own sense of shame is evident in her parodic self-labelling which barely conceals failure, despite her best efforts. Simultaneously, she wishes to shame and embarrass the mistress, curtailing her expressions of desire by calling to mind the social disapproval that surrounds it, a message most powerfully sent in the form of a humiliating public event where 'the world's entire wasp population' are

¹⁴⁵ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 282.

¹⁴⁶ *Violet*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

invited. To not be a quiet, submissive wife is to then be seen as the mistress who is abhorred for savagely expressing sexual desire: “if anyone stopped her now | she’d cut their head off.”¹⁵⁰ The final lines depict the mistress as a hellish antithesis of femininity: “she’s only happy when she’s short of time. | If you say a word about the future | she’ll gag you with her sulphurated veil.”¹⁵¹ These actions call to mind how promiscuous behaviour is often socially rewarded in men, bolstering masculinity; Hill’s poem suggests that for women, it signifies corruption and raises suspicion. This is powerfully communicated through the demure feminine symbol of the veil; it becomes an instrument of violence capable of inciting fear and mistrust in relation to female sexuality.

Compared to her husband’s glamorous new lover, the protagonist feels old; she explores the shame associated with being a woman and becoming socially invisible beyond her child-bearing years in ‘Being Fifty’:

Being fifty makes me feel large,
large and cold
like someone else’s fridge.
I harbour scarlet fish
and fat gold eggs
that men in suits
with hands like vets’
remove.¹⁵²

The protagonist ‘belongs’ to someone else in that her identity has been shaped from without, comprised of pre-conceived gendered overlays causing her to feel distant from, and struggle to recognise, herself. Her stolen eggs are symbolic of patriarchal control over women’s bodies which are relegated to the status of domestic pets. The redundancy that the protagonist perceives in herself and subsequent attempts to become a viable identity within patriarchal society is likened to someone “that’s suddenly learnt how to swim.”¹⁵³ However, she is weighed down by a long list of gendered baggage she has acquired over the years including “cheeses, cushions | [...] babies, balding men, | [...] hospitals.”¹⁵⁴ The depressing last option is the placebo of “tiny pills, like polystyrene granules, | people advise

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

one, or not, | to start taking,”¹⁵⁵ reflecting the lack of choice and misery endured by those individuals that do not fit neatly into two-dimensional gender roles. This is emphasised by the addition of ‘or not’, suggesting that such a conversation is common and normalised. Similarly ‘Being a Grandmother’ comically conveys a woman’s diminished sex appeal into old age: “men walk past with buckets on their heads. | Some of them, alas, no longer know you.”¹⁵⁶ An important aspect of Hill’s thirty-year publishing career is that her work offers an account of female concerns and experience at different points in life and how they may change with age.

The husband and his mistress appear to occupy a distant and inaccessible world in which their bodies still have currency within structures of desire. Each constructs the other’s body in a way that is pleasing to them and thoroughly unfamiliar to the protagonist in ‘The Smell of Women’ who describes how her husband drives women around:

like pet princesses,
the smell of their bags,
the smell of their leopard-skin-gift-wrapped
powders and creams
from pink boutiques in caffeinated cities
drove me away¹⁵⁷

These lines evoke vacuous femininity which is preoccupied with beauty and sex-appeal, covering smells and blemishes in order to present a male-pleasing exterior. Presumably the protagonist has been ‘driven away’ to a hotel room “where sheets can be spotless as they please.”¹⁵⁸ The domestic imagery captures the shame and loneliness over having ‘failed’ as a woman. Similarly, ‘Your New Shoes’ deals with the failure of the masculine performance, as the protagonist finds her husband defamiliarised, not least resulting from the shock of his deceptive behaviour but also his accompanying makeover: [of the mistress] “to her, this must be you being you.”¹⁵⁹ The protagonist views her husband’s desire to appear younger and more attractive to his lover as middle-aged insecurity:

To me, you’re like a man who’s been undressed

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

and wheeled away to some remote annexe
where women in white skirts and rubber gloves
plump you up and rouge you like a corpse
then wheel you back into the world again,
complete with hair and teeth and new shoes.¹⁶⁰

The preposterous description emphasises the protagonist's ridiculing of him, masking feelings of shame and inadequacy over the betrayal and rejection. It also highlights how in this case, the ageing man undergoes some of the lifelong body maintenance and beautifying procedures that Hill's female characters feel pressured into performing in order to appear sexually attractive (and authentically feminine).

As the protagonist struggles to deal with her emotions, she recalls childhood memories in order to comfort herself: "my happiest day | was the day we all played baseball | after exams were over."¹⁶¹ This tendency becomes increasingly alarming in 'My Wedding Ring' where she appears to revert back further to an infantile state in which tinned milk becomes a replacement mother:

this sudden undignified craving
for tinned milk
I keep giving in to, and sucking,
like *Who shall I cling to,*
*who shall I cling to now?*¹⁶²

Childhood is identified as a time of freedom and safety when the pressure of conforming to a strict gender role appears unimportant or has yet to be considered. There is also the suggestion that, for this protagonist at least, femininity involves being submissive and dependent: the husband appearing to take over control from the mother. Although the outlook for many of Hill's characters within intimate relationships may appear bleak, her narratives are redeemed for the catharsis they offer in addressing shameful emotions and taboo subjects, as well as finding strands of positivity. She explained this aspect of her work during the Exeter interview:

Nevertheless, it dips down into darkness again and again. I can feel myself always trying to raise the work up, that everything is alright [...] I can only hope that the act

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 49.

of writing is somehow positive even if what you write appears to be brutal. I think there is some, if not benevolence then at least hope in the mere fact that I'm creating an artefact from such pain.¹⁶³

In *Violet* too, the protagonist suffers but throughout the process we see her rediscover her desire and in turn, her identity, after many unhappy years of oppressive married life. She appears to acknowledge that everyone struggles in one way or another, regardless of gender:

Everyone is on the same side.
What side is that?
Of wanting to be good.
Every day I tell myself *Remember:*
somewhere in your heart
*there must be tenderness.*¹⁶⁴

This outlook appeals beyond gender politics so, even when violently opposed, Hill's characters – male and female – are attempting to reconcile how they see themselves with the gendered expectations placed upon them. If masculinity and femininity are constructed in relation to each other then Hill's characters must dismantle one another through physical and emotional violence, shame, guilt and embarrassment, in order to attempt the difficult and painful task of assembling themselves. The protagonist in *Violet* even comes to view the mistress as someone capable of being loved and vulnerable: "what I saw was a tiny blue woman | swimming around inside a drop of gin. | And at that moment, by her side, I loved her."¹⁶⁵ It may be that she recognises her own insecurities within her rival.

The final poem in the book 'I Will Be Arriving Next Thursday in My Wedding-Dress' finds the protagonist having let go of the past through a form of reappropriation: "I will be arriving next Thursday morning | at seven o'clock | in a white satin wedding dress."¹⁶⁶ This return becomes representative of survival beyond marital breakdown, as the dress is

dragged over to one side by a large rucksack
containing nougat, maps
and a rocky island

¹⁶³ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 292.

¹⁶⁴ *Violet*, p. 56.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

crossed by the tracks of relays of stocky horses
carrying the world's fiercest
and most nimble seamstresses
towards a bed piled high for him and me
with eiderdowns that hold a million lips
peeled from the heads of skilfully-dried
small lovers.¹⁶⁷

The protagonist transforms the wedding dress (a traditional symbol of beauty, femininity and purity) therefore departing from the negative connotations it holds for her and embraces the adventure that the next stage of her life poses. However, the fact that she does not do away with this overlay altogether – and requires the presence of ‘nimble seamstresses’ – suggests that for female identity to remake itself, it must do so from a position entrenched in conventional feminine values. The tone changes with the final image of peeled lips, where the protagonist appears to reframe the terms of her previous oppression into a kind of fetish. It also darkly implies that her success in overcoming the emotional distress endured as a result of her husband and his lover is dependent upon their deaths.

Hill's 2006 collection *Red Roses* is prefaced with the statement “*this book is dedicated to the men I love*” which adds an interesting dimension to the short, free-verse poems which build up a picture of violence within heterosexual relationships. The poems are readable in a single movement and are unified by themes of domesticity, sex and denial as opposed to an obvious protagonist and underlying narrative. The narrator in each poem appears to be speaking to and for women in general (‘we’, ‘our’), while ‘they’ refers to men. Roses appear throughout as a subverted symbol of romance by means of which women may be cynically flattered and wooed in order to be coerced into sex. The rose also engenders the oxymoron of beauty, how highly it is valued and yet easily discarded as it ages. In ‘It's Dark Between Our Thighs’ a woman's genitalia is described as a garden “where everything and everyone gets lost | and all night long they crawl and grunt like babies | down avenues of bruises’ yellow roses.”¹⁶⁸ The vagina is disconcertingly described as a site frequented by ‘everything and everyone’ establishing women's bodies as public spaces incapable of self-government.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁶⁸ Selima Hill, *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 19.

The sinister secrecy surrounding this body part (dark, crawl, grunt) is also suggestive of the shame attached both to its appearance and to expressions of female sexuality. The echoing half-rhyme in the line 'bruises' yellow roses' implicitly links physical harm with the flower's traditional femininity while assonance elongates the sound of the words, as if prolonging and relishing such discomfort; the sound seems to swell like a bruise. The objectification and lack of autonomy over women's bodies is reiterated in 'Our Private Parts': "our private parts aren't private at all! | Strangers like to cuddle them and smell them | and poke them."¹⁶⁹ Describing men as babies links to a theme in Hill's work of the 'blamelessness' of abusers; they cannot be held accountable as they too are struggling against the restrictive gender roles. 'See the Flies' describes how "roses part like thighs on polished sideboards,"¹⁷⁰ connecting romance to sex where carnal desires masquerade as love and tenderness. The flies (another motif in Hill's work, particularly in the burnt baby poems) are described as "delirious with joy, | plunging blindly into fresh wounds."¹⁷¹ In a similar way here they demonstrate how weakness and vulnerability can be preyed upon and exploited; they instinctively hone in on and draw attention to a character's secret shame, bringing an element of disgust to it.

In 'They Told Us They Were Strong' the rose is used as a metaphor for the fallacy of static gender roles; this is reiterated repeatedly throughout Hill's oeuvre where characters battle to uphold certain ideals and inevitably fail: "some of us fooled ourselves, briefly, | then fell apart, | like the perfect rose."¹⁷² Embarrassment serves as a reminder of the constructed composition of identity and often stimulates the process of 'falling apart' – or being 'torn apart' – into multiple and contradictory facets. When the topic of love is plainly addressed it is associated with sex and violence: "love is like a bag of warm eyeballs | passed from hand to hand in the dark"¹⁷³ and "love is like a large warm knife. | We keep it in a bag in our handbags."¹⁷⁴ Hill draws upon horror imagery to unnerve the reader into reconsidering clichéd poetic subjects like love; physical contact becomes repulsive and unsettling with the potential for a nasty surprise if the lights were to be turned on. Describing a knife as warm

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

makes it seem alive and an extension of the protagonist's body that, juxtaposed with the handbag, defamiliarises femininity into something menacing and all the more dangerous for its harmless appearance. The image also conjures the violence individuals wreak on one another within intimate relationships in the name of love.

The domestic settings in *Red Roses* see very little activity beyond sexual intercourse, eating and sleeping, placing the lives of the protagonists (aptly) on a par with animals:

Finally they grunt
and roll over
and silence settles over us
like sorrow.¹⁷⁵

Although this is specifically a post-coital moment, sleep also becomes the only respite from the aggression of other endeavours. However, loneliness is not enough of a motivating factor to prompt Hill's characters to re-evaluate their lives; it appears easier to remain in denial, distracted by relationships characterised by extreme violence. 'How Dangerous and Beautiful It is' argues that women masochistically place themselves into the role of victim within sexual scenarios. That they do so and derive enjoyment from the experience is a source of anxiety:

How dangerous and beautiful it is
to kneel in the dust at their feet.
Don't worry if we don't understand!
No one does!
This is what it's like!
This is what it's like to feel happy.¹⁷⁶

The poem is deeply ironic, depicting a caricature of submissive female and dominant male relationships, while exclamation marks suggest the exuberance of humour employed to deflect shame and guilt. The direct address and language forces the reader to engage with and reflect on the gender roles presented. While the protagonist would presumably not engage in this behaviour without personal gain (masculine or societal approval), the suffering it entails is evidence of how restricted her options are in terms of expressing desire. The feminine identity which emerges as a result is consciously and shamefully

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

submissive: “we slither to our knees”¹⁷⁷ and ignorant: “we don’t understand! | No one does!”¹⁷⁸ In using the plural form ‘their’, such behaviour becomes faceless, pervasive and normalised, emphasising the protagonist’s helplessness (‘this is what it’s like’). The poem continues:

And this is where we slither to our knees.
What’s the point of being upright anyhow?
It’s safer in special bays,
with blindfolds on, and rope between our legs.¹⁷⁹

The ironic tone underlines the absurd process whereby gender roles are socially formed and obediently performed without being challenged. The ‘special bays’ recall the farming imagery in *A Little Book of Meat and The Hat*; women are treated as animals bred for a specific purpose. Further, the women are led by rope and blindfolded (evoking the treatment of animals before slaughter). The final line of ‘How Dangerous and Beautiful It is’ becomes a powerful indictment of female sexuality and enslavement, the rope forming a noose for the protagonist’s desires. Blindfolded, she is unable to fixate on an object and form her own desires. Despite these constraints, her one desire appears to be to build herself according to the desires of the male gaze on her body. This is not without shame however as the verb ‘slither’ carries more than a hint of self-loathing. In revealing the limited choices available to the protagonist if she wishes to experience intimacy, Hill reveals the constructed and psychological nature of the protagonist’s entrapment; the possibility of an escape is offered through challenging accepted understandings of gender identity in this critique. This poem – as with many others discussed in this section particularly – also opens up discussions on the operation of irony in Hill’s poetry as a way of dealing with the difficulty of embarrassment, shame and guilt as they emerge out of the writing. Denise Riley’s work in *The Words of the Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*¹⁸⁰ is especially useful here; Hill’s repetition of harmful language about women in particular can be described in Riley’s terms as the ability of irony to “[make] mention of something by displaying it, holding it aloft to view in a pair of tongs. It makes a curio out of the bad word, a proper object for

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁸⁰ Denise Riley, *The Words of the Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000)

dispassionate investigation.”¹⁸¹ In this way, Hill is able to defamiliarise social attitudes towards gendered behaviour which are taken for granted, positioning her reader to reconsider them. The repetition of violent images and shameful articulations can also serve to distance oneself from trauma, as Riley explains: “The mechanical iteration and reiteration of harsh words has in itself generated at least this everyday and cheap anaesthetic of dissociation.”¹⁸² There is a sense that by returning the images of violence, Hill is perhaps attempting to make them less intimidating and therefore easier to dissect.

Similar feelings of body disconnection emerge, alongside passivity and loathing, in ‘They Ram Themselves with Thumps Between Our Thighs’ where the female form is unfamiliar and inhuman: “they jam themselves inside our leaky thighs | like mattresses inside abandoned mini-bars.”¹⁸³ The sexual act is described in terms of a violent beating upon the body, the ‘abandoned’ vagina describes lost hope while metaphorical discrepancies in the size of characters’ respective genitalia suggests a forced and painful event. Could it be that with ironic reiteration, the impact of these words and images fade somewhat?

In ‘They Take One Look’, the fact that women’s bodies must be shamefully hidden and sanitised yet conveniently accessible should they be required for sex, is offset by the humorous irony of: “pop us in a little drawer like lingerie, | smelling not of blood but summer meadows.”¹⁸⁴ Disgust and shame act as a suppressant to expressions of female sexuality in ‘They Like to Fill Us Up’:

They fill us up so full we tip and leak.
Our pubic hairs keep sticking to the sheet.
They fill us up and wish we’d go to hell
where we can be as sticky as we like.¹⁸⁵

The repeated references to ‘leaking’ evoke the uncontrollable aspect of the female body and suspicion regarding its apparently mysterious functions. The idea of a heaven and hell links to the way in which society punishes and rewards behaviour through embarrassment and shame; women learn to hate their bodies in *Red Roses* which lowers their self worth

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁸³ *Red Roses*, p. 27.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

and perpetuates their servitude to men. However, could these descriptions be once more linked to the operation of irony and what Riley describes as “taking on as my own whatever hand fate has played me, assuming it, and so (in theory) mastering its brutal contingency by making it my own.”¹⁸⁶ Hill is so forthright at times, that indeed she seems to be fiercely appropriating the conditions of traditional femininity and hurling them back on themselves; this is especially evident in her unflinchingly account of a relationship comprised of horrifying, clichéd gender roles of a violent male and submissive female who is complicit in her abuse in ‘Whack Us on the Head’:

Whack us on the head!
And again! And watch the blood bubble in our hair
and watch our skin turn from pink to blue
and watch us going limp.
And again!
Don’t they know our heads are hanging off?
No they don’t.
They haven’t a clue.¹⁸⁷

Within the context of intimate relationships, this could be read as a form of ‘silent violence’ and the forceful, identity shaping effects of certain behaviours. While the detailed account of injuries makes for uncomfortable reading, it also highlights the shameful truth of damaging gendered behaviours which pass for normal interactions. Any deviance from the pre-figured characteristics which are attributed to men and women, become exaggerated and so the body must impose itself as aggressively masculine or feminine to recoup. ‘They Twiddle Us’ also introduces the recurrent theme of forgiveness within Hill’s work on physical and sexual abuse; as masculine violence increases so must feminine tolerance and compassion:

They twiddle us as if we were machines.
They twiddle with our nipples and our noses.
They twiddle –
and when everyone’s gone home
they fall on us and tear us apart!¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ *The Words of Selves*, p. 128.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁸⁸ *Red Roses*, p. 71.

The word ‘twiddle’ makes these actions appear less harmful and even playful, reflecting how Hill’s characters often make light of their abusive treatment to give the impression that it is socially accepted, emphasising their helpless position and hidden shame. It is also a sign of denial over something too painful to confront and reflects stereotypical feminine traits of submission and forgiveness: “how can we forgive them when they’re blameless? | They don’t know what they’re doing.”¹⁸⁹ These lines demonstrate the denial that takes place in the minds of men and women in order to keep their identity anchored within conventional ideas of gendered behaviour. As Hill explains, “sometimes when I write, as I’m sure you know, it’s kind of ironic so when I say the men are wonderful. It’s what they think themselves clearly, and the same with women I suppose.”¹⁹⁰ Her two-sided critique of feminine and masculine identities in her poetry becomes what could be described in Kristevan terms as an effort towards the “demassification of the problem of difference.”¹⁹¹ In *Women’s Time*, Julia Kristeva suggests that lessons derived from feminist theories have the potential to liberate all identities from the suffering associated with confined gender roles:

And this not in the name of some reconciliation – feminism has at least had the merit of showing what is irreducible and even deadly in the social contract – but in order that the struggle, the implacable difference, the violence be conceived in the very place where it operates with the maximum intransigence, in other words, in personal and sexual identity itself, so as to make it disintegrate in its very nucleus.¹⁹²

While Hill’s ‘us and them’ approach to gender – particularly overt in this collection – could be said to risk reinforcing difference, in Kristevan terms, a writer seeking to take on the task of deconstructing gender must do so from within this familiar binary framework. In presenting clichéd versions of masculinity and femininity, this is just one of the ways in which Hill opens them up for consideration and criticism by her reader.

In *Red Roses*, domestic scenes are fraught with anxiety and violence; during mealtimes, men are depicted as ferocious dogs with insatiable appetites. Hill’s female characters meanwhile

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁹⁰ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 284.

¹⁹¹ Julia Kristeva, ‘Les temps des femmes’, transl. as ‘Women’s Time’ by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, Volume 7, No. 1, (Autumn 1981), p. 34.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 34.

frequently exercise restraint in relation to food with clear links to sexual appetite in ‘When We Put Their Dinner Down’:

We put their dinner down
they growl.
First they growl and then they start to bite.
They bite and chew anything in sight.¹⁹³

This description resonates with themes elsewhere in Hill where women are described as food or as being edible; ‘anything in sight’ implies that they too will be eaten. Evoking the cliché that a woman’s work is never done and image of the neurotic housewife, the poem ends “and even when they fall asleep at last | we rush and put their dinner down *again!*”¹⁹⁴ In ‘They Must Of Course Be Fed Completely Separately’ men’s feeding habits are elaborated on: “they must of course be fed completely separately | with separate knives and forks | at separate tables.”¹⁹⁵ These lines evoke the practice of feeding dogs separately who fight during mealtimes. This is further defamiliarised when we learn that the cutlery has been “carried day and night”¹⁹⁶ by cannibals, a figure traditionally associated with the complete debasement of humanity. Considering the drama surrounding mealtimes, accounts of women eating are notably absent from these scenes; the only example is of sexualised and brutal force-feeding: “they stuff our mouth with sausages like sandwiches | and anyone who wriggles will be tickled | and wrapped and rolled in body-parts like bandages.”¹⁹⁷ To resist such an assault is to be considered sick (‘bandages’) and treated with further disregard and contempt. Hill also returns in ‘Searching Searching’ to considering old associations that persist of women being the weaker sex, passive and requiring a man in order to feel complete:

Searching, searching,
on our stiff red legs,
here we come,
searching yet again,
searching through the bedrooms and the boardrooms
for somebody to *run to*

¹⁹³ *Red Roses*, p. 68.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

and *cling to*¹⁹⁸

This recurring thought reiterates the incapacitated nature of femininity, seemingly stuck between opting to embody a singular, restrictive version of 'woman' or nothing at all; they must suffer quietly or wander the world aimlessly with no hope of finding a figurative home that is flexible enough to accommodate their own perceived gender identity. In Hill's poetry women are under constant pressure to perform selflessly maternal roles for children and partners while secretly desiring to be mothered themselves. Riley describes the dilemma faced by feminine identities, reflecting the disbelief and dread which can be observed in Hill's characters: "can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror? How could someone 'be a woman' through and through, make a final a home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia?"¹⁹⁹

Death is presented as the only escape from feelings of gender claustrophobia and in 'Our Dream' it is a typically feminine death: "our dream is to design the perfect dress | whose icy sheath will grip us like a vice | and hold us steady till we freeze to death."²⁰⁰ Elsewhere in Hill, dresses are designed to thwart female sexuality, making the wearer physically uncomfortable, unpleasant to touch or smell. In this poem, the wearer has seemingly designed the dress herself as opposed to embodying the projection of another; through expressing her desires the protagonist reveals herself. While she apparently takes control over her life, veering away from submissive stereotypes, that her only option is death evokes the limited nature of female identity: Hill's characters repeatedly remind us that to be female is to experience a form of homelessness in relation to identity. The familiar feels unfamiliar and is a constant source of guilt and shame in 'We Like to Do Our Best But We Can't': "we make mistakes again and again. | Why? Because we're stupid! We're so stupid | we feel homesick in our own homes."²⁰¹ In 'When We're Bored' Hill mocks the stereotype of inane women obsessed with shopping and the sad desperation that lies beneath: "perhaps a hat! | Perhaps a pair of shoes! | We're aiming for a bit of distraction!"²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁹⁹ *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, p. 6.

²⁰⁰ *Red Roses*, p. 67.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 39.

Dresses are but one way in which the body is shaped in order to conform; Gilbert and Gubar argue that women stand under and over the sphere of culture's hegemony,²⁰³ either transcending it as a merciful, goddess-like figure or subverted as a witch or whore. Key to fitting into an acceptable role within society, women preen themselves and become preoccupied with hair and weight. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that these women are not only trying to be angels but also trying not to become "female monsters."²⁰⁴ This fear is described in Hill's 'They Stride Across the Tarmac':

[Men] have no room today or any day
for any woman with imperfect teeth,
imperfect ears or imperfect handbags,
whose families will discover them years later
rocking in the passages of hospitals.²⁰⁵

Hill's varied portraits of women and the scenarios her characters face in *Red Roses* demonstrate that complete obedience to gendered expectations does not bring happiness or contentment either. Women who aspire to be virginal and pious inevitably find this version of femininity to be a dead end also. This will be explored in detail in Chapter Three; this also covers the alarming association between physical appearance and assumptions of mental illness, how hospitals reinforce and perpetuate societal assumptions of good and bad gendered behaviour. The operation of shame within these portraits of failed femininity is addressed in 'Every Night Imaginary Cows':

Every night imaginary cows
come and stand beside us in our room
and gaze at us with disappointed eyes.
These are the cows of shame.
They will not budge.²⁰⁶

Sibilance operates throughout the first four lines in this extract to create an atmosphere of hushed secrecy befitting of the women's shame which is metaphorically mirrored in the cows' unwavering gazes; this is interrupted by the hard and abrupt-sounding final line which communicates the women's disappointment and frustration regarding their own behaviour.

²⁰³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 814.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 823.

²⁰⁵ *Red Roses*, p. 53.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

However, this projection of shame also carries a nurturing, caring element in the 'disappointed eyes', as the narrator feels able to express concerned kindness for her plight only at a slight distance from herself. The cow – a symbol of Mother Earth and femininity in many cultures – appears in *Bunny* too to provide assistance and support to the female protagonist. It represents an inspiring and positive version of femininity amongst so many helpless and hopeless female figures. In the poem 'Cows' from *Bunny* the cows disrupt the oppressive order of the household and destroy the protagonist's hair which is an object of the lodger's lust: "[they] trample on the flowers and eat the lawn | and when she lies in bed on summer nights | they wander up the stairs and eat her hair."²⁰⁷ In this example, the cow once more represents emotions which the speaker is too afraid to act on, along with an expression of shame, this time regarding physical appearance and the unwanted attention it attracts.

There is one instance in *Red Roses* of pleasant heterosexual relationships: "some of us actually do love them! | They stay at home together in warm pairs."²⁰⁸ This thought offers no comfort for the protagonist however who cannot relate to or understand such an arrangement and can only "marvel at them | as one might at fur,"²⁰⁹ as if to argue that the beauty of fur is lost when considering the violence that went into acquiring it. The final poem 'Leave Them' abandons all hope of men and women co-existing happily together:

Leave them.
They must never be disturbed.
Our mothers hated everything about us
and so do they.
Never smile at them.²¹⁰

The sober, stilted lines speak of the tired acceptance of untenable, vagabonding femininity. The protagonist describes how mechanisms set in motion during childhood ensure that shame and guilt underpin and control feminine behaviour; even a smile can be to blame for unleashing the violence that typifies *Red Roses*. In Luce Irigaray's terms, Hill's characters

²⁰⁷ *Bunny*, p. 42.

²⁰⁸ *Red Roses*, p. 72.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

could be described as being locked into the “feminine masquerade,” acting out a set of male-defined roles and scripts:

I think that the masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant [male] economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything.²¹¹

The ‘in spite of everything’ mentality is explored in Hill’s poem ‘Footwear’ (taken from *The Hat*), which emphasises how women are perpetually encouraged to act against their bodies, either narcissistically as sex objects or masochistically as mothers (as seen in the previous chapter):

Men kill each other as and when they can
and when they can’t they do each other’s heads in
and women with red knickers and red nails
and red high-heeled footwear are to blame.²¹²

The repeated colour red is symbolic of sexual desires projected onto the female body in fetishised fragments. In an attempt to participate in desire, albeit the dominant economy of desire, the women in this poem must submit to clichéd versions of femininity and sexuality. There is a feeling of helplessness that nothing will suffice in pleasing men or themselves but in order to ‘recuperate some element of desire’ they will persist in the charade of male-defined portraits of femininity. Irigaray explains the idea of mimesis as a strategy to elude male scripting:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try and recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be reduced to it. It means to re-submit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter” – to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.²¹³

²¹¹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.133-34.

²¹² Selima Hill, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 32.

²¹³ *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 76.

Hill's characters repeatedly show that in everyday situations, women attempt to mimic the expectations of the female gender but continuously give themselves away. 'Lily and Beef', also from *The Hat*, begins with a jocular tone "funny isn't he"²¹⁴ as a man burns one of the protagonist's breasts, leaving one red and one white, hence the title. Burning this part of the body may have links to sexual sadism beyond the obvious slight on the female form. There is also a connection to Hill's burnt baby poems whereby the resulting disfigurement becomes symbolic of lifelong shame and engaging in intimate relationships is akin to the re-opening of old wounds. The reference to 'beef' ties in with Hill's depictions of women as animals and of women being metaphorically eaten by men. The protagonist seems embarrassed to disclose this information to the addressee: "this is just between ourselves ok"²¹⁵ before presumably sinking back into her own private shame.

Hill's violent portraits of heterosexual relationships and unconventional depictions of the roles therein attempt to offer alternative representations and enable us to see that gendered overlays are mere projections and not the body itself. This process is integral to the formation of identity. As Butler argues:

Human desire articulates the subject's relationship to that which is *not* itself, that which is different, strange, novel, awaited, absent, lost. And the satisfaction of desire is the transformation of difference into identity: the discovery of the strange and novel as familiar, the arrival of the awaited, the re-emergence of what has been absent or lost.²¹⁶

Hill's poems provide a platform whereby the culturally unacceptable aspects of gender identity or those parts 'lost' through social conditioning are brought to the fore and explored. By defamiliarising naturalised gender constructions, she in turn makes the unfamiliar and abject more familiar by having her characters return to and dwell in those places, forcing the reader to consider where they situate themselves in relation to them. She works with the fact that men and women must accept an inherited set of assumptions with regards to their gender identity and from this position she subverts, exaggerates and finds humour (to name a few approaches) in order to veer away from perpetuating the notion of feminine timidity and silence. Hill describes how

²¹⁴ *The Hat*, p. 19.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²¹⁶ *Subjects of Desire*, p. 9.

it is hard for women to stand up to men without appearing to be either whingey or bossy or neurotic or violent even. It's hard. If you're talking about feminism, I feel and I felt very strongly that it's for men too, that men suffer as much or more than women from the struggles with power and identity.²¹⁷

This chapter demonstrates that desire has a clear role to play within the identity formation theories in this thesis and how they apply to Hill's work. Her portraits of male and female characters within intimate relationships and settings, foreground the everyday struggles and tensions which have an impact upon gender. These heterosexual expressions of desire are often unexpected, disturbing or embarrassing, however the multiple perspectives presented through Hill's characters serve to highlight the absurd divisiveness of gender when it is in fact spectrum. She opens up possibilities for the disintegration of conventional conceptions of gender identity through techniques of deconstruction and defamiliarisation. The way in which this may operate is described by Butler:

The human subject does not exhibit greater potency through an unobstructed expression of selfhood, but requires an obstruction, as it were, in order to gain reflection of itself in its environment, recognition of itself by Others.²¹⁸

This obstruction appears in Hill's poetry as poetic artifice through which she defamiliarises intimate relationships, often through the use of irony or violence in its various forms, pulling apart pre-conceived notions of identity and offering the possibility for transformation. Again, the extremes of sadistic and masochistic gender roles force a reader or listener to inescapably position themselves in relation to them. Those approaching Hill's work are led into experiencing difficult emotions (which might otherwise be avoided) and the self-recognition therein, by her often conversational tone and deceptively simple language. Her unfamiliar depictions of masculinity and femininity allow the reader to stand back from themselves for a moment and view gender identity more clearly, not necessarily for what it is but perhaps for what it is not. Just as it has been argued that embarrassment has the capacity to pull apart identity and thus reveal something about it, desire too necessitates the determination of the self as subjectivity emerges out of an expression of desire.

²¹⁷ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 283.

²¹⁸ *Subjects of Desire* p. 13.

CHAPTER 3

INSTITUTIONAL LIFE: HOSPITALS AND THE CHURCH

The previous two chapters focussed upon intimacy within domestic settings of the family or marital home, relationships played out within a private realm. However the same gender identity shaping forces of emotional abuse and real or imagined violence can be observed within those of Hill's poems that take place in the public setting of institutions. This is a theme which she repeatedly returns to throughout her work, including two collections based in hospitals: the maternity ward of *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* and the psychiatric ward of *Lou-Lou*. There are also numerous references to religious figures throughout Hill's poetry. She traces these concerns back to her life experiences:

I confess I'm still like a teenager who rages against authority (including that of my own sons!)- having been 'institutionalised' all my life by daughterhood, boarding school from which I was expelled, by marriage, by university, by being sectioned and sent to live in psychiatric hospitals, the burns hospital, by prison (for 'civil disobedience' at Aldermaston).¹

In juxtaposing institutionalised living and private lives, Hill's poetry illuminates the symbiotic relationship between the two whereby attitudes towards gender are produced and perpetuated within intimate relationships on a small scale and in the forced intimacy of institutional settings on a larger scale. This leads us to question where notions of gender identity originate and how they are constructed: do institutions enforce and set the tone for gendered bodies to follow in everyday life or do they merely reflect the reality of gendered behaviour within interpersonal relationships? Hill's observations on institutions demonstrate an acute awareness of the tension that exists between private and public intimacy and the impact upon emerging gender identity. Her disfigurement in a fire and subsequent time in hospital created

this feeling of being branded, acted upon, institutionalised, abused, insulted – first by my poor mother in whose 'care' I was burnt (so it obviously affected her relationship to me – badly!) Secondly by my father. I was marked physically as someone not pretty enough, not demure enough, not good enough, not female enough.²

¹ Selima Hill postal interview, March 2010, p. 274.

² Selima Hill Exeter interview with Lucy Winrow, September 2010, p. 275.

Hill carries into her work this tension and anxiety regarding the powerlessness over the assembly of gender identity and how one is perceived. Her poetry is populated with medical figures such as doctors, surgeons, nurses, sisters and religious figures such as Gods, the Virgin Mary, nuns, monks and angels. This may be linked to the way in which embarrassment and gender formation functions. If embarrassment is the sudden awareness or perceived awareness of the presence of another at a moment when one's gendered identity is compromised and not neatly assembled into an acceptable whole, we may observe what Goffman describes as the uncomfortable experience of being "torn apart however gently."³ Indeed, these settings and figures will be infinitely familiar to many readers, bringing a wealth of personal experience into the process of reading or listening to the poems. Hospital settings evoke the fear of a loss of control, something which female readers may identify with most strongly; their biology and its inherited associations have been bestowed upon them by chance, yet it may open them up to shameful and embarrassing experiences of forced intimacy. Where would a male reader situate themselves in these poems; with the authoritarian doctors, perhaps? Yet, Hill's use of irony and rigid separation of gender in hospital settings ensures that such an association could not be made without at least a prickle of embarrassment.

In Hill's work, religious and medical figures take on – sometimes symbolically, sometimes literally – the role of this 'presence' of another, serving as a reminder of both the plural nature of gender identity and the tension that underlies apparently seamless and unambiguous performances of gender. Hill's characters' interactions with these figures evoke the unsettling immediacy of embarrassment, but this also occurs in more abstract ways through fantasy in which a character's subconscious speaks, suggestive of the residual and lingering emotions of shame and guilt which are attached to gender identity formation.

In an early poem 'Above Tooey Mountain' from *Saying Hello at the Station*, the narrator describes giving birth to her son "you are born 'like greased lightning' | into the cold hands of the doctor"⁴ contrasting a highly intimate experience with impersonal, clinical surroundings. Amongst the bustle of the ward, she recalls something of her earlier life which

³ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 110.

⁴ Selima Hill, *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 16.

brings the gendered, institutionalised position she feels she now occupies, sharply into focus:

*The Queen of Scots is this day
leichter of a fair son.
Brightness falls from the air,
from the hair, from the Queen's
son and heir. All this
the teachers taught us
before we were mothers.*⁵

The notion of 'teachers' evokes the way in which society informs each new generation of the gendered expectations placed upon them. It conjures thoughts of authority figures from medical, religious and schooling backgrounds as guardians of traditional gender roles. In this instance, the female narrator describes being taught – in preparation for inevitably becoming a mother – and that the glory is to be placed on the child as opposed to the mother, regardless of her status. The holy image of the son with light cascading around him, emphasised by tumbling internal rhyme, makes the 'Queen of Scots' fade into the background by comparison. Institutional influences combine to create an expectation of femininity associated with mothering and selflessness. Further, these lines may well reflect arguments that Mary Queen of Scots' long-term imprisonment was actually a direct result of giving birth to an heir (Geraldine Monk's gendered negotiation of this historical figure in *Escafeld Hangings* is discussed in the next chapter). In the sequence 'The Culmination Of All Her Secret Longings' from Hill's *My Darling Camel*, the narrator also views institutions with fear and suspicion:

Have I ever told you
that when I was at school
I was absolutely CONVINCED
we were all in a mental home,
and only I knew the secret,
and the nurses-stroke-teachers
were secretly rather afraid of me⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶ Selima Hill, *My Darling Camel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), pp. 60-1.

Spoken from the perspective of a child, it could be argued gender identity has yet to become habitual; either way she poses a threat (and is implicitly at risk) through her ability to penetrate social conditioning and expose its constructed nature. The ‘nurses-stroke-teachers’ evoke the widespread and overlapping control of identity by social institutions with the common purpose of controlling and enforcing a mode of behaviour. A possible pun on ‘stroke’ suggests the collusion of these figures and mutual approval regarding objectives; traditionally considered to bring social order and govern behaviour, in patriarchal societies these social mechanisms operate to perpetuate and exert male dominance over women. This chapter examines the role of institutions and the figures that inhabit them, and how they elicit embarrassment, shame and guilt in relation to gender identity within Hill’s characters. Further, in documenting the difficulties these characters face, Hill fulfils her objective in writing about institutionalised figures, as she explained during the Exeter interview: “I want to help people who have been silenced to speak.”⁷ In this sense, Hill can again be linked to Monk whose account of the Pendle Witches in *Interregnum* represents the recovery of oppressed female historical voices.

1. THE PSYCHIATRIC WARD

Hill’s accounts of madness and institutional settings deal with how problematic and potentially damaging attempts to define and treat mental illness may be. These issues take on new complexities from a gendered perspective. Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness* traces instances of physical and mental abuse towards women within the mental health system from the sixteenth century up to the point of publication in 1972. She argues that views on mental illness correlate with societal expectations of acceptable femininity and that due to the patriarchal nature of these institutions, many women have been labelled as ‘unwell’ simply for failing to conform to traditional notions of femininity:

Men are generally allowed a greater range of “acceptable” behaviours than are women. It can be argued that psychiatric hospitalisation or labelling relates to what society considers “unacceptable” behaviour. Thus, since women are allowed fewer total behaviours and are more strictly confined to their role-sphere than men are,

⁷ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 288.

women, more than men, will commit more behaviours that are seen as “ill” or “unacceptable.”⁸

By analysing psychological and psychiatric mental health studies and statistics, reading women’s biographies and autobiographies and interviewing women patients, Chesler demonstrates that women have been often institutionalised for displaying ‘male’ traits such as aggression or outspokenness. Hill’s depiction of female experiences within the mental health system demonstrate the role these institutions play in the public shaping and controlling of gender identity, as well as perpetuating and endorsing the abuse women undergo within the private realm. Chesler identifies further gendered differences in public perceptions of mental illness: “the greater social tolerance for female “help-seeking” behaviour, or displays of emotional distress, does not mean that such conditioned behaviour is either valued or treated with kindness.”⁹ This observation reflects an important aspect to Hill’s work: Although her characters are predominantly women involved in ‘female’ struggles, she demonstrates that men too suffer due to the burden of conforming to narrowly defined gender roles, despite associations of greater freedom with masculine identity.

Hill has disclosed publicly her battles with mental illness, her breakdown and suicide attempts, which have presumably fuelled her interest in exploring this subject further in her poetry (and also through teaching creative writing as a volunteer at the Maudsley Hospital in South London). However, her poems must be read in terms of how they represent mental illness as opposed to an examination of Hill’s personality. While many of her poems are set within the parameters of psychiatric institutions, issues relating to mental health are found throughout her writing, arguing that these experiences are part of everyday life for many people as opposed to isolated and bizarre incidents. Her 2004 collection *Lou-Lou*¹⁰ is perhaps her most direct work on this subject, written in the form of an imagined verse diary kept by a psychiatric patient over several months. Composed of a sequence of 103 short, single stanza poems, each ‘entry’ is titled according to date and location such as Ward, Night-room or Bathroom. On certain days, there are multiple entries, suggesting a troubled

⁸ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness: Revised and Updated* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Selima Hill, *Lou-Lou* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2004)

or repetitive mental state. There are also unexplained blanks for days at a time, making the environment appear unpredictable and perilous. The setting allows for interactions with fellow patients, doctors, nurses and visitors, while exploring the female protagonist's intense vulnerability and loss of identity. The collection is narrated in the first person, offering a more personal account of hospitalisation but this frequently shifts to first person plural in order to capture both the generalisation and depersonalisation of those deemed to be mentally ill, as well as their shared experiences. The opening poem 'Ward 6 June 2nd' instantly communicates the shame and embarrassment of the incarcerated women as the nurses cry:

Wakey, wakey, wakey, Little Ones! –
'Little Ones' being us, enormous
blood-stained women
grunting on tin beds.¹¹

The cooing tone, better suited to small children, reflects Chesler's assertion that "the female-“dominated” atmosphere of hospitals means a (shameful) return to childhood, for both men and women."¹² The language the nurses use both ridicules and overlooks the patients' obvious anguish, normalising their monstrous and bloody appearance which is darkly suggestive of abuse, self-harm or menstruation. The noises and tin beds coincide with farmyard imagery elsewhere in Hill's work relating to descriptions of women and the cultivation of femininity. On admission into hospital, the patients are dehumanised: "people don't have faces anymore"¹³ and become one repellent mass: "the hush | of orifices opening and closing."¹⁴ 'Night-room July 4th' provides an insight into this distressing process which involves a complete abandonment of the self and the world outside:

We our have long forgotten our houses and our homes,
our pretty clothes,
our little dogs on leads –
we're not that kind of woman anymore.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² *Women and Madness*, p. 98.

¹³ *Lou-Lou*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

If hospitalisation stems from the rejection of domesticity and beautification there is an implied link between the failure to conform to traditional notions of femininity and a mental breakdown requiring treatment. The reference to dogs on leads is an echoed line from *Bunny* in which the controlling Aunts own “little dogs on leads,” symbolic of their conventional attitudes which repeatedly clash with the young protagonist’s rebellious personality. By returning to this image, Hill highlights how certain behaviour is repeated and arbitrarily normalised while any deviation is viewed to be defective. On the psychiatric ward, these social structures break down entirely and Hill shows the patients’ struggle to find coherence, in gendered terms especially (‘not that kind of woman’). The patients are forced to focus on themselves, augmenting their inadequacy and shame: “all we have to do is nothing.”¹⁶ Everywhere they look, their faults are reflected: “we smell not of ourselves but of each other, | of rubber gloves and borrowed dressing-gowns, | of rubber doors.”¹⁷ Emanating an odour, the patients appear animalistic, unclean and uncivilised, hinting at the superstition and fear surrounding mental illness within wider society. That they smell both of each other and the hospital evokes the depersonalised grouping together of individual concerns. The borrowed dressing gowns link clothing with identity – similar to the function of dresses elsewhere in Hill’s work – as something which can be taken on and off or be given to wear by others. The dressing gowns serve to overlay or conceal ‘inappropriate’ behaviour. The patients’ primary point of contact on the ward is the formidable character of the ward Sister. This character is introduced early in the sequence in ‘Night-room June 28th’ which reveals the unusual nature of her relationship with the patients and the protagonist’s perception of her as sexualised:

Sister
whose rigid breasts,
so sumptuous,
and belligerent,
whose smell of wild cats
show no mercy;
whose knotted muscles
and unruly hips
have no respect

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

for our austere unhappiness¹⁸

The masculinised description of female body parts with an emphasis on strength and muscularity evokes the patients' intense erotic longing towards this figure. Her scent too defamiliarises femininity with 'wild cats' being the antithesis of domesticity, suggesting adventure and danger. Sister's overpowering physicality symbolises the forced intimacy patients are subjected to and how inappropriate it feels given their vulnerability; they are unable to hide from this insidious, invasive presence and helpless to prevent it from encroaching on their inner world. The element of sexual attraction is offset by a childlike admiration and the attachment patients feel towards Sister which is formed out of necessity to aid survival in this environment: "no one is allowed to come near us| or ask how we are| except sister."¹⁹ In this context, the professional title of 'Sister' ironically evokes connotations of female kinship. While the patients are powerfully drawn to her, proximity reminds them of the tragic nature of their relationship: "her smell alone is like a terrible accident – | burning rubber, | burning hair."²⁰ The references to smell (which continue throughout *Lou-Lou*) enhance our impression of the patients as animalistic and primitive, while 'burning hair' recalls the protagonist's self-harm following sexual abuse in *Bunny*, which also resulted in hospitalisation. Sister's elevated standing on the ward verges on saintly and exaggerates the patients' self-loathing and shame in the deeply ironic lines "everywhere she goes she is adored. | Everything she touches turns to gold."²¹ 'Sister' refers to her position as senior nurse but also has religious connotations; despite the power she wields on the ward she is still a servant of a patriarchal system, illustrating the complicity of some women in their own oppression. In 'Night-room, September 4th' the image: "on quiet nights| we can hear the blood | pounding through her veins like God Himself"²² combines the masculine and feminine in one body – accounting for Sister's unnerving appearance – with 'male' blood moving through it, apparently motivating its actions. This also raises the interesting notion of where the reader would position themselves in relation to this figure; would women feel an affinity with the patients' suffering, or relish the opportunity to

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

²¹ Ibid., p. 20.

²² Ibid., p. 49.

imagine the control and admiration Sister's position affords her? Might men struggle to reconcile the power she wields, a typically masculine position, with her physical body? Sister's presence is also God-like in its pervasiveness, capable of striking sudden fear into the patients as in 'Night-room, July 22nd:

She fills the night with blood
like a mouth
filling up with blood
you can't swallow.²³

Psychiatric treatment is violently forced upon the women, evoking panic and death, with a pun on 'swallow' meaning to accept. A destructive and dependant mother-daughter relationship dynamic is set in motion between the patients and Sister whereby they yearn for her despite her actions towards them: "we need her right up close so we can smell her. | Our rows of little nostrils are aching."²⁴ The rows of noses call to mind animals in stalls and the complete depersonalisation of patients. Despite of her position of authority, Sister is coquettish and knowing, encouraging an unhealthy response. When the patients appear childish and stubborn "she pouts her crimson lips | and stares into our faces like a helicopter"²⁵ to get them to cooperate while disclosing her awareness of their desire for her. This image is an unsettling mix of overt femininity and sexuality versus machines, symbolic of masculinity, surveillance and control. Just as the lodger in *Bunny* smells of marzipan and nuts, the "sweeter and more frightening"²⁶ Sister is also enticingly described in terms of food, embodying temptation and danger in 'Night-room, August 4th:

Her little dress is tight
like a spoon.
Underneath her dress she smells of onions
softening in butter over gas.²⁷

Femininity is defamiliarised and expressions of female sexuality are abhorred for the destruction it provokes: To capture Sister's attention the protagonist describes how "we

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

slice our little violet-coloured wrists, | we spray the walls with blood – | because of her.”²⁸ That her smell alone can whet appetites, incite complex stirrings of desire and provoke such acts of violent self-harm is also a criticism of the mental health system; in order to be taken seriously, the women must engage in increasingly annihilative actions, detrimental to their sanity. This in turn perpetuates their oppression. In ‘Day-room, September 25th’ the sexualised depiction of Sister’s body reflects the patients’ admiration for her: “the folds and swellings of her sun-tanned body | smell as if she’s come direct from Heaven | to stand before me in her uniform.”²⁹ The uniform and reference to ‘Heaven’ evoke patriarchal institutional structures designed to control and enforce behaviour, operating covertly beneath Sister’s appealing veneer. The object of the patients’ desires, Sister occasionally appears to desire them in return. ‘Night-room, July 1st’ describes sensuality tainted by undertones of consumption and death seen elsewhere in Hill’s work on abusive relationships:

When Sister smiles
she makes us feel like chocolate
being licked and softened by a tongue
that spends its life seeking out sweet surfaces
with which to share
its love of licks and licking.³⁰

While being ‘licked and softened’ may represent an enjoyable experience for the patients, they are being manipulated into compliance. The natural conclusion of this action is that the patients figuratively vanish (die), devoured slowly with such tender subtlety that they do not notice the abuse taking place. Alternating between being jealous lovers and motherless children, dependant patients vie for Sister’s attention. In ‘Office, September 5th’ the protagonist explains “Sister is the only one whose touch | my skin can bear to be the object of.”³¹ She speaks from a position of distance to her body, associating psychiatric hospitalisation with the surrender of cognitive autonomy, reverting to an enfeebled, infantile state where bodily needs must be tended to by others. However, the clear, self-

²⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

³¹ Ibid., p. 52.

possessed tone suggests that this behaviour may be performed knowingly; the protagonist appears aware of the social approval attached to submissive, compliant femininity.

Sister's divided attention on the ward means that patients are offered only a brief respite from the horror of their predicaments. So great is their dependence that when she is preoccupied elsewhere, this is perceived as cruelty and indifference: "she hurtles through the ward like a train | hurtling through a land of sacks and walls."³² The simile reiterates a character that embodies the extremes of clichéd masculinity and femininity; having seduced the patients with her feminine charm, she is able to exert patriarchal control. This dichotomy serves to inflame the patients who like jilted lovers "long to hear her footsteps in the corridor."³³ Also competing for Sister's affection³³ are the male doctors whose sexual intentions imply approval for what she represents:

They rush upstairs
to touch it in her office –
the hair, the belt, the tights,
they touch it all.³⁴

The list of items and references to 'it' are oddly impersonal given that it is Sister specifically who is being described; Hill often uses synecdoche when alluding to the female form in order to evoke its cultural fetishisation. This interaction may be a figment of the protagonist's jealousy-fuelled fantasies but it exposes her fear that her status as a psychiatric patient may prevent her from interacting with Sister as an equal. The patients feel paranoid and humiliated by the doctors' attempts to enter Sister's office unseen: "once inside her room, | we hear them laughing – | throwing themselves against her desk and laughing."³⁵ These events appear exaggerated in the patients' minds for how they emphasise segregation between staff and patients, replicating the social exclusion the mentally ill can face within wider society. The patients may also suspect that they are being laughed at, causing their private shame over hospitalisation, to surface. Further, might the doctors – apparently the only male figures in the collection – be a source of identification for the reader, or would they too unsettle traditional notions of gender roles as they also

³² Ibid., p. 33.

³³ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

appear to be under Sister's influence? The doctors' bedside manners are especially unsettling; intimacy feels forced and inappropriate, described in brutish terms as the doctors press into patients "like bristly pigs."³⁶ Despite being physically close, the doctors are emotionally distant:

The doctor disappears
like a goods train
that travels through the night without stopping
or caring who is born or who dies.³⁷

The train image implies that hospital staff are components within the same system, while evoking the impersonal treatment patients come to expect, heightening their alienation and loneliness. Any treatment provided by the doctors is sudden and brutal; the protagonist describes her screams "into which | the duty-doctor tip-toes with his needle."³⁸

Through the protagonist, we come to learn more about the circumstances that led to the patients being hospitalised, and invariably these experiences relate to gender. In 'Night-room June 28th' the protagonist is visited by "the tiny woman | who drags a little suitcase round my head"³⁹ who never manages to catch the man who "glides ahead [...] | refusing | to acknowledge her small tears."⁴⁰ This scene in which a submissive woman pursues an impassive man in a perpetual motion may be a subconscious representation of gender-related anxiety or a reflection of real events in the protagonist's life. The woman is dismissed by virtue of her small size; even her tears are small, conveying her irrelevance and inability to assert herself. In contrast, the gliding man moves regally and with confidence away from her, his silence prolonging her agony. This figure re-emerges in a later poem, moving through the protagonist's mind "like someone who has somehow ruined something, | *someone else's entire life*, for example."⁴¹ Speaking in vague terms referring to 'something' and 'someone' she appears reluctant and fearful to speak openly about this man's negative influence on her life; alliteration creates a hissing sound of bitterness and resentment.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 19.

In 'Day-room September 9th' the protagonist wryly introduces the hospital to outsiders: "welcome to the wonderland of dreams."⁴² This may be a reference to the God-like arrogance of the doctors who believe they can cure 'sickness' or the false hope of patients whose lives are inevitably diminished. Bedridden and surrounded by others' distress, the patients cannot forget their woes and inhabit a world where there is "plenty of time for the tropical flowers to bloom | that bloom in the night in the heads of the tranquillised sick."⁴³ These lines reveal the horror and fear of losing one's mind, particularly within a system that promises to heal but in some cases, incapacitates patients with medication instead. Strange and unfamiliar faces of failed femininity populate the ward: "the woman sitting next to me is smiling. | Apparently she killed a baby once | but now she's as serene as a potato."⁴⁴ The tone suggests that rumour alone is sufficient for one's sanity to be questioned; further, in committing the ultimate female sin of infanticide, the woman's vacant, medicated state serves as a warning to other women. Similar conduct can be observed in the hospitalised women in 'Corridor September 9th', demonstrating how gender is socially produced and reproduced:

Tiny married women
gripping handbags
are regularly led onto the ward
and offered bits of cake
like birds on leads.⁴⁵

Referring to their married status suggests that the women's husbands were somehow complicit in or responsible for their admittance. Abandoned and frightened they cling to their handbags as symbols of femininity which afford a level of acceptance and safety on the outside world; gripping suggests that this lifeline to feminine normality is about to be removed. This recalls the protagonist's account of hospitalisation at the beginning of the collection ('we have forgotten our houses and our homes, | our pretty clothes'). An absurd and unnatural image, a bird on a lead defamiliarises the institutionalisation of women who are controlled like animals and placated with cake. The patients observe these scenes so

⁴² Ibid., p. 57.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

regularly that they fail to be moved: “they’ve got to learn to love it here, | like we do.”⁴⁶ The atmosphere of grim acceptance is alleviated at times by humorous accounts of the patients’ idiosyncrasies. The protagonist describes herself: “I go from bed to bed | stealing people’s sweets | from the orderlies;”⁴⁷ they “watch a patient from another ward | shuffle in and try and sell us lipstick”⁴⁸ and another patient “wonders if I’m going *near an offie*.”⁴⁹ In ‘Night-room July 12th’:

We creep about the ward at night
with sleeping pills nestling
in the pockets of our dressing-gowns
like the motherless eggs
of a sort of mutated insect
that doesn’t know or care about tomorrow.⁵⁰

Initially it appears that patients are being deceptive, moving furtively and concealing tablets to evade treatment. However, the surreal metaphor Hill uses to represent medication unravels into a complex condemnation of the patients’ failure to conform to conventional female roles, particularly motherhood. Eggs are substituted for medication as if to imply two choices available to women; to be mothers or to be treated as insane. Conversely, the suggestion of deformity evokes suspicions over mental illness being hereditary. When the patients are medicated their state of mind becomes hazy and distant:

while far away
the days go by like barges
that have no heart
with which to know joy⁵¹

While Hill’s characters are sedated, the oblivion this entails disarms them of the ability to reflect on their lives or progress towards recovery. The emphasis on promoting paralysing submission within patients as a form of control is also enforced by hospital staff; the protagonist describes Sister breathing near her “like a spoon | spooning something warm |

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 50.

into my brain.”⁵² Hill captures a terrifying loss of control over mind and body, heightened by her protagonist’s lucid account of these events. Restricted emotionally, the patients are also confined to their beds “like a private desert | where even the sand | is made of nothing but ears.”⁵³ This image captures the irony of their situation; patients are remote and abandoned, they are also surrounded by ears, amplifying their isolation and paranoia. The sensation of being spied on creates the disconcerting impression of powerful and militaristic forces operating behind such an institution. Despite their somnolent states patients are dimly ashamed and embarrassed over their appearance in ‘Day-room, August 10th’:

Beyond the zoo-like sloth of the humiliated,
whose brains,
like roses,
are falling apart in our hair⁵⁴

Mental breakdown is described in physical terms to demonstrate the excruciating exposure these women endure while at their most vulnerable. References to animals create a bewildering atmosphere and their characteristics are transferred onto patients, making them appear irrational and therefore deserving of the treatment they receive. The protagonist explains how, when panicked “we hide in toilets| like large flightless birds| that Sister insists on driving into the Day-room.”⁵⁵ The notion of patients as flightless birds implies that they are inherently defective human beings who will never be able to lead ‘normal’ lives. This is echoed in ‘Side-room, August 15th’ where Sister keeps patients locked up “like whippets made of glass”⁵⁶ and later tucks them into bed “like wild swans | who tried to fly indoors | and bruised themselves.”⁵⁷ Hill’s portraits of emotional distress are especially poignant for how they capture the intangible through imagery and physical descriptions. The patients’ defective bodies and resulting dependence on others appears to be a source of pleasure for Sister and the nurses, as in ‘Corridor, July 27th’:

Nurses lead us
to and fro

⁵² Ibid., p. 50.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

like horses –
the most beautiful horses
Sister has ever seen.⁵⁸

Despite being humoured and played with like children, the patients are fully aware that their suffering is not 'beautiful'; this may be a projection of the desires of staff and wider authorities who may derive a sense of pleasure from controlling the women. To be paraded and admired while at their most vulnerable is shaming for the patients and represents a metaphor for the insensitivity some experience within the mental health system.

These short, fragmented poems are evocative of stolen moments and a lack of privacy within the ward. 'In a Hedge, July 25th' is the only poem set outside of the hospital and the longest in the sequence, indicating that the space allows the protagonist to think more clearly. She describes the hedge as "a nice airy tent| where I can take my overdose| in peace,"⁵⁹ the revelation that she is there to commit suicide is startling not only in itself but also that she speaks from a position of calm and clarity. Hill draws attention to the fact that those hospitalised are often not the stereotypical 'crazed lunatic', rather they are individuals reacting to everyday difficulties and subject to narrow social classifications regarding gender. The hedge allows the protagonist to remain:

hidden from the prying eyes of those
who've chosen not to kill themselves today;
who walk about the streets as if it's easy.
as if they were *born*
to wear big shoes and clothes.⁶⁰

Hiding implies her shame over how others may view her and her inability to integrate into 'normal' life as effortlessly they do. The oversized garments allude to her childishness and inferiority, while the idea of being 'born' with the ability to succeed in life is a more a reflection of the lack of flexibility within society to accept a range of identities. On the ward, certain items of clothing – most notably dresses – are considered appropriate for the patients to wear as part of their treatment. Hill returns to this motif in her work as a representation of acceptable femininity which becomes a literal and metaphorical overlay

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

on women's bodies. In *The Flesh Made Word*, Helena Michie examines the portrayal of women's bodies in Victorian literary and non-literary forms. She describes the significance of dresses in culture, citing a series of paintings of fallen women for how their clothing with its patterns and textures comes to erase and dominate the bodies beneath. On William Morris' *Queen Guinevere* and Rossetti's *Persephone*:

The pattern of Guinevere's dress provides a motif for the rest of the painting and is echoed in the wallpaper and curtains. The dark folds of Persephone's gown obscure her body from view; her hair and her dress meet darkly to make the painting almost unfathomable.⁶¹

Similarly, Hill uses dresses to disrupt and defamiliarise the way in which we view women's bodies. They become a metaphor for desires projected onto women's bodies and for the way in which gender is assumed and performed as opposed to naturally and biologically determined. In 'Day-room, July 20th' Sister plays an active role in readying the women for leaving hospital:

She likes to sit beside us in the day-room
designing the beautiful dresses with matching handbags
we're going to model
on the Big Day⁶²

In this context the 'Big day' may refer both to the patients' release but also to the traditionally feminine aspiration to marry, equating mental health in women with a desire to be domesticated and a wife. Treatment focuses on improving their physical appearance as opposed to seeking the underlying reasons for their illness. Later, Sister is described as "designing the dresses she wants us all to be wearing – | though *how will she ever get married.*"⁶³ Here the women are being 'fitted' for an acceptable version of femininity along with a final emphasis on the importance of being a wife and the implied guilt the patients are expected to feel over Sister's sacrifice. In 'Day-room, August 11th' Sister imagines "distant islands where her little ones | will dance about all day getting married"⁶⁴ to which the protagonist adds "but we prefer to dream about our deaths."⁶⁵ In the background of these colourful scenes, the patients' serious and genuine individual crises continue to be

⁶¹ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 77.

⁶² *Lou-Lou*, p. 24.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

overlooked. Sister's role becomes a feminine cliché here also; a maternal figure, she is submissive and martyrs herself for the patients who symbolise her children. Sister emerges as a central character, essential to the conflicting meanings arising from institutional care and the cultural policing of women and mental distress. The influence of religion within this process is raised in 'Night-room, July 2nd':

Sister re-arranges us like lilies
taken from dark homes
and carried here,
crushed and precious,
to be sanctified.⁶⁶

Flowers associate women with beauty and fragility, emphasising the importance of their appearance while lilies have a symbolic association with death. To be 'crushed' is to have sinned or strayed from their gender role, requiring psychiatric intervention; only when purified and conditioned to become socially acceptable women may they be considered 'cured'. In Gilbert and Gubar's terms, these events reflect the cultural dichotomy whereby women are viewed as either angels or monsters; whores or virgins. However, 'O.T. Room, August 22nd' describes a rare display of kindness and sympathy towards the protagonist; a member of staff asks "*where do you come from, Poppet?*"⁶⁷ She replies to each subsequent question robotically with "I don't know."⁶⁸ Spoken to like a child she responds in a similar fashion but draws some comfort from the exchange: "this is kindness | leading me back to the lights of my long-lost home."⁶⁹ This analogy depicts mental illness as separate to one's personality, a diversion from an approved path as opposed to simply exhibiting behaviour which is further down the continuum of 'normal' traits; Hill's exaggerated depictions of mental illness and treatment thereof draw attention to this fact. Further, as in *Red Roses*, home becomes a metaphor for gender roles in which the anxiety associated with the pressure to perform a gender in opposition with what personally feels appropriate, could be termed 'homesickness'. The idea of being led home may be interpreted positively as returning to a state of contentment and authenticity, or forebodingly an arrival into a socially acceptable and claustrophobic gender role. As a result, we come to question pre-

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

conceived notions of gender identity as it is revealed to be plural, contradictory and complex.

Another aspect of psychiatric hospitalisation explored in *Lou-Lou* involves interactions with the patients' families who serve as a reminder of the outside world and the potential for social judgement. During visiting times, their embarrassment is palpable as patients watch them "fiddling with their handbags, | please – | *just go*."⁷⁰ The protagonist imagines the private shame of loved ones who hurry home "but even there | they hear our low grunts."⁷¹ These lines resonate with the patients' guilt over the discomfort they cause their families and shame regarding their uncouth, animalistic mannerisms. This association continues in 'Day-room, September 3rd':

How fat we are
how abject,
like old frogs
squatting on the feet of their beloved.⁷²

However institutionalised the women become, their visitors remind them of the peculiarity of the situation and thus feelings of self-loathing surface. Counter-productively the patients come to depend more heavily on the hospital, as the protagonist admits that Sister "lets us be as ill as we want."⁷³ 'Corridor August 14th' describes how, beyond shame, families may also feel excluded and bewildered when a relative is hospitalised: "the visitors avoid the numb arm | that swings against their woollen coats | like rubber."⁷⁴ A 'numb arm', comes to symbolise the unnameable and upsetting whole of a tranquillised, unfamiliar loved-one. Sister has little patience with familial grief over these events and promptly "drive[s] our troupes of *loved ones* | meekly home."⁷⁵ A recurring verb 'drive' is used to describe Sister's actions with stereotypically masculine connotations. The use of italics makes the sentiment appear contrived and mocking; described through the eyes of the protagonist, it casts doubt on whether she or her fellow patients could ever partake in a 'loving' relationship given their repugnance. Patients become the property of the hospital once admitted, furthering

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷² Ibid., p. 48.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 48.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

the families' sense of impotence as Sister leads the patients away "like freshly-slaughtered cattle | only she | is qualified to handle."⁷⁶ Animal imagery is sustained whereby women's bodies become commodities to be controlled by patriarchal structures under the threat of violence. 'Day-room, August 1st' implies the shame families feel who – to an extent – appear aware of the type of treatment patients receive:

Our visitors look down at their toes
as if they are ashamed
of what they know:
that hopelessness takes care of everything⁷⁷

Towards the end of the collection, the protagonist appears to make a little progress in her battle with mental illness. In 'Office August 18th' she is child-like with excitement at the prospect of leaving the ward to go shopping: "three of us are going down together, | taking money with us, | and a list."⁷⁸ She attributes her newly granted freedom to an improvement in her attitude: "*I'm so much better.*"⁷⁹ Hill uses italics once more to demonstrate speech but also to add an ironic dimension to meaning; in this case the protagonist appears to repeat these words as opposed to believing them. The protagonist is deemed well enough to leave hospital in the final poem 'Reception, September 26th' in which she pays homage to the impact Sister has had upon her life: "to the vision with tangerine eyebrows and rock-hard thighs."⁸⁰ This recovery appears surprising and concerning given the apparent lack of treatment beyond tranquillisation and beautifying practices with particular attention to hair, which emerges as key to the construction of femininity in Hill's work. Helena Michie describes the long literary tradition⁸¹ of associating women with their hair. She cites Carry Brattle in Anthony Trollope's *Vicar of Bullhampton* whose curls are referred to as "tawdry," Milton's Eve's "wanton and dishevelled ringlets" or Hester Prynne whose hair in *The Scarlet Letter* comes to echo her inner feelings; her loneliness manifests itself in her 'hiding' her beautiful hair in a cap, an act which symbolically eliminates her beauty and femininity (by burning off her hair, Hill's protagonist in *Bunny* violently rejects her own femininity, going a

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 74.

step beyond Victorian practices in which women wore their hair up to avoid associations between loose hair and sexual looseness or unbridled desire). In *Lou-Lou* the protagonist describes the absurd situation whereby Sister calls people into the room “to come and see how beautiful I am | sitting – no, enthroned – in the day-room | underneath my crown of hair-sprayed hair.”⁸² She is rewarded for presenting herself in a groomed manner and controlling her hair – and by association her sexuality – with hairspray, in accordance with socially acceptable feminine behaviour. This lesson appears to resonate with the protagonist who senses the pressure to maintain a restrained hairstyle in ‘Corridor, September 25th’: “hasty movement doesn’t suit my hair | so walking to the room where they’re waiting | is taking me much longer than they planned.”⁸³ A great deal of effort and careful consideration is channelled into this performance, highlighting its artificiality and the likelihood of an inevitable false move. The final lines are aptly reserved for Sister who dominates patients’ consciousness throughout the collection:

not a word of thanks,
not a single smile,
as they lead us away to be normal,
hair-dos swaying.⁸⁴

An emphasis is once more placed on hair and the importance of the beautifying process in producing an acceptable version of femininity. However, the resounding lack of gratitude from patients suggests their true feelings of resentment towards her or their lack of awareness of her as a separate being. As opposed to explorations of mental illness elsewhere in Hill’s work, the protagonist in *Lou-Lou* does not emerge from adversity into self-discovery and liberation but is repressed further, moulded into a fragile image of acceptable femininity, making a relapse seem inevitable.

Images and references pertaining to issues of mental health and psychiatric institutions are diffused throughout Hill’s work as an abiding reminder of social control through shaming and punishment, in relation to women who fail to comply with gendered expectations. The lengthy sequence ‘The Culmination Of All Her Secret Longings’ from *My Darling Camel* is

⁸² Ibid., p. 63.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 63

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

comprised of fragmented, disconnected stanzas relating to various events and recalled conversations. At various points, the protagonist appears to have been hospitalised and representing her loss of autonomy, she is spoken about in the third person:

Oh no, she's never been like this before.
All one can do is keep her nighties clean,
and all her things.
She wants a book on the Sahara now.
And she's not supposed to read.⁸⁵

As in *Lou-Lou*, hospitalisation is characterised by the prevention and enforcement of certain behaviours, along gendered lines. The narrator describes the protagonist's desperation to convince others of her normality and that the causal events that led to her hospitalisation were out of character. In her weakened position, her only option appears to be to engage in traditional feminine domestic duties of cleaning and maintaining her appearance. This scene is reprised three stanzas later with what appears to be a carefully chosen extract from documented observations on a caged animal:

'A captive female
that was ignored by a male
cried out, rolled on the floor,
urinated at frequent intervals,
pawed the ground,
jumped, kicked,
and lay down repeatedly,
merely on hearing the call
of a male she could not see.'⁸⁶

Hill juxtaposes animal and human behaviour in order to defamiliarise normative understandings of gender identity and to capture the frightening aspects of a mental breakdown. The 'captive female' linked to the hospitalised woman earlier in the poem suggests that these events are somehow playing out behind hospital walls. In the poem, mental illness in women is thus associated with a lack of male attention, causing them to react violently, obsessively and childishly, perpetuating the myth of female dependence. The incidents of incontinence correspond with popular perceptions of 'madness' as wild and undomesticated; presumably being viewed by her 'captors' this hints at the protagonist's

⁸⁵ *My Darling Camel*, p. 58.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

humiliation and shame, and the animal analogy calls to mind the damage caused by neglect. Later in the sequence, a hospitalised woman named Laura is introduced in the form of a letter:

Dear Rory,
When Laura is lying down,
you'll see her shaved door.
Open the little door,
and shake the batteries out.⁸⁷

Hill defamiliarises women's bodies to suggest fragmentation and objectification. The vagina is likened to an appliance requiring batteries, thoroughly dehumanising the protagonist and suggesting that her body is purpose built to be controlled; female sexuality can be terminated at will within an institutional setting and under male guidance. The stanza ends with the request "please tell the nurse | to keep her pink flap clean,"⁸⁸ demonstrating how the forced intimacy of institutions gives rise to embarrassment and discomfort, reiterating women's lack of ownership over their bodies. In *Red Roses*, femininity is associated with sickness:

Be like us!
Never smile.
Sob.
Sob for drips, a fuck, a cigarette,
Sob for Heaven like the sobbing sick,
Sob for nurses, sob for medication.⁸⁹

Repetition mirrors the habitual nature of this undignified feminine performance and how childish, submissive demeanour is synonymous with femininity. This is rewarded with attention but the kind that tranquillises and debilitates, indicative of the limited choices available to women. In the sequence 'Grunter' from *Fruitcake*, psychiatric hospitalisation immediately seeks to deal with the teenage female protagonist's wayward attitude: "they say there's something wrong | with my brain."⁹⁰ She is sent away to live with her Aunts and blamed for her mother's breakdown: "they say | the way I treat my mother's |

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

⁸⁹ Selima Hill, *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 64.

⁹⁰ Selima Hill, *Fruitcake* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2009), p. 83.

inexcusable."⁹¹ The poem concludes with the protagonist's dismissal as she appears powerless to resist a family decision to incarcerate her:

Never mind,
I can go to hell

where women in white uniforms
are waiting for me.⁹²

The final image of hell reflects the terror – real for all readers – at the prospect of being wrongfully labelled mentally ill and once more equates hospitalisation with metaphorical violence and death, in relation to identity.

2. THE MATERNITY WARD

Women's experiences of maternity wards are explored for the first time in Hill's work in 'Above Tooley Mountain' from *Saying Hello at the Station*; comprised of fourteen irregular free verse stanzas documenting the birth of a baby, with extracts from original letters to and from the mothers of Sir James Melville and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hill occasionally adopts this self-conscious form of intertextuality in her work in order to defamiliarise and contextualise gender roles to certain effect. In this poem 'Sister Payne' (with a possible pun on pain) is brusque and matter-of-fact as she oversees the birth of the protagonist's child:

armed with newspaper, long gloves,
and a pudding bowl for the after-birth.
'Lie down and think of England',
says the Sister through her paper mask,
and the student nurse laughs
as she ties back her auburn hair.⁹³

The primitive implements Sister carries make the act of childbirth appear animalistic; to be 'armed' is more suited to descriptions of battle and immediately removes traditional thoughts of softness and femininity. The jocular tone Sister uses to address the protagonist feels vaguely inappropriate and heightens the protagonist's vulnerability; the remark appears to associate birth with shame regarding sex. The nurse's laugh and the emphasis on her hair (a symbol of sexuality in Hill) represents the vision of a free woman who can choose

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹³ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 16.

when to tie back her hair or leave it loose, a subtle yet poignant reminder of what the protagonist is about to lose in becoming a mother with its associated expectations. The doctor enters the scene at the exact moment of birth, as if to claim credit and confirming his position of authority within the group. As in descriptions of doctors elsewhere in Hill's work, the doctor is male, distant and superior; her baby is born

into the cold hands of the doctor.
He puts away the pethidine and kisses me.
'A beautiful boy!' he exclaims –
glad it's Friday, glad to be going away
on his long fishing week-end.⁹⁴

That the doctor's hands are cold implies that there is nothing caring or warm about his role. The protagonist interprets his enthusiasm as self-satisfaction over the respect his role commands and the imminent holiday. The doctor's joy can also be linked to the gender of the baby. In her poems Hill often describes doctors as superior with little connection to patients; the job is merely a well-paid means to an end, allowing a lavish lifestyle. She described this aspect of her work during the Exeter interview: "I set up the doctors as sort of self-styled glamorous, tall, heroic and God-like. Which of course I don't go along with, that's their own view of themselves, so it's ironic."⁹⁵ The poem ends with the apparent reunion of mother and son after a period of unexplained separation:

I have been waiting to see you
all morning. The tall Sister
bends down to smooth your hair,
then takes away the tulips
I have brought you –
my arms are damp
from holding them so long.⁹⁶

The Sister's height exaggerates the protagonist's weakness as she takes control of the situation and sidelines the new mother in her son's life. Her attempts to demonstrate that she is a good mother (and by association, a good woman) are sincere; her damp arms suggest nervousness and a long wait. However these efforts are symbolically taken away

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 281.

⁹⁶ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 19.

from her and in effect, neutralised. By stroking the baby's hair, Sister dominates the situation and signals to the protagonist that she is not in control of her own son. It is implied that the protagonist has fallen short of the standard expected of her as a mother and is being punished, first through an enforced separation and secondly by the dismissive attitude of the hospital staff. The way in which women are institutionalised, pathologised and socially scrutinised for failing to epitomise conventional maternal (feminine) characteristics is considered in greater detail in *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness*.

This collection was discussed in Chapter One in relation to motherhood. Set in a maternity ward with numerous references to new born babies and breastfeeding, there is a suggestion that the young female protagonist is being treated for depression as part of her hospitalisation. Written in the form of a journal, the collection is divided into three parts with subsections entitled; 'Boys', 'Sons', 'Doctors', 'Masters' 'Strangers' and 'Monks' tying the protagonist's experience of institutional life to masculine figures. The book moves from long verses of irregular length, to a series of couplets and quatrains with a subtle rhyme scheme, through to individual poems with titles in the final section. These shifts in form are crucial to understanding the trajectory of the protagonist's experiences of hospitalisation, gaining in coherence as the sequence moves towards life as an out-patient and recovery. This structure also captures the confusion of the environment and the protagonist's state of mind, allowing for sudden realisations and confessions as well as illuminating aspects of her situation and personal history. In the preface, Hill outlines the 'rules' of the text as the reader is invited to enter a private world:

Italics are used here for the imaginary voices the diarist hears in her head; double quotation marks for the direct speech of doctors, visitors, etc.; and single quotation marks for indirect speech or words she remembers reading.

Similarly, as the form of the sequence becomes more cohesive, there is less reliance on this 'code'. The opening 'chapter' 'Boys' is written in a sequence of thirty-five verses comprised of seemingly disconnected nouns and statements such as: "calves. | Nipples. | The teachers

smell of beans and dressing gowns.”⁹⁷ This is almost a form of code, devised as a result of the protagonist’s mistrust of her environment. The poem opens:

Whatever's the point of writing it all in code?
Supposing the coat is a monk,
and the sofa's a young horse;
and supposing the photos are real?⁹⁸

These questions convey the complex and confusing world she inhabits where nothing is as it seems, even for the reader; it is unclear as to whether these metaphors are an aspect of the protagonist’s defensive ‘code’ or a criticism of the uncertainty and suspicion she experiences surrounding her treatment. When writing about particular individuals, she does so in code, “Mr. C. is calling” or “Last night G. told me everything,”⁹⁹ possibly to preserve their anonymity but also to conceal her true thoughts from those she imagines are spying on her. In this tense, self-conscious atmosphere nobody can be trusted, including fellow patients: “she knows I’m writing about her. Now she’s gone.”¹⁰⁰ At times the narrator wishes to open up but stops: “I wanted to tell you about...I nearly did.”¹⁰¹ The shame and anxiety she feels over expressing herself freely is also conveyed in changes of language as the narrative occasionally drifts into French or German: “dans le petit berceau peint en blanc, | il attendra le retour de Belmondo.”¹⁰² This translates as “in the small cradle painted in white, | she will expect the return of Belmondo” which is possibly a reference to the French actor Jean-Paul Belmondo whose eldest daughter died in a fire, suggesting uncomfortable connections with the burnt baby motif. These variations on a code could be termed as consciously female writing; held within an institution that is overshadowed by masculine figures, she fashions this mode of communication in order to express an aspect of herself that is being suppressed, without detection.

Everyday objects echo the narrator’s fears in relation to sex and the body; a bedside light “emits a stream of questions”¹⁰³ and “the nipples floating in the soup are carrots,”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Selima Hill, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

suggesting the resurfacing of repressed desires. The fragmented images serve to disrupt linear narrative – an effect also seen in *Bunny* – to create the disorientating sensation of mental breakdown, for example:

I told him not to hit her but he did
Who is that little boat for?
Not for me.
Beetroot. Boiled egg. A bowl of custard.
Elephants.
THE SEA OF GALILEE.¹⁰⁵

The narrative shifts between different locations and times; back on the ward, the protagonist gives a contradictory and confusing account of her mother’s encounter with the mental health system: “she waited for me patiently in VISITORS. | Seven years they said she waited there.”¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere the narrator states that she will be “sixteen in the night”¹⁰⁷ and yet later she states “no visitors. | I’ve wanted to go home all my life”¹⁰⁸ and “I’ve been depressed for over twenty years.”¹⁰⁹ These techniques combine to create an atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty, while reflecting how emotional trauma – or silent violence – has fragmented the protagonist’s thoughts and memories but also dismembered her sense of self. In ‘Part Two, The Out-Patient’, Chapter 2 ‘Strangers’ is a poem written in couplets with a sporadic rhyme scheme that appears at other points throughout *The Accumulation*, typically on the concluding lines of each couplet:

Toast and cream. Her deep-blue velvet dresses.
I haven’t told the others where I’ve been.

Dragonflies fly around her head in traces.
There may be someone there – we’ll have to see.¹¹⁰

Although the appearance of this rhyme scheme (or a variation on it) fluctuates throughout, it brings cohesion to apparently haphazard images and thoughts while demonstrating the protagonist’s feelings of meaninglessness. The couplets above illustrate a world created by

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

the protagonist, full of animals, colours, memories and unusual characters. The ephemeral images also allow for sudden sinister turns, interruptions and recollections where “pumas | drink cherry-flavoured Methadone,”¹¹¹ giraffes are spying nuns and gorillas cry in dark houses.¹¹² This also becomes a way of exploring disturbing events and behaviours from a distance, as Hill explains:

especially my early work, if I wanted to say something unkind about somebody I would turn them into an animal and then even possibly change their gender in order to encode them in some way so it wasn’t so direct.¹¹³

The notion of encoding her writing is typical of the stylistic characteristics of Hill’s work in which she deliberately obscures meaning, however in this collection it also reflects the narrator’s secrecy. This surreal aspect is heightened by disorientating events; in one moment the protagonist’s baby is being cared for on the ward and later in the text, it is found at a roadside. In an ambiguous statement the protagonist says “all the baby’s family are missing”¹¹⁴ – which surely includes herself – perhaps an indication of how lost and confused she feels and that she does not feel connected to the child.

In representing the protagonist’s battle with mental illness, the poem repeatedly returns to themes and images which appear to be causally linked to her distress. The most prominent source of anxiety stems from approaching womanhood. At unexpected points throughout *The Accumulation*, the protagonist declares “my socks are blood-soaked”¹¹⁵ and while this is never fully explained, it creates primary associations with acts of violence, miscarriage or even menstruation as the protagonist later states “I’m menstruating on a stranger’s blankets.”¹¹⁶ This evokes the uncontrollable nature of the female body that does not respect boundaries and potential for embarrassment for the protagonist and/or the reader. These physical changes suggest that the protagonist is poised to occupy a problematic new role; in ‘Masters’ she is described as “departing for womanhood,”¹¹⁷ recalling arguments raised

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹³ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 284.

¹¹⁴ *The Accumulation*, p. 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

earlier in relation to gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one *becomes* a woman through social conditioning.

Interestingly, it is quite some way into *The Accumulation* before the protagonist explains that she is pregnant: "being pregnant makes me feel dishonest. | Now I sleep with foreign men in dreams."¹¹⁸ The delay gives this piece of information more power once it is disclosed and leads the reader to question whether the protagonist's mental distress is related to embodying the maternal roles. Echoing her feelings of guilt, the image of the virgin appears repeatedly, as if in judgement: "[the] taut purity of virgins in white landscapes, | overwhelmed by tenderness."¹¹⁹ The pun on taut/taught emphasises how femininity is socially constructed and externally imposed, highlighting the tension this creates. The colour white speaks of overpowering and oppressive purity and the loving approval of such a figure. In a variation on this image "the virgin in her wooden dress is kind"¹²⁰ sees a return of the dress motif in Hill's work. Dresses in Hill preserve modesty and purity, making the body inaccessible to sexual advances. However the wooden garment here evokes death through its coffin-like appearance; the virgin is literally interred by her gender. Hill's negotiation of femininity through the dress metaphor demonstrates how gender identity can be personally 'put on' or how we can be 'dressed' by others. As a social overlay, it functions by concealing the 'real' self while unpleasant materials (a "dress-maker of hollyhocks"¹²¹ is mentioned in *The Accumulation*) serve to constrict, shape or suffocate identity. The protagonist admits "wearing dresses frightens me"¹²² confirming the power and influence behind this image. Virginité is likened to "a hive of honey bees. | Four-minute warning. | Pleats"¹²³ with conflicting connotations of innocence, enticement and danger, requiring social management.

Beyond the Virgin there are many other references to Catholicism, intimating the far-reaching and collaborative efforts of institutions such as hospitals and the church in the production and perpetuation of narrowly-constructed gender roles. At times, the

¹¹⁸ *The Accumulation*, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

protagonist refers to those charged with her care as *monks* or *the sisters*. While 'sisters' may refer to female members of staff, this leads to wider considerations of whether the setting is in fact a convent, in the melding together of two influential institutional forces within the protagonist's consciousness. The protagonist recalls a childhood memory overshadowed by religious thoughts: "sunlight. Netball. Ankle-socks. White rabbits. | Ceaseless prayer like purity of snow"¹²⁴ associating this time with simplicity and innocence. When she is first admitted into hospital, she laments "*they have taken away my Lord*"¹²⁵ indicating a continued strong connection to God which has been somehow altered or tainted by her hospitalisation. This relationship is clearly central to her well being: "I see myself as Jesus' private nun,"¹²⁶ however this description carries sinister connotations of masculine control and female sexual submission. The significance of the nun's role as explained by Marina Warner outlines the dilemma faced by women who became nuns in the fourth century who certainly benefited from taking greater control over their lives:

By cutting themselves off from the traditional role of women, and by abjuring all relations with men, consecrated virgins established a certain freedom and autonomy that permitted them to lead lives of greater distinction than their married sisters.¹²⁷

However, their role in itself still originated from the mistrust of women: "the foundations of the ethic of sexual chastity are laid in fear and loathing of the female body's functions, in identification of evil with the flesh and flesh with woman."¹²⁸ This tension is unveiled in Hill's protagonist who, having positioned herself as a servant of patriarchal power, her subservience fails to protect her alienation and anxiety. However, the protagonist continues to derive security and spiritual superiority from her beliefs in order to endure her situation. Writing becomes a form of therapy during her stay and in documenting these events she believes this affords her a special position: "the poet is God's spy."¹²⁹ The protagonist imagines herself to be protected from unwanted sexual advances from other men: "the gods of Europe shower me with smiles, | unnerving all the men that come and stare"¹³⁰

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

¹²⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 76.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

¹²⁹ *The Accumulation*, p. 63.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

which is in effect replacing one form of male domination with another. Acknowledging her spiritual inferiority to this omnipotent masculine figure, she asserts “it is not *God* who must be good and kind.”¹³¹ This statement demonstrates an awareness of expectations that she conduct herself in a typically feminine manner in order to please God, linking to the idea of the nun as a bride of Christ. A more ambiguous reference in Chapter 3 ‘Doctors’ may refer to a failed suicide attempt:

Waking up from dreams of frozen valleys
and violet bluebells nodding by the pools.
The face of God the doctor said I touched.
And loneliness in pink kneels down to pray.¹³²

That death brings one closer to God connotes the dangerous and controlling nature of this relationship. The last line evokes a female figure who feels compelled to embody feminine cliché and demonstrate obedience for patriarchal institutions, despite the alienation it brings.

The treatment patients receive within the hospital are also based on notions of good and bad feminine behaviour. Rewards include “cherry nougat for the quiet children”¹³³ or being moved to a better room “*we’ll move you to another bed tomorrow, | we’ll move you to a place where good girls go.*”¹³⁴ Despite being an adult ward, patients are referred to as ‘children’ and ‘girls’ creating a dynamic whereby submissive, child-like women are shaped by a guiding, patriarchal power that also decides the boundaries of acceptable femininity. The patients are punished as part of this process including verbal discipline: “the doctors say I read too much.”¹³⁵ This disapproval regarding a woman’s quest for knowledge sends a powerful message to patients that this is not favourable female conduct. Further, the protagonist is shamed for being quiet: “the doctors say my shyness is repellent. | The shyness of the bittern. I’m alone.”¹³⁶ Likened to an elusive breed of bird, this metaphor isolates her but also conveys the doctors’ frustration over her ability to retreat into a private world and potentially evade their control. The doctors also dominate patients through

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹³² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

physical threat: “the red-eyed doctors block the corridors | with turquoise needles tipped with methadone.”¹³⁷ This chilling description evokes a ‘bogyman’ figure reminiscent of those used by adults to frighten children into compliance. Similarly, this atmosphere generates a sense of real or imagined threat from other members of staff: “I think the nurse said she was going to shoot me.”¹³⁸ While such a comment is often made in jest, in this environment it is transformed into an extreme threat. The protagonist observes that within the hospital: “the only men were doctors. We were dollies | put to sleep in resonating halls.”¹³⁹ The controlling and frightening treatment appears at odds with what should be a caring environment; to say that only doctors were men implies that all the patients are women and emphasises gender as a key concern within psychiatry. Describing the patients as ‘dollies’ demonstrates their passivity and lack of control over their bodies which are toyed with as part of a masculine game. The echoing halls amplify the patients’ loneliness and helplessness while emphasising their diminutive size. During the Exeter interview, Hill clarified her motivation behind constructing her male characters in this way:

My brother was much older than me and he was a doctor so that compounds I think my sense that doctors are the embodiment of male authority. They’re also people who have a license to intrude on your body.¹⁴⁰

There is often a sexual undercurrent to the protagonist’s interactions with men, which appears to guide her sense of self: “a man in a suit is waving from a sports car. | If only my hair was straight.”¹⁴¹ This image of clichéd masculinity and power contrasts with the protagonist’s embarrassment over not being attractive enough. Her thoughts of re-arranging her body to become more appealing underline the performative nature of gender. Being in the vicinity of men causes the protagonist to be overwhelmed by the guilt associated with temptation and the expression of female sexuality: “my skirt is like a lorry load of whiskers. | It makes me sick to think of him.”¹⁴² A similar reaction can be detected in the lines “feeling with his fingers up my skirt. | He looked into my frightened, rubber eye-

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴⁰ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 282.

¹⁴¹ *The Accumulation*, p. 15.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 25.

balls.”¹⁴³ Feminine clothing may be worn to create an agreeable veneer of femininity, although it appears to encourage and allow unwanted touching; the cartoonish ‘rubber eye-balls’ serve to trivialise the protagonist’s fear. She recognises that subservience is required of her in sexual encounters: “a schizophrenic dressed in silk to please him, | I part my lips like lilac, brush his sperm.”¹⁴⁴ Speaking in the third person signifies detachment (perhaps stemming from shame) when performing such acts, while the reference to her mental condition suggests she is being taken advantage of. Once more, garments are used to create a male-pleasing overlay to women’s bodies. Despite the efforts made to satisfy male partners, the statement “he always hates the girls that he has slept with”¹⁴⁵ reveals the protagonist’s perpetual state of shame and failure regarding sex. This extends to attitudes towards her body for which she is apparently pitied for not being ‘womanly’ enough: “the poor thing’s got no breasts.”¹⁴⁶ To have small breasts is likened to having ‘no’ breasts, suggesting that woman is an ‘all or nothing’ categorisation. The protagonist is also verbally censored; she begins to describe objecting to a kiss, yet an unseen force prevents her from continuing, “ecstasy, which makes him feel nearer, | has made me ill. I never talk. I’m banned.”¹⁴⁷ An implied, unspoken rule prevents her from objecting to how she is treated. Fathers too comprise one of the many male figures to whom the protagonist struggles to relate: “I want to scream and scream and all I do | is write *I want to scream* down in my book. | Fathers coming closer like the tide.”¹⁴⁸ This image speaks of an inability to vocalise distress or defend oneself against unwanted and tyrannical male interference, both in the family and wider society.

Gender tension can also be identified in lines which satirically depict male cultural figures reducing women to sex objects, for example “Sigmund Freud, I know you can see my knickers”¹⁴⁹ and “Picasso in his villa touches girls.”¹⁵⁰ An aspect of Hill’s style, it serves to show the proliferation of the objectification and abuse of women throughout all levels of

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

society. The anxiety surrounding male-female relationships in *The Accumulation* is linked to the notion of an inherent difference between men and women: “this isn’t what you think. It’s radioactive. | Many men and unknown things go down there.”¹⁵¹ Masculinity is defamiliarised into something sinister and dangerous, occupying places where women would by implication not survive or be welcome. However, the vulnerability of women and the submissive behaviour model enforced by social institutions angers the protagonist who comes to resent feminine clichés for their perpetuation of repressive images of women: “Hepburn – ‘fragile, feminine’ – please die.”¹⁵² This frustration could be linked to the many examples of cruelty and violence towards animals throughout *The Accumulation* and Hill’s oeuvre. The protagonist states: “both the cats are miaowing. We won’t feed them. | We think it’s much more fun than being kind.”¹⁵³ Elsewhere, animals are attacked and killed, with the staccato syntax creating an indifferent tone: “the bulldog’s blood drips on the red linoleum,”¹⁵⁴ “they killed my kitten”¹⁵⁵ and “bunches of butchered seagulls.”¹⁵⁶ Planted amongst scenes of misery and helplessness, these images become a metaphor for the emotional violence endured by Hill’s characters who (like animals) are less able to defend themselves against the violent tendencies and desires of others. Further, there is an undercurrent of how defenceless animals may become an outlet for the grievances of those who are powerless to have an impact upon the human world.

Bringing a further dimension to Hill’s exploration of the treatment of women in hospitals are the references throughout *The Accumulation* to childbirth and motherhood. In this context there is the possibility that the protagonist may be suffering from post-natal depression. However, given the deliberately enigmatic setting in which reality appears subject to change, it may be argued that these images are a metaphor for the way in which women’s life-giving capacity ensures that their bodies and minds are subject to institutionalisation and patriarchal control. The protagonist’s attitude towards her baby (literal or metaphorical)

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

appears irresponsible and cold. In Part One, Chapter 2 'Sons'¹⁵⁷ she admits:

She told me not to leave him, but I did.
I am the Mother from the Baby Ward.
He's screaming for the breast from which he's torn.¹⁵⁸

Appearing infantile in her wilful disobedience of the advice offered, she speaks passively about her own body which is unresponsive (and unnatural by implication) to the baby's emotion. That the baby is 'torn' away demonstrates a forcible removal due to his mother's actions. She distances herself from her nameless son, who may have been born prematurely due to his small size, referring to him in impersonal terms: "the tiny boy the nurse is wheeling in | was seven inches long when he was born."¹⁵⁹ Images pertaining to miscarriage or abortion suggest that the protagonist associates motherhood with guilt, shame and loss: "talking to him in a voice as distant | as unborn daughters kneeling by my bed."¹⁶⁰ The 'unborn daughters' may refer to a fear of men (and therefore her son) and a desire to have had a girl who, kneeling, would have been more submissive and less threatening. An absence of nurturing thoughts and inability to physically support life is equated with failed femininity. Paranoia propagates within the hospital walls as the protagonist suspects an institutional role in discrediting and undermining women as mothers: "eight babies have been brutally attacked. | the day I saw the nurse, her cheek was bleeding."¹⁶¹ The staff also appear to abandon the protagonist as she unsuccessfully attempts to care for her son "you've got to go on crying all your life.' | I thought you would look after him for me."¹⁶² The tears may refer to her own as she is condemned to continue struggling, or they may exemplify the rejection of her son who must carry this shame. The protagonist's thoughts on pregnancy and femininity appear to be linked to her references to writing and ambition, the idea that a woman cannot exist as both a mother and an artist:

You see, it is so lonely I get serious.
Dream of a dream and shadow of a shade.
'The writer's instinct is essentially heartless.'

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 20.

The wa-wa babies burst into floods of tears.¹⁶³

The protagonist's frank admission is lucid, however her incarcerated state communicates social intolerance and shaming attitudes towards such views and serves as a warning to other women who may feel the same. The final line argues that having ambition precludes expressions of tenderness or sympathy towards children. Hill highlights the tension between how women relate to their bodies and rigid societal standards that exist in relation to femininity, enforced by institutional structures. This is supported by the protagonist's comments as she locates her feelings of displacement within the masculine realm: "I long for scenes where man has never trod."¹⁶⁴

One way in which the protagonist attempts to reclaim a degree of control over her life may lie in her relationship to food. Her aversion to eating indicates a possible eating disorder: "hiding during meals – the seventh day."¹⁶⁵ These actions could also stem from wariness towards hospital staff and paranoia: "I cannot touch my cup in case they see me."¹⁶⁶ Eating is equated with death and over-indulgence in lines such as: "the anorexic suffocates in chocolate"¹⁶⁷ and "I threw the chocolate biscuits in the bushes. | Everyone is eating;"¹⁶⁸ associations between appetite and sexual desire also imply that a woman risks being viewed as promiscuous if she enjoys food. Helena Michie discusses this link in *The Flesh Made Word*: "delicate appetites are not only linked with femininity, but with virginity."¹⁶⁹ She observes how the figure of the Virgin Mary embodies both chastity and fasting with links to wholeness and purity within women:

Fasting, then, purifies the body by eliminating signs of sexuality; the Virgin Mary, predictably, inverts the fall by replacing sexuality with chastity, hunger with self-denial.¹⁷⁰

This self-imposed desexualisation provides Hill's characters with a degree of autonomy. However, while Hill's protagonist may evade control on a daily basis by secretly refusing to

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 11

¹⁶⁹ *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

eat, she fails to see that this could be also viewed as submitting to dominant patriarchal attitudes towards women's bodies, emphasising constricted femininity. As the protagonist is readied for release, the abiding message is of the inadequacy of the mental health system and the lack of understanding that still exists regarding mental illness:

Who but a beaten specialist would offer
to map the changes of the ocean floor?

I didn't say a word about the therapy.
The doctors deal in glitter-coated worms.¹⁷¹

Comparing the mind to an ocean bed suggests awe over its complexity and mystery while suggesting the futility of attempting to grasp something so complex. In keeping with characterisations of doctors elsewhere, their duplicity is implied in claims of expertise in something this incomprehensible. However 'beaten specialist' suggests that the most knowledgeable on a subject are not necessarily the most effective in this context. 'Glitter-coated worms' captures the slippery and elusive nature of the doctor's diagnoses: both flamboyant and empty. In reality, the doctors in *The Accumulation* are as confounded as anyone else on the subject: "the doctor wrote it down: | 'Her haunted mind'."¹⁷² This makes treatment a daunting prospect for patients: "the waiting-room. It frightens me. The hole. | DISEASES OF THE MIND. Pet monkeys. Silk."¹⁷³ A 'hole', with a pun on whole, implies emptiness and emotional deficiency as well as fear and caution in approaching mental illness – as if it has the power to overwhelm and engulf. Capital letters ironically frame 'diseases of the mind' which reads as a warning message, standing out amongst the lists of images. As throughout the book, uncomfortable and unacceptable thoughts are managed through the suppression of voices that do not fit into prescribed behaviour within the heterosexual binary: "we are the children of This. This is the silence."¹⁷⁴ It is 'this' that Hill is arguably attempting to identify, an unseen force with far-reaching influence which takes on a naturalised appearance, revealing itself through the suppressed voices that Hill allows to speak in her work. As 'children' the protagonist alludes to the patients' meekness but also that they have inherited these problems from a culture that places emphasis on the

¹⁷¹ *The Accumulation*, p. 35.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

oppression of women by patriarchal structures. Upon leaving the hospital, a weight appears to lift as the protagonist leaves the male-dominated environment behind with a further reference to the role of religion in this process:

The hooded men who follow me and whisper
have slipped away like weasels in the snow.
I too must say good-bye to the monastery.
The train is waiting. "Really, I must go!"¹⁷⁵

The tone in the final line is reminiscent of a childhood adventure story, capturing the protagonist's excitement to be leaving but also ironically suggesting that she is about to re-enter patriarchal society at large. A number of Hill's collections end in a similar fashion which she discussed in the Exeter interview: "I can feel myself always trying to raise the work up, that everything is alright. To make the work inspiring in the end but sometimes I find it hard."¹⁷⁶ However, the suspicion persists that Hill's characters will relapse or continue to encounter problems of this nature, having thoroughly demonstrated how narrow attitudes towards gender identity permeate all aspects of public and private life. In this context, the impact of shame and embarrassment as a tool to coerce notions of 'correct' gendered behaviour, feels more intrusive and frightening for the weight of assumed authority behind it. Yet this scenario is not without hope; the rigid male/female divisions Hill sets up in many hospital scenes exaggerates differences between patients and doctors, forcing us to identify with one or the other, and leading us to question gender performances through our resulting embarrassment. At times, a lucid voice shines out from the apparent incoherence, uninhibited by shame and guilt, to express the desire to be a woman without being a mother, or to challenge the logic of a 'beaten specialist'.

3. THE BURNS UNIT

Hill's characters encounter doctors, nurses and hospital settings in poems set within a burns unit, where there is also an emphasis on conditioning femininity. In *Bunny* the doctors appear complicit in the abuse of the protagonist whose distress over being sexually assaulted by the lodger sees her hospitalised for – amongst other things – burning her own hair off:

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁷⁶ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 292.

The doctor says
the lodger says I'm sorry.

But it isn't enough.
*It isn't enough, I'm sorry.*¹⁷⁷

In speaking for the lodger, the doctor appears to condone and trivialise the preceding events, instilling the protagonist with an understanding of the treatment she can expect as a woman and sexual object. As the blamed and 'punished' party she is taught to passively accept such advances without protest. Incarcerated, the protagonist carries the burden of guilt and shame associated with femininity and disturbed patients act as a deterrent against further deviation:

somebody's put her away
with the dead-end blind:
She shares a room with a milliner from the Valleys
whose twin has sprinkled quicklime in her eyes.¹⁷⁸

The 'somebody' behind these actions leads to thoughts of a faceless and terrifying source of power and control. The poem 'Hairbrush' describes the oppressive atmosphere within the hospital in which the nurses "ceaselessly" brush the protagonist's hair: "the most beautiful hair the lodger had ever seen, | the hair of angels, | lovers –."¹⁷⁹ Conflicted attitudes towards women are revealed in the classic Madonna-whore dichotomy of the final two lines. Galia Ofek explains how a woman's hair may evoke her sexuality:

Bodily hair patterns emphasise sexual differentiation: the facts that hair grows densely only on some regions of the body at puberty, and that the pattern of women's body hair is different from men's, invest hair with the power of sexual demarcation. As the growth of pubic hair coincides with the first menstruation, these synchronous bodily signs of sexual maturity link hair, feminine sexuality and fertility.¹⁸⁰

Throughout Hill's work, hair is associated with the expression or suppression of female sexuality; the adolescent protagonist in *Bunny* observes these changes to her body and

¹⁷⁷ Selima Hill, *Bunny* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), p. 65.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁰ Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 14.

notices how others to relate to her differently through it. Given the lodger's obsession with her curls and the drastic measures she takes to repel him, the nurses' actions appear highly insensitive and inappropriate. Forcing her to re-live the abuse and endure the shame and embarrassment of performing such an intimate act, they continue to brush her hair:

till she panics.
She cannot bear their need to understand her,
she cannot bear their need to get so close,
to fondle her scar
and take their gloves off and explore it
and climb up her hair¹⁸¹

As in many hospital scenes in Hill's poetry, patients are consumed or engulfed by their surroundings – another form of being 'eaten' by abusers within intimate relationships. The nurses' domination of the protagonist's body by touching her with their bare hands appears ravenous and sexually motivated. A reference to 'climbing' the protagonist's hair calls to mind the fairytale 'Rapunzel', transforming the nurses into persistent suitors. Misguided and barbaric treatments are meted out as the nurses "drill through her brain to the sorrow"¹⁸² and "ceaselessly, ceaselessly brush | her desirable hair."¹⁸³ The protagonist may infer from the unfettered abuse she endured within the family home and her subsequent hospitalisation that being a woman requires passively submitting to the desires of others. Hill's work emphasises how psychiatric treatments involve relating to women physically, through interfering with and managing their bodies as opposed to speaking to them and trying to understand them as individuals; Hill voices this concern in her poetry. In 'Arm' the protagonist is drugged and ignored:

Every week a different bored doctor
asks her how she is and gets no answer

and then arm leads her back to bed
to sleep it off for a million years or more¹⁸⁴

The impersonal nature of her treatment sees a lone arm guiding her, not a human being, while an ambiguous time scale evokes the loss of identity, adrift in an overbearing setting.

¹⁸¹ *Bunny*, p. 69.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Medication heightens this sensation of distance from oneself; whenever the issue of the lodger is raised “it is time for her little injection again.”¹⁸⁵

The image of the superior male doctor returns in the burns unit poems, an embodiment of patriarchal control, emphasising the patients’ inferiority. In ‘Prawns De Jo’ from *Bunny*, the protagonist describes how someone “wheels her off to the sun-tanned arms of a specialist”¹⁸⁶ and in *The Hat* self-loathing is triggered by the doctor’s presence: “and here’s the surgeon | with his lovely hands, | Oh dear, the baby’s face is falling off.”¹⁸⁷ In ‘a Nightdress Sprinkled with Fish Scales’ from *Aeroplanes of the World* the protagonist describes life in the burns hospital after “what the family call ‘the accident,’”¹⁸⁸ suggesting shame and secrecy. A fishing metaphor is used to describe the way in which the protagonist now relates to the world around her following her injuries: “swimming may no longer be an option | but fishing is. I lay them on my bed, | cold and heavy like abandoned guns.”¹⁸⁹ Reflecting her immobilised, injured state, from this position the protagonist draws in fish, symbolic of the shame and guilt that surrounds her. In placing them between her and her visitors, the ‘fish’ represent an emotional distance between them; the weight of ‘abandoned guns’ denotes the harm intended towards her converted into a defensive barrier, perpetuating an atmosphere of blame and guilt. She explains how the doctor intrudes upon this private process:

The doctor, quite the fisherman himself,
sometimes finds a scale, like confetti,
sticking to my nightdress or my bandages,
and picks them carefully off, like tiny mirrors,
before he turns away to join the swimmers
fanning out across my bedside lake.¹⁹⁰

The tone suggests the doctor’s jaunty, boastful attitude towards fishing and by implication, his role as a clinician; equating the two trivialises the protagonist’s suffering and turns it into a competitive pursuit. In identifying mere fragments of the emotion she describes, his

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸⁷ *The Hat*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁸ Selima Hill, *Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 135.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

limited ability to understand and identify with the protagonist is revealed; further the ‘tiny mirrors’ provide a reflection of himself, demonstrating how this relationship in which he holds control and power, bolsters his ego. In a final act of arrogance, the doctor turns his back on the protagonist and towards those at her bedside (which may include family and nurses) who are impliedly of more value for the admiration and respect they bestow upon him. This imagery is revisited in ‘Being Angry’ from *Violet* which is also set within the burns hospital: “and the lake’s so close | you can fish in its lap from your bed.”¹⁹¹ Swarms of insects surround this scene:

I lie here with my eyes all clouded over
and insects sucking
where my legs should be –
and as I speak they’re pouring up my arms
and crawling down my throat
as if they own me.¹⁹²

‘Clouded’ eyes suggest the protagonist’s drug induced state or even death; this is supported by the presence of insects which – as in other poems on this subject – emphasise the repellent nature of her injuries while drawing attention to them, in turn causing her shame and embarrassment concerning her appearance. In a reversal of images of consumption, the protagonist is eroded and erased from without, signifying the body horror and complete absence of autonomy which characterises Hill’s poems within hospital settings. Her descriptions of bodily experiences within hospitals are so vivid and visceral that the reader cannot help but imagine themselves in a similar position; the shame and embarrassment evoked alerts them to tensions within their own identity construction.

4. OUT-PATIENTS

Advice on Wearing Animal Prints is Hill’s 2009 award winning pamphlet for Flarestack poets. Comprised of twenty-six short single stanza poems, each is titled and ordered according to the alphabet, (the first poem being ‘A’ and the last ‘Z’). The collection introduces the character ‘Agatha’ whose age and mental condition are ambiguous although there are references to her physical disability and the flat she occupies in ‘R’:

¹⁹¹ Selima Hill, *Violet* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Book, 1997), p. 57.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Agatha herself is as good as gold
and rarely strays from her small flat.
It's like a lady's hand-bag it's so small –
but that's OK, she's only got one arm!
(That was mean. I'm sorry. I should say
How *neat* she is, and that her needs are *modest*.)¹⁹³

The third person omniscient narrator throughout provides an insight into how Agatha is perceived by others and how she experiences the world as an outsider. The scathing tone regarding her appearance which quickly switches to a contrived apology exemplifies the way in which Agatha – and those more generally who do not fit in to the prescribed norms of society – are treated and how these reactions are concealed but nonetheless felt. Comparing Agatha's flat to a 'lady's hand-bag' has clear links to notions of female gender identity as constraining and claustrophobic. There are numerous incidents throughout the collection that suggest Agatha possibly has a condition that lies along the spectrum of autism; although she lives independently and is not institutionalised, she may be an out-patient as her life is characterised by dealings with doctors and 'visitors' to her home:

It's true she bites.
She bit a doctor once
who had to have eight stitches in his cheek!
(There's still a nasty scar and no one knows
He didn't get it *surfing in Hawaii!*)¹⁹⁴

Italicised words signify irony and dark humour, replicating depictions of doctors throughout Hill's work as glamorous and arrogant. Compared with Agatha and her reputation for having an animalistic, violent temperament, the doctor makes her appear all the more dysfunctional. The opening poem 'A' describes the visitors' reaction to her:

It's lying on the floor as good as gold.
It never moves. It never cries.
It likes to simply lie there doing nothing.
But visitors complain it smells of stew.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Selima Hill, *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints* (Birmingham: Flarestack Poets, 2009), p. 18.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The impersonal way in which she is referred to as 'it' and left to lie on the floor with her odour as the sole concern, thoroughly dehumanises her. This is followed by instances of violence towards Agatha, including "anyone could come in here and tread on it! | Could? They do! They kick it down the hall!"¹⁹⁶ The boisterousness tone amplifies these distressing events and a lack of sympathy. Agatha's age is unclear; in one poem she plays with toys "when Agatha arranges her unicorns | up and down the carpet in the dark, | somebody tells her she's an idiot."¹⁹⁷ However, two pages later in 'E' she goes clubbing:

Encumbered by her lace-encrusted dress,
she hurries down the street to the club.
The other girls are blonde and wear tutus.
Her bodice creaks as if it's made of floor-boards.¹⁹⁸

Agatha struggles to assume a female role – a source of anxiety for many of Hill's characters – with uncomfortable and restrictive dresses again serving to highlight these efforts and their artificial results. While other girls make the transformation appear effortless and elegant, the noise and elaborate appearance of Agatha's dress exposes her fraudulent femininity. 'K' reveals the depths of Agatha's alienation and sadness:

The weight of many things but mostly sorrow
weighs her down like meat in a sack.
She rolls against the door like a giant
who rolls against the door of a club
where giants in uncomfortable dresses
soothe each other with their large hands
and when you know you know and when you don't
there's something wrong and Agatha knows that.¹⁹⁹

The notion of a night club gains new significance with wider implications for those identities that are 'part of the club' and those deemed unacceptable and subject to social exclusion. Described as giants, physiques are exaggerated and defamiliarised evoking women's difficulty of relating to their bodies and the cultural expectations placed upon them; they all wear 'uncomfortable dresses' yet appear able to draw comfort from one another. The final

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

two lines identify Agatha's isolation and inability to form close and meaningful associations with others.

As elsewhere, animal imagery features throughout *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints*. Sheep for example, symbolise security (as in *Bunny*): "Agatha likes sheep because sheep | aren't remotely interested in fun"²⁰⁰ but there are also more examples of cruelty to animals. 'D' describes her pet cats: "she thinks she's entitled to have slaves | and pull their greasy tails till they mew."²⁰¹ This may indicate a childish mindset but also links into the recurring theme of animals serving as an outlet for the frustrations of the powerless within society. 'P' indicates that Agatha's age may be around adolescence as we are told "her underwear now comes in special boxes. | And every little nook is smeared with goose-fat."²⁰² The female form is defamiliarised and fetishised as the goose-fat alludes to images of being cooked and eaten as an object of desire.

Agatha becomes somewhat of an unlikely heroine amongst Hill's characters as her undefined condition – although a source of great sadness – provides a lack of awareness that precludes embarrassment. She often disregards conventions of behaviour and with reference to the pamphlet title, 'U' describes her defiance and eccentricity: "they told her not to time and time again | but here she is, on the actual day, | walking down the aisle wearing animal prints!"²⁰³ The wedding day scene becomes a liberating act of rebellion, subverting traditional associations of feminine reserve and purity with this garish, provocative pattern. Further, Hill draws attention to the absurd social practice of shaming women over something as trivial as their dress. However, this triumphant moment is fleeting and – as is the case with many of Hill's female characters – they find themselves ultimately anchored within confining bodies. The poem 'X' refers to Agatha's missing arm: "she sees an arm lying in the grass | and then a man runs across the field | shouting something Agatha can't hear."²⁰⁴ Feelings of physical disconnection are echoed in the hazy, dream-like recollection of events which are overshadowed by a male presence, linking to

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 16.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

Helena Michie's argument on the function of synecdoche in representations of the female form as:

a way of introducing sexuality by implication and a fragmentation and fetishisation of culturally selected parts of the female body. The hand or arm that comes to stand for the unnameable body parts at once introduces the larger body by implication and focuses the reader's attention on disembodied fragments.²⁰⁵

Hill takes this approach a stage further in her description of Agatha; she does not simply focus on certain body parts but literally separates them from the whole body as a metaphor for its cultural fragmentation, powerfully demonstrating what Monique Wittig would describe as the pain involved in the entrance of women's bodies into language. The collection closes with the sombre realisation in 'Z' that those who appear different will be neglected, punished and shamed by society:

They hear her gnawing at the skirting board
but by the time they reach her
it's too late.
She's lying on the floor as good as gold.
No wonder she can't breathe. She's got no breath.²⁰⁶

Descriptions of feral behaviour dehumanise Agatha and make her disturbing actions appear comical: the failure to take her suffering seriously is an implied contributory factor in her death. The narrator's detached, factual account communicates that such a loss is of no consequence to the society she inhabited as she was never considered a part of it to begin with. It may be that many readers in this instance would be forced to position themselves as one of Agatha's abusers, since Hill goes to great lengths to demonstrate Agatha's 'outsider' status; the poems can shame us into recognising how, in every day scenarios, we may exclude those identities that do not fit neatly into a binary understanding of gender

5. CATHOLICISM

Numerous references to Catholicism and Catholic figures persist in Hill's poems on the family, sex and hospital settings, giving a clear indication of their significance within her oeuvre. The teachings of the Catholic Church have been shown to be inextricably bound to

²⁰⁵ *The Flesh Made Word*, pp. 86-7.

²⁰⁶ *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints*, p. 26.

notions of gender identity – femininity in particular – an aspect which will now be considered in greater detail. Hill elaborated on the motivation behind adopting these themes during the Exeter interview:

My brother and my father set themselves up as God-like in my universe, so clearly ‘God’ is talking about patriarchy as well. And I think there’re also wonderings about the gender of God.²⁰⁷

By incorporating gods, nuns and angels into her work, Hill demonstrates the role of religious institutions in the production, dissemination and enforcement of gender roles; these figures defamiliarise and call attention to behaviours which become normalised and naturalised within the intimate relationships amongst family members and between lovers. This effect is also achieved through the free indirect discourse in many of Hill’s poems with the ability to penetrate each character’s private shame and guilt. Conversely, the many pleas to God, Lord or Jesus throughout, for example “the lodger | who thanks You for inventing thighs, O Lord”²⁰⁸ also gives the impression that a ‘creator’ or deity is an addressee (or at least presumed to be listening in). This ties in with an understanding of embarrassment as a public emotion, triggered in response to the real or imagined presence of another. Even when alone, ‘God is always watching’ Hill’s characters.

Hill’s early poems incorporate religious imagery slightly differently than in her later works; in *Saying Hello at the Station*, ancient Egyptian Gods appear alongside contemporary relationships and figures. In general, Egyptian Gods were believed to have been loved and celebrated – rather than feared – by ancient civilisations which may account for the more positive tone in this collection (it is only later when Hill introduces the Catholic Church with its formidable God that references to religion become increasingly linked to shame). ‘Questioning Mr Bonnet’ draws upon a framework of reference relating to Egyptology and mythology surrounding Thoth. Unlike her later work in short sequences, this poem is more structured and self-contained, written in four eleven-line stanzas and guided by Hans Bonnet: “Mr. Bonnet, the helpful Egyptologist, | explains the strange cosmology.”²⁰⁹ The poem follows Thoth’s adventures with the Gods of the moon and the sun, crossing “the

²⁰⁷ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 271.

²⁰⁸ *Bunny*, p. 8.

²⁰⁹ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 9.

celestial ocean | as helmsman of the world, | called Aah, the vizier of Ra, the sun”²¹⁰ and positions him as a masculine figure of central importance to civilisation “for he is the measurer of time, | and he invented writing.”²¹¹ Hill challenges this precedent through her writing; similarly her characters make frequent references to their own writing as a means of empowerment. Having described a male-dominated history, documented through the eyes of Mr Bonnet, the female speaker struggles to understand where she belongs in this context. She directly addresses Mr Bonnet with questions about what would happen if she ever met Thoth:

Will he be saying *Pleased to meet you,*
Mrs Hill, and how’s the writing going?
as we descend the corridors of night
into the Judgement Hall. Will he pat me
on the shoulder with his cracked
avuncular hand and, tucking my book
inside his sky-blue cape²¹²

Mr Bonnet is questioned as an authority on the subject but there is also the implication that she must access this information through a man. She seeks acceptance from Thoth as a dominant male figure, however there is something warm and reassuring about this playful imagined exchange: it gives the speaker pleasure to imagine the existence of a God with whom she could share her love of the written word, regardless of gender. ‘The Fowlers of the Marshes’ is set three thousand years ago in the “marshes around Thebes”²¹³ – a scene presided over by Nut, the goddess of the sky. The narrator juxtaposes this with the “hushed peculiar world”²¹⁴ of her own mother who is an equally unfamiliar and distant figure. When the narrator meets her mother at the station, she adopts a cheerful tone: “I say | *Hello, Mum!* and think *Hello, Thoth,* | *This is the weighing of the heart.*”²¹⁵ The final line refers to the ceremony in which the god Anubis weighs the hearts of the dead while Thoth records the findings: a light heart was said to signify a life of good deeds and passage into eternity, while those with a heavy heart were to be eaten by the god Ammut. These lines suggest a

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²¹² Ibid., p. 10.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 13.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

difficult mother-daughter relationship but in a less forthright way than in later poems. The narrator senses her mother's presence as oppressive and judgemental. 'Elegy for the Bee-God' draws upon ancient Mayan civilisation and the motifs of bee²¹⁶ gods found in Mayan ruins which were believed to bridge the natural world and the underworld:

the fat bee-god, who buzzed
in the heated air
to their music.
He lived in a gold house
in the hotlands, and drank
cocoa sweetened with honey.²¹⁷

The scene is vibrant and luxurious, gilded with warmth, gold and honey. The bee-god lives a contented life, celebrated by the bee keepers who "played their raspadores | and danced across the fields | with bells and ribbons"²¹⁸ in his honour. Like the drone, the bee-god is an essential part of a functioning hive. Once their purpose is served however they are ejected from the hive by worker bees or die shortly after mating with the Queen Bee. The narrator imagines finding the bee-god's dead body: "if ever I find him – thin, | justly offended, dead | in the dry chaparral"²¹⁹ and describes how she would honour him in death:

I will put jade beads
and honey on his tongue,
and wrap him in a shroud
of wings, and loop his neck
with pearls from Guatemala;
I will light him candles
of beeswax²²⁰

Again Hill uses different species to offer an alternative slant on traditional gender roles within humans. The narrator also laments the short lifespan which is briefly celebrated then immediately forgotten. This aspect perhaps mirrors the way in which men, as well as women, may experience shame as they age; their ability to inhabit masculine and feminine roles diminish as women reach menopause and men lose virility – characteristics that are intrinsically bound with their self-worth. The detail and care entered into following the bee-

²¹⁶ Bees are also used by political theorists to represent a model of human society.

²¹⁷ *Saying Hello at the Station*, p. 27.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

god's death draws attention to how much he was celebrated during his life which then seems to have no bearing on his body being cast aside once his purpose is served. 'The Picnic', also taken from *Saying Hello at the Station*, is in three parts, each made up of irregular verses. The first deals with a woman from the narrator's past whom she respected for her free spirit:

We used to shave our armpits
as smooth as a baby's bottom.
She always left hers hairy.
How we admired her!²²¹

The woman's refusal to be ashamed of body hair elevates her to heroine status in the narrator's eyes who envies her adventurous life and disregard for female convention (albeit replacing her life as mother with that of wife): "she ran away to Wales | and became a farmer's wife" and later "she joined the ashram | at Poona, leaving her sons."²²² In an implied punishment for her lifestyle, the woman lives alone in later life "considering Russian Orthodoxy | beside an icy sea."²²³ The second part of the poem begins "consider the Ancient Egyptians, | the most religious of all!"²²⁴ and reflects on the passionate, liberated lives led by the gods. The narrator excitedly envisions these figures transported into the present day: "they could come soon, | in their sacred barges, | made from cedarwood."²²⁵ In welcoming the gods, the narrator images their presence would bestow on her (and her female friends) a sense of confidence. This feeling projects itself into a fantasy involving the removal of the God Min from his shrine:

Dress him
in his plumed head-dress
and bring him in from the chill
holy-of-holies into the light.
We will worship him, the tall
ithyphallic lover-lover,
we will lift up our skirts
and get drunk...²²⁶

²²¹ Ibid., p. 36.

²²² Ibid., p. 36.

²²³ Ibid., p. 36.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

This passage is a rare example of men being dressed by women in Hill's poetry in a demonstration of assertive female sexuality suffused with irony and mirth. These events do not emasculate Min, he remains tall and phallic as the women submit to him. The final section of 'The Picnic' returns to the present day with the narrator enthusiastically addressing her friends about a trip to the beach: "we will pack baskets | of rolls and lemonade."²²⁷ From the shore, the group of women

watch the gods, happy
in their swimming-trunks,
collecting shells,
and doing press-ups on the sand²²⁸

While in the sea, the narrator describes "the tall priests, | knee-deep in turquoise."²²⁹ These men represent her lived experiences with gods and authority figures, in complete contrast to the thrill of her fantasies. God is equated with man and demonstrations of strength and physical prowess; the 'tall priests' recall the aloof tall doctors elsewhere in Hill's work where height is equated with superiority and distance from femininity. The women on the beach allow themselves to be passively dominated by these visions of masculinity: "on the stones, we'll lie | like seals in the sun, | letting their voices wash over us."²³⁰ Despite the many ways Hill's female characters may attempt to 'shake off' their bodies, it is implied that they will always be anchored within them. In *My Darling Camel* the poem 'Diving at Midnight' describes the protagonist's love of swimming and diving:²³¹

she was born to be a diver:
every day until she dies,
she wants to stand,
with nothing but her Speedo on,
and stretch into the dive
like a high note; fly beautifully²³²

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

²²⁸ Ibid., pp. 37-8.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

²³¹ A passion also shared by the protagonist in *Bunny*.

²³² *My Darling Camel*, p. 7.

The reference to ‘Speedo’ as opposed to a bathing suit evokes masculinity and the strength the protagonist draws from assuming this role. She finds this liberating experience a preferable way of worshipping God to performing acts of penance: “it isn’t true | that suffering in empty solitudes | is all man has to bring him close to God.”²³³ A distinction is drawn here between how men and women relate to God; deference towards God is key to masculine identity in order to maintain the appearance of naturalised patriarchal control. Although Hill’s female characters also demonstrate obedience to Catholic conventions, they are sometimes more creative in their interpretation of a relationship with God as a respite from oppression. In ‘Sky’ from *Bunny* the young protagonist praises God as she emerges from enduring sexual abuse and psychiatric incarceration, into newfound freedom: “thank You for inventing space, O Lord.”²³⁴ However, poems that relate to religion in a positive way are infrequent; in ‘No one’ from *My Darling Camel* the narrator states “no one is to touch me | but the Lord.”²³⁵ What initially sounds like a vow of abstinence and obedience to God takes on new meaning: “his finger-tips caress me | like a knife.”²³⁶ A palpable physical threat of masculinity is shown to operate through her spiritual connection with God. Thoughts turn to an escape from organised patriarchal control as the narrator imagines being a monk. Achieving maleness and celibacy, would allow her to circumvent the physical and social expectations and restrictions placed upon her body. This not being an option, she resigns herself to the only role available to her: “but I’m a wife.”²³⁷

The poem ‘Little Sisters’ from *A Little Book Of Meat*²³⁸ rigidly segregates the sexes therefore reinforcing the heterosexual binary. Set on a farm populated only by women, the poem’s title suggests these women are nuns. They live a simple, pastoral existence and appear unaware of the existence of men, who are sporadically seen in far off fields:

there are girls growing into women
without knowing why;
there are duck-feeding mothers
and duck-feeding, stern-faced daughters,

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³⁴ *Bunny*, p. 79.

²³⁵ *My Darling Camel*, p. 45.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²³⁸ Selima Hill, *A Little Book Of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993)

their dresses smelling of church
and giant azaleas,
who haven't the slightest idea
what they've got coming to them.²³⁹

Despite the fact that mothers and daughters are very much socialised into gender, it may be useful here to think about Butler's idea of imagining a time before sex becomes socialised as gender, such regulations having yet to overlay the scene; the women's 'dresses smelling of church' imbues them with submissive and virginal qualities, and the sense of foreboding regarding an imminent disruptive event is impliedly related in some way to their indeterminate identities. This becomes clearer as the poem progresses:

for whom the only males are bulls and cobs,
and the only man they know is the Man they don't,
Who might appear out of the woods at any moment,
with blood on His hands like a sunset,
and somehow redeem them.²⁴⁰

The capital letters in 'Man' and 'His' emphasise the introduction of a new and distinct category to the scene while appearing to equate man with God or Christ, supported by the image of bloodied hands, as if from crucifixion. Although Catholicism teaches that we are all sinners, this scene specifically focuses on women judged by man; something is wrong with their current way of life and a man has come to save and change them. This exchange replicates traditional gender relations in which femininity represents a passive blank surface waiting to be imprinted on or dominated by man. De Beauvoir's contention that one 'becomes' a woman is once more called to mind; Hill metaphorically isolates the imagined moment that this takes place, delineated as an awareness – both sudden and deep-seated – of masculinity and how female identities must relate and submit to it.

Portrait of My Lover as a Horse is composed of a hundred short single stanza poems linked by the repetition of the phrase "Portrait of My Lover..." in each title. The book explores aspects of intimate relationships, focussing on the female narrator's lover whom she addresses as 'Lord' – reiterating an association between man and God, as in 'Portrait of My Lover as a Bar of Soap':

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

What I said I want
are lots of parrots
trampling on my back
like polo ponies
while you, O Lord,
congeal in the bathroom,
meekly getting used to being soap.²⁴¹

These surreal images capture her desire to participate in a colourful, boisterous and non-sexual bodily experience without the involvement of her lover who, it would appear, stifles her self-expression. That his absence alone is insufficient suggests his far reaching influence upon her; only as a disintegrating and inanimate object does he pose no threat and narrator's wish to debase and incapacitate him is a fantasised revenge. The holy address is therefore ironic in tone, reflecting the respect and reverence she feels she must show him as a man, while powerfully communicating underlying feelings of resentment. In 'Portrait of My Lover as a Chicken' too, the narrator longs for her relationship with this man to be more manageable:

If only you had been
a little chicken
living quietly
in a chicken-run
nobody, O Lord,
would have to tell you
they never even loved you anyway.²⁴²

The narrator's anxiety over expressing her true feelings manifests itself in imagining her lover as small and mute; in a reversal of the conventional male-female power roles, she emasculates him and brands him unlovable, the final line chiming with instances of female shame elsewhere in Hill's work.

Hill's religious imagery predominantly relates to the control of femininity and sexuality. In *Red Roses* the narrator describes how abuse towards women is forgivable in the eyes of the church. Sex is depicted in terms of ravenous men devouring women's bodies: "they binge and bulge like little bloated puppies | that roll around the bedroom like their sins | (though

²⁴¹ Selima Hill, *Portrait of My Lover as a Horse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 12.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

only Jesus washes *those* away!)”²⁴³ Any objection to this behaviour is curbed by the innocent, vulnerable appearance of the aggressor, whose actions are endorsed in religious teachings, leaving the women to carry the burden of shame. In ‘Corsetry’ from *The Hat*, women’s bodies are also presided over by the church and the narrator repeatedly implores God to help: “oh my God | this girl needs holding together, | send her something, God.”²⁴⁴ The dramatic tone borders on comical suggesting that the narrator is subversively mocking conceptions of weak, dependent women in need of male support. She continues:

if only corsetry,
whose warm elastic fingers hold on *tight*,
like God might hold her,
but He’s got no fingers.²⁴⁵

This poem makes explicit associations between dresses and the shaping of gender identity that appear elsewhere in Hill’s poetry over the years. While the corset constricts and transforms women’s bodies into an idealised hourglass feminine shape, we are prompted to consider the psychological shaping that also takes place as a consequence. The ‘warm elastic fingers’ evoke an uncomfortable and disconcerting smothering sensation while personifying the pressure this garment exerts on the body. Described almost entirely in figurative terms, this mirrors some of the more covert ways in which patriarchal structures exercise power and control in the subordination of women. As has been established, dresses made from unpleasant and harsh materials serve to thwart female expressions of sexuality, as in ‘Her Wheezy Mother’ where the protagonist’s mother “dresses her in dresses | made of thistles, artichokes and porcupines.”²⁴⁶ Clothing of this nature can be linked to the function of shame and guilt in gender formation – as garments of penance. In her essay ‘Pleasure, resistance and a feminist aesthetics of reading’, Geraldine Heng describes thirteenth-century ‘confessional manuals’ as “guides on how to scrutinise conscience and root out sin, and poetry and prose on the close surveillance and disciplining of the interior self.”²⁴⁷ She explains the role of penance in preserving the purity and holiness of the individual’s inner

²⁴³ *Red Roses*, p. 46.

²⁴⁴ Selima Hill, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 18.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴⁷ *The Cambridge Companion of Feminist Literary Theory*, Edited by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 60.

world through bodily suffering and pain: “pain through mortification of flesh with fasts, vigils, scourgings [...] harsh garments, a hard bed, sickness and massive labours.”²⁴⁸ Hill’s female characters engage in a number of these practices; suggesting that women see themselves as inherently sinful, perpetually experiencing shame and guilt and striving to present an acceptable version of femininity within intimate relationships and wider society. Heng explains the effect of pain on the body:

pain by its nature over time or with due intensity breaks down subjectivity, disrupts the flow of inner consciousness, and unhinges the coherence of the self [...] So effectively does pain fragment inner integrity and concentrate attention obsessively, shutting out other stimuli and demands, that little remains – for wrongdoing or deviancy, or agency of other kinds.²⁴⁹

In Hill’s poetry, dresses aid the moulding and policing of femininity; the painful aspect of these garments may disrupt and discourage behaviour considered to be deviant, that is, unfeminine – socially defined by narrow criteria that ensure constant feelings of shame and guilt over failed femininity. The emphasis on being dressed by others evokes the outward pressure Hill’s characters experience to conform within the home, in hospitals and before God.

The Catholic figures that appear throughout Hill’s poetry function as a constant reminder and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. In *The Hat*, the female protagonist is referred to as a goose on several occasions, which takes on sinister connotations in ‘Goose Feathers’: “God has got a larder full of angels | gripping geese | between their huge thighs.”²⁵⁰ Typically associated with serenity and tenderness, the angels appear startlingly aggressive and unfamiliar as they carry out God’s bidding; the setting and context suggest that the protagonist is being plucked in preparation for being eaten, a metaphor for the domination of women’s bodies by men. This threat is perceptible in ‘The Tiny Room’ where the protagonist hides surrounded by objects of comfort – a place where “God Himself with all His horsey angels | is actually unable to get through to her!”²⁵¹ The penultimate poem in *The Hat*, ‘God Has Found His Way into Each Duck’ lists the many places where God can be

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁵⁰ *The Hat*, p. 43.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 47.

found suggesting the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures with regards to the monitoring of gender roles: He can be found everywhere from the “wheezy little mother, wheezy father”²⁵² to the states of “Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, Tennessee”²⁵³ with the final line stating that he has also found his way into “every stork”²⁵⁴ – as if this controlling presence has been with the protagonist since birth. In ‘My Veins’ from *Fruitcake* the narrator describes seeing God in her own body as she studies her veins: “made by God | as part of His experiment | with pleasure.”²⁵⁵ This description speaks less of awe over the miracle of creation and is more evocative of masculine control and arrogance with regards to the management and social formulation of women’s bodies. This extends to the bodies of mothers in ‘God’ from the same collection which deals with the shame associated with motherhood and rejection:

God shakes a drop of milk
from her nipple

into His enormous hand
and licks it:

just because she says
she doesn’t like me

she mustn’t think
He’s going to take me back!²⁵⁶

The mother in the opening sequence of *Fruitcake* is cold and distant towards her baby whom she rejects emotionally, manifesting itself physically as a refusal or inability to produce breast milk. God’s actions represent male intervention in and the medicalisation of women’s bodies: While the protagonist’s mother apparently attempts to avoid performing this maternal role, intrusive and humiliating measures are taken to force her body – and mind – into compliance. The ‘lick’ implies a degree of sexual satisfaction is derived from this subjugation, amplifying her shame and embarrassment. Further, the notion of being taken

²⁵² Ibid., p. 61.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁵⁵ *Fruitcake*, p. 57.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

back by God, suggests the mother's murderous intent towards her child, further defamiliarising portraits of maternity.

Further to assisting God in the intimidation of women, angels also prevent wives from discovering their husbands' infidelities. In *Violet*, the protagonist watches her partner sleep untroubled by guilt: "the luxuriant golden hair, | that sticks up on top of his head like a pet field | giving him the contented unmarried look."²⁵⁷ In keeping with descriptions elsewhere in Hill's poetry, men who mistreat women appear weak and innocent, impliedly transferring blame to their victims. The protagonist is preoccupied with suspicious thoughts while her husband sleeps like a baby which she likens to "the visitations of prejudiced angels | all breathlessly susurrating around me | to block her out."²⁵⁸ Traditionally depicted as protecting and guiding spirits, that the integrity of angels can be compromised reflects the protagonist's jaded worldview following her husband's betrayal. The angels' whispers attempt to 'block out' the presence of the mistress and are therefore prejudiced in the husband's favour, an image in which masculinity and spiritual life entwine. In *Red Roses*, love is feared for the possibility that it may lead to relationships characterised by physical and sexual violence. 'Love Is Like a Terrifying Angel' describes this anxiety:

Love is like a terrifying angel.
We hate to hear its terrifying wings.
We hate to feel it crawling down our ears
like slugs in evening dresses down dark corridors
from which the sound of counting can be heard.²⁵⁹

Love is personified here as an angel that stalks Hill's characters, overpowering them physically and mentally by infiltrating their bodies through the threat of an inevitable meeting. The 'sound of counting' suggests that this is played out as a menacing game of hide and seek. In 'Portrait of My Lover as an Angel' from *Portrait of My Lover as a Horse* the narrator addresses her lover and explains that nothing would please her more "than if you were to find yourself in Heaven | standing on a cloud with nothing on | being measured by

²⁵⁷ *Violet*, p. 58.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁵⁹ *Red Roses*, p. 31.

a large saint.”²⁶⁰ Alluding to a religious hierarchy in which the protagonist acknowledges her lowly position, she longs for her lover to experience the subjugation she endures. His nudity reflects her desire to see this authoritarian figure humiliated and vulnerable, presided over by someone physically dominant who calls him to account for his actions (similar to the treatment Hill’s female characters encounter within patriarchal society). In ‘Goose’ from *The Hat*, the protagonist is described as her lover’s “cold angel”²⁶¹ as he force feeds her: “she’s like a goose he stuffs with stuff like weights | that makes her feel so sick she can’t refuse.”²⁶² The associations with being ‘stuffed’ include an animal being fattened in preparation for being eaten, or rape. This is an act of absolute domination which the protagonist is physically prevented from objecting to: “take this, he goes, | gag gag, she goes.”²⁶³ Her moniker may refer to the emotionless exterior she adopts out of necessity in order to survive the ordeal but the term ‘angel’ could be read as praise for submitting to these acts without protest.

The Virgin Mary is another recurrent figure whose influence on women’s lives has already been raised in relation to virgins in dresses and associations with fasting and chastity. In *Alone of All Her Sex*, Marina Warner examines how the figure of the Virgin Mary has shaped the social history of women and continues to condemn them to inferiority in their everyday lives. Tracing back to Eve and original sin, Warner describes how the evils of sex were associated with femininity in particular:

Eve, cursed to bear children rather than blessed with motherhood, was identified with nature, a form of low matter that drags man’s soul down the spiritual ladder. In the faeces and urine – Augustine’s phrase – of childbirth, the closeness of woman to all that is vile, lowly, corruptible, and material was epitomized; in the “curse” of menstruation, she lay closer to the beasts; the lure of her beauty was nothing but an aspect of the death bought about by her seduction of Adam in the garden.²⁶⁴

Hill’s female characters have been shown to struggle physically and emotionally with childbirth and motherhood; they experience shame and are shamed by others regarding their bodily functions; and expressions of female sexuality are viewed with suspicion or met

²⁶⁰ *Portrait of My Lover as a Horse*, p. 9.

²⁶¹ *The Hat*, p. 13.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶⁴ *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 58.

with violence. The Virgin Mary represents a vision of unyielding and unforgiving feminine morality, compared to whom all women are found lacking; the resulting feelings of shame serve to control them into submission. The fetishisation and complex emotions surrounding the Holy Mother emerge in 'When We're Bored' from *Red Roses*. The poem looks at the reasons behind clichéd and inane female activities such as shopping and fashion, comparing women to the Virgin Mary in the process:

We're aiming to forget the stubby fingers
riffing through our hairdos like the Pope
(even though he *is* the Pope) might ruffle
Our Lady's veil, to reach Our Lady's lips,
from which a stream of light can be seen
lighting up a mattress²⁶⁵

Upon this mattress along with "several scowling women,"²⁶⁶ a man "enjoys his favourite way of being naked – | several of his favourite ways, in fact."²⁶⁷ While engaging in sexual acts, the women passively allow their bodies to be objectified and groped in order to please and appease their male companions; the image of 'Our Lady' evokes the guilt they experience nonetheless and the conflict inherent in female identities. The Virgin symbolises motherhood and yet is exempt from intercourse and labour, demonstrating the difficulty of mixed messages women are expected to follow. The double standard regarding male and female figures of eminence in the church is also raised; the Pope represents corrupt and hypocritical male morals which are revealed by and in comparison to, the purity of the Virgin. In *A Little Book of Meat*, the protagonist seeks the Virgin's advice – establishing her guiding role within women's lives – after seeing the slaughterman for the first time: "so what am I supposed to do, Our lady | – casserole it?"²⁶⁸ Referred to as 'it', masculinity appears daunting and strange; the ill-equipped protagonist can only think to respond from a narrow scope of female experience involving cooking and homemaking. This becomes a reversal of gender roles typical of Hill's negotiation of desire involving women being associated with food and eaten. In this context, cannibalism is the ultimate act of power and sexual aggression, but for the protagonist there is an element of attempting to gain

²⁶⁵ *Red Roses*, p. 39.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶⁸ *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 11.

control over an unknown and frightening quantity. In the anaphora poem 'Our Lady of Meat' each line begins "our lady of..." followed by: meat, pain, wedding dresses, virginity, love, vans, lips etc. These objects unfold as signs of femininity under the master-sign of the religious mother. The last line "what am I supposed to do now I'd like to know,"²⁶⁹ sees the protagonist lost and in need of guidance. These images and items bear no relevance to her own gender construction and yet this is what she has been bestowed with as a woman.

While the figure of the Virgin Mary excludes women, nuns make them seem spiritually inferior, fuelling Hill's characters' confusion over the Bible's conflicting messages with regards to ideal feminine behaviour. In turn, women are kept disenfranchised and striving to please God. The multiple references to nuns in Hill's poetry are possibly inspired by her own experiences of being sent to a Catholic convent at three years old (two years earlier than usual). She describes being physically abused by the nuns during the Exeter interview: "the Mother Joanna would put her thumbnail underneath my chin and would put it up 'til it was bleeding so I'd look into her face when she talked at me."²⁷⁰ Contributing to feelings of confusion and ambivalence towards religion – which is borne out in the poetry – her parents were in no way religious: "they submitted me to it and when I was at home they would jeer about it. Yet when I was at school, I had to do as I was told by the Nuns obviously and believe them. So that was cruel and hard."²⁷¹ 'The Convent of Sleep' describes how such an environment uses shame to shape gender identity, enforcing notions of 'good' and 'bad' people and behaviour in a women-only ward. Those who sleep are "good, calm people"²⁷² and everyone else is a "worrier and a fantasiser."²⁷³ The latter description raises clichéd responses to women who rail against submissive models of femininity: they are either discredited as unstable or unrealistic in their ambitions. The protagonist roams the borders of her dream world which become a metaphor for the borders of her gender identity and as a result, she "gets into all sorts of trouble"²⁷⁴ and draws "the wrath of people."²⁷⁵ Inasmuch as Hill presents God, the Virgin Mary, angels, nuns and monks as formidable and substantive

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷⁰ Selima Hill Exeter interview, p. 280.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 280.

²⁷² *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 52.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

within her characters' lives, there are many examples of these figures in everyday situations. In 'My Happiest Day' from *Violet* the protagonist reminisces about her time in convent school when she played baseball: "Mother Maria yelled *Catch* | and I caught it every time."²⁷⁶ As a woman, these carefree times are a distant memory and, addressing her unfaithful husband, she explains that now she 'catches' all that "you and the world and its wives | and various pungent mistresses | care to throw at me now."²⁷⁷ The church seems naïve and incapable of offering guidance in these matters, dispelling associations of authority and wisdom: "and Mother Maria's got nothing to do with it. | She probably never even touched a man."²⁷⁸ Monks are similarly demystified in 'Natural Wonders' from *My Darling Camel* in which they give in to their amorous desires:

The handsome mountain-dwelling monk lies dead.
Something is wrong with the electric fan.

His secret love-affair
exceeds his wildest dreams,

while here on earth
the other monks are lapsing.²⁷⁹

The closer biblical figures seem to humanity, the more their power and influence appears to diminish, while simultaneously revealing the far from harmless human – and notably masculine – desires that operate behind religious institutions.

Finally, the swarms of flies that appear in many of Hill's poems, particularly those involving the burnt baby, could be viewed as reminiscent of biblical plagues in the Book of Exodus. Sent as a punishment, this demonstration of great power was believed to increase faith in God. Poems featuring flies have been cited already but 'The King' from *Fruitcake* particularly draws out links to religion:

Every day
the largest fly in Christendom

²⁷⁶ *Violet*, p. 46.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷⁹ *My Darling Camel*, p. 18.

walks across my head
like a king²⁸⁰

The setting adds weight and significance to this scene in which flies are again attracted to the protagonist's injuries, exacerbating her suffering. The 'largest fly' plays with perspectives in size between aggressor and victim (as with the 'tall doctors'): characterised as masculine and authoritative, he 'walks all over' her body in an act of patriarchal domination.

Institutions such as hospitals and the Church are of central importance to Hill's negotiation of gender identity. These social structures exercise control over women's minds and bodies, overseen by authoritarian male figures. Women are pathologised and incarcerated for displaying traits deemed to stray too far from proscribed notions of femininity, and subjected to shameful and embarrassing bodily experiences. Behavioural expectations are shown to be entrenched in traditional Catholic understandings of masculinity and femininity and enforced by the presence of real and metaphorical biblical figures. Their presence represents the perpetual feelings of guilt and shame experienced by Hill's characters over their failed femininity. However, the various identity positions she puts forward in her work challenge and undermine the authority of such institutions, highlighting the process of oscillation between the two; this in itself underlines the fallacy of traditional gender positions. In Fischer-Lichte's terms:

Individuals alone do not control the conditions for the processes of embodiment; they are not free to choose what possibilities to embody, or which identity to adopt. Neither are they wholly determined by society. While society might attempt to enforce the embodiment of certain possibilities by punishing deviation, it cannot generally prevent individuals from perusing them.²⁸¹

In Hill's poetry, patriarchal institutions exploit the powerful emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt in order to propagate, normalise and enforce restrictive notions of gender identity. These messages filter down into intimate relationships between family members and between lovers, frequently causing great personal distress. However, a clear message

²⁸⁰ *Fruitcake*, p. 15.

²⁸¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 27.

emerges from Hill's work; while the process of attempting to embody a role that feels authentic is fraught with difficulty and conflict, true suffering is reserved for those who do not try.

CHAPTER 4

SHARON OLDS AND GERALDINE MONK

This chapter considers the work of Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk alongside that of Selima Hill, with reference to the theoretical framework on the shaping of gender identity through embarrassment, shame and guilt. The reason behind this choice of writers has been touched upon in the introduction; in addition to similarities in age, religious backgrounds and a long history of negotiating gender within their work, it was felt that this particular grouping would be particularly revelatory regarding the distinctive nature of Hill's work. In some sense Hill seems to fall somewhere between Olds and Monk, which will become clearer as the chapter progresses, as a writer who straddles the mainstream and experimental genres and eludes straightforward classification. Hill and Olds are somewhat notorious for their 'embarrassing' styles of writing which has been repeatedly commented on by literary critics and in reviews. By contrasting the two, we start to think about notions of embarrassment in American and British literature, the different ways in which this unsettling effect on the reader can be achieved and how it impacts upon gender formation in the text and for the reader. Likewise, we unravel more of Hill's poetics through a comparison with Monk; while Hill is published by a mainstream publisher, her work can appear deceptively accessible in terms of language and structure when in fact, it displays experimental aspects, notably in relation to poetic voice. Close readings of a selection of poetry from both writers will draw upon themes raised in the previous three chapters on Hill's work: intimate relationships between family members and between lovers, and the forced intimacy of wider institutional control and societal influences.

1. SHARON OLDS

Olds was born in San Francisco in 1942 and to date she has published twelve volumes of poetry, including a selected works. Having won numerous awards – most recently the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2012 and Pulitzer Prize in 2013 for *Stag's Leap* – she was asked to be New York's poet laureate during years 1998-2000 and currently teaches creative writing at New York University. Olds is a confessional poet whose work covers overtly auto-biographical issues such as her childhood, her own family as an adult, sexual experiences and interactions with various characters within intimate settings. In doing so Olds appears to use

(with few exceptions) the same female narrator throughout her work, albeit at different stages of life. She writes predominantly single, free verse poems in enjambed lines with a conversational tone. It is her portrayal of her father particularly which has led some critics to situate her within the longstanding tradition of American women confessional poets dealing with this theme, drawing comparisons with Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. While early tendencies in confessional poetry are typically characterised by the assumption of a persona or 'mask' which hides the poet's actual face, M.L. Rosenthal¹ explains how Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* was revolutionary in this respect: he describes how his speaker is "unequivocally himself [...] it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal."² Rosenthal feels that the difference between the long tradition of intimate, lyric poetry and confessional poetry was that the latter goes "beyond customary bounds of reticence or personal embarrassment"³ – citing such examples as Lowell's discrediting his father's lack of manliness and his family life.

However, when Rosenthal states that it is hard *not* to think in these terms, perhaps we must; if not to settle on a final understanding of the origins of the poetry (which would be impossible) but as part of a consideration and analysis of the work. A poem is not the poet but neither can the two be fully disentangled. In another definition, Irving Howe argues that a "confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without the mediating presence of imagined event or persona, something about his life."⁴ Although Olds encourages an autobiographical reading of her work through its subject matter, style and intimate tone, in interviews she is vague on this issue using the phrase "apparently personal" to characterise her work and encouraging writers in her workshops to adopt a similar approach, expounding its liberating effect. In this way, it could be said that Olds adopts a similar approach to Hill in her writing whereby conventional understandings of intimate relationships and gender roles are deliberately unsettled, refusing to rest upon concrete conclusions: in Hill's words 'to get to the truth, I lie'. The process she describes

¹ M.L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

² *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁴ Irving Howe, 'The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent' in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work* ed. Edward Butscher (London: Peter Owen, 1979), p.233.

utilises personal experience whereby events are described using poetic artifice in order to allow the reader to feel as if they are as close as possible to what was and is felt – it is the *feeling* which is confessional and not necessarily the factual events of the poems. Hill's 'to get to the truth, I lie' and Olds's notion of the 'apparently personal' can be linked to T.S. Elliot's concept of 'objective correlative':

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.⁵

Olds and Hill both strive towards creating an emotional experience that resonates with their reader, often evoked through engaging with events and images that surround these emotions which are all the more potent for being accessed indirectly. Readers of Olds and Hill are engaged by the intimate tone of the speaker which draws them into a world with its own uncertain set of rules to be negotiated. Olds's female narrator – as opposed to Hill's various characters and storylines – can still be challenged in terms of reliability through noticing the context of each poem and who the speaker is addressing. However, speakers in both poets' work include survivor figures that – for example – having suffered an abusive childhood, later find happiness as an adult through marriage and children or through forgiving an abuser. This tendency may negate the prolonged suffering associated with the confessional school, although the speakers' past is a pervasive memory which sees them engaged in a constant re-negotiation of these events in the context of an ever changing present. Hill revisits themes and images as part of an extended exploration of certain subjects, using multiple characters. Here both writers could be said to defect from the so-called confessional school, presenting the opportunity for catharsis in their work. Hill focuses too on the need for survival and offering the reader hope through her characters:

I can only hope that the act of writing is somehow positive even if what you write appears to be brutal. I think there is some, if not benevolence then at least hope in the mere fact that I'm creating an artefact from such pain.⁶

⁵ T.S. Elliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 86.

⁶ Selima Hill Exeter interview with Lucy Winrow, September 2010, p. 292.

The discussion of Olds that follows covers the portrayal of feminine and masculine identities within her work. Interactions between these characters and the intimate relationships they share will be shown to impact upon gender identity, with the potential to unsettle the reader's beliefs regarding their own gender construction. Alice Ostriker observes how the formation of identity operates symbiotically in Olds: "the self in Olds is never presented in isolation but always in relation, penetrated and penetrating, glued by memory and gaze to others."⁷ I argue that these relationships are fuelled by embarrassment, guilt and shame, emotions capable of both undoing and reinforcing gender identity. Within Olds's familiar domestic settings we witness the painful embarrassment of children by their parents, the different ways in which self-loathing masculine and feminine identities unload their shame-fuelled aggression onto others and the echo of guilt as a stark reminder of the complicated, repressed feelings operating beneath the emotional abuse and real or imagined violence. The difficult and uncomfortable feelings that arise for characters and potentially the reader, stem from the challenge this process poses to traditional notions of gender identity, revealing its constructed nature and thus opening up the possibility for transformation for those constrained by conventional gender roles. The unsettling potential of embarrassment described in Hill's work is also especially potent in Olds's poetry, reflected in the controversy that surrounds it; critic Helen Vendler labelled the work as 'typically pornographic'⁸ and of questionable ethics. Denise Levertov shares these concerns in her remarks on Olds's poem 'Six Year Old Boy' where the narrator describes her young son's penis in detail:

Adults can object and defend themselves [...] children cannot. Yet there are many poems in which a parent [...] most often a mother – writes of a child in ways liable to cause acute, even traumatic embarrassment.⁹

Whilst the concern for a vulnerable child may be valid, Olds might argue that the level of intimacy of feeling she strives to convey would be compromised by the notion of self-censorship, something which she seeks to overcome by her "apparently personal" approach. Amy Hempel also isolates this aspect of Olds's writing process in a way that strikingly chimes with some of the commentary on Hill:

⁷ Alicia Ostriker, 'I Am (Not) This: Erotic Discourse in Bishop, Olds, and Stevens' *The Wallace Stevens Journal* Volume 19, No. 2 (Fall 1995), 234-54.

⁸ Helen Vendler, 'Feminism and Literature' *The New York Review of Books* (1990) 37. 9.

⁹ Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 182.

She has written without embarrassment or apology, with remarkable passion and savagery and nerve, poems about family and family pathology, early erotic fascination, and sexual life inside marriage.¹⁰

The way in which Olds negotiates these themes can be traced back to her exploration of adolescence which she establishes as a key stage in gender identity formation. Her poems featuring a pre-pubescent female narrator detail a journey into womanhood which is shaped according to surrounding familial relationships, echoing earlier discussions of Butler's gender performativity and Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one."¹¹ In 'The Bra' taken from *One Secret Thing*, the narrator observes her changing body: "I would look down, and the soft skin of the | nipple had become like a blister, as if it had been | lifted by slow puffs of breath."¹² Noticing these subtle yet powerful physical changes suggests a mental shift in the narrator in accordance with a dim awareness of the implications of acquiring a woman's body. Undercurrents of difficulty associated with the female form arise in the breast as an injury or 'blister' and the unsettling image of mouths 'inflating' the young girl's breasts, eroticising this process and implicating others separate to oneself in inducing womanhood. The direct tone of the lyrical voice in Olds is where embarrassment lies for the reader, whereas a similar experience put forward in 'Aunt Lou's Last Summer' from Hill's *Bunny* is embarrassing for the surreal imagery built around it in which the young female protagonist's aunts bake fairy cakes:

as warm and light
as little warm breasts
whose cherries
she can lie in bed and suck,
surrounded by a ring of old ladies
with sifted flour and sugar in their hair.¹³

In this poem, adolescence takes on ominous connotations whereby maturation signals an immediate change in the treatment of the body. The sexual objectification of the protagonist is all the more disconcerting for the adult characters that sit and watch – cake

¹⁰ Amy Hempel, *Sharon Olds* (Bomb 54, Winter 1996). Available at: <http://bombsite.com/issues/54/articles/1927> (Accessed: 15 August 2013)

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 1.

¹² Sharon Olds, *One Secret Thing* (London: Cape Poetry, 2009), p. 33.

¹³ Selima Hill, *Bunny* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), p. 57.

ingredients in their hair subtly suggest their involvement – magnifying the protagonist’s emerging perception of her body as a public, as opposed to private, site.

‘The Bra’ continues with Olds’s narrator describing her first bra: “those white harnesses, | like contagion masks for conjoined twins.”¹⁴ The defamiliarisation of a garment which is habitually associated with femininity and the rite of passage into womanhood, leads the reader to re-evaluate their understanding of it. The notion of ‘contagion masks’ evokes an infected and imminently dangerous body which poses a threat to the self and others; femininity is viewed with a suspicion that perpetuates shameful associations. Olds juxtaposes this familiar garment with incongruous events and images (in a similar way to Hill), imbuing it with renewed weight and significance. Olds’s narrator recalls reading about the discovered body of a murdered classmate: “in the paper they printed | the word in French, *brassiere*, I felt a little | glad she had still been wearing it.”¹⁵ In a later update the narrator learns that the bra was in fact found buried in the perpetrator’s basement – confirming a sexual motivation – and she describes the dug up, photographed item:

It looks like something taken down
to the bones – God’s apron – God eviscerated –
its plain, cotton ribbons rubbed
with earth¹⁶

These lines suggest a media and societal fascination with, and fetishisation of, women’s bodies and feminine clothing. Initially associated with shame and the preservation of modesty – even in death, communicating the potency of gender roles – the bra comes to symbolise a religious, patriarchal role in the subjugation of women. Imagery moves through literal and figurative death with ‘bones’, into ‘God’s apron’ a garment with typically domestic, feminine associations of (implicitly) masculine design. As in Hill’s work, clothing acts as a gendered and constricting overlay to the body. Finally, the bra comes to represent the violence inherent in controlling influences over gender identity which is all the more powerful for how it is simply expressed in ‘plain, cotton ribbons’. In the poem ‘Pyjama-case’ from Hill’s *Bunny* the adolescent protagonist explores her emerging gendered and sexual

¹⁴ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

identity through dressing up and trying on lingerie, posing on the rim of the bath in a bra like “elastic pudding-basins”¹⁷ in a bathroom “panelled with mirrors like flattened eyes| in one of which he watches as she pouts.”¹⁸ The bra is once more defamiliarised into something alien and firmly disassociated from women’s bodies, while at the same time evoking conventional links between femininity and cooking. Further, the absurdity of trying it on draws attention to the constructed nature of femininity, the formation of which is overshadowed by the male gaze. The male presence may be real or imagined, a violation upon an otherwise innocent scene or tentative sexual expression on behalf of the protagonist from a position of fantasy and safety. Similarly, feminine items of clothing – of impliedly masculine design – function to shape and control femininity in *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* where the virgin’s burdensome wooden dress ensures her “taut purity”¹⁹ with its coffin-like appearance suggesting death. In *The Hat* the female protagonist is described as in need of ‘holding together’ by an oppressive corset “whose warm elastic fingers hold on *tight*, | like God might hold her.”²⁰ The world in Hill’s poetry feels introspective and strange contrasted with the familiar references to newspaper articles and happenings in the outside world in Olds’s poem.

Olds continues her exploration of adolescence in ‘Men’s Singles, 1952’ in which the narrator watches a tennis match and imagines her changing body: “and something was building in my belly, some scaffold, | an edifice where the flesh of those half-bare | kings could sing.”²¹ These lines describe awakening sexual organs in ominous terms as the image of the scaffold brings thoughts of femininity constructing itself but also of hangings: approaching womanhood signals a metaphorical death in relation to identity and autonomy. That her body assembles itself automatically for men to enjoy or ‘sing’ in, evokes her helplessness in this process – her body no longer belongs to her. The narrator is seated next to an unknown man who unexpectedly brings her a ‘Coke’ in the interval: “the varicose | brown-emerald bottle I had seen the magazine | pictures of, forbidden drink with | cocaine and dead men’s

¹⁷ Hill, *Bunny* p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Selima Hill, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 9.

²⁰ Selima Hill, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 18.

²¹ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 29.

fingers in it.”²² The drink offers a glimpse into a glamorous and dangerous adult world, at once both familiar and strange. Although intimidated by this interaction, the narrator “cracked a sepia sweat”²³ after consuming the drink, she also feels excited and empowered by it. As the poem concludes, Olds inserts the image of the goddess Diana in a comparable way to Hill’s use of such mythological characters in everyday scenes:

Diana racing through the forest, the V of her
legs, at the top, as beautiful
as the power of a man, the nipples on her chest
pointing her to the hunt²⁴

A maiden goddess of hunting in Roman mythology, Diana was said to look after virgins and women, presiding over animals and woodland. Although Olds’s description of Diana sees her identity anchored within her body by focussing on her breasts and genitals, her anatomy projects strength and dynamism. In this context such a figure reflects the narrator’s naïve excitement regarding the new experiences a woman’s body might have to offer her, an image of feminised athleticism as opposed to the male tennis players. Further, a pun on ‘single’ in the poem’s title alludes to the men’s un-married status and its associated freedoms, as well as their potential availability.

In ‘The Couldn’t’ the narrator is fitted with her “Young Lady’s First Sanitary Belt;”²⁵ capital letters highlight the significance of menstruation in her transition from girl to woman, while announcing an intimate, private subject that heightens shame and embarrassment; in addition it also identifies the object as a product of proud American design. As with the bra, this feminine item appears unnatural and discordant with the body: “its | metal teeth gripping the pad,”²⁶ which is also reminiscent of a chastity belt. The poem captures the awkwardness of this in-between stage where despite her maturing body, the narrator must submit to her mother’s rules and be spanked as a child in the event of her disobedience. The narrator reasons “I couldn’t be punished, unless I was bare, but I | couldn’t be bare.”²⁷ Here enjambment captures the devastating realisation of the way in which her body is

²² Ibid., p. 29.

²³ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

compromised. The mother compounds her daughter's shame – and appears to derive pleasure from her discomfort – by persisting with the punishment: “her face lit up with sarcastic | wonder, and combat.”²⁸ Described in terms of ‘combat’, this incident illustrates how the family home comes to represent a battlefield in which physical and emotional violence is wielded to gender-shaping effect. The narrator maintains that she would resort to physical violence before allowing her mother to triumph: “I would hurt her before the last scene | of this long-running act could be played out | to its completion.”²⁹ The implication is that these lines refer to more than a protracted hostility between these two characters and rather to age-old patterns in mother-daughter relationships; powerless-feeling women take out their frustrations over their limited domestic role on their daughters who variously endure and rebel against such treatment, a relationship dynamic which is complicated and motivated by the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt. In ‘The Couldn’t’ the mother recognises her daughter’s challenge to her authority and there appears to be a moment of self-recognition within each other: “when she got there, maybe she could see that, | we faced off, dressed in our dresses and our | secret straps and pulleys.”³⁰ Femininity is exposed as an elaborate construct which pits women against each other thus keeping them disenfranchised, while alliteration ensures that the repeated ‘s’ creates a hissing sound, matching the tone of resentment, or a whispering sound suggestive of secrecy. The ‘straps and pulleys’ refer to the way in which women’s bodies are intrusively managed; underwear contorts them into shapes conventionally pleasing to men but this image also suggests puppets on a string being manipulated and controlled by wider patriarchal powers. The repetition of ‘dress’ reminds us that while used to describe typically feminine attire, the word also denotes the adornment of the body and the covering of a wound, meanings that resonate with Olds’s negotiation of gender identity. ‘The Sisters of Sexual Treasure’ is taken from Olds’s debut *Satan Says*, a collection that explores aspects of femininity in sections entitled ‘Daughter’, ‘Woman’, ‘Mother’ and ‘Journey’. In this poem, despite a mother’s best efforts to curtail her daughters’s sexual expression, the narrator states:

²⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

As soon as my sister and I got out of our
mother's house, all we wanted to
do was fuck, obliterate
her tiny sparrow body and narrow
grasshopper legs³¹

These lines echo Hill's fragile, timid mother in *Fruitcake* for whom her daughter's sexual maturity is a terrifying prospect, especially as she responds to her mother's fear by exacerbating it (albeit in a more passive yet allusive and unexpectedly intimidating way to Olds): "I grow enormous breasts | that make her bedroom | smell of fresh meat."³² The sober tone in both poems reveals an absence of sympathy towards the mother's plight, although her diminutive size and physical weakness may call for sympathy from the reader. Olds infuses the act of sexual intercourse – emphasised by coarse terminology – with the gravity to 'obliterate' the mother's body, reiterating that there is something shameful and destructive about female sexual expression and women's bodies. In contrast the narrator and her sister "like explorers who | discover a lost city"³³ devour men's bodies with great enthusiasm:

The men's bodies
were like our father's body! The massive
hocks, flanks, thighs, male
structure of the hips, knees, calves –
we could have him there, the steep forbidden
buttocks, backs of knees, the cock³⁴

The 'massive' and mysterious male body is broken down into parts in an attempt to make it more manageable and comprehensible. The list reads like a butcher's diagram of anatomy, objectifying men's bodies in a way that is typically reserved for women and linking desire with consumption in a similar way to Hill. In her essay for *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Kate Daniels highlights the potentially embarrassing impact of Olds's work on the male reader:

Male readers and critics, however, have sometimes found themselves quite uncomfortable at being "undressed" in the pages of Olds's poetry in a way that is

³¹ Sharon Olds, *Satan Says* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 24.

³² Selima Hill, *Fruitcake* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2009), p. 68.

³³ Olds, *Satan Says*, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

reminiscent of the centuries-old tradition of undressing women for the gratification of male readers.³⁵

The reference to the father picks up on Olds's frequent use of incest as a metaphor, seemingly conforming to conventions of Freudian theory regarding how gender identity is formed within the home in response to other family members' bodies, and as a device to deconstruct the contract of traditional gender roles between the sexes. However, Daniels argues that Olds's delight in heterosexual experiences within her poems serves as a challenge to Freudian theories regarding the consciousness of men and women: "it is a true sexual equality that Olds depicts in her poems, with each of the partners active agents of desire and will, both devoted to the creation of mutual pleasure that diminishes neither."³⁶ In this sense, Olds absolutely deviates from Hill whose heterosexual relationships are firmly rooted in stereotypes of dominant males and submissive females. At best, the latter experience a kind of perverse pleasure in pleasing men through their own humiliation.

Olds's 'At Night' depicts a mother performing a traditional maternal, domestic task of tucking her children tightly into bed, with an emphasis on how this incapacitates the children. Although the scene is recalled fondly: "the room full of girls was her blossom, the house was my | mother's bashed, pretty ship, she | battened us down, this was our home,"³⁷ these actions are motivated by anxiety and fear. The girls are described as "parts of a | sexual part, squeaky and sweet,"³⁸ a sensation so overwhelming and tempting to men that in an attempt to stop or control it, their beds are turned into a device of torture:

tightening the bed, racking it one notch
smaller, so the sheets pressed me like a fierce
restraint. I was my mother's squeeze,
my mother was made of desire leashed.³⁹

The term 'my mother's squeeze' refers to the slang for lover, continuing the theme of familial incest but also evokes the violence and dependence that characterises her relationship to her daughter. Recurring suggestions of incest – on a metaphorical level at

³⁵ *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Edited by Jack Myers and David Wojahn (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 249.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁷ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

least, function to unsettle the reader's understanding of gender roles, opening them up to the possibility of alternative constructions. This uncomfortable scene undermines conventional notions of motherhood while simultaneously this character conforms to traditional societal expectations of mothering behaviour and restrained female sexuality. Olds locates the mother as a source of fear and shame over the female body which can be passed on through generations; the loaded phrase 'desire leashed' powerfully captures the destructive potential of intimate relationships in which actors struggle within outwardly imposed and narrowly constructed gender positions. Such conduct is comparable to that in 'The Darkness of Her Meekness' from Hill's *The Hat* where the protagonist "rages in the darkness of the meekness | in which they have installed her as in stalls."⁴⁰ In both examples, Olds and Hill demonstrate how women can be metaphorically imprisoned by femininity as approaching womanhood is associated with shame, a cause for panic and a need for control. The shame surrounding sexual expression is most powerfully communicated by mothers with whom daughters usually first associate and come to mould their own understanding of gender. In Hill's poem however, there is a greater sense of guilt over failing or being unable to resist such constraints; in her passive position, the protagonist can only 'rage' at her meekness. Remarkably, the narrator in *Red Roses* uses identical phrasing to Olds when describing the way in which men control women in sexual relationships, with a pun on 'battered': "they like to keep us well battened down!"⁴¹ Again, this is spoken at a slight distance from the self, as if conceding defeat.

Olds offers an alternative account of female identity in her poems on becoming a mother. In 'The Language of the Brag' the narrator expresses guilt over having conformed to traditional notions of femininity by becoming pregnant as opposed to using her body differently: "I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw, | I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate | arms."⁴² Imagining excitement and danger empowers her, as the piercing blade "heavily vibrating like a cock"⁴³ signifies masculinity. However, the fourth stanza turns the image of the knife back on the narrator and lays bare the reality of her condition:

⁴⁰ Hill, *The Hat*, p. 21.

⁴¹ Selima Hill, *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 10.

⁴² Olds, *Satan Says*, p. 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

my belly big with cowardice and safety,
stool charcoal from the iron pills,
huge breasts leaking colostrum,
legs swelling, hands swelling,
face swelling and reddening, hair
falling out, inner sex
stabbed again and again with pain like a knife.
I have lain down⁴⁴

Overtuning stereotypical depictions of pregnant women as ‘blooming’ and ‘glowing’, this monstrous account in which everything swells captures how overwhelming and unfamiliar her body feels. Just as Hill’s new mother in *The Accumulation* states “my uterus felt like a sunlit knife,”⁴⁵ the pregnant body in Olds’s work is described in defamiliarising, violent terms. The itemisation of body parts and functions in embarrassing, shameful detail dehumanises the narrator into final submission. However, her perspective on motherhood changes after giving birth and witnessing the baby with the “language of blood like praise all over the body,”⁴⁶ blood representing a bold, visceral sign of universal approval. The final stanza sees the poem come full circle from feelings of alienation in a woman’s body to a triumphant expression of self-acceptance: “I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman, | Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing.”⁴⁷ The act of giving birth becomes victorious; her woman’s body allows her to do something a man cannot, and as a poet she writes from personal experience on childbirth and mothering in a way that eludes male poets. Whitman deals with mothers and birth on a number of occasions in his poetry, for example ‘Unfolded out of the Folds’ empowers women as life-givers with the capacity to shape the men who emerge from their bodies. The lines “unfolded out of the inimitable poem of | the woman can come the poems of man – | only thence have my poems come”⁴⁸ appear especially resonant in the context of Olds’s poem whose narrator claims ownership over this experience. In Ginsberg’s *Kaddish* he also describes mothers as givers of life and

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁵ Hill, *The Accumulation*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Olds, *Satan Says*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

⁴⁸ Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1995), pp. 292-93.

language: “o glorious muse that bore me from the womb, gave suck | first mystic life & taught me talk and music, from whose painted | head I first took Vision.”⁴⁹

Olds’s early poem ‘Station’ describes the guilt experienced by a mother who aspires to write, a tension identified in Hill’s work. After running “out on the dock to write | as soon as one of the children is in bed”⁵⁰ – a shameful admittance of her need to escape her maternal role – she returns to her husband’s silent disapproval:

An elegant hand on your beard. Your tapered
eyes found me on the lawn. You looked
as the lord looks down from a narrow window
and you are descended from lords. Calmly, with no
hint of shyness, you examined me⁵¹

Like so many of Hill’s male characters, the husband appears glamorous, aloof and is equated with God. His ‘narrow window’ perspective of the narrator may represent a wider commentary on patriarchal views on women that construct female identities along rigidly maternal and submissive lines. His elevated position and lack of embarrassment in observing his wife suggests that he occupies the correct standpoint and intensifies her shame and guilt: “the poems | heavy as poached game hanging from my hands.”⁵² Once more, images of death surround the failure to perform gendered roles to a socially acceptable standard. In ‘When Our Firstborn Slept In’ a new mother relays how her body has become uncomfortable and unmanageable: “my breasts hardening with milk – little seeps | leaking.”⁵³ This disconnection carries over into her candid acknowledgement of the pressure to act in a maternal manner and her fear of failure:

When she was awake, I was
purpose, I was a soft domestic
prowling of goodness – only when she slept
was I free to think the thoughts of one
in bondage.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 55.

⁵⁰ Olds, *Satan Says*, p. 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵³ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

In likening motherhood to slavery the narrator articulates thoughts that many women may feel ashamed to express. The maternal role is represented as a performance which is switched on and off according to the child or, in terms of embarrassment theory, within the perceived presence of another. However a contradiction lies in the phrase 'prowling goodness', contrasting the wild with the domestic and revealing the guilty truth of the narrator's feelings. She describes a loss of self and of the desire to be: "someone – | not just someone's mom, but someone, some *one*"⁵⁵ emphasised by the repetition and breakdown of the word, eventually focussing on the elusive single unit. Shattering the taboo on admitting to feelings of inadequacy as a new mother, she confesses that despite her love for her baby: "still there was a part of me | left out by it, exposed on a mountain of mothering."⁵⁶ The image of the mountain once more evokes the overwhelming experience of living up to demanding and rigid social expectations. The speaker's husband in Olds is another male figure to be explored. In 'New Mother' the narrator describes the sensitive subject of having sex shortly after giving birth: "a week after our child was born, | you cornered me in the spare room."⁵⁷ To be 'cornered' suggests resistance and coupled with a painful, unflinching account of the maternal body, such a proposition feels inappropriate:

You kissed me and kissed me, my milk undid its
burning slip-knot through my nipples,
soaking my shirt. All week I had smelled of milk,
fresh milk, sour. I began to throb:
my sex had been torn easily as cloth by the
crown of her head, I'd been cut with a knife and
sewn⁵⁸

The image of the 'slip-knot' reiterates associations between female biology and death in Olds's work; female suffering appears inbuilt and inevitable, thus neutralising the ordinarily shocking sensation of being cut by a weapon. The body provides no defence, giving way easily to acts of force upon it as a vessel for a higher purpose, while the narrator's vulnerability and shame is enhanced by the unpleasant odour she emits. Despite her

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁷ Sharon Olds, *The Dead and the Living* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 53.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

partner's arousal "your lips hot and swollen | as a teen-age boy's, your sex dry and big"⁵⁹ his restraint and tenderness is unexpected and heart-warming as he leans over the narrator's stitches as one who: "finds a wounded animal in the woods | and stays with it, not leaving its side | until it is whole, until it can run again."⁶⁰ This final image – although comforting to the narrator – sees women equated with animals, as seen throughout Hill's work, which brings connotations of otherness and unfamiliarity.

Olds also considers a mother's dominance within the domestic realm and over her children who become an outlet for her frustration and powerlessness in other areas of her life. This manifests itself in physical and emotional violence, subverting gentle and submissive female stereotypes and informing a child's understanding of gender identity. Such behaviour can be observed in Hill's sobbing mothers in *Red Roses* who "grip the bars of buggies | and grip the tiny shoulders of thin children | we button up ferociously in coats."⁶¹ However, these women speak as a faceless mass, making them seem less human and perhaps less deserved of our sympathy (a deliberate attempt to place the reader in an uncomfortable position) than in Olds's 'The Clasp' where the narrator physically punishes her daughter for the first time. This is prefaced by excuses that are subtly loaded with guilt: "she was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds, | we had been in the apartment for two weeks straight."⁶² After her daughter repeatedly pushes her youngest child, the narrator intervenes by grabbing her arm tightly, deriving a sense of pleasure from doing so: "I even nearly | savoured the stinging sensation of the squeezing, the | expression into her, of my anger."⁶³ Physical pain is used to convey and shape emotion, causing the child to view her mother anew: "her dark, | deeply open eyes took me | in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment."⁶⁴ In a reversal of roles, the physically superior mother is diminished in the child's shame-inducing stare which acts as an unflinching mirror, reflecting who she really is. The final line is a realisation that characterises intimate relationships and their capacity to cause harm and shape identity: "near the source of love | was this."⁶⁵ In '35/10', the poem title

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶¹ Hill, *Red Roses*, p. 35.

⁶² Sharon Olds, *The Unswept Room* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 43.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

refers to the respective ages of the protagonists as the narrator confronts her aging body in the face of her daughter's juvenescence:

Why is it
just as we begin to go
they begin to arrive, the fold in my neck
clarifying as the fine bones of her
hips sharpen?⁶⁶

These observations reflect the narrow timeframe in which traditional notions of femininity may flourish; women are valued socially for their youthful bodies and appearance. As aging and physical changes take place, identity may be sent into crisis as a result of the body's diminished social value. Similarly, the narrator's daughter with her "full purse of eggs, round and | firm as hard-boiled yolks | about to snap its clasp"⁶⁷ acts as a reminder that she (the narrator) will soon begin to lose her foothold in the acceptable feminine role of mother. However the speaker concludes: "it's an old | story – the oldest we have on our planet – | the story of replacement."⁶⁸ This is characteristic of Olds's work in which challenging everyday situations are drawn back from and contemplated from a distance, introducing a sense of resigned acceptance. In 'Twelve Years Old' the protagonist's daughter's once familiar body suddenly appears altered and strange: "the femur in her pelvic socket | orbits in a more elliptical way, | her joints gently rocking her body."⁶⁹ As the child's body becomes a woman's, her mother's interpretive response to it implies that biology informs mannerisms and characteristics in a typically feminine way. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of great anticipation and even impatience, as regardless of the protagonist's wishes, her body determines that she will soon be ready for sex: "her buttocks begin to flash their signals, | *Soon, now.*"⁷⁰ The poem ends with a striking description of the daughter diving into a pool full of boys:

[she] plummets through the air in silence and then
enters the water with the charged thrust of her
knife into the chicken in a dream when she is really hungry.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Olds, *The Dead and the Living*, p. 75.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶⁹ Sharon Olds, *The Wellspring* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 48.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

With thrusting, phallic imagery this dive becomes a sexual act emerging out of the daughter's vague awareness of her body's signals (and how its connotations will alter as she matures). The silence is akin to the implied pause in 'Soon, now' with the violence that follows capturing the mother's sense of her daughter's appetite, a metaphor for sexual desire.

An aspect of Olds's negotiation of gender identity is that she demonstrates how narrow gender roles can be problematic and confining for men also. In 'Rite of Passage' the narrator considers her young son's developing masculinity as he interacts with his friends during his birthday party: "short men, men in first grade | with smooth jaws and chins."⁷² Although yet to reach puberty, the boys conduct themselves in a way that reflects learnt masculine behaviours: "hands in pockets, they stand around | jostling, jockeying for place, small fights | breaking out and calming."⁷³ This boisterous activity is decoded by the narrator to reveal elaborate role play in preparation for life as adult men. They compare ages and argue over who could physically dominate the other, until the narrator's son takes charge: "for the sake of the group. | *We could easily kill a two-year-old* | he says in his clear voice."⁷⁴ Although darkly comical, this unsettling statement suggests how masculine processes of maturation whereby boys mimic men, highlights the constructed nature of gender. In response, "the other | men agree, they clear their throats | like Generals, they relax."⁷⁵ Referred to as 'men' at this point, the approval of his peers rewards the son for taking charge 'like a man' while the calming effect and military reference suggests a tendency towards rules and order. This caricatured, exaggerated version of masculinity – also present in Hill's poetry – can be read alongside poems which reveal more complex accounts of masculinity as a means of deconstructing gender. 'My Son the Man' observes a boy, through his mother's eyes, passing through puberty and thus becoming a man: "suddenly his shoulders get a lot wider, | the way Houdini would expand his body | while people were putting him in chains."⁷⁶ As the narrator fondly recalls how recently it seemed that she would dress him

⁷² Olds, *The Dead and the Living*, p. 66.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁶ Olds, *The Wellspring*, p. 64.

“and toss him up and | catch his weight,”⁷⁷ ‘chains’ become a metaphor for how he breaks free from his mother and how gender identity may emerge from the expectations placed upon us within intimate relationships. As much as the mother wishes for her son to remain child-like and less threatening, attempting to do so through the use of emotional ‘chains’ or constraints, his body becomes that of a man’s nonetheless. Approaching male adulthood is anticipated with uncertainty and mistrust in much the same way as approaching female adulthood in Olds’s work. As the narrator concedes: “I know I must get ready, | get over my fear of men now my son | is going to be one,”⁷⁸ we reach the crux of the poem’s message of androphobia. Continuing the escape artist imagery, the narrator recounts how her son escaped from her body in birth: “snapped the padlock, unsnaked the chains, | and appeared in my arms.”⁷⁹ Here the body is located as a source of mutual definition within intimate relationships, the boy’s body being of crucial importance to the narrator’s identity of mother in which birth represents a kind of physical splitting in two of the body. Adolescence is the catalyst for the loosening of the mother-child bond and the rigidifying of gender identity, palpable in the way in which her son watches her now: “the way Houdini studied a box | to learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be | manacled.”⁸⁰ These lines suggest that the son’s view of his own masculinity carries awareness that he is ultimately dominant within this relationship. This is an aspect which is fairly unexplored in Hill’s work where she chooses instead to focus on discussions of femininity in the context of mother/daughter relationships.

The change in identity and motherhood is raised in ‘Physics’, also from *The Wellspring*, when the narrator’s daughter leaves home for college. Building up to this point, she remembers various stages of her daughter’s education: “her first puzzle had three pieces”⁸¹ and later, more complex jigsaws “1000 pieces, we would gaze, on our elbows, | into its gaps,”⁸² evoking the connection between them and their mutual wondering at the world. However, as her daughter grows up and becomes more knowledgeable, the narrator feels a growing distance between them and the impending change in her role. The narrator recounts a

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸² Ibid., p. 63.

physics lesson which her daughter explains to her whereby if a fifty-foot ladder travels through a twenty-foot barn at the speed of light, in one moment: “the whole fifty-foot ladder would be | inside the twenty-foot barn, and I believe her.”⁸³ Her willingness to accept this as fact, we later find, derives from feelings of inadequacy but also for how it resonates with her own situation: “I have thought her life was inside my life | like that,”⁸⁴ reflecting in a similar way to the previous poem the importance of the maternal role in gender identity formation. The unity between mother and daughter described during the early years is shattered with the dawning realisation that her daughter’s life is not only larger than but will exceed her own. The narrator responds by regressing back through the years, throwing her own identity into crisis:

When she reads the college catalogues, I
look away and hum. I have not grown up
yet, I have lived as my daughter’s mother
the way I had lived as my mother’s daughter,
inside her life. I have not been born yet.⁸⁵

These lines evoke the restriction in female agency and a failure to occupy acceptable female roles such as mother or daughter; the narrator is paradoxically assigned a clear gender role and yet is without an identity or autonomy. The image of containment seen in ‘My Son the Man’ is echoed here; one body having been physically inside another, it continues to be metaphorically contained after birth. The mother holds onto this image and her child’s body, for as long as she can in order to construct and stabilise her own identity which creates claustrophobic and tension-filled mother-child relationships. Further, the crucial final line ‘I have not been born yet’ is especially striking in terms of De Beauvoir’s argument that one is not born, but becomes a woman. This suggests that to be a woman is always to be constructed and outwardly moulded, never to truly become oneself. The narrator’s coping method is stereotypically feminine and un-confrontational, reflecting a state of powerlessness and recalling the mother in Hill’s *Fruitcake* whose adolescent daughter explains: “and when she is afraid of things | she hums.”⁸⁶ The work of both writers expresses the disillusionment and shame associated with femininity, of ‘not being born yet’

⁸³ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁶ Hill, *Fruitcake*, p. 68.

but having allowed oneself to be defined by constructed notions of femininity. These experiences can lead women to become complicit in the repression of other women, particularly within mother-daughter relationships. The subtle discouragement and resentment towards the ambitious daughter in Olds's poem is exaggerated and acutely experienced by Hill's protagonist in *A Little Book of Meat* regarding her own mother: "the more half witted I am, | the more she likes it."⁸⁷ The use of caricature and irony has been discussed in previous chapters relating to Hill's work, which creates a very different tone and atmosphere to Olds's equally embarrassing, yet plain admission of stifled resentment and shame in the mother/daughter relationship.

Olds enriches her portrayal of mothers and the mother-daughter relationship in poems in which an adult female narrator describes her elderly mother. 'Pansy Coda' uses the image of the mother's pansies in order to explore intimacy and distance between the two characters. The narrator explains how these flowers remind her of her mother: "when I see them, my knees get a little weak. | I have to squat down close to them, I | want to put my face in one of them."⁸⁸ In the context of what we come to learn is an emotionally difficult relationship ("I get that nervous feeling | I've had all my life around my mother"⁸⁹), this scene evokes the strong desire for intimacy. The clichéd, romantic expression in the first line and erotic potential of the third sees Olds adopt metaphorical incest once more as a means of capturing the intensity and potency of familial relationships. The narrator goes on to reveal how occasionally, her mother will engage in the inappropriate and embarrassing act of exposing her body to her: "she is so lonely | since her husband died, she just wants to be | naked in a room with someone."⁹⁰ The mother does this knowingly: "whenever it can be done with the slightest pretence of dignity."⁹¹ Olds presents us with yet another conflicted female figure, struggling to function as a woman without a husband, a relationship in which she expressed herself and was defined, through her body. As a result she fails to uphold the behaviour expected of her as a mother as the scene destabilises conventional depictions of female behaviour. In a similar way to her daughter, she must pursue intimacy indirectly as

⁸⁷ Selima Hill, *A Little Book of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p. 54.

⁸⁸ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

there is something inherently shameful about such activity, evidenced in the final description of the pansies:

I would like
to wrap myself in a cloak of them,
a cloak of one if it were large enough.
I am tired of hating myself, tired
of loathing. I want to be carried in a petal
sling⁹²

Even the narrator's frank confession of her desperation to be close to her mother is conveyed metaphorically, continuing associations between intimacy and shame. Her mother is implicated in causing the feelings of self-hatred for failing to protect and heal her. These silenced emotions are articulated in 'After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood' from *The Gold Cell*:

When you tilted toward me, arms out
like someone trying to walk through a fire,
when you swayed toward me, crying out you were
sorry for what you had done to me, your
eyes filling with terrible liquid like
balls of mercury from a broken thermometer⁹³

The enjambment between lines four and five leads to an expectation that the next word after 'your' would be 'daughter', however the focus remains on the mother and her feelings, ironically continuing the emotional abuse of her daughter. The mother's swaying, tilting movements convey how momentous and devastating this event feels to the narrator; the hyperbolic language (fire, terrible, broken) demonstrates her mother's difficulty in apologising but also suggests her martyrdom and an element of cynicism on the part of the narrator. In a similar way to Hill, Olds uses fire to represent emotional difficulty within intimate relationships. Olds's narrator continues: "when you quietly screamed | *Where else could I turn? Who else did I have?*, the | chopped crockery of your hands swinging towards me."⁹⁴ The oxymoronic 'quiet scream' is akin to Hill's 'silent violence'; suggestive of the insidious destructiveness of intimate relationships. Even during this moment of apparent vulnerability and remorse, the mother appears to occupy a selfish, narcissistic position.

⁹² Ibid., p. 53.

⁹³ Sharon Olds, *The Gold Cell* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 43.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

Further, she advances towards her daughter with violent overtones, the ‘chopped crockery’ of her hands ensure that a physical embrace or intimacy is ruled out, or would wound her daughter. The imagery alludes to a destructive home life and a fracturing of the traditional domestic, maternal role. Despite this acknowledgement, the narrator must once more relegate her own feelings, embracing and consoling her mother: “I said *It’s all right*, | *don’t cry*, it’s all right, the air filled with | flying glass.”⁹⁵ As the narrator takes on a maternal position it triggers a silent, violent reaction that typifies the quiet force at work within intimate relationships; gender identity is shaped when individuals shift the burden they feel in upholding their own expected identity, onto others. As the mother projects her frustration onto her daughter, the narrator in turn feels compelled to suppress and silence her own.

Hill also writes female characters for whom maternal behaviour does not come naturally or easily, resulting in feelings of shame and guilt. In *Fruitcake*, the female narrator explains how her mother cries continually, offering no emotional support and blocking any attempts at comfort; as her daughter approaches: “her handkerchiefs | harden like fins.”⁹⁶ In a later poem from this collection, her mother is depicted as: “the panic-stricken mole | with hands like wood.”⁹⁷ The last line echoes Olds’s hands of broken crockery, in which a potentially gentle aspect of the maternal body is defamiliarised into something unsettling, threatening and insensitive. The animal imagery in Hill adds a further dimension to the defamiliarisation of the mother as something small and basically blind, incapable of performing the role required of her. In ‘The Pact’ Olds sets out an ironic model for family life characterised by an overbearing father and weak, anorexic mother, perpetuating the stereotype of the submissive female and dominant male:

We played dolls in that house where Father staggered with the
Thanksgiving knife, where Mother wept at
noon with her one ounce
of cottage cheese, praying for the strength not to
kill herself.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁶ Hill, *Fruitcake*, p. 78.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

⁹⁸ Olds, *The Dead and the Living*, p. 45.

Two versions of violence (and desire) are presented in the outward and physical expression of masculine strength, versus inwardly directed feminine self-hatred and self-denial. The narrator and her sister play with dolls, reflecting how gender performances within the family may inform and be assimilated into children's emerging identities. The sisters engross themselves in the activity of play as an act of survival and denial: "as if we had made a | pact of silence and safety."⁹⁹ Recalling Hill's remarks during the Exeter interview on 'silent violence', the silence is all the more excruciating and charged in Olds's poem for the parents' obvious distress stemming from the claustrophobia of the family home and their respective gender roles:

[We] never spoke of the
woman like a gaping wound
weeping on the stairs, the man like a stuck
buffalo, baffled, stunned, dragging
arrows in his hide.¹⁰⁰

At this point they are simply referred to as a man and woman; the narrator recounts these events with distance and morbid wonder which enables her to proffer a degree of sympathy to these figures caught in a perpetuating cycle of domestic violence. The woman's injuries evoke both horror and female genitalia (once more associating female sexuality with death) and her response shows that she has capitulated. The man is depicted in typically masculine terms as strong with a 'thick skin' and animal-like in his bewilderment and failure to understand human emotions. Men and women both suffer as a result of restrictive gender roles in Olds's work; female characters often react by deviating from behavioural expectations while male characters display an exaggeration of conventional masculine traits. It is the mother therefore who is often held accountable for domestic unhappiness as seen in 'The Pact' where the narrator accuses her mother of giving her away when she was eight:

as if you took Molly Ann or
Tiny Tears and held her head
under the water in the bathinette
until no bubbles rose, or threw her
dark rosy body on the fire that

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

burned in that house¹⁰¹

Giving away a child may be a metaphor for emotional rejection which is conveyed in violent terms (similar to Hill's "drip that milk. | Bastard!") Olds reintroduces the image of children playing with dolls, reiterating how destructive, gendered behaviour is learnt within the family home. Furthermore, such an account of abuse appears almost flippant, trivialising thoughts of infanticide and capturing the narrator's view of her mother as cold and unfeeling. The narrator's focus on the mother suggests that she is both complicit in and has been moulded by an environment which holds mothers accountable for a child's well-being. Fire symbolises the annihilative potential of intimate relationships – as it does in Hill's poetry – and how the emotions of shame and guilt silently spread, shaping identity.

In 'Calvinist Parents' Olds considers the childhood guilt of being indebted to parents, regardless of their behaviour, for providing food and shelter: "they put roofs over our heads"¹⁰² and towards the end of the poem "how does a young 'un | pay for room and board?"¹⁰³ The home is likened to a Colosseum, reflecting the physical and emotional battles that take place and how children are at the mercy of their parents: "where a lion might appear, or an eight-foot armoured | being with the painted face | of a simpering lady."¹⁰⁴ Femininity is revealed to be a performance in which cosmetics mislead, not only by concealing flaws and augmenting sexual appeal, but by masking terrifying matriarchal figures masquerading as weak and helpless. The narrator explains how she was shaped by her parents' strict upbringing: "under that roof, they laboured as they had been | laboured over, they beat us into swords."¹⁰⁵ Parents treat their children according to how their parents raised them; according to the poem, mothers and fathers beat gender identity into shape – or swords – creating individuals who perpetuate these unhealthy behaviours within their own families. A possible pun on swords/words suggests the latent violence in everyday language and interactions within intimate relationships. In 'The Lisp' the narrator recalls how as a child, she had a speech impediment: "sometimes they liked me, when I was a kid, |

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰² Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 23.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

I lisped, I could not get my s's | out."¹⁰⁶ Her father devises a phrase which she repeats for his amusement and approval during Sunday dinners: "Sharon swallows sausages – I would | say it and they'd laugh."¹⁰⁷ This tradition offers a brief respite in a household of silence and punishments: "there was a required, silence, | twenty-four hours of silence for a child | or silence at the table for a mother and three children."¹⁰⁸ The omission of the father in these lines speaks ominously of masculine control and dominance while in turn, the mother dominates her daughter: "as I grew bigger and bigger over the years | I began to hang over the ends of her lap | in massive shame."¹⁰⁹ The correlation between the narrator's physical size and her experience of shame reveals her growing self-awareness and understanding of how it has an impact upon her sense of self. The repetition of her father's phrase becomes an important and elusive moment of self-expression for the narrator whose final thought: "they would | get me to say it again, they would *ask me to speak*"¹¹⁰ is expressed with a tone of wonder and pride. However, the domestic backdrop is quietly saturated in violence and tension:

batter faintly seething
in the bowl, syrup from the waists of trees,
butter off the block, and the membrane of the pig
crackling in the skillet, the knots of fat
undoing¹¹¹

Food is infused with death and aggression; consonance creates an audible hiss of resentment in words like 'seething', 'syrup', 'waists' and 'trees' while exploited trees are personified and butter is impliedly 'beheaded'. Such a description negates any light heartedness that could be read into her father's request which changes to something more sinister, an act of masculine control and shaming of his daughter, compounded by the sexual innuendo present in the phrase she is asked to repeat. Similar feelings of female shame and inadequacy within father-daughter relationships are palpable in Hill's work, notably *Bunny*, in which the narrator returns to the image of the burnt baby, who: "should never have been his daughter in the first place; | because she was ugly| and he was

¹⁰⁶ Olds, *The Wellspring*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

magnificent.”¹¹² This brings to the fore the protagonist’s self-loathing and difficult feelings in relation to femininity that are connected to her absent father. His apparent rejection is perceived by the protagonist to be linked to her failure to be a ‘good’ daughter but this could also be read as an ironic comment on male arrogance, an aspect of tone in Hill which is especially noticeable when contrasted with Olds’s more straightforward, albeit highly descriptive, language.

Both Hill and Olds write about violence within domestic settings which can be interpreted literally but also as a metaphor for the damage that emotional dysfunction or oppressive silence inflicts, generating emotions such as shame and guilt which act as a determining force upon gender identity. In Olds’s ‘Burn Centre’ the narrator discovers that her mother has donated a burns unit to the local hospital and greets the news of this apparently caring act with disbelief: “my hair lifts and wavers like smoke | in the air around my head.”¹¹³ Olds uses fire and burning – in a similar way to Hill – as a metaphor for the suffering that takes place within intimate relationships and the resulting emotional injury; fire captures how individuals can be branded or consumed by the desires of others:

I think of the
years with her, as her child, as if
without skin, walking around scalded
raw, first degree burns over ninety
percent of my body.¹¹⁴

To be ‘without skin’ is to be especially vulnerable to the emotional ‘scalding’ inherent to this mother-daughter relationship. The mother’s inability to protect and nurture the narrator also carries a suggestion of the pleasure she takes in neglecting and abusing her child (as displayed by mothers in Hill’s poetry); Olds’s narrator’s skin is described almost appealingly as “well-done pork.”¹¹⁵ She laments how “no one gave me | a strip of gauze, or a pat of butter to | melt on my crackling side.”¹¹⁶ References to food exaggerate the element of horror and create a further dimension to thoughts of metaphorical consumption. The narrator’s wounded state is aggravated by proximity to her mother, showing how children

¹¹² Hill, *Bunny*, p. 18.

¹¹³ Olds, *The Dead and the Living*, p. 37.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

can become defenceless passengers in their parents' lives: "when my scorched head stank she would | draw me deeper into the burning | room of her life."¹¹⁷ To 'stink' indicates that her emotional needs appear repellent and unpleasant to her mother as well as the narrator, revealing her shame and self-loathing.

In the fifth movement of the sequence 'Cassiopeia' from *One Secret Thing*, Olds touches on the continuing effects of domestic violence in a telephone conversation with her elderly mother who laments kicking her husband shortly before his death: "suddenly, my mother bursts out, | *And my therapist says it COULDN'T have been my | kicking him, the night before.*"¹¹⁸ The narrator's response is typical of Olds's poems on mother-daughter relationships in which the daughter must suppress her anger due to an emotionally dependent mother: "I hold the phone | in the crook of my shoulder, where the heads of sleeping | infants have rested."¹¹⁹ Assuring her mother that she need not feel guilt reflects a familial pattern of normalising abusive behaviour, as some time later the implications of her mother's actions sink in: "but a week later I stop short | on the street: my mother is still hitting and kicking people? | I know that soft sneaker."¹²⁰ The 'soft sneaker' once more alludes to deceptive feminine appearances as the incident powerfully evokes her childhood-self, destabilising her adult beliefs: "or do people hit and kick each other | a lot, does everyone do it?"¹²¹ However, the tone changes in the final lines as the narrator whose lyrical, vengeful tone recalls Olds: "no one hit her back | until today – by-blow of this page, | coldcock to her little forehead."¹²² The narrator shames her mother by exposing her behaviour, using humiliating, sexualised language to do so. Olds forcefully demonstrates the cathartic act of writing and speaking out – in turn, her reader may feel compelled to break their own shameful silence.

In 'I Go Back to May 1937' Olds attempts to humanise abuse and abusers within intimate relationships as the narrator imagines her parents meeting outside the college gates: "they are about to graduate, they are about to get married, | they are kids, they are dumb, all

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

¹¹⁸ Olds, *One Secret Thing*, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹²² Ibid., p. 70.

they know is they are | innocent, they would never hurt anybody.”¹²³ These lines suggest that everyone starts out this way; unmarried and childless her parents still occupy the child role within their respective family units and their gender positions have yet to become toxic. Acting with the benefit of hindsight, the narrator experiences an urge to tell them: “you are going to do things | you cannot imagine you would ever do, | you are going to do bad things to children.”¹²⁴ Having presented parental figures as abusive and flawed throughout her work, Olds redeems them slightly – appealing to her readers’ sympathies and perhaps her own – by considering their emotional foundations:

her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don’t do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together¹²⁵

Their virginal states are both admired and pitied; before touching they were free of the domestic horrors to come after having sex and as a result, children. As the narrator imagines them turning towards her, she experiences a vertiginous rush at the thought of warning her parents-to-be of the destruction ahead. Recognising that this would result in her own life being extinguished, like a child playing with dolls, she metaphorically forces their bodies together in panic. With the repetition of ‘I’ in the line “but I don’t do it. I want to live. I”, the narrator emphatically calls herself into being. By representing this alternative view of maternal and paternal figures, Olds emphasises how the biological act of becoming a mother or father does not automatically mean that the societal expectations for these roles come naturally. In turn, these pressures and the shame over failing to adequately perform gender roles are transferred between family members in the form of physical and emotional violence. Similarly, Hill writes retrospectively about parental figures in an attempt to understand their behaviour. ‘Chicken Feathers’ portrays the narrator’s mother as a care-free young woman with a love of dancing: “she went to the Chelsea Ball | dressed as a leopard |

¹²³ Olds, *The Gold Cell*, p. 23.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

there she met my father”¹²⁶ – a striking contrast to her later depictions of mothers as bitter and impotent.

Olds continues her negotiation of masculinity and the father-daughter relationship in poems on a daughter’s reaction to her father’s terminal illness and eventual death; her collection *The Father* deals entirely with this subject. In ‘His Stillness’ a doctor delivers the news that all treatment options have been exhausted. Now a frail, vulnerable figure, her father retains a degree of authority through an association between man and God: “he sat up, | thin, and clean, in his clean gown, | like a holy man.”¹²⁷ His simple, solemn response (“Thank you”¹²⁸) comes as a surprise to his daughter based on the dominant figure from her childhood: “I had thought | he would rave if he understood he would die, | wave his arms and cry out.”¹²⁹ In this sobering moment, the narrator understands her father at last, with a suggestion of shame and regret over not having done so sooner: “he had always held still and kept silent to bear things, | the liquor a way to keep still. I had not | known him. My father had dignity.”¹³⁰ Olds demonstrates how men suffer for attempting to maintain an appearance of acceptable masculinity; the social taboo regarding masculine expressions of emotion can lead to self-destruction through violence and alcoholism. The narrator’s newfound understanding of her father stems from their shared proximity and the forced intimacy of the hospital ward, as she tends his bedside and he is too unwell to resist. This opens up the possibility of emotional closeness which has eluded them for many years; with intense fascination she pores over the details of his body in ‘Death and Murder’: “we tried to keep him alive, cut him and | piped him, tubed him, reamed him, practically | keelhailed him and it could not be done.”¹³¹ Images of penetration and violence – typically seen in accounts of women’s bodies in Olds and Hill – defamiliarise the father’s body and emphasise his defenceless position. In a similar vein, ‘The Lifting’ sees the hospitalised father exposing himself to his daughter: “suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I | turned my head away but he cried out | *Shar!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked.”¹³² The way in which the

¹²⁶ Selima Hill, *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 45.

¹²⁷ Sharon Olds, *The Father* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

father captures her daughter's attention by using her nickname, despite her obvious embarrassment, suggests an attempt at shaming her. However, recalling 'Pansy Coda' in which the narrator's mother exposes her body to her, these poems present exaggerated and awkward attempts at intimacy between family members. While the father does this to demonstrate his weight loss, they both seem to sense a deeper meaning:

I saw
his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he
shows me his old body, he knows
I will be interested, he knows I will find him
appealing.¹³³

His regretful smile transforms the act into an unspoken apology and show of humility; in becoming vulnerable he reverses the dominant father and submissive daughter roles, humanising himself in the process. The narrator marvels at the similarity of his body to her own, drawing them closer: "I saw how much his hips were like mine, the long, white angles, and then | how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's."¹³⁴ This discovery exposes societal tendencies to emphasise the biological differences between men and women's bodies, and by extension, their minds. In 'His Costume' from *The Unswept Room*, Olds disrupts conventional attitudes towards masculinity and the paternal body, while highlighting the performative essence of gender. The narrator expresses her father's disdain for women: "he had his sign language about women | talking too much, and being stupid"¹³⁵ – views which presumably inform his children's shameful associations with femininity. However, looking back the narrator recalls how her father would always dress as a woman for fancy dress parties:

the tennis balls
for breasts – balls for breasts – the pageboy
blonde wig, the lipstick, he would sway
his body with moves of gracefulness
as if one being could be the whole
universe¹³⁶

¹³³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

¹³⁵ Olds, *The Unswept Room*, p. 24.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

In her portrayal of the outfit, Olds purposely opts for items with androgynous qualities to emphasise its impact, as well as the arbitrary social inscription of inanimate objects with gendered qualities. The humorous pause on ‘balls for breasts’ evokes testicles, while the ‘pageboy’ haircut represents both a fashionable women’s hairstyle and a pre-pubescent boy. The outfit is outwardly mocking and derisive of women, suggesting the father’s secret shame regarding his own identity and the behaviour it confines him to; dressed as a woman he grants himself the freedom to express aspects of his identity with which he identifies but usually suppresses. The male body is also feminised in ‘My Father’s Breasts’ as the narrator recalls a memory of leaning on his chest: “their soft surface, the polished silk of the hair | running down them delicately like | water.”¹³⁷ The sensual, luxurious description is enhanced by alliteration in the first line as the repeated ‘s’ creates a soothing sound. The narrator remembers doing this just once but was so moved by the closeness of the act that it felt “as if I had spent | hours, years, in that smell of black pepper and | turned earth.”¹³⁸ The feminine physical description and evocatively masculine scent combine to provide a more encompassing account of gender identity, while the powerful final line hints at a wider, universal significance. In ‘The Struggle’ from *The Father*, the narrator observes her terminally ill father’s attitude towards other men. Despite his rapidly failing health, he is determined to appear dignified:

When the minister would come into the hospital room
 my father would try to sit up, he would cry out
Up! Up! for us to raise his bed-head, then
 silently he would wrestle himself
 up, sweating, he would end up
 leaning on the pillows, panting, a man, erect.¹³⁹

He begins the scene as a child, calling to be lifted up and crying to get the attention of his family; with great effort he builds his body into that of a man’s, his straight posture evoking associations between masculinity and virility. Doctors have a similar affect upon him: “he would start to labor up, desperate | to honor the coat, at a glimpse of it he would | start to stir like a dog.”¹⁴⁰ The dog simile reveals his respect for and obedience to the masculine role

¹³⁷ Olds, *The Dead and the Living*, p. 43.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³⁹ Olds, *The Father*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

which in turn strengthens his own gender position. These images coincide with doctors and religious figures in Hill's poetry as the embodiment of heroic and authoritative masculinity. However, these figures appear throughout her oeuvre and not just within certain expected settings; for Hill they are a stylistic device to highlight and scrutinise institutionalised, patriarchal control over women's lives. When the father in Olds's poem fails to maintain this performance which is so crucial to his identity, the narrator knows that his death is near, while he paradoxically appears at his most alive, most nakedly himself: "he lay and stared, it was | nothing like the nights he had lain on the couch passed | out, nothing. Now he was alive."¹⁴¹ The final sombre lines demonstrate how, despite being incapacitated, gendered behaviour becomes naturalised over time and the father cannot resist the urge to impress and revere masculine figures: "the raw boy of his heart stood | up each time a grown man | entered his death-room."¹⁴² After her father's death, the narrator attempts to make peace with him. In 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' she imagines him saying: "of course I love | your breasts – did you see me looking up | from within your daughter's face, as she nursed?"¹⁴³ Repeated imagery of interfamilial desire is used as a way of accepting and receiving acceptance through the body.

There are numerous references throughout Olds's work to God and religion. Despite her strict Calvinist upbringing which is touched upon in the poems, as in Hill, these images are more a metaphor for existential concerns. In *The Father* especially these images are utilised to powerful effect. As her father grows weaker, the narrator describes feeling him move in her as if giving birth to him: "down through my body, | as if I were God feeling the rivers | pulling steadily through me."¹⁴⁴ In another poem she watches him: "every time he blinked, the powerful | wave of the blink moved through my body | as if God had blinked."¹⁴⁵ After his death, religious family members respond differently:

they called my father *the shell on the bed*, I was the
only one there who knew
he was entirely gone, the only one

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

there to say goodbye to his body¹⁴⁶

These examples bring harmony to a discordant father-daughter relationship, irregardless of perceived gender differences. The image of God as an actual or inferred presence also lends weight and gravitas to the grand themes at hand of love, life and death. In the last extract however, the narrator as a non-believer honours her father's body and acknowledges its importance in shaping and reflecting both of their personalities.

Olds and Hill are concerned with intimate relationships that exist between lovers and amongst family members from the perspective of different stages in life. The focus is often upon gender and the various ways in which it is challenged and re-enforced, notably through shame, embarrassment and guilt. As identified in critical responses to Olds's work,¹⁴⁷ these emotions make for uncomfortable reading; her characters embarrass one another to gain control, they take out their frustration and shame regarding their non-negotiable gender roles on family members through physical and emotional violence. However there are moments, particularly in poems from *The Father* where reflective guilt allows for moments of true intimacy and mutual respect between father and daughter in later life (this provides a sense of peace which is mostly absent from Hill's negotiations of these same emotions.)

The function of physical and emotional violence – demonstrated particularly through the metaphors of incest and of fire – have been shown to be significant for Olds and Hill, in representing intimate relationships. The embarrassing subjects addressed have the capacity to unsettle the reader, evoking deep rooted feelings of shame and guilt. Olds pulls apart identities with her perceptive, unsentimental writing with its emphasis on detailed description; gender identity is revealed to be a complex source of pain, while the subtle customs and practices involved in its assembly are brought to the surface. In comparison, Hill achieves this through the defamiliarising effect of irony and exaggeration, as well drawing upon what feels like a more private, idiosyncratic and certainly more surreal framework of reference. Both present male and female characters as multi-faceted and

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴⁷ Some critical studies on Olds's work can be found at: Gale Swiontkowski, *Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich, and Olds on Life with Daddy* (Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 2003); Alicia Ostriker, *Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

conflicted, and gender performance is repeatedly exposed, offering the possibility of transformation for those struggling to embody a proscribed role.

2. GERALDINE MONK

Geraldine Monk¹⁴⁸ was born in Blackburn, Lancashire in 1952. Since her publishing debut in 1974 with *Scarlet Opening*, she has produced a further twenty-eight collections including pamphlets and selected works. This chapter will provide some close reading of Monk's collection *Escaped Hangings* and the sequence of poems *Interregnum* in particular, utilising the gender-identity theories of this thesis and, making links to the themes which arise in Hill's poetry. These works were chosen as they explore the experiences and voices of condemned women; Mary Queen of Scots and the Pendle witches (although they were not all women) respectively, with wider implications for women and gender more generally. Monk's motivation in writing is arguably similar to Hill's, in attempting to speak for and reconstruct the experiences of women condemned to strict gender roles, held in place by psychiatric institutions, the family and social attitudes. Although both writers like to write in sequences, seek to display the injustice of rigid gender positions, as well as dealing with uncomfortable subjects such as mental distress, emotional, sexual and physical violence – they vary stylistically. Where Hill creates a narrative by using poetic artifice to defamiliarise personal experiences in order to capture an element of their authenticity, Monk negotiates factual events more literally but experiments with language in order to defamiliarise those events to suggest new interpretations beyond closed-off cliché. In an early poetics statement made jointly by Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan they argued that much feminist poetry is “versified propaganda,” passed off as something capable of speaking for women. They propose that:

the most effective chance any woman poet has of dismantling the fallacy of male creative supremacy is simply by writing poetry of a kind which is liberating by the breadth of its range, risk and innovation.¹⁴⁹

Monk adopts a number of techniques to this end: typography, fragmented and compound words, internal rhyme, puns, neologisms, homonyms, unconventional stanza structures as

¹⁴⁸ A collection of critical essays on Monk's poetry can be found in *The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk*, ed. Scott Thurston (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007)

¹⁴⁹ Geraldine Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan, *City Limits* (13-19 July 1984)

well as a great awareness of the musicality of language and how different dialects affect how words are received. In *Interregnum* and *Escafeld Hangings*, Monk creates multi-layered landscapes in which voices and historical events shift and merge. The primary concerns within these landscapes are gender and class, and beyond her protagonists Monk's text is a commentary on the subordination of women. Like Hill, Monk delves into the controlling structures behind the emotional and physical imprisonment of her characters, for how they seek to shape gender identity through physical and 'silent' violence; in this sense, both writers allow these repressed and silenced figures to speak. Embarrassment, shame and guilt arise as a result of this treatment, thus twice imprisoning her characters; both emotionally and also in gaols, the family home, mental institutions. Monk's work can make for uncomfortable reading with her forceful, visceral poetics of liberating range and depth; there are parallels here with the apparent lack of embarrassment in Hill, evidenced in Monk's poignant and unflinching explorations of female experience. In this respect, Monk is challenging what she and O'Sullivan term: 'the fallacy of male creative supremacy' as well as opening up alternatives for those confined to narrowly constructed gender roles. In giving back a voice to these repressed historical figures, she is also offering others the opportunity to take back their voice by extension, including her own.

Monk's *Interregnum*¹⁵⁰ is based upon events leading up to the Pendle Witch Trial in Lancashire in 1612. The word *interregnum* describes a gap within a sequence of events which focuses on what happened immediately before and immediately after, and the relationship between each stage. The book is divided into three parts, beginning with present day Pendle Hill, in the middle, a transition period and ending with the 'witch' hangings. Monk uses the idea of the gap to explore the relationship between a place and its history, emphasising how history never leaves and can be powerfully evoked if you look in the right places. She also argues that with events of great significance, there is some residual energy that survives the centuries, enabling the beginning, middle and end stages to co-exist. In her sequence *Hidden Cities*, Monk demonstrates great interest in the history of place and in particular forgotten or marginalised people and events: "journey with me now and regain a return to where we almost started...glossed out histories...contrived

¹⁵⁰ Geraldine Monk, *Selected Poems* (London: Salt Publishing, 2003), p. 98.

'lascivious' conjures the body's vulnerability as the reader is forced to face and be intimate with injury and death. The entire scene is preceded by the words: "(brooding dislocation) | limits,"¹⁵⁷ as if something is stirring and awakening.

Those who visit Pendle Hill for tourism appear to lay claim to the area and feel they have a right to be there, and are categorised as 'The Hill People' in the poem. However, Monk exposes the transient nature of these groups and how inconsequential they are within the area's long history. In 'Good Friday Hikers' the day trippers experience a sanitised version of the hill, singing and carrying: "snap | emergency kits | Kendal mint cake."¹⁵⁸ Although comfortable and boisterous, they remain strangers within this environment, unable to grasp the complex, unattainable nature of the place and only ever scratching the surface. 'Hallowe'en Bikers' is divided into two columns; the left-hand side addresses the bikers who also appear as fraudulent fixtures in Pendle Hill, arriving with drama and noise, sharing the same attire and scent:

leather sweat out
beer
piss
patchouli.¹⁵⁹

Appearing repellent and uncouth, the similarities between the bikers emphasise the contrived nature of their identities; the animal skin becomes an overlay crucial to this performance pertaining to further indifference towards animal life, symbolising man's domination over animals and nature. The poem's right-hand column introduces a religious dimension to the hill, not least for its connection to Quakerism, founded after George Fox had a vision on Pendle Hill. The presence of the bikers with implied links to Satanism provoke unrest:

clash a holy
war with
water
air
earth-back
firing up

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

turned cruci
forms¹⁶⁰

Short lines meld two sets of imagery into one seamless movement: the word ‘up’ serves as a crossover point between the firing engines of the bikes and the blasphemous positioning of the cross, for example. Riding their “leg-spreading | fundamental | engines”¹⁶¹ the bikers display their disdain for Christianity, the ‘fundamental’ engine symbolising and forming the core of their beliefs instead. Further, ‘leg-spreading’ links to sex which appears unseemly given the religious context, identifying humanity as lovers of – and complicit with – machines. In ‘Born Agains’ the poem’s subjects flock to the hill only to be exposed by the omniscient narrator as being equally corrupt and “sinlovers.”¹⁶² In a reference to a cross placed on the hill during Christian festivals, the poem describes:

your dreams
of thirty
foot
of
stainless steel
erection¹⁶³

A product of dreams, this vision is considered to be more the result of indulgent human fantasy as opposed to a selfless act of worship. The choice of stainless steel as a material parallels descriptions of modernisation and technology in previous poems; the developed world appears threatening and overpowering to nature. The sexually suggestive language and central phallic column of words on the page combine sex with religion once more; both Monk and Hill make this link throughout their work in viewing the Church as a masculine institution responsible for centuries of female oppression. In Monk’s poem, these events all take place on: “just a | rather very small | Pennine hill”¹⁶⁴ contrasting its humble appearance with the arrogance and posturing of its visitors. Technology and nature also collide in ‘Drivers’:

spin

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

can
tin chrome
aluminium womb¹⁶⁵

The car is simultaneously a flimsy tin can and a womb, identified as a precarious method of travel capable of preserving life or just as easily extinguishing it. The notion of a mechanical womb represents the birth of the technological age in which environmental concerns are sidelined. Such a reliance on technology allows the driver to be “tuned in | to cruise | on out”¹⁶⁶ and with the mind switched off, the ‘womb’ ironically becomes the perfect killing machine. Animals are again victims of these actions as the final line is a repetition of an image from the opening poem: “(((warm runny thing cold unmoving tarmac)))”¹⁶⁷ the triple parentheses signifying that this is a fading memory. Building up to this final line, Monk breaks the word ‘animal’ down into a repeated, fragmented sound: “mal | (mal) | ((mal))”¹⁶⁸ with a pun on the combining form meaning bad or wrongful.

The only individuals present on the hill who do not have a parasitic, destructive relationship with it are described in ‘Shift Workers’. These people work in the area and appear to pass through unseen:

I
come
in the night
black
as.¹⁶⁹

With references to bobbins and churning milk, they appear to work in traditional, low paid jobs such as seamstresses or farmers, and parallels begin to emerge between them and the ‘witches’ of the 1600s. Seemingly faceless and ignored, the shift workers seem as elusive as ghosts leading the reader to question if they are in fact people from the past – a slip in time which sets up events to come, whilst the sharp points of the diamond-shaped final verse suggests underlying violence.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

At junctures throughout the sequence Monk also turns to the animals that populate the area, bringing a fresh perspective on the events taking place. In 'Flyer' a bird provides the reader with an aerial tour of Pendle, viewing the people below: "now see the little people-pricks | see their little pin-pricking | steeples of truth."¹⁷⁰ The 'pin-pricking steeples of truth' refer to religious structures whose spiritual, divine connotations are negated by the mirrored imagery of 'people pricks'; such institutions and the beliefs they perpetuate are shown to be entirely man made. Further, the sharp appearance of the steeples openly displays the violence and destruction beneath the surface, crucial to maintaining its authority. Finally, the bird symbolises the natural world with a humble, simple approach to life, flying "across uncontrolled | airspace and | forest"¹⁷¹ versus the arrogance of humans who attempt to play God. 'Fox Hunt' appears to associate fox hunting with the witch hunt that the protagonists are subjected to. Narrated from the perspective of a fox, the reader is immediately thrust into a frightening scene:

All a sudden all
the people were in out rage and in up roar:
that they fell upon
me knocked me
down and kicked
me trampled me
(and people tumbled over fear)¹⁷²

In breaking down words such as 'outrage' and 'uproar' the reader is forced to pause on these words and consider the weight of their meaning; in fragments they evoke firstly anger released and secondly the rising sound of aggression. A frenetic atmosphere is also created through the tumbling sensation of lines such as 'me knocked me'. The mob tumble over the fox as the embodiment of fear but also their own fears, fuelled by ignorance and self-preservation. As the poem concludes, the fox senses its life ending: "then staggering and bled | I rose red | a reversed emblem."¹⁷³ This final image of reversal conjures a bleeding wound but also the Red Rose of Lancaster, the town in which *Interregnum* is set. The encounters with visitors to the hill appear to provoke a reaction, leading into a sequence of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 108.

poems in which distinct time periods merge together, disrupting linear time and the earth seems to split open allowing long dead spirits to come back to life:

pooling centuries
deep
crush and spurt of
wide-open¹⁷⁴

The reader is transported back to the events of the 1600s as Monk gives an account of the lives of the women accused of being witches. As the earth erupts our attention is immediately focussed on the plight of women:

sinew
ligament
dried mud under painted
finger
nails chipped red
lips
tic grimace¹⁷⁵

The subtle curve of the verse impaled with sharp lines evokes injury inflicted on the female form. Images of sinew and dirt under fingernails suggest mistreated figures rising from the dead in order to take revenge. The red nail varnish and lipstick represent clichéd feminine signs, while the dirt beneath suggests how women may struggle to dispel this stereotypical image. Similarly when Hill writes about the “women with red knickers and red nails”¹⁷⁶ who are to blame for masculine aggression, she exposes the quagmire that female identity faces with its limited roles. However, her tone sounds somewhat simplistic and flippant compared to the ferocity and immediacy in Monk’s poem; it is only through engaging with Hill’s wider work that we really come to see this as a complex form of subversive repetition which uses irony to deconstruct restrictive gender roles. By giving these women a voice that they did not have in their lifetime, Monk attempts to provide a fuller, more inclusive account of history in *Interregnum* in an attempt to correct the wrongs done to this marginalised group of people. In so doing, she explores a number of issues including female identity, history, language, childhood and imprisonment.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁷⁶ Hill, *The Hat*, p. 32.

In terms of repressed identities, two distinct groups are brought to the fore throughout *Interregnum*, the working classes and women. Monk demonstrates how men and women from the lower classes both suffered as a result of poverty, lack of education and having their voices silenced. In ‘... of James ...’ the male protagonist endures a life of “perpetual damp”¹⁷⁷ and “glowly cold. Starved to each | poriferous bone.”¹⁷⁸ While later in the sequence in ‘James Devise Replies’, the same figure is accused of witchcraft, emasculated and tortured horribly as a result:

snip-snippity
my strut kicked feeble
tongue lollery
lip-s-titched to-g
buggered and frog marcht t t-here
w-here I was not
HEARD¹⁷⁹

The disjointed diction expresses the narrator’s dialect and the stuttering of his pain; despite great suffering, James remains defiant over his right to be listened to, emphasised by the final capitalised word. The captors go to great lengths to achieve his silence, figuratively cutting his tongue and stitching his lips, symbolic of his subjugation. Similarly in Hill’s work where domestic settings bristle with silent violence, thoughts and feelings are repressed by the real threat of physical and emotional violence. Both writers provide space in their work for addressing aspects of masculinity, strengthening the standpoint on gender as performance and social construction running throughout their poetry, although their focus lies predominantly on female identity and experience. *Interregnum* begins by presenting Pendle hill as the natural ‘feminine’ world, dominated and overpowered by the masculine. This aspect of Monk’s work is discussed by Harriet Tarlo who cites landscapes and nature as a point of interest for Monk although her approach as an experimental writer means that she does not fall into the traditional ‘landscape poet’ category. As Tarlo argues of *Interregnum*: “issues of locality, culture, class and gender are inseparable and are in their

¹⁷⁷ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 148.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

turn related to place and landscape.”¹⁸⁰

Interregnum's female characters are introduced to the reader in '... (PEEPHOLE FROZEN MOANS)...' in which their entry into life is a far from romanticised event:

...Three little shit houses
spawned
spawned
spawned
(NEVER ASKED TO BE)¹⁸¹

Their births or 'spawnings' are articulated in dehumanising terms that, given the reader's understanding of the context, make them appear as dispensable and unremarkable as farm animals bred for slaughter. The narrator's angry tone is devoid of compassion, challenging traditional images of maternity, while the language used in relation to the babies is infused with self-loathing and shame; a relationship of mutual resentment and guilt between mother and child is set in motion '(NEVER ASKED TO BE)'. There are links here to Hill's poems on the shame of being a rejected child and of unconventional maternal expression. In *The Hat*, the mother-baby relationship based on shame and regret: "(there shouldn't have been a baby in the first place – | it's far too late for that sort of thing...)." ¹⁸² Like Monk, Hill uses parentheses to signify suppressed or shameful thoughts and ellipses to demonstrate a space in which gender-shaping forces such as embarrassment, shame, guilt and violence silently operate. A further social dimension – not so obviously present in Hill's work – is revealed in Monk's *Interregnum* as her protagonists endure a life of poverty, hard labour and discrimination, exhibited by their apathetic attitudes. '... (Peephole Frozen Moans)...' ends with the narrator describing the effect of giving birth upon her identity:

I
to think
I
my
loin seeds
me me me me
divided into three¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ *The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk*, p. 29.

¹⁸¹ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 119.

¹⁸² Hill, *The Hat*, p. 9.

¹⁸³ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 119.

With the repetition of 'me', she appears to be bringing herself into being, albeit in a narrowly constructed maternal role, whilst also showing how she is diminished for having her body 'divide' into parts. The description of the body dividing up also defamiliarises child birth, making it seem alien and unnatural. "I | to think | I" mirrors an internal struggle between conflicting identity positions in which she attempts to maintain a sense of self. This tension arises in Hill's *The Accumulation* when the mother narrator states quite plainly (in contrast to Monk): "whenever a child is born, a woman is wasted. | We do not quite belong to ourselves."¹⁸⁴ Both poets represent the predicament women face as a result of their bodies; their remarkable life-giving capacity is offset by the social and personal burden it carries. The protagonists' attitudes towards childbirth may be shameful or embarrassing for many women to admit but by allowing these voices to speak, Monk and Hill open up the possibilities for a critique of gender roles.

In *Interregnum*, local suspicions of the characters' potential involvement in witchcraft begin to build as in 'The Great Assembly & Feast' where the group take a walk to discuss a "murder plot"¹⁸⁵ involving an explosion: "grow semtex – | a likely. Banged up L/caster (via forbid Trough). Run proof. | Bolt-stare of stone. S'easy. Blow away – fuft."¹⁸⁶ The abbreviation and coded language evokes secrecy, although a number of issues cast doubt on these individuals as a serious threat. In a writer's joke, Monk refers to the use of an explosive which was not invented until three centuries later. Their blasé attitude exposes limited understanding and intelligence, giving the impression of childish fantasy. In the second verse there is a growing sense of tension: "jitter. Belly knot. Brewst hysterical terror. Turn | mindlimbs out their course. Spasmics. Consort then with | demons."¹⁸⁷ Their initial excitement builds with each word into something dangerous and quite different from its origins. Capturing the infectious nature of rumour and terror, 'mindlimbs' creates a presumptive link between thought and action; suddenly these naïve figures are associated with devil worship. The third and final verse sees a further shift in the stance of the narrator who associates such activity with women, communicated in the form of hurled insults:

¹⁸⁴ Hill, *The Accumulation*, p. 68.

¹⁸⁵ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 122.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

They glamour. They bleed. Deceive. Imperfect animal. Barely
once removed from. Come. Snake woman. Wolf woman.
Whore woman. Witch. Deformed and depraved mother woman.
Worry-to-death woman. Howl all night under reeds. Girlgrace.
Blood to nothing. Love seed. Nether smell. Pro terra. Contra
mundum.¹⁸⁸

Although there are no specific clues as to the narrator's identity, we can assume them to be male and of a higher social class than the subjects: local magistrates would seek to find favour with King James in these superstitious times by identifying and dealing swiftly with what was perceived to be witchcraft. The verbal tirade moves through a range of misogynistic clichés, fuelled by a deep mistrust of femininity; an alluring façade is viewed as a deceptive distraction from the horror within. Numerous animal similes shame and dehumanise women, characterising them as sly and uncivilised. The menstrual cycle in particular is repeatedly returned to with grim fascination, a bodily function which is misunderstood and adds to the perception of women's otherworldliness. They are also shamed for their scent and sexual expression, as the poem concludes with the Latin phrase meaning 'against the world' – a final statement of disapproval regarding female autonomy. Only the 'girlgrace' of the virgin is acceptable, implying that once they become women they are beyond redemption. In Hill's poetry, the "taut purity of virgins in white landscapes"¹⁸⁹ represents an agreeable and constricted version of femininity which is ironically contradicted in *The Hat*: "women without men are the worst: | they smell of fish, | their eyes are red from crying."¹⁹⁰ Both writers illustrate how women have a variety of socially constructed feminine roles thrust upon them and are punished both for failing and striving to occupy them. While the implied irony in their forthright, hyperbolic descriptions may operate – in Denise Riley's terms – to hold these notions of femininity up for scrutiny, they also demonstrate femininity as being deeply involved in such constructions and not at a distance from them.

The traditionally feminine domestic realm is located as a site of tension throughout

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁸⁹ Hill, *The Accumulation*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁰ Hill, *The Hat*, p. 57.

Interregnum. ‘...(LEGIONS OF FRANTIC MISERIES)...’ begins with “...so tiny | drop of fear,”¹⁹¹
a potent emotion which unfolds into tangible threat:

tickles fringe
of young blood
 wetting scrubbed floorboards
virginal
 carbolic fist hits
tiny face-in-waiting¹⁹²

References to the apparent victim are aligned to the left, while her abuser and the setting are identified in indented lines, creating a sense of tension between the two. The ‘scrubbed’ floorboards hint at fastidious cleanliness within this household, with greater concern for the blood stains than the violent event which precedes it. The ‘carbolic’ fist intensifies the imagined sting of the blow while subtly connecting the abuser to the scrubbed floor. With the spilling of young, virginal blood, a violent rape appears to be taking place; the ‘tiny face-in-waiting’ conjures a small and vulnerable figure who is in the process of being aggressively initiated into the role expected of her as a woman, and implicitly deserving of such treatment. Finally, ‘in-waiting’ also suggests the role of a servant. By writing about intimate relationships and violence in its various forms, Monk defamiliarises gender roles, prompting self-recognition in the reader of the harm we cause to those closest to us. The poem ends with the unnerving presence of an eavesdropper (in keeping with the suspicious times):

and the stained black habit
flapped away
cawing
taa taa taffa-teffy¹⁹³

The gothic imagery combines a crow, with its mythological associations as a harbinger of death, and a religious garment. Drawing on the historical abuse suffered by women at the hands of the church, this ‘stained’ figure is implicated in the attack upon the protagonist. The final line evokes Lancastrian slang for goodbye. A family mealtime turns sour in ‘(...Mouth Dripping Verbal Crucifixions...)’ – the title alluding to the power of words to

¹⁹¹ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 114.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

condemn an individual, the silent violence arising from speech: "...three o'clock Good Friday dinner | hits | floralwallpaper."¹⁹⁴ The floral backdrop symbolically papers over the anger at the heart at the domestic scene, yet it is easily covered by this angry act. The perpetrator succeeds in subduing and intimidating other family members: "eyes slop about... | redden... | mouth drippens."¹⁹⁵ Shifting eye-contact demonstrates fear and shame which prevents retaliation and the dripping mouth provides evidence of neglected injuries. Monk also explores expressions of female sexuality, characterised by violence and repression. '...(Gestures Destroying All Meaning)...' begins with a gentle mood, reminiscent of traditional romantic poetry:

...arise
make haste
 my love
my dove
 my beautiful one¹⁹⁶

However, the tone switches after having apparently achieved the desired effect, describing: "disturbing| pink| bedroom landscapes."¹⁹⁷ Pink landscapes prompt associations with the curve of a woman's body which is portrayed as shameful and unpleasant. Leading up to an act of intimacy, the woman is pursued and trips: "fall | nightlong | licked clean,"¹⁹⁸ once more viewed as animalistic and strange, something to be hunted and trapped. To be licked clean is to be metaphorically devoured with erotic overtones but 'clean' also suggests purification, particularly in light of the following reference to the "five | bleeding wounds of passion."¹⁹⁹ This complex association implicates the role of the Catholic Church in justifying the objectification of women's bodies. Similar feelings of bodily disconnection are evoked in Hill's 'They Ram Themselves with Thumps Between Our Thighs' where the female form is unfamiliar and inhuman: "they jam themselves inside our leaky thighs | like mattresses inside abandoned mini-bars."²⁰⁰ While Monk's figurative language is layered with meaning, Hill's effectiveness lies in shock as the colloquial tone is interrupted and unsettled by the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁰⁰ Hill, *Red Roses*, p. 27.

enjambéd line as it introduces a startling simile. Monk's '(Lascivious Sprawl)...' recalls the dying animal from the opening poem in *Interregnum*, enriching our understanding of the sprawl in this sexual context in which an older man forces himself on a young girl:

...the old
 suffocating tongue
giving endless
 so-called kiss
 on
 into the anonymity
of outer space
 girl²⁰¹

The 'so-called' kiss represents so much more and undermines its affectionate or loving connotations; the act itself smothers the female protagonist literally and metaphorically as her identity is extinguished. An 'outer space girl' may refer to her astonishing beauty but as the poem continues it takes on darker meaning:

can't breathe even moan
girl-mind
 hooks on transference
 out-of-body trance
crawls into cool dreams of
future
disconnected bliss...²⁰²

Deprived of breath, the female protagonist is unable to 'moan' – that is, cry for help – but she is also denied sexual expression or enjoyment. Monk raises the idea of psychological differences in terms of gender; she implies that the 'girl-mind' emerges out of necessity in order to survive traumatic experiences and confining social attitudes towards femininity. The 'girl-mind' is characterised by the ability to disengage with the surrounding world in order to survive abuse. Again, we observe how Hill uses animals in her work to communicate emotion in highly idiosyncratic way; the young female protagonist in *Bunny* makes herself act like a "deep frozen rabbit"²⁰³ in order to withstand the predatory lodger's behaviour, a version of 'girl-mind'. This proves to be an inadequate defence as she is

²⁰¹ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 118.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁰³ Hill, *Bunny*, p. 51.

eventually attacked and admitted into a psychiatric hospital where her account of events is doubted, revealing once more the narrow passage down which female identity must tread.

'...(Hatching Premonitions)...' from *Interregnum* addresses attitudes of repulsion towards female genitalia: "sticking sticky fingers into | sweet weepings,"²⁰⁴ identifying the vagina as a point of both pleasure and pain, provoking a conflicted reaction:

Passion tides awash un upflood
to pain-point-hidden-pinks

bogey man
mother smell
witch weavings...²⁰⁵

The ambiguous narrator allows for these lines to encompass a man's reaction to women's bodies or women's experiences of their own sexual expression. The densely packed images project multiple negative social constructions of femininity onto the body – negating any initial enjoyment – making any interaction with it seem repellent and shameful. 'Witch weavings' likens seduction by a woman to the casting of a spell or performing a trick. Such is the strength of feeling that the often acceptable female role of mother is also called into disrepute.

In 'of James' there is the appearance of familial incest as impoverishment requires that many family members share a bed: "aching warmth. Aching| feet creepin up between Alliz inner thighs screamin| gedoffsob-laughin little Jenny joininin."²⁰⁶ While the exact nature of events is unclear, there are sexual overtones and although Ali (Alison) is laughing and apparently willing, she is also screaming and sobbing. Her feelings of helplessness are compounded by her mother's disinterest: "groanin shudup moanin grow up please | to her self-soft sleep and earth warm dirt | of her dreams."²⁰⁷ Monk introduces another version of 'girl-mind' in her representation of the mother; it is easier to live in denial of the events taking place and to attribute blame to her daughter. This approach lays the burden of shame and guilt onto the victim as women are shown to be complicit in the suppression of

²⁰⁴ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 116.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

other women. Many examples of similar female characters have been touched upon throughout the discussions of Hill's poetry in the previous chapters. Women fail to protect their daughters, for fear of failing to be submissive and 'lady-like', through deliberate abuse fuelled by their own gender-related frustrations or through a desire to gain favour with a dominant masculine figure. In exploring such shameful issues both writers draw attention to the various ways in which we are all complicit in the repression of others. *Interregnum* is littered with disconnected female body parts, representing the writing of the female body into language as well as the disjointed nature of female sexuality and how aspects of the female form are objectified. In naming this pain, Monk acknowledges this suffering and gives a voice to the silenced.

The three women at the centre of the Pendle Witch trial in *Interregnum* are Alizon, her mother (Demdike) and Ann Whittle (Chattox). At points throughout the sequence each displays incriminating behaviour as Monk draws upon the historical events of the witch hunt leading up to the capture and trial. In 'All Sing' the appeal of witchcraft and devil worship seems irresistible: "this age and era's evil ills| dearly and dangerously sweet | delights buried deep."²⁰⁸ Referred to as "three biters bitten,"²⁰⁹ this may be a comment on how the women's posturing and fantasies translate into serious consequences and ultimately their deaths. The image also demonstrates the cyclical nature of violence which is perpetuated by violence, and how it inscribes identity within intimate relationships and wider institutional contexts. The scene ends with the women appearing to engage in a form of devil worship: "around the beating heart. | In the fine flood. | In the deathdance in the blood."²¹⁰ An act of human or animal sacrifice may have taken place or the more likely scenario is that this ritual is part of an elaborate game and furthermore, a metaphor for the suspicion with which groups of women were viewed at this point in history. In '*...of Demdike...*' the mother speaks in the first person as she too displays suspicious behaviour. Describing her 'art' which she bestows with supernatural powers – capable of killing children and animals – she makes clay figures representing voodoo dolls:

I dried them. Fixed them. Thornpricked them.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 128.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

Then sat well back and waited for the
diabolical climate to heighten.
Obliterate.²¹¹

The maternal figure is defamiliarised for expressing intent to cause infanticide: “I spiked it with droplets of wonder | to be drunk unwittingly by children.”²¹² However her actions may be both justified and discounted as a serious threat, given the powerlessness of her position. Monk seeks to rescue these historical figures from biased historical accounts and attempts to give a voice to these women in order to provide the reader with a more sympathetic understanding of their lives. As has been demonstrated, behaviour that is perceived to be different is often repressed due to fear; in *Interregnum* Monk writes these female historical figures back into language and into the reader’s consciousness.

‘Demdike Sings’ demonstrates the narrator’s connection to nature: “wild air, | world-mothering air, | nestling me everywhere.”²¹³ Drawing upon traditional associations between women and nature, this relationship provides Demdike with a means of escapism from a life of poverty and oppression, further complicated by gender. The sense of contentment in these lines reveals how mothers struggle to maintain the absolute selflessness socially expected of them and yearn to be mothered themselves. In ‘...of Alice...’ the narrator shares similar affection and admiration of the outdoors:

Flapping wildly in
cloud broods
move and roost of hill rain
I never tired of.²¹⁴

As a mist drops over the scene, the familiar becomes strange and threatening: “white. Sightless. Bafflement. | Thickening animal throats | mutating child man woman.”²¹⁵ here even rigid gender divisions blur under the mist as a natural occurrence takes on magical qualities in Alice’s eyes. Despite the area’s treacherous conditions it provides a source of excitement in her life: “consorting with elements: | fractious, undesirable, | contra,

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 141.

²¹² Ibid., p. 141.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 125.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

alive.”²¹⁶ Resenting the behaviour expected of her as a woman, she longs for passion and freedom beyond the domestic realm, finding this in her surroundings: “the feed for my ungovernable | core to help me fight the regime of | mealtimes and stifling niceties.”²¹⁷ ‘...of Alizon...’ continues this theme, conveying a great love of the countryside: “sinking head-low and happy in | grasses and bracken: | mating with ghosts.”²¹⁸ Speaking in the past tense, the memory is tinged with sadness and nostalgia for these carefree times, while ‘mating with ghosts’ represents further freedom in the form of sexual fantasy. Appearing to confess to the charges they face, Alison admits:

Sure we made spells:
knees under chins toes wiggling
fingers doing silly dances knotting
hair in kiss curls²¹⁹

Speaking with a tone of disbelief regarding the devastating consequences of jovial, childish games, Alice’s account of events is consistent with other family members; they were simply attempting to alleviate the boredom and misery of their lives: “till rain spat and scattered us | back to predictability.”²²⁰ The desire to be free of pressure to fulfil a gender role can be observed in Hill’s *A Little Book of Meat* in which the female protagonist aspires to be a cow: “she doesn’t speak | she doesn’t do housework or worry about her appearance.”²²¹ Once again, the contrast between writers highlights how Hill’s writing style may sound flippant on occasion and almost seems to playfully tempt a dismissive response from the reader. It is only through engagement with the work that we come to realise how Hill uses humour to demonstrate how everyday behaviour is accepted and overlooked and, in this case, to deflect the shame experienced by a human narrator who cannot escape her body.

Monk’s ‘...of ‘Mouldheels’...’ articulates – with increasing desperation – the argument that the women were merely pretending to be witches in order to escape their limitations for a period of time. On being accused of casting deadly curses, the narrator protests: “we didn’t

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

²²¹ Hill, *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 50.

invent mortality | death came regardless.”²²² Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the authorities are determined to find them guilty; witch hunts were the preferred method of oppressing non-conformists during this time. In choosing their path, however innocently, unstoppable events are set in motion and the protagonists’ helpless pleas are ignored:

Unfussed as always the
dead bled fresh blood –
I swear
they needed no encouragement from us –
willingly – with gasp
the shrieking and the
foul yelling²²³

Events are manipulated or conspire to discredit them further, although there is an element of inevitability regarding the outcome, not least due to their status as (mostly) women from the lower classes. The message that there will be severe penalties for those refuse to behave in a manner deemed acceptable by society is unequivocally driven home by a triumphant and raucous mob. In ‘...of Squintin Lizzie...’ Monk once more includes ellipses in the poem’s title suggesting both open edges but also continuity between the characters’ experiences. This poem puts forward another variation of failed femininity in which guilt is inferred from appearances alone:

No, I was no beauty that’s true
but with each telling my ugliness grows
like a bodily fungus
and guilt spreads accordingly
as though the two were somehow related.²²⁴

Demonstrating the devastating effect of rumour, as news of the women’s capture spreads they grow to be increasingly grotesque with each embellishment. The community’s thirst for gossip strengthens the case against them and illustrates how women who do not fit the typical social model of feminine beauty are viewed as deviant and shameful. With wry humour Lizzie retorts: “I could easily break into a cackle – | but I think the irony would allude you.”²²⁵ Monk uses ‘allude’ instead of the expected ‘elude’ to demonstrate how an

²²² Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 143.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

acknowledgement of irony would give away the flawed logic behind their capture. To ‘cackle’ evokes the stereotypical image of a witch that, contrasted with the gravity of the situation, communicates the level of tragedy in these events. There is no room for the women’s version of events; they are convicted on the arbitrary and tenuous grounds of having a strange laugh or an unconventional face. Hill comments on the pressures women face (albeit from a twentieth-century perspective) to maintain a certain appearance for fear of being viewed with suspicion, for example in *Red Roses*: “we’re here to look our best *and we do*. | We look our best even though it hurts. | It hurts so much it makes our hair fall out!”²²⁶

The protagonists in *Interregnum* seem resigned to the fact that their gender and position in society has sealed their fate but Monk allows each to speak in order to answer their accusers. ‘Anne Whittle Replies’ explains how the events leading up to their capture and resulting executions were a product of their persecutors’ imaginations:

thi med id up
with things never
born
till pushed and named
from their gobs²²⁷

Images of pregnancy and childbirth appear defamiliarised and at odds with the lies and violently forced confessions throughout the sequence. Nonetheless, these charges become fact upon leaving the mouths of those in power, imprisoning the protagonists “in tittle-tattle | & | chains,”²²⁸ demonstrating how gossip spreads and language is manipulated to seal their fate. Further, as in Olds, chains are a metaphor for how others impose identity upon us. ‘Elizabeth Southern Replies’ identifies how such hegemonic groups are formed:

Unification creates power.	Creates remains.
Unification creates exclusion.	Persecution.
Random cells need violence to club and hang together – hang together! Ha! ²²⁹	

²²⁶ Hill, *Red Roses*, p. 35.

²²⁷ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 153.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Monk draws our attention to 'Creates remains. Persecution' isolated on the right-hand side of the page, highlighting how the creation of a group automatically generates a surplus or remainder which must be persecuted in order to maintain the solidarity and authority of the founding group, echoing the patriarchal subordination of women. Violence is essential to maintaining certain established norms; its physical and emotional forms control behaviour through fear and shame, both in the privacy of the family home and in this instance, stemming from wider political influences. Exclamation marks in the final line above signify dark humour in relation to a pun on 'club' and particularly, 'hang'. Colloquial language reflects how unassuming these dangerous formations initially seem and the protagonists' execution by hanging. Further, poverty and a lack of education makes the women physically and mentally defenceless:

We hadn't the learning
to read us right.

We hadn't the food
for big-boned words to
kick mule-like
the wisest fool.²³⁰

Despite their deficiencies, they are astute enough to question and understand the flawed motivations of those persecuting them. 'Alice Nutter Replies' begins: "Alice through the centuries | of unrecorded silence. That is my story."²³¹ This poem illustrates of a life overlooked, as well as a male gender bias in historical accounts of women's lives. Alice explains the effect of the sanitised lies of her history perpetuated in the present day:

Your bedtime night-night
fairy tales fill
cells
with injury
hurt the heart and
bleed the kick from
words²³²

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 155.

²³² Ibid., p. 155.

To cover over and ignore certain aspects of these women's stories is to doubly torment and incarcerate them; entering the 'cells' demonstrates how such thoughts metaphorically enter the mind and body but also the site of Alice's imprisonment, reiterating the power of words to inflict violence. The poem ends with the dismal realisation that her life was insignificant and arbitrarily ended: "my inconvenient reasoning | my one stab at life | cut..."²³³ The final ellipsis forms a space in which to imagine what could have been, while 'stab' and 'cut' refer to the violence which surrounds Alice's entry into and exit from the world. 'Katherine Hewit Replies' describes the feelings of helplessness at being interrogated and patronised by a powerful man:

It hurt. Being
felled by a blunt brain.
A nincompoop
poking iz nosey
wi manicured nails
tapered to cynical infinity²³⁴

Katherine's strong dialect creates further distance between the two characters and makes the likelihood of persuading her inquisitor of her innocence a remote possibility. The contrast between 'blunt brain' and 'manicured nails' generate the image of a man who is preoccupied with appearances, over emotion and understanding. Katherine has nothing to offer him as his priorities lie with those in power: "the patronising smirk of | ultimate noble birth to charm iz drab | and impotent circle."²³⁵ In a small gesture of defiance she claims: "a could ave done a lot o things – hypothetically – | with water mirrors and half moons."²³⁶ This approach is futile, not least because the spells she casts are not real; fantasy is no longer a viable solution to her problems.

In 'Anne Redfearn Replies' Monk extends her consideration of the relationship between language and identity. Anne draws comfort from the sound of her name while captured: "it came curling round my body | securer with every repeated utterance | its fronds caressing with familiarity."²³⁷ The nurturing images demonstrate the importance of identity and

²³³ Ibid., p. 155.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 156.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

autonomy, an internal source of power which is untouchable by others. A name becomes synonymous with a person and in Anne's case, where she has limited influence and few possessions, it is all she has: "Redfearn. So sticky. So brightly mine."²³⁸ However, the tone of fascination ends abruptly as she recalls her predicament, along with a suggestion of blood (bright, sticky):

Until the book pressed shut.
Pressed out the light.
Dried up the sap.
And I vanished at the wave
of the nametakers²³⁹

The full stop at the end of the lines in succession evokes the finality of every step as an unfeeling administrative procedure determines her fate. A pun on 'nametakers' expresses how an official taking a note of Anne's name ensures that she is literally and figuratively erased from existence, while her name lives on in historical records and is associated with the events surrounding her death. 'Alizon Devise Replies' maintains the mood of inevitability in this section of the sequence:

I just dwindled into the situation
 dwindled into life really
what alternative?
fourteen and female – an unloved combination²⁴⁰

Poignantly, she senses that her age and gender make her repellent, possibly because she unable to occupy an acceptable female role at this moment; this is also Monk reflecting on her own life as a young woman in Blackburn. Her quiet acceptance of the path her life is about to take arises from an absence of hope and the knowledge that "violence is futile."²⁴¹ To be born female and poor is to be born into a life of limitations. Alizon speaks from experience as one who has rebelled against physical and emotional imprisonment:

to smash the head and
 fists
against an anger

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 157.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 160.

a dungeon wall
bloodies only the moment
and yourself.²⁴²

Any act of retaliation will ultimately backfire. As Alizon's monologue ends, she is overcome with frustration and helplessness as she begins to doubt even the reader's interest in her: "ARE YOU LISTENING? | I said | I just dwindled in..."²⁴³ In 'Elizabeth Devise Replies', an atmosphere of terror builds as the group approach an: "ever nearing death of | laughable proportions. | This trumped up charge of nothing."²⁴⁴ In a last attempt to make their voices heard they: "chalk words of desperation before | the smashing slate,"²⁴⁵ a potent symbol of their absolute disempowerment in which every attempt at communication is blocked. The mood darkens further still in poems describing the capture and torture of the protagonists. 'Gaol Song – Part 1' depicts a tormented prisoner:

No physics
can explain
the tortured ball of
mind screwed up and
savaged into dense primordial
black²⁴⁶

These lines convey the effect of pain on identity. The function of the Catholic practice of penance was touched upon in the previous chapter, detailing how individuals undergo violent punishments in order to maintain purity of spirit. A similar process can be observed here, recalling Geraldine Heng's assertion that: "pain by its nature over time or with due intensity breaks down subjectivity, disrupts the flow of inner consciousness, and unhinges the coherence of the self."²⁴⁷ The extreme methods of torture outlined in *Interregnum* – also exacted in the name of religion – serve to annihilate identity in order to theoretically make way for an alternative configuration more amenable to power. The 'primordial black' of the mind evokes this state of non-existence which is only seldom alleviated by narrator's

²⁴² Ibid., p. 160.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁴⁷ *The Cambridge Companion of Feminist Literary Theory*, Edited by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 65.

memory of the “home-hills,”²⁴⁸ still able to pass through “impenetrable walls.”²⁴⁹ Although an utterly hopeless image, a crumb of inner strength is drawn from it.

In ‘Gaol Song – Part 3’ the prisoners are kept apart presumably to prevent them from discussing their predicament, drawing strength from one another or attempting to alter their versions of events:

No messages allowed.
Triggers & cues
plot holes
to fill with dynamite
blow bleeding syntactical
structures to smithereens²⁵⁰

‘Syntactical structures’ refer to the lies constructed against them but also the institutional structures that are built upon proliferation of certain lies and beliefs; to challenge one is to challenge the other and in this sense, the prisoners pose as much of a threat as if they truly were guilty of the charges they face. Out of sight and unable to defend themselves, the conditions are ideal for public hysteria – “(incubated and bred)”²⁵¹ – to flourish. In this context, society is referred to as: “a law unto itself | unknown | it ritualises abuse,”²⁵² an observation that rings true more generally regarding how misguided patterns of thought become cemented as fact. The terrible treatment endured by the protagonists, due to their gender and social standing, becomes an accepted way to proceed. ‘Gaol Song – Part 4’ emphasises this point:

(the lunatic guilt swings)
blinded
we pin the tail
in the donkey’s
eye²⁵³

The image of the blind leading the blind and in turn, blinding others, draws attention to the

²⁴⁸ Monk, *Selected Poems*, p. 129.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

destruction caused by widespread ignorance. This childish game illustrates the arbitrary way in which certain groups or individuals come to be perceived and how they are violently excluded from society. The classic pun on eye/I draws attention to the way in which the protagonists play a part in their own downfall.

Language has been demonstrated to be a key factor in the downfall of Monk's main protagonists; their lack of education, low social status and gender (regarding female characters) led to difficulties in expressing themselves and being listened to. Although these events took place in 1612, the issues raised continue to be relevant today in terms of imprisonment, propaganda and gender struggles. Monk demonstrates the power of language in a multitude of ways. In 'Strip Search' the title alludes the intrusive act of searching the suspects as well as the metaphorical 'stripping back' of language in order to refresh and bestow it with new significance. "The mumbo jumbo prance from sound to seemingness"²⁵⁴ effectively delineates the value and weight we attach to random sounds. Words appear particularly meaningless to the protagonists, confined in a cell and waiting to die, they only hear "abandoned screams."²⁵⁵ In 'Blind Talk' a suspect is being tortured for information:

we only believe
your truth telling
it like we
want to
hear what we
don't is

lying²⁵⁶

This account raises questions over the accuracy of historical documentation and how the pervasive version of events is often that presented by the most powerful group, predominantly male and privileged. The word 'lying' appears at the outer edges of either side of the poem, as if mimicking accusations levelled from all directions towards the prisoner. The force used to achieve the inquisitors' version of the truth is expressed in the final section of the poem; structured in a central narrow column down the page, the words

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

form the shape of a tooth hanging from its root or a hangman's noose:

dangling
ont end
of
s
t
r
i
n
g
s
of
root
twisted
FIBS²⁵⁷

'Sweet Talk' continues the quest for a forced written confession from the prisoners. Mocked for being unable to write, their captors sadistically wait for a teardrop or drop of blood to form the ink with which they are to sign: "weep stupid cunt you? | one inky indelible blub."²⁵⁸ These bodily fluids are expected to leave a condemning mark: "of tellingtale | stigmatic | guilt,"²⁵⁹ as if deception and evil were a part of their biological make-up. Based on historical events, these descriptions of torture are completely devoid of the distancing exaggeration and irony present in Hill's poems on physical and sexual abuse; Monk places her reader unflinching into the scene. In 'Playtime' the title chillingly refers to how the prisoners were literally the playthings of their captors who maintained absolute power over them and their bodies:

fistfuls of revenge	(we let rip
torn	
routed out	(tear away the hairy
most grievously	
screwed to poppies	(to pinky point
straddled exceedingly ²⁶⁰	

These excessive actions appear less for the purpose of drawing a confession and more an

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 138.

act of revenge for the fear and threat the prisoners have apparently caused. Numerous references such as ‘screwed’ and ‘straddled’ connote sexual violence and rape; to ‘tear away the hairy’ may allude to known Medieval methods of identifying ‘witches’ by removing all body hair in order to look for marks of the devil on the body. These horrific events are followed by the repetition of the phrase: “through your fault”²⁶¹ reiterating how, as women of low social standing who dared to behave differently, they deserve it. The poem ends with the prisoners looking out through a barred window, post-attack: “dripping | gun-games | needlework.”²⁶² The ‘dripping’ may be of tears, blood or even of the spirit; they emit extremes of masculine and feminine associations, an ambiguity that signals a threat. In the background to these events, Monk continues a dual narrative along the right hand side of the page in unclosed parentheses, representative of occurrences which are barely concealed beneath the surface:

(behind
 (closed doors
 (systems echo
 (spilling towers
 (strewn.²⁶³

These lines portray corrupt institutional control and certain practices that are not permitted or admitted to; that a system falls suggests a loss of control resulting from the tyranny which powerless groups within society are at the mercy of. Towards the end of the sequence, the main protagonists speak as one in ‘...of All...’, demonstrating that there is strength to be drawn from shared experience. They imagine haunting the community (and specific individuals) responsible for their downfall:

Steal
 up behind you
 tap
 (so gently)
 tap tap
 you left shoulder
 ghosting you wont see standing right
 tap again²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 138.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

Their approach is subtle, almost teasing which appears to negate any threat or impact. However, it is designed to operate on a more psychological level and is evocative of the way in which guilt may 'haunt' the mind:

But you'll know we are there.
Know it is us.
Breathing.
Waiting.²⁶⁵

These menacing lines are all the more intimidating for the absence of violence or clues as to their true intentions (although the reader senses that it simply to ensure that they are not forgotten). The narrator continues to explain the liberating and empowering effect the group experience as 'witches': "to out-think. Out-manoeuvre. | Out-last you. To move. Shapeshift. Move again."²⁶⁶ The performance lifts them above the banality of life, while to 'shapeshift' implies that they are no longer confined to the gendered bodies that restricted and defined them. At the time they did not realise that by escaping through fantasy, they were drawing attention to their otherness and the threat they could pose to social convention. Shape-shifting is also apparent in Hill's exploration of gender identity which turns characters into animals and presents a multitude of male and female perspectives – both individually and within one character – demonstrating the plurality and complexity of gender.

'...of All...' continues with the spectre of the protagonists watching the community in which they used to live:

We studied the back of your head and shoulders.
They were not beautiful. Not even vulgar.
They were closed and peevish.
How could such mediocrity of form
block our forward charge. Damn our flow.²⁶⁷

Their unassuming appearance belies insularity and intolerance. Although a closed-minded society may appear passive, it poses a great danger to those who refuse to conform to its

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

situation and resumes her game: “we re-formed | ganged | crawled on all fours.”²⁷² During childhood, when the boundary between imagination and reality tends to blur, it is easy to see how her words could have been twisted and used to condemn her family.

‘Touching the Everywhere – The Eternal Bewilderment of Jennet Device’ in which Jennet explains her previously cheerful disposition and thoughtless approach to words: “I led a merry crab dance. Bright. | Kookie-mad. | Rhymed thing with thing string...”²⁷³ Only after the hangings take place does the importance and power of language begin to dawn on her and ironically, evade her: “OH MA | mi maa mi mother | mUth er ing.”²⁷⁴ As a young girl, she contends with the overwhelming feelings attached to losing her mother and reverts to baby language. Further, she appears to be attempting to make sense of the word and to draw something tangible from it, while calling out to be loved. A pun on ‘murdering’ brings to mind the guilt she must be experiencing for placing her mother in this position. Jennet runs through her mother’s many roles:

O mother mine
mother o me
mother o diva
mother o prima-diva-donna on
the hill-sang
Mother-O Me-O
O
that lime lit cherry glow²⁷⁵

This fond recollection lists all the things that Jennet will miss about her mother, including her singing, cooking and nurturing influence. Repeatedly turning over the words mother/me, she tentatively considers her own gender identity and experiences a degree of confusion as to where she should anchor herself. Her ‘eternal bewilderment’ implies that in some ways, a part of her will remain in and be shaped by this moment and her guilty involvement in it. However, in her final words she emerges from confusion to speak with clarity, unclouded by childish daydreams – these devastating events become the catalyst to Jennet becoming a woman:

²⁷² Ibid., p. 149.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

OH MA
the word all round
is

TOUCHED.²⁷⁶

To echo Hill, to become a woman is the realisation of ‘what is coming to you’; to be touched is another term for the influences and forces (physical or verbal) that serve to shape gender identity. These lines may also reflect a pun on madness, as in to be ‘touched’ by madness. Finally, ‘touched’ may refer the ease with which misguided notions of acceptable gendered behaviour are socially formed and perpetuated.

In Monk’s 2005 collection *Escafeld Hangings*²⁷⁷ she once more takes on a female historical figure whom she feels has been misrepresented; the lesser documented years of Mary Queen of Scots’ life as a political prisoner in Sheffield from 1570 to 1584. Monk seeks to provide the silenced Queen with a voice. Just as *Interregnum* began in the present day with its history bubbling beneath, this is how we are introduced in Part One to Sheffield, ‘The City of Eternal Construction’. Monk is a long-time resident in Sheffield and has witnessed the city’s painful and protracted period of regeneration. Here she imagines the space in which Mary would have been held: “at a rough guess the foundations | are under the fish and meat markets | and extend beneath the law courts.”²⁷⁸ In identifying the precise location, Monk provides a clear link to the past while the juxtaposition of the markets and law courts reflect Mary’s royal standing and her lowly surroundings, sharpening our imagined sense of her embarrassment. This effect is heightened by the humiliating description of her:

begging
with an eloquence to
warm the feet of our
mongers and butchers
wallowing in the traces of
her damp
lodgings²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁷⁷ Geraldine Monk, *Escafeld Hangings* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2005)

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

Monk juxtaposes two separate points in time in order to bring new meaning to each; Mary's eloquence represents a fragment of her old identity when the remainder has been stripped away by demeaning conditions. The notion that her suffering provides warmth and, by association pleasure, is disconcerting, while 'mongers and butchers' being typically masculine professions, the issue of gender power roles is subtly introduced. During her imprisonment, Mary displays both conventional masculine and feminine traits, undoubtedly fuelling suspicion regarding her character:

Within these precincts the Scottish Queen schemed
and plotted and ordered the latest
French fashions
suffering
agonies of ages –
deferred
hope –
endless embroideries.²⁸⁰

Neither role particularly compliments her; in scheming she appears ruthless and masculine while typically feminine interests such as stitching and clothing may infer vanity but also discernment and sophistication. This suggests how, despite her imprisonment, as a woman Mary passes the time with worrying about her appearance and sewing, initially appearing superficial. However, these unassuming pursuits could also be observed in terms of a duplicitous cover for more vengeful intentions. Commenting upon behavioural clichés that have followed women throughout the ages, Monk describes:

all the bunions down the centuries
of women's feet
plodding their varicose and
purpose purse
to market²⁸¹

An emphasis on physical flaws evokes monstrous femininity and deglamourises feminine allure by revealing the efforts that go into maintaining appearances. The 'purpose purse' evokes a medieval pun on purse as female genitalia, while calling forth thoughts of caricatured women whose purpose in life is to go shopping and hunt for bargains: "on | the

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 14.

altar of | special offers.”²⁸² Religious imagery hints at the role of cultural institutions in the formation of and attitudes towards gender roles. Similarly Hill’s poetry ironically uses vacuous female caricature to depict the limited options available to women in terms of identity, and the physical or emotional pain that goes into performing femininity: “as beauty parlours hum; | all we’re allowed is having pretty faces | and cold and glittery hearts like water-ices.”²⁸³

The link between sixteenth century and present day Sheffield is also reflected in the secret passages that run beneath its streets in ‘Tunnel Spottings’:

The city is mythically riddled.
Subterranean tunnels.
Human burrows from the Cathedral
to the Castle from the Hall in the Ponds
shooting up Manor Lodge²⁸⁴

The tunnels represent a connection between points in time but also the city’s intestines, continuing Monk’s negotiation of place as something which is alive and evolving according to the events that have taken place there; to be ‘mythically riddled’ is to be permeated with an ever-present sense of history. Humans have literally and figuratively shaped the land while images of submersion lend an air of mystery and menace. This atmosphere is amplified by a later description of the tunnels as:

snaky ructions
black as
Bertie Bassett’s
innards²⁸⁵

References to the body, formed through battle, suggest the many that suffered and died (including Mary) whose memories the city is built upon. The liquorice black of this underground world is sticky and sweet, signalling danger; the oppressive darkness is both tempting and enveloping. In a further link to place, the sweet company Bassett’s, best known for their ‘Liquorice Allsorts’ was founded in Sheffield in 1842. Age-old stories replay

²⁸² Ibid., p. 14.

²⁸³ Hill, *A Little Book of Meat*, p. 60.

²⁸⁴ Monk, *Escafeld Hangings*, p. 17.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

under Sheffield Crown Court as the tunnels “run like imaginary lines of freedom | teasing the feet of the convicted.”²⁸⁶ ‘The Lady Chapel – Sheffield Cathedral’ describes a monument that lies in the Cathedral of George Talbot, the sixth Earl of Shrewsbury: “our man Shrewsbury.”²⁸⁷ He was married to Bess Hardwick and had custody over Mary Queen of Scots during her imprisonment. His death is attributed to being nagged by the women in his life as Monk, with wry humour, plays upon clichéd male-female relationships:

worry to death
by Elizabeth
Mary
and his wee-wife Bess²⁸⁸

Lying on its back, the monument of Shrewsbury is placed in a typically female, sexually submissive position and forced to endure dominant women even in death. In his imagined line of vision is the green man imagery on the ceiling of the Cathedral: “the sheela-na-gig | spewing forth her seeds,”²⁸⁹ a reference to the consort of the Green man, the Mother goddess. Green *women* were rare and in this case, ‘spewing’ refers to a type known as ‘disgorging heads’ that spew vegetation from their mouths. Such imagery evokes themes of fertility and the maternal nature of women. However in this instance these associations are defamiliarised into something lewd and shameful:

w-hey she wears no knickers
and it’s a strange trick
for a circus artist
to spew seeds from a place
surrounded by green men’s
astonished heads
teetering between
crossed swords
playing over and again the
‘beheading game’.²⁹⁰

Presented as a performer surrounded by men and without underwear, the description of this figure is more akin to that of an exotic dancer or a prostitute, as opposed to the

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

traditional meaning of Sheela-na-gig. The ‘astonished heads’ imply that such expressions of female sexuality are shameful and shocking. Spewing seeds emulate the menstrual cycle and the uncontrollable nature of the female body which does not fit neatly into the binary system of body classification. As a result, the body becomes a source of fear that needs to be repressed through social shaming. The violent end to this ‘game’ recalls Mary’s execution and that of countless women of suspect femininity before and after her; lines positioned from side to side subconsciously create a cutting motion. In this poem the sheela-na-gig represents two opposing versions of femininity – the mother and the whore – both of which are doomed.

‘Part Two – Unsent Letters’ imagines the letters Mary Queen of Scots might have wanted to send from her prison cell. The title may be a reference to the so-called ‘casket letters’ which were used as evidence against Mary in relation to her husband Lord Darnley’s murder. These letters are considered by some to be complete or partial forgeries; in keeping with Monk’s interest in misrepresented historical female figures. Her poems allow Mary to metaphorically reclaim a degree of autonomy and have her silenced voice heard through the medium that condemned her. In ‘Scandal Letter’ Mary addresses ‘Goode Queen Bess’ (another name for Elizabeth I) who is believed to have ordered her execution. Mary begins: “you do not marry they say for | never would you surrender a freedom to take new lovers to your hot-bed”²⁹¹ and later: “you slapped Killigrew for not bringing back your scared-stiff lover.”²⁹² She discredits Elizabeth by drawing attention to her conventionally more masculine traits such as aggression, dominance and promiscuity. That men were forced to spend time with her, and that doing so entailed entering her ‘hot-bed’, further undermines Elizabeth as unappealing and ruinous to be involved with. Once more, female sexual expression is used to shame women – in this instance by another woman – and the desire to avoid marriage and by implication children, appears monstrous and egotistical:

I hear you have a high opinion of your beauty as if you are a goddess [...] your ladies
daren’t but
look at each other in the eye for fear of bursting out laughing at the flatter-
lies they tell you.²⁹³

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁹² Ibid., p. 26.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 26.

Seeking to heighten Elizabeth's shame and embarrassment, these lines ensure that everyday intimate interactions with her ladies will come to be marred by paranoia that chips away at stable gender identity. Further, just as women may be derided and branded unfeminine for not being conventionally beautiful, they are equally ridiculed for attempting to be, reflecting once more how femininity is constructed from a multitude of contradictions.

'Airport Security' reveals Mary's helplessness in relation to her corrupt captors who are determined to hear – not the truth – but what they want to hear: “they wish again to wall up my windows and make a | false door through which to enter my sleeping body.”²⁹⁴ They relate to Mary as a body and through her body, echoing traditional corporeal associations with women; to ‘wall up’ her windows is to discount and erase her inner world. What her captors seek – a confession – is accessed using violence with entry through a ‘false door’ suggesting rape. Mary continues: “why while my body sleeps? Do they seek a sleep-stalked-loose-talking | confession? T’place a mirror in my mouth and pray it doesn’t mist?”²⁹⁵ In attempting to gain a confession while she sleeps they do so while she is most vulnerable, hoping that she incriminates herself and hoping for her death in equal measure. Mary expands upon feelings of disconnection between mind and body as a result of her incarceration, which her captors are keen to take advantage of. In ‘Menagerie’ this sensation is replicated using violent imagery:

The skeleton is what is left after the insides have
been taken out and the outsides taken off. It is something to hitch meat onto.
I wish mine was unhitched. Meet me now. Please. Or. Unmeat me now. Dust
me.²⁹⁶

Referring to herself as ‘the skeleton’ and ‘meat’, the experience of being imprisoned and abused has thoroughly de-humanised Mary to the point that her body, and by extension life, is meaningless to her. The utter debasement present in these lines demonstrates Monk's capacity to evoke the futility felt by repressed women whose identities are forcefully erased. Death is preferable in Mary's eyes, begging to be ‘unmeated’ (killed) and to be turned to dust (to rot). The single word ‘me’ on the final line communicates her isolation

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

and diminished sense of self. In Hill's 'Rock' her female protagonists cope with the suffering they endure at the hands of abusive males by becoming disconnected from their bodies, reducing themselves to meat and perpetuating their objectification: "rows of women | fry themselves like chops."²⁹⁷ In Monk's poem, Mary is simply worn down and waiting for death, whereas Hill's characters are typically more theatrical and masochistic in their misery, suggesting (once more recalling Denise Riley's work on irony) a surprising degree of resolve.

This is taken a stage further in Monk's 'Lay Your Apples Like Eggs' when Mary explains: "I | begin to think in food and dwell on past feasts"²⁹⁸ a form of escapism to be expected given the luxurious lifestyle she would have enjoyed as a free woman. She continues:

Lard me with Lemon and cook me alive as they did-do with a goose –
sponging his head and heart as his inner parts roasted till he run mad up and
down and stumbled with his cooking juice roiling to the verge of language.²⁹⁹

In wishing to be cooked and eaten, Mary is not only calling for an end to her suffering but also submitting to the ultimate form of domination by the controlling powers. This scene also captures how easily she may have trusted certain individuals who in turn, betrayed her; 'sponging' the head and heart implies that while this took place she was being flattered and lied to. Significantly, the focus shifts halfway through these lines to refer to a male goose. This is possibly an allusion to Lord Bothwell who was believed to have murdered Mary's husband (at her command) before marrying her – he too was captured and subjected to appalling treatment before his death. Hill uses this image in a similar way in *The Hat* where the female protagonist is repeatedly referred to as a goose: "God has got a larder full of angels | gripping geese | between their huge thighs."³⁰⁰ The context infers that she is being forcefully prepared to be cooked as food in a sequence of poems which see her rally against preconceived and rigid versions of femininity. As a result, she is punished by death; that God is complicit in this act demonstrates the role of patriarchal institutions in the oppression of women. In another poem, the protagonist is forced-fed with connotations of oral rape:

²⁹⁷ Hill, *The Hat*, p. 56.

²⁹⁸ Monk, *Escafeld Hangings*, p. 30.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁰⁰ Hill, *The Hat.*, p. 43.

“take this, he goes, | gag, gag, she goes,”³⁰¹ an image which captures how views regarding gender are violently thrust upon Hill’s characters, both physically and mentally.

‘Mutability Hall’ from *Escafeld Hangings* considers the pressure placed on women to appear youthful and to reproduce. Mary describes watching her body age: “mi marrow. Mi back. Mi hand back and forth exclaims in | blue. Tut bone. With squiggly red thread veins. And liver spots.”³⁰² This physical decline serves as a painful reminder to Mary that she is losing her value as a woman whose identity is bound up in appearances but also of the toll that years of imprisonment have taken upon her. The real or imagined voices of social pressure question and accuse: “have you brought forth yet my pet? May your bundles | of joy be without beginning.”³⁰³ These lines begin with soft, nurturing tones, however this switches to one of condemnation as one woman damns another for not being maternal enough, perhaps based on rumours of Mary’s promiscuous behaviour and the reality of her fading youth. This is yet another example of women, as well as men, contributing to the perpetuation of confining gender roles. However, in what could be viewed as the desire to be free from such pressures to bear children or appear attractive to men, Mary later states: “God speed the menopause.”³⁰⁴ She may also be drawing on her own shameful feelings regarding a lack of maternal instinct, an aspect of female identity unflinchingly addressed in Hill’s *Fruitcake* where an indifferent new mother describes her child: “off it wobbles, | scraping its fat knees...| You’re going to have to learn to *get up*, Baby!”³⁰⁵ Hill’s plain language once more conveys deliberately deceptive simplicity; she articulates every day frustrations which many mothers are ashamed to think and embarrassed to candidly state. In Monk, ‘Points of Colour’ represents Mary’s final imagined letter in which she laments:

How I have had to sleep upon
the ground and drink sour milk and eat oatmeal without bread and have
been three nights like owls, with no female companionship. Like owls is like
free.³⁰⁶

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁰² Monk, *Escafeld Hangings* p. 31.

³⁰³ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁰⁵ Hill, *Fruitcake*, p. 168.

³⁰⁶ Monk, *Escafeld Hangings*, p. 40.

The things she has missed most are simple pleasures such as food and female company. There is a weight of sadness in these lines revealing a tired acceptance that comes from year upon year of oppression and abuse; the owl becomes a last bitter image of dashed hope as a simile to describe insomnia but also representing unattainable freedom. Mary concludes her final letter with the chilling realisation that it will be her last and that her situation could deteriorate further: “my heart hopes to die cleanly but my ever diminishing octaves condense | into deep-throated curse. And here comes the inconsolable scratch of quill | at the final loop of my signature.”³⁰⁷ This pitiful final mark on the world is nothing but a scratch, symbolic of her violent death but also the futility of her efforts to resist it. This final statement is spoken with the heaviness of one signing her own death warrant, as if to be a woman and attempt to have a voice is to be always found guilty.

It has been argued through close readings of the poetry that Monk, like Hill, builds up a complex picture of gender identity, and femininity in particular, within her work. In Monk’s poetry, there is an additional social element whereby she attempts to offer a fairer representation of other identity groups such as the working classes. However, both poets use violent imagery and tackle embarrassing or shameful issues such as mental illness or domestic violence in order to defamiliarise and unsettle our default views on gender. The uncomfortable feelings that we experience as readers coming to the work can be linked to the sensation outlined throughout the thesis of being: “torn apart however gently”³⁰⁸ when one is embarrassed and feels the tug of the multiple selves, both on the surface and deeply buried. By contrasting Hill with Monk, perhaps the most striking observation to emerge is how both writers are experimental with regards to poetic voice, yet very different in their approach to writing. Hill’s deceptively simple lines and unusual imagery (which, to a reader unfamiliar with Hill, may seem arbitrary) reveal a sophisticated and detailed account of gender identity, once one engages with the work.

Both writers’ work demonstrates the power of physical and silent violence as a controlling and shaping force upon gender identity – wielded within the family home and by societies influenced by cultural institutions such as governments and religion. In Monk’s case,

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁰⁸ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Random House, 1982)

because these messages are all around us, her work makes us sit up and pay attention to what has always been there. Her experimentation with language re-invigorates our understanding of gender in the same way that she excavates words for far more than their surface meaning. In re-telling the stories of historical figures such as the Pendle witches and Mary Queen of Scots, she demonstrates the importance of history when negotiating attitudes towards gender. In allowing silenced voices to speak Monk unearths the constructed and multi-faceted nature of gender identity, which has the potential to be a cathartic and transformative experience for her readers.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis is to explore the construction of gender through embarrassment, shame and guilt in the work of Selima Hill, and in so doing, establish Hill as a figure of key significance to British poetry. For the first time, Hill's entire oeuvre up to 2010 has been examined here through close readings of the poetry, with an emphasis on the construction of gender throughout. Drawing upon theories which were initially developed out of my close readings of the poetry, alongside correspondence and a rare face-to-face interview with Hill in 2010, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate how representations of gender identity come to be shaped within the intimate relationships Hill presents. Further, it has identified key themes in Hill's work such as mental illness, familial abuse and sexual violence, as well as the controlling influence of cultural institutions such as hospitals and the Catholic Church. As each chapter has moved through the private and public settings of Hill's poems, a picture has begun to emerge of the way in which the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt function within Hill's negotiation of gender throughout her oeuvre.

It has been argued that despite a prolific and award-winning writing career spanning nearly thirty years, there has been a distinct lack of critical engagement with Hill's work due to perceived difficulties in subject matter and style. Repeated accusations from critics and journalists of 'whimsical' and 'fragmented' writing have been shown here to be a deliberate aspect of Hill's style. The close readings of a broad selection of Hill's work reveal it to be far from directionless and arbitrary; in working through difficult issues such as intimacy, shame and desire, Hill's work is no less valid (and is arguably more persuasive) for coming from a less stable sense of literary worth. Indeed, Ricks claims in *Keats and Embarrassment* that in modern literature "whimsy is inherently a protection against embarrassment."¹ If we apply this notion to Hill's poetry, along with O'Brien's and Hill's own statements regarding her lack of embarrassment, this may partly account for the uncomfortable experience some readers describe when coming to her work. As Ricks comments upon the relationship between a piece of work and its audience, and the potential for embarrassment:

¹ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 189.

For although it is indeed true that we judge a book and that a book judges us, it is importantly not true (importantly, because our valuation of and gratitude to art are intimately involved with the fact) that we can shame or embarrass a book although a book can shame or embarrass us.²

In relation to Hill's poetry, I would argue that not only can it cause embarrassment for the reader, but crucially, that this emotional response has implications for the construction of gender identity itself. The critical writing that currently exists on Hill's work has placed an emphasis on how it affects the male reader. I believe that Hill's poetry has the potential to unsettle any reader, regardless of gender. While this may be an unpleasant or uncomfortable experience, it is potentially beneficial. The feeling of embarrassment may be prompted by the reader's recognition of the tension within Hill's characters who also experience embarrassment, shame and guilt in relation to the formation and maintenance of their gendered identities. This could result in the sensation that Goffman describes as "being torn apart, however gently."³ By embarrassing her reader Hill exposes them to the tension inherent in their own gender construction, exploding its naturalised appearance. While being 'torn apart' may lead to self-doubt and questioning, it also opens up options for alternative constructions of gender identity – which is presented in the poetry as plural, complex and conflicted – for those who struggle to embody restrictive masculine and feminine positions. In addition to this, Hill's own apparent lack of embarrassment in relation to writing allows her to take on difficult subjects such as mental illness, sexual violence or non-maternal mothers. In breaking certain taboos she opens them up for discussion, and provides a space for suffering and acceptance as well as the possibility of catharsis and transformation for her readers.

Hill's most recent publication *People Who Like Meatballs*,⁴ saw her once more recognised and praised for her work, nominated for the Forward Prize and The Costa Poetry Award. In this collection Hill extends her negotiation of gender, particularly masculinity. Comprising two sequences, the title sequence concerns a man's humiliation by a woman and the second sequence 'Into My Mother's Snow-Encrusted Lap' explores a dysfunctional mother-son relationship, narrated from the son's perspective. Hill continues to draw upon the

² Ibid., p. 189.

³ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 110.

⁴ Selima Hill, *People Who Like Meatballs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2012)

wealth of images that characterise the body of her work, including animals, religion and violence. She also opted to write in separate – albeit related – sequences in her previous book *Fruitcake*, a departure from several years of writing from the perspective of a single person narrator with a narrative thread running throughout. This may represent a development in Hill's work which allows her to explore gender identity with greater flexibility. Indeed, her forthcoming collection *The Sparkling Jewel of Naturism* which is scheduled for publication with Bloodaxe in March 2014 is also written in three sequences. In committing herself to exploring both masculine and feminine roles and issues, Hill exhibits a stance on feminism which she outlined during our correspondence: that feminism is for men as well as women. In Denise Riley's terms, such an approach is essential to deconstructing confining gender roles: "all definitions of gender must be looked at with an eagle eye, wherever they emanate from and whoever pronounces them, and [that] such scrutiny is a thoroughly feminist undertaking."⁵

In applying the theoretical framework to the work of Sharon Olds and Geraldine Monk, the viability of its argument has hopefully been demonstrated as an illuminating way of discussing and understanding the formation of gender identity within intimate relationships. The comparison has also brought out fresh interpretations of Hill's poetry and demonstrated the different ways in which the emotions of embarrassment, shame and guilt can operate within literature, differently positioning the reader. The next step may be to apply the theoretical framework on these identity-shaping emotions to a wider range of contemporary poetry – written by both male and female poets – in order to further this particular avenue of exploration regarding the construction of gender.

⁵ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 2-3.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

SELIMA HILL POSTAL INTERVIEW, MARCH 2010

Q1.In many of your poems, there is a great deal of tension surrounding your female characters in their relationships to their bodies and with men. In *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (1989) the protagonist seems to feel incredibly uncomfortable with her body and the implications of it, describing her breasts like “rocks of milk”, her uterus as “like a sunlit knife” and she states that “being pregnant makes me feel dishonest.” In *The Hat* (2008), women are seen as subservient to men and “fry themselves like chops” for the “man-sized birds” and women without men “smell of fish, | their eyes are red from crying.” What motivates you to write about your female characters in this way?

A. My motivation? Being me is being a poet and being a woman. Or, ‘to be’ me is to be, first, a poet and secondly a woman. And as a ‘practicing’ poet and a ‘practicing’ woman I felt (60’s, 70’s) marginalised and insulted (a world without men? No crime and lots of happy, fat women!) I suppose that’s why the two came together – as a way of trying to talk to someone about something, although I didn’t – and still don’t know to whom, about what... I do know that I don’t feel I have ‘a message’ – I am just lucky enough to have found the space (i.e. the white page) in which I can say what I want to say, which may not be demure and nice, but may be ruthless, cold hearted, brutal- all the things I’m not supposed to be and say (according to the women who brought me up- nuns, ‘spinsters’ and blue stockings, mainly! And my poor mother, who I think was afraid of me. What legacy is that (for me)?!...) I do not feel consciously motivated by anything. I don’t stop and think. I just crash on and never look behind me! “Do the do, don’t don’t the don’t!” Self-indulgent? Yes. I would accept that.

Q2.I was intrigued by your remarks in an interview with Lidia Vianu in which you say “I have a man’s brain in a woman’s body...emotionally I’m a cripple. What was I

supposed to do with my body?” Does this account still stand and, if so, is it an ongoing issue in your poetry?

- A. Yes. I read moral sciences at Cambridge, brainy males everywhere, but had no friends. I avoided intimacy at all costs, ‘tho have always liked ‘extreme’ (and usually solitary) sports – bareback riding, high diving, long-distance walking, winter/wild swimming etc- a physical energy, strength, recklessness and sense of empowerment that does not sit easily with literature, especially poetry, which is traditionally more “hello-birdies-hello-trees” territory. If I could talk about all this, I wouldn’t need to write about it, would I?!

Q3. Would you describe yourself as a feminist, however you define that word? What do you think is the legacy of the Women’s Movement in this country? Is it relevant to you and your writing?

- A. Feminist? I think the less dividing-up there is the better. Men suffer as much as, if not more than women. The excitement is in the difference between the genders. It’s pointless to try and be the same. Equal, but not the same, please (whatever women do they must do twice as well- luckily, it’s not that difficult!) A woman who wants to be like a man lacks ambition! What about Lady Astor’s “I married beneath me – all women do!?” We are not inferior or superior, but different. Legacy of Women’s movement? Well, girls wear more pink now than ever they did, that’s for sure. My grand-daughter thinks it’s a law! Like wearing a seatbelt. (In Afghanistan, pink is for boys! This she could never believe...)

I ‘identified with’ men, some pretty odd men! (Kafka, Marc Chagall, Thomas Merton, Joseph Beuys, Rilke, Hans Christian Anderson, Edward Thomas, Nijinsky, Edmund Hilary (!!), Grayson Perry, Robert Crumb, WG Sebald, more than women,* not a very ‘feminist’ position – I derided women’s whingeing, their stridency, their aggressiveness, which only makes matters worse. Much worse. I don’t believe in fighting. We are all human, all just want to be happy, same, male or female.

*Identified as a writer. After all, women looked after my body but men looked after my brain- my father, my professors, my psychiatrists (“Looked after” – haha). Who looked after my soul? That was for me to look after. Is. Only later did I identify with women – particularly Jane Bowles, Elizabeth Bishop (although I don’t drink), Flannery O’Connor, Janet Frame, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Georgina O’Keefe, Katherine Mansfield. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton – they failed as women, in that they took their lives. I hate the identity of being a woman poet because of them! Who wants to be seen as hysterical, spoilt, bad-tempered, devious, mean, whingey...?

Q4.In your essay for the book *Private Views: Artists Working Today* (2004), you quote the poet Jenny Joseph as saying “if you are a married woman and you want to be a writer, you have three choices: one, to leave your husband; two, to give up writing; or three, you commit suicide.” And in *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness*, the poem ‘Sons’ says “Whenever a child is born, a woman is wasted. | We do not quite belong to ourselves.” What have been your experiences of writing as a woman and do you think that there are more obstacles for women, than men in writing today?

A. I’ve never heard a man ask for advice about how to combine marriage and a career! Having said that, as a mother of sons, I can say without doubt that not a day passes when I don’t feel them twisting me round their little fingers! Not so with the daughter. Twas ever thus. (However see ‘Advise on Wearing Animal Prints’ for ‘Spinster’ – not a happy situation either!) Why did I have the most privileged and expensive education in the world, only for my mother to be horrified by the fact that I wrote books? I wasn’t even taught to use a typewriter or drive a car, far less exposed to chemistry, physics...blah blah blah... Afterthought: Do I want to get married again? No. I’m married to my writing! I find men are like big children and I’ve got enough of those- nice little ones! (These comments are getting more random – sorry!)

Q5.Sean O'Brien (1997) has described you as "one of the least embarrassed poets to have found publication," a remark which I have spent a lot of time reflecting upon. How do you respond to it? Do you find it insightful? Offensive?

A. Offensive? No, I'm not offended by anything. I am only too happy for people to take what they want from my stuff. It's like sending your kids to school. My poems have just got to get on with it out there on their own. I'm not attached to them really. I'm only interested in what I'm writing now. It's true shame is my big thing. Women are motivated by shame and guilt. I am, anyway. I can feel it. But art does not make excuses or forgive us. I cannot hide behind it. 'Art' does not mean I can hurt people. I know I do not want to do that. I think I have an unspoken understanding with my family, for example, that I would never write about them (not directly, I turn them into animals or something instead). Who do I write for? Strangers. Then I feel free. I have written stuff which is cruel and personal and will not publish- even though it might be stronger stuff and more fun for the reader. Certain terrible things I will not publish. There, I do draw the line. I don't want to make the world a worse place.

Q6.Do you feel that embarrassment has a function in your poetry in terms of how it affects your characters, but also, potentially, how it affects the reader?

A. Embarrassment? I don't set out to shock. Certainly not. That's just silly. I don't care about the reader. They can go and read something else. They don't have to like it! (I do however feel a fellowship with other writers, an intense secret silent fellowship – and we don't have to meet! My body doesn't get in the way...).

Q7.Speaking to Lidia Vianu in the interview previously referred to, you say "when I meet real people face to face I feel trapped – as if I am a bad person. Ugly. Dirty. Inadequate. (Not at all the person I feel I am when I am writing, the person who is one with all things!)" Does this affect your experience of reading your poetry to an audience and if so, how? What sort of experience do you intend for the listening audience?

A. Funnily enough, I like talking one-to-one (e.g. to student writers, mad people in

hospitals, bad people in prisons) and lecturing to big hallfulls of people and reading to big theatre audiences. It's situations like pubs, parties, hotels, that do my head in! (Can't do small talk: no way). I want my audience, who I am aware might have had to make quite an effort to actually turn up and be there, to interact with me! To have fun, I want to show them I'm alive! (Something I did not know when I was at Cambridge – that the people whose texts I was reading were, or had been, actually alive! Like me! Hey!!! That they are alive.

Q8.In your essay in *Private Views: Artists Working Today*, you write: “the place where I feel happiest as a poet is in the day room of a prison or hospital. I feel understood there.” In your collection *Lou-Lou*, the hospital is depicted as an extremely uncomfortable place to visit, where the patients squat “like old frogs” on the feet of their visitors and new people arrive in the night “sobbing like a beautiful wet dress.” What is it about these environments that make you feel so at ease and give you creative opportunities?

A. Maybe I like to make my own rules! I confess I'm still like a teenager who rages against authority (including that of my own sons!) – having been ‘institutionalised’ all my life by daughterhood, boarding school from which I was expelled, by marriage, by university, by being sectioned and sent to live in psychiatric hospitals, the burns hospital, by prison (for ‘civil disobedience’ at Aldermaston). I've learnt that nobody gives you power- you just have to take it! I also accept writing is a monologue and no one else can have their say. I am therefore selfish, absurd, vulnerable, alone.

Q9.In *Lou-Lou* (2004) the patients say “we have long forgotten our houses and our homes, | our pretty clothes, | our little dogs on leads – | we're not that kind of woman anymore.” It seems as if they have strayed from the behaviour that society expects of them (both in terms of behaviour but specifically the behaviour expected of them as women.) At the end of the book, the protagonist is led away “to be normal” as if the mental health system is failing to help these women and instead is molding them back into an acceptable role within society. Would you agree with this

interpretation and does this relate to your own experiences of the mental health system?

A. Yes!

Q10. There are numerous references to God and religious figures within your work. In *A Little Book of Meat* (1993) a man appears to a community of women “with blood on His hands like a sunset” and in *The Hat*, the protagonist blocks herself up in her room away from “God himself with all His horsey angels.” What would you say is the function of religion in your work and the nature of your characters’ relationship to God?

A. The function of religion in my work? The function of my work is religion! It’s where I put all this stuff I can’t work out but love to think about- like who we are and what we are doing here. The published book is in a way a by-product, actually. The things are important – moles, fish, chocolate, trains, buckets, whatever- then the ideas; and then the contemplation; then the cross-word-like fiddle of forming it all into ‘poems’, whatever they are, which are the least important part of the process, in a way. If I could be silent, I would be! That’s what my work aspires to: Silence.

Q11. In *Bunny* (2001), the poem ‘Prawns De Jo’ talks about a baby burnt in a house fire “it must never be mentioned: | the unforgettable smell of the singeing baby,” something which happened to you as a baby. This incident was powerfully revisited in the poem ‘The Day the Cows Got Out’ from *The Hat*. How much has this experience affected your life and your writing?

A. The experience feeds into this feeling of being branded, acted upon, institutionalised, abused, insulted – first by my poor mother in whose ‘care’ I was burnt (so it obviously affected her relationship to me- badly!) Secondly by my father. I was marked physically as someone not pretty enough, not demure enough, not good enough, not female enough...

Q12. The depictions of the mother and motherhood within your work I often find quite negative. For example in *The Hat* from the initial rejection of “there should never

have been a baby in the first place” to the “wheezy mother” who dresses her daughter in “thistles, artichokes and porcupines” and agrees that her daughter has “the sort of neck people want to strangle.” What is your view of the experience of motherhood for contemporary women?

A. Motherhood – I’m talking about my own mother as the mother. Not myself. Although I struggled terribly to be a good, adequate wife, I loved being a mother (and love now being a grandmother and the male-free world of play i.e. babies, animals, singing...) See my most recent collection *Fruitcake* about mothers.

Q13. You describe in your interview with Lidia Vianu being strongly influenced by 20th century Romanian poets. Which poets in particular are you referring to and in what way have they influenced your work?

A. Romanians – plucky, subversive, ingenious, devious, warm hearted, passionate, wild-they’ve had to be! (see end for list of poets)

Q14. Do you read reviews of your own work and, if so, does this affect your approach to writing?

A. I don’t write for approval. I approve myself. If I lived on a desert island, I would still write. I just love it – readers or no readers.

Q15. How would you say that the style and content of your books has changed over time?

A. Trying to shut up and write less. Not succeeding. Seem to be writing more. Same old stuff – sex, rabbits, chocolate!! Becoming more elliptical, precious and bleak: but wanting to become more generous in spirit! This is bewildering because although I try and write less (and hope to find more compassion, forgiveness, grace, in my writing) nevertheless in my day-to-day life (what to call it?) I have never felt more happy. In fact I’m always happy, always have been ‘in myself’ i.e. energetic, physically fit, curious about the world, playful, caring etc which is happiness isn’t it?

A funny headline a cheeky interviewer wrote above a piece about me – “no TV, no car, no computer, no lover- no problem!” Very true!

Q16. Would you be able to talk about the poetry you are currently working on and the poetry you plan to write in the future?

No answer

Q17. What do you think about the state of women’s poetry in Britain today?

No Answer

Additional notes Hill included on her influences:

Romanians: Nina Cassian (of course!), Ana Blandiana, Demisa Comanescu, Mircea Cartescu, Leone Leoni, Grete Tartler, Liliana Ursu and Marin Sorescu.

Polish: Anna Swirszczuska, Anna Kamienska, Wislawa Szymborska, Ewa Lipska,
Bulgarian: Blanga Dimitrova.

APPENDIX TWO

SELIMA HILL EXETER INTERVIEW, SEPTEMBER 2010

Lucy Winrow (LW): Dresses and being dressed are themes that continue to appear in your work. In *Red Roses* the protagonists are looking for “the perfect dress whose icy sheath will grip us like a vice and hold us steady ‘til we freeze to death.” In *The Hat* the women require corsetry to hold themselves together and the protagonist’s “wheezy mother | dresses her in dresses | made from thistles, artichokes and porcupines.” In *Lou-Lou* the ward sister is designing “beautiful dresses” for the patients to model and in *Bunny* the lodger has also designed a dress; a “prickly taffeta dress he’s pinning her into.” Would you say these images

are about being constrained by femininity and the projection of an idea of femininity by one person onto another?

Selima Hill (SH): Yes, yes obviously. Yesterday I saw this picture of Lady Gaga, did you see, dressed in meat? I'd written somewhere that someone was dressed in meat and I thought "Hey, I done that!" It is about being constrained and wearing pretty dresses and being pretty which I have a problem with but it's also that dresses can disguise you and you can wear weird inappropriate dresses too. So I didn't want the dresses just to be like uniform or well behaved dresses. I was thinking that I have a lot of animals in dresses. I'm writing at the moment about a fly wearing a white dress, so I don't know where that's come from and also men in dresses. I love writing about and thinking about men and boys in dresses; I don't know why, that's up to other people to work out!

LW: Animals feature throughout your poetry, often in one of two ways: As a friend or saviour as in *Bunny* where the cow eats the protagonist's curly hair which the lodger lusts after or the "lovely sheep" who wants to help her escape her situation. However, animals are also treated with cruelty. In *Violet* there is talk of "breeding unwanted kittens" and "mutilating horses." While in *A Little Book of Meat* there is a reference to killing weasels and in *The Accumulation* the mother kills a German Shepherd dog. How do these two roles work together?

SH: Yes! It's so where I'm at but I can't articulate any more than what I do in the poetry. Yes animals are vulnerable and I feel much more empathy with animals I think than I do with people who I find quite difficult. I feel I'm a cruel, bad person with people but with animals I can feel closer. I live alone with my dogs and I feel I should get a grip but that's the fact. There's a field opposite my house where some sheep are and one of the sheep has been sheared and had a cut on her back and it's crawling with flies and maggots. It's so sad that I walk right round the other way so I don't see her 'because she looks so sad and yet it's fascinating to see her black with flies.

LW: The subject of hair also appears frequently in your work. In *Bunny* the protagonist dampens down her curly hair (which the lodger loves), she also has a cow eat her hair and later, she dips it in fire. In *The Accumulation*, the protagonist's hair is often commented on

“why don’t you ever brush your hair” and “she’s cut her perfect hair.” In *Lou-Lou* the protagonist says “I find myself alone inside my hair” and “I rock inside the forest of my own hair.” While in *The Hat* the narrator remarks “he’s lost inside the tunnels of her hair.” Why is there such a focus on hair and would you say it is linked to connections that are sometimes made with ‘desire’ or ‘the conscious mind’?

SH: Argh, I’m so into hair, help! Forest I could perhaps say, I don’t know if you do but at school we used to call women’s private hair, forest. So that’s that bit of hair. And when I was little everybody used to love my curly hair and the more they loved it the more I hated myself and them and anybody who mentioned my hair were automatically people that I hated! And when I had this breakdown and was in hospital, a measure of when we were getting better was if we groomed ourselves again and particularly if we brushed our hair. Before visiting hours the nurses would come and make us brush our hair or brush our hair themselves.

LW: Yes, I think sometimes hairdressers are brought onto wards in psychiatric hospitals to do the patients’ hair.

SH: [laughs, then stern tone] Go away!

LW: When we last spoke I asked you about the function of religion in your work, to which you replied that your work was your religion and a way of making sense of things. However, I wanted to ask more specifically about the religious imagery that appears in your work. Frequently a protagonist or narrator will address directly “O Lord” or “O God” as well as thanking God or attributing certain events to God. In *Lou-Lou* “blood pumps through her veins like God himself.” In *The Hat* “God has found his way into everything” and when the female protagonist is ‘turned’ into a goose we are told that “God has a larder full of angels, plucking geese between their thighs.” She is also seen barricading herself in her room where “God himself and all his horsey angels can’t get through to her.” Throughout the other books there are references to Sisters, The Virgin and the crucifixion. Is this a comfortable relationship to Christianity and religion and is this institution in any way linked to the repression of women?

SH: This made me think of Michele Roberts, who comes from a Catholic background and also Flannery O'Connor who I mentioned there [Hill gestures to our correspondence which is on the table] as someone whose work and life interests me. She's a Catholic. Just for the background, it may interest you that when I was small I was very precocious so I went to a Catholic convent when I was three to be tested and they let me go in with the five year olds. So, I went to the Catholic convent and my parents were completely not Catholic or into Catholicism and yet they submitted me to it and when I was at home they would jeer about it. Yet when I was at school, I had to do as I was told by the Nuns obviously and believe them. So that was cruel and hard. [Hill pauses] In fact I've still got a scar here [Hill points under her chin] where the Mother Joanna would put her thumbnail underneath my chin and would put it up 'til it was bleeding so I'd look into her face when she talked at me. And I didn't really know what a Virgin was, they were always talking about this Virgin. I never knew what a Virgin was until about twenty years later so it was all a complete mystery. As I say, at home they would just laugh at the Nuns and call my rosary a chain of the Virgins old teeth and yet in the school we had to treat it with the utmost respect!

LW: That sounds so strange, each scenario bouncing you into a more unsympathetic one.

SH: Yes, exactly.

LW: There are some noticeable patterns in relation to food in your work. In *Bunny*, the protagonist is "proud to be so undernourished" and "the word vanilla is her only comfort." She is also "the only girl in the world not allowed ice cream." In *The Accumulation* there are references to hiding food "I throw the chocolate biscuits in the bushes." This evokes Victorian times in which it was seen as ladylike to abstain from food or have a tiny appetite. Also within Christianity, not eating was considered holy and pure for women in that it halted menses. Your characters are also associated with food. The lodger in *Bunny* seems to roast the young girl like a chicken, whereas in *The Hat* the protagonist described as a goose that is force fed with the implication of eating her. In *Lou-Lou* the ward Sister is described as smelling of "butter and onions over gas." What does food represent for you? Desire?

SH: Well that's Michele Roberts as well isn't it? Food. [In terms of sexual desire in *Bunny*] Yes, you're absolutely right. No one's picked up on the Sister before but yeah, there's this kind of homosexual desire there for the Sister and the food is linked to that.

LW: Being undernourished, hiding food and throwing away food – is that again linked to notions of femininity, for example in Victorian times women were expected to eat little portions so as to be seen as lady-like.

SH: Yes and about rejecting what's given to you and thereby establishing your own independence.

LW: In my last set of questions, I asked you about the mental health system and referred to a line from one of your poems in which mental patients are discharged from hospital and "led away to be normal, hair-dos swinging." You agreed with my interpretation of the system tending to attempt to mould people back into an acceptable role rather than dealing with the real cause of their problems. Notably, the patients in your work are depicted as animals "graceless, vicious creatures" and "old fat frogs" in *Lou-Lou* and in *Advice On Wearing Animal Prints* Agatha bites the doctor. In contrast, the doctors are described at various points in your work as "tall, fragrant" (*Red Roses*), as having "suntanned arms" (*Bunny*) and regarding the scar caused by Agatha's bite "he didn't get that surfing in Hawaii" (*Advice On Wearing Animal Prints*). It would appear the worst pairing in that the people given the task of helping the patients have on the face of it, very little understanding of their lives and problems.

SH: I suppose by worst, I set up the doctors as sort of self-styled glamorous, tall, heroic and God-like. Which of course I don't go along with, that's their own view of themselves, so it's ironic. And again, the nurses or the women as pond life or lowly creatures. Particularly in the hospital they like to be like that so although you may say they're like animals, they understand each other like that. That's who they are and the visitors and the doctors don't understand the underworld that the patients belong to. The patients or the women are freer there, down there (the ward) than when they're with their brushed hair with the doctors as it were. For a bit of background, my brother was much older than me and he was

a doctor so that compounds I think my sense that doctors are the embodiment of male authority. They're also people who have a license to intrude on your body.

Going back to your 'God' question that also my brother and my father set themselves up as God-like in my universe, so clearly 'God' is talking about patriarchy as well. And I think there're also wonderings about the gender of God.

LW: Both passive and aggressive forms of violence can be seen throughout your work. In *Bunny*, the "passion fruit resembles coloured bruises rolled into a ball that you can suck", implying that some sort of pleasure is derived from the violence. In another poem, the lodger is described as cramming the female protagonist's lips down her throat like broken glass. While in *Red Roses* the narrator says "Whack us on the head! And again! And watch the blood bubble in our hair (they haven't a clue our heads are falling off)." In *The Hat* the mother harbours the desire to strangle her daughter and in *Fruitcake*, a mother murders her baby. What is the motivation for violence within your characters and would you say these acts are the result of normal human urges or deviant desires?

SH: I think maybe I hype up the violence in order to try and help people understand where I'm coming from emotionally. So I can talk about blood and hair much more easily than I can talk about abstract things like anger or fear, or more subtle things. It can be hard to write without sounding like you are whinging which I don't want to do. For background, as a young woman I self harmed a lot and particularly my hair which I was always cutting and burning! I burnt myself a lot; I've got scars from that and now I see that violence particularly against myself as deviant because I was so full of energy and passion and there didn't seem to be an appropriate way to deal with it. I also attempted suicide a lot but it wasn't because I wanted to exterminate myself, on the contrary it was because I wanted to be more alive and explore the edges of what it would be like to be out there at the edge of being alive. And so that's violence but it was energy and passion more and there didn't seem to be any which way I could do it. Also for the background, my father was an old man. He was over sixty when I was born so that wasn't much help; I had a sense of being suppressed. But the violence in our family wasn't overt, it was aggressive silence, violent silence, so as a writer I think I've taken it upon myself to articulate that silence which was violent although my family might not agree that it was, possibly.

LW: When we last spoke, you touched upon the nuns and spinsters who gave you a strict upbringing and also your mother about whom you said “why did I have the most privileged and expensive education in the world only for my mother to be horrified by the fact that I wrote books?” This notion of women being responsible for women’s repression is a theme that can also be seen within the poetry. In *A Little Book of Meat* the narrator addresses her mother, who likes her daughter to act dumb “if I am not to your liking, shoot me please.” In *Red Roses* the narrator speaks to other women “be like us – sob for nurses, sob for medication” while in *The Hat* the narrator’s mother finds her a man she can lean on, as if she’s a bicycle. Who is responsible for keeping these characters trapped within detrimental visions of their gender roles? Themselves? Society? Family?

SH: I don’t know if you’re wanting me to answer in abstract academic or intellectual ways or if you just wanted to know the background of my own personal family and where I’m coming from. I suppose I would say if you’re wanting the latter that I was angry with my mother without knowing it for being so...humbled and indecisive and unhelpful. She just would collapse and not be supportive when I was...difficult. And she would go along with what the men proposed and I suffered, and I probably do the same with my daughters, who knows. But I agree that it is hard for women to stand up to men without appearing to be either whingey or bossy or neurotic or violent even. It’s hard. If you’re talking about feminism, I feel and I felt very strongly that it’s for men too, that men suffer as much or more than women from the struggles with power and identity. I worried more for my sons I think, than my daughters bringing them up. How to make my sons understanding and careful and kind, it’s very hard.

LW: Some examples of male identity within your work include the predatory lodger in *Bunny*, the references to the absent father figure and also the aggressive sexuality of *Red Roses*: “they fill us up and wish we’d go to hell.” In *A Little Book of Meat* the narrator says “you are my hero-shaped hero, my indifferent bear.” However in *Red Roses*, in references to her poor treatment by men the narrator says “they’re blameless, they don’t know what they’re doing.” You mentioned feeling that men have it as bad if not worse than women, so would you agree that men can also feel trapped and unhappy within their gendered identity, even if it manifests itself in different ways?

SH: Yes, yes I do. And the divisiveness of gender, when it seems really spectrum. Sometimes when I write, as I'm sure you know, it's kind of ironic so when I say the men are wonderful. It's what they think themselves clearly, and the same with women I suppose.

LW: Yes, I thought "my hero-shaped hero, my indifferent bear" sounded quite desperate, about not being noticed perhaps. That the character felt she had to be noticed, or desperate for feeling desperate.

SH: Exactly. Absolutely, exactly. Desperate about feeling desperate, because she doesn't really want to be noticed anyway or she's always noticed in the wrong way.

I just had a thought, if I want to say something that is violent or distressing I don't think that art forgives, I don't think that art is an excuse to upset people. But to go back to the animals, especially my early work, if I wanted to say something unkind about somebody I would turn them into an animal and then even possibly change their gender in order to encode them in some way so it wasn't so direct.

LW: In my last set of questions, I asked you about what you thought the legacy of the women's movement was to which you replied that girls wear more pink than ever today. Would you agree that while feminism may have given women a choice, that there is such a thing as a 'right' choice that is still more in keeping with traditional view of a woman, to choose to be a mother for example?

SH: The right decision from whose point of view?

LW: Well of course women now have more choice, but are still perhaps judged by society.

SH: Society. Ok. So do I think that is the case?

LW: Yes, for example you mentioned in one of your letters that girls wear more pink now than ever. I know you were joking a bit there but still...

SH: My granddaughter actually thought it was a rule, government imposed because she saw a boy with pink and she thought that the boy would be sent to prison. That it was actually a rule. Frightening. I think it's hard to be a mother. My last book *Fruitcake* is about different ways of being mothers but funnily enough, I myself love being a mother. So the book is not

about my own experiences of being a mother which people assume, understandably that it is but on the contrary I see around me mothers struggling and I wrote those books in response to an awareness of how horrifically people can feel and how unhappy mothers can be. Not myself but actually my daughters-in-law particularly. And my own mother.

LW: The idea of mothers struggling is addressed in a poem from *Red Roses* where mothers grip the shoulders of their thin children and shake them. Would you agree with my interpretation of powerless-feeling mothers, taking their anger out and being powerful over their powerless children?

SH: Exactly, exactly you're so right. Not only are they trapped but they are incredibly powerful and it's frightening. They're very powerful too, they have a whole life there, whole lives dependant on them. So I think it's belittling to pathologise mothers to say that they're trapped, miserable at home, because they're also ogresses, giantesses at home.

LW: Cases in the media where mothers have badly injured or murdered their children are discussed in the 'Mommy Myth'. There the authors discuss the idea that 'mother' is not something that you *are* but something that you *do*. Further that when such a terrible event happens, the mask of motherhood slips and we glimpse what is underneath and discover a frightening truth of its socially constructed nature. In the first sequence in 'Fruitcake', I'm sorry I can't pronounce it!

SH: Which one? Bougainvillea? [laughs] Brilliant! I wanted it to be difficult to pronounce and to spell!

LW: Yes. In that sequence mothering does not come naturally to the protagonist, who seals herself off from her baby and fails to nurture it. She is in denial almost that there is this life dependant on her.

SH: As I say, that wasn't my experience as a mother. It also made me think of my mother and how that was probably the case for her, except my mother – I think – was frightened of me.

LW: I think that's a really interesting statement.

SH: So do I! And I've only just realised it and as soon as I realised it I thought "yes, that explains everything." Because how strange for me to be in that position of power, really...frightening, ha! As we were saying, that mothers can be so powerful and drive their children into lakes but there's also the idea that mothers can be frightened of their own children that they bring up.

LW: Returning to my question on embarrassment from the previous interview, at the time you replied that you felt you weren't offended by anything and that you were only too happy for people to take what they wanted from your work.

SH: Absolutely. Embarrassment too is unspellable like Bougainvillea because of all those Rs and Ss! But no, I don't give two hoots, I don't care what people say about my work. It's all spread out there for them to make of what they want. But again I think we get confused with my private life and the background which might help you in your reading and the work itself which doesn't make me feel vulnerable because it's...I love it! But in my actual real life, like now, I'm embarrassed to be with you whereas I wouldn't if I was writing. And I'm an embarrassment – I can see – to say my grandchildren, more than I'm embarrassed. Maybe that something to do with a definition of maturity one could say. It also struck me last week that my children have in the meantime grown up and I haven't, so I think that's when my children can be rather embarrassed by me and my grandchildren as they get older. For instance, on the way here this morning, outside this vegetable shop there's sweet corn with their hairy bits and I picked one out and whirled it around my head as I went into the shop. I only realised when I saw my granddaughter's face that we don't do this. So sometimes I can be embarrassing...and I like being older and I liked it when my parents died.

LW: Did you feel more yourself then?

SH: Yes. And I feel I struggle very much with receptions, hotels, small talk but I can deliver lectures to thousands and millions of people and it doesn't bother me in the slightest. What that's about I'm not sure.

LW: Maybe intimacy?

SH: Yes, that's the word! That's what I have a problem with, although I like it. When I was teaching I liked one-to-one and I can deal with small and massive groups. But one to one to kind of embarrassing but that's why I like it because it's on the edge. And it's real. This might be an opportunity for me to say, people say that I'm brave and honest sometimes but I don't see a value in that, in honesty in itself. I don't think it's clever say to walk down the high street with no clothes on just for the sake of it. I'm very aware of that. People say I'm honest but I'm thinking what's the value and why am I being honest and am I just betraying my family and culture's trust. While at the same time when I'm writing I try and come up as close as I can to the line of being raw, being as raw as I can but that seems slightly different from honesty for the sake of it. There's lots of books now like 'mis lit' autobiographies of peoples hard times and abuse and so on but I want to know what the point of honesty is. I don't want to shock for the sake of it, just to be clever, that's how I feel. I'm not being very articulate but that's my thing that I'm worried about at the moment or interested in.

LW: In mentioning the mis lit, this made me think of the 'Baby P' case where the young boy was very badly abused and then died. The way in which the media itemised all the injuries and produced diagrams of the body. That to me seems unnecessary.

SH: Yes, it's sick. Yet people always say it's so honest. It doesn't make sense to me when people say to me "ah God you're so brave" or they say "oh my God, aren't you lonely living on your own?" Those few words don't make any sense to me at all, I don't understand where people are coming from, that's just how I am. But something like a reception in a hotel at a festival, that's scary, that's really scary!

LW: I suppose some people are not brave enough to say some of the things that they feel. Maybe they censor themselves a lot more.

SH: But is clever not to censor yourself?

LW: It depends what's motivating you to do it.

SH: Exactly. And that's exactly what is it that puzzles and bewilders and worries me. Why am I published? Why do I go around the country talking about things which are so painful, who is it helping? I can understand when I work in prisons and day hospitals and day centres and

so on. I can understand how I want to help people who have been silenced to speak. That is very important to me and I can see the point of being a writer from that point of view but I can't understand why I'm published in the first place when the place for me which feels safest is the white sheet. A lot of students on the contrary, that's what frightens them but that to me, I feel totally safe. But then why be published 'cause it then becomes shared and exposed so it's kind of scary. Maybe that's why I like it, I don't know.

LW: It is debatable whether embarrassment, shame and guilt are emotions that are experienced privately or publicly. However, if an individual is reading your work there may be the potential there for them to feel some of those emotions if something resonates with them. Linking to O'Brien's comment about your lack of embarrassment as a writer, as well as the praise you receive for being brave, this makes me think of something that Goffman talks about in *Interaction Ritual*; he argues that "interaction consists of projecting and accepting appropriate selves but when a person falls short of certain standards set in society (for example, as mother or female) they may feel trapped into making implicit identity claims they can't fulfil." Goffman adds that in the events of embarrassment "the individual finds himself being torn apart, however gently" and that there is self recognition of the multiple selves in embarrassment. He believes that it is a healthy identity that remains open and not closed-off. What, if anything, do you have to say about the potential of your work to this influence on the reader?

SH: So embarrassment is just linked to social interactions is it because you can't be embarrassed on your own can you?

LW: Perhaps that is more shame and guilt, the more private feeling.

SH: I suppose I'm bewildered because the very things that when I was growing up were shameful, such as pushing the boundaries I suppose, telling lies or jumping into lakes or those very things as a writer are precisely what I'm being praised for. So I'm very confused, and then when I actually interact with the public as a woman, the most important thing still to me is to be pretty and kind and polite and nice. The most important thing is for people to think I'm nice. Please, please, please love me and think I'm nice and pretty first, never mind the work! The work as you suggested, is a completely different person. You know I'm telling

it how it is and I'm sorry if I'm horrible but this is how it is for me. To live those two lives, the sort of public person and the private person, and bringing the private person out into the public is hard. But I suppose I might have said that's I think my strength when I first started publishing because I was a very highly educated male-dominated and educated head in a woman's body and it was a bit of a muddle really. To go back to that question about my mother, little did she know then that she was empowering this body that I'd inherited by educating my brain and it gave me power to get out of my body really. Then to learn how to inhabit it as an articulate woman.

LW: You have described yourself as being motivated by shame and guilt, so how does this operate within your work?

SH: This is like an image but I'm not sure where it's going, once I was doing this course at a grand house in Devon and grand houses intimidate me as they do a lot of people probably. I was teaching and I noticed there was a swimming pool which was being re-developed and they'd taken all the tiles and the water out of the swimming pool. It had been raining and raining and I was fed up with being indoors lecturing, all these whinging students. It was a nightmare and the rain was coming down, I realised that the swimming pool was all muddy around. I just had to go out and roll in this and swim in this swimming pool filled with mud! Then I realised that I had to get back from the swimming pool to the building without being seen really, 'cause I kind of realised too late – like swinging the sweet corn this morning – that it's not on to start running around with no clothes on in the mud when you're on the faculty, aged fifty or something. I didn't know where this image is going but I just thought...I knew it was wrong so I thought "God, I mustn't let my mother see or she'll think I'm showing off" but I wasn't because I genuinely didn't want the people to see. The library had all glass so they could totally see me if I ran across with no clothes on, with this mud and the rain! So I had to sort of creep around the back where all the catering bins were. I don't know where that's going but I know that guilt is very strong for me, or shame and I genuinely didn't want people to see me doing this.

Also last summer, my son got married on the beach and my daughter said to me "don't go into that water, this is about the wedding, you wearing your smart clothes" and so on, not to do it. So when everybody was in with the speeches I just had to sneak out the back, pray

no one would notice and run and run far down the beach where no one could see me. I just had to kind of swim! And yet I knew it was wrong so I was sort of guilty about it but I did have to do it, I'm sorry. I don't know what... And when I was at boarding school also, another image that comes to me as I speak, actually I think I've written about this somewhere. I used to go round the back of the building where the kitchens were and there was this huge silver catering tin of marmalade. They'd emptied out all the marmalade and there were wasps there, a great buzzing tangle of wasps and so I covered myself with the marmalade from there so that the wasps would come all on me.

LW: And did they?

SH: Yeah! I was fearless! I mean I still am pretty fearless. So when I was young I did that but I didn't mind if people saw but now I would understand that that's showing off and I mustn't do it. I think I'm talking about showing off and being a woman and the problems with that.

LW: I really like that story, you sounded very alive.

SH: Yes. Then as a teenager, you see, I subverted the 'showing off' behaviour into self harm because there was no way out for it really. Then I ran away a lot as well and travelled a lot and just compounded that sense that I was a bad person. All these things are precisely the things that as a published writer people are saying, like you, "I really like that!" I'm so happy to have survived and struggled to be a writer, I just love it to bits. Everybody gives me nothing but praise and joy and support. It's incredible and it's all the things that aren't supposed to be right so it's a bit of a puzzle. I would just like to thank my readers and talking of embarrassment, I just love my readers 'cause we all have such good fun together talking about jumping in lakes and insects and things. Whereas in this real scary world of receptions and hotels it's not easy to be like that so I'm very lucky that I'm a writer. Thank you everybody [laughs] Also I'm invisible as a writer.

LW: Is that why you're embarrassed to be here now?

SH: Yes. I hate to be seen, I hate to be seen. I have a scar on my forehead, I don't know if you know or have seen...bit of a pyromaniac. That makes me self conscious as well.

LW: I suppose people have told you not to be?

SH: Yeah, they have [laughs] I'm not just blaming my scar because my scar is there because I have a high pain threshold and it's there because it's part of my body. So I kind of like it and yet I know it's not a well behaved thing to do, go around with a scar on your forehead. If I didn't cover it I think it would be aggressive actually because it's so in your face that people would have to deal with it and so I think it's more polite. I'm also glad I'm a woman because if I was a man it would look more aggressive definitely. I have a friend where I live who has a scar from a car crash and he just looks so aggressive, you know? But he's been told by his therapist not to cover it or pretend it's not there and so he's very boldly out with it...but I'm not!

LW: Don't people say that scars are sexy?

SH: Yes, but that's another reason to hide it! I don't go around showing my forest either.

LW: Shame can be a very destructive emotion in your work and also recognition of something that you don't want to be. Would you agree with this?

SH: Ah that's brilliant! More destructive? Yes, excellent.

LW: This is discussed in the book *Shame and Guilt* which discusses this issue in relation to the family and a child's development within the family: "in the home environment where family members are ignored, disconnected, belittled, such an environment can turn up emotional volumes, especially negative ones like shame, anger and loneliness."

SH: There can be good feelings in the family too. I think the family is very powerful but it can be good, we hope it can, we live in the hope that it can. We live in hope.

LW: You've previously described how your work is your way of making sense of things and aspires to silence. However you said you seem to be writing more and more; is this because the more you write the less you understand?

SH: [Laughs] Oh great, absolutely perfect! Spot on. Absolutely, yes yes yes. Going back to your God question, although I don't believe in God I do believe in a silence or sort of something opposed to violence which I aspire to engender in my life. I live a very reclusive quiet life and I try to care for my family and my animals and my world. So consciously I

couldn't be less violent. In fact I think even greed is a kind of violence and I live a very simple life. Even as a teenager I used to go on Aldermaston marches and was into peace theoretically even if not actively because, you know... But in saying I aspire to silence, I want to inspire people somehow or share some kind of benevolence or compassion because I'm always aware that my readers like me, are suffering and my readers only, like me, want to be happy. So me and my readers are the same, all we want is to be happy and not to cause people to suffer, simple as that. Nevertheless, it dips down into darkness again and again. I can feel myself always trying to raise the work up, that everything is alright. To make the work inspiring in the end but sometimes I find it hard, like in 'Bunker Sacks' for instance; the people just tore each other apart, legs and arms flying apart in all directions! I just let it come, so it was bleak hey, that's how it is. I can only hope that the act of writing is somehow positive even if what you write appears to be brutal. I think there is some, if not benevolence then at least hope in the mere fact that I'm creating an artefact from such pain. Then I ask myself "does the writer have a duty to inspire or make the world better or resolve or come to conclusions?" Is that somehow a duty of the writer? But I don't want it to be, I don't want it to be. But I don't at the same time very clearly want to upset anybody; I don't think that gets anybody anywhere. So I'm sorry if my work is bleak but at the same time the most important thing is for it to be as raw or as authentic as I can make it for me. I test it always, always that was I'm saying is the truth for me. I can only talk about my own truth. I certainly don't want to writing about my life as in proposing that my life is more exiting or more exciting than anybody else's, I'm only using my life. It could be completely arbitrary actually what I'm writing about in terms of the action or the dramas. I'm only using it as an example of what it is that I want to convey in terms of what it's like to be human and our place on this earth and whether or not we are strangers here and whether or not we can help each other.

LW: This is reminding me of a quote I've heard you mention on several occasions of "to get to the truth, I lie."

SH: There are two ways of lying, there's the way of turning my Aunt into a bison or whatever I was saying earlier, turning people into animals so that I can take the bull by the horns as it were. There's also the other kind of lie which again I referred to earlier which is a

kind of exaggeration, talking about blood in the hair or having a wolf ripping up someone's ear when really I'm talking about someone talking, whispering to the head. Jane Campion I think it was said that autobiography sometimes is not true enough and to me that's just absolutely where I'm at. So of course you're trying to be as true as you possibly have it in your power to be but sometimes the truth was slightly more, you know that the truth wasn't quite true enough. For instance I was trying to write about my father who the day he died, he died at home and he was walking, I remember him walking across the garden and so I was writing about the lawn and then I had him peeling an orange. Well he wasn't peeling an orange actually but the orange there was a kind of physical embodiment of how it was, that atmosphere on the lawn before he died. So I put that orange there to kind of articulate or incarnate the feeling that there was between us so I made it be an orange. That is an example of where I say, or Jane Campion said, autobiography is not true enough. That in order to make it more true, to help to reader understand I put something there that wasn't there in fact but I put it there for the sake of the artefact of the poem. And the same with the animals in my work, they're all hopping and crashing about, to try and put the energy into the feeling that I have for the reader. So if you're at a wedding and you're feeling the excitement of relationships going on, then I might put a giraffe on the lawn; just an easier way of saying...crap! Shut me up! Let's go, is this the end?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Armitage, A. *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (London: Viking, 1998)

Armstrong, J. *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy* (London: Penguin, 2003)

Astley, N. *In Person: 30 Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008)

Beake, F. *A Mingling of Streams: An Anthology of Poems Selected from The Poet's Voice, Vols. 1-9* (Salzburg, Austria: University of Salzburg, 1989)

Berlin, R. M. *Poets on Prozac: Mental Illness, Treatment and the Creative Process* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2008)

Bertram, V. *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997)

Bertram, V. *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Sexual Politics* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2005)

Breakwell, I. *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinema going* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990)

Breton, A. *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969)

Bristow, J. and Broughton, T.L. (Ed.) *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter* (London: Longman, 1997)

Butler, J. *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993)

Butler, J. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (Columbia: New York, 1999)

Butler, J. *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006)

Butscher, E. (Ed.) *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work* (London: Peter Owen, 1979)

Chesler, P. *Women and Madness: Revised and Updated* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

- Childs, P. *The Twentieth Century In Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999)
- Cixous, H. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, trans. by Cornell, S., Sellers, S. and Jenson, D. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992)
- Cixous, H. and Clement, C. *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997)
- Crawford, R. *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia and Knowledge since the 1750s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Davey, M. *The Mother Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001)
- Day, G. and Doherty, B. *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art* (London: Macmillan, 1997)
- Douglas, S.J. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2005)
- Dowrick, S. *Intimacy and Solitude* (London: The Women's Press, 1995)
- Dowson, J. and Entwistle, A. *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Dowson, J (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Duffy, C.A., Rumens, C., Adcock, F. and Hill, S. *The Poetry Quartets 2: v. 2* [Audio Book] (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998)
- DuPlessis, R.B. *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2006)
- Elliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)
- Fischer-Lichte, E. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008)
- Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Vintage, 1988)
- Garner, S.N. (Ed.) *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* Garner (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985)
- Gerhardt, S. *Why Love Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

- Gilbert, S. and Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000)
- Ginsberg, A. *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009)
- Goffman, E. *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Random House, 1982)
- Greer, G. *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)
- Gregson, I. *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)
- Hamilton, I. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
- Hedges, D. *Poetry, Therapy and Emotional Life* (Buckinghamshire: Radcliff Publishing, 2005)
- Herbert, W. N. and Hollis, M. *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2000)
- Hill, S. *Saying Hello at the Station* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984)
- , *My Darling Camel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988)
- , *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989)
- , *A Little Book of Meat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993)
- , *Aeroplanes of the World* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994)
- , *Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994)
- , *Violet* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1997)
- , *My Sister's Horse* (Sheffield: Smith/Doorstop Books, 1998)
- , *Bunny* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001)
- , *Portrait of My Lover as a Horse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002)
- , *Lou-Lou* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2004)
- , *Red Roses* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2006)
- , *Gloria: Selected Poems* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008)

-----, *The Hat* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008)

-----, *Fruitcake* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2009)

-----, *Advice on Wearing Animal Prints* (Birmingham: Flarestack Poets, 2009)

-----, *People Who Like Meatballs* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2012)

Ingman, H. (Ed.) *Mothers and Daughters in the Twentieth Century: A Literary Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

Irigaray, L. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985)

Jamison, K.R. *Touched with Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 1996)

Kalbfleisch, P.J. *Interpersonal Communication: Evolving Interpersonal Relationships* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993)

Kinsman, J. (Ed.) *Six Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

Kristeva, J. *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)

Kristeva, J. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

Kristeva, J. *New Maladies of the Soul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

Lawrence, B.B. and Karim, A. *On Violence: A Reader* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007)

Levertov, D. *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992)

Lorde, A. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 2007)

Marcus, L. and Nicholls, P. (Ed.) *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Mark, A. and Rees-Jones, D. (Ed.) *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice* (Hampshire: St. Martin's Press, 2000)

Michie, H. *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Miller, J.E. *Who's Who in Contemporary Women's Writing* (London: Routledge, 2001)

- Mole, J. *Passing Judgements: Poetry in the Eighties* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989)
- Monk, G. *Walks in a Daisy Chain* (Yorkshire: Magenta, 1991)
- , *Noctivagations* (London: West House Books, 2001)
- , *Selected Poems* (London: Salt Publishing, 2003)
- , *Escafeld Hangings* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2005)
- , *Ghost & Other Sonnets* (London: Salt Publishing, 2008)
- Montefiore, J. *Arguments of Heart and Mind: Selected Essays 1977-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002)
- Myers, J. and Wojahn, D. *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991)
- Newman, C. *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970)
- O'Brien, S. *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British & Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1997)
- Ofek, G. *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009)
- Olds, S. *Satan Says* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980)
- , *The Dead and the Living* (New York: Knopf, 1983)
- , *The Gold Cell* (New York: Knopf, 1987)
- , *The Father* (New York: Knopf, 1992)
- , *The Wellspring* (New York: Knopf, 1996)
- , *The Unswept Room* (New York: Knopf, 2002)
- , *One Secret Thing* (London: Cape Poetry, 2009)
- Ostriker, A. *Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000)
- Palmer, J. *Private Views: Artists Working Today* (London: Serpents Tail, 2004)

- Parker, A.M. and Willhardt, M. *Who's Who in Twentieth Century World Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Paterson, D. and Simic, C. (Ed.) *New British Poetry* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004)
- Rae, S. *The Orange Dove of Fiji: Poems for the World Wide Fund for Nature* (London: Hutchinson, 1989)
- Rees-Jones, D. *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2005)
- Rich, A. *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977)
- Rich, A. *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993)
- Ricks, C. *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)
- Riley, D. *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)
- Riley, D. *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000)
- Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M. (Ed.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)
- Roberts, N. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001)
- Rooney, E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion of Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Rose, J. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1992)
- Rosenthal, M.L. *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).
- Roth, P. *Portnoy's Complaint* (London: Vintage, 1995)
- Rumens, C. (Ed.) *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-feminist Poetry 1964-1984* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985)
- Sage, L. *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
- Sax, L. *Why Gender Matters* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005)

Scaglia, B. (Ed.) *The Humanity of Emotions: Embarrassment and Shame* (Kansas: Webster's Digital Services, 2008)

Sellers, S. (Ed.) *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988)

Sellers, S. *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (London: Macmillan, 1991)

Sellers, S. *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996)

Sen, A. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2006)

Showalter, E. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987)

Smith, K. and Sweeney, M. (Ed.) *Beyond Bedlam: Poems Written out of Mental Distress* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1997)

Swiontkowski, G. *Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich, and Olds on Life with Daddy* (Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 2003)

Tangney J.P. and Dearing R.L. *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004)

The Poetry Society, *Poetry on a Plate: A Feast of Poems and Recipes* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004)

Thurston, S. (Ed.) *The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk* (London: Salt Publishing, 2007)

Vianu, L. *The Desperado Age* (editura.liternet.ro: Liternet Publishing, 2006)

Wade, S. *A Straightforward Guide to Writing Performance Poetry* (London: Straightforward, 1998)

Warner, M. *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 1983)

Weissbort, D. (Ed.) *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1991)

When, F. *Lord Gnome's Literary Companion* (London: Verso, 1994)

Whitman, W. *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1995)

Wittig, M. *The Lesbian Body* (New York: Avon Books, 1975)

Wykes, M. and Welsh, K. *Violence, Gender and Justice* (London: Sage Publications, 2008)

EXHIBITION

Bill Woodrow: Point of Entry, New Sculptures (Poems written in response by Selima Hill)
Imperial War Museum, 8 December 1989, 4 February 1990.

INTERVIEWS

Selima Hill postal interview with Lucy Winrow, March 2010.

Selima Hill Exeter interview with Lucy Winrow, September 2010.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Cixous, H., Cohen, K. and Cohen, P. 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Chicago Journals*, Volume 1, No. 4 (1976), 875-93.

Finch, P. 'Selima Hill's *Violet*', *Poetry Wales*, Volume 33, No. 3 (Winter 1997/98), 70.

Gross, P. 'Wriggling On A Pin', *Poetry Review*, Volume 83, No. 4 (Winter 1993/94), 57-58.

Hill, R. 'Secret Longings', *Poetry Review*, Volume 78, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), 64.

Johnson, K. 'Dangerous Dancing', *Times Literary Supplement*, (1 August 1997), 26.

Kitzinger, C. 'The Myth Of The Two Biological Sexes', *The Psychologist*, Volume 17, No. 8, (2004)

Knight, S. 'Bitter Chocolate', *Times Literary Supplement*, (24 February 1995), 23.

Kristeva, J. 'Les temps des femmes', transl. as 'Women's Time' by Jardine, A. and Blake, H. *Signs*, Volume 7, No. 1, (Autumn 1981), 34.

Milburn, M. 'Trembling Hearts in the Bodies of Dogs by Selima Hill', *Harvard Review*, No. 9 (Fall, 1995), 177-178.

O'Reilly, C. 'Images of Engulfment', *Times Literary Supplement*, (17 May 2002), 24.

Ostriker, A. 'I Am (Not) This: Erotic Discourse in Bishop, Olds, and Stevens' *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Volume 19, No. 2 (Fall 1995), 234-54.

Vendler, H. 'Feminism and Literature' *The New York Review of Books* (1990) 37. 9.

Wandor, M. 'On Vicki Feaver, Selima Hill and Grace Nichols', *Poetry Review*, Volume 96, No. 3 (Winter 2006/07), 100.

Yeh, J. 'Poetry Books- In Brief', *Times Literary Supplement*, (23 February 2007), 32.

PROSE

Monk, G. and O'Sullivan, M. 'Move Over Darlings' *City Limits*, July 13-19 (1984)

RADIO

Interview with Selima Hill for BBC Radio, Woman's Hour, 2002.

WEBSITES

Battista, A. 'Erasing Clouds Book Review: Selima Hill, *Red Roses*'. Available at:
<http://www.erasingclouds.com/wk1806redroses.html> (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Casciani, D. 'Inspirational Figures in Whitbread Race'. Available at:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/reviews/1768393.stm> (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Geddie, R. 'Review: *Lou-Lou* by Selima Hill', *Verse Magazine* (2005). Available at:
http://versemag.blogspot.com/2005_03_01_archive.html (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Hempel, A. 'Sharon Olds' (*Bomb* 54, Winter 1996). Available at:
<http://bombsite.com/issues/54/articles/1927> (Accessed: 15 August 2013)

Markham, J. 'Review: *Bunny*, Selima Hill', *Ambit* No. 167 (2002) Available at:
<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=9013> (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Pegnall, P. 'Save us from melodramatic thespians reading poetry'. Available at:
<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/peterpegnallbooks/100062062/save-us-from-melodramatic-thespians-reading-poetry> (Accessed: 30 March 2012)

Rajendra, P. 'Interview with Selima Hill: Is there room for a poet in the multi-disciplinary team?' Available at: <http://pb.rcpsych.org/content/12/11/491.full.pdf> (Accessed: 02 January 2013)

Sampson, F. 'Truth and Dare'. Available at:
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/12/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview25>
(Accessed: 5 May 2012)

Sears, J. '*Portrait of my Lover as a Horse: Selima Hill*'. Available at:
<http://www.popmatters.com/books/reviews/p/portrait-of-my-lover-as-a-horse.shtml>
(Accessed: 13 January 2004)

Smith, J. 'Selima Hill: A Critical Perspective'. Available at:
<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth191> (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Southwell, R. 'The Burning Babe'. Available at:
<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/burningbabe.htm> (Accessed: 13 February 2013)

Stannard, J. 'Cold Mountain Review of Selima Hill's *Bunny*'. Available at:
http://www.coldmountain.appstate.edu/issues/spring_2003/selmahill.html (Accessed: 10 March 2004)

Taylor, D. 'Mslexia Interview with Selima Hill'. Available at:
<http://www.mslexia.co.uk/interview/extract6.html> (Accessed: 24 October 2007)

Vianu, L. 'Sometimes Autobiography Is Not True Enough'. Available at:
http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/selima_hill.htm (Accessed: 27 October 2009)