

THE KISSING PARTY

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FATHERS, MOTHERS, AND DAUGHTER-TEXTS: REAPPRAISING MARY
COWDEN CLARKE'S GIRLHOOD OF SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES

In 1852, a group of American Shakespeare devotees—among them William Cullen Bryant, Samuel Eliot, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, George Ticknor, and Daniel Webster—issued *A Testimonial* to accompany a remarkable gift to “an English lady too little known in America” (7), Mary Cowden Clarke. They presented her with what Richard Altick, Clarke’s only biographer, describes as a “sumptuous” easy chair,

upholstered in rich satin brocade. Surmounting the back was a head of Shakespeare, “exquisitely carved in ivory and inlaid, surrounded with a wreath of oak leaves and laurel.” On either side of the head, with wings extended to form a canopy over it, was a swan carved in alto relievo.

Below the seat were masks of tragedy and comedy. (174-75)

This chair was the most tangible token of the gratitude widely expressed in both America and England for Clarke’s work in compiling the first *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (1844). Begun after a chance remark over a breakfast table that a concordance to Shakespeare would be a handy thing to have, the work, Clarke remembers in her autobiography, took nearly sixteen years to complete (*My Long Life*, 92). Though Clarke had been barely twenty and possessed no credentials other than her own diligent work ethic when she began it, her completed *Concordance* was widely reviewed and, in general, rapturously received.

Today, Clarke's *Concordance* is forgotten, although it remained the primary reference work for Shakespearean scholars until about 1894 (when Bartlett's *New and Complete Concordance* appeared). Instead, when she is remembered at all, it is for one of her many fictional works, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-52); in that series of fifteen novella-length tales, she imagined the childhood and adolescent years of Shakespeare's heroines in an effort to account for their behavior in the plays.¹ As Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts have pointed out, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* has long been labeled an oddity, "usually by people who have not read it" (170). This may be because the stories Clarke tells about her heroines (Portia, Lady Macbeth, Helena, Desdemona, Meg and Alice, Isabella, Katharina and Bianca, Ophelia, Rosalind and Celia, Juliet, Beatrice and Hero, Olivia, Hermione, Viola, and Imogen) raise issues associated with conventional notions of sexual morality. These themes make it all too easy to misrepresent the text as "an example of a naïve Victorian novelistic approach to the plays" (Thompson and Roberts, 170)—mere misguided nineteenth-century character criticism disguised as fiction.

However, I would argue that we should read Clarke's project as we might any other adaptive work: with an eye to what these texts *add* to Shakespeare (rather than simply to what they *change*) and what might motivate such additions.

Clarke's major addition lies in developing backstories for these characters, but

¹ Clarke's major non-Shakespearean works include the collection of children's stories, *Kit Bam's Adventures, or The Yarns of an Old Mariner* (1848); the novel, *The Iron Cousin; or, Mutual Influence* (1854); the biographical essays in *World-Noted Women; or Types of Womanly Attributes of All Lands and Ages* (1858); and *Memorial Sonnets* (1888), a sequence addressed to her husband, Charles Cowden Clarke. She is also the author of "The Song of Drop O'Wather" (1856), a wicked parody of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha" (1855).

what is most significant about these backstories is that they frequently contain extra-Shakespearean characters: mothers and fathers who do not figure in the plays. What Clarke adds to the plays is an interest in the impact of parental advice on the heroines. Her attention to this issue serves to re-center plays around the filial response to parental authority. It also helps her to repurpose both Shakespeare's text as suitable reading material and Shakespeare himself as a father-figure for young women readers.

While the stories she tells about the heroines do comment on the action in the plays, what they offer in terms of plot is very different from what the plays offer. Though each of Clarke's tales always concludes with the heroine's first lines in the play, there is little other overlap. Instead, Clarke's *Girlhood* tells a series of new stories about Shakespeare's heroines. While scholars like Juliet Fleming and Nina Auerbach do acknowledge that Clarke is engaged in a project of addition, neither has offered a coherent picture of just what it is that Clarke's *Girlhood* adds to Shakespeare. Unfortunately, the scholarly emphasis on the issues of sexual morality that arise in the course of Clarke's intervention into Shakespeare has obscured other questions we might equally profitably ask about her text.

Because Clarke's young women suffer or triumph based on their responses to the men around them, who are variously portrayed as seducers, child-molesters, cads, or the frequenters of prostitutes and courtesans, it has been tempting for scholars to read the *Girlhood* as if it were primarily engaged with issues specific to women in the Victorian period. Thus, the few who have paid Clarke's tales

serious attention have focused their efforts on trying to untangle the distinctions between what is (for its time) a radically honest approach to the sexual and moral education of women—an effort we might reasonably label as feminist—and the construction of a fairly conservative notion of femininity, one which depends on patriarchal assumptions about a woman’s duties as a wife and mother. Following the example of George C. Gross, who in 1972 produced what is to my knowledge the first critical study of the *Girlhood*, some have argued that it represents a repurposing of Shakespeare’s plays for the education and training of young Victorian women.² Others have argued that Clarke’s work participates in the nineteenth-century tradition of Shakespearean character criticism.³ This latter group of scholars frequently invokes Clarke’s relationship to other early female writers on Shakespeare; they argue that the tales approach the heroines from a feminist perspective akin to that of Anna Jameson’s in *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (1832, later titled *Shakespeare’s Heroines*).⁴ In such readings, Shakespeare serves merely as a soapbox upon which Clarke stands,

² See Gross, “Mary Cowden Clarke, ‘The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines’” and Sarah Annes Brown, “The Prequel as Palinode: Mary Cowden Clarke’s *Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*” (*Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005): 95-106).

³ See Ann Thompson, “Pre-Feminism or Proto-Feminism?”; Fleming, “The Ladies Shakespeare”; Michael Bristol, “Vernacular Criticism and the Scenes Shakespeare Never Wrote,” *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000): 89-102; and Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London, 2004).

⁴ A third group of critics has recently begun to approach Clarke from a materialist historicist perspective, citing the *Girlhood* as an influence on the popularity of anthologies of Shakespearean extracts and the many late-Victorian gift-books devoted to the heroines. Their innovative work may do the most to bring Clarke to popular recognition as a significant force in the shaping of Victorian attitudes to Shakespeare. See Kathryn Prince, *Shakespeare in the Victorian Periodicals* and Georgianna Ziegler’s monograph for the Folger’s 1997 exhibition of Victorian portraits of the heroines, *Shakespeare’s Unruly Women* (Seattle, 1997). For later writers continuing Clarke’s work with the heroines, see Henrietta Lee Palmer, *The Stratford Gallery; or the Shakespeare Sisterhood: Comprising Forty-Five Ideal Portraits* (New York, 1858) and M. Leigh-Noel, *Shakespeare’s Garden of Girls* (London, 1885).

uttering either the reactionary sentiments of a conventional Victorian “prude” or a proto-feminist’s forward-looking criticisms of patriarchal society. Both approaches facilitate a response to Clarke that leave us little to say about its relationship to adaptation.

Despite the current flood of work studying film and stage adaptations of Shakespeare, there has still been far too little attention paid to fictional adaptations of Shakespeare, and especially to work like Clarke’s, which resists categorization as adaptation and yet rewards the comparative approach scholars of adaptation often employ. The fact that we lack an appropriate critical terminology for categorizing works like *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* may be one thing that has impeded our awareness of the revisionary nature of Clarke’s project. If we could develop a new way to classify Clarke’s text, we might begin to compensate for some of the lack of attention to fictional adaptations of Shakespeare. Perhaps more significantly, we might begin to develop a way to approach adaptive texts that identify themselves as “faithful” reworkings of their source-texts—as Clarke’s *Girlhood* does. I propose that we consider Clarke’s work as a group of daughter-texts. The thematic emphasis of Clarke’s *Girlhood* on the filial relationships of the heroines makes the term especially apposite. Furthermore, the term emphasizes the way Clarke’s work depends from and advertises its dependence on the Shakespearean text. Much like Gérard Genette’s “hypertext,” which develops from a historical predecessor through either transformation or imitation (7), Clarke’s *Girlhood* could not exist without the prior text of the plays.

While other possibilities for categorizing Clarke's work are both numerous and promising, none wholly captures the dynamic between promised fidelity and actual intervention that characterizes her work. For example, the *Girlhood* fits into Ruby Cohn's rubric of "transformation" that categorizes texts in which "Shakespearean characters are often simplified or trundled through new events, with the Shakespearean ending scrapped" (4). Yet the suggestion of metamorphosis and deviation contained in it make the term problematic for texts like Clarke's which insists on a "Shakespearean ending." Marianne Novy's ideas of "engagement" and "response" are attractive, as is Diana E. Henderson's "collaboration."⁵ However, both terms suggest that something of the appropriator's desire motivates the engaged, responsive or collaborative author and Clarke offers no such desire desires. Instead, she freighted her text with assertions of its subservience to Shakespeare, none of these suits it.

Clarke herself merely called the *Girlhood* a series of "Tales". As she explains it, after the favorable public reception of her *Concordance*, "these stories of pure imagination and sentiment presented themselves to their author's thought as an attempt to further her desire of still promoting the study and enjoyment of our great Poet-Teacher" (Preface to the 1850 edition, v). Simply put, she intended, by pleasing the reader with "imagination and sentiment," to direct that reader's attention to Shakespeare. However, the implicit assumption behind Clarke's stated desire to encourage the enjoyment of Shakespeare is that his plays need her "promotion." Her project assumes that readers, however familiar with

⁵ See Marianne Novy, *Engaging with Shakespeare: Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (Athens, GA, 1994) and Diana E. Henderson, *Collaborations with the Past: Reshaping Shakespeare Across Time and Media* (Ithaca and London, 2006).

Shakespeare they may be, require the further inducement of her tales to properly appreciate his plays; it thus places itself between the reader and the Shakespearean text, as if, upon completing the *Girlhood*, readers might return to the plays. In this way, the *Girlhood* represents an intervention into the relationship between reader and play.

Clarke must have been aware of the dangers of presuming herself capable of making such an intervention. The Preface to the first edition of the *Girlhood* begins by declaring that hers is a work “especially needful” of prefacing with “an explanatory word [...] an exculpatory word” (iii). For her, that word is love. Insisting that “Shakespeare himself is my voucher,” Clarke writes, “I beseech my readers to believe that love, not presumption, prompted the subject of this series of stories” (iv). For her readers, Clarke’s love of Shakespeare would have been well-documented; nearly every reviewer referred to it as the motivation for her *Concordance*. In their *Testimonial*, the grateful American subscribers to the fund for her chair commended her for “the unwearied industry [and] the indomitable perseverance, with which she had, through a long series of years, pursued her labor of love” (3). In 1847, Douglas Jerrold called it a product of “the patient adoration of a woman” (221) and pictured Clarke’s adoration earning her Shakespeare’s own admiration. Jerrold envisions the playwright in attendance at a performance of his plays; after receiving the newest editions of his work, he then turns to Clarke, asking,

“But where is *your* book, Mistress Mary Clarke? Where is your *Concordance*?” And again, pressing her hands, with a smile of sun-lighted

Apollo, said, “I pray you let me take it home with me.” And Mrs. Clarke, having no words, dropped the profoundest “Yes,” with knocking knees.

(221)

If even the mere transcription work of a *Concordance* required a Shakespearean imprimatur such as reviewers like Jerrold envisioned, then a work like the *Girlhood* which proposed “to place the heroines in such situations as should naturally lead up to, and account for, the known conclusion” (Preface to the 1850 edition, iv) needed extra support.

In the front matter, then, Clarke and her publishers relentlessly advertised her devotion to Shakespeare. As part of the book’s title, his name took a much larger font than did Clarke’s own. Furthermore, she and her publishers chose to append, after her own name, two signifiers of her relationship to Shakespeare. In the first, she is identified as “Author of the Concordance to Shakespeare”—an attribution that would have recalled for a contemporary reader the glowing reviews of that work. In the second, a quotation suggests that her work is “as petty to his ends, / As is the morn-dew on the myrtle leaf / To his grand sea” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.12.7-9). The care evidenced here calls to mind nothing so much as the effort, in contemporary film adaptations, to use Shakespeare’s name to sell the adapted work.

While approaching it from a comparative perspective like that an adaptation scholar might employ is helpful, I would not suggest that Clarke’s *Girlhood* is a genuine adaptation of Shakespeare. She and he do not tell the same stories; quite simply, the tales in the *Girlhood* neither perform nor re-write

Shakespeare though they do repurpose him in interesting ways. Though clearly a lineal descendent, dependent on the plays, the *Girlhood* is self-contained in a way that adaptations are not: its characters reside in extra-Shakespearean worlds and have extra-Shakespearean adventures. Given that they provide versions of the childhood years of characters we meet in the original text as young adults, we would need to qualify the *Girlhood*'s tales as "prequels" rather than adaptations. Yet I would resist such a term because the prequel has traditionally been dismissed as not demonstrating an extended or serious engagement with a prior text. Even for an adaptation theorist like Linda Hutcheon, "sequels and prequels are not really adaptations, nor is fan fiction. There is a difference between never wanting a story to end [...] and wanting to retell the same story over and over in different ways" (9). To link Clarke's work to "fan fiction" would, given the traditional approach to that genre, reaffirm the notion that it does not reward scholarly attention and perpetuate the neglect that recent scholarship has endeavored to correct. Although her work is best understood as a daughter-text rather than an adaptation, approaching it from the comparative perspective of adaptation studies is productive.

Clarke's work can amply reward close scrutiny. The comparative approach shifts our attention as scholars so that, while still acknowledging its historical and social context, we can see what the *Girlhood* does with Shakespeare. To see her works as daughters of their Shakespearean texts frees us from the thorny and finally unanswerable question of whether Clarke anticipates feminist criticisms of Shakespeare. It also highlights the filial relationships that

constitute Clarke's most significant additions to the plays. Looked at closely, these relationships can tell us a good deal about Clarke's project to present Shakespeare as a father to his readers; given her significant status in the Victorian period, her readings would have carried some influence and her vision of Shakespeare-as-father may have impacted the way others responded to Shakespeare.

As she described it for Robert Balmanno, her American correspondent and co-devotee, Mary Cowden Clarke's home was a kind of shrine to Shakespeare. Most notable was the portrait of Shakespeare or "Angel William" that hung at the foot of her bed, alongside a portrait of her mother (*Letters to an Enthusiast*, 147). The juxtaposition of the two is striking. That on her bedroom walls Shakespeare became literally the companion of her mother—a surrogate father of sorts—is fitting, for Clarke pictured Shakespeare as a father to readers.

In 1887, writing for the *Girl's Own Paper*, Clarke describes Shakespeare as "The Girl's Friend." As she puts it,

for moral introspection and self-culture [he] is a grand aid...peculiarly so, as regards women; since he the most manly thinker and most virile writer that ever put pen to paper had likewise something essentially feminine in his nature, which enabled him to discern and sympathize with the innermost core of woman's heart. (562)

Because Shakespeare has access to the "essentially feminine," his work can be repurposed for women as fundamentally instructive; a kind of hornbook of idealized female qualities, the plays can teach young women

lessons in artlessness, guilelessness, modesty, sweetness, ingenuousness, and the most winning candor; from his wives and matrons she can derive instruction in moral courage, meekness, magnanimity, firmness, devoted tenderness, high principle, noble conduct, loftiest speech and sentiment.

(562)

The length of Clarke's list here suggests how innumerable are the virtues young women readers will find in Shakespeare.

Yet it also suggests that Shakespeare possesses a dual nature peculiarly suited to the training of young women. Like a wife or matron, he can summon "loftiest speech and sentiment" to inculcate such notions as "modesty, sweetness, ingenuousness" in his young women readers. However, in Clarke's formulation, these abilities depend as much upon masculinity as femininity: his knowledge of what women should be develops only because he is "the most manly thinker and most virile writer." What we are offered, then, is a Shakespeare who combines the knowledge presumed essential to a woman with the capacity for paternal instruction.⁶ Cast as instructor and "the girl's friend," Shakespeare fills the roles of both mother and father to his readers.

The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines shifts this dynamic of instruction so that her invented mothers and fathers take on the role Clarke elsewhere casts Shakespeare in. The mothers Clarke gives her heroines are often entirely her own creations, for, as a number of critics have observed, there are no mothers in

⁶ Clarke's essay for *The Girl's Own Paper* shows that Shakespeare offers not motherly advice but intellectual "friendship"; this is surely a significant difference for a writer like Clarke, whose own education was influenced by her family's close relationships with major male literary figures of the day like Charles Lamb, and who would have first known her much older husband, Charles Cowden Clarke, as a family friend.

Shakespeare, or no mothers who “count” (Quiller-Couch, 10). The mothers of Clarke’s heroines take three forms: a supportive, instructive mother (Lady Aoudra for Ophelia), a guiding mother-figure (Sister Aloysia for Isabella from *Measure for Measure*), or a mother-as-monster (“the dark lady” for Lady Macbeth, or Claudia for Katharina and Bianca).

Clarke’s good mothers are much as one would expect. Lady Aoudra, though saddled with Polonius for a husband, is a wise woman whose few words are to the purpose. She takes special care to enlighten her daughter regarding the dangers she faces from men:

Gradually, then, and very heedfully, did this tender mother lift the veil from her young daughter’s mind. She told her how the selfishness of man, frequently, under the pretence of love for his victim, sacrifices her innocence, blasts her good name, betrays her to shame and misery, and then leaves her to ruin—to utter perdition. (vol. 2, 246)

Ophelia is thus warned against a romance with Hamlet, and their relationship proceeds, at least until Clarke must silence herself and the words of the play take over, to flower properly. Like Ophelia, Isabella is also warned by a good mother-figure about the dangers posed by men. When we are first introduced to the girl, she has fallen into the company of two bad “mothers” (one, a young prostitute, Nanni; the other, a woman with “good intentions” but little action, whom her father pays to care for her while he is at war). From these influences, she is rescued by her acquaintance with a nun, Sister Aloysia. As is the case with Lady Aoudra, Sister Aloysia’s main purpose is to explain the dynamics of sexual

relationships to her young charge after she has already been exposed to them. Isabella cannot understand Nanni's situation until Sister Aloysia has "unveiled to her, —as a tender mother might do, —how the especial virtue, esteemed the crown of women, was fair chastity" (vol. 2, 58).

While the activities of Lady Aoudra and Sister Aloysia may seem limited to this singular conservative brand of "tender" "unveiling," Clarke's creation of these two characters is radical. In her Shakespearean life, neither Ophelia nor Isabella has a mother-figure to warn her against the dangers she will face. In Clarke, however, Sister Aloysia and Lady Aoudra supply moral admonition and guidance. Thus, they represent a major intervention, on Clarke's part, into the action of the plays. So, too, do the bad mothers she creates. Clarke gives bad mothers to the heroines who are the most morally problematic so that each of her mothers can be seen to have infected her daughter with the particular poisonous quality she will exemplify in the play. In so doing, Clarke makes the bad mothers a means of giving alternative characters or personalities to the heroines; these have the effect of excusing the heroine for her behavior in the play.

For example, Claudia, the mother in "Katharina and Bianca; the Shrew, and the Demure," assumes sole responsibility for the personality of Katharina. When we meet Katharina in the *Girlhood*, she is hardly the confirmed shrew we find in Shakespeare. Instead, she is no more than a bright and inquisitive child, whose development into a good woman is hampered by a negligent mother. As Clarke puts it, what the girl needs is a "judicious mother, to train the insolence into sprightliness, to subdue the malapertness into harmless mirth, and to soften

the character” (vol. 2, 103). A sensible girl who prefers knitting to knick-knack making and whose plain speech would be a virtue, Clarke’s Katharina would have been fine had she had a mother to teach her tact. Clarke’s claim that she is merely a misguided child facilitates a reading of the play such that Katharina *needs* Petruchio in order to continue her interrupted personal development. Here, Clarke’s backstory works to provide a sort of narrative closure when it is read in concert with the play; setting up the characters as it does, it allows for a reading of the play as a genuine comedy that resolves Katharina’s mother-imposed personality disorder by presenting her with a husband who treats her as her mother should have.

In essence, by giving the heroines mothers, Clarke gives them extra-Shakespearean lives; though these lives can serve as commentary on the Shakespearean text, they seem also frankly to intend to alter the reader’s response to the play. If, as Clarke suggests she intended, her readers return to Shakespeare’s text upon completing hers, that reader carries into Shakespeare an understanding of each heroine that could not be wholly justified by reading the Shakespearean text alone. The backstory Clarke offers for Lady Macbeth is a good example. In Clarke’s *Girlhood*, Lady Macbeth (or Gruoch) is an innocent child, born to a mother who does not want her. After the early death of the son into whom she had hoped to instill enough pride and ambition that he might reclaim his decrepit father’s patrimony, Gruoch’s mother cannot accept a daughter as her second child. “As well unborn, as born a girl” (vol. 1, 102), she tells the horrified nurse. Born to such a mother, the infant Grouch cannot help

sucking the poison of that mother's unsatisfied desire for glory and pride of place from her breast. Clarke explains,

Mother's regards were well-nigh scowls; mother's smiles were all but disdain, not pitiful tenderness; mother's breast heaved repiningly, in lieu of yielding its balmy treasures lavishly and lovingly; and thus the babe gazed wondering up into those dark unfathomable eyes with naught of maternity in their irresponsive depths; and thus the babe sucked bitterness, perverted feeling, unholy regret, and vain aspiration, with every milky draught imbibed. (104)

What Clarke gives us is a radical revision of *Macbeth's* equivocal connection between "the milk of human kindness" (1.5.16) and the nursing babe whose brains Lady Macbeth swears she'd have dashed out on the ground had she so promised (1.7.54-59). Nurture, according to Clarke, makes nature: a perverse mother's milk will raise, in turn and after time, a perverse mother. Clarke's solution to the problem of Lady Macbeth—a woman for whom the only praise at the time seems to have been Anna Jameson's rather feeble argument that Lady Macbeth was after all only a bit too zealous in trying to further her husband's career (328)—is to turn Lady Macbeth's mother into a Lady Macbeth. In effect, she issues, through her mother's breast milk, a kind of post-dated check that will come due in Lady Macbeth's plea, in the play, to be filled "from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (1.5.41-42).

Yet even the dark lady herself is excused, in Clarke's rendering, by still more bad maternal blood. Both women are descended from a certain "Fenella of

Fettercairn,” who murders her king for killing her son (vol. 1, 113). The parallels between Fenella’s inhospitable invitation to her king and the cruel treatment Duncan receives from his hostess in *Macbeth* are obvious, and in them we can see Clarke fulfilling the promise she has made to readers of the *Girlhood* “to place the heroines in such situations as should naturally lead up to, and account for, the known conclusion of their subsequent character and after-fate” (Preface to the 1850 edition, iv). Yet even in this instance Clarke does more than anticipate the action of the plays; again, she intervenes in that action. Although the fluid connections she makes between Fenella, the dark lady, and Gruoch or Lady Macbeth can seem to suggest that Gruoch is destined to live out both her mother’s dream of reclaiming position and her ancestor’s story—destined, in other words, to become Lady Macbeth—Clarke also implies that such a fate was not inevitable. After all, her father Kenneth, Thane of Moray, might have intervened.

Kenneth is a failure as a father. As Clarke is careful to tell us, he ought to have warned his daughter of her maternal inheritance. She even creates an opportunity for him to do so. One night, he notices his daughter’s grim look and realizes she bears a striking resemblance to her female ancestor; he begins to tell her the story, then—“with the fatal weakness which was a part of his exceeding gentleness [...] instead of seizing the occasion to administer wholesome instruction, —to inculcate salutary admonition and precept” (vol. 1, 121)—he stops. Thus, as Clarke would have us understand matters, it is not Lady Macbeth nor even her mother who is to blame for her crimes in the play; it is her father.

The fathers in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* are nearly all like Kenneth: absent, neglectful, or inadequate. Portia's father abandons her immediately after her birth, returning only in time to have the brainstorm of the three caskets before he dies. Ophelia's father deprives her of her mother during a crucial developmental phase, leaving her open to the attempted molestation of her foster family's developmentally-challenged son and to witness the seduction, childbirth, and death of their daughter. Later, his only interest in lies in using her as a pawn for his political advancement. Isabella's father delivers her over to the care of a well-intentioned but neglectful gentlewoman who lets her run about with prostitutes. Katharina's raises her on dry bread only to turn her over to a convent that provides her with a frivolous education. Olivia's father marries his foster-daughter off to a cad and spendthrift. Viola's leaves her with an unkind peasant during his years-long search for wealth.⁷

And, of course, there is Gruoch, future lady Macbeth, whose father Kenneth's ineffectuality trumps all these others listed. Kenneth is the second father to appear in the *Girlhood* (the first is Portia's), and our first glimpse of him shows "an impoverished old man, with little beside his patrimonial castle and title, to prevent him from being nominally, as well as actually, a beggar" (vol. 1, 95). Gruoch's response to Kenneth suggests the depth of his impotence. Though she often sits at his feet, gazing into his face, she feels none of the "respect and

⁷ The roles of these young women's fathers are so significant that the daughter's patrimony often provides Clarke with the title for her tale: Gruoch is "The Thane's Daughter," just as Desdemona is "The Magnifico's Child," Portia "The Heiress of Belmont," Helena "The Physician's Orphan," and Hermione "The Russian Princess."

reverence” that are, according to Clarke, “the true guiding lights that should direct a child’s gaze to its parent” (vol.1, 119). Instead, she thinks only of

how ardently she longed to pour some of her own spirit into that placid nature; how she would willingly infuse some of her own youth and vitality into his veins, where the blood flowed so tamely and sluggishly; how eagerly she would part with some of her own vigour and strength, to impart energy and impulse to those aged limbs, those supine and flaccid muscles. (vol. 1, 120)

As I’ve suggested earlier, Kenneth’s own defects—“so much meekness and softness” (vol. 1, 119) and “so little of martial ardour, of aspiring [...] so total an absence of ambition, of thirst for preferment or advancement of any kind” (vol. 1, 120)—are presented by Clarke as the cause of his daughter’s dissatisfaction, not her own. Furthermore, it is because he neglects to properly educate her that she grows imperious and aggressive, willing even to kill another young maiden she perceives as a threat to a young soldier’s (Macbeth’s) attentions to her. Given his pattern of failures, Clarke’s Kenneth may as well be as absent from her story as he is from Shakespeare’s play.

Clarke certainly could have made him a good father if she wished. Not only does she have the luxury of imagining, for her heroines, relationships that pre-date those available to them in the Shakespearean canon, she also has ample license from the play in this case. She could easily have made Kenneth a good man, the sort whose memory could justifiably induce Lady Macbeth’s later guilt at having killed a man so like “my father as he slept” (2.2.13). That she does not

signals that she is less interested, in the end, in Kenneth as a character than in his effect on his daughter. Though she claims only to imagine what might have happened prior to the plays in order to make what does happen seem more realistic, she is instead creating a parallel text to the plays, one in which Shakespeare's heroines take center stage.

Clarke's motivations in calling attention to the heroines are not what many critics have argued. She is not interested in Shakespeare's women—or her own variations on these women—simply in order to make a political argument about women's rights. Instead, her daughter-text is created in service to Shakespeare. The *Girlhood's* primary responsibility, as she envisions it in her Preface, is to promote the reading of Shakespeare. In suggesting that there are moral lessons to be found in the plays, she implies that Shakespeare himself intended such readings. Clarke thus presents herself only gently “unveiling”, as her heroines' imagined mothers do, the messages Shakespeare has veiled. Her creation of bad father figures in the *Girlhood* points at an ideal father elsewhere; that ideal is the Shakespeare-father, carefully creating for his women readers what Clarke would later describe as “the most exalted ideal of womanhood” for which “every woman [should be] bound in gratitude to him eternally” (“Shakespeare's Self,” 155). Clarke's claim here echoes the sentiments expressed by the only positive examples of fatherhood offered in the *Girlhood*, the Russian Emperor whom she imagines as the father of Hermione from *The Winter's Tale*.

Clarke opens her story with Hermione's father lost in the woods and in danger of dying in a snowstorm. He is rescued by the child Paulina, traveling

through the same snowstorm to find her banished father. As Clarke's Emperor gratefully embraces the child who has saved him, his reflections make clear that Paulina is the epitome of the good daughter. Not only has she saved her homeland's patriarchal head, she has done so in "the sweet, confiding, ingenuous manner of a child brought up to meet with nothing but gentleness from others, and to mean nothing but gentleness herself" (vol. 3, 206). The Emperor's reflections here emphasize the significance of the father's task of childrearing. Unlike, for example, Katharina or Gruoch, Paulina has been "brought up" well and her growth into a good woman is assured. It's important to note here that Paulina's developmental progress is attributed not to maternal instruction but to paternal instruction.

Clarke puts into the girl's mouth much florid praise of her father. One example is Paulina's explanation that she has learned charity and good sense from the father who

used to tell me, —I often find myself thinking over what he used to say, since he has been taken from me, —that very few people have the opportunity of rendering a service in equal kind, to the individual who has rendered it; but that we can all requite a kindness received, by doing one to the next person who needs it from us. (vol. 3, 209)

The Emperor's response to this innocuous moral sentiment, as to the others Paulina demonstrates in their journey to safety (such as positive thinking, physical fitness, an awareness of duty, and honesty), is to conclude that her father "must be worthy himself, to teach his daughter so worthily" (vol. 3, 216). In fact, the

daughter's behavior carries such weight with the Emperor that he reinstates her banished father. A good father, Clarke tells us, teaches his children worthily. However, for her the equation cuts both ways so that the actions of good children also guarantee the goodness of their fathers.

Clarke depends on such dubious propositions because, even in this simple exchange, she is up to something more complicated than the inculcation of virtue in her readers: while offering moral lessons herself, she is also positioning Shakespeare behind the absent figure of Paulina's father. He is the good father who teaches his children "worthily". However, he is simultaneously the father whose status can only be evaluated based on his children's behavior. That is, the lessons readers learn from Shakespeare can be understood to guarantee his status as acceptable reading material. In effect, the character of Paulina exemplifies good readership. She herself tells us how important careful thinking and repeated attention—the same activities demanded by Shakespeare study—have been in her education. The solitary "thinking over what he used to say" that Paulina describes is exactly what Clarke and others prescribe for young readers.

Though Clarke explicitly notes in her 1891 Preface that she intended the book for "maturer" minds (iv), copies of the *Girlhood* seemed to find their way into the hands of adolescent women (the inscription on my own 1897 edition, wishing "Marie Duck" a "bright and happy future," suggests as much). Her book's moral agenda also suggests that it participates in the nineteenth century effort to renegotiate the morality of Shakespeare's texts to render them acceptable for a wider readership. An extreme example of this impulse is the editorial work

of Henrietta Bowdler, whose *The Family Shakespeare* (1807), sought to emphasize the “unexceptionable” (vi) in Shakespeare. Though Bowdler manages this through excising the exceptionable—she promises to have removed “every thing that could give just offense to the religious and virtuous mind” (vii)—Mary Anne Lamb (and her brother Charles) achieved a similar goal in *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) by rewriting.⁸

Though Clarke neither mentions the Lambs in her Preface to the *Girlhood* nor dedicates any of its tales to them, the example of Mary Lamb cannot have been too far from her mind. For Clarke’s family was connected to the Lambs—she was in fact tutored as a child by Mary—and in her autobiography she offers a vivid account of her introduction to their *Tales*. She describes it as arising out of a Novello family tradition:

my father [the musician Victor Novello] used to have his breakfast in bed [...] we children were allowed to scramble up to the counterpane and lie around him to see what new book he had bought for us, and listen to his description and explanation of it. Never can I forget the boundless joy and interest with which I heard him tell about the contents of two volumes he had just brought home, as he showed me the printed pictures in them.

They were an early edition of ‘Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare.’ And

what a vast world of new ideas and new delights that opened to me!—a

⁸ Like Henrietta Bowdler’s, Mary Anne Lamb’s work was originally published under her brother’s name. However, I follow recent scholarly practice which has emphasized her contribution to the *Tales* over that of her brother Charles, to whom only six of the twenty stories have been attributed. See Susan J. Wolfson, “Explaining to Her Sisters: Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespear*” in *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare: On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot, and Others* (ed. Marianne Novy, Urbana and Chicago, 1990), 16-39.

world in which I have ever since much dwelt, and always with supreme pleasure and admiration. (*My Long Life*, 11-12)

Clarke's account emphasizes not only the role played by her father in introducing her to Shakespeare, but also the synthesis of the adaptation (the Lambs' *Tales*) with the Shakespearean source-text. In her account, the Lambs do what the Preface to the *Girlhood* expresses a desire to do: they open the "vast world of new ideas and new delights" that is Shakespeare to their readers.

Compared to Lamb, who was more cautious, Clarke is an enthusiastic advocate for the universal study of Shakespeare's texts. Lamb was very careful to define her own intended readership and hesitant, in particular, to use her *Tales* to promote the reading of Shakespeare by young women. "Instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals," Lamb commends her work to their sisters who are not "permitted to look into this manly book" (ii). Her Preface imagines a cadre of patient brothers for her young female readers. Looking over the *Tales* together, these brothers have the task of

explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand; and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene. (ii-iii)

At this rate, a young girl would never have gotten to Shakespeare on her own.

I do not intend to undermine Lamb's *Tales*. Indeed, her notions of what is acceptable for young readers are far more liberal than her contemporary Henrietta Bowdler's were.⁹ What I do want to point out, however, is how widespread was the nineteenth-century anxiety regarding the morality of Shakespeare's texts. As Linda Rozmovits has pointed out, the fact that one could find not only an Imogen but also an Iago—and a Lady Macbeth, a Goneril, or a Regan—challenged claims that Shakespeare was acceptable reading material. As Rozmovits explains, Shakespeare's various representations of women good and bad

allowed people to say: "Portia is an exemplary female. Try to be more like Portia," [but] it was also what caused people to shoot themselves in the foot with regard to female characters who, for example, dress up in men's clothing, refuse to marry, and occasionally kill people. (44)

One solution to this quandary was to offer extenuating explanations of the heroines' behavior through character criticism. This was the approach taken by Anna Jameson, Clarke's most immediate female predecessor in the field of Shakespeare studies. The other was to follow Lamb and undertake a project of rewriting. Clarke's choice of the latter path suggests she believed that young women could prove themselves capable readers of Shakespeare. Like the young Paulina she imagines in the *Girlhood*, they could "think over what [Shakespeare] used to say" and draw from it the appropriate moral conclusions.

⁹ As Clarke herself would do, Lamb does not hesitate to include, for example, her own renderings of *Measure for Measure*. In some ways, she is more willing than Clarke to push the envelope; *Tales from Shakespear* includes both *Pericles* and *King Lear*, neither of which (despite their fruitful possibilities for revising Shakespearean fathers) Clarke chose to include in *The Girlhood*.

In fact, this is exactly what *The Girl's Own Paper* asked its young readers, with Clarke herself as their model, to do. In 1885, *The Girl's Own Paper* had introduced "Our Shakespeare Society." By 1887, its young female society members had presumably progressed to a level of Shakespeare study that allowed the magazine to introduce an essay contest on the subject "My favourite heroine from Shakespeare." Young entrants were advised to model their essays on Mary Cowden Clarke's article, "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend," which had appeared in an earlier issue. Clarke's notion, as expressed in that piece, that Shakespeare might offer life lessons, thus becomes the lens through which young women are encouraged to read and respond to Shakespeare. In pointing to Clarke's work as a model, the editors at *The Girl's Own Paper* intended to privilege readings which discovered in Shakespeare the ideals the magazine itself hoped to inculcate. However, the editors lamented that some had failed to win the prize by choosing to make "their essays a vehicle for expressing their ideas on some social problem": the issue of "women's rights" (380). That the editors rejected both those entries which viewed Shakespeare's heroines as supportive of enhanced women's rights and those which took the opposite position suggests that the real problem is not with the arguments the essays made. The real problem is that these essays were not mediated, as it had been suggested they should be, by Clarke's idea that Shakespeare's plays offer us a single, universally-applicable view of what is good in human nature. In choosing to relate the plays to current events rather than to a group of supposedly fundamental "feminine" qualities, these four young essayists struck an unintentional blow against the notion that Shakespeare's

work expressed the world as it is. Instead, they repurposed the work in order to address questions of what the world should be. These anonymous respondents can thus far more reasonably be identified as proto-feminist readers of the plays than Clarke can be.

Clarke consistently presented her writing as an act of filial devotion to Shakespeare rather than as criticism of him or his texts. The pictures she presents of the good daughters Hermione and Paulina are especially telling as they are analogous to her own resistance to superseding the Shakespearean word. As they grow into womanhood in the *Girlhood*, Paulina and Hermione long to marry men other than those their fathers have chosen for them. Because her father has already promised her, Paulina swears that “his daughter’s weakness shall not cause [his promise] to be impugned” (251). Hermione, too, marries against her own will in response to her father’s urging. Though she has fallen in love with her Sicilian tutor, and though he has saved her from a pack of wolves, she trembles to thank him “lest she should be unable to maintain the adherence to her own and her father’s vowed word, which she had firmly resolved upon, yet which the sight of him might shake” (vol. 3, 278).¹⁰ The emphasis both girls place on their duty to the father’s “vowed word” is striking. It recalls Clarke’s claims in the Preface that “all *climax* in incident and sentiment was to be carefully avoided throughout these stories, —inasmuch as they are merely preliminaries” (iii-iv) to Shakespeare’s.

There is, of course, plenty of climax for Hermione and Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*: Leontes will turn out to reject his wife and exile her daughter, and

¹⁰ In a father-knows-best twist, the suitor turns out to be none other than Leontes in disguise. Thus, after a period of waiting—as in *The Winter’s Tale*—Hermione gets her “happy ending.”

Antigonus will be eaten by a bear. Though the fact that Clarke's fathers make what prove in the play to be poor choices certainly is matter for a feminist reading of her work, it hardly follows that Clarke foresaw such readings. The *Girlhood* resists reading the fathers' choices as ironic; instead, it presents them as foreshadowings of the "happy" resolution of *The Winter's Tale*. There, Paulina eventually gets Camillo, the man Clarke's story tells us she wanted originally. There, Hermione is reunited with a Leontes who no longer feels the need to test her fidelity as he does in Clarke's tale. Clarke sets her reader up to read through the *Girlhood* and into *The Winter's Tale*. This is because, as Martha Tuck Rozett has pointed out, "however much seems possible in the new text, its outcome is predetermined by the known text to which it is implicitly subordinated" (103). Unlike her contemporary, Helena Faucit Martin, who tried to "live into [the] future" (39) of the heroines she had portrayed (by imagining, for example, Portia's post-*Merchant* kindness to Shylock), Clarke is unwilling to alter anything in the future of her heroines' lives; she will not let them speak beyond the boundary of the opening of their respective plays. The daughter-text, though chronologically anticipatory, remains subordinate to the father-text.

Clarke's project in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* is to create a series of stories which justify both the plots and the moral implications of Shakespeare's plays. Her motivation is daughterly: her love for Shakespeare lies behind her desire to encourage further reading of him. That the readings of Shakespeare Clarke longed to encourage do not square with contemporary readings is not the point; that she chose to develop these readings through a

creative process of addition rather than a critical process of commentary is. Until we are willing to understand Clarke's work as fiction, and to practice readings of it as such, we will continue to dismiss it as naïve criticism rather than a creative engagement with the questions raised by the plays. This is a significant loss because Clarke's work is one of the first creative responses to Shakespeare to take a novelistic form. If we are willing to look at the *Girlhood* more seriously as fiction, to treat it as adding to rather than subtracting from the complex cultural construction of Shakespeare's plays, perhaps we might begin to see connections between her work and that of novelists like Margaret Atwood, Gloria Naylor, Jane Smiley, Nadine Gordimer, and Elizabeth Nunez. Though we cannot give Clarke a chair to express our gratitude, we might pay her still "too little known" Shakespearean daughter-text the respect of reading it again as creative work in its own right.

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THE KISSING PARTY

The Kissing Party

The kissing party was ending.
Kids went home for supper.
Kids went home to twin beds.
It was sad—oh yes, we were sad

and for nothing but the body
of the girl next door pretending,
through two lit windows, sleep
on a grass-green quilted coverlet.

Deliberately lit, calculatedly
curled, the curve of her hip
went disappearing into the dark
landscape between the legs.

That's the place where the longed-for
dead walk about without us.
In the parks of our childhood
in an endless afternoon:

birds asleep on their branches,
the sun as hot as a mouth,
and even under the shady leaves
nobody loves us, or will, ever.

The Mechanical Heart

Proposition

Let the body be our manufacture.
Let a panel in the breast unhinge
on a tin nipple. Let the mechanical
heart open, reveal its gears
in inevitable clockworks toothed
one on another, precise and greased.

Still from a Porno

Here we are in our bodies,
here we are on the couch when the dvd
with the inimitable timing
of insensible things skips, pauses

so that a girl who is taking
and taking a penis into her mouth
makes us come to a parenthesis—here

we are in our bodies,
all flushing and conscious
that they knew this as love—

while oh yes the god in his power
is descending: terrible, careless,
his wings in the immaculate silence beating
like what I used to call the heart,

like that obscenity the heart.

A Grotesque

I oil my hair in the bath. That gluts
with gold a something delicate,
and like a shell, and pink, that fingers,
slipped along the ridge of collarbone,
dimpling all the skin, might seek.
Imagine whatever you require.
The Greek, in his splendid physique,
will accede. He is trying to believe
in his body. The caryatid is threaded
through, cunt to chin, with strings
to raise her arms as if the body were
a burden (take it in—how heavy it is,
how strong). I oil my hair in the bath.
Each nipple cuts the water like a new tooth.
Ah, we are trying to seduce you;
these are not questions to be answered.

A Note in My Copy of *Phaedrus*

What if Apollo can
in powder blue parade all day,
then, looking down on that boy whose buttocks

are so firm in their proud
frown, give in, give his horses rein
enough for their no-nonsense ass-kicking?

I say, give gods their due.
That cart is like love is like strength.
We circle, admiring, these notable

rogues. We mark their speed. There,
in a myth of charioteer and horse,
they mean one does not feel how quick he's been,

in deciding *to love*
the boyfriend means *to lead his soul*,
to forgo the muscle's slow luxury,

nor how quick he's let go
the prize of erotic madness—
O small prize, no more to be carried off!—

for psychogogia.
That's transport. That's a car. Cue X,
who entered in a '77

Grand Prix. That chariot
left me stranded by the highway.
Poor hitchhiker!, but he wouldn't be moved.

What if Apollo can't?
Then what a girl needs is a winch,
and the man in the big truck to work it.

Self-Portrait, as Landscape

Don't be afraid to do more than gaze.
There's no glaze against your fingers.
Is hers then the clear sight that holds out
no horizon? Well, no. But don't gloss
the pathetic, sir. So the heart's a mirror
carried in the eye, so love can't keep
its quicksilvered lenses long enough
for you two to fall into the sky. So what?
The body's not a glassed-in picture.
Just step back from the middle distance.
Look away if you cannot touch her.

How to Wear Jewelry

Stop fiddling with your earrings.
I know you're afraid that precious stone
is slipping from its silver hook,
is falling chiming to the sidewalk
or down the sink's expectant mouth.
Let it go. Not even care would redeem
the misery spent for that diamond
chip or those oysters' exquisite pains.
Remember the Princess Parizade,
whose principal dish was a cucumber
stuffed with pearls? She knew how
to wear jewelry, went out like Babylon,
lately sacked—remember her veils?—
could tell how a girl had lived
by her jewelry box: one crushed bead
of onyx—how did you ever manage
it?—a pendant of glass flowers, Italian,
snapped at the stem; one basket-weave
bracelet, grown too slim for the wrist;
gift after damaged gift. She knew
that a man can't live in the inside
of a pearl, knew that, if a girl's heart
will be hung on a fine silver chain,
anyday someone is going to break it.

Cupid Leaving the Bed of Psyche

Under her body he's caught his wing.
That's how you know it's morning
and time the god of love made his exit.
He rolls her over grinning, as he'll do
again forever, since the rising action
of the sun is just one more dart
in his erotic arsenal, a plaything
for tracing the bones of her shoulder
or tangling tomorrow into her hair.
Ah, was the night so short, again?
Have we come to the dangerous time
when somebody is waking a little
too quietly while the other sleeps?
In the myth, wax falls from a candle.
If they're both awake now it's time
you made the classical gesture. Leave.

(after Jacques Louis David's *Cupid and Psyche*)

A Classical Education Can't Save You from the Radio

I looked up sky. I blued, obscured.
You were nowhere in my dictionary.

And the birds gave up reciting
their foreign vocabularies.
The clouds broke off their pas de deux.

Do do. The world is full of spit.
The sun's just a French pop song.

Do do, you do, you don't, you did
decline the thunderstorm, the chorus
girl and all her words for weepy.

During the Special Effects

The trees were undecided. So was I.
But la lune was on the up-and-up—

it was evening, or it was about to be—
and nature, in a heap of atoms,

was static and fuss. I felt you out
while you felt me up. We kissed

amidst some special effects:
bird dropped out of their nests, stars

ashed and burnt in our laps. In the simple
math of storm and porch and two

by two all over town, green girls
went down on their broken hearts.

It was all there in the quivering air.
And it had, in fact, been raining.

The Distance to the Moon

I call your attention to a Blake etching
where a short ladder points at the moon
and the man in the caption is crying,
I want! I want! Too sober. Too sad.

No, I wasn't around when you planned
this celestial body's pathetic end—

so *Cosmicomics* opens up on a white
nakedness which is shuddering
at the touch of the characters climbing on,
so you'd have us begin before we began to want—

but look (I'd have said) if you make desire
the matter you've made a story for its moral

denouement. And the moon may be
a lit sphere we chafe our hands on,
but if it only brings on the climactic
melancholy, you haven't been paying attention.

Lord Byron Swims Home

Because the restless mind wants depth,
he dives in, despite his evening dress,

despite the baffled glance of his dismissed
gondolier. And the clubfoot does not break

the surface, so the reflected moonlight
does not flicker; and he holds his breath,

so no feeble bubbles rise in the flat
soda water of the della Madonetta canal.

But when his head comes up the light
goes glistening over water like diamonds

on the breathless bosom of another beauty.
Who—in Venice's bright ballrooms—

should he want to see instead of this
sweet nothing in permissive mist?

To the Moon

The bedroom's black and unromantic I
lie stoned on rapture, lack, the bright fact

of the body beside mine falling away
in the spectacular accident of every night:

you go to sleep for awhile, you rise—
luminous insomniac, ultraglide in white—

and, like the metaphysic incidental we
call heart, you cold you dark and fast.

We fall out of love

and into the sky.

But to dwell with intricate, endless
precision on fibres and films of moss
and lichen was never the plan. If you
were a leaf, you could not think *how strange,*
a leaf. You'd hang out out there, in the actual
blue outside the window of the bedroom
where, though we've read deeply into it,
we are finding the body is not the soul
made visible. And you wouldn't care,
adrift in the air, if the ether material
was restive in your nerves or the universe.
Meanwhile, we are having to invent
new words to settle the sky, the sick quiver
in it at evening. Lake blue. Infinity pool.
Your eyes if your eyes were blue.
Palisade, moth-wing, waxed moon blue.
Alloy, cerulean, old azure blue. The color
of longing with, finally, just landscape
behind it, the pure abstract color
of the unquiet heart and its *why*
at the vastness inside what is not quite
the body every big black oncoming night.

Late Archaic

If the heart were a city this would be its first
and oldest wall, here where the clay was worked

with steps where prostitutes and citizens
freely met with the night's pedestrian

longing here where the custom was to kiss
beneath the pandered moon, beneath the knowing

stars that lit the long way down to the sea—
here exiles turn their backs, traditionally.

Still-Life, with Bruise

Girl in a Painted Dress

A bird flares feathers
through a sky: he's herald
for that lion whose roar
crowds out the seams
of—what? shawl, shroud,
the costuming Pain
makes his pratfalls in?
Within the simplest
descriptions of a girl
on whose back and breast
there live a bird
and an embroidered lion
is just a body breathing
out. How like a fable!,
that begs us see,
through its attendant
pleasure-speaking
beasts, the trees
who make of soft wind
slurring their softly
moral speech: below
the watercolor wash,
below the flattered
fabric, even I am not safe
from affect. In a body
turned museum
the fragile frisson
of a bird against a sky
is just the impression,
not the flame, of fire.

Self-portrait, with Poultry Shears

Jointed with a coil
and bar, a nut and bolt, they expand
on a familiar marvel—
spring and catch—unfasten
fast heft that's made

for larger hands. Held
together by a latch itself held
a-pivot, stainless teeth
partnered to the sharp shaft
let the shears stay

closed. So, they assume
a shape not unlike a dagger's, curved
to a crest, handled fine in
hammered steel. *Cut's* not far
from *ornament*.

How the Schoolchildren Killed Themselves in Spring

Light fell as a rope the tall one
slipped his neck in. And he pulled
himself up, and his teeth were set
fast as the hook in the center brace
of the gymnasium's glass roof;
it's there his shadow drew
the long loose line the others filed
outside in: boys who didn't stop
marching when the teacher called—
he chased them to the lake too late—
girls, untying braids of dotted ribbon,
who choked themselves in unison.

World's Finest Model Horses

Midway through his proud first step—
all lifted head, all irritable lifted tail—
the Arabian, his cut nostrils flared
for the scent of saddle-leather, sights
you in his fixed black eye. But where
is the glint of the bit, of the buckle
on the bridle? He can't think why
you don't mount him, intelligent
as he is in these precise and heavy
hooves. Even the ground rises up
to meet their step, is never unsteady
under glorious legs. Don't tell him
the muscle he thinks he's flexing
to kick out, quickened with desire,
is thickened with plaster and painted on
with darker shellac. Don't tell him
he can't fall because he can't run.

The Elgin Marbles drop from the sky

dusting England's neoclassical parks
with the nipples of goddesses,
fresh pebbled grapes, pearlescent
curls sheared off the pubic coil
of a beautiful boy. A perfect body
count is impossible. Torsos muscle
into the grass; desirable heads dull
to their sensual lips. A satyr's eye
rolls underfoot.

Insurance men weep,
but the reason Greek art bores you
is that you do not see the gods—
how they were white and red, how fleet
over ground with easy steps they walked
in the cool of those early mornings
when men believed in artlessness
and a girl, raising her arms, would know
how her breasts rose ripe and seemed
to open the soul in her body—
which you cannot see in stone.

Erotic Novel from the Abruzzi

She cannot even tell the heroine's name—
maybe she's unbound, uncorseted, all
ragazza, present perfect at the novelist's
discretion, or ours, so we can leave
as it's getting less erotic than a wife's
flannelled belly swollen after much birth
(four in five years) and the doctor's mercy
hysterectomy; maybe she is stripped
down to *type*: nun, virgin nun, weak
for peonies, those sex-resemblers,
touching lips to them, rolling onto her fingers
to twiddle a mock Magnificat, a handmaiden
sort—and there are pictures which don't
surprise, but whose hand drew them here?
Stepfather, father, or mother who, eighteen,
lovely as a type, left the Abruzzi to home here
boarding strangers, renting room in her bed?
And which one of the fathers was it
who bedded a tree to bear figs (even
in Illinois) for preserves, the late-ripening
flesh kept present, reserved for him
to spoon over toast muttering *delicious*
like a folk-tale peasant girl who could not fill
herself full enough with figs. Sweet enough
to his taste though she did not like them, sucked
too slowly and the fig pulled away, tongue
left a moment to her fingers, salty
as this book is not, its illustrations more dry
than any pornography she's seen where sex
looked damp, large-breasted, hard-nippled,
had long tapered legs that did not end
in ankles, the banal body excised by the frame:
a body like her own displayed, fucked
with looking. The nun in the novel enjoys
what is being done to her. She will not
get pregnant a fifth time, not even once,
with doctors more tender than merciful,
half up the ropeladder and promising
the peonies gentleness and absolutely
nothing lurid until they've had their fill.
Everywhere but a brief flowering.

The Cardinal Sees a Dirty Picture

Paint, you old pander, again
you miss your way to the heart.
Who's roused to heresy these days
is claimed by its subtler art.

But how does a devil enter there?
Like an arrow tapped through the chest.
And what does he within?
Cricket's work, black and tuneful,

his wings a carriage for despair.
And how do we force him out?
An organ that does not open must
be cleft as buttocks. Pincers in

and look, the testicle without its skin!
Make a man of two asses,
spank him behind and before.
Get thee on thy ways to sin no more.

Gloss for a Fable

In the story behaving itself, a fox
pursues a priest to water. No one falls in;
no one sinks. No one is thinking
of that oldest character in the fable,
the soul, which sits on the margins
anyway, taking notes in an italic hand.

Still-Life, with Bruise

This fruit, of course, was rotting
while the painter painted. Do not mistake me;
these were not the strawberries daubed
with fantastic mold in the glass museum,
not even the rind, with its coat of wax
and fruitflies, of the cantaloupe I failed to eat
all week because my lover had not come.
He had those perfect curving brows
of the Caravaggio boys, the thick pink
lips, the heavy cream skin. Young and broke,
he occasionally sucked sweet-vinegar
juice from an overripe matron in exchange
for rent that winter in the warehouse
of the local art league. It was cold. The windows
cracked like loose bits of lace, and every day
the same knife sank into the same fat slab
of plastic-wrapped cheese. Then you would
have done it, too, lubed your asshole, rammed it
with the blunt point of the difficult sculpture
no one ever came to see—a pure aesthetic
response to that something cold in art
that does not care for us, as after our supper
of milk and peaches, he stood behind me
at the mirror, laced our fingers, traced the line
running down to the mons veneris, stopped.
Why put yourself at risk by becoming beautiful?
The Arab in the overcoat was not an angel;
when they found me naked in the field,
that much became clear. Picture it
and try not to think of a Renaissance still-life:
blue bruise on the bare plucked thigh.
A teenage girl is just another sort of game bird.
And as for this terrible gorgeous fruit,
the resin-hued grapes and pomegranate, sour-apples,
plums and peaches and pears, the blood-red gape
of the fig-throat, the melon quartered, splayed
open with rot—it is only the most expensive
form of riot the painters knew, the one the body
always already is yielding to. And the scent
in his studio was the same rich perfume
of decay that hung thick and sweet
in his lungs, in his heart, in his humid blood.

Advice to a Boy on a Roof in November

You're a heavy cloud, dropped
slow and settling its white
slates low on a gray slate roof
where snow comes down so
like snow, in all a soft
dissolving foreground, false
to the hard and far below.
Try to keep hold of your soul.

The Archbishop at Court

Here evil made an appearance,
not its first: the pin-pricks
to the keyhole finding sin a door,
a mouth, a crack, lubricated,
easy to slip into, a state
of the body like the sleep
of the not incorruptible behind
their doors where they can be left
to sleep or not. Always, among
the well-adjusted, are some
who are not, of whom the mystery
of iniquity admits nothing
except look out, look out.

Allons Enfants

Add this to rhetoric: a rock.
The intellectual, fast descending from
the podium, jerks his elbow,
masturbate his politics.

Was it for that you gave up
sodomy, Byron? As, to spite the Austrians
who wore those pompous epaulettes,
Venice once quit smoking (add this:

torches and a military
march), for they'd given up applauding long before.
Elsewhere, surely, there's an exploding.
But fatherlands are dead to us.

My Study of the Law

Inside the hall the light was dim. No one
else was waiting and no one seemed
to sit inside. But a few dreary prints
rehearsed an argument by example.
The walls expanded on their punitively
boring bricks. And below the Grand Jury Room
sign, a light was red. Filament of flush,
a hectic skin, of blood—stop. Stop what?

The Golden School

The Plate of Grapes

Nobody was getting any younger
sitting there at the table waiting
for a word to rise, more luminous
and real than morning or rain

coming down as it came down
outside, glass-globed and glinting
in the perfectly meaningless dark.
And then, after the lightning,

there they were, the gods—
explaining nothing. They couldn't
even speak. It was the first morning
in their bodies. It was a golden age.

And they stared at the world
which was not new, as if, for awhile,
day would be day and grapes
swell under a frankly sensual sun.

Aubade

And after the loves, after the others
with their rough or gentle ineffective hands,
forget how you were dreaming then,
dreaming to the sick quick metronome
the heart kept beating, too hectic
from speed and cigarettes to sleep,
though someone hushed all night
as if to hold you dreaming that long,
dreaming the moon was a marble
put in your palm to finger and forget
how the fidget-birds at morning rise
inevitable, and no dreaming holds them off.

Yesterday, the crane

caught me up after two day's want
of sleep. Well, wasn't that sweet
unconscious mechanical drop
once something like heaven? And God
so careful an engineer he gauged
the weight of restlessness—exactly
my body in its plummet to nothing—
against His pulley, soul? That cord
kept taut, and its hook was a naught
whose function was lift, let me go
after a crane and through a conceit
and back to the seventeenth century.
But I never believed. I mostly didn't
even read the works we undid,
line by line unfastening sense
from sensory (like touch, given us
as if just for its excellence—hand
on my hip! hand in my hand!)
while afternoon blew by glorious
blue and the usual hipsters outside
the engineering building waited
for who-knows-what which these days
looks to me like it won't ever come
to lift me—from desire—up.

To a Ring I Lost Planting Bulbs

You give me the slip between garlic and lilies,
as if this is what comes of my unprotected
loves, of my hands in the sweet earth,
their willful miscegenation of the border bed
where you're tucked in deep with tulips, too,
like just one more of their heart-freaks:
a fluke diamondine flake, a thin vein gone gold.
Being mine, you'll grow up a girdled tree, girt
with a ringed-around root, nothing like
the fruitful vine of good wives—one of which
I'll never be so, my not-love-knot, you may
as well come up instead like a kiss:
the one wind gives to rouse the Japanese maple,
October's aerialist, its bright aureole
in the last late sun a red mouth, opening.

A Note to the Air

An alley of trees
whose white lace
blooms

(like women)
give me

headache.
Along the sewage
river's lead

fence, seed pods—
all milk-whiteness

in a rush
of wind. And sky,
so far above, don't

ever bend
to touch my nose.

Late Birds

If sometime after supper you walk
down to Douglas Park where all summer
the birds of the neighborhood gathered,
you will probably not be thinking
that this is the place where the birds
would be if it were not already winter.
But it is. And so here is your heart
in its sweatercoat, and here is your heart
in its moccasins waiting for birds already flown.
It was autumn, there was that great black beating
of wings that blows open the soul.
Could you have done things differently,
caught, once, their particular art
of rising and finally been exalted?
Of course not. Of course not.

A Scene from The Renaissance

Lemon balm, mint, elderflower.
Under his arbor, this prince
in his body of glass—wearing of love
or pleasure or action—seems
like no fragile manufacture.

And if you want a garden, too,
you'll start with your idea
of color: green green green for spiderplant,
elephant's ear, Lenten rose.
Out under the common daylight

*we could drop the mirror we hold
to Nature, replace the sun
with clusters of yellow cosmos, level
hills, clear the creek-bed, color
the sky with lavender-flowers,*

and hold the whole world just as still as—
a statue under a trellis?
Right. Here's the cue for those youths on horseback—
with their level glances, proud
patient lips, chastened reins, their whole

bodies in exquisite service
nerved for the celestial,
for that spasm in the shining fretwork
of the animate—who lift
the mirror, and cannot fix it still.

(after Walter Pater)

There is a Garden in Her Face

But the sonnet lady is a slut, my students say—
as if a girl, or bird, or vase should restrain
our longing, as if we'd want them to. They don't,
I think, believe in beauty. And though
the body can be polished to inanity—
there the flower's as frequent as the leaf—

the landscape can feel, and is glad of her too,
was all the poets meant. The world's so bare
already: this bird no more than a drift of air
in the form of plumes, this sky from science tubes,
and that girl loved out in the medicinal lace-
weed, the one the universe clung to, a cloud
hovering low—was cropped above the waist
and blonde. You sang her the one that goes brick, house.

Self-Portrait, in Botanical Garden

Like a jaundiced heart, in throbs of gold
and yellow, the koi thrash, pack
belly on back for a living dam of mouths.

On its concrete piles the footbridge
does not shudder; the water in the next pond
hardly makes a pockmark
in a surface of lilies whose pads, outspread,
propose to bear a body-weight.

Amorous reeds are played on by the wind.

One ought not touch any of it.

The Lawn Mower

When we finally flip it over
the fireflies are out. The neighbor boy
has had his stitches in so I can admit
I think it is all fantastic: the suck
of the spark plug undone, the stuck blade
bent into the guard, and the sound
of the hammer's head reshaping the metal.
In this our suburban Eden we've only
a teenage Adam too dreamy to manage
his motorized scythe and silly Eve leaving
her coffee cups and plastic plant pots
behind in the grass. Though it's a long way
from a fall, this spring's first disaster,
I did like the thin thread of red
on his upper lip, and I like my mower
turned over among the glow-worms,
a monstrous dandelion as unnatural as we
are, out in a garden, untidily
golden and dangerously sharp.

Gerard Hopkins, Reflected in a Lake

My own impulse would show sky
in lake. Let blue on blue efface
the eye which sees both blues.
You can see I don't believe
in immanence: the landscape
I look at looks back, reflective
of the lack I stress it with.
But then, my vision's bad.
Your own's so sharp you sketch
it shaded, two black lakes.
As if the pupils overcame
their eye-holes. Like a skull.
Whose memento mori do you see
when light dilates to dazzlement,
draws sight, at last, wide open?
Not the soul's. Your own has eyes
which could not be closed.

Not Singing

Small intelligences on the upper branches—
birch and very white—black
themselves, burning, on the eye like sparks
catching now that branch, now this,
so that I turn my head to the superimposition
of another tree on the empty sky.
My eyes are bad. The birds are mad atwitter.

The Big Bad Wind

It comes in and fucks everything up:
suddenly the backyard empties out
its trees and the ground gets trashed
with beer-bottle brown and beer-bottle green.

Darling, it was a real good party
but it's time you got off my couch.
Every apocalypse is just a joke
apocalypse, a fierce black birdie

who flew at the front door's glass;
every ending disappoints.
All these leaves and these feathers—
might some god show up to collect them?

Po-mo Ode

Invoke the autumn. The leaves
grind down in concentrated
golden powders exhaled
windily onto fluorescent light.
None of us is ever going to die.

Bird Lawn

Though leaves collect their yellow tongues
to strop the thousand blades of sky
and make them cut out pain, someone
is forever coming up the garden
with a palette and a brush
demanding an exact location for the light
that dazzles. An aesthetics of injury
is easy enough. Grass nubs itself down to the quick.
Even the birds silence themselves, refusing,
with judicial vigor, the longing to rise.

The Golden School

Yellow tones to mustard, goes gold
and then horizon-lines itself with white,
blues off into a distance he's hung
at the foot of his bed. I know

there's no landscape like this one,
not even in memory, not in mine. I try
and it's always the nineteenth century:
on the edge of Lake Como an ersatz

ex-pat on a faux palazzo patio with yes,
a mountain, the open air, cold
coffee in an enamel cup—and here's the soul
and its parse, its partition, its part

with the body, ascend as a bird
beyond the eye whose sentimental lens
sees nothing real. The young lady
is inevitably sketching, says James.

Gold, gold, goes the Rothko; gold,
and no evading metaphor, no local color.
I know. But I'd have a night, an evening,
an afternoon he told me as a series

of summers, sun down like nothing
I know of the sunset, sun down in a room
they broke into, abandoned, the 80s,
the college girls gone home, acid and sun

ever more acidic, orange and red
and flame-out against the glass
I could not have brought myself to break,
I who make longing a professional career.

More Light

Such spectacle as sun makes, rising,
makes the eye that sees grotesque
the show: the world will take its turn,
in white, as abrasive powder dropped
(to what effect, the artificer
of the drama doesn't say) on stage.
If the boards laid edge to edge
weren't groaning like a body
that would break if it knew how
to best display violence for delight,
if light would wear a costume
other than the heart's, or move more softly,
a ghost in a fantastic snow—
but for what other audience
than this, that can drop the curtain
if it wish, shall I have sun put on
an awful conscious grace?

VITA

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