

## Female Desire in Prose Poetry: Susan Holbrook's "as thirsty as" and Hilary Clark's "Tomato"

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*I think your drama lacks a little line - bony structure and palpable, as it were, tense cord - on which to string the pearls of detail. It's the frequent fault of women's work - and I like a rope (the rope of the direction and march of the subject, the action) pulled, like a taut cable between steamer and tug, from beginning to end. [Your plot] lapses and lapses on a trifle too liquidly (347).*

-- from a letter Henry James wrote in 1900 to Mrs. Everard Cotes after reading her novel *His Honour and a Lady*

Kathleen Fraser, in her examination of the line in poetry by contemporary women, argues that the poetic line is often the location for experimentation with and departure from received poetic norms. As a result, she contends, the line provides women poets with "the difficult pleasure of reinventing the givens of poetry, imagining in visual, structural terms core states of female social and psychological experience not yet adequately tracked: hesitancy, silencing or speechlessness, continuous disruption of time, 'illogical' resistance, simultaneous perception, social marginality" (153). She then proceeds to support her position with a detailed examination of works by eleven women poets, including reference to her own poetry. With each poet, she demonstrates how that woman alters the poetic line to enact certain female experiences. For example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis visualizes the experience of mothering a small child with her split words/lines and handwriting around the typed text; Frances Jaffer resists silencing by resisting closure with her unorthodox line breaks; and Ntozake Shange breaks patriarchal and racist control by using slashes to interrupt the line (158-59, 165-66, 170-72). Although Fraser occasionally mentions female desire, she never fully explores in this essay how these women writers might visualize female sexual desire. She begins her essay by stating, "The line, for a poet, locates the gesture of longing brought into language," but does not elaborate in terms of sexual longing, sexual desire (152). I wish to examine what Fraser does not. Using prose poetry by Susan Holbrook and Hilary Clark, I trace how these women writers enact a female sexual desire in language.

Why focus solely on prose poetry? Fraser makes no distinction between the line in verse poetry and the line in prose poetry, using examples from both to illustrate her thesis. I, however, wish to narrow my focus to prose poetry, not only because of its deliberate challenge to both the verse line and the prose line, the sentence, but also

because the prose poem subverts the longer line of traditional narrative. As part of her attempt to define the prose poem, Marguerite Murphy contends that prose poetry challenges narrative in two ways: (1) through plot with its sequential movement from beginning through middle to end, and (2) through referentiality with its "assumption that the novel represents a world that imitates a certain reality, an experience of human life and society" (70). The tension that results from the conflation of prose and poetry, from the challenge of the line(s), presents even more opportunities for women to disrupt conventional forms and to resist the patriarchal containment that often is implicit in those forms.

## I

Before moving to an examination of Holbrook's and Clark's prose poetry in the second half of this paper, I will first outline a theory of female sexual desire and its appearance in language. Susan Winnett was one of the first critics to reveal that Peter Brooks' and Robert Scholes' theories of narrative are based on a pattern of normative male sexual pleasure.[1] With male sexual arousal, the penis becomes erect. Then, sexual tension increases until the male experiences orgasm. After ejaculation, the penis loses its erection, and the male relaxes into, what Winnett terms, "the myth of the afterglow - so often a euphemism for sleep - [. . .] a compensation for the finality he has reached" (506). Male desire, Winnett points out, is constantly moving toward the illusion of finality. "Even at its inception," she argues, there is a "desire for the end," not only the little death of orgasm, but also literal death (508). This pattern of arousal, tension, climax, and relaxation follows the traditional narrative pattern of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion.[2]

Winnett, though, also points out an implication of the typical narrative pattern that is, perhaps, less obvious. Readers cannot escape being implicated in male pleasure, for, according to Winnett, "the pleasure the reader is expected to take in the text is the pleasure of the man" (506). She doubts that Brooks and Scholes are aware of, let alone celebratory of, the homoerotic aspect of their narrative theories. Although these theories imply a challenge to the tyranny of heterosexuality, Winnett points out that women are left out of the equation; they are neither the implied authors nor the implied readers. Indeed, any pleasure women receive in reading is because they "have been taught to read in drag" (516). Rather than internalize male sexual pleasure, women, Winnett believes, "must begin to question seriously the determinants that govern the mechanics of our narratives, the notion of history as a sense-making operation, and the enormous investment the patriarchy has in maintaining them" (516).

One way to question the "determinants that govern the mechanics of our narratives" is to uncover female patterns of pleasure in language.[3] Not surprisingly, female sexual pleasure deviates from the male pattern. Winnett reports:

Everything that the last two decades have taught us about human sexual response suggests that the female partner in intercourse has accesses to pleasure not open to her male partner. [. . .] Without endangering her partner's ultimate "success," she can begin her own arousal at whatever point in the intercourse her fantasy finds exciting. She can even take as her point of arousal the attained satisfaction of her mate. Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, she can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the "conventional" heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that. (507)

For women, then, sexual pleasure does not depend on a linear beginning-middle-end pattern. Female pleasure can begin at any time during the "heterosexual sex act," while male arousal, subsequent erection, and attendant pleasure is necessary for conventional sexual intercourse.[4] Furthermore, women's pleasure does not depend on male pleasure. Even reproduction is not contingent on the "successful satisfaction" of female desire as it is on the male climax. In addition, multiple female orgasms prolong female pleasure well after male pleasure has come to an end. What would a narrative pattern of female sexual pleasure look like?

Winnett uses two novels by women to illustrate their narrative difference from the typical male pattern. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the birth of the monster is not the end Frankenstein hopes for (the culmination of male sexual pleasure), but a beginning that refuses the finality of an ending (509-11).[5] George Eliot's *Romola* illustrates the main character's desire for a plot of her own. Even though her desire is often subsumed by male narrative, she escapes the masterplot long enough to discover her own narrative pattern. She constructs her own story (512-15). I find Winnett to be less successful in illustrating female narrative patterns with *Romola* than with *Frankenstein*. She is not clear how the construction of a woman's story challenges male narrative patterns. Nevertheless, she does suggest that women's narrative begins, resists the closure dictated by the satisfaction of male desire, and wishes to tell its own story.

Luce Irigaray offers a more detailed picture of women's pleasure in language. In "This Sex Which Is Not One," she argues that woman's desire cannot "be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks" (25). Woman has often been defined by lack, lack of a penis, lack of logic, lack of power. Irigaray, however, contends that woman lacks no/thing. For example, she has multiple sex organs, beginning with her labial lips. Indeed, "she finds pleasure almost anywhere. [. . .] [T]he geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined - in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on

sameness" (28). Woman's language, Irigaray asserts, registers her multiple sources of pleasure:

[In her language,] "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. [. . .] She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished . . . When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an *"other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, concealed in them.* (29)

In Irigaray's conceptualization, then, female sexual pleasure appears in language as multiple beginnings, succinct diction, fragmented sentences, and illogical reasoning as well as a refusal to follow sequential patterns (beginning, middle, end) and a resistance to fixed definitions and positions.

Of course, any theory that argues for some form of writing female experience, the female body so to speak, risks being charged with essentialism. Ann Rosalind Jones does exactly that in her critique of French feminism. She argues that Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, particularly Cixous and Irigaray, base their theories of women's language on the premise that female sexuality is innate. Jones contends that it is next to impossible for women to experience their bodies outside social constructions of their sexuality. She asserts that sexuality is developed, rather than fully present at birth, and that development is affected by cultural attitudes toward sexuality (374-75). Although she does not mention it, recent research into multiple orgasms reveals that even though all women are capable of experiencing multiple orgasms, not all (less than 50%) do, and that some men (10%-15% of the male population) are capable of multiple orgasms, but far less than that percentage actually experience them (Block 198). What this information seems to suggest is that biology may have less of an effect on sexual response than does training, or, to use Jones' term, "development." If sexuality is primarily the product of social construction, then how can the body be a source of purely female knowledge, infected as it may be with male paradigms? Jones also argues that theories of writing the body, such as Irigaray's, assume a universal sexual experience for all women. As I have just pointed out, not all women experience multiple orgasms and, as Jones notes, not all women experience their sexuality free of "phallogocentric habits of thought and feeling" (375). Neither can readers assume that female sexuality is the same for all classes, races, and cultures of women. "How can one libidinal voice," asks Jones, "or the two vulval lips so startlingly presented by Irigaray - speak for all women" (376)?

In addition, Jones contends that French feminists, Irigaray included, merely reverse the male/female binary. Women are different from men, but their difference is better. Such a construct, Jones believes, serves to reinforce male dominance because it still "leaves the man as the determining referent" (376).

In spite of her criticisms, however, Jones finds much to be valued in writing the female body:

As a lens and a partial strategy, *féminité* [sic] and *écriture féminine* are vital. Certainly, women need to shake off the mistaken and contemptuous attitudes toward their sexuality that permeate Western (and other) cultures and languages at their deepest levels, and working out self-representations that challenge phallogocentric discourses is an important part of that ideological struggle. (378)

Jones does acknowledge the "need to examine the words, the syntax, the genres, the archaic and elitist attitudes toward language and representation that have limited women's self-knowledge and expression during the long centuries of patriarchy" (381). She does caution, however, that even with the concept of writing the body as "energizing myth," not as a model for all women, women's writing cannot be located in a "spontaneous outpouring" of the body (379). There is always the danger that spontaneous writing may be tainted with cultural, more specifically patriarchal, attitudes. According to Jones, writers and readers need to examine the context of any *l'écriture féminine* (379).

Jones does pose a number of difficulties implicit in any discussion of female sexuality in language. However, her reading of Irigaray does not adequately register Irigaray's position. Irigaray's use of the phrase "the imaginary" leaves open the possibility that the imaginary is not solely a "spontaneous outpouring" of innate sexuality, but is also the result of cultural constructs. She uses the phrase in reference to both male and female sexuality. As well as the imaginary that is governed by too much sameness, Irigaray refers to the imaginary that governs Western sexuality and argues that it consists of "the more or less exclusive . . . attention paid to erection" with its consequent male rivalries and sadomasochistic fantasies (24). When *imaginaire* is used in French to describe a place, as Irigaray seems to be doing with her play on the noun form of the adjective, one of the possible connotations of the word is *fictif* or *fictive*, implying false or fictitious. How much of the imaginary can be the result of essential biology with this constructed sense of the term *imaginaire*? Irigaray is playing, no doubt, with the multiple meanings of the word to illustrate, in part, the constructed nature of the female and male imaginations and the ways in which fiction/*fictive* offers a space for the imaginary "really" to take place.[6] Irigaray's placement of quotation marks around "she" and "him" also leaves these terms open to more than an essential reading of female and male. "She" and "him"

seem to suggest that Irigaray views woman and man as culturally constructed in addition to being biologically determined.

If Irigaray views woman and man as culturally constructed, at least in part, then she would also acknowledge the differences not only between women and men, but also between women. Different cultures produce different versions of woman, which in turn results in a "multiplicity of female desire and female language" (30). Irigaray is also aware of the dangers inherent in merely reversing binary oppositions. If, Irigaray argues, women, primarily heterosexual and bisexual women, withdraw from engagement with men to foster lesbian relationships with each other, as tempting as that might be, then women run the risk of losing out in the power game.<sup>[7]</sup> In addition, "if their aim were simply to reverse the order of things, even supposing this to be possible, history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallograticism. It would leave room neither for women's sexuality, nor for women's imaginary, nor for women's language to take (their) place" (33). Consequently, Irigaray contends, woman is never "*simply one*"; she "always remains several" (31). By refusing singular definitions, by resisting one or the other side of a binary construction, by foregrounding plurality, women move beyond simple male or female categories.

Even though Irigaray's position resists many of the difficulties with essentialism that Jones finds in French feminism, Jones does point out the risks involved in writing and reading the female body in language. If the female body is the basis for female knowledge, then the female body can also be the basis for female oppression. Nevertheless, as Jones admits, women need to resist patriarchal views of female sexuality by re/constructing their bodies in language. With Jones' criticisms, but also her realization of the need to write the female body, I wish to adapt Winnett's and Irigaray's theories to my study of female sexual desire.<sup>[8]</sup> I contend that writing the body is not so much an automatic writing of a physical experience as it is a conscious effort to construct a sexuality that resists patriarchal definitions of women as lack, as negative half of the male/female binary, as oppressed by their bodies. In what follows, then, I examine "the words, the syntax," the challenges women's prose poetry makes to "the archaic and elitist attitudes toward language and representation that have limited women's self-knowledge and expression," rather than examine a universal, innate female sexuality through women's texts (Jones 381).

## II

Female desire in Susan Holbrook's collection of prose poems "as thirsty as" disrupts the linear narrative model that Susan Winnett identifies with male sexual response as well

as bears the marks of Luce Irigaray's description of l'écriture féminine. The first section contains what appear to be eleven "sentences"[9]:

Only you could carve a pumpkin and make it look aloof. Neck up, it doesn't suck.  
The more she began to love her, the more she avoided that word. Signed her  
letters 'Yours,' and she was. Embouchure blown out of proportion. Whet with an  
'h' is wetter. If language really were transparent, I would like the bathing suits.  
Always horning in on his own thoughts. As we dance, as wet as. Call your dog  
'Toot' or 'Chutney' and it won't grow any bigger. Consider the whistle blown.  
(misled 24)

The first three sentences are grammatically correct. Sentence four, however, breaks with grammatical convention. At first glance it appears to consist of two independent clauses, but the first clause, "Signed her letters 'Yours,'" does not name the subject who signs "her letters." Sentence five needs a helping verb to complete the past participle "blown." Sentence eight lacks a subject and verb: [He is] "[a]lways horning [. . .]," and sentence nine consists of two adverbial phrases with no independent clause to complete the thought. These sentence fragments break the linear grammatical progression of subject-verb-object, and, as a result, figure the movements of female desire.

Female desire is also evident in the numerous challenges to referentiality throughout the section. Pronouns rarely signify a known noun. Who "could carve a pumpkin" (24)? What "doesn't suck" (24), the pumpkin, the neck, you? Who is "she," and whom does "she" love? Who is the "I" voice, a neutral narrator/speaker, or is the "I" involved in the she/her relationship? Who does "his" refer to? Who are "we," the she/her, the I/you, both, neither? Individual words or phrases also resist stable definitions. For example, what word does "she" avoid, "neck," "suck"? The word "love" does not become a possibility until we read the next line: "Signed her letters 'Yours,' and she was" (24). Signifiers are rarely anchored long enough to determine meaning. Throughout the passage, syntax works to interrupt linearity. Each sentence defies logical progression either within the sentence itself, or without in its relationship to the sentences that precede and follow it.

In her exploration of the erotics of translation in Nicole Brossard's and Daphne Marlatt's collaborative works *Mauve* and *Character/Jeu de lettres*, Holbrook cites Marlatt's description of poetic movement to support the contention that logical disorder is an enactment of female desire:

In "Lesbera," Marlatt identifies her own movement in language as erotic, "surg[ing] beyond the limits of orderly syntax and established meaning" (124). This is a processual poetic, driven by association, a form of thought Marlatt calls "erotic because it works by attraction" ("Musing" 54). Proposals, then, are thrown over in favor of a mobile unravelling of propositions. ("Mauve Arrows" 233)

This erotic associational movement is also evident in Holbrook's works. Rather than follow a sequential narrative movement (beginning, middle, and end), the sentences, indeed the sections themselves, in "as thirsty as" relate to each other through erotic association. In the first section, each sentence moves into another by word association. "Neck up" in the second sentence relates to "pumpkin" in the opening sentence (misled 24). If the stem of a pumpkin can figure the neck, then when the pumpkin is carved, the stem becomes part of the top of the jack-o-lantern - the neck is "up." As I have already pointed out, the non-referentiality of "that word" in sentence three includes "suck" from the previous sentence as well as "love" when the following sentence, sentence four, is taken into consideration. "Embouchure," in sentence five, with its suggestion of mouths and lips produces a reverberation back to "suck" as well as forward to "whet," in the following sentence, with the connotation of lip movement in the playing of a musical instrument. "Whet" connects with "bathing suits" (sentence seven), and transparent "bathing suits" could relate to male desire as in horni/ng "in on his own thoughts" (sentence eight). However, the "I" of "I would like the bathing suits" is ungendered and just as likely to be female, especially if the "I" is one half of the "she began to love her" relationship. Thus, the fantasy of being able to see through swim suits at the beach or swimming pool is, at the very least, both male and female and, even more likely, only female, the desire of a woman, who horns in on male territory, for another woman. "Wet" in sentence nine relates back through each sentence to "whet" in sentence six, and "embouchure" finds echoes in "[t]oot" (sentence ten) and the blown whistle (sentence eleven).

Transparent language, or the desire to see/fix reality through language, also reverberates in sentence ten with the desire to solidify size and shape through specific words; however, the desire for language stability is denied by the associational movement of the passage. Thus, readers should "[c]onsider the whistle blown."<sup>[10]</sup> Although desire for fixity in language is denied through the "mobile unravelling of propositions" in this passage, Holbrook celebrates female sexual desire. It hardly seems necessary to point out that many of the words that build the associations between sentences also have strong erotic connotations. Not only does the syntax speak a form of female desire, but also the words in the section give voice to a female sexuality.

Grammatical and referential disorder build throughout the prose poem collection of "as thirsty as." For example, the second section contains fourteen fragmented sentences and two complete sentences. Holbrook continues to challenge referentiality with sentences such as "Would you swim through it for money?" and "Did they ever occur to you?" (26, 29). Swim through what? Who or what is "they," and who is "you"? The syntax also foregrounds ambiguity. For example, the fourth section begins, "She gave her lip" (29). The sentence could be a fragment that could be completed by stating to whom



or to what "she" gave her lip. Or, the sentence could be a colloquial expression to suggest that "she" was disrespectful to "her." Or, the sentence could indicate female sexuality: "she" caressed "her" with her lip(s) or on her lip(s). As possible readings blur into each other, female desire surfaces and floats through the collection.

Associational erotics also functions between the sections in the collection. For example, the interrogation of transparent language from section one reverberates in section two with "[I]f the figurative does precede the literal, what about falling in love" and "Meow Mix the heteroglossia of cats" (25). It is repeated again in section three with "I'd like to be a gumshoe so I could put my foot in my mouth," in section four with "When you think of a horseshoe is it on a horse," in section five with "The mop was flooded," and in section nine with the sentence "With crown taken, what's the synecdoche for you," to list a few of the more obvious points of connection (26, 27, 28, 32). The adverbial fragment(s) that echoes the title "as thirsty as" repeats throughout as well. In addition, plays on associations with certain words, ideas, and activities, such as swimming, animals, clichés, and letters, construct a random dynamic between the sections. The movement, however, is never from point A to point B, but is always, to use Irigaray's words, setting "off in all directions."

After Holbrook outlines Marlatt's erotic poetics in the passage quoted above, she elaborates, "One thing leads to another; intentionality surrenders to desire, which represents far more of a threat. Pressed up against desire, intention speaks a dogged morality; aren't we asked, when our desires are discovered, to declare our intentions?" ("Mauve Arrows" 233-34). She repeats this interrogation of intention in the last section of "as thirsty as": "The proper mode of proceeding based on intention, not desire. Tutti patouti. We are asked, when our desires are discovered, what are your intentions. As tutti as" (misled 32).[11] Male sexual pleasure follows a path of intention. From its inception, it intends to end. Female desire in "as thirsty as" follows no such pattern; it moves independent of a controlling, ordering logic. The multiple associations generated by the insertion of "Tutti patouti" and "As tutti as" between and after the two sentences about intention and desire subvert the controlling power of intention and construct a space within which desire can freely circulate. "Tutti patouti" is a derivative of Tutti Frutti, a popular bubble gum. As gum, the phrase then works its way through the collection, picking up all of the words associated with gum: "gumshoe," "gummy bears," "gumption," as well as words related to eating, mouths, and sexuality (26, 29). The phrase also connects to "embouchure" with the connotation of playing a musical instrument, to "toot." In addition, the phrase syntactically relates to the other clichés, such as "Pell-Mell and Willy-Nilly" as well as "Loop de loop ennui," which serve, in part, to interrupt sequential movement (25, 28). Of course, "As tutti as" takes readers through every similar phrase to the title itself, "as thirsty as," as well as conjuring up "tittie" and

"titter" (25). With each association, the fragmented movement from word to word in any direction in the collection both enacts and connotes female desire.

In Hilary Clark's prose poem "Tomato," a similar associative erotic as well as grammatical and referential disorder speaks female desire. Each section of the prose poem is a rewriting of the previous section. The sections, however, do not proceed through a logical order where one idea moves rationally into the next, but find their movement, instead, through association. The first section reads as follows:

Eat it, snuff it, cup it. Pomodoro, the word rolls off the tongue, pulp, seeds and all. Golden apple spurt. Little pumpkin. Red ruddy rotund, fall fires and the days quickly darkening. One perfect blemish, one shadow elongating. Open. Flesh, the soft parts of bodies frighten me, vegetable animal, inner water. Cut the rim of skin remains red; paler tissue, cloud of juice or albumen. Whiter veins branch, disappear; lakes open. (Faint smell of sour earth, salt.) Greenish slime sac, amniotic, tomato babies cluster and wait. Faint spines cross our vision, fetal extensions. The heart at the rot of it. Loveapple, skin closing over. Two wet seeds on a white plate. (14)

The first sentence of the second section, "In a cupped hand" (14), repeats the word "cup" from the first section. Sentence number two emphasizes the juxtaposition of abstract words and material substance in the second sentence of the first section with "confusion of tongues and flesh," thereby moving the focus away from a tomato to a human body (14). The following sentences in the second passage continue associations with eggs, water, lakes, amniotic fluid, and seeds that also occur in the first section: "Fish to spawn. [. . .] Egg rind, bloody, and feverish fleeing days. [. . .] larvae in a soft brush with water. [. . .] Fluid humour between skin and the edible part of the embryo. [. . .] On the dark side of the moon, a sea, amniotic limbs" (14). This movement constructs reverberations between nature, nature's processes, and the female body, enacting in the repetition the rhythms of the female reproductive cycle as well as female desire. The direct use of the word "flesh" in section one becomes "[c]oral granulation" in section two (14). "One perfect blemish, one shadow, elongating" becomes, in the second passage, "One pale long shadow sully. Perfect" (14). "Cut the rim of skin remains red" metamorphizes the second time around into "Cut, the skin remains a lip, delicate" (14). In each of these examples, the associational movement flows subtly away from a negative view of female bodies - the fear of flesh, the suggestion of imperfection, the destructive cut - to a more hopeful, if not positive, view of female sexuality.

Rather than illustrate the erotic movement between each of the seven passages in "Tomato," I wish to move to the last two sections to show how far from the first section

the prose poem has moved as well as demonstrate the associational movement between these last sections.[12] Section number six reads:

Intelligence, split distinctions. In each seed, a smaller worm carrying a seed. Hot bluff but wind at the flash of a gun. Yellow forsythia, wool and dust; snuff after love. Logic, the ligament of thought. The spikes opened holes for fluid to pass. She has a toothache, delusions of light and swift change. Her fingers dissemble, find spots on a leaf. Sacramental, knowing the water sign, deep green syringa, blood. We are suspended over the flood. Iris, sea baleine. The sun licks the first wild hyacinths. Glass. I am wrapped in the humour or your eye. (16)

Although this passage has moved considerably from the first section - any direct references to tomatoes have disappeared, for example - there are still many points of connection between the first passage and this section. The "[t]wo wet seeds on a white plate" echo in the second sentence. However, in passage number six, the figure of a worm within a seed, within a seed, within a seed, *ad infinitum* challenges the binary opposition of two seeds placed side by side on a plate. In this rewriting the image becomes one with the other, not one or the other. When readers associate "[i]ntelligence, split distinctions" and "[l]ogic the ligament of thought" with the seed image, the interrogation of patriarchal binaries and linear logic becomes evident. Clark is not suggesting that binary thinking is a relic of the past; "light and swift change" are delusions (16). The worm is, after all, still in the seed; there still is "snuff after love"; but resistance to patriarchy has "opened holes for fluid to pass."

Section seven reverberates with associations from section six. The suggestion of water and female sexuality in number six echoes in section seven: "In every oyster a stone. Red roe. [. . .] A compulsion to open holes, read flesh in mystic shorthand. [. . .] Will wisdom be gold, silver, salmon, very thin - or winged? [. . .] The Hyades dip below a rolling sea. Withdraw your fingers, glistening. I am rising" (16). Female sexuality continues to be heard in this last section as the associations and fragmented sentences enact the disjointed movement of female sexuality in language. Here, Clark figures the challenge to binary constructions and linear narrative as "[a] compulsion," a reading of the body in "mystic shorthand." [13]

At this point in my discussion, I realize I must make a disjunctive move of my own. The setting off "in all directions" that Irigaray describes occurs in "Tomato," and to a lesser extent in Holbrook's "as thirsty as," as a complex web of interactions, so much so that it is next to impossible to sort through each thread of association separately. In an effort to coherently articulate associational movement, I have arbitrarily constructed an order that the prose poetry repeatedly resists. Rather than structuring the movement as bi-directional, where the link between words moves either ahead to another word or back to

a previous word, a more appropriate model for associational movement is that of an interconnected web of associations, similar to Bill Cheswick's and Hal Burch's map of the internet ([http://www.cybergeography.org/atlas/lumeta\\_large.jpg](http://www.cybergeography.org/atlas/lumeta_large.jpg)). One word or phrase may, and often does, have multiple associations in multiple directions that often connect with other points of association. For example, previously, I suggested a connection between the water associations in the sixth section and "oyster," "red roe," "salmon," "sea," and "glistening" in the last section. However, "oyster," "red roe," and the glistening fingers also hint at sexuality, specifically female sexuality in the salmon eggs. When readers also add the associations developed in other sections between water and female sexuality, they can see that the same movement occurs in this passage as well. But the associations do not stop there. The Hyades' movement below the "rolling sea" connects with "I am rising" and the cyclical movement of female sexuality. Star formations dip below the horizon at certain times during the year only to rise again depending on the earth's position in orbit around the sun. However, the Hyades, the Greek women who nursed the infant Dionysus, also connect with the numerous mythological associations in "Tomato." For example, "spurge" in section two is a play on "spurt" in section one, but also indicates a spurge laurel, the bush into which Daphne supposedly metamorphosed. Of course, this association then leads into the numerous connections to plants in the prose poem as well as suggests the actual physical dangers patriarchy poses for women. Clearly, this web-like movement that branches off in many directions demonstrates the complexities of female sexuality, a sexuality that resists straightforward, linear progress.

With the complexity of movement throughout "Tomato" acknowledged, I resume my examination of the inter-related associations between sections six and seven, trusting that my readers will be cognizant of the constructed nature of my discussion. Earlier, I quoted the entire sentence that includes "salmon" to illustrate the association with water, but "wisdom" connects with the previous sentence - "She has toothache, hard dense lumps under pink gums" - and then back to section six: "She has toothache, delusions of light and swift change" (16). In section seven, however, the toothache relates to wisdom, as in wisdom teeth, rather than delusions of "light and swift change," and, once again, there is a movement away from negative associations to a positive, even celebratory, speaking of female sexuality. A similar movement occurs in the associations between the world of plants and sexuality, not only throughout the prose poem, but also in sections six and seven. In section six, "deep green syringa" placed between "water" and "blood" invites readers to remember the cyclical nature of female sexuality - syringa, commonly known as the lilac, symbolized memory during the Victorian era. The associations between water - the wetness of female sexuality - and the cyclical appearance of menstrual blood continue in the next sentence with the word, "flood," which rhymes with "blood." The following sentence sustains these associations: "Iris, sea baleine" (16). Not only does Clark deepen the water associations here, but she also expands upon the links between

female sexuality and plant life. The shape of an iris resembles female genitals. That shape also appears in the next sentence with the lick of the sun on the "first wild hyacinths." The Greeks believed the hyacinth to be an exclamation of grief, but the flower has also been "identified with the martagon lily, a kind of iris" ("Hyacinth"). Female sexuality slips and slides throughout the passage and into the next section where wind and breath take on the task of random movement. "Ovules," "pollen," and "[I]ips [that] blow the blossoms home" continues the fragmented, disjointed, multiple enactment of female sexuality that moves throughout these sections and, indeed, the entire prose poem.

Just as readers have seen in Holbrook's work, Clark also enacts female sexuality by disrupting the plot of the sentence. Aaron Shurin, in his elaboration of narrativity, contends that "syntax is the plot of the sentence, a systematic ordering of person and event, of who does what to whom and when and to what end. Encoded in its structures are a variety of fixed agreements that always end in a point (.) [. . .] Business conveniences that make of stories little prisons of discrete power relations with seemingly invisible walls" (9). Very few sentences in "Tomato" contain an ordered subject-verb-object pattern, and when they do, the sentences never relate sequentially to each other, so the larger linear pattern of narrative is also frustrated.

In addition to associative logic, which also subverts the mechanisms of plot, Clark refuses to meet any expectations readers may have for familiar patterns. For example, the first section appears to begin as a meditation on the tomato: "Eat it, snuff it, cup it (14). Even in this opening sentence, there is a push against the confines of the meditation. The first three injunctions seem to ask readers to sensually experience a tomato: taste it, smell it, and feel it. The word "snuff," however, resists simple definitions. "Snuff" may be a version of "sniff," meaning to smell, but it also has sinister associations. Another possible connotation of the word is to kill, or to murder. In the next sentence, the Italian word for tomato, *pomodoro*, "rolls off the tongue," just as it would if readers not only were to taste, smell, and feel the vegetable, but also were to "speak" the tomato. Immediately, though, the meditation is disrupted because the actual tomato, "pulp, seeds, and all" rolls off the tongue as well. Instead of moving, sequentially from one point of meditation to another, each section begins the meditation again, while also moving away from the original point of contemplation. The prose poem ends with section seven, but the present participle construction of the last sentence indicates a continuation, not closure. The narrator/speaker will keep rising, and the prose poem will continue to generate sections. This circular, disjointed, never-ending motion enacts the pattern of female sexuality described by Winnett, a female sexuality that starts and ends whenever it wishes and continues for as long as desire is also pleasurable, rather than until desire changes into pleasure.

Throughout the prose poem, words and phrases resist fixed definitions, resist reader expectations for stability. "Tomato" is also, "[p]omodoro," "[g]olden apple spurt," "[l]ittle pumpkin," "[r]ed ruddy rotund," and "[l]oveapple" as well as slang for a sexually attractive woman. The association of women's bodies with a tomato is both erotic and destructive. Women do enjoy their sexual bodies, often passionately so, but patriarchy portrays women's bodies as only a vehicle for male pleasure. Clark continually juxtaposes opposites, not to construct binaries, but to move beyond them by revealing their arbitrary and, thus, constructed nature. A woman may be a "tomato," but when she is objectified as such, her voice and her sexual pleasure, if not her life, are "snuffed." Constructions, however, are not "necessities," as Shurin points out (5). When a construct is revealed as such, it then becomes "open to change" (5). Thus, women are not by necessity the objects of male desire. They can move beyond that patriarchal construct.

Even clichés and familiar phrases are open to change. For example, Clark questions the existence of a centre, a locus of meaning, by conflating two clichés: Something is either "the heart of the matter," or "the root of the matter" (14). In Clark's version - "The heart of the rot of it," rot is at the centre, not stability (14). Another example occurs in section four. Clark changes the cliché "caught red-handed in the cookie jar" to "[c]aught red-handed in soft chuckle mickle silk, ruby and blossom and dust" (15). The play of sound from the partial rhymes of "chuckle mickle silk" and the soft repetition of the "s" removes the overtones of embarrassment from the original cliché and adds, instead a note of pleasure. A female sexuality speaks again.

Pronouns also resist containment. Rarely are pronoun references in "Tomato" clear. More often, the pronoun, just as it does in Holbrook's collection, remains open to multiple significations. Does "we" signify men, women, a heterosexual couple, a gay couple, a small group of people, all humanity? Who is "she," a child, an adult, both? Who is the "me" in section one, a woman uncomfortable with her body, or bodies in general, a man who is frightened by female sexuality, the patriarchy? Is the "I" of six and seven the same voice, or two voices? Is the "I" of six a woman caught up in the eye/I of the male gaze, who then finds her way into speaking her body to, then, rise as a phoenix from the ashes in seven? The shifting pronoun along with the challenge to familiar patterns, and the instability of meaning in words and phrases refuses identification and, in so doing, enacts the plurality of female desire.

The project of writing the body in Susan Holbrook's and Hilary Clark's prose poetry, to borrow Irigaray's words, "upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" (30). In doing so, both Holbrook and Clark resist familiar patterns of male sexual pleasure in their prose poetry. Their work does not follow the typical

narrative pattern of arousal, tension, climax, and resolution. Instead, both women use language to enact a female sexual desire that contradicts the linearity of male desire. In the work of each writer, female desire refuses conventional logic, disrupts the pull of narrative - Henry James' "taut cable between steamer and tug" - and challenges syntactic order. Holbrook and Clark deploy an associational erotic that weaves in and out, between and around passages and words to speak a female sexuality, a sexuality with multiple stops and starts, multiple orgasms, multiple voices, multiple patterns of female sexual pleasure.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Robert Scholes directly compares narrative patterns to sexuality (Winnett effectively argues male sexuality) with his pronouncement: "the archetype of all fiction is the sexual act" (26), while Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, applies Sigmund Freud's theorization of the oedipal complex to the linear patterns of traditional narrative in terms exclusively descriptive of male sexual desire and pleasure. See Scholes and Brooks.

<sup>2</sup>Although Winnett did not point out the relationship between male sexual response and narrative pattern until relatively recently, the connection between the two is obvious to first-year undergraduate students. Each time I have discussed the typical plot pattern in introductory English classes, I have heard embarrassed snickers from some of the male students. They recognize a familiar pattern.

<sup>3</sup>Throughout this study, I interchangeably use the terms "desire" and "pleasure" to blur the boundaries between the desire for something and the pleasure that women receive when that desire is satisfied. I wish to move beyond sequential thinking - first desire, then pleasure - to also suggest that the process of desire can be a form of pleasure in itself.

<sup>4</sup>Winnett is careful, here, to note the multiplicity of sexualities. She uses heterosexual sex to illustrate how female sexuality differs from male sexuality, not to infer that heterosexuality is the norm (508-9).

<sup>5</sup> Although Winnett does not explore the implications of Frankenstein's and the monster's "ends" in her reading of the novel, the eventual "deaths" of these two main characters also challenge the male narrative pattern. Frankenstein is unable to realise satisfaction in the monster's demise (a literal climax of male desire - death). Even though he is consumed by a desire for the monster's end, he does not realise the satisfaction of his desire. Frankenstein does die, but he dies believing that his creation is alive to wreak havoc on future generations. His desire remains unsatisfied. Similarly, the monster's desire remains unfulfilled at the end of the novel. He wishes to escape the

agony of unfulfilled desire through his own death. He promises Walton that he will commit suicide and even describes how he will set himself on fire, but the monster's words are only a promise. The narrative does not end with the monster's death. Instead, the novel ends with the monster disappearing into darkness; his end unknown.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, one of the meanings of word "imaginary" that Irigaray plays with is Jacques Lacan's use of the term. Lacan's location of the mirror stage with its consequent formation of the subject in the desire of the Other further emphasises the constructed nature of Irigaray's approach to female sexuality. See Lacan, *Seminar Book I* and *Book II*.

<sup>7</sup> With this statement, Irigaray appears to assume an inherent homosexuality in all women, a homosexuality that would flourish if developed. However, one should note that Irigaray is suggesting a theoretical possibility not an actual possibility. She is not suggesting that all women are, or could be, lesbian, but, rather, she is arguing what would happen if it were possible for all women to be lesbian and if all women refused relationships with men.

<sup>8</sup> Although Winnett's argument is based on the physicality of female sexual pleasure, she does not view the writing process nor narrative as the result of sexuality alone; she merely wants to introduce another possibility, another theory. In addition, she does not argue that the alternative she suggests be the model for narrative, nor does she suggest that it serve as a model for "all 'female' narrative" (508). She sees her model, rather, as an alternative, one of many possible models that may, or may not, consider sexual desire (508). Hence her careful use of the indefinite article "a" before the phrases "female sexuality" or "female pleasure" throughout her essay. On occasion, I will also insert an indefinite article before a phrase indicating female desire or pleasure to signal that female sexuality, desire, and pleasure is multiple and never fixed or stable.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "sentence" in my discussion of prose poetry rather "loosely." I realise that many discussions of prose poetry refer to the sentence as "the line;" however, I wish to use the word "sentence" because I am primarily interrogating the plot line found not only in sentence structures, but also in narrative patterns.

<sup>10</sup> This movement between preceding and following sentences is also illustrative, in part, of Ron Silliman's definition of the new sentence. Silliman argues that the primary syllogistic movement of the new sentence is between the sentences immediately before and after any particular sentence. This limited movement, he contends, helps keep "the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below" (91). As this gesture to Ron Silliman's work suggests, the male L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets engage many of the same strategies that Holbrook and Clark employ. The disruptions to narrative, syntax, and reference, for example, are not strategies exclusive to female poets. These male poets, however, are not attempting to write the female body into language; they are more invested in challenging structures such as liberal humanism and capitalism. Female prose poets, such as Holbrook and Clark, however, utilise the strategies of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets not only to challenge humanism and capitalism, but also to disrupt conventional (male) narrative structures and write the female body and its experiences into language.

<sup>11</sup> This passage from Holbrook's examination of Marlatt's work also suggests the numerous challenges prose poetry makes to genre boundaries. Not only does prose poetry interrogate the conventional distinctions between poetry and prose, but Holbrook's work also illustrates how prose poetry blurs the boundaries between other genres, in this example, the boundary between poetry and literary criticism.



<sup>12</sup> Mapping all of the associations between sections would be a gargantuan task and beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, I limit my examination to the associations between the first, sixth, and seventh sections to illustrate for my readers the forms associational movement takes in "Tomato" rather than explicate every thread of association.

<sup>13</sup> A challenge to binary constructions, a full discussion of which would be outside the scope of the paper, is the process of pregnancy suggested by Clark's references to, among others, amniotic fluid, "tomato babies," "fetal extensions," embryos, and salmon eggs (14, 16). Not only does the image of two bodies in one defy simple binary divisions, but also the process of giving birth is, for many women, a highly sexual event.

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