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FEMININE POWER AND THE METAPHOR OF THE
FEMALE NATURE MYTH IN THE POETRY
OF JOHN MONTAGUE

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PREFACE

This study was conducted to explore John Montague's treatment of women as poetic characters, not auto-biographical representations. The majority of Montague's volume of work was considered in an effort to create as complete an overview as possible into the roles his female characters play and how these roles change over time. Because Montague's female poetic personalities are most often studied in terms of what they represent in the poet's own life, the specific objectives of this research were to examine these characters within the context of the poetry alone, without considering the poet's life or personal attitudes towards or experiences with women. The goal of this study is to learn what parallels Montague makes between women and landscape and to discover the extent to which he empowers or disempowers his female characters. The purpose behind this objective is to prove Montague's poetry is not totally misogynistic and that it contains women who are complex and multi-dimensional. Finally, by articulating a power struggle which is never fully resolved, this study should lead the reader to an understanding of the relation-ship between women and the mythical traditions which are the foundations of the Gaelic culture Montague seeks to preserve.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The racial aspect of a poet's inheritance should be unconscious as breathing."[1]

"I think the ultimate function of a poet is to praise."[2]

The poetry of John Montague both extols and maligns woman in all her levels of being and phases of existence, from hag to goddess, from infant to crone. Montague himself refers to his choice of incarnations for his feminine characters in "The Figure in the Cave: A Chapter of Autobiography": "Women are everywhere in my work, healing and harassing presences, the other half of an equation one spends a lifetime trying to solve" (87). His attempt at solving this equation begins in his earliest volume of poetry, Forms of Exile (1958), extends to his collection Mount Eagle (1988), and includes the seven volumes in between. The scope of his work, in addition to its focus on women in their relationships to men, includes as well an equally pervasive correlation between woman and landscape, and--more specifically--between land and life in Ireland.

The reason for Montague's interest in these two aspects

derives, no doubt, from his own relationship to his mother and to other women in his life and to the fact he grew up near the town of Garvaghey in a rural area in Northern Ireland. A Catholic, Montague was not only raised within a patriarchal religion--that is, a religion which holds as its highest object of worship a tri-partite masculine god, but in a region torn apart by political turmoil based largely on religious differences. Thus the problems of Northern Ireland reflect the poet's personal strife concerning identity and nationality, while, as a "Muse-poet"[3], he creates women in his poetry whose roles mirror the functions of women in his own life. Montague fuses these two essential concerns--women and Ireland--into a single topic, an interchangeable depiction of one in terms of the other. John Montague's poetry inextricably intertwines women and landscape throughout.

The equation Montague alludes to in "The Figure in the Cave" must include as one primary integer the concept of woman as mother, as so much of Montague's work is spent examining the women he has known in their roles as mothers or maternal figures. The often-repeated biographical references to Montague's relationship (or lack thereof) with his own mother--and, to a lesser extent, with his wives--offer a valid temptation to explain biographically the poetic personae's angry tones when describing motherhood in works like "Sheela na Gig," "A Flowering Absence," and most

of the other selections in The Dead Kingdom. Events in the poet's life may also contribute to the reverent quality of the poems dealing with his second wife's role as "good mother" in The Great Cloak. Underlying these personal references, however, are ideas concerning the feminine which have roots much deeper than Montague's own experience, ideas grounded in the earliest forms of religion and art, and traceable from the most ancient writings through the most modern forms of literature. As a self-proclaimed devotee of Robert Graves' The White Goddess, Montague is familiar with the theme of woman as "ur-mother"[4] and muse; similarly, he has translated and adapted poems from Gaelic and Old Irish, indicating a comprehension of the languages and the literature from which they derive.

Although critics such as Antoinette Quinn and Dillon Johnston accurately and firmly couple Montague's poetry and the poet's own life experiences, I would argue that the poems retain their potency and depth outside of biography. One basis for this assertion is Montague's inclusion of several translations from Gaelic, Old Irish, and French, works of other bards on the subject of women. Although these translated poems may represent a further expression of the poet's own views towards the women in his own life, he is not the author; thus, they are not--originally, at least --autobiographical and arguably represent a broader spectrum of poetry concerned with the position of women in all

aspects of life. Both paths of interpretation, of regarding the speakers of these poems as exemplifying Montague himself or as simply a collection of masculine voices, lead readers ultimately to question the position of women as characters in this poetry in relation to both their connection to landscape and to the power that connection gives them.

The origins of these questions concern the placement of the feminine within nature and the role of women as "other," that is, outside the unified, masculine whole represented by the city, the symbol of civilization. Beliefs which connected women to nature by virtue of the ability of both to create and sustain life were superceded by a patriarchal hierarchy which occurred in both government and religion. Women, despite their increasingly subordinate roles within these societal constructs, remained equated with nature, the one force over which people and their gods had no real control.

Connecting woman to a power before which human beings were ultimately helpless placed her squarely outside the religious and social standards, imbuing her with an "otherness" which was both threatening and compelling, making her and her influence upon men ultimately a focus of or inspiration to the arts, or, more specifically, to literature. As Dillon Johnston writes, "It may be, as [William] Wilson has suggested, that women lead the poet into literature, complexity, and <u>difference</u>, and away from

the primal unity of the father" ("Next to Nothing" 133). The placement of women as guides into literature--as objects of love, desire, political influence, jealousy, and anger--occurs in the earliest recorded literature, in the myth of Helen and the legend of Deirdre. And just as women influenced early the oral tradition of storytelling as the goddess of all aspects of nature, so they continue as muses for modern authors.[5] For a writer to attempt to find a period in literature in which images of landscape and the physical aspects of womankind are interwoven--either one used to describe the other--would be simple; more difficult would be to discover a literary stage in which this conjunction did not occur. The literature of Ireland--both ancient and modern--proves no exception. Just as many twentieth-century writers describe the landscape in inherently feminine terminology, and women in terms of the physical features of the landscape, so early Irish mythology does as well. The primordial sense of the earth as a life-giving Mothergoddess remains reflected in the lingual foundations of literatures around the world, and, more specifically, in Ireland.

Historical Influences

The use of female anatomical adjectives to describe landscape--and, more often, the use of features in nature as metaphors for aspects of a woman's body--is as old and

familiar as literature itself, and Montague's poetry as a form of contemporary Irish art makes woman and landscape as inseparable as they were during prehistoric times. Erich Neumann writes:

> The dominance of the archetype of the Great Mother constellates the human psyche of the primordial situation in which consciousness develops only slowly and only gradually emancipates itself from the domination of unconsciousness-directing processes.
>
> Although the beginnings of the psychological-matriarchal age are lost in the haze of pre-history, its end at the dawn of our historical era unfolds magnificently before our eyes. Then it is replaced by the patriarchal world, and the archetype of the Great Father or of the Masculine, with its different symbolism, its different values, and its different tendencies, becomes dominant. (The Great Mother 92)

It is this "psychological-matriarchal age" which Montague explores in his poems, an exploration which, as in history, culminates with a realization of the growing patriarchal hierarchy. Montague, however, retains an underlying sense of a dormant matriarchy. Additionally, he assumes a matriarchy which has become more purely personal and psychological rather than a matter of organized societal or

religious practices, but which nevertheless retains all its influences--good and bad--on the human unconscious.

Montague's modern approach to the metaphor which compares the physical features of woman and landscape adds a fresh interpretive possibility to the dark side of his bitter poems of motherhood, retrieving for the reader a sense of the time when growing patriarchal ideologies clashed with the established matriarchal system and created a need to incorporate both sets of beliefs into one functioning entity. The inability of humankind to adequately meet this need is one theme underlying Montagues's poems, and in his work the poet manages to relay both the strife and the unsatisfactory compromise between the two cultures of Earthmother and Skyfather. According to some theories concerning prehistoric religions, when a culture worships earth as woman, the sky becomes the male figure, and vice versa. Neumann notes examples in literature in which the earth and sky are seen to have a sexual relationship, with the sky "lying" on the earth (98-99). Sometimes the poetry indicates a dominance of one over the other, sometimes an uneasy reconciliation.

The introduction of Catholicism to Ireland may have furthered the cause of the patriarchal system of worship (and, given the importance of religion to the individual, of everyday life), but the Celts had already begun the transition. Ireland's insular condition makes its history

unique among nations; as T.W. Rolleston writes,

> Ireland alone was never even visited, much less subjugated, by the Roman legionaries, and maintained its independence against all comers nominally until the close of the twelfth century, but for all practical purposes a good three hundred years longer.
>
> Ireland has therefore this unique feature of interest, that it carried an indigenous Celtic civilization, Celtic institutions, art, and literature. . . . right across the chasm which separates the antique from the modern world, the pagan from the Christian world . . . .
>
> (35-36)

This uninterrupted form of civilization permitted a continuation of strong matriarchal tendencies longer than in many other civilizations. Among the deities worshipped in Ireland was a tripartite goddess expressed as three goddesses: virginal maiden, mother, and death.

Other scholars support Rolleston's view of Irish history and pre-history. While we have little information concerning Ireland, patterns of development in other Celtic regions of northern Europe may be applied to Irish history. For instance, J.A. MacCulloch notes that among the druidic priests in other Celtic areas with more thoroughly recorded and therefore more readily accessible pasts than Ireland's,

one priest of a group of twelve was married to the tribe's priestess (161); although the number of men with power was twelve times that of women, it seems the increasingly subordinate role of women did not reach its lowest level until after the Christian "Father/God" replaced the "Earthmother/ Goddess" completely. During the Celtic period in Ireland, the two systems reached a temporary compromise: while the various earth-connected incarnations of the Great Goddess were considered more immediate in importance to everyday life than were the gods, the phallic, upwardly aimed stones erected by the early Celts reflected the same ambition as the later churches or cathedrals--"pleasing structures whose slender spires reach skyward, embody[ing] the richness of tradition" (Johnson 135)--as they reach towards the gods of the sky and the sun.

Religious architecture has throughout the world incorporated both masculine and feminine anatomical shapes. According to James Hannay,

> The spire is the Phallus. In Roman Catholic countries it was not a "glorified roof," as Ruskin calls it, and it stood not <u>on</u> the church, but <u>beside</u> it, as we see in Florence, Venice, and other Cathedrals, as a bell tower or campanile. It was the Church's "Ishi," or husband; the Church is the "Ark of God," the delphic "Queen of

> Heaven," and is always feminine. The dome on the other types of Church is the om, womb, nave, navis, ship, or ark of life, always symbolic of Isis, or the womb, and the central mast or spire is the Phallus, or erect one . . . . (259)

Thus, the circularly grouped or single standing stones across northern Europe serve a structurally symbolic purpose similar to that of the later church structures.

In Ireland the phallic stones referred to as "dolmens" or "holed stones" (Scott 209) may have aimed skyward, but even more than the solid standing stones, the dolmens incorporated both the masculine and the feminine. The holes in the stones were thought to possess healing powers, and, according to George Riley Scott, the ill or infirm were pushed through them "for the purpose of effecting a cure. The very fact of passing through the aperture was symbolical of passing through a female vulva . . . and resulted in purification and regeneration" (201).[6] Although the Celts' phallicism may have, as Scott notes, "reached a greater degree of ecumenity, and was prosecuted with more realism in Ireland than in England and Scotland" (204), the worship of the female was not neglected; indeed, at the very least the phallus appears to have gained importance by taking on these female healing characteristics. The very fact of its existence implies the feminine; the rooting of the stones in

the earth raises a rhetorical question: what is the use of worshipping the male organ of regeneration without its female counterpart?

As with the religion of the Celts, patriarchal Christianity could not escape the influence of the Earthmother; ancient churches were decorated with "sheelah-na-gigs," which

> represented a female exposing herself to view in the most unequivocal manner, and are carved on a block which appears to have served as the keystone to the arch of the doorway of the church, where they were presented to the gaze of all who entered. (Scott 206)

Like the holes on the dolmens, the exaggerated genitalia of the sheelah-na-gigs are the focus of attention, stressing the importance of woman as mother. The usually hideous facial features and emaciated, death-like physiques of the carvings add a monstrous, evil effect to the representation of motherhood, and, according to Patrick Keane, "the gaunt, skeleton-ribbed torso of the typical Sheela-na-gig, along with the often ferociously gaping mouth, suggests a connection with the devouring war-goddess" (114n5). He adds, "Like the sheelas, the Celtic war-goddesses are also sexual hags" (114n5). By combining sexuality, or fertility, with the devouring, or deadly, aspect, the sheela-na-gig "is

the Celtic goddess of creation and destruction, a Kali-like vulva-woman whose 'blatant sexual nature relates to male fear-fantasies of the devouring mother'" (x).

If John Montague utilizes this ancient preoccupation with the female body as a symbol of the divine, he equally draws from the Irish concept of the land as a "feminine" form. He comments in the chapter "Notes and Introductions", in The Figure in the Cave, that "the Irish landscape is a kind of primal Gaeltacht, and that anyone brought up in it has already absorbed a great deal of the language" (44). Seamus Deane, further explaining what he perceives as an Irish tendency--initiated during the two Celtic Revivals (13)--to link landscape and language in literature, notes first that the issue of language in Ireland is the "product of a long political struggle" (13). He adds that "Irish literature tends to dwell on the medium in which it is written because it is difficult not to be self-conscious about a language which has become simultaneously native and foreign" (13). The British influence did not stop with language, however, and the issue of Irish land and landscape being controlled by British landowners was a second cause in the Celtic Revivals (13). In discussing Irish politics and the question of land rights between the Irish tenants and the English landlords, Deane writes:

> In literature, this economic and political question was converted into a fascination

> with the regional landscape. Loyalty to that particular region, another characteristic of early Romanticism, when it was called 'local attachment', was both a literary and political gesture in Ireland. (13)

Ultimately, Deane notes, "language and landscape, so understood, can lead a protean existence in literature" (14), permitting either separate treatment or, as the Revivalists often chose, a combination of the two. The latter could, in turn, lead to politically oriented texts or to a romantic view of a lushly green Ireland which permeated its literature and established a global image of Ireland against which Irish poets have continued to struggle. Montague's effort in this struggle has led him to consider land in a more primitive fashion, moving the poetic images he creates to a feminine influence far more primal than that which permeates Revivalist literature.

As an Irish poet, John Montague deliberately inherits traditional concerns with the the power of the mythic female and her connection to the land. Montague's poetry, however, does not portray only the evil incarnations of womankind; he conveys a multifaceted, gentle yet powerful, complete image of woman, a combination which he often expresses one facet at a time. Thus, while his poetry is expressive of women as whole and complex beings, some of the powerful images of his more bitter poems tend to lead readers to the idea of

Montague as misogynistic. A close reading of his work, however, belies this idea, revealing a poet who is as apt to praise as he is to condemn women. To focus solely on either stance to define Montague's attitude towards the female characters he creates is to deny the depth and insight of a collection of poems which evidence not only the progression of a poet's growth both as an artist and a human being, but also the unending fascination of a contemporary world with its most fundamental ancestry.

To examine Montague's poetic development in terms of his use of women characters and landscape, the most sensible approach would be chronological, permitting us to view the changes--or lack thereof--over the thirty-year span of Montague's career. By examining one or more poems from each of seven works, I hope to show how the relationship Montague creates between woman and land is not static, but rather an ever-changing association reflecting, at last, Montague's impression of the power of the feminine in all its many forms, from mythological to mundane, from primal instinct to prosaic intuition.

CHAPTER II

POISONED LANDS AND A CHOSEN LIGHT

" . . . watch us / Move in the the wet darkness
Kissing, still unable to speak."
("All Legendary Obstacles," A Chosen Light 16)

Poisoned Lands

The text of Poisoned Lands used for this study is a revised version of Montague's 1961 collection of the same name. This edition also includes work from Forms of Exile, and in the introduction the poet notes, "this new edition of Poisoned Lands is much closer to what it should have been" (10). The focus of these poems is Ireland, a focus which "[m]ore or less directly . . . examines [the poet's] Ulster childhood and tainted aspects of the region" (Johnston, Irish 197). The physical imagery used to describe the landscape--both rural and urban--is harsh, seldom presenting the feminine metaphor which will come later in his work.

In focusing on Ireland, Montague comes face to face with the question of poetry and tradition. Robert Garratt describes the poet's stance in these poems as "tentative . . . distanced from his material and wary of the tradition he has inherited" (203). However, Garratt also argues that Montague does not fully repudiate a Celtic revival

aesthetic, that he is in fact "ambivalent . . . toward the idea of an Irish tradition" (202) when the majority of more sophisticated Irish writers of the time were firmly attempting to step outside the sentimentally traditional depictions of their country.

In what is arguably the best known poem in the collection, "The Sean Bhean Bhocht," Montague offers what initially appears to be a poem in the tradition of portraying a bucolic Irish peasantry. Yet his tone and approach belie the very convention about which he is supposedly ambivalent. In describing the old farm woman in the first of his many "hag" poems[7], Montague employs a sly humor. The old woman, her "Eyes rheumy with racial memory" (12), is so decrepit as to have to eat bits of bread "soaked in brown tea" because she no longer has teeth. She smells, struggles for breath, and is halfway dead, but none of these things prevent her from her heart's delight: gossiping. Her gossip, however, ranges back and forth between actual problems befalling her neighbors and the racial memory which creates superstitious belief in an otherworld, or faeryland:

> 'The fairies of Ireland and the fairies of
>
> Scotland
>
> 'Fought on that hill all night
>
> 'And in the morning the well ran blood.
>
> 'The dead queen was buried on that hill.
>
> 'St. Patrick passed by the cross:

'There is the mark of a footprint forever
'Where he stood to pray.'

and

'Mrs McGurren had the evil eye,
'She prayed prayers on the black cow:
'It dropped there and died.
'Dropped dead in its tracks.
'She stood on the mearing and cursed the
Clarkes:
'They never had a good day since,
'Fluke and bad crops and a child born
strange.' (12)

Despite the humorous, yet ominous, description of the old woman's gossip, the speaker is sympathetic to her motivation for talking, describing her habit as "Weaving a litany of legends against death" (12). While the old woman herself is, as a hag, "post-sexual" according to Antoinette Quinn, she has also assumed the

> role of crone as chronicler . . . a vital link between the recent and remote history of a region, bilingual, blending pagan and Christian beliefs, a living archive of local folklore and superstition. (31)

By relaying her knowledge of her area's lore to the speaker, she permits hims to "consciously assum[e] the role of Irish tribal bard" (31), connecting him to a tradition but

permitting him to contemporize it (31).

The poet employs a modern "Ulster accent" (31) within the poem, yet by using the hag, the third facet of the mothergoddess, he makes an association between the land and the feminine in the poem's final stanza:

> But in the high summer as the hills
>
> burned with corn
>
> I strode through golden light
>
> To the secret spirals of the burial stone:
>
> The grass-choked well ran sluggish red--
>
> Not with blood but ferrous rust--
>
> But beneath the whorls of the guardian stone
>
> What hidden queen lay dust? (32)

The references to corn--associated with Ceres, the goddess of corn--and to the well--a common representation for the woman, or, more specifically, for the birth canal/vagina in Montague's poetry and in Irish tradition--indicate a union between woman and earth. However, the hills "burned" by corn indicates a crop ready to be harvested, no longer in need of the earth's sustenance, and a symbol of the masculine agriculture searing the feminine earth. At the same time, the feminine well is "grass-choked," and marred by an overabundance of iron, the material of weapons--traditionally masculine despite the Irish tradition of warrior women--and, as rust, a further signifier of decay and disuse. Both traditionally feminine references, then,

are empty, devoid of any potency.

The reference in the last line to the queen who was earlier described as having died in battle--an echo of Medb, the warrior queen and Scatha, Cuchulain's female tutor in the arts of war--provides both a possible reason for the sterility of the area and a hope for future fecundity. That she died in violence in which she seemingly took part undermines her maternal feminine aspect, as killer and mother, outside a mythological context, would not be considered mutually sustaining characteristics.[8] Thus the region is described in terms of an ascendant masculinity: the "golden light" of the sungod, the phallic "spirals of the burial stone," and the typically masculine gait connoted by the verb "strode." However, hope remains within the word "hidden," implying a temporary absence, a power waiting for renewal or release. This second iteration of the phrase "queen lay dust," when considered in conjunction with the fact of the old woman's nearness to death, creates an even stronger parallel between the crone and the queenly goddess, and indicates the goddess' cyclicality, dormant potency, and future rebirth. This sleeping strength is further supported by the image of the women warriors of Irish mythology suggested in both the references to iron in "ferrous rust" and to the "hidden queen," who takes on an Arthurian and a Christ-like quality in the intimation that she is asleep rather than dead, awaiting only the right moment to return,

both of whom are powerful masculine icons of heroism who entered literary and religious tradition--in Ireland, at least--after the times in which the events of Irish mythology occurred.

A Chosen Light

Women characters gain more prominence in this 1967 collection, and the female nature metaphor is definitively established despite the fact many of the poems in this text were written when Montague moved to France, where he lived for a decade. Despite his relocation, the poet creates his most vivid representation of nature as woman in "Virgo Hibernica," or "Irish Virgin" (15). The female character in this poem is young and virginal, a Diana-figure who is described as "an innocently / accomplished huntress," whose "hair is chestnut / light" and whose "each breast [is] kernel-slight" (15).

Paralleling this description of the character in terms of not only nature, but of seeds--the virginal, or unawakened, state of vegetative growth echoed in the acorns "snapping beneath / her feet"--is a depiction of the land in sexual female images: "a moist hillside," "the groin / of the woods." The combination of innocence and sexuality draws the speaker, who feels "the gravitational pull / of love" for her, but

. . . fight[s] back, knowing

gold of her cheekbones,
her honied, naive speech
drains power from manhood.

The persona resists the lunar and earthly influence out of a fear of resulting impotency rather than a respect for the virginity of the girl, supporting a comparison of the girl to Diana, the goddess of the hunt and of the moon. In the myths regarding her, Diana remains a virgin and spends her life being chased by would-be suitors, their intentions apparently as base as rape, and retaliating against those wooers, like Actaeon, who grew too close. This retaliation stems from the aloofness the goddess maintains from the act of love, just as the girl in the poem remains detached from the speaker, despite the fact that inherent in both the myths of Diana and this poem of a girl-muse is a sense in the speaker's language of intentional sexual teasing by the woman. The truth of the situation remains cloudy; while the girl is described in words of consistent innocence, occasional terms such as "poses" and "honied" confuse her purity, at least in the eyes of the speaker, who is drawn like a moth to the bright aspects of the girl's power. However, the indifference displayed on the part of the female here, which echoes that of nature to humankind, dissipates in the collection Tides, in which the female characters' roles change, and they, too, are subject to the feminine power of nature.

CHAPTER III

TIDES AND A SLOW DANCE

Seen,
as in a pallid
lightning flash

a grieving woman
& not a goddess.
We begin
the slow
climb
down. ("Down," Tides 28)

Tides

Montague's 1970 collection of poems, Tides, focuses to a great extent on the relationship between the male speaker of the poems and his wife, a relationship which disintegrates before the readers' eyes as the poems progress. Like the poet's other volumes, Tides makes liberal use of the Irish landscape; however, the images are presented less as primordial connections to an Earthgoddess than as a pastoral Irish setting of bogs and berry bushes, of lush meadows and low mountains. Similarly, Tides' female characters are less connected with motherhood than are the women in his other collections of poems.

Despite the lack of the female nature metaphor in this

volume, Montague concentrates fully on the female characters he creates, from the lover in the book's first poem, "Premonition," through the devouring mother of "The Pale Light," to the hags of "The Wild Dog Rose" and "The Hag of Beare," a feminine spectrum which represents all the facets of the tri-partite goddess, including, primarily, the power she preserves in all of her manifestations. Although in his later books the poet evinces nature in feminine terminology, in Tides Montague switches--at times--to describing the women characters with occasional references to nature. Within both these latter poems of Tides and the poems in which women and nature are less specifically conjoined, however, the question of feminine power--resented and rejoiced, coveted and cursed by the male speaker--remains an underlying, permeating theme. Throughout the text, the various types of women the poet creates, representing the tripartite goddess, intermingle; that is, each facet of the goddess seldom stands alone. These female characters range from lover and mother, to lover and hag--or death--to mother and death, and to virgin and death, all multi-dimensional, and all metaphoric examples of the multiplicity of feminine power. We will see throughout Tides the poet's concern with the power of the goddess, who, in all of her incarnations, always reflects some aspect of motherhood. The order of my treatment of the poems is not chronological because I wish to show in stages how Montague manipulates the creative

power of the women in this collection, ranging from a positive and natural motherhood, to an empty, seemingly powerless maternity, and reaching eventually a recognition of the masculine role in this diminution. The last is achieved when the role of speaker is allotted to a woman who makes it clear her power is the power of an entire gender which persists in memory and in all of nature.

The first example of feminine potency occurs in the juxtaposing of subject and descriptive metaphors and similes in "Tides," the third section of "Summer Storm," in which the speaker describes to his lover the motions they make as "turning like fish / in obedience to / the pull & tug / of your great tides" (7.15-18). With "tides" the woman here is compared to the moon as gravitational influencer of the tides and to the earth and sea as containers of the tides, all of which indicate a feminine nature and birth or birth fluids. The description of each of the characters as fish-like suggests a graceful, natural, positive quality to the lovemaking. Both speaker and lover are subject to the laws of nature, which are inexorable in their power, but which here are almost gentle.

Despite a continuation of animal imagery, the poem's second section, "Mosquito Hunt," in which the flight of bats becomes a simile for copulation, does not contain the fluid moderation of "Tides":

Heat contracts the

walls, smeared with
the bodies of insects

we crush, absurd-
ly balanced on the
springs of the bed

twin shadows on
the wall rising
& falling as

we swoop &
quarrel, like
wide winged bats. (13)

The description of passion in terms of argument and of bats on the hunt creates a frenzied image of animalistic behavior: although the bats' hunt for mosquitoes is natural in itself, the general association of the word "bat" to "vampire" is reinforced by the introduction of blood-sucking insects, and the whole image acquires a sinister quality--especially in the concept of two blood-sucking mammals which appear to be involved in a cannibalistic ritual of sex presaging death. Despite this, the nature in "Mosquito Hunt" represents a less direct potency, expressing, as it does, a nature represented through simile. "Tides," in contrast, also employs the more powerful grammatical approach of metaphor. Both sections implicitly compare the characters--male and female--to animals before finally

making the comparison explicit through the use of the word "like," but "Tides," through its reference to the woman's "great tides," also metaphorizes the female character and the Earthgoddess as represented by the sea-affecting moon.

The power of the three-part goddess appears even more directly as death in "Premonition," the first poem in the collection, which reflects "Summer Storm"'s link between lovemaking and death. In this manifestation of the female, however, the sexual power's coupling with death is no longer the natural urge to feed that it was in "Mosquito Hunt." Instead, in "Premonition" the persona seeks to remove the power of the woman by making her helpless against a phallic knife. In a dream, the speaker describes the death and dismemberment of his red-headed lover as they lie naked in bed:

> That is not hair, but blood
> Flowing. Someone is cutting
> Your naked body up:
> Strapped in dream helplessness
> I hear each thrust of the knife
> Till that rising, descending blade
> Seems the final meaning of life.
>
> Mutely, you writhe and turn
> In tremors of ghostly pain,
> But I am lost to intervene
> . . .

. . . released from dream,
I lie in a narrow room;
Low-ceilinged as a coffin
The dawn prises open. (11-12)

The vague "someone" identifying the attacker and the speaker's own disassociation through inaction create such a distance between the poem's two characters that ultimately the poem's focus is not the horrific image of violence, but the emotional and psychological reasons behind the persona's inability to intercede. The combination of the woman's flowing blood, suggesting menses, her nudity, and terms such as "thrust," "rising," "writhe and turn," and "released" is entirely sexual, creating a scenario in which the man attains sexual gratification through this "dream"--or fantasy--of the woman's death. The third stanza's references to "coffin" and "dawn" echo the use of bats in "Mosquito Hunt," and indicate through their comparison to vampires a desire on the speaker's part for the kind of immortality women can achieve through their ability to "create" life.

The dream-vagueness continues in the opening of the poem's second section, "On the butcher's block / Of the operating theatre" (12), which, while maintaining the ritualistic and sacrificial positioning of the woman in the first section, creates a reason for the attack: an operation, thus permitting the speaker to resume an

untroubled sleep. The claustrophobic sense of being entombed he expresses at the poem's end leads to a reading of the dream as that of a man trapped in a relationship and resenting the one who trapped him. But the woman is ephemeral throughout the poem, with only her hair and her blood being vivid; otherwise the adjectives used to describe her are colorless and nonspecific: "pale, freckled skin," "breasts I have never seen," "ghostly pain," and "far away." When the indistinct contours of the woman in the dream and the explicitly vivid aspects of the violence are considered in relation to the poem's title, "Premonition," the possible identity of the knife-wielder expands to include the speaker himself, caught, perhaps, in a wishful thinking stimulated by his own fear of entrapment created by the relationship. Thus, despite her blurry depiction, the woman in the poem, who is both the lover and mother aspects of the goddess, wields a power over the speaker, even if only in his instinct.

The power of the mother coveted by the speaker in "Premonition" is altered to sterility in "King & Queen," in which the landscape is a wasteland, evidence of a fruitless earth and a barren mothergoddess. Masculine imagery prevails over the feminine:

> Jagged head
> of warrior, bird
> of prey, surveying space

side by side
they squat, the pale
deities of this place
. . .
blunt fingers
splay to caress
a rain-hollowed stone (15).

Although the title intimates that one of these deities is female, the language itself, cacophonous with its harsh consonants and the severe and even phallic imagery it evokes with words such as "jagged," "warrior," "prey," and "stone" --along with the even more vividly phallic "squat" and "blunt," which suggest not only penile images, but are also "masculine" words by virtue of their abrupt monosyllabic forms and their consonantal endings--indicates a masculine deity represented by the warrior surveying his domain, which in turn becomes the feminine, the barren queen°. While either figure--the warrior or the bird of prey--may be a female character, again the positioning of that character outside the feminine tradition of nurturing and giving life removes the mother aspect from her and leaves her solely within the goddess' facet of death. The stone, part of the earth, is eroding due to the force of the rain, which, although it is a part of a nature traditionally described in feminine terms, here suggests seminal fluid. Thus, in this poem the earth/earthgoddess is barren, described finally as

"terminal, / peewit haunted, / cropless bogland" (15), and the masculine god, the warrior, holds all the power. Interestingly, however, the poet creates a parallel between the masculine and feminine; after all, it is his domain which is an infertile wasteland, devoid of any ability to sustain life, of any monetary value.

Barrenness is again the topic of "The Pale Light" (27), a poem in which the sterile female assumes a malevolence in the eyes of the speaker. She is described as a Medusa, a "putrid fleshed woman / Whose breath is ashes, / Hair a writhing net of snakes!" Despite this hideous depiction, however, the speaker is sexually drawn to her, his muse and his fear at once. His compulsion to be with her is beyond denial:

> All night we turn
> Towards an unsounded rhythm
> Deeper, more fluent than breathing.

But the cost he must pay is high, as she

> Tears away all
> [He] had so carefully built--
> Position, marriage, fame--

until, in the end, he has used her to satisfy his need for inspiration, but again faces a high cost as "the hiss of seed" he releases "into that mawlike womb" becomes to him "the whimper of death being born." Thus woman, as his muse, acquires aspects similar to those of the sheela na gig, and

to the powerful goddess who is both life-giver and grave, or, for the poet, poetic power and human frailty.

The hag, a "physical" representation of the tripartite goddess' third facet, death, is also empowered in Tides as the character of the Cailleach of "The Wild Dog Rose." While the old woman has never been a mother, by the poem's end she is connected to the most renowned mother of all, the Virgin Mary. As an aged person, the woman here also represents death; although any aspect of the goddess may be connected to death, as seen in "Premonition," in the "hag" poems death assumes its most commonly considered form: old age.

Also as in "Premonition," the motivating factor for the male characters of the poem "The Wild Dog Rose" is fear of the female power. For the speaker, this fear is expressed from the point of view of a child frightened by the rumors and superstitions concerning an old woman he describes as "that terrible figure who haunted my childhood" (16). The crone is closely connected to the landscape in the second stanza's description of her home:

> The cottage,
> circled by trees, weathered to admonitory
> shapes of desolation by the mountain winds,
> struggles into view. The rank thistles
> and leathery bracken of untilled fields
> stretch behind with--a final outcrop--

the hooped figure by the roadside,
its retinue of dogs . . .
. . .
And I feel again
that ancient awe, the terror of a child
before the great hooked nose, the cheeks
dewlapped with dirt, the staring blue
of the sunken eyes, the mottled claws
clutching a stick . . . (16)

The sterility of the landscape surrounding the old woman's home, drawn by the adjectives "weathered," "rank," "leathery," and "untilled," and by the terms "desolation" and "thistles," reflects her own old age and lack of fecundity. She evokes within the now-adult speaker, if only for a moment, the "terror" he felt as a child when in her presence, and the "ancient awe" pushes that terror into a more primal, racial form. His initial reaction to her indicates she is not powerless at all, but that her power has taken a different form, or has simply moved to a more sublimated level.

As an adult, however, the persona is able to overcome his childish fears and meet the old woman on equal grounds, to "return her gaze, to greet her, / . . . in friendliness" (16); in doing so he finds she is simply a lonely person in desperate need of telling someone of "the small events in her life" (17). These "small events," however, include "a

story so terrible" (17) that the speaker tries "to push it away" (17). The story is one of rape by a violent and drunken man, an act only sexual in its actual activity, but psychologically an act of removing choice, and therefore personal power, from the "seventy year / old virgin" (17). The speaker's use of the word "terrible" to describe the woman's story and his description of her desperate struggle against her assailant create a sense of sympathy, and even empathy, on the part of the speaker, and, arguably, on the part of the poet who makes frequent use of the hag figure in his work.

From an autobiographical standpoint, the poet may well identify with the old woman of "The Wild Dog Rose." According to Antoinette Quinn, "As a lonely, crazed and isolated woman she touches some profound chord in Montague's psyche and sometimes seems a female alter-ego" (31). Through her "loneliness, ostracism and otherness" (28), she becomes for the poet, who was abandoned by his own mother, a "mirror-image" (28). The hag in Montague's poetry, "Old, childless, unmarried, ugly and workworn [as] she is" (31), becomes, "nevertheless, a foster-mother to the poet, an inspirational analogue to the spinster aunts who reared him" (31).

Autobiography aside, this seeming empathy is subverted by obliquely undermining language within the poem: while the description of her conversational topic of "small events

in her life" may be viewed as simply a means of making the ensuing rape tale even more shocking in its horror, it also negates by the use of the word "small" the impact of that horror. Montague does not entirely condemn the rapist; the effect of switching to the attacker's viewpoint--however briefly or minutely--by describing the sensations he is experiencing serves to humanize him. He writes,

> In the darkness
> they wrestle, two creatures crazed
> with loneliness, the smell of the
> decaying cottage in his nostrils
> like a drug, his body heavy on hers,
> the tasteless trunk of a seventy year
> old virgin, which he rummages while
> she battles for life (17).

That he is also "crazed with loneliness" abrogates to a minor level his own guilt in the situation. The word "wrestle" invokes violence, certainly, but is also a term used to described impassioned lovemaking. Similarly, "rummage" both discredits him as an indifferent violator and minimizes what he is doing. Quinn sees the former as the poet's expression of the most horrific aspect of the act, in that the rapist's indifference only fosters the aspect of complete disregard he feels for his victim. However, the choice of word, "rummage," which calls to mind an idle search through a dresser drawer, or, with an alternate

interpretation of the word "trunk," through an old piece of luggage, invalidates to some extent, by its very innocuousness, what the woman is experiencing. It is, perhaps most of all, the overlying view of the male rapist as being "drugged" by the decay of the cottage and of the woman herself as he removes her power which signifies the poem's theme of the unceasing power struggle between the genders. The "drugged" condition of the drunken man certainly indicates mental incapacity on his part, inciting him to continue, while at the same time relieving him of some of the responsibility for his actions. In a broader sense, it is the very fact of the goddess' power which--given the nature of man--forces him into a struggle for it, just as the old woman on both a personal and symbolic level had by her own nature to struggle against him.

That the old woman does struggle "desperately" against her attacker indicates she retains some power, that she is not entirely defeated. Indeed, the rapist can finally only claim to possess the stronger physical power. He fails to reach whatever source of strength it is he seeks. Again, however, Montague creates an interpretational duality concerning the outcome of the struggle. The question of whether the rape is completed, whether the rapist achieved ejaculation, remains. Quinn refers to the <u>cailleach</u>'s "near-defloration" and to an "attempted rape" (32). However, the term "rummage," again, suggests at least

penetration: when one rummages in a drawer, one's hand is inside the drawer; thus, when the attacker rummages the "trunk" of the woman, he is within her. Whether or not the woman's hymen is pierced--the indicator of "defloration"--and whether or not he achieved ejaculation, his penetration of her is actual rape. The source of the woman's power, however, lies not within the possibility of an intact or broken hymen, a purely patriarchal valuation; instead, it lies within her reaction to the incident, in which she sees herself, in breaking his grip, as the ultimate victor. Despite her fear, which causes her to "cower[] until [his departure at] dawn" (18), she takes comfort in what she perceives as a similarity between her and the Virgin Mary: a kind of suffering only women can experience, the cailleach through rape and the Virgin as a mother who loses her child.

The Virgin Mary becomes the means by which the old woman feels the conflict was ended:

> 'I prayed
> to the Blessed Virgin herself
> for help and after a time
> I broke his grip.' (17-18)

Quinn describes Mary as "the cailleach's own Muse" and the "Holy Mother of God" (32), the former based on a shared virginity, the latter on Mary's position as intercessor between humanity and God. The position of Mary as mediator again creates a duality when defining her power. Certainly

she is the most powerful female icon of the Catholic religion, but that religion is patriarchal, and the extent of Mary's power is limited to one of passive conduit. While calling upon Mary in times of strife may be less effective than direct aid from God, perhaps the hag's faith alone is the source of the power she finds to break the rapist's hold on her. As that faith is solely within her, in the end she is the one who has the power to save herself. Mary--like the old woman--is thus both a symbol of power (through faith) and of futility (not the true source of strength).

However, to the cailleach herself, the help is real, and through her the speaker's description of the landscape is altered from a wasteland to a fertile region represented by the dog rose itself. In the final section of the poem, the description of Nature, as represented by the rose, is one of fertile beauty:

> And still
> the dog rose shines in the hedge.
> Petals beaten wide by rain, it
> sways slightly, at the tip of a
> slender, tangled, arching branch
> which, with her stick, she gathers
> into us. (18)

The language here is sexual, calling forth images of a youthful woman, "slender, tangled, arching," who retains the potency of fecund youth. Connected with the old woman, the

rose indicates the same cyclicality the earthgoddess represents: lover, mother, and death. But, despite the newly indicated sense of feminine power, the poem ends on what is ultimately a disempowering note; the speaker, with apparent sympathy, records the end of this encounter with the cailleach:

> 'The wild rose
> is the only rose without thorns',
> she says, holding a wet blossom
> . . .
> 'Whenever I see it, I remember
> the Holy Mother of God and
> all she suffered.'
> Briefly
> the air is strong with the smell
> of that weak flower, offering
> its crumbling yellow cup
> and pale bleeding lips
> fading to white
> at the rim
> of each bruised and heart-
> shaped petal. (18)

Despite the tenderness of the description of the flower, and its position within the poem as both the hag's opposite in appearance and her equal in experience, the poet's choice of language and image again distorts the sympathy. First, by

telling the story of the woman, and, in effect, iconizing by both making her a symbol in his own life and by comparing her to the Virgin Mary, the speaker asserts his power over her. Second, the sympathy itself has a dual impact on the reader, as on one level it denotes caring and understanding, yet on another connotes a weakness in the old woman's need for sympathy, an emotion often confused with pity, arguably the most disempowering emotion of all. And third, while Mary did suffer, and in suffering found strength (and sainthood), still the term "suffering" also connotes a certain weakness, or inability to control the events in one's life, just as the cailleach could not stop the rapist from attacking her. The rape is also evoked by the adjectives at the poem's end: "weak," "bleeding," and "bruised," the last reflecting also what the seminal rain has literally done to the petals of the flower. When combined with the other descriptive words here, such as "briefly," "offering [as in sacrifice]," "crumbling," "pale," and "fading," the gently described rose becomes the disempowered rose, beautifully and powerfully symbolic, perhaps, but as an actual flower, quite an impotent object.

A Slow Dance

A Slow Dance, published in 1975, focuses on women much less than does Tides; instead, this volume concentrates on Irish life, both historical and contemporary, rural and

urban. However, the book's first section, "A Slow Dance," arguably the most powerful section of the volume, centers almost entirely upon the metaphor of Nature-as-woman and feminine power. "A Slow Dance" uses nature to represent the feminine directly; in fact, even a first reading of the poem suggests an ancient, ritualistic dance, a druidic, pre-sacrificial orgy. To interpret the poem in this manner is not incorrect, merely insufficient. Upon closer reading we find the poem is an examination of the animalistic side of human nature and of humankind's movement away from this unthinking level of existence. Within this context, the poem then chronicles both the decline of a culture impelled toward and by nature and the birth of a patriarchal religion, reflecting a pagan form of worship's absorption into the encroaching Christian faith.

The first part of "A Slow Dance," "Back," contains clear references to pagan religious ceremonies, presaging also the idea in "Sheela na Gig" that the male wants to return to the womb, that humanity is destined--and therefore desires--to rejoin the earth:

> Darkness, cave
> drip, earth womb
>
> we move slowly
> back to our origins
>
> the naked salute

to the sun disc

the obeisance
to the antlered tree

the lonely dance
on the grass (A Slow Dance 7)

The image here of earth as simultaneously grave and womb is created with the sexual imagery evoked by "cave drip" and "earth womb," and by the idea of "earth to earth" elicited by "origins." Here also, however, is the first indication of a patriarchal religion yet to come, as evidenced in the worship of the masculine sun and the phallic tree, made even more male by describing it in term of an "antlered" stag.

Section two, "Sweeny," like "Back," refers to the "human beast" (8): all actions are reflexive, unthinking beyond the fact that joy is created by simple interaction between human and the "greenness, rain / spatter on skin, / the humid pull / of the earth" (9). The title character from a 12th-century poem, Buile Suibhne, the mad king Sweeny, reflects both the unbridled behavior of a child--or, in this case, of a non-Christian society (from a Christian viewpoint)--and an ever-increasing cunning used to extend power. "Sweeny" is the poem's first indication of a growing awareness on the part of human beings, a suggestion of a future use of reason which will replace instinct.

By using Sweeny, however, the poet is able to create a

two-fold effect: he suggests by using a masculine character the eventual attempt of the masculine to replace the empowered feminine, and he foreshadows for the second time the eventual replacement of a matriarchal religion by a patriarchal one by choosing this particular character, a pagan king who one day "set out in anger to expel the cleric [St. Ronan]. . . . [T]he king seized the psalter [the cleric was using] and threw it into the lake. He then laid hands on the saint and was dragging him away" (Murphy 29) when he was stopped. Sweeny, then, is contradictory in "A Slow Dance," representing the pagan unwilling to convert. At the same time, however, Sweeny symbolizes the slowly growing male dominance over the female in this section of the poem's first two stanzas:

> A wet silence.
> Wait under trees,
> muscles tense,
> ear lifted, eye alert.
>
> Lungs clear.
> A nest of senses
> stirring awake--
> <u>human beast</u>! (8)

"Wait," "tense," "ear lifted, eye alert," and "stirring awake" are all premonitory terms. When combined with "wet silence," "lungs clear," "nest of senses," and "stirring awake," all suggestive of birth, the image is one of the

birth of the human race in addition to an awakening sense of reason and a foreshadowing of a future patriarchy.

The awareness suggested by the introduction of Sweeny in section two subsides in the third section, "The Dance," a prose poem in which the speaker describes his immersion in the natural rhythm of his own heart, and the echoing drumbeat which brings his awareness. The hypnotic quality of the dance, created by the force and abandon of the dancer's movements, mirrors the blind reliance of unquestioning worshippers on their religions as they grope for an importance to attach to their positions in the natural scheme. The speaker's absorption into the music and movements is complete: "Totally absent, you shuffle up and down, the purse of your loins striking against your thighs, sperm and urine oozing down your lower body like gum" (9). The release of both his useful and useless bodily fluids downward towards the earth reflects her pull on both his physically oriented functions (urination) and his mentally stimulated functions (ejaculation). The implicit absorption of these fluids into the ground represents humankind's only true hope for immortality: to be gathered back into the earth, part of the unconscious chain of existence. However, the lack of control the dancer has over his own bodily functions may suggest a foundation for the resentment he comes to feel in the later sections of the poem.

"The Dance" also becomes a metaphor for the act of

sexual intercourse as a force of regeneration: "In wet and darkness you are reborn, the rain falling on your face as it would on a mossy tree trunk" (9). The poet's use of trees, greenness, flesh against the earth, "wet / and silence" (9) inextricably intertwines nature and the feminine, and man becomes a willing participant in the rites which he can only partially comprehend but which lead him as though he were ensorcelled.

The entire poem appears to be an awakening of the male desire for power, and his growing resentment toward the female supremacy. In the fourth section, "Message," this resentment is at its greatest, as reasoning man is unable to function except blindly in the natural world of the Earthgoddess. The means by which the speaker fosters this resentment is through the creation of an unnamed, non-specific character who appears as a woman of power, perhaps a priestess:

> With a body
> heavy as earth
> she begins to speak;
>
> her words
> are dew, bright
> deadly to drink (10).

The description of her words as "deadly" is only the first sign of the speaker's resentment in this section; these words are further described as "her secret / message" (11),

which "puts the eye / of reason out"

The animosity of "Message" is alleviated in the fifth section, "Seskilgreen." This section comes closest to finding a balance between the genders and between the connection to the ground and the desire to reach the sky, but it is only a balance in passing, as the power shifts. The duality created by this temporary balance echoes throughout this section: stone and meadow, the listing of paired features ("eyes, breasts, / thighs" [11]), and the masculine form of worship tied inseparably to the feminine as the poet looks back through time to a ritualistic dance for the Goddess being performed in a "circle of stones" (11). Nature is described in terms of woman, and the sexuality is overt:

> I came last in May
> to find the mound
> drowned in bluebells
>
> with a fearless wren
> hoarding speckled eggs
> in a stony crevice (11).

The tone here differs greatly from that in "Message", where the crevice was a "rot-smelling crotch" (10) and the two eggs promising life were the Goddess' "sunless breasts" that promised nothing. Although the Goddess' message draws the poet blindly to her, tempting him with secretiveness, he recognizes its ultimate emptiness. In "Seskilgreen", then,

the female power has waned, going from a deadly priestess to a bird hiding in a phallic gravestone marking the place where the queen returned to the earth. The language of this section indicates the shift in power: the grave of the queen, a place of power, is "drowned" by a most innocuous form of flower; where nature and generation has always been the root of the Mothergoddess' power, now her power--the "speckled eggs" the speaker feared in "Message"--is hidden in a "stony crevice," which is no longer the fecund, damp cave of the poem's beginning, but an inanimate, barren location. The secretiveness here is not one of repressed potency, but the hiding of an old way from the new. The male power has waxed as the land loses almost all mystery through being cultivated.

Not all feminine power is lost; the wren, after all, is fearless and still productive, the goddess "still fragrant" (11). Nature may be controlled, to a great extent, by cultivation and by being populated, but the feminine still persists, however deeply hidden in the subconscious. In section six, "For the Hillmother", the union between the feminine and the natural is strong: perhaps the open power of the earthgoddess has been subdued, but she is manifest in every small feature of nature that exists. Woman in this section, then, is no longer the hag-goddess, but the mother-goddess; this change is due, perhaps, to an understanding by the masculine that the feminine power simply bides its time.

This idea grows in the "Hillmother" section, as Nature is mother once again. "Hillmother", then, as Antoinette Quinn writes, is a "crucial poem in Montague's Irish female canon . . . a Roman Catholic litany to the Blessed Virgin transposed into a pagan chant. This is not a hag poem but a prayer to the fecund, maternal earth, fertility goddess and poetic Muse."

Although this section of "A Slow Dance" may be read as the poet's supplication to the Muse, grammatically each line is a command, creating an unbreakable union between the duty of the female and the purposes of nature. Despite the use of the imperative, however, man is made passive here by his own prepositions, and acts as a support, a weak entity, a recipient, and a creature of need relying on woman to give birth to him: "Hill of motherhood / wait for us / Gate of birth / open for us" (12). He also expects her to be his entertainment--the tri-partite woman as mother-lover-virgin--in her lover aspect: "Wood anemone / sway for us / . . . / Leaves of delight / murmur for us" (12). The once self-reliant male's recognition of his reliance on the female for both his own existence and his children's is clear in "Hillmother". Any subsequent resentment, expressed in the violent images of "Sheela na Gig", is suppressed in "Hillmother". To be dependent upon the needs and even whims of the woman is finally what puts the eye of reason out, and the male in his animosity and desire for self-creation

creates his own blindness. Through this inability to see and thereby control the natural order, the male then desires to control the mystery, the very part he cannot comprehend, and his means of doing so is expressed through physical strength.

The final section of the poem, "The Hinge Stone and the Crozier", reflects the physical violence with which the patriarchy has been established; the relationship between superior strength and its signifier, the penis, has been invoked in the form of the godhead, and the priests have created a new supremacy. The phallus, represented by both the stone-worshipping and snake-worshipping cults, is used to counteract the pull of the woman, who is now not simply subordinated, but victimized:

> The tame serpent glides to the altar
> to lap the warm spiced milk.
> . . .
> His vestments
> stiff with the dried blood
> of the victim, old Tallcrook advances
>
> singing & swaying
> his staff, which shrivels and curls:
> a serpent ascending a cross. (13)

One way of reading this indicates that the priest, amidst all the phallic language, has killed the victim, who, by use of the word "milk" and the approach of the serpent to "lap"

it, appears to be a woman. The death of the victim suggests a perversion of Christianity, a sort of black mass used to oppress the prevalent matriarchal religion. However, prior to the actual sacrifice, the poet has metaphorically raped the victim through the suggestion of the phallic snake entering the woman, or altar. By the repetition of the serpent image in the final line, the rise of patriarchal Christianity seems assured, through the word "ascending" and because the staff--associated with the staff of Aaron used to free God's chosen people and with Joseph of Arimathea's legendary journey to Wales--"shrivels & curls" into the snake, the phallic image ascending the cross, heralding as a type of caduceus the healing strength of Christianity. This assumption is further strengthened in the serpent imagery of "the seething scales / around the astronomer's neck" (13) as they "harden to the coils of a torque" (13), an emblem of kingly power upon one who understands the heavens. Christianity controls the mysteries both of earth and of the skies, and the astronomer-prophet assumes, by the wearing of the enabling torque, kingship.

Within this final section of the poem, however, lie words which suggest the supremacy of the fathergod is impermanent. The phallic staff "shrivels," indicating its impotency; the priest is old, suggesting approaching death; and the snake, the instrument of rape, is "tame" as it approaches. The "altar" becomes not a place of death for

the woman, but, as the bearer of the "warm spiced milk," the woman herself, suggesting, at last, that the control the masculine has seized is being held tenuously at best in a world in which the feminine is the foundation. Finally, despite the fact that the poem exhibits various masculine interpretations of the feminine, from primordial earthmother through entrapping hag, and ultimately to a feminine which appears to have been suppressed into memory and instinct, Montague's suggestions that the feminine is simply temporarily disempowered refers to his own recognition that women are half of an equation, necessary to him especially as a source of poetic inspiration.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEAD KINGDOM AND MOUNT EAGLE

"all her wild disguises!"
("The Well-Beloved," Mount Eagle 46)

The Dead Kingdom

Montague's 1984 poetry collection, The Dead Kingdom, is presided over by a picture of a sheela-na-gig on its title page, although the poem "Sheela na Gig" itself is contained within Mount Eagle. The Dead Kingdom juxtaposes poems concerning the political strife in Ireland, myth-oriented--both Irish and Middle Eastern--poetry, and many poems concerning the death of Montague's mother and his memories of her. He writes of his own reconciliation with his mother in "Intimacy," but undermines that reunion in "A Muddy Cup," in which he speaks of his abandonment by her and the fact she kept her other children. Despite the occasional subversion of the general tone of appeasement, however, the book as a whole is an effort at bringing together opposing sides of several issues.

Although the poems of The Dead Kingdom contain many male characters and refer often to masculine imagery, often

phallic, the book's second section, "The Neutral Realm," is muse-oriented and founded in Irish mythology and Irish history. Six of the section's eight poems are focus on or are set near water--bogs, lakes, the sea, wells--and the other two allude to water as well. The section's final poem, "The Well Dreams," is a conciliatory piece which connects masculine and feminine symbols as it outlines a history of matriarchal power through the use of nature references.

An unconscious recognition of the feminine echoes in "The Well Dreams," not only in the poem, but in its title, the "ambiguity [of which], whether substantive [the well's dreams] or statement [that the well does dream], suggests that either meaning is a reflection of the human mind" (Johnston 201). "The Well Dreams" uses small pieces of the same feminine imagery as "A Slow Dance"; in the former, however, the tone is not finally one of resentment on the part of men as it is in the latter. Instead, the speaker's attitude in "The Well Dreams" is one of acceptance of the natural feminine power represented by the well.

The feminine water (birth fluids) and well (birth canal) support a spider in its journey:

> The well dreams;
> liquid bubbles.
>
> Or it stirs
> as a water spider skitters across;

a skinny legged dancer. (38)

Montague's water spider suggest Yeats' poem "Long-Legged Fly," the chorus of which repeats three times with little variation, "Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His ["Her" in the second chorus] mind moves upon silence" (193). Just as thinking cannot disturb silence, the insect does not disturb the water in "Long-Legged Fly," a poem which has a patriarchal context: the first stanza speaks of "civilisation" and "Our master Caesar," and the third of "Adam," the "Pope," and "Michael Angelo," all of which represent a patriarchal religion and the equally male-oriented society based upon that religion. Sandwiched between these two stanzas, however, is one in which the focus is a young woman, "part woman, three parts a child" (194), who dances oblivious to onlookers. Her dancing and the naivete suggested by the reference to "child" equate her with the waterbug, which acts entirely according to its nature. When her innocence is considered in tandem with the "girls at puberty" of the third stanza, the image becomes one of virgins, who gain value--to men--by means of their intact hymens.

The water in "The Well Dreams" also assumes the aspect of virginal innocence by means of its description as "meniscus," from the Greek meniskos, the diminutive of men, which is "moon" or "crescent." The word "menses" has the same etymology, establishing the well as an unquestionably

feminine image, a birth canal. The depiction of the water's surface as "tremor laden," able to be disturbed by the "gross interruption" of a dropped stone and to be stirred, even, by the slight movements of the spider, indicate the hymen-like quality of the water's surface. However, the stone and the pebble of the third and fourth stanzas break through the surface and "sink toward the floor," while the spider's movements, as it "skitters across" the top of the water, do not pierce the surface.

Because its movements are not the same as the violent, penetrating actions of the two stones, the spider, like the insects in the poem's fifth section and the birds in the fourth, is a representation of the feminine. One aspect of the mothergoddess is that of "Lady of the Beasts," "who governs the fecundity of animals and all wild nature" (Gimbutas 152), and the Celtic goddesses shapeshift throughout Irish mythology into beasts and birds, all manners of animals (Stone 46). Although these animal forms are often a precursor to violence in these myths, and despite the fact spiders are generally intended as frightening images, such as the male-devouring black widow fiercely guarding her sac of eggs, here the picture is light, lovely, disturbed only by the intrusion of the masculine imagery:

> Sometimes, a gross interruption;
> a stone plumps in.

That takes a while to absorb,
to digest, much groaning
and commotion in the well's stomach
before it can proffer again
an almost sleek surface. (38)

Man becomes the negative force here, disrupting the beauty of the scene. However, the implicit violence of the entire scenario is undermined by the passage's humorous images--the spider's skinny legs, the "plump"-ness of the stone, which becomes then a full, or erect, phallus, and the "groaning" of the well as it receives that stone, all of which foreshadow the mirth of the final two lines and add to the poem's largely conciliatory tone.

The entire poem follows this vein, with the woman/well--acted upon by the man and the pilgrims--subject to the vagaries of her lover. She is also vulnerable to the eventual demands of motherhood, a woman who is almost a victim. However, by dint of her separateness--as the recipient of action--from man and through her awareness of her own power, she does not surrender to the "jerks" and other violent acts of men. The separation between the masculine and the feminine at all times except during the sexual acts described in the first and second sections is created by the images used as metaphors, such as "a silent cyclops" (38)--a reference, according to Johnston, to the one-eyed goddess, Morrigan--a being which differs from men.

Other suggestions of separateness occur with the repetition of the word "dream," which creates a perception outside of reality, and by the words "sleek surface," "meniscus," and "skin," all of which indicate hymeneal barriers--albeit weak ones--between the well and its interlopers. This obstruction is the inability of those who wish to revere the well/woman as queen, lover, wife, and mother, whether she wishes these burdens or not, to understand her power as a source of creative power for all people.

The fifth section of "The Well Dreams" indicates a continuing feminine power still camouflaged from the casual observer who cannot comprehend it:

> But a well has its secret.
> Under the drifting leaves,
> the dormant stones in
> the whitewashed wall,
> the unpredictable ballet
> of waterbugs, insects,
>
> there the spring pulses,
> little more than a tremor,
> a flickering quiver,
> spasms of silence,
> small intensities of mirth,
> the hidden laughter of earth. (40)

Here, one source of the woman's strength is in her close connection to the birds, trees, and various forms of weather

which surround the stones. The stones themselves, as both part of the well and container of the well, are both object (the well) and that which imprisons the object. For the well, though, imprisonment is not a dissolution of power; instead, it "recomposes itself" after every disruption when it is violated, as by the coin--a symbol of masculine civilization and its religion, which sought to reinvent wells as a location of Christian power while retaining the wells' feminine aspects in Biblical stories of thirsty men--Christ, for example--given water by kind women. The coin is also a means of treating the feminine as a prostitute, suggested by the word "tarnished," but the well "Water's slow alchemy washes [the coin] clean" (39), permitting the well to be "made virgin again" (39). The coin also gives a third meaning to the poem's title: the person throwing the coin, traditionally making a wish, hoping a dream will be fulfilled, suggests by that very wish that the well has the power to bring his dream to life, to fulfill his desire. Thus "The Well Dreams" may also refer to the puissance with which the outsider, the pilgrims in the poem, imbues the well.

In the final stanza, the well, a "contained fluidity and a source of life . . . also is composed of silence and emptiness which we humanize" (Johnston, Irish 201). The well becomes, like the genitalia of the sheela na gig, the orifice into the earth, which in its amusement is at once

powerfully emasculating (laughing at men as it lures them in) and simply pleasure-filled (in her knowledge of herself) as she recognizes the impermanence not only of the visiting pilgrims, but of the artificial structure which confines her: "small intensities of mirth, / the hidden laughter of earth" (40).

Mount Eagle

Montague's 1988 collection returns to present autobiography in the poems about his second wife and his daughter, but it again contains poems about his childhood in Ireland and the Irish characters who people his memories. Everyday events are chronicled here, and mythological images appear as simply references to nature, with one exception: "Sheela na Gig," a poem which stands out from this collection by means of grotesque mother imagery.

"Sheela na Gig" is a graphic, Oedipal paean to motherhood and female sexuality. Through the use of both mythic and biographical elements in his landscape metaphors for the mother, the poet expresses a sexual ambivalence created by the power struggle between male and female. If the influence of both the poet's bitterness towards his own mother and his love for the miracle that is his daughter are put aside, then the physically unpleasant connotations of the lines "The bloody tent-flap opens. We slide / into life, slick with the slime and blood" (Mount Eagle 31) are

simply de-romanticized descriptions of the physical part of the birth process. As it is difficult to ignore the speaker's feelings, the image here is one of armed camps and male infants born into a battle with their mothers because of the violence of birth and the desire to return to the womb.

The modern view of the Oedipal implications of this poem is that they are unnatural, but when combined with the use of terms such as "sail," "overhang," and "moss," which call to mind seascapes, cliffs, and plant life, the reader understands the primordial pull of the earth upon humans; thus the poem becomes a recognition of the metaphorical relationship between earth and mother as life-givers. When the referents "blood," "banishment," "darkness," and "die" are used, woman and land become synonymous with death and grave, but the desire of the seeking son is not lessened; death reflects the Oedipal sexuality of the poem, becoming, as Elizabeth Grubgeld observes, "the region to which all are lured by instinct and necessity" (17).

Despite the grotesque and gory imagery of "Sheela na Gig," Mount Eagle remains basically a collection of works praising individuals, and suggesting a certain contentment on the author's part. Although he seems unable to finally reconcile with any completeness his own relationship to his mother, he can reconcile the concepts of maternal power and masculine potency. The prose poem "Luggala" is one of

Montague's most clear reconciliations between the masculine and feminine; told from the point of view of the poet as pilgrim seeking his Muse, this poem relinquishes all bitterness as the speaker attempts an understanding of the feminine Muse: "Again and again in dream, I return to that shore" (Mount Eagle 66) of the title lake. Within "Luggala" are typically masculine elements--boating scenes, scattered phallic stones, and a hunting lodge--which also contain feminine aspects. The hunting lodge is described as a "white wedding cake . . . [the road to which is] lined with late blooming daffodils" (66), and the stones and boat are spoken of only in terms of the lake and streams of the place, which are made fully feminine by the use of the adjective "bogbrown" to depict the streams, and by the lake being described as a "basin" at the center of "hills forming a circle" (67). The description of the lodge as a wedding cake foreshadows the union at the end of the poem of both masculine and feminine images.

When the poet takes the boat to the center of the lake, a moment of epiphany is reached. At the "heart of the lake" (67), where he should be closest to his Muse, he becomes aware of "another, still greater presence" (67), a "huge cliff" reflected in the water. While the mountain may initially appear as a phallic symbol of nature echoing the "pillars of the [man-made] mausoleum" (66) in the poem's first section, the poet sees the reflection, the containing

of the mountain within the water, as a "lasting embrace" (67), a joining of the male and female halves of his psyche.

The language of the poem, however, creates a tension: "beating," "falls," "breaking," "splash," "shoving," and "leaping" are all strong words of movement, indicative of a vibrant sexual union which disrupts the dead images, the "calm," "dark," "glacial" "silence" of the scene, and mirrors the sense of "unresolved conflicts which constitute one of Montague's strengths as a poet" (Mariani 259). Although these two readings seem contradictory, with the tension of the language denying the poet's ability to be at peace with both his "self" and his "otherness," a third reading is possible. Although the "huge cliff" standing by the lake appears to be the "greater" presence, the lake holds the reflection of the mountain in a "lasting embrace" (67). The feminine, finally, is able to hold all things; the lake reflects both the phallic trees and mountains and the masculine dream, the sky, within herself. The patriarchal hierarchy chooses to trample the feminine in its bid for dominance, but what it sees in nature is simply its own reflection, implying that in its overweening desire for power the patriarchy attempts to suppress an important aspect of itself. The eventual outcome of this suppression is an imbalance within a factionalized hierarchy which weakens its very foundations and portends its destruction.

And the poet in "Luggala", recognizing "no promise of

resurrection, only the ultimate silence of the place" (66), cannot seem to reconcile the promises of the patriarchal religions with the evidence of his vision, that in nature and in this world everything dies. The face of a dead friend, which "rises, sad beyond speech, sad with an acceptance of blind, implacable process" (66), affirms the idea that the feminine power of nature is not vanquished because it does not battle, it does not tolerate with fortitude, it does not wait its moment. It simply exists, certain only of the great flux and flow and of the brevity of the lives of poets.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

"'To walk away, without
looking back, or crying'"
("Back," The Dead Kingdom 96)

Although John Montague creates images which arguably depict women in less than flattering ways, the duality he continues to find in some of objects on which he concentrates, such as water and stone, and in the relationships between men and women, permits the poet to express the anger and grief, as well as their opposites, love and joy, which the women in his life have caused him. By ultimately maintaining this duality however, while also suggesting the possibility of compromise, Montague's poems not only permit the co-existance, as raucous and painful as it may be, of powers inherent to women with those inherent to men, but also recognize that this co-existance is that spark which creates all things. Perhaps Montague retains a level of anger, personal or primal, towards the gender which drives, infuriates, compels, and astonishes him; ultimately, whether directly or obliquely, he does fulfill the task he set himself as a poet: he praises.

NOTES

[1]Montague, quoted in O'Driscoll, p. 68.

[2]Montague, "The Figure in the Cave," p. 44.

[3]Quinn, p. 27. For further explanation, see note 5 below.

[4]Johnston, "Eros in Eire," p. 45.

[5]As both Quinn and Johnston note above, John Montague writes in the muse-poet tradition, which he saw at one time as a tradition open only to male poets. As Quinn notes in "'The Well-Beloved': Montague and the Muse," "In Montague's creative schema, where poetry is bred of an orgasmic relationship with the Muse, a woman poet is, psychologically, 'an absurdity'" (43). The phrase "an absurdity" is a quotation from "In the Irish Grain," from The Faber Book of Irish Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). Quinn also notes that the phrase was altered by its author to "an anomaly" in a later publication. Montague himself, in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, amends his earlier comments on women and muses with humor:

> I swallowed the idea of the Muse hook,
> line and sinker. But . . . one now has
> to think of the Muse much less in terms
> of her being reincarnated in a succession

> of striking young women. . . . The Muse is anything that excites you--to awe first and to poetry second--and that, for me, also includes wells, stones, old women and babies. I think that the poet, whether male or female, is to some extent androgynous. A man who writes poetry would have a very strong anima. (63)

The rather self-excusatory tone the poet employs here may be an effort to cater to the new "atmosphere in the air" (O'Driscoll 63) created by feminism, but it is, nevertheless, an effort in a positive direction. For information concerning women poets as muse-poets, Mary K. DeShazer has written a study: Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse (New York: Columbia TC, 1987).

[6]Other historians of Ireland speak of dolmen being used for reasons similar to the ones Riley suggests, such as James Bonwick, who equates dolmen with cromlech, and speaks of a cromlech as being "a Bethel, or house of God" (218). One cromlech in particular, "St. Declan's Stone, Waterford, had a hole through it which people crawled for the cure of maladies" (218). Engravings found on many of the stones across Ireland may have given historians clues as to the usage of these stones.

[7]See Chapter 3, the discussion on "The Wild Dog Rose" for further explication of the Montegasque perception of the

hag.

[8]For a further commentary on this, read Chapter 4, the discussion of the poem "Sheela Na Gig."

[9]Several of the poems in this section of Tides are arguably concerned with the poet's own life and the dissolution of his marriage to Madeleine, his first wife. To the disappointment of both, they were unable to have children, a fact which--according to autobiographical readings of his work--played a major role in their break up.

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