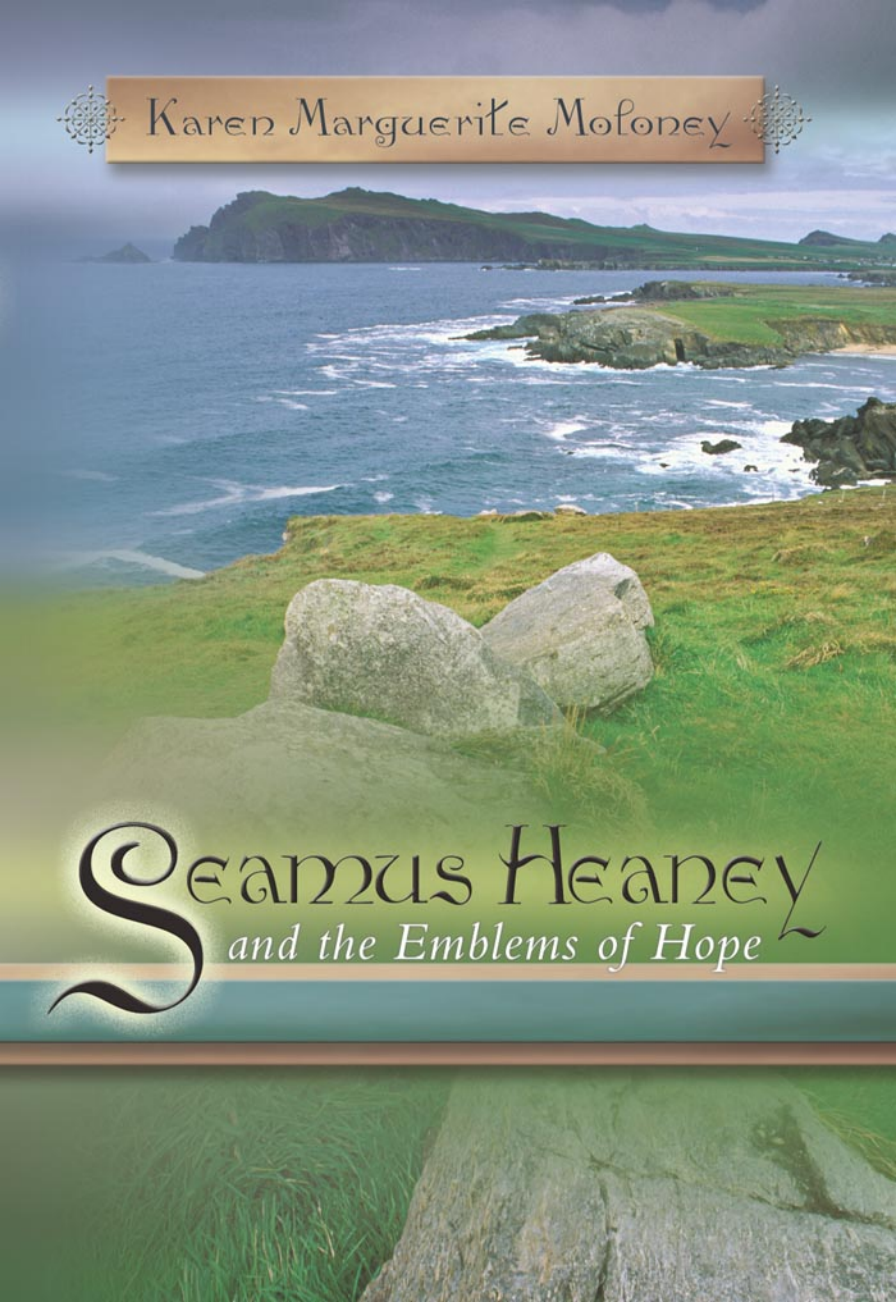
Karen Marguerite Moloney



Seamus Heaney
and the Emblems of Hope

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For my mother,

Frances Leuenhagen Moloney,

and in memory of my father,

Daniel Thomas Moloney

A synthesis is achieved in studies that confront rather than simply deplore the residual power of such archetypes as the Woman as Creator or Destroyer, as Nature or Muse.

—Patrick J. Keane, *Terrible Beauty: Yeats, Joyce, Ireland, and the Myth of the Devouring Female*

What does it mean in contemporary terms if we follow the logic of the old mythographers, and Heaney, who follows them? An Irish person wants the sovereignty of Ireland to be preserved; that means it must be capable of accommodating *everything, all* traditions. . . . Maleness will take on femaleness and the other way around.

—Robert Welch, *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*

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Acknowledgments

When I happened upon Seamus Heaney's "Waterfall," "Docker," "Gravities," "In Small Townlands," and "The Outlaw" in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* in 1978, I was living in London as a graduate assistant for a semester-abroad program. The effect of the discovery was immediate, quiet, powerful. Who *was* this poet whose words, in a matter of moments, had caught me—tongue-tied and infatuated—in their net? That he was Irish was a bonus: he could speak to me as a family member; he could tell me more about the lost "Irish mould" ("Gravities," *DN,* 43) of my Galway and Kerry emigrants. Perhaps, too, the Friesian cow in heat ("The Outlaw," *DD,* 16) prompted me to remember the North Friesian farms of my mother's line. When a few weeks later I encountered the Windeby bog burial ("Punishment," *N,* 37–38) in a slim blue paperback, I didn't yet know that my grandmother's village rises on sand dunes deposited by the North Sea only an hour away from Domland Fen on the Windeby estate. But my browsing had already halted. In its place a journey commenced that would lead to the writing of this book. My specific focus came while reading Edward C. Whitmont on the myth of the Grail, incorporating for him the romance of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, in his Jungian treatise *Return of the Goddess.*

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations in the text signify the following primary works, arranged alphabetically by abbreviation.

Works by Seamus Heaney

DC	*District and Circle*
DD	*Door into the Dark*
DN	*Death of a Naturalist*
EL	*Electric Light*
FK	*Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001*
FW	*Field Work*
G	"The Glamoured," translation of "Gile Na Gile," by Aodhagán (or Aogán) Ó Rathaille
GT	*The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978–1987*
HL	*The Haw Lantern*
IB	Introduction to *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*
MB	"The Man and the Bog"
MV	*The Midnight Verdict*
N	*North*
NPL	"The New Poet Laureate"
OG	*Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966–1996*
OL	"An Open Letter"
P	*Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*
PC	"The Poet as a Christian"
PD	*Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland*
PPP	"Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych"
PW	*The Place of Writing*
R	"Remarks at the Announcement of John Montague's Appointment to the Post of Ireland Professorship of Poetry, 14th May 1998"
RP	*The Redress of Poetry*
SA	*Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*
SB	*The School Bag* (edited with Ted Hughes)
SH	"Singing High: James Clarence Mangan"
SI	*Station Island*
SL	*The Spirit Level*
SLR	"Summoning Lazarus"
ST	*Seeing Things*
WO	*Wintering Out*

Works by Eavan Boland

ALP	*Against Love Poetry*
CPB	*Collected Poems*

KS *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*
ITV *In a Time of Violence*

Works by Ciaran Carson

MCC *The Midnight Court: A New Translation of "Cúirt an Mheán Oíche" by Brian Merriman*
TN *The Twelfth of Never*

Works by Austin Clarke

CPC *Collected Poems*
POP *Pilgrimage, and Other Poems*

Work by Katie Donovan

EM *Entering the Mare*

Works by Robert Graves

CPG2 *Complete Poems*, vol. 2
CPG3 *Complete Poems*, vol. 3
GL Robert Graves to Frank Kersnowski, Mallorca, dated Easter Sunday [1969]
MBG *Mammon and the Black Goddess*
WG *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*

Work by Michael Hartnett

SNP *Selected and New Poems: Michael Hartnett*

Works by Ted Hughes

C *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow*
N "Note"
SG *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*
RC *Rain-charm for the Duchy, and Other Laureate Poems*

Works by James Joyce

D "The Dead"
U *Ulysses*

Works by Thomas Kinsella

AS *Another September*
BD *Butcher's Dozen*
BF *Blood and Family*
CPK *Collected Poems, 1956–2001*
I Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*
IAC Introduction to *Austin Clarke: Selected Poems*
NLD *Notes from the Land of the Dead*
NLDO *Notes from the Land of the Dead, and Other Poems*
NOP *Nightwalker, and Other Poems*
O *One, and Other Poems*
PK *Poems*
PP *Personal Places*
TK "Thomas Kinsella Writes . . ."
TS *A Technical Supplement*

Work by Derek Mahon

HLM *Harbour Lights*

Work by James Clarence Mangan

PM *Poems*

Works by Medbh McGuckian

CFA "Comhrá, with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor," coauthored with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill
SPMc *Selected Poems*

Works by Paula Meehan

D	*Dharmakaya*
PT	*Pillow Talk*

Work by Brian Merriman

MC	*Cúirt an Mheadhon Oidhche: The Midnight Court*

Works by John Montague

BA	*The Bag Apron; or, The Poet and His Community*
CL	*A Chosen Light*
CPM	*Collected Poems*
DK	*The Dead Kingdom*
DS	*Drunken Sailor*
FC	*The Figure in the Cave, and Other Essays*
IIG	"In the Irish Grain"
LER	"Love's Equal Realm"
ME	*Mount Eagle*
RF	*The Rough Field*
SD	*A Slow Dance*
SP	*Smashing the Piano*
SPM	*Selected Poems*

Work by Thomas Moore

PWM	*The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore*

Works by Paul Muldoon

M	*Mules*
NW	*New Weather*
Q	*Quoof*

Work by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

SV	*The Second Voyage*

Works by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

AC	*The Astrakhan Cloak*
CFA	"Comhrá, with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor," coauthored with Medbh McGuckian
CP	"Contemporary Poetry"
F	*Feis*
P'sD	*Pharaoh's Daughter*
SE	*Selected Essays*
SPRD	*Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*
WF	"What Foremothers?"
WH	*The Water Horse*

Work by Dáibhí Ó Bruadair

OB	*O Bruadair: Selected Poems of Dáibhí O Bruadair,* trans. Michael Hartnett

Work by Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin

A	*Aislingí / Vision Poems*

Works by Seán Ó Tuama

CM	"Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche"
RD	*Rogha Dánta: Death in the Land of Youth*
RSE	*Repossessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage*

Works by William Butler Yeats

CNH	*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*
CPY	*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*

Seamus Heaney
and the Emblems of Hope

Introduction

Sympathy into Symbol

Like other symbols and images of the period of romantic nationalism, that of Ireland personified has faded very much in the Republic, where independence gradually brought about concern with everyday and mundane affairs and a diminishing response to the old stimuli of patriotic fervour. It has been otherwise in the North.

—Liam de Paor, *Portrait of Ireland*

For it is against the survival of personal and human values that the odds, in our mass-civilization[,] have been laid. But these pressures have driven the poets to the rediscovery of emotional, mythopoëic, and ultimately, of religious modes of response to the world.

—John Heath-Stubbs, introduction to
The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse

The poet Seamus Heaney charges that the sterility and fragmentation of postcolonial Irish society stem directly from overreliance on the rational, masculine portion of the psyche. Accordingly, his verse pays homage to the intuitive, feminine life force of a primordial goddess and to the Dionysian values suggested through portrayals of her consort or bridegroom. The verse offers its affirmation not at the exclusion of the analytic, ordering, assertive qualities that

typically mark the masculine (or patriarchal) disposition but through a form of wedlock in which neither set of values is slighted and the feminine/Dionysian is perhaps preeminent. Specifically, Heaney will praise any existing harmony between man and the earth; decry the intrusion of the rational, linear, and patriarchal when achieved at the expense of the intuitive, cyclic, and marginal; and bow in prayer beside the water's edge. Such defining attitudes can be traced throughout his verse, but nowhere are they more evident than in his deployment of a motif associated with the Celtic *Feis* of Tara, or wedding feast of kingship. The symbols, prominent in the Gaelic oral tradition and a large body of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature, also prove uniquely responsive to the needs of an Ulster poet who would address the deficiencies of contemporary Irish life.

In a frequently quoted passage from "Feeling into Words," Seamus Heaney explains the impact on his verse when "the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was . . . initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast." He asserts unequivocally that "from that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (*P,* 56). The body of poetry written during succeeding decades arises from the same "slow, obstinate, papish burn"[1] as the more transparent verse that preceded it, but the outbreak of Ulster violence led Heaney to trade an activist persona—newspaper editorialist, civil rights marcher ("scared, irrevocable steps" ["Triptych," *FW,* 14]),[2] and author of the provocative "Docker" (*DN,* 41)—for a role resembling that of the eighteenth-century Irish poets who evaded the Penal Laws by concealing their meaning in metaphor. Heaney chose subtlety over plain speaking in his volatile environment, the instillation of political subtext in ostensibly nonpolitical poems. In the rich, pliant imagery derived from the "marriage of sovereignty" of the *Feis* of Tara, Heaney encoded his remedy for an eruption of Ulster violence that evolved quickly into a way of life.

1. Heaney, "Unhappy and at Home: An Interview with Seamus Heaney," 62. Today, Heaney is more likely to speak of "the purely religious, transcendental importance of Catholicism" than to use a defiant phrase like "papish burn" (Heaney, "Seamus Heaney," 83).

2. Heaney refers to his participation in a march at Newry in 1972 to protest "Bloody Sunday" in Derry that January.

As students of Heaney's verse are well aware, the poet's search for "befitting emblems of adversity" ("Meditation in Time of Civil War," pt. 2, "My House," *CPY,* 202) led to

> a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started, in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People.* It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. The author, P. V. Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these, and in particular the Tollund Man, . . . were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. ("Feeling into Words," *P,* 57)

As Heaney explained in an earlier interview, he recognized significant parallels to contemporary Ulster atrocity in Glob's description of these rites:

> You have a society in [the] Iron Age where there was ritual bloodletting and killing to a goddess of the territory of the ground. . . . [Y]ou have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the land and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Yeats's play; she appears as Mother Ireland, she appears you know playing her harp. I think that the kind of republican ethos is a feminine religion in a way.[3]

In offering so explicit a gloss on the link he perceived between sacrificial offering of a "bridegroom" to an ancient fertility goddess and modern "sacrifices" to Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the most widely recognized female symbol for Ireland, Heaney provided a key to his poetry's interpretation that critics have deftly, and one often feels exhaustively, employed. Heaney's emphasis on sacrifice, however, diverted attention away from the influence on his poetry of the more optimistic elements of the sacred marriage between tribal spokesperson

3. Heaney, interview by Andy O'Mahony, broadcast on the Northern Ireland Home Service of the BBC (November 21, 1972), as quoted in Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster,* 176.

and goddess, particularly as developed within a distinctive Irish context and connected thereby to Grail mythology. Obscuring even further the distinctive role of the sacred marriage in the verse, readers who have noted its presence have typically discredited it as blurring significant boundaries between gender and national identity. Such perceived blurring contributes, for example, to Patricia Coughlan's indictment, frequently reprinted and influential, of Heaney's poetry.[4]

Female representations of Ireland are problematic symbols in contemporary Irish literary and cultural studies, as are feminine national abstractions worldwide: women and nations have too often been configured as "interchangeable terrain on which colonial power could be deployed." Deniz Kandiyoti, in an essay drawing its examples from the Middle East and South Asia, highlights the practical consequences of such thinking as the "deleterious effect on [women's] emergence as full-fledged citizens of nation-states," while Sabina Sawhney notes the shadow cast by Mother India on postcolonial women who serve as subjects of, rather than equal participants in, debate about their country. Still, as Ania Loomba forcefully reminds us, women "are not just a vocabulary in which colonial and colonised men work out their relations with each other but at least half the population of any nation. This is not to pit 'symbolic' and 'real' against each other, but to remember that symbolism shapes the real-life roles women are called upon to play." Interrogating the deployment of feminine national icons remains, therefore, a vital task in countries, like Ireland, where women await the full benefits of decolonization. Edna Longley speaks for many critics of Irish culture when she regrets the destructive entanglement of myth in Irish women's lives.[5]

4. Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." See Carlanda Green, "The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," for an appreciative response to the motif; and John Haffenden, "Seamus Heaney and the Feminine Sensibility."

5. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* 152; Kandiyoti, "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation," 388; Sawhney, "Mother India through the Ages: The Dilemma of Conflicting Subjectivities," 89; Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* 222. See Edna Longley's chapter "From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands," esp. 186–92; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "Thinking of Her . . . as Ireland"; and Clair Wills's chapter "Women Poets: The Privatization of Myth," in her *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry.* For specific critique of Heaney's images of women, see Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 88–92, 99–111.

In this climate of reassessment, Irish male authors who reproduce symbolic figures of women attract particular scrutiny. Such inquiry is understandable and enlightening; it can, however, be too uniformly applied. Clair Wills has observed that readers can find "the feminist critique of the motherland myth" too compelling, leading one both to assume that "all figurations of the nation as female are equally retrograde" and to discount any salutary effects in their activation. Even Coughlan acknowledges that "it might be a mistake to assume that the inherited material itself offers only irremediably disempowering representations of women."[6] Moreover, if we approach a work impatient to discredit its female figures of Ireland, we run the risk of misreading crucial textual evidence. In contrast, careful reading of a text, including detailed attention to prosody in the case of verse, can reveal canny infusion of subversive content into old stereotypes, as in Heaney's emphasis on the quality of relationship between his poems' narrators and the goddess of sovereignty.

Admittedly, a number of Heaney's early poems reflect the views of his patriarchal culture. The characters in his first two books, for example, divide sharply into male artists and female muses. The males in these poems cut turf, plough, divine for water, thatch roofs, fish, sing, and teach creative writing, whereas the females function largely as symbols of fertility, regeneration, and inspiration. The only women to come close to acting as an artist or expert craftsperson are Heaney's aunt in the poem "Churning Day" (*DN,* 21), referred to only in passing, and the first owner of the musical instrument described in "Victorian Guitar" (*DD,* 33), whose marriage "cancelled" whatever musical ability she possessed. Even the affectation-fearing woman eulogized in the 1987 sonnet sequence "Clearances" (*HL,* 24–32) is presented primarily in relationship to son, father, and husband. The numerous homely details of the poem allow us to catch glimpses, though, not of a generic muse but of a highly individualized woman, punctilious, proud, devout. Nine years later, the blind musician of "At the Wellhead" may represent both muse and sovereignty goddess, but she is "also just [a] neighbour, Rosie Keenan," a gentle, "withdrawn" woman who "played the piano all day in her bedroom" (*SL,* 76). In Heaney's newest collection, the finally assertive, loved aunt remembered in "The Lift"; Sarah, the resolute gardener in "Helping Sarah"

6. Wills, *Improprieties,* 53; Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 95.

(the first section of "Home Help"); and Dorothy Wordsworth caught in candid, telling snapshots, young and old, in "A Scuttle for Dorothy Wordsworth" (the first section of "Home Fires") (*DC,* 40–41, 68–69, 72) offer realistic—yet sympathetic—portraits of women "independent of [their] sexual attributes and [their] reproductive apparatus" ("Orpheus in Ireland: On Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court,*" *RP,* 56).

Surely, in the light of Heaney's still unfolding achievement and expanding compassion, he can be forgiven some perpetuation of sexist stereotypes. The nature of the feminine persona in a poem like "Bone Dreams" (*N,* 27–30) might represent a powerful soul projection, even a "prized elixir sought and usurped by the male," but, as Annette Kolodny argues, "we cannot forget that the images of Nature-as-Woman or Woman-as-Muse once held their own kinds of truths and worked forcefully within our shared cultural psyches; as such, they will always be with us—an inheritance from our past, not to be annihilated or forgotten, but, with a new consciousness of their less attractive implications, to be transcended, superseded, or even subsumed into something else."[7] That said, even "Bone Dreams" offers more to a reader at once attentive and open-minded than lessons from leftover, irrelevant mythology. Where misreading has fueled a dismissive view of Heaney as distressingly sexist, careful reconsideration is therefore needed to appreciate his actual achievement. As Eavan Boland, a poet known for her impatience with the image of the woman as nation, acknowledged to me, Heaney's poetry incorporates complex dimensions into such symbols.[8]

My first two chapters, then, review the millennia of oral and literary tradition providing the distinctive Irish context for Heaney's verse. The first chapter includes discussion of Gaelic classics *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeney)* and *Cúirt an Mheán-Oiche (The Midnight Court),* to which Heaney's translated versions ease access; my second chapter focuses on the four Irish contemporaries—Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Eavan Boland, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill—whose work draws most consistently upon motifs derived from the marriage of sovereignty. The four chapters that

7. Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction,* 8; Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism,'" 90–91.

8. I questioned Boland after a poetry reading she gave at the University of Utah (on April 27, 1993) about Heaney's use of the sovereignty motif. She also explained that her real impatience lies with the unexamined image of the woman as nation, rather than with the image per se.

follow comprise prosody-sensitive readings of representative poems frequently misunderstood in previous commentary. As Heaney himself declares,

> It is not only a poem's explicit political concerns and paraphrasable content that need attending to. A précis of the content, for example, takes no account of literary echoes and allusions which can be fundamental to its poetic energy. In a poem, words, phrases, cadences and images are linked into systems of affect and signification which elude the précis maker. These under-ear activities, as they might be termed, may well constitute the most important business which the poem is up to and are more a matter of the erotics of language than of the politics and polemics of the moment. ("Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain," *FK,* 405–6)

A reading of a poem that includes "literary echoes and allusions . . . . words, phrases, cadences, and images" requires for its approach a willingness to become intimate with one locale. As my study values the closer look over frequently changing scenery, it concentrates, with a view both to meaning and to "under-ear activities," on relevant poems from the early volumes *North* and *Field Work:* "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N,* 46–47), "The Guttural Muse" (*FW,* 28), "Come to the Bower" (*N,* 31), "Bone Dreams" (*N,* 27–30), and "A Drink of Water" (*FW,* 16). That these poems tell a story, even a Grail story, when read together and consecutively further justifies the time I take with them.

When Heaney's eighteenth-century predecessors "lamented their country's servitude to a foreign oppressor and wishfully prophesied . . . the restoration of the native kingship" in countless *aislingí,* or vision poems, theirs was "a gesture almost entirely devoid of political reality, but it was delivered with much eloquence and . . . with a profound sense of tradition."[9] Similarly, Heaney's poems adapting the sacred marriage of sovereignty may be ineffectual in a practical political sense, but like the earlier poems that indexed the misery of their century, his tribute draws poignantly from an ancient past to address the failures of his times. When he writes of his betrothal thirty years earlier to "green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra

9. Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 114.

vegetation" ("Mossbawn," *P,* 19), he signals that, from boyhood, his has been a tender, husbandly relationship with the earth. He also reveals his link to a long line of tribal representatives and prospective kings who pledged themselves in sacred marriage to a figure representing Ireland, earth, primordial feminine principle, and territorial dominion; more significantly for this study, he indicates his willingness to participate in a centuries-old literary tradition that adapts the rituals of the *Feis* of Tara for varied, continually evolving purposes. The Gaelic tribal leaders and poets who preceded him never anticipated that a "bridegroom to the goddess" ("The Tollund Man," *WO,* 47–48) at the turn of the third millennium might fashion, in the relationship of male lover to female goddess, a prototype for the humility and deference needed to repair the ill effects of English plantation in Ireland—nor that it might serve in "Irish verse in English" as an important metaphor for the contemporary need to reinstate and honor archetypal feminine and Dionysian principles.

In the introduction to Heaney's *Place of Writing,* Ronald Schuchard makes a particularly relevant assessment of Heaney's work. He comments on the Irish poet's need to separate from the grim "political reality of Ulster, to transcend it in highly formal lyrics. . . . To Heaney, the poetic transcendence is not an evasion of sympathy with national conditions but rather a transposition of that sympathy into symbol." Schuchard has identified here, in Heaney's ability to transcend reality by transposing sympathy into symbol, one of his poetry's most resonant chords, for, surely, when he "detaches himself from . . . predatory circumstances," his readers both accompany him and share the rewards of his liberating act.[10] As I trust the present study will demonstrate, one of the most memorable symbols transposing Heaney's sympathy, in the face of pressing need, is his adaptation of the ancient Celtic *Feis* of Tara.

10. Schuchard, introduction to *PW,* 6.

1

Sovereignty and the Irish Talent

The Gaelic poets usually imagined their monarch wedded to the land, which was emblematized by a beautiful woman: if she was happy and fertile, his rule was righteous, but if she grew sad and sorrowful, that must have been because of some unworthiness in the ruler. The artist was the fittest interpreter of the state of this relationship.

—Declan Kiberd, "A New England Called Ireland?" in *Inventing Ireland*

The stories . . . stay away from a definite identification of sovereignty with one tribe, one people, one place. Indeed, all may be seen to have a claim upon her. Sovereignty itself as a concept remains fixed; that is a unifying notion. But it can be adapted and changed depending on circumstances and need.

—Robert Welch, "Movement and Authority," in *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*

David Marcus chooses the year after the end of Ireland's Civil War as the starting point for his *Irish Poets, 1924–1974* because, in his estimation, "only with the generations of poets born free of the original sin of subjugation could the era of modern Irish poetry . . . really begin. And indeed, the work of such poets," he believes, "has consistently reflected their release from the hag-ridden themes that

haunted so much pre-1924 Irish poetry."[1] Marcus is correct in suggesting that postcolonial Irish poets have prospered in being liberated from obligation to tradition, but his assessment both ignores many poets' continuing engagement with their inheritance and minimizes the complexity of the political situation in post-1924 Ulster. In this chapter I cite the relevant pre-Christian belief and historical ritual for the sacred marriage of king to kingdom—the *Feis* of Tara or marriage of sovereignty—before considering its mythological spin-offs, primarily the tale of a future king's encounter with a hideous, well-guarding hag. I then provide an overview of a millennium—and then some—of Irish literature, almost exclusively poetry, with an eye to what Marcus calls (one feels resentfully) its "hag-ridden" themes, though I expand their jurisdiction to include aspects of a large family of thematic elements under the heading of sovereignty motif.

As I move in mostly chronological fashion through the literary tradition into which Seamus Heaney was born, the picture that emerges is both constant and varied in its response to the ritual in which king or tribal leader weds the goddess/land. Poems in the Irish language explore the surprisingly sensitive soul of the hag, compose bardic eulogy, focus on the Dionysian kingly consort (as in *Buile Suibhne,* or *Sweeney Astray*), and express a range of responses to the growing dissolution of the old Gaelic order in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—rage, hope, despair, parody—in elegies, laments, vision poems, and keens. Poetry in English begins primarily as translations from the Irish but quickly turns to new creations intended to spur rebellion and preserve tradition, certainly including the myth of a pre-Christian goddess and her Dionysian consort. The canvas, we shall see, is well populated, and 1924 provides useful demarcation for discussing the work of poets born before and after the confirmation of the Irish Free State. Where this chapter ends, the next begins, picking up the trail as traveled by poets who transform the trope in contemporary terms. With this backdrop in mind, Heaney's adaptation of the symbols of sovereignty can be more appropriately assessed.

The concept of an earth goddess who bestows the right to rule can be traced in the ancient literature of cultures as diverse as Greece, Iran, and India, but "nowhere was this divine image of sovereignty

1. Marcus, introduction to *Irish Poets, 1924–1974,* 15.

visualised so clearly as among the Celts, and more especially in Ireland." The Irish had, after all, escaped both Roman occupation and displacement by the invading Anglo-Saxons—in sharp contrast to the British Celts, for example. Accordingly, they became "intimately and indissolubly associated in their own minds with a clearly defined and, as it were, god-given (or goddess-given) territory: the island of Ireland." As Proinsias Mac Cana asserts, "In Irish tradition it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this idea of the land and its sovereignty conceived in the form of a woman."[2]

Closely related to this concept is the requirement that the king maintain an intimate sense of connection with the earth that nurtures the tribe he represents. Reflecting this view, pre-Christian ritual surrounding the inauguration of a new king included a marriage ceremony uniting the king to the goddess of the earth. Deriving ultimately from a tradition predating Indo-European civilization, the *hieros gamos,* or sacred marriage, has been amply documented in the ancient records of the Near East. Historical evidence exists as well for its Irish counterpart, as in the rite reluctantly recorded by the cleric Gerald de Barri, called Giraldus Cambrensis or Gerald of Wales, in about 1187. Gerald observes how the prospective king of an area now part of County Donegal copulated with a white mare serving as a surrogate for the goddess. Afterward, the mare was killed and her body cut into pieces and boiled. The candidate for king then bathed in and drank from the water used to cook the mare's flesh while partaking with his people of the meat. As Giraldus comments, "When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, [the candidate's] kingship and dominion have been conferred."[3]

An entry from *Annála Connacht* (The Annals of Connacht) regarding the inauguration in 1310 of Feidlimid, son of Aed Ó Conchobair,

2. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 92; Liam de Paor, *Portrait of Ireland: Ireland—Past and Present,* 36; Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology," 7. See Catherine A. McKenna, "The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll,*" on "the Welsh sovereignty tradition" (46, 39); and Alexander H. Krappe, "The Sovereignty of Erin."

3. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland,* 110. For a recent poem's account, see Katie Donovan, "Entering the Mare," in *Entering the Mare,* 40–41. See Merlin Stone's chapter "If the King Did Not Weep," in *When God Was a Woman,* on the sacred marriage in Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Crete, Northern Canaan, Anatolia, Cypress, Greece, and Israel; chap. 12 in Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion;* and Caitlín Matthews and John Matthews, *The Western Way: A Practical Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition,* vol. 1, *The Native Tradition,* 40.

records another historical instance of the marriage of sovereignty. According to this account, when Feidlimid "had married the Province of Connacht his foster-father waited upon him during the night in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books; and this was the most splendid kingship-marriage ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day." A reference of this nature does little to clarify the exact manner of the rite, but one can hope that Feidlimid deserved his kingly appointment. Ancient Irish cosmology presumes that "the qualities of a rightful king . . . are reflected in the condition of his kingdom. They ensure peace and equity, security of the kingdom's borders, and material prosperity: the trees bend low with the weight of their fruit, the rivers and the sea teem with abundance of fish, and the earth brings forth rich harvests. Conversely, a king who is blemished in his conduct and character or in his person will bring about corresponding privations."[4]

Sir James George Frazer tells us that "the Book of Acaill and many other authorities [take kingly requirements one step further by stipulating that] no king who was afflicted with a personal blemish might reign over Ireland at Tara. Hence, when the great King Cormac Mac Art lost one eye by an accident, he at once abdicated." Had he continued to rule, "dearth, dryness of cows, blight of fruit, and scarcity of corn" comprise a few of the territorial ills that might have been laid at his feet, for the ancient Irish regarded such afflictions as "infallible proofs that the reigning king was bad" or blemished. Certainly related to this concept are Grail legends of a Fisher King whose wounding explains his kingdom's conversion into wasteland. Preoccupation with the king's worthiness may also help to explain why the sacrificial death of the currently reigning king (or a priest or slave killed in his place) may have preceded the installment of his successor.[5] Particularly if the all-important crops had begun to fail, or if the current king were injured, ill, aging, or impotent, replacing him with a younger, virile ruler would constitute a necessary insurance policy for his anxious subjects.

Wide reliance on P. V. Glob's *Bog People* has led Heaney scholars to conflate the concept of a sacred marriage with ritual killing, though

4. A. Martin Freeman, ed., *Annála Connacht / The Annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224–1544)*, 223; Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 119.

5. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 318, 103. See also G. F. Dalton, "The Ritual Killing of the Irish Kings" and "The Tradition of Blood Sacrifice to the Goddess Éire."

blood sacrifice is not the defining characteristic of the sacred union. Mac Cana overlooks this aspect entirely when he asserts confidently that the king's inaugural wedding feast featured two primary elements: a draft or libation proffered by the bride or priestess to the prospective king and an act of coition uniting them physically (*feis* meaning not only feast but also sleeping, spending the night). Ireland's conversion to Christianity ensured the removal of copulation from the ceremony (as well as any component of human sacrifice), but even modern coronation ritual retains vestiges of this marriage to the goddess of the land. Caitlín Matthews specifically cites "the English coronation rite where the monarch is ceremonially wedded to the land with the 'wedding ring of England,' at the presentation of the regalia." Heaney recognizes a related stance in Ted Hughes's poem "Rain-charm for the Duchy: A Blessed, Devout Drench for the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry." The poem, which Heaney describes as a "shower of benediction" by the then poet laureate, memorializes a powerful cloudburst after drought. Heaney observes, "On one level, [the poem] was about the immense rich surge of life that came over the fields and rivers of Devon and Cornwall. . . . But at another level it was an aspect of one of the most ancient rites of Indo-European kingship, the betrothal of the King to his physical territory" (NPL, 46).[6]

The sexual component of the ritual survived, too, through its conveyance to a host of mythological tales considering the theme of marriage between king and goddess. As even a brief study of these myths reveals, transformation tales employing the loathly lady theme, or metamorphosis of hag into damsel, represent a particularly popular variant. In the Irish oral tradition, such myths frequently highlight a crucial interaction between the goddess figure, typically appearing in the guise of a loathsome hag, or *cailleach*, and the male who approaches her. If the male acts harshly toward her, often evidenced in an abrupt, horrified refusal to give her the kiss she requests, the goddess figure remains concealed in ugliness. But for the man who treats her with courtesy, granting her the kiss she desires, the hag is transformed into a beautiful maiden and rewards

6. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 117, 119; Matthews, "Sophia: Companion on the Quest," 115. See also Matthews and Matthews, *Western Way*, 1:40; and Hughes's "Rain-charm for the Duchy: A Blessed, Devout Drench for the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry," including notes (*RC*, 1–4, 51–52).

this exceptional individual with the kingship of Ireland. The story of Niall of the Nine Hostages, recorded in Middle Irish in *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin (The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón),* can be taken as exemplary. The tale's compelling center is the physical encounter between Niall and the ugly guardian of the well, changed with his kiss into a maiden promising Niall and his posterity the kingship of Ireland; the story plays as well upon the motif of the bridal libation with its water-dispensing hag. In addition, students of English literature are likely to have encountered the tale indirectly in two permutations: Chaucer's tale of the Wife of Bath and the medieval romance *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell,* the story of lessons taught King Arthur's nephew Gawain (or Gawen) through kissing a loathly hag. Jungian psychologist Edward C. Whitmont even sees the second variant as an integral, previously undervalued element of the Grail myth. For him, Gawain's discovery that both sexes prosper when women exercise volition and autonomy (or sovereignty) helps train the knight to ask the Grail Keeper, or Fisher King, the question that heals the king's festering wound and restores the realm's fertility.[7] Niall's story merits telling in full.

The five sons of the Irish king Eochoid Muigmedón undertake a hunting expedition to determine whether Niall, a half brother and youngest of the five, deserves to rule in place of his older siblings. Along the way they stop to eat some of the game they have killed. Shortly after the meal, thirst overtakes the hunting party, and one by one, the four older brothers—Fergus first, then Olioll, Brian, and Fiachra—set out to find water. In turn, each of their searches leads finally to a well, but its access is guarded by an old woman who is "blacker than coal . . . ; blackened and smoke-bleared eyes she had; nose awry, wide-nostrilled; a wrinkled and a freckled belly, variously unwholesome; warped crooked shins, garnished with massive ankles and a pair of capacious shovels; knotty knees she had, and

7. Whitmont argues for his atypical view in *Return of the Goddess,* 166–68. For more on loathly lady stories, see J. K. Bollard, "Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English, Welsh, and Irish"; R. A. Breatnach, "The Lady and the King: A Theme of Irish Literature"; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Loathly Bride"; Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of "The Wife of Bath's Tale";* Norman N. Holland, "Meaning as Transformation: The Wife of Bath's Tale"; and Laura Sumner, "The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, Edited with a Study of the Date and Dialect of the Poem and Its English Analogues."

livid nails." One by one, each brother draws closer to the hag, apparently the well's appointed sentry, and requests permission to retrieve some water. To each in turn the hag gives her consent, attaching, however, one condition: a kiss on her cheek. One by one, the young men scorn the bargain, and Fergus's hot reply is recorded as a typical rejoinder: "My word I give . . . that sooner than give thee a kiss I would perish of thirst!"[8]

Finally, Niall sets out to search for water. At length he encounters the same well and the same hag as had his brothers. But this time, when the hag stipulates the price for the water, Niall breaks the pattern by responding, "Forby giving thee a kiss, I will even hug thee!" Niall's own mother had been kept by the queen, his father's wife, in virtual slavery, forced to draw water for all of Tara. Reminded likely of his mother's sad servitude, Niall both embraces the hag and gives her the longed-for kiss; in some tellings of the story, he consents also to lie with her.[9] Standish H. O'Grady describes the ensuing transformation: "In the whole world was not a young woman of gait more graceful . . . to be likened to the last-fallen snow lying in trenches every portion of her was, from crown to sole; plump and queenly forearms, fingers long and taper, straight legs of a lovely hue she had; . . . lustrous teeth of pearl, great regal eyes, mouth as red as the rowan-berry." She announces that she is "Royal Rule," promises the kingship of Ireland to Niall and his posterity, and explains the significance of both her loathsome and her beautiful aspects in political terms: "And as at the first thou hast seen me ugly, brutish, loathly—in the end, beautiful—even so is royal rule: for without battles, without fierce conflict, it may not be won; but in the result, he that is king of no matter what shows comely and handsome forth."

Valuing the story's metaphorical richness, Jean Markale views Niall's kissing of the hag as "a kind of sexual initiation in which the mother figure opens a new world to him. The change from an ugly hag into a radiant beauty is really a change in Niall, who is seeing her through new eyes." The story in this form serves most obviously, though, as "a piece of blatant propaganda in favour of the political

8. All the quoted material from this tale is taken from Standish H. O'Grady, ed. and trans., *Silva Gadelica (I.–XXXI): A Collection of Tales in Irish,* 2:370–72.

9. See Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology," 8; and Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 119–20.

ambition of the Ui Neill dynasty who were descended from Niall."[10] Similarly, many applications of the motif associated with the sacred marriage contain marked, perhaps primary, political connotations; some stories may even have been constructed, like Niall's tale, to bolster a particular claim to kingship. Political aspirations and discontent often motivate the use of the sovereignty motif and dictate its particular form, even if indirectly, as we shall see with Heaney's contemporary appropriations. But the motif also serves other ends, and its remarkable pliability across more than ten centuries demonstrates a resilience worth tracing—better to appreciate both the tradition itself and Heaney's take on it. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* begins its review of "Sovereignty and Politics" with the fourteenth century, but two earlier poems, both likely written by women who lived their later lives in convents, give poignant voice to the mercilessness of old age as experienced by the *cailleach* (meaning nun and penitent spouse—a nun formerly married—as well as hag). The two poems offer a fitting embarkation point for an overview of "hag-ridden" verse.

The first of these is the well-known ninth-century lament "Aithbe Damsa Bés Mara" ("Digde's Lament"), a poem more often ascribed to unknown authorship and titled "Cailleach Béara," or "The Old Woman of Beare," but probably the work of Digde, a Kerry woman who later became a nun.[11] The poem's setting mirrors the narrator's physical decay in a tribute to the sovereignty motif, as in these lines conflating wasteland and hag:

> The sea grows smaller, smaller now.
> Farther, farther it goes
> Leaving me here where the foam dries
> On the deserted land,

10. Markale, *King Arthur: King of Kings,* 123–24; Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology," 8. To please patrons, clerics inserted propaganda into early Irish history. Still, the traditions of Niall's family "form a bridge between the oral records of prehistoric Ireland and the later written records. . . . Irish history really begins" as Niall and his family rise to power (Myles Dillon and Nora K. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms,* 55). Niall's story may also signal the goddess's decreasing influence, as "the attainment of sovereignty came to be viewed as the result of personal achievement rather than of divine assignation" (Máire Herbert, headnote to "Society and Myth, c. 700–1300").

11. In her headnote to "Aithbe Damsa Bés Mara," Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha provides evidence that Digde wrote the poem.

Dry as my shrunken thighs,
As the tongue that presses my lips,
As the veins that break through my hands.[12]

The arms of this hag "did sweet business once / round the bodies of mighty kings." However, since she can neither defy mortality like her legendary namesake, the sovereignty goddess Cailleach Bhéarra,[13] nor renew herself in spring like the yellow flowers of a Tipperary plain, the only transformation that awaits her now is death. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha confirms, "In the poem [the narrator] has become at last an ordinary mortal who cannot postpone death, and is living out her span in a monastery of women: she is now . . . the *former* Caillech Béirre." But behind the utterance of the Christian penitent can still be heard, as Gearóid Ó Crualaoich explains, the "powerful expression" of "an alternative dispensation . . . [,] the pre-Christian, ancestral cosmology wherein the female endures as ever-renewed divine agency of the land . . . and . . . glorious sovereignty queen, . . . joined in mystical union with a succession of mortal male rulers." The near seamless intertwining of these voices, one mortal, one otherworldly, has led to the lament being described as "the greatest poem in Old Irish."[14]

In several of the eighteen Late Middle or Early Modern Irish poems attributed to Gormlaith, whose "work may well underlie" poems produced at least two centuries after her 947 death, the sentiment echoes that in the poems ascribed to Digde. A widow for nearly thirty years following the passing of Niall Glúndub, the "clear favourite of her three husbands,"[15] Gormlaith is traditionally believed, after his death, to have entered a monastery. In the following lines from "Ro

12. Brendan Kennelly, ed., *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse,* 64.

13. Thomas Kinsella, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse,* 24. In quoting from more than one translation for a poem, I select lines best suited to my purposes, here and below. For Cailleach Bhéarra, I use the spelling in Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer.*

14. Ní Dhonnchadha, headnote to "Aithbe Damsa Bés Mara," 111. Ní Dhonnchadha observes that although the Cailleach Bhéarra is considered "a goddess of the land and of sovereignty," Gaelic tradition actually "represents [her] as a revenant who enjoyed extraordinary longevity and survived serial epochs and historical ruptures." Ó Crualaoich, *Book of the Cailleach,* 48 (see also 48–52). See also Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrígan to Cathleen ní Houlihan,* 147; and Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 91–92.

15. Ní Dhonnchadha, headnote to "Éirigh a Inghean An Ríogh," 133; Ní Dhonnchadha, headnote to "Ro Charas Tríocha Fo Thrí," 135.

Charas Tríocha Fo Thrí" ("Gormlaith Speaks"), the narrator recalls her proud status as Niall's wife and contrasts the indignity and poverty of her lonely widowhood with those halcyon days:

> His coloured cloaks, his rings of gold,
> his fine horses that won the prize—
> . . . . . .
> all in turn come to an end.
>
> I own nothing between heaven and earth
> but a white shift and a dark cloak.

The poem continues by noting the painful slights she endured from the abbot's wife, Mór, who callously returned such generous gifts as Gormlaith's "two score cattle," "a blue Norse hood," and "thirty ounces of gold" with "two tenths of hard oats, / [and] two hen's eggs from her clutch!" In the spirit of Digde before her, who lamented the materialism of the succeeding generation ("Girls nowadays / Dream only of money—When we were young / We cared more for our men"), Gormlaith concludes the poem only after forcefully declaring, "Woe to all who take pride in gold / and woe to Mór in her stinginess."[16] The political edge to the motif returns soon enough in "bardic eulogy, the central poetic genre of the classical period (*c.* 1200–1600)." The genre "draws repeatedly on the pre-colonial sovereignty goddess tradition in works in which the particular lord being addressed—whether of native Irish, Norman or Old English stock—is depicted as a worthy spouse, who will look after Éire's welfare and overthrow her enemies." Such poems praise even "relatively minor provincial figures" and typically employ "the notion of a marriage union . . . as one element in a whole series of stock phrases and images."[17] The fourteenth-century praise poem "Fuirigh Go Fóill, A Éire" ("Wait a Little While, Dear Éire"), by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, offers a clear example of the genre. Written to commend and rally Tadhg Mac Carthaigh, a McCarthy of Desmond still a young man at the time, the poem advises Éire to exercise patience regarding his youthful stature with such direct

16. Angela Bourke and others, eds., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, trans. Ní Dhonnchadha, 4:136–37; John Montague, ed., *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*, 71; Bourke and others, *Field Day Anthology*, 4:137.

17. Máirín Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300–1900," 273.

reminders as "your husband is not yet mature" and "so remain unmarried yet awhile." The poem nevertheless "ends by inciting Tadhg to demonstrate his kingly potential by taking up arms against his rivals."[18]

Bardic eulogy was not the only genre to access the symbols of sovereignty during this period. *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeney)* tells the story, alternately prose and verse, of another provincial ruler, Suibhne Geilt, the poet-king of Dál Araidhe in Northern Ireland who was cursed with madness and changed into a bird (or bird-man) for inflicting violence on a cleric. The story may be traced back, finally, to "the Battle of Moira (A.D. 637)" (*SA,* v) and poems attributed to Suibhne himself (*WG,* 450); Seamus Heaney based his 1983 *Sweeney Astray* on J. G. O'Keeffe's 1913 bilingual version.[19] The poem's narrative structure, described by Heaney as "a primer of lyric genres—laments, dialogues, litanies, rhapsodies, curses" (*SA,* vii), provides ample backdrop for deployment of several aspects of the sovereignty motif. Notably, the poem provides early, imaginative dramatization of the relationship between a birdlike Celtic Dionysus, "the green spirit of the hedges" (*SA,* ix), and his hard-driving consort-goddess as the two interact in an Ireland still copiously forested with alders, oaks, hazels, blackthorns, rowans, briars, yews, ivies, hollies, ashes, apples, and birches.

The figure of Dionysus represents for Whitmont "the phallic power of maleness, aggression and emotion" and serves also in his view as the constant companion—child or lover—to the archetypal goddess. Sir James Frazer devotes a chapter of *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* to Dionysus, identifying him as a famous participant in an ancient Greek version of the *hieros gamos:* "At Athens the god of the vine, Dionysus, was annually married to the Queen, and it appears that the consummation of the divine union, as well as the espousals, was enacted at the ceremony; but whether the part of the god was played by a man or an image we do not know." Such a marriage may later have been followed by human sacrifice, dismemberment, and burial, and Frazer notes that "distorted

18. Bourke and others, *Field Day Anthology,* trans. Nic Eoin, 4:276; Nic Eoin, headnote to "Fuirigh Go Fóill, A Éire." Her translation (of a portion of the poem) does not include the actual final lines.

19. O'Keeffe based his work, in turn, on a manuscript produced between 1671 and 1674 whose text "might have been composed at any time between the years 1200 and 1500" (quoting O'Keeffe, in *SA,* v).

reminiscences of a custom of sacrificing human beings, and especially divine kings, in the character of Dionysus" may be traced in Greek traditions featuring the exploits of the mad, shapeshifting god of wine and trees.[20]

After all, as a king-turned-bird and elegist of trees (*SA,* 36–38, 40), Suibhne is not only mad but also a wild man of the woods—and may even represent, according to Heaney, "development of a British original, vestigially present in the tale of the madman called Alan" (*SA,* vi) with whom Sweeney spent a year after flying over to Britain and exchanging life stories (*SA,* 55). Henry Hart, who explores affinities between Heaney and "the Celtic king who fled from battles in Ulster to take up the more solitary ardors of contemplation and poetry in the South," correctly observes that the figure also serves for Heaney as "the prototype of the Irish exile or 'inner émigré' (as he refers to himself in 'Exposure') who never quite escapes the forces that set him in motion." Heaney himself has clarified the connections he sees between a character he refers to as a "Celtic wild man . . . [and both] the new wild men of the Provisional IRA . . . . [and] the nationalist minority . . . [with] their lost title to sovereignty" ("Earning a Rhyme," *FK,* 65). However, despite recent attempts, like Heaney's, to equate the traditional figure with aspects of contemporary Irish life, Suibhne may act in a manner truer to his origins when linked to the Britannic sun and vegetation god whom Rodney Castleden affirms as a manifestation of Dionysus.[21] Richard Bernheimer's *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* includes British and Celtic models, if not Suibhne, and links the medieval wild man, at once "harbinger of fertility and . . . embodiment of the returning dead," to an "older mythology, which . . . had decreed his slaughter for the good of all." As Hart has pointed out, though, Sweeney's wild man is also more sensitively observant than Bernheimer's. In Suibhne, Dionysus becomes a poet with "a remarkably realistic eye

20. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 58 (see also 6–7, 58–59, 155); Frazer, *Golden Bough,* 164–65, 439.

21. Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions,* 140; see also his chapter "Heaney's Sweeney." In other recent work, Tom MacIntyre equates Ulster with a lunatic asylum in "Rise Up Lovely Sweeney," and Brian Friel's title character in *Molly Sweeney* both mirrors Sweeney in "flights" and "madness" and symbolizes Ulster. See Clune, "Mythologising Sweeney"; my "Molly Astray: Revisioning Ireland in Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*"; and my discussion of Dionysus in Chapter 6.

for nature's cycles of affliction and appeasement, rugged bestiality and uplifting beauty."[22]

If it is relatively easy to recognize Dionysus in a protagonist who metamorphoses from aggressive king into cursed creature of the forest, modern readers have more difficulty discerning the goddess, given her cameo role, whom Dionysus faithfully attends. Still, as Thomas C. Foster suggests of Heaney's version of the medieval classic, the mill-hag who entices Suibhne to resume his wild leaping "becomes something like the 'poor old woman,' that representative of Ireland, run amok"; if the leaps of flight she inspires in Suibhne are seen as metaphors for the inspired writing of verse, the mill-hag's true identity becomes easier to confirm. Robert Graves tells us that the "Hag of the Mill" in *Buile Suibhne* is "another name for the White Goddess," or muse (*WG*, 455), and though "her presence has become submerged," as Brian John sees it, "in the later Christianization of the myth," she represents for John "the true source of Sweeney's madness."[23] Knowing as she does the poetry that will result, she lures Suibhne away from relatively placid, sane intervals among kinsmen to renew his exile in the natural world. For Graves and John, the relationship between Suibhne and the hag mirrors the troubled bond between poet and muse, whereas Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill notes (disapprovingly) the role played by "the ubiquitous Sweeney figure of the 1980s" as an "acolyte of the Muse" (CP, 1292). Heaney doesn't gloss the mill-hag in his version, but he does identify Sweeney as "a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance" (*SA*, v). More tellingly, Heaney suggests the interdependence of the unusual leaping partners in these lines, spoken by Sweeney:

> I was the wind and she was smoke.
> I was the prow and she the wake.
> I was the earth and she the moon.
> (*SA*, 72)

22. Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, 7, 10–11, 13–15, 56; Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, 151. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill sees the mad goddess Mór Munhan (who inspired three poems in *SPRD*) as "a possible precursor to Sweeney" (Clune, "Mythologising Sweeney," 59). Others "have seen parallels" with Merlin and figures in Scotland and Brittany (Brian John, "Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Matter of Ireland: Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, and Seamus Heaney," 55). *Geilt* means "mad or insane" but may also refer "to the wild man of the woods figure" with powers of levitation (Clune, "Mythologising Sweeney," 49).

23. Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, 103; John, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," 55.

Of course, Sweeney leads the hag to a leap she cannot make, and so to her death; he also refers coldly in Heaney's version to her "bitch's body" and burial by "A crew of devils" (*SA*, 72). In a story meant to illustrate the Roman church's ascendancy over Celtic ways, a repentant bird-man must, finally, repudiate the goddess. Thus, Heaney's Sweeney is quick both to insult her and to blame her for his madness:

> I fell for that old witch's trick.
> . . . . . .
> The mill-hag spun her web and swore
> her innocence. I leaped for her
> and leaped beyond the bounds of sense.
> (*SA*, 71–72)

The poetry she inspired provides fitting testimonial nonetheless to a Celtic king who left his kingdom for service to the sovereignty goddess and muse.

The power of the sovereignty figure diminished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the wake of Elizabethan colonization of Ireland and the dissolution of Gaelic culture. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford notes this decline when she observes how, "as the colonization of Ireland progressed, the myth changed: the idea of a miraculous renewal became increasingly improbable." George O'Brien provides details: "After the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and the Battle of Aughrim, followed by the Treaty of Limerick, the following year—all unhappy defeats—the aristocratic Catholic polity of Ireland lay in ruins. Rapid social and cultural deterioration followed as victorious English interests consolidated their control of the country." A large number of "bitter elegies" were written in response, and in some of these poems, the figure of the sovereignty goddess provides a ready target for the poets' helpless rage and, in relation to colluding countrymen, keenly felt betrayal. Consider, for example, the resentment fueling these seventeenth-century lines from Dáibhí Ó Bruadair's "Eire":

> Lady of the bright coils and curlings
> . . . . . .
> Though middle-aged and long a matron,
> The wife of Nial the fearless,

You played the harlot with men you hated
And those who loved you dearly.

Resentment is too mild a description for Ó Bruadair's tirade against the shrew who refused, despite the poet's great thirst, to serve him drink. The dissolution of the Gaelic order stripped patronage from the *file*, or professional poet, and transformed him from deserving recipient of traditional welcome "to a ragged horny-handed itinerant, muttering under his breath." Thus, in all likelihood, a real serving girl refused the poet drink, but his anger extends to the mythic representation of the country countenancing such rebuff, as in these lines:

She's a club-footed slut and not a woman at all,
with the barrenest face you would meet on the open road,
and certain to be a fool to the end of the world.
May she drop her dung down stupidly into the porridge![24]

In another poem, "'A wound has poured me . . . ,'" Ó Bruadair moves beyond magnifying personal grievance to blaming the sovereignty goddess for the culture's demise. He begins by cataloging such ills as the "scyth[ing] down" of valiant princes' "growing heirs" and the self-serving acts of "Hundreds . . . now vowing they're English" who formerly "maintained Irish estates and guarded trade-routes." He follows with harsh condemnation of the figure he holds symbolically responsible:

she promised her blossom, her kiss, her dependance
to a Gaelic king and to all his descendants.

To that whoring female no change was ugly:
not her fate as a bed-mate to all new snugglers—
though gaily, safely, richly, smugly
she laid with her old loves beyond insulting.

24. Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*, 58; O'Brien, headnote to Art Mac Cumhaigh / "Fair Churchyard of Cregan," 170; Montague, *Faber Book*, trans. Austin Clarke, 130; Michael Hartnett, *O Bruadair: Selected Poems of Dáibhí O Bruadair*, 11; Kinsella, *New Oxford Book*, trans. Kinsella, 174. Kinsella uses the poem's first line for his title, "A shrewish, barren, bony, nosy servant"; Michael Hartnett uses part of his first line, "A shrivelled-up skivvy" (*OB*, 21); James Stephens titles his translation "A Glass of Beer" (*SB*, 266–67).

Disappointed as Ó Bruadair is with the collusion of the Irish, he levels greater censure at the goddess for turning aside from those "old loves" and changing the terms of the sacred alliance. And so he mourns, calling to mind the lost world of Gaelic ascendancy "in the days of the chiefs":

> Her shores were filled with fish from the ocean,
> her badgers packed fat in every ditch-slope:
> her trees leaned down at the end of autumn
> with the crush of the crops that harvest brought them.
>
> Her fleet at sea under sail and creaking
> kept a look-out for doers of evil:
> her white dwellings held angels at evening
> and her low hills were laid out like deer-parks.
>
> (*OB*, 30–31)

Abundant food and game, confident coast guard, satisfying aesthetic pleasures: hallmarks of a world vanished with the conquest of its protectors, and so the literature of its poets also alters in response.

"As the eighteenth century wore on," O'Brien affirms, "a modified form of these laments emerged," and the figure of the goddess, no longer a shapeshifting hag with whom prospective kings made love, becomes the dazzling *spéirbhean*, or sky-woman, sorrowing in countless *aislingí*, or vision poems, over the exile of her true mate. According to Seán Ó Tuama, the form may have been imported from France by "Irish literary men studying abroad in the seventeenth and late sixteenth century [*sic*]." In this view, the poem's basic formula—the poet sees in vision, often while asleep, a maiden personifying the nation and lamenting English servitude since the loss of her true king—was then welded to "traditional thematic material" (*RSE*, 107). Both the increasing restrictions of the Penal Laws upon the Catholic population and a desire, in the face of cultural dispossession, to save the language spurred the genre's development, and examples proliferated. Daniel Corkery's depiction of its romantic heroine thus derives from appearances in *aislingí* so numerous that "there is now no reckoning the number" of them; indeed, "if we had the complete works of every Munster poet who lived at any time from the middle of the [eighteenth] century to its close, we would find that every one of them wrote at least one such poem." Corkery's description offers a composite portrait: "Her hair is golden, pearly, gentle-tresses, and

flows in wreathed, trembling layers to the ground. Her eye-brow is like a single hair, a single stroke of the pen. . . . In her cheeks the flushing of red berries contends with the whiteness of a gentle lily. . . . Her teeth are small and bright. . . . Her throat and brow are as white as the foam on a wild lake. Her face is like the glowing sun seen through crystal. Her breasts are sharp-rounded and inviolate." The English term *sky-woman* aptly conveys the grace and attributes of the figure, but as beautiful as she may be, her sphere of influence has contracted. Rosalind Clark describes her new role as that of "the fairy mistress instead of that of the goddess. The tribal goddess . . . brought fertility to the land, cattle, and people, and by her marriage to him she established the rightful king. The Lady of the *aisling* poetry can no longer do any of these things."[25]

The *spéirbhean* also appears as "a shameless prostitute granting her favours to the boorish foreigner who had usurped the place of her rightful partner." A vivid example of this displaced, pining figure animates what is likely the earliest of three major *aislingí* composed by the Kerry poet Aodhagán (or Aogán) Ó Rathaille: "Gile Na Gile." Seamus Heaney translated this phrase as "The Glamoured," but the poem is better known by variations on James Clarence Mangan's title "The Brightest of the Bright."[26] In Mangan's translation, the sovereignty figure sings "a chant, a beautiful and grand hymn, / Of him who should be shortly Eire's reigning King—," yet the poet is later devastated to discover her sitting "low beside a clown," or, in Heaney's more literal version, the narrator is "taken and cruelly shackled in fetters / As the breasts of the maiden were groped by a thick-witted boor," a "lazarous swine" unworthy of her (G, 105). Again in Mangan's words, when the poet chastises the beauty for her shameful choice of mate, "Her tears ran down in rivers, but

25. O'Brien, headnote to Art Mac Cumhaigh, 170; Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century,* 128, 139; Clark, *Great Queens,* 159 (see also 5–7). See also Ó Tuama, *RSE,* 145–48; Corkery's chapter "The *Aisling*," in *Hidden Ireland;* Ó Cruaolaoich on the *aisling* and the Whiteboy insurgency in *Book of the Cailleach,* 58–67; and Heaney, *FK,* 394 (on the genre "as a vehicle for the myth of access to poetic power"), and *RP,* 48. For a sample of one Munster poet, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, see the twenty-one poems in *A.*

26. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 121. Heaney's translation appears as "The Glamouring" in vol. 4 of *Field Day Anthology,* ed. Bourke and others. Variations include Kinsella's "Brightness Most Bright" (Seán Ó Tuama, ed., *An Duanaire, 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*), Kennelly's "Brightness of Brightness" *(Penguin Book),* and Hartnett's "Silver of Silver" *(O Rathaille).*

nothing could she say" (*PM*, 136–37). Heaney's final stanza sharply underscores the sorrowful, disillusioned reaction of the narrator, tempered only by a "note of veiled optimism in the final line":

> Calamity, shock, collapse, heartbreak and grief
> To think of her sweetness, her beauty, her mildness, her life
> Defiled at the hands of a hornmaster sprung from riff-raff,
> And no hope of redress till the lions ride back on the wave.
> (G, 105)

Such poems voice the people's desire, at times exuberantly hopeful though increasingly realized as vain, for help from a Jacobite prince, a Stuart, who might yet sail to Ireland and vanquish the usurping English. According to Seán Ó Tuama, the poem "reflects the mood of the years 1707–1709 when many of the poet's Jacobite friends (if not himself as well) were held in Tralee jail having refused to take the oath of abjuration. The feeling of incarceration is clearly present, and little hope is held out for any immediate action on the part of those advocating a Stuart invasion."[27]

In "Vailintín Brún" ("Valentine Brown" [or Browne]), Ó Rathaille leaves aside the *aisling* to express grievous personal disappointment, likely over Sir Valentine's refusal—or inability—to return to him his ancestral land. When vast acres of his Anglo-Irish, Catholic family's holdings passed to him with his father's 1720 death, Sir Valentine traveled back from England, and Ó Rathaille responded to his return as a *spéirbhean* might a Stuart's landing on a west coast strand. In an epithalamion written for Sir Valentine's wedding, Ó Rathaille joyously invoked images of the environs' renewed fertility under the care of their rightful chief. Sir Valentine, he assumed, would both allow him to go back to his family home and restore his privileged life as a *file*. On each count, despite Sir Valentine's fair dealings with other landholders, Ó Rathaille was frustrated, and images of wild destitution replace abundance in these lines:

27. Nic Eoin, headnote to "Gile Na Gile." Nic Eoin notes that *adharcach*, or *cuckold*, translated by Heaney as *hornmaster*, is "a popular Jacobite reference to George I" that helps to date the poem to "around the time of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion." Ó Tuama suggests a slightly earlier time frame, noted in my text (*RSE*, 107).

Cashel without company or horses, overgrown,
Brian's palace swamped with a black flood of otters,
. . . . . .
Fish leaving sunlit pools and hidden silent streams.[28]

Hope for deliverance, personal and otherwise, vanishes shortly thereafter when Ó Rathaille entertains the vision he describes in "Mac An Cheannai" ("The Redeemer's Son"). The maiden he beholds while resting in bed is beautiful, "with eyes of green hair curled and thick, / fair her waist and brows," but she is also "wasted, weak, with mourning eyes." Indeed, this "sweet mild woman" envisioned by the poet, exhausted with waiting for a redeemer for her occupied land,[29] represents a "poor substitute for the early Irish fertility goddess" with all her traditional power. In the poem's last stanza, the poet decides to present the listless maiden with the bleak news that Spanish aid for her cause will never arrive:

I told her, when I heard her tale,
in a whisper, he was dead,
that he had found death up in Spain,
. . . . . .
her soul departed in a leap.
Alas, that woman lifeless.

Reflecting not only the national situation but Ó Rathaille's own altered professional status and loss of hereditary holding, "The Redeemer's Son" was the last *aisling* he would write.[30]

Like Ó Rathaille, Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill was reared in Kerry, though in the privileged O'Connell family of Derrynane, one of the few great remaining Gaelic households (and from which her nephew Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, would later hail). Also like Ó Rathaille, Ní Chonaill turns to sovereignty conventions as tools for expressing personal anguish: her deep grief over the murder of Art

28. Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop, eds., *An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama,* trans. Joan Keefe, 41. See also Ó Tuama, *RSE,* 102, 109–13.

29. Ó Tuama, *An Duanaire,* trans. Thomas Kinsella, 157, 159.

30. Clark, *Great Queens,* 161; Ó Tuama, *An Duanaire,* 161. See also Ó Tuama, *RSE,* 111–13.

Ó Laoghaire, a fellow young Irish noble she had met and married following his service with the Hungarian Hussars. In her moving *caoine,* or keen, she casts herself in the role of a *spéirbhean* mourning the loss of her true king. Seán Ó Tuama observes of a passage from "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" ("The Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire"), "Her reference to the possibility of the fertile districts associated with his aristocratic family blazing up in grief at his death, would be appreciated by anybody familiar with the traditional Irish and, indeed, Indo-European feeling that the rightful king was united in a mystic marriage-union with his own kingdom." The lines follow:

> where the berries grow,
> yellow nuts on the branches
> and masses of apples
> in their proper season
> —need anyone wonder
> if Uíbh Laoghaire were alight
> . . . . . .
> for the fine-handed rider
> who used [to] tire out the hunt . . . ?"[31]

An earlier passage in the poem invokes the ancient sovereignty goddess as *cailleach.* The lines quoted below are taken from Paul Muldoon's translation of the passage, published as the powerful, discrete poem "Keen," and dramatize both Ní Chonaill's finding of Art's body and the dwindling of Gaelic values in a rapidly Anglicizing world. The horse she rides, her husband's faithful, fine brown mare, has just returned riderless to their home:

> I went off at full gallop.
>
> I would find you stretched
> . . . . . .
> Without priest or monk
> To preside or pray over you,
>
> But some withered, old woman
> Who had wrapped you in her mantle.
> Your blood was flowing still.
>
> (*M*, 24)

31. Ó Tuama, *RSE*, 92; Ó Tuama, *An Duanaire*, 213.

Though she has honored the body by covering it, the hag is alone—and quiet. Probably afraid of English retribution, no cleric has appeared on the site; neither have any women, likely "ignorant of the ancient rites to which a dead chief might be entitled," been generously dispatched from nearby Carraig an Ime to voice a lament over the Gaelic aristocrat's freshly slain body, so resonant of lost Gaelic Ireland. The hag who appears simply to be "some withered, old woman," though the only person "to show faith with the better days by spreading the cloak," is Éire herself in her most despised form. Quietly, she pays respect to a member of the last Gaelic nobility, significantly a person to whom she might feel indebted: Art Ó Laoghaire had called attention to himself, in actions leading finally to his death, by flouting the Penal Laws designed to erase his—and her—Gaelic world. When Ní Chonaill gallops up, the crone metamorphoses into *spéirbhean,* and the old mourning ritual, complete with formal lament, gets under way. And mourning is doubly required. As Declan Kiberd perceives, "If the fate of Ó Laoghaire proved anything, it was that the deliverer from Europe promised in the *aisling* would die and leave the *spéirbhean* widowed."[32]

Brian Merriman adopted a new pose toward the goddess in his 1780 *Cúirt an Mheán-Oiche (The Midnight Court).* The poem portrays a comic trial in which Merriman's narrator, the poet-turned-character acting on behalf of all Irish men, answers for the country's declining population to Aoibheall, the wise and powerful queen of the fairies.[33] Trading ineffectual name-calling of the sovereignty goddess for the shock value of burlesque, Merriman's poem turns the *aisling* on its ear and jettisons the exquisite but feeble *spéirbhean* for what Heaney describes as "a blast of surrealistic ridicule directed at such a fantasy" (*MV,* 48): a strong-arming bailiff descended not from radiant sky-women but from Niall's hag. Her shapeshifting prowess, however, is denied the bailiff, and she remains to the napping narrator-poet as she first appears, an apparition anything but beatific, as attested in these lines translated by Heaney:

> Bony and huge, a terrible hallion.
> Her height, I'd say, to the nearest measure,

32. Kiberd, *Irish Classics,* 169, 177.

33. Traditionally, Aoibheall is the "hag-goddess of the North Munster landscape and sovereignty queen of the leading hereditary North Munster O'Brien lineage" (Ó Crualaoich, *Book of the Cailleach,* 70).

> Was six or seven yards or more,
> . . . . . .
> So hatchet-faced and scarred and sour—
> With her ganting gums and her mouth in a twist
> She'd have put the wind up man or beast.
> (*MV,* 24–25)

Accosting the narrator-poet, the hag proceeds to decry the country's conditions under the Penal Laws, comparing the situation, in David Marcus's translation, to the rape of a woman helpless countrymen are forced to watch. Announcing "[t]hat unless there's a spurt in procreation / We can bid goodbye to the Irish nation," the bailiff finally hoists up the narrator-poet and, in Heaney's words again, "races like hell over glen and hill" (*MV,* 12, 27) to deliver him to Aoibheall's female court. There witnesses lampoon local marriage patterns, praise the healthy bastard child, and argue that priests should marry.

Merriman certainly was not the first to see the subversive potential in the *aisling.* Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, and Peadar Ó Doirnín, all authors of previous parodies, "could deface the old form, but not use it to create anything new or strange. Merriman alone," affirms Declan Kiberd, "managed to do that." Though Kiberd sees Merriman as "indifferent to the cause of nationalism in just those years when it was taking its modern shape," he also argues that Merriman "transformed the inherited myth to propound radical ideas about the needs of the body for an unfettered sexual life." Gearóid Ó Crualaoich elaborates:

> Merriman looked for deliverance . . . to the older, supernatural "female" sovereignty of the spirit of the land itself. Thus he seeks to ensure the return and perpetuation of fertility and prosperity for all, not in the restoration of the Stuart or any other royal line, but in the restoration of the primacy of *"fonn na fola agus fothrom na sláinte"* ("the urge of the blood and the lustiness of health"): the basic, healthy, animal, life instinct of the mature, adult, individual man and woman, free from conventional guilt or shame or repression.

Merriman's sentiments regarding sexual drive were also "wholly in keeping with earlier Gaelic traditions"; Kiberd cites the central passage in the poem, spoken by an old man on behalf of "free sexual activity," as "really a none-too-covert call for a return to ancient

systems" where genuinely powerful women divorced impotent partners, illegitimacy bore no stigma, and priests married the women they loved.[34]

By contrast, the wilderness of the social conditions presented in the poem calls out for rejuvenating redress: in conveying his own Grail remedy for the times, a "dream-world of polymorphous sex as a return to a desirable Gaelic order," Merriman turns the *aisling* to new use. True, "all of the major features of his poem were already a vibrant part of Gaelic tradition, from the *chanson de la malmariée* of the young woman to the complaints of the betrayed old man,"[35] but with "no other Gaelic work similar . . . in its overall structure," the composite effect of this anti-*aisling* is strikingly innovative. Seán Ó Tuama memorably remarks, "Anyone who is familiar with the general literary background . . . will be reasonably certain that all medieval themes and conventions as handled by Merriman were changed, transmuted utterly, and that a new demonic comic creation emerged which is absolutely eighteenth-century Irish." The result, explains Kiberd, is that "here the old sovereignty myths of the *aisling* were well and truly parodied by a sophisticated intellectual of the Enlightenment, a man all too keenly aware that they had long been outmoded."[36]

The figure of the bailiff-hag is certainly not the only stock character parodied in the poem. Heaney's partial translation stops before the first witness describes herself to the court, but David Marcus transfers into English what amounts to an eighteenth-century oral contribution to Gaelic personals, a speech that also demonstrates what Heaney calls Merriman's "transfusion [into the character] of emotional and rhetorical energy long denied to women by poets who had preceded him" ("Orpheus in Ireland," *RP,* 55):

> "I've plenty to make a fellow linger;
> My waist is slim and my back's unbowed,
> With the best of fittings I'm well-endowed;
> . . . . . .

34. Kiberd, *Irish Classics,* 183; Ó Crualaoich, *Book of the Cailleach,* 69; Kiberd, *Irish Classics,* 193.

35. Kiberd, *Irish Classics,* 202, 192. See also Ó Tuama, CM, 7–27, and his chapter "Brian Merriman and His *Court,*" in *RSE,* 63–77.

36. Ó Tuama, *RSE,* 64, 72; Kiberd, *Irish Classics,* 82.

I'm not a slattern who has no pride
. . . . . .
But a female fit for a prince's wife."

Princes had long failed to wed the *spéirbhean,* of course, but in Merriman's poem, even louts ignore her—and prefer hags to her nubile charms. As she tells us, again in lines from Marcus's translation:

"That's the cause of all my crying—
When I see a youth of vigour and verve,
. . . . . .
Badgered, bought, and bound for bed
With a ga-ga old gipsy gone in the head."
(*MC,* 16, 15)

In Merriman's "anti-*aisling,*" then, one hag appears to the narrator-poet in place of the sky-woman, while others marry unheroic Irishmen and experience no return to youth and beauty; meanwhile, the *spéirbhean* trades traditional mild manners and her quest for a proper mate, sometimes degraded into dalliance with unworthy or abusive partners, for blatant self-advertisement. No doubt about it, she is there for the taking—and still she attracts no takers, worthy or not.

Heaney suggests for the poem an additional, more unexpected connection to the sovereignty motif. He explains at the beginning of *The Midnight Verdict,* the small collection in which he uses two translated sections of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to bookend his partial translation of *The Midnight Court,* how he "gradually came to think of the Merriman poem as another aspect of the story of Orpheus's death" (*MV,* 11). Arranged as the book's three sections are, they support this connection: Eurydice's death in the first section motivates the single status of Merriman's narrator-poet in the second, while the third section enacts the judgment leveled against him as the second concludes, Orpheus torn to death by female followers of Dionysus incensed at his scorn for them (and, in some myths, at his new preference for Apollo). The fury of the maenads, carried over to the women of Munster, would surely have intensified the narrator-poet's whipping had his nightmare continued. What is significant here is that Orpheus acts in Greek legends as a priest or avatar of Dionysus, who, like him, braves the underworld

to rescue a loved one; his gruesome tearing to pieces as "a sacred victim of [the] fury" (*WG*, 99) of the goddess echoes Dionysus's own dismemberment[37] (a likely fate for Merriman's narrator-poet, too, in a punishment scenario of escalating violence). For Heaney, "the *death* of Orpheus . . . provides an acoustic where the end of *Cúirt an Mheán-Oiche* can be heard to new effect" ("Orpheus in Ireland," *RD,* 58).

But if Merriman's character serves for Heaney as "another manifestation of the traditional image of Orpheus" ("Orpheus in Ireland," *RD*, 58), the figure also ties the poem to Dionysus, partner to the goddess, and the narrator-poet's proposed punishment represents retribution for turning his back on the pair. Leonard M. Scigaj may as well have the world of Merriman's narrator in mind when he reminds us regarding another layered, symbolic character, Ted Hughes's Crow, that "Jung maintained that the nonrational psychic centers contain powerful libidinal energies: when an individual or a culture represses them, the bottled-up energies may explode into violence after projecting the inner chaos and fears upon a scapegoat."[38] Late-eighteenth-century Munster had strayed a long way from Gaelic traditions once aligned with a powerful goddess and Dionysian energies; in this light, Merriman's character serves clearly as a scapegoat upon which the culture's pent-up libido prepares to explode, and Heaney's assertion that the poem's "power is augmented by being located within the force-field of an archetype" ("Orpheus in Ireland," *RD,* 61) is canny indeed.

Even lesser energies attached to the poem show no signs of dissipating anytime soon. Ciaran Carson published his translation of the poem in 2005, his foreword informing a contemporary audience about Merriman's background and Carson's translation process. The piece concludes with an anecdote from Carson's dream life, perhaps better described as the poet's encounter with, shall we say, a sky-man: "I was wandering on a dark hillside when I saw a light in the distance. I followed it, and came to a little house. The door was ajar; timidly, I pushed it open. Merriman was sitting by the hearth, wearing a

37. See Harold R. Willoughby's chapter "Orphic Reform," in *Pagan Regeneration: A Study of Mystery Initiations in the Graeco-Roman World.*

38. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes,* 19. See also *C;* Scigaj, "Genetic Memory and the Three Traditions of *Crow,*" 170; and Rand Brandes, "Ted Hughes: *Crow.*" In Brandes, note Crow's "polyglot of possible meanings," 513–14; Irish connection, 515; and response to sexual repression, 519–20. Hughes "is arguing that Christianity made a huge mistake when it denigrated the physical and natural and elevated the spiritual and dogmatic" (520).

greatcoat. He gestured at me to sit down. I did so, and we conversed. True, he did most of the talking, but I was fully able to follow the flow of his intricate Irish. I cannot remember what was said. When I awoke, I was disappointed to find my Irish restored to its former poverty" (*MCC,* 15). Clearly, Gaelic voices like Merriman's still speak in the dreams of at least one contemporary poet, even if the exact message is forgotten.

In the real world, Irish-language treatment of the sovereignty theme was effectively silenced by the failed uprising of 1798 and the ensured ascendancy of the colonizer's English-speaking culture. With a survivor's skill, the symbols found their way into the songs and poems being written in—or transferred into—the new language, as in Thomas Moore's ballads and James Clarence Mangan's translations from the Irish. The spirit of the *aisling* infuses Moore's "Oh! Blame Not the Bard," for example, when it personifies Ireland as a woman "whose pride is gone by";[39] the *spéirbhean* is even more easily recognized in the figure that materializes before the narrator in his "Erin, Oh Erin":

> Erin, oh Erin, thus bright thro' the tears
> Of a long night of bondage, thy spirit appears.
>
> The nations have fallen, and thou still art young,
> . . . . . .
> And tho' slavery's cloud o'er thy morning hath hung
> The full noon of freedom shall beam round thee yet.
> (*PWM,* 190)

Moore may not, like his predecessors of the previous century, prophesy a Stuart redeemer for his country, but he nonetheless heralds her delivery: he announces, too, that she has survived her winter of hibernation to be revitalized in the spring.

D. J. O'Donoghue tells us that James Clarence Mangan did not begin serious study of Irish until 1846; before then (if not after, since his knowledge of Irish was never deep), when transferring the poems into English verse, he worked from scholars' literal English translations of Irish poems and "deviated widely from the [originals] whenever he chose to do so." Despite its essential accuracy, O'Donoghue's description, which could imply capricious or arbitrary carelessness on the

39. Kinsella, *New Oxford Book,* 269. See also Corkery, *Hidden Ireland,* 142; and Muireann Ní Bhrolchain, "Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas," 15.

poet's part, fails to convey any genuine achievement. In contrast, Heaney explains that the translations "were essentially transfusions of power, a unique grafting of poetic tradition and personal sensibility that happened in 1840 when . . . something in Mangan suddenly stood up and girded itself for action in earnest. The confidence, the metrical stride and syntactical force of those first assays are epoch-making" (SH, 15). Thus, in attempting to preserve portions of the ancient literature, even if not in literal faithfulness to the originals, Mangan unquestionably prolonged the life for English-speaking audiences of such *aislingí* as Ó Rathaille's "Brightest of the Bright" and "Sighile Ní Gara" ("Sheila O'Gara"), written by the eighteenth-century poet Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin (Timothy O'Sullivan). Mangan's version of Ó Súilleabháin's poem, which refers to Ireland with one of several female names used for the country in penal times, brought nineteenth-century readers face-to-face with a *spéirbhean* described without a hint of parody:

> Her eyes, like twin stars, shone and sparkled with lustre;
> Her tresses hung waving in many a cluster,
> And swept the long grass all around and beneath her;
> She moved like a being who trod upon ether,
> And seemed to disdain the dominions of space—

Better known, however, are Mangan's "Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan" (1841) and "Dark Rosaleen" (1846). The first represents the poet's version of the early-eighteenth-century "Caitlín Ní Ualláchain," a song "often attributed to the Tipperary poet Liam Dall Ó'hIfearnáin [William Heffernan] . . . [but] composed in reality around the time of his birth" in approximately 1720. The second adapts the seventeenth-century "Róisín Dubh," likely by Owen Roe MacWard.[40] Each of these versions of the Irish doubles as love poem and political allegory.

In "Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan," a translation of the Irish ballad that first personified Ireland as Cathleen, Mangan introduced into English the figure that leaped into prominent public consciousness when Maud Gonne played Cathleen in Yeats's 1902 play. The name

40. O'Donoghue, *The Life and Writings of James Clarence Mangan,* 168, 171–72; Mangan, comp. and trans., *Poets and Poetry of Munster,* 125; Nic Eoin, headnote to "Caitlín Ní Ualláchain." Citing tradition, editor David H. Greene suggests Hugh O'Donnell, Earl of Tyrconnell, for the author of "Róisín Dubh." He notes that O'Donnell "depended on Papal and Spanish assistance to help him and Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, repel the English at Kinsale in 1602" (*An Anthology of Irish Literature,* 226).

Cathleen Ní Houlihan may have belonged originally to a woman about whom a love song, now lost, had once been written, though, as Máirín Nic Eoin notes, "the lack of evidence of such [a song] makes this theory rather implausible." Mangan's poem repopularized for nineteenth-century readers the possibility of transformation for the "ghastly hag" should she be united with her Stuart redeemer: "Young she is, and fair she is, and would be crowned a queen, / Were the king's son at home here with Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan!"[41] Mangan's most famous translation from the Irish, however, is "Dark Rosaleen," the poem whose popularity accounts for the entrenchment in Anglo-Irish tradition of the small black rose as a symbol for Ireland.

Despite what Diane E. Bessai describes as "the persistent belief that the patriotic poems which name Ireland allegorically as Róisín Dubh[,] or any of its English variations such as Little Black Rose or Dark Rosaleen, draw on a centuries-old tradition of mystical association of Eire with rose symbolism," the conflation does not actually extend into Irish antiquity. Bessai attributes the poem's forceful appeal, to which we must trace the new symbol, to its "remarkable assimilation of the love-poem features of the original Irish text and a number of elements from the *aisling* convention. . . . The wistful longings of Penal times . . . are redirected to emphasize the willing martyrdom of the patriot-poet himself for the salvation of his beloved." Ireland desired freedom from England no less in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth, but the independence to which Irish patriotism aspired, no longer based on unrealistic hopes, entailed utter "allegiance to a cause whose outcome [was] agonizingly uncertain." Such patriotic fervor is unmistakable in a final stanza that addresses the Little Black Rose and prophesies gun battle and bloodshed "Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die, / My Dark Rosaleen!" Aubrey de Vere's "Little Black Rose" in turn promises that the black rose "shall redden the hills when June is nigh," but it was left to poets of the early twentieth century to explain how this could be accomplished—sadly, with a renewal in the sovereignty goddess of her taste for blood.[42]

41. Donal O'Sullivan, ed., *Songs of the Irish: An Anthology of Irish Folk Music and Poetry with English Verse Translations,* 130, 142; Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics," 274; Kinsella, *New Oxford Book,* 279.

42. Bessai, "'Dark Rosaleen' as Image of Ireland," 62, 76, 79 (refer to the entire article for a thorough discussion of the poem's provenance and variants). See also Clark, *Great Queens,* 164–65; Kinsella, *New Oxford Book,* 275; and Montague, *Faber Book,* 205.

Yeats drew frequently from the imagery of the sovereignty myth to enrich the meaning of his poems. As Rosalind Clark tells us, "To trace Yeats's use of this theme throughout his work would be a sufficient task for a book; the subject is all-pervasive." But even a discussion of this size must include a reference to Yeats's most sustained treatment of the myth, his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), in which the sovereignty goddess resumes her knack for shapeshifting. Consider the play's final scene: when Peter Gillane asks his son whether he has seen an old woman who left the house moments before, Patrick replies, "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (*CNH,* 11). But the crone's metamorphosis comes only after the older brother leaves all to help retrieve her lands, even if it means dying for her: the goddess has also regained a desire for sacrifice. Yeats never intended the play to incite rebellion, but its action had an incalculable effect on its audiences and helped to prepare public sentiment for the 1916 Easter Rising. More than Yeats could have realized, his audiences identified with the figure of the peasant woman evicted from her land. In the first half of the twentieth century, the devotion of Irish patriots, not the attention of future kings, would restore her to youth and beauty. Bessai summarizes: "The embrace of the prince-lover in the sovereignty stories with its echoes of an ancient custom of ritual marriage is modified into an idea tantamount to ritual sacrifice."[43]

When Padraic Pearse gives voice in "I Am Ireland" to an embodiment of his country, he creates a mother-goddess older and "lonelier than the Old Woman of Beare," whose children have betrayed her. But with fellow 1916 poets Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Mary Plunkett, Pearse had determined to remain true to her, even if it should require one—or all—of their deaths. Thus, in "Renunciation," Pearse's translation from his original Irish, he turns away from the *aisling*-like vision he entertains of a "beauty of beauty" lest her loveliness sway him from, as he puts it, "the deed that I see / And the death I shall die." Yeats would later look to the sacrifice of these young poets, executed for their role in the Easter Rising (and mourned by the Poor Old Woman herself in Francis Ledwidge's "Lament for the Poets: 1916"), for an explanation of how the black

43. Clark, *Great Queens,* 182 (see also 171–80); Bessai, "Who Was Cathleen Ni Houlihan?" 125.

rose might turn red.[44] In "The Rose Tree," written in April 1917 and first published in 1920, Yeats has Pearse himself clarify that, when the wells have dried, "There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree" (*CPY,* 183).

Not every Irish writer would hereafter credit the notion that blood sacrifice must be linked with the goddess of sovereignty. James Joyce develops the ancient motif in a different direction even as he disputes it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* whose "hero begins with the kiss and, after all the arguments are in, turns his back on the lady."[45] Consider, too, how Joyce "holds at glittering manageable distance a whole tendency in national thought and expression; and dismisses it" (*KS,* 18) when he muses on the old woman who delivers Stephen milk in the opening scene of *Ulysses:* "Silk of the kine and poor old woman, names given her in old times. A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal, serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean, a messenger from the secret morning. To serve or to upbraid, whether he could not tell: but scorned to beg her favour" (*U,* 13–14).

Austin Clarke, on the other hand, finds sustaining succor within the traditions Joyce—and his alter ego—spurn. Clarke dedicated himself as a young man to a literary career working to advance the Irish tradition from within—and damned the consequences (notably to include international obscurity). As part of this commitment, Clarke emulates his eighteenth-century predecessors by writing *aislingí* throughout his life, but he looks to earlier models when he imagines the "flushes of desire" of a well-known *cailleach* metamorphosed into her younger self in his dramatic monologue "The Young Woman of Beare." Certain of her allure, "the bright temptation," as she knowingly calls herself, asks us to observe her as she lies "Half-clad in silken piles / . . . upon a hot cheek," as well as in the moments that follow the arrival of a silver-bearing, "big-booted captain":

> See! See, as from a lathe
> My polished body turning!
> He bares me now at the waist

44. Desmond Ryan, ed., *The 1916 Poets,* 17–18; Kathleen Hoagland, ed., *1000 Years of Irish Poetry: The Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Poets from Pagan Times to the Present,* 702.

45. Janet Grayson, "'Do You Kiss Your Mother?': Stephen Dedalus' Sovereignty of Ireland," 119.

And now blue clothes uncurl
Upon white haunch.
(*POP,* 24–27)

In an explanatory note included in *Pilgrimage, and Other Poems,* Clarke refers to this poem as allegory: the monologue enables him to echo Brian Merriman's application of the sovereignty motif. Using methods that include juxtaposing scenes like that above with others in which "praying people hurry" (*POP,* 24) on their way to and from devotions, Clarke, like Merriman, both celebrates sexuality and engages in "humanistic critique of the puritanical strain in Irish Catholicism."[46] In the same note, he also links the poem to actual circumstance: "In Glendalough, that holy place, a man told me of a poor crone who had lived in the ruined settlement below the abandoned mines. She refused even the consolations of religion, for she remembered with great anger her own times of merriment and the strong mortals she had held, when silver and lead were brought down the mountain-side, more than a half-century ago" (*POP,* 44). Real and traditional fuse as Clarke creates a backstory for two crones separated by a thousand years.

Robert Graves, born of mixed European lineage outside London the year before Clarke's birth in Dublin, asserts Irish credentials through his father's family, resident in Ireland since 1575 (GL). Notably, Graves's paternal grandfather was the bishop of Limerick, and his father, Alfred Perceval Graves, was an authority on the Celtic Ogham tree alphabet, a minor Irish poet, and the editor of an Irish literary magazine. (More suggestively, "towards Ireland" is the English translation of Erinfa, the Welsh name for his parents' holiday home in Wales.) Still, Graves has "never been appropriated either by the revivalists or the revisionists in Ireland," though John Montague, a self-described "friend and amused admirer," recognized the loyalty Graves claims "to the Anglo-Irish tradition into which [he] was born" and included him in *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974). Fran Bearton also places Graves within the Anglo-Irish tradition. After

46. Gregory A. Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English,* 283 (see also 294). See Schirmer, *The Poetry of Austin Clarke,* 35–40, for an excellent explication of the poem that emphasizes its endorsement of sexuality against religious prohibition; and *CPC,* 173–75, 299–300, 315, 445–46, for *aislingí* from 1929–1930, 1963, and 1968. On the effects of Clarke's "isolationism," see Schirmer, *Poetry of Clarke,* 4; and *IAC* ix–xv.

remarking on Yeats's "indisputable" influence on Irish poetry, she observes, "Less frequently acknowledged is the fact that many of Graves's poetic descendants are, like his ancestors, Irish: the implications of his work have been more thoughtfully absorbed by contemporary Irish poets—notably Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, John Montague, and Seamus Heaney—than is generally recognized."[47] Graves's development of the motif of the sacred marriage will serve as my final example of such embellishment by poets born before Irish Independence.

Poets like Heaney who owe a debt to Graves have likely been less influenced by his substantial poetic oeuvre than by *The White Goddess,* the book so indebted to both *The Golden Bough* and Graves's investigation into ancient matriarchal religion. Published in 1948, the book also responds to two potent emblems of twentieth-century wilderness: the trenches and the mushroom cloud. Both horrors inform his belief that the "true," or inspired, poem once served as "a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family" (*WG,* 14).[48]

Writing in 2003, Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop summarize the book's questionable status and attest to its continuing significance, primarily for poets: "Neglected by most academic scholars of modern poetry, alternately celebrated and reviled by feminists, banished from the syllabus in departments of classics, Celtic studies, and anthropology, *The White Goddess* has nonetheless exerted a persistent influence in these and many other fields for more than half a century

47. Bearton, "Visions, Goddesses, and Bog People: Yeats, Graves, and Heaney," 162; Montague, "Love's Equal Realm," 565; Graves quoted in Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves*, 6; Bearton, "Visions, Goddesses, and Bog People," 153. For more on the Graves's holiday home, see Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*, 12.

48. See *WG,* 24–25, for more on the "true poem"; and John B. Vickery's chapters "The Origin of the Myth" and *"The White Goddess* and *King Jesus"* in *Robert Graves and the White Goddess.* On Graves's response to twentieth-century war, see Bearton, "Visions, Goddesses, and Bog People," 152–53, 155–58; Nick Gammage, "'The Nature of the Goddess': Ted Hughes and Robert Graves," 151; and Frank L. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons,* xi–xii and the chapters "The Lunatic: War" and "The Lunatic: After the War."

and has continued, above all, to be a central source of inspiration for poets, the more potent for remaining hidden." Heaney suggests, for example, that Ulster's modern predicament may be traced to a "struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess," a conflict in which the "sovereignty" of the island's goddess "has been temporarily usurped" by adherents of patriarchal Protestantism ("Feeling into Words," *FK,* 26). The statement echoes Graves's earlier assertion that Christianity derives from "an ancient law-suit about religious rights between adherents of the Mother-goddess who was once supreme in the West, and those of the usurping Father-God" (*WG,* 476). The likeness in the two poets' views is not unique in suggesting Heaney's reliance on Graves's insights into "the old feminine religion" (PC, 606).[49]

A large number of Graves's poems reveal deference as well to a capricious, divine feminine entity described in the language of an eighteenth-century *aisling* as an alluring beauty "Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips, / With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips" ("The White Goddess," *CPG2,* 179). (The line "Her sea-grey eyes were wild" in "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," *CPG2,* 151, also ties the figure to Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci.") The poems—treated competently and at length, including discussion of their Dionysian/Orphic elements, by a variety of previous critics[50]—reveal few details tying them to specific Irish settings. They offer instead an understanding of the male consort who, though doomed to what he knows is fleeting alliance with the goddess, remains utterly her servant. No matter, the poems tell us, if serving her means awakening to remember nothing of a night in her company but "whipcracks and [his] own voice screaming," as does a narrator in "Hag-ridden"

49. Firla and Lindop, eds., introduction to *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's "The White Goddess,"* 7. See also David Annwn, *Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, and George Mackay Brown,* 151. Hughes's *SG* enacts Graves's belief that England entered a "purely patriarchal" phase during the Commonwealth, when the "Virgin and Son—who took over the rites and honours of the Moon-woman and her Star-son—[were set to one side]." Graves attests: "The Welsh worshipped Virgin and Son for fifty years longer than the English; the Irish of Eire still do so" (*WG,* 389).

50. See Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves,* 171–73, and the chapter "The Goddess in the Poems"; Keane, *Wild Civility,* 69–90; and Vickery, *Graves and Goddess,* 86–88, and the chapter "The White Goddess and the Beloved Victim." On Dionysus and Orpheus, see Robert A. Davis, "The Black Goddess."

more akin to Orpheus/Merriman than Sweeney (who could at least describe for us his "hag-bidden" leaping contest). This poor narrator must petition the goddess-as-hag for their journey's details:

> Through what wild, flinty wastes of fury,
> Hag of the Mill,
> Did you ride your madman?
> (*CPG3*, 24)

No matter, too, if their journey together leads even to eventual decapitation by her axe, a fate the narrator of "Darien" is prepared to face as the steep price of regenerating both himself and his age (*CPG3*, 189–90). Dazed by the "nakedly born magnificence" of the goddess, her consort is disposed to "forget cruelty and past betrayal, / Heedless of where the next bright bolt might fall" ("The White Goddess," *CPG2*, 179). All suffered, all forgiven for the intoxication of a few more years—or hours—in her company.

Graves elaborates on the finally abandoned consort's confusion and loss in his sonnet "In Her Praise." In lines summarizing the consort's fate when the goddess departs from a priestess in whom she has incarnated (in the language of the sonnet, "each new lovely woman whom she rides, / Straddling her neck a year or two or three"), he explains in conspiratorial tones how that departure devastates "Her chosen lover, even again thrust through / With daggers . . ." (*CPG3*, 52). Patrick J. Keane's understated comment about "On Portents" (*CPG2*, 63) also applies here: "Clearly, service to the Goddess . . . must take the form of a freedom to be achieved only after considerable difficulty, and pain, on the part of her acolyte."[51] Graves says it best himself in "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," addressed to his infant seventh son, when he illustrates how little choice the consort–solar hero enjoys at the beginning of the partnership:

> When with her right [hand] she crooks a finger, smiling,
> How may the King hold back?
> Royally then he barters life for love.
> (*CPG2*, 151)

51. Keane, *Wild Civility*, 72–73.

Graves's focus here would be echoed later in the stance taken by Heaney's own Dionysian bridegrooms to the goddess.

For more than a thousand years the literature of Ireland records consistent engagement with the myths surrounding the sacred marriage of sovereignty. From the laments of the *cailleach* to the sonnets of a shell-shocked survivor of trench warfare, Irish poetry records—in both its native and its colonizers' languages—the enduring appeal of the images attached to the ancient ritual of the *Feis* of Tara. The rich malleability of the myth is also revealed in its centuries-spanning shifts of focus, setting, and character as its leading lady metamorphoses from hag to sky-woman to bloodthirsty revolutionary to divine muse, accompanied all the while by a leading man shapeshifting from kingly consort into embittered bard, political martyr, and love addict à la Robert Graves. David Marcus may have been distracted when he assumed that the creation of the Irish Free State would signal the end of the influence on Irish verse of what Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill calls "the most potent image working subliminally on the collective psyche of [the] island" (*SE,* 84). As my next chapter will reveal, "hag-ridden" verse responds with distinct difference to the molding of male and female poets born after the end of Irish Civil War: the transformation tale of the *Feis* of Tara continues to unfold.

2

Millennia in Their Eyes

The test of any artist surely is how creatively he can handle whatever conventions are available to him.

—Seán Ó Tuama, "The World of Aogán Ó Rathaille," in *Repossessions*

The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.

—T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

In "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," Eavan Boland denounces the unreal image of the Irish muse, or sovereignty goddess, to her face. "I know you for the ruthless bitch you are," the poet tells her, adding that no cosmetic can "disguise / That there's a dead millennium in [her] eyes" (*CPB*, 55). The conflation of a female figure with the sovereignty of Ireland surely reflects centuries of tradition, but I dispute Boland's description of that heritage as "dead." The shape of the *Feis* of Tara may have shifted many times, but the essence of the sacred marriage between goddess and king has survived more than a millennium through the intervention of a host of Irish and Anglo-Irish poets. Never entirely absent from the Irish literary imagination, it continues today to convey a variety of images and meanings in the

work of Seamus Heaney and other contemporary poets. With millennia of tradition in their eyes, such poets infuse new life into customary symbols, ushering lyric use of the marriage of sovereignty into yet another long millennium of Irish literature. Such continuing transformations of the motif, critical to the appreciation of Heaney's own inventive adaptations, will be the focus of this chapter.

David Marcus may have believed that the end of civil war would alleviate the need for "hag-ridden" verse, but he underestimated both the powerful pull of the symbols associated with the marriage of king to kingdom and the ability of later poets to extract new meanings from the traditional material. Notably, the poems of Seamus Heaney's *North* rely heavily on imagery associated with the evocative bog bodies of northern Europe to suggest his response to the renewed Troubles; he finds inspiration as well in his native literary tradition, particularly in its link between the demeanor of the king and the condition of his kingdom. Heaney is scarcely a solitary exemplar in extending "hag-ridden" themes into recent verse. Even such Northern Protestant counterparts as Derek Mahon make occasional use of the trope, as in his revival of the Hag of Beare as a Rover-driving, elderly empty nester in "The Widow of Kinsale," published only two years ago (*HLM,* 41–44). Still, the majority of poets who turn today to the motifs come from Catholic background, whether born in the North or in the Republic (or in Brooklyn and Lancashire, as with John Montague and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, respectively). Such poets reach maturity both before and after the resumption of the Troubles. (Katie Donovan, for example, was only seven when violence broke out again in Ulster.) They divide into roughly equal numbers of men and women, though in likely reaction to feminist rethinking of the sovereignty motif, the quantity of male work deploying the themes drops off just as women begin responding to the challenge to subvert it. In consequence, work on the topic by male and female poets formulates differing, if overlapping, transformations of the trope.

In addition to Heaney, the contemporary male poets whose work most consistently employs the imagery of the sovereignty motif are Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, though a number of other male poets have succumbed as well to the symbols' allure. Seán Ó Tuama, for example, transforms the motif by shifting the spotlight away from Ireland-as-nation to quieter, more personal use, as in "Ise Seachtó hOcht, Eisean Ochtó Ceathair," the elegy he translated into

English as "She Being Seventy-Eight, He Being Eighty-Four." The poem commemorates a couple's twenty-year marriage after the husband dies. His face is that of "an old king," and he is mourned fiercely by a widow who "shrieked with rage, and combed him / with pagan fingerings." Despite—or perhaps due to—her haglike attributes, Ó Tuama's narrator views her as "the only woman in my lifetime / to have loved a prince" (*RD,* 5). In "My Dark Fathers," Brendan Kennelly turns the image of a woman dancing on the Kerry shore (and later dead in the Great Famine) into a symbol of the Irish people, if not the Irish nation. Michael Hartnett memorializes a frost-creating *cailleach* in "I saw magic on a green country road" (*SNP,* 213) and the *speírbhean* as Irish-language muse in "A Farewell to English" (*SNP,* 237–38). In "The Oat Woman," he ascribes a feminine persona to an oat field (*SNP,* 43–44); in "A Falling Out," he differs with a muse reminiscent of the White Goddess (*SNP,* 71–72). Richard Ryan personifies Connemara as a widow "Splayed, trampled" by storm during "A Wet Night," while Ciaran Carson imagines the invaders of "The Insular Celts" in the act of naming the landscape: "to hard hills of stone they will give / the words for breast."[1] In his first verse collection, Paul Muldoon relates a story about "Macha," the giant, "Curvaceous" goddess of war who, "Clutching a town // To [her] breasts," falls backward in battle and is changed into the landscape of Armagh (*NW,* 18). A decade later in *Quoof,* much darker humor makes sky-women of an Aer Lingus attendant and casual sex partners alternately diseased and domineering.[2]

The transformations of the motif in the work of contemporary women poets also reveal a variety of application, though more often in the spirit of Muldoon's irreverence than Ó Tuama's awe. Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are primary practitioners here, though the themes show up in both oblique and concentrated fashion in the work of a growing number of women poets. Medbh McGuckian's "Soil Map" subtly identifies woman with an Anglo-

1. Montague, *Faber Book,* 353–54; Anthony Bradley, ed., *Contemporary Irish Poetry,* 380–81; Montague, *Faber Book,* 379. See also such poems of Carson's as "The Rising of the Moon," "The Display Case," and "The Arterial Route" (*TN,* 19, 74, 77).

2. See "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants," 57 (of 40–64); "Aisling," 84; and "Sky-Woman," 32, in *Q;* Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon,* 95–96, 106—and 112 for Muldoon's quote about the *aisling* middle of "The More a Man Has"; and Wills, *Improprieties,* 197–98, 222–23.

Irish house and probes the notion of a "motherland" likened to the sovereignty goddess Queen Medbh, "never without one man in the shadow / of another" (*SPMC,* 20–21).[3] "The Apparition" by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin links curative water with the appearance of the Virgin, who quietly assumes in the poem the legendary role of hag-steward of a well (*SV,* 49); more obviously, Moyra Donaldson's "Kali" may as well have been titled "Cailleach." Jesse Lendenne's "Sand Goddess," musing on the body of a woman sculpted in sand, counters "The Sandwoman" of Mícheál Ó Ruaire in which boys on the emigration-depleted Great Western Island "construct / a woman out of sand" to

> take turns in mounting her
> sending the hot seed spinning
> deep into the earth.[4]

Paula Meehan's "Pillow Talk" rues the selection of the narrator's lover for the goddess's sacrificial consort (*PT,* 32–33, 40–41); "Autobiography" incorporates the *spéirbhean* and *cailleach* as distinct stages in the narrator's life (*PT,* 40–41); and "On Poetry" details three faces of the goddess in sections titled "Virgin," "Mother," and "Whore," the last sounding strong echoes of "The Old Woman of Beare" (*D,* 44–47). Katie Donovan's "Muse" voices the desires of an aging goddess pining for the (literally) rejuvenating gifts of a new young consort (*EM,* 38), while "Entering the Mare" offers the first update of the equine sovereignty rite recorded by Gerald of Wales (*EM,* 40–41). Among this array of authors Eavan Boland stands out for her clearly announced intention to undermine expectations for the motif by focusing on the lives of real women, whereas Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill similarly chooses subversion but by using the motif in a number of ways Boland appears to have foresworn. Poets' responses from both the figurative and the physical halves of the island, then, testify to the thematic material's supple, resilient weave. The examination that follows focuses on its most sustained contemporary use—among male poets, in the verse of Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, and among women poets, in the work of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

3. See Wills, *Improprieties,* 72–75.

4. Bourke and others, *Field Day Anthology,* 5:1321; Joan McBreen, ed., *The White Page / An Bhileogv Bhán: Twentieth-Century Irish Women Poets,* 130–31; Gabriel Fitzmaurice, *The Kerry Anthology,* 292–93.

In the poetry of Thomas Kinsella from the South and the year-younger John Montague from the North, recourse to the metaphors tied to the sacred marriage can be seen as early as the publication of their first books more than a decade before the resumption of the Troubles. In Kinsella's verse, the motif begins its appearances with the *speírbhean* in *Poems* (1956),[5] while subsequent volumes reveal her gradual replacement with the *cailleach.* Primarily, Kinsella's engagement with the theme traces his own growing acceptance of life's complexities. ("Butcher's Dozen," written in swift response to the miscarriage of justice after Bloody Sunday, represents a departure from that norm.) Like Kinsella, John Montague engages consistently with the motif from his first book (1958) on, though in more varied and finally more developed fashion than his southern counterpart: most simply, to honor elderly neighbors and friends, but also to intimate in his verse that cultural obeisance to feminine values might alleviate the crisis of Ulster. He refrains, however, from direct depiction of the marriage of sovereignty as a symbol for such response, and recent prose statements suggest conscious movement away from the imagery to which it is tied.

Thomas Kinsella, born in the Republic in 1928, employs the emblems associated with sovereignty more subtly in his verse than poets who preceded him. When he wrote "Butcher's Dozen" in response to the denial of justice in tribunal findings after Bloody Sunday that "exonerated the [British] troops more or less, and managed to leave a suspicion of conspiracy and covert violence hanging over some of the victims," its poetic form puzzled critics. Though Heaney pointed to the poem's "rage and certitude" as connected to Ó Bruadair's and Ó Rathaille's ("The Poems of the Dispossessed Repossessed" [*GT,* 32]), Kinsella himself, in the twenty-year-anniversary reissue of the original 1972 pamphlet, informed critics of the poem's kinship with Brian Merriman's *aisling:* "The pressures were special, the insult strongly felt, and the timing vital if the response was to matter. . . . Reaching for the nearest aid, I found the *aisling* form—that never quite extinct Irish political-verse form—in a late, parodied guise: in the coarse energies and nightmare Tribunal of

5. See "Second Night Song" and "Who Is My Proper Art" (*P,* 11, 20–21). Two years later, *AS* includes both poems; "Second Night Song" appears as the second section of "Night Songs."

Merriman's *Midnight Court*" (*BD,* 18, 21).[6] An *aisling* that substitutes for the *spéirbhean* the ghosts of thirteen murdered victims may be altered enough to throw critics off the track, but the poem's lineage can be traced ultimately to representations of the sacred marriage.

As a young poet, Kinsella had been aware that Irish thematic material could lead to critical disregard like that endured by Austin Clarke, perhaps partially explaining Kinsella's early willingness to forego explicit labeling, in the manner of Clarke, for his *aislingí* and to locate "good poetry by Irishmen" within English rather than Anglo-Irish tradition (TK). Brian John notes that "Kinsella's underestimation of his Irish connection is less intentionally misleading than calculated to show him moving away from Yeats's shadow and to avoid, not wholly successfully as it turned out, being classified as a 'regional' poet." But add to Kinsella's glossing over his role in a specifically Irish tradition two more factors—a muse "only partly derived from the Irish *aislingí*" (as in "Invocation" where she blends with Prosperina) and Kinsella's own relatively unconscious awareness of evolving poetic development—and his deployment of the sovereignty motif fades from the spotlight.[7]

Enacted center stage or not, Kinsella's recourse to the myth has been detected by such critics as Brian John and Thomas H. Jackson to begin early in his career and develop over successive volumes as part of a larger message: the need to confront one's own darkness, whether psychological or historical, to attain understanding and induce regeneration. It is a quest aided in early poems by the appearance of the *spéirbhean* and later by "the more ominous and threatening Hecate, the dark face of the White Goddess." Confronting and honoring the goddess in her guise as hag symbolize vital steps in Kinsella's psychic evolution as he grows in his acceptance of the complexities and paradox she embodies. Jackson's insight into the reliance on the feminine in poems like "Phoenix Park" (*NOP,* 73–84) (Kinsella's "major love poem," instructs Dillon Johnston) is especially clarifying: in "the ancient Irish ritual of union—explicitly sexual—of

6. The conclusions of the Widgery Tribunal were published in April 1972. See Samuel Dash, *Justice Denied: A Challenge to Lord Widgery's Report on "Bloody Sunday"; BD,* 22; and Brian John, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella,* 143–45, for summary of the critical response to Kinsella's poem.

7. John, *Reading the Ground,* 29–30. See 123–24 on Prosperina and 113–17 on Kinsella's revaluing of the Irish literary tradition; and "Invocation," *NLD,* 13–14.

king and Sovereignty . . . the union or fusion with the female is enabling—without it the male simply does not accede to his full powers; with it, he does."[8]

On the simplest level, the myth often acts as an affective prop in poems enriched by, if not dependent on, the reader's knowledge of the old stories. Even the occasional allusion, as in the lines "The goddess who had light for thighs / Grows feet of dung and takes to bed" in "Baggot Street Deserta" (*AS,* 30), can be enjoyed at startling face value, but only readers familiar with the Irish mythic tradition can fully appreciate its significance. As early as *Another September* (1958), his second volume of verse, the poems signaled much more than their echoes of Auden. "Night Songs" opens as the poet "sink[s] in sleep," unhappy with failed attempts at writing and love, while the poem's second section portrays the comforting visit to the dreaming narrator of "A woman with a golden skin / That tangled with the light" (*AS,* 6)—the *spéirbhean* "who is to prove a central Kinsella figure."[9] She appears as well, muselike, with two "soaring" white horses in "Who Is My Proper Art" (*AS,* 21–22), whereas the ballad-reminiscent "In the Ringwood," set on the Vinegar Hill site of "ancient slaughter" during the rebellion of 1798, has been identified by Kinsella (two decades plus after publication) as "an *aisling* in the manner of Aogán Ó Rathaille." In this poem, the narrator's wife is transformed after arrival on the hill into a mournful *spéirbhean,* "Sorrow's daughter" (*AS,* 37), who "initiat[es] her husband-poet into the tragedy of temporal existence." Johnston's observation that Kinsella's wife, Eleanor, "serves as the model in several poems for women whose courage and intuitive insight complement and ease the poet's compulsion for structural order" is relevant here and suggests another partial derivation for Kinsella's sky-woman.[10]

8. John, *Reading the Ground,* 25; Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce,* 103; Jackson, *The Whole Matter: The Poetic Evolution of Thomas Kinsella,* 55 (see also 53–59). Jackson notes, "In work to come, the axis of gender will dissolve under the poet's fascinating imagining of both the feminine and masculine principles" (59). See also Peggy Broder, "Images of the Feminine in the Poetry of Thomas Kinsella," esp. 88–92.

9. Ten of the thirteen poems in *P* (1956) also appear in *AS* (1958); the poems of both volumes appear under one heading in *CPK.* "Night Songs" *(AS)* incorporates "First Night Song" and "Second Night Song" (*PK,* 11). See John, *Reading the Ground,* 3, 17–19; and Jackson, *Whole Matter,* 16–17.

10. John, *Reading the Ground,* 15; Kinsella, poetry reading, Project Arts Theatre, Dublin, March 15, 1982, as reported in *Reading the Ground,* by John, 32; Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce,* 103. See also Heaney's sonnet "Requiem for the Croppies" (*OG,* 23).

Later volumes record more visits from the *spéirbhean*, as in the nineteenth section of *A Technical Supplement* (1976). Here the figure's wild hair and dark message—reminiscent of the "locks in black lament / Like blows on your white cheek" of "In the Ringwood" (*AS*, 37)—point to gravity's pull in both poems away from inspiring beauty toward the *cailleach*'s disarray:[11]

> I met a fair maid all shining
> with hair all over her cheeks
> and pearly tongue
> who spoke to me and sighed
> as if my own nervous nakedness
> spoke to me and said:
>
> *My heart is a black fruit.*
> *It is a piece of black coal.*
> *When I laugh a black thing hovers.*
> (*CPK*, 189–90)

Serving as the "ancestor of the poet's grandmother and all the other threatening and forbidding old women inhabiting his work," the *cailleach* also makes unequivocal appearances in the verse, as in "Ancestor," "Tear," and "Survivor" (1973); "Prologue" and "The Oldest Place" (1979); "1938" and "1740" (1988); and "Dura Mater" (1990) (*NLDO*, 19, 20–23, 30–33; *O*, 9, 16–19; *BF*, 74–75, 85; *PP* 12).[12] I single out "Tear" as a final example of Kinsella's unobtrusive, evolving engagement with the motif of the sacred marriage. On the literal level, the poem succeeds admirably in its evocation of a boy's farewell at the deathbed of his grandmother. But in an image conjuring the wasteland hag, the woman is also "drying mud," and the grandson's struggle with kissing her recalls the struggle of Irish and Grail heroes with a courteous gesture they would prefer not to give—yet one that provides such significant, lasting reward:

> Was I to kiss her? As soon
> kiss the damp that crept

11. See Broder, "Images of the Feminine," 94–95; and John, *Reading the Ground*, 177, on symbolism of the *cailleach*'s hair, "a net in which the masculine consciousness feels ensnared, preventing its growth toward light, individuation, and wholeness."

12. John, *Reading the Ground*, 238.

in the flowered walls
of this pit.

Yet I had to kiss.
(*NLDO,* 21)

The reader schooled in Irish myth cannot fail to appreciate the dual level of meaning in such poems, documenting a journey in which, like his character Amergin in "Finistère," Kinsella "proceeds forward from silence to expression, darkness to light, exile to possession."[13]

The myth plays a more integral, truly visible role in the poetry of John Montague, taken from the United States at age four to be reared by his father's sisters in County Tyrone. In his verse, Montague draws frequently on the motif to reflect on old neighbors known in childhood, linking them to the aged version of the sovereignty goddess as a way of honoring them. In addition, a number of poems in Montague's large body of verse respond to a divine feminine entity influenced by Graves's White Goddess—and often blended with real women in his life, though the absence in more recent volumes of such mythologically shaded figures reveals likely reaction to a new critical climate. Montague explains: "The whole tradition of courtly love is virtually impossible now in poetry. You cannot go tripping over your heels after the muse as Yeats once did; if you invoked women as Athene or some classical goddess would they now accept the offering? Robert Graves is the last kick of this tradition."[14]

Perhaps, but Niall's hag confronts us again in Montague's first volume of verse, *Forms of Exile* (1958), in the "Eyes rheumy with racial memory," "shrunken gums," and stinking "rags and shawls" of the crone depicted in "The Sean Bhean Bhocht" ("The Shan Van Vocht," or "The Poor Old Woman") (*SPM,* 18–19).[15] She appears, too, as the *cailleach* of the "The Wild Dog Rose," with her

13. John, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," 42. See also *O,* 12–16.

14. Montague, "John Montague," 58. See also Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 88–99; and Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "'The Water There': Montague and His Readers," in *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague,* ed. Redshaw, 11–13, 21–22.

15. The poem also "hints at the crisis to come a decade later in Ulster" (Honor O'Connor, "Forms of Exile: Poems and Satires, 1946–58," 40). Montague notes that the poem is "not about a national symbol, but a real poor old woman whom I had known" (*BA,* 28).

great hooked nose, the cheeks
dewlapped with dirt, the staring blue
of the sunken eyes, the mottled claws
clutching a stick.

(*RF,* 78)[16]

Terrifying as these hags may once have seemed to him, however, the narrator emulates Niall by seeing past their exterior and regarding each—"a human being / merely, hurt by event"—with respect:

we talk in ease at last,
like old friends, lovers almost,
sharing secrets.

(*RF,* 78)

Additional former neighbors are memorialized in "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People." This poem, to which Heaney responded on first reading with "an almost literal quickening in [his] bones" (R, 11), vividly characterizes the individual lives of several elderly men and women of the poet's youth before collapsing the group, as the stanzas conclude, into the female figure by whose bedside he tells us he was reared: "Ancient Ireland" (*SPM,* 27). Montague's access to Ireland's history is made easier by the old people in his poems, figures who reward his kindness with their reminiscences of the old ways. The verse in turn pay homage to the elderly's generosity in sharing their lives with the poet.[17]

Several of Montague's poems also link these figures explicitly to wells and the hag's shapeshifting art. In "The Music Box," for example, Niall's well-guarding crone serves as prototype for Mary Mulvey, who

lived in the leaning
cottage, beside the old well

16. The poem gains by its placement before the epilogue of *The Rough Field,* the long sequence examining Ulster's history: its hag character suggests the Ulster townland, or rough field, with which the poet makes peace; the hag's story of attempted rape (in the second section) is also symbolic. See the entire poem (*RF,* 77–80).

17. For Antoinette Quinn's keen insights into these and related poems, see "'The Well-Beloved': Montague and the Muse."

she strove to keep clean,
bending over to skim dead leaves
and insects; ageing guardian
whom we found so frightening.
(*SPM,* 186)

More prosaic than Niall's hag, Mary herself may not be able to reverse her aging in this poem, but in Montague's version of the myth the fair maiden is transposed to the "small figure on [the] rosewood top" of her music box, a "timeless dancer" (*SPM,* 187).[18] In "The Well Dreams," the hag is absent, but when

a tarnished coin is thrown in,
. . . . . .
Water's slow alchemy washes it clean:
a queen of the realm, made virgin again.
(*SPM,* 184)

On a related note, "The Sean Bhean Bhoct" concludes beside a "grass-choked well" with the narrator asking, "beneath the whorls of the guardian stone / What hidden queen lay dust?" (*SPM,* 19). Even in his own seventieth year, Montague memorializes the Irish-language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin by depicting an encounter with a *cailleach* (minus a well in this case) in the second section of "The Two Seáns":

and only after she has passed
does a chill tell you
that beneath her shawl
she had no shoes,

and no feet, but was floating
a foot above the ground!
(*SP,* 59)

Five years later, in "First Landscape, First Death," he recalls the difficult dying of the elderly "Big Allie Owens": neighbors depart

18. The phrase "timeless dancer" in *SPM* is changed from "tireless dancer" in *DK,* 37.

from farewell visits "carrying sweet water from the well" (*DS,* 61–62). Montague acts throughout his career to honor elders and friends by associating them with the image of the *cailleach:* Sweeney's "Hag of the Mill" or Robert Graves's White Goddess.[19]

The volumes *A Chosen Light* (1967), *A Slow Dance* (1975), and *Mount Eagle* (1989) suggest another role for the sovereignty motif in Montague's oeuvre: more direct homage, in the spirit of his friend Graves, to a divine feminine presence, often doubling as a mortal woman (mother, lover, wife). In "Virgo Hibernica," a figure blending Cathleen Ní Houlihan and lover appears "on a moist hillside" as a raincoat-clad huntress. The narrator accompanies her, "docile / by her flank," though "her honied, naïve speech / drains power from manhood" (*CL,* 15). The seven poems of the sequence "A Slow Dance" (in a volume with the same name Montague describes as "an embrace of the earth, a return to the Ireland of my boyhood") strike an even more Gravesian, obeisant pose, actively prayerful when "For the Hillmother" rewrites the traditional litany to the Virgin (*SD,* 7–13).[20] "Ó Riada's Farewell," the volume's eight-section elegy to the Irish composer, also affects humility toward the goddess in poems in which she presides, as "the damp haired / seaweed stained sorceress," over death, and later as "a lonelier lady mourns, / the muse of a man's particular gift" (*SD,* 60, 62).

As part of a volume that suggests the violence of Ulster "must be endured . . . ," Montague advises, "even when . . . a harsh dance of healing is our only answer" (*FC,* 53), such poems "reach back to the primal and elemental in an attempt to reconstruct or imagine what might be the starting point for hope."[21] "The Well-Beloved" in *Mount Eagle* nevertheless registers Montague's growing consciousness of the limitations of images conferring "divinity or angelhood" on women. Asked whether the women in his love poems are "symbolic or real or both," Montague acknowledges, "As I grow older I would

19. See Montague's epigraph, *DK,* 24; my discussion in Chapter 1 linking Sweeney's Hag of the Mill to Graves's White Goddess as a muse rather than riddling Sphinx; and, for another view, Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 93–94.

20. Montague, "John Montague," 53. On the role of Montague's own mother in the poetry, see Elizabeth Grubgeld, "John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom* and the Postwar American Elegy" and "Matriarchs, Mothergoddesses, and the Poetry of John Montague"; and Quinn, "'The Well-Beloved.'"

21. Richard Greaves and Michael Parker, "'Blood Talk': Politics and Family in *A Slow Dance* (1975) and *The Dead Kingdom* (1984)," 235. See also John Hobbs, "Radical Metaphors in *A Slow Dance* (1975)."

be less inclined to mythologise, especially since I have daughters myself. . . . The 'Well Beloved' [*sic*] deconstructs the Muse."[22] Yet he also intimates women may one day miss the gifts offered by the muse poet:

> when the old desires stir—
>
> fish under weed-tangled waters—
> will she remember that we once were
> the strange ones who understood
> the powers that coursed so furiously
> through her witch blood, prepared
> . . . . . .
>
> To defy custom, redeem the ordinary,
> with trembling heart and obeisant knee
> to kneel, prostrate ourselves again,
> if necessary, before the lady?
> (*CPM*, 315; *ME*, 47)

Montague's essay "Love's Equal Realm" extends this discussion when he suggests that men and women "both search for . . . a society where the male and female principles are not hostile, opposed, mutually destructive. But this society of equality is still to be won; beyond male condescension, feminist reaction, lies love's equal realm. And perhaps this realm should still be ruled by the Muse, redefined according to our need" (LER, 568).[23]

Both Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill act in their verse to redefine the muse according to their need, Boland by downplaying the symbols of sovereignty and Ní Dhomhnaill by playing them up. Focusing on the work of the two women again pairs poets of Catholic background, both in this case from the Republic, and both with ties to Dublin, the city that hosted Boland's birth, university attendance, and child rearing and that serves now as Ní Dhomhnaill's family home. (Boland's London and New York upbringing, perhaps even her current residence in California, contributes to strong identification

22. Montague, "John Montague," 58. The question was asked in regard to Quinn, "'The Well-Beloved.'"

23. See LER, 565, for a view of the muse much modified since Montague observed, as related by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, that "you couldn't have a woman muse poet, because that would be tantamount to a woman being in love with a woman, and that wouldn't do now, would it?" (*SE*, 141).

with Irish emigrants; Ní Dhomhnaill's reliance on the language of the Kerry Gaeltacht of her childhood links her, despite a Lancashire birth and sojourns abroad, to older traditions.) Like Kinsella and Montague, both poets begin to engage the sovereignty motif early in their careers, though Boland serves a more conventional poetic apprenticeship before setting out to expose the familiar icons and find inspiration in the lives of real women. Ní Dhomhnaill, on the other hand, follows her Gaelic poet-mentors in writing love poems that disguise a serious agenda: transformation of both herself and her culture. Purposely working to expose repressed material to gain freedom from its otherwise dangerous demands, Ní Dhomhnaill draws freely and widely upon the sovereignty motif, though with such subversive twists as the identification of Irish locale with a man's body and the sacred marriage as an adulterous act.

Eavan Boland challenges the sovereignty symbols' fusion between women and Irish nationhood while refusing to discard the images entirely. It may be "easy, and intellectually seductive," she observes, "for a woman artist to walk away from the idea of a nation," but Boland chooses to engage the tradition, even if flawed, as "one of the vital human constructs of a place in which, like Leopold Bloom, [she] was born" (*KS,* 19). The "fragmentations" of the tradition, after all, reach "in some subterranean way" into her own. She explains: "Rather than accept the nation as it appeared in Irish poetry, with its queens and muses, I felt the time had come to re-work those images by exploring the emblematic relation between my own feminine experience and a national past" (*KS,* 20). Boland thus subverts the traditional symbols of the sovereignty myth to train attention on "the complicated human suffering," including her own, of real Irish women, living and dead (*KS,* 13). The following lines from her poem "The Women" illustrate her method:

> The hour of change, of metamorphosis,
> of shape-shifting instabilities.
> My time of sixth sense and second sight
> when in the words I choose, the lines I write,
> they rise like visions and appear to me:
>
> women of work, of leisure, of the night,
> in stove-coloured silks, in lace, in nothing.
>
> (*CPB,* 114)

Shapeshifting is traditionally the province of the Irish sovereignty goddess, and most *aislingí* commence with the male poet's vision of the beautiful *spéirbhean.* Boland alludes to myth even as she stakes out her own poetic territory—the lives, too often overlooked in deference to mythic material, of ordinary Irish women.

Boland's choice of emphasis also spurs her to engage the mythic icons directly, as in "Tirade for the Mimic Muse." The poem denounces the muse, or sovereignty goddess, as a "ruthless bitch" far past her prime. Condemning the figure further, Boland speculates on the vast effort required by others to keep her young:

> With what drums and dances, what deceits,
> Rituals and flatteries of war,
> Chants and pipes and witless empty rites
> And war-like men
> And wet-eyed patient women
> You did protect yourself from horrors,
> From the lizarding of eyelids
> From the whiskering of nipples,

all the while she ignored, in supreme self-absorption, "The scream of beaten women, / The crime of babies battered" (*CPB,* 55). In words akin to manifesto, Boland proclaims, "I will show you true reflections, terrors" (*CPB,* 56). Her poems proceed to portray women the myths missed, such as the victim of domestic violence sculpted "In His Own Image," a self-punishing "Anorexic," a patient grieving after a "Mastectomy," an imprisoned "Woman in Kitchen," and a blinded maker of "Lace" (*CPB,* 57–58, 58–60, 60–61, 76, 110). As Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has observed, Boland revises "conventional images and ideas to turn the 'trivial' and 'private' into 'universal' and 'public.'"[24]

Boland also gives us a glimpse into the soul of the Irish hag repeatedly reconfigured as a young woman. Such a return to youth and beauty—via magical transformation or any other route—is out of the question for the aging women in Boland's poems, as she insists in "Time and Violence."[25] Approaching fifty, the narrator contrasts herself with the narcissi, crocuses, and snowdrops of early spring:

24. Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets,* 59.
25. The poem appeared with the title "What Language Did" in *ITV,* 63–65.

> I stood there and felt the melancholy
> of growing older in such a season,
> when all I could be certain of was simply
>
> in this time of fragrance and refrain,
> whatever else might flower before the fruit,
> and be renewed, I would not. Not again.

While musing in this way, the narrator notices in the air, sky, and pools of water the images of a shepherdess, "her arm injured from the mantelpieces / and pastorals where she posed with her crook," Cassiopeia trapped in her constellation in the sky, and a mermaid with "all / the desolation of the North Sea in her face." In a voice the narrator wonders if she imagines, they make it clear that all would gladly trade places with her:

> We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy.
> We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty.
> Help us to escape youth and beauty.
> Write us out of the poem. Make us human
> in cadences of change and mortal pain
> and words we can grow old and die in.
> (*CPB,* 206–8)

Frozen and imprisoned as they are, longing for the very ability to age, these images would reject magical means to preserve youth. Old age and ugliness may horrify Niall's four half brothers, but Boland's mythic figures would welcome an aging process that leads to the release of death—as might the *cailleach* herself, jolted like a yo-yo from maidenhood to decrepitude and back, could we learn from her own lips her thoughts on the matter. We might be surprised at her boredom with her static existence as a "a symbol with two aspects and two appearances . . . a sterile figure whose tale is repeated over and over."[26] Boland, then, disregards conventional expectations for the women we meet through myth. In doing so, she points to inherent value in the human condition—and in the natural life cycle of a real woman. The water carrier memorialized in "The Achill Woman" is celebrated, albeit by a much wiser narrator many years

26. Clark, *Great Queens,* 152.

after meeting her, for her ordinariness, not for her resemblance to mythic attendants of wells (*CPB,* 148–49).

In a more recent imaginative reworking of sovereignty symbols, the mythical is pitted against the real one more time in "Embers," the fifth of the eleven poems constituting the "Marriage" sequence in *Against Love Poetry.* The narrator is reading a transformation tale to her preoccupied husband about "a wretched woman, eyes staring, hair in disarray," who arrives one wintry night at the camp of the Fianna. Reminiscent of the hag who is refused her kiss by each of Niall's half brothers before Niall himself obliges, the woman asks each member of the camp

> to take her to his bed, to shelter her with his body.
> Each one looked at her—she was old beyond her years.
> Each one refused her, each spurned her, except Diarmuid.
>
> When he woke in the morning she was young and beautiful.
> And she was his, forever, but on one condition.
> He could not say that she had once been old and haggard.
> He could not say that she had ever . . . here I look up.

Realizing her partner is "turned away" (*ALP,* 10), uninterested, the narrator breaks off, and the story goes without ending. The reader is nevertheless reminded not only of Niall and the *cailleach* at the well but also of such stories' English derivative, in which Dame Ragnell is changed from loathly lady into beautiful maiden by Sir Gawain's willingness to marry her in loathly lady guise.[27]

Still, in suggesting the newly young woman might feel embarrassment if others learned "she had once been old," Boland provides yet another view into the complex soul of the loathly lady, vaulted back to youth and beauty and more sensitive about the change than we would guess from acquaintance with other characters pleading weariness with their frozen youth. But the poem shifts quickly to suggest as well the needs of the narrator, here addressing the husband to whom she has been "married thirty years":

27. The story of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell also features a "condition," likely in similar spirit to the tale broken off by Boland's narrator: Ragnell, transformed into a radiant maiden by Gawain's kiss, announces she can retain her beauty by day or by night. She asks Gawain to choose which he would prefer. When he leaves the choice to her, since it is her destiny the decision affects, he grants her "sovereignty" and frees her to remain beautiful.

I made this fire from the first peat of winter.
Look at me in the last, burnished light of it.
Tell me that you feel the warmth still.
Tell me that you will never speak about the ashes.
(*ALP,* 8, 10)

The plea is heartfelt: remember the "real-life" narrator in the glow of beauty, even in its "last, burnished light," but never in the ashes of its burned-out fire. Like the character in the interrupted story, the "real-woman" narrator is sensitive and proud, with real needs in a relationship—and a person more important, finally, than any inhabitant of myth.

The Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill found early inspiration in Ó Bruadair and Ó Rathaille and memorized their verse as an enthusiastic adolescent. Though her ardor failed, later, to inure her to frustration with "the myth of sovereignty envisaged as a woman," some of it must have survived. In 1992, the year after both Clair Wills's essay on Boland and McGuckian (but including Ní Dhomhnaill) first appeared and Patricia Coughlan's essay was collected in *Gender in Irish Writing*, Ní Dhomhnaill counters them with some assertions of her own. She proclaims, for example, that Boland "is dead right to engage polemically with this image because . . . there is a psychotic splitting involved where, the more the image of woman comes to stand for abstract concepts like justice, liberty or national sovereignty, the more real women are denigrated and consigned barefoot and pregnant to the kitchen." Moreover, as Ní Dhomhnaill explains, to ignore the image is to consign to it a power to oppress us with a vengeance that only repressed material can wield. If images like woman-as-Ireland, she announces, "are not engaged with in playful dialogue, if we do not take them seriously, then they will wreak a terrible revenge by manifesting somatically as illnesses, or being acted out blindly and irrationally, as we see being acted out at this very moment in the sack of Sarajevo, as ethnic and historic tensions, long brushed under the carpet of a monolithic Marxism, explode to the surface" (WF, 27–28).[28] As one might expect

28. The revised version of WF, "An Bhanfhile Sa Traidisiun: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition" (*SE,* 43–58), does not include this last quotation and alters the previous quote; see 48. See Coughlan, "'Bog Queens'"; and Wills, "Contemporary Irish Women Poets: The Privatisation of Myth" (a later version appears in 1993 as "Women Poets: The Privatization of Myth," in Wills, *Improprieties,* 47–77).

in view of these prose statements, the image of the sovereignty goddess makes conspicuous, often playful appearances in Ní Dhomhnaill's verse, but the meanings underlying the poet's treatment of the sacred marriage have implications as serious as those motivating Ó Bruadair's and Ó Rathaille's efforts to defend Gaelic culture. For Ní Dhomhnaill, the culture in need of saving has expanded to the Western world.

As Ní Dhomhnaill elaborates in memorable conversation with Medbh McGuckian, "The whole of Western discourse is ripe for transformation and is transformable. . . . [S]omething as deeply important as this is implied in our writing and is necessary if we are to survive on the face of the earth" (CFA, 598). But in the manner of bardic verse that combined seriousness of purpose with fluctuating attitudes toward the sovereignty figure, Ní Dhomhnaill will not be hamstrung by deference to the icon. She inclines instead toward interrogating it with a zeal matching Ó Bruadair's scorn and Boland's "deconstruction." If inverting the expected transformation from hag to *spéirbhean* will accomplish her poetic purpose, it is time for the change. In "Teist Dhonncha Di Ar Mhór" ("Donncha Di's Testimony"), one of her early "Mór poems" translated by Michael Hartnett, the sovereignty goddess Mór appears to her consort Donncha Di

> naked
> . . . . . .
> her hips
> flashing fire
> beneath the two moons
> of her breasts.

The pair engage in a night of lovemaking, but with a nod to the goddess's caprice (and Ní Dhomhnaill's insistence on upsetting expectations), the morning finds Donncha Di facing a *cailleach:*

> I saw sallow scales encrusted her
> and rotten teeth from the abyss
> snarled at me and hissed.
> (*SPRD*, 35)

Seán Ó Tuama sees little playfulness, rightly so, in such a transformation; for him, the poem "clearly signals that some major elements

of the ugliness and cruelty in the feminine nature (and accordingly, in her own nature, too) had shocked the young Ní Dhomhnaill. She found herself staring into an abyss she had not foreseen or understood" (*RSE,* 36).[29]

Ní Dhomhnaill's dejection appears to have lifted by the time she expands the traditional identification of Ireland with the female body to include the body of a beloved man, as in "Oileán," translated by Michael Hartnett as "Island":

> Your body an island
> in the great ocean.
> . . . . . .
> Your forehead a spring well
> mix of blood and honey—
> it gave me a cooling drink
> when I was burning
> . . . . . .
> Your eyes
> are mountain lakes
> . . . . . .
> Flowing reeds your eyelashes
> growing at their margins.
> (*SPRD,* 71)

In the spirit of the sovereignty goddess who initiated her sexual encounters—though this goddess drinks, rather than proffers, the Grail-like libation—the poem seizes for the female poet subject matter once monopolized by male counterparts.

Ní Dhomhnaill's remaking of the sovereignty figure continues in her volume *Feis* (1991), not by persisting with the inversion of "Donncha Di's Testimony" but by drawing on the customary change from *cailleach* to *spéirbhean* for the collection's organizing principle. The volume's eighty poems are arranged in four sections: "Cailleach," "An Leannán Sí" ("The Land of the Fairies"), "Feis," and "Spéirbhean." The order inverts that in which Thomas Kinsella displays his own

29. Ní Dhomhnaill's gloss on this abyss cites opposition so intense to her love for the Turkish man she later married that the Guardianship of Infants Act of 1964 was invoked to deprive the nineteen year old of her civil liberties. See "Cé Leis Tú?" in *SE,* 136–42.

growth and suggests a progression, even a transformation: the darkness of repressed psychic matter, symbolized by the hag, is mitigated through recognition and acceptance, represented by the sacred marriage, and finally returned to health, emblematized by the *spéirbhean.* Insights Ní Dhomhnaill offers during her conversation with Medbh McGuckian bear repeating here: "I am for a marrying of the logical with the non-rational. The sovereignty-myth story I have as a framing metaphor to my book *Feis* is basically it. The king is the ego energy. . . . And that energy, part of the dominant European energy, marries the *cailleach,* the despised, left-out, repressed female energy. And in the marriage she is transformed into the *spéirbhean,* which is what happens when a genuine marriage of these two energies occurs in the personality at a deep level" (CFA, 598). A bilingual critic would be best equipped to comment on the movement toward transformation in the book, especially while many of its poems remain untranslated; until then, at least five of its poems, appearing later in translation in other volumes, merit mention here. The first three form part of the "Cailleach" group in *Feis;* the fourth is included in the grouping "The Land of the Fairies"; "Feis" ("Carnival") is part of the group taking the title of the volume; and "Primavera" comes in the section called "Spéirbhean" (*F,* 28–29, 32, 31, 56, 99–102, 114).

"The Shan Van Vocht," Ciaran Carson's translation of "An tSeanbhean Bhoct," displays frustration with the image of the sovereignty goddess invoked in a nationalist ballad commemorating the Rising of 1798. The poem refers to "a poor old woman," portraying her as a vain, quarrelsome crone living in the past, oblivious to the sacrifices made in her name, and so tiresome as to inspire the narrator to say "Anything, every old cliché in the book, anything at all / To get this old bitch to shut the fuck up" (*P'sD,* 131). Similarly, in ("Caitlín") "Cathleen," Ní Dhomhnaill set out to "pile up images [of Ireland as woman] taken from the canon of Gaelic patriotic verse, . . . throwing in for good measure examples of the native idiom as imagined by Revivalist writers." She correctly points out that "the overall effect is satirical, as the Kathleen Ní Houlihan theme collapses under the weight of its own rhetoric" ("An Bhanfhile Sa Traidisiun: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition" [*SE,* 57]). Paul Muldoon's translation of the poem reduces the character of Cathleen to "a widowed old woman" conveniently blind to reality:

even if every slubberdegullion once had a dream-vision
in which she appeared as his own true lover,
those days are just as truly over.

(*AC*, 39)

But Ní Dhomhnaill's conscious reappraisal of the figure also frees her to conscript the sovereignty motif for her own wide-ranging purposes in ways Ó Bruadair and Ó Rathaille would never have imagined and Boland chooses to ignore. Consider the dream rehearsed in "Hag," Montague's translation of "Cailleach": the female narrator's body becomes the earth of the parish of Ventry, with her brow, forehead, flank, shanks, backbone, and feet all identified with features of the natural landscape (*P'sD*, 135).

Three more poems suggest additional new shadings for the material. "The Prodigal Muse," Medbh McGuckian's translation of "Filleadh na Béithe" and originally part of "The Fairy Land" grouping in *Feis*, is addressed to a muse who has returned like a lover without explanation after long absence. Significantly, the gender of the muse remains inexact in the poem: possibly male, a designation that would expand the reach of the sovereignty metaphor (and correct Robert Graves's views on the subject), though the traditional female identification cannot be excluded, especially in a poem by a bisexual poet. In the end, the situation remains ambiguous, further extending the reach of the metaphor by allowing the reader to ascribe either gender to the figure who inspires verse:

You saunter back in
as cool and dandy
as if you'd not been
on your travels
since the Lord-knows-when.

As the figure makes him/herself comfortable by the fire in a "favourite armchair," the female narrator reacts, anticipating the coupling to follow:

I come out in
An all-over body-rash,

my erect nipples
in for a nuzzling

by the stomach of the chimney
stack, or the cubby-hole
under the stairs.
(*WH,* 99)

The "sacred marriage" here will not be enacted against a magnificent backdrop, or even in the speaker's master suite, but the "nuzzling" doubles for the act of verse writing, and the job description of the sovereignty goddess has adapted with the times to serve authentic needs of a female Irish poet.

In the eleven-section poem "Feis," yet another departure from conventional deployment of the motif can be observed in the narrator's willingness to act, goddesslike, on desire, and this time in a more appropriate, upscale location. The poem, translated by Muldoon as "Carnival," draws on the old myths to plumb the emotions attending a passionate extramarital affair—including the inevitable grief foreshadowed by Muldoon's title. With portmanteau dexterity, "Carnival" fuses "carnal embrace" and "festival," the two meanings of *Feis;* more tellingly, the title also reflects its roots: *carne vale,* literally "farewell flesh," or the indulgence of final pleasures before the season of Lent.[30] But grief is absent from the poem's first section, a clear appropriation of the sovereignty motif to pay tribute to the narrator's lover. Here the act of consummation occurs during midwinter dawn as a phallic ray of sun enters the "enormous womb" of the New Grange tumuli, for Ní Dhomhnaill "an architectural marvel by which the central sacred image of the religion of the time, the penetration of the Earth-Mother by the Sky-God, the sacred marriage or *'Hieros gamos,'* can take place—physically—before our eyes" ("Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of Psychic Transformation" [*SE,* 83]). The goddess of sovereignty herself might be speaking in these lines to her kingly lover:

When you rise in the morning
and pour into me
. . . . . .

30. I thank José Lanters for recognizing the word's portmanteau nature as we puzzled over the title; my student Kate King reminded me of the role played by pre-Lent carnivals.

A ray of sunshine comes
slender and spare
down the dark passageway
. . . . . .

[into] the nethermost
sealed chamber.

Newgrange is located in County Meath near the River Boyne, and Ní Dhomhnaill capitalizes on the river's geographical proximity in section 3 of the poem:

If we were gods
here at Newgrange—
you Sualtam or the Daghda,
myself the famous river—

we could freeze the sun
and the moon
for a year and a day
to perpetuate the pleasure
we have together.
(*AC*, 11, 13)

The lines here allude, appropriately in a poem suggesting the vexed nature of desire, to two famous Celtic love triangles. In the first, Sualtam prepares to wed Dechtire (or Dechtine), the daughter of the Daghda (also Daghdha or Dagda), the great Irish father-god known for his club and cauldron (and a deity depicted for some by the Dorset hill figure known as the Cerne Abbas Giant). In the shape of a bird, the god Lugh steals Dechtire away on the day the ceremony is to take place and impregnates her with Cúchulainn; Sualtam later marries Dechtire and thus becomes the mortal father of the Irish hero. In the second myth, the Daghda loves Boann, goddess of the River Boyne. Their union, as Miranda J. Green explains, "is one example of the many instances of marriage between a tribal god and a nature-goddess who nourished the earth and could easily personify a spring or river as a life-source." But in most tellings of the myth, Boann is already married when the Daghda encounters her, and their liaison requires concealment. For this reason the Daghda suspends

the sun in its path for a full nine months, and their child's conception and birth occur in the space of a single day.[31] The imagery of the marriage of sovereignty seems created for a poet like Ní Dhomhnaill who moves so easily between the arenas of otherworldly myth and the utterly earthy—and to signal here the intense, addictive nature of desire in a narrator who wishes to extend the brief hours of lovemaking with her paramour.

"Primavera," the last Ní Dhomhnaill poem I will cite, appeared in *Feis* as part of the climactic, final "Spéirbhean" grouping of poems toward which the others moved. Ní Dhomhnaill's English translation concludes her essay about a West Kerry transformation tale, and she precedes the poem with a prognosis:

> The only way forward [for our modern selves and society] is to somehow break out of the dominant patriarchal ethos of our age. For all of us, inwardly, the king must die. Then . . . the Hag energy must erupt. The too-long repressed Feminine comes into its own, and, as we learn to come to terms with what is dark and frightening in ourselves, we can release others from the burden of carrying our resentment in one way or another. Then a new form of male energy asserts itself in the unconscious, and, challenging the hag, uniting with her, brings forth the conscious reality of the Goddess, as *spéirbhean*. . . . It is only with the arrival of softer spring weather that inner transformation sometimes seems to take place, as happened, I think, when I wrote the poem "Primavera." ("Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of Psychic Transformation" [*SE* 87])

The poem details the effects a visit from the goddess produces on the landscape—ecstatic birdsong, explosion of wildflowers—and on a narrator no longer "quietly weeping . . . / . . . a grumpy old thing":

> I had announced beforehand, far and wide,
> that it would take a lot more than a winsome smile
> from a fair damsel to coax me out of my shell.
> But she did it, with one shake of her milky thigh,

31. Green, *The Gods of the Celts,* 149. See also Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales,* 216–19, for other versions of Cúchulainn's birth; Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage,* 88–89, on the Daghda's ability to lengthen time; Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 32; and, for more on the Cerne Abbas Giant, my discussion in Chapter 6.

with a laughing, lascivious beam out over her shoulder
she wrenched up my roots, and left me addled, high and dry
footless, footloose, fanciful and fretful.
(In "Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of
Psychic Transformation" [*SE,* 88])[32]

It is "in hope" of experiencing more lasting psychic metamorphosis that Ní Dhomhnaill continues to attend to the male energy of her own "inner harper in all his powerful dream manifestations as Enemy, Sea-Horse or Minotaur, Bull of the Mothers" ("Mis and Dubh Ruis: A Parable of Psychic Transformation" [*SE,* 87]).

As even this abbreviated survey of contemporary Irish verse demonstrates, the *Feis* of Tara keeps up its shapeshifting into a new millennium, preserving all the while its truly identifying features. Both male and female poets, most consistently Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Eavan Boland, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, draw regularly from its cache of symbols, each in turn inflecting a distinctive cast upon the old material.[33] One obvious difference separates male and female poets: persisting conflation of women and land/Ireland/muse in the male mind, whereas such images assume fluidity in their handling by women. Male poets moreover have reacted self-consciously to feminist interrogation of feminine icons. Genuine experimentation with the symbols has thus become the province of women poets, many of whom embrace the challenge of updating—and subverting—them. It was Katie Donovan, not a canonical male, who animated the ancient image of the goddess as mare,

her white coat vainly shrugging,
as the would-be chieftain
plunges in, burying deep
his puny, acrid man's seed,
between her fragrant haunches.
(*EM,* 40)

32. See also McGuckian's translation (*WH,* 93).

33. The poets are not alone in doing so. As I explore in my "Molly Astray," Brian Friel frequently connects female characters with the sovereignty goddess. Many relevant examples in other genres could be cited.

Still, none of these poets, male or female, has reconnected the motif of the marriage of sovereignty to its political heritage in the sustained manner of Seamus Heaney.

All four of the poets on whom this chapter focuses assent to the need to espouse feminine values to rectify the imbalance of a patriarchal world, but none turn as Heaney does to the sacred marriage of sovereignty to address the unique political challenges of Ulster, particularly the widespread violence tied to the resumption of the Troubles. If "it is all too easy, under the rule of a worthless king, for the land to turn sour; its crops wither, its people turn to violent crime and the whole body politic [to become] racked with strife," it is also easy for the hubris of the colonizers to continue to infect the territory of the colonized even after their departure.[34] Heaney's own adaptations of the marriage of sovereignty represent a return to the ancient focus on the link between the qualities of the king and the condition of his kingdom, though the king becomes the individual as tribal spokesperson and the kingdom becomes the earth and postcolonial Ireland—with a focus on Ulster. The *spéirbhean* also lives again in Heaney's incarnations of the sovereignty goddess, often depicted as beautiful, sorrowful, waiting for a redeemer. However, she cannot be described as entirely passive, for she may have been colonized, but she has never accepted—indeed, she has resisted with every means available—the conditions of her servitude.[35]

Like Kinsella, Heaney leaves a record of personal growth imprinted in his symbols; like Montague, he relies on the motif to honor both old neighbors and the goddess of sovereignty; like Boland, he respects the natural rhythms of life; and like Ní Dhomhnaill, he returns the sexual overtones to representations of the ancient rites. But Heaney also takes the motif into new territory with his deliberate placing of allegiance on the side of the oppressed: the rape-victim/*aisling* he champions and the bog-body/*cailleach* whom he loves may represent, by extension, every despised minority, every marginal group. For Heaney, the motif of the sacred marriage affords a way to honor them and restore

34. Caitlín Matthews, *Arthur and the Sovereignty of Britain: King and Goddess in the "Mabinogion,"* 241.

35. Even the water sprite in Heaney's "Undine" (*DD*, 26) works to attract the attention of the farmer: sexual union with him will secure her a soul. She "rippled and [she] churned" until he noticed her.

their dignity—perhaps the best way of all to bring fertility to an arid world.[36] The four chapters that follow look closely at the example of one Northern Irish poet who adapts the symbolism of the *Feis* of Tara in the face of still urgent cultural impoverishment and contemporary need.

36. The particular violence of Northern Irish terrorism may have been overshadowed in a post-9/11 setting, but that underscores, rather than obviates, the continuing need for transformation.

3

Heaney's Love to Ireland

So we acknowledge that the violation of the Mothers' and Grandmothers' laws of kinship, respect, balance, and harmony brings about social, planetary, and personal illness and that healing is a matter of restoring the balance within ourselves and our communities.

—Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*

What can fend us now
Can soothe the hurt eye

Of the sun,
Unpoison great lakes,
Turn back
The rat on the road.

—Seamus Heaney, "Augury," in *Wintering Out*

During a 1974 lecture to the Royal Society of Literature, Heaney asserted the presence of "an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelar of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; [whose] sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of

Orange and Edward Carson" (*P,* 57). Heaney could easily have added to this list the name of another English patriot and enemy of the Irish, Sir Walter Ralegh (or Raleigh), the imperial colonizer depicted in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N,* 46–47). Included in *North* the year after Heaney's lecture, the poem dramatizes Ralegh's soldiering exploits in Ireland as the rape of a young girl, a figure for the Irish sovereignty goddess in her guise as *spéirbhean.* In both Irish and Grail legends, such an act of disrespect against a maiden of the Grail castle would transform king into invalid and once fruitful region into wasteland.[1] "Ocean's Love to Ireland" in fact portrays such a fallen world: Ralegh's assault on the maid and on her homeland transforms self-respecting Irishwoman into wearisome castoff and Gaelic Ireland into English-occupied, deforested waste. The sovereignty of the goddess has not, however, been destroyed but "temporarily usurped." A brief but poignant introduction to an Irish fallen world, "Ocean's Love to Ireland" acts as an "emblem of adversity" that implies its own antidote.

When Heaney allegorizes English conquest of Ireland as rape in "Ocean's Love to Ireland," he relies on a familiar trope. As Ania Loomba observes, rape has served as "an abiding and recurrent metaphor for colonial relations."[2] This should not be surprising. Rape reduces another person to sexual object; colonization discounts another nation as conquest. In doing so, both acts forego a relationship of reciprocity between equals; both relish the assertion of power over someone or something else. This commonality between the exercise of individual and large-scale domination explains why practices that subjugate a race, class, or sex are described as rape in popular parlance. What adds dimension to Heaney's poem and sets it apart is its deployment of aspects of an additional metaphor, the Celtic motif of sovereignty. Both "Act of Union" (*N,* 49–50) and "An Open Letter" (OL, 19–30) also allegorize colonial relations with rape metaphors and focus on Ulster as the offspring of British imperialism; in "Act of Union," the identification of the female character's body

1. Grail legends uniformly describe the effect of the wound sustained by the Grail king; they vary when attributing the cause. Whitmont groups the possible causes under the heading "an act of disrespect . . . variously represented as insult, rape, assault on [the Grail castle's] maidens, disrespect of the sovereignty of the Grail itself or of its law through an improper attitude to . . . love" (*Return of the Goddess,* 155).

2. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* 164.

with Irish landscape broadly suggests connection to the sovereignty motif. "Ocean's Love to Ireland" reveals more levels of connections to the Celtic myths.

David Annwn noted previously that the rape victim in the poem "is the central muse of a long tradition of 'Aisling,'" Edna Longley cites the poem as one of a set she feels strains "the aisling element" by overemphasizing phallic symbolism, and Michael Parker notes a precedent for the poem in an eighteenth-century *aisling* by Aodhagán Ó Rathaille—though he attributes a stanza from "Creachta Crich Fodla" ("The Wounds of Fodla") to "Gile na Gile" ("Brightness Most Bright"). These three observations are as close as anyone has come to examining "Ocean's Love to Ireland" in the context of the sovereignty motif, and no one has offered a full reading of the poem. Only detailed analysis reveals both the subtleties of Heaney's achievement and the central role played in that achievement by the symbols of sovereignty: as we shall see, Heaney enlists ancient Celtic tradition in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" to reclaim a portion of his nation's past. Just as Ralegh's rape victim is "the divine mother Ériu conceived anthropomorphically," a figure whose mistreatment ensures not fertility but blight, the colonizer's disregard for native sovereignty in Renaissance Ireland ensures consequences that lead, ultimately, to the conditions of the present.[3] To the arrogance of the imperialist can be traced the hybrid identity and political trauma of the modern nation, at once a former colony and a British province.

Walter Ralegh and his fellow Elizabethans came to Ireland during the second stage of the Desmond Rebellion, the attempt by the Fitzgerald family, or Geraldines, to dissolve English plantations in southwestern Ireland. Rather than routing the English, the rebels were themselves dispossessed, and English armies proceeded to transform Gaelic Ireland's fertile, ancient *Plaithlands* (or clan divisions) into the embittered clay of bone-strewn fields and charred villages—battle and burial ground only the most intense cultivation would later salvage (at the price of further recasting into well-

3. Annwn, *Inhabited Voices,* 146; Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'? Seamus Heaney's *North,*" 48; Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet,* 142, 254; T. F. O'Rahilly, "On the Origin of the Names *Érainn* and *Ériu,*" 14. I credit Annwn, *Inhabited Voices,* 146; Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney,* 120–21; and Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney,* 64–66, for pointing out significant historical background and sources.

manicured English communities). John Hooker's description of Munster in the aftermath of the rebellion reads like a passage from a Grail text: "The curse of God was so great, and the land so barren, both of man and beast, that whosoever did travel from one end to the other of all Munster . . . he should not meet man, woman, or child, saving in cities or towns, nor yet see any beast, save foxes, wolves, or other ravening beasts."[4] It is this gruesome historical wasteland that Heaney invokes in "Ocean's Love to Ireland."

The title of the poem sets the stage. Ralegh's own long and plaintive poem "Ocean's Love to Cynthia" was written during an interlude of disfavor with Elizabeth I. In happier times, Elizabeth had referred to Ralegh as "the Shepherd of the Oceans"; with a true courtier's grace, Ralegh had "replied that even the oceans were ruled by the moon."[5] The poem appeals to Elizabeth as Cynthia, or the moon, and examines Ralegh's love for her. Heaney's ironic title (Ralegh surely bore no love for Ireland) suggests a companion piece, counterpart to Ralegh's poem, which will supply the previously discounted other half of the picture. Ralegh today enjoys more renown for spreading his cloak in Elizabeth's muddy path, an act perhaps only legendary, than for his role in neutralizing Irish rebellion. The poem essays to rectify the balance.

Ralegh fashioned the lengthy "Ocean's Love to Cynthia" almost entirely in quatrains but wrote in tercets the twenty-one-line fragment that purports to begin the next book.[6] Heaney's twenty-nine-line poem compares in length to this fragment and is similarly written in tercets. But unlike Ralegh's poem, Heaney's is divided into three distinct sections, each a set of three tercets. Also unlike Ralegh's abstract contemplation of personal woe, the allusions to specific historical incidents in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" are Heaney's vehicles for expressing national grievance.

4. Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland,* as quoted in John Winton, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 86.

5. Annwn, *Inhabited Voices,* 146. Stephen J. Greenblatt notes that "'Ocean' probably had its origin in the queen's nickname for Ralegh—'Water' (probably a pun on the Devonshire pronunciation of 'Walter' as well as a reflection of Ralegh's interest in the sea)" (*Sir Walter Ralegh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles,* 193–94).

6. Gerald Bullett, ed., *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century,* 299–314. See also Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 95.

The first section of Heaney's poem depicts the rape of a young subordinate by Sir Walter Ralegh, who has confidently pinned her against a tree. The lines highlight Ralegh's superior strength:

> Speaking broad Devonshire,
> Ralegh has backed the maid to a tree
> As Ireland is backed to England
>
> And drives inland
> Till all her strands are breathless:
> "Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!"
>
> He is water, he is ocean, lifting
> Her farthingale like a scarf of weed lifting
> In the front of a wave.

With the unrelenting momentum of an ocean current, Ralegh is wheedling, trapping, ravishing, ignoring boundaries and pressing inland—an ambitious soldier and colonizer to whom Irish sovereignty is as inconsequential as a slip of seaweed in a massive wave, or a young maid's skirt. Robert Lacey explains Ralegh's motivation for such actions as his craving for wealth and power, lures as irresistible for this young man of meager means and unsecured future as are his inveigling and forcefulness for a young, deference-drilled maid:

> [Ralegh] came to the country, a younger son with little wealth and no lands to inherit, with the express intention of carving out for himself from the lush and mineral-rich acres an estate whose resources he could never hope to win in England. In Ireland he could—and in due course did—secure a castle from which he could lord it over the hapless natives whose leaders, lands and faith it was his pride to have taken away. When he went to explore the jungles of South America, Walter Ralegh was to treat the naked savages of the Guiana swamps with more respect and kindness than ever he showed to the Irish.[7]

It is not surprising that Ralegh leaves his victim frenzied: Ireland has been invaded, raped by an aggressive male emissary of the elite ruling class, a courtier-in-training of the English queen.

7. Robert Lacey, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 34–35.

The prosody conspires to convey Ralegh's dominance. The trochee that begins the first line emphasizes Ralegh's act of speech (as opposed to listening), his appropriation of language for his own purposes; the spondee that follows slows the line and imitates the broad effect of the dialect it describes: "*Speak*ing | *broad Dev* | on*shire*." The plosives *p* and *k* also serve to slow our reading, as do the alliteration and consonance of the *b*'s and *d*'s that begin here and continue in the second through fifth lines:

> Ralegh has *b*acke*d* the mai*d* to a tree
> As Irelan*d* is *b*acke*d* to Englan*d*
>
> An*d d*rives inlan*d*
> Till all her stran*d*s are *b*reathless.

We picture a deliberate, proud, unfrenzied man using language and physical strength to overpower the maid.

Line four, "And *drives* | *in*land," iamb countered by trochee, marks the actual moment of penetration. The word *drives* itself connotes the vigor and force with which Ralegh pursues his goal. In addition, despite the line's brevity, the slowness of tempo adds to the drama, particularly as it focuses attention on *drives:* the consonant clusters (*dr* and *vz* [or *ves*]), resonance *(z),* and the long *i* that lengthen *drives* are preceded by hiatus (between the *d*'s of *and* and *drives*) and followed by the further line-slowing stress of *in.* In fact, the accent on *in* creates the line's primary stress: thus, the first three syllables build to a climax; *land* provides brief denouement. The syllables, then, simulate Ralegh's thrusting action as he rapes the maid. The line, which numbers the lowest syllabic count of the poem, is nonetheless strikingly emphatic—just as Ralegh, skipping foreplay, is all the more insistent and imperious.

The breathy *s*'s of this stanza, particularly those in lines five and six ("Till all her *s*trand*s* are breathle*ss:* / '*S*wee*s*ir, *S*watter! *S*wee*s*ir, *S*watter!'"), underscore the irregular breathing and excited emotional state to which Ralegh has unfeelingly reduced the young woman. She is, in Ralegh's mind, an inferior in class, sex, and—at least in Heaney's version of the incident where the victim is an Irishwoman—race. In John Aubrey's account, which provides an origin for the unusual sixth line (the girl's appeal to Ralegh's honor made even as he penetrates her), Ralegh's unwilling partner is an Englishwoman:

> He loved a wench well: and one time getting up one of the mayds of honor against a tree in a wood ('twas his first lady) who seemed at first boarding to be something fearful of her Honour, and modest, she cryed Sweet Sir Walter, what do you me ask? Will you undoe me? Nay, sweet Sir Walter! Sir Walter! At last, as the danger and the pleasure at the same time grew higher, she cried in the extacey Swisser Swatter! Swisser Swatter! She proved with child and I doubt not but that this hero tooke care of them both, as also that the product was more then an ordinary mortall.

The woman here referred to may even have been Elizabeth Throckmorton, whose honor he restored (if the incident actually occurred out of wedlock) in marriage.[8] But no comparable act of reparation is even remotely suggested in Heaney's poem. In "Ocean's Love to Ireland," Ralegh rapes an Irish maid—and Ireland—with the conqueror's cool aplomb.

The third stanza shifts abruptly to a falling rhythm, pointing to the sad accomplishment of Ireland's fall: "*He* is | *wa*ter, | *he* is | *o*cean, | *lift*ing." (Even if scanned "He is | *wa*ter, | he is | *o*cean, | *lift*ing," the three predominant feet are trochees.) The shift matches a change in focus: the cameraman has stepped back to allow a brief editorial on the previous action, and the simile stresses again the maid's unimportance to Ralegh. Additionally, the seventh and eighth lines both end with *lifting;* the seventh line enjambs gracefully into the eighth line, the eighth into the ninth:

> He is water, he is ocean, lifting
> Her farthingale like a scarf of weed lifting
> In the front of a wave.

The effect suggests both the ease with which the lifting is achieved and the relative weightlessness and inconsequence of the lifted object. Then, too, simulating Ralegh's power, the first two caesurae fall heavily: "He is water, ‖ he is ocean, ‖ lifting." Their weight contrasts with the effect of the next two briefer, softer caesurae that combine with the two enjambments to mimic a gentle, wavelike phrasing, again suggesting how easily Ralegh picks up the hooped skirt:

8. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, and Other Selected Writings,* 326–27. See also Lacey, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 112.

lifting
Her farthingale || like a scarf of weed || lifting
In the front of a wave.

The smooth, rhythmic effect of these lines is further heightened by the alliteration and consonance of sonorants *l, r,* and *w:* "*l*ifting / He*r* fa*r*thinga*l*e *l*ike a sca*r*f of *w*eed *l*ifting / In the f*r*ont of a *w*ave." The recurring *f*'s ("li*f*ting," "*f*arthingale," "scar*f*," "*f*ront") only increase the reader's pleasure. The end result is a stanza that elevates Ralegh's tawdry act to the dimensions of myth.

Scarf and *weed* are deft choices here. Not only does *scarf* echo the first syllable of *farthingale,* but in present-day usage it represents an item of clothing much like the Irish girl herself: ornamental, useful at times, but easily dispensed with. In addition, *scarf* can signify the band of black crepe worn by a mourner, also referred to as a weed. Literally, *weed* in this stanza is seaweed, but Heaney creates additional associations by removing the prefix. A weed is an annoyance, something to be removed—extraneous, to Ralegh's mind, like the maid's farthingale. Of course, *weed* refers, too, to clothing, often to that worn by a woman bereaved. In all ways, the stanzas conspire to paint Ralegh as the heartless aggressor—the maid as the bereft victim.

The second section alerts us to further ironies:

Yet his superb crest inclines to Cynthia
Even while it runs its bent
In the rivers of Lee and Blackwater.

Those are the plashy spots where he would lay
His cape before her. In London, his name
Will rise on water, and on these dark seepings:

Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses
Of six hundred papists, "as gallant and good
Personages as ever were beheld."

Ralegh's real focus is Elizabeth. Ireland matters little to him "save as an instrument to solicit royal favor." And, actually, Ralegh's year soldiering in Ireland—and his coffer-saving counsel on dealing with the Irish—likely did serve to bring him to Elizabeth's eye: within a year of returning to England, he was the queen's favorite. At any

rate, Heaney here assumes that Ralegh's intention in despoiling Ireland is to curry favor with Elizabeth. And so "his | su*perb* [nothing small-scale for this extravagant Elizabethan] | *crest* in | *clines* to | *Cyn*thia," the iambic second foot in an otherwise noniambic line magnifying the drama of "superb crest."[9]

Crest conjures the image of a grand heraldic device. In addition, a crest that "runs its bent / In the rivers of Lee and Blackwater" carries forward the water metaphors begun in section one: *crest* as the ridge of a colossal wave, pulled all the while by the moon's gravity, which churns the Irish rivers—or the powerful prow of the boat that navigates them. The reader recalls Ralegh driving inland until the Irish coast is "breathless," perhaps a reference to the "constant use" made by the English "of the indentations of the coast and of the navigable rivers to bring seaborne supplies deep into the country."[10] Moreover, the Blackwater would have special significance to Ralegh: in 1589, Elizabeth helped him to acquire vast acreage in Cork, Waterford, and Tipperary, an area "from ten to twelve miles long and five miles wide at its widest point, stretching inland from Youghal on both sides of the Blackwater River." Finally, as a phallic symbol inclined toward Elizabeth, *crest* is a magnetic needle indicating Ralegh's real attraction, for, in Stephen J. Greenblatt's words, "there is no warrant . . . to dismiss the expressions of love in *Ocean to Cynthia* as mere cynical flattery. Ralegh's courtship of the queen was for those years the chief focus of all his intellectual and emotional energies, the central core from which his far-ranging activities derived their meaning."[11] Where Ralegh does not hesitate to overpower an Irish maid, he "inclines" to Elizabeth, ready even now to

9. Irvin Anthony, *Ralegh and His World,* 57. In *P,* 91, Heaney cites Ted Hughes's statement that the English queen represented "the Celtic pre-Christian goddess" (N, 186), but Ralegh's court to Elizabeth offered no homage to deity. *Cynthia* mimics Ralegh's poetic use of the name and recalls the courtier's need to flatter; the name's connection to a moon goddess signifies little since, for Ralegh, "the queen is at one moment the moon and at the next the sun" (Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 86).

10. Cyril Falls, *Elizabeth's Irish Wars,* 344.

11. Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 88, 79. The River Lee holds less memorable meaning for Ralegh than the Blackwater. The river empties into the sea at Cork, at that time limited to an overcrowded space between the river's arms (see Richard Berleth, *The Twilight Lords: An Irish Chronicle,* 55) and a town frequently in Ralegh's path. For example, he disembarked at Cork on his first trip to Ireland and was quartered there during the winter of 1580, as noted in Martin A. S. Hume, *Sir Walter Ralegh: The British Dominion of the West,* 23.

join her obsequious admirers at court. For the English queen, he would hold his own power in check, yielding to hers: what better way to increase his? The necessity of calculating and responding to Elizabeth's moods must have engendered resentment in so proud a man, though his survival in court—and his accrual of any real personal power in the realm—dictated that any umbrage he might take be as swiftly repressed. Such smothered resentment might account, partially, for his violence against Ireland and the ease and alacrity with which he dominates when the occasion arises.

Certainly, Ralegh's "name / Will rise on water": at least one career high-water mark will follow his service in "the plashy spots" of Ireland. In the words of one English historian under his spell, "It was the portion of destiny that Ralegh bore despatches from the Lord Deputy into England. Ralegh, the hero of fearful night riding, the man who had stood off the Irish twenty to one, who captured castles without expense to the crown, and before whom the massed rebels broke and ran! His legend ran before him at a court where information concerning Ireland was important. Who so apt to comment intelligently upon conditions as the carrier of despatches?"[12] Heaney, however, shifts the focus from exploits that endeared Ralegh to the English to the "dark seepings" on which his reputation was built. After the loftily sounded "his *name* / Will *rise* | on *wa* | ter," the heaviest accent falling so fittingly on *rise,* the line wanes: "and | on *these* | *dark seep*ings." The three successive stressed syllables further prepare for the shift to a scene of cruelty that continues to haunt the imagination after four hundred years: "Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses / Of six hundred papists."

Under orders from Lord Arthur Grey and joined by the one other duty officer of the day, Captain Walter Ralegh began and oversaw the slaughter of six hundred Basque and Italian soldiers landed in Ireland on "an expedition . . . Philip II had allowed to be fitted out in the Biscay ports" and sailing to Smerwick under the papal flag. They had been sent in response to the importuning of Irish insurgents who, though their "Papist leanings were real, [hoped] primarily . . . to avert the famine which the English operations were bound to

12. Anthony, *Ralegh and His World,* 55. *Plashy* is, of course, puddly: the reference is to Thomas Fuller's account of the cape-laying gesture with which Ralegh responded when Elizabeth, "meeting with a plashy place . . . seemed to scruple going thereon" (quoted in Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 42).

bring, since the war-racked land bore next to nothing and ruin stalked everywhere."[13]

The wasteland specter was not easily chased. After heavy English bombardment of their encampment at Fort Del Oro on the rocky Dingle peninsula, the mercenaries surrendered. Their plea for mercy was met with grisly massacre, and the Second Munster Plantation, "a consuming mission, conceived in imperial might, and implemented by the full efforts of the English nation," proceeded on lands the rebels' long inheritance, the hereditary rule of which they now stood stripped. So, though the bodies of the butchered Smerwick troops "were carried to the sea face, flung over the wall, and allowed to roll down onto the narrow beach below" (the easier "to dig mass graves in the soft sand at the base of the cliff"), this second plantation indeed sprang figuratively from the seeds of their corpses—and the queen might well be prepared to take notice when Ralegh arrived back at court. He gained the queen's favor, put simply, at Ireland's expense, though Richard Berleth notes that after Smerwick, "a shadow of controversy attached to [Ralegh's] name and limited his usefulness in the future."[14]

The poem's sympathy lies with the ruined Irish maid and the six hundred irrevocably silenced men, "'as gallant and good / Personages as ever were beheld.'" The quotation here is Lord Grey's as he walked among the corpses, mutilated and stripped; there to record it was his secretary, the poet Edmund Spenser. Berleth comments: "The dead of Del Oro had been rabble and scum while alive; slaughtered, they became gallant foe. Perhaps this change of mind is a part of all war, the inevitable aftermath of hatred; yet it is not the victor suddenly pitying the vanquished which disturbs in this scene. Grey speaks as though his enemy were slain in defeat, where, in fact, his enemy was murdered in surrender."[15] The "seepings" on which Ralegh's reputation rises are emphatically "dark," he lifts a dress like a useless weed, and he seeds the Irish plantation with corpses, grimacing even in death, their right to declare their murderers denied. The poem focuses, after all, on the destruction Ralegh left behind him, and so the poem's third section concentrates, properly,

13. Hume, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 23; Anthony, *Ralegh and His World,* 46.

14. Berleth, *Twilight Lords,* 217, 174, 175. See his chapter "Smerwick, 1580: Siege" for a grim description of the executions and an excellent, riveting account of the entire siege.

15. Berleth, *Twilight Lords,* 174. See also Lacey, *Sir Walter Ralegh,* 37.

not on the English exultation resultant from Irish defeat—but on Irish defeat. It also provides the clearest picture of the figure who represents the sovereignty goddess in the poem; in doing so, it probes the peculiar saving quality in Irish defeat.[16]

Unlike the previous two sections, each of which features a quotation preserved by a contemporary chronicler, the final section of the poem reverberates with no quotations "chosen and placed with more than Poundian ebullience and force."[17] The focus will not be deflected from an enigmatic drama of quiet recovery after compelling loss:

> The ruined maid complains in Irish,
> Ocean has scattered her dream of fleets,
> The Spanish prince has spilled his gold
>
> And failed her. Iambic drums
> Of English beat the woods where her poets
> Sink like Onan. Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,
>
> She fades from their somnolent clasp
> Into ringlet-breath and dew,
> The ground possessed and repossessed.

Significantly, the maid has reappropriated her own language, distancing herself from her oppressor. She is Irish, in the end, and, humiliated as she has been, she is freed from the necessity of conducting herself according to another's rules. Besides, she has now lost even hope of deliverance, and so she complains, the long *a* in *maid* and *complain* echoing her plaintiveness.

As Judas commissioned his son Onan to go to Thamar, Onan's widowed sister-in-law, "and raise up descendants for [his] brother," the pope had organized a fleet to rescue the abandoned Irish maid. However, Ralegh "scattered" any "dream of taking Ireland, England, and Scotland in a holy war." Philip II, who financed the mission and might have restored Irish honor, has, instead, "wasted his seed on the ground." Literally, "The Spanish prince has spilled his gold / And failed her": after the massacre, "between 300 l. and 400 l. was found in

16. As Robert Fitzgerald suggests, "The still richer details of Part III come together to state something with great precision that would be unstatable otherwise" ("Seamus Heaney: An Appreciation," 28).

17. Ibid.

Spanish reals, and this money was divided among the soldiers, who were in their habitual half-paid state." (The lines might also recall, faintly, the reason for naming the fort Del Oro: Sir Martin Frobisher shipwrecked beneath its cliffs a vessel from Newfoundland carrying to England a shipment of what he thought was gold, actually a form of pyrite, or fool's gold.)[18] More metaphorically, the plantation ensuing from "Smerwick sowed" with the bodies of the slain might well look to Catholic eyes like wasted seed. And, after the emphatically iambic phrasing, "I*am* | bic *drums* / Of *Eng* | lish *beat* | the *woods*," the maid's own poets give way. Ralegh rose on water; these Gaelic poets *sink.* Unlike Onan, they do not deliberately fail to ensure continued dynasty, but they do fail, and, like Onan, they will be destroyed.

Gaelic poets had long provided their patrons, the native lords, with an "assurance of continuity and stability" in bardic praise—a service the English could not allow them to continue: "As one of Spenser's contemporaries put it: 'these people [the bards] can be very hurtful to the commonwealth, for they chiefly maintain the rebels'—and [therefore] during the Elizabethan campaigns which put an end to the native order the bards were especially marked out for liquidation."[19] So the English "beat the woods," searching for the bards. Montague remarks how strange that Ralegh, "one of the best Elizabethan poets," should assist "at the destruction of a society which produced a poetry so akin to [his] own." Ironies aside, Ralegh's "broad Devonshire" carries the day. Set in motion are the "profound political and social changes" that, due to "the extermination of the Irish aristocracy who were its patrons," led to the disappearance of bardic poetry in Irish—"the Irish language itself . . . in retreat, into isolated areas, apparently on the way to extinction, and taking an entire literature with it."[20]

The woods beaten by the English are a redolent symbol here: "The Irish strength in their guerilla war was the ability of raiding parties to lay their ambushes and then to disperse into the woods and marshes." In doing so, the rebels provided "no single focus that their pursuers could follow, no control fortress or point of resistance they could lay siege to or destroy." Capturing the bards so inimical to

18. Gen. 38:8; Anthony, *Ralegh and His World,* 47; Gen. 38:9; Richard Bagwell, *Ireland under the Tudors with a Succinct Account of the Earlier History,* 76. See also Berleth, *Twilight Lords,* 163.

19. David H. Greene, "The Bardic Mind," 38.

20. Montague, "In the Irish Grain," 26; Kinsella, introduction to *New Oxford Book,* ed. Kinsella, xxiv–xxv.

English ambition required far greater doggedness than did winning Del Oro: perhaps, had the woods persisted, the poets might also have endured. But the woods, too, were marked for booty. "Goodly woods," wrote Spenser, "fit for building of houses and ships, so commodiously as that if some princes in the world had them, they would soon hope to be lords of all the seas, and ere long of all the world." His words might well have beaconed to successive generations, as woods "that like a magic cloak had sheltered the Gael in every century" were felled and sold as timber by English undertakers (a name for the colonizers unusually apropos). Thus, *beat* in Heaney's "Iambic drums / Of English beat the woods" signals, in addition to a hunt for Irish poets and the imposition of foreign verse, the gradual flattening of the forests. Aside from Heaney's arresting pun, no poetic innovation here: "All the [eighteenth-century] poets lamented the vanishing woods: the downfall of the Gaelic or even the Gall-Gaelic nobility, the downfall of the woods—these two went together in their verses."[21] So too they go together in Heaney's poem.

Bardic poetry, highly formalized verse in strict syllabic meters, was created during the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries by members of a "rigid professional literary caste." Graduates of a rigorous seven-year course of study that Montague describes, alluding to the custom of composing in small, windowless cubicles, as "seven winters in a dark room," the bards depended thereafter on aristocratic patrons. Take away this economic base, target the bards as seditionaries, and the poetry itself must yield. Replacement arrives in the form of freer, stressed meters, and the *aisling* evolves into a genre of its own.[22] Little surprise then that the *spéirbhean* should make an appearance in a poem on the violent passing of one order into the other.

Ralegh's castoff may not qualify as the inspiring beauty described by Daniel Corkery, but sister she is to Montague's internee: "By the end of the century . . . the maid of the *aisling* . . . poems is a captive who is concerned with only one thing, her freedom. But her mournful cries have to compete with a new literature, in the language of her conqueror." Despised by her captors, she is also a

21. Lacey, *Sir Walter Ralegh*, 35; Spenser quoted in Corkery, *Hidden Ireland,* 22 (see also 21).

22. Montague, "In the Irish Grain," 25. See also "The Bardic Schools," in *Hidden Ireland,* by Corkery; Greene, "The Bardic Mind"; and Corkery, *Hidden Ireland,* 128.

loathed, if not loathly, lady, but like the hag of the older Celtic literature, her current status as object of derision is not her ultimate fate:

> Rush-light, mushroom flesh,
>
> She fades from their somnolent clasp
> Into ringlet-breath and dew,
> The ground possessed and repossessed.

She knows the safest place to hide and wait, realizes "the boon" an "overlooked existence" might now provide. Ceasing her complaint, "she recedes into the heart of Nature, into the centre,"[23] into the earth seized most recently by Ralegh and other "land pirates," but through her simple, unassisted action "repossessed."

"*R*u*sh-l*ight, *m*u*shr*oo*m-fl*e*sh*": the liquid *r*'s and *l*'s, the lingering *m*'s, and the breathy *sh*'s entwine the full and slant rhymes *(rush-mush-flesh),* the words savory and springy in one's mouth as mushroom slices. But the images are strangely ambiguous. Are they kennings for the ruined maid, or are they antecedents for *their* in the following line? Do they represent elliptically condensed action? Are they figures for the Irish poets who have retreated to the forest floors? Rushlight, or the light of a rush candle ("the pith of rushes, dried and drawn through melted grease or oil"), is feeble, insignificant, a glimmer; mushroom flesh comparably ephemeral—both terms may refer to the dying bardic order.[24] But each is also associated with specific times of day: rushlight with evening, when candles extend the turf fire's light, and mushroom flesh with the period from night to noon most likely to stage the appearance of mushrooms. On this level, the "somnolent clasp" from which the maid slips would be the night; the "ringlet-breath and dew" into which she fades denotes the inspiration of early morning. The four images accordingly suggest progressive movement forward, a journey from the night that closes on unmolested Gaelic culture to the dawn that promises it some form of survival. In this sense, "rush-light" and "mushroom-flesh" do compress action; they also act as antecedents for *their.* Doing so does not preclude them from doubling as references for *She*.

23. Montague, "In the Irish Grain," 27; Corkery, *Hidden Ireland,* 127; Annwn, *Inhabited Voices,* 146.

24. Corkery, *Hidden Ireland,* 19.

Rushlight is a rural handicraft, illuminating before laid aside, whereas mushroom *flesh* refers to the visible portion of a fungi whose mycelium, or spawn, "is hidden in the ground . . . [and] continues to grow from year to year, lying dormant in winter and in dry periods but becoming active almost at once when conditions are again favorable." The Irish peasant girl, or Gaelic Ireland, also radiated warmth and light before shunned; underground, she continues to grow, dormant until "conditions are again favorable." In addition, fleeing with her poets from the iambic drums, she also "rushes light[ly]," escaping. Perhaps, too, she nibbles with Alice a bite of mushroom, and shrinks to minute Wonderland size, the better to enter the shelter of "ringlet-breath and dew." Perhaps there, still rushing light, she dances in a fairy ring, the circle "of vivid green frequently observed in the darker green of old pastures, and within which the fairies dance on moonlight [*sic*] nights," a ring held "time out of mind . . . in great reverence by the country people." One sense of *ringlet* refers to such fairy rings; strikingly, they are caused by the unique growing pattern of certain mushroom species whose hardy roots "may outlive many generations of men," even such self-assured men as Walter Ralegh.[25]

The poem's last line, "The ground possessed and repossessed," settles the matter, typically, on several levels—final comment on the unrelenting struggle for possession of Irish ground and naming of the final repository for the maid's Irishness, to cite two. Like the mushroom spores, the girl hides, finally, within the "possessed and repossessed" earth. Any ambiguity reinforces the central meaning: one may try to pin down the maid, so as to dismiss her. Ultimately, though, she cannot be pinned down, and, therefore, she cannot be dismissed. Masculine imperviousness may temporarily strut past feminine vulnerability—but the victory cannot endure. The "repossession" in the last line may refer, too, to Heaney's reclamation in the poem "of history, of his tongue, of himself"—not only for himself but also, in his

25. Clyde M. Christensen, *Common Edible Mushrooms,* 6; W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland: A Folklore Sketch, a Handbook of Irish Pre-Christian Traditions,* 196. Christensen explains: "A few spores of one of the fairy-ring mushrooms fall upon a favorable place and begin to grow. . . . [in] an approximately circular patch of mycelium. . . . After a few years mushrooms spring up near the outer border of this circle. Each year the mycelium advances . . . regularly outward, and mushrooms again arise at its outer edge, thus forming an ever-growing fairy ring" and "spring[ing] from roots [as old as 400]" (6–7).

role as Irish poet and modern-day Niall, for his fellow Irishmen and -women. Ireland in this poem "as always . . . heels under pressure, tugs her forelock, and speaks with pure English vowels. But she remains inviolable from within."[26] Potent comfort, even inspiration, to the descendants of her dispossessed.

Blake Morrison is right. The poem's "compacting of the historical, geographical, sexual and linguistic is dense and deliberate." If Heaney omitted the poem from his *Selected Poems, 1965–1975* (1980) because, as Morrison suggests, it is perhaps "too knowingly constructed," its very explicitness pinpoints some of Heaney's key concerns.[27] The goddess who figures in the poem is no Cynthia-epitheted English queen. She is "the divine mother Eriu conceived anthropomorphically"—Ireland, political sovereignty, earth goddess, earth. The rape the poem dramatizes is an act of disrespect that blights once-fertile land—respect for the victim, the Grail tonic that will raise the maid, "the very essence of Irishness,"[28] from her "overlooked existence." Just as she has waited in countless old stories and poems for her rightful king to reveal himself and break her enchantment, so she waits now in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" for those who can see past her loathly lady disguise and who will accord her the honor that will bring both Ireland and themselves a new form of freedom.

True to the English historical record, the colonization of Ireland, dramatized as an Irishwoman's rape in "Ocean's Love to Ireland," altered it irrevocably. Through an emphasis in this telling on the victims' point of view, the poem is also a tribute to Irish invincibility. Ireland has been cursed through imperialism—but not destroyed. Like numerous earlier Irish and Anglo-Irish poets, Seamus Heaney has turned to the ancient symbol of the goddess of sovereignty as a way to manifest his own "love to Ireland." In a time in which Ireland continues to suffer the effects of another English plantation in the North of her land, Ériu herself can be gratified only with so compassionate a telling of her tale, one that transforms the courtier to rapist and the victim to queen.

26. Jay Parini, "Seamus Heaney: The Ground Possessed," 116, 100.

27. Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 65. My 1982 edition of *Poems, 1965–1975* contains the poem; *New Selected Poems, 1966–1987* (1990) does not.

28. Annwn, *Inhabited Voices*, 146.

4

The Fish and the Fisher King

But one thing would certainly follow from the persistence of the taboo, namely that the original desire to do the prohibited thing must also still persist among the tribes concerned. They must therefore have an ambivalent desire towards their taboos. In their unconscious there is nothing they would like more than to violate them, but they are afraid to do so; they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire.

—Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*

Art in the end is [Heaney's] therapeutic mirror in which he will try to envision himself and his culture as they really are.

—Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*

Like the act of contempt that lays waste to the Grail kingdom, Sir Walter Ralegh's affront to the sovereignty goddess in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N,* 46–47) turns self-respecting maid into castoff, fertile fields into battleground, and Irish earldoms into English plantation. The poem ignores the second traditional result of such an offense: the spearing that produces a wound that will not heal in the leg, thigh, or genitals of the Fisher King. The nature of the wound

in these legends suggests impotence, and, as dictated by the ancient Irish insistence on kingly health and virility to which the myths can be traced, relieves him of rule. Suffering acutely yet unable to die, the Fisher King "can neither walk nor ride, so that fishing is his only pastime." Often seen as a solitary figure "fishing from a small boat in the lake which surrounds the Castle of the Grail," he awaits the healing that will renew both himself and his kingdom.[1] The metaphor of wasteland thus applies to both king and kingdom after an offense against the goddess, but "Ocean's Love to Ireland" assesses only damage to kingdom. For a portrayal of the toll on the male psyche when feminine values are overlooked, the reader must look ahead to a poem in *Field Work* where the narrator longs for rejuvenation at the goddess's touch. In "The Guttural Muse" (*FW,* 28), Seamus Heaney explores the psychology of the impotent Fisher King.

Surely, Heaney has written more frequently of women's suffering under patriarchy than of men's. Consider, for example, the woes chronicled in such poems as "The Wife's Tale," "Mother," "Victorian Guitar," (*DD,* 27–28, 29, 33), "Shore Woman," "Maighdean Mara" (*WO,* 66–67, 68–69), and "A Migration" (*SI,* 28). But he has also written a number of poems that explore the ill effects of contempt for the archetypal feminine on the male psyche. "Docker" (*DN,* 41), for example, considers the rigidity of a surly Protestant dockworker and domestic tyrant; poems like "The Forge" (*DD,* 19) and "Last Look" (*SI,* 28–29) contemplate industrialization's toll on men whose self-image derived from labor now decisively outdated; "Servant Boy" (*WO,* 17) highlights the subservience (and resentment) of an Irish errand boy whose survival depends on the good graces of the English patriarchy. Like these poems, "The Guttural Muse" focuses on a male character wounded and in need of healing; unlike them, it examines its subject in relation to the goddess of sovereignty and confirms the powerful motivating effect of incestual drive.

The Celtic scholar Jean Markale suggests that "the language of our origins, the first structuring of the unconscious," can be approached

1. Emma Jung and Marie-Louise Von Franz, *The Grail Legend,* 186; John Matthews and Marian Green, *The Grail Seeker's Companion: A Guide to the Grail Quest in the Aquarian Age,* 65. Matthews and Green distinguish the Fisher King, or keeper of the Grail, and the Wounded King. Whitmont tells of one character—called the Fisher King until wounded, and the Maimed or Wounded King thereafter (*Return of the Goddess,* 154). I refer as the Fisher King to the archetypal figure whose wounding coincides with his kingdom's ruin.

through a study of mythology, particularly myths like those of a princess submerged under a lake or sea, secluded in a castle, cave, or on an island, and whom the hero must waken and free. In such myths, "the princess whom [man] has consciously repressed returns [to his imagination] with more beauty and strength than ever in the image of a goddess he should never have ceased to adore." One powerful manifestation of such a myth is that of the Grail, a quest that "is really a *regressus ad uterum,* an attempt to re-create the state of paradise that preceded birth." The Grail itself "is an image of the maternal womb"; the submerged princess is a form of loathly lady with the power to "bring happiness or misery in her amorous relationships with mortals." Her "fundamental ambiguity," so alluring to men, and her ability to bestow "knowledge, wealth and power" result in the need "to divert the desires of ordinary mortals away from her by means of taboos or fear, which is just another form of taboo. The breaking of taboos is then a magical act accomplished by the man who loves, who has overcome repugnance and is resigned to annihilation in order to win all. For, just as there is no spark of new life without death and putrefaction, so the new man of whom the myths dream can be born only after total annihilation in the woman's embrace."[2] This "new man" is epitomized by heroes like Gawain, Niall's English counterpart, who reverse the blight set in motion by the wounding of the Fisher King. The archetypal power of the Fisher King should not be overlooked, however. His psychology, too, illuminates the modern predicament.

Like the figure of the Fisher King, the narrator of Heaney's "The Guttural Muse" is an aging, solitary fisherman who longs to reclaim the well-being and amplitude of an earlier period of his life. He is also a man with the leisure to have spent his late afternoon fishing and with the means to secure a hotel room for his comfort while traveling, a character we have no reason to assume has not profited from patriarchal privileges. Yet here is a character, too, sensitive enough to acknowledge a not particularly flattering difference between himself and the young people whose voices lift to him at his hotel window. He is willing as well to concede the value of those young people, even his need for them. Specifically, he longs for rejuvenation through the ministering of the Irish sovereignty goddess, here a "guttural muse" who catalyzes in the narrator a

2. Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 83, 84, 174, 63, 60.

profound desire to re-create a sense of primal oneness like that once enjoyed as fetus or pre-Oedipal child.[3]

The poem opens with the narrator standing at his open hotel window after an oppressively warm day. Even at midnight, the breeze that reaches him, far from bracing and refreshing, is "muddied":

> Late summer, and at midnight
> I smelt the heat of the day:
> At my window over the hotel car park
> I breathed the muddied night airs off the lake
> And watched a young crowd leave the discotheque.

Suggesting the pensive mood of the narrator, the stanza sets off slowly, thoughtfully, with two of the opening line's three stresses occurring in the spondaic first foot. The second syllable of resonant *summer* then provides an extra beat, sounding like a hum suddenly brought up short, and is split off from the next pyrrhic foot by a caesura: "*Late sum* | mer, || and at | *mid*night." The emphasis falls on the image of "late summer," and the figure intimates more than the year's warmest season drawing to a close. If we think of the seasonal round as beginning each year with the onset of spring, late summer is the conclusion of the year's first half. By implication, the narrator seems to be referring as well, in a spirit reminiscent of Arnold's "Dover Breach" (if not of "Sailing to Byzantium," written by a sixty-one-year-old Yeats), to his own middle-aged status, perhaps even to a midlife crisis or confrontation with mortality, given the lines that follow. The reference to midnight is more puzzling, for in one sense midnight indicates the end of the night, with the morning hours counting forward from that point. On another level, midnight literally refers to the middle of the night, the darkest point in a twenty-four-hour period. *Midnight* here probably operates in this way, suggesting a low point or dark period in the narrator's life during which he nonetheless trains his focus on the experiences of the day: "and at midnight / I smelt the heat of the day."

3. Though Markale's "paradise" is that of the fetus and Julia Kristeva's *chora* coincides with nebulous infancy, both concepts identify preconscious states of being without language and entail close identification with the mother, particularly Markale's symbiosis. See Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language,* 27.

Smelt is a deft choice here. The heat is of course breathed in, but *smelt* has the advantage over *smelled* of its *t*, which echoes the *t*'s in *late*, *at*, *midnigh*t, and *hea*t. *Smelt* also startles more than *felt* would have, and conveys stronger associations: heat that can be smelled, not just felt, is heavy indeed. Additionally, its one-letter distinction from *melt* is probably not enough to preclude images of melting in fierce, perspiration-inducing humidity. More important, *smelt* recalls the action of melting or fusing ore so as to remove impurities from the metal; *heat* can refer to a single instance of heating such metal in a furnace or forge. A narrator who smelts the day's heat may feel compelled to cleanse himself, to extract those impurities that keep him from the fresher, more trusting outlook of an earlier, more fertile period of his life. Heaney intimates as much in an interview with John Haffenden, when he comments that an evening he spent "feeling strange and poetically barren" in a County Monaghan hotel catalyzed at least one set of images for the poem.[4] Additionally, a smelt is a type of small, troutlike fish that emits a peculiar odor—apropos in a poem that depends on fish imagery to reinforce the narrator's jadedness.

The first two lines of this stanza, meanwhile, serve as an introduction to the poem, linked as they are by their syllabic counts, the consonance of their *t*'s, and the assonance of "midn*i*ght / *I*."[5] As the colon after *day* promises, the third through fifth lines then elaborate on the scene, their syllabic counts expanding appropriately to iambic pentameter. The narrator's hotel window overlooks a parking lot: likely, he is alone and traveling, and several centuries separate him from the hospitality (surely to include a more pastoral view) once delightedly bestowed by aristocratic patrons on a poet whom nightfall deposited at their door, and that a poet like Ó Bruadair misses so profoundly.

We can assume that the narrator goes to the window to cool off, to air out. However, the air he breathes there is "muddied"—thick, gloomy, confused—likely heavy with the moisture of the nearby muddy lake. It is also not air that he breathes, but *airs*—rock melodies, or perhaps a reference to the word's archaic sense as

4. Heaney, "Meeting Seamus Heaney: An Interview," 58.

5. The lines are also linked, to a lesser degree, by the repetition of *l*'s, *s*'s, *m*'s, *n*'s, and *d*'s: "*L*ate s*umm*er, a*nd* at *midn*ight / I *smel*t the heat of the *d*ay."

inspiration: obviously, the scene served to inspire Heaney. Perhaps most intriguingly, the "night airs off the lake" could represent the lake's own breath, in turn shared with the narrator—his life sustained, like the fish with which he will later compare himself, by the oxygen contained in the waters of the lake. Compared to the four lines that precede it, then, the fifth line is straightforward, literal: "And watched a young crowd leave the discotheque." Yet by placing successive stresses on *"young crowd leaves,"* the line focuses our attention on the exit and presages the next stanza's observations on this group of young people.

The narrator is candid about the solace he finds in the quality of the group's utterance:

> Their voices rose up thick and comforting
> As oily bubbles the feeding tench sent up
> That evening at dusk—the slimy tench
> Once called the "doctor fish" because his slime
> Was said to heal the wounds of fish that touched it.

In a sixth line slowed by monosyllables, long vowel, long diphthong, and resonant *z*'s ("v*oi*ce*s*," "ro*s*e"), the narrator reproduces the unhurried deliberateness with which he makes his observation, highlighting the upward motion of the bubbles with a spondee *("rose up").* In an unexpected simile, he also likens the "thick and comforting" sounds of the young people to the similarly dense, consoling profusion of tench air bubbles he had seen earlier that evening rising to the surface of the lake. Smoothly, Heaney links the human, Irish dialect voice to a slimy fish attributed with mysterious healing powers.

"Oily bubbles," "dusk," "slimy tench"—and "muddied night airs": in Heaney's hands, images that might repulse work instead to allure. One is reminded of Blake Morrison's vision of Heaney "burrow[ing] down beyond fluency and the politer conventions of speech to what he calls elsewhere his 'guttural muse,'" ultimately "the primeval source of his selfhood and race." If Heaney's "slime" evokes subconscious memories of either fetal existence or primeval evolutionary ooze, it is linked emphatically here to the power to heal. More subtly, the young people themselves are linked to the tench, especially to the fish's reputed healing powers. In the Haffenden interview, Heaney comments on the connections he perceived between them:

> One evening, I went . . . tench fishing. They're a toothless fish and they send up bubbles—they love the slime and the mud, and you fish for them in the dark. There's this kind of slimy goodness about them; they told me they were called a doctor fish because there was a superstition that the slime upon them healed wounded fish—pike and so on—that touched them as they went past. Then later on I was in a hotel . . . and there was a dance on, a lot of country kids listening to pop music, and at about half past one they came out over the car park, and these absolute dialect voices came bubbling up to me. It was like a vision of the kind of life I had in the fifties, going to dances and so on, and I felt the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self.

The superstition to which Heaney's friends referred has its roots in antiquity. In *The Compleat Angler,* Izaac Walton declares that "the tench is the physician of fishes, for the pike especially; and . . . the pike, being either sick or hurt, is cured by the touch of the Tench." As support, Walton cites Rondeletius's statement that he saw a sick man cured in Rome by having a tench applied to his feet and concludes that the tench "is very useful both dead and alive for the good of mankind" (fig. 1).[6]

The tench itself, a member of the carp family "found in most ponds and slow-running rivers, with muddy bottoms, in England, Ireland and the south of Scotland,"[7] is known to "bite well during hot, sultry weather," particularly during "early morning and the evening."[8] Though their proclivity for mud ("tench thrive in the very muddiest ponds, seem perfectly happy in the thickest weeds and scum, and will live where there is sometimes hardly any water") and Heaney's emphasis on their mucous skin coating suggest an unattractive fish, actually the tench is "very handsome," a quality likely shared by the young crowd of disco-goers whose vitality so impresses the narrator that he labels it "redemptive."[9]

What is it about "the dialect, . . . the guttural, the illiterate self" that fascinates the narrator? Would he trade positions with these young people, or is he simply blessing the quality of life as it exists

6. Morrison, *Seamus Heaney,* 43–44; Heaney, "Meeting Seamus Heaney," 57–58; Walton and Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Angler,* 177–78.

7. E. G. Boulenger, *British Anglers' Natural History,* 26.

8. A. R. Matthews, *How to Catch Coarse Fish,* 31.

9. Charles H. Wheeley, *Coarse Fish, with Notes on Taxidermy, Fishing in the Lower Thames, Etc.,* 181.

Fig. 1. TENCH
Drawing by Henry Stannard
From *Coarse Fish, with Notes on Taxidermy, Fishing in the Lower Thames, Etc.* (1897) by Charles H. Wheeley

here? Perhaps he would go back if he could—his quickness to identify himself in the next stanza with the old, diseased pike points at least to strong current discontent. Either way, it is certain that he recognizes "natural balsam" in the "illiterate" quality of life these youths are leading; the poem's emphasis on their sounds indicates that a good portion of that balm is derived from what Heaney in the interview passage refers to as "absolute dialect voices." It is these sounds that trigger his reminiscence, his nostalgia. Hardly surprising—after all, earlier poems like "Anahorish," "Toome," "Broagh," "The Backward Look," and "A New Song" (*WO,* 16, 26, 27, 29–30, 33) made *Wintering Out* a collection "not only concerned with sound but obsessed with pronunciation," a book in which "in poem after poem, vowels, consonants, the organs of speech themselves provide metaphor."[10] Two collections later, Heaney's finely tuned ear continues to provide an inspirational wellspring.

Guttural, in fact, as it operates in the poem's title, has special significance for Heaney, far more than its technical sense as throaty, rasping sounds. Certainly, this meaning is also pertinent to the poem, harshened as it is by the guttural consonants sprinkling eleven of its

10. Walton and Cotton, *The Compleat Angler,* 178; Patricia Beer, "Seamus Heaney's Third Book of Poems," 795.

fifteen lines. Notice too, as shown in the text marked below, the cluster of gutturals in the prominent last feet of lines 3–6 (and simulating rhyme in lines 3–5). The emphasis reinforces focus on the "thick and comforting" voices rising to the narrator at his window:

> Late summer, and at midnight 1
> I smelt the heat of the day: 2
> At my window over the hotel *c*ar par*k* 3
> I breathed the muddied night airs off the la*k*e 4
> And watched a you*ng c*rowd leave the dis*c*othe*que.* 5
>
> Their voices rose up thi*ck* and *c*omforti*ng* 6
> As oily bubbles the feedi*ng* tench sent up
> That eveni*ng* at dus*k*—the slimy tench
> Once *c*alled the "doc*t*or fish" be*c*ause his slime
> Was said to heal the wounds of fish that touched it.
>
> A *g*irl in a white dress 11
> Was bei*ng c*ourted out amo*ng* the *c*ars:
> As her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs
> I felt like some old pi*k*e all badged with sores
> Wanti*ng* to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life.

More important, though, *guttural* for Heaney also symbolizes a more deeply sustaining inspirational well than even his poetic ear: a language and culture vital for centuries before colonization altered it forever. In "Traditions," wry comment on the fate of this culture throttled and set aside by English-speaking Elizabethan planters, Heaney explains:

> Our guttural muse
> was bulled long ago
> by the alliterative tradition,
> her uvula grows
>
> vestigial, forgotten
> like the coccyx
> or a Brigid's Cross
> yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that "most
sovereign mistress,"
beds us down into
the British isles.
(*WO,* 31)

A bitter undertone is unmistakable, and understandable: "Our guttural muse" here clearly represents the Irish language and literary tradition, Heaney's proper heritage, "bulled long ago" by the usurping English. For most observers at the time of Heaney's writing, as Jay Parini notes regarding this poem, "Irish poetry [was] . . . a subdivision of English poetry." *Bulled,* of course, puns on John Bull. More narrowly, the obsolete sense of *bull* meaning to cheat or make a mock of adds an enriching connotative layer, as does the still current sense, used for cattle, to copulate with (not to mention the close resemblance of *bulled* to *bullied*). Corcoran sees Heaney here as "adapting Shakespeare to create a linguistic/sexual metaphor for Ireland's traumatic colonial history, a history whose crucial moment occurred during Shakespeare's lifetime." For Corcoran, the lines designate "Elizabethan English as that 'alliterative tradition' (. . . the earliest metres of English poetry, in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, were alliterative in form) which, following the Elizabethan Plantation of Ireland, has 'bulled'—raped, masculinely forced its will upon—the 'guttural muse' of the native Irish language, that virtually disappeared tongue."[11]

The young people in "The Guttural Muse" are not speaking Irish, but they do speak a Gaelicized English dialect. Thus, even if the youths' uvulas have grown "vestigial" and their common vocal repertoire relies decreasingly on sounds like the *gh* once only "the strangers found / difficult to manage" ("Broagh," *WO,* 27), their speech is still throatier than that of other English speakers. Its distinctiveness implies, of course, not only the linguistic history of the Irish nation as a whole but also that of the rural community of Ulster: County Monaghan, today part of the Irish Republic, belongs to the historic province of Ulster, and the rich variety of dialects the province supports, together referred to as Ulster English, diverge markedly from English as spoken in the Republic. As Helen Vendler explains, "The local vocabulary and

11. Parini, "Seamus Heaney," 112; Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney,* 81 (see 81–82 on allusions to *Othello*).

speech in Northern Ireland make an Ulster poet effectively bilingual in English, as he hears from childhood the Anglo-Irish accent, with its imitation of the English; the sound of English radio; and the correction of his own accent by schoolmasters."[12] Reminiscing in "A Sofa in the Forties" about his Derry childhood, Heaney says of the "absolute speaker" who read the news:

> Between him and us
> A great gulf was fixed where pronunciation
> reigned tyrannically.
>
> (*SL* 11)

Three years later (twenty after "The Guttural Muse" appeared in *Field Work),* Heaney can speak in an interview to the value of venturing past "the cultural or conceptual limits of [one's] first language," but he still regards his original speech patterns as "a kind of guttural bough," "a register that stays reliable."[13] It is easy to understand why the sounds of an isolated, rural Ulster dialect might evoke strong nostalgia in the poem's narrator for the homelike comfort associated with first speech, nostalgia that, after a fashion, is itself "thick and comforting / As oily bubbles the feeding tench sent up."

The third stanza shifts away from the liveliness of the group of youths as a whole to focus on one arresting young person and Heaney's reaction to her:

> A girl in a white dress
> Was being courted out among the cars:
> As her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs
> I felt like some old pike all badged with sores
> Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life.

12. Vendler, "The Music of What Happens," 148. Irish English, resistant to British accents, reveals strong Irish phonetic influence; thus, "an Irish accent consists in the sounds of Irish imposed upon English" (J. C. Wells, *Accents of English 2: The British Isles,* 418–19). "Those outside Ireland" balk at the guttural spirant *gh,* once an "English sound that disappeared early in the Modern English period" (John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Seamus Heaney," 44, 48, citing J. Taniguchi, *Irish English,* 240). See also maps in G. B. Adams, *Ulster Dialects: An Introductory Symposium,* preceding 1; and A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster, 1609–1969,* 17.

13. Heaney, interview with Karl Miller, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller,* 29. The interview was recorded in May 1999 with new material added in 2000.

The first line, simply stated, clear, trimeter flanked by pentameters, presents a marked contrast to the images of heat, mud, and slime that have preceded it. Even the fact that the wooing takes place "out among the cars"—or that the girl's voice is described with such verbs as *swarmed*[14] and *puddled*—does not detract significantly from the simplicity of romantic vision in the phrase "A girl in a white dress." There is obviously something immensely appealing in the girl's voice, its various tones swarming upward like the profusion of tench bubbles, puddling into laughs like the tench bubbles pooling on the lake's surface. The poem's last two lines are emphatic about the sharp response the sounds waken in the narrator, who, feeling "like some old pike all badged with sores / Want[s] to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life."

Unlike the "handsome" tench, the pike elicits distinctly prejudiced commentary, likely because the fish is predatory, even cannibalistic (fig. 2). Known as "the tyrant . . . of the fresh waters," it is also "the longest lived of any fresh-water fish"[15] and "shares with the salmon the distinction of being the largest fish inhabiting [British] fresh waters." (It grows to even larger, in fact legendary, weight in Ireland.) Significantly heavier, often many years older than the fish it victimizes, the pike is ultimately "a solitary, melancholy, and a bold fish: melancholy because he always swims or rests himself alone, and never swims in shoals or with company."[16] The fish certainly is a memorable image (if not entirely apt) for a middle-aged man cut off from the lively, wholesome social life swirling below him in the hotel parking lot. If we are still unclear as to the narrator's state of mind, the final two lines of the poem are unequivocal, an explicit comparison of the narrator to a fish not only friendless, aging, and melancholy but also "all badged with sores."

Badged here provides a valuable clue to the dual tone of these last two lines. On one level the word implies distinction: one imagines the pike proudly showing off his various injuries like medals won in

14. The roots of a word primarily associated with insect movement rest surprisingly, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* in words signifying sounds, voice, or hum.

15. Walton and Cotton, *The Compleat Angler,* 149.

16. Boulenger, *British Anglers' Natural History,* 32; Walton and Cotton, *The Compleat Angler,* 151. See also C. W. Gedney, *Angling Holidays: In Pursuit of Salmon, Trout, and Pike,* 144, 146; and Boulenger, *British Anglers' Natural History,* 33, for stories of pike up to 112 pounds.

Fig. 2. PIKE
Pen drawing by L. R. Brightwell, 1946
From *British Anglers' Natural History* (1946) by E. G. Boulenger

battle. Yet, as Heaney reminds us in "Veteran's Dream," the real military veteran "Walks with a limp" and still wakens from dreams

> Where he lies
> On cankered ground,
> A scatter of maggots, busy
> In the trench of his wound.
> (*WO,* 52)

Sores—injuries, grief, pain, even irritation—remain sores, even if one chooses to downplay them by upgrading them to badges. Clearly, this narrator is not humorless. Desiring the girl, yet sensing immediately the disparity between their positions in life, he is willing to communicate that disparity, making himself the butt of the joke as it were, by invoking the comparison between "handsome" tench and older, heavier, diseased pike. The humor saves the lines from sentimentality and so allows us to savor their more tender dimension. Still, self-deprecating jest aside, the narrator, like the legendary Fisher King, is far from reconciled to his lonely, outcast state. He longs to be able, like the pike who can cure himself by rubbing against the tench, to "swim in touch with [the] soft-mouthed life" of his guttural muse, aches both to feel her healing touch and to be in touch with her—sensitively in

sync with her rhythms, connected intimately to her vitality's core. Anxiously, he dreams of vindicating Walton, even if figuratively, and finding in "soft-mouthed life" the renewal he craves.

Markale makes much of "the affinity between the watery worlds of the fish and of woman." In a number of poems, Heaney also draws upon water imagery to represent feminine influence or principle. "The Otter," for example, likens the narrator's wife to an animal utterly at home, even at her graceful best, in water. The narrator, in contrast, is no swimmer; rather than joining her, he sits "dry-throated on the warm stones"—not surprising if one recalls Heaney's "Elegy" (to Robert Lowell), in which Lowell chides the younger poet for his "fear of water" (*FW,* 31) or fear of the feminine realm, fear of the mother, even horror at the perceived feminine capacity to devour (penis, male ego, identity). Even so, the narrator is not completely at the mercy of his fear: through the power of the love—and memories—he shares with his wife, he can approach her feminine realm and taste spiritual renewal in their sexual embrace:

> When I hold you now
> We are close and deep
> As the atmosphere on water.
>
> My two hands are plumbed water.
> You are my palpable, lithe
> Otter of memory
> In the pool of the moment,
>
> Turning to swim on your back,
> Each silent, thigh-shaking kick
> Re-tilting the light.
>
> (*FW,* 47)

In "The Guttural Muse" the narrator expresses the desire to swim, even if indirectly through the symbol of an injured pike. He *wants* to swim, he *wants* to be part of the feminine world, wants even to establish communion with its "soft-mouthed" source. Actually, the poem appears tailor-made support for Sandor Ferenczi's observation that, with striking regularity and in a large "variety of mental constructs (dreams, neuroses, myths, folklore, etc.), . . . the sensations of swimming, floating and flying express at the same time the sensations

in coitus and those of existence in the womb."[17] The narrator of "The Guttural Muse" indicates his wish to experience both in his desire to make contact with the soft-lipped mouth of the girl/tench/muse, passageway to the once familiar shelter of the womb.

Erich Neumann notes that "*all* body openings—eyes, ears, nose, mouth (navel), rectum, genital zone—as well as the skin, have, as places of exchange between inside and outside, a numinous accent for early man." Presumably, some of that aura must still exist for modern man, at least unconsciously, with the vagina in particular retaining special significance: "The positive femininity of the womb appears as a mouth; that is why 'lips' are attributed to the female genitals, and on the basis of this positive symbolic equation the mouth, as 'upper womb,' is the birthplace of the breath and the word, the Logos." "Soft-mouthed life," thus, in a wonderfully condensed phrase, refers not only to the lips from which issue the vital Anglo-Irish accents of the girl's voice (and to the accents themselves) but also to the vaginal lips that offer access to her womb. "Man," explains Markale, "is in fact incomplete, and he realizes it. In his fear of attraction to the bottomless pit (the nothingness to which he will go), he searches for security *at all costs,* and this security is represented by the mother, for woman as for man. Yet, both in a physical and an emotional sense, man has the means to return, if only temporarily, into the mother, to re-enact, through the act of love, an imaginary return to paradise." Ferenczi is more explicit about the actual "means to return" to this "paradise":

> The purpose . . . of the sex act, can be none other than an attempt on the part of the ego . . . to return to the mother's womb, where there is no such painful disharmony between ego and environment as characterizes existence in the external world. The sex act achieves this transitory regression in a threefold manner: the whole organism attains this goal by purely hallucinatory means, somewhat as in sleep; the penis, with which the organism as a whole has identified itself, attains it partially or symbolically; while only the sexual secretion possesses the prerogative, as representative of the ego and its narcissistic double, the genital, of attaining *in reality* to the womb of the mother.[18]

17. Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 73; Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality,* 42.
18. Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype,* 39, 168; Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 146; Ferenczi, *Thalassa,* 18.

But to the womb of a *girl*? A girl in a *white* dress? A *virgin*?

The girl on whom Heaney focuses his attention is an actual person, likely attractive, but she is also a symbol, as is the virginity implied by her white clothing, "for, ultimately, what is a virgin? The word comes from the Latin *virgo* . . . [and] means 'young girl,' 'unmarried woman,' with no other qualification and certainly no inference of chastity." Or, as M. Esther Harding concludes, "The term 'virginity' must refer to a *quality,* to a subjective state, a psychological attitude, not to a physiological or external fact." Paradoxically, though virginity represents (at least for Jean Shinoda Bolen) "that part of a woman that . . . exists wholly separate from [man], in her own right," it is also a quality regarded by a man as exceptionally inviting and whose compelling fascination accounts, for example, for

> the Celts' use of the "maiden" as a symbol of divinity. . . . The maiden encountered somewhere along the journey, guardians of fountains, beautiful but forlorn ladies of the manor, prisoners of wicked lords, the Maiden of the Grail herself . . . were all indisputably "virgins" in the broadest sense of the word, meaning they were not . . . *subject to the authority of a man*. For, ultimately, both in the Celtic tradition and in all pre-Christian Mediterranean traditions, virginity is not physical but purely moral, and concerns only the independence of the woman from man. The non-Christian virgin is the free woman, ever available, ever fresh, ever possible, a dazzling symbol of renewal, youth and, by inference, of sexual freedom.

Sounding a similar theme, Harding also notes that "the Moon Goddesses from Asia, Europe and the New World all have in common this characteristic of being one-in-themselves, virgin," a quality, in Harding's analysis, that enables them to represent "the essence of the feminine in its sharpest contrast to the essence of masculinity."[19]

The "free woman" laughing below him, "maiden encountered somewhere along the journey," is certainly a striking symbol of renewal. Like the maid in "Ocean's Love for Ireland" (*N,* 46–47), she is also a symbol for Ireland, political sovereignty, earth goddess,

19. Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 128; Harding, *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern,* 77; Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women,* 35; Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 132–33; Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 82–83.

earth: "the divine mother Ériu conceived anthropomorphically,"[20] even "the essence of the feminine." Dressed in the white we have come to associate with Graves's White Goddess, she is moreover here the Muse to whom is addressed the "true poem" ("necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living"). The narrator in this sense is her son; his desire "to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life" is an expression of "the oedipus wish, the wish for sexual intercourse with the mother . . . the psychological expression of an extremely general biological tendency which lures the organism to a return to the state of rest enjoyed before birth."[21]

Or even to a state *preceding* the intrauterine. Noting the frequency with which "the sexual act and the intrauterine situation are expressed by the symbol of . . . a fish moving or swimming in the water," Ferenczi queries whether "beyond the purely external similarity between the situation of the penis in the vagina, the foetus in the uterus, and the fish in the water, there might not also be expressed in this symbolism a bit of phylogenetic recognition of our descent from aquatic vertebrates." Markale would likely see in the narrator's willingness to identify with the pike the expression of "an unconscious desire to return to dampness," to negate "the disaster of drainage, which expelled the distant ancestors of man from their watery environment millions of years ago." The narrator's desire to swim in touch with the tench would then assume additional significance as an effort to "restore the lost mode of life in a moist *milieu* . . . to bring about *the reestablishment of the aquatic mode of life in the form of an existence within the moist and nourishing interior of the mother's body.*" On such a level, "The Guttural Muse" develops sentiments earlier alluded to in "Toome," a poem in whose "final Medusa-like image" Blake Morrison "sees echoes of evolution theory (man and mammals having been preceded by fish and reptiles)," as well as an attempt to locate the poet's "primeval, preliterate self":[22]

> I push into a souterrain
> prospecting what new
> in a hundred centuries'

20. O'Rahilly, "Origin of the Names *Érainn* and *Ériu*," 14.

21. Graves, *The White Goddess,* 24; Ferenczi, *Thalassa,* 19.

22. Ferenczi, *Thalassa,* 44–45; Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 72; Ferenczi, *Thalassa,* 54; Morrison, *Seamus Heaney,* 44.

loam, flints, musket-balls,
fragmented ware,
torcs and fish-bones
till I am sleeved in

alluvial mud that shelves
suddenly under
bogwater and tributaries,
and elvers tail my hair.
(*WO*, 26)

Swimming "in touch with soft-mouthed life" may signify desires multiple and diverse—from attraction to the young woman laughing in the hotel parking lot to homesickness for the sounds of one's boyhood dialect to regressive evolutionary striving. But the question remains: is the narrator of "The Guttural Muse" ready to explore any of the emotions welling within? Emma Jung and Marie-Louise Von Franz assure us that "the fish, living in the darkness of deep water, is often illustrative of a content of the unconscious that lingers below the threshold of consciousness and in which instinctual and spiritual aspects are still merged in an undifferentiated state. Therefore, the fish is an inspirer, a bringer of wisdom and, at the same time, a helpful animal—at once insight and redemptive, instinctive impulse."[23] Is this narrator ready for what the tench can teach him? Does he have the courage to embark on a quest into the "undifferentiated" unconscious realm where the fish would lead? Or, like the Fisher King, stricken and unable to initiate his own cure, must he wait for another braver than he, and more worthy?

One who regards himself as "badged with sores," who gives no indication—beyond his *desire* for healing and rejuvenation—that he can actually overcome his paralyzing fear (of swimming, of water, of "falling under the power or fascination of a woman" and "sinking irretrievably into the mother"),[24] is far more likely to remain at his window, estranged and alone, than to venture forward on an underworld journey. Truly, the narrator's present state of mind is more akin to the psychology of an impotent king than to the constellation of attitudes propelling taboo-defying Gawain on his Grail

23. Jung and Von Franz, *The Grail Legend,* 189.

24. Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 224; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* 64.

quest. So it will be difficult, if not impossible, for this narrator "to return to the mother," not "as Oedipus did . . . by removing the father and appropriating her . . . [but] by identifying with her spiritually or physically."[25]

Even a figurative return to the mother requires both the certainty of purpose to "break down the boundaries of the safe and the familiar built up by custom and convention" and the daring "to accept feeling as a divine principle having equal rights with the masculine principle or Logos." To do so requires, as well, what Julia Kristeva has described as the role of the writer: "to be not only the one who separates, a father, as it were, but also the one who touches, the son and the lover, even taking the place of the feminine."[26] Conviction, courage, sensitivity: requirements for a hero capable of regenerating the wasteland world—qualities as yet insufficiently developed in the narrator of "The Guttural Muse," at least as he presents himself here.

Kristeva postulates that poetic language represents "a reconciliation with what murder [of the father by his banished sons] as well as names were separated from . . . [in] an attempt to symbolize the 'beginning,' . . . to name the other facet of taboo." Though one might argue that "The Guttural Muse" as poetry does effect such a reconciliation, the narrator himself is trapped by his ambivalence. Only a much braver narrator than this middle-aged fisherman will be able to embark on the Celtic heroes' (and Gawain's) journey—in Markale's estimation "part of the myth of mother-son incest which underlies the concept of imposing order upon the world," in Whitmont's view an effort to see past the repugnant aspect of the loathly lady and restore her to her proper domain.[27] This narrator is not up to the task. It remains to Heaney elsewhere to examine the role of the Niall/Gawain archetypal hero. Still, when the solitary fisherman of "The Guttural Muse" compares his feelings to those of an old, diseased pike "Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life," could even Niall or Gawain have phrased it so well?

25. Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 141.

26. Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 301, 299; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 169.

27. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 61–62; Markale, *Celtic Civilization,* 271. Galahad, rather than Gawain, is named by Markale as "the predestined and long awaited hero who will regenerate the sovereignty function" (270). Versions of the Grail myths support various interpretations.

5

Bridegroom to the Goddess

When he has made love to me on the bed, then I in turn shall show my love for the lord, I shall make for him a good destiny, I shall make him shepherd of the land.

—Sacred drama of the *hieros gamos,* texts of Shulgi, a king of the third dynasty of Ur (in Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*)

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage . . . of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart.

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Weakened by a festering wound and surrounded by wilderness, the legendary Fisher King awaits the arrival of a courageous hero who will restore health and abundance to the Grail kingdom. A long series of initiations must first qualify the hero for this task, and at least one scholar believes that the hero's key initiatory trial is an encounter with the sovereignty goddess as loathly lady.[1] As we have

1. See Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 166–68.

seen, the narrator of Heaney's "Guttural Muse" (*FW,* 28) is afraid to enter the realm of such a goddess: he will wait with the ailing and impotent Fisher King for a cure rather than assume the role of heroic knight. Others of Heaney's poems are narrated by a dramatically different kind of character, an individual blessed with the courage that the aging fisherman lacks. Such is certainly the case in "Come to the Bower" (*N,* 31), a too often misunderstood "bog body poem" whose narrator joins Niall and Gawain in his willingness to court the loathsome hag of Celtic myth. More important, the narrator's ceremonious wooing of a bog-preserved Iron Age corpse demonstrates the quality of humility essential for healing present-day blight. In "Come to the Bower," Heaney turns to the marriage of sovereignty to suggest a curative Grail tonic for contemporary woes.

Daniel Tobin refers to "Come to the Bower" as a "disturbing fantasy," Henry Hart likens the poem's male persona to a "typical conqueror" in the vein of Sir Walter Ralegh, Edna Longley wonders whether the poem's conceit does "more than consummate itself," and Patricia Coughlan sees in its stanzas a tale of "female disempowerment." Elmer Andrews, attuned to the poem's "undulating rhythms" and "musical effects," views the lines as an attempt at "loving intercourse with the past, the land, Ireland," but even for him the poem generates less "excitement," finally, than "The Tollund Man." The poem is easy enough to misunderstand, particularly if the reader ignores the subtleties only a close reading can provide. But sustained attention to the poem's small details reveals a very different text from the one dismissed by so many critics, and to misinterpret the poem is to misunderstand a central theme in Heaney's verse. On the other hand, to recognize the poem's tone, to appreciate its mythological context, and to take note of its careful prosody are to deflect the criticism of its detractors.[2] Dauntingly imaginative and empowering rather than "disturbing," inhabited by a persona utterly at odds with the imperial "conqueror," "Come to the Bower" discounts patriarchal dictums and articulates a compelling statement about our need to embrace the world of Dionysus, the realm of flux, transience, renewal—fruition *and* decay.

2. Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* 126; Hart, *Seamus Heaney,* 89; Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" 48; Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 94; Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper,* 88, 87, 89.

The title of Heaney's poem derives from the popular Republican song "Will You Come to the Bower?"—a fervent musical appeal to Irish emigrants to come home and "love Erin the green, the dear land of [their] fathers."[3] The actual body of the song is a catalog of the various attractions awaiting their return, from sites of historic battles to the groves of Blarney to the beautiful Killarney lakes. The urgency of the request is revealed in the chorus, in which a repetition of the phrase "will you" underscores its uncertainty: "Will you come, will you, will you, will you come to the bower?" The song's most telling lines occur as it concludes: "Will you come and awake our dear land from its slumber?" promising in return that "the air will resound with hosannas to greet you," not to mention "gallant Irishmen to meet you." The bower referred to in the song, clearly, is Ireland itself, a nation whose fetters "long have encumbered." The song is a heartfelt plea to members of the Irish diaspora to return home and help both to rouse and to free the land of their birth.

But Ireland as a bower, an arbor, a retreat overhung and shaded by branches? Perhaps in the imagination of those seeking to entice others to come to their aid—and in the minds of all who love the island. *Bower* also refers, though, to a bedchamber or boudoir; here the song taps into the power of the ancient sovereignty motif. Merlin Stone notes in discussing the *hieros gamos:* "The accounts of four kings of Sumer recorded that the Goddess known as Ninlil brought the new young king into Her bower each time [he was "raised" to kingship], presumably meaning that a sacred sexual union took place between the potential king and the high priestess of the Goddess."[4] The poem's Republican fervor, in fact, relies heavily on the image of a nation asleep, a woman asleep, in her bedchamber. The bower to which the emigrants are invited is Ireland all right, but in her guise as a woman, or goddess, beckoning them to her bed.

Heaney's poem alludes to this image. His own title drops the emphasis on "will you" and resounds more as a command, or invitation, than as a request, likely spoken by the goddess herself and "implicitly invit[ing] the poet," in John Haffenden's view, "to sexual

3. The version of the song I refer to here is recorded on the Dubliners, *Finnegan Wakes.*

4. Stone, *When God Was a Woman,* 138. Stone quotes Sidney Smith as well: "The records of the Ninlil festivals show that the occasions when a king of Sumer and Akkad was brought into the bower, marked the establishment of different dynasties" (138).

congress."[5] If the phrase were also to indicate the response to the invitation (*come* functioning as an elliptically shortened past participle), the poem would then give voice to someone who has responded to the message sounded in the song and come to the bower. The title works on both levels, most obviously as an imperative asking us to come, too—but also more subtly, as a commentary on the recipient's response to its invitation.

Haffenden describes Heaney as "employing the ceremonial courtesy of skillfully rhyming quatrains" in responding to the summons: the poem not only constitutes Heaney's own effort to "awake [the] dear land from its slumber" but also dramatizes a penetration of "the earth in order to make love to 'the dark-bowered queen.'"[6] Haffenden's comments merge poet with narrator perhaps too easily, but efforts both to waken a nation and to make love to its queen will surely require more special skill or insight than just any narrator—or poet—can bring. In Heaney's poem, the woman to whom the narrator responds is the sovereignty goddess as loathsome hag, and her bedchamber is, in this case, a grave. I include here the full text of the poem:

My hands come, touched
By sweetbriar and tangled vetch,
Foraging past the burst gizzards
Of coin-hoards

To where the dark-bowered queen,
Whom I unpin,
Is waiting. Out of the black maw
Of the peat, sharpened willow

Withdraws gently.
I unwrap skins and see
The pot of the skull,
The damp tuck of each curl

Reddish as a fox's brush,
A mark of a gorget in the flesh
Of her throat. And spring water
Starts to rise around her.

5. Haffenden, "Heaney and Feminine Sensibility," 91.
6. Ibid.

I reach past
The riverbed's washed
Dream of gold to the bullion
Of her Venus bone.
(*N*, 31)

If the "dark-bowered queen" of the poem is not the maid whom Ralegh raped, she is certainly her kinswoman, waiting beneath the surface of the earth, hibernating in obscurity and safety until her welcome above can be ensured. However, underground, the maid has assumed characteristics more like an ill-favored hag's than those of a young woman capable of igniting Ralegh's lust. Like both the loathsome guardian of the well and Dame Ragnell, the maid appears to have fallen under a curse; like both Niall and Gawain, Heaney's narrator is gifted with the gentilesse required to redeem her from its effects.

This queen, we know, is literally an ancient, mummified corpse, preserved for centuries by the unique tanning properties of bog-water acids; the poem itself is a record of the contemporary, exciting discovery of such a body, lying as it has indefinitely beneath layers of turf. What is remarkable here is that the experience is described from the viewpoint of a narrator carefully, gently approaching the body of his lover, preparing literally to make love to a body long dead but, as perceived through the eyes of this narrator, nonetheless inviting.[7] Anyone who has seen the photographs in P. V. Glob's *Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* would never mistake the incredibly preserved, two thousand–year-old corpses of the woman from Borre Fen, the decapitated girl from Roum, or the Windeby girl (or Windeboy, in line with recent DNA tests), no matter how attractive they may have been in life, for conventionally beautiful women. Though their uncanny preservation admittedly inspires awe, still they simply do not look as once they did in life. The bodies are shrunken, wrinkled, leathery, partially decomposed—scarcely the stuff of which love poetry is made. Yet these photographs (and, of course, those of other bodies recovered from the bog, notably the Tollund and Grauballe men) are the inspiration for a series of poems at the heart of Heaney's *North*, likely his most original book to date, of which at least one poem, "Come to the Bower," is a genuine

7. Foster assumes the narrator is an archaeologist (*Seamus Heaney*, 57).

love poem addressed to a body recovered from "the black maw / Of the peat."[8]

"Come to the Bower" itself does not dwell on the less attractive physical characteristics of the body it describes—what love poem would? Nevertheless, as Edna Longley points out, "the female figures in the poems . . . bear a family resemblance to one another." Similarly, Neil Corcoran observes that the poems in part 1 of *North* (particularly the bog poems) "frequently share similar or identical images" and constitute "a sequence of poems bearing an exceptionally close family resemblance," even making it "difficult, in memory, to tell them all apart."[9] Thus, though "Come to the Bower" forbears in this instance to detail the loved one's more repellent features, we can fairly assume that she shares much in common with the female personae depicted more frankly in other bog poems, portraits certainly no less disquieting than the photos in Glob's book.[10] Surely, none of the female bog bodies featured in Heaney's poems can be described as alluring; they add up, instead, to the opposite extreme: a composite loathly lady every bit as repugnant as Niall's hag. Recall, for example, that in "Punishment" not only is the head of the adulteress shaved to "a stubble of black corn," but her brain is also exposed, her body shrunken and ridged by muscle and bone (*N,* 37–38). In "Bog Queen," paired often and relevantly with "Come to the Bower," the speaker recounts interminable years as a slowly decaying victim of the elements. Her stomach and sockets were reduced to "cavings," her nails shielded "Bruised berries," and her breasts, likened to glacial debris, became "soft moraines" (*N,* 32–34). In "Strange Fruit," the girl's "leathery beauty" includes a "broken nose . . . dark as a turf clod," "eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings," and "prune-stones for teeth," facial features rendered even more horrible when one realizes they belong to a decapitated head (*N,* 39). Though speaking of Cundrie as a Grail messenger in *Parzifal,* Caitlín Matthews and John Matthews

8. See Glob, *Bog People,* 94–95, 99, 111, 115, chaps. 1–2. Richard Murphy says of the series: "You could call them love poems that resurrect the dead in poetry" ("Poetry and Terror," 38). On the Windeby bog body, see Friedhelm Caspari, "Windeby-Moorleiche ist kein Mädchen"; and Josef Nyary, "Der Junge im Moor, was war sein Geheimnis?"

9. Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" 46; Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney,* 106.

10. At least one of Heaney's bog-body poems, "The Grauballe Man" (*N,* 35–36), fails to capture for Calvin Bedient the magnetic mystery conveyed by Lennart Larsen's photos. See "The Music of What Happens," 111.

might as well have been describing Heaney's composite bog lady when they succinctly observed, "She is the personification of the Waste Land."[11]

The "prune-skinned," "tar-black," "dark-bowered" (*N,* 39, 38, 31) demeanor of the composite figure suggests at least one other possible derivation. According to John Matthews and Marian Green, Dame Ragnell and figures like her, whom they see comprising "a whole gallery of Loathly Damsels, Black Hags, and Proud (Orgellous) Ladies . . . reflect an even older icon—that of the Black Goddess of Wisdom and Sovereignty." Similarly, but with a full, supporting discussion, Caitlín Matthews claims that the loathly lady's "ultimate archetype [is] that of Sophia, the Holy Wisdom of God . . . , the symbolic personification of exile from paradise, as well as showing us the way of return to our original state."[12]

In Robert Graves's view, this mysterious deity—known variously as the Black Goddess, Sophia, or Goddess of Wisdom—is a being entirely distinct from her more celebrated sister, the White Goddess, or Muse. "So far hardly more than a word of hope whispered among the few who have served their apprenticeship to the White Goddess," a mere shadow in contrast, Graves asserts she "will lead men back to that sure instinct of love which he long ago forfeited by intellectual pride" (*MBG,* 164). Clearly, for Graves, the figure is more reliable than the White Goddess (though "as a creature of almost infinitely metamorphic nature who changes her guises, roles, and qualities, as well as names," the White Goddess too is tied to the loathly lady through incarnations like the Hag of the Mill).[13] The Black Goddess also "seems to be a figuration of death rather than life"; she is the "sovereign deity of a state of consciousness which renews the single poetic theme for one final creative flourish" and "the fulfillment of the one story, the point to which the spiral moves."[14] The mystery surrounding her

11. Matthews and Matthews, *The Western Way: A Practical Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition,* vol. 2, *The Hermetic Tradition,* 169. For links between "Come to the Bower" and "Bog Queen," see Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney,* 113–14; Parker, *Seamus Heaney,* 135–36; and Tobin, *Passage to the Center,* 125–26.

12. Matthews and Green, *Grail Seeker's Companion,* 67; C. Matthews, "Sophia," 112. In addition, Eisner links winter to Dame Ragnell's Irish precursors (*Tale of Wonder,* 40), and Krappe believes that "the ugly old woman [in an Iranian text] is the kingship of an old and unpopular ruler" ("The Sovereignty of Erin," 451).

13. Vickery, *Graves and Goddess,* 38.

14. Davis, "The Black Goddess," 109, 104. See the entire essay, especially for its connections to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

dissipates only a little with such statements: she continues to manifest herself as a riddle elicitory and confounding, a figure not only relatively obscure but also, to the uninitiated, undesirable: among goddesses better publicized, both upstart and underdog.

Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor go a step further than Graves in suggesting for this puzzling entity a historic base. For them, "the archetype is an archetype because it represents a past reality; its power over us as internal image is so profound because it was once an experienced fact of the external world." Claiming that the Black Madonnas found in eastern Europe, Spain, France, and Italy recall the "real, historic blackness of the early goddesses of Egypt and Africa," the authors assert that the likenesses represent "solid iconic remains of the ancient time when the religion of the Black Goddess ruled Africa and from thence, much of the rest of the world."[15] Supporting an African provenance accounts most logically for the darkness of the goddess's hue, but that need not detract from poet Peter Redgrove's more imaginative suggestion that the deity is "black because she is the symbol and gateway to everything we could know in the apparent blackness beyond visible sight" and because "she lives in the darkness men have created by their blindness."[16]

Heaney's composite bog woman, like her mother with the mysterious dark face (and whom in Heaney's verse she likely represents), thus offers little to conventional Western suitors in "flight from darkness . . . from the realm of the unconscious, the region of myth and archetypal symbols, to the region of consciousness, the sphere of concepts and definitions." Certainly, when the poem's narrator approaches his lover's bedchamber, eager to caress her, his "tone of love-making compensat[ing] for any [of her] deficiencies," he joins with Niall, future king and founder of a royal dynasty, as he enfolds a gnarled Irish crone in his embrace and with Arthur's courteous knight Gawain in kissing Dame Ragnell.[17] But Heaney adds yet another dimension to the role of hag-reversing hero. Hideous as

15. Sjoo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth,* 31–32. See also Ean Begg, "The Archetype of the Black Virgin" and *The Cult of the Black Virgin.*

16. Redgrove, *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense,* 31–32.

17. Eulalio R. Baltazar, *The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness,* 95; Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" 44. Baltazar paraphrases Neumann; Longley speaks of the girl's body described in "Punishment," but I believe she meant the comment to apply to all the female bog-body poems.

Niall's hag and Dame Ragnell may have been, both were creatures at least still breathing. Heaney's hag was retired two thousand years ago to a watery grave.

"Come to the Bower" could be dismissed as an unwelcome, distasteful portrait of a necrophiliac in action—a pathological narrator making love to a strangely preserved corpse. But to overlook the poem would be to fail to recognize the vast symbolic power of that ancient corpse. Jean Markale asserts that the hideous women with whom the heroes of Celtic literature grapple "can only have risen from the world of the dead," and Joseph Campbell explains that mythology's universal mother figure represents, in addition to profound protection and nourishment, "the death of everything that dies."[18] Certainly, the advanced years and grotesque ugliness of the hags of Celtic myth and Arthurian romance do serve as reminders that our own youth and beauty are fleeting, that, inescapably, we are mortal—and therein lies much of their hold upon our imaginations. By fashioning his own loathly lady from a woman already dead rather than simply frighteningly close to life's end, Heaney has merely translated this symbolism into more obvious terms. In doing so, he not only creates a hag of unsurpassed horror, a hag to beat all other hags, but also addresses with unique urgency the need to integrate Dionysian values into our contemporary worldview.

Death itself may be a "natural life process," but so many of us "deny the existence of death [that] we make it all the more frightening and difficult to face," and "if we do not deny death, we fear it."[19] We are trapped in the patriarchal world that "stresses existence to the exclusion of nonexistence" and fail to benefit from "the archetypically feminine . . . in [whose] realm, existence and nonexistence, life and death, are one." Death is "no longer accepted as [one of the] inevitable aspects of life," and so death, part of "the Dionysian night side of existence . . . , is gradually relegated to the sinister."[20]

Rosemary Radford Ruether observes that, in death, "all the component parts of matter/energy that coalesced to make up our individual self are not lost. Rather, they change their form and become food for new beings to arise from our bones. To bury

18. Markale, *Women of the Celts,* 59; Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 114.

19. Judy Tatelbaum, *The Courage to Grieve: Creative Living, Recovery, and Growth through Grief,* 18, 12–13.

20. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 84, 61.

ourselves in steel coffins, so that we cannot disintegrate into the earth, is to refuse to accept this process of entering back into the matrix of renewed life. Such a manner of burial represents a fundamental refusal to accept earth as our home and the plants and animals of earth as our kindred." It is not a steel coffin, of course, that has retarded the disintegration of the bog bodies. Their preservation can never be attributed to an unwillingness on the part of Iron Age man to regard death in a realistic manner. Widespread rejection of Dionysian values is a contemporary disorder. But for Heaney's narrator to embrace a dead body, even if it has yet to enter "back into the matrix of renewed life" (though in "Bone Dreams" [*N,* 27–30] even this objection will be countered), is to suggest comfort with that Dionysian realm and an ability to identify "with 'the larger matrix' as a living entity that contains and supports the human species along with every other."[21]

The poem begins with a direct response to the invitation offered in the title:

> My hands come, touched
> By sweetbriar and tangled vetch,
> Foraging past the burst gizzards
> Of coin-hoards
>
> To where the dark-bowered queen,
> Whom I unpin,
> Is waiting.

In memorable contrast to Ralegh's heedless aggression in "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N,* 46–47), the narrator of "Come to the Bower" moves slowly, gently: he will undress the body of his loved one in nearly venerative awe, a loving prelude to actual lovemaking. Even the poem's first line signals that what occurs in this bower will be no rape. Most obviously, the line is slowed—to a lover's gentleness—by its long *i* ("M*y*") and the lingering *m*'s, *n,* and *z* of its four leisurely monosyllables, the final three successively stressed: "*M*y *ha*n*ds* | *co*m*e*, touched." In addition, the placement of the comma, interrupting the line, acts to separate *come* from *foraging,* and so places more

21. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology,* 258; Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power,* 114.

emphasis on *come*—the response to the title's invitation (encompassing as well the suggestion of sexual fulfillment)—than on *foraging.* In its sense of hunting for food and provisions, *foraging* further ties the poem to "the myth of royal initiation," in which "the motif of the hunt" is one of the "familiar features," but the word also calls to mind rape-related plunder and marauding.[22] Skillfully, then, the poet separates the two words; more skillfully, the phrase with which he does so, "touched / By sweetbriar and tangled vetch," retains links to the first line by creating the slant rhyme of *touched*/*vetch*—and by echoing the long *i* of *My* ("B*y* sweetbr*i*ar") and the plosive *t* of *touched* (swee*t*briar, *t*angled, ve*t*ch)—even as it allies the bog body of the poem with the enchanted sleeping princess memorialized by the Brothers Grimm.

Sweetbriar, or eglantine, is a climbing, fragrant wild rose with small pink flowers common in the British Isles ("local in Ireland") and other portions of Europe.[23] Though its arching branches and height (up to eight feet) might create a bowerlike enclosure, sweetbriar flourishes only in well-drained soil and is therefore a very unlikely rose to find growing in the peat where the bog bodies, Scandinavian or Irish, have been recovered. Similarly, the species of vetch found in Scandinavia and Ireland are flowering, "clambering" plants that require well-drained soil.[24] Vetch, with the sweetbriar rose, might intertwine to create a bower, but not a bower gracing a bog-side grave. Why then does the poem mention these specific flowers by name?

Perhaps an association with Sleeping Beauty helps to explain Heaney's choice of a bower of sweetbriar and vetch. In the Grimms' collection, the name of the fairy tale's heroine is, fittingly, Briar Rose: as the princess succumbs to her hundred years' sleep, "round the castle a hedge of briar roses began to grow up. Every year it grew higher, till at last it surrounded the whole castle so that nothing could be seen of it." The *Oxford English Dictionary* specifies dog rose, not sweetbriar, as the wild rose referred to as "briar rose," but the two wildflowers are both tall, thorned, arching European hedge growers, with sweetbriar the more happily connotative and melodious of the

22. Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology," 8.

23. A. R. Clapham, T. G. Tutin, and E. F. Warburg, *Excursion Flora of the British Isles,* 155; Roy E. Shepherd, *History of the Rose,* 136–37.

24. Alastair Fitter, *An Atlas of the Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe,* 101–2.

two species' names.[25] Heaney might well have chosen sweetbriar over the more precise dog rose at least partly to suggest the protective hedge surrounding Sleeping Beauty's castle,[26] but there is a more compelling reason to make the connection between sweetbriar and briar rose, and via that link to establish the more suggestive kinship between tales of a supernaturally preserved princess and Heaney's bog-preserved queen.

Sleeping Beauty's hedge formed a daunting barrier between unqualified suitors and the maiden lying within in deathlike sleep: "And from time to time princes came and tried to force a way through the hedge into the castle. They found it impossible; for the thorns, as though they had hands, held them fast, and the princes remained caught in them without being able to free themselves. And so they died a miserable death." At the end of the stipulated hundred years, however, a prince arrives and determines, like so many before, to try his luck with the briar hedge. At this point the Grimms' story implies the successful outcome of his action will depend more on the finally elapsed century than on any superior worthiness. In any case, and however effected, "when the Prince approached the briar hedge it was in blossom, and was covered with beautiful large flowers which made way for him of their own accord and let him pass unharmed, and then closed up again into a hedge behind him."[27]

Here is the incident that most surely links the fairy tale to Heaney's poem. The hands of Heaney's narrator do not touch the sweetbriar and tangled vetch; rather, his hands are touched *by* them (felt, struck lightly, emotionally moved—but certainly not torn, ensnared, or transfixed). It is as though this narrator, like the rescuer of Sleeping Beauty, is for some reason given right-of-way by the flowers themselves, that they respond to him of their own volition (prefiguring the queen's own positive response to the narrator's advances). The gesture suggests that the natural world endorses what transpires here. In addition, if we make the connection between narrator and prince, bog body and sleeping Briar Rose, "Come to the Bower" is contextually enriched, revealing kinship with a story much loved,

25. The Brothers Grimm, "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)," 103. See also Oleg Polunin, *Flowers of Europe: A Field Guide,* 163.

26. He would not be the first to do so. Ann Mayhew's *Rose: Myth, Folklore, and Legend* contains an illustration of the hedge: it is formed of rosa eleganteria, or sweetbriar (56–57).

27. The Brothers Grimm, "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)," 104.

replete with symbolic values of its own. For example, the poem's link to the fairy tale helps to convey the positive conviction that, like Briar Rose, the goddess is "destined to be saved." As Campbell observes, "Time [may have] sealed her away, yet she is dwelling still, like one who sleeps in timelessness, at the bottom of the timeless sea"—or the timeless bog.[28]

Such optimism is reinforced when the narrator's hands, having succeeded in entering the bower, go "Foraging *past* the burst gizzards / Of coin-hoards" (italics added). Glob describes "a hoard of current Roman coins" found in an Iron Age house in Northwest Jutland: "The treasure, buried in a hole dug beside the hearth, lay in a heap, as though the coins had all been contained in a purse." He also notes that buried with the Huldre Bog woman were "a leather strap . . . and a woollen hair-band . . . packed inside a bladder."[29] Prepared animal bladders, or other membranous bags in an animal's body, make useful receptacles: the "purse" that once may have contained the buried Roman coins might even have been gizzard-fashioned, and the fact that the gizzards of coins in Heaney's poem are "burst" likely points to the natural breakdown of the coins' original containers. If this narrator were Walter Ralegh, the discovery of a fully visible coin-hoard (or gold neck torque, silver cauldron, or bronze drinking vessel) might have ended his search. Highlighted as the phrase "Of coin-hoards" is, in a line of its own and at the end of a stanza, one might even be led to expect this narrator to succumb to the lure. But, though the line does pause a moment—the narrator is not oblivious to the cache—it moves on. In lines whose predominant monosyllables still imitate a lover's courtesy rather than a rapist's speed, this narrator forgoes the easier material reward; unlike Ralegh, he is pursuing more valuable treasure. And so his

> hands come . . .
> . . . . . .
> To where the dark-bowered queen,
> Whom [he] unpin[s],
> Is waiting.

28. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 63, 111. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales,* 225–36, regarding such messages as the tale's assurance that "a long period of quiescence, of contemplation, of concentration on the self, can and often does lead to highest achievement" (226).

29. Glob, *Bog People,* 127, 80.

The phrase "Whom I unpin" (altered to third person in the quotation above) forms a nonrestrictive clause interrupting the continuity of the thought, offering supposedly incidental information. The emphasis in the stanza is thereby deflected from the narrator's own unpinning action to the anticipation of the woman herself: she is waiting, presumably, for him, for him to arrive, for him to unpin her. The deflecting is deliberate: it is the waiting woman who figures uppermost in the narrator's mind, not his own desire. In these stanzas, his entire energy is focused on her, unpinning her, unfastening her, freeing her, as well as preparing to remove her clothing. His delicacy betokens not embarrassment but deep respect for the woman he is approaching. If he *must* tell the story of such private moments, he will do so in a voice, sensitively heard by Elmer Andrews as "intense with anticipation, hesitant, reverential, hushed," that focuses attention away from himself: perhaps he believes that dwelling on his own strong desire might somehow sully *her.*[30]

Thus, the narrator focuses next on the willow that pins her to the bog. Like the wooden crooks clamping the woman from Haraldskjaer Fen, willow pins had perhaps once been "driven down tight over each knee and elbow joint,"[31] but the wood now slips out easily enough, even, as it were, by itself:

> Out of the black maw
> Of the peat, sharpened willow
>
> Withdraws gently.

The less this narrator can involve himself directly in the poem's action, so it seems, the better.

Reasonably, I would add, the willow that pinioned her for centuries is "sharpened," having been deliberately prepared for its office. If the image serves also as a phallic symbol, it is highly appropriate: perhaps the stake was used, as Glob suggests regarding a similar case, to secure the restless spirit of someone regarded in her lifetime as a witch, a creation of a patriarchal society that feared women and sought in every way to "pin them down." Heaney would not be the first poet to see the phallic dimension in such stakes. Writing in 1841, the Danish parson, short story writer, and

30. Andrews, *Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* 87.
31. Glob, *Bog People,* 74.

poet Steen Steensen Blicher addressed the woman's body recovered from Haraldskjaer Bog:

> Now you lie naked, shrivelled and foul
> With a bald skull for a head
> Blacker far than the oaken stake
> That wed you to the bog.[32]

Blicher's pejorative tone, though, acts as a foil for Heaney's compassion. Moreover, if Blicher represents patriarchal consensus regarding female bodies pinioned in the bog, the poem highlights the radical difference of "Come to the Bower," in which the narrator himself "marries" the bog woman, overlooking her shame—a far cry from suggesting that she married the bog. The contrasts continue as the willow in the poem "Withdraws," lifting out of the turf that has blanketed her, that "black maw" (such an ominous spondee, yet a tongue-in-cheek reference to the black mother?) of peat, the earth's own gizzard, in which she has lain. Just as the sweetbriar and vetch allowed the narrator to pass, the willow appears to recognize his supreme claim and withdraws, taking courteous leave from this bedchamber.

Now, exactly as though he has been left alone with his bride, the narrator is direct, to the point: "I unwrap skins." Often, bodies recovered in a bog are naked except for one or more short skin capes covering "only the shoulders and upper part of the body"; sometimes they are found merely "wrapped in the capes, . . . not dressed in them." Unwrapping and removing these capes thus exposes an otherwise unadorned body to the narrator. If patterned after the body found in Haraldskjaer Fen once believed to be that of the Norse queen Gunhild (as with the willow stakes that pinned her in the bog and the rising water level during excavation), the narrator might now be confronted by "well-preserved breasts with very large nipples."[33] But he keeps his eyes focused on features above the neck (keeping *our* eyes there as well):

> I unwrap skins and see
> The pot of the skull,
> The damp tuck of each curl

32. Ibid., 76–77; "Queen Gunhild," as quoted in ibid., 73. See Walker, *Crone,* 125–44, on witches.

33. Glob, *Bog People,* 96, 77 (see also 69–79).

Reddish as a fox's brush,
A mark of a gorget in the flesh
Of her throat.

Attention-holding monosyllables again reinforce meaning: the loving, deliberate detailing here—hollowed skull; acid-reddened hair likened to the reddish brown, bushy tail of a fox; the impression left on her neck by necklace or collar—slows down the movement and imitates the lingering quality of the narrator's gaze. Consider, too, the unabashed affection, the passion, that would move a narrator to savor "The *damp* | *tuck* of | *each curl*." Again the narrator demonstrates that his desire is under control, restrained, indicating not that it is slight but, to the contrary, that it is powerful. His deliberateness serves as a measure of his love and his awareness that, even if she *has* been waiting for him, she has still been imprisoned for centuries and will respond only to the tenderest of care. He appears to be waiting for a sign of response, of consent, like a lover dazzlingly in love, filled with desire yet frightened to offend.

Fittingly at this point, with a rhythmic lift climaxing on the heavily accented *rise,* "spring water / Starts to rise around her." Glob notes how the excavation of the "Queen Gunhild" body had to be postponed when "the water-level in the bog began to rise." Six months later, when a long pole was removed that had been used to plumb the bog, "a powerful spring welled up from the depths in a strong jet of water."[34] For the nineteenth-century excavators of this body, the rising water meant delay and turning back; the jet of water acted as simple attestation to abundant underground flow. Not so differently, though the rising water necessitates no delay in "Come to the Bower," it affects the tempo of the action by indicating a need for the narrator to hurry, or at least to quicken pace, and points to the presence of abundant, deep-welling emotion on the part of *both* participants.

Spring water (especially *rising,* awakening spring water) carries all the connotations of spring itself—freshness, rebirth, new beginnings; the appearance of fluids at this point in the tryst also suggests the response of a sexually aroused woman. The rising water in fact points to a powerful avowal of the life force motivating this encounter and profound, confirming response from the earth goddess herself. The narrator may be flooded with emotion while looking at this queen

34. Ibid., 74.

lying naked in her bedchamber of bog, but his feelings are not unrequited. Looked *at,* the naked woman reacts to the narrator's desire with her own unmistakable, physical response and signals him thereby to proceed. Suddenly, finally confident, he reaches out

> past
> The riverbed's washed
> Dream of gold to the bullion
> Of her Venus bone.

Bogs may not be associated, typically, with the rivers in which prospectors pan for gold, but streams often flow alongside a bog, while gold, which "may have contributed to the flourishing state of early Bronze Age culture in Ireland," can still "be found . . . in the gravels of mountain streams in County Wicklow. [Moreover,] as no traces of ancient mining have been discovered, it is probable that the supply was won from the same alluvial gravels in early times."[35] But the narrator has already passed up the coins lying in his path, and these lines, with their allusion to the ambition fueling a gold prospector's unrelenting gravel washing, further confirm that he has not come to the bog to claim any picked-over desserts. Who needs coins, or even glinting gold fragments, when the solid virgin gold of bullion lies near at hand? Others before him may have valued the peat for its yield of priceless artifacts, or panned its streams for gold, but this narrator has come here as a lover; the bullion he values is the Venus bone of a woman beloved.

Is Heaney referring to a woman's ingot-resembling breastbone, or sternum, close as it is to the heart? Venus, after all, is a goddess of love ruling "affairs of the heart." The narrator may indeed be reaching to the bone lying between the woman's breasts, and only inches away from her heart. Or, in a climactic gesture more tuned to the dramatic tone of resolution sounded in this final couplet (the slant rhyme of *bullion/bone* intensified by further echoes in *bone:* the long *o* of *gold* and the *b* and *n*'s of *b*ullio*n* and Ve*n*us), he may be reaching for the "mount of Venus" lying on her pubis bones, especially if it yet

35. *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 14th ed., s.v. "Ireland." See also A. G. Tansley, *The British Islands and Their Vegetation,* 675.

supports any hair that might resemble the ornamental fringe or lace made from twisted gold or silver thread and also known as bullion.[36]

Either way, we see the narrator here in an act of foreplay, and we are assured, once again, that the lovemaking to follow will be exactly that. Serving in no sense as the setting for a self-gratifying act, this bower will hallow, instead, the ritual marriage of a tribal spokesman, who loves and honors even his bride's most loathsome features and least-ingratiating ways, to the emissary of an earth goddess "literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored to youth through union with her rightful mate." Assuredly, "Come to the Bower" adapts the motif of the marriage of sovereignty: the bog body the poem celebrates equals hag equals goddess equals bog equals earth equals feminine principle—equals even "a subject people and by association the Irish Catholic consciousness," or, more inclusively, "that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order." The poem's courteous narrator typifies the gentle and courageous among us who, like Niall and Gawain before, prosper in the Dionysian world. But the narrator's willingness to embrace the Iron Age corpse also flies in the face of the patriarchal desire to control even death; it is a gesture, ultimately, of humility, a bow of recognition to the sovereignty goddess, a votive candle lit upon her altar. It is, as well, eloquent acknowledgment that the personal ego is "but a recipient and channel of a destiny flowing from a deep, mysterious ground of being which is the source both of terror and revulsion as well as of the beautiful play of life."[37] As a powerful antidote to the arrogance that propelled such imperialists as Walter Ralegh, "Come to the Bower" offers reverential tribute to the transcendent realm of the archetypally feminine. In my next chapter, the narrators of "Bone Dreams" and "A Drink of Water" will be shown to adopt a similar pose.

36. Remnants of the later Bronze Age in Ireland include "numerous torques made of gold bars and ribbons spirally twisted. They vary greatly in size, from specimens small enough to have been used as bracelets to ones large enough to have been worn as girdles" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 14th ed., s.v. "Ireland").

37. Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology," 7; Mary P. Brown, "Seamus Heaney and *North,*" 293; Julia Kristeva, "La femme, ce n'est jamais ça," 59, as quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory,* 166; Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 173.

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6

Remembering the Giver

The theme is not always consistent, and the metamorphosis from hag to young girl does not always occur [in the sagas and myths], but the main feature, that of the union of king and goddess, always appears.

—Muireann Ní Bhrolchain, "Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas"

The ancient feminine religion of Northern Europe is the lens through which he looks and the landscape becomes a memory, a piety, a loved mother. The present is suffused with the past.

—Seamus Heaney (about John Montague), "The Sense of Place," in *Preoccupations*

"Come to the Bower" (*N,* 31) is possibly the clearest and most direct example of Heaney's refurbishing of the ancient Irish motif of the marriage of sovereignty goddess to consort. To overlook such poems as "Bone Dreams" (*N,* 27–30) and "A Drink of Water" (*FW,* 16), however, would be to fail to appreciate the full magnitude of that contribution. For example, "Come to the Bower" relies on its arresting present tense for the reenactment of the sacred marriage, whereas "Bone Dreams" and "A Drink of Water" draw on the past—prehistoric in the first case, personal in the second—to frame their

more enigmatic tributes to the goddess. The past for Heaney is a dimension simultaneously mysterious and familiar, a realm that, when we follow him into it, can only serve to enrich the ordinariness of our everyday lives. "The sense of the past," Heaney reminds us, is "a fundamental human gift, as potentially civilizing as our gift for love" (PPP, 30). If a ritual that constrains powerful men to acknowledge humble dependence on a superior, female entity can be considered "potentially civilizing," then it should be no wonder if poems that adapt the motif of the Celtic *Feis* of Tara should also explore our sense of the past.

In his 1985 essay "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," Heaney describes how the "quality of feeling" associated with the word *old* can bring "you out of yourself and close to yourself all at once." To illustrate, he recalls an incident from his own past that triggered his "first archaeological tremor." Digging holes for goalposts in a field his family reserved for grazing, and considered "therefore always pure surface, pure present," Heaney uncovered "a hoard of soft red brick and white crumbly mortar, an unexpected cache that even to a six year old meant foundations, meant house, a living but obliterated past. . . . [Soon] the hole for the goal-post began to open down and back to a visionary field, a phantom whitewashed cottage with its yard and puddles and hens. The world had been amplified; looking and seeing began to take on aspects of imagining and remembering." The brick and mortar that the child discovered were palpably "old"; they catalyzed for him a deepened "sense of belonging to a domestic and at the same time planetary world of pure human being" (PPP, 32, 34). Perhaps most significant, his find impressed upon him the importance of context, the awareness that his own life is enmeshed with the lives of those who preceded him, and that in a very literal way his existence is built upon earlier foundations.

All this, one might ask, from some old brick and crumbling mortar? That is precisely Heaney's point. Utterly ordinary objects, he suggests, "can become temples of the spirit" and can provide "a point of entry into a common emotional ground of memory and belonging." They may even transmit "the climate of a lost world and [keep] alive a domestic intimacy with a reality which might otherwise have vanished." Heaney claims, in fact, that "the more we are surrounded by such things, the more feelingly we dwell in our own lives" (PPP, 30, 31).

Comments like these surely help to explain the consistent appearance in Heaney's poetry of such concrete, meaning-laden objects as his uncle's portrait in "Ancestral Photograph" (*DN,* 26–27); the musical instrument in "Victorian Guitar" and the small stone in "Relic of Memory" (*DD,* 33, 37); the "civic print" in "Linen Town" (*WO,* 38); the plaited straw bow of "The Harvest Bow" (*FW,* 58); the granite chip, smoothing iron, pewter plate, iron spike, stone, and snowshoe of "Shelf Life" (*SI,* 21–24); the items meditated on in "The Pitchfork," "The Biretta," "The Settle Bed," and "The School Bag" (*ST,* 25, 28–29, 30–31, 32); the platforms for fancy evoked in "A Sofa in the Forties" and "The Swing" (*SL,* 10–12, 58–60); the smooth shelves laden with books in "The Bookcase" (*EL,* 60–62); and, most recently, the gift of a fireman's headgear in "The Helmet" (*DC,* 14). Such comments also illuminate Heaney's method in a poem like "Bone Dreams" in which one object, in this case a "White bone found / on the grazing," catalyzes a sequence of six reveries linked by successive steps further back in time toward England and Ireland's common Celtic past—until the final section catapults us back into the present with its musing on a dead Devonshire mole. (Even this last section, quiet variation on an elegy written by Scottish poet Andrew Young to the "strong-shouldered" mound-builder, thereby recalls—if distantly—ancient burial practice ["A Dead Mole," *SB,* 229]).[1] In Heaney's imagination, no doubt, "something previous was vestigially alive" (PPP, 32) in that small fragment of bone, and as surely as the brick and mortar he unearthed as a boy led "down and back to a visionary field, a phantom white-washed cottage," the bone, too, leads backward in time to a phantom bone-house, and even into a shadowy prehistory when

> the bone's lair
>
> [was] a love-nest
> in the grass.
> ("Bone Dreams," *N,* 29)

1. Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes anthologized Young's poem in a collection meant to pay homage to poems they had long admired, representative of their "singing school," if you will (*SB,* xvii). Foster considers it significant that the mole, like the snake, never crossed to Ireland (*Seamus Heaney,* 69). This fact may link Heaney's mole to the Anglo-Saxons, fellow mound-builders who stopped at the Irish Sea; for Parker, the mole represents England (*Seamus Heaney,* 134).

"A Drink of Water" may not lead quite so surely into previous eras, but it does resurrect childhood memories of an old woman and her bucket of water, as richly rewarding to the adult as the brick and mortar find was to the child. Both "Bone Dreams" and "A Drink of Water" are poems that adapt the motif of the marriage of sovereignty; both, we shall see moreover, also explore the marvelous suggestive powers of the past even as they adapt that motif.

The enigmatic reveries of "Bone Dreams," particularly those in sections 3, 4, and 5 of the poem, testify at least as memorably as "Come to the Bower" to Heaney's rare ability to perceive beauty in the figure of the loathly lady, perhaps even more startlingly since the woman persona of "Bone Dreams" has retained no mummified flesh, merely her skeletal frame. Previous critics have focused on "Bone Dreams" as a love poem written to the language and landscape of England (and in one instance more broadly as homage to the "the alliterative tradition of German oral literature"). Commenting on the poem as a whole, Thomas C. Foster, Michael Parker, and Daniel Tobin incorporate such views; the poem's entire text follows this chapter for easy reference to the relationship of individual sections to the whole. I focus here on sections 3 through 5, those least commented on to date yet most relevant to a study of the sovereignty motif in Heaney's verse. The passages' sexual overtones have not, of course, gone unremarked: excerpts from these sections led Coughlan to describe the narrator as a "fetishizing erotic persona" and John Goodby to label the poem "a seduction couched in anti-colonial, and strikingly sexist, terms." With more approbation, Neil Corcoran finds sections 4 and 5 "as strange as anything Heaney has written, fascinatedly creating a sexual philology and topography."[2] My own approach respects the poem as a linguistic paean but opens its meaning outward (or backward) to contemplate a "Celto-British Land" in which "the Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Saxon antithesis [are] momentarily collapsed" (IB, xxv). I begin my reading by considering section 3:

2. Floyd Collins, *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity,* 90–91; Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 102; Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History,* 158; Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney,* 111. See also Foster, *Seamus Heaney,* 67–69; Parker, *Seamus Heaney,* 133–34; Tobin, *Passage to the Center,* 117–18; Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry,* 15; Robert Welch, *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing,* 253–54; and Andrews, *Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* 88–89. Andrews believes the bog is the setting for the poem's fifth section; he sees the narrator "seek[ing] union with its primeval mystery" (89).

In the coffered
riches of grammar
and declensions
I found *ban-hus,*

its fire, benches,
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while

in the roofspace.
There was a small crock
for the brain,
and a cauldron

of generation
swung at the centre:
love-den, blood-holt,
dream-bower.

Bān-hūs (as Heaney revised the spelling in 1990 ("Bone Dreams" [*SP, 76*]) is the Anglo-Saxon word for *bone-house;* the kenning applies both to a coffin and to the human body. But in section 3 of Heaney's poem, *bān-hūs* signifies a tomb, specifically a charnel house, a house or vault for dead bodies, complete with a fire and benches above which the soul lingers, and includes, in addition, such other mysterious objects as a pot "for the brain" and a cauldron mounted from the ceiling. At first glance, the stanzas may appear to do little more than offer the reader a list of exotic funerary furniture. In reality, the objects assume a function in the poem like the "fells, kestrels, dooms, dingles, snows, crossroads" of W. H. Auden's verse that Heaney points out "are not simply 'effects' but passports to a locale, a sensibility and an inheritance"; they are similar as well to "the hill-forts and earth-works of Celtic Britain [that] infuse the atmosphere of [Hardy's "Channel Firing"] with a feeling of ancient belonging" (PPP, 45, 33). The poet who noted "no portrait of [Hugh O'Neill] with his strong Ulster face and Elizabethan clothes can . . . be as acutely suggestive of the conditions of his life . . . as [a] list of his abandoned possessions" (PPP, 36) also delighted the year before *North,* as a reviewer of *The Mound People: Danish Bronze-Age Man Preserved,* in P. V. Glob's inventories of grave goods, praising the Danish museum director's ability

to "conjur[e] epiphanies out of the *disjecta membra* of a culture" (SLR, 741–42). Sarah Fulford registers impatience with such enthusiasms: "For the poetry to be critically historical and move towards the present, it must attempt to free itself from the temptations of the curator who catalogues a museum culture or the archaeologist who digs for the dead." I align instead with archaeologist Christine Finn, who examines Heaney's relationship with the past (including the effect of museum visits) in her study of the role played by archaeology in Yeats's and Heaney's verse. For Finn, as for Heaney, "the relationship between the poet and archaeologist is potent and human."[3] Surely, such a poet, who values the art of precise naming and whose esteem for artifacts surpasses an archaeologist's in imaginative reach, would not employ his own props indiscriminately (though he might substitute a location name for its sound, as in "Aarhus" for "Silkeborg" in "The Tollund Man" [MB, 6]). I must conclude then that the various objects "listed" here by Heaney are placed very deliberately in the poem.

If the poem's fire, benches, and other effects are not random allusions, though, I am left with a problem: to what do they allude? The poem itself provides elusive clues (at least for those reared far from the ancient burial chambers of the British Isles), but when they are combined with insights derived from secondary sources, the enigmatic references become, if not familiar, at least more hauntingly compelling. So I turn now to the insights of anthropology and archaeology to help determine the purposes of these unusual objects and the structure that contains them.

Charnel houses are mentioned in the available literature less frequently than other kinds of prehistoric British and Irish archaeological remains, but Aubrey Burl speculates that the first structure erected at Stonehenge itself may have been a timber mortuary hut:

> Before [Stonehenge] was built there were a dozen or more earthen long barrows nearby on Salisbury Plain, many of them having end-chambers of wood. Stone was scarce. Close to its future site was the small Amesbury mound in which a Neolithic family laid dried ancestral bones, leaving them there with some joints of ox and an entire goose. They may have carried the decaying skeletons from a neighboring hut, the first structure on the site of Stonehenge, a

3. Fulford, *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry,* 44; Finn, *Past Poetic: Archaeology in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney,* 128.

> charnel-house in which the few families left corpses to decompose before taking the bones to their respective long mounds. A round mortuary enclosure, its doorway facing the rising sun at midsummer, conveniently situated on the gentle downs, would have made an ideal ossuary.

After centuries of "bad digging," decisive evidence is lacking for a central hut at Stonehenge (though Burl considers its existence "likely," a plausible explanation for "two definite astronomical alignments at Stonehenge"), but remains of similar huts exist in other locations. One such timber mortuary hut (in which, intriguingly, seaweed had been burned) was apparently erected on the Orkney mainland as part of the ruined circle-henge known as the Standing Stones of Stenness. Close by, pits contained a combination of soil and seeds from fruit and grain. "One might guess," suggests Burl, "at rites of homeopathic magic, the deposits of food representing the harvests needed by the people and communicated to the forces of the Other World through the spirits of the dead whose bodies had lain inside the wooden charnel-house." Or, he continues to speculate, "perhaps the bones of animals were thrown on to smouldering seaweed as offerings to the spirits, the people asking in return for a bountiful harvest symbolized by the grain and the fruits deposited in the pits nearby."[4]

It is difficult to do more than speculate. As Rodney Castleden remarks, "Little is known of the rites and practices connected with the preliminary burials; because the structures associated with them were temporary, the archaeological evidence is inevitably slight." Still, the available evidence does support the widely held view that "the great megalithic tombs are not tombs of chieftains or of any other individuals. They were clearing houses or waiting rooms through which people passed on their way from life to afterlife. The newly dead were either temporarily buried or exposed for a year or so, until the flesh had decayed, and then the bones were gathered up and stored in the tomb." In this way the megalithic passage grave may act as a "monument to Death itself, affirming the important trust that life and death are two continua, two modes of being that continually intertwine." Neolithic man could have regarded his own mortality, according to Castleden, in no other way. Dependent on the

4. Burl, *Rings of Stone: The Prehistoric Stone Circles of Britain and Ireland*, 72, 72, 114, 48.

soil and its harvest, he would have recognized a connection between decomposition of a buried corpse and the fertility of the soil. The earth itself, birthing and feeding us, would be viewed as a mother who "needs to be repaid with offerings . . . to ensure that the nurture continues"; moreover, "the surrender of our own earthly bodies for reincorporation into the substance of the Earth Mother" would represent a final act of appeasement. Castleden goes so far as to call "burial in the chambered tomb or in the solid earth of the long barrow . . . the central symbolic act of neolithic faith."[5]

Admittedly, it might be helpful if we could tie Heaney's enigmatic *bān-hūs* to a specific historical period. If, for example, we could say as confidently as David Annwn that the structure was a Saxon longhouse whose "hall is seen to frame the horizons of Old English life," then we might look solely to Anglo-Saxon rites and customs to elucidate the poem. To do so would risk oversimplification for several reasons. First of all, Anglo-Saxons frequently interred their dead in "mounds originally raised over Neolithic or Bronze Age graves." Additionally, the native British continued to occupy the land during "a slow takeover of the decaying Romano-British villages and estates" by their new Angle and Saxon overlords.[6] Under such circumstances, what would have kept an Anglo-Saxon from applying the epithet *bān-hūs* to a Celtic burial chamber? Finally, the poem's "cauldron / of generation" recalls too vividly the Celtic "cauldron of *re*generation" examined later in this chapter (note how the extra prefix would have disrupted the line's rhythm) to dismiss Celtic influence at play in both structure and poem. Thus, the sources I draw from here to help explain the poem will not focus on one historical period at the exclusion of others. What I lose in exactness I trust will be compensated for by the richness of possibility. If we cannot determine whether Heaney's *bān-hūs* is pre-Celtic, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, or of mixed provenance, ultimately I feel such slipperiness was exactly what Heaney had in mind. In the succinct words of Maurice Harmon, "Heaney's layered vision frees him from exact chronology."[7] These poetic vignettes are bone *dreams,* remember, and do not need to reflect reality. Still, I will proceed to approach the poem as though it does—that is, until finally it escapes me, as we shall see.

5. Castleden, *Wilmington Giant,* 105, 97.

6. Annwn, *Inhabited Voices,* 140; Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons,* 78; *Heritage of Britain: Great Moments in the Story of an Island Race,* 47.

7. Harmon, ed., *Irish Poetry after Yeats: Seven Poets,* 29.

Whoever its builders, with its "wattle and rafters" (presumably wooden), Heaney's *bān-hūs* does at least appear to be a type of timber mortuary hut.[8] After all, a body whose

> soul
> fluttered a while
>
> in the roofspace

is in all likelihood recently dead. (Notice how the long vowel of *while* and the stanza break's slight pause slow the clause just enough to reinforce the slant rhyme—*soul*/*while*—and mimic the soul's brief lingering.) But as has already been noted, this structure is also equipped, puzzlingly, with a fire, benches,

> a small crock
> for the brain,
> and a cauldron
>
> of generation
> swung at the centre

—normal tools of the trade for early morticians?

Perhaps the reference to fire implies that, in this bone-house, cremation was preferred to the longer process of decomposition. Michael Herity concedes that "large circular paved fireplaces sited opposite the entrances to Loughcrew T, Newgrange I and Knowth West may well have served to provide at least token cremations for burial in these tombs." Even so, Herity points out, we have little idea where cremation occurred for the majority of passage-grave burials, possibly because those living some distance from the graves may not have been able "to bury each corpse in its tribal passage grave immediately after death. Cremation may then have been a device to preserve the dead and make the remains easy to transport, until the opportunity or the ritually correct time for burial came round."

8. See P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, 23–29, regarding the use of wickerwork, or wattle, in the construction of dwelling places among Celtic peoples. See also Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 43, for the description of a wooden temple whose "inner walls were lined with wattle and daub."

Evidence for cremation would thus become virtually impossible to locate.[9]

Heaney's *bān-hūs* may portray the interior of a crematorium, but it is more likely, especially since care was taken in this hut to preserve at least one of the body's vital organs, that its fire was used for other purposes. In Estyn Evans's view, the "occasional hearth and chimney" found in souterrains "point to occupation, if only temporary." But it is also possible that this fire heated a cauldron swung, or suspended, "at the centre," especially since "all those caldrons that have been preserved have a pair of ears or rings at the sides by which they were hung over the fire on hooks." In figure 3, a chain is attached to a length of hooked metal at the cauldron's top, while two more lengths of metal extend (in V fashion) from the last link of chain to rings attached on opposite sides of the cauldron.[10] Surely, both the presence of the "crock / for the brain," and the "cauldron / of generation" suggest that this bone-house functions as more than an ordinary mortuary.

Janet Bord and Colin Bord would probably agree. As they explain,

> It is questionable . . . whether prehistoric burial structures . . . were built primarily to house the dead, or whether they may have had other, more obscure, uses. . . . The small chambers within the tombs could have been used for the performance of secret rituals or ceremonies or by those seeking mystic experiences, as also could the still enigmatic underground chambers of Cornwall and Ireland, known as fogous or souterrains, the earth-houses or weems of Scotland, and the dene-holes of Kent.

Aubrey Burl would also likely concur. Writing about the Clava tombs near Inverness, he contends that "it is wrong to think of all these Clava cairns simply as graves. Many of them were places that the living used as shrines, perhaps as centres of ancestor cults where the human bones were instruments to protect the living from the

9. Michael Herity, *Irish Passage Graves: Neolithic Tomb-Builders in Ireland and Britain, 2500* B.C., 122. See also Owen, *Rites and Religions,* 87–88, for a reconstruction, as suggested by the evidence, of the cremation "rite as performed in Anglo-Saxon times" (87).

10. Evans, *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland: A Guide,* 29; P. Joyce, *Social History,* 126; T. G. E. Powell, *The Celts,* 139.

Fig. 3. IRON CAULDRON WITH SUSPENSION
La Tène, Switzerland
Drawing by Margaret Scott
From *The Celts* (1980) by T. G. E. Powell
Courtesy of Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London

dangers of their everyday lives." And protection, Burl explains, would have been at a premium for their neolithic builders:

> As though compelled by their own insecurity to intercede fanatically with the natural forces against which they were helpless—famine, blizzards, disease—they built gigantic mounds in which the bones of the dead where laid. Every region [of Scotland, England, and Ireland] had its own style. . . . Yet all these had one thing in common. . . . These . . . monuments were directed towards the sun. . . .
>
> It is possible then that these, like the Clava cairns, were shrines rather than burial-places, sanctuaries where the living took the powerful bones of their ancestors for rituals of intercession with sun, moon, rain, waterhole, whatever force of nature was being invoked.[11]

John Sharkey maintains that "the age-old communal tomb . . . was the place where the forces of heaven and earth could meet" and from which the Celtic and pre-Celtic shaman derived his power. Accord-

11. Bord and Bord, *The Secret Country: An Interpretation of the Folklore of Ancient Sites in the British Isles,* 20–21; Burl, *Rings of Stone,* 19, 41.

ing to Sharkey, it was this shaman, a "living embodiment of the collective psyche" and "link with the ancestral spirit world," who "performed the ceremonies connected with the dead, and the annual rites of renewal in behalf of the living." What more appropriate setting for at least some of these ceremonies than the power-bequeathing communal tomb? Sharkey notes that the shaman's own initiation was carried out "in a succession of trance states for three days and nights inside the dark interior" of a burial chamber, "symbol of the mystery of death and rebirth, and a dream place of past and present where psychic and physical realities merge." Sharkey also includes, among photos and illustrations of various dolmens, quoits, and cromlechs, a photograph of the folklore-steeped Dwarfie Stane (Scots for *stone*), a three thousand–year-old chambered tomb hollowed out of a detached block of red sandstone on the Isle of Hoy, Orkney, Scotland (fig. 4). Into the upper end of the stone an entrance passage reaches seven feet; two additional small cells open onto the corridor. Although both these secondary chambers have been described as beds, the slightly larger of the two best deserves the reference. Not only would its size (five by three feet, thirty inches high) better accommodate a human body, living or dead, but the head of that body could be supported by a carved stone pillow (fig. 5). Martin Martin wrote "circa 1695" that the "bed and pillow [were] capable of two persons to lie in"; he also referenced a commonly held view, unsupported by modern investigation, that the hole in the roof over the cells "was a vent for smoke." Such statements perhaps led to Sharkey's own suggestion that the tomb "may have been used for meditation or initiation."[12]

Apparently, Bord and Bord, Burl, and Sharkey would all appreciate Heaney's reference to his *bān-hūs* as a "dream-bower," setting for visionary communion. Do their comments account, though, for its simultaneous roles as "love-den" and "blood-holt"? Linking a charnel house with a romantic lair or sexual retreat may not appeal to contemporary Western sensibility, but, as Burl observes, "That sexuality formed part of these rituals [mystic rites performed within burial chambers] can hardly be doubted from the evidence of male organs carved out of chalk found in ritual enclosures in southern

12. Sharkey, *Celtic Mysteries: The Ancient Religion*, 76, 40, 77, 76; Martin Martin and Donald Monro, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland Circa 1695 and A Late Voyage to St Kilda with A Description of the Occidental i.e. Western Islands of Scotland*, 216; Sharkey, *Celtic Mysteries*, 76. The hole referred to in the roof of the Dwarfie Stane, noted as "breakage" in figure 5, has been sealed over.

To view the complete page image, please refer to the printed version of this work.

Fig. 4. THE DWARFIE STANE FROM THE NORTHWEST
Isle of Hoy, Orkney, Scotland
Crown copyright © 2006, Historic Scotland Images, Edinburgh

Fig. 5. THE DWARFIE STANE, CROSS SECTION AND PLAN
Drawing by Charles S. T. Calder, 1936
From "The Dwarfie Stane, Hoy, Orkney: Its Period and Purpose; with a Note on 'Jo Ben' and the Dwarfie Stane" by Charles S. T. Calder and George Macdonald (1935–1936)
Diagram adapted by courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh

Britain, in long barrows, in mines, in those places where sexual activity might be thought to affect, by sympathetic magic, the fertility of the land, the production of flint, the awakening of the dead."[13] Could the Dwarfie Stane's "bed," "capable of two persons to lie in" (even if cramped), have been used for a form of *sexual* initiation, or even as the setting for the sacred marriage? Could Heaney's "benches"?

Edward C. Whitmont notes that the central ritual of the Indian Tantra, a "cult of ecstasy focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality," involves "carefully controlled, meditative sexual intercourse with a female power holder, whose favor the initiate has to win. She represents the goddess: the Shakto, or pure energy. . . . This rite may be carried out in a cremation ground among the corpses and flaming pyres." Perhaps a similar rite occurred in Heaney's "love-den." If, like the Tantra's "most powerful rite of reintegration," the ritual also "require[d] intercourse with a female partner when she is menstruating and her red sexual energy is at its peak,"[14] the chamber might deservedly also be referred to as a "blood-holt." A holt is a grove, thicket, or wooded hill. Thus, a *blood*-holt might also refer to a sacred grove or site of blood sacrifice, animal or human. Though Heaney's *bān-hūs* is not situated in a grove of trees, the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that *holt,* as a variant of *hold,* can also suggest a place of abode or refuge, like the lair or den of an animal. Might *blood-holt* then refer to the home of the dead, the sacrificed? Could it refer to both a form of the sacred marriage *and* the blood sacrifice of a ritually killed victim? Closer attention to both the "crock / for the brain" and the "cauldron / of generation" suggests tentative answers.

Sharkey observes that "collecting and comparing 'brain balls' seems to have been a favourite pastime in many of the [Celtic] warrior tales." He refers here not to human brains but to decapitated heads. The Celts were preoccupied with the human head, symbol "of divinity and otherworld powers," and Diodorus and Strabo record how they embalmed in cedar oil, as proud testimonial to their ascendancy in battle, the heads of their most prominent foes. Even closer to our purpose is T. G. E. Powell's observation that "it would be hazardous to dismiss this custom [of exhibiting enemies' heads

13. Burl, *Rings of Stone,* 41.

14. Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra,* 9, as quoted in Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 176.

"at homes or in sanctuaries"] amongst the Celts as being merely a desire to collect trophies for the accumulation of martial prestige. It is more likely that it originated in cult practices to do with fertility, and with bringing the ghost into servitude." Additionally, Anne Ross suggests that "shrines in which sacrifices were carried out (human and animal), and in which such trophies and cult symbols as human crania were displayed [from which the brains had been ritually removed?], must have had their own associations with death and dying."[15] However, these authors allude to human heads or skulls rather than to their contents. For guidance on the role the brain itself might have played, we must look elsewhere.

John Matthews includes in his study of the Grail the photograph of a silver bowl, or "skull cup," from Tibet (fig. 6).[16] Resting at the bottom of the bowl is the small silver replica of a brain, "symbol of the whole dismembered body." According to Matthews, "Unlike the Aztec sacrifice [which deposited "the still-warm heart of the victim" in the center of a hollowed stone], that of Tibetan Buddhism is purely symbolic. The skull cup, which here contains the brain . . . has many ritual uses associated with release and transformation." Any sacrifice performed inside a "blood-holt" would likely recall Aztec mutilation before "purely symbolic" Buddhist rite, but it is equally likely that Heaney's "small crock / for the brain," like the Tibetan skull cup, "has many ritual uses associated with release and transformation." Perhaps it was even used to carry the brain (and other body parts) to deposit in fields as part of a fertility rite similar to that suggested by "most authors who discuss the sacrifice of the 'king' and who postulate that his remains may even have been scattered over the newly sown fields."[17]

One thing seems certain: it is hardly likely that a brain would be removed from a body destined either for cremation or for natural decomposition. Its preservation points to ritualistic use, possibly as a revered component in a fertility rite; its presumed freshness also

15. Sharkey, *Celtic Mysteries,* 12; Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition,* 61; Diodorus Siculus 5:29 and Strabo 4:4, 5 in Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* 65 (see also Ross's chapter, "The Cult of the Head," 61–126); Powell, *The Celts,* 130; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* 39.

16. The digital photo here was taken by museum staff in November 2006.

17. Matthews, *The Grail: Quest for the Eternal,* 74; Stone, *When God Was a Woman,* 135. Talking with Heaney about "Bone Dreams" in approximately 1992, I told him of the photo of the Tibetan skull cup; he was pleased to have me send him a copy.

Fig. 6. SILVER BRAIN AND SKULL CUP
Tibet
By courtesy of Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde / National Museum of Ethnology Leiden, The Netherlands (inventory number 4723-79)

suggests that the brain's late owner, human or animal, died in this very chamber only a short while before, in turn implying a purposely inflicted death. The soul, remember, is hovering for a moment in the roofspace, presumably before leaving the chamber: the belief that the spirit stays in proximity to the deceased body for a short time is common enough even today. A sacrifice performed moments before within the chamber itself would account both for the brain's freshness and for the soul's continuing presence. But how might such a sacrifice occur? M. Esther Harding comments on one method: "The chief priestess of the Celtic Moon Goddess was required to act as executioner whenever a human sacrifice was made. She had to kill the victim with her own hands. After a battle, for instance, the prisoners were so sacrificed, their heads being cut off, while they were held over a silver cauldron in which the blood was caught." *The Bog People* includes Strabo's description of a similar ritual practiced among the Cimbri upon their prisoners of war:

> Among the women who accompanied their war-like expeditions were prophetesses who were also priestesses. . . . These women would enter the camp, sword in hand, and go up to prisoners, crown them, and lead them up to a bronze vessel which might hold some twenty measures. One of them would mount a step, and, leaning over the cauldron, cut the throat of a prisoner, who was held up over the vessel's rim. Others cut open the body and, after inspecting the entrails, would foretell victory for their countrymen.[18]

Could Heaney's "cauldron / of generation" also act to contain sacrificial blood? Might this be yet another function, even the most apropos, named by the "blood-holt" kenning?

The cauldron, even on its simplest level, is a vital symbol of the feminine sphere. Barbara Walker remarks specifically on its medieval role, but the usefulness she describes undoubtedly had ancient roots: "The cauldron was essential for cooking, brewing, processing many kinds of food and medicines, treating hides, washing, dyeing, making household items like soap and candles, carrying fire or water. It was one of the most useful articles in the kitchen. Nothing could have been more appropriate as an emblem of the woman of the house . . . [or of] the essential caring behavior of the female sex, without which any mammalian race would perish." But it is on a level less mundane that the cauldron's antipatriarchal character becomes unmistakable. Again in Walker's words:

> Always the cauldron was understood to signify the cosmic womb, source of regeneration and rebirth. All life, mind, matter, and energy arose in various forms from the ever-boiling vessel, only to return thereto, when each form came to its destined end. As ingredients dissolved and mingled in boiling, so the elements that made all things were separated and recombined in the cauldron. . . . As the Christian cross stood for linear finality—one death, one resurrection, one postmortem reward (or punishment) forever—so the pagan cauldron stood for its opposite, perpetual cyclic recurrence.

Such a vessel is regarded as the precursor to the Grail cup, and though Walker notes Christian efforts to substitute the Grail for the

18. Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 164; Glob, *Bog People,* 176.

cauldron, medieval poets "knew that the blood-filled vessel of life energy was the cauldron of the Crone long before it was the cup of Christ," as would a contemporary Irish poet writing of a "cauldron / of generation" swung from the center of a blood-holt.[19]

Assuredly, the cauldron had a specialized meaning among the Celts. As Harding attests,

> The silver vessel [used by the Celtic priestess in sacrificial rite] was called the "Cauldron of Regeneration." It is the cauldron of the Moon Goddess who was the giver of fertility and of love. The blood poured into it must have formed a regenerating drink, or possibly bath. It is also recorded that the cauldron must be boiled until it yielded "three drops of the grace of inspiration," so that it is also the cauldron of inspiration. . . . The chalice containing blood is the sacrificial cauldron of the Celtic Moon Goddess. To drink from that vessel bestows regeneration, renewal, perhaps immortality.

Not surprisingly, given this symbolic importance, the cauldron plays a prominent role in a host of Celtic legends.[20]

The most celebrated Celtic cauldron is the real silver-gilt vessel known as the Gundestrup cauldron, discovered in 1891 where it had been dismantled and placed—likely as an offering in the first or second century B.C.E.—in a small bog near Borre Fen in northern Denmark. Though its decorative motifs are Celtic, the smithing and metal suggest an origin outside Denmark, possibly Gaul; Ruth Megaw and Vincent Megaw argue persuasively for an eastern European provenance. How the vessel got to Denmark remains a mystery (as war booty, commissioned art, an import?); perhaps most scholars believe it was carried north as plunder. To the bowl's walls had been attached discrete metal plates. In its reassembled form, seven of an original eight short plates line the exterior, five long rectangles face the interior, and one circular plate covers the bowl's base. The vivid reliefs worked into these plates feature such figures as a goddess of war, possibly Medbh (inner plate B and outer plate e), and a male deity who resembles Cernunnos, the horned Celtic version of Dionysus (inner plate A). Outer plate f, depicting a goddess and her attendants, appears on the cover of the British edition of Heaney's *Seeing Things.* Most pertinently for our purposes, inner plate E

19. Walker, *Crone,* 121–22, 103, 106.
20. Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 165. See also J. Matthews, *Grail,* 9–10.

depicts a foot soldier's ritual immersion headfirst into a cauldron half his size, calling to mind the Celtic tales of victims sacrificed over and in cauldrons. As the soldiers—or prisoners—who approach the cauldron from below appear to be transformed, by drowning or bathing, into the warriors riding away above on horseback, the scene also illustrates the cauldron's distinctive, regenerating role (figs. 7 and 8).[21]

Heaney likely did have in mind the Celtic cauldron's role as container for ritually shed blood when creating the blood-holt kenning. Perhaps, too, he had in mind the sacrifice of more than prisoners of war: the sacrifice of a king, a consort of the goddess whose life was offered in her honor, might also qualify the chamber as a "love-den," especially if it were here that the ritual marriage had also been enacted. "There can be little doubt," asserts Powell, "that the Celtic king, in fully pagan times at least, met a violent but ritual end, and there are a number of somewhat veiled allusions to deaths by weapon wounds, drowning and burning, in the midst of high magic, in the presence of the hag and the tribal god." Without further explanation, he notes as well that "the tribal god's cauldron played its part also in the sacred building into which certain kings were brought for their deaths."[22]

Merlin Stone's chapter "If the King Did Not Weep" summarizes the available evidence from a variety of cultures and historical periods indicating that the first "kings" were temporary consorts of a high priestess or queen, representative of the goddess. At the end of a specified period, possibly on an annual basis, the consort was slain in ritual sacrifice, if not as part of a fertility rite, then as punishment when "he was no longer willing to defer to the wishes, commands and power of the Goddess." P. V. Glob attributes the death of various male bog bodies to such a practice:

> The Tollund man and many of the other bog men, after their brief times as god and husband of the goddess—the time of the spring feasts and the wanderings through the villages—fulfilled the final

21. See Glob, *Bog People,* 83, 86, 171–79; Miranda J. Green, "The Gods and the Supernatural," 468–70; Ruth Megaw and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art: From Its Beginnings to the Book of Kells,* 174–77 (and 291 for sources); Peter Northover, "The Technology of Metalwork: Bronze and Gold," 302; and Powell, *The Celts,* 193–94.

22. Powell, *The Celts,* 150, 153.

Fig. 7. SILVER CAULDRON FROM RÆVEMOSE / RAEVE BOG, NEAR GUNDESTRUP
West Himmerland, Region North Jutland, Denmark
By courtesy of Lennert Larsen / Nationalmuseet / National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen

Fig. 8. SCENE OF HUMAN SACRIFICE OR REBIRTH
Detail from interior plate E, Gundestrup cauldron
By courtesy of Werner Forman Archive / Nationalmuseet / National Museum of Denmark, Photographers Direct

> demand of religion. They were sacrificed and placed in the sacred bogs; and consummated by their death the rites which ensured for the peasant community luck and fertility in the coming year. At the same time, through their sacrificial deaths, they were themselves consecrated for all time to Nerthus, goddess of fertility.[23]

Heaney makes a similar assumption about the sacrificial "bridegroom to the goddess" eulogized in his own "The Tollund Man" (*WO,* 47–48).

Writing about a recumbent stone circle, Burl concedes that excavators have discovered so many related artifacts that "it seems it would be a straightforward matter to decide what the circles were used for. A recumbent stone circle, however, is not a treasury but a tantalus. As in a dance of the veils, one by one the coverings are removed, a little more of the mystery is disclosed until everything is about to be revealed, and then, as the last veil falls . . . the lights go out."[24] In a similar way, one may expect through careful explication to decipher the exact uses of Heaney's *bān-hūs.* But the reader who also recalls the poem "Parable Island" might temper that expectation, realizing that literary criticism may not trump archaeology, whose science, the poem tells us, can be inexact:

> Now archaeologists begin to gloss the glosses.
> To one school, the stone circles are pure symbol;
> to another, assembly spots or hut foundations.
> (*HL,* 11)

The furnishings of this hut, we have learned, have multiple uses, all of which may have been employed at various times. Even so, its fire and benches; the roofspace that hosts a soul separated recently from its body; the crock used to contain a brain; the cauldron if not of *re*generation, at least of generation; and the three provocative kennings with which the stanzas conclude all suggest that the chamber is more than a charnel house and point to its role as shrine, sacrificial setting, even possible marriage bower. Certainly, nothing in Heaney's *bān-hūs* rules it out as shelter either for the sacred marriage or for the sacrifice of the goddess's consort, whether king or substitute; the bone-house could even serve as a backdrop for both rituals,

23. Stone, *When God Was a Woman,* 135; Glob, *Bog People,* 190, 192.
24. Burl, *Rings of Stone,* 15.

and those final kennings are much easier to understand when viewed in such a context.

At the least, Heaney is intertwining here, in four short stanzas, death-related and sexual/regenerative concepts and terms. Like the ancient Celts and Anglo-Saxons themselves, he seems to be proclaiming the inseparability of life and death, the intimate association among the procreative act ("love-den"), sacrifice and death ("blood-holt"), and intercessory, meditative fertility or initiation rite ("dream-bower"). The view is emphatically cyclic, decidedly antipatriarchal; it is a view carried forward in the following four stanzas, section 4 of the poem.

The final line of section 3 comprises the kenning "dream-bower" and acts aptly both to conclude one "bone dream" and to lead then subtly to the next. More than any other of the poem's six sections, section 4 (with section 5 as its extension) represents the high imagination characteristic of the dream or trance. In a way, section 3 merely sets the stage for sections 4 and 5. Perhaps sections 4 and 5 offer the best evidence of all that the *bān-hūs* we have been pondering may be a bower for the sacred marriage of goddess and tribal representative, at least during an earlier period of time when the "bone's lair" was still "a love-nest / in the grass":

> Come back past
> philology and kennings,
> re-enter memory
> where the bone's lair
>
> is a love-nest
> in the grass.
> I hold my lady's head
> like a crystal
>
> and ossify myself
> by gazing: I am screes
> on her escarpments,
> a chalk giant
>
> carved upon her downs.
> Soon my hands, on the sunken
> fosse of her spine
> move towards the passes.

The section begins with an invitation to step back further in time, into the "memory" of Britannic prehistory. In this distant past, an era that would have raised more than an eyebrow at "philology and kennings," "the Celts were essentially illiterate and, in the absence of writing . . . , relied on the training of the memory to preserve their traditions and ways of life."[25] Thus, the poem offers a small window onto scenes that memories long untrained have propelled into near oblivion. Specifically, the poem asks us to remember a time when bones now sepulchered supported human flesh, when flesh now decomposed engaged in lovemaking. Death and the procreative act, extremes in human activity, are again juxtaposed and intertwined. What follows is yet another poetic version of the sacred marriage.

The four stanzas that constitute this love poem tell us little about its "lady"; the focus, instead, is on the narrator's response to her, a response epitomized by several figures of speech.[26] First, the narrator compares holding his lady's head—a portion of the anatomy venerated among the Celts, recall, "as the most important bodily member, the very seat of the soul"—to holding a crystal, that form of typically clear and transparent quartz used in magic practice to facilitate a trance, dissolve time barriers, and see, dreamlike, into the past, present, and future. Crystal balls have frequently been retrieved, with such other luxury items as jewelry and gold-decorated headbands, from the sixth-century graves of apparent noblewomen in England and on the Continent; scholars link them to possible ritual, even magical, use among the Anglo-Saxons. In 1855 on the Isle of Wight, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Chessell Down, George Hillier recovered a dark crystal ball, mounted in a silver sling and resting on a silver sieve-spoon, from grave 45, the island's most lavishly equipped sixth-century burial (fig. 9). The ball and spoon lay, as many similar finds have been positioned, between the skeleton's legs, suggesting that the items hung originally from a belt or girdle at the waist. Earlier that year, a clearer, shinier crystal ball mounted in silver had been retrieved, along with such burial goods as silver-gilt brooches and a bronze buckle, from nearby grave 40 (fig. 10). Gale Owen (later Owen-Crocker) speculates that those who, like the well-off woman buried in grave 45, owned crystal balls and spoons

25. H. H. Scullard, *Roman Britain: Outpost of the Empire,* 14.

26. See my earlier response to the possibility that the poem's female persona is a soul-projection, in the Introduction herein.

"performed some magical rite with the objects." Audrey L. Meaney assembles the evidence that supports such a conclusion, including Robert Mannyng's fourteenth-century reference to scrying.[27]

A metaphor that invokes holding a crystal thus draws on archaeological reality and is especially apt in a poem that asks us to "reenter memory." The metaphor is even more apt when one considers that to gaze into a crystal ball is to look with serious intent, meaningfully, for meaning, just as a lover is inclined to look into the eyes of the loved one. In a clever permutation of the sequence's bone motif, the narrator then describes this process as turning him to bone (or bonelike substance): he claims to "ossify" himself, presumably achieving an erection (or "boner"), "by gazing."[28] The colon that follows *gazing* announces two additional intriguing metaphors to explain his meaning.

In the first, "I am screes / on her escarpments," the narrator compares himself to the small, broken stones lying loosely at the foot of a steep slope or cliff (sometimes formed deliberately for the purpose of fortification). It is a humble, self-abasing stance: what self-interested man would describe himself as mere bonelike stones scattered at his lover's feet? It is also a stance obeisant on a much larger level, for the metaphor acts to vivify the love felt by a man not only for a woman but also for his goddess, in this case the earth goddess herself. He is screes, he tells us, upon the slopes of her hills, and hills, reminiscent of the female breast, have often been identified as a special manifestation of the earth/sovereignty goddess. Proinisias Mac Cana, for example, reports that "the name of . . . twin hills in Co. Kerry was Da Chich Anann, 'The Paps of Anu' [the name of a Munster fertility goddess], and they are still referred to in English as 'The Paps.'"[29] But the narrator's relation to the goddess is typified most clearly when he describes himself, next, as "a chalk giant // carved upon her downs."

27. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* 124; Owen, *Rites and Religion,* 70. For more on graves 45 and 40 (25 and 20 to Hillier), see C. J. Arnold, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries on the Isle of Wight,* 25–28, 64–65. For more on Anglo-Saxon crystal balls, see Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones,* 81–96 (in which grave 45 is 15 and Mannyng is quoted on 94); and Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England,* 93–95. In the eighteenth century, similar crystal balls appeared in Ireland and Scotland.

28. My thanks to Conor Johnston for his insight here.

29. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 83.

Fig. 9. BURIAL PLAN FOR AN ANGLO-SAXON WOMAN
Grave 45, Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, England
Engraving (not to scale)
by George Hillier, 1855
From *Collectanea Antiqua: Etchings and Notices of Ancient Remains, Illustrative of the Habits, Customs, and History of Past Ages* (1868) by Charles Roach Smith

Fig. 10. ANGLO-SAXON CRYSTAL BALL IN A SILVER MOUNT
Grave 40, Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, England

A surprising variety of "hill figures," likenesses both animal and human, have been carved over time into British hills, particularly into the hills of the open, grassy, treeless chalk uplands of England's South and Southeast. Such terrain features "long, sinuous escarpments stretching for miles across the countryside and presenting the artists with steeply tilted easels," ensuring their handiwork will be seen from a distance. "The chalk soils are thick and the green turf provides a strong dark foil for the giant scraperboard images scratched through them. The outcrop of Jurassic limestone running across the country parallel to the chalk is almost as well suited."[30] Two of the drawings benefiting from these natural advantages are among the most famous hill figures of all: the Cerne Abbas Giant in Dorset and the Wilmington Long Man in Sussex.

Of the two figures, the more often reproduced is the Giant of Cerne Abbas. The following description suggests why: "On the steep slope of Trundle Hill, a quarter of a mile north of Cerne Abbas Church, stands the monstrous figure of a man facing slightly south of west. From the top of his head to the soles of his feet, he measures 180 feet, his club in his right hand bringing the total height of man and weapon to 200 feet. . . . He is portrayed as equipped with a phallus 30 feet in length, with accompanying masculine features." The Cerne Abbas Giant has been described as the "most remarkable portrait in Britain of male aggressiveness and sexual energy." Truly, "with his erect phallus . . . and his huge knobbed club, [the giant] is altogether a more unruly and antic figure than the Long Man"; after all, only the outline of the more self-respecting figure confronts visitors to the downs. Yet the Long Man is also the taller of the two giants: despite a foreshortened appearance when viewed from the ground, the figure extends a full 231 feet up the side of its Sussex hill (figs. 11 and 12).[31]

Based on a perceived similarity to Hercules, the Cerne Giant has generally been supposed to be Romano-Celtic, "cut at a time when Britons were becoming familiar with the gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon to which they had been introduced by their

30. Rodney Castleden, *Ancient British Hill Figures,* 5. With such figures, what appears to be exposed chalk bedrock can actually be fill of chalk rubble piled into shallow ditches (see 6). See also Kate Bergamar, *Discovering Hill Figures,* for a guide to the chalk figures of England and Scotland.

31. H. S. L. Dewar, *The Giant of Cerne Abbas,* 5; as quoted in Bergamar, *Discovering Hill Figures,* 15, with no original source; Castleden, *Wilmington Giant,* 28.

Fig. 11. THE LONG MAN OF WILMINGTON
Near Eastbourne, Sussex, England

Fig. 12. THE CERNE ABBAS GIANT
Dorset, England

conquerors." A reliable analysis of its age, however, has yet to be conducted: it could be shown to share an Iron Age origin with another chalk figure of demonstrated age, the White Horse of Uffington; it could be as new as the Long Man of Wilmington, dated by recent fieldwork to the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The actual dates for the figures matter little, however, to the popular imagination, long confident that the downland hills mount portraits of lost Britannic gods. The Cerne Abbas Giant, so like the iconographic and written depictions of Iron Age Celtic warriors, has been thought to portray such Celtic deities as Nodens and the Daghda (also Daghdha or Dagda); some have favored the god Cernunnos or a local deity known as Helis (also Hele or Helith). The identity of the less familiar-looking Long Man has also attracted speculation: he is Baldur the Beautiful, Odin, Lugh (or Lugus)—or any other of a range of legendary figures, divine and otherwise.[32]

Perhaps most memorably, researcher Rodney Castleden argued in a 1983 book that the Long Man depicts a Neolithic god, "the midsummer sunman who brought [to his devotees] light, warmth and a full belly . . . [and] who mysteriously activated the magic squares of the arable fields and caused the crops to grow." For Castleden, this prototypical Britannic divinity, known by such names as "year-god, guardian-god, barley-god, sickle-god and sun-god," was the same deity as the much later Dionysus, consort to the goddess. Castleden's model of the Neolithic cosmos assumed the supreme position of the earth goddess; the recovery of ancient Britannic phalli fashioned from chalk or bone is viewed as evidence that "the male principle was [also] held in some awe." Thus, in the setting of the Sussex hill country, today the site of a modern chalk giant's sloping green canvas, the ancient inhabitants revered both the goddess and her Dionysian companion as vital presences in their lives.[33]

32. Dewar, *Giant of Cerne Abbas,* 6. See also Martin Bell, "Not So Long Ago"; Castleden, *Ancient British Hill Figures,* 65–68, *The Cerne Giant,* 133–54, and *Wilmington Giant,* 82; Paul Newman, *Lost Gods of Albion: The Chalk Hill-Figures of Britain,* 79–97, 140–50; Powell, *The Celts,* 155; and Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* 381. For Ní Dhomhnaill's use of the Daghda, see "Carnival," Muldoon's translation of "Feis" (*AC,* 13), in Chapter 2 herein.

33. Castleden, *Wilmington Giant,* 138, 189, 179. In *Ancient British Hill Figures* (2000), Castleden withdrew his earlier conclusion that the Wilmington Giant depicted the moment of the sun-god's arrival to the valley. His insights into the Neolithic mind-set remain trenchant.

Castleden may have been influenced in such views by Sir James Frazer, whose seminal *The Golden Bough* links the changing of the seasons, "and particularly the annual growth and decay of vegetation," to human explanations "as episodes in the life of gods." Frazer also designates Dionysus, to whom he devotes a chapter of his treatise, as a primary example of "deities of vegetation, who are believed to pass a certain portion of each year underground, [and] naturally come to be regarded as gods of the lower world or of the dead." At least as important for this study, and as documented in my first chapter, Frazer also links Dionysus to an annual Greek enactment of the sacred marriage. Walter F. Otto further comments on the figure when he describes Dionysus as "not only the exultant god, the god who brings man joy. He is the suffering and dying god, the god of tragic contrast" whose "duality has manifested itself to us in the antitheses of ecstasy and horror, infinite vitality and savage destruction." Friedrich Nietzsche instructs us as well in the values associated with the Dionysian realm when he emphasizes their opposition to Apollonian light, reason, and classical beauty, asserting in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature, which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man." In Heaney's poem, the narrator assumes an essentially Dionysian role. He is an amorous, determined, appropriately scaled suitor of the goddess, a triumphant courtier who lies upon her downs, those "vast protuberances . . . [with their] deep divisions between, suggestive of the most prominent and beautiful curves of the human figure."[34] On the most literal level, then, the narrator is preparing to make love to the earth goddess; he is her consort, an enthusiastic lover both subservient and bold who will enact the sacred marriage in "a love-nest / in the grass," and whose

> hands, on the sunken
> fosse of her spine
> move toward the passes.

A backbone, of course, is normally raised; a spine described as a shallow depression, moat, or ditch could belong only to an unusual

34. Frazer, *Golden Bough,* 448, 452 (see also 164–65); Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult,* 78, 121; Nietzsche, *"The Birth of Tragedy" and "The Case of Wagner,"* 37; W. H. Hudson, *Nature in Downland,* 22.

body: the earth herself, or a human body in some state of malformation or decay. Suddenly, we are reminded that the goddess is also a hag, but we are reminded as well that, to the Dionysian narrator, his hands moving without hesitation "toward the passes" between buttocks and breasts, the fact is immaterial, a point made even more emphatically in section 5 of the poem:

> And we end up
> cradling each other
> between the lips
> of an earthwork.
>
> As I estimate
> for pleasure
> her knuckles' paving,
> the turning stiles
>
> of the elbows,
> the vallum of her brow
> and the long wicket
> of collar-bone,
>
> I have begun to pace
> the Hadrian's Wall
> of her shoulder, dreaming
> of Maiden Castle.

The "And" with which the section begins clearly introduces a sequel to section 4: we can assume that the couple is "cradling each other" after a ritual act of lovemaking that occurred offstage. But the desire of the narrator, at least, is not yet slaked. Already he is again appraising, "for pleasure," his lover's knuckles, elbows, brow, and collar-bone, measuring her shoulder, dreaming as he does "of Maiden Castle."

The imagery of the poem operates deliberately on several levels. Most obviously, the knuckles, elbows, brow, collar-bone, and shoulder refer to parts of a living human body; they also refer to a body's bones, living or dead. Thus, on one level, the Dionysian narrator is making love to a skeleton, a hag even less lifelike than the flesh-retaining bodies from the bog, though once again, to her far-seeing lover, her loathsomeness is a matter of no consequence. In

addition, her knuckles are "paving"; her elbows "turning stiles"; her brow a "vallum" or defensive rampart of earth, especially Roman; her collar-bone a "long wicket" or gateway; and her shoulder "Hadrian's Wall," the remarkable barrier built by Hadrian to protect Roman Britain from Celtic tribes living to the north. One could almost be tempted to assign Roman nationality to Heaney's goddess-lover, but aside from his references to a vallum and famous Roman wall, the terms used here have no specific Roman connotations and could as easily represent "barbarian" bulwarks. More significant, Heaney's metaphors refer to pieces and methods of fortification; perhaps here we have an attempt to illustrate the aggressive side of the great goddess. At the minimum, the allusions recall the anti-Petrarchan sentiment of such poems as Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") and reinforce the goddess's dimension as hag.

The reference to Maiden Castle involves more complex connotations. The imposing hillfort, "stronghold and sanctuary from the Neolithic till the Iron Age[s],"[35] was believed at the time of the poem's writing to have staged "one of the fiercest battles of the Roman conquest of Britain." The mutilated skeletons discovered at the site horrified Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the archaeologist who excavated there during the summers of 1934 to 1937 and presumed the bones belonged to overwhelmed defenders of the massive earthwork (fig. 13). New fieldwork, suggesting bodies were buried over time rather than following a single event, has only more recently revised the view that the hillfort fell in a dramatic defeat that wielded "the death-blow to British resistance in south-west Britain." Is Heaney's narrator, then, dreaming of conquest, even brutal conquest, when he dreams of Maiden Castle? Perhaps—but the affectionate tone suggests otherwise. After all, a couple "cradling each other" betokens mutual feeling, not a one-sided involvement necessitating forceful persuasion of the unenamored party.[36]

35. Scullard, *Roman Britain*, 9.

36. *Heritage of Britain*, 30. See also Niall M. Sharples, *Maiden Castle: Excavation and Field Survey, 1985–6*, 100–101; and R. E. M. Wheeler, *Maiden Castle, Dorset*, 61–65. Figure 12, detail of a photograph taken by M. B. Cookson (Wheeler, *Maiden Castle, Dorset*, plate 52B), shows two skeletons Wheeler believed to be evidence for a Roman massacre. Their arms do not intertwine, but the frames lean together: could they be described as "cradling each other / between the lips / of an earthwork"?

Fig. 13. SKELETONS EXCAVATED AT MAIDEN CASTLE
Dorset, England
From *Roman Britain: Outpost of the Empire* (1979) by H. H. Scullard
By courtesy of Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London

More likely, the narrator identifies here with the injured Britons rather than with the conquering Romans, perhaps dreaming of his own forthcoming sacrificial death. If he *is* dreaming of conquest, it is only figurative, and in a romantic context. Certainly, Maiden Castle is an ancient earthwork fortification, once thought to be the scene of grisly slaughter, and its name, albeit evocative, was commonly applied to English and Scottish strongholds or high settlements since at least the twelfth century. But the name lives up to its tantalizing

promise by also alluding to "the castle of women, the world of the Fee or mount of Venus, which is the hidden aspect of the Grail castle" redeemed by Gawain in Wolfram's *Parzifal*.[37] Known as the Castle of Maidens, "place of the feminine mysteries of the Grail [where] the Lady of the Lake and her entourage hold court, . . . this castle should not be seen as the domain of women only, however: men with sufficient understanding of the feminine principle are welcome here also and can learn much from such a visit." Surely, Heaney's Dionysian narrator has sufficient empathy to enter and learn within this mysterious realm of the "woman as Grail"; surely, too, dreaming of Maiden Castle also epitomizes his growing desire to touch more than his lover's shoulders, indeed, to reenter "the womb of life."[38]

Affectionate tone on one hand, metaphors reminiscent of warfare and death on the other. Lovemaking on one hand, skeletal allusions on the other. Once again, generation and death inseparably linked; once again, the goddess revered in a less than charming pose—in this case, without even her skin. Variant treatment indeed of the sovereignty theme and ritual marriage in Irish verse, and the effects are unique: "Bone Dreams" is an original, freeing effort to transcend restricting polarities, to reach back into prehistory to model a form of union that can dissolve divisive ethnic, cultural, and political difference—and even propel us with its energy of vision, in the words Heaney will later use to describe *Beowulf*, "forward into the global village of the third millennium" (IB, xiii). If translating *Beowulf* represents, again in Heaney's words, "one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with [Ireland and England's] complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism" (IB, xxx), "Bone Dreams" is an earlier attempt to do so, though Heaney relies here for his vehicle on the marriage of sovereignty rather than on the *Beowulf* poet's commanding Anglo-Saxon.

The motif of the ritual marriage, of course, also included a reference to a sacred libation proffered by goddess-bride to prospective king. Remotely, the rising water level in "Come to the Bower" and the mysterious cauldron in "Bone Dreams" may develop this theme. But we must look to "A Drink of Water" to fill out our discussion of the marriage of sovereignty as adapted in Heaney's verse:

37. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 167. On the current and past names of the earthwork, see Wheeler, *Maiden Castle, Dorset,* 8–14.

38. Matthews and Green, *Grail Seeker's Companion,* 53.

She came every morning to draw water
Like an old bat staggering up the field:
The pump's whooping cough, the bucket's clatter
And slow diminuendo as it filled,
Announced her. I recall
Her grey apron, the pocked white enamel
Of the brimming bucket, and the treble
Creak of her voice like the pump's handle.
Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable
It fell back through her window and would lie
Into the water set out on the table.
Where I have dipped to drink again, to be
Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
Remember the Giver fading off the lip.

(*FW,* 16)

Like the guardian of the well in the story of Eochoid's sons, the water-pumping woman of Heaney's boyhood elegized here is the *cailleach,* that specter so disconcerting to those who would deny the reality of aging, the inevitability of death. She approaches the well *"Like* an | *old bat* | *stag*ger | ing *up* | the *field,"* the line itself lurching, batlike (how adroitly Heaney transfuses the overworked "old bat"), as its three successive stresses give way to two light syllables only to catch itself again on the accented *up.* Her apron is grey: the color connotes dullness, dreariness, old age itself. The "treble / Creak of her voice" (*creak* aptly the highest-pitched note in the line, if not in the poem) reminds the narrator of the noise made by the pump handle's shrill creaking. The pump itself is afflicted with whooping cough, the white enamel of the clattering bucket is "pocked," and its inscription is "fading": the language of infirmity applies even to the tools of the lady's trade. The bucket is nonetheless "brimming"; the sonnet's sestet could scarcely affirm more strongly the restorative quality of the lady's drink. At least one critic has previously noted the old woman's kinship with the *cailleach;* another links the poem to the traditional wedding toast.[39] The *cailleach* and her offer of drink, however, require joint consideration—and against the background of the marriage of sovereignty.

39. Carolyn Meyer, untitled essay in the section "*A Drink of Water* (by Seamus Heaney)," 8:74. See also 69 for insight into the "poem as a toast." For extended application of the poem and an overview of critical response, see the entire article.

As Mac Cana asserts, "The wedding ritual of the *banais righi* evidently comprised two main elements, a libation offered by the bride to her partner and the coition." Similarly, T. F. O'Rahilly comments that "it is likely that in pagan times the acceptance by the bridegroom of a draught of liquor handed to him by the bride signified mutual consent to the marriage. If so, we may suppose that this part of the ceremony, at least, originated in imitation of the religious wedding ritual performed at the inauguration of kings." Recalling that the sovereignty goddess is also "the goddess of springs and rivers, we can see the appropriateness of representing her as filling her cup with liquor and handing it to her intended spouse." It is also easy to see why "receiving the cup of drink from the goddess, or winning her cup, was tantamount to winning the goddess herself." For example, in the bargain struck between Niall and his hag—drink for a kiss—"the marriage of king and goddess is symbolized by the gift of liquor."[40]

So too is the sacred marriage shadowed in Heaney's poem when the narrator dips, even if symbolically, from the old woman's cup. The water, recall, is "set out" on "Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable," and since the full moon is the classic symbol of the Great Goddess in her most beneficent guise, the water "set out on the table" is most certainly an offering not only to the thirsty narrator but to the goddess herself.[41] Happily, the moon's rising over the old woman's house only to fall "back through her window . . . [so as to] lie / Into the water" must signify that her offering is accepted and approved, even enlivened and enriched. To drink from water thus blessed is akin to drinking from the goddess's own cup. The poem might be written by Niall himself some years after his initial encounter with the hag at the well: he could no more fittingly convey his continuing dependence on and gratitude for her favor than to return to her willingly

> to drink again, to be
> Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
> *Remember the Giver* fading off the lip.

40. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology,* 119; O'Rahilly, "Origin of the Names *Érainn* and *Ériu,*" 15, 14, 16, 17.

41. See Harding, *Woman's Mysteries,* 24–34, on the relationship between the moon and the feminine principle.

According to A. G. Van Hamel, "The act of drinking from a particular well may have the deeper meaning [in Celtic mythology] of a communication with the earth and a magical enlightenment as to its secrets." In this view, when the narrator of "A Drink of Water" dips into the water the crone so graciously provides, he may dip as well into the "the maternal domain of the unconscious," the restorative, knowledge-bequeathing pool of memory and poetic inspiration.[42] He can even be said to drink from the Grail cup, honoring as he does so the realm of the archetypal feminine as few are willing to do, for "in the drinking of the Goddess's waters the ego's personal claim to power is renounced." In its place, the ego acknowledges dependence on sacred energies, "flowing from the sovereignty of life," which must "be handled in a reverential fashion if the protection of the Goddess is to be gained," or retained, and how many of us are willing to renounce unequivocally our "personal claim to power," especially when the goddess who invites us to do so rises before us like a staggering old bat?[43]

This narrator, however, is no ordinary member of our ranks. Disregarding the hag's appearance, he has drunk already from the water she "set out" in offering; he returns now to drink again, a tribute surely to the drink she proffers but, more important, a gesture of submission and an acknowledgment of her superior wisdom: in seeking another "drink of water," he literally obeys the charge inscribed on her cup to "Remember the Giver." The lettering of the charge may appear faint, but the narrator's compliance with its request, at least for Dillon Johnston, "re-etches the admonishment and restores it to the lip."[44] At the minimum, when the narrator returns to the memory of a kind old woman in this poem, he does so in an effort "to be / Faithful" to her admonishment and to her, to the maternal, the feminine, the loathsome—and to the sovereignty goddess of the earth, springs, and rivers who first entrusts man with her liquid, life-sustaining gift. He is, after all, her bridegroom, pledged, for whatever length of time she may allow him to live, to fidelity and devotion toward his divine bride.

42. Van Hamel, "Aspects of Celtic Mythology," 246; Jung and Von Franz, *The Grail Legend,* 113. "In readings Heaney has related the slogan to the muse" (Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce,* 151). Johnston cites a reading at Kelly's Hotel, Dublin, January 10, 1980.

43. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 173.

44. Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce,* 151–52.

The pail of water remembered in this poem does not, like the small white bone in "Bone Dreams," send us spinning back in time to earlier epochs. Nevertheless, it functions as a focal point for the reader, its image serving as "a point of entry into a common emotional ground of memory and belonging" (PPP, 31). Additionally, one should not underestimate its power as an elegiac symbol for a simple, generous woman whom Heaney knew in his rural Ulster youth.[45] "A Drink of Water" is an eloquent acknowledgment of our dependence on nature and the feminine principle—and the necessity to recall that dependence. In true sonnet fashion, it is also a love poem, written by Heaney to the mother of us all, though it might as easily have been written by Niall to his hag or by Gawain to his loathly bride. Together with "Come to the Bower" and "Bone Dreams," it dramatizes the enduring value of the feminine and cyclic over the patriarchal and linear and draws powerfully upon the traditions of the ancient Celtic *Feis* of Tara to make of us a fervent collective request: Remember the Giver. Poems like these, in which we have encountered the sovereignty goddess in such striking manifestations, will undoubtedly simplify that task. Thanks to the startling, singular verse in which they appear, the *cailleacha* loved and revered in "Come to the Bower," "Bone Dreams," and "A Drink of Water" will be anything but easy to forget.

45. Heaney describes how, in the early 1940s, five families used a common pump located by the Heaney family's back door: "Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water" ("Mossbawn," *P,* 17).

Appendix to Chapter 6

"Bone Dreams"

I

White bone found
on the grazing:
the rough, porous
language of touch

and its yellowing, ribbed
impression in the grass—
a small ship-burial.
As dead as stone,

flint-find, nugget
of chalk,
I touch it again,
I wind it in

the sling of mind
to pitch it at England
and follow its drop
to strange fields.

II

Bone-house:
a skeleton
in the tongue's
old dungeons.

I push back
through dictions,
Elizabethan canopies.
Norman devices,

the erotic mayflowers
of Provence
and the ivied latins
of churchmen

to the scop's
twang, the iron
flash of consonants
cleaving the line.

III

In the coffered
riches of grammar
and declensions
I found *ban-hus*,

its fire, benches,
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while

in the roofspace.
There was a small crock
for the brain,
and a cauldron

of generation
swung at the centre:
love-den, blood-holt,
dream-bower.

IV

Come back past
philology and kennings,
re-enter memory
where the bone's lair

is a love-nest
in the grass.
I hold my lady's head
like a crystal

and ossify myself
by gazing: I am screes
on her escarpments,
a chalk giant

carved upon her downs.
Soon my hands, on the sunken
fosse of her spine
move towards the passes.

V

And we end up
cradling each other
between the lips
of an earthwork.

As I estimate
for pleasure
her knuckles' paving,
the turning stiles

of the elbows,
the vallum of her brow
and the long wicket
of collar-bone,

I have begun to pace
the Hadrian's Wall
of her shoulders, dreaming
of Maiden Castle.

VI

One morning in Devon
I found a dead mole
with the dew still beading it.
I had thought the mole

a big-boned coulter
but there it was
small and cold
as the thick of a chisel.

I was told "Blow,
blow back the fur on his head.
Those little points
were the eyes.

And feel the shoulders."
I touched small distant Pennines,
a pelt of grass and grain
running south.

Conclusion

Praying at the Water's Edge

> [W]e stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe,
>
> More scouts than strangers, ghosts who'd walked abroad
> Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning
> And make a go of it, alive and sinning,
> Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.
>
> —Seamus Heaney, "Tollund" (September 1994), in *The Spirit Level*

> The poet who had once taken up a position in the real world from which he explored analogies of distant metaphor now reversed the process, occupying a world of metaphor from which he could now and then look back upon the real.
>
> —Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*

Like so many Gaelic and Anglo-Irish poets before him, Seamus Heaney has turned for inspiration to the traditional Celtic motif of the *Feis* of Tara, or marriage of sovereignty. But unlike nearly all other contemporary poets who incorporate the motif into their work, Heaney takes a cue from their predecessors and imbues his mythic adaptation with political subtext. The resultant poems speak only indirectly to the political situation of Ulster, but they trace their

existence to Heaney's decision in 1969 to find symbols and icons adequate for the Northern Irish predicament. In the mythologically significant *Feis* of Tara, rituals in which the Irish goddess of sovereignty weds a tribal representative, Heaney found one such appropriate, many-faceted emblem, and he employs it to rich effect in poems spanning a number of collections.

In "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N,* 46–47), for example, the sovereignty motif provides Heaney with oblique means to denounce the short-sightedness with which colonizers like Walter Ralegh quelled Irish rebellion. Heaney is willing to admit that the arrogance informing acts of colonization may reside in us all, so he also creates the self-incriminating narrator of a poem like "The Guttural Muse" (*FW,* 28) and suggests it is fear, finally, that keeps us from embracing the feminine and Dionysian set of values that might save us. He proceeds to intimate, through the actions of the heroic and courteous narrators of such poems as "Come to the Bower" (*N,* 31), "Bone Dreams" (*N,* 27–30), and "A Drink of Water" (*FW,* 16) what we must do to redeem ourselves.

The narrators of these poems, unlike the aging, wistful fisherman who longs for healing in "The Guttural Muse," effectively conquer their fear of the feminine. With warmth and understanding, they embrace the revolting hag and, like the Celtic hero Niall of the Nine Hostages and Gawain, Niall's look-alike in English tales of the loathly lady, they recover the Grail remedy for reversing wasteland blight: respect in the place of fear, scorn, or distrust for values of the archetypal feminine and Dionysian realms. Such a powerful cure, especially when it applies a view of life as cyclic round and accords full equality to the marginal among us, can restore even the wasteland depicted in "Ocean's Love to Ireland"—and mitigate a wide array of contemporary social ills traced, ultimately, to the trademark arrogance of the one-time colonizer.

This is where the ancient ceremonies of the Celtic *Feis* of Tara come into play. Heaney's appropriations from the motif extend beyond its sacrificial aspects to its lovemaking with a hag: in "Come to the Bower," the poem's narrator engages in loving sexual foreplay with a bog body; in "Bone Dreams," a skeleton is gently caressed. As revealed by the poems' language and prosody, their narrators approach these contemporary hags with affection and tenderness. Heaney here represents the humility vitally required in our interactions with each other, particularly with those considered undesirable

by the patriarchy. It is kindness, after all, that transforms the hags of Celtic and medieval English literature into beautiful maidens. The curses under which they labor are thereby broken, freeing them to display their true selves to those who offer them respect.

The journey of the archetypal Grail hero, though, does not end with his discovery of the draft contained in the elusive, healing cup. The knight who has achieved the Grail quest must next apply what his adventures have taught him, shifting his focus from a "magico-mythological system that dealt with power by propitiation," through such rites as those of the *Feis* of Tara, to "an ethically responsible sense of personal freedom and choice." As could be expected, later volumes of Heaney's verse reveal a similar shift in emphasis. Where poems from his first volumes indicate strong willingness to appeal to Celtic ritual and espouse the hag in her bog, burial site, or cottage, later collections reveal that the poet has left behind "bogs and megaliths with their archaeological secrets" and assumed the role of a seeker of mysteries and "marvels" ("Fosterling," *ST,* 52). Arthur E. McGuinness aptly summarizes: "He has left the secure feminine nest and has embarked on a moral and artistic journey to unfamiliar places."[1]

This is, of course, no news for critics of Heaney's work over the past four decades. McGuinness sees the shift beginning as early as *Field Work,* though I would argue that not only "The Guttural Muse" and "A Drink of Water" but also poems like "The Otter" (*FW,* 47), "The Skunk" (*FW,* 48), and "Homecomings" (*FW,* 49) in their deferential, appreciative pose; "A Dream of Jealousy" (*FW,* 50) in its portrayal of tensions between muse and wife; and "Polder" (*FW,* 51), in which embracing a wife after "squalls" recalls diking back the sea from low-lying coast, all point to the volume's continuing preoccupation with "the feminine." Michael R. Molino is closer to the mark in noting a shift after *Station Island:*

> While Heaney is not likely to forget or abandon the issues of tradition, language, and myth that have played such an important role in his poetry in the past, he has since "Station Island" taken flight, as the speakers in various poems find themselves floating, flying, or gliding above the ground or observing objects that do

1. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess,* 229, 238; McGuinness, *Seamus Heaney: Poet and Critic,* 71, 43.

> so. And *Seeing Things* seems to be Heaney's mature attempt, again at Joyce's behest, to "fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency, / echo sounding, searches, probes, allurements, / elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea." (SI, 94)[2]

Heaney himself is more general about a time frame for a change of direction in his work. As he explains in his speech accepting the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature: "Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as the murderous" ("Crediting Poetry," *OG,* 423). Even more directly, he observes in "Fosterling" that he "was nearly fifty" before he began "To credit marvels" (*ST,* 52). Heaney predicts in "The Tollund Man" (1972) that a future pilgrimage to the Jutland bog that mummified its most famous burial will make him feel "lost / Unhappy and at home" (*WO,* 47–48); his trip the following year to Silkeborg to see the body's strangely familiar head likely engendered just such emotions. As he tells us, however, in "Tollund," he arrived a second time in Jutland twenty-one years later to find himself "at home beyond the tribe," clearly more comfortable than he once imagined he could be. Significantly, this visit coincided with the historic first IRA cease-fire in the autumn of 1994. "Things," he tells us, "had moved on" (*SL,* 80–81)—and sometime during those intervening years, so, apparently, had he.[3] Heaney confirmed a shift in his personal outlook two years later when he returned to Jutland to open an exhibition of bog bodies at Silkeborg Museum. After acknowledging Danish friendships and his "imaginative debt to the Tollund Man and to the spirit of rural Jutland," he remarked: "I can now revise the words that concluded my poem on the Tollund Man and say with gratitude that in the old man-killing parishes I am no longer lost and unhappy, but find myself welcome, happy, and at home" (MB, 6).

This is not to say that Heaney has turned away from the figure of the sovereignty goddess. She continues to make propitious, *spéir-bhean*-like appearances in his verse, as in "The Underground" (*SI,* 13), where her figure shares lineage with Persephone, and in the

2. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* 192–93.

3. See Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney,* 155–56; Fulford, *Gendered Spaces,* 66; and Finn, *Past Poetic,* 101–2, 113.

arrival of the female naturalist and tour guide in "An Aisling in the Burren" (*SI,* 47), a poem in which "County Clare's rocky limestone terrain is pictured as a state of the soul."[4] She materializes as well as in the second section of "Alphabets":

> Here in her snooded garment and bare feet,
> All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes,
> The poet's dream stole over him like sunlight
> And passed into tenebrous thickets
>
> (*HL,* 2)

and in her loathly guise during the "devotions . . . centred towards a feminine presence" depicted in "The Mud Vision" (*HL,* 48–49).[5] Heaney still associates her with wells and healing in "At the Wellhead," in which piano music played by his blind neighbor, Rosie Keenan, "came out to us like hoisted water / Ravelling off a bucket at the wellhead"; Rosie's companionship, moreover, "Was intimate and helpful, like a cure / You didn't notice happening" (*SL,* 76–77). The goddess grows more ethereal with the publication of *Electric Light,* and one strains in "Red, White and Blue" to see her influence when a woman's speech reminds the narrator of "a goddess [who] might vouchsafe / To recall a hero to his ardent purpose"—and when the vehicle he and his hitchhiking companion flag down becomes "a Venus car" (*EL,* 33–37). Just as elusively, the goddess reveals her trace in "Sruth," Heaney's elegy to a woman who invited him to visit

> Those sky-maiden haunts
> [She] would tell [him] about
>
> Again and again—

as she washes her "face / In the guttural glen" (*EL,* 92–93). A sure allusion to the *spéirbhean,* the lines provide more passing reference than invocation.

Most recently, *District and Circle* returns to the theme as the goddess's former consort describes his resurrection in "The Tollund Man in Springtime":

4. Tobin, *Passage to the Center,* 201.
5. Heaney, "Meeting Seamus Heaney," 61.

> I reawoke to revel in the spirit
> They strengthened when they chose to put me down
> For their own good
>
> (*DC,* 53)

—though the world to which he returns is endangered ecologically and in need of new and different sacrifices. Our continued need for healing at the goddess's well motivates the pilgrimage to Lourdes in "Brancardier," the second poem of the three-part "Out of This World": "And always the word 'cure' hangs in the air"; fittingly, the narrator returns home with "one plastic canteen litre / . . . of the Lourdes water" (*DC,* 46–47). In "Chairing Mary," the second poem of "Home Help," the hag makes an updated appearance as the "Heavy, helpless" woman who must be lifted upstairs in her chair each evening. The two men acting as her "home help" proceed respectfully, "Not averting eyes from her hurting hulk / And not embarrassed"—though they are also "never used to it." The poem concludes with a nod to the traditional kiss—and rue for the lost chance of further kindness: "I think of her warm brow we might have once / Bent to and kissed before we kissed it cold" (*DC,* 69).

One should not be surprised by the waxing, waning appearances of the sovereignty figure and reference to sacred marriage in Heaney's verse. Like the Grail knight who has completed his quest, the poet has refocused his energies. In poems like *The Haw Lantern*'s "From the Frontier of Writing" (6) and "From the Republic of Conscience" (12–13), Heaney declares himself ready to explore new territory, to abandon predetermined ethics for untried terrain—to take personal responsibility for his actions and desires, no matter how shadowy. One suspects that his praise for Czeslaw Milosz, whom he tells us "will be remembered as one who kept alive the idea of individual responsibility in an age of relativism" ("Secular and Millennial Milosz," *FK,* 447), also represents a wish for himself. The poems in *Seeing Things, The Spirit Level,* and *Electric Light* document the discoveries on Heaney's new paths; by the time he writes "Tollund" (in 1994), he is already able to look back with satisfaction on his "new beginning" and know he had "made a go of it" (*SL,* 80–81). Authors of recent books on Heaney's verse agree: the later volumes emphasize personal ethics and responsibility. Henry Hart speaks eloquently of these concerns in the final paragraph of his book: "Heaney's private investigations into writing . . . strive to

reveal truth—the way things are in the present and have been in the past—and reveal justice—the way things should be in the future." And so "poem after poem bears witness to the sort of scrupulous conscience needed to expose and rectify the cultural forces embedded in language that define and, to a certain extent, determine the way we live."[6]

Heaney's career continues to evolve. In the final analysis, his reworking of the *Feis* of Tara motif will not serve as his oeuvre's delineating watermark. Still, in volumes leading up to and including *Field Work,* and with continued play in the subsequent *Station Island, The Haw Lantern, Seeing Things, The Spirit Level, Electric Light,* and *District and Circle,* as well as in his translations of *Buile Suibhne (Sweeney Astray)* and *Cúirt an Mheán-Oiche (The Midnight Verdict),* the motif serves as a critical element of his overall vision. To misunderstand this is to fail to appreciate his imaginative contribution to a long body of literature that appropriated the motif for a startling variety of purposes. In contrast, recognizing the tradition within which many of his poems are written establishes Heaney at once as linked utterly to his Irish past even as he argues memorably for a world beyond the postcolonial, one in which both Hibernian and Britannic live in mutual respect. I pointedly use the term *Britannic* here (as I have earlier), persuaded as I am by Heaney's offer of an alternative to the less inclusive "British":

> In a context where "British" might function like a political reminder, a mnemonic for past invasions and coercions, there is a wonderful originality, in all senses, about employing instead the word "Britannic." "Britannic" works like a cultural wake-up call and gestures not only towards the past but also towards an imaginable future. Without insistence or contention, "Britannic" is a reminder of much that the term "British" managed to occlude. "Britannic" allows equal status on the island of Britain to Celt and Saxon, to Scots and Cymri, to Maldon and Tintagel, to *Beowulf* and the *Gododdin,* and so it begins to repair some of the damage done by the imperial, othering power of "British." ("Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain," *FK,* 411–12)

The struggle in Northern Ireland has borne positive fruit in the decades since the young Heaney marched there with civil rights

6. Hart, *Seamus Heaney,* 200, 201.

protesters. In the 2001 lecture in which he proposes *Britannic,* Heaney points to such specific steps forward as "the Anglo-Irish Agreement of the late 1980s which opened up the possibility of new relations between the administrations in London, Dublin and Belfast, the declaration of a cessation of violence by the IRA in 1995, the establishment of a new assembly and the promise of an all-Ireland dimension in the governance of Northern Ireland, the beginnings of devolution in Britain itself" ("Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain," *FK,* 403). Even so, Cathleen Ní Houlihan has yet to reveal her true demeanor, and it remains Heaney's task to labor for her full unveiling—and to advocate that others do the same. In choosing this course, he joins a long queue of poets who, over the centuries, borrowed imagery from the Celtic *Feis* of Tara. Unfortunately, Heaney's place in this tradition goes, to date, largely, unrecognized.

As recently as 2003, Floyd Collins contends in his book on Heaney's "crisis of identity" that the poet's verse depiction of Nerthus, ancient goddess of northern Europe, is an effort to resist "the heroic dimensions of Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan." He explains: "With 'The Tollund Man' and the subsequent bog sequence of *North,* Heaney concocts a Counter-Sublime to the heroic ideals of Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan and Cuchulain, presenting a grim and fitting analogue to contemporary violence in Ulster. Unlike Yeats, Heaney's longing to forge a national identity depends upon a return to a past that is more real than legendary." Heaney in fact draws inspiration from the real past—and present—of northern Europe, and in a chapter titled "Heaney's Response to the Troubles: History, Myth, and the Bog Poems," Collins correctly recognizes in these poems the poet's response to the crisis of Ulster.[7] The poems' subject matter, though, is not "more real than legendary," nor do such poems constitute a "counter-myth of ritual sacrifice" to Yeats's Cathleen. Instead, poems like "Ocean's Love to Ireland," "The Guttural Muse," "Come to the Bower," "Bone Dreams," and "A Drink of Water"—and the recent "The Tollund Man in Springtime," "Brancardier," and "Chairing Mary"—draw simultaneously on both the real past and millennia of Irish mythic tradition. To discount the links in Heaney's poetry to both the Celtic *Feis* of Tara and a host of previous Gaelic and Anglo-Irish poems that develop this tradition is to overlook a significant aspect of Heaney's achievement.

7. Collins, *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity,* 60, 105 (see also 55–106).

In this study I have essayed both to place Heaney's work within the wider Irish context within which it is written and to examine his unique contribution to centuries of poetic treatment of the sovereignty motif. In doing so, I disagree not only with Floyd Collins but also with such respected Irish critics as Edna Longley and Patricia Coughlan. I do not do so lightly. Both Longley and Coughlan have asked courageous questions of a very popular poet, and their essays are reprinted for a reason. Their comments, though, do not close off debate, and I offer here a different reading of the verse, one that counters the rhetorical question asked finally by Coughlan: "So must we not conclude that the poetry of . . . Heaney as a whole is insistently and damagingly gendered?"[8] This is not to say that Heaney's poetry has shaken off all traces of the sexist society in which we live, but I believe the poems I have chosen for analysis here suggest any rush to discredit them is premature, if not unjustified. Close reading of the poetic texts suggests alternate interpretations. A poem like "Come to the Bower," for example, is not the missive of a colonizer, imperialist, or rapist; "Bone Dreams," in turn, is not a love poem addressed only to England and its language. Both poems declare devotion to a goddess whose kingdom includes each of the two large islands lapped by the Irish Sea. Mythic ruler in (and of) the free imagination, she serves as past and present sovereign of Irish and English, Catholic and Presbyterian, Presbyterian and Anglican, female and male; she is the true queen also of Celt and Saxon, of even, to borrow Joyce's phrase, "all the living and the dead" (D, 224). Like the eighteenth-century *aislingí* that preceded them, such poems drop their masks to reveal a very different subtext.

M. L. Rosenthal argued as early as 1966—in his assessment of Irish verse since World War II—that "Irish poets are constantly faced with the pressure to choose between native, traditional perspectives and 'larger' ones. All serious poets, everywhere, doubtless, are faced with similar issues. For obvious reasons, though, the poet in Ireland seems to find the issue more acute than it is elsewhere, at least on the surface." If Rosenthal's "obvious reasons" include the precariousness of Irish identity, long years of subjugation, and the width of the rift between Irish traditional perspectives and British "larger" ones, then reconciling "a vividly exotic and meaningful past [with] the pressures of the modern" remains even more relevant today than

8. Coughlan, "'Bog Queens,'" 108.

four decades ago.[9] Most pointedly, the scene that Rosenthal surveyed did not include the vicious attack by "a becudgelled loyalist mob" on civil rights marchers at Burntollet Bridge, near Derry, on January 4, 1969. By August, Belfast would be reeling from "the most serious rioting since the 1920's," and the first British "peacekeeping" troops would be posted to Belfast and Derry. Rosenthal's comment came, as did Heaney's first published collection of poems, three years before the resurging Troubles added their own tragic dimensions to the dilemma of the contemporary Irish poet. As we have seen, Heaney turned to a traditional Irish motif to articulate his response. If some have failed to see in such poems as "Come to the Bower," "Bone Dreams," and "A Drink of Water" a suggested antidote for the root disease disfiguring Ulster, perhaps this study will help to clarify the symbols of an Irish male poet uncomfortable with hubris, a visionary postcolonial begetter of verse for whom "the bowing down to the mother [is] a way of saying that."[10]

In the last section of "Triptych," Heaney recalls for us an overwhelming desire for reconciliation when confronted with the impoverishment of his wasteland world. In simple sincerity, he declares:

> Everything in me
> Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
> To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,
> And pray at the water's edge.
>
> (*FW*, 14)

Carlanda Green for one is certain that it is Heaney's task to pray in just such a manner "for the revitalization of his people," and I must admit that I like that thought.[11] Ultimately, I cannot believe that the goddess—whether *cailleach*, *spéirbhean*, or muse—will scorn his plea. He is, after all, her bridegroom, his prayer the very wooing she craves. In Seamus Heaney's goddess-invoking verse, legendary symbols become the emblems of hope.

9. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*, 308, 265.

10. Paul Arthur, *Political Realities: Government and Politics of Northern Ireland*, 109–10; Heaney, "Meeting Seamus Heaney," 61.

11. Green, "Feminine Principle," 11.

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