

That Whole Wild Fucking Queendom. Female Legacy in The Republic Of Motherhood by Liz Berry. 2020441

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‘That Whole Wild Fucking Queendom’

Female Legacy in The *Republic of Motherhood* by Liz Berry.

‘All human life on the planet is born of woman’¹, writes Adrienne Rich. Yet it seems incredible that after over one hundred and twenty years of public debate and literary enterprise, women still feel that they have untold stories about something so commonplace as pregnancy, birth and early motherhood – particularly as the production and reception of literature is something many women turn to in times of crisis.

Liz Berry wrote the poetry pamphlet, *The Republic of Motherhood*², after the birth of her first child. She admitted to being profoundly shocked - ‘as if my life had been pulled from under my feet and flung to the wind’ - by the experience.³ Despite being part of a supportive community of women within that ‘wild queendom’⁴, she found her usual source of comfort, poetry, strangely lacking in the experiences of new mothers. In response, she wrote a suite of poems relaying her individual experience and those of women she met on her journey; stories she calls ‘beautiful, raw, heartbroken, joyous, deep beyond reckoning.’⁵

Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf wrote that their sex, their womanhood, was impeding their writing. ‘The true artist transcends his sex, or her sex. If this is not the case, the art suffers,’ wrote Gilman⁶. Woolf elaborated with ‘Anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death’.⁷ Their proposed solution was androgyny. Similarly, Adrienne Rich adopted this gender-neutral stance in her early collections.⁸ Thereafter she felt able to explore her experiences of womanhood, particularly in her essays. She wrote candidly of her own journey through motherhood in her critical work *Of Woman Born* (in which she quotes her private journal entries):

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*, Kindle edn. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 11.

² Liz Berry, *The Republic Of Motherhood*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2018).

³ The British Library. Liz Berry, ‘The Republic Of Motherhood’, [podcast], Soundcloud, 2018, <<https://soundcloud.com/the-british-library/liz-berry-the-republic-of-motherhood>> [accessed 18 April 2021].

⁴ Berry, ‘The Republic Of Motherhood’, in *The Republic Of Motherhood*, p. 1 (line 2).

⁵ The British Library. Liz Berry, ‘The Republic Of Motherhood’, 2018.

⁶ Maren Tova Linett, ‘Modernist Women’s Literature: An Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion To Modernist Women Writers*, ed. by Maren Tova Linett (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jane Hedley, *I Made You To Find Me: The Coming Of Age Of The Woman Poet And The Politics Of Poetic Address*, (The Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 26 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27777>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours.⁹

It was only in the 1960s that a poem about childbirth first gained public attention with the publication of *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. Curtis Fox points out that women did not have many role models for this kind of subject matter. Even if poetry dealing with childbirth and motherhood, both on a physiological and psychological level, was in existence, it was not in the public sphere as 'women's voices had been silenced' by the lack of opportunities for publishing poetry concerned with women's experiences, mainly due to the attitudes of the traditional, male-centric publishing houses.¹⁰ Despite decades having passed since *Ariel*, Amy Wack still feels that the breadth of women's poetry in the late twentieth into the twenty-first century has not been reflected in general anthologies. She exclaims, 'it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that these poems are the flowers that grew on battlefields.'¹¹

Peter Barry acknowledges that the representation of women in literature has always played an important role in the way that women are perceived in society. Whilst feminist criticism in the 1970s put its efforts into laying bare the cultural perceptions which led to inequality among the sexes and challenging the socially constructed view of the 'feminine', the 1980s saw women beginning to explore the idea of the 'nature of the female world' and they began expressing earnest experiences of what it is to be female (which Barry defines as 'matters of biology').¹²

⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Helena De Groot. *A Change Of World, Episode 5: Poetry Gives Birth*, [podcast], Poetry Foundation Podcasts, Poetry Off The Shelf, 10 April 2018, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/145557/a-change-of-world-episode-5-poetry-gives-birth>> [accessed 25 April 2021].

Ariel was edited and published posthumously in 1965. Another example of a poem about childbirth (discussed in this podcast) was 'Parturition' by Mina Loy, written in 1914. Loy writes in an experimental style from inside the experience of birth. This poem was not widely available, being out of print until 1982. In other episodes, (A Change of World, episodes 1-6 available from <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/>>), Curtis Fox discusses how the feminist movement in America in the 1970s and 1980s led to women setting up small, independent, community presses to publish their work and held poetry readings in small community venues, as the traditional publishing houses were unwilling to publish poetry by women about women's issues. This is reminiscent of Virginia and Leonard Woolf setting up the Hogarth Press, which published Woolf's books (until they became too popular and were outsourced to larger presses) and those of key Modernist writers such as Katharine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot and is also reminiscent of the publishing of Modernist Journals such as *Rhythm* and *Blast*.

¹¹ Amy Wack, 'Introduction: Amy Wack', in *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing In English*, ed. by Eva Salzman and Amy Wack (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 2016), pp. 37-39 (p. 38).

¹² Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 3rd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 116. The difference between the terminology feminist, female and feminine (as clarified by Barry) is important: 'Feminist' defines a political position; 'feminine' is a set of characteristics constructed by society which determines how a woman should look or behave, whereas the 'female' is 'a matter of biology', which is my main concern in this essay. 'Feminism' and 'female' are linked only in so far as feminist movements paved the way for writers to explore the female in their poetry.

Alicia Ostriker gave birth to a baby boy at the time of the Vietnam war. This positioning of a traumatic, medically controlled birth experience (one decided for her by her male doctor)¹³ alongside war and human destruction inspired *The Mother/Child Papers*. In writing this collection, Ostriker strove to deal with 'the huge mix of emotions a mother feels toward her children and herself', alongside the human tragedy of 'wartime being the whole of human history'.¹⁴ At the time, pregnancy and childbirth were not topics for public conversation and certainly not one for literature. The rise of the women's movement was one of the social changes which caused 'radical shifts in cultural perceptions', according to Ian Gregson.¹⁵ Another, he adds, was the increasing importance of popular culture as the economy moved away from its reliance on heavy industry towards technology. 'The impact of the technological media, especially television, on social experience and cultural perception is also a crucial postmodern phenomenon.'¹⁶ The achievements and progress made by writers such as Gilman, Woolf, Rich, and Ostriker (to name but a few) have, arguably, enabled women writers to challenge taboos and write openly about their female experiences. In Modernist terms, these 'deliberate acts of self-assertion progress towards the realization of a distantly idealized goal'¹⁷, that of busting the 'Motherhood Myth'.¹⁸ I aim to explore this juxtaposition between a fragmented view of motherhood and a common unity of experience, and how this legacy of female writing, presents itself in two poems from Berry's collection, 'The Yellow Curtains' and 'The Republic of Motherhood'. As the historical timeline of the feminist literary movements spans the Modernist and Postmodernist periods (or moods), it is an equally interesting exercise to reflect upon their influence upon Berry's poetry.¹⁹

¹³ Adrienne Rich discusses the right of the women to decide on her own birth experience in *Of Woman Born*.

¹⁴ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, 'Preface', in *The Mother/Child Papers*, Kindle edn. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, (London: Arnold, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Richard Appignanesi and others, *Introducing Postmodernism: A Graphic Guide To Cutting Edge Thinking*, (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2007), p. 102.

¹⁸ This is a contradiction in terms. The meta- or grand narrative which is I have named the Motherhood Myth for the purpose of this essay, is what an Enlightened thinker would be looking to aspire to, and a Postmodernist would be intent on debunking. I throw in this juxtaposition at this point as it remains a confused position in Berry's poetry. Barry (*Beginning Theory*, 2009, p. 83.) sums up the Habermas- Lyotard debate: Whilst Habermas called for order, unity, identity and security, Lyotard claimed that 'these metanarratives, that purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality.'

¹⁹ The feminist movement in literature originates further back than Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman affords a convenient starting point for this essay as she features in Berry's poetry collection, so it can be assumed this is a writer she discovered in her exploration of women's writing about early motherhood. Another poem from Berry's collection alludes to a Modernist poet. 'Sky Birth' alludes to 'Parturition' by Mina Loy (1914), as Berry reuses Loy's mountain imagery to describe childbirth.

Berry's poem 'The Yellow Curtains'²⁰ contains (acknowledged) quotation from Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.²¹ The literary technique of quoting, alluding to, rewriting or simply plagiarising the work of another writer is not new, although the development of the theory of intertextuality is relatively recent, the term first being used by Julia Kristeva in 1966.²² In her exploration of the origins and development of this concept, Maria Martínez-Alfaro pinpoints the twentieth century as a period where intertextuality was prevalent, featuring across the cultural spectrum in both Modernism and continuing into Postmodernism. In general terms, Modernism tended towards the highbrow²³ whereas the aims of Postmodernism included the 'levelling down of all traditional distinctions between high and low: past and present, classic and pop, art and commerce, they all are reduced to the same status of disposable materials'.²⁴ The use of quotation in a text can be for many purposes. Anneli Mihkelev writes that a quotation may simply carry denotive meaning but can also allude to a connotative meaning which is determined by the reader's understanding of the quotation. This becomes further complicated if the quotation is loaded with context. 'If the quotation moves from one text to another it can also carry several contexts and contexts of utterances'.²⁵

The use of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is particularly interesting as the protagonist (Jane) was 'absolutely forbidden to 'work'' (10), her work being her writing, which the narrator is convinced will help her recover from the birth of her child and her fragile mental state. Berry claims to be writing her poems for similar reasons. Another parallel is Berry's imposed period of bedrest which features in 'The Yellow Curtains'. In her afterword to this edition of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Elaine Hedges emphasises the importance of Gilman as a feminist and someone who was not afraid to write about issues concerning women.²⁶ 'The story is one of

²⁰ Berry, 'The Yellow Curtains', in *The Republic Of Motherhood*, p. 11-12. Subsequent line numbers appear in brackets.

²¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (London: Virago Press, 1981). Subsequent page numbers appear in brackets.

²² María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro, 'Intertextuality: Origins And Development Of The Concept', *Atlantis*, 18.1/2 (1996), 268-285 (p. 268) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41054827>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

Julia Kristeva first used this term in "Word, Dialogue And Novel" (1966) and then in "The Bounded Text" (1966-67).

²³ We only need to consider 'The Wasteland' by T.S. Eliot to highlight our first contradiction, as references to popular culture and demotic speech feature in this poem. The difference lies with the intended audience of the work, with the author-perceived Modernist audience being the educated elite rather than the 'man on the street'.

²⁴ Martínez-Alfaro, 'Intertextuality', 1996, p. 271.

²⁵ Anneli Mihkelev, 'The Time Of Quotations: How Do We Communicate with Quotations in Contemporary Culture and Literature?', *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of The International Association For Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS)*. Universidade da Coruña, 2012. Available at: <The time of quotations: how do we communicate with quotations in contemporary culture and literature? (core.ac.uk)> [accessed 3 May 2021]. (Typographical error in web address as original)

²⁶ Elaine R. Hedges, 'Afterword', in Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, pp. 37-59.

the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship.²⁷ Hedges highlights that post-natal mental illness was the kind of issue which would be concealed, a taboo. Julie Bates Dock points out that different editions of the text have appeared over time, and these editions have small differences such as section breaks and the omission of words, which subtly influence the interpretation of the story.²⁸ A good example, suggests Dock, is the line 'John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.' Other editions have been printed without the words 'in marriage', leaving 'John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that.' Some scholars, Dock points out, have added 'loaded phrases' to clear up any ambiguity such as 'in men'. This creates a very anti-male message, Dock suggests, and changes the focus of the story from one which questions sexual equality within a marriage to what she calls 'men-bashing'.²⁹ Dock also points out that each new generation of readers interprets the text according to social and historical context and their own personal experience.

By using quotations, Berry is suggesting a reading of her poem. This means she is also suggesting a reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as the influence flows in both directions; 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.'³⁰ However, the interpretation of Berry's poem will depend on what the reader chooses to do with the quotations (accept or ignore), how the reader interprets the meaning of the poem (before or after deciding on the importance of the quotations), the meaning of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (as interpreted by the reader) and the relationship between the two texts. Some suggested outcomes are as follows: Firstly, Berry is simply creating an analogy relating to the vision of the face of her child in the curtains, as the narrator (Jane) in *The Yellow Wallpaper* sees a figure within the pattern. A second reading is that Berry is feeling locked in by her enforced bedrest, referring to how Jane feels about her own enforced rest period. A third reading implies the general vulnerability of a woman's state of mental health due to pregnancy and childbirth. A fourth reading is a political statement regarding the rules of a patriarchal society, in particular the medical profession, which makes the rules about how women should experience pregnancy

²⁷ Ibid. p. 39.

²⁸ Julie Bates Dock and others, "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' And The Shifting Light Of Scholarship", *PMLA: Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America*, 111.1 (1996), 52-65 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/463133>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

²⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

³⁰ Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Tradition And The Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood; Essays On Poetry And Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921; Bartleby.com, 1996) <<https://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>> [accessed 3 May 2021].

and childbirth. This implies that society has not changed enormously in the time period between the two texts. (Note that it is Jane's husband who decides on her medical care and attention.)³¹ A fifth reading highlights the importance of writing as a form of self-expression and catharsis, particularly when experiencing illness or difficulty (Berry is a poet, after all, and Jane tells us how she was forbidden to write). Finally - a reader may not make any connection at all between the two texts. The quotations are italicized and acknowledged, but not until the end of the pamphlet. This leads to a further ambiguity. Should the reader note the acknowledgement, then return to the poem with fresh insight, having read *The Yellow Wallpaper*, or does Berry intend to subtly mask the use of Gilman's story, as beyond plagiarism of language there, are no comparisons to be drawn? Mihkelev neatly concludes that 'quotation is a proactive part of cultural and social production, and the reader plays an important role in this communicative situation'.³²

Berry dips in and out of quotation, using lines from *The Yellow Wallpaper* with and without italics and with subtle changes in wording to suit her own purposes. In lines one and two of 'The Yellow Curtains', Berry introduces the curtains in her hospital ward using Gilman's description of the yellow wallpaper in her room where she, too, must rest. Berry spends a lot of time staring at the curtains and the significance of the pattern narrates her inner thoughts as the biology of creating a child continues within her body, and the business of preserving the lives of babies takes place in the ward around her. Instead of the figure of a woman, Berry places the face of her unborn child in the pattern. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the protagonist sees 'a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design,' (18) which we can compare to 'the small face in the oaks,' (22) and 'the little face in the oaks' (39) in Berry's poem. The design on the curtains is a traditional toile de Jouy pastoral scene.³³ It is interesting that Berry uses the symbolism of the oak tree and the shepherdess in her curtain pattern, the maternal image of a shepherdess looking after the lambs and the oak being a sacred tree, which suggests that she is looking at the curtain to protect her child, the one she imagines she sees within. Despite her anguish, she realizes that the hospital stay is a means to an end, the safe delivery of her child. This comforting image opposes my

³¹ Note Ostriker's criticism of the male-imposed medicalisation of her own childbirth experience.

³² Mihkelev, 'The Time Of Quotations', 2012.

³³ Toile de Jouy is a cotton printed fabric with a repeated pattern, usually one colour on a light background, which was named after the factory at Jouy, near Paris.

interpretation of the wallpaper in Gilman's text, as being threatening and sinister. For me, Jane does not have a happy ending.³⁴

The 'I', possibly Berry herself in confessional mode, is feeling an inner anxiety about the health of her child, which projects onto the curtains and is a sign of her fragile state of mind. 'But I cry at nothing and cry most of the time' (37), which is non-italicized in this case, but is nonetheless a quotation from Gilman's text (19). There is also a sense of frustration and boredom – 'this toil of joy' (33)³⁵ - and a third emotion of guilt, as her frustration and anxiety collide as the poet reminds herself that 'I must take care of myself. For his sake.' (26) In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Jane recounts her husband's reasons why she should rest. The line reads: 'He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake.' (21) Jane must get well for her husband. Berry, however, enters a full-stop into the sentence, splitting 'for his sake' from the rest of the line, causing ambiguity. I suggest that the first half of the line refers to something her husband has said to her (as it is with Jane), whereas the end of the line refers to her bedrest ensuring the health of her unborn child. Alternatively, Berry could also be in dialogue with her child, who she moves on to apostrophizes in line forty, using indirect free discourse to switch the narrative perspective. 'I' in this case becomes the voice of the face in the curtains. This questions an assumption about the confessional 'I' and the identity of the narrator. Indeed, the presence of multiple narrators may account for the poem's fragmented style. The quotation reverts back (ironically) to simple quotation - voices she has heard as she has been lying in bed, who pass comment on the colour of the curtains. In my opinion, Berry cleverly exploits the possibilities of the intertextual to offer many layers of interpretation, which, at the same time, come together as a whole to depict a state of relatable emotional turbulence.

Berry's deeply personal poetry is drawn from individual experience, yet in 'The Yellow Curtains' she interconnects with the voice of a woman several generations before, thus creating a unity of experience. Her poem 'The Republic of Motherhood' calls into question the wider issue of Western society's paradigm of the ideal childbirth, pregnancy or motherhood.³⁶ 'The Republic' represents the social construct that is Motherhood, with all the myth and expectation that encompasses it. Berry puts on the 'uniform' of Motherhood, prays 'in the chapel of Motherhood' and works 'in the factory of Motherhood'. All these words turn motherhood into

³⁴ My personal reading therefore exemplifies the role of the reader in intertextual interpretation.

³⁵ A play on words on *toile de Jouy*, the juxtaposition of *toile* and *joy* presents a strong contrast of emotion.

³⁶ Berry, 'The Republic Of Motherhood', in *The Republic Of Motherhood*. Line numbers referred to in brackets.

something institutionalised where rules and procedures need to be followed. The 'wild, fucking queendom' (notice the small 'q') encompasses the individual story. Each woman has a unique and individual experience of motherhood which may never seem to fit in with what they expected or what they are told. I disagree with Geraldine Gould's opinion that 'the powerful Republic, with its capital letter, is replaced by the embracing and ironically lower status 'whole wild fucking queendom' with none.'³⁷ By using profanity, Berry is strengthening this queendom and stressing its power. To claim that the queendom is inferior would lend power to the Republic, the socially constructed viewpoint, which Berry is speaking out against. Similarly, the 'queendom' is 'wild' because it is unregulated - it is the realm of the individual.³⁸ Berry realises that not everybody can sign up to the mythological version of motherhood, that the ideals of the Republic do not work for everyone. She realises also, however, that fragmentation is equally distressing and that a unity can be established through the community of other mothers, through sharing their stories. She recalls how she was 'kept afloat through that lonely, difficult time by the support of other women in clinics, playgrounds, church halls and living rooms.'³⁹ This fragmentation of self is demonstrated in the closing line of the poem, 'sunlight pixillating my face like a kaleidoscope.' This implies she is broken by her experience, but conversely the sunlight and the colourful rainbow of the kaleidoscope are positive images.⁴⁰

The deployment of 'fucking' in a poem about motherhood is interesting. It further destabilises the myth of the ideal mother and sits uncomfortably against the social construct of the feminine, demonstrating that women's experiences can be pithy, raw and primal, echoed also in the word 'wild'. Claire Lucette makes several salient points on the subject. Firstly, she quotes scientist Emma Byrne, who has split the use of profanity into two camps. The propositional is the involuntary reflex associated with pain, and the non-propositional is the deliberate use of a swear word as an emotional panacea. In the study quoted, fear was an emotion made easier to

³⁷Geraldine Gould, *Dundee University Review Of The Arts* (2018) <<https://dura-dundee.org.uk/2019/03/06/the-republic-of-motherhood/>> [accessed April 16 2021].

³⁸ An interesting comparison could be made at this point between 'queendom' and Sylvia Plath's bee poetry in *Ariel*. This merits further investigation. In 'Stings': 'but I / Have a self to recover, a queen. / Is she dead, is she sleeping?', Plath imagines herself as the queen bee being sacrificed for the collective. As Gregson puts it, 'Plath's identification with the queen represents a wish-fulfilment of transcending the biological process...the idea of 'being locked in a process that effaces her'. The dehumanising effect of becoming a mother is a recurrent theme in *The Republic of Motherhood*. I highlight here a couple of examples (page numbers in brackets). In 'Sky Birth' (8) she writes of leaving her body to be picked clean by birds, in 'Connemara' (3) she steps out of her skin: 'I threw the skin to the wind/ sweet sack/ I'd tended and punished /for thirty-three years' and in 'The Republic of Motherhood', the queendom has a 'skinless beauty' (line 41). Points and quotation about Plath taken from: Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, 2004, p. 44.

³⁹ The British Library. *Liz Berry. 'The Republic Of Motherhood'*, 2018.

⁴⁰ In contrast to Plath (in my opinion), Berry's mood is positive. A queendom has positive connotations, almost of splendour; 'skinless' is paired with 'beauty'; She gives herself 'gladly' ('Sky Birth' line 29).

bear by swearing.⁴¹ Although this fits with the mood of the poem, I prefer to read the 'wild fucking queendom' (39) as an 'emphatic exultation'. 'When our workaday vocabulary fails to represent awe and reverence and glory, only a dirty word will suffice.'⁴² Another example of Berry's nod to the beauty of motherhood.⁴³

Berry not only questions the validity of the *grand narrative* of Motherhood, but also questions its actual existence:

As required, I stood beneath the flag of Motherhood
and opened my mouth although I did not know the anthem. (21)

[...]by lamp-light wrote urgent letters of complaint
to the Department of Motherhood but received no response. (24)

Postmodernism is associated with 'the loss of the real'. Jean Baudrillard's theory was that the technological age, especially mass-media, resulted in 'a culture of hyperreality and the distinctions between real and imagined are eroded.'⁴⁴ Forty years on this statement rings truer than ever, if we add social media, the power of the 'influencer' and celebrity authors into the mix.⁴⁵ If the myth is not an illusion, it is at the very least a fiction that nobody can understand

⁴¹ Claire Lucette, *Poetry Foundation*, (2018) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/146097/reader-discretion-advised>> [accessed 11 May 2021].

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Berry uses 'wild queendom' twice in her poem, once at the beginning, and a second time near the end, with the addition of 'fucking'. This further underpins my argument that 'fucking' is used in a jubilant sense. I think, if the opposite were true, the 'fucking' would have appeared at the beginning of the poem and been removed at the end, slowing the poem down rather than giving the sense of speed which pushes to the climax of fragmentation in the last line.

⁴⁴ Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p. 83-84.

⁴⁵ 'Revisiting my experience of postpartum psychosis is not something I can get wrong, I value my recovery so much. I see *What Have I Done?* as precious cargo! Writing the book saved my life'. Performance poet and author Laura Dockrill wrote her autobiographical book on post-partum psychosis in 2020, tapping out over two hundred and eighty thousand words on her phone with a baby in her arms. She is currently doing the rounds of daytime television and radio shows to promote the book's paperback release. *The Other Mother*, a televised event as part of the 2020 Cheltenham Literature Festival, featured an interview with Candice Braithwaite (journalist, TV presenter, blogger), Jen Brister (comedian) and Louise Pentland (influencer), all having released books that year describing their experience of motherhood, with a view to adjusting the 'one-note portrayal of it we're fed by society.' Braithwaite and Brister want to top up the Motherhood Myth so that it includes the experiences of black and lesbian mothers. The Myth, then, is in a state of constant revision.

Alex Ritman, 'Gangs Of London' Producer Takes Rights To Laura Dockrill Memoir', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 October 2020. <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/gangs-of-london-producer-pulse-films-takes-rights-to-laura-dockrills-what-have-i-done-exclusive-4072787>> [accessed 9 May 2021].

'Episode 15: The Other Mother', *Cheltenham Literature Festival 2020* (television programme) (Sky Arts on demand) [accessed 9 May 2021].

and cannot be explained in language – ‘I wanted to speak to them but the words came out scrambled’(37).

Berry writes with the confessional ‘I’ whilst looking down upon the world of Motherhood into which she is intrinsically interwoven yet strangely detached. On one hand, Berry calls into question the value of the Motherhood Myth (our Modernist metanarrative), one that she tries to buy into but fails because of the uniqueness of her own physical and emotional journey. Hers is one in a series of Postmodern micro-narratives, each being played out by individual women. At the same time, she appreciates that the journey into motherhood is conversely both a fragmentary and unifying experience for women (a confusion of both positions).

Ostriker suggests that ‘the poetics of postmodern witness’ should not be introspective but should delve into the wider issues of society. Equally, the consciousness of the individual should not be lost, so that the poet is ‘not simply a manipulator of words but a confused, actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend.’⁴⁶ Berry’s confessional ‘I’ differs from that exemplified by Plath as she is both inward and outward looking and balances the fissured self with unification. There are elements of joy rather than the mood of self-destruction which seems to plague the Confessional Poets.⁴⁷ ‘Indeed, this inclusive sense of community is a hallmark of the whole collection, a fine example of what poetry does at its best – reaching out to the universal from the particular and the personal.’⁴⁸

Berry’s poetry edges into Ostriker’s description of ‘the poetics of postmodern witness’ through its rejection of the metanarrative and its global reach, but her work is not experimental nor

⁴⁶ Alicia Ostriker, ‘Beyond Confession: The Poetics Of Postmodern Witness’, *The American Poetry Review*, 30.2 (2001), 35–39, p. 35 < https://whel-rimo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/6s7mjt/TN_cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_220649174t> [accessed 30 April 2021].

⁴⁷ These three regarding the Confessional Poets struck me as interesting:

‘Plath’s posthumous celebrity is a postmodern phenomenon which has reinvented her work in the light of a crude sensationalism which draws upon populist myths of the poet as madly inspired and self-consumingly driven.’ Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, 2004, p. 42.

‘At its worst, Confessional poetry is a kind of therapy that thrusts private experience upon an unwilling reader. At its best, [...], it is a way of creating character so as to inform the trauma of the past with understanding and, sometimes, compassion. ‘from ‘Confessional Poetry’, in *The Oxford Companion To Modern Poetry*, ed. by Ian Hamilton and Jeremy Noel-Tod, (Oxford University Press, 2013)

<<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199640256.001.0001/acref-9780199640256-e-1407>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

‘Has anyone ever remarked that the self-destructiveness of a generation of poets might not be pure coincidence of private malaise, but a consequence of porousness to the disasters of history?’

Ostriker, ‘Beyond Confession’, 2001, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Gould, (2018)

fragmented in form, although the fragmentation of the self is a strong theme, which she explores through clever use of intertextuality. Berry's concept of the format of her collection and her imagined readership becomes concrete through the internet and social media, which allows the reader direct access to the poet. Unlike many Modernist writers, the Postmodern poet, arguably, sought *not* to distance herself from the reader.

'I felt that a pamphlet was the perfect form for these poems. It's as small as a passport to this strange new queendom, so small it can be slipped into bags and pockets. It's brief enough to fit in those snatched moments of reading when the baby's sleeping. I love it now when women send me photos of the pamphlet surrounded by the paraphernalia of early motherhood: tiny rice cakes, nappies, Duplo, even little babies asleep on their mum's shoulder as she reads.'⁴⁹

The technological age requires the contemporary poet to engage directly with her readership. It is as common for writers to be featured on daytime television or on live social media platforms as at literary festivals or bookshops (who are also widening their customer base via the same means). Referring to Barry's thoughts on the power of literature and the feminist movement, this interaction with the readership raises the question as to whether the moving of literature into the realm of the celebrity debunks or feeds the Motherhood Myth.⁵⁰ Cynically, this simultaneously feeds the capitalist publishing machine. Identities, wrote J.G Ballard back in 1974, are 'blurring and intermingling [...] within the realm of consumer goods.'⁵¹ Motherhood is being commodified.

Arguably, Berry's poetry owes much to the legacy of her predecessors. Similarities or differences in form, style or technique from her forbears aside, Berry owes the free  to develop her female subject matter because of a legacy of bravery. But as Ostriker says of her own writing on motherhood, 'it didn't feel like bravery, it felt like necessity.'⁵²

⁴⁹ The British Library, Liz Berry, *'The Republic Of Motherhood'*, 2018. This has parallels with a stanza of Adrienne Rich's poem 'Dedications', although only in a dialogic reading which assumes the confessional 'I' and 'you' as being the reader. 'I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove / Warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your / hand / because life is short and you too are thirsty.' 'Dedications', in *An Atlas Of The Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*, (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1991) p. 26.

⁵⁰ See my earlier comments on the mass-media promotion of new motherhood books (footnote 43).

⁵¹ Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, 2004, p. 2.

⁵² Ostriker, 'Preface', in *The Mother/Child Papers*, 2009, location 123.

That Whole Wild Fucking Queendom. Female Legacy in The Republic Of Motherhood by Liz Berry. 2020441

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

78/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

A wide-ranging and witty reading of LB's poetry around motherhood linked well to key ideas, texts and contexts from the module.

Your readings of individual poems is excellent.

You navigate well key issues such as intertextuality and (gender) identity constructedness, linked to the more general interest in the idea of the grand narrative. In both cases more might have been added (at least to the footnotes): for example, you note that you give your reading of TYW --- which is fine, but you might have added to the footnote other more subversive readings which might ironically aligned more directly with some of your points so that it is not a contrast but a point of comparison that is in play.

Your conclusion is powerful but I wonder how free LB is?

Well written and presented.

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

Text Comment. silent upon?

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

QM

Cap. Error
Capitalization

Strikethrough.

Strikethrough.

PAGE 5



Comment 3

Is this true of Eliot in WL and Joyce?

PAGE 6

PAGE 7



Comment 4

It is possible to read the end of TYW more subversively

PAGE 8



Comment 5

You might have included other readings here

PAGE 9



Comment 6

Perhaps support in notes with wider feminist reading of the idea of constructed (gender) identity?

PAGE 10



Comment 7

good

PAGE 11



Comment 8

Isn't there some joy in SP?

PAGE 12



Comment 9

No " here



Comment 10

Is she completely free?