

RENGA + Guy Barker, Elizabeth James/Peter Manson, Christine Kennedy
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The thing about innovative poetics is that you are continually learning how to read them. Bearing this in mind, it is a rare thing that something complex and — you might think — difficult is easy to get into: but so it is with Elizabeth James and Peter Manson. Their **Two Renga** achieve a harmony. The fusion — if that is what it is — works. It works a bit like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* but is less twee. It has the same sense of sufficiency — but is more compressed. It flows through the moment of reading as if oiled, “in balloon space, pierced / by thumb rules of the psychic mafia / ...” It holds a slightly bruised reality, as if the brightness has been turned up to wash out blemishes left by violence. These are poems for the age of personal success. They contain lines of extreme or unreasonable beauty:

In the rain the rose is
successively beaded, a made-up logo, unstable flower
...

This is a hyperreality that cannot last but is sustained. Affective democracies of one advertise rights, issues, politics, style:

escaping the Earth's vague umbra, embarrassed red
unnecessarily, the inexactly-calculated visitor is welcomed
with the smile for which you're famous,
the one to occult all stars
...

A sense of present time is maintained throughout. It is sharply in focus, like an in focus dream. It is post-human. I had the odd feeling that I was learning something about my own life, but afterwards — in that post dream way — I didn't know what it was. It makes you want to read some more. This kind of thing is probably addictive. The multiple personality responsible for this shows the way forward. It is a founding text.

And then there is the past and Christine Kennedy's **The White Lady's Casket** — the text from a site-specific installation — creates 'false memories' to “trigger new ideas about the innumerable forgotten people and events belonging to the house.” The house is ‘the Bishop's House’, Sheffield's oldest remaining timber framed building. The work alludes “to the two stories of hauntings associated with the house: the White Lady apparition, and the poltergeist that opens the small locked casket in the bedchamber.”

There is no tension between the feminist historiography of Kennedy — with her use of “random cut-up procedure using the words of the Bishop's House information sheet” (which she describes as “a very familiar and reactionary form of history”) — and the Freudian symbolism generated by the ghosts. In one sense such a tension might be desired, it is the kind of thing a Creative Writing tutor might encourage. In **The White Lady's Casket** a feminist-Freudian interpretation of the vibrant (past) life of a house releases in playful fashion the ghosts of the vitality that never made it

into the archive. Forms break down as the syntax is reduced. Kennedy has Puck-like qualities as she snips away with her scissors — in castrating a defunct bibliography she releases its fecundity:

The leade shape scythes first roses instead of straw
and quarters are re-used to staircase rooms

These texts were inscribed on parchment and stuffed into nooks. Reading them in collected form created fantasises (for me, it was my fecundity): *one* - that I was locked in that house overnight, saw the phrases pass through walls, scamper, appear, disappear & other such stuff; *two*: that this kind of thing happens everywhere. *Prepression*. Ghosts. Dora with her dream of keys and how she 'lacked a vocabulary'. It made me want to give her one.

Chamber of meat forms and Technique

Kennedy does a very good impression of Mother Goose (phallic nose, etc.). In a fairy tale the hysteria nearly breaks out — there are shrieks and giggles — loud crashings in the dark recess (my dark recess):

The parlour suggests the seen usual
his Hammers thrash Tonges
the contents neatly suggest the usual seen century
The son is possibly seen upstairs ready in skeleton

It also worked like this: "One little Captain carved from the War". A recent memory took me with that line. A memory of walking past Winchester cathedral one Friday afternoon (a Bishop's House, of sorts). There was a big funeral going on. Lots of posh people outside the door. *Journalists in the close*. It was the funeral of an officer who'd been killed in Iraq (it was the funeral of Major Paul Harding of the 4th Battalion, The Rifles). It was a complicated moment and it forms a complicated memory. Memories laden with conflicts (social, political, etc.) but, for all that, no less rent by visible grieving. It is odd how things are knotted up and released by language, especially in poetry. It doesn't wear out, become less powerful, like most things do.

the previous War altered communal time
the previous Museum to the War altered communal time

Guy Barker's innovative rendering of the **Hero and Leander** myth runs through the emotionally turbulent story of ill-starred love, stormy nights and suicide with an oddly light touch. The myth hinges on a contradiction — Hero was a *chaste* devotee of Aphrodite. Sexual repression on behalf of the classical Greek goddess of love, lust, and beauty makes no sense. Sexual intercourse with her priestesses was considered a method of worshipping Aphrodite, but not in the case of Hero. Aphrodite was a mite neurotic, clearly. There is something of the cut-up procedure of Christine Kennedy in the birth of Aphrodite and this might explain her contradictions. Cronus cut the testicles off Uranus and threw them in the sea where the divine genitals fizzed a white foam from which the

girl Aphrodite emerged. Given the amount of genital action in the story you'd think Hero could have entertained Leander without the catastrophic results that followed. But the taboo being broken, doom approached.

...his sweet body dreamt of her
swam through the green wave, salt tipping
up his cheeks neptune came
and went within the quick squall...

from hellespont

I like the way Neptune bobs past — it creates a Monty Python cut-out figure image in my mind... But anyway, Leander drowned and Hero — with her light having gone out in the stormy blast — jumped from the top of her tower. On the build up to her sticky end Hero had got sticky inside the fatal tower with Leander. In the flirting sequence they go all coy: “the laden face swerves cold away / am the devotee you say / while sinking on velvet too // less to lose than I yet you / do not know the half of it / young beast she smiles / ...” Then there is the build up to the money shot:

...
gone the flush and tears

parted ecstasy, recognition
playing its mezzo in the room
here, here, lasting to lasted last

from die buchse der pandora

No jism there then, but Guy Barker does leave me wanting more. I like his lightness of touch and I like the way he refers himself out of a dead end into an image of Louise Brooks. It means that he can move into the final poem of the sequence without any sense of containment (faultline theory prevails).