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Paratextual Jouissance in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*

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Abstract

Scottish novelist Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) refashions the myth of Iphis and Ianthe from Book IX of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* into a modern narrative that subverts and challenges gender binaries. This paper shall explore how the novel *Girl Meets Boy* attempts such a re-creation, and how the paratextual strategies used by the text serve to remythify a canonical myth to produce a more empowering narrative, which in turn opens up the source text to alternative, enabling interpretations.

The present paper shall focus on the paratextual elements of Smith's novel, and attempt to show how the five heterogeneous epigraphs that frame the text open up a space for creative commentary through thick description. The epigraphs thus create a narrative bricolage and a palimpsest used strategically in the novel not only to signal gender fluidity, and participate in feminist reclamatory practice through the retelling of the myth, but also to initiate a dialogue with other works and authors across time and space, to destabilise the grand narrative of heteronormativity, and open up enabling ways to perform identity. Since myth is a historically produced system that makes itself appear contingent and natural, Smith through her paratextual practice strives to show how the heterosexual normative trope is itself a myth, a construct enabled through centuries of erasures and silences, and how its status as truth may be interrogated through an imaginative paratextual jouissance.

Keywords: paratextuality, myth, bricolage, epigraph, gender

Reinterpreting and retelling myths to challenge canonical representations of gender and sexuality is a powerful strategy within feminist discourse. By revisiting traditional narratives—often rooted in patriarchal or heteronormative frameworks—feminist scholars, writers, and artists can highlight the limitations and biases of these canonical stories while creating space for alternative voices and perspectives. This endeavour is not only critical, but also reclamatory: it seeks to unearth suppressed or overlooked aspects of myths, reimagine characters' agency, and introduce narratives that affirm diverse experiences of gender and sexuality. In this vein, Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy* offers a skillful re-creation of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to trouble binary, gendered representations of sexual desire.

This paper examines the novel's paratextual elements, focusing on its five heterogeneous epigraphs, which frame the text and create a space for creative commentary through thick description. These epigraphs invigorate the work and encourage readers to consider gender and sexuality as discursive practices rooted in history and power dynamics, rather than immutable, normative constructs. The narrative theorist Gerard Genette suggests epigraphs can signal cultural affiliations or intellectual genealogies (158). Smith uses her epigraphs to craft a narrative bricolage and palimpsest that strategically signal gender fluidity, engage in feminist reclamation, and destabilize heteronormative grand narratives.

Myth, as Barthes posits, is a constructed, historically produced system that appears unbiased and immutable. Barthes characterizes myth as "frozen speech…. [which] assumes the look of a generality: "it makes itself look neutral and innocent." (*Mythologies* 149) What Barthes says further may be regarded as one of the motivations contemporary writers have for reclaiming myth: reconstituting myths anew is the only way to rob old myths of their oppressive power, thus transforming their narrative impact (*Mythologies* 161).

Recreation of the mythical thus offers a potent space through which writers can interrogate and subvert the phallogocentric and replace it with alternative modes of non-hierarchical thinking and being. As to what prompts contemporary writers to rework these ancient narratives, instead of replacing them with new stories, Susan Sellers posits that myths are tales that have been

refined over centuries of telling. Consequently, we can "deploy myth's power" (43) to resist and reimagine what may appear universal or ubiquitous. Don Cupitt suggests that the contemporary function of myth is to offer a range of possibilities and ethical choices as to how we may perform self and identity (87). Hence, a reinterpretation or recreation of the mythical offers a way to question and destabilize master narratives, enabling ways to perform identity, especially for those repressed and relegated to the margins by the dominant ideology that expresses itself through myth.

Smith's paratextual practice in *Girl Meets Boy* interrogates heterosexual normative tropes as constructs enabled by centuries of silences and erasures. Through an imaginative paratextual jouissance, she reframes the traditional Iphis-Ianthe myth to question its perceived truth, and offer transformative possibilities for performing identity.

The interplay of myth, gender, and paratextuality in *Girl Meets Boy* exemplifies how literature can function as a site of resistance and innovation. By positioning paratextual elements such as epigraphs as integral to the narrative's aesthetic and ideological framework, Smith does not merely retell a myth but radically reinterprets it, highlighting the creative possibilities inherent in destabilising canonical texts.

Interrogating Myth Through Paratextuality

Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy*, published by Canongate in 2007, retells the myth of Iphis and Ianthe from Book IX of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's text, Iphis is born as a girl who is brought up as a boy by her mother Telethusa, to prevent her from being killed in infancy by her father Ligdus, who wanted a male child. Iphis, brought up as a boy, eventually has her marriage fixed with Ianthe, and both fall deeply in love. However, Iphis is aware of the impossibility of her love for Ianthe, for as a woman, her desire for another woman is figured as unnatural, monstrous, and impossible in the Ovidian text (714). Here, the obstacle in the path of true love is presented not in the form of social forces, but apparently by Nature itself.

The conundrum is ultimately resolved when Iphis's mother Telethusa prays to the goddess Isis, and Iphis is transformed into a man on the eve of her marriage. Gifts are taken to the temple of Isis, and a votive tablet is added: "Iphis performs as a boy, what he promised as a girl" (Ovid

797). The myth of Iphis and Ianthe has a relatively happier resolution than the other myths in The *Metamorphosis*, where stories of transformations are not always so propitious. In Ovid's text then, the impossibility figured is the inconceivability of lesbian sexual performance, not the impossibility of lesbian affection or lesbian desire. Iphis is already in love with Ianthe, but she cannot 'have' Ianthe and bring this affection to physical fruition, as the Roman conception of sexual fulfillment is structured within the heterosexual imagination.

Ali Smith, in her retelling of the myth, employs an interesting paratextual aesthetic to authenticate, and comment on her reconfiguration of the mythical, as intertextual meanings generated through references to other texts can offer a potent strategy of dissidence through writing. (Kristeva 84)

Paratextual Elements as Strategic Commentary

Gerard Genette's notion of paratexts as a "threshold" between the text and its contexts is crucial in understanding the multidimensional implications of Smith's epigraphs. The epigraphs in *Girl Meets Boy* do not simply preface the narrative; they actively frame the novel's engagement with myth, gender, and cultural critique. Each epigraph connects the story to broader discourses, strategically embedding Smith's retelling of Iphis and Ianthe within a constellation of ideas about fluidity, resistance, and transformation.

Epigraphs are paratexts that occupy a liminal space: not quite a part of what is regarded as the text, and yet not quite outside it, they inhabit a grey zone that gives them a peculiar illocutionary force. Smith makes an artful use of this liminal space by framing her novel with five heterogeneous epigraphs which are an eclectic mixture of authors spanning diverse eras and genres. Gerard Genette delineates four functions which the epigraph may perform: to justify the title of the work, to comment on the text, to align the text with the name of the quoted author, where the epigraph works as a dedication or homage to the author of the quoted text, and finally, how the epigraph, in itself, is a sign of culture, and maybe a declaration of one's intellectual and cultural affiliations, the mode through which the writer " chooses his peers, and thus his place in the pantheon."(160)

Epigraphs as Invitations for Dialogue

Smith's choice of epigraphs, spanning different genres and eras, invites a polyphonic dialogue that extends beyond the novel into the space of cultural critique. For instance:

E.M. Forster's invocation of a "new dawn" aligns with the novel's vision of an inclusive, post-gender utopia.

Joseph Roth's statement that a narrow world mistrusts the undefined calls for a broader, more tolerant worldview.

Kathy Acker's propensity "to misquote" speaks to the bold creativity of refashioning the familiar to offer fresh perspectives.

Judith Butler's interrogation of gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" becomes a theoretical lens for understanding Robin and Anthea's relationship, which transcends traditional binaries.

John Lyly's playful allusion to "practising impossibilities" encapsulates the narrative's commitment to envisioning possibilities beyond heteronormative constraints.

These epigraphs thus function as textual bridges, underscoring Smith's alignment with thinkers who challenge entrenched power structures while providing a roadmap for the novel's exploration of queer identity and feminist politics.

The quote from E.M. Forster's essay "Me, Them and You", first published in 1925, speaks of how "far away, in some other category, …is forged the instrument of the new dawn" (Forster 41). The essay itself is a commentary on British social class and the "snobbery and glitter" (Forster 41) of the upper classes. The sections of Smith's text are titled 'I', 'You', 'Us', 'Them', and 'All Together Now', echoing the title of Forster's essay. The essay voices Forster's moral outrage at John Singer Sargent's painting "Gassed", with its romanticised portrayal of blinded, working-class soldiers in the First World War. The reader is meant to go back to the source of the epigraph to find the affinities between Forster's title and Smith's sections. Further, Forster's plea for humane empathy which transgresses class difference in the ideal future utopia of the "new dawn", resonates with Smith's text and the gender utopia reimagined therein.

Smith's second epigraph offers a relatively more immediate allusion to the theme of her novel. It is from the Austrian writer Joseph Roth's series of essays written while in exile in France: "It is

the mark of a narrow world that it mistrusts the undefined." (161) A Jew fleeing from Nazi Germany, Roth, like Forster, advocates for a more inclusive worldview and an ethical stance which resists xenophobia.

Both E.M. Forster and Joseph Roth were public intellectuals who steadfastly believed in the tenets of liberal humanism and emphasized tolerance and empathy as modes of being. Both were prescient about the rise of totalitarianism and its consequences in the early twentieth century, and both dreamed of a cosmopolitan, broad-minded brotherhood of man that would rise above the fear of difference. Through quoting them, Smith then aligns herself and her text with a school of thought that resists monolithic, authoritarian, narrow-minded ideological apparatuses of class or race, which promote a fear-based interaction with the other and refuse to allow for legitimacy or dignity to that which falls outside the dominant structures of power.

The third epigraph is from Kathy Acker's collection of essays *Bodies of Work:* "…the need for narrative and the simultaneous need to escape from the prison-house of story-to misquote" (xviii). It offers the reader a glimpse of how Ali Smith's poetics in *Girl Meets Boy* may be theorized, from within a tradition of feminist counter-narratives which reuse the canon to produce new texts that interrogate and subvert expected outcomes. Widely regarded as one of the pioneers of postmodernist writing in the late twentieth century, Acker often writes by collating together portions of other texts within a loose narrative framework. Nicola Pitchford notes how Acker's poetics exemplifies the tactics available to postmodern subjects, who must build a self out of existing images and stories. Since people who seek resistant politics have only at hand a language that is already infused with oppressive power relations, the only way they have to counter-hegemonic narratives is to use bricolage to alter the received story, thus altering their own identity to suit their needs instead of inhabiting identities which may be disempowering or unproductive. (61)

The quote from Judith Butler directly announces Smith's commitment to exploring the idea of gender as being performatively produced: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity…" (Butler 179). If the basis of gender normativity is "the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of transformation… may be found in …the breaking of that style." (Butler 520) Gender is constituted in time, even

though its naturalization appears to make it transcendent and immutable. It is grounded in a series of performative acts permitted by social consent or proscribed through social taboo, and a series of different acts can pose a challenge to the power it wields over the subject. Hence an awareness of the possibility of gender metamorphosis destabilizes and disrupts the site of gender hegemony. Smith's retelling of *Girl Meets Boy* performs this by legitimizing the homosexual desire in Ovid's text, and situating it in a context of enabling jouissance rather than monstrous anomaly.

The last quote is from John Lyly's comedy *Gallathea*, which then acts here as a possible intertext to Ovid's text. First performed in 1588, the play has similar themes of cross-dressing, gender-bending, and same-sex desire as in the Iphis myth, and as such offers an interesting comment on *The Metamorphosis*. Smith's epigraph is a partial quote from Cupid's speech in the play regarding Diana's nymphs: "I will make their pains my pastimes, and so confound their loves in their sex that they shall dote in their desires, delight in their affections, and practise only impossibilities" (Lyly 118). Here Cupid impishly vows to make Diana's nymphs fall in love with each other, and with the heroines of the play Gallathea and Phyllida, women dressed as men who are in love with each other too. As in Ovid's myth, Venus pities the loving couple and promises to transform one of them into a man. Reechoing the "impossibility" figured in Ovid's text, Smith here seems to draw a parallel between *Gallathea* and *The Metamorphoses*, where lesbian desire is articulated and represented, indicating that it was culturally imaginable, only to have its supposed impossibility reinscribed in the text. (Traub 246) Thus Isis in Ovid's myth and Venus in Lyly's play naturalise same-sex desire through unthinkable transformation, but interestingly, the desire itself is unrepresentable. Smith's playful use of only a part of the quote in her epigraph: "practise only impossibilities", then points towards this paradox, and also indicates it is precisely the representation or practice of such impossibilities that her novel shall focus on.

Myth as a Site of Self-Determination

Smith's approach to the Iphis myth transforms it from a story of biological determinism to one of joyous self-determination. By situating Iphis's story in contemporary Inverness, *Girl Meets Boy* reclaims myth as a living, mutable cultural artifact. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformation is

a deus ex machina that resolves the "impossibility" of same-sex love. In Smith's hands, transformation becomes a metaphor for liberating gender and desire from rigid frameworks.

Girl Meets Boy takes these traditional gendered perceptions of desire and fulfillment and opens up the narrative to alternative interpretations which then replace the idea of certain kinds of fulfillment being impossible, with a gender-fluid paradigm where desire may be either or both. In twenty-first-century Inverness, Robin is the girl with the gender-neutral name, (Ovid's text too emphasizes the gender neutrality of the name Iphis, which could belong to either a man or a woman) who the modern Anthea (Ianthe) falls in love with. Anthea lives with her sister Imogen. Interestingly, half of the narrative is focalized through Imogen's point of view. The Shakespearean name carries associations of moral purity and exemplary womanhood. While not naturally conformist or intuitively fearful, Imogen endeavors to mold herself into what a woman is socially expected to be. The only concession she makes to her true nature is to keep and ride a motorcycle, which too she does rather sporadically, to avoid undue attention.

Gender and Desire as Polysemic Constructs

The metamorphosis in Smith's text is not the literal metamorphosis of a woman into a man, brought about by a deus ex machina as in Ovid's text, but the transformation in Imogen's outlook towards her sister Anthea, and towards the repressive forces which have imprisoned her psyche. The narrative arc of Imogen, or "Midge," serves as a counterpoint to Anthea and Robin's love story, showcasing the transformative potential of witnessing authenticity. Midge's journey from internalized conformity to embracing fluidity reflects the broader societal shifts that Smith envisions. Her eventual assertion that she belongs to a family and country that defies "dominant narratives" parallels the novel's thematic resistance to oppressive ideologies. Imogen, or Midge as she is lovingly referred to, represents the conformist, heterosexual, non-confrontational figure who has always believed in blending in and getting on. She is a woman whose individuality has been repressed as she has internalized misogynistic ideas that society throws at her. Robin and Anthea's fearless claiming of their love and its celebration makes Midge too daring and defiant. From a position of complete shock: "O My God my sister is A GAY" (Smith 34) she has moved on to: "… I come from a family that can't be had. I come from a country that's the opposite of a, what was it, dominant narrative" (Smith 75).

Smith's text celebrates the fulfillment of both homosexual and heterosexual desire in the union of Robin/Iphis and Anthea/Ianthe and Midge and Paul. In doing so, it demonstrates how it may be more productive to look at gender and desire as fluid, transformative, and mutable rather than frozen, fixed, or static. The Goddess Isis in Ovid's text had resolved the difficulty of the 'impossibility' of lesbian love by transforming Iphis into a man. Here, it is Smith's language that reclaims the space of desire from gendered interpretations: "I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth" (Smith 63). Here the polysemic language does not replace heterosexual desire with a homosexual one, but blurs the male-female binary altogether, figuring desire as multifarious and multivalent: "…we were both genders, a whole new gender, no gender at all" (Smith 64). Smith's play of words defamiliarises language and does not allow her readers to settle into anticipated ways of reading or being. This polysemic approach disrupts binary thinking, creating a space where identity is plural and performative.

This linguistic freshness forces the reader to consider how undoing gender is not simplistically about having a broader perspective on gender or desire or sexuality, but involves a complete disruption of linguistic habits that have naturalized gendered thinking. Language itself, since it is the medium through which meaning gets disseminated and shaped, needs to be reframed anew, dismantled, and defamiliarized to transform thought forms and to counter the dominant hierarchical structures. This is in consonance with Cixous' conception of using language in a way that seduces yet undoes (31), what Cixous defines as ecriture feminine: "bringing into existence alternative forms of relation, perception and expression" (xxix).

Since language is endemic to the repressive social structures within which woman has been figured as the other of man, Cixous suggests that inscribing women's history and sexuality through writing could recast the prevailing order. Writing for Cixous is the locus and site through which this revolutionary reclamation may take place, where the masculine I is replaced, not by a feminine ego, but by a self or selves that always already resist monolithic, unilateral, or unisexual identity formation (89). The motif of thirst amidst water present in Ovid to refer to same-sex love is transformed in Smith's novel into watery motifs which, as Kaye Mitchell notes, reflect a gender-fluid paradigm that does not privilege normative heterosexuality (87). The water

imagery throughout the novel reinforces this fluidity, transforming the motif of thirst in Ovid's text into a symbol of boundless possibility.

Rewriting Myth through Paratextual Jouissance

Paratextual jouissance aptly describes Smith's strategy of engaging with myth. Barthes describes the writerly text as that which "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (*Pleasure* 14). In Smith's novel, the epigraphs, and the text's self-reflexive narrative structure, invite readers into a space of interpretive play. By framing the text with voices from Forster, Butler, and others, Smith constructs a palimpsestic dialogue that challenges canonical authority and opens up the myth to counter-hegemonic readings.

The paratextual frame of the novel thus provides a multiplicity of voices which then "talk back" to Ovid's text, enabling a contrapuntal reading of the Iphis myth, and revivifying it by placing it in dialogue with other texts. The epigraphs are akin to textual 'hyperlinks' (McNeill 358), which open up for the reader a joyful open-ended chain of associations and significations, much like the playful and virtuoso gender and genre-bending strategies that are a hallmark of Smith's oeuvre. *Girl Meets Boy* explores the supplement in Ovid's myth to mine the potential for transgressive plurality present in the text, creating a network of continually unfolding, ever-changing, and changeable meanings. In doing so, it refashions the site of gender in myth into an arena replete with playful possibility, rather than a vacuum signifying lack and loss.

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