

Helen Adam and the Feminist Gothic Imagination

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The Berkeley Renaissance of the mid- late 1940s saw concerted attempts by writers and artists to renew a sense of imaginative possibility in art throughout the San Francisco Bay area. Critic Michael Davidson states that in the wake of the Second World War, poets in the Bay area felt “a need to discover some sort of vital contact” both between people and between poetry and human beings. For Robert Duncan and his circle of friends and fellow artists, vitality was sought through “a revival of the romantic tradition.” The romantic vision of the circle of poets who gathered around Duncan and poet Jack Spicer was strongly rooted in a sense of the mystical powers of poetry, and of a vision of the poet as partaking of a secret knowledge. Davidson writes that for Robert Duncan, “the romantic tradition represents more than a historical period or canonical body of texts. It represents an ancient quest for knowledge that, for a variety of reasons, has been suppressed or marginalized.”(1) He found in Scottish-born poet Helen Adam and in her eerie gothic ballads the incarnation of the occult aspect of that tradition.

Helen Adam arrived in San Francisco with a body of suppressed and marginalized knowledge. When she entered the environment of the Berkeley Renaissance, through a poetry workshop hosted by Duncan in 1953, her highly traditional ballads of the supernatural were received as “the link with the forgotten romantics.”(2) Adam’s work shares Duncan’s drive for romantic revival in its confidence in the transformative powers of poetry, as she shares with other writers of the San Francisco Renaissance a poetics which Charles Altieri sees as an “*immanentist* vision of the role of poetry”(3) wherein poetry becomes an avenue by which the material and spiritual worlds can be recognized as interpenetrative. Adam’s work added to Duncan’s project a gothic preoccupation with how the world of the mundane and the darker, hidden energies of the numinous universe intersect. Kristin Prevallet notes that Adam’s relationship with Duncan’s circle “sustained her passion for folklore, ritual, and the ways of the ‘old religion’ (witchcraft),” just as that circle “incorporated the significance of ancient folklore, primitivism, and magic” into their approach to poetry.(4) Likewise, her extensive knowledge of the occult was welcomed in a group very much interested in the hermetic.

Despite (or perhaps because of) her upbringing by a minister, Adam’s spiritual leanings were decidedly un-Christian. Her notebooks evidence a wide range of learning about magical theory and practices, folklore, and mythology. From these notebooks, it appears she was most drawn to ancient Egyptian and hermetic traditions, although she culled from other classical Greek, Roman, medieval, and contemporary Scottish sources as well. Her “reputation as an expert tarot card reader” was well-known among her friends, as was her interest in reading dreams. She was also well-versed in various techniques for raising spirits and demons. One particularly frightening passage in her notebooks contains an incantation to raise the demon Azrael, under which read the words, “are those his eyes there in the flames.” Her ability to curse is recounted by Prevallet in an anecdote about her threatening a critic who disparaged Duncan, “if I ever meet this character I am going to put a spell on it to rot its bones,” although whether she intended to raise any demons to do so is unclear.(5)

Adam’s poetry translates her interest in occult philosophy from notebook to verse. Her representations of the occult are highly romantic in the way they bypass the rational, academic discourse with which her notebooks treat the subject of the supernatural. Her works, however, evince both a playful subversion of romanticized fantasies of occult philosophies and a desire to make them relevant for the present day, particularly where gender roles are concerned. Adam’s embrace of the supernatural does not function as

an escape from present reality to some otherworldly fairy realm, but is made relevant to a contemporary struggle over gender inequalities. A great part of the subversion of her project centers on her use of conventional representations of wicked women, particularly the figure of the witch. Her poetry imagines a context where women's occult power is re-envisioned for a modern audience. Her own assumption of the role of "good witch" (6) within her community of friends and her use of powerful, supernatural women in her poetry demonstrates the viability of the image of the witch as a symbol for the reclamation of spiritual power that is specifically women's. In Adam's work women's mystic power is seen as having real consequences for those who threaten to limit it, and serves as a site of resistance to people or precepts that seek to deny that power to women. Utilizing the gothic ballad as a landscape where tradition and innovation intersect, Adam's poetry adopts and politicizes the figure of the witch to advance feminist ideals of women's autonomy and freedom.

Helen Adam's presence within the West Coast literary scene provided a link to the past for writers like Duncan who were interested in exploring a mythic lineage of poets, just as her work provided a model for those who sought to re-energize conventional forms of poetry. "Many poets of this time," notes Prevallet, "perceived rhymed verse, fairy tales, and folk songs not as dated, but as essential to the living community that they were creating through their art and writing." The benefits of recovering and "reconceiving" traditional poetic forms, she argues, were twofold, allowing the poets of the Duncan-Spicer circle "not only to rescue poetry from academic readings but also to assert themselves into the trajectory of genuine poetic practice."⁽⁷⁾ The link to ancient knowledge and past forms of poetry that Adam embodied was conceived as a two-way street, where the effect of recollection on the present was primary.

In his introduction to Adam's collection *Ballads*, Duncan asserts the mystical power of the ballad to connect its audience to a distant past "of ancient dancers tromping around the moon or against the sun." The ballad is not an escapist form to Duncan, however. He writes that the "ballad in our age of increasing aesthetic inhibition has all the force of the return of the repressed." Repressed cultural knowledge is seen here as recoverable particularly through Adam's ballads because their rhythms have great potential to speak to the subconscious and make us remember the deep cultural significance of poetry. Also valuable to Duncan is Adam's ability to reconnect her audience with "the invisible World" of fantastic imagination which to him is an integral part of the mind that has been undervalued in modern times. Duncan saw in Adam's ballads that "the measures and images of the witch-cult" continue to exist, and he lauded their ability to engage the imagination.⁽⁸⁾

Adam's ballads are exemplary of the desire to both partake of literary tradition and subvert the academicism poetic tradition is prone to. Her rigid adherence to the ballad form nevertheless often subverts the "familiar landscape" of the romantic ballad by creating contemporary, more politically charged, contexts for her narratives. The poem "Apartment at Twin Peaks" is demonstrative of her ability to use conventional forms in order to subvert the restrictions on women that convention has typically endorsed. The poem adheres to "stock topoi of romanticism" in its conception of the witch as an image of power and danger for men, but it is set squarely in post-World War II America, and uses the figure of the witch to overthrow the patriarchal culture that created those stereotypes.⁽⁹⁾

After detailing the want ad that has led the speaker and her husband to take an apartment, "Reliable people, their reference read./ No drinking, no parties, no smoking in bed," Adam's speaker makes clear to the reader that things are not so respectable within its walls. "My apartment is haunted!" she states, by the ghost of her husband, whose fate points to the discrepancy between the appearance of respectability and reality:

New Year's Eve, and the moon like a flame.
 From as far as Fresno my girl friends came.
 I knew my party simply could not miss
 Though I served my husband as the principle dish. (10)

The speaker's murder of her husband for the "full moon feast" of her witch friends is the culmination of years of slow devouring on the part of the speaker, "My girlfriends worried him close to the bone./ And of course I'd been nibbling for years alone." The witch and the nagging housewife are fused in the poem, but the addition of the supernatural to the stereotypical wife allows her to turn her henpecking into more than a metaphor and free herself from the limitations of her own stereotype.(11)

The gradual wearing away of the husband is Adam's critique of American consumerist culture. The speaker goads him to work for material comforts, asking him, "Don't you want to be the gracious host/ In a lovely home of which you're proud to boast?" It is not only the pursuit of possessions, however, but the possessions themselves that devour him:

After the carpeting he fought and bled,
 Sloshed by the billows of the water bed.
 He screamed as he vanished up the vacuum (*sic*) spout.
 In triple sealed bags it spat him out.

The husband is spineless in the poem, unable to reject the dictates of his culture, even when they are killing him. His endless pursuit of an ideal of masculinity that he has bought into but cannot replicate re-orders the consumer-goods relationship, and makes him a victim of a culture that consumes him. He is more effective as a part of the veneer of respectability than as a human individual, and his inability to either fulfill or transcend the gender role assigned for him makes him a mere accessory in his own life. He becomes the provider in the poem, quite literally, but to do that, he must give up his life.

By contrast, the wife uses social mandates to liberate herself from them. Excess is a feature of the poem that allows Adam to criticize the pursuit of material goods in place of spiritual ones. Adam's speaker is a caricature of the nagging wife, but through her excess, she is also powerfully subversive of the culture that determines gender roles. As a domestic wife, the speaker is trapped by her prescribed role to make a 'nice,' materially comfortable home. That she does not care for the role is evidenced not only by the fact that she kills and eats her husband, but by the lines:

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief,
 Any damn husband's sure to bring you grief.
 Keep him working for his very life
 To prove he's worthy of a virtuous wife. (12)

The speaker retains her 'virtue' in the sense that she adheres very closely to the values of the culture in which she resides. Rather than defy mainstream American culture by refusing to conform, the speaker decides to fight fire with fire, killing her domestic constraints (i.e. the husband) with a surfeit of the 'ideal' American household, forcing him to attain everything from furniture to "[c]eramic monkeys" to "a pop-up toaster playing 'Home sweet home.'"(13) By playing the role of the good consumer and housewife to excess, she manages to turn the tables on the culture that has placed her in domestic bondage. She is initially trapped by her marriage, but it is through that domestic arrangement that she traps her unwitting captor.

The wife's supreme gesture of rejection towards consumerist culture is her decision to eat its representative. The speaker cooking and serving her husband like a good hostess demonstrates her power over the culture that seeks to limit her freedom. The theatrical violence of the poem, and its depiction of the wild sabbat that follows her husband's death, "I hung his guts in the entrance hall," is a release of raw energy that contrasts the dead life of convention. The couple's adherence to socially acceptable roles, and the outward respectability of their lifestyle belie the violence of the materialist system, "When the walls closed in till they crushed his breast,/ The neighbours envied me my snug little nest./ For the apartment his blood was spent . . ." The wild sabbat that the witches engage in is horrific, but portrayed as playful, ecstatic in its joy, and ultimately liberating for the speaker.

Typical of Adam's heroines, the speaker shows no remorse, and receives no punishment for her deeds. Instead, she redirects blame onto the paper in which she decides to rent the apartment again, "If his ghost goes with it, let the 'Chronicle' take the consequences./ Ha! Ha! Ha!" and cheerfully goes free.(14) The poem uses the figure of the witch to highlight the destructive nature of mainstream culture, and the positive value of releasing oneself from the constraints of socially determined roles. It also demonstrates the capacity of the witch-as-symbol to gain political relevance in contemporary struggles.

Adam's poems, according to Davidson, are populated by "powerful women ruled not by institutional authority (marriage, the nuclear family, traditional religions) but by nature."(15) Adam never denies the conventional association of women with nature and the irrational. Instead, she capitalizes on it, asserting a kind of dangerous power that is specifically women's, and can be used to overthrow systems which oppress them. Her women naturally have mystic power that they claim for themselves without external authorization. They are never depicted learning their craft, but appear as fully competent and formidable wielders of spiritual power.

It is clear from her copious notes, however, that Adam valued the craft of the esoteric. Invocations and recipes for charms in her notebooks are extensive and complicated, requiring a good working knowledge of astrology, herbology, crystals, Hermetic correspondences, and a thorough familiarity with the angels and demons of both Christian and non-Christian religions. One exemplary page of her notebooks explains that a circle to bind a spirit "must be made upon a Wednesday the day of Mercury, at the increase (*sic*) of the moon," and that in it must be written "first the name of the hour in which thou shalt make thy work. In the second place the names of the angel of the hour, third the seal of that angel, fourth the name of the angell (*sic*) that governeth the day & his ministers." The names are followed by an elaborate ritual of purification for the "conjurer," the space in which the ritual is performed, and the pentacle by which the spirit will be invoked, at which point the magic really begins. (16)

That Adam's impressive store of specific magical knowledge never makes its way into her poetry suggests that she considered that this knowledge was not for casual consumption. Over the top depictions of sabbats, prayers without specific invocations, and spells without words demonstrate a desire to retain the mystery of the occult in her poetry. In addition, her work's lack of specificity speaks to a desire to de-emphasize the academic aspects of the occult. Ritual, initiation, and learning do make their way into the poetry, but the processes are depicted less as passing down a body of knowledge from teacher to student than as a realization of innate spiritual powers that have been waiting to be cultivated. Despite her estimation of secrecy and ritual, Adam's work demonstrates a belief that women are witches by virtue of their sex, and not their training in occult practices.

“The Fair Young Wife,” like “Apartment at Twin Peaks,” portrays a heroine’s rejection of a socially mandated role that reduces her identity to the titular epithet. The poem opens, “This is a tale for a night of snow./ It was lived in the north land long ago./ An old man, nearing the end of his life,/ Took to his arms a fair young wife.” Unbeknownst to the old man, his blushing bride is a witch with the power to transform herself into one of the “wolves abhorred” who hunt outside their cottage in the forest. The poem recounts the process of spiritual transformation that the wife undergoes, a transformation as dramatic as her physical one. She begins by hearing the wolves outside through the curtains of her new marriage bed and the sound kindles in her a sense of sympathy, “She heard them running, though far away,/ And her heart leapt up like a beast of prey.”(17) That night she has a dream where she envisions herself as one of them, and the dream awakens her to her powers:

She dreamt she walked in the forest shade,
Alone, and naked, and unafraid.
The bonds of being dissolved and broke.
Her body she dropped like a cast off cloak.

Her shackled soul to it’s (*sic*) kindred sped.
In devouring lust with the wolves she fled.
But woke at dawn in a curtained bed.
By an old, grey man, in an airless bed. (18)

Her dream world offers her the possibility to transcend her conventional life, and the mundane world. Alone, the wife is free to develop into a fearless and powerful being, and to find a place where she can feel at home. Adam contrasts the liberation of the vision, where the wife is free to pursue her wildness with her “kindred,” with the ordinary “grey” marital world which shackles and suffocates her.

Adam insists that the world of the wilderness is the “natural” one for the wife, while her ability to actually become a wolf once she has the dream suggests that she confers this power on herself, “She dreamt she walked where the wolf eyes gleam./ And soon she walked, and it was no dream./ She fell on fours from the world of man,/ And howled her bliss when the rank beasts ran.” The wife is not provided with a teacher to impart the secrets of metamorphosis, or with a program of study to undertake to make her transformation possible. Her ability to transform is portrayed as the product of her communication with herself, and of her willingness to reject her given role and become who she really is.

Her life then splits in two, “The morning life, and the mid-night life./ The sun and moon of the fair young wife;” the domestic life which she must, by convention, live, and the authentic one where she can be whole. The very existence of the husband is oppressive, as it prevents the heroine from participating in that which gives fullness to her life. Her wild connection to the woods is inhibited by her placement in a domestic environment which is clearly contrary to her nature. Prevallet notes that one theme of Adam’s work is the volatility of female desire when it is limited; “desire becomes a monster when it is inhibited or threatened in any way.” I would argue that this theme of explosive emotion is linked to the limitation of autonomy. In this poem, the wife prays to the moon, asking, ““Can I lie down at a husband’s will, When wild love runs, and my heart cries, Kill!”” Her fury is directed at her inability to follow her desire, but also to the husband who commands her, and asserts his will over her own.(19)

The resentment of the wife towards her husband has bloody consequences. He tells her one full moon night before they sleep, ““I’ll draw the curtains, and hug you near./ And we’ll lie hid from the moon, my dear.”” The curtained bed becomes a symbol of the hapless husband’s desire to shield her from the

dangers of the wilderness around them. He proposes to keep her from the wolves and the moon to which she prays – cutting her off from her freedom and from her spiritual life. She retaliates by becoming a wolf in his bed and attacking him, “in ravenous play.”

(20) That the wife transforms in her bed and devours her husband, rather than simply abandoning the man, suggests that she must confront and overcome the representative of her captivity in domestic life before she can be free. Becoming a wolf in her bed allows the wife to retake her autonomy from the man who usurped it at the site of her greatest oppression, but to do so, she must use the specifically feminine power that he fears. Davidson asserts that Adam’s heroines “often struggle out of a marriage net in order to have identity as individuals.”(21) Here the struggle over identity is implicitly linked to the struggle for freedom. Identity is only complete in the context of freedom. To become whole, the wife must assert her autonomy by killing that which presumed to govern her, instead of simply abandoning her wifely post and leaving the marital structure intact.

With no initiation but what she gives herself, the wife lays claim to a whole history of mystical powers, and to a community of wolves with whom, presumably, she has shared nothing but the instinct to run and kill. Through her negation of learning and initiation in her poetry, Adam makes mystic power accessible to all women, suggesting that connection with occult forces is made possible not through serious and objective study, but by acceptance of a connection that already exists.

This innate and dangerous power of women is theorized by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar as part of the patriarchal apparatus that denies women identity as individuals. Gilbert and Gubar posit that women have been imaged throughout the history of literature as “eternal types,” what they term “angels” and “monsters.” The function of these types has been to mediate “between the male artist and the Unknown,” either to inspire him to greater spiritual things, or to reify male anxiety about the feminine and all it is supposed to represent. Not essentially different, these angel and monster figures circumscribe women’s identity to a muse function predicated on our lack of subjectivity, “it is just because women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power (like ‘Cyphers’) that they become numinous to male artists,” and emptying any sense of individual identity.(22)

The specifically literary dimensions of the problem, for Gilbert and Gubar, are that “until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image” foisted upon her by masculine literary culture. Gilbert and Gubar draw on Virginia Woolf’s argument that in order to claim an identity outside of what masculine imagery offers, women must kill the angel: “the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art.” They add that “all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the ‘monster’ in the house”(23) in order to transcend both aspects of the patriarchal definition.

Adam, however, takes precisely the opposite track, asserting individualist values by using the idea that the monstrous woman “embodies intransigent female autonomy”(24) as a positive way to overcome the limitations attendant on female imagery. Adam’s women epitomize the symbolic representation of women as assertive, aggressive, and closely allied with nature, but they partake of the same kind of feminist strategy as the WITCH groups of the 1960s. Originally formed in New York under the acronym “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell,” these protest groups were the first widely publicized feminist circles to see the political potential of the witch as a contemporary symbol of women’s power, a symbol that served as a rallying point in their efforts to take down aspects of the patriarchy ranging from the exploitative practices of food companies to bridal fairs. Their original manifesto makes the link between witches and political action clear, “Witches and gypsies were the

original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression – particularly the oppression of women – down through the ages.” They attributed radical qualities to witches, terming them “aggressive,” “nonconformist,” “independent,” and “revolutionary”(25) in their bid to reclaim the witch as a positive role model for women. Unlike Adam’s heroines, they recuperated the figure of the witch by spinning the negative aspects of feminine stereotypes into positive qualities like independence. Adam anticipates the feminist appropriation of the witch as symbolizing resistance to oppression, but her strategy is less to recuperate the figure than to demonstrate its capacity to obliterate value systems that have worked to demonize it. Her heroines embody the conventional negative typology of the witch to such an extreme that the masculinist value system that encourages women not to identify with witches becomes woefully inadequate as an opponent. Her works asserts that male anxieties about women are not only true and justified, but that conventionally patriarchal strategies of controlling women are in the end ineffectual against women’s powers.

Adam’s women exceed containment both by the masculine figures in her works and by Adam herself. As author, she declines to control her women, refusing to re-place them under the governance of some authority figure at the end of their poems. Not only does Adam not condemn them, she allows her “monstrous” women to create their own value systems, in which freedom and autonomy are the highest ideals. In their insistence on autonomy, they avail themselves of “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place.’” (26) Her characters go gleefully unpunished for their crimes because the more heinous crime in Adam’s works is for anyone to attempt to place limits on a woman’s freedom.

Her ballad “The Queen o’ Crow Castle” narrates just such an attempt in a world governed by female divinity, and operating under laws which hold autonomy for women as the highest ideal. The poem opens by placing the scene under the rule of female divinity, “In the glen o’ Crow Castle the mountain is steep/ Whaur groves o’ the Goddess grow secret and deep./ Groves o’ the Goddess whaur Love doth abide./ There walk the young at the blue even tide.” The Goddess is allied with young love and with life in both a physical and emotional sense. It is here that we meet the hero of the piece, Callastan, who defies the principles of the Goddess by walking alone in the glen and spurning love, “The finest young man in the length of the glen,/ Averteth his face frae the pleasures o’ men.” Callastan does not value the sensual, the earthly, or the feminine, and takes an angel instead of a girl as his companion, “He walks wi’ an angel baith morning and night./ The heavens may lour but he looks to the light.” There is an ambivalence to the heavens’ regard for him. He seems privileged to have an angel for a friend, but his preference of a strictly spiritual companion risks the displeasure of the Goddess. Callastan expounds more specifically on his attitudes towards women in the lines that follow:

“I walk wi’ an angel, his garments are spun
O’ vanishing rays frae the ultimate sun.
He smiles when I speak, and his face shines sae clear
The beauty o’ women I’ve nae need tae fear.

“I walk wi’ an angel, I follow his tread
By bridges o’ fire over wild gulfs o’ dread.
I watch while he wrestles celestial despair.
The sorrows o’ women I’ve nae need tae share.”

The passage illuminates Callastan’s paradoxical attitude towards women – that they are both inferior, and fearsome. The beauty of women is a danger to him, kept at bay while his masculine angel accompanies

him. The sorrows of women are seen by Callastan as inferior next to the “celestial despair” he witnesses in the angel. The hero accepts the construction of femininity as both dangerous, unknowable other, and also earthly, less important counterpart to the entirely spiritual being that is supposed to be the masculine prerogative and goal. By denying those qualities conventionally associated with women, and then proclaiming them to be inferior to conventionally masculine principles, Callastan unwittingly plays a risky game in a land ruled by the feminine.

The heavens align against Callastan at this point, while Aphrodite conspires to have him catch a glimpse of the Queen of Crow Castle at the top of her enchanted tower, and so fall desperately in love. Callastan is unknowingly overpowered by the divine feminine, and while his angel tries to persuade him against his new inclination, the hero makes up his mind to wed the Queen. The angel explains why this is a bad idea, “Seven as husbands ha’ entered her tower,/ Lain in the dark by that lass like a flower./ Always, at morning, the Queen lies her lane/ Nought left o’ the man but a fire brackled bane.” The Queen is ‘possessed’ by a devil, the angel tells him, a spirit who kills any man who tries to spend the night, and Callastan’s desires are inflamed by the chivalric aim of rescuing the maiden from the devil.

Adam immediately deflates the romance of his intentions, however, by making it clear that the hero’s desire to save the girl has much more to do with him than with her. He vows to the angel to confront the devil at any cost, “Though held tae her Deil’s hert I hear her laugh low,/ I’ll strike doun her door wi’ a stunning blow.” He intends to forcibly separate the two, even if this is not what the Queen wishes. In the lines which immediately follow, Callastan again reveals an anxiety that she might not mind the devil, but declares his determination to possess her anyway, “What e’er lurk behind it, I’ll rive doun her door./ Aye though she be ten times the Deil’s mocking whore./ I’ll beat frae her chamber that Prince in his pride,/ And I’ll be the first man tae wake by her side.” The repeated image of him violently breaking down her door like an intruder combines here with heroic desire for combat with the devil to make the rescue mission seem more about war than love. Callastan wishes to succeed where others have failed, a desire which has nothing to do with the Queen. Adam suggests that victory on the part of the hero would be no less oppressive than possession by the devil, and denounces the romantic notion of masculine figures struggling over a woman’s freedom.

The undaunted hero gets some unexpected help from the crows of the castle, who tell him how to defeat the devil, which he and the angel manage to do after a short but fiery battle. The devil’s banishment occasions the poem’s first lines about the Queen’s thoughts, and the mystery behind her “possession” starts to unravel. Their relationship becomes clear when she laments his defeat, “That sun shaking fury she will’na forget./ Till the end o’ a’ love nights her Deil she’ll regret.” Far from being held against her will, the Queen has enjoyed the presence of her devil. She manifests the anxieties Callastan spoke of to his angel – that he will not be rescuing a helpless victim.

Adam’s representation of Callastan’s spiritual aide as an angel and the Queen’s as a devil figures the struggle for the Queen’s liberation in terms of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. In typical Adam fashion, she aligns her heroine with the side that women have conventionally been assigned to anyway, but uses the identification as a site of resistance to limitations on women’s autonomy. The Queen is what Callastan feared of women, but his moral judgement of women and his identification with the angel mean little, since his values run contrary to the values of this world.

The poem continues:

The Queen o’ Crow Castle leads doun intae night

Callastan her new love that creature o' light.
 They move in the mirk as the moon and the sun,
 Compelled tae their love since the planet first spun.

The man and the woman are naked and lone.
 His angel awa, and her Deil overthrown.
 Who then prevaieth, who taketh that tower?
 Hushed is the night, and the lass, like a flower.

The elemental differences between the Queen and Callastan are stressed in their moment of union. Her sensuality, which has throughout the poem been inextricably linked with her spiritual relationship with the devil, leads him from his purely spiritual life, just as her association with darkness leads him from the light. Once the two are alone and without supernatural friends, the question of autonomy comes to the fore again, suggesting that Callastan's victory is not final, and has not entitled him to the possession he imagined he would have. The real battle is not the one between angel and devil, but the mortal one that will decide who gains control over the life of the Queen. The crows utter warning that, "*Rash is the mortal who plucketh that flower,*" but the hero does not take heed. The poem closes:

Smoke reeking black on the blue morning sky.
 Over his ashes her gorged corbies fly.
 Mair than the Deil must a man overthrow
 Wha weds wi' the Queen o' the Castle o' Crow.
Great cry her corbies, they reel as they go.
Great is the Queen o' the Castle o' Crow.
Great is the Queen. Kra, Ha! o' the Castle o' Crow! (27)

Prevallet sees the poem's ending as "a sinister subplot" of the crows to "seize the castle for themselves" in order to "attack and eat the fair Castellan (*sic*)."(28) I would argue, however, that the poem makes clear that it is not the crows, but the Queen who has prevailed. Callastan's burnt body links him back to the other seven suitors, suggesting that the same power that did away with the seven would-be husbands is still at work. The real extent of the Queen's power is revealed only in the final lines. The devil is permitted because she wishes him to be there, but the same is not true of the seven suitors, or of Callastan. To wed a man is, in this poem, to be overthrown, and the Queen is having none of it. The terrible things that befall Callastan – his being compelled to fall in love with a woman loved by a devil, and then burnt to a crisp, even after victory seemed assured – are the result of the same crime against the feminine. Callastan's initial disregard for women in favour of his angel, and his consequent about-face in wanting to possess one woman, are really two sides of the same coin – devaluing women.

Adam diminishes the importance of the conventional struggle between good and evil by rendering the battle between angel and devil essentially meaningless in terms of plot development, and endowing the Queen with power that transcends their Christianized struggle. The feminine divine is figured in the poem as the larger, inescapable background against which the fight between good and evil takes place. It is not as demonstrative or flashy as masculine power, but it is inexorable. Even the concepts of good and evil are emptied of their significance, since this world operates by an entirely different, feminine, set of values.

In Adam's works, the ability to disregard patriarchal forces that use gender constructs as a way to subjugate women is won by a process of assuming those constructs in order to overcome them from

within. Stressing their complete and excessive embodiment of the negative typology associated with the figure of the witch – an embodiment Adam postulates as natural and innate in women – Adam’s heroines proceeds to demonstrate that this figure transcends the value systems which generate the typology, and answer ultimately only to the laws which women themselves allow. The transformative potential of her critique of the power inequalities of this world lies not so much in her heroines’ violent victories against individual men who seek to limit them, but in their instantiation of, or adherence to, value systems that privilege autonomy for women, and need no external authorization to function effectively.

1. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 58, 127.
2. Kristin Prevallet, "The Worm Queen Emerges: Helen Adam and the Forgotten Ballad Tradition," in *Girls Who Wore Black*, ed. Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002), 30.
3. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1979), 17.
4. Kristin Prevallet, "The Reluctant Pixie Poole: A Recovery of Helen Adam's San Francisco Years," (1995). <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/prevallet/adam.html> (accessed 22 April, 2009).
5. *Ibid.*; Helen Adam papers (box 21, folder 5, insert notebook 1, page 6); Adam, qtd. in Prevallet, "Pixie."
6. Davidson, 187.
7. Prevallet, "Queen," 26-7; 27.
8. Robert Duncan, Preface, *Ballads*, Helen Adam (New York: Acadia, 1964).
9. Davidson, 181.
10. Helen Adam, *Turn Again to Me and Other Poems* (New York: Kulchur, 1977), 104.
11. *Ibid.*, 106; 105.
12. *Ibid.*, 106.
13. *Ibid.*, 105.
14. *Ibid.*, 106.
15. Davidson, 183.
16. Helen Adam papers, (box 21, folder 5, insert notebook 1, page 9).
17. Adam, *Turn*, 13.
18. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
19. *Ibid.*, 14; Prevallet, "Queen," 29; Adam, *Turn*, 14.
20. *Ibid.*, 15
21. Davidson, 183.
22. Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale, 1979), 17; 20; 21.
23. *Ibid.*, 17.
24. *Ibid.*, 28.
25. Robin Morgan, "WITCH: Spooking the Patriarchy during the Late Sixties," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City: Anchor, 1982), 428.
26. Gilbert and Gubar, 28.
27. Helen Adam, *The Queen o' Crow Castle* (San Francisco: White Rabbit, 1958).
28. Prevallet, "Queen," 37.