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Subversion and Containment in Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"

The poetry and prose of Adrienne Rich become so radically feminist in her later work, that it is hard to imagine the poet writing in any other mode. A closer examination of her earlier work, however, reveals a Rich that is more conservative. Rich herself suggests that her early style was "formed first by male poets" (21), and her early work is generally regarded as bearing little resemblance to her later radical works. Claire Keyes goes as far as to acknowledge that Rich "accepts certain traditions associated with the division of power according to sex" (6). It's as if Rich is playing by the rules of the male-dominated game in order to establish her identity first as a poet—or at least on the surface. Keyes suggests that in these early poems "we detect subversive undercurrents and an assertion of power" (6) that are buried in Rich's formal and thematic obligations to the masculinist tradition. These subtle subversive elements have largely been the focus of critics in studying Rich's early poetry.

While Keyes and others have done substantial work in identifying subversion in these poems, it is not the only force at work. At the same time that the female voice is developing and seeking its independence from the patriarchal tradition, the repressive voice of masculinism is pushing back. This tension is the "split" that Rich identifies in her early poetry (21) and the "double-voiced discourse containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story" identified by Elaine Showalter (204). Essentially, there is a force of masculine hegemony that attempts to contain any act of subversion present in Rich's early poetry.

Looking specifically at “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” we can see this tension between subversion and containment. As critics have observed, the subversion of power relationships in the poem is evident. For example, while the poem references the patriarchal system of hegemony through the institution of marriage—“The heavy weight of uncle’s wedding band”—Keyes argues that Aunt Jennifer resists this hegemony through means of her artistic expression, the tigers representing “creative power or art” (22). The elements of containment, however, are more difficult to detect. Containment, being the means by which patriarchal power prevents subversion from reaching full fruition, is visible both through the poem’s metrical form and its plot. This essay will explore the containment of subversive manifestations and its surrounding implications in the poem.

It is unlikely that Rich consciously made patriarchal containment a function of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Indeed, Rich tried to portray in her early work what Keyes calls a woman’s “negative experience with power” (18); however, the effects of subversion and containment are fiercely contrary to Rich’s ostensible feminist agenda. The theory of subversion and containment is first established by Stephen Greenblatt in his essay “Invisible Bullets.” The basic idea is that a well-established belief or maxim of a repressive power is brought into question. The subversion is then stifled by a reinforcement of the repressive maxim. Greenblatt explains that the subversion is, in consequence, the “very product of that power and furthers its ends” (48). In other words, the repressive power itself allows subversion to occur so that it can be contained. Its containment makes the original maxim even stronger than it was before the subversion had occurred.

But critics tend not to see the patterns of containment in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” focusing only on the subversion. We have already identified Keyes’ identification of “subversive

undercurrents” in this and other early poems (6). Cheri Langdell even asserts that the poem “foreshadow[s] ideas about [Rich] and women” and is “in general characteristic of her later feminist work” (26). The critical consensus of this poem is that it is less radically feminist than Rich’s later work, but critics still draw feminist themes and conclusions from it through the identification of subversive elements. Contrary to the poem’s typical interpretation, I contest that the process of subversion and containment reinforces a hegemony of masculinist maxims in the poem. These maxims actually debilitate any feminist dictum that could otherwise be part of the poem’s interpretation. In other words, the typical reading of the poem, that the tigers embody liberation from masculine oppression through artistic expression, is actually suppressed by the masculinist maxim that prevents the development of an audible and distinct female voice.

In order to see how a masculinist agenda is realized in an ostensibly feminist poem, we must examine the allusions to subversion and containment built into the formal construction of the poem. As I mentioned earlier, the poem’s metrical composition reveals a structural pattern of subversion and containment. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is written in three rhyming quatrains. The rhymes are in a perfect ABAB pattern and the meter is mostly written in iambic pentameter. What we have is a fairly traditional poem, written with an emphasis on formal precision.

What seems to contradict the typical reading of this poem is that its form adheres to a male-dominated tradition of poetry. Critics have usually either ignored this fact or found a way to manipulate it into a feminist expression. Langdell, for example, recognizes Rich’s formal precision saying that the poem is “written in perfect quatrains in iambic pentameter” but insists that the poem represents an escape from patriarchal hegemony through a woman’s craft (Aunt Jennifer's needlework) (26). Ironically, the form of the poem itself reflects a rigid adherence to regulations of poetry established by a male canon. Keyes discusses Rich’s choices “regarding

diction, syntax, imagery, musical values, and prosody—that is, the components of poetic form,” in her later work and asserts that “governing these choices is her womanhood” (10). This governance of “womanhood” that characterizes Rich’s later poetry is clearly absent in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Instead we witness a woman’s muted voice that is valued only in its relationship to male poetry. The poem’s form fails to develop its own tradition, but is instead forced to imitate the male poetic tradition, thus establishing an oppressive power.

With a clear understanding of how the poem’s metrical composition represents a masculinist power, the poem’s metrical subversions are manifested. There are several instances in the poem of Rich choosing words that disrupt the iambic pentameter. These words are “Jennifer’s” (1, 5, 8), “denizens” (2), “fluttering” (5), “heavily” (8), and “terrified” (9). Each of these words has a dactylic meter. While dactylic meter isn’t necessarily associated with a female tradition, the dactylic feet do interrupt the formal regulations of the masculine iambs. These interruptions represent the subversive act of the female voice rebelling against the masculine poetic tradition.

We can learn a lot from Rich’s choice of diction in the subversive dactyls as well. The theme of these words illustrates woman’s negative relationship with power. “Terrified,” “heavily,” and “fluttering” all share a tone of fearfulness. “Denizens,” incorporates an element of foreignness representing the alien feeling of women participating in a male-dominated field or discipline. While these words do appear to embody the practice of oppression itself, they are subversive in that they call into question the maxim of acceptable masculine domination of women. The “wedding band” sitting “heavily” questions the institution of marriage and family as a positive social force. And so the diction is not actively rebellious, but subversive in calling attention to the problems of patriarchal mastery.

Containment is introduced alongside the dactylic use of “Jennifer” as an identifier for the aunt. Originally the use of “Jennifer” is subversive; not only does it interrupt the dominance of metrical structure, but it also assigns an individual identity to Aunt Jennifer. Using her name makes her a subject, capable of making judgments and being creative—not just an object as a part of a social system that benefits male subjects. We notice, however, that in the final stanza describing her death, her name “Jennifer” is no longer used. She is just referred to as “Aunt.” The dactylic name that individualized her is discarded and she is instead given a signifier that identifies her as merely an object in the institution of the family. And so she is “still ringed with ordeals” in death: not only Aunt Jennifer’s physical death, but a death of the poem’s subversive spirit. The concept of an individual identity for women is contained by the overwhelming domination of the “ideological state apparatus” of marriage (Althusser 1341).

The poem’s final stanza also represents containment on a more structural level. Beginning with the identifier “Jennifer” and the “denizens”—the tigers—we see metrical subversion throughout the first two stanzas of the poem. The last stanza, however, aside from the hopeless adjective “terrified,” is void of any dactyls. It is written in perfect iambic pentameter. Looking specifically at the last two lines of the poem, “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (11-12) we see what critics generally consider to be the most subversive and hopeful lines in the poem. But the lines are superimposed with a formal restriction that represents centuries of masculine domination in all creative faculties. While the disruptive dactylic feet used early in the poem definitely arouse subversiveness, the poem ends with said subversiveness being contained. And so the very lines that are meant to inspire hope for women are burdened with the restrictions of a patriarchal poetic tradition.

The actual effect of the poem's final two lines functioning against feminism and reinforcing masculinist maxims is better understood thematically than formally. Critics have typically interpreted the closing couplet positively rather than negatively, expressing a theme that claims the tigers as an expression of freedom through art. Keyes suggests that the tigers represent how "a woman transcends the traditional dependency of her role by means of her craft" (21), and Langdell claims that the poem's theme is that "while her actual life was 'ringed with ordeals she was mastered by,' her cherished embroidered tigers somehow escaped any such domination" (26). But this interpretation of the poem is fundamentally flawed when the theory of subversion and containment is applied. Keyes and Langdell's interpretation is founded on two axioms: one is that Aunt Jennifer's embroidery functions as an expressive and empowering form of artistic creativity and not as a repressive apparatus. The second is that the symbolism of the tigers embodies a female liberation from the maxims of patriarchal dominance and marital constraints. I will explain how each of these axioms can be seen from an alternative perspective as a function of subversion and containment.

Keyes and Langdell have both focused on Aunt Jennifer's needlework as a means of overcoming masculine power through art, parallel to Rich's own subversion through poetic composition. The problem with this assertion is in the nature of Aunt Jennifer's craft itself. It is a silenced and domesticated art form with no platform for exposure. Where Rich's poetry will eventually reach a large audience and effectively create a voice for women's art, Aunt Jennifer's Embroidered Tigers are destined to be confined within the walls of her own home. Her art is institutionalized in that it is an art to be performed in the domicile for the domicile. It is an example of how the dominant power of masculinism allows a minor subversion, but the subversion is quickly contained reinforcing the masculinist maxim. Aunt Jennifer is permitted

this domesticated handicraft, but is given no real influence in artistic expression. The tigers may “go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (12), but they will do so within the confines of a patriarchal system where only men are given a dominant voice.

The second axiom of the poem’s typical interpretation, that the tigers are symbolic of a female escape from masculine oppression, is actually the poem’s most stunning example of subversion and containment. Looking at the first stanza, we see the subversion as the tigers “do not fear the men beneath the tree” (3) and “pace in sleek chivalric certainty” (4). The tigers represent the experience of women in an ideal world where they are unburdened by the weight of patriarchal oppression. This metaphorical liberation calls into question the established maxim that women are subordinate to men, especially in family structures. The patriarchy, however, will not allow this subversion to be taken very far—it is contained in the poem’s last two lines, “The tigers in the panel that she made/Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (11-12). These lines are usually seen as the poem’s ultimate feminist moral, but they can be seen alternatively as a masculinist maxim meant to placate woman’s desire for subversion. Keyes states that the last stanza of the poem “indicates that [the tigers] will endure while Aunt Jennifer will die and that they will continue to represent her unfulfilled longings” (22). What we see here is a promise of fulfillment post mortem that will validate a life plagued by injustice and oppression. It is a maxim similar to the religious promise of heaven that maintains submission and obedience. And so while there is subversion at the beginning of the poem, eventually that subversion is contained by the surrogacy of the tigers. In the end, the original masculinist maxim of female subordination is ultimately reinforced to be even stronger than it was before the subversion occurred.

What appears to be a feminist dictum of hope is actually a lie; a lie that is alluded to earlier in the poem. Michael Rizza, Claire Keyes, and others have recognized the ambiguity in

the word “lie” at the end of line nine (Rizza 65, Keyes 23). The line presumably means that Aunt Jennifer's hands lie passively as she is dead, but it may also mean they lie, as in deceive. This lying represents not only the illusion of hope expressed in the poem's last two lines but also the general function of deception as an artificial seizure of power by women. Keyes asserts that a woman is generally incapable of obtaining power from men, but may appear to have power through cunning, seduction, or deception:

A mask is put on in order to gain favor or position that the woman cannot openly achieve or demand for herself. That mask can, of course, be a certain kind of language or tone, perhaps a gentle acceptance or modesty. . . . Naturally, the restraint of actual feelings composes the substratum of disguise.” (18)

It is interesting that Aunt Jennifer's hands “lie” only in death. In life they may have been truthful. Their creation of the tigers was hopeful, and perhaps they did “pace in sleek chivalric certainty” (4) at one point. But with Aunt Jennifer's death, the hope of liberation dies as well, and the final dictum becomes mere fancy that fortifies masculine power.

This poem stands as an example of Adrienne Rich before her development into the feminist visionary that she is known as today—and there is no shame in that. The poem is both an important step in her own self-discovery as a poet, and an exploration of the injustices of patriarchal power. However, as instrumental as “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” may be in Rich's ultimate reputation as a feminist poet, feminist subversion operates in the poem itself only as a part of the whole. Examining the poem as an example of subversion and containment, the subversive elements of the poem are revisioned as tools of patriarchal hegemony. The subversion

is an allowance made by masculine power that can be easily contained, creating the illusion of freedom. Overall, the poem does not further the cause of feminism as does Rich's later work. Instead it perpetuates the muted female voice by giving it a false and controlled sense of subversion.

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