

DEBORAH FRASER

THE LIONESSE, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE

INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic as a way of knowing is not always valued yet it shapes us (Eisner, 2004, 2002; Gendler, 1988; Lovecky, 1990; McCrary-Sullivan, 2000, 2005; Osna Heller, 2010; Parkyn, 1995). This article is in some ways an exercise in ‘poetry’ therapy as I reflect on the inextricable ways the women of my family and their aesthetic have shaped me. This is far deeper than a mere interest in fashion; the ways in which my mother and grandmothers dressed and the ways they related to clothes permeated my consciousness. Clothes are literally the threads that bind us, as women, as mothers, as daughters, and as lovers of clothes.

In addition to clothes, the visceral memories of my female lineage include scent, hair, jewellery, make-up and accessories which were vivid sensory impressions with magical qualities. It is through my mother’s and grandmothers’ wardrobes that I inhaled the accoutrements of femininity; the alchemy of colour contrasts; the textural nuance of fabric; and the wondrous transformation of dressing up and dressing down.

I hope that readers of these poems see some glimmer of these women brought to life on the page. McCrary-Sullivan (2005) argued that “the poems we read can take us across boundaries, give us vicarious experience, render the abstract concrete, take us under the skin of the other, generate empathy” (p. 29). These poems convey the influences learnt at the hemline of my mother and grandmothers. Like values and attitudes, the gift of style is caught, not taught; caught in the cuff of a velvet dress, or the gleam of a brooch, or the startling sparkle of purple sandals. In essence, these poems explore the multiple selves that a wardrobe offers, from lioness to witch.

Frock Habits

My mother’s mother
Had a strange habit
Of wearing black to weddings
And she’s not Italian

And a habit
Of not
Wearing a bra

And a love of frocks

*R. Gibson (Ed.), The Memory of Clothes, 7–15.
© 2015 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.*

THE LIONESS, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

A shock of frocks
Frocks for all occasions

The house frock
The garden frock
The take-the-smoko to the shearers
Frock

Bent double
Between the endless rows
Of vegetables
She gleaned her harvest
In the garden frock

While
Her garden pansies
Dahlias
And violets
Grew in glee
Around the house

And her tireless house frock
Dealt with jam-making
Scone-baking
Clothes-mending
Fruit-bottling
House-scrubbing

Shelling peas
With wicked chortle,
The bowl nested in her lap
Narrow ankles crossed.

Blind Faith

Her husband
Her second husband
Built their home
With his farmer's
Capable hands

Including a magical wardrobe
With its entry in their bedroom
And its exit in the spare room

DEBORAH FRASER

A veritable jungle
A Raiders of the Lost Ark
Tunnel of garments

Sleeves that grasped and groped
Unpredictable shoe hazards
And still darkness
At the centre.

Airless, musty
That mixture of perfume and dust and death
The bodies hung limp
The end relying on
blind faith.

A Reason to Dress Up

My father's mother
Wore tortoiseshell combs
Gleaming brooches
Warm stoles
Embroidered blouses
And matching cloche hats.

Photos of her
In some windswept
Arid field
Show her smiling with her sister
Dressed for high tea
On the low tussock.

Reasons to dress up
Were scant
In those remote
Rural soils,
Yet there is proof
That fashion
Thrust from the ground.

No Money but Plenty of Style

Not many could wear
An all-in-one
Purple pantsuit
Those large

THE LIONESS, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

Purple quadrangles
A walking geometry
Of cloth

At little over five foot
You'd think she'd avoid
Such bold statements
Such a barrage
Of shape and colour,
colour and shape

But with her hair swept up
And that sparkle
Of purple sandals
She sailed
Like a tall ship
Proudly flying –

No money
But plenty of style.

At the Machine

There was plenty
Of muttering
At the machine
As mum cut
And sewed
And grumbled

Turning out
Pantsuits
And floral dresses
In blues and greens and browns
Pinning garments
Inside-out
While I yelped and winced
Learning about
Pain
And fashion
And their strange
Relationship

Watching her make magic
Out of cloth and thread

DEBORAH FRASER

Making two dimensions
Three.

Creating me over and over again
As she did
In the beginning,
From the inside-out
And the outside-in.

Caught in the Cuff

Green velvet at night
Daughter's delight
Purple at cuff
And V-neck ruff
Such is the style
Capped with a smile
Sporting a wig
And sherry to swig
Fabric so soft
Dreams held aloft
Mother so fine
Captured in time.

Cigarettes

When cigarettes were fashionable
My mother and her mother
Both
Sported cigarettes
Like a fashion accessory

Roll your owns
And trails of ash
Encircled my grandmother

While my mother
Tried telescope holders
At one stage
Holding the nicotine
Like a spear

Armed with a cigarette
They both seemed bolder
And stronger

THE LIONESS, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

And ready to take on
Those crouching
In corners.

I See You

I see you
Those elegant bright nails
Counting money, lugging wood
Hoping you can make the mortgage this week
And that the bank will understand

I see you
Letting that man
Hold your hand
For a discount on the kerosene
Paying with pride, your head down

I see you
Putting on that lipstick
While other women
Clutched their husbands close
And warned their daughters not to visit

I see you with
That Cleopatra flick
Those wigs and gold filling
Beaming at the world
As you bounced past in that turquoise mini

I see you
Lost in a book
Safely wrapped in a chair
Living a life unlimited
Denied beyond a small town house

I see you
Bringing clothes to life
Effortlessly
In ways that others
Could only admire and darkly glare

I see you
Cast as the tragic heroine
In plays and in life

DEBORAH FRASER

A warrior princess
A femme fatale (doomed of course)

I see you
Lying in the garden
And the black sand beach
Sunglasses and bikini
On the edges of it all, letting the sea stroke your toes

And later – I see you
In intensive care
Hallucinating
And dealing with white on white
Groping for that tissue lost on the bed

I see you
Shrunk into yourself
Your head too large
Your feet too small
Staggering from bed to chair and back

I see you
Sorting your clothes
Taking out the mediums and large
Stocking up with
Skinny jeans, tiny tops and extra-smalls

I see you
Bright-eyed still
Lost in a book again
And the world it offers
Beyond the past and future both.

Everlasting Love

Before I loved men,
I loved
clothes.

When I finish loving men
I'll still love
clothes.

They are the weather
An inescapable part

THE LIONESSE, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

Of my life

The focal feature
Of every
Single
Style-infected day.

When down
I don tangerine
Shot through with aubergine

When playful
Lemon vies with lime
From neck to toe

When aiming
For profound
Turquoise takes a twirl with taupe

And all is
As it
Should be.

CONCLUSION

Poetry, like science, helps us to observe or recall things intensely. It helps us to make the ordinary, extraordinary. Poems are more expressive than analytic, yet like the shearing of cloth, they cut to the heart of the matter, with depth of feeling. Moreover, they promote empathetic understanding as they enable us to get under the skin of another. Inevitably, the highly personal nature of the poetry above is therapeutic; an excavation of the female family ties that informed and shaped me in ways both subtle and blunt. Writing such poems offers insight and healing, a process which has been acknowledged for centuries. For instance, Soranus, a Roman physician in the first century A.D. believed in the healing power of the aesthetic, prescribing tragedy for his manic patients and comedy for his depressed ones. Interestingly, Apollo the God of medicine is also the God of poetry, underlining the ancient connection between the aesthetic and health (A brief overview of poetry therapy, n.d.).

These poems offer a chance to honour the women, the clothes and the memories that bind, that enfold, that wrap, and cover me. They stitch us together across the generations from seam to seam. Some garments are left unfinished. The wardrobe drawn from here, like memory, is selective. But these are the clothing stories that insisted on being told.

DEBORAH FRASER

REFERENCES

- A brief overview of poetry therapy (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.poetrytherapy.org/articles/pt.htm>
- Eisner, E. (2004). What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education? *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 5(4), 1-12.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *Arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gendler, J. R. (1988). *The book of qualities*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Lovecky, D. V. (1990). Warts and rainbows: Issues in the psychotherapy of the gifted. *Advanced Development*, 2, 65-83.
- McCrary Sullivan, A. (2005). Lessons from the Anhinga Trail: Poetry and teaching. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 107, 23-32.
- McCrary Sullivan, A. (2000). Notes from a marine biologist's daughter. On the art and science of attention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(2), 211-227.
- Oсна Heller, P. (2010). Kenneth P. Gorelick: Poetry therapy pioneer. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 23(2), 107-114.
- Parkyn, P. W. (1995). *To the aesthetic road: Neglected areas of giftedness: A series of papers 1975-1984*. Wellington: NZCER.