

Research Article

Subvert Sculpture, the Old Mode: Representing Women in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image

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Abstract

The paper examines the representation of women in *In Her Own Image* (1980), one of the early collections of Eavan Boland, often considered to be the most prominent woman poet to have emerged from the twentieth Irish literary scenario. In a series of poems, as the title and the titular poem indicate, Boland raises relevant questions that challenge the female stereotypes constructed by gender dominant discourses that have at all points in history, determined the representation of women. The gross falsifications that were in currency under the guise of determinism and biological inferiority based on defining difference as having hierarchical implications which came to be critiqued through different stages of feminism, continue to find literary expression in Boland's poetry. A profound sense of history informs Boland's poetry; there is an urgency in her poems that demand a critical engagement with the past and the present that becomes the past. Unreflecting acceptance of received images of femininity is anathema to her poetry and it is here that one finds the key to the force and meaning of her poems.

Keywords: anorexia, mastectomy, subversion, history, violence.

Eavan Boland, a preeminent Irish Poet who established herself with her first volume of poems *23 Poems* (1962) expressed her preoccupation with the issues of women as early as 1971 when she wrote a verse play "Femininity and Freedom" which remained unpublished till 2009. Her poetry and prose are profoundly concerned with absences, distortions and misrepresentations of women. A preoccupation with the challenges a woman poet faces, is not limited to Boland's poetry alone. She addresses the issue in *Object Lessons* an early prose work, where she writes:

I believe that the woman poet today inherits a dilemma. The dilemma I speak of is inherent in a shadowy but real convergence between new experience and an established aesthetic. What this means in practical terms is that the woman poet today is caught in a field of force. Powerful, persuasive voices are in her ear as she writes. Distorting and simplifying ideas of womanhood and poetry fall as shadows between her and the courage of her own experience. If she listens to these voices, yields to these ideas, her work will be obstructed. (Boland, 1995, p.161)

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The problems of resisting the dominant representations of women in a male dominated literary tradition find expression in her writings, something which she shares with other women writers of Ireland:

The difficulty of negotiating a position with respect to the male Irish literary tradition is a theme reflected in some of the poems of other Irish women writers of Boland's generation, including Eilean Ni Chuilleanain (1942-), Medbh McGuckian (1950-), and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill (1952-). Like Boland, Ni Dhomhnaill (who writes her poetry in Irish) addresses the ways women are mythologized. (Stade & Goldstein, 1999, p.35)

The male literary tradition, Boland knows, endorses patriarchal biases and gender dominance and stereotyping. Adrienne Rich states the centrality of body thus:

I know of no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves— for whom the body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meanings, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power. Physical motherhood is merely one dimension of our being. (Rich, 1976, p.284)

The concerns raised by Rich in the mid-1970s still have not lost their relevance nor is the process of reclaiming the female body, over. Boland's poetry is an attempt to address the relevance and to further the process of reclaiming and the poems in *In Her Own Image*. The opening poem, significantly raises this issue. "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" is about the literary tradition that has systematically created false images of womanhood over centuries. The pressures of the established aesthetic pervade the poem. For Boland, the mimic muse represents the aesthetic that has to be resisted by all, particularly the poet, since she holds the power of expression which she can use to right the wrongs done by the mimetic muse. The anxiety of the influence of the established aesthetic runs through the poem, but equally strong is the awareness to resist the temptations to succumb to the security of the tradition. The poem thus is about two conflicting fields of power. The passionate outburst with which the poem begins is suggestive of the energies that will be employed later in the poem and Boland uses the metaphor of the slut to describe the muse. "I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout" (New Collected Poems, (hereafter NCP), p.71). Not satisfied with the expletive, the anger not spent, she elaborates: "An ageing out of work kind hearted tart, / I know you for the ruthless bitch you are / Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse- / Our Muse of Mimic Art" (NCP, p. 71). The muse's historicity is confronted directly and also its datedness: "That there's a dead millennium in your eyes" (NCP, p. 71). The poet sees the Muse's crime as her own, it cannot be sugared over or glossed over. "Your time is up. / There's not a stroke, a flick / Can make your crime cosmetic" (NCP, p. 71). The lines reflect Boland's understanding and attitude towards literary conventions and the rejection of transcendental attributes of traditional values. The engagement with historicity is the first step in the rejection of an oppressive tradition. Timeless quality of literary works is in the first place suspect, the poet reminds the reader, and in the poem tells the Muse that her tricks are up. The tone softens as the poem moves forward. There is a tenderness when she writes of what the Muse has done: "You did protect yourself from horrors, / from lizzarding of eyelids/From whiskering of nipples, /from the slow betrayals of bedroom mirrors" (NCP, p.71). The muse, Boland suggests, has shielded herself and humanity from time. Shielding from time amounts to the evasion of reality. This protection is not wholly commendable, Boland suggests. It is wilful courting of ignorance and unreflecting conformity to beauty norms that exclude the aged female body.

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The attractive female figure is often the favourite theme of art; seldom are the ravages of time on the female body considered subjects fit for poetry. An ageless quality both of the human subject and the art that deals with it, Boland argues, cannot be merited with unthinking acceptance. The art and the artist are guilty of misrepresentations or total indifference to the human subject in its varying stages. The less appealing aspects of life, like aging and the unsightly body do not figure at all. The dominant concepts of feminine beauty are too narrow to accommodate aging. By pointing to the absence of realism in the treatment of the female body, the poet draws attention to the gender bias in the aesthetic atmosphere of bygone centuries, a feminist insight that had brought about far reaching consequences in redefining the subject position of women. The understanding that the female body is always subjected to objectification and commodification, an insight central to feminism, informs the poem. The female body is admissible only as a particular type and in a condition in so far as it is a source of pleasure. It is this crime of art that Boland exposes right from the opening line. As is evident from the descriptive title, it is a tirade, the direct addressee is the muse, but behind her is a whole range of social fabric with its patriarchal operations of power that construct the female body and define femininity from the perspective of heteronormative prescriptive practices.

Boland goes on to describe the life of a housewife in all its reality and refuses to glorify it. The world of women left out by the Muse is easily identifiable as the daily lived experience: What she could have allowed in her poetry is well documented "The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,/ the wash thumbed and the dish cracked, the scream of beaten women /the hubbub and the shriek of daily grief ' (NCP, p.72) In the 1950s and 1960s a dissatisfaction with the capacities and responsibilities of housework among early second wave feminists cast the emotional state of the housewife as a case of arrested or incomplete development within the terms of modernity: her daily life was characterized as being about repetition rather than progress; her association with cleaning, child rearing and dreary routines of shopping made her a worker who produced no product; and her spatial confinement to the home placed her crucially outside the urban and public world of mass culture and the dynamics of spectacular changes and developments in modernity (Johnson & Llyod , 2004, p. 94)

Boland's description of the drudgery of household work represents a stage in the feminist revisions of the gendered nature of work and is part of the realization that gender roles instituted by patriarchy will not die a natural death. "But the traditional expectations will not wither of their own volition. Thus, gender feminists have actively sought to establish a new pattern of socialization for men and women that raises expectations for equal participation at all levels in the labor force and in every facet of domestic work and childrearing" (Gilbert, 2008, pp. 98 -99). And she does it by questioning the notion of the happy housewife. Boland argues that literary representations are implicated in constructing and endorsing the already gender biased role ascriptions. The narrator's accusation is directed towards the Muse who chose to ignore the hard realities of a woman's life. The attitude of the Muse is tellingly described: "A world you could have sheltered in your skirts-/ And well I know and see it now, / The way you latched your belt and itched your hem / And shook it off like dirt" (NCP, p.72). The Muse is guilty of the dismissive attitude that she takes towards the suffering of women which she should have encouraged to be recorded in art. The gravity of the predicament of women is sharply contrasted with the treatment that it gets. The narrator admits that she too was influenced in her youth by the muse and realizes she was fooled: "To think I waited on your trashy whim" (NCP, p.72). The narrator, here comes not just to represent herself but her kind. The power of the muse is irresistible and the narrator cannot help but admit it.

There is also a moment of growing out of this vision offered by the Muse. In a moment of epiphanic dimensions, the narrator outgrows the demands and security offered by the muse. Boland envisions the world of reality pressing upon the mirror (the symbol of mimetic art) offered by the muse, leading to its destruction. What goes unrepresented in poetry, what is ignored by the muse, is what really matters. This is the moment of initiation; the poet outgrowing the demands of the muse. The directives of the muse, the narrator realizes, are to be shunned; it is necessary for a better understanding of the lives of woman and better representation of the same in art. The poem ends with a reversal of roles. Throughout the poem, the narrator is candid about how she was driven by the muse in her life, how she learned and followed the ways of the Muse, and what was wrong with the Muse's vision to which she subscribed in her childhood and womanhood. It is thus a logical conclusion when the student of the Muse becomes the teacher, and the learner and the teacher roles are reversed with a sense of clinching finality. The act of writing becomes a manifestation of the rejection of all that the Mimic Muse stands for.

Writing thus becomes an act of stripping the Muse. The reverential tone with which the Muse was always approached gone, the body of the Muse is assailed by another female poetic voice in the process of finding her own distinctive voice freed of the demands of the Muse. The moment of the birth of a female poet is at the expense of the death of the female Muse, one produced by men. The image of exposing, of stripping the layers of falsehood of centuries, an act of violence, enters the poem and this violence is the retaliation of those who have been held in object position, voiceless, with no agency. It is also the physical manifestation of the verbal violence directed towards the Muse with which the poem opens and also points to the conclusion cogently arrived at by the narrator. The Muse which has never shed tears, which has always presented rosy pictures of women's lives will, the narrator hopes, weep seeing the narrator's work of art that addresses issues hitherto ignored by the Muse.

The same rejection of the woman's image as perceived by men and consequently internalized by women appears in the titular poem "In Her Own Image". That she had once believed in such images is looked upon by bewilderment and dismay: "To think they were once my satellites! / They shut me out now" (NCP, p.73). There is no nostalgia or sense of loss. The emotion and the language are within control, suggestive of the mastery and the distance that she has gained. The initial shock of recognition that one senses in "Tirade" is replaced by a mind that is willing to rethink the possibilities other than one of outright and complete rejection which explains the declamatory force of "Tirade." The language has softened, shows greater composure, and the poem ends with an image of a lesbian erotic embrace, a female bonding, however stultifying it might be.

If "In Her Own Image" is about outgrowing the prescriptive roles and rejection of traditional demands of art, and revisiting of the same, "In His Own Image" is about the violence to which women are subjected; the ordinary world of daily living which appeared earlier in "Tirade" reappears here, the mundane listless nature of daily existence does not create a sense of being alive; the narrator complains only to find out it could be suddenly otherwise. The entry of the drunken husband changes everything suddenly and the woman is reconstructed quickly: "He splits my lip with his fist, / shadows my eye with a blow, / knuckles my neck to my proper angle (NCP, p.74). The candid portrayal of domestic violence is part of Boland's preoccupation with the assaults that the female body has to suffer. The verbal and physical assaults demand verbal retaliation and reconstruction, which are abiding concerns in Boland's poetry. Dark humor takes over and the poem ends with the 'birth' of a new woman both physically and psychically. The

bruised and battered body which is defined by the husband who is compared ironically to a sculptor, is the new woman.

From the female body subjected to torture and domestic violence and substance abuse related violence and alcoholism, Boland moves to self-torture, i.e. the torture of the body by the woman in "Anorexic", a powerful poem about Anorexia Nervosa, a disease with marked gender prevalence. Anorexia, like bulimia, both eating disorders, have attracted the attention of feminists due to issues of noncompliance with accepted body images of women. "Anorexia has been interpreted in widely divergent ways, from a paradigm of liberal democracy to a fear of orality to a parody of femininity. Still it remains an unreadable text, a system of signs that refuses to signify. Its meaning is "secret" and refuses to give itself up" (Heywood, 1996, p. 63). Whether anorexia is a symptom of resistance to the beauty ideals or a clinical condition that needs treatment, were major preoccupations of feminists particularly in the eighties and nineties of the last century. The Fashion industry and urban living, it was believed, contributed to the greater number of cases in the West. Whatever be the degree of ethnic factor to be considered, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw a spurt in body image studies, particularly associated with body image dissatisfaction, social and gender roles and sexuality studies. Though there is no generic continuity, since most of the works about anorexia and other eating disorders are in prose rather than in poetry, Boland's "Anorexic" can be seen as forerunner of many later literary representations in the form of memoirs and novels based on true stories.

The oppositional nature of body and soul, the binary of body/soul and denigration of the body, particularly in religious discourses finds expression in the opening line of the poem. "Flesh is a heretic. My body is a witch I am burning in it" (NCP, p.75). In this battle, thinness represents a triumph of the will over the body, and the thin body (that is to say, the nonbody) is associated with "absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh" (Bordo,1995, p.148). The intense animosity towards the body and the rejection and destruction practiced upon it find expression in the images of the witch and the heretic, both of which carry traces of historical and religious ramifications.

Well-known examples would include the early Christian anchorites and anchoresses who practised extreme forms of self-denial, living in caves as desert hermits. Underlying these practices is a dualistic understanding of mind/soul and body. The body is viewed, like the external world, as essentially sinful. The mind/soul can achieve perfection only if the body can be subdued and overcome. The body is felt to be an enemy of the soul, which it attempts to keep trapped in sinful imperfection (Lawrence, 2008, p.7)

What is attacked in "Anorexic" is the notion of the body image. The image of burning alive a heretic is a telling metaphor of the attitude that an anorexic takes towards his or her body. Boland here expresses an approach to Anorexia that was common until the closing decades of nineteenth century: "In the history of female fasting behavior, the nineteenth century was a crucial divide. During those hundred years food refusal was transformed from a legitimate act of personal piety into a symptom of disease" (Brumberg ,1988, p. 98). The idea of burning in desire, again a metaphor turned cliché with Augustinian undertones, is also linked to the desires of the body and as is also the desirable female body imaged in curves, that is the focal point of attack in Anorexia. The body is imagined as a witch who is burned. "Yes I am torching / her curves and paps and wiles" (NCP, p.) The act of torching the body suggests the power of the mind over the body. "The anorexic, on the other hand, splits mind and body so dramatically that, for her, her emaciated body is a sign of her mental strength" (Lawrence,2008, p.84).

Anorexics with their rejection of food, lose their weight and shape. The images of burning and witching, all carry religious connotations suggestive of the way anorexia was understood in the early nineteenth century. The purging episodes of anorexics are vividly described: “I vomited her hungers. / Now the bitch is burning. I am starved and curveless / I am skin and bone” (NCP, p.75). The anorexic’s mind and body undergo conflicting experiences, suggesting the complexity of the widely divergent cultural receptions of an anorexic. “In this situation the anorexic’s starving articulates a woman’s agony with contradictory demands; the woman aims to resolve the contradictory demands by attaining a thin body, which signifies both strength and self-determination and frailty and traditional feminine attractiveness” (Saukko, 2008, p.106).

The narrator is happy that the body has learnt a lesson. Still the curves haunt the poet suggesting the tenacious grip of the widely accepted images of the female body. “My dreams probe / a claustrophobia, a sensuous enclosure” (NCP, p.75). There is the pain of the loss of the appealing body: “How warm it was and wide / once by a warm drum, / once by the song of his breath / and in his sleeping side” (NCP, p.75). The poet dreams of a recovery and a return to a body that is free of the anorexic features and the recovery signals a move, in keeping with the figural characteristics of anorexia: “Caged so / I will grow angular and holy” (NCP, p.76). The poet by collating angular and holy is implicitly suggesting its opposites- voluptuous /sensuous, an opposition introduced, though in different terms, in the opening lines of the poem. Body, sin and food get equated in the dream of recovery: “Only a little more / only a few days / sinless, foodless” (NCP, p.76). Boland expresses a concern noted by historians of anorexia.

The woman who put soul over body was the ideal of Victorian femininity. . . . one of the most convincing demonstrations of a spiritual orientation was a thin body—that is, a physique that symbolized rejection of all carnal appetites. To be hungry, in any sense, was a social faux pas. Denial became a form of moral certitude and refusal of attractive foods a means for advancing in the moral hierarchy. (Brumberg, 1988, p.182)

The poem ends with figures of falling into a trap of eating: “the fall into forked dark, / into python needs. / heaving to hips and breasts and lips and heat and sweat and fat and greed” (NCP, p.76). The concluding images are antithetical to anorexia; fat and greed which in western religious thought are linked to gluttony (a sin), greed for food or overindulgence in eating. The image of the breast introduced through ‘paps’ returns in the final lines along with ‘hips’ suggesting the presence of the sensuous body resisted throughout poem. By equating food with sex and the rejection of one standing for the other and the consequent holiness towards which the body aspires, Boland presents the complex cultural lens through which clinical conditions may be better understood.

The cultural mediations of the female body continue in the next poem “Mastectomy”. The very act of talking about the unhealthy breast let alone healthy breasts is an act of feminist discourse since silence and cover up pervade this part of the anatomy of female body. “At almost every age and every stage in women’s lives, the promise or specter of sexual appeal looms as a factor in social exchanges. It leads us to conscientiously cover the immature breasts of prepubescent females-not only school-age girls, but also female toddlers and infants” (Reid & Bing, 2000, p.142). “Mastectomy” anticipated the growing body of literature about breast cancer which exhibits remarkable generic diversity. As Mary K Deshazer notes in her analysis of the literary representation of cancer

During the 1990s and beyond, women writers working in all genres devised innovative representational strategies for interrogating how cancer affects women's subjectivity, relationships, and politics of location. Plays by women have employed what Rebecca Schneider terms "explicit bodies in performance" to foreground the

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cancerous body's materiality as well as its capacity to resist appropriation. (1). Breast cancer poetry has focused on such embodied imagery as the vulnerable nipple, the surgical scar, and the damaged or reconstructed breast tissue. (DeShazer, 2005, pp. 5-6)

The very act of talking about breast and breast cancer experiences is an act of resistance since it breaks the silence around such experiences. Shame and suppression of fact defined such experiences. Over a period of time with the rise of feminist movements, articulating the female breast has become more easy. "The fact that we can now talk so freely about breasts means our blind spots are getting smaller (Williams, 2012, p.281). Assessing the relation between breast cancer and art, DeShazer notes

The scope and parameters of this disease reveal a global crisis. It is therefore unsurprising that not only awareness campaign and races for cure abound but also new artistic forms of recounting trauma, celebrating survival, and memorializing the world's dead or dying mothers, daughters, partners, sisters, and friends. (2015, p.2)

Beginning with the description of the shock of hearing about the illness, the poem is an act of recollecting a traumatic incident, the removal of the sick breast. From hearing the news of the need for mastectomy, and from the present, the narration displays a profound historical sense that informs Boland's worldview. The violence done to women, to the female breast, and the invading armies who slice off women's breasts loom large: "I could see / through them / to the years / opening/ their arteries, / fields gulching into trenches / cuirasses stenching a mulch of heads / and towns / as prone / to bladed men / as women" (NCP, p. 77). Rapid oscillations occur, and the narrative returns to the present: "I recognized the specialist / freshing death / across his desk, the surgeon, blade-handed," and later "I look down / It has gone." (NCP, p.77). If in "Anorexic" Boland was employing an imagery suggestive of a historical moment that viewed Anorexia as a religious condition, in "Mastectomy" as the very title / term indicates, Boland is concerned not with religious connotations of the breast but in situating it in a domain of secularization and medicalization, with the reference to the specialist testifying to it. The medicalization appears in the poem in the form of a careful selection of imagery traceable to medical advances.

The mediated body is everything but transparent; it is precisely this complexity and stratification that makes it a contested cultural object. The mediation of human bodies, both historically and contemporarily, has occurred primarily by way of two types of technologies: medical imaging and media technologies. (Dijck, 2015, p.17)

The rapidity of the change is the major concern of breast cancer and mastectomy. "The challenge of breast cancer and mastectomy is the challenge of change, not the slowly evolving change that we associate with life, but the cataclysmic change that drops like a death sentence and forces us into being who we are not" (Lifshitz, 1988, p. xvii). Again the historical perspective of violence on women returns: "So they have taken off / what slaked them first / what they have hated since" (NCP, p.77). Boland moves to fleshing out the breast, the act of embodying it. This embodying of the breast ironically comes after disembodiment, both from a historical perspective that is violence done by armies in the past to a woman's anatomy often identified with feminine beauty and female eroticism and also from the perspective of the narrator's experience on the operation table. The breast as a site of violence is suddenly replaced by the idea of the breast as a site of erotic attraction with great candour: "blue veined / white domed/ home/ of wonder/ and the wetness / of their dreams" (NCP, pp. 78-79). Unlike the loss of internal organs through surgery, loss of the breast results in profound negative changes in body image perceptions and has been extensively recorded: "Mastectomies, which annihilated breasts, constituted threats to beauty, sexuality, and

femininity (Olson, 2002, p. 115). Boland directly addresses issues of the female body in relation to its sexual attractiveness. The loss of the breast results in desexualization as breasts are most often routinely associated with a woman's sexual attractiveness. "One is victimized not by a disease but by its cosmetic consequences: the threat of a desexualized body" (Datan, 1989, p. 185). Sexual desire, erotic potential and the breast are linked in the reference to the 'wetness of their dreams'. The loss of the breast thus has far reaching consequences.

It is no wonder, then, that a woman diagnosed with breast cancer is terrified. She is terrified because of the sharp double edge of facing a potentially fatal disease, and of losing a precious part of her body that is deeply tangled in her sexuality/femininity/self. Often she is furious, and her fury, along with that of other women similarly stricken, is diffuse and multilayered". (Wear, 1993, p. 82)

The narrator's response records a very prevalent reaction.

Women are more frightened by breast cancer than other, equally deadly diseases (Love 1990). Treatments for breast cancer, sometimes referred to as the slash /burn/poison trilogy (surgery, radiation, chemotherapy), are traumatic and often mutilating and starkly visible. Because breasts are the most visible and the most tangible signifier of womanhood in Western culture, breast cancer is frequently assumed to produce special problems over and above those experienced by other cancer patients, problems specifically associated with feminine identity, body image and sexuality (Langellier & Sullivan, 1998, p. 76)

The relation of breasts to beauty and femininity is evident in most breast cancer memoirs:

A diagnosis of breast cancer is a major health crisis for a woman; however, breast cancer is more often portrayed as a cosmetic crisis. That breast cancer is viewed as a threat to women's beauty, and thus to her female identity, is underscored by a review of the titles of several recently popular breast cancer memoirs, such as *Crazy Sexy Cancer Tips* (Carr, 2007), *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (Lucas, 2004), and *Pretty Is What Changes* (Queller, 2008). (Rubin & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 408)

The erotic mood passes along with the loss of the breast and the poem is back to the brutal reality. "I flatten / to their looting / to the sleight of their plunder" (NCP, p. 79). The violent dispossession to which breasts are subjected has a long history. "Since the beginning of Judeo-Christian era churchmen and secular males not to mention babies, have considered the breast their property, to be disposed of with or without women's consent. (Yalom, 1997, p. 5). The specialist doctor, the specific person disappears, and in his place the reader finds a 'they' representing all the men, with the images of plunder and looting echoing the armies' onslaught on suggesting continuities of violence from the past to the present. With the 'white dome' gone, the body flattens and the poem ends with a realization of the loss and altered perception of the mutilated body: "I am a brute site / Theirs's is the true booty" (NCP, p. 79). Woman's body/ breast becomes a property, an object over which she has no agency. The impact of the loss of anatomy in cancer is expressed in recent studies on fractured subjectivities. "Vulnerability to life altering loss is a chronicity from which no one is immune. As subjects who suffer as objects, we are often lost to ourselves, and we must strain to repair what holds us together both within and between ourselves" (Lin, 2017, p. 25). The feminist concerns about the female body as possession, the violence wreaked upon it, the dispossession of the female body, or its possession by the male, the breast as site of erotic pleasure and of the violence practiced upon it, and the historical perspective that Boland brings to bear upon the subject, make "Mastectomy" both intensely personal and sufficiently universal.

If "Anorexic", and "Mastectomy" are held together by their attempts to rethink the female body in terms of disease conditions and healthy biological processes they are also about history of

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the reception of the female body. History is everywhere in Boland's poetry as an epistemic source for her feminist concerns. Boland's sense of the inequities that women had to suffer determines the nature of her treatment of both the present and the past. The last three poems of *In Her Own Image* consider the possibilities of righting the wrongs done to women. Boland's understanding of the past tainted with the blood of the women burnt as witches is at the heart of "Witching", a poem about how the idea of the witch as the ultimate metaphor of victimized woman, allows the poet to explore the possibilities of the revenge that women can take.

"Witching" reverses history and is about the past when women branded as witches were burned at the stake. In "Witching", the agency is vested in the narrator who is a witch. Beginning with the traditional references to what witches were believed to be capable of in the past, the helpless woman is transformed enough to take on those who burned her: The revenge comes in the form of burning not just those who once burnt witches, but even the pages of history. That women also were complicit in burning women who were branded as witches makes the poet burn them who were party to the heinous crime: "I'll singe / a page/ of history/ for these my sisters / for those kin / they kindled. / Yes it's my turn / to stack / the twigs / and twig the fire / and smell / how well / a woman's / flesh / can burn (NCP, p. 84) The process of making a woman a witch, witching suggests orientation towards action which is countered in the present by the reversing the action. Underlying the victim's active, performative role is the rage that makes such a drastic alteration of roles possible.

The sense of power and subversion continues, in the "Exhibitionist." As in "Witching", the body is the focus, and Boland presents the metaphor of stripping. The exhibitionist manipulates the voyeuristic tendencies in men; the manipulative power of the narrator is difficult to ignore and the entire process is subversion as the poet writes: "I subvert / sculpture, / old mode (NCP p. 85). The helpless woman is replaced by a woman of strength who knows that men are caught in her erotic shapes. "I'll show them how / in offices, their minds / blind on files, / the view / blues through / my arcs and curves" (NCP, p. 86). Boland exposes the workings of sexual behavior in relation to social perceptions of the body. "The ubiquitous message that external beauty is the *sine qua non* of sexual allure sends a parallel message to girls that the proof of their sexuality lies not in their own experience so much as the experience of others (i.e., boys and men) (Travis et al. , 2000,p. 258). The poem ends on a note of defiance and on a nature totally different from the one that is imagined by men. "Let them know / for a change / the hate/ and discipline, / the lusts/ that prison/ and the light that is / unyielding/ frigid / and constellate" (NCP, p.86). The closing lines present a contrast between the image that she presents to men of herself as a ploy, and her real nature which refuses to conform. It is this difference between the real and the imagined, as the title of the collection indicates, that is theme of the closing poem of *In Her Own Image*.

The final poem of *In Her Own Image* is a return to the theme introduced in the opening poem of the collection in that both are about the roles that women have to play and the responses to them. If in "Tirade" Boland takes a general stance and implicates the Muse who falsifies the realities of living as a woman and the aesthetic that the Muse puts forward, in "Making up", the closing poem is more consistently personal in its approach. Beginning with the image of the face in the morning with no makeup, i.e. the face as it is, she goes on to say that she will apply makeup. Putting on make up, becomes making up. "I grease and full / my mouth" (NCP, p.88). This cosmetic conformity to the received image of the woman and concepts of beauty, is not complete conformity. The spirit of resistance is unambiguous "it won't stay shut" and in a befitting close to a collection that insists that women should question and should not accept unreflectingly anything that is said about them, the narrator warns the reader: "Legendary seas, / nakedness, / that up and

stuck / lassitude / of thigh and buttock / that they prayed to- / it's a trick. / Myths / are made by men" (NCP, p.88)). The poem ends with an image of the dawn and of the narrator rising out of the "rouge pots, / the hot pinks, / that fledged / and edgy mix / of light and water / out of which I dawn" (NCP, p.88)

In *Her Own Image* is thus sharply grounded in the need to continually revisit and rename the existence and definitions of women, the way they are represented in history and literature. From the Muse whose time is up, to the extensive analysis of experiences specific to women, informed by the history of violence perpetrated on them, both physical and verbal, to critiquing of the beauty myth, and pressures of gender roles and survival strategies, Boland's poetry is part of a powerful literature written by women who take nothing for granted, women who continue to believe in the need to unlearn the stereotypes of women created by men and internalized by women.

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