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Contemporary British Poetry and the Long 1980s

"The Witch Thinks about What It Would Be Like": The Figure of the Witch as a Contemporary Poetic Emblem

Laure-Hélène Anthony-Gerroldt

RÉSUMÉ. *Suite au tournant néolibéral qui marque les années 80, la poésie britannique s'ouvrit à des voix marginalisées et à une esthétique fondée sur l'association entre innovation formelle, politique et intimité. Cette esthétique perdure aujourd'hui dans l'utilisation récurrente de la figure de la sorcière dans la poésie écrite par les femmes. À mesure que les historiens offraient de nouvelles perspectives sur l'histoire des chasses aux sorcières et des religions païennes liées à la sorcellerie, certaines théories féministes ont commencé à s'approprier la figure de la sorcière pour en faire une icône féministe. Cet article étudie deux approches poétiques de cette appropriation. Avec la redécouverte du travail d'activiste comme Starhawk, de nombreuses poétesses britanniques ont en effet adoptée la figure autrefois diabolisée de la sorcière pour s'en faire une force inspiratrice. Les recueils de Claire Askew,* How to burn a woman*, et de Rebecca Tamás,* WITCH*, en sont deux parfaits exemples. Bien que le ton, le style et le sujet des deux ouvrages diffèrent, les poétesses partagent la même volonté de donner une voix à l'intimité des femmes à travers la figure de la sorcière afin de laisser les sorcières dévoiler une histoire qui leur avait été impossible d'exposer, ce qui permet dans le même temps de fusionner un discours public et politique avec l'intimité de la sensation et du ressenti.*

ABSTRACT. Following the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, British poetry became more open to marginal voices, and to an aesthetics based on a combination of formal innovation, politics and intimacy. One lingering trace of this aesthetics is the recurring use of the figure of the witch in the poetry written by women today. As historians offered new perspectives on the history of witch trials and ancient religions associated with witchcraft, some feminist theories gradually started to appropriate the figure of the witch as a feminist emblem. This article studies two different poetic approaches to this theme. With the rediscovery of the work of activists like Starhawk, many British women poets adopted the once demonised figure of the witch and used it as a channelling force. Claire Askew's *How to burn a woman* and Rebecca Tamás's WITCH are two perfect examples. Though the tone, style and subject of the collections differ, both poetesses share the same willingness to give a voice to the intimacy of women through the figure of the witch to let the witches speak a story they could never speak themselves, thus merging public political discourses and the privacy of feeling and sensation.

MOTS CLÉS : *sorcières, intimité, poétesses, body politics*

KEYWORDS: witches, intimacy, women poets, *body politics*

While the British 1980s might have appeared as a time of political conservatism and the triumph of a capitalistic worldview, they were also a time of protest, punk music, and radical feminist movements. Deregulation and the promotion of free trade coincided with the emergence of divergent voices, calls for freedom and social upheavals. In the process, some parts of British society became more open to hearing and listening to marginal voices, and as they did, so did poetry. In the introduction to *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry*, Antony Rowland thus defines contemporary British poetry as an art that "thrives on a refractory relation between itself and dominant aesthetic values, and between itself and mass culture, between itself and society in general" (Rowland, 6). This definition highlights the birth of an aesthetics that blurs the lines between the private and public spheres, reflecting the conflicts and interests of society and making contemporary British poetry a place where intimacy and politics coexist and entwine.

Following these changes, the late 1970s and early 1980s became a time of increased interest in women's poetry. This interest was expressed in the publication of a growing number of female-only poetic anthologies throughout the decade. While some of these anthologies aimed at recognising the work of women poets from the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (1978), others focused on emerging voices, such as *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black British Women Poets* edited by Barbara Burford and *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry 1964-1984* edited by Carol Rumens, both of which were published in 1985. As Claire Buck suggests, "the titles of the anthologies acknowledge the central role of the women's movement in altering the map of both contemporary and earlier poetry" (Buck, 82). The anthologies thus establish a connection between poetry writing, feminism, and politics. The titles of the collections also reflect two other aspects of contemporary British poetry, namely its propensity for a plurality of voices and the junction between intimacy and politics. The title of Carol Rumens's anthology, *Making for the Open*, indicates a desire for change, for something new that parallels the political aspects of feminism, but also takes the reader inside an opening that could be the secret path to the intimate lives of women while allowing space for a variety of voices to be heard. Similarly, the idea of a "dangerous knowing" could encompass both the political power associated with knowing and the secrecy and threat of the word "dangerous" while the mention of four different black poets multiplies the perspectives taken on poetry. The burgeoning of poetic anthologies itself can be understood as a sign of the refractive nature of contemporary British poetry, since, like a prism, an anthological collection may contain a variety of voices and discourses on poetry and society within a single volume.

Consequently, we may wonder what form the altering of the poetic map mentioned by Claire Buck took. Are today's women poets still living in the wake of the 1980s aesthetics – continuing from the 1960s – mixing politics, intimacy,[1] and

[1] The combination of intimacy and politics can be traced to the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s and continued to be a significant feature of many poetry collections published in the 1980s. As such, it can be seen as a legacy of the 1980s. See for instance Joseph Brooker's introduction to *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (2010). The

formal innovation? How do they fit into the poetic culture of what Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley identify and praise as a pluralism of poetic voices in the introduction to their 1993 anthology *The New Poetry*? Because even an in-depth, full-length study could hardly encompass the sheer diversity of voices, techniques and themes that have been tackled by contemporary British women poets since the 1980s, this article will focus on a specific aspect of their poetry– the use of the figure of the witch as a contemporary poetic symbol – to answer the two questions asked above.

It is indeed safe enough to say that several female poets – be they British, American or from other parts of the English-speaking world – have been influenced by the figure of the witch. As early as the late 1950s and early 1960s, American poetess Sylvia Plath used the multifaceted image of the witch in her poems to evoke the relation between the self and the expectations of society. Generally speaking, in women's poetry, the witch can be as many things as a representation of madness, of exclusion or, aligning with the earliest feminist studies on the witch, a symbol of sisterhood between women, of reconnection with the natural world, and an advocate of social justice. Such approaches to the figure started as early as 1978 with the publication of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* and Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark: Sex, Magic and Politics*, first published in 1982. The conceptualisation of the witch as an avatar for social change and ecological consciousness continued well into the 21st century, as confirmed by Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch,* published in 2004 and *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, published in 2018. The common denominators between these studies are the willingness to make marginalised voices heard, the resistance to conservative backlashes and the desire for more social, cultural, and ecological justice. These studies not only integrate the political and intimate spheres (through a focus on the sexual lives of women, for instance), but also provide a variety of experiences, which aligns with the contents of the collections by the two poets this article will focus on: Rebecca Tamás and Claire Askew. After briefly outlining the connection between the witch and some of the contemporary poetry written by British women, the article will concentrate on the recent works of Rebecca Tamás and Claire Askew, whose poems can be read as extensions of the movement mingling intimacy, politics and feminism and as an exemplar of the plurality of voices distinctive of contemporary British poetry starting in the 1980s especially.

Among the leading figures of women's poetry, many have chosen to dedicate at least part of their work to the figure of the witch. North American poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Erika Jong, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath all mentioned the witch, if only in filigree, in the text of singular poems or in titles. For instance, Erika Jong entitled one of her pieces "Lovespell", while Edna St Vincent Millay chose the title "Witch-wife" for her poem about a spellbinding, charming woman no one can tame. Focusing more directly on the identity between the witch and the self, Anne

analysis of the anthology titles also demonstrates the importance of mixing intimacy and politics in the publication of women's poetry in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Sexton wrote about the sorceress's nature. In the poem "Her Kind", the witch appears as the possessed, misunderstood but free woman to whom the poet compares herself, which not only joins the private and public spheres together, but also the past and the present as it creates a lineage of women that is continued to this day. This poem is, indeed, one of the two pieces that Rebecca Tamás decided to quote at the very beginning of her collection.

In the British Isles, women poets shared their American counterparts' fascination with the witch. For instance, Maggie O'Sullivan, Geraldine Monk and Patience Agbabi have all been influenced by the figure of the enchantress or the witch in one way or another, ranging from the odd reference to "a waxing moon, and a séance / of candles dipped in oil of frankincense" in Agbabi's poem "Transformatrix" (2000) to larger scale uses, as in Geraldine Monk's 1993 *Interregnum*, a collection of experimental poems based directly on the witch trials that took place in Pendle, Lancashire, in 1612. Geraldine Monk's choice is particularly significant since for the longest time finding any relevant information about the trials proved difficult.[2] The choice therefore stands as an attempt to document a past event that was disregarded and obscure to give it more value: for Monk, writing about the systematic torture or persecution of women was in and of itself a feminist, political gesture. Moreover, Monk's decision is personal as she, herself, is a Lancastrian. This, in turn, makes her appropriation of the Pendle witch trials both an intimate choice and a political one: the poet uses her voice, and even her dialect, as the intermediary through which multiple other voices may speak, be heard and be seen as more than memories but as actual bodies in time. As David and Christine Kennedy put it, "Geraldine Monk's book-length *Interregnum* […] convey[s] a powerful sense of the body as multifunctional (that is, it is not just what produces the voice and, consequently, poetry) and portray[s] the voice as a total body manifestation – a full embodiment" (Kennedy 17). In writing the collection *Interregnum*, Monk makes the female body and voice[3] the embodiment of feminist political claims,[4] but also appropriates the figure of the witch, thus contributing to making her a contemporary poetic emblem: a symbol for the particular brand of feminism endorsed by the works of Mary Daly, Starhawk and Silvia Federici, but also by the more recent poetry collections of Rebecca Tamàs and Claire Askew.

The legacy of these women's poetry lives on today in the collections of many young contemporary British poets like Rebecca Tamás's *WITCH* (2019) or Claire Askew's *How to Burn a Woman* (2021),[5] on which this article will now focus. One of

[2] Geraldine Monk published a second version of *Interregnum*, entitled *Pendle Witches Words*, in 2012. The same year, several more British poets wrote about the trials, like Blake Morrison, who published the collection *Discoverie of Witches*. The trials had by then been more documented and fictionalized than they had when Monk first wrote *Interregnum*, which points to the changes in the perception of women, feminism and witches over time.

[3] She also gives voice to a male victim, and to the male judges, thus exemplifying the plurality of voices inherited from the 1980s.

[4] In 2012, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the trials, Monk then published another collection, entitled *Pendle Witch Words*, in which she reworked the poetic monologues from the 1993 *Interregnum*.

[5] More recently, Chloe Hanks published *I Call Upon the Witches* (2022), but I was not able to procure the book as I was writing this article and could therefore not include any comments on her work.

the reasons for choosing these two poets is that they entirely belong in the prize and poetry anthology culture that has characterised the poetic landscape of Great Britain since the early 1980s. Rebecca Tamás is one of the editors of the anthology of occult poetry entitled *Spells: Occult Poetry for the 21st Century* and the 2016 co-recipient of the Manchester Poetry Prize. Claire Askew, on the other hand, won the 2010 Virginia Warbey Poetry Prize for her collection *The Sailors* and was awarded the Gerard Rochford Poetry Prize in 2021.

Another reason for choosing to focus on both poets rather than only one of them is because the titles of their poetry collections are explicit enough to place them at the end of the long line of women poets who have written about witches mentioned above. This is all the truer as the two collections are wholly different in terms of style, voice, and form: Claire Askew's *How to burn a woman* and Rebecca Tamás's *WITCH* exemplify the ways in which similar themed collections by women can embody a pluralism of voice on the one hand and share the same willingness to give a voice to the intimacy of women on the other. Through the figure of the witch, either using lyric forms or wearing the masks of dead witches from the past to let them speak a story they could never speak for themselves, the two poets thus merge public political discourses and the privacy of feeling and sensation. In so doing, they follow the 1980s aesthetics of mixing intimacy, politics and formal innovation.

Of the two collections, Tamás's is the more explicitly daring and innovative. Its language is crude, often violent and sometimes verges on the pornographic or at least uses some unusual images of sexuality: her witch has sex with different partners, including animals, enjoys the company of all genders, and she even revels in metamorphic sex. Rebecca Tamás also reinvests most of the stereotypes and accusations that were made against witches during the witch trials. The collection thus begins with a curse entitled "/penis hex/" and is framed by two poems respectively titled "Interrogation (1)" and "Interrogation (2)". The two framing pieces are composed as dialogues reminiscent of the witch trials, where an unidentified inquisitor asks the main character in the collection, the witch, questions about her practice and experience, starting with "Are you a witch?" (l. 1) and "Have you had relations with the devil?" (l. 3). From the very start, the character of the witch is questioned, but she is never embarrassed or taken aback by the interrogation: instead, she returns the questions, answering the first two with a simple, unpunctuated "Are you" and "Have you", as though she wished to defy the authority of her inquisitor or simply asked herself the question again. The lines here are blurred and there is no definite answer, which leaves the reader wondering about what it means to be a witch or a woman and wandering through the centuries and through the expectations of society. The questions may even impact the reader's own ability to distance him or herself from the poems since the use of the pronoun "you" in the two tags can be construed as a direct address to the audience.

Similarly, opening the collection with a "penis hex" takes the reader back to one of the main accusations worded against women who were believed to be witches during the witch hunts, namely the sorceress's ability to remove men's penises, to make them infertile or their tendency to collect male appendices which they kept

alive in cosy little nests. Such charges were documented by Heinrich Kramer in the 15th century in the *Malleus Maleficarum* which he wrote in 1486. As Elinor Cleghorn explains in *Unwell Women: A Journey Through Medicine and Myth in a Man-Made World* (2021), after Kramer's reputation as a Catholic inquisitor was tarnished by his attempt to try an adulteress for witchcraft failed because of his focalisation on her sexual behaviour, the man returned to his hometown of Cologne where he wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum*,[6] a book supposed to explain to all how to "identify, try and punish suspected witches." As a result, "any woman whose lifestyle, behaviour and personality didn't conform to the highest virtues of chastity and faith" (Cleghorn 45-47) became liable to be accused of witchcraft and heresy, to stand trial and to eventually either be burnt at the stake or hanged. The *Malleus Maleficarum* thus made women's sexuality one of the best ways to threaten and belittle them as it was used to identify them as witches.

In his study of Kramer's book and its consequences, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (2003), Hans Peter Broedel further explains that Kramer consistently portrayed witches as libidinous women and that "one of the most alarming of these impediments [was] a witch's ability to cause a man's penis to vanish into thin air" (Broedel 27). This specific action is mentioned in Rebecca Tamás's "/penis hex/", albeit humorously. The ninth stanza of the poem indeed reads: "hex in a philosophy seminar / see them start to detach and waver / a few centimetres apart from their owners" (l. 43-45). Though the image of little penises detaching from the male bodies and floating about is quite absurd, like the witches of the *Malleus*, Tamás's seems to be able to literally emasculate her male counterparts. Yet, as the poet reminds us at the very beginning of the poem, "the hex for a penis isn't really all about / the penis" (l. 1-2). Instead, it is about women's reactions to male abuse and about vengeance: it is about Judith cutting off Holofernes's head in Artemisia's cathartic painting (stanza 4) or about saving a little girl from being forced into marriage to an older man, allowing her to leave with a "hello kitty backpack / full of dicks" (l. 41-42).

All these references resonate with the fears we can associate with the accusations made in Kramer's book. As Hans Peter Broedel suggests, the act of stealing penises and other associated folklore found in the *Malleus Maleficarum* might sound unreasonable to today's audiences, but they still reveal a fear of emasculation and of the loss of virility (Broedel 181) which was incidentally – as can still be the case nowadays – associated with the loss of strength and power. To lose one's penis was essentially comparable to being turned into a woman under the witch's spell and was synonymous with becoming passive and therefore "weak, bedridden, domesticated, and dependent" (182). The witch, because she was sometimes construed as an embodiment of the powerful woman,[7] appeared as a threat to male domination that

[6] The context behind the writing of the *Malleus Maleficarum* has also been documented by Silvia Federicci and by most scholars working on the history of witchcraft. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was first published in Germany in 1486.

[7] The witch has also been represented as a madwoman, a crazy old lady or, as is the case with Monk or in parts of Silvia Federici's studies, as women who not only had no supernatural powers, but were also disempowered by

had to be both feared and eradicated. In the meantime, the figure of the witch could also be appropriated as a model of female empowerment whose power derived primarily from her own innermost potential, which in turn makes her a perfect embodiment of the ways the intimate and the political can come together.

Later in the collection, Rebecca Tamás goes even further in her representation of witchy female sexuality in order to both reclaim female bliss and *jouissance*, but also to comment on the monstrosity that has been associated with female sexuality. To do so, Tamás joins together all the stereotypes of witch sexuality into one poem – "WITCH AND THE DEVIL" – where she stages the moment of sexual intercourse between the witch and the devil:

> the witch kept having sex with the devil and the devil
> had all the sexual organs you could
> want so the witch could have him inside her at the same
> time as putting his breast in her mouth
> and even though the witch had always assumed that she
> probably did like sex in general
> though not usually in practice this time the witch liked it
> in practice because she didn't have
> to put her hand over her mouth or anything like that she
> just had to do what she was doing
> and the devil loved putting his tongue between her and
> also turning into other animals whilst he was
> down there so the witch didn't feel like she was getting
> what she wanted she felt like everyone
> everywhere was getting what they wanted (45-59)

In these lines, the witch enjoys a moment of pure bliss: she is free from expectations as she does not have to repress her pleasure by putting "her hand over her mouth" (l.53) and she is not constrained, which allows her to enjoy sex physically rather than only the idea of sex. Despite the strangeness of the scene and the devil's metamorphic abilities, sexual intercourse appears as a wholesome moment of contact and sharing whereby domination is eradicated and the pleasure of one becomes the pleasure of many, as emphasized by the enjambments, the absence of punctuation, and the numerous repetitions and parallelisms used in the extract, the most potent being "she was getting / what she wanted" and "everyone / everywhere was getting what they wanted" (l. 57-59). However, for this reclaiming of the female body and its sexuality to be possible, Rebecca Tamás must rely on those very stereotypes that were used to depict female sexuality as depraved and abnormal. These include the desire to have intercourse with animals (represented line 56 with the devil's metamorphosis into "other animals"), but also having sex with an

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the patriarchal society that they lived in. Silvia Federici's argues that witchcraft accusations were often made against women who had medical knowledge, or against older, widowed women who depended on the community for survival and therefore potentially threatened the advent of a more individualistic, capitalistic society.

octopus-like government in the poem "WITCH GOVERNMENT" or giving birth to "a squadron of frogs" in "WITCH AND THE DEVIL", all of which associate female sexuality and bestiality. As Silvia Federici remarks in her ground-breaking volume *Caliban and the Witch*:

> Regardless of age (but not class) in the witch trials, there is a constant identification between female sexuality and bestiality. This was suggested by copulation with the goat-god (one of the representations of the devil), the infamous sub cauda, and the charge that the witches kept a variety of animals – "imps" or "familiars" – that helped them in their crimes and with whom they entertained a particularly intimate relation. […] The surplus of animal presences in the witches' lives also suggests that women were at a (slippery) crossroads between men and animals, and that not only female sexuality, but femininity as such, was akin to animality. To seal the equation, witches were often accused of shifting their shape and morphing into animals, while the most commonly cited familiar was the toad, which as a symbol of the vagina synthesized sexuality, bestiality, femininity and evil (Federici 194).

Every one of the elements given by Silvia Federici appears in Tamás's collection, from the frogs emerging from the witch's vagina to the shape-shifting abilities of either the witch herself or the devil. Yet, the scene described is less animalistic than it is loving. While it does not aim at hiding the physical and somewhat raw nature of sexual encounters, its focus on the woman's thoughts, on her pleasure and the discovery that she, too, may enjoy herself while having sex transforms the scene and makes it appear as a moment of feminine empowerment through physical liberation and sharing. Tamás thus turns the injunctions to be silent and chaste on their head, and frees her witch-woman from male domination, if only temporarily.

Moreover, the world of Rebecca Tamás's witch not only uses the accusations made against witches and the stereotypes that were associated with them but has the figure of the witch stand on the edge of society as well. The witch of her story-collection is both old and young at the same time, but also acts as a witness whose story is narrated in the third person in order to shock and to reclaim the female body as a desiring body, as well as a thinking, political body. Two poems of the collection in particular play this role: "WITCH GOVERNMENT" and "WITCH WOOD". Rebecca Tamás writes: "The witch thinks about what it would be like to fuck the government" and "The witch thinks about what it would be like to fuck woods and not the government." These quotes are the opening lines of two consecutive poems in Rebecca Tamás's collection, and just like the second quote appears to be a reversal of the first, the two poems function as mirror images. In the first poem, WITCH GOVERNMENT, the witch, through her sexuality, through the rough act of fucking, may acquire power. However, that power is soon recognized as less desirable than it might appear because it implies becoming "disconnected" (l. 42). This is because sexual interaction with the government is compared to sexual interaction with a giant octopus and described in terms of abuse: the witch keeps her eyes closed, and the government is an all-devouring entity composed of tentacles

and many phalluses that cannot be distinguished one from the other, resulting in a "fucking [that] is deeply impersonal" (l. 40) and can only lead to power through becoming "not your actual self" (l. 44). The confusion and dissociative nature of the act can also be traced in the use of pronouns throughout the poem: while the piece begins like a third-person narration, when the sexual interaction intensifies and becomes more hurtful, the pronouns shift from "she" to "you" to "I", thus merging the voice of the witch with that of all other women – and perhaps of the persona of the poet as well – who might have been abused by the patriarchal, capitalistic society they live in.

On the other hand, sexual intercourse with the woods, or the trees is described as "giving back the means of production to the trees". In these two pieces, Tamás seems to poetically illustrate one of the main arguments of Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*: that the persecution of women during the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries contributed to the process of primitive accumulation that led to today's capitalistic economy (12). Though most readers might not be aware of the connection with Federici's work, the lines still read as Marxist discourse, which is the theoretical frame Federici uses in her studies. This is particularly evident in the use of such phrases as "giving back the means of production to the trees" whereby the witch, instead of abusing the natural world, shares her existence with it. Instead of the confusion and dissociation of the previous poem, the pronouns Tamás uses here invite a sense of reunion and reciprocity: "we" is preferred to "I", and the witch does not only feel the octopus-government penetrating her, she is penetrated by the branches of the tree as much as she herself penetrates them. As such, sexual intercourse with the woods leads to reconnection, it results in "stacked cream layers of light skin just touching the next fine membrane of skin." Industrialisation, violence, disconnection, and abuse are replaced by contact with the natural world and by a communist rather than capitalist world view.

Such an approach to the relations between the political and the intimate does not, however, come as a surprise to the reader and could already be guessed from the title of the collection. Rebecca Tamás entitled the collection *WITCH*, in full capital letters. Giving such a title to a collection of poetry associates it with feminist theory and implies that the collection will not only be concerned with the challenges that women face, but also with activism, politics, and ecology. The acronym "WITCH" is politically charged as radical feminist groups started to use it in the 1960s in the USA and beyond. The first WITCH acronym stood for "Women's International Conspiracy from Hell" (Madej-Stang, vii-viii). As Adriana Madej-Stang points out in *Which Face of the Witch: Self-representations of Women as Witches in Works of Contemporary British Women Writers*, the feminists who came up with the acronym chose the figure of the witch because "the witch trials were acts of violence undertaken by the patriarchal system against strong and independent women. The witch as a social outcast could subvert the patriarchal society with her "hexes", that is, actions questioning and challenging the existing social and political system" (vii). Behind this is the idea that women wanted to reclaim a power that had been stolen from or lost on them, a power that lay as much in their bodies as it did in their roles

in society. Since then, the acronym has been used repeatedly, so much so that it made its way into pop culture. For instance, in 2022, a song by Canadian pop artist Devon Cole entitled *W.I.T.C.H*, in capital letters, came out. In the video, you can hear Devon Cole singing about a "Woman in Total Control of Herself," a witch, dancing with a group of young women that look very much like a multicultural, cottage core, girl power version of a coven. The idea of control sounds like a realignment of the figure of the witch with a neoliberal, individualistic ethos of girl power and might in some way be a capitalistic appropriation of feminist battles, since the secretive culture of outcast, persecuted women is here used to make money. Nevertheless, this song, no matter how much money it did make and no matter how much it may have capitalised on the fashionable Celtic, cottage-core aesthetic boards found on social media, still sends girls and women the message to be confident and empowered. As such, the video and the song align with the earliest critical studies and with the reclaiming of the witch as a symbol of sisterhood between women, of reconnection with the natural world, and as an advocate of social justice mentioned in the introduction.

The several ways in which Rebecca Tamás's witch-figure voices both the imagined concerns of an immortal witch over time and the issues raised by feminist research therefore make her collection a good example of the 1980s aesthetics of making the intimate political and vice versa, as her collection repeatedly uses sensations and perception to raise political questions, as we saw in the previous examples. Her poetry also displays formal innovation: she consistently blurs the lines between the speaker's "I", the witch's thoughts and a "you" who is sometimes antagonised and sometimes fosters intimacy. This is in fact specific to the use of the pronoun "you." As Sandrine Sorlin has argued in *The Stylistics of You* (2022): "If 'I' most of the time can only refer to the person who says 'I', and if the reference of a third-person form can most of the time be easily retrieved, the flexible, diverse and sometimes ambiguous reference of 'you' renders any simple classification illusory" (Sorlin 9). As a consequence, it comes as no surprise that the "you" used in Tamàs both antagonises and creates empathy and intimacy as it can serve multiple purposes: it can help the persona of the poem enter a conversation with herself, it can address the reader who becomes the persona's or the poet's direct interlocutor and even, perhaps, confidante, but it can also create a distance and emphasize the difference between the "I/we" couple and the "you."

Claire Askew's collection is less formally experimental than Tamás's. The layout of the poems is more conventional, with clearer line breaks especially, but just like Rebecca Tamás, Claire Askew uses her poetry to make the intimate and the political coexist within the same space. She first does so by alternating what seems to be more personal poems with poems in which she makes dead witches speak of the abuse they suffered in their lifetime, which is meant to reflect the abuse suffered by today's women. For example, one poem in the collection, entitled "Men" openly discusses the paradoxical relationship that men and women share. The speaker of the poem, a woman, loves men, but she is also afraid of and angry with them because she knows men "in linen and chinos will bray at you" (l. 16) and she knows "he wanted

to hurt me: wanted it so fiercely / I nearly let him" (l. 26-27). The speaker tells her personal, intimate experience of loving the men she is familiar with, and being estranged from the ones she doesn't know because they present a threat to her well-being and to her safety. The men outside the friend or family circle are comparable to the men who abused and tried witches: they wanted to hurt them, and they did. In the examples cited above, the use of pronouns is comparable to Tamàs's: when Askew writes that men "will bray at you", the pronoun refers both to the speaker-poet herself and replaces "me". As such, it addresses the reader, and women in general, thus allowing for a feeling of communion between the reader and the speaker of the poem. This coincides with Sorlin's analysis of the pronoun as well as with María-Ángeles Martínez's argument that "double deixis entails the contextual anchoring of the reader at a physical, perspectival, emotional, and evaluative location […] thus favouring perspectival alignment and identification" (Martínez 156).[8]

These communal experiences and feelings of identification are later reflected in the poems written in the voices of dead witches, who suffered at the hands of men. A good example of this is the poem "Devils" in which the devils are neither demons nor the goat-god, but regular men. In the poem, the witches are presented as victims of the patriarchy, capitalism, male violence and male desire. The pronoun "we" is used instead of "I" to highlight the similarity between the experiences of different women, and is opposed to a generalising "they" that stands for the abusers:

> They were men,
> who owned things – our father's
> land, our parish's
> collective souls – always had
> some hold over us weak-legged
> girls too hungry to run (l. 23-28)

In "Devils", the pronoun "they" does not refer to all men: just like some men, family members in particular, can be absolved in "Men", here, the communal figure of the father seems to be under as much influence from the domineering "they" as his daughters who cannot escape the power of the landowners and clergymen. Yet, the ones who suffer the most are the molested girls and women whose weakness and naivety are hungered after. In the same way that Rebecca Tamàs created a parallel between the poems "WITCH GOVERNMENT" and "WITCH WOOD", Askew writes two poems that are mirror images. The situation in "Devils" is indeed the reflection of the one presented in "Men". There is, however, an evolution between the two poems: while the liberation of the young girls in the poem "Devils" comes from their death by fire, the contemporary woman's lies in her ability to use her voice. She only "nearly" lets the man hurt her but does not, whereas the girls in "Devils" eventually die saying:

[8] This quote from Martínez is cited in Sorlin's book, p. 21.

> We welcomed the fire.
> Our cries were cries of joy
> as every fingerprint,
> shackle-mark, every bite
> in our flesh was blistered
> clean. (l. 37-42)

In that sense, when Claire Askew uses her poetry to give a voice to the dead witches, to voice their concerns, their fears, and their outrage, she not only lets a political feminist discourse run through her poetry, but she also contributes to the creation of a community of women whose lyric "I" becomes a collective "we". In depicting the burning at the stake of young women, Askew also reclaims the collective trauma of the witch hunts and transforms it, through poetry, in a kind of healing spell that turns the punishment on its head.

This is where Rebecca Tamàs's and Claire Askew's poems come together: aside from their use of the figure of the witch, the common denominators between the two poets' work are their reclaiming of hurtful, or stereotypical images of the witch and their use of pronouns to emphasize the pluralism of voices and to merge the public and private spheres. In that sense, both continue the work of women poets of the 1980s, who started a movement of reclaiming, as we saw, for instance, in the publication of female-only anthologies. Askew and Tamàs constantly multiply the poetic voices that run through their collections. In *WITCH*, the enchantress speaks, but other voices can be heard as well as the study of "Interrogation (1)", "WITCH GOVERNMENT" and "WITCH AND THE DEVIL" have already shown. Much later in her collection, Tamàs also uses the communal pronoun "we" as in the poem "WITCH SISTER" in order to amplify the poet's and the witch's voices as they become the voice of a whole community. Claire Askew uses a similar strategy throughout her own collection. As a result, the overly sexualised and victimised witch gains the agency that she was refused and regains the power to control her own existence.

Despite their differences, both poets therefore use the figure of the witch to raise similar questions about women's ability to reclaim their bodies and their history. One of the ways they answer such questions is by letting the form of their poems come to the service of their political commitment and by allowing the intimate to seep into the political, and vice versa. Another way in which Rebecca Tamás and Claire Askew can be seen as continuing the legacy of the 1980s is in their intricate manipulation of subject and object pronouns, which they use to let the unique voice of the poet be refracted through the prism of the poem into the multiple voices of the witches that came before them and of the women they speak to and speak for, because the 1980s and the years that followed were characterised by a pluralism of voice and the discovery of marginalised voices. Of course, Rebecca Tamás and Claire Askew are both white women, and they belong to the same marginalised group. Yet, because they play with pronouns so much in their poetry, because they also use

clashing registers, types of discourse and modes of address, the pluralism of voices[9] becomes indissociable from their poetic practice: reading the poems of the two collections is a polyphonic experience where the "I" becomes "we" becomes "you", where several voices are heard separately, or simultaneously, so that the pluralism of voice could almost appear as the continuation of the aesthetics that mingles intimacy, politics and formal innovation, turning the voice of the one into the voice of many.

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[9] Tamàs's pluralism of voice does not only come from her use of pronouns. She also alternates registers, types of discourse and of address, as can be inferred from the difference between "WITCH AND THE DEVIL" and the two "Interrogation" poems.

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