

Introduction

In these poems, two impossible characters living at an impossible historical moment write impossible letters to each other about an impossible cultural/religious change. In doing so, they reveal the ways that religion influences our perceptions of women as evil. They also engage in a conversation that still happens today when people who care deeply about each other must negotiate the territory of opposing but strongly held philosophical views.

The characters in the poems are Lady Macbeth and Lady Guinevere. Little is known of the real Lady Macbeth, Gruach Ingen Boite, except that she lived around the year 1000 in Scotland. The literary Lady Macbeth, with her lust for power, capacity for murder, and strange madness in its aftermath, comes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and her character is largely his invention. Guinevere is part of the British Arthurian myth. If Arthur existed at all, he lived around the late 400s. These two characters, Gruach and Guinevere, being more literary and mythical than historical, are malleable, allowing both to struggle with what it means to be a good woman and what it means to be an evil woman within their cultural milieu.

The ingress of Christianity into Britain was complex and prolonged, not accomplished in a single generation, yet Christianity was undoubtedly a major influence on what came to be considered the proper behavior for women as post-feudal societies began to more clearly differentiate and enforce male and female roles. Stories of Guinevere pre-date Christianity in Britain, but later stories have her spending her final years in a convent, suggesting that she was a practitioner of Christianity. The real Gruach was likely a Christian; however, it is tantalizing to imagine that she practiced a pagan religion, particularly as the play *Macbeth* has three witches, and some have argued that Christians demonized pagans by claiming that they were evil witches. The goddess religion of which my Gruach speaks may or may not represent some aspects of such a pre-Christian ideology.

The stories of Gruach and Guinevere are the stories of women who internalize their culture's ideas of what makes women evil. Lady Macbeth commits suicide and Guinevere leaves society to live in an abbey. Just as they choose to commit acts that they consider evil, they punish themselves for those acts.

These impossible characters, in their impossible letters about good and evil, sin and salvation, struggle to maintain an impossible friendship when their entire worlds tell them they should be enemies. Sadly, for many women, the struggle continues today.

The Poems

Dearest Gru,

Sweet sister of my fosterage,

I write to you of Camelot, / and of my lord, / and of his Lord,
whose love unites me and my lord / and will one day unite us all.

I miss grim Scotland's stormy clime,
the imposing thunder and driving rain,
the thrill of lightning, / how it would lift the hairs
on our necks, / how the clouds break
and climb and rush into dusk.

Yet Camelot's clime is charming, warm,
a respite from the storms. / No more the nights
when you rubbed my aching legs
for some respite / from the pain
that haunts me always.
Here my legs are calm, / and sun follows sun

as if the Lord himself has blessed this spot,
for Arthur rules with divine favor
and he is divine in my favor / and I in his.

I miss your father's house, / the dusk,
our wild rides / across the moors,
our beasts shining / in the moonlight,
the dizzying descent /of hawks, their prey
our dinner. I think now / my hawk knew not love,
although you shared your very breath with yours
and you flew together, hawk mistress
and hawk, lover and beloved.

With Arthur, I know the love / that you feel for that hawk,
and for Macbeth, your grim but caring mountain man.
My lord is kind, his kindness / is my strength.
He keeps me, keeps us, all of us in England, safe.

In all our girlish games, of counting bluebells
and drawing tiles to name our future husbands,
I never drew an "A," / yet here he lies at my side
his breath brushing my arm as I write.

Do you still hawk? Does Fallon sit
upon your arm? Do you chase the thunder
and swoop across the heath, hair unloosed,
the cry of bagpipes at your back?
Do you challenge the night / with your fierce cry?

My life is different here, where flute and harp
flutter in the air and gentle rains grace
my days. My days are spent / in quiet contemplation
of the words / the priests tell us /the Galilean spoke.

There, in your wild land, / have you heard of him?
Have you heard of Galilee?

Dearest Gwen

Your god of peace, this Odin in disguise,
has brought war to our doors / and to our hearths.
He will not be a consort to the Goddess,
Nor walk her lands in peace, / but troubles the soil
and strives to steal Frigg's bondsmen,
whose toil brings harvest. / And then, how shall we eat
sans rebirth, sans grain, / sans song or dance?

This Galilean severs men / from women, and hard
harvest follows hard harvest, / as men strive to confine
us to our homes. They weaken us / and risk defeat.
The shield maidens' shields are broken now,
their defenses breached, / and wave after wave of foes
break woes, like waves, against our weakened army.

I'm glad your legs are free of pain,
 for pain is its own bondsman/ and I have watched you strive,
 beyond all reason, to walk when compresses and magicks failed,
 and a weaker would woman fall. I would not deny you
 your feet warm on Mother Earth, / a rebirth of strength and pleasure.

And yet you seem no longer / my dear sweet foster sister,
 with whom I have shared my secrets, /my longings, my dreams
 of ruling / well and wisely. We are of one heart
 for we have, between us, wove / a single rope of flowers and vines.

Out of this love, I must ask / what price have you paid
 for your freedom? Where is / your wild laughter?
 Where is your divine anger, / my friend? You, /
 who once shot arrows from your steed,
 who danced naked at the harvest, / should not be locked
 in any castle / of flesh or stone / and should not kneel
 before any god, but ride into battle / your shield
 before you, and me at your back.

Fallon sits alone now, hooded, / consumed by darkness, with only
 the memory of foam and blood. /His wings no longer shred the air.

I long to ride, to stride / across this land,
 but I am / locked within stone walls
 with simpering women / who have turned from war,
 from their farms, / from the mountain's arms,
 to endless talk of birth / and clothes and men.

I think the men do not speak of us
 except of how to cow us, / how to make us bow,
 to whip their storms / across our backs
 until we cry "no more!" No more.

Sweet Gruach

Such good care you take of me, / even from afar.
 Lay your burden down / for he who made me
 bears my burdens / now, far better than a mortal can.
 Yet I must speak of something else, / of danger
 to your mortal soul. / Your dear innocence I fear,
 cannot save you now. You've heard
 the Word, you must convert, / or hell's torments await.
 I beg you, listen / to the Lord, rest in his arms,
 resist pagan alarms, / for what is done is done,
 and he who comes has come.

As autumn slides to winter, / my legs ache once again.
 Sometimes sweet death / would be a blessing,
 but I know my heavenly Lord / is bringing me,
 through pain, to my knees, to help me see
 that through his goodness, I will someday find release.

Be content, I beg you, with your / womanly tasks,
 and serve your Thane, / the good Macbeth, as he must defend
 you now. Know that / our heavenly Lord
 is with you and your people,
 but the shield maidens must / give up their arms,
 for the priests have said that “he who troubleth
 his own house / shall inherit the wind.”

Good Gwen,

We have had no cross words, / in all these years together and apart,
 yet your letter invites my anger. / Do you hate all pagans now?
 Do you hate those who took you, / poor fosterling, into their caves
 and gave you sustenance direct / from the Goddess’s breast.
 Do you hate the boy you took / into the woods on Valpurgis eve,
 after you festooned a leafy bed /with sweet garlands and lavender
 and from whom you would have / borne a son
 had the goddess decreed it? / For he is pagan still.

And do you truly think your godling can steal this thing
 you call my soul / from our mother’s hands? Or that
 your heaven, with its harps and frills / could thrill
 a Scotsman’s soul?

Give me the black earth / and the blue sky,
 and the bagpipes / with haunting merriment
 screeching across the heath.

I am saddened by your pain / and shall send some of the unguent
 that eased your stricken legs. / If you believe your god has caused
 your aches, then I’ll have none of him.
 Such cruelty does not deserve your love.
 But since you love, and I know you love well, I pray,
 in my wayward and pagan way, that you will
 find sweet release in this world, / for I am not prepared
 to send you to the next,
 where my letters cannot go.

My Faithful Gru,

I do not hate you or the goddess or the boy
 who first led me through the wilderness of love,
 but now, I’ve found a truer love,
 that blossoms in the deep winter
 as my body grows rich / with a hidden miracle,
 the daily miracle, of life.

My dearest friend, I am with child, and no ordinary child,
 but a king, / whose father and heavenly father
 have blessed my blooming, / and I no longer mind my pains
 for from the icy pain of winter’s skies

I will bring forth a blessing
before the snow melts into spring.

Sweet Gwen,

Where are the midwives?
Where are the wise women?
Where are the mothers
and grandmothers?
Did they not teach you /simple magicks
to lay unfertile under winter's snow
and avoid birth while the killing frost
stalks the land?
I beg of you to find the women in the caves
and let them lead you through the freezing fire
of a winter birth. Their hands can bring you through
safely.

Gru,

Have you turned so cruel that you would bid me
surround my chamber with godless women?
My child was born amidst the chants of monks
and nuns, a stronger magick than any known by
ancient witches or heathen whores.

I did not heed your wicked words, but
Even the chanting was not enough, so that
bad news follows too hard upon the good
for I have borne a son and he has died
unshriven, unforgiven, for no priest
would absolve his first sin, / when I bore him
in my pride.

I was too proud of my child who would be king
and leaned not on the Lord as women should
but boasted he'd one day wear Arthur's ring
and have more strength than our almighty God.

Now Arthur sleeps at night amongst his men
and turns away when I walk down the hall.
I spend my days in the chapel's quiet glen
For where can I go now? How far to fall.

I mourn my child, my son, my babe, alone,
for mortal eyes have turned as cold as stone.

Dear Gwen,

I would chide you for a foolish child,
an ungrateful one who turned her back

on all that I hold dear. But this is not the time.
This is the time for tears.

Were all the world between us, I would ride
to you, but I cannot, for my lord and master, Ha!
has forbidden me to ride, and says obey the priests
in everything. The priest would have me crawl
from the nursery to the kitchen and to my husbands bed.
Still, I have sent a ribbon for your wee bairn's grave.
Know you do not mourn alone.

I know the comfort of the chants, / for our shield maidens chanted too,
but herbs, not chants, bring babies whole / from birthing beds.

I've sent some herbs / to keep the winter births at bay
so that you can wrap the next small one / in all the warmth of spring.
And fear not, for Arthur is a man, and if he has not yet,
he will return to your bed, /for flesh calls out for flesh.

Of course you mourn, but let this lighten
your burden a bit: Your lord of fishermen casts
his net too wide. A babe is innocent, and words and water
cannot carry one / to heaven and their lack would never
marry one to hell. Many a man is slow of tongue
and water, even blessed, can make one ill.

Dear child, for you were born two years behind,
and must allow my motherly approach,
there is no sin in love, and no petty boast
can slip past the shoals of eternity.
I pray you, believe your child is well,
and no more thoughts of heaven and of hell.

Sweet Gwen,

I fear your silence. Are you well?
Do you still wander dappled woods alone?
Are you still trying to atone
for too much love, as if it were a trifle
to be bargained into your god's heaven?

Good news has come to Cawdor
from a most surprising source.
Do you remember the priestesses
who gave us sweet meats when we lost our way?
They seldom show their shrunken faces now,
for fear the men, drunk on their brand new god,
will draw their steel against the pagan Norns.

My good man, they told him, will be king,
and I, his queen, can maybe turn the tide
of murder done by your god's acolytes,
who believe it better to burn here on earth
than in his barren winter hell,

who bind our women to the hearth
and wrench our babies from our bodies,
to turn the girls to slaves and lure
the boys with promises of war.

Faithful Gru,

I hear your love in every angry word,
and I would fly like a bird to Cawdor,
were I strong enough to fly.
I do not hate the pagan Scots, and I love
my patrons to the end, but I grieve
that they are lost in sin and pray
that they will find their way.

My Arthur has gone to war without once
turning his face to me. My body aches
for his touch, for something, anything,
that does not feel cold. The doctor says
that not this spring, nor any future spring
will bring a child, for I cannot bear again.

The priests called this my punishment
and burned your unguents,
for they say good women accept
a child when god has planted one,
not on their own time.

You will laugh at that. I hear that bitter
caw that greets any who would try
to scratch the chain mail of your desire.
I would, if I could, bury myself in your arms,
but that, too, is forbidden. Women must cleave
to men, and men to the Lord, for only then
will we see eternity.

Now it is I who fear for you,
for I hear your burning heart
in every syllable you write. Be wise, I pray.
Be cautious. Be silent. Allow God to bless
you / and turn from the evil mutterings
of the Weird Sisters.

I pray you do not burn this letter
or think that I think less of you.
You are my true sister, the one
who shared my great adventures.
I wish that you could share this one too.

The woods are still this time of evening.
The birds have fled and the owls keep
to their nest. Soon rabbits will begin to move
to the edges of the shadows, and I will

breathe in the deep, cold mist of Camelot.
 Where once I found the summers fair,
 now I shiver, and my hair, shorn as penance,
 protects me not. I must go to prayer.

My Beloved Gwen,

Stop your bloody praying!
 If your heart is black with sin,
 than mine is cold embers,
 for I have clutched
 my own dead child, my ambition,
 to my breast,
 and I fear where my anger
 may take me. Macbeth broods,
 but I hunger for action.

You were my gentle guide,
 back when we were girls,
 and bade me silence my pride,
 but you never demanded
 my silence. I will not acquiesce!

Sweet, Tortured Gruach,

The distance between us is a knife
 that plunges again and again
 into my heart. If your goddess were true
 then you would be safe, and I destroyed,
 for she looks only to actions.
 But my god rules, / and we are both evil,
 for I have looked upon one / who is not my husband
 with lust. My soul clutches / at my ribs, at the thing
 from which I was born, / and I feel myself falling
 into a well of blackness.

I do not blame our youthful pact,
 to be first and foremost / each for the other, and only
 our husbands / to come between us.
 My god, who each day / eclipses us more,
 has forgiven me / for coming to him
 foresworn.

I beg of you, sweet friend,
 grow peace within you,
 for action too often follows thought,
 and your actions would endanger you.

Gwen,

For the love of all this is holy, / in this land and yours,
 remember yourself, that you are whole and good.

The body's desires are not evil, / nor any act of love. Your god
must be a eunuch, his hands / clench so tightly at your groin.

I too, am forsworn, for I have put / my ambition, my restlessness,
my need to act, ahead of you. / Duncan and his guards
lie dead here at Cawdor. / Macbeth is lost to me,
more shadow than husband,
and my hands are covered in blood.

Gruach,

Do you confess to murder?
I blame your goddess, for she is evil,
and your heart is lost / to her and to me.
I beg you go to your confessor
and buy back your gentle heart
with prayer.

I am no better.

My desire, like a tide, has flooded
Camelot, and I have made love
to Lancelot. / I have destroyed this tender,
this gentle, guileless man / with my ungodly lust.

You write lies, / for my body writhes and my soul
is covered with boils. God turns his face from me.

Gwen,

My life has been circumscribed by these thick walls,
by the sound of my own footsteps from kitchen to marriage bed to nursery,
by the petty gossip of bored women and the bile of undigested sweets.

Had I been born a man, to strength and swords, instead of crying babes
and fainting ways, to fight and win or fight and die, but fight, with
war paint and wilding cries, I would not have turned to the dark magic
that boils inside me and bred this ambition,
this shadow demon that can only rule through another.

You say I'm heartless,
who would bash out the brains of my babe if it were to suit me.
And it would suit me.
You men have pinned me and silenced me
and turned your swords to me without pity.
Why, then, should I show any?

You think that the blood I wash from my hands is the blood of my victims,
but you're wrong.
It's my own blood, pouring eternally from invisible wounds.
It's the blood of my lust, the blood of my need.
It's the blood that should have ruled.

I should have joined my sisters on the heath,
mixed poisons and told prophecies.
I should have cast curses on sailors and kings,
for they have surely cursed me.

But I will not give them the victory.
I will not say that the dagger poised at my breast is because of them,
or for them.
I will give them no more potency over my death
than they have given me over my life.
This dagger is my dagger and the poisoned tip made from my venom,
the edge sharpened by my hatred.

If I could use this sword to cut the woman from this body and walk free,
a swaggering godling, owner of my own self and ruler of my own passions,
I would endure whatever pain such a sacrifice demanded.
But I will kill the rotten core of this worthless body.

Take my body, unmourned, to the weird sisters, the bearded sisters,
and let them cast my innards into pots to create powerful spells
for only my sisters know the value of my curse.

Dear Gru,

I pray this letter finds you healed
in body and mind, but I fear the worst,
for word of war comes from a faithful courier.

You can yet be saved, as I can yet be saved.

I travel tomorrow to a far shore
to spend my life in service / to my lord,
to redeem myself, / and if my prayers be heard,
to redeem you as well.

The nunnery allows no letters,
so you will not hear from me again,
nor I from you, but know that my prayers
are with you, my faithful friend.

Dear Lady Guinevere,

I am Lady Macbeth's servant,
and she is dead. She did not receive
your final letter.

Her heart was as frozen as the heath
where she pressed her naked breasts
to the earth
and waited to be healed,
only to feel the dull pressure

of stones
and the sharper prick of thorns.

Her ladies waited for the thaw
as they watched her press the earth
to her hands
and let it fall away,
her look that of a killer,
grown old,
who fears the hangman's noose.

Her stigmata bled curses
and peopled her nights
with Judas-bred children.
Her candle was too weak
of a god-light
to turn the blood into rivers
of penitent beasts.

She died as she lived
unreconciled
to her place
as the bearer of
her husband's sins,
unwilling, even to the last,
to repent.