

Kathleen Margaret Lant: On "Lady Lazarus"

"Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus" - written within a week of each other during October 1962 - further reveal Plath's conviction that undressing has become for her a powerful poetic gesture, and in these poems it is the female speaker who finally disrobes - and here she attempts to appropriate the power of nakedness for herself. Plath does not simply contemplate from the spectator's point of view the horrors and the vigor of the act of undressing; now her female subject dares to make herself naked, and she does so in an attempt to make herself mighty. At this point, nakedness has somehow become strongly assertive, at least at one level in these poems. "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus" take up the power of the uncovered body that Plath began to explore in "A Birthday Present." But in these two later poems, that figurative nakedness is compromised by the metaphorical significance of the female body. The naked force in "A Birthday Present" is ultimately masculine since it has the potential to enter the speaker like a cruelly sharp knife; the body that is unclothed encodes the assertiveness of the revealed male body. The body made bare in "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah," however, is female, and for that reason the power of that body's undraping must be - at least in terms of Plath's metaphorical universe - necessarily diminished.

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"Lady Lazarus" conveys the same sense of confusion or ambivalence in that the power of the speaking subject of the poem seems undermined by the melodramatic unclothing of that subject. Lady Lazarus is clearly - like the speaker of "Purdah" - meant to threaten; she asks rather sarcastically, "Do I terrify?", but the language by means of which she shapes her unclothing seems to compromise the grandeur of her act. She is not covered by grime or grit or falseness; her covering is somehow already too feminine, too ineffectual: My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen. // Peel off the napkin" (244). "Lady Lazarus" presents most clearly one of the central problems with Plath's use of the metaphor of nakedness, for in this poem Plath refers to this act of unclothing as "The big strip tease." And in this act, no woman is terrifying, no woman is triumphant, no woman is powerful, for she offers herself to "the peanut-crunching crowd" in a gesture that is "theatrical" (245) rather than self-defining, designed to please or to appease her viewers more than to release herself.

To strip is to seduce; it is not to assert oneself sexually or psychologically. And by the end of the poem, the speaker seeks to shame the male viewer who is exploiting her; she threatens him openly: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (247). But the threat is empty. Alicia Ostriker observes, too, that the rage here is "hollow" because the reader is fully aware that the speaker of this poem "is powerless, she knows it, she hates it" (102). But Ostriker does not name the source of this powerlessness - the speaker's physical vulnerability. The female subject has offered here pieces of herself, she has displayed herself not in an assertive way but in a sexually provocative and seductive way, and - at the very end - she resorts to descriptions of her appearance - her red hair - but not delineations of her reality - her anger. She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous, for she must offer the female body as an object rather than assert it as a weapon. It is telling, too, that the speaker's audience in "Lady Lazarus" is made up entirely of men (Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Herr Doktor), for by revealing herself only before such an audience, she ensures that her

unveiling will be read not as a powerful assertion of identity but rather as a seductive gesture of submission and invitation.

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