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Sweet Demons: Male Body and Masculinity in Anne Bishop's Dark Fantasy Novels and Related Fan Art

Anne Bishop's best-selling dark fantasy romance series for young women, comprising of *Daughter of the Blood* (DOTB), *Heir to the Shadows* (HTTS) and *Queen of the Darkness* (QOTD), which constitute *The Black Jewels Trilogy* and are followed by another six novels set in the same universe, clearly belongs to the realm of popular fiction, often perceived in academic circles as a poorer cousin of Literature spelled with a capital "L." Rather than apply the same criteria for their analysis, Ken Gelder, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's characterization of highbrow and low forms of cultural production, observes that popular fiction and Literature occupy distinct socio-cultural positions and consequently deploy "a set of logics and practices that are different in kind" (12). Literature is "autonomous" of the demands of the public and the market, "creative," "original," and uses the language or discourse of high art. The artists involved in its creation often position themselves in the field of "restricted production" by directing their works at a small group of trained audience. By contrast, popular fiction is "heteronomous," i.e. open to mass audience and subject to market demands. Conscious of its readers and construed so as to please their tastes, it relies on conventions more than on originality and aims at a worldly or commercial success (cf. Bourdieu 217-220, Gelder 12- 15). As such popular fiction seems to be closer to its target readers and more prone to reflect socio-political currents, which allows McCracken to see it as a "structure within which our lives can be understood" with "the capacity to provide us with a workable, if temporary, sense of self" (2).

It is perhaps this proximity to the real world that has inspired the interest of feminist critics to study popular texts – the genre of romance in particular – rather than elite ones. Although in one of the first notable publications on the subject Germaine Greer argued that "romance novels pacified, deceived, and manipulated their female readers and should be shunned by women" (Sch-

neider-Mayerson 26), her view was challenged already in the 1980s by Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* and Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, both of whom rejected the assumption that readers were simply inert receivers of patriarchal indoctrination. Further influenced by the audience-reception approach applied to popular culture in general, the current study of popular fiction seems to be "the feminist-cultural studies approach," which as Schneider-Mayerson observes, "sees in readers the ability and tendency to re-interpret texts that are seemingly conservative and patriarchal in a resistant, transgressive, unpredictable and/or socially and politically informed manner" (30). Appealing to the tastes of their target female readers, Bishop's novels can be seen as indicative of their hopes and fears and, quite possibly, even give us some insight into the plots, heroes and heroines women lack in real lives.

Frequently branded by readers as "feminist fiction" or "feminist fantasy," *The Black Jewels Trilogy* may become a uniquely interesting source for the discussion of the perception of masculinity by popular audience. Paradoxically, as the novels depict a fantastic matriarchal world, they can offer a uniquely interesting insight into mass fantasies about men. It is with this assumption in mind that the present paper will attempt to (re)construe the image of male body and masculinity as emerging from Bishop's texts and further discuss it against the context of related fan art, i.e. popular amateur artwork based on the original story but created independently of the author's intentions by fans.

Bishop's extensive narrative in three volumes follows a bildungsroman formula by delineating the story of maturation in physical, emotional and sexual terms of Jeanelle, who grows from a seven-year-old exceptional girl into an adult all-powerful woman. Unlike a typical damsel in distress, who serves as adornment and waits to be saved by her knight, she is strong, independent and eager to embark on her own adventures rather than be drawn into them by male heroes. Jeanelle is in fact anything but adornment. She is presented as the pinnacle of the universe, around which all male characters revolve, eager to act as her help-mates or sacrifice themselves if the need arises. Ambivalent and paradoxical, the heroine combines love and anger, trust and terror, forgiveness and vengeance, stability and change, death and rebirth. In short, Jeanelle is precisely what Thelma J. Shinn coined as "another face of Mother-Goddess" (37) – a heroine showing the potential to recreate cultural myths and to embrace and celebrate femininity rather than reproduce the patriarchal matrix.

The matriarchal world of *The Black Jewels Trilogy* is depicted with considerable depth as the one in which the roles of men and women are reversed. Its

social organization is highly hierarchical and depends on social class on the one hand and on personal magic power on the other. The magic is strongly connected with sexuality and it is gender that determines to a large extent one's social position. Women enjoy a strong connection with Nature and are raised to the position of power whereas men are literally born to serve their queens. As we learn in the very beginning, "among the Blood, males were meant to serve, not to rule... . There was something bred into them that made them crave service, that compelled them to bond in some way with a Blood-Jeweled female" (DOTB 23). Interestingly, this "something" has less to do with the superior social position of women than with the very essence of femininity seen in the following way:

It was the inner radiance housed within those female bodies, a luminescence that some men had craved as much as they might have craved a light they could see glowing in a window when they were standing out in the cold. They had craved that light as much as they had craved being sheathed in the sweet darkness of a woman's body, if not more. (HTTS 367)

Central to the imagery in the quoted passage is this external position of man desiring the internal "radiance" and "light" of women, his crave to possess what is hidden inside her body and to return to her womb, the source of life, to which he will always be an outsider. And yet, femininity is not univocally connected with giving life and goodness; to the contrary, women can actually be "deadlier" and mercilessly cold when emotionally disturbed and "riding the killing edge" (QOTD 208). While men are presented as driven by quite simple instincts of providing protection, women are much more complex and combine apparently incompatible paradoxes.

Three men, however, prove to be indispensable for both the construction of the novel and for the heroine's intellectual, emotional and sexual development. The first of them is Saetan sa Diablo, Jeanelle's guardian and the Lord of Hell, who functions as a strong archetypal father figure, an authoritative yet just ruler, displaying a strong sense of moral code. Interestingly, Bishop breaks the rules of decorum, endowing the demonic lord with much more human touch and showing his transformation from the absent father, whose sense of duty and honour pushed him to neglect his two sons that fell into slavery, to a doting parent who offers unconditional and uncritical love that is central to Jeanelle's personal growth. In the process, his image becomes domesticated and sexualized and fifty-thousand-year-old Saetan becomes not only an ideal father to a little girl, but also an older, experienced and protective man whom an adult woman might crave to have as a lover and father of

her own children. The second man is Lucivar Yaslana, a violent and aggressive soldier, who acts as Jeanelle's older brother, treats her with care-free but non-sexual familiarity, and whom the girl calls "a pain in the ass" and "overprotective bully" (HTTD 312). Lucivar is construed as an unsettling combination of a warrior, who overcomes all challenges, and a trickster, always eager to play jokes and disobey the rules of conventional behaviour. Grown as half breed and bastard who does not know his father until he is adult brands him as the other in his community. Troubled with identity problems, Lucivar is a man of contradictions: dangerous but loyal, impulsive but inherently good-natured, lethally violent yet protective. As an Eyrien, he is endowed with wings, the attributes that associate him with wildness and unlimited freedom. In short, he is a savage and a rebel with kind-hearted nature – the embodiment of a female fantasy about a bad boy who will, nevertheless, change his ways and become tame under her influence.

The third male character, Jeanelle's future lover, is the most disturbing and at the same time the most appealing to mass imagination. Daemon Sadi, motivated by extreme emotions of love and hatred, also known as the Sadist, is a man with the most infamous reputation. Deeply sensual, he is an ultimate seducer no woman can resist. Let us consider a few passages that might illustrate his slightly perverse allure:

He's beautiful, bitter, cruel. He has a seducer's smile and a body women want to touch and be caressed by, but he's filled with a cold, unquenchable rage. When the Ladies talk about his bedroom skills, the words they whisper are "excruciating pleasure." (DOTB 14)

Maris stretched and sighed with pleasure. "You remind me of a wild cat, all silky skin and rippling muscles." Daemon slipped into the white silk shirt. A savage predator? That was a fair enough description. If she ever annoyed him beyond his limited tolerance for the distaff gender, he would be happy to show her his claws... . His face was a gift of his mysterious heritage, aristocratic and too beautifully shaped to be called merely handsome. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He kept his body well toned and muscular enough to please. His voice was deep and cultured, with a husky, seductive edge to it that made women go all misty-eyed... . His body was a weapon, and he kept his weapons well honed. Daemon shrugged into his black jacket. The clothes, too, were weapons, from the skimpy underwear to the perfectly tailored suits. Nectar to seduce the unwary to their doom. (DOTB: 29)

For nearly 1700 years Deamon has been a sex-slave and a male whore, leaving women hysterical about his bedroom skills. He hates the "distaff gender," a diminutive misogynist term and does not hesitate to use his body

as a deadly weapon. He gives women “excruciating pleasure,” leading them through a sadistic sexual dance, yet he himself is never aroused by them and never allows his body to enjoy sex. He is accessible yet distant, physically seductive yet emotionally cold. He seems to be the product of a darker side of female imagination, a sexual predator whose passion cannot be tamed or controlled, a wild cat that cannot be domesticated. And yet, he is more connected with culture than with nature, there is something decadent, theatrical, verging towards the grotesque about his appearance with his made-up face that makes him look “androgynous and yet more savagely male,” (DOTB 292) and predilection for costume-like clothes: black leather pants, “so soft and cut so well they fit like a second skin,” and white perfectly tailored silk shirts that “formed a slashing V from his neck to his waist, where two pearl buttons held it closed and had billowing, tight-cuffed sleeves” (DOTB 292). Deamon is like an actor, he assents to wearing his “whore’s clothes,” but at the same time there is nothing chippendalish about him, nothing that makes him more available or touchable. On top of that, it is emphasized over and over again that he was born to be the Jeanelle’s lover, which is his destiny and the ultimate goal of his existence. Probably, it is this combination of his general indifference to women with the confidence that there is one, but only one, for whom he is patiently waiting that makes him particularly attractive to female audience of Bishop’s texts.

Even if Jeanelle is construed as the most powerful Witch, the role of the discussed trio cannot be underestimated as her life, just as the life of any woman the narrative seems to be claiming, would be incomplete without the father, the brother, and the lover, who revolve around the heroine, contribute to her development, and finally save her life. In the ideal world of Kaeleer, the realm of Jeanelle, male characters complement female ones and are treated with due love and respect. Bishop, however, does not stop at this point and provides us with an alternative, corrupted image of this world. The territory of Terreile, controlled by Dorothea sa Diablo, Jeanelle’s antithesis, stands out as a different universe, in which the social position of men is totally different.

Dorothea sa Diablo possesses all the qualities that classify her as “the bitch,” the misogynist term that according to Beverly Gross “means to men whatever they find particularly threatening in a woman and it means to a woman whatever they particularly dislike about themselves” (qtd. in Aguiar 148). She is a domineering, aggressive, and power-hungry woman, a *femme fatale* who uses sexuality to satisfy her carnal appetites and to acquire even more power. In Terreile, therefore, men are reduced to the role of servants, whose primary duty is not so much to protect as to be obedient. To ensure blind submission,

any man stronger than a woman, is forced to wear over his penis the so-called Ring of Obedience, through which an extremely painful, and possibly even lethal, punishment can be executed. The punishment can be inflicted for any sort of real or imagined transgression, or simply for the sadistic pleasure connected with causing pain. The descriptions of male sufferings actually take up a considerable amount of the narrative:

Her eyes sparkled. Her voice dripped with excitement. "Strip him." Daemon angrily shrugged off the guards' hands and began undressing when a bolt of pain from the Ring of Obedience made him catch his breath. He looked at Cornelia and lowered his hands to his sides. "Strip him," she said. Rough hands pulled his clothes off and dragged him to the posts. The guards lashed his ankles and wrists to the posts, tightening the leather straps until he was stretched taut. Cornelia smiled at him. "A slave is forbidden to use the Jewels. A slave is forbidden to do anything but basic Craft, as you well know." (DOTB107-108)

The account continues in a similar vein for more than a page, delineating in meticulous detail the scale of male pain and humiliation. What is more interesting, however, is the position of a female observer, who is distanced physically and merely observes with unquestionable excitement the scene in which one man is forced to undress and hit another. If the scene was filmed, her gaze would in fact be an equivalent of the "male gaze," typical of the presentation of women in mainstream movies, which occurs when the audience see the woman from the angle of a heterosexual male, which perception usually objectifies her. Whether employed consciously or not, the technique emphasises strongly the reversal of gender roles in the scene. Furthermore, the external position of a female observer corresponds to the situation of the reader, who may take a voyeuristic pleasure in reading the passage clearly depicting female domination and sexual objectification of man who assumes a submissive sexual role.

The reversal of gender roles becomes even more apparent when we examine the concept of sadomasochism that is still popularly, if problematically, seen as "only a quantitative heightening of the normal sexual impulse, whereby sadism corresponds to the masculine, masochism to the feminine component of the sexual instinct" (Stekel 57). The behaviour is also seen as culturally coded with the male supposed to be domineering and sexually aggressive while the female reluctant or passive (Noyes 29). Consequently, sadomasochism is frequently understood as straight sexuality pushed to its extremes. Yet, the phenomenon appears more problematic to Freud, who in "The Sexual Aberrations" stresses the changeability of the sadistic and masochistic instincts:

Every active perversion is thus accompanied by its passive counterpart: anyone who is an exhibitionist in his unconscious is at the same time a voyeur; in anyone who suffers from the consequences of repressed sadistic impulses there is sure to be another determinant of his symptoms which has its source in masochistic inclinations. (qtd. in Lynch 2003).

Intentionally or not, Anne Bishop seems to follow Freud's premise in her construction of Daemon, who appears to be a sadist and masochist in one. He endures suffering and inflicts pain as "he'd learned to embrace agony like a sweet lover" (DOTB 108). And yet even if he has taught himself to enjoy physical pain, which associates him with the female role, he never becomes docile and submissive – any attempt to force him to surrender his principles results in an outbreak of rage and destruction. In fact, Bishop presents her readers with a highly ambiguous image of Daemon's masculinity: his sensual appearance is deceptive and only serves to emphasize his unyielding power just as his position of a sex-slave does not seem to undermine his alpha-male status.

As we go through Bishop's narration, Terreile appears more and more like a sick and twisted fantasy, in which women have lost their senses and concentrate their energy on humiliating men both physically and emotionally. The abuse of female power seems to derive from the fear of men that verges upon hysteria. The women of Terreile are so terrified of masculinity and so focused on the acquisition of power for its own sake that they perceive men as their worst enemy. Not being able to embrace the differences between the genders, they try to destroy masculinity altogether, which is symbolized by their delight in castrating males, presented quite vividly and indicative of penis envy. Their cruelty in turn influences the males, who resort to violence, destruction, rapes performed on younger and less powerful women, and even pedophilia. The reader is thus slowly but surely led to believe that the fight between genders is absolutely futile and equally harmful for both men and women. Here, the ideology present in Bishop's texts, starts to go in line with certain studies emerging in the 1990s in response to the second and third wave feminism. In a book sometimes referred to as "antifeminist" and sometimes as "postfeminist," titled *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, Christina Hoff Sommers distinguishes between what she calls "gender feminism," which prevails at the universities and is misandric in its perception of men as the source of all evil, and "equity feminism" that aims for full civil and legal equality of women but not at the expense of men. Around the same time, early masculinity studies, also sought to diminish the claims of feminism, stating that "it is an article of feminist faith that for woman to become strong,

man must become weak. The argument is truly basic to the distorted reasoning that in order for women to gain power, men must be forced to yield” (Schoenberg 26).

If Terreilean women from Bishop's novels represent warrior-like “gender feminists” who take over male power, the ones from Kaeleer, with Jeanelle in the forefront, stand for “equity feminists,” whose ideology seems to be better accommodated by mass audiences as the success of *The Bridget Jones Diaries*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Sex and the City* has shown. Kaeleer is in fact a utopia-like vision of the world in which there is balance between the genders and where both men and women can find space for self-expression. It is the vision of the society that has reached a state of balance:

In Kaeleer, service was an intricate dance, the lead constantly changing between the genders. Witches nurtured and protected male strength and pride. Males, in turn, protected and respected the gentler, but somehow deeper, feminine strength. Males weren't slaves or pets or tools to be used without regard to feelings. They were valuable, and valued, partners. That, Lucivar had decided that day, was the leash the Queens used in Kaeleer—control so gentle and sweet a man had no reason to fight against it and every reason to fiercely protect it. Loyalty, on both sides. Respect, on both sides. Honor, on both sides. Pride, on both sides. This was the place he now proudly called home. (HTTS 372)

Kaeleer is a place where gender differences are celebrated, where the Ring of Obedience has been substituted with the Ring of Honour, which makes it possible for a man to better respond to female emotional and sexual needs, and where masculinity is not threatening or domineering but helpful and protective. Even if sentimental and slightly naïve, Bishop's novels seem to appeal to so many readers precisely by providing them with the plots and characters absent from their real lives.

Although *The Black Jewels Trilogy* has been marketed as fiction for women containing adult content, the novels prove to enjoy extreme popularity among teenagers and inspire their imagination and creativity. One of the most popular sites devoted to fan fiction, Fanfiction.net, features hundreds of fan-created stories, ranging from childish naïve to sex-oriented narratives that are centered around the novels. DeviantART, the largest online social network for artists and art enthusiasts with over 19 million registered members and attracting 45 million unique visitors per month, also abounds in the images inspired by Bishop's prose. It must be stressed that both fanfic and fan art are highly intertextual phenomena, blurring the distinction between the primary and fan texts. Consequently, the original narrative ceases

to function as a solitary and autonomous object and in fans' perception can be freely adopted, recreated, and appropriated to reflect their needs, views and ideologies. Although the following discussion of the visual representation of Saetan, Lucivar and Daemon featured on DeviantART will be by no means exhaustive, it will provide us with a glimpse, however elusive and transient, into how Bishop's texts acquire new life and meanings that were probably never intended by the author herself.

The duality of the image of Saetan, who emerges from Bishop's narrative as an ambiguous embodiment of an ideal father and mature lover seems to be preserved although the fans tend to forget that he is in fact an old yet very powerful and authoritative figure. Even if he is portrayed with a wrinkle or two and a touch of grey hair in some pictures, he still looks like a man just past his prime, more mischievous and naughty than cruel and threatening. Many of the images jump at the opportunity to depict his vampiric qualities suggested by Bishop's text, according to which he needs to drink wine mixed with blood to preserve his vital powers and avoid sunshine that weakens him. While for Bishop this serves as a means of emphasising that he exists on the borderline between life and death, the fans often present him as another version of a mass-culture vampire – a beautiful and timeless creature that has more to do with the Cullens from Meyer's *Twilight Series* than with Stoker's *Dracula*, an association the author could not possibly have foreseen.

The visual representation of Lucivar brings to mind the image of a fallen angel combined with a stereotyped, romanticized image of a wild man. Depicted as a strong and muscular man with long disheveled hair, he also has a much more serious or contemplative look than the novels suggest. He is frequently shown against the storm in the background, which links well with his impulsive personality and probably suggests certain freedom associated with nature. Proudly displaying his naked, well-toned and well-depilated torso, he is clearly a warrior type, but his delicate, even slightly feminine facial features point to emotional sensitivity and make him look alienated. Despite the fact that according to Bishop's trilogy he was frequently flogged, most pictures feature a perfect, scar-free body as if there were no place for a less perfect image in teenage imagination. What is the most striking, however, is that somehow in the process of being re-imagined by fan artists, he has lost his boyish energy of a trickster and an older-brother look and become much more mature and yet metrosexual in appearance than indicated in the novels.

Despite the fact that Daemon seems to be most frequently depicted by teenage audience, he seems to pose the biggest challenge to their imagination. In most images, the artists strive to emphasize his sensuality with depicting

his half-naked body, well-built but much leaner than Lucivar's, which makes Daemon appear more like a boy than a man. In one of the pictures he is reclining against animal-print pillows on a bed covered in black and purple sheets, but this context seems to emphasize his boyish innocence rather than sex appeal. His theatrical clothes are usually kept, but the leather pants, *Matrix* inspired coats and black nails combined with androgynous appearance make him appear more like a member of a teenage Goth subculture than a sexually active and sadistic predator. His facial features are often inspired by adorable looking Japanese manga characters with big eyes, almond-shaped faces, and very small mouth. What also catches attention is Daemon's hairstyle, mainly a long, side-swept bang that covers one of his eyes and immediately brings to mind the Emo subculture with its stereotypes of being particularly oversensitive, shy, introverted, and verging towards depressive and suicidal tendencies with an inclination for self-injury in its extreme form.

The images of Saetan, Lucivar and Daemon created by DeviantArt artists seem to re-interpret the vision of masculinity created in *The Black Jewels Trilogy* by adding a different perspective. Bishop's narratives were originally intended for young adult women who wanted to be drawn away from their surroundings and duties into a fantastic world governed by different rules. If we contend with Radway that such escape, and possibly "neglect of everyday duties" can be interpreted as a temporary "declaration of independence" (62) from their social roles, we are inclined to conclude that the romances metaphorically provide women with their own special place and give them the pleasure of reading about the heroines that are treated by men like the reading women would like to be treated. If so, instead of looking for signs of timeless literary quality in Bishop's trilogy, we might appreciate it as a contemporary commentary upon female perception of gender roles. What women want seems to be partnership, equality, sexual passion and emotional security. The differences between the genders are not blurred but male and female distinct qualities are celebrated as equally important. In short, Bishop's universe seems to be the place where man can be men and women can be women without constant struggle for power and dominance. Yet, these quite lucid expectations become fuzzy in the context of fan art and a coherent image of masculinity emerging from Bishop's novels is being invaded with cultural signs and messages that are alien to it. In the process of appropriation of Bishop's text by teenage audience, the male characters become more androgynous and metrosexual while gender differences instead of being celebrated become quite vague. Adult men are transformed into boyish, less clearly defined versions of themselves, and

the addition of Goth, Emo, and manga elements seems to strengthen the impression of their incompleteness as fully developed characters.

The analyzed images appear to show male characters caught in the process of transformation from boyhood to adulthood, which may serve as a metaphor for what happens to a popular fiction text which is never close and complete, but always in the act of becoming. In his already classic study of fandom Henry Jenkins, drawing inspiration from Michell de Certeau, has identified the fans as “textual poachers,” i.e. active interpreters rather than passive consumers, who create different meanings from the same context depending on their personal background (26-27). De Certeau’s metaphor of poaching, originally applied to readers who appropriate literary texts for their own purposes, is actually illuminating here: “... readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves” (De Certeau 174). Fan cultures poach their beloved texts without permission. They are not passive any more, they resist whatever is offered, they do not rely on meaning by other interpreters, and they are massively creative. Thus, studying fan fiction and fan art can be a fascinating though illusory task if only we manage to accept that we, as critics, will always lag behind the fans, forever trying but never arriving at a unified and complete interpretation of their all-encompassing activity.

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