Queer Feminist Hermeneutics: Deconstructing Patriarchal Logic in Ali Smith's Girl Meets Boy

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Introduction

This article considers Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) as a powerful illustration of the deconstruction of patriarchal power by enacting a radical re-narration that unsettles heteronormative constraints. It does so by systematically dismantling the textual foundations of patriarchy: language, narrative structure, and plot. Smith's work deconstructs the Western literary tradition by reinterpreting Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to critically examine current gender politics. *Girl Meets Boy* represents a retelling of the classical myth of Iphis and Ianthe through which Smith performs the dual operation of both exposing the patriarchal reasoning that dismisses non-heteronormative desire as unattainable and, simultaneously, redefining Ovid's concept of metamorphosis as a fundamental principle of queer fluidity and possibility.

Thus, the article will first examine Smith's critical rewriting of the Ovidian source text, demonstrating how she transposes the myth's conflict from a biological impossibility to culture. It will then proceed to a close analysis of the novel's formal and stylistic choices, arguing that its manipulation of language, grammar, and syntax constitutes a direct political intervention. Such analysis will employ queer theory, particularly the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the epistemology of the closet (1990), Judith Butler on gender performativity (1990, 1993, 2004), and Annamarie Jagose (2002) on queer as a critical positionality, to unpack the novel's subversion of identity catego-

ries. At the same time, the insights of feminist literary criticism on the gendered reader and narrative voice (Flint 2000, Lanser 1992, Marcus 2007) are brought together with the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss (1982) to argue that Smith's portrayal of internalised homophobia and toxic masculinity is constructed to cultivate a gendered ethics of reception, forcing the reader into a critical dialogue with their own deeply held assumptions about gender and sexuality. It is hoped that this will make it evident how *Girl Meets Boy* ultimately forges a queer feminist hermeneutic, a mode of reading that is itself an act of ethical and political engagement against those performances that police and maintain heteronormative order, transforming not only the text but the reader.

1. A knife to cut through myth: Queering the Ovidian canon

At the core of *Girl Meets Boy* lies a profound and politically charged engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As part of the Canongate Myths series, the novel explicitly positions itself within a tradition of literary reappropriation, seizing upon the myth of Iphis and Ianthe (the sole mythological account of female same-sex desire in all of classical literature) to deconstruct the patriarchal logic that underpins it and transform its central conceit of metamorphosis from a tool of heteronormative restoration into a principle of queer liberation.

To understand the radical nature of Smith's intervention, one must first grasp the logic of the *amor impossibilis* (impossible love) which is central to the tale of Iphis and Ianthe. In the Ovidian source, Iphis, a girl raised as a boy to escape infanticide, falls in love with her childhood friend, Ianthe. The impossibility of their love, as David Robinson notes, is not due to external barriers: "No watchful guardian, jealous husband, strict father, unloving beloved... their fathers both approve" (2006: 171). The

conflict is biological. Iphis despairs because she believes her female body is inadequate for the consummation of their love, lamenting that "Passion for a cow does not inflame a cow, nor does that for mares inflame the mares" (Ovid 2012: 1401). This despair is rooted in a specifically Roman, penetration-based model of sexuality, which distinguishes between an active, masculine role and a passive, feminine one. As Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Judith Roof (1991) have argued, lesbian love becomes unimaginable within such a phallocentric system since it is perceived as lacking the essential, active male element. Indeed, Ovid resolves this 'impossibility' through the divine intervention of the goddess Isis, who physically transforms Iphis into a male just before the wedding, which legitimises the union through the complete erasure of same-sex desire.

Smith's novel transposes the locus of this impossibility from the natural or biological realm to the cultural. The obstacle to Anthea and Robin's love is not an anatomical lack but the weight of societal prejudice, a force expressed by Anthea's sister, Imogen Gunn. Where Ovid's Iphis embodies a sense of biological inadequacy, Smith's Imogen internalises a pervasive cultural homophobia. Her initial reaction upon discovering her sister's relationship ("Oh my God my sister is A GAY", 60) is a raw expression of shock and dismay, objectifying Anthea's identity into a terrifying label. Imogen's subsequent internal monologue becomes a satirical exposition of the cultural scripts used to pathologise and explain away homosexuality. She frantically searches for causes, blaming everything from her parents' divorce to Anthea's taste in pop music:

> (It is the fault of the Spice Girls.)
> (She chose the video of Spiceworld with Sporty Spice on the limited edition tin.)
> (She was always a bit too feminist.)
> (She was always playing that George Michael cd.)

> (She always votes for the girls on Big Brother and she voted for that transsexual the year he was on, or she, or whatever it is you're supposed to say.)
> (She liked the Eurovision Song Contest.)
> (She still likes the Eurovision Song Contest.)
> (She liked Buffy the Vampire Slayer.) (62)

This desperate attempt to retrospectively identify 'symptoms' reveals a worldview in which heterosexuality is the unquestioned norm, and any deviation is an aberration that must be accounted for. Smith thus directly confronts the premise of 'unnaturalness' that, as Kaye Mitchell (2013) observes, pervades translations of the Ovidian myth. In *Girl Meets Boy*, this unnaturalness is exposed as a purely social construct, a product of fear, ignorance, and the rigid binary categorisations that structure heteronormative society.

The most radical element of Smith's rewriting is her reclamation of metamorphosis itself. In Ovid, the transformation serves to restore order and enforce a gender binary. Iphis becomes a boy with conventionally masculine traits: "both her strength is increased, and her features are more stern; and shorter is the length of her scattered locks. There is more vigour, also, than she had as a female. And now thou art a male, who so lately wast a female" (Ovid 2012: 1403). Smith, in contrast, redeploys metamorphosis as the central principle of a queer existence defined by fluidity, flux, and anti-essentialism, thus aligning with postmodern readings of Ovid which, as Philip Hardie (2002) suggests, appreciate his "flight from realism and presence towards textuality and anti-foundationalism" (4).

This idea is most clearly seen in the novel's love scenes, where the writing itself changes, and people and language are no longer the same. Anthea talks about her experiences with Robin, which involve lots of changes that go against binary

thinking: "I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth. [...] We were [...] both genders, a whole new gender, no gender at all" (113, 115). The first part of the sentence destroys the idea of a single, fixed subject that traditional language and logic create. Through a quick series of changes to pronouns, the text shows that a person's identity can change, and it doesn't give the reader a fixed point of reference to latch onto. This is not a story about transition in the conventional sense of moving from one fixed point or stable condition to another. It shows that things are *always* changing, in a state of perpetual flux. The way it is written makes it a strange space, because it does not follow the language rules that make binary logic work. The most striking feature of this chain of pronouns is how fast it is: the order of words, with no commas or semicolons, creates a feeling of non-stop speech that matches the content. It makes the reader feel what it's like to lose a sense of who they are, which happens quickly and out of control, instead of happening bit by bit and being thought about. This is a crucial distinction from earlier literary explorations of gender fluidity, such as in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), where the protagonist's transformation is a singular event that unfolds over a long duration. This instantaneous and continuous grammatical modulation reflects Butler's concept of gender identity's essence. The prose itself embodies this central idea as "a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (1990: 33). The swift shift from 'I' to 'she' and then to 'he' eradicates the individual subject, demonstrating that no fixed, pre-gendered identity is in control. Progressing from 'I' to 'we' indicates a significant political development within the sentence from which originates the individual ('I') navigating the binary's opposing forces ('she', 'he'). However, it does not resolve back into a new, singular identity, to transcend the individual alto-

gether and move into a collective 'we'. This move is a powerful subversion of the masculine narrative of individual self-discovery, suggesting that liberation from the binary is not an individualistic project but a coalitional one. Far from being a simple amalgamation of 'shes' and 'hes', this 'we' is a new political entity born of the turmoil of binary deconstruction and may serve as an example of how pronouns can be used in political discourse to build a shared identity or foster a sense of collective endeavour. The subsequent proliferation ("a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy", 114) further reinforces the depiction of a collective that is joyfully, anarchically multiple, refusing to be reduced to a single, manageable category, in a linguistic rebellion that extends to the grammar itself. The sentence flouts conventional rules of pronoun consistency and subject-verb agreement, becoming a 'queer' text at the most fundamental level, where the language refuses to conform to the strictures of a grammatical system that is itself a product and enforcer of the binary logic being critiqued. Such an act of linguistic non-compliance is a political statement asserting that a language built to uphold patriarchy is inadequate to describe an experience of liberation from it. Furthermore, the rapid cycling of pronouns also prompts reflection on contemporary political issues surrounding their usage. While it is true that stating one's preferred pronouns is a vital political and social practice that demands recognition for the safety and validation of transgender and non-binary individuals, the passage, however, pushes this logic to a more radical conclusion. By refusing to land on any single pronoun, it gestures toward an identity so fluid that no stable signifier can contain it as an exploration of what lies beyond the politics of recognition: a politics of dissolution in which an underlying assumption that identity must ultimately resolve into a stable, nameable state, even a non-binary one, is questioned. The 'subject' is presented here in a state of constant, vibrant flux, for

whom identity is a perpetual, metamorphic process reaching its conceptual climax in the phrase: "we were both genders, a whole new gender, no gender at all" (115), a seemingly paradoxical declaration capturing the simultaneous acts of creation and abolition expected in a radical break from the patriarchal gender system.

It is important to note that this idea moves on to another surprising comparison when it changes from talking about who someone is to talking about what someone can do: "...we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth" (114). This image is a radical reinterpretation of the blade as a symbol of queer identity. The blade is a well-known symbol of patriarchal power, violence and authority. The group, which is both flexible and unified, mentioned in the previous sentence now has a new quality: it is sharp, dangerous and has the potential to do great things. The fact that it is a group of people suggests a shared force or a shared state of being that is honed and ready. Instead of a single hero with a magic sword, here we have a community weaponised through its shared experience of deconstructing the binary. This image then coalesces: the plural blades become a knife. The purpose of this knife is explicitly defined, 'to cut through myth' as a symbol of cultural deconstruction. The violence of the blade is redirected from a human body to an ideological construct, a 'myth' or, more specifically, the foundational patriarchal myth that the gender binary is natural, essential, and immutable.

This kind of strong and clear protest against traditional ideas about gender can be seen as a contemporary iteration within a century-long literary tradition of works that use narrative and stylistic innovation to challenge and deconstruct gender norms. By comparing this passage to key predecessors like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1994), and the more recent Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

(2015), we can see a clear trajectory of increasing radicalism, moving from allegorical representation to direct linguistic confrontation with the reader. *Orlando* is the first to do this, by questioning what gender is by using a story with an allegorical plot. The main character lives for hundreds of years and changes from male to female. This suggests that who a person is is more important than their biological sex. By using a strategy of negation and absence, *Written on the Body* also challenges traditional ideas about gender by removing all gender markers from the story, thus unsettling readers' assumptions and showing how deeply gender shapes desire and interpretation. Blending memoir and theory, *The Argonauts* pushes further by narrating queer family-making (staging parallels between pregnancy and transition alongside theorists like Butler and Sedgwick) to critique gendered language and fuse analysis with lived experience at the level of content. Smith seems to continue this tradition by transforming the political struggle into the syntax of a single sentence, breathing life into a textual performance that, having desire proliferate into an "open mesh of possibilities" (Sedgwick 1994: 8), directly challenges Ovid's rigid, binary transformation. The novel's central motif of water – fluid, uncontainable, powerful – becomes the primary symbol for this queer, metamorphic identity, standing in stark opposition to the sterile, commodified, and artificially contained product sold by the Pure Corporation where both Anthea and Imogen work. The suggested company's own marketing slogan ("water IS us", 49) is ironically reappropriated by the novel's queer ethos, suggesting an identity that is inherently changeable, forceful, and resistant to being bottled up by social convention.

Smith's decision to rewrite a classic myth is a deliberate political move to suggest that the idea of a modern patriarchy is not new, but is actually based on the ideas expressed in foundational books of Western history. The novel shows how the idea

of female-female desire without a penis has been connected to the basic, male-dominated thinking of Imogen's colleagues today. To challenge traditional ideas about gender, we need to look at the ancient stories and beliefs that underpin them. The persistent nature of these beliefs, enduring for millennia rather than being mere contemporary biases, is notable. The novel's dual narration of the myth serves as an example of the critical re-interpretation it advocates. Initially, Robin offers a direct summary, which is subsequently followed by an interactive dialogue with Anthea. This second rendition, facilitated by Anthea's interruptions and questions, reveals the myth's male-centric bias, prompting Robin to comment on Ovid's "fixat⁅ion⁆ on what it is that girls don't have under their togas" (108). It could be contended that this process is analogous to the practice of feminist literary criticism itself: namely, the re-reading of canonical texts from a critical, gender-aware perspective.

2. The life that disproves the machine: Style as subversion

Smith's critique of patriarchal structures extends beyond plot and theme into the very mechanics of language. Grounded in her own critical assertion that "how something is told ⁅...⁆ makes what's being told. A story is its style. A style is its story ⁅...⁆. Style is never not content" (Smith 2012), the novel demonstrates that political resistance can be enacted through formal and stylistic choices. By rejecting the specious binary of *style versus content*, Smith frames her novel's linguistic experimentation not as mere aesthetic flourish, but as a direct challenge to the reductive, mechanistic categories of heteronormativity. Style, for Smith, is "the life that disproves the machine" (2012), and in *Girl Meets Boy*, the 'machine' is the patriarchal system that attempts to contain and define identity through a rigid and impoverished lexicon. The novel subverts grammatical gender

norms from the outset, as seen in the introductory line "Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says" (12), where the atypical use of gendered pronouns challenges reader expectations and immediately posits that biological characteristics do not dictate identity. This initial disruption sets the stage for a narrative where linguistic structures become sites of ideological struggle and, as Marina Warner has noted, shows Smith's rare "ingenuity with pronouns" (2013: ix), using them to unsettle fixed premises about her characters' sex.

In stark contrast to this fluidity, Imogen's narrative voice is marked by a pervasive use of parentheses. These enclose her most anxious, prejudiced, and self-doubting thoughts – such as "(Oh my God my sister is A GAY.)" (60) and "(It is our mother's fault [...])" (60) – serving as both a syntactical separation of thoughts that challenge her carefully constructed, heteronormative worldview, and her visual confinement within restrictive social norms. This constrained style can be seen as a direct enactment of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick termed the 'epistemology of the closet' (1990): a defining structure of knowledge and ignorance that polices the boundary between the known (heterosexuality) and the unspeakable (homosexuality). Imogen's parenthetical thoughts are her personal closet, a space of self-imposed identity regulation where queer possibilities are entertained only to be suppressed and contained. Smith's stylistic choice forces the reader to experience the very functioning of the closet in the act of reading. Imogen's eventual shedding of these brackets later in the novel may signify her 'coming out' of this restrictive epistemology, a breaking free from the grammatical and ideological confines that have defined her.

In contrast, the pub encounter with her colleagues, Dominic and Norman, demonstrates how language is externally wielded to enforce social hierarchies. This scene illustrates the patriarchal power dynamic and shows how small acts of sexism lead to more

serious prejudice, from casual misogyny to an escalation of overt and violent homophobia. The *Everyday Sexism Project* by Laura Bates (2014) backs this up by documenting how the cumulative effect of such incidents favours a hostile cultural environment. Right at the beginning of their conversation, Norman insults Imogen by calling her a "useless slag" (73), a slur that includes both sexual and professional insults. According to feminist linguists Sara Mills and Louise Mullany (2011), this tactic is used to establish male dominance and undermine female autonomy and competence by reducing women to sexual objects, reinforcing their subordinate status. When Imogen objects, Norman uses gaslighting tactics, making fun of her objections by saying, "Can't take a joke? Loosen up. Ha ha!" (73) This manipulative response, as Mary Crawford (1992) explains, is a classic example of making abusive behavior seem like harmless humor. By doing this, Norman can deny his actions, effectively blaming Imogen. She then feels responsible for being 'oversensitive', which isolates her and makes her doubt her own reality. This subtle strategy not only dismisses her valid feelings but also strengthens Norman's control, creating a harmful dynamic where Imogen constantly questions her own thoughts and feelings. This method intentionally stops any disagreement and puts Imogen in a difficult situation where any action she takes will lead to a bad outcome. If she protests or disagrees, she is immediately called 'difficult'. But if she stays silent, her silence is seen as agreement. This forces Imogen into a no-win situation, where both resisting and complying lead to her feeling powerless. The subtle but significant change in Norman's behavior shows a clear increase in his disrespect, moving from just ignoring her words to openly forcing her to do things. This growing aggressive behavior is immediately clear when he ignores Imogen's simple and clear request for a Diet Coke. Instead of giving her what she asked for, he deliberately brings her wine, a drink she didn't ask

for, replacing her requested drink with one of his choosing as if Imogen's preferences were unimportant and undeserving of attention. He establishes a precedent where her autonomy and wishes are disregarded in his presence. The implicit expectation that she consume the wine he offers further reinforces this control, demanding her compliance. Norman subtly asserts his dominance over Imogen, expecting her to comply with his desires and suppress her own. His deliberate act of overfilling her glass, forcing her to stoop and drink like an animal to avoid spillage, is a calculated humiliation leading to Imogen's eventual capitulation, where she performs for their amusement ("Eventually I do it so that that's what it will do, make them laugh", 76) to diffuse the tension. Their colleague Paul accurately describes Dominic and Norman as a "nasty double act off tv" (75), highlighting their shared bond built on cynical superiority and camaraderie achieved through the denigration of women. They derogatorily label Paul as gay in his absence for refusing to partake in their toxic behavior ("They're wankers", 75), ostracising him with a slur characteristic of homophobic masculinity. To be a 'real man' in their world, one must participate in this brand of misogynistic and homophobic banter. Imogen's own thought ("I don't see why he can't just pretend to find it funny like the rest of us have to", 75) reveals her own tragic complicity and her normalisation of this toxic environment.

Their employment of the derogatory Scottish slang term 'greggy' to describe a disappointing female colleague, tthe stereotype of a progressive activist and possibly resentful feminist who always gets her own way or speaks out of turn (i.e. by questioning the dogmas of a patriarchal society), is another display of how in-groups weaponise language. Initially presented as an innocuous private joke, the term's meaning is deliberately withheld from Imogen, reinforcing her status as an outsider to their particular brand of toxic masculinity. Her attempts to decode it

("So it means unfeminine?", 78) are met with condescension. As sociolinguist Deborah Cameron (2012) has explored, the policing of language is a key way that social hierarchies are maintained. The eventual, convoluted reveal, linking greggy first to Greg Dyke (the former BBC Director-General, for "let[ing] people say what they shouldn't have, out loud, on the news", 79) and then, brutally, the reference to Robin as "that freakshow who daubed the Pure sign that day [...]. Fucking dyke" (79) exposes the potency of this kind of hate speech masked by their linguistic game, as well as in-groups' use of coded language and neologisms to exclude, denigrate, and enact violence. 'Dyke', another slang for 'lesbian', serves to create an exclusionary secret and its meaning is deliberately withheld from Imogen to reinforce her outsider status until they, the men, choose to indoctrinate her. The scene culminates in the raw, unfiltered expression of the violent homophobia that underpins their misogyny. Their pseudo-intellectual discussion of lesbianism as a "state of lack" and "adolescent backwardness" (80) is a grotesque parody of Freudian pathologising and a direct, modern echo of the phallocentric logic in the Ovidian myth, where female-female desire is deemed impossible without a male presence.

Their gleeful reaction to the statistic about high suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth ("Good. Ha ha!", 80) is the scene's most shocking moment, the absolute endpoint of their dehumanising ideology. This is where the pretense of joking is stripped away, revealing a profound and violent cruelty, the horrifying, real-world articulation of the very tropes Imogen has passively consumed herself, for example through the idea that "Gay people are always dying all the time" (69). Hearing it expressed with such sadistic glee forces her to confront the sheer ugliness of the prejudice she herself has harboured in a more sanitised, internal form.

Imogen's reaction ("My whole body goes cold", 79) and her subsequent internal summary show her being forcibly

indoctrinated into a hateful lexicon, arming her with a new vocabulary of hatred to define her sister: "(Oh my God my sister who is related to me is a greg, a lack, unfuckable, not properly developed [...])" (81). The scene ends with her physical revulsion, vomiting under a blossoming tree, in a bodily rejection of metaphorical poison that symbolises the profound internal crisis of the abstract ugliness of patriarchy becoming a sickening, unbearable reality. This also demonstrates the terrifying power of language not merely to describe reality but to actively construct it, to define and dehumanise individuals, and to provide, as Imogen tragically realises, "so many words I don't know for what my little sister is" (81).

3. The anxious gaze: Performing and policing heteronormativity

Through the character arc of Imogen, the novel dissects the anatomy of internalised homophobia, while the scene with her colleagues externalises this prejudice into its most toxic and violent form, in an unsettling examination of the anxieties that fuel the maintenance of a patriarchal social order both performed by individuals and policed by social forces. Imogen's panicked search for 'causes' to Anthea's relationship is a raw, unfiltered stream of societal biases attempting to pathologise her sister's identity, to frame it as a deviation from a 'normal' developmental path rather than an intrinsic part of who she is. This fear of the 'other' quickly turns inward, morphing into an anxiety of contamination: "(But if that's true then I might also be a gay.) [...] (How do you know if you are it?)" (60). Here, female homosexuality is figured not as an orientation but as a frightening, unknown 'it' that one might unknowingly be.

This personal anxiety is buttressed by a broader conservative ideology. Her internal monologue, "(Thank God that feministy time of selfishness is over and we now have everything we

will ever need, including a much more responsible set of values)" (64), is a clear articulation of the anti-feminist backlash rhetoric identified by Susan Faludi (1991, 2020). It also reflects what Angela McRobbie (2009) describes as a postfeminist logic, where feminist gains are taken for granted while its political critiques are dismissed as outdated or selfish. Imogen's anxieties about Anthea's future are further fueled by her passive consumption of homophobic cultural narratives. She invokes the notorious 'Bury Your Gays' media trope – "(There is also that gay woman doctor character on ER whose lovers always die in fires and so on.) (Gay people are always dying all the time.)" (69) – and recalls real-life homophobic political campaigns, misattributing the blame for such bigotry to her sister for simply existing: "(My sister is now one of the reasons the man who owns Stagecoach buses had that million-pound poster campaign...)" (71), thus revealing how media and political discourse provide the raw material for the construction of personal prejudice.

Imogen's worldview is fundamentally structured by what queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004) terms 'reproductive futurism', an ideology that posits the figure of the Child as the ultimate horizon of the political, the symbol of a viable and continuous future:

> (I will never leave my children when I have fallen in love and am married and have had them. I will have them young, not when I am old, like the selfish generation. I would rather give up any career than not have them. I would rather give myself up. I would rather give up everything including any stupid political principle than leave children that belonged to me. Look how it ends. [...]) (64)

Imogen's fervent desire for a traditional family and her willingness to sacrifice everything for her children reveal an identity and sense of worth predicated on her capacity to reproduce and participate in a normative vision of the future. Within this

framework, Anthea's non-reproductive queerness is perceived as a profound threat rather than a mere personal lifestyle choice because it represents a break in the chain of futurity, a form of social death or degeneration. When Imogen laments the consequences of feminism and her mother leaving her father, her conclusion ("Look how it ends", 64) pointedly frames Anthea's homosexuality as the negative, sterile outcome of societal decay, a direct affront to the reproductive futurism that underpins her conservative values.

4. Forging a queer feminist ethics of reception

In its synthesis of mythical rewriting, linguistic experimentation, and psychological realism, *Girl Meets Boy* actively forges and performs a model of queer feminism. This model is not presented as a didactic message but is realised through the novel's structure and style, which demand a particular kind of engagement from the reader. Ultimately, the novel constructs a gendered ethics of reception, transforming the act of reading into a platform for the critical negotiation of social and personal norms.

The novel explores a form of queer feminism that challenges rigid definitions of identity, linking patriarchal oppression to a broader exploitative system. Its critique of the Pure Corporation thereby connects traditional gender roles with the detrimental ideologies of late capitalism, which makes Robin's environmental efforts a queer and feminist act of resistance against the commodification and control of both nature and identity. Furthermore, the grandfather's stories of the Suffragettes, of figures like 'Burning Lily' Lenton and the cross-dressing escape plots, weave contemporary queer resistance into a longer history of feminist struggle, creating an intergenerational 'herstory' of defiance grounded in the queer principles of fluidity and the deconstruction of binaries. The novel eschews stable identity

politics in favour of what David Halperin describes as "a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (1995: 62), summarising a key tenet of queer theory. The ultimate objective is not the establishment of a new, 'correct' lesbian identity, but rather to celebrate the very processes of transformation and becoming that normative structures seek to suppress.

The novel is meticulously structured to challenge what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss terms the reader's 'horizon of expectations' (1982), in that approaching a novel titled *Girl Meets Boy* brings obviously a set of generic and cultural expectations, shaped by the long history of the heterosexual romance plot, an horizon which Smith systematically dismantles the very first page. Smith immerses readers in the narrative through a non-linear plot, ambiguous language, and the interweaving of myth and reality, which collectively foster a sense of detachment. The prejudices in Imogen's reasoning and anxieties, being depicted as they are from such a deep internal perspective, cannot be readily dismissed as the result of mere external evil or malice, but expose the absurdities inherent in a self-righteously conventional outlook. As Imogen's own horizon of expectations is shattered by her sister's reality, the reader, too, is invited to undergo a parallel hermeneutic journey.

This process of readerly negotiation culminates in what can be described as a gendered ethics of reception. Smith's novel internalises the project of feminist literary criticism, making the reader an active participant in that project. The work of Kate Flint (1993, 2000), particularly *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, provides a crucial historical context, detailing the myriad ways in which women's reading has been policed and constructed as a site of moral danger. Smith subverts this history by creating a text that demands a 'deviant', non-normative reading practice – one that embraces ambiguity, questions authority, and finds pleasure in the dissolution of fixed categories. Furthermore,

drawing on Susan Lanser's (1992, 2014) work on narrative voice as a site of power, it is clear that Smith's manipulation of focalisation and voice constructs a specific subject position for the reader, who is encouraged to align not with the seemingly stable, yet deeply anxious, voice of Imogen, but with the fluid, joyful, and transformative perspective embodied by Anthea and Robin. By engaging with the novel's form and style, readers are encouraged to challenge their own ingrained biases. Smith's novel incorporates a queer feminist perspective, suggesting that novels can change how we understand things, much like feminist criticism, as argued by Laura Marcus (1994, 2007) changed how people viewed authors such as Virginia Woolf. Ultimately, the novel conveys that stories, myths, and identities, as well as the reader, can be reinterpreted, emphasising that interpretation is a flexible space for potential change. The profound parallel between the metamorphoses occurring *within* the text (to the Ovidian myth, to the historical narratives of the Suffragettes, and most centrally, to Imogen) and the hermeneutic transformation demanded *of* the reader, for whom making sense of the novel becomes an ethical act of unlearning patriarchal ways of seeing and being.

Conclusion

Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* stands as a powerful enactment of a queer feminist critique that operates at the deepest structural levels of narrative. It moves beyond mere representation to perform its politics through its very form. By seizing the classical myth of Iphis and Ianthe, Smith updates an ancient story to subvert its foundational logic, transposing the *amor impossibilis* from a biological lack to a cultural prejudice, and reclaiming metamorphosis as a radical principle of queer fluidity. Through this act of canonical rewriting, Smith proposes a reconfigura-

tion of contemporary heteronormativity as the direct inheritor of a patriarchal logic embedded in the foundational texts of Western culture. The destabilisation of gendered pronouns, the weaponisation of neologisms and the textual 'closet' of parenthetical thought provide a dazzling array of stylistic innovations through which she masterfully demonstrates her own critical axiom that a story *is* its style. The novel's language actively dismantles patriarchal categories used to police identity, rather than neutrally conveying content. This creates an intimate confrontation with internalised homophobia and toxic masculinity, exposing the deep anxieties that fuel the constant performance of a normative social order.

Ultimately, *Girl Meets Boy* makes its most significant contribution by creating a transformative narrative experience for the reader. The novel deliberately challenges what readers expect, encouraging a critical and ethical way of looking at gender relationships. Smith makes reading itself an act of breaking down old-fashioned and discriminatory ideas about gender, and the book's conclusive promise that "things can always be different" (171) is also a direct invitation to the reader to join in the hopeful pursuit of change.

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