

Counterpoint (Penelope)

Poems

Gina Rae Foster

(from *heart speech this*, Atropos Press, 2009)

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Ensemble

From heddle and frame she unraveled night,
smoothed snags from her linen, reset the loom,
unbalanced weft and warp not to provide
too much deftness from hands, no quickened tune

that might knot moirae in this shroud, assume
a plan she had not spun, snarl lovers in
the spaces out of which she grieved. She crooned

to pull each helix parallel, to thin
the flare, the filaments, tears fraying for their kin.

Slur

She learned there were no bargains to be made
with gods or wars. He left, knees and shins stained
from where he'd slid to stop the plow, the blade
skidding a heel's breadth from Tele's belt, reined

in by love more lunatic than fear. Named
husband, king, vow-bound, he shuddered, stood. *Choose,*
he'd spat, *whom you want divided: brother maimed,*

son claimed, cousin damned by face, bodies bruised
around the axe's edge, the sword to furrow trued.

Key

The impulse on her tongue diffuse in air,
yes and *no* dissolved, distressed, entangled
in veil and loop and cord—*I speak, I dare*—
her pulse the rudest noise, raw and jangled

as these snarls beneath her hands, now angled
half between and half apart, twined, doubled
in the pattern setting choice, the dangled

words—*I go, I stay*—his promise muffled,
hers held, as cloth covered lips, as eyes uncoupled.

Descant

A veil, a shroud, a sea—a cloth, a wall
between her and the men she loved—the loom
almost a window if her hair could fall
from her face, threads fray to mist, to fume

that lips could break, teeth abrade, breath un-moon
to sun where space to space, throat to chin, each
swallow, prayer, groan found light. Here, at noon,

she turned to catch a waver, a sigh, a breach
of rhombs stretched across the frame, weft beyond her
reach.

Progression

First she matched, then doubled, then tripled, then
lost count of each return he'd failed to meet,
brushing against her lips a forgotten
warmth, a year's wakings and partings, their Crete

a promise of sky swathed in sea, their feet
printing sand in the wake of ink and smooth
blue. She matched, then multiplied the discreet

then urgent requests she forget, the youth
ebbing her smile, flooding her throat, muddying truth.

Phrasing

Why was there pattern to anything? Why
became the stems that rose and branched, leaving
time to furl and flower from past to sky
at the edge of sight, then back, bereaving

the frame of its fruit, racing, retrieving
the first thread, the blue almost cloud not yet
sea, the ripeness of grief in believing

leaf came from seed, light could return. She set
herself this challenge: embrace, weave what never met.

Da Camera

She had forgotten touch, taste, smell, the sound
of him shifting beside her in bed. He
lived in their son, the bed he had made, ground
of their planting fallow as the field three

cuts had flung reckless, the emissary's
gaze turning the plow, raveling the earth
from destination, return. Was the sea

his new wife, city and child? She gave birth
to her dreams, wisdom's shadows bitter in her heart.

Interval

She began to long for the chill, the fever
that loosened her sense of within and with-
out, sudden sweat slicking flax, the weaver's
fingers dulled, space to width undefined, swift

patterning caught in the fall of her stitch,
her jaw slack, head toppled to frame, excuse
to leave this seat, this loom, one night to drift

without unpicking every line, a truce
between day's moods, the floating, fraying of her ruse.

Counterpoint

She wove a different flaw into each
day's work, that point at which her tears or rage
refused to count, her hands to dive and search
the denser hue, the deeper thread to cage

the breath of him, death of him, to engage
story in its lines, its knotted fringe. Flaw
became the hope, diversion the page

she blurred into return, begging her raw
and crooked hands to guide him, weights to twist his vow.

Augmented

Was she a fool to imagine a life
beyond this, a different isle, shadowed
against heat and time? Was she a wife,
a fool, to think him gone? Within this crowd

of shoulders and mouths she turned and slowed,
the pull of a thread snagged out of its weave
in her eye, in her ear, her heel—she vowed

to vow more patiently. Not to love thieves,
not to lose sense. To ravel, not mend, not retrieve.

Tremolo

Did he think that blood and death were sweeter
scents than the smell of her own sea? She stood,
loom between her and the room, scarlet sheer
in random spatters on her dress, winter hued

to summer, light between the frame, the shroud
ragged across the knees of the one whose
name she'd forgot. Ulysses smeared his foot

on the skein fallen from her lap, the loose
strands tangling as he neared, tendering ruse to ruse.

Harmonics

Different patterns meant different frames
within the space of wood and weight. He stayed;
she left. They loved. They broke apart the names
within and out. No Ithaca, no grayed

return or laughter-worn embrace. Afraid
to find a rougher, denser thread between
her thumbs, fennel instead of winter sage

warming his breath, she wound his return, line
coiling on line, whorl taut, loose ends fixed to the skein.

Notes

Glossary

Ensemble

heddle: the mechanism that guides the placement of the weft lines

warp: the parallel guiding lines in a loom that are attached through the heddle to the frame

weft: the string or cord that is threaded through the weft to make the fabric

moirae: fates (fates in general when written in lowercase letters)

Da Camara

da camara: to be performed in a small, intimate setting

Counterpoint

weights: weavers use weights on their warps to maintain consistent tension on the lines

History/Myth

Ensemble

“shroud”: Laertes, Ulysses’ father, had died, and Penelope took on the task of weaving his burial shroud.

“moirae”: The Moirae (with the capitalization) were the three Fates who determined the substance of a life (Clothos who wove a life’s line), the length of a life (Lachesis who measured this line), and the end of a life (Atropos with her scissors). These goddesses were the source and enforcer of destiny. Through the Fates, the purpose and experience of life were established before birth and inescapable through individual free will.

Slur

“the plow”: Ulysses (Odysseus) pretended to be mentally unfit to fight when asked to join Agamemnon’s war against Troy. He acted as a farmer and began to plow an empty field, over and over again, to show that he had lost his sense of himself. Skeptical, Agamemnon’s emissary tested Ulysses’ sanity by placing Telemachus, then an infant, in the path of Ulysses’ plow. Ulysses’ could not bring himself to hurt his son and shifted the plow. This proved his fitness to serve in the war, and Ulysses accepted Agamemnon’s commission.

“Tele”: short form for Telemachus (my liberty in imagining his parents’ pet name for their son)

Progression

“their Crete”: Penelope and Ulysses’ imagined second honeymoon spot (ironically located where the House of Atreus and Penelope’s cousin Clytemnestra committed horrific family crimes)

Da Camara

“the emissary’s gaze turning the plow”: another reference to Ulysses’ attempt to avoid joining the Trojan Wars.

Augmented

“this crowd of shoulders and mouths”: Penelope’s numerous suitors were ill-behaved daily dinner guests for the 20 years Ulysses was at war and lost in his travels.

Tremolo

“tendering ruse to ruse “: Penelope and Ulysses recognized each other’s tricks that helped them to reunite in her delaying tactics with Laertes’ shroud and Ulysses’ disguising himself as an old beggar.

Harmonics

“Different patterns”: there are multiple versions of Penelope’s and Ulysses’ lives after their reunion. None of these had been realized at the moment Ulysses reclaimed his kingdom and Penelope accepted him back as her husband.