

Comment on the Papers by Megan Gallagher and Lilith Todd

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Lilith Todd is a doctoral candidate in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her dissertation is entitled *Tending Another: The Rhetoric and Labor of Nursing in the Long Eighteenth Century*, and she has forthcoming publications on Mary Collier and Hans Sloane's *A Voyage*. She's also got a great piece in *The Rambling* called "A Journal of Keeping Up," which I encourage you all to take a look at. She is an active member of ASECS, and was recently awarded the Race and Empire Caucus Graduate Student Essay Prize for her work in our field.

Megan Gallagher isn't able to be with us today because of a medical emergency, but she's an assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama, and is working on a book entitled, *Beyond Sacrifice: Civic Virtue and Emotional Practices in Republican Thought*.

My remarks are going to be centered on Lilith's work, but I'm assuming you've also read Megan's submission, and it may be appropriate to bring it into discussion in thoughtful ways as well. I'm sure if you have thoughts and would like to send them to her directly, she would appreciate that kindness.

Indiana is very full of allergens right now, and it is unpleasant. At the same time, there are other things mixed in the air—in bondage with the pollen, really—that are less evil. One of the lovely things about living in Indiana in May is all the lilacs, both their color and whimsy and the smell.

A few days ago I was walking the dogs with my spouse, and I said something about how I was enjoying the lilacs in our neighborhood, and he very uncharacteristically replied, "Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac." And I said what the fuck are you talking about? And he told me Walt Whitman wrote a famous poem about Abraham Lincoln called "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" like I was a moral reprobate for not knowing this. And I said, look, I'm a well-read person, but I can't read everything, and basically all I know about Whitman is some bits and bobs from "Song of Myself." And he said "But Whitman is the father of free verse." And then we both talked about how everyone pretends free verse is so great but really it's just because meter is hard.

Now, I'm not saying free verse isn't literary or lacks charm. One of the things I most appreciate about Megan's work is this: "I say 'the figure of the prostitute' because it's not entirely clear to me that Wollstonecraft is always dealing with the reality of women living by sex work versus the morally deficient character of the prostitute which she critiques so ruthlessly. Any suggestions about how to address this more subtly in the paper itself are more than welcome." Later on in a refrain she calls this the "Rhetorical recourse to the figure of the prostitute," the charming alliteration of which almost points to a kind of free verse.

I'm all for defamiliarization, even in academic work. But also, as I argue to my students (I used to cite Simon Jarvis on this before he was rightfully cancelled), meter and rhyme—what used to form verse—used to be a fundamental part of literacy; it's something we've abnegated over the years. Why? We can tell ourselves that the Romantics freed us from the confines of the heroic couplet, or that Whitman freed us from slavish rhyme, but when it comes down to it, one of the questions we struggle with is, "is rhyme really kind of embarrassing?" And this is something Lilith tackles pretty directly. Is metrical rhyme fundamentally childlike, or, to use a

word that comes up in Lilith's essay often, "jingling?" (Whitman doesn't rhyme, but he uses the word "warbling," like, a LOT in that lilac poem.) This is an issue for modern poets, and it was a question in our period—c.f. the controversy around heroic drama, which made Dryden very popular, while the nascent field of theatrical criticism cringed its way through a toxic mixture of Francophobia and Fremdschämen.

John Dennis, who God knows had a lot of dramatic hangups and insecurity of his own to work through, said he found jingling (along with a lot of other things, quite frankly) effeminate. On the other hand, English is a rhyme-poor language, and rhyme is really quite hard to do; English poetry is hard to do. This is why some robustly patriarchal egos like Pope and Byron excel at rubbing it in. "But—Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?" may not be an especially nice formation, but it's one that Byron and very few others could even have formulated.

Milton, meanwhile, eschews the cringe of rhyme for blank verse, transcribed by the work of his daughters—whose free-floating hands in bondage presage Lilith's conclusion in which servants' body parts likewise become detachable and answerable to their households.

But other poets refuse to cast out the rhyme. Lilith tells us that in Lucy Hutchinson's hands, "The bondage [of the couplet] becomes one between bodies, reflecting the ties, material and legal, between women and the bodies that they work on." There's a pre-Romantic connection here, obviously, between political oppression and the breaking of rhyme and metonymically the rules for neoclassical literature more generally. For Hutchinson, the bondage imposed by couplets speaks to an intimate bonding, invoking "reproductive labor [and including] the parts of reproductive labor that can be and are outsourced from the mother—that is, nursing, in all its many permutations."

Hutchinson teases out eerie connections between bodily and poetical labor, between reproduction and production, or "repeating pangs and the pangs of repetition" (I argued a long time ago that certain kinds of periodical writing were associated with femininity because of the presumption that women reproduced, men produced; I still think that was pretty much correct).

I was thinking of ending my remarks by doing something with pleading the belly and the troping of legal fictions around pregnancy and tying that to the Hutchinson's sonic skills create, per Paul Hunter, a "field of suggestibility." But I think I'm going to leave fetuses to Stephanie for now.

Instead, I want to underscore the resonance—almost rime riche—of the severed hands of Elizabeth Hands with recent nineteenth-century scholarship that examines the weird Victorian fixation with ghostly and severed hands (work by Sue Zemka, Katherine Miner, Katherine Rowe, etc.). Lilith unpacks not an eighteenth-century spectral hand, but rather a synecdochal hand, in which figurative speech turns a household governed by master-servant hierarchy into, to borrow a phrase coined yesterday by Mark Vareschi, an eighteenth-century Voltron.

The imaginative power of this piece as it outstrips Gothic criticism in favor of something both weirder and more leftist gives me hope for the future.