

Diana Hume George on: "And One for My Dame"

The identification of a woman's husband with her father remains implicit in the first two volumes, where it is hinted at, leapt beyond, or discussed at one remove through mythology, anthropology, or the buffer of an extra generation. In *Live or Die*, Sexton's third volume, that identification is made explicit for the first time. The speaker's father was "a born salesman" who sold wool and a born talker "in love with maps," who "died on the road." Her husband also sells wool, also travels on the road:

And when you drive off, my darling, Yes, sir! Yes, sir! It's one for my dame, your
sample cases branded with my father's name, your itinerary open, its tolls ticking
and greedy, its highways built up like new loves, raw and speedy.

This is a world where women stand and wait? "I sit at my desk/each night with no place to go"--while men explore and conquer, "greedy" for the open road and all it represents: freedom, independence, possession, the familiarly "raw and speedy" litany. The salesman father and husband of Sexton's real life symbolize a cultural axiom she would later explore in *Transformations*, where the fairy-tale world is one of masculine and feminine principles meeting and conflicting. The man brings home "one for his dame," who sits and waits while he conquers a world in which the highway inflicted on the countryside is the equivalent of the penis entering the body of nature--always a woman's body. The "new loves" allude to the infidelity inherent not only literally in the salesman's life but figuratively in the desertion of the wife or daughter for that new love, the road that is always open, offering adventure.

In "Mother and Jack and the Rain," a child speaker becomes the daughter figure of "One for My Dame," in which the woman was both wife and daughter. The speaker

went to bed like a horse to its stall, . . . and heard father kiss me through the wall
and heard mother's heart pump like the tides. The fog horn flattened the sea into
leather. I made no voyages, I owned no passport. I was the daughter. Whiskey
fortified my father in the next room. He outlasted the weather, counted his booty
and brought his ship into port.

Rain is here the replacement for the snow in "Letter Written." (The sexual encounters of Sexton's fathers and daughters take place in a medium of fluid or fire or music or flight.) Sexton continues the mercantile motif of "One for My Dame," this time in a portrayal of an unseen, but vicariously felt, primal scene. Identifying with the mother, the daughter feels the father's kiss and inhabits the mother's heart that pumps "like the tides," the final destiny of rain. Once again, woman is the medium for man's journeying, the water buoying his ship. The wry metaphor of shipping brings an unlikely note of humor to the scene of parental intercourse, in which the sailor's booty is the mother's body. The sexual act is one of conquering and possession, as "raw and speedy" as the highways of "One for My Dame."

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