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A Literary Commentary of Liz Lochhead, *My Rival's House*

The relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is a universally tenuous one; often times full of unfounded hatred and discontent. In the poem, *My Rival's House*, Liz Lochhead explores the discomfort and superficiality in the cliché relationship of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and comments on the unspoken, unwarranted rivalry between the two. common

The poem follows the line of thought of the speaker visiting the house of her mother-in-law with her fiancé. The uneasy, awkward atmosphere of the visit is immediately established in the opening line, in which the speaker describes that her "Rival's House is peopled with many surfaces." (2) The use of the word "peopled" describes the overflow of reflective ornaments that seem to be gazing at the persona, conveying the uncomfortable mood of her rival's house. The enjambment with the title enforces the idea that this discomfort is the defining aspect of her rival's house. This uneasiness is further concentrated by the imagery of shining furniture, the "Ormolu and gilt, slipper satin." (2)

She continues to describe the details of the furniture, including the cushions that are "so stiff you can't sink in," (4) or the tables that are "polished clear enough to see distortions in." (5) The mention of stiff cushions, or the use of the word "distortion" conveys her discontented attitude towards the ornamentation of the house, which hints at her annoyance towards its decorator, her mother-in-law. The apparent cleanliness and beauty of the house—the polished tables (4) and the "beautiful parquet floor" (7)—contrasts with this perception to further annoy the persona.

She points out that "We [took] our shoes off at [the] door" (6) because the wooden floorings "must / be protected" (8-9) from dust and fading colors, and how she had to

apparently “shuffle” and “tip-toe” on the floors with “stocking-soled” feet, commenting on the obnoxious ostentation of the house’s decorations. The alliteration of the “s” sound additionally conveys her irritation, while the line “Dust- / cover, drawn shade,” with the alliteration of “d,” heightens this atmosphere by delineating the dark, gloomy room. Moreover, the enjambment of the word “Dust” in this line, with its rhyme with “must,” (8) stresses the “dustiness,” the dirtiness of the mother-in-law’s inner attitude towards the speaker.

This constant criticism about the unpleasant decoration reveals how the speaker is evidently hateful towards the interior, and possibly the owner of the house, her rival. It is often the case that the persona misinterprets her mother-in-law’s intentions, seeing “distortions” in polished tables (5) and grumbling about the “dust-covers” (9) which could have just been an effort to keep the house at its best for the visitor. The interior, objectively, does not appear to be distasteful or overly decorated—yet, the speaker may feel so due to her disapproval towards its owner.

The detailed description of the beautiful but but ostentatious interior alludes the superficial relationship between the speaker and her rival. As the house is seemingly beautiful but functionally uncomfortable, the speaker’s attitude towards her rival is also outwardly polite but internally full of discontent. Although she acts “deferential, daughterly,” (21) and “thank her nicely” (22) for the tea, she employs the unpleasant gustatory image of its “bitterness,” showing her hatred against her rival. The speaker describes that she is “all edges, a surface, a shell,” (15) indicating that the kindness is merely superficial and only outwardly displayed, that she is always ready to take a edgy attitude when necessary. The juxtaposed image of her “[thanking] her nicely” and the “bitter cup” further expresses this disconnect between her inner and outer face.

The speaker perceives this shallow kindness from her rival as well, writing “yet my rival thinks she means me well. / But what squirms beneath her surface I can tell.” Her disgust towards the mother-in-law’s superficial attitude is delivered with this description of the hatred that “squirms” beneath her skin. The enjambment in “my rival / capped tooth, polished nail / will fight,” (18-20) leads the audience’s focus to the description of the “capped,” faked tooth and nails, referring to the pretentious character of the mother.

She continues to express extreme dismay towards this superficiality, suggesting that her rival, and to an extent she, will not hesitate to “fight, fight, foul for her survival;” (20) this alliteration of the “f” sound add on to the underlying fierce attitude that the speaker perceives. The utilization of the olfactory image of foulness portrays this rivalry as distasteful and sickening, and that she is willing to withstand such a battle regardless. It is important to note that she leaves her fiancé out of this rivalry, distinguishing between “him and me” (14), and emphasizing that this rivalry is a solitary one, repeatedly referring to her mother-in-law as “my” rival. (13, 18)

Throughout this description of the intense antagonism between the two, the persona maintains a condescending eye, seemingly always seething through her rival and sustaining a superior position; she “can tell” (16) her rival’s inner thoughts, and keeps a tough, outer “shell” which is intentionally “differential, daughterly,” being one step ahead.

The speaker’s satirical personality, extensively explored in the fourth stanza, further develops her critical character. Hinted initially in her sarcastic attitude of sipping on and thanking for her “bitter” tea (21-22), this personality is advanced continually, as when she sarcastically denotes “And I have much to thank for” (23) for giving birth to her lover. She offers a sardonic, but insightful comment when she writes “never, never can escape scot free / the sour potluck of family.” (26-27) The repetition of “never” stresses the fact that her lover’s family is a closely-knit one, also shown when she says “and oh how close / this family that furnishes my rival’s place.” (28-29) Calling this family a “sour potluck” shows how this intimacy is unbearable and disgusting to her, like a “sour” smell, while also scornfully commenting on the random nature of familial composition.

Offering only a first-person perspective from this antagonistic, sarcastic persona instills a similar emotion of hostility in the reader’s mind; however, it is crucial to differentiate between metaphors and events in order to clearly understand the speaker’s perspective. Calling her mother-in-law the “Lady of the house. / Queen bee,” ultimately reveals how she views her rival; a dominant leader in her lover’s household, and therefore an obstacle to overcome in her love. Her abstract hatred is further shown when she emphasizes “She is far more unconscious, far more dangerous than me.” (32-33) Repeating the structure “far more (...),” she emphasizes the perceived threat, presuming that hatred is also present in

her rival's mind as well, concluding her rival to be overwhelmed by emotions and "unconscious." She suggests in the following lines: "Listen, I was always my own worst enemy. / She has taken even this from me;" (34-35) slightly deviating from her normal tone to address the reader directly and focus their attention, to deliver her emotions clearly. Although sarcastically presented, this phrase gives insight into the persona's perception of herself as a victim in this relationship.

An important detail to note during the last three stanzas is the fact that what is presented are not concrete events, but a largely figure of the speaker's imagination; the first-person perspective of the poem effectively limits the reader's grasp on her mother-in-law's true actions or emotions. This disconnect is markedly presented in the line where the persona suggests "[My rival] dishes up her dreams for breakfast." (36) The mother-in-law "Dishing up" and presenting her "dreams,"—arguably, the speaker's withdrawal from this battle—, as well as peppering the "soup" with her "salt tears,"—her inner bitterness—can connote that her rival is aggressively presenting her intentions to the speaker in the form of food. This interpretation, however, is done by the speaker, who is evidently hostile towards its cook; the speaker's extreme interpretation of the presented food, reveals the extent to which the persona is possessed by her hatred.

In any relationship, direct and straightforward communication is crucial; due to its absence, the persona and her mother-in-law show no possibility of reconciliation—the speaker establishes that "[My rival] won't / give up," with the use of enjambment to ground the word "won't." This emotion of hatred and disgust is the defining character of the persona, the cause of this rivalry. Singularly through this daughter-in-law's sarcastic rendition of the scenes and events, as well as her speculation of her rival's inner thoughts, Lochhead effectively describes the extreme rivalry that can be present in the relationship of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and shows the difficulties in reconciliation.