

# 4

## STRANGE GENDER

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the relationship between Robert Hood and Greenstockings takes peculiar routes, and one effect of these routes is the unfolding of unstable and precarious gender identities for each that rub against any normative understanding of masculine and feminine. This chapter will flesh out the implications of this emergence of a strange gender, by engaging with Judith Butler's explorations of gender in her work *Antigone's Claim* (200). The engagement with Butler will allow me to productively entertain alternative forms of gender construction that are able to consistently resist that which is normative, not only for the English and the Tetsot'ine at the time of the Franklin Expedition, but for Canadian culture today as well. In the context of the relationship of Hood and Greenstockings, I will propose the idea that northern love invites the possibility of a strange gender.



Hood suddenly appears in the family lodge of Keskarrah while Greenstockings is webbing snowshoes. He says he wants to draw her while she works. Hood points at Greenstockings, and “gestures a

fluid shape lightly in the air with his hand.” (81) Despite the disdain for English instruments, and in particular English drawing, which attempts to create permanence out of change, to stem the flux, Greenstockings likes Hood’s hand: “so long-boned and pale, so quick that the pencil it holds between two powerful fingertips sighs grey lines out of the bending paper.” (81)

Hood’s drawing, his production of the image, his gaze, is different from the rigid, fixing gaze of the English. As before, when he took Greenstockings’ hand and drew his name in the shape of his head, Hood’s hand moves from gesture to paper with an embodied sigh. Greenstockings, whose desire was closed to men, is now open to Hood: “A curve of her knee, her leg, appears.” (81) He is so very unlike the men whom she does not desire: “he is so thin, so stretched and gaunt, so obviously helpless.” (82) If all desire returns to the mother, a return that leaves us like children, helpless, then possibly Hood’s unmanly helplessness makes him desirable, unlike the manly men who simply want to go in and out aggressively. In the face of such helplessness, Greenstockings wonders what would make Hood strong: “would good, rich food make him strong enough...to be interesting?” (82) Food prepared in the family lodge with the animal furs in a womb-like pot, a food from the mother, will make him strong, with a strength unlike that of the manly men.

Hood, of course, cannot communicate with Greenstockings by words, and he derives an intense pleasure from this: “it is enough for him that the meanings of their two incomprehensible languages pass each other unscathed in the close warmth of these hide walls.” (83) Unscathed, because the meanings are not fixed and ordered but are contained by the maternal, the warmth of the lodge. This is so different from the words written in the “cold mud-smearred logs of the officer’s quarters” (82) of the English, where Franklin and Richardson and Back “write down every English word they can think of.” (82) Hood realizes that he has fallen into an unfathomable freedom.

Greenstockings’ desire is excited, but she is, at the same time, troubled by that excitement. It seems that the desire she has unleashed is a necessarily troubled desire: “She cannot believe this thin, bony English can exist here: if she lets him love her, she will kill him.” (84) Hood’s love for Greenstockings will kill him, bring him death.

What kind of death? Birdseye still thinks Hood is Snow Man: “...Snow Man, Snow Man, white as snow man...why have you come?...what follows you...nothing but snow, nothing but woe man.”

(84) Greenstockings' love is a love for Snow Man, a love for an unmanly man who brings on woe and is woe-man. Greenstockings says that if Birdseye insists on viewing him as snow, this makes it all the more important for her to love him, so that she can "hold him within herself" (84) even though he is already dead and gone. Yet, "he is certainly alive at this moment." (84) A moment where "she could thread him like this snowshoe." (84) Greenstockings' love is for an unmanly man who is both dead and alive at the same time. One who could become like the snowshoe.

Keskarrah agrees to Hood's sketch, and then he talks, telling a story which is an image of the land as an animal, a fish. Keskarrah talks "as if it were his voice that is drawing his outline from the white paper." (86) A voice can draw, a story creates an image. The word is an invitation for an image. He says: "the lake you named 'Winter' is really a fish with its head to the east and its tail whipping up the froth of rapids just below us, the place you've tried to draw so often already." (86) The fish is trying to swim away, to the east: "That's why the last trees here grow so large: that giant fish tries to swim east, but these giant trees hold it back, no matter how hard it swims, it can't move." (86-87)

Keskarrah then refers to the snowshoes Greenstockings is making. "they could carry you around [the lake]...Then you might be able to see." (87) If Hood, the Snow Man, becomes the snowshoe then he will be able to see correctly. And his seeing correctly would allow him to draw correctly: "If you drew the lake as it is you would have to see the fish, and you could name it correctly." (87) The implication is that the English naming, the English word, is not related to a correct seeing.

These reflections by Keskarrah on seeing and drawing relate directly to Hood's drawing of Greenstockings, who makes the snowshoes and who will make Hood the Snow Man into a snowshoe. Hood turns to Greenstockings and "is trying to find her shape before he attempts details." (87) He knows that "his fingers must imagine her shape since he cannot yet imagine physically uncovering her and actually seeing skin." (87) Then he says with words what he desires: "you are such a woman..." (87) And proceeds to draw those words of desire. He "draws this stunning woman's line from his fingertips over and over again; he can fondle her until he has found her body's exact turn, until he knows it so indelibly that when he slashes the snowshoe across her lap it seems he has hurled himself, dived across

her lap stretched out and pointed, become the long fish-like shape he aches with her to be. Thrashing.” (88) Gesturing, saying, drawing, and Hood becomes the fish that Keskarrah said he might be able to see. He has seen the fish, he has become the fish.

Given that Hood has learned to correctly draw, Greenstockings “believes [he] ... may be able to understand her fingers and her father.” (88) He will be able to understand the story of the beginnings of the world, told by Keskarrah.

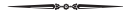
Sky and Earth came to lie together creating ground, which “is nothing more nor less than their happiness together.” (89) Out of that happiness came moss and trees and fish and caribou, and then on the fourth day, man. The woman on four legs, the great bear, caught the man, but he escaped from her den to create the great river and the Everlasting Ice. Keskarrah says this is a story about “woman and man lying together...like bears.” (89) Bears “will lick you tenderly because they want no more than what they already have.” (89)

Then there is a shift in the storytelling, a turn to the fall from want to desire. Keskarrah says that “man does not have an endless bone like a bear ... something got mixed up for the man, somewhere, and he can’t.” (90) He can’t stay inside the woman, the mother, and so he escapes. When he escaped from the great bear he was alone, alone with little to eat, hungry, feeling great absence and deprivation. And he sank always into the snow. Yet, he dreamt that he could run over the snow “as easily as the animals, as swiftly as wind smoothing it, whispering among birch.” (90) So he turns to the birch trees and strips them into large hoops. But in the centre of the two strips was a hole, a huge absence. Every animal could easily run from him.

In his shelter, while he was gone hunting, a ptarmigan was busy working on the snowshoes, “their sad emptiness half woven over with babiche.” (91) The ptarmigan would fly out the opening at the top of the shelter when he approached. To prevent her flying out again, before he left in the morning he sewed the opening closed. When he caught the ptarmigan “it turned into what he had often dreamed: someone like himself but o so different!” (91)

Then the two, the man and the woman, are able to return from absence into presence, the presence of the mother. They were “lying together hot as bears and children for ever.” (91) For it was the woman who “alone could fill the frames he had dreamed and bent.” This changed him, away from loneliness and absence; she provided for him “frame and woven center.” (91)

This story represents an escape from the maternal only to return to the maternal. Keskarrah sings that “long ago, my mother told me this story of beginning ... O my mother, long ago my mother.” (91) His mother told him about the escape from the den of the bears, but also from the original lying together of sky and earth, the sky in the earth forever, licking.



Perhaps the cutting of ties to the mother is also an escape of the word from the flesh. The subsequent loneliness and absence create a longing for return. The severing of word from flesh, word from image and thing, creates a desire for the word to be reunited with the flesh, the image and thing, for the word to be once again in communion with the thing. Hood appears as a Christ-like figure whose sojourn in this land is an allegory for the possible (re)uniting of word and flesh. Certainly, Greenstockings, in identifying with Hood’s lack, seems to be identifying with him as a kind of suffering Christ.

David Savran, in *Taking It Like a Man* (1998), sees the identification with a Christ-like loss as a form of identification which is tied intimately with forms of masochism, both Christian and feminine. He sees these forms of masochism emerging strongly in various prominent countercultural movements in the U.S., from the Beats through to the Robert Bly-inspired men’s movement. The identification with the suffering Christ allows for a divestiture of phallic values and an attempt to return to an open space of desire. However, Savran believes that, at least in the American experience anyway, this divestiture of an oedipal masculinity (represented by a controlling and over-bureaucratized father), leads to an attempt to return to a kind of frontier masculinity that is free to do as it pleases, especially to women, outside of any law-like structure that might constrain. According to Savran, what we then witness is the return of the phallus, an often aggressive masculinity that is now allowed to do violence without fear of penalty. And the hope is that this cleansed masculinity will be desired by all the women for its undomesticated virility.

Is that what is transpiring in Greenstockings’ identification with Hood as a suffering Christ? Is Hood’s unmanly suffering an attempt to shed the vestiges of the oedipalized world of the English society as reflected in the English masculinity of the Expedition? Is his encounter with lack and loss only a first move, after which is a movement into an aggressive and virile frontier masculinity?

I do not think so. Hood's encounter with loss is a quite different kind of loss than that outlined by Savran concerning the American experience, because it is bound up with a return to the mother. That is why ultimately Hood must be sacrificed, facing a Christ-like fate.

Kaja Silverman, in her essay "Masochism and Male Subjectivity" (1992), quotes approvingly from Deleuze's work on masochism, to suggest that the unravelling of male subjectivity and the movement into feminine masochism hinges on the return to the mother and an alliance between the son and the mother against the father. The father fails miserably to provide identification for the son and subsequently the son revels in an identification with the mother. In *World Spectators*, Silverman associates this paternal failure with a failure of the word in relation to the image. As the word-presentation fails in its attempt to control and conquer experience, the image or thing-presentation allows for an abundance of affective transfers.

Hood's Christ-like fate is one that witnesses the unravelling of the paternal English word and an encounter with the maternal Thing. How do we interpret the son's rebellion against the father and the subsequent pact with the mother against the father? And how should we interpret Greenstockings' rebellion against the father (Keskarrah) and against men (both English and Tetsot'ine) and her identification with the position of the son (Hood) as suffering Christ?

There is another question that arises from Keskarrah's story and its application to the love of Hood and Greenstockings. Could we not interpret the story's reference to the man's need for the woman as a conservative move, one that attempts to recoup the heterosexual norm in the face of the explosion of desire and difference? Yet, Hood is not a normative man and Greenstockings is not a normative woman. So, if this story has the possibility of a conservative recouping, in the context of the contact between Hood and Greenstockings, in the context of the contact between Christian sailor, whose identity as English masculine subject is troubled, and Tetsot'ine woman, whose identity as a native feminine subject is troubled, this particular recouping has other possibilities that are less normatively familiar.

Judith Butler addresses the question of non-normative gender recouping in *Antigone's Claim* (2000). We might say that the institution of the heterosexual norm whereby men and women meet to consolidate their desire through difference presents itself as a symbolic law that seeks to reproduce its effect from generation to generation. According to Butler, there are two accounts that legitimate this passage:

a conservative Hegelian account and a conservative Lacanian account, accounts that can quickly become unravelled.

First, the Hegelian account. Butler claims that Hegel's reading of Antigone renders Antigone's defiance against Creon as a defiance based in a wayward femininity that must be contained by the state. The power of Antigone's defiance is one that deforms the idealized kinship structure that the state assumes. According to Butler, Hegel, in *The Phenomenology*, universalizes a kinship structure that is socially contingent. (6)

Antigone presents a problem because she assumes a form of power which is denied to her in the normative kinship structure of the state. She becomes manly, adopting a form of masculine sovereignty. Her opposition to the rule of Creon must take on the normative power that she opposes. She must assume the voice of the law in opposing the law. She must appropriate the voice of the very one she is defying. (8–10)

Yet, Hegel claims that Antigone cannot claim the rights of citizenship, because her future place as mother in the family structure does not involve recognition, or even the desire for recognition, which is the basis of citizenship. Kinship relations, unlike state relations, do not involve the desire for recognition. Antigone's non-normative desire for her brother does not constitute a desire because, for Hegel, relations between brother and sister are not governed by desire. (13, 14)

In Butler's interpretation of Hegel, the state only gains its existence through interfering with the bonds of kinship, especially those that might go wayward. In particular, it is the duty of the state to oppose women, because women are by nature apolitical, and will turn to action that perverts the rightful activity of the state. To act in the state is to act universally. The problem with women, and especially mothers, is that they act particularly, for example, in a mother's love for the son. In order for the normative order of the state to be reproduced, the mother must sacrifice her son for the state. According to Butler, in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel maintains that the mother cannot be allowed to appeal to the ancient law of the gods, a law that comes before the codification of written language, a law that is enigmatic and incommunicable in the confines of the word. (31–39)

Greenstockings is like Antigone in assuming a manly posture that is non-normative for both the English and the Tetsot'ine. Her love for Hood is like the love of a sister for a brother and like the love of a mother for a son. And if desire collapses into identification (aren't

the two to be normatively separate: we desire that which we do not identify with, and we identify with that which we do not desire?) then Greenstockings assumes the position of the brother and the son.

And Hood is attempting to forestall his complete sacrifice to the state as a normative masculine subject in the English navy. His desire for Greenstockings is a desire and identification with the position of sister and the position of mother and a defiance of the normative rule of the father who seeks his sacrifice.

What about the Lacanian account? Butler believes that conservative Lacanian theorists tend to insist on the separation of symbolic law and social norm. Social norms are alterable, but the symbolic law has a universality to it that defies alterability. This is particularly true in the realm of desire, for conservative Lacanians, according to Butler, maintain that the law of desire is regulated by the oedipal drama, and in particular, the law of the father, which operates there. There is an insistence here that the law of the father is not the same as the position of biological and socially specific fathers. Yet, the law must hold. (15–20)

For Butler, the distinction between symbolic position and social norm does not hold, because the symbolic position is only a social norm in a different mode of appearance. It is simply rendered ideal, and its very ideality comes from the fact that its contingency has been made necessary. When some Lacanians declare “It’s the Law” this is for her a performative utterance, one that actively grants a force to a law that is believed to be universal and non-contingent. This performative action represents an allegiance to the law, a desire for the law. (21, 22)

In relation to Antigone’s actions, Butler wants to know what will happen to the legacy of Oedipus when the rules that Oedipus defies no longer carry the power and stability attributed to them.

The problem with Antigone, according to Butler, is that she lies at the threshold of a symbolic order which is awarded universality. Although the symbolic order is external to the subject, there is, according to the conservative Lacanians, no impossibility of escaping it. It is universal and contingent at the same time. It demands to appear for the subject, but it has no ground outside of itself. This is especially true of the oedipal drama: it is both universal and contingent. The law of the father cannot be escaped, yet this law only appears through substitution by real fathers. What happens when real fathers fail, sometimes deliberately? This cannot affect the universality of the law,

because the law is not dependent on its contingent substitutions. Butler claims that here contingency is stripped of its contingency, stripped of the possibility of establishing variable norms for the pursuit of desire. (40–45)

Butler sees Lacan's reading of *Antigone* in *Seminar VII* as pointing to an enigmatic appearance within desire that is not oriented toward the good, something that intervenes in the good to derail it from its path. In this sense, *Antigone* represents a desire for something on the far side of the symbolic, something before the codification of the law in the word. According to Butler, Lacan believes that it is possible for humans to cross this limit, but not in order to produce durable forms for the life of the state. The problem with *Antigone* is that she crosses over the limit permanently. The unwritten laws which *Antigone* claims are ones that do not correspond to the types of exchange that are part and parcel of the symbolic order. *Antigone's* love for her brother is not communicable with the symbolic exchange of signs. This brings her into death, but this death comes, according to Butler, only because she has defied the contingent structures that define intelligible and acceptable living. And if *Antigone* counters this symbolic, perhaps it is because she is challenging the acceptable terms of livability that the reigning symbolic order articulates. (46–55)

If *Greenstockings* is a manly woman who desires and identifies with *Hood*, who is an unmanly man, and they both, in their desire and identification, seek to return to the mother, are they then not slipping into an unlivable space that cannot endure, that can only be momentarily assumed to be abandoned to symbolic necessity? Yet, perhaps the unlivability of their space is one that can only be momentarily assumed because the symbolic rule of the father is a contingent assumption of power that remains normative, and not because of the universal insistence of the symbolic rule of the father. In this sense, its prevailing is due to its ability to beat back the challenges to the contingent norms it asserts, not because it is universal and necessary. The love of *Greenstockings* and *Hood* may have to be sacrificed, but this sacrifice is not a necessary sacrifice, but one contingently mandated by a ruling symbolic. At the same time, and precisely because of its contingency, the love of *Greenstockings* and *Hood* may live on as an enduring possibility and an enduring challenge.

