

Two Women Poets: Helen Adam and Bub Bridger
Jan Pilditch

It is a truism of feminist literary criticism, most especially of the nineteenth century, that women's poetry took place in the private, and often domestic, sphere. In the occidental contexts of this essay, poetry was the province of men. In the twentieth century, however, western women poets emerged, such as Edith Sitwell or Anna Wickham, who rejected the idea of a private poetry in favour of performance and a public poetry. As a new intellectual climate grew in the aftermath of World War II, performance by women poets became more common, and in 1947 Madeline Gleason organised the Festival of Modern Poetry at Lucien Labaudt Gallery, Gough Street, San Francisco.

This was one of the first public presentations of poetry as a performance-oriented art form. Performance continued to grow, especially through the "Happenings" associated with the emancipation of culture and art, but this did not entirely bring women's poetry into the public sphere. Riemke Ensing, in her introduction to the 1977 *Private Gardens: An Anthology of New Zealand Women Poets*, comments on the disturbing similarities of experience of the poets represented in the anthology: "problems which had to do with the *condition* of being a woman—of being a wife and mother first, a poet second" (11). Performance continued to bring some women poets popularity and even acclamation during their lifetimes; but despite this, performance, though sometimes commented upon, is rarely considered as integral to the art of the women poets whose practice it was to perform. That these poets were women hardly constitutes an explanation for the apparent neglect, and Laura Severin suggests that since feminist critics are also implicated in this neglect, "A more satisfactory explanation is that much of these women poets' work has not fit into the conceptual frameworks used to analyze twentieth-century literatures written in English"

(*Poetry Off the Page* 1). This paper, then, reflects upon the poetry and performances of two women poets to consider how their poetry might be read in relation to its performance.

Helen Douglas Adam (1909-1993) was a Scottish immigrant to California, who found a place, albeit a relatively neglected one, among (but not of) the poets who would come to be known as the Beat Generation. Yet despite her radical nature and a geographical placement among the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, for the most part she remained true to the ballad form of her native Scotland and during her life time she performed within that tradition:

During the fifties, her performances in San Francisco were great happenings during which she chanted her poetry in a light Scottish brogue that crept up behind the listener, weaving an uneasy spell. Folksingers, poets, and artists were influenced by the haunting burr of her voice, which some claimed was so magical it could cause a mist to rise in the air. (Knight 9)

Brenda Knight describes Helen Adam as a “bardic matriarch”, for despite being a generation older than the other women of the Beat Generation, her life and work demonstrate connections with the work of Robert Duncan (and thereby the Maidens and the Black Mountain poets) and Allen Ginsberg (and thereby the Beat Generation), among others. Bub [Noeline Edith] Bridger (1924-2009), was a New Zealander, part Irish on her father’s side and part Maori and English on her mother’s. She began writing at the age of 50 after attending a writers’ workshop at Victoria University, run by historian Michael King, in 1974. She became a noted live performer and her poems and stories have appeared in numerous anthologies. She also wrote for radio and television, acted on the stage, and was a member of the women’s comedy group Hen’s Teeth, a collection of women performing artists. In his introduction to *Wild Daisies: The Best of Bub Bridger*, Andrew Mason comments:

Out of that grew those deliberately risqué poems celebrating men . . . Her wantonly expressed desire for the All Black Whetton brothers created a national enthusiasm for the work of this elderly maker of rhyme—and also led ultimately to the present selection. Despite many requests, Bub has always resisted publishing these poems, feeling that her tongue-in-cheek delivery is an integral part of them and fearing that on the printed page they would give people the wrong impression about her. (11)

Bub Bridger became a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and was declared a National Treasure before her death in 2009. Helen Adam, on the other hand, died in poverty (despite the best efforts of Robert Duncan), in New York in 1993. Yet, mature as these women poets were by 1960, both embraced and participated in the radical emancipation of culture and art of the second part of the twentieth century.

Adam was born in Glasgow in 1909, the elder daughter of Isabel and the Reverend Douglas Adam, a somewhat stern and distant father and a passionate golfer, who died in 1931 as a result of being hit by an errant golf ball. At the age of two, she began composing poetry, which was written down by her mother. Her first book of verse, written between the ages of four and twelve, and which she later dismissed as “dreadful doggerel”, was published when she was just fourteen. Critics did not agree with this judgement, and on the whole praised *The Elfin Pedlar: and Other Tales Told by Pixie Pool* for its imaginative quality and remarkable sense of form, together with its handling of rhythm and rhyme. It was much admired by the late Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and only the *Evening Standard* critic sounded a note of caution, commenting that “Not for some years has a book appeared which has aroused so much interest among psychologists” (Adam, *Charms and Dreams from the Elfin Pedlar’s Pack*, title pages and advertisements). The poems, while inhabiting a magical realm, do carry a darker hue that renders them not altogether out of keeping with Adam’s later works. In “Kind of Magic” the little creatures:

Come whispering over the unknown graves . . .
So little, so little, so lonely are we,
Lost, lost, lost in the sounding sea. (*Charms and Dreams* 50)

By 1929, Helen Adam was a non-matriculated student at Edinburgh University studying English and Fine Arts, and Kristin Prevallet’s “Introduction” to *A Helen Adam Reader* provides a full biographical sketch. In 1933, with her mother and younger sister, Isabella Theodosia Patrick (always known as Pat), she went to London where the two sisters hoped to find careers in journalism. Then, in July 1939, when Adam was thirty years old, the three women borrowed money to go to New York to attend a cousin’s wedding in Hartford, Connecticut; when war was declared, they were encouraged to stay. Helen got a job as a messenger, while working prolifically on a sinister fantasy novel, *Branch of Tamarisk*, from which she would later extract the ballads while abandoning the prose part of the novel. Pat worked as a designer for advertisements, and Isabel in a silk factory to help the war effort. By 1949, finding the winters cold, these three Scottish ladies moved first to Reno and from there

moved to San Francisco, by then the home of dissident and politically-minded poets, artists, writers and intellectuals (Prevallet 3-62).

Bub Bridger was born in Napier, New Zealand, growing up during the depression years, and attended Napier Girls' High School. She left at the age of fourteen to work, first at a hat factory and then at a tobacco factory, until 1942, when the family moved to Wellington. She married Brian Bridger in 1949 and the couple had four children, but the pair separated and Bridger raised the children alone. Her late blossoming as a writer came with the encouragement of Michael King, and her first published story, "The Stallion", appeared in *The Listener* in 1975. A visit to Ireland in her 60s encouraged a poetic impulse and her first book of poems, *Up Here on the Hill*, appeared in 1989. Like Adam, however, it was for her performance that she was valued. A review from Lawrence Dale in *Landfall*, a journal that was the arbiter of all things literary in New Zealand at the time, refers to her as a "bluff Baxterish bard from Wellington" (comparing her to the well-known New Zealand poet James K. Baxter), and comments that Bridger "may well be a thrill in person, but the fun in her book remains safely at the level of promise" (382). Both poets have had recent compilations published, and both—Bridger's *Wild Daisies: The Best of Bub Bridger* (2005) and the Helen Adam retrospective, *A Helen Adam Reader*, edited by Kristin Prevallet (2007)—come with CDs to enable readers to experience the authors' readings. It is, then, timely to consider in what sense performance might be integrated into a reading of their poetry.

The six poets for the Six Gallery Reading, on 7 October 1955, were arranged by Allen Ginsberg. On the night of the reading Helen Adam was present. On 29 March 1956, she wrote to Robert Duncan that "Allen Ginsberg is filling in until you get back [from Black Mountain College] . . . I wonder if you heard his long poem 'Howl' before you left? Possibly he had not written it then. It is really an excellent thing" (*Adam Reader* 319). Jonah Raskin comments that "Many of the notable local poets—Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser—were not included in the program, so the gala event at the Six Gallery was a cultural snub of sorts to the poets who thought they embodied the best of the Bay area poetry. The outsiders were taking over" (14). However, the gathering was united by a dynamic love of poetry and "Kerouac collected dimes and quarters and bought gallons of cheap California burgundy" (Raskin 15), which he passed around to audience and poets alike, while Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl" passed into the realm of literary legend. Adam was moved to write a poem to mark the occasion, "After Listening to Allen Ginsberg". Of course, Adam was older than the rest of this group; Ginsberg was born in 1926, Jack Spicer in 1925 and

Duncan, a mere ten years younger, in 1919. The narrative voice of Adam's poem begins in the hallowed tones of a seer issuing edicts to the young and inexperienced: "Let the words be naked . . . walking / The streets unashamed"—"Let him not neglect / The seemingly trivial."—"Let him listen, / His heart in his ears, / To the cry of the kicked beast, The songs of the mad" (*Adam Reader* 205-6). The Lord Buddha, the speaker asserts, is more likely to be found "Grubbing in garbage" than among those "sitting down to a good dinner". Prevallet, the curator of Adam's papers, has commented that in this poem, Adam articulates her belief that there are "essential truths and secrets that are only accessible to visionary artists" (*Adam Reader* 26). However, in spite of her belief in the entitlement of visionary poets, Adam is clear that this higher state of awareness comes only after the poet has wallowed in the filth of the world. This is the price to be paid for the wisdom to see "From the city dump / The world of Blake / The blazing sunflower" ("After Listening to Ginsberg" 206). Then, the poem shifts in tone in the last stanza and carries a warning for the would-be visionary:

In fact,
To be brief,
The Palace of Buddha,
Its shocking glory
As yet unuttered
May have walls of shit
Or forged of lightnings
The sun for its flag
Or be built in a rain drop.
But the plainest words
Will best reveal it. (206)

One recognises a wry voice of Scottish realism with a satiric edge bringing us down to earth, and one can recognise, perhaps, that the enormous persona Adam developed as a part of her performance work—of the hallowed tones of the seer weaving an uneasy spell—can in fact mask a more practical poetic on occasion.

Bridger too, is a critic of high sounding discourse, but her satire is more gentle, Horatian, with its sympathetic tone more in keeping with New Zealand society. Her "At the Conference: Sydney University, August 1988" finds the unnamed narrator:

In the midst
Of all the academic discourse
In language fearfully
Intelligent and intimidating (*Wild Daisies* 38)

Also at the conference “There’s a lady / Knitting . . . in cobweb-fine cotton cloth”. The lady, without missing a word of the conference, has two thousand stitches on her needles. Of course, in 2002 Judith Tizard, the then Minister of State, was given permission to continue knitting in parliament which, she claimed, helped ease the pain of her occupational overuse syndrome, and so brought the domestic into the public sphere. “At the Conference”, also pays homage to a female capacity to multi-task. The narrator is a naive one—the paper has her “totally confused”, but in the lecture room, “Stacked / With literati from all over / The world”, the woman and the two thousand stitches to be made into a dinner cloth, “has made [the narrator’s] day (Bridger, *Hill* 38-39). The anti-intellectual and anti-elitist stance in this poem is not uncommon in performance poetry, which hopes to appeal across a broader range than the readers of poetry in books. Adam’s practical advice for plain speaking appealed at a time when poetic inspiration and narrative voice seemed in the process of freeing themselves from the constraints of the modernism which often perpetrated “an unfortunate dichotomy of literary and political value which identifie[d] formal experimentation as the most authentically resistive practice” (Felski 28). Both poets, however, question the new poetics. In Adam, it takes the form of a sharp reminder not to take oneself too seriously. In Bridger, the knitter carries out a similar function, apparently interested in all that she hears at the conference; but being female, and more concerned presumably with domesticity, she issues a gentle reminder for the paper-givers that intellect alone will not get the work of this world done. But we have known other knitters—that tireless worker for the French Revolution, for example, Madame Defarge; and this knitter, given her cobweb-fine thread, comes with all the overtones of the female spider. She is not missing a word, “she is knitting”.

The popular appeal of Bridger’s and Adam’s performance poetry comes not only in terms of content but also in form. Both favoured the ballad form or strongly metrical versifying, at a time when the preference for most poets was for free verse, or even prose poetry. In performance, the ballad form and incremental repetitions enable the audience to keep up and follow the sense of the poem, but its use by Adam and Bridger was not necessarily traditional. Another member of the San Francisco Renaissance, Jack Spicer, as a young graduate student at Berkeley, aided Harry Smith in compiling the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a six-album compilation by Folkways Records which, when released in 1952, had a widespread impact on the world of popular music that might include everyone from Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan and beyond. Spicer was also a central figure of Donald Allen’s, also influential, 1960 edition of *The New American Poetry* and his interest in folk

music is apparent in his poetry. On the page, the ballad allows for unexpected associations and plays a strong part in establishing tone. In Bridger, rhyming and metrics are used largely for her comic poetry and take the place of the poet's strong delivery, ensuring that the playful tone cannot be mistaken. Even the limerick is not unknown in Bridger's poetry:

I must make a confession
I've a wicked obsession
For long-legged sexy young men
I try to write words
About flowers and birds
But I've lost all control of my pen. ("Men", *Wild Daisies* 20)

Bridger's parody here—of the common female stereotype of the older woman panting after younger men—like the rhythms of the poem, stems from her performance work and ensures easy recognition of both form and content. Adam uses the ballad form in similar ways in one of her groups of poems. She had been introduced to the San Francisco literary scene through the workshops of Robert Duncan, held at the Poetry Centre, and in 1956 Ginsberg took classes while Duncan was fulfilling an invitation to teach at Black Mountain College (Prevallet 25-28). During her time with Ginsberg she experimented, not altogether successfully, with American vernacular and forms, perhaps with an ear for her audience. In these poems she develops a satiric voice to comment on social conditions, the Cold War, and the Arms Race, of which all of these poets were acutely conscious and which places her within the 'Cold War' ethos that is the subject of much Beat Generation criticism. Her work, however, differs aesthetically and thematically from that of her male counterparts:

The nice clean bombs America tests
Have a limited poison span,
From nice clean bombs there is no fall-out
Or only as far as Japan. ("Big Dirty Bomb" 197)

Here, her favoured form—the ballad—asserts itself, creating comic associations via the rhyme, so that, in a 1978 interview with the *New York Quarterly*, the interviewer comments:

In the Donald Allen anthology *The New American Poetry* your work is the only work that is regularly metrical. You manage to combine the traditional love of metrics with a very contemporary voice.

Adam replies:

I don't really feel it's contemporary very much; it usually more or less belongs to the fairy tale or archaic world—in

fact one critic called me a pre-Christian poet, which I think is nice, because I think I probably am—most of my poems are about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. (“Craft Interview” 14)

Thus, while Ginsberg’s “Howl” might be seen as a Jeremiad, bewailing the ways of the world, with himself and his group most affected, Adam’s visionary seems more vengeful, but less confessional and self-concerned. “Big Dirty Bomb” ends with the verse:

Pride in their project made them quick
And almost before they knew
The latest, greatest American Dream
Came violently true. (197)

Adam does share Ginsberg’s apocalyptic vision and his use of biblical language. She was practically brought up on the old ballads and Scottish hymns, and comments, “D.H. Lawrence says somewhere every poet should know the hymn book in general. It does have good tunes, set to preposterous travesties of the gorgeous Biblical language . . . They’re all very simple rhythms” (“Craft Interview” 14).

The act of performance was taken seriously by both these women poets, perhaps responding to a need to know, literally know, that there was an audience for their work. The direct appeal to audience, circumventing established literati and intellectual readership, was a characteristic of the Beat Generation and others of the era. Art was for all, and the universities and the establishment were the very people who had brought into being a bomb capable of killing the planet. Ginsberg had seen the “best minds of [his] generation destroyed by madness” (“Howl”), and as a group, these poets were determined to do things differently. The group, however, was largely male and young and this had not changed so very much in New Zealand at the time Bridger was writing, although it might be fair to say that women had. The introduction to Lydia Wevers’ 1988 *Yellow Pencils: Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women* looks back at *Private Gardens* as “a book across a boundary, the historical boundary of feminism” and celebrates the move from “private to public . . . from writing poems and stowing them in a cupboard . . . to publication and professionalism” (Wevers xx). Adam’s place on the margins of the poetics of her day cannot seem unusual. She and Madeline Gleason were the only female representatives of The Maidens in the first edition of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry*, and she was removed from the second edition amid

the urge to canonise and categorise what the *New American Poetry* was really about. Allen was questioned about this by Prevallet and he responded in a letter, 28 April 1988, by saying:

In editing NAP I tried to give a sense of milieu, which didn't really work well, so Butternick and I dropped it for The Postmoderns. In the [San Francisco] section of NAP Duncan very much wanted me to include the members of his little clique self-styled The Maidens; hence Adam, Broughton and Gleason. Others I omitted. Then after I'd set it up Duncan decided he wanted to be with the Black Mountain poets. Such is the life of an editor. (*Adam Reader* note 1, 57)

Such too was the life of a woman poet, and Wevers considers Carl Stead's review of the 1985 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, in which he remarks: "I don't believe that during my lifetime any male editor in New Zealand, either of a literary periodical or an anthology, has ever discriminated against a woman writer on the grounds of sex" (qtd. in Wevers xxvii). The implication, as Wevers asserts, "is that male writers were simply better than women" and, she goes on, "the domination of New Zealand literature by male writers over much of its history . . . may have acted as a condition against which only some women were prepared to struggle" (xvii-xviii). Performance, however, was a part of that struggle.

Of course, in reading the poetry of performance on the printed page one misses a large part of the creative aspects of the performance, or the framings of the work. A performance, after all, takes place as a single event in space and time, which is difficult to re-create other than by reviews. Part of the performance is the theatricality, the lighting and the costume, which form a frame for the poetry and the role-playing. Thus, we find Bridger resisting the publication of her performance poems, "feeling that her tongue-in-cheek delivery is an integral part of them and fearing that on the printed page they would give people the wrong impression about her" (Mason 11). Bridger's fear of being misunderstood as a poet goes to the centre of the adopted role as integral to the poetry. That is, while printed poetry may develop a persona that speaks and thus distances the poet from the poem, this distance is increased when the speaker is dramatised, allowing the poet to use another's voice to deliver their message. It has the potential to free the poet to speak easily and frankly about issues in a voice other than their own, while masking their social identity. Further, women performing their own poetry place themselves in a position of deliberately inviting objectification in a process that redefines audience expectations associated with a single female body performing

in centre stage. Then, there are the voices themselves, which—in the case of Bridger and Adam—are culture-specific in terms of language and dialect. In performance the spoken language allows for a resonance that may be absent from the written page. As Dubois and Horvath suggest:

People can often use their conscious or unconscious knowledge of dialectal variation to achieve some rhetorical effect: friendliness, humor, earthiness, honesty, nostalgia, and a host of other possibilities. But in writing, standardization imposes a special problem for using linguistic variation rhetorically. Written languages homogenize much of the linguistic variation that identifies a speaker's background, and if writers want readers to know a narrator's or a character's social and geographic background, they either have to state it explicitly or break the rules — primarily, but certainly not exclusively, the spelling rules. (Dubois and Horvath 264)

In this way, Bridger's lustful objectification of the All Black body delivered in a strong New Zealand accent is both a cultural and personal assertion of identity. Adam's use of the demotic and the chanting of her poetry "in a light Scottish brogue that crept up behind the listener, weaving an uneasy spell" (Knight 9) reinforces her adopted persona and the gothic strangeness of her poetry, while marking her difference from her American audience. For both poets, all of these aspects of performance create multiple frames for their work and serve to alter expectations of what poetry, particularly women's poetry, might be.

Both Bridger and Adam use and appropriate the ballad and narrative form for feminist ends and critics have noted this. Speaking of Edith Sitwell and other female performance poets, Laura Severin comments that "[T]hrough twentieth-century poetry has been most noted for its fractured lyrics, these women poets continued to breathe life into what has been seen as an outmoded nineteenth-century vehicle, the dramatic monologue" (Severin 4). Adam's dedication to narrative and the ballad form is a part of her background and natural poetic. The Scottish novelist, poet and Christian fantasy writer George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a long-time favourite, as was James Thomson's "City of the Dreadful Night" which she read as a child "as a dark fairy tale . . . enthralled by the nightmare city" ("A Few Notes on the Uncanny in Narrative Verse", *Adam Reader* 373). Further, this poetic is reinforced by Adam's mystical performance persona, which was lived as well as performed. She was given

to reading tarot cards and was intensely interested at one point in Egyptian magic. Certainly, she believed in the capacity of magic to act in this world and once commented:

I think it's absolutely true that there must be a link between second sight and the vision of the poet. My Mother had second sight, but I don't. And unfortunately I've never seen a leprechaun or any of the fairies, although I've felt their presence—I have seen a ghost or two. But I do think there is a definite link between the vision of poets and a belief in the supernatural, way down deep . . . The whole thing of the magic feeling of ancient ballads—I've always loved that verse in THOMAS THE RYMER:

O they rode on, and further on,
And waded rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea. (“Craft Interview” 15)

The feminist interest in Adam's poetry is reflected through her numerous representations of “wicked women”. Contrary to the traditional form of the fairy tale or ballad, the women in Adam's poetry don't appear to mind being wicked; in fact, they seem to delight in their status, and carry with them truths about society and its view of women. These women, while out of step with many of the almost wholly male contingent of poets of the Beat Generation, appear to endorse the radical feminism of the 1960s by embracing their own perversity. At the heart of *San Francisco's Burning* (Adam's musical theatre piece) is the Worm Queen, (originally called the Queen of Rages), thriving on the modern decadence and general rottenness that will destroy the city. As a catalyst, encrusted with carrion flies, her very presence mocks the search for love, meaning, or absence from pain in a city wholly concerned with the trivial: “who sleeps in the bed of the Worm Queen will never weep again”. The Worm Queen, a role entirely antithetical to Duncan's characterisation of Adam as the “nurse of enchantment”, is an almost gleeful embrace of the dark and powerful woman—the stuff of male literary nightmares—ironically juxtaposed with songs of true love. The song, “My Crown is Crusted with Carrion Flies”, urges the young man to follow the Worm Queen, presumably to his death, even as his song suggests he knows “[He'll] love some day.” However, in Adam's poetry the love object should not be mistaken, and nor should be the all-encompassing and devouring nature of true love.

The Gothic, omnipresent in the poetry of Adam, takes a gentler turn in the ballads of Bridger, and her ironic treatment of males as sex objects in “Ode to Jokers” relishes her position as the invisible older woman, ignored by all:

They think I’m a lovely old lady —
That I’m there for the good of my health —
But I’m not . . . It’s the jokers I covet
All that flesh on those beautiful bones
And the smiles and the teeth and the torsos!
And all those erogenous zones! (*Wild Daisies* 42-43)

The emphasis remains firmly on the humour, and sex firmly in the realm of consensual play, so that the darkness inherent in notions of an old crone luring young men to their doom is rendered harmless: “I really am kind and will keep you in mind / If you prove that you know how to . . . play . . .” (43). It was, after all, for comedy that the Hen’s Teeth Collective, in which Bridger performed, was known. Comedy, however, even when gentle is aggressive—something inherent in the very name of the collective—and the genre was still not considered an appropriate form for women, even in the 1980s. In this sense, even stepping onto the stage represented a challenge, not merely to males per se, but to the idea of what constituted the art of performance. Tom Cardy reflects on this in a 2001 article, “Rare Commodity: Funny Women are Making a Return to the Wellington Stage.” He comments:

But in 1988 a fair crop of Kiwis, women as well as men, didn’t think women could be funny. It was those attitudes that spurred Kate Jason-Smith to stage the women’s comedy revue Hens’ Teeth at Circa Theatre. From tonight, Hens’ Teeth is back, with a season at Circa Studio after a four-year absence from Wellington. “People used to say women aren’t funny. ‘They used to say that, truly,’” says Jason-Smith. “One of the things Hens’ Teeth did is that it shot that idea in the head and nobody has dared say that ever since. But it wasn’t really that unusual to hear it. . . .” Ticket sales for that first season went through the roof. By 1990 Hens’ Teeth had a show in Wellington’s international arts festival, playing to 3000 in one week. In 1992 Hens’ Teeth performed at the Adelaide Fringe Festival. Its success surprised Jason-Smith. “I never ever expected it to go for 10 years, let alone 13. I thought it would run for a year.” (24)

The success of the Hen's Teeth Collective, and Bridger's part in it, may have depended in part on the filter of comedy that enables the audience to "normalise" women's performances within the parameters of genre. That is, if expectations of women performing on stage have been thoroughly disrupted by the Bridger persona, and probably those of her fellow performers, the comic nature of the poetry renders the work permissible while the thorough objectification of the male body gives the work a feminist impulse that its apparent celebration of the male form does not entirely mask.

The devouring nature of true love is much closer to Adam's vision in Bridger's long narrative poem, "Johnny Come Dancing", dedicated to Long John Montgomery. In that poem a seventeen-year-old Johnny is accosted by five little girls: "Their black curls bouncing / And their red shoes flashing." John is entranced by the girls' "dark gleaming eyes" (*Wild Daisies* 25) and joins their dance when they offer him a shilling (Bridger elsewhere refers to her father as "Long John"; see "Skeletons", *Wild Daisies* 69). He dances until daybreak when the young maidens disappear, and Johnny limps home with his shilling, whereupon his mother declares that he has danced with the fairies, and must leave. Despite entreaties the dancing girls refuse to take back their shilling, and Johnny is condemned to dance forever. He leaves for New Zealand, where the poem takes a more realistic turn. As long as he keeps on dancing, it is not all grief and pain, but his New Zealand wife does not understand his need to dance:

And the new land was almost
As green as Ireland
And he married a girl
With her black hair waving
And she led him a dance. (28)

Johnny, it seems, is destined to dance for the rest of his days. He dances through her sneering at his stories of Ireland, "through the love and the hating / And her final betrayal / And he danced to his death" (29). Ultimately though, when he has danced through love and hate and the birth of his children, the five little girls of Irish legend fuse to become his only wife at the end of the poem. Her dancing is the last thing he sees. Elsewhere, others are dancers in Bridger's work, and in the poem "Prioritie" dance becomes a metaphor for poetry itself: "If the bright light should fade / And I could never / Dance with words again" (56). Our pity then, for Long Johnny is tempered by the fact that only in his dying moments does he actually see his wife dancing, or as Hélène Cixous expresses it:

[I]n fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question “What is it?”; as soon as there is a will to say something. A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back to the father. You can even fail to notice that there’s no place for women in the operation! (“Sorties” 288)

Dance of course as the supreme epitome of an inseparable art form. How do you tell the dancer from the dance?

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s terms, men “dream of something we are not” (*Aurora Leigh* I.463). In Adam’s poetry female power is also masked, and often to the cost of males who mistake it for something else. In “I Love my Love” female power is mistaken for acquiescence by a newly-wed husband, to his cost:

There was a man who married a maid. She laughed as he led her home.
The living fleece of her long bright hair she combed with a golden comb.
He led her home through his barley fields where the saffron poppies grew.
She combed and whispered, “I love my love.” Her voice like a plaintive coo.
Ha Ha
Her voice like a plaintive coo.
...
She circled him with the secret web she wove as her strong hair grew.
Like a golden spider she wove and sang, “My love is tender and true.”
She combed her hair with a golden comb and shackled him to a tree.
She shackled him close to the Tree of Life. “My love I’ll never set free.”
No, No.
My love I’ll never set free. (*Adam Reader* 65)

However, this is no helpful Ariadne’s thread leading Theseus out of the labyrinth, nor Penelope’s weaving of a chaste tapestry. The husband does escape and murders his wife: “He dug a grave, and he dug it wide. He strangled her in her sleep . . . He buried her deep when the sun was hid by a purple thunder cloud. / Her helpless hair sprawled over the corpse in a pale resplendent shroud” (65-67). The hair, however, continues to grow and follows him about the farm, before finally pulling him down into the grave. Dangerous, not to say murderous, women bespeak a relationship with the nineteenth century mad woman of the attic, the difference being that in Adam’s poetry these women prevail. In similar vein, in another aspect of Adam’s work, the women in her photography and collages are often shown with dangerous animals, tarantulas or snakes, as in much Pre-Raphaelite photography and art;

for example, J. W. Waterhouse's "Ariadne", in which the deserted Ariadne sleeps on the island of Narcos, unaware of Theseus's desertion or indeed of the leopard coiled about her. In one of Adam's photographs a pair of large bats feature on the sleeve of a demure debutante's evening dress and the pensive look on the woman's face is accounted for by the ironic title of the picture: "Perhaps no one will notice them."

For Helen Adam, part of the ballad's great power was the matter of fact manner in which the supernatural is treated, and her performances in the oral tradition have been documented as influencing folksingers, poets and artists (Knight 9). Duncan came to see the "grue" of Adam's poetry as an element in a contained experience, as "an event in language of poetry", with its consequences belonging to art (*Adam Reader* 23). More than that, however, like Bridger's performances in New Zealand, Adam's performances were an event in the language of women's poetry. These women drew from diverse performance traditions—the music hall, musical theatre, the revue, and the avant garde—to bring multiple dimensions to bear upon their work. The nature of their performance, with its many frames, enables it to question the culturally specific and to disenfranchise cultural signs and signifiers. For example, in *San Francisco's Burning* the music (by Warner Jepson, 1961) and lyrics of true love are undermined by the presence of the deadly Worm Queen, who also loves, without ever losing the beauty suggested by the songs of love. Costume and role may reinforce the poem's message, or totally undermine it. In the closed theatrical world of performance multiple readings become possible, and poetry becomes especially adapted to the examination of the concepts and values we take for granted. It is a poetry that endows its female protagonists with power, passion, desire and humanity.

Works Cited

- Adam, Helen. *Charms and Dreams from the Elfin Pedlar's Pack*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924. Print.
- . *A Helen Adam Reader*. Ed. Kristin Prevallet. Orono ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2007. Print.
- Allen, Donald M. *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. New York: Grove P, 1960. Print.
- . *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*. Berkeley and London: U of California P, 1999. Print.
- Bridger, Bub. *Up Here on the Hill*. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel, 1989. Print.
- . *Wild Daisies: The Best of Bub Bridger*. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel, 2005. Print & CD.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Aurora Leigh*. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996. Print. Norton Critical Editions.
- Cardy, Tom. "Rare Commodity: Funny Women are Making a Return to the Wellington Stage". *Evening Post*. 3rd ed. 22 November 2001. 24. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "Sorties". *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London and New York: Longman, 1989. Print.
- "Craft Interview: Helen Adam." *New York Quarterly* 21 (1978): 13-23. Print.
- Dale, Lawrence. Review. *Landfall* 44.3 [175] (1990): 379-83. Print.
- Dubois, Sylvie, and Barbara M. Horvath. "Sounding Cajun: The Rhetorical Use of Dialect in Speech and Writing". *American Speech* 77.3 (2002): 264-87. Print.
- Ensing, Riemke. Introduction. *Private Gardens: An Anthology of New Zealand Women Poets*. Ed. Riemke Ensing. Dunedin: Caveman Press, 1977. 10-13. Print.
- Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1995. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl, and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print.
- Knight, Brenda. *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*. New York: MJF Books, 1996. Print.
- Mason, Andrew. Introduction. *Wild Daisies: The Best of Bub Bridger*. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel, 2005. 9-12. Print.

Prevallet, Kristin. Introduction. *A Helen Adam Reader*. Ed. Kristin Prevallet. Orono ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2007. 3-62. Print.

Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2004. Print.

Severin, Laura. *Poetry Off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. Print.

Smith, Harry. *Anthology of American Folk Music*, (six-album compilation), Folkways Records, Catalogue FP 251, FP 252, and FP 253

Wevers, Lydia. Introduction. *Yellow Pencils: Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women*. Compiled by Lydia Wevers. Oxford and Auckland: Oxford UP, 1988. xvii-xxvi. Print.