

FEMINIST FOLKLORE IN AMI MCKAY'S *THE BIRTH HOUSE*

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## INTRODUCTION

Ami McKay's novel *The Birth House* presents both maritime lore and superstition, in relation to the female, through McKay's explorations of motherhood, childbirth, and midwifery practices. *The Birth House* opens sometime in the midst of World War I, and chronicles the life of central character Dora Rare, as she embraces the practice of midwifery, and in doing so embraces the folkloric traditions passed down to her from matriarch midwife Miss. B. Through the acceptance of the unruly woman, and the maintaining of matriarchal spaces in *The Birth House*, McKay advocates for a matriarchal society which values the physical and emotional experiences of women over the rational order of the patriarchy. In studying the figure of the midwife, it is essential to first understand the complicated history of the figure, who has long been associated with witchcraft and secrecy. In reflecting on the treatment of midwives throughout history, and how the field came to be dominated by men, I argue that McKay's narrative becomes even more pressing. For centuries the female body has been viewed as disordered, associated with the abject and the grotesque, while the male form has been associated with purity and reason. The grotesque is an element that McKay embraces in the novel, as she does not shy away from descriptions that include blood, sweat, death, and decay. In this way, McKay is attempting to reclaim the female body, fluids and all, in advocating for her matriarchal community.

Much in the same way as McKay aims to reclaim the female body, she reclaims folkloric elements that have traditionally been gendered as female, bringing new meaning to traditionally bad omens. These omens are found in works such as Coleridge's 1798 *The Rhime of the Ancient Mariner*, and, most recently, in Robert Eggers' 2019 film *The Lighthouse*. Both works feature the same legend: that all seagulls are departed sailors. Coleridge presents the albatross, itself a gull, as a symbol of male kinship in the poem. When that kinship is betrayed and the mariner

kills the bird, he is punished by being thrust into the female realm—one ruled by a disordered female figure. Similarly, Eggers presents the seagull in *The Lighthouse* as a symbol of male kinship. When Winslow kills the bird, and later the other keeper, he betrays the community of man and is tormented by the grotesque and uncontrolled female figure: the mermaid. In bringing the disordered female body and avian folklore together in *The Birth House*, McKay is subverting the masculine sphere of maritime folklore, advocating for the female sphere that she presents in *The Birth House*, which is founded on the traditions of folklore itself.

## THE MIDWIFE — A HISTORY

In order to examine McKay's treatment of the female body, and folklore in the novel, it is essential to first understand the tradition of midwifery that the writer is working within, and the complicated history of midwifery as a vocation. Historically, midwives have been viewed as untrustworthy because of their close relationship with other women, and the often holistic nature of their work. As Samuel S. Thomas writes in his article on midwifery in the early modern period, midwives were often associated with witchcraft (115). Thomas examined midwife testimonials, mainly from York, that range in date from 1662 through to 1751 (116). Despite the strong association between midwifery and the occult, scholars have “found no such connection” in the testimonials of the midwives themselves (115). Thomas, in an effort to dispel this myth, describes the traditions of midwifery in great detail, stating that the birthing room itself is an “all-female arena of childbirth” (117). He asserts that while “all midwives delivered children... their experience diverged widely” (130). Traditionally, in provincial England, there were differing degrees of midwifery, ranging from what Thomas terms the “occasional midwife,” to “the midwife who has a more public presence” and is seen as a primary figure in the community

(121). Midwives occupied a controversial role, as from 1662 on “contemporaries placed midwifery in the same conceptual category as work done by men” (123). This special societal status, existing outside of the traditional female domain, allows midwives to occupy a space that gives them autonomy. In this way, the birthing room itself was outside the realm of male control—it was a domain understood and controlled by the midwife, and the midwife alone.

Not only is the domain of the midwife entirely female, but the tradition of the occupation is itself matriarchal. Thomas writes that “There is evidence of generational continuity, as women followed their mothers or mothers-in-law into the practice and even practiced at the same time” as their relatives (117). Midwifery is itself a matriarchal community, passed down from older generations of women, and shared between them in an all female domain. Many women assisted or performed births occasionally, as Thomas explains, but “If a woman discovered an aptitude for the work, or simply wished to do more of it, she could establish a formal relationship with a local midwife and perhaps become her deputy” (117). Furthermore, “it is likely that the outgoing midwife trained and even designated her replacement” in the community (122). Midwives worked in teams, training and preparing other women to take over the trade, and to pass it on to the generations after them. Even the process of becoming a midwife is inherently female during this period, as it is achieved not through official licensing, but rather “when an expectant mother ask[s] her to deliver her child” (117). The designation of midwife is not given to women based on formal education, but rather based on the opinion of the delivering mother, and who she believes is fit to deliver her child. It is a designation given by women, to women.

One of the central questions raised by Thomas, and by McKay in her novel, through her depiction of the male doctor, is: “how men came to dominate the field” of obstetrics (115). Thomas states that the male domination of the female realm of midwifery, and the birthing room,

began when “Nicholas Culpepper... re-imagine[d] the female body” which, he argues, “undermined women’s knowledge about their bodies and made the case for their subordination” (115). Culpepper’s position as a botanist and physician gave him authority over both the subject of the body and of the natural world. The masculine intrusion into childbirth can be understood as an impulse to control and discipline “the disorderly female body” (124). Thomas emphasizes how, in this time, the conception of pregnancy and motherhood changed. In the 1690s, “women’s bodies were reimagined in mercantile language” (125). Mary Fissell describes them as such in *Vernacular Bodies*, stating that a pregnant woman is “a ship, enclosing valuable cargo,” (247-8). As such, female existence is reduced to that of a “[container], loaded and unloaded by men” (247-8). Men began to raise the question, “Could the business of childbirth be left to women?” (Thomas 125). As men became increasingly interested and involved in the birthing process, “male authority was felt even where men were nowhere to be found” (126). What arose was a total “disregard for women’s knowledge,” and the “subordination of maternal experience to medical opinion,” a distinctly male domain (128). Thomas writes that “the medicalization of pregnancy undermined the subjective and experiential knowledge of midwives, but equally important is that it challenged women’s knowledge of their own bodies” (128). The female body was no longer under the control of the female in childbirth, but instead was repurposed to serve the patriarchal society it existed within. What resulted was a total disregard for the mother, who was portrayed by male midwives “as dead flesh or absent entirely save her uterus” (130). In the nineteenth century, the “focus on the child at the expense of the mother became explicit,” as it was argued that “the doctor might choose to sacrifice the mother in order to save the infant,” in opposition to the traditional assumption, prior to 1730, that “a fetus should be sacrificed to save the mother” (130). Childbirth was no longer the matriarchal, feminine community it had been for

so long. Gone were the days when women could appoint their midwife themselves, because “they were incapable of judging a midwife’s understanding of childbirth” due to their own lack of formal education (130). As such, the only matriarchal, female space these women had the opportunity to occupy was taken from them. In *The Birth House*, McKay brings us back to a similar matriarchal community, one that is founded on midwifery itself, and is on the cusp of change.

## MCKAY’S MIDWIFE

### *Matriarchal Community in The Birth House*

*The Birth House* is itself a microcosmic example of the issues that have faced midwives for centuries. The midwife in McKay’s text is a highly controversial figure within the community. *The Birth House* opens during World War I, in the community of Scot’s Bay, Nova Scotia, which is “perched on the crook of God’s finger,” and “has always been ruled by storm and season” (vii). Because of the isolated location of the Bay, Victorian gender traditions rule most households, as Dora explains in the preface that while “the men bargained with the elements, the women tended to matters at home” (ix). It is revealed, however, that there is a secret community of womanhood in the Bay, as “In the secret of the night, mothers [whisper] to their daughters that only the moon [can] force the waters to submit. It [is] the moon’s voice that call[s] men home, her voice that turn[s] the tides of womanhood, her voice that pull[s] their babies into the light of birth” (ix). The connection to myth and lore in the community is strong, because the “people of the Bay find it easier to believe in mermaids and moss babies” than to face the trauma that they have endured; they prefer “to call it witchery and be done with it” (5). Folklore and

legend are woven into the very fabric of the community, and woven into the practice of midwifery in the novel as well. In this way, McKay is associating positive folkloric tradition with matriarchal spaces.

Marie Babineau acts as the training midwife to Dora, and is herself unconventional in her treatment of women, and her focus on the birthing mother. In the first ten pages, Dora Rare has been called to assist in her first birth. The matriarchal Miss B., midwife for the community of Scot's Bay, is shrouded in mystery and controversy: "Some say she's a witch, others say she's more of an angel. Either way, most of the girls in the Bay (including [Dora]) have the middle initial of *M*, for Marie" (emphasis original, 7). Despite her association with witchcraft, Miss B.'s importance to the community is recognized in the tradition of naming a newly delivered baby after the midwife who delivered her. Dora is seventeen when she is first asked to attend a birth by Miss B., who is going "to catch a baby and... needs an extra pair of hands" (7). Dora protests that she should ask someone else, but Miss B. insists that she is the woman for the job—in this moment, whether intentionally or not, Miss B. is choosing Dora as her successor. Dora mostly watches the birth, which is complicated by the fact that the baby is premature. Experience Ketch, the mother, is not ready to deliver and protests, to which Miss B. replies, "If you don't birth this child today, all your other babies don't gonna have a mama'" (11). Miss B.'s insistence on saving Experience, over the possibility of delaying the labour and potentially saving the fetus, shows that her primary concern is the survival of the mother. This is contrary to the custom of the time, which presented the female body as a vessel, something carrying precious cargo, but not precious in and of itself. Miss B. manages to save Experience's life, and the child is born living, but quickly dies in Dora's arms while Miss B. delivers the afterbirth. Both Miss B. and Dora empathize and interact extensively with the mother and put her comfort and safety above



all else. Even when Experience refuses to hold her dying child, they do not judge or condemn her, but abide her wishes. This empathy is made possible through the matriarchal environment of the birthing room, and of the midwife and her practice in general. After the birth, Dora and Miss B. bring the baby's body to a secret shrine in the forest with a statue of the Virgin Mary at the centre. Miss B. insists that Dora remove her shoes, stating that they "Can't let no outside world touch Mary's ground'" (19). The shrine in the woods contains a mix of iconography, with "strings of hollowed-out whelks and moon shells hung with tattered bits of lace from the branches" of the trees, and "In the centre... a tall tree stump" that has been carved with "The likeness of... the Virgin Mary, standing on a crescent moon" (18). Both Mary and the moon reinforce the midwife and her space as matriarchal spaces, as they are both female symbols.

### *The Moon*

McKay uses the moon as a positive symbol of femininity within the novel. The moon has long been a symbol in literature, and a significant emblem in many different cultures across the world (Brunner 184). For centuries, "the human body" has been regarded as a microcosm of "the atmosphere," because "both... were thought to be influenced by the moon and sun" (181). Women are believed to be "particularly liable to lunar influences," while "Men [are] assumed to be reasonable and resistant to natural conditions" (181). It was believed that women are influenced by the celestial bodies because they "[are] closely associated with nature and considered more susceptible" to them as a result (181). But as time progressed, the symbolism of the moon began to change, and so too did conceptions of female identity as a result. In the nineteenth century, "the moon was associated with evil forces," and the unregulated natural world that the moon controlled, women included, began to be overtaken by patriarchal control

(184). McKay reclaims the moon as a positive symbol of womanhood through her depictions in *The Birth House* by featuring the moon as a reoccurring symbol—one that is associated with childbirth itself both through the folkloric understanding of the moon as a female symbol, and through Miss B.’s decision to include the moon in her iconographic shrine.

## THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

McKay uses the female grotesque to advocate for the acceptance of the natural female form. According to Yael Shapira, the female grotesque is, at its core, an attempt to “reclaim the female body as literary subject matter,” focusing on “women’s unstable, ‘disgusting’ bodies and their violation of social norms” (52). The grotesque body “recalls such uncomfortable aspects of corporeality as disease, death and decay,” that society would prefer to ignore (53). As Shapira writes, while one would assume that grotesque bodily functions would be “gender-neutral,” they are in fact “associated strongly with women” (53). The female body is often depicted as being “dominated by gaping orifices and biological flux” in order to emphasize the disordered nature of the female body (53). This representation serves to undermine female authority, by “grounding women’s ‘aberrance’ in their distasteful corporeality” (53). In writing realistically about the female bodily experience, the abject and the grotesque are always present: “Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, the interior of the female body... and its outpourings of blood, amniotic fluid, milk” (53). Many female authors, Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood included, have incorporated the female grotesque into their work, in an effort to “remov[e] the grotesque from its usual location—hidden inside the body, concealed by convention and good taste” (68). As a result, some hope to overturn the conventional understanding of womanhood

enforced by imperial rule by writing narratives featuring women who would have been considered unruly historically. I argue that this overturning is exactly what McKay intends in *The Birth House*.

The grotesque is central to McKay's text as she features the birthing mother in her narrative, explicitly describing the abject aspects of birth: blood, amniotic fluid, sweat. Judith Mintz argues that the central conflicts of the novel surround the fact that men have used, and continue to use, "science and medicine to exert influence over women's bodies" (108). The female body is itself a major symbol in the text, as McKay "unsettles and rejects the cultural norms while doing away with assumed notions of a clean body" through her depictions of women living in poverty, during childbirth, and simply choosing to keep an unruly appearance (118). The abject and the grotesque are present in the birthing room always, and McKay "articulates the abject in her representations of death in childbirth" (116). McKay does not delay in confronting readers with the abject or grotesque aspects of childbirth, but rather foregrounds them in the opening of *The Birth House* when Dora attends her first birth, and witnesses the death of a premature baby. Immediately after this scene, Dora states that "It's a disgusting mess we come through to be born, the sticky-wet blood and afterbirth, mother wailing, child crying... the helpless soft spot at the top of its head pulsing, waiting to be kissed" (19). The terms she uses to describe childbirth are not mystical and beautiful, but harsh and unemotional—in presenting childbirth, and womanhood by extension, in this way, Dora is refusing to romanticize the female experience. Her focus on the texture and smell of blood, the description of the baby as pulsing, and her insistence that childbirth is a "disgusting mess," highlights the abject and grotesque aspects of not just birth, but womanhood more generally. Dora's first experience in the birthing room is not pleasant, and she does not describe it as such. She furthers her honest description of

the birthing room by stating that the only miracle associated with childbirth is “How a mother comes to love her child, her caring at all for this thing that’s made her heavy, lopsided and slow, this thing that made her wish she were dead... that’s the miracle” (20). In this way, Dora is rejecting the understanding of childbirth as a miraculous occurrence and natural part of womanhood, instead focusing on the ways in which pregnancy deforms the female body.

## MARITIME FOLKLORE

### *Avian Symbolism*

Birds are central to maritime lore and carry many symbolic meanings and omens. Maritime folklore contains many legends, a large portion of which relate to birds. Historically, “Sailors and nautical men... watched sea and land birds for indications of prosperous voyages and favoring winds,” and based their decisions on information gathered from these interpretations (Bassett 269). Worldwide, “The crow and the raven are proverbially birds of ill-omen” (274-5), and there are many different superstitions relating to the fact that “Fishermen don’t like a crow to cross their bow” (124). Similarly, one of the most well known legends relating to seabirds is that “All seagulls are old sailors” (126). Seagulls feature as a symbol in many works, and can be read as a symbol of male kinship.

Birds have come to represent male kinship through their association with fallen sailors and the fables of betrayal that have spun from this legend. In her article on avian symbolism in Coleridge’s work, Jeanne Halpern states that the author separates birds into two categories of representation: good, and bad. Halpern explains that “For the most part birds are visible and friendly” in Coleridge’s work, but “His negative birds are mainly predators” (9, 13). “The positive group includes the albatross,” which Halpern states may be “the best-known bird symbol

in literature” (13, 9). Indeed, when the mariner describes the albatross for the first time, he states that it appeared “As if it had been a Christian soul,” and that they “hailed it in God’s name” (I.61-4). Halpern writes that the albatross represents “a positive force of nature... innocence, spiritual unity in nature and human society, and poetic imagination” (14). The albatross, like the seagull, is meant to embody the souls of fallen sailors, as it is described as gull-like in appearance (I.61-70). In this way, it embodies the male community of sailors, and acts as a positive force to guide the men in their journey, as they battle the female elements. The bird brings good fortune, causing “a good south wind [to spring] up behind” the ship, and it is a loyal companion to the mariner: “The Albatross did follow, / And every day... Came to the mariner’s hollo!” (I.69-72). The albatross, as well as seagulls and other positive birds, represent male kinship through their guidance of male forces, and their embodiment of the sailor lost at sea. They are in contrast to birds, such as the crow, that represent bad omens. It is these omens which McKay herself reclaims in her text in an attempt to redefine folkloric tradition.

While gulls have typically been regarded as benevolent symbols of male kinship, Robert Eggers complicates this understanding in his 2019 film *The Lighthouse*. Eggers’ film centres on two characters who tend a lighthouse and are slowly driven mad by the sea and the isolation. In this way, Eggers depicts a patriarchal community—one that reflects McKay’s patriarchy through the isolation and folkloric traditions he evokes. One of the most significant symbols in the film is the seagull, which serves to represent male kinship again—but male kinship that has been betrayed. The gull begins to torment Winslow early in the film, blocking his path when he is trying to work (16:55). Eggers’ screenplay describes the scene best, as “It turns its head, revealing: A MISSING EYE. The empty socket is gruesome and twisted. A war wound” (15). Winslow, the younger and more impulsive of the two, is aggravated by the gull’s persistence,

and Wake confronts him about it, warning him that it is: ““Bad luck to kill a sea bird”” (23:05). When Winslow responds sarcastically, ““More tall tales?”” (23:15), Wake “GETS UP AND SLAPS HIM HARD IN THE FACE, out of nowhere!” (20) and shouts again: ““Bad luck to kill a sea bird!”” (23:20). Winslow attempts to let the bird go, but it continues to pursue him, tapping on the window while he lays in bed smoking a cigarette (24:10), and then, later it “perche[s] on his leg... pecks him, scavenging the fresh meat” (28). Even when the gull attempts to eat his flesh, Winslow “is afraid of the bird. Afraid to harm it” because of Wake’s warning (28). After this incident, Winslow inquires ““Say, why’s it bad luck to kill a gull?”” (35:40). Wake replies bluntly that ““In ‘em’s the souls o’ sailors what met their maker”” (35:42). The seagulls in *The Lighthouse* share the male kinship of Coleridge’s albatross, joined together through maritime avian lore. Finally, Winslow snaps and beats the one-eyed seagull to death after witnessing it pick up an injured “gull in his beak, and [begin] to eat it” (38). When the one-eyed seagull betrays its own community—the community of male kinship—Winslow cannot stand to let it live any longer. He is compelled to kill the bird, and beats it to a pulp against a rock (40:30). Immediately after this scene, the camera pans up to the lighthouse, showing the wind changing from West to East gusting (41:25). It is only after this that it is revealed that Winslow himself has betrayed the brethren of men by killing another man.

### *Avian Symbolism — The Birth House*

#### *The Birth House*

Maritime symbolism is present in every aspect of McKay’s novel *The Birth House*, which centres on the female relationships between the women of the Bay. Similarly, avian lore is associated with the female through depictions of childbirth in the novel, which rely on holistic

methods featuring, at times, bird feathers to bring forth a healthy baby when a mother is in distress. During a particularly difficult birth, Dora states that the mother has become “faint from exhaustion” and that if she is unable to do anything “Soon, mother and child [will] be in danger” (254). Suddenly, she remembers the practice of quilling the maternal figure Miss B. passed down to her. She takes a crow’s wing from the wall and “pull[s] a feather from the wing” of the bird (254). By using a feather in her childbirth practices, and in drawing on legend for the idea, Dora solidifies the connection between the female and avian lore. She fills the tip of the feather with pepper and then “With a shot of breath” blows the pepper “through the quill and into [the birthing mother’s] nose,” who almost instantaneously “[delivers] her baby into [Dora’s] waiting hands” (254). Dora is able to save the baby, but can do nothing for the mother, who dies shortly after. In this passage, McKay is not only associating maritime lore with the feminine, but also subverting it. While traditionally crows are viewed as a bad omen, Dora uses the crow’s feather to bring a new life into the world, associating it with the female through birth, and positivity through the delivery of a new baby. In this way, McKay is transforming folkloric traditions from bad omens and monstrous women, to reclaim elements of folklore that have been dichotomized for so long. Dora Rare herself becomes, then, through the use of lore and holistic medicine with regard to birth, an embodiment of the unbridled female in the novel, as she gains her place as matriarch of the community and provides this space to the women who need her.

The ties between matriarchal female society and avian lore are once again reinforced through Dora’s decision to name her daughter Wrennie—a direct association between a woman of the Bay and a bird: the wren. After Iris Rose dies in childbirth, Dora decides to adopt her baby and raise her as her own. She states that the child “sings... like a bird” (263). The association of the newborn child with a bird does not end here, but rather is furthered through her own name.

Dora states that it is the baby's singing that leads her to name her after a wren, calling her Wrennie. Dora associates the baby with the bird, once again tying the female and the avian together. Finally, in the end of the novel, Dora states that "Wrennie... grew up caring for women as much as [she] did" emphasizing that while she helped women through childbirth, Wrennie would "[hold] a young mother's hand" in assistance (367). In this way, Wrennie herself becomes associated with the folkloric tradition, assisting in the practices of holistic medicine that her mother has fought for throughout the novel. Through this, McKay herself is cementing the idea of lore being associated with the female, describing how the folkloric tradition is passed down through generations of women—as it was passed down from Miss Babineau to Dora herself. McKay is hopeful that the tradition of matriarchy within the birthing room will continue, as she posits Wrennie as a symbol of the hope of a generational continuance.

### *The Femme Fatales of Folklore*

When birds, representing male kinship, are betrayed the unsightly feminine force is released: the femme fatale of folklore, represented through ghost-like figures, sirens, and others. In her article on monstrous women in popular culture, Stephanie Daniels terms the trend of evil, grotesque women "The Femme Fatales of Folklore" (1). This figure is often depicted as grotesque or abject, and "Historically, narratives that give prominence to female bodily processes have often been misogynous cautionary tales that used the constitutive elements of narrative to 'read' the body as symbolic of a dangerous disorder" (Shapira 55). The disordered female body is often unleashed upon men as punishment or warning, and it is common for horror stories to "draw on the full richness of the macabre imagination in portraying unruly women as distortions of a 'normal' female physicality" (58). In this way, narratives traditionally portray the disorderly



female body as dangerous, infectious, and, above all, unruly. This tradition serves to undermine female power, as it depicts women as incapable of reason, and therefore order—especially without the presence of men. In this way, “the imagery of the unstable, ‘repugnant’ body lends a visceral power to the story’s denunciation of female misrule, bolstering moral disgust with physical repulsion” (55). The female body has historically been represented as an embodiment of male anxieties within folklore, highlighting the disorder of the female body in an attempt to undermine female power, and painting women who do not fit the mold of femininity created by the patriarchy as monstrous.

The disordered, monstrous female is present in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, and serves to illuminate the anxieties surrounding women and the female body at the time. Where the albatross represents male kinship, the monstrous female represents the threat of matriarchal rule. The mariner and his crew are guided by the albatross until the mariner “kill[s] the bird / That made the breeze to blow” (II.11-2), exclaiming: “I shot the ALBATROSS” (I.80). In killing the albatross, the soul of another fallen sailor, the mariner betrays the male bond between them, and commits an act of fratricide. After the mariner shoots the albatross, they soon behold “A something in the sky” which appears to be another ship sailing towards them (III.6). When they get closer, the mariner remarks that the ship is manned by a woman, and that is “all her crew” (III.41). The woman-sailor who approaches has “skin... as white as leprosy,” and, upon beholding her, she “thicks man’s blood with cold” (III.45-9). The mariner describes her appearance in traditionally feminine terms, stating: “Her lips [are] red, her looks [are] free, / Her locks [are] yellow as gold” (III.45-9). While the female-sailor is indeed an embodiment of femininity, she is not the respectable female form that is acceptable at the time. The mariner describes her looks as free, meaning that they are unkept or unruly. Furthermore, the

female-sailor is historically a bad omen as women are widely believed to be bad luck at sea. In this way, the female-sailor represents a free-reigning female force, one who, though outwardly beautiful, is “The Night-Mare LIFE-IN-DEATH” (III.48). Once she approaches in her ship, one by one the mariner’s crew “[turn their] face[s] with a ghastly pang, / And curs[e] [him] with [their] eye[s]” (III.67-70). Then, “With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, / They [drop] down one by one,” dead (III.76-7). When the mariner betrays his fellow man in killing the albatross, he is removed from the community of man entirely by the embodiment of death itself: the unruly, monstrous woman.

This loss is not the end of his suffering, as he remains stranded on the deck with the decaying bodies of his crew. The mariner “look[s] upon the rotting deck, / And there the dead men lay,” a constant reminder of his sin against the fraternity of man (IV.19-20). He feels immense guilt for his sins, stating: “a thousand thousand slimy things / Liv[e] on; and so [do] I,” lamenting his cursed existence as a betrayer of man (IV.15-16). For “Seven days, seven nights, [he] saw that curse” in the eyes of his dead crew, “And yet [he] could not die” (IV.38-9). In order to reenter the fraternity of man, the mariner must be “absolved of his sin against nature and God” (Halpern 14). In the interim, the mariner lives in a world ruled by feminine forces. He watches “The moving Moon [go] up the sky,” and observes that “Her [beam] bemock[s] the sultry main... where the ship’s huge shadow lay[s], / The charmed water burn[s] away / A still and awful red” (IV.40-9). The mariner genders the moon as female, and notes that when the moon is in the sky: “water-snakes... mov[e] in tracks of shining white” (IV.51-2). Under the rule of the moon, the waters become a grotesque and fearful place. Finally, “The self same moment [he can] pray” to God to repent for his sins, “from [his] neck... The Albatross [falls] off, and [sinks] / Like lead into the sea” (IV.66-69). Once the mariner has successfully repented for his sins

against the community of man, led by the paternal Judeo-Christian God, the evidence of his sins fall away: the corpse of the bird, and the ship itself. Halpern writes that “after the last vestige of th[e] ship sinks... the Mariner reenter[s] *human* society” (emphasis added, 15). Halpern’s statement that the mariner reenters human society is correct, as he has been isolated from the community of humankind; however, it would be more accurate to state that the mariner reenters patriarchal society when he returns from his adventures at sea. Coleridge writes the sea in a distinctly female way, as is tradition, referring to the sea itself and the ship as female. This is furthered in the description of the grotesque aspects of this oceanic world, which are embodied in the female representation of death in the poem. Through her beauty and frightfulness, she represents a deeply misogynist tradition within folklore itself: the femme fatale of folklore, but she also represents unruly chaotic matriarchal rule.

Similarly, in *The Lighthouse* Winslow’s punishment for killing a fellow man appears as a mermaid, taunting him mercilessly throughout the movie. She is outwardly beautiful, but when he sees her “He is frozen in terror” by her unnatural form (Eggers 46). Later, we see Winslow “straddling the MERMAID... his pants half down, FUCKING HER WHILE THE SEA LAPS OVER THEM” (67). The mermaid herself represents disorder within the film, as she is depicted as the same kind of monstrous woman that has plagued lore for centuries. The mermaid, as well as the sea, is gendered as female within the film, as is the custom. The sea has been gendered for centuries because of the volatile and uncontrollable nature of the waters, which indicate a female temperament: one that is beyond rationality and reason. The mermaid herself can be viewed as an embodiment of uncontrolled womanhood through the exaggerated, enormous vulva which is centered on her tail. Her body is, “dominated by gaping orifices and biological flux,” in order to accentuate her corporeal nature (53). By accentuating her sex, depicting it as gaping, Eggers is

reinforcing the traditional understanding of the female body as grotesque. While McKay focuses on the female grotesque in an attempt to reclaim it, Eggers instead reiterates the same misogynistic image that has been circulating for centuries: the femme fatale of folklore.

## CONCLUSION

Ami McKay's novel *The Birth House* serves to highlight the masculine takeover of childbirth, taking control of the female experience of motherhood by re-claiming obstetrics itself. Men could not trust women to control their own pregnancies and deliveries, and they certainly could not trust women they did not know with their wives and offspring. By imposing their rule on the birthing room, patriarchal society has disrupted one of the only matriarchal communities in existence today. McKay posits this fierce rationality against the natural, folkloric tradition of midwifery, but she also subverts folkloric tradition in the text. While historically women have been depicted in folklore as symbols of death, mermaids, or dangerous beauties, McKay changes this discourse to show the intimacy and kindness within the birthing room, as opposed to the supernatural elements and witchcraft that were imagined. There are two symbols in particular that McKay reclaims within the text: the moon, and the bird. By refocusing the narrative on the female body, not attempting to hide the monstrous or grotesque aspects of womanhood, McKay is able to create a matriarchal community, even if it is one that only exists within the confines of her novel. She transforms the symbols within the novel to reflect a new, positive form of maritime lore that doesn't place women in opposition to men but allows them to exist as their own entities, without judgement. McKay's text is at once historical and futuristic, as she imagines a world in which the female experience is valued rather than vilified, creating a world in which women are free to be who they are, unruly as they may be.

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