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Review of *Emptied of All Ships* (Litmus Press, 2005)

Szymaszek's Homo Sailor King in *Emptied of All Ships*—do you Speak Greek?

Stacy Szymaszek's book *Emptied of All Ships* (Litmus Press 2005) combines the homo and the piratical to make outlaw speech in a place which has traditionally been outside the law. The sailor-protagonist in the book is James, "alias James," a robotarmed sailor-siren with Protean shoulders, sailing on a bonhomie sea where "friends become / ink on the knees / held to chin / **TA NM.**" "James" I gather has had some kind of accident. When I call James musclearned, Szymaszek corrects me, saying "the salient feature of his arms is that he lost one, replaced by a robotic one...I don't know how he did, but rocks are falling out of the sky and there are dead fish in a hot sea and he was reclaimed adrift on a fin so there was some kind of accident."

Szymaszek's queer pastorals—aquatorals really—show the sailor James as an "ambidextrous wonder." Not just ambidextrous, but a transitional self-objectifying object, who can envision his own arm as a fish. She writes that he

envisions his tan arm

in a Sicilian net
gilled and thrashing

mummified arm Indonesian
sailor skin
boxed in glass and lead

call it James

It, the object James, lets us in on his "cruise" of personae—not disphoric but euphorically around the world on an ambisexual and serpentine path from Cypress to Elysium, Pompeii to Finland. But the journey is also a literary one; speech is the dress of the poet-sailor's thought and in the ballast of persona (I puff / words / into / a brass / speaking / tube // to preserve / radio silence" ["Radio Silence"]) the reader is invited or dared to "knock my hat off / swill my brain." Brains from the first poem are a synecdoche for masculinity:

no one
knows
the brains

I am now

but the sailor has brawn too and: “[h]e is thought / to possess / a charm...that renders him / lawless” (“Sailor King”). Queers have always been fond of adventures “at sea”—the sea is a notoriously good place for outlaw behaviors—where kitsch, chaos and rum rule and James is inevitably “queer”—an adjective of doubtful origin but possibly in the sense of the German “quer” or “oblique”—oblique, perverse, not going straight to the point; roundabout, indirect.

And queer girls for some reason have always liked gay porn and the sailor aesthetic—the beauty of the Tom of Finland muscled homo-sailor in tight pants nuzzling against his hot friend the “one who / taught him / to smoke.” Szymaszek is not just a voyeur, she is the sailor, she wears masculinity as a kind of literal suit (swimsuit? sharkskin?) in her work as an embedded gender-journalist, punning on the craft of craft (the pen, the work) and craft (the vessel). This allows her to be literally composing on a ship wearing a strapon. Ink is immediately conflated with a porno sea, the sailor with the sail and writing with mariner-errancy. The Szymaszek-poet sailor (SS or Stacy) writes that a “sailmaker / stitches you / inside a sail / last to touch / your craft / slipped starboard.” And the tree is considered as proto ship, with “ruptured joints” that “soak in / deep ink.”

Everything is pitched seaward, though she wrote this while living in Milwaukee. Perhaps the sea pulled her to New York, where she now lives and works. Even her initials are nautical: S.S. S.S.—which is the name of the craft itself not the person sailing the craft—SS herself says “I the Szymaszek poet definitely inhabit all the pronouns and the proper names—in this way it is a solipsistic journey, with language, having the appearance of adventure genre.” Like books of the adventure genre must be, this is a riveting book, a real page-turner. In her “luminous prow of sea,” Szymaszek tells of a misadventured sailor she ships off to an island:

isl.
where I sent him
bell-bottomed
I won
wrong woman called

where “bell-bottomed” could apply to either the he or the I. We speak of cloaking our speech or dressing our thought, fabric-ations, vestments. That SS puts on male vestments in the adventure reveals language as a site for performing drag. As literary style merges with sartorial style, poetic craft with nautical craft, the result is an absence of opposition between the genders. The androgyne has not a lack but a surplus of tendencies, after all. The relationship between hes and hes and hes and shes and Is and yous as they morph reveal not a fragmented discourse but various body parts coalescing: a protean shoulder, a mummified arm, a wax phallus mending kit (contents of a “secret-bottomed drawer”)—tools giving the poet the ability like Milton’s angels to switch genders at will. The poetic persona even has a poetic persona: James is a poet who translates Su Tung-P’o and Yu Xuanji. And cruises.

And she is “wrong woman called.” The sailor who can pass as a boy and feign a kind of faggotry. The sailor who can pass as a girl. Szymaszek’s sea is doubly paved with these ornaments—not only femininity speaks with florid speech but there is a cloaking. There are flamboyant ornamental rhymes like “my embroidered misnomer,” and she says “my oratory is a gurgle of scales and water.” Whereas Adam complains that there is “too much of ornament” in Eve, Szymaszek’s style ambiguates so-called feminine ornament by housing it in a tight ship—one to three words per line. Many of her lines are like classical columns:

Pompeii
ash in
orange
wedge

a single image that sticks on the brain and the tongue. These stanza-pearls are dressed in tight corsets emulating a Roman, masculine brevity. Her use of craft (“last to touch / your craft”) tells us shucks we are outside the law. The last words of the book are “in Greek.”