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## A Genealogy of Collision: Robyn Schiff's *A Woman of Property*

Colleen Morrissey\*

\*Ohio State University, [morrissey.36@osu.edu](mailto:morrissey.36@osu.edu)

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## Review Essay

### **A Genealogy of Collision: Robyn Schiff's *A Woman of Property***

**Colleen Morrissey**

*A Woman of Property*. By Robyn Schiff. Penguin Books, 2016. 96 pp. \$20.00 paper. Ebook available.

The title of Robyn Schiff's third poetry collection evokes themes of the Victorian era. For one thing, as Schiff herself acknowledged in an interview with *The Rumpus*, it alludes to *A Man of Property*, the opening installment of John Galsworthy's *Forsythe Saga* (1906-1921), which chronicles a wealthy man's attempts to showcase his wealth in erecting a lavish country house. But beyond direct allusion, the collection's title sounds like something one of Charlotte Brontë's characters would say: "She is a woman of property." It is, after all, the fact of Jane Eyre's becoming "a woman of property" that enables her to meet Mr. Rochester on equal footing after his own house burns to the ground. When she inherits a fortune, Jane transforms from a friendless young woman moved by the plans of others into a prime mover herself. Schiff's multifarious references to two heavyweight periods in the Western canon, the Victorian novel and Greek tragedy, function as a way to voice her preoccupation with the elemental tension between agency and contingency, between individual will and one's vulnerability to countless collisions with others. *A*

*Woman of Property* is concerned with who does what and why and to whom, and it is also concerned with what happens when bodies—human, animal, and celestial—collide. Collision threatens incursion, penetration, and violation. As a result, material, physical, or personal properties can be tainted or destroyed by an “alien” invasion. Schiff’s deliberate blurring of genres is one way this collection shows how collision also offers the possibility of expanding identities and combined strengths, turning the foreign into the familiar and embracing the limitations of personal agency. This is what makes Schiff’s collection such a potent tableau of contemporary American existence: the pathological desire for individualism, down to the drawing of exact property lines, coexisting with the simultaneous yearning for connection and even self-loss.

Allusion itself is a way of incorporating the familiar within an unfamiliar context and turning the *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*. For instance, Jane Eyre and Rochester make appearances in the collection’s most visually-striking poem “A Hearing.” These characters, along with Madame Bovary, Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon, and Thomas Hardy’s Jude lurk in the background of a kind of trial between neighbors warring over a strip of land:

...Madame Bovary  
 is what I think they call  
 that same dog in hell Jane Eyre  
 recalled when she heard Mr.  
 Rochester’s riderless black horse chained to the  
 furnace— *Motion to Strike Motion*  
**Denied...**

Not only do texts blur together here, but so do species, times, worlds, and voices. But Schiff’s gaze is not only directed backwards in time, traveling unilaterally through the nineteenth century all the way to antiquity. In *A Woman of Property* history always acts upon the present just as the present always acts upon history. In “Fourth of July, 2012,” the poem which includes the collection’s title, the ancient past comes to define a specifically 21<sup>st</sup>-century collision. In the poem, Schiff contemplates the emptiness or momentousness of the CERN discovery of the “God particle” and in the same breath meditates on Greek tragedy. The crisis of representation expressed in this poem, in which the speaker watches a performance of Antigone but also becomes Antigone, repeats across the entire collection. The ancient and the ultra-modern smash together inside the manmade Large Hadron Collider, which seems to have discovered the answer to a cosmic riddle—but to what end? The “wild particle” is simply

... hanging  
 and Antigone needed something  
 to do with her hands  
 and she did it.

The horror of a godlike force acting without discernable purpose, simply for the sake of acting, is one of the fears Schiff highlights. It is impossible to determine if Antigone's own actions, as she "picked up/ a piece of dust," denote human mastery over the universe or human impotence in the face of a cosmos beyond understanding. This question of agency (or lack thereof) permeates Schiff's examinations of border-crossings and infiltrations, including the skin-thin line between "I" and "not-I."

For instance, the second piece of the collection, "H1N1," articulates the terror of disease. The narrator likens infection to demonic possession, as in the Biblical story of Jesus casting out "Legion" from a crazed man. Hypochondria about "flu season" joins climate-change dread: "I am better than healthy./ I am cooling even as the earth/ heats..." The poem voices the existential fear of being touched and, by touching, losing something essential about the self. This becomes even more complicated by the many references to pregnancy and the "you," seemingly a baby in utero, to which the latter part is addressed. Pregnancy itself uncannily stretches the boundaries between bodies, and impregnation bears a disconcerting similarity to demonic possession. The danger of pregnancy, to both mother and child, holds all of its risk in this poem. Modern knowledge, far from making pregnancy safer, instead renders it more ominous: "The book of death is open on my bedside/ table and is called *The Pregnancy/ Countdown...*" For fear of infection, the poem's speaker

... will  
not give the mosquito  
her share even though the blood meal

is all she has to nurture her eggs  
and mother-to-mother I hear  
her flight...

Though no direct reference to the Zika virus appears in this collection, the image of the mosquito and what Schiff calls elsewhere its "bio-weapon" mouth makes for an ever-present, awe-inspiring threat. The boundaries between lives—human and mosquito, mother and child—are pierced by the mosquito's needle nose or perhaps the needle of an epidural, both described by Schiff as "pins through the body." This image is echoed in "The Mountain Lion," where Schiff pens what may be the most impactful lines in this collection: "This is the Infiltration Age./ To be made in the likeness/ of Nature is to/ be inserted."

Although pregnancy, an example of penetration *par excellence*, is a major through-line, Schiff's work is not reducible to a single theme. Rather, she uses pregnancy as a refrain in her exploration of dangerous encounters. In "A Hearing," we see a Neonatal ICU resident named "Evil-/Though-Well-Meaning" inserting "the feeding/ tube and the spinal tap..." This same resident, however, "practiced on herself," showcasing a moment of penetration, even self-harm, that transforms into something altruistic. Many of Schiff's poems confront this same question of what it means to sacrifice, either in the name of others or for some higher moral truth.

Poems referencing Antigone and Iphigenia face each other on opposite pages as Schiff draws forth the ghosts of two women whose sacrifices, willing or unwilling, have defined Western warfare. In addition to the organized slaughter of war, Schiff also plays with the role of killing within the cycle of life and reproduction. “Gardening” makes a fascinated and revolted catalogue of animal cannibalism:

There exists in nature  
a wolf-kind of every species

whose criminal hunger takes the shape of  
the most vile courtship...

Predation, she suggests, is just as hideously “natural” as sex. Ergo, what we see as dangerous, inhuman irregularities like war might actually be disturbingly normal and endemic.

Even at the level of form, in the very shape of the collection, Schiff plays with this uncomfortable meeting of the regular and the irregular. The answer to “A Doe Replaces Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” called “A Doe Does Not Replace Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” reproduces almost verbatim the opening lines of the first poem but reverses “mouth” and “mother,” creating the pivot onto which the poems shift their rehabilitative portrayal of weakness, or “the confusion/ between strength and/ surrender...” Thirty pages apart, these twin poems become puzzle boxes that twist words and their meanings into startling shapes.

Schiff’s style itself reflects a type of textual collision, only shaped by a skillful and deft hand. She moves easily between traditional structure and freeform, picking up and dropping rhyme and assonance at will. For instance, she fractures the sing-song of a children’s rhyme in the opening lines of “Gate”:

Everyone has a cousin Benjamin Bunny.  
Peter said a walk would do him good.  
The edge of the wood. Peter did not  
enjoy himself anymore. He never would  
again. The brooding lettuces  
in their falcon hoods. The coppice gate

Some of Schiff’s poems unfold in series of neat three-line stanzas while others unspool in solid columns down the page. All are chock full of enjambment, which propels each poem to its end like a tumble down the stairs. At times, a couplet will take the reader by the throat in what seemed to be a freeform poem, as in the last two lines of “Dyed Carnations.” The poem hints in only 21 short lines at the asphyxiation of domesticity, the ineffability of a thing’s true essence (“There’s blue, and then there’s blue.”), and the permeation of toxic synthetic substances that have poisoned even the flowers we send each other as tokens of love. It ends, “They won’t even

look at me./ Happy anniversary.” Schiff’s use of structured meter and rhyme after 19 lines of free verse are devastating.

For all its anxiety, the takeaway from *A Woman of Property* is not fear or isolation. The paranoia of penetration gives way to a shifting allegiance—a productive transference of identity. In the final lines of “H1N1,” the baby in utero that began the poem as a demon possessing the mother becomes that mother’s ally as they fight together against the real enemy. The speaker promises not to “fail to meet you/ when you get here,” and then asks,

... On what  
grounds, on what faith,  
dare we aspire

together where Legion  
hears the ventilator  
and enters the wire?

Although success or even survival is far from guaranteed, when “I” and “you” become “we,” there is at least communion. And this is the parting impression of *A Woman of Property*: It is a remarkably nuanced collection, at once hauntingly Gothic and achingly current, allusive and imminent. In a time that seems ever more apocalyptic, Schiff’s collection traces a genealogy of collision that points out both its dangers and its affordances, sometimes showing how what seem to be dangers can actually be affordances and vice versa. The richness of Schiff’s poetry, both in substance and style, consists of this capably-rendered multivalence, and it’s why it deserves our rapt attention.