

## The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk

SCOTT THURSTON lectures in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Salford. He has published articles on linguistically innovative poetry and interviews with the poets Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke, John Wilkinson, Maggie O'Sullivan, Ulli Freer and Ira Lightman. As a poet his most recent book is *Hold: Poems 1994–2004* (Shearsman, 2006). He edits *The Radiator*, a little magazine of poetry and poetics.



# The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk

*Edited by*

SCOTT THURSTON



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*for*  
*Jeff Nuttall*  
*(1933-2004)*



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## *Foreword*

Geraldine Monk is not the type of poet who waits for inspiration. The moment of insight doesn't visit her at its own speed. She is not a talent, like Larkin or Hamilton, from whom we breathlessly await our two or three poems a year.

Rather does she work as artists commonly do in other media. As a painter goes to his studio and puts out his colours, as a saxophonist goes to his rehearsal room and works on his phrasing, so Monk goes to work on her words every day, allows one cluster to set in motion a whole sequence, summoning up gags, puns and sonic felicities to spin her off into the next. Inspiration for her is continuous because her inspiration is the practice of composition itself, an activity in which, through all pitfalls, trajectories, catastrophes and famines of one woman's day-to-day life, she is utterly riveted and professionally dedicated. As a priest devotes himself to his ceremonies, so Monk devotes herself to her words. It's what she does, come what may. Tennyson had the same work pattern, believing that if he was to be honoured with the title laureate he ought not to be idle. Similarly Ken Smith wrote for his statutory daily number of hours whilst Gregory Fellow at Leeds.

Reactionary opinion would possibly say that this was a kind of doodling, a disrespectful demotion of the muse from angel to pastrycook. There is certainly a strong thread of the artisan about the way of working.

The importance, as with so much work over the last century, lies more in the work itself than in what the work is about. The painting is important, not the scene it depicts. Monk's poetry is important, not any great rueful truth she may have to reveal about the mystery or history of life.

Monk's work is panoramic. Each day becomes a landscape marked out in short lines, continuous paragraphs, staccato image-chains

situated across the page as the stuff that feeds them is spaced, spattered or repeated across the day, one incident cutting in on another, as an assonance, a pun or suggestion tips us into what follows.

Monk loves puns. Try these. Back and forth from disillusioned Labour to patriotism in

Some union Jack. Some bloody union. Remember Jack.  
Flying flags. Pigs might. Flies might.  
No Jack. Not pickets.

From onomatopoeic cricket to relentless time in

Image and out.  
Clock.  
Tock.  
Cuckoo.

Look at the titles. *Noctivagations*. Vaginal night voyages. Puns seem to be the way she hits the ignition. The lines thus detonated are the work of a highly sensitised rhythmic sense. They recall the riffs and rim shots of great drummers but they are not left as they spontaneously occur. Anyone who could believe this isn't really listening. They are worked, tailored, trimmed and polished for maximum effect in performance.

Because she works in a workshop manner Monk works with other artists. She has written for radio ('Manufactured Moon') and changed her rhythm so that it sounds like wireless. She has written work put together as though it were fiction ('Short Sorties'), performed in varied venues with painters ('Fluvium') and musicians ('Songings'). Her work is objective and crafted.

Monk had a lot of time for the great Bob Cobbing in most of whose work the meanings of the words are totally irrelevant. The words are sounds and the work is music as much as it is literature. Monk is not so abstract. In her panoramas her clusters feed, as we have seen, from incidents, accidents, half-memories of meals, menu items, timetables, catalogues, heartbreaks, a love-life as headlong and bashed-about as anybody's, eavesdropped dialogue (great snippet from a New York restaurant), even the ads on passing busses. In the midst of this, from

the city's railway bridges, she catches the pulse of Manchester: 'B.eating. B.eating. B.eating . . . ' She shares this kind of spaced detail with Maggie O'Sullivan, Bill Griffiths and other contemporaries.

However, she has ongoing themes that sometimes give her a more coherent content. Monk is concerned with places. Her travelogue is political and informed. In Toledo 'Duende's all the raging' recalls Lorca on flamenco. In Prague she recalls St Vitus and St Agnes. Flying she recalls Davis in *All About Eve*: "Fasten your seat belts", says Bette.' In the film she continues 'We're in for a bumpy ride.'

But as a Lancastrian, Geraldine Monk does for Greater Manchester what MacSweeney did for Northumberland and Sinclair for East London. Sometimes she is explicit as in her commissioned poem about Manchester and her oblique homage to her father called 'Imagining a Walk Round the Grounds of Church and Oswaldtwistle Cricket Club One Fine Evening in Autumn.'

Sometimes her perceptive hostility to metropolitan attitudes expresses graphically the Lancastrian identity which is always evident when she reads in her rich local vowels. Neither masked nor affected, her tongue gives her performed writing the confirming authenticity great blues singers enjoy through their pronunciation. This is nourishing brain-food.

JEFF NUTTALL, July 2003



## Notes on Contributors

**David Annwn's** latest collection of poetry is entitled *Bella Fawr's Cabaret*. His work 'tabula gratuloria' is to appear with Thomas Ingmire's calligraphy in the San Francisco Harrison Collection.

**Sean Bonney** was born in Brighton, grew up in the north of England and now lives in London. He has had poetry published in many magazines, including *Quid*, *The Gig* and *The Paper*. His full length productions include *Notes on Heresy* (Writers Forum, 2002), *Poisons, their antidotes* (West House, 2003) and *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (Salt, 2005). A part-time lecturer, he has taught at Birkbeck College, Roehampton, and the University of Southampton.

**Chris Goode** was for three years the artistic director of Camden People's Theatre, where he curated two editions of the poetry festival Total Writing London. He now works as a freelance theatre maker and writer. As a poet he has published three chapbooks with Barque, most recently *No Son House* (Barque, 2004). He lives in north London with an imperious cat and three experimental musicians.

**Bill Griffiths** was born in Middlesex in 1948. Not a bad time, he considers, for if the 1950s were a bit static, the 1960s brought an outburst in popular culture: music, football, bikes, pop festivals, that made it an exciting time to be growing up. By 1972, his first poems were published in *Poetry Review* under the editorship of Eric Mottram, and subsequent booklets were published in conjunction with Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum. Over the last decade he has moved gradually from little press booklets to paperback—with most recently *The Mud Fort* (Salt, 2005), collecting his short poems from 1986 on. Other interests include Old English, the piano, North-East dialect (he is currently Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Northern Studies, Northumbria University) and website design. Visit [www.billygriff.co.uk](http://www.billygriff.co.uk)

**Elizabeth James** is a poet and librarian with a research interest in book history. She lives in London and works at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the Word & Image Department. Poetry publications include: *Base to Carry*

(Barque Press, 2004) *Recognition* (Writers Forum, 1999) Two Renga, in *RENGA+* [Collaboration with Peter Manson] (Reality Street, 2002) and *Neither the One nor the Other* [Collaboration with Frances Presley] (Form Books, 1999). Other publications include: 'Poetry and Experimental Typography' [compiler and main author], in James Bettley, ed., *The Art of the Book* (V&A Publications, 2001).

**Christine Kennedy** is a Sheffield-based artist and writer. Her publications include *Possessions* and a new limited edition of *Twelve Entries from the Encyclopaedia of Natural Sexual Relations* (both The Cherry On The Top Press, 2003). She was a contributor to *RENGA+* (Reality Street, 2002).

**David Kennedy** lives and writes in Sheffield. His books include *The President of Earth: New & Selected Poems* (Salt, 2002) and *The Roads* (Salt, 2004). Newer works, in collaboration with Christine Kennedy, can be seen at the 'LitTeR' <http://www.leafepress.com/litter/> and Ahadada websites. A book on elegy is forthcoming from Routledge.

**Geraldine Monk** was born in Blackburn, Lancashire in 1952. Via a variety of routes and circumstances she came to Sheffield, South Yorkshire in 1984. She has lived there ever since.

**Jeff Nuttall** was born in Clitheroe, Lancashire, in 1933 and grew up in Herefordshire. He trained as a painter in the years following the Second World War and began writing poetry in 1962. He published widely with Writers' Forum, Turret Press, Unicorn Press, Fulcrum, Trigram, Pirate Press, Rivelin and Penguin (Modern Poets No. 12). He taught fine art in schools and polytechnics, acted in film and television and was best known for his remarkable book *Bomb Culture* (1968) which formed a manifesto for the internationalist revolutionary counter-culture of the cold war generation. His *Selected Poems* was published by Salt in 2003. He lived in Crickhowell, Wales and died in 2004.

**Frances Presley** was born in 1952 in Derbyshire, and now lives in London and Somerset. She is a free-lance author and also works at the Poetry Library. She studied modern literature, writing dissertations on Ezra Pound and Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as the contemporary French poet, Yves Bonnefoy. Publications of poems and prose include *The Sex of Art* (North and South, 1988), *Hula Hoop* (Other Press, 1993), *Linocut* (Oasis, 1997); and *Private writings: a Vermont journal* (Maquette, 1998) with drawings by Peterjon Skelt. She has collaborated with the artist Irma Irsara, on a multi-media performance about clothing and the fashion trade, *Automatic Cross Stitch*, (Other Press, 2000); and with the poet Elizabeth James on an email text and performance, *Neither the One nor the Other* (Form Books, 1999). *Somerset Letters*

(Oasis, 2002), with drawings by Ian Robinson, explores community and landscape, through a dialogue with other women poets. *Paravane: new and selected poems, 1996–2003* was published by Salt in 2004: the title sequence is a response to 9/11/2001. *Myne: New and Selected Poems and Prose, 1976–2006*, was published by Shearsman in May 2006. She has written various reviews and essays and is on the editorial board of the experimental poetry journal *How2*.

**Harriet Tarlo** teaches Creative Writing at the University of Leeds. She has published essays on modernist and contemporary British and American poets, including Basil Bunting, H.D., Lorine Niedecker and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Her poetry appears in little magazines and anthologies such as *FOIL* (Etruscan Books). Her recent books include *NAB* (Etruscan Books, 2005), *Poems 1990–2003* (Shearsman, 2004) and *Love/Land* (REM Press, 2003) and she is currently working on an academic book on contemporary British radical landscape poetry.

**Scott Thurston** lectures in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Salford. He has published articles on linguistically innovative poetry and interviews with the poets Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke, John Wilkinson, Maggie O’Sullivan, Ulli Freer and Ira Lightman. As a poet his most recent book is *Hold: Poems 1994–2004* (Shearsman, 2006). He edits *The Radiator*, a little magazine of poetry and poetics.



## Introduction

Geraldine Monk is one of the most exciting and consistently engaging poets writing in Britain today. Since her first books appeared in the late 1970s she has produced an extraordinarily wide-ranging and innovative poetry with a strong underlying commitment to feminist and other political concerns. Monk has published almost exclusively throughout her career with small presses—including her own Siren Press and Gargoyle imprints as well as other presses run by poet-publishers, such as Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum press, or more recently Alan Halsey's West House Books. The publication of Monk's *Selected Poems* by Salt in 2003 collected a number of earlier works which were either out of print or very rare and gave rise to the possibility of this companion volume: the first critical book on Monk's poetry and designed to be read alongside the *Selected Poems*.

The diversity of Monk's concerns is reflected in the range of approaches and interests of the writers whose work is collected here. Virtually all of Monk's published output is discussed in this collection, with particular attention paid to the impact of her first books in the late seventies and early eighties, to the important long poem *Interregnum* (1994)—considered by many contributors to be amongst her finest work—and to her most recent publications at the time this volume was compiled. The complexity and scale of *Interregnum* itself has permitted three separate considerations which cover themes of difficulty and emotion; place, landscape, nature and women's relationship to nature, and the importance of history. Taken together, these three essays represent the fullest critical account yet of this key poem of the nineties. Other contributors deal with the necessity of reading Monk's work within the crucial contexts of women's writing in general, and of women's experimental writing in particular, whilst acknowledging the

craft, eeriness and political sharpness of her poetry. Further contributions examine the significance of Monk's practice for the development of visuality in poetry and also the role of voice and performance in her presentation of her work. Furthermore, it is a privilege to be able to include in this volume a recent statement of poetics and accompanying poem by Geraldine Monk herself which brilliantly illustrate a key theme of her work: that poetry can be means of collaborating with the dead.

To introduce each contribution in turn, Bill Griffiths opens the Companion with an account of the context and publication of Monk's early work: the books *Long Wake* (1979), *Rotations* (1979), *La Quinta del Sordo* (1980), *Banquet* (1980) and *Spreading the Cards* (1980). Griffiths knew Monk personally during this time and assisted in the publication of *Long Wake*. He offers a useful guide to the overall themes and devices of these works: the memory and dream poems of *Long Wake* with their attendant awareness of place, the responses to the harrowing work of Goya in *La Quinta del Sordo*, the seasonal cycle explored in emotions of *Rotations*, the sensual language explorations of *Banquet* and the wide-ranging explorations of language and event in *Spreading the Cards*. As Griffiths suggests, this early work shows 'remarkable confidence in generating subject matter from the immediate and personal'; a facility which is still present in Monk's mature writing.

The trio of essays which take *Interregnum* as their main focus begins with Christine Kennedy and David Kennedy's piece, which approaches Monk's work from the perspective of 'difficulty.' This is a key concept that has attended the critical reception of innovative poetry like Monk's, often as a form of objection to such work's challenge to traditional forms. The authors demonstrate the constructed nature of 'difficulty' as it relates to innovative poetry but argue that if innovative poetry is difficult, then it is to do with the kind of experiences that it explores and the intensity with which it does so, rather than as a function of purely formal devices. *Interregnum* takes as its focus the deaths of ten men and women from Pendle, Lancashire accused of witchcraft and hanged in Lancaster castle in 1612. The poem opens by exploring the current life and rituals surrounding Pendle Hill before descending into the maelstrom surrounding the trials within which Monk evokes the voices of the dead accused. As the authors argue, the difficulty of this text lies principally in the way in which Monk handles this dark material. She takes the reader fully into an engaged, imaginative reading without the mediation of any quaint historical devices which might set up a safe distance between the reader and the events. The emotional

intensity of the poem is thus pitched very high: dominated by the themes of oppression and resistance and how these conflicts are inscribed on the body. The authors therefore conclude that the ‘difficulty’ and challenge of Monk’s poem lies in how it demands that the reader examine his or her own cultural prejudices and assumptions in the act of reading: a demand that can be heard elsewhere in Monk’s oeuvre.

Harriet Tarlo focuses on the role of place, landscape and nature in *Interregnum*, making a link with the work of eco-critics such as Kate Soper and Patrick D. Murphy and eco-feminist Annette Kolodny in examining the way that Monk’s work challenges simplistic ideologies and seeks a more integrated approach to understanding the relationships between the human and the non-human world. For Tarlo, reading *Interregnum* involves being pushed to consider our ‘human investment in nature, how this sits with our sense of the sacred, and our cultural sense of ourselves, be it in terms of gender or nationality.’ Tarlo examines these themes in Monk’s early poetry before looking at how the first part of *Interregnum* dramatises the relationships between human and nature, human and animal, in the interactions between contemporary users of Pendle Hill. The notion of the patriarchal domination of nature is crucial here, as is the view that this is linked to the domination of women which is central to the main section of the book. Tarlo shows how Monk challenges patriarchal constructions of women’s identities and sexuality and explores how women’s identification with nature can become a force for liberation and expression. Tarlo concludes her essay by examining how the role of Jennet Device—the nine year old whose testimony at the witch trials was instrumental in the fate of her family—operates as a figure for the precarious and exploited position of the virgin girl in society.

Sean Bonney’s account of *Interregnum* places Monk’s work in a tradition of radical British writing which includes her contemporaries Maggie O’Sullivan, Barry MacSweeney and Bill Griffiths as well as earlier poets such as Basil Bunting, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Blake and Abiezer Coppe. As Tarlo, Bonney is concerned with Monk’s engagement with place, but takes a more historical perspective. He examines how the opening section of *Interregnum* deals with the present Pendle Hill as a tourist site on which various hill-walkers, day-trippers, Christians and Pagans converge in tension with the local inhabitants. ‘Palimpsestus’—the second section of the poem—then acts as a bridge between the present and the past history of Pendle in making the link to the witch

trials. Citing Kurt Selligman's argument that the revival of witchcraft in the middle ages was the response of the poor rural population to increasing oppression by Church and State authorities, Bonney reads Monk's portrayal of the witches' defiance of authority as key to the poem. In *Hidden Cities* (1995), Monk's alternative bus tour of Manchester, Bonney identifies Monk's poetic insistence that any reading of history has 'real and active consequences' on the nature of the present, signalled in this text's opposition to the official tourist version of Manchester's history. Bonney concludes therefore that Monk's concern with place is inextricable from her concern with history and that her poetry constitutes a political act in its aim to grasp the 'entirety of history in order to change the present, and the future.'

In a more thematically driven essay, David Annwn explores the history of the meaning of the Scots word *eerie*, inspired by how Monk's poetry often involves 'doubles, mirrors, shadows and guardian spirits.' A key sense is of a state of consciousness aware of 'prevalent mysterious powers', which Annwn, with reference to the French writers associated with *l'écriture féminine*: Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, contrasts with Freud's *unheimliche*: arguing for the latter as a more static conceptualisation of this kind of awareness. Whilst acknowledging the role of clairvoyance and other related psychic activity in the history of women's writing, Annwn carefully qualifies the risks of designating Monk's poetry as *eerie*, since it plays into the hands of a common critical trope in regard not only to Monk's work, but also to that of poets such as Maggie O'Sullivan, whereby women's writing becomes othered as an exotic, otherworldly, intuitive practice: a move often tantamount to undermining its intellectual seriousness. Instead Annwn cites the increasing usage of *eerie* by critics 'to denote that acuity to seeing that which is subtly present, (but not apparent to everyone), and the linking of that faculty to rare skills and formal experimentation.'

Annwn demonstrates this usage in his readings of a wide range of extracts from Monk's work, including specific accounts of *Long Wake*, *Fluvium* (2001) and the pamphlet *Mary Through the Looking Glass* (2002): this last recently republished as part of Monk's *Escafeld Hangings* (2005). In his extensive reading of *Mary Through the Looking Glass* Annwn explores Monk's concern with the confined female figure of Mary Queen of Scots, imprisoned in Monk's adopted home city of Sheffield (and the central figure of *Escafeld Hangings*). Mary's postures before the mirror seem embued with all the eeriness of an encounter with the subconscious, with dreams of freedom and desire, whilst Monk's writing, in its

virtuosic punning, shifting of registers and sonic exuberance, constantly reminds one of the crafted nature of this transport. Indeed the key to eeriness lies within this sense of craft at levels of language not usually encountered in the everyday.

Frances Presley discusses Monk's work in the context of debates about women's experimental writing, particularly in relation to what Clair Wills has called a false polarisation between formal experimentation and expressivity, as if such qualities were mutually exclusive and reflected differences between male and female writing. Presley acknowledges how experimental poetry by both men and women can be expressive, but also suggests that a commitment to a socialist framework in male experimental writing often coincides with male critics' apparent discomfort with the feminism of Monk's texts, and how she portrays her female self. Whilst acknowledging the important influence of Bob Cobbing on Monk's poetry, Presley also points out how Monk has developed her practice to take into account the possibilities of concrete and sound poetry as a new form of communication, without withdrawing from an engagement with the debates of current politics and religion informed by gender.

Presley's reading of Monk's fourth poem in *La Quinta del Sordo* acknowledges the political resonances of a depiction of bullying as an allegory of Thatcherism and shows how the poem situates this in the context of children's games, as both preparation for the socialising and controlling games of adulthood and a means for surviving or resisting adulthood; showing how Monk's work was also bitterly aware of women's complicity with cruel and irrational policies during the Thatcher era. Presley explores how the experimental, the expressive and feminism persist and transform in the totality of Monk's oeuvre, taking a tour of *Noctivagations* (2001) before coming full circle with a consideration of 'Mary Through the Looking Glass.' Alert to Monk's interest in 'girls and women in real or imaginary prisons, rather than at play' Presley also makes a powerful connection with the image-theme of girlhood: linking the poem to 'the land of children's games, of grown up nonsense rhymes which might provide a means of escape.'

Elizabeth James undertakes an examination of the role of the visual in Monk's poetry on several fronts. Thematically she explores how the concern with eyes and seeing in Monk's poetry indicates an interest in 'the implications of visibility for the individual', particularly for the female individual. This is connected to the themes of witnessing and the notion of blindedness as a social condition in *Interregnum*, and the

making visible of those who are invisible, such as the incarcerated Mary Queen of Scots. Vision in Monk's work is also linked to memory and memorialisation, to prophecy and to human sympathy through weeping. This powerful gathering of concerns extends to a consideration of the visual appearance of the poem on the page itself: the role of layout and typography. As James argues:

The page as such has cultural valency: 'Centre' and 'margins' are socio-political and cultural categories also. Matters of practical poetics, such as prosody, typography and visual arrangement, can be held to imply and even to activate these categories.

James also includes in her discussion a consideration of the fact that many of Monk's books bear portraits of her, both photographic and graphic. Reading these images as varieties of experimental self-presentation, James points out how Monk once again confounds the false binary of experimentation and expressivity in her interest not only in disjunctive collage poetics but also in more traditional explorations of personae, dramatic or lyric. James concludes her discussion with a detailed account of Monk's book *Sky Scrapers* (1986). This poem-sequence, ostensibly 'about' clouds and the sky, explores the visual in many of the ways outlined above: thematically, James argues, the book rehabilitates the pathetic fallacy by turning clouds and sky, not into pseudo-people, but into sites or screens for the associative projections of language. Layout is used subtly to signal shifts or patterns in tone and argument, and the cover and frontispiece play an important role in placing such visions in an urban context. As James concludes, although Monk is not a practitioner of exclusively visual poetics, her work in this area is an important contribution to the development of visuality in poetry and such an approach is a key part of her commitment as a writer.

Chris Goode takes the importance of performance to Monk as a starting point for a discussion which focuses on the idea of voice: both on the page and in live and recorded performance. For Goode the idea of the 'outward movement' of the voice models the activity of Monk's poetry. Speculating on how the way in which a poem appears on the page can evoke a poet's voice (stylistically or individually), but does not, nevertheless, resemble the experience we have when we hear the poet herself read, Goode argues that the crucial element of performance is how the poet's voice is embodied. Monk's 2003 performance at the Camden People's Theatre (hosted by Goode) also reveals Monk's related concern with dis- or post-embodied voices, in her billing of her reading of other

poets' poems as a 'séance.' In Monk's important poetics text 'Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text' (2002) she discusses and perceives continuities between oppositions such as vocalised/unvocalised, private/public and dis/embodyed. Through this Goode builds up a picture of a poet engaged with the paradox that finding one's own voice is also to acknowledge the constraints of one's own body and socio-political identity. However, rather than seeing voice as a category to be stabilised, rather like the stylistic voice which can amount to a kind of brand identity, this situation is actually an opportunity.

For Goode, voice can be seen as a performed event rather than a static value: as Monk herself writes: 'To perform is to *in habit* space.' This has important consequences for Monk's practice and Goode explores this principally in relation to Monk's first CD collaboration with electro-acoustic composer Martin Archer: *Angel High Wires* (2001), where the treatment of the recorded voice creates all manner of creative opportunities. In relation to Monk's treatment of text on the page, Goode describes how she uses the full range of typographical devices available in modern word-processing packages to make possible on the page what isn't possible in the performed voice. Again, almost paradoxically, this contributes to further individuation of voice when the texts come to be read. Crucially, when the voices that concern Monk are those of others—Gerard Manley Hopkins or Mary Queen of Scots, for example—this complex set of shifting relations opens up imaginative space in which seemingly unbridgeable gaps between the past and present, between self and other suddenly become crossable.

It is this very possibility that is explored by Monk herself in her own contribution 'Collaborations with the Dead.' Working from a model of identity that acknowledges its psychological and physiological limits, Monk nevertheless affirms the human need and desire to overstep 'social, temporal, geographic and individual entrenchments.' Within the context of writing she identifies the means of this enquiry as experimentation with form and content, but argues that this too is ultimately limited, until it comes up with the possibility of disrupting itself via collaboration with an other. Acknowledging the frustrations and tensions of creative collaboration with other writers she also wittily posits an alternative, that is, collaboration with writers who are no longer living. Outlining the role of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry in Monk's composition of *Interregnum*, her use of Roman poets in 'Roman Rumourals' and use of Mary Queen of Scots' letters and poems in *Escafeld*

*Hangings*, Monk reveals a incisive visionary and revisionary practice which, whilst she acknowledges that it is necessarily conducted ‘without permission’, emerges as a deeply serious and engaged relationship with literary history. Monk’s ideas here are also given full illustration by the presentation of her collaboration with John Donne: ‘A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day.’

Monk’s poetics of collaboration finds a poignant analogue in the fact that the Companion is dedicated to the memory of the poet, artist, musician, publisher, teacher and actor Jeff Nuttall (1933–2004) who is also the author of the volume’s foreword; quite possibly one of the last pieces of writing he completed before his death in January 2004. Remarkably Nuttall was also the first person to ever review a book of Monk’s poetry and Monk has acknowledged the importance of Nuttall’s influence for her development as a writer, through her contact with him in Leeds in the 1970s. The gesture is a significant one as it also indicates the importance to Monk of her participation in the energetic, constantly-shifting and cross-disciplinary social networks that have attended the production of innovative writing over the past few decades—indeed, many of the contributors to this volume can be said to share in this context as fellow writers and performers as well as critics, musicians, actors, directors and visual artists, to many of whom Nuttall was also an inspirational figure. It is therefore fitting that this critical companion to the work of one of our most adventurous and talented poets should be carried out under the sign of Nuttall, as much as Monk’s work itself demonstrates the scope of its own developing importance in the landscape of contemporary British poetry.

Scott Thurston

## *Editor's Acknowledgements*

Geraldine Monk herself deserves a special mention for her support and involvement in this project from the start including granting permissions, making available copies of her books, advising contributors, giving bibliographical advice and offering her own material. Nate Dorward, Robert Sheppard and Gavin Selerie also contributed valuable bibliographical information and advice, for which I am most grateful. I would also like to thank Peter Griffiths for his image-making of the covers of Geraldine's books and for his keen and sympathetic understanding of the project. Thanks are also due to Lawrence Upton and Adrian Clarke for granting permission for the reproduction of the Writers Forum covers and to Peterjon and Yasmin Skelt for the reproduction of the North and South cover. Finally, I would like to thank the contributors themselves for their commitment, patience and dedication in creating this Companion.

Scott Thurston



## Geraldine Monk in Staithes

BILL GRIFFITHS

This brief survey looks at Geraldine's early work in print, during the time she was living near Staithes in North-East England.

In 1977 I was working in Germany, and my first contact with Geraldine was by post—I think Allen Fisher 'introduced' us. On returning to England, I was very pleased to be invited up to North Yorkshire to visit. Geraldine shared the stone-built extension to an old farmhouse with Bob Clark, the artist; this was inland from the fishing village of Staithes in a sheltered valley eventually accessible from the coast road. (The farmhouse was built half-way up the east side of the valley; according to geographers, this is the spring line, but if so it had since failed.)

Apart from the distant but unmissable Boulby Potash Mine to the north, the location was isolated and possibly idyllic. You could walk to Staithes, or catch the one-an-hour bus to Whitby (south) or Middlesbrough (north). Not far from the farm was the grand headland of Boulby, identified (inaccurately) in the nineteenth century as Beowulf's resting-place. It was all very bleak in winter—somehow it put Ted Hughes and *Crow* in mind—but warm and flowery in the summer, by which you can tell I was a moderately frequent visitor over the next few years.

We walked much, and must have talked a good deal (literature, art, music), but my impression is the landscape was less an influence on her initial work than the sense of isolation, her household with Bob, and (it may be) memories of Lancashire where she grew up.

In 1979, I encouraged Bob Cobbing of Writers Forum to publish a booklet of her poems. A little extra enthusiasm was needed, as Bob had just published booklets by two London poetesses and felt rather discouraged by the response they had received. Nonetheless, *Long Wake* went ahead, and justified not only its printing but its reprinting soon after. And so we have Geraldine's first 'book' in print.

This was a duplicated production, though the evenness of the type points to WF's 'golf-ball typewriter' stage (in 'Dream Two' there is a slightly emphatic 'a' where a typing error in a stencil has been daubed over and retyped). The cover—by Bob Clark—has titling and transformed visage (Geraldine was his favoured and nearest subject), and was printed, on the duplicator again, in two colours. The whole is side-stapled. (See p. 139 for an image of the cover.)

The title 'Long Wake' suggests the ambiguity of consciousness/oblivion; with memories and dreams forming the main subject matter; the closing poem, 'Lyke Wake', resolves this towards a whiteness of winter with references to the Cleveland poem 'Lyke Wake Dirge' (fifteenth/sixteenth century) and Eskimoesque chant, ending:

phosphorus	snow ghost
passing strangely now	
feline shivers of	
violet and blue ignite	
	caress this mute
	albino.
	(Monk, 2003, p. 9)

Layout and cultural awareness are important in this set of poems, as well as personal observation and effectiveness of word. The farm was remote, but its library was impressive—Bob's art books on van Gogh, Soutine, etc., a set of world music LPs, purchases, presents, a range of literature, little press material . . . (On checking this with Geraldine, she writes: 'Definitely would be reading Stein—I came across her when I was 17 . . . I would have been probably reading Lorca, Georg Trakl, Dylan Thomas (always Thomas!), Hopkins of course and the Beats, oh I was also big-big fan of Emily Dickinson at that time (hence my early love of long dashes!) and also everything that dropped through our letterbox').

The poems typically refer to Geraldine as a youngster in Lancashire, along with references to contemporary Cleveland, and involve impressions of place, family, childhood. The format is often geometrical, benefiting from fixed-space typing, and not so easy to achieve today. But here is the opening of 'Return of Dream One\*\*\*Pendulum' which uses a more continuous format:

The fish are / dead / lying open / mouthed / I / walk  
village / streetdown / towards / deathwake / cure I /  
have / biscuits soaked in / lemon / juicesky sea / at

mosphere lem / onjuice / the fish / willwake / willmake /  
lively as Scaling / Dam in Spring /

(Monk, 2003, p. 6)

Lugubriousness, language, and the stillness of winter (alert to Spring).



A second book from Writers Forum in 1980 was titled *La Quinta del Sordo* ('The house of the deaf man')—the reference being to the little house Goya lived in outside Madrid 1819–1824. The title poem is followed by 5 poems, each relating to one engraving in Goya's series of 22 'Disparates' (Foolishnesses or Proverbs). These are: 1. *El Caballo Raptor* (the horse abductor—showing a woman falling from a rearing horse) 2. *Disparate Ridículo* (ridiculous foolishness—showing people nesting on a tree branch) 3. *Disparate Desordenado* (disorderly nightmare—a standing man, joined from head to waist with a woman, gestures at a lunatic—a detail of this etching is used on the booklet's cover—see p. 139 for an image of it) 4. *La Lealtad* (I find this one difficult to interpret; Geraldine kindly supplied this summary: 'A figure sits dead centre with what I find is almost a serene expression (in Goya terms) with a dog cowering under its legs whilst other figures dance round her pointing and taunting (I think it's female—well I read the figure so). I don't like this title at all as it seems to me an utter misreading—I see the central figure as the epitome of passive resistance—quite the opposite of loyalty. The viewpoint of the poem is taken from the taunting figures.') 5. *Disparate de Miedo* (a proverb of terror—a gigantic phantom,—'Whether of war or death or common sense (!) I'm not sure'—looms over tiny human figures—'weeny soldiers (yes they seem to be soldiers)').

A cautionary note at the back explains that these titles are not Goya's and indeed the images have a brooding, gnomic ambiguity—but some description is advisable as the poems take the form of fantasias prompted by the original etchings.

The title poem, 'La Quinta del Sordo', describes the horrors that crowded Goya's imagination at this time—'sweet and sticky leeches of twilight'—exerting unendurable mental pressure: 'How tight grew your creatures of myth | How tight grew the monkey wrench' (Monk, 2003, p. 19).

The first 'print' poem relates to the sense of horse (aligned left on the page) and falling woman (aligned right on the page). The text then

changes to a single central column, describing the general impression of an 'airquake' and something of the artistic process:

unblinking  
the eye of a squid  
devours  
their future shadows  
stretched and melted wax  
frozen

(Monk, 2003, p. 20)

For the second print, the poem opens with an apposite sense of the ludicrous:

We are gathered here today  
because peacocks are pretty birds  
and perfect monsters of iridescence

(Monk, 2003, p. 21)

The image of people in a tree is seen in terms of imminent disaster ('stumbled and tumbled viciously | off its floating circles' (Monk, 2003, p. 21)), the folly underlined by their un-consciousness of the risk they are in:

but we will not follow such wandering disasters  
we are too smug and swinging  
happy from this bough and bony thing

(Monk, 2003, p. 21)

The third poem centres on the 'siamese' image of the gesturing figure and its load 'fused in trepidation' (Monk, 2003, p. 22). Before them is an 'obese gutter pressing crowd' while the lunatic seems invoked in the reference to 'black marrow gape' (Monk, 2003, p. 22). The closing lines carry (perhaps) a further reference to the print as print:

Come now  
Let us beckon  
Let us reckon hard  
with this block vengeance

(Monk, 2003, p. 22)

The fourth opens with an image of rotation—'here we go sound around the one in the middle who we | shall riddle' (Monk, 2003, p. 23). The lines are set continuously in a justified block, extra spacing indicating the performed pause; the tensions and silliness of strained relationships conveyed more by frequent rhyme and word transformation ('choke/spoke', 'blind/find/d eye' (Monk, 2003, p. 23)). As for the ties of loyalty:

for a while just tow the line and you'll be        perhaps  
and maybe wet with sweet dew if the morning ever   or  
never

(Monk, 2003, p. 23)

The fifth and last poem climaxes with a narrow centralised column of verse, echoing the fearsome towering phantom of Goya's print, and emphatic with a frequent use of block capitals making the vertical image seem taller and stronger (in the etching, the scale of the phantom is indicated by a comparison with a diminutive tree). Beside the phantom itself, with 'low BELLOWING shroud' are references to war ('blood-rowned', 'DRUM', 'BRITTLE WEAPON') and the sequence ends with a 'SH | OUT' (Monk, 2003, p. 24).

The foolishnesses are seen (I suggest) in terms of human relations and their insane incongruities. Ostensibly an exercise in terror, the etchings are extended here to suggest a range of human frailties and challenging situations that make a very intense literature. A variety of formats is employed, and typically a sense of word sound and word play. The page size is now A4, with in each case a poem taking one page. The text is generated on a fixed-space typewriter, the printing being by photocopier in the second edition of 1990; binding by staples left. This is an awkward format for bookshops, but as Writers Forum distributed almost none of its publications by formal channels, this mattered little, and poem size and shape is allowed to dictate the larger page size.



Slightly earlier than the above is what we might call an 'art book', *Rotations*, published by Geraldine's own Siren Press in 1979. In this case the poems are interleaved with original woodcuts by Robert Clark, in varying coloured inks. The text was set and printed litho and the book assembled by Tony Ward of Arc & Throstle Press, Todmorden, with the