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Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh

‘Gender’

Carole Jones (University of Edinburgh)

Irvine Welsh is infamous for his representations of men and masculinity, most notoriously his ‘hard men’ such as *Trainspotting*’s Begbie and Roy Strang in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. However, beyond the widely felt shock and awe of his engagement with such ‘toxic’ masculinities (‘ladlit of a misogynistic kind for the *Loaded* crowd’ (Morace 2007a: 128)), his texts also effectively play with the boundaries of gender identity in the context of *fin de siècle* anxiety regarding unstable, changing gender roles. In light of this transitional moment, this chapter examines the trajectory of gender representations in Welsh’s work and questions the implications of the more recent though slowly documented increase in visibility of women in his texts.

Many critics would agree with Stefan Herbrechter when he states that Welsh writes ‘above all, about the dissolution of patriarchy and the de(con)struction of masculinity’ (2000: 109). Moreover, there is also recognition that this involves an ‘unprogrammable inclusion of a broad range of gender identities as a natural part of his fictional world’ (Morace 2007a: 27). However, it is the gender *relations* portrayed in Welsh’s fiction that give pause for thought to this potentially optimistic reading. In narratives in which men and women usually only come together for sex, depicting the dissonant pleasures of a rarely breachable gulf between them, but also often intimating the violent potential of male sexuality (shockingly realised in the lengthy portrayal of a gang rape in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*), Welsh’s delineation of gender relations along with the visceral existence of male and female bodies have encouraged commentators to employ such labels as ‘the aesthetics of repulsion’ (Riach 2005: 45) to describe his work. Within such a putatively dystopian gender context, though, the trajectory of gender representation referred to above does present us with a greater visibility and presence of women in Welsh’s more recent fictions, culminating in the co-authored script for the 2007 television drama *Wedding Belles*, his first major narrative to feature exclusively female protagonists.

This turn to femininity has prompted Robert Morace for one to comment that in this later work Welsh seems ‘to be trying to make amends and to prove that he can “do” women’ (2007a: 128). But more significantly the representation of women

prompts the question of whether these narratives, as is Welsh's professed desire (see Kelly 2005: 121), succeed in exposing the sexist workings of a patriarchal society at the end of its legitimacy? Or do they, as some critics argue in relation to the earlier novels (for instance, Jackson and Maley 2000; Schoene-Harwood 2000), continue to reproduce that which they are intended to critique, namely, oppressive representations of women? Do the later fictions, in effect, promote a 'repositioning of traditional gender roles' (Schoene 2004: 141) or are Welsh's women merely 'dragged up' men, 'XX-chromosome versions of the lads' (Campbell 2001: 8)? This particular critique will form an important strand of investigation in this chapter.

The gender inversion of this latter image suggests that the Bakhtinian concept of the 'carnavalesque' maybe a useful touchstone in thinking about Welsh's engagement with gender. This is a prominent feature of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogism', his theories regarding the dialogic or relational nature of language and the novel form which have been popularly applied to much Scottish writing and Welsh's fiction in particular. Roderick Watson, for example, has commented that 'the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogical processes, Rabelaisian excess and heteroglossia have become very valuable models for defining and discussing the Scottish literary and cultural tradition' (1997: 5). With regard to Welsh, these concepts are often employed in reference to his language, his use of the vernacular in particular, as 'the interplay of a multiplicity of voices ... fully embodies Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* [and] revels in ... over-turnings of received meanings' (Kelly 2005: 25). However, it is the piquant reversals of the 'scary carnival' (Riach 2005: 41) of Welsh's writing which exuberantly evoke such a reading here.

Carnival, Bakhtin's 'most popular and clichéd concept' (Pearce 1994: 54), refers to a range of tendencies in literary representations which 'involve the temporary cessation, overturning or inversion of the world of monological authority and orthodoxy and the erupting of the liberating forces of lawless proliferation and renewal' (Morace 2007a: 19). This concept has its origins in the medieval carnival which 'temporarily suspended and upturned the orthodox hierarchy and allowed, quite literally, the people their "voices"' (Pearce 1994: 55). It is a parodic and relativizing strategy, then, which subverts repressive authority and 'constructs a cynical linguistic distance between the two voices or perspectives [the parody and its source], causing them to interrogate each other's "truth", thereby refuting either's claim to unitary, uncontested "Truth"' (Morris 1993: 155). A major feature for Bakhtin is the

‘grotesque realism’ of the carnivalesque, with, as Mary Russo points out, particular emphasis on the ‘grotesque body’:

The open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. (Russo 1986: 219)

Welsh’s writing is of course replete with images of such excess, not least in *Trainspotting*, the beginning of his publishing success. The ‘First Day of the Edinburgh Festival’ section with its notorious opium suppository episode – made more infamous if less filthy by the film version – is an obvious example, as Renton’s rebellious, heroin-starved body seeks sudden and urgent relief: ‘Ah empty my guts, feeling as if everything; bowel, stomach, intestines, spleen, liver, kidneys, heart, lungs and fucking brains are aw falling through ma arsehole intae the bowl’ (Welsh 1994: 25). Traditionally associated with women, leaky bodies feature prominently in a later episode, ‘Eating Out’, when waitress Kelly has her revenge on some obnoxious English ‘white-settler type’ (302) customers by lacing their food with her own bodily excretions including menstrual blood and urine.

The carnivalesque transgression of order may at first glance appear positive for representations of the feminine, the overturning of established hierarchies suggesting an undermining of power relations which can be shown to benefit women in the struggle to resist their inferior social positioning. But Kate Webb points out that the appropriation of carnival for feminist purposes is not as straight forward a strategy as some would wish. ‘Women and carnival’ she writes, ‘might, ultimately, be inimical because female biology and the fact of motherhood make women an essentially connecting force, while carnival is essentially the celebration of transgression and breakdown’ (1994: 301). Webb here, intentionally or not, fixes women in a manner which Welsh resists, marginalising and often expelling from his texts mothers and the nurturing, connective power of mothering. Yet in Welsh the resistance to order manifests itself in a ‘truly, frighteningly, carnivalesque’ world of ‘violence, homophobia, the most profound sexism, male rage and rape’ (Watson 1997: 13). Webb is identifying such a situation when she points out:

When women become the object of this disorder – as they are in war, or in rape, or in ‘kiddiporn’ – then the idea of carnival becomes much more problematic for

them, and their relation to it becomes an inevitably ambivalent one ... carnival is as likely to defeat women as it is to bring down order. (Webb 1994: 305)

Does the carnival aspect of Welsh's writing illustrate Webb's thesis that 'patriarchy relies upon such masculine transgression of order as a reminder and a symbol of the very force which shores it up' (305)? And does it ultimately serve to highlight what Jackson and Maley identify as 'a lacuna in Welsh's work, the question of female agency' (2000: 193).

Certainly Welsh's women are 'more strictly delimited by the directives of plot and their relationships with men than by their own character and motivation' (Riach 2005: 40). In effect their identities have a greater fixity in comparison with the men who are often more adaptable to circumstances, adept performers of their identities and effective mimics of multiple discourses and language registers. Renton, for instance, often displays his 'skill in negotiating a subversive path through the implications of power in language' (Kelly 2005: 53) as he 'code switches' between the Leith vernacular and Standard English, most impressively in court when, to avoid a custodial sentence for shoplifting, he avers that he intended to read the stolen books and not to sell them, and gives an eloquent account of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy (Welsh 1994: 165–6). Performance is also emphasised in the 'Equal Opportunities' section of *Filth* where police inspector Bruce Robertson intersperses the sexist, racist, expletive laden language of his thoughts with a command of the discourses of political correctness in order to undermine the running of an anti-racism course he has been forced to attend. Women, traditionally associated with a lack of authenticity and presence, with mimicry and performance (see, for example, Riviere 1986), are denied this postmodern multiplicitous shape-changing. In *Trainspotting* for instance, 'whilst the names of the female characters remain fixed ... the male figures are subject to continually shifting designations' (Kelly 2005: 50) in their multiple nicknames.

Though for Kelly this emphasises a sense of masculinity in crisis, these slippery male identities may also be interpreted as appropriating those characteristics often associated with femininity – a lack of authenticity and presence emphasised in the masquerade and performativity of identity. In Welsh's earlier fiction where female characters are relatively sparse and marginalised this can amount to a 'colonization of femininity' in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's words, 'so that what has been rendered peripheral and marginal in the social and cultural realm, or actively devalued, is

effectively incorporated within the compass of masculinity' (1995: 73). This can amount to the exclusion of women from representation and a more complicated designation of the feminine. For example, an expulsion of the feminine principle is most dramatically executed in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* where the rape victim Kirsty takes her own personal revenge on her attackers, murdering them one by one. When at the end of the novel she tells Roy, the principle perpetrator of the crime, before killing him, 'you've made me just like you' (Welsh 1996: 259), she is effectively masculinized, leaving him at the close of the narrative as the main, perhaps the only, victim. The 'lacuna' of female agency, then, becomes 'an eradication of sexual difference' (Schoene-Harwood 2000: 156), a disappearance of the feminine (see also Jones 2006).

However, in line with Soloman-Godeau's ideas, it is possible to detect an attempt at reconnection with the feminine in a significant number of Welsh's narratives, which often takes the form of an unhappy queering of the male body. A number of homosexuals, transsexuals, drag queens and transvestites populate the work, lacing the texts with a notion of feminised masculinity. For instance, Welsh rightly discerns that there is a feminine aspect to the hysterical explosive violence of the hard man, as in this satirical portrait from his novella 'A Smart Cunt':

One thing about hard cunts that I've never understood: why do they all have to be such big sensitive blouses? The Scottish Hardman ladders his tights so he rips open the face of a passer-by. The Scottish Hardman chips a nail, so he head-butts some poor fucker. Some other guy is wearing the same patterned dress as the Scottish Hardman, and gets a glass in his face for his troubles. (Welsh 1995: 276)

The marginalisation of women itself promotes a proliferation of other(ed) femininities, part of Morace's 'broad range of gender identities', as masculinity seeks to define itself in relation. These include 'the gorgeous young queen' (Welsh 1994: 233) Renton picks up who 'looked like this lassie ah used tae fancy ages ago' (234); Denise the drag queen in 'A Smart Cunt' who 'embarrasses most homosexuals' and 'loves to be hated' (Welsh 1995: 243); Chrissie the 'scarred' (20) male-to-female transsexual in 'Eurotrash'; Bernard, Roy's 'broken-spirited pansy half-brother' (Welsh 1996: 30) in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*.

The most extreme example, however, is in *Filth* where cross-dressing and female impersonation signal the limits of a psychotic dissociation. The novel is a

vigorous exposure and humiliation of the sexist male, embodied in corrupt policeman Bruce Robertson. His relentless misanthropy expresses a desire to cause pain which in itself is an attempt to offset his own shame instilled in him through an abusive, neglectful childhood and the circumstances of his own birth as the illegitimate child of an infamous rapist. Through this issue Welsh roguishly explores and complicates the question of 'evil' and whether it is produced through nature or nurture as the novel frenetically spins out its carnivalesque narrative into a melee of disorder and misrule overturning the moral weightiness of all authority and argument. The law enforcer is a hard-drinking, drug-taking, corrupt sociopath, which is not in itself an original strategy; the rude satire of the piece comes in giving the voice of reason to the tapeworm in his gut: 'I know for sure that the complexity of my soul doesn't even start to approximate the basic organism that is my body' says the worm, and, in a parody of Cartesian subjectivity, it continues, 'So what can I call myself then? Well, all I can call myself is the Self' (Welsh 1998: 70). However, the celebratory chaos of the carnivalesque is certainly strained here, and indeed the malicious sexism and racism voiced in the novel can certainly be taken as 'a sign of the resentment that is the inverse of carnival's joyous relativity and that results when carnival turns bitter' (Morace 2007a: 92). Joyous does not describe the reconnection with the feminine enacted in this narrative in Bruce's 'incorporation' and mimicry of his wife Carole. This is a sign of his complete disintegration – a psychic fragmenting of selfhood that parallels the breakdown of his body – which ultimately results in his suicide. The sections of the novel which initially appear to be narrated by Bruce's estranged wife – titled 'Carole', 'Carole Again', etc. – we gradually realise are projections of Bruce's own consciousness:

We're remembering how this all started: that when Carole first left with the bairn we used to set the table for two and then we started wearing her clothes and it was like she was still with us but no really. (Welsh 1998: 343)

Bruce's cross-dressing is a symptom of the all-male, sexist dystopia he inhabits where women are not subjects in themselves, but 'objects upon which male subjects project their fears and anxieties' (Kelly 2005: 165). So reconnection with the feminine here is more an attempt to realise a male fantasy and only highlights the marginalisation of women in Welsh's fictional worlds.

From this point of view *Filth* constitutes a turning point in Welsh's oeuvre, the place on the trajectory after which these queered characters largely disappear and

women begin to become more prominent and narratively significant. Such a move can be thought of as an attempt, though a slowly realised one, to reverse the ‘colonization’ of femininity and give women a voice and an opportunity to be heard among Welsh’s cacophonous heteroglossia, a form of reparation but also proof that he ‘can “do” women’. The next novel *Glue*, an expansive narrative about male friendship and bonding over the period of a generation, has the ‘novelty’ of a group of women characters, introduced late in part four, ‘who have their own stories to tell and whose lives are, at least initially, perfectly unrelated to that of the men’ (Schoene 2004: 140). In *Porno*, a sequel to *Trainspotting* which takes as its subject the ‘do-it-yourself’ dimension of the pornography industry, one of the four narrators, Nikki Fuller-Smith, is a young middle-class English woman, a student at Edinburgh University who seeks fame in becoming a porn star. It is a cogent irony that female characters are more vocal and visible at the point where, as critics have observed, Welsh’s fiction starts to become more conventional. In *Glue* he ‘jettisons the radical typographical and technical experimentation’ to write a ‘proper book’ (Kelly 2005: 175–6), in which for Morace ‘much of the writing seems canned or a combination of the inept and the inapt ... stale language for equally stale ideas’ (2007a: 124); while *Porno* is a ‘flaccid read’ (Morace 2007b: 228). The radically decentring formal initiatives of the earlier narratives seem tamed by this incorporation of the feminine.

However, this increased female visibility is characteristically Welshian in many ways. These women are often irreverent and exuberant; they indulge in drink, drugs and sex with enthusiasm, and speak the vernacular with equally colourful fervour. They are overturning the dominant scripts of femininity; like the women Maria Pini describes with reference to rave culture, these female characters explore ‘a right to adventure’, and insist on indulging in the same ‘illegal adventures which have traditionally been primarily the preserve of men’ (Pini 2001: 170). Welsh has taken up this idea throughout his fiction, but in a particularly parodic manner in a previous short story, ‘Where the Debris Meets the Sea’ in *The Acid House*. Here four iconic female celebrities, Madonna, Kylie, Victoria Principal and Kim Basinger languish in a luxury Californian mansion entertaining themselves by fantasising over magazines and videos of sexy young Leith men. To complete the comic reversal, they speak in the Leith vernacular: “‘We’ll nivir go tae fuckin Leith!’” Kim said, in a tone of scornful dismissal. “‘Yous ur fuckin dreamin.’” (Welsh 1995: 92). Such representations prompt the accusation that Welsh’s women are simply loutish and

laddish, who by turning the tables on men are merely mimicking them and not undermining the oppressive and objectifying system of interpersonal relations that frames this behaviour; they are ultimately ‘dragged up’ men. Schoene for one disagrees with the generalised sweep of this critique, seeing Lisa and Charlene in *Glue*, for instance, ‘as emancipated females, who categorically reject woman’s inferior place’ (2004: 140). And moreover:

What seems more significant is that Welsh portrays his women characters as capable of forming strong homosocial bonds, without the mediation of men, and that their practices of resistance and self-assertion are presented to us as a true alternative to the men’s ... What ensues is a dramatic deconstruction of traditional gender polarity, and the tentative beginnings of a radical communal reassembling. (Schoene 140–1)

Ending as the novel does on the death of the father of one of the four staunch male friends, and signalling the passing of the traditional male values he stood for, perhaps Schoene is right in promoting this optimistic reading.

Such a theory can be put to a more stringent test in a text that does prioritise female experience. The television film *Wedding Belles* has four women protagonists and explores their friendship and bonding in difficult circumstances. In this it follows a popular Welsh model of narratives of male bonding such as *Trainspotting* and *Glue*, and the dominant themes of drugs, violence, ribald humour, carnivalesque sexuality and the corporeal pleasure and pain of the ‘grotesque’ body do at first glance suggest that these are female versions of Welsh’s familiar ‘stock’ of male characters. This impression is only strengthened by Welsh’s own assertion in his comments on this film on his website that ‘I liked the girls so much that I wanted to be one of them and so got dragged up’ (in the ‘extras’ to the DVD edition of the film we see him in the process of accomplishing this, sat in front of a dressing room mirror being made up by a professional make-up artist, though we do not see the completed transformation). Knowing Welsh’s penchant for irreverent and anti-establishment male characterisation, our attention is thus drawn to the possibility that he may only be able to create characters from a masculinised point of view. But this might also suggest, in light of Morace’s accusation, for instance, that ‘Welsh has lost his distinctive voice and, with it, the “bunch of voices shouting to be heard” that made his early fiction so urgent, unpretentious and compellingly local’ (2007b: 234), that a feminisation of his characters may be one way in which to refresh his ‘jaded’ (Morace 2007a: 124)

literary corpus. Such an injection of femininity to invigorate a supine masculinised form could only serve to further the colonisation and objectification of the feminine which undermines the subversive potential of literary carnival where women are concerned.

Certainly *Wedding Belles* has enough of the carnivalesque about it to make us wary on this count. Interjected fantasy murder sequences, a ‘saints and sinners’ fancy dress party, senior citizen sexuality and an irreverent anti-political-correctness humour all contribute to a raucous upturning of established hierarchies. However, its sustained focus on female experience does foreground serious consideration of the particular material detail of female oppression: the sexual abuse of girl children and the resulting pregnancy; the effects of trauma; cosmetic surgery and its violent enacting of a fascistic conceptualisation of the female body all contribute to the specific oppressive timbre of women’s lives represented here. Indeed, hairdresser Amanda’s displaying of her labiaplasty, her ‘designer vagina’, to her cleaning woman and praising it as ‘perfectly symmetrical’ illustrates how cosmetic surgery engages with and promotes the image of the smooth, sleek classical body. Of course this moment is also a carnivalesque one as exposing genitals in a public place upsets all standards of decorum and propriety; and this allusion to these transfigured, mut(il)ated female genitals evokes the countercultural connotations of the grotesque body – we acknowledge the excess that is absent as well as the smoothness that is present.

The boundaries of femininity are pressurised in *Wedding Belles*. The opening of the narrative introduces a female revenge tale where the four women, in wedding dresses and a transit van, kidnap and execute four men who have betrayed them. Though this sequence turns out to be a fantasy – a crack-withdrawal dream of Rhona’s – the relationships alluded to here are intimately connected to the women’s lives. The four women are old mates, abrasively affectionate and aggressively supportive of each other. Amanda is a successful business woman, running her own beauty salon, and the narrative is framed by the preparations for her wedding to Joshua, an ostensibly clean-living pilot who in reality has been stealing money from her to fund his internet gambling addiction. Sharon or Shaz is a care worker who is having an affair with a priest. Rhona is a former model whose suicidal descent into drug addiction has been triggered by the death of her fiancé in car crash caused by a joyrider. Kelly, the most tragic of the four, was abused by her father and gave birth to

a son who has been brought up in the family as her brother. These stories of loss and yearning give rise to the revenge fantasy in which the women's ritual execution of their oppressors signifies their rebellion against lives circumscribed by exploitation and betrayal.

There is, then, from the opening of the film, a carnivalised reversal of gender expectations. The women are costumed in wedding dresses, the stereotypical uniform of traditionally acceptable femininity, while behaving like a criminal gang, flaunting violent power over others and brandishing with expert style the masculine accessories of the transit van and the gun. However, this fantasy of female dominance is followed immediately by a nightmare evocation, dreamed by Amanda, of her wedding reception in which Josh is a perverse master of ceremonies, lewdly exhibiting and manipulating her and inviting the serial killers Fred and Rosemary West on their honeymoon. This spontaneous combustion of the fantasy of female dominance constitutes a warning against celebrating too quickly the appropriation of masculinised power by women. In this we can interpret it as a further problematisation of the close of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* with its re-centering of the male as victim, and as a thought experiment which deliberately questions the possibilities of female power, whether masculinised or otherwise, in a misogynist culture. The humiliation of Amanda in the nightmare is an equally tenable expression of the carnival context, when so much of the effective overturning and undermining of social conventions and hierarchies revolves on emphasising and exaggerating improper behaviour where, as Webb says, women are not subjects but 'the object of disorder'. As Russo points out:

The marginal position of women and others in the 'indicative' world makes their presence in the 'subjective' or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival 'quintessentially' dangerous ... In the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive – dangerous, and in danger. (Russo 1986: 217)

As carnival misrule is by definition a temporary state, in many ways a licensed disorder, the empowering in any manner of the marginal marginalised, such as women, is a dangerous precedent not without effects when the status quo is restored. Even in its modes of disorder, there must be 'a reminder and a symbol', in Webb's words, of patriarchy's power.

Other questionable implications of hierarchical reversals are highlighted in *Wedding Belles*, particularly regarding Amanda's partners, her fiancé Joshua and her ex-fiancé Barney, an armed robber who has just been released after his latest jail sentence. Having rejected Barney because of his lying and criminal activity, Amanda is betrayed by Josh's embezzlement of her business capital in a parodic overturning of the hero-villain coupling. Dressed in angelic wings for the 'saints and sinners' party Josh's aura of wholesome innocence is exposed as a performance, while Barney is recuperated into respectable society through his marriage to Amanda's 'nemesis' – a woman with a disability previously attacked by Amanda – at a wedding attended by the four women at the close of the narrative. Barney's rehabilitation from criminal to respectable citizen is initially enacted, however, at his 'coming out' party – that is, his coming out of prison celebration – when, in a scene of soft focus, sentimental sensuality, he dances solo, circled by admiring friends, to a love and life-affirming soul soundtrack. This performance signals his reform from hard man to husband; it civilises him, disarming through synchronisation the threat of disorder he symbolises and signalling his access to a more feminine sphere, dancing being an activity traditionally associated with femininity (Pini 2001: 49). Witnessing Barney's wedding, the four female protagonists contemplate their own failure in their personal quests to find a place in mainstream society through the traditional female narrative closure of marriage. They are left to carry on as they were, Shaz with the priest, Rhona scoring drugs, and Amanda and Kelly chasing romance with new men. This lack of conclusion in their stories suggests their continued social marginalisation and reinforces their status as dangerous and transgressive.

At the end of *Wedding Belles*, then, the implication is that the women, as the outsiders, are really the only subversives in the social scene, still willing and able to destabilise the dominant social hierarchies and relations. The re-incorporation of the criminal into the social family constitutes a re-establishing of the status quo and, in effect, a re-centering of the disruptive marginal male. His marrying a woman with a disability signals the widening berth of that social mainstream, but also its maintenance under the norms and values of the patriarchal centre. This rush to embourgeoisment, suggested by Barney's running to the church, illustrates the ambivalence of Welsh's carnival strategies and the stalling of their disruption. As with Renton's rush to individualism in the betrayal of his mates at the end of *Trainspotting* – 'Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be.

He'd stand or fall alone' (Welsh 1994: 344) – Welsh's disruptive male characters are contradictory, at once anarchic and conventional, signalling the limitations of his carnivalesque subversion in an age and for a generation for whom 'the conflation of subcultural dissent and entrepreneurial capitalism holds no contradiction' (Monk 1996: 285).

Yet, in light of the trajectory of his engagement with gender relations and this latter representation of seriously seditious women, are the revolutionary inconsistencies and frequent annihilation of Welsh's male characters symptomatic of a masculine inability, except through colonisation, to connect with the feminine and its potential for invigorating, revitalising critical disruption? It is significant, for instance, that in *Wedding Belles* the four female protagonists are left marginalised and a continuing threat to order, but they are also given the moral upper-hand in contrast to many of Welsh's men as the worst of the women's violence is contained in fantasies. They are capable of aggression: in one scene an indifferent Amanda gives Shaz and Kelly permission to attack a man they think has stolen his mother's purse; and, poignantly, Kelly reveals that she was responsible for starting the fire which killed her father, but in which she also intended to die. This (sometimes passive) aggressive self-defence circumscribes the women's capability for violence as controlled and judicious even, as if resigned to the occasional need to indulge a masculinised approach to conflict resolution in the light of a misogynist society's inability to dispense justice for women. These aggressive acts can be seen as women's 'practices of resistance and self-assertion', in Schoene's words, even if they do not constitute 'a true alternative to the men's' (2004: 140). However, where in *Wedding Belles* the men are passively complicit with the dominant culture, unwilling to rock the status quo, this female resistance, sometimes violent, to male exploitation and cruelty evokes Schoene's desire for 'a turbulent reshuffling' and 'communal reassembling' (141) of gender roles and relations, a process of repositioning which is beginning to be imagined here.

Such radical possibilities arguably spring from female resistance to dominant hegemonic femininity, as with the raucous portrayal of the women in *Wedding Belles*. Clair Wills writes of Klaus Theweleit's argument in *Male Fantasies* that in presenting a 'different history of the creation of bourgeois identity ... he stresses the part played by a fantasy construction of womanhood in the evolution of a "civilised" ego', that this distorted fantasy arises from 'a historically repressed

femaleness' (2001: 93). Such constructions, as expressed in Bruce Robertson's mimicking of his wife Carole, are resisted by Amanda, Shaz, Rhona and Kelly, both in their fantasies and in their waking lives. As agents of anti-bourgeois disaffection, they are Welsh's only potential subversives. Yet they also sound warning bells about the effectiveness of the carnivalesque for promoting social change, particularly where women are concerned. The film performs a judgement on Welsh's use of carnival over the span of his oeuvre, impelling us to re-read his fiction's attempts to contain, disarm and co-opt disruptive female power from the point of view of the subversive feminine.

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