

Kathleen Jamie and Kathryn Stripling Byer: Re-envisioning a Poetics of Place in Scottish and Southern Literature

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In the culture of both Scotland and the American South, “the land”—both politically and romantically conceived—has been at the heart of each region’s distinctiveness, evoking memories of a noble and glorious past and a fierce commitment to freedom, but also conveying a unique sensitivity to natural beauty. Both traditions, however, have been prone to backward glances, if not romanticizing Highlanders or Southern plantation culture, then wrestling with what these images mean to the modern world. Therefore, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, neither region has entirely shed traditions that are predominately masculine, for the past carries with it a sense of the land as feminine—to be conquered or defended or cherished—and the heroes of the land as masculine. Plantation lords may have been replaced by Southern politicians espousing “family values” and Highland warriors by Scottish MP’s touting “Land Reform,” but, regardless of the worthiness of their causes, both Scottish and Southern cultures have been slow to shed a masculine point of reference.

At the same time, given each region’s dependence on and connection to the land, ties to nature provide a powerful motif for the literature of both Scotland and the South, especially in a time when the future of each literature is being called into question. While Scottish writers seem a bit more secure in their refusal to be swallowed up by “British literature,” Southern writers frequently worry that their tradition is dying, soon to be completely assimilated into the mass of American literature.

This combination of circumstances provides unique opportunities for contemporary women poets, particularly those with distinct ties to the land. Focusing on Jamie’s *The Queen of Sheba* and *Jizzen* and Kathryn Stripling Byer’s *Black Shawl* and *Wildwood Flower*, this paper will offer an analysis of the poetics of place each writer creates through her work. Both Jamie and Byer describe their connection to the land on several levels. First, both offer a distinct picture of the literal place—Scotland and the Appalachian Mountains—and their poetry defines this space in very specific terms. At the same time, each place resonates with symbolic meaning, both personal and communal. Finally, the land takes on spiritual significance for each writer, endowing the landscape with archetypal significance. In all instances, it is the relationship to the land that gives the poetry force. By re-envisioning landscape and creating their own “poetics of place,” writers such as Jamie and Byer demonstrate that they have the power not only to sustain the literary tradition, but to transform it.