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"So This Is Women's Work": Maternal Identity and Elemental Instability in Kathleen Jamie's *Jizzen*

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Acknowledgements

To my grandmother Ani, because the Tooth Fairy also visited her home.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how Kathleen Jamie's *Jizzen* (1999) presents motherhood as a process of transformation marked by contradiction, disorientation, and renewal. The main objective is to explore how Jamie's poetic language and imagery reflect the instability of maternal identity. Focusing on five poems, "Ultrasound", "Bolus", "The Tay Moses", "Thaw", and "St. Bride's", it addresses the research question of how Jamie uses natural, mythological, and cultural imagery to express the shifting and porous nature of maternal identity. The thesis statement is that Jamie portrays motherhood not as a fixed role but as a continuously evolving state shaped by loss, instinct, memory, and connection.

Drawing on feminist psychoanalysis, maternal studies, and ecofeminist theory, each chapter traces a different stage of maternal experience: from the medical alienation of pregnancy to the intimacy of feeding, the fear of separation, and the reclaiming of identity through myth and ecological symbolism. Rather than resolving these tensions, Jamie leaves them open, presenting maternal identity as fragmented and constantly evolving. Her work resists idealisation and foregrounds the mental and emotional labour of becoming a mother. In doing so, *Jizzen* presents maternal experience as a personal process shaped by nature, history, and the continuous negotiation of identity.

Keywords: *Jizzen*, Kathleen Jamie, motherhood, Scottish literature, feminist theory

Introduction

For as long as human life has existed, so have mothers. This role has been central to the survival and continuity of communities, across species and centuries. As primary caregivers, mothers shape both the physical and emotional development of their young, becoming the architects of the next generation. Yet, despite its essential place in the world, the complexities of motherhood have long been overlooked and simplified in art, culture, and public life. "I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional'," Adrienne Rich reflects, "and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity" (22-23). Rich's observation reflects how, though often idealised, maternal identity is shaped by pressure, uncertainty, and the erosion of the self. This dissertation stems from those tensions and explores how Kathleen Jamie's poetry engages with the reshaping of the self in the context of motherhood, both physically and psychologically. It considers how her use of natural, folkloric, and cultural imagery opens space for a maternal voice that is fragmented, instinctive, and continually evolving.

Appointed Scotland's fourth Makar in 2021, Jamie is known for her ecological sensibility and her portrayal of human experience through the natural world. This project focuses on five poems of her 1999 collection *Jizzen*: "Ultrasound", "Bolus", "The Tay Moses", "Thaw", and "St. Bride's", each exploring different stages of maternal transformation. Together, they present speakers shaped by rupture, devotion, memory, and myth, moving between closeness and distance, instinct and social expectation.

The aim of this dissertation is to examine how Jamie presents motherhood as a paradox in which the self is both dissolved and reformed. The research question that guides the analysis is how Jamie's use of natural, mythological, and cultural imagery reflects the instability of maternal identity. The thesis statement is that she portrays it as

a fluid state shaped by physical, emotional, and symbolic forces. Through close reading and contextual analysis, the dissertation traces how her use of imagery and poetic form express the instability of maternal identity and the emotions that are often overlooked or excluded from public conversation.

This study draws on feminist psychoanalytic theory, maternal studies, and ecofeminist criticism. While previous scholars, such as Emily Blewitt and Timothy Baker, have addressed aspects of Jamie's ecological and maternal writing, this dissertation offers a focused reading of *Jizzen* that places the experience of motherhood at the centre.

1. Alienation and Devotion – "Ultrasound" and "Bolus"

This section explores the tensions between alienation and devotion in the experience of motherhood as represented in Kathleen Jamie's "Ultrasound" and "Bolus". It first explores how "Ultrasound" highlights the mother's sense of detachment from her own body and the impact of medicalisation on her agency. Then, it examines "Bolus", which reclaims maternal agency through physical and mental acts of nourishment. Together, these poems illustrate the duality of motherhood as both a space for loss and connection.

Motherhood is a deeply personal experience, and when pregnancy becomes reality women are faced with a myriad of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it is often idealized, with every moment described as a beautiful journey, for "the best feeling for every woman in her life [is] to feel the soul and its movements in her womb" (Mane). On the other, it can become a source of distress and panic. Many mothers describe their nine months as sleepless, "from the buzzing and the thrashing, from the terrifying thoughts they have about being alone with their babies, from the improbability of their children's futures" (Tierney); women are subject to "unrealistic expectations to live up to. I felt like

I had to carry my pregnancy beautifully in order to convince people that I could be a mother. But pregnancy isn't always beautiful. Pregnancy is hard" (Maddox).

Moreover, the experience of childbearing is often accompanied by a haunting fear and a profound sense of dread, anxiety, and uncertainty. A study conducted in 2023 found that 23.6% of women ended their pregnancies with high anxiety levels, with researchers noting that "more than 80% of participants were found to have compromised sleep" (Pascal et al. 12) at some point during their gestation. Although motherhood is present in literature, media, and social structures, and, as Rich notes, most women have interacted with it in some form, as "tenders and carers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers" (12), nothing prepares them for the reshaping of their lives that pregnancy entails.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding conception – whether it was planned or unplanned, within a nuclear family or a single mother, through natural conceiving or with the aid of science – a common fact prevails: the process inevitably alters the woman's existence. Dana Raphael defines pregnancy as a transformative experience that directly affects "a woman's physical state, in her status within the group, in her emotional life, in her focus of daily activity, in her own identity, and in her relationships with all those around her" (66), being, thus, a transitory process full of contradictions, with the potential to have both a positive and negative impact on her life; for instance, blogger Mariah Maddox defines her experience as fulfilling yet overwhelming: "I was supposed to be thrilled and overfilled with joy. And I was—but I was also filled with anxiety. I was also filled with grief over the loss of my identity. I was also sick more days than not. And I was also terribly terribly lonely".

Kathleen Jamie explores these tensions in the first poem of her "Ultrasound" sequence. In it, the speaker attends an early pregnancy scan, her "second sight" (l. 4) of

the foetus. Typically performed between the eighteenth and twenty-first week of pregnancy, this second ultrasound serves as a reminder of reality: through the scan, the mother visualizes the developing entity of her child – a "wee shilpit ghost" (l. 2) whose presence is "summonsed from tomorrow" (l. 3), not yet fully tangible. Correspondingly, "women report that in the moment of seeing the fetus on the ultrasound screen, it suddenly becomes real to them" (Rothman, [Article] 125). Yet, is this realization comforting, or does it deepen a sense of alienation?

Motherhood has long captivated the human mind, as evidenced by its extensive representation already found in ancient art and religious traditions. Pregnant figurines predominated Neolithic Near East and Formative Mesoamerica, with some contemporary anthropologists suggesting that their popularity may have been due to them being created "by, for, and about women" (Lesure 596) in order to represent themselves. In Christianity, the veneration of Mary, the mother of God, reflects maternal devotion, with her figure evoking "feelings about human mothers as well as faith in a divine Son" (Atkinson 103). Similarly, the Indian mother-goddess, worshipped for over 5,000 years, attests to the "continuous tradition of imaging and worship" (Ganesh 58) and the enduring cultural importance of maternal imagery.

Thus, as Adrienne Rich observes, "the fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood have been […] no less impressive imprinting forces than the fears and mysteries of the world of nature itself" (Rich 103). Until the mid-twentieth century, pregnancy was a private, intimate experience, but with the development of modern obstetrics, it has been stripped of its former intimacy; technology has claimed authority over childbirth, gradually detaching the birthing process from women. It is now a diagnostic, "framed by markers to measure scale, and other factual pointers such as the date and time" (Blewitt 49), inviting medical strangers to explore, surveil, and control it.

Moreover, access to ultrasound images has become commodified. At health centres such as The University Hospitals of Derby and Burton, printed pictures are charged with prices starting at £5, and the payment methods are specified – typically both cash and card. Additionally, most hospitals forbid the taking of pictures during scans, issuing a clear warning: “if you attempt to do so, your scan will be terminated” (Hull University Teaching Hospitals). Thus, the mother is privatized: as Rothman argues, this shift prioritizes the foetus over the mother, with the first becoming the patient, and the latter the “maternal environment” or even the “maternal barrier” ([Article] 126). Consequently, medicalisation results in a loss of maternal agency, transforming childbirth into a scientific phenomenon linked to a detached clinical procedure that “has become more real for those with this outsider gaze than those with the lived bodily experience of it" (Martin 64). Fox and Worts further critique this development, asserting that by deeming childbirth as hazardous, medical professionals intervene excessively in a natural process, ultimately alienating “the woman from a potentially empowering existence" (327-328).

Jamie reflects on this alienation through the imagery of the ultrasound scan. The foetus is presented in a blurry, drifting state, “hauled silver-quick / in a net of sound” (l. 16-17), being pulled into existence through the scan. This imagery resembles that of an astronaut floating in space, yet, as Rothman asks, if the foetus is the man, connected to the spaceship by the umbilical cord, “where is the mother in the metaphor? She has become empty space” ([Book] 114). The foetus is represented as independent from the mother; through “a seer’s” prophetical gaze, she perceives the foetus as something otherworldly, a “monthly flicker” (l. 5): fragile and fleeting. Thus, she is alienated from her own body; she is reduced to an environment rather than an autonomous entity. Blewitt notes that when the foetal identity is emphasized it is always at the expense of the

mother's agency; "the placenta and uterus walls, elements of the maternal body, are excluded from the frame" (48).

However, this erasure is challenged in "Ultrasound". Halfway through the poem, we encounter the word *keek-aboot* (l. 9), a Scots compound noun created by Jamie herself. *Keek* means *glance*, while *aboot* suggests movement in all directions. Additionally, *keek* can mean *kick*, bringing to mind the intimate sensation of foetal movement felt by the mother alone. This small affair, shared only between mother and child, resists the piercing medical eye: "the internal touch of foetal movement is a way of 'seeing' that has not been replaced entirely by modern ultrasound technology" (Blewitt 40). Moreover, the word carries an even more ambiguous interpretation: *keek* can also refer to a malicious person, while *aboot* has the idiomatic meaning of someone recovering from illness. This linguistic richness mirrors the complexity of pregnancy and its surrounding tensions, reaffirming it as an experience that varies for each mother and resists a singular definition.

Furthermore, the foetus' uncertain presence is emphasized through supernatural imagery: a ghost (l. 2), a ghoul (l. 14), and a sprite (l. 6) – all of them supernatural beings without a solid representation. As Baker observes, the foetus, not yet born, "cannot be viewed in terms of a stable individual identity, but resists definition" (63). Just like these folkloric elements, the foetus is "neither fully present nor absent, both homeless and at home, from the past and appearing repeatedly in the now" (Blewitt 50); it is nothing but an apparition, something neither fully present nor absent that exists in a liminal space.

Additionally, the poem invokes the myth of Pandora's box. First recorded in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c. 700 B.C.), Pandora's curiosity leads her to open a jar left under her care, unleashing all evils upon the world – including sickness and death. Its presence in the poem aligns the womb with Pandora's box, suggesting that pregnancy, although often viewed as a gift, can also be hiding misfortune. Nevertheless, this modern

Pandora has been gifted the technological equipment to peek inside her box: “If Pandora / Could have scanned / her dark box, / and kept it locked –” (l. 10-13). The image of the scan is a form of foreseeing the future, accentuating the mother’s anxiety as she glimpses the unknown, for she is aware that the foetus can “be perceived as a disaster, as an ‘enemy within’” (Rich 161). However, this “primal agony” (Ibid 161) surrounding the conflict of self-preservation and maternal feelings is challenged by the box’s last element: hope. Suggesting a redeeming possibility, “this ghoul’s skull, punched eyes / is tiny Hope’s” (l. 14-15), it conveys that despite the fears surrounding the uncertain future, the unborn child remains a source of promise yet to be fully realized.

Following the themes introduced in “Ultrasound”, “Bolus” offers a more intimate portrayal. Structured as a long, reflective sentence, it explores motherhood as an act of love and self-erasure, where both the mother’s and the child’s identities are transformed. Through the opening lines, ‘so little of the world is bequeathed / through us’ (l.1-2), we are reminded of the alienated mother also found in “Ultrasound”, suggesting a tension between permanence and transience. The term ‘bequeathed’, a legal term typically associated with inheritance after death, initially carries a sense of finality. However, the following lines, ‘our gifts / instead, are passed among the living’ (l. 2-3), redefine inheritance as an intergenerational exchange of experience; as Blake argues, “no object, word, or identity is significant on its own” (69), thus reinforcing the idea that motherhood is not solely a biological process, but a continuous transmission of love, care, and knowledge.

Additionally, the image of premastication is central to the poem. The poem’s title, “Bolus”, refers to a mass of chewed food carried from the mother’s mouth to the child’s. Also known as kiss feeding, it’s an ancient and intimate act; “it is unlikely that our hunting-gathering ancestors would have survived” (Pelto et al. 5) without it, and its fairly

recent disappearance mainly "occurred in populations that either have access to modern food processing techniques or in which traditional practices have been lost" (Pelto et al. 6). The enjambment between "bolus" (l. 4) and "of chewed bread" (l. 5) visually enacts the process of food transfer, mimicking the act of chewing and passing. This act becomes a metaphor for maternal sacrifice: as the mother mixes food with saliva, she adds a part of her own identity to the child's nourishment. In this way, Jamie portrays motherhood as an act of dissolution, where identity is shaped through giving. As Baker notes, identity "can only be established in the passing of one to another, or one through the other" (Baker 69), reinforcing the mother's role in shaping their child's understanding of the world.

Furthermore, the poem also establishes a parallel between food and language, linking "bolus" to "words" (l. 4) as two different forms of nourishment. Thus, there is a suggestion that "our knowledge of the world is not innate, but rather passed from mouth to mouth" (Baker 69), and the mother is responsible not only for physical sustenance but for transmitting language, culture, and meaning to the infant; "women became the civilizers, the inventors […] some maintain of language itself" (Rich 101). Therefore, this dual nutrition highlights the mother's role as the main provider and guide, emphasizing the fundamental dependency of the child on her.

In the final lines, the portrayal of the baby resembles a nestling, its open mouth demanding food like a baby bird. The word "gorgeous" (l. 7) adds a layer of awe and tenderness to an otherwise animalistic act, reframing an action often deemed as primal as something sacred and beautiful in its need. Furthermore, the child's vulnerability is contrasted with the power the mother holds over their survival; as Rich asserts, "nowhere else […] does a mother possess such literal power over life and death" (68). Yet this power is paradoxical: the survival of her child is in her hands and thus both are bound

together in a moment of profound intimacy; their identities merge in an act of mutual dependence.

Additionally, Premastication, though still practised in some cultures, has largely been abandoned in Western society due to modern medical discourse, which deems it as unhygienic and outdated. The poem's speaker resists this medicalized view of motherhood, challenging the notion that maternal instincts should be subordinated to technological intervention. This aligns with Emily Martin's argument that under industrial capitalism "women's bodies are seen as more or less efficient machines, women as unskilled workers, and doctors as managers" (qtd. in Fox & Worts 329), distancing the maternal body from instinctual caregiving.

Furthermore, Pelto et al. argue that the devaluation of premastication parallels past stigmatization surrounding motherhood, such as breastfeeding: while modern societies reject ancestral practices, "a substantial portion of humanity experienced this practice over the course of human history" – according to their study, "one-third of societies" (Ibid 8). Furthermore, they suggest that the disappearance of this practice coincides with the shifts in food processing and economic changes rather than inherent dangers, (Ibid 6) associating it with capitalism. Thus, the mother in "Bolus" resists the notion that technology and modernisation are better than nature and rejects the attempt of the scientific field to transform motherhood into something impersonal. As Rich writes, in the "mother's battle for her child", she reclaims herself in a destructive institution, preserving "tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned" (280). Thus, the mother reasserts her agency and reclaims the power of maternal connection by embracing an instinctual form of caregiving.

Together, these poems explore the duality of motherhood as a space of both loss and connection. "Ultrasound" reveals the mother's alienation during pregnancy, and how her

body is distanced from her identity, while “Bolus” reclaims physical intimacy as a merger of care, language, and identity. Thus, Jamie ultimately represents a transformative aspect of motherhood that encompasses both a dissolution of the self and an assertion of agency, an ongoing negotiation of presence, absence, and love.

2. Disorientation and Evolution – “The Tay Moses” and “Thaw”

This section examines how Jamie’s “The Tay Moses” and “Thaw” explore maternal ambivalence and identity transform themselves through imagery of nature and myth. It first considers how “The Tay Moses” uses natural symbolism and biblical references to depict the maternal self as both protective and destabilised. Then, it turns to “Thaw”, where natural imagery reflects the speaker’s psychic fragmentation and the dissolution of pre-maternal identity. Together, these poems reveal how motherhood reshapes the self through different forms of disorientation.

Life on Earth is based on water. It covers around seventy-one percent of the Earth's surface, and beyond oceans, lakes, and rivers, it is likely to be found everywhere one looks: in the air as vapour, in the soil as moisture, and even inside the human body. Without water, life simply would not exist. Thus, water is the original life-bringer, and even in modern times it unconsciously remains sacred, for many people carry a small bottle everywhere they go. It is no wonder, then, that a powerful connection exists between women and water, a link that goes beyond spirituality. As Sami Brisson notes, “women’s bodies are more affected by the natural world […] through things like the moon” (19), a claim supported by studies which suggest the menstrual cycle sometimes synchronises with the lunar rhythm (Komada et al. 2). This ancient bond between women and water is reflected in popular culture as well: there are numerous creatures, such as sirens, selkies, and loch spirits, that represent the untameable freedom of the deep and

unknowable waters. In Kathleen Jamie's "The Tay Moses", these associations are brought to the fore.

As the title suggests, the central images of the poem are the Tay River, Scotland's longest natural watercourse, and the biblical figure of Moses. Alluding to his story in the Book of Exodus, particularly the account of his infancy, its mention evokes themes of protection and release: faced with the Pharaoh's decree to kill all Hebrew male infants, Moses' mother places him in a basket and entrusts him to the Nile River, which delivers him not to death, but to unexpected salvation, for he is found and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. This mythic motif recurs across cultures: Romulus and Remus are set adrift on the Tiber, Sargon the Great on the Euphrates, Karna on the Ganges. In each instance, as in "The Tay Moses", the river embodies the maternal desire to protect. Nevertheless, the use of Scots lexicon, for instance the verb "birl" (l. 16), meaning to spin or whirl, anchors the poem in a specific cultural landscape. Other details further evoke a working-class rural world, including "grieve" (l. 20), an agricultural overseer, and "tractor man" (l. 20), whose roles tie together the speaker's maternal vision and the everyday labours of the land. In this way, Jamie fuses elemental forces such as birth and water with the textures of local life.

Yet the river, while a symbol of life and shelter, is also a site of danger and unpredictability. The Tay itself, biologically rich and visually beautiful, has authored numerous destructive floods which have caused millions of pounds' worth of damage. The worst disaster of all occurred in 1879; named the Tay Bridge Disaster, the collapse of the railway bridge during a storm led to the deaths of over seventy people. This event has remained engraved as having a near-Titanic scale in the collective memory of Scotland. Hence, the numerous mythological associations with deities and water spirits suggest not only a reverence for its life-giving properties, but also a deep-rooted fear of

its destructive potential. In this way, women, and by extension mothers, are linked to natural forces that are nurturing yet capricious. Catherine Roach observes that to an infant, the mother appears both “all-powerful and caring” and “capricious and malevolent” (48); like a river, she is vital yet capable of destruction. As Brisson notes, the term “Mother Nature” implies something that can be easily exploited or taken for granted (21), yet in moments of catastrophe such as blizzards, floods, or landslides, its illusion of benevolence is shattered. Likewise, human beings struggle to accept that the early mother is not an omnipotent presence but a vulnerable, autonomous subject. Jamie reflects this tension through the shifting imagery of water in “The Tay Moses”, where language such as “tide” (l. 7), “flow” (l. 8), “ebb” (l. 15), and “birl” (l. 16) capture the flow of maternal presence, both life-giving and overwhelming.

This paradox is further reinforced through the symbolism of the golden oriole. Once breeding in Britain, this now rare bird builds hammock-like nests suspended above ground. Jamie’s “golden / oriole’s nest” (ll. 4-5) hangs above a “woven / creel of river- / rashes” (ll. 2-4), suggesting a delicate safe space over a wild, unpredictable force. The bird itself, once at home in Scotland but now nearly extinct there, carries connotations of foreignness and danger due to its rarity and association with migration. Juliet Simpson comments that the golden oriole captures “a mood at once domesticated (in its nested presence) and rare; protecting and wild” (74), just like the mother’s individuality. The natural world, thus, appears both nurturing and estranging, much like the speaker’s ambivalence towards motherhood, where it is unclear if the child allows her to renew herself or pushes her to fly away.

Moreover, the river’s colourful imagery, including “hills” (l. 10) and “salmon” (l. 11), contrasts with the speaker’s own inner turmoil. She imagines two possible futures for her child depending on the river’s pull: one where the child is gently carried by the

tide to her "favourite hills" (l. 10), an idyllic, natural place; and another where the child becomes ensnared "on reeds" (l. 17), evoking an abortion-like termination. Even though both futures involve separation, the natural world offers a consoling vision. Şafak Altunsoy notes that "since the mother regards herself as an extension of 'the natural', she does not object" (147) to the baby's drifting towards the hills. The natural world, then, embodies the idealised vision of motherhood as a nurturing extension of the speaker's being, but this ideal is disrupted by the human world. A man fishing on the river shouts, "*Name o' God!*" (l. 19), marking the intrusion of cultural and religious imagery into the otherwise natural landscape, thus replacing the "neopagan multiplicity" with a "monotheistic description" (Altunsoy 149). The "river-pilot" (ll. 17-18), the "tractor man" (l. 20), and the "farm-wife" (l. 20) further symbolise the cultural imposition onto nature's domain, and despite this scene referencing Moses' finding by the Pharaoh's daughter, it moves beyond historical allusion by echoing the erosion of maternal instinct under the pressure of societal expectations.

Furthermore, the baby's rescue and the exclamation "*Name o' God!*" hints at an almost divine status for the infant, who becomes the new centre of the speaker's universe. By "change[ing] hands" (l. 19), he spreads his word like a prophet, but this new divinity threatens the mother's past sense of self. The symbolism of the "salmon" (l. 11) deepens this reading: unlike the now-absent oriole, the Tay's thriving salmon represent the natural way. In Celtic tradition, the salmon itself is the "wisest of all the creatures" (Jay 41), a sacred being revered for its association with divine knowledge, poetry, and prophecy. According to myth, it inhabits otherworldly wells near the world tree, gaining knowledge from the fruit of the hazel trees that fall into the waters. Its pairing with "wisdom" (l. 11) is far from incidental, drawing on deep-rooted folklore in which salmon is a liminal figure linked to sacred rivers and sites of healing. Thus, the "mysterious being" (Jay 40)

becomes not just a creature of nature, but a symbol of knowledge passed through watery thresholds.

The poem culminates in an expression of primal fear. Desperate, she is depicted "slamming / the car's gears, / spitting gravel on tracks / down between berry-fields" (ll. 23-26), an image reflecting the urgency that mirrors her inner panic and emotional unravelling. The speaker rescues her child and clings to him, begging for everything else to "*LEAVE HIM! Please, / it's okay, he's mine*" (ll. 29-30). The mother feels despair, for she is aware that while she is offering him access to the natural realm, the child will eventually enter a "human, social world over which she has no control and in which she plays no part" (Baker 65). This complexity, where she misses her older self but cannot fathom a future without the child, creates a sense of anxiety and instability in her mind: even in the present moment, when the child's identity remains entwined with hers, she anticipates the inevitable distance and fears the future repetition of this process of reframing. Thus, the mother experiences a complicated duality: in choosing one life, she mourns the loss of the other. Jamie captures this poignant tension, illustrating how the beauty of nature offers solace but cannot ultimately shield against change, separation, and the irreversible passage of time.

While "The Tay Moses" engages with motherhood through expansive natural symbolism and mythic resonance, "Thaw" shifts the focus inward. Although both poems address the transformative experience of motherhood, "Thaw" takes a more intimate approach, grounding itself in the psychic and physical transformations that accompany early motherhood. The natural world remains a significant medium through which the maternal self is shaped, but in "Thaw", nature serves as a more solitary, introspective mirror of the mother's psyche, reflecting the painful transition into a new existential state.

This existential shift is rooted in the poem's opening scene, which captures the immediate aftermath of childbirth. The speaker returns home with her baby during a "steel-grey thaw" (l. 2), a setting both literal and metaphorical: the thaw signals not only making something warm, but also the act of becoming friendlier to someone. This mirrors the mother's process of adapting to the life-altering presence of the child. Thus, the phrase "coldest week in memory" (l. 3) evokes not only weather, but an existential chill following the traumatic act of birth. The ice "river sealed" (l. 4) mirrors her transition: temporally contained, it will eventually crack open and flow into a new form.

However, this landscape of transformation offers little comfort. The speaker feels confused and reaches towards the garden's familiar objects for orientation. The "plum trees" (l. 16), the "chopping block" (l. 8), and the "robin's roost" (l. 16) become not domestic details but ritual markers: her "homage of equals" (l. 14) to these natural elements reflects her desire for reconnection in the midst of her inner reformation. Yet, these fractured details reflect a deeper rupture in the speaker herself. The setting's "frost- / split" (l. 8-9), damaged surfaces echo the mother's rupture after giving birth. There is no effortless recovery, as it is often romanticised, but an uneasy process of reintegration. The maternal home is not stable, but fragmented and reshaped. As Rich writes, "the extinguishing of an earlier self" is an inherent part of motherhood, particularly in its earliest stages (167). The speaker's walk in the garden, though brief, reads as an act of existential grounding: she is trying to locate herself in a world that has been altered by the arrival of her child.

This sense of personal disorientation intensifies with the presence of the child, always present and completely vulnerable. Yet the speaker is not focused on the baby's needs but on her own interior state. This may seem reprehensible, but it reflects the often-overlooked psychological demands of postpartum identity: since the mother is expected

to be both environment and the self for the child, the infant becomes an absorbing presence who suppresses her own needs. Thus, the mother's guilt stems from the fact that "separateness during this early period threatens not only anxiety at possible loss, but the infant's very sense of self" (Chodorow 60-61), which relies totally on the mother's actions.

In fact, the child's extreme dependence only sharpens the speaker's internal crisis. According to a study conducted by the University of Rochester, human infants are observed to be born neurologically premature, requiring intense caregiving and creating unique psychological pressures amongst all other animals (Piantadosi & Kidd 6875). Jamie's speaker is aware of this: she must shelter, feed, and protect her child, but she does so while feeling herself rapidly dissolve. "I tried to remember; / but even my footprints were being erased" (ll. 18-19); even as she tries to anchor herself, her past identity is vanishing behind her, just like her footprints on the snow.

Still, the poem does not express resentment towards the child. Rather, Jamie captures the mother's existential crisis that arises when the infant's presence disrupts the mother's previous sense of wholeness. The line "before we were two, from my one" (l. 26) encapsulates this paradox: the mother has gained a child but lost her sense of wholeness. Thus, birth is not a moment of pure joy, but of ontological split, a moment of rebuilding and reframing the mother's perception of the world.

This shift is reflected by the figure of "Orion" (l. 20), which appears both on the hospital ceiling and in the winter sky. It links the personal with the cosmic and becomes a symbol of continuity in a moment of unravelling; its presence is reassuring but also distant, fixed in the heavens while the speaker's identity is still in motion. Nevertheless, in "Thaw", Orion functions more as a passive witness than an agent of transformation. It reflects the mother's grief but does not resolve it, mirroring her sense of powerlessness

and the stasis of her emotional state: its fixed position in the sky highlights the contrast between the permanence of cosmic forces and the fluidity of the speaker's own identity, stuck in a moment of profound transformation.

Ultimately, "Thaw" presents the maternal experience as a process of dissolution and remaking, offering a powerful resistance to romanticised depictions of motherhood. There is no sentimentality in its closing image: the speaker is not overwhelmed by love, but by the recognition that she is becoming someone else. As Lucy Jones observes, mothers are caught between impossible ideals: either selfless nurturers or emotionally absent failures (162). Jamie's speaker inhabits the liminal space between these roles, fully present to the child's vulnerability yet painfully aware of what that presence demands from her own identity. The self is not physically lost, but mentally altered, caught between what it was and what it is becoming.

Therefore, both "The Tay Moses" and "Thaw" use imagery of movement to explore the instability and fluidity maternal identity. In "The Tay Moses", the car creates a moment of stasis before inevitable separation, capturing a desire to pause time at a critical maternal point. "Thaw", by contrast, places the mother travelling through a morphing landscape, reflecting the gradual loosening of early maternal closeness. Thus, both poems present a tension between containment and release, stillness and motion, using physical movement to mirror the shifting boundaries of maternal selfhood. And, most of all, using nature as a mirror of the mother's experience.

Nature, rather than offering consolation, reflects this fractured psyche; it is cold, cracked, and uncertain. Jamie resists any resolution that restores order or sentimentality. Instead, she captures a motherhood still in the making, painful and incomplete. As in "The Tay Moses", she offers no stable or idealised maternal identity. The maternal self is not at home in either body or world. Constantly dissolving and reforming, the mother is

unstable, mutable, and in flux, mirroring a natural world that is itself fragmented and never entirely whole.

3. Reclamation and Return – "St. Bride's"

This third section explores how Jamie's "St. Bride's" reclaims maternal identity through layers of myth, folklore, and ecological symbolism. It first explores how the poem invokes Brigid, an ambiguous figure, to frame maternal transformation as part of a cultural and spiritual inheritance. Then, it turns to the selkie, whose shapeshifting nature reflects the fragmentation and concealment of the maternal self. Finally, it considers how natural imagery, particularly animals, situates motherhood within wider cycles of rupture and renewal.

Folklore is one of the pillars of any community. It floats around culture, shaping the stories people tell about themselves, and therefore influences how they perceive not only their individuality but the world around them. It is a piece of tradition transmitted through contact with others, surviving even in an age dominated by technology. Folklore lives on through repetition and oral renewal, for "a recorded item of folklore […] is like any museum piece: you can study it, you can admire it, but it has no life of its own" (Kongas 85). Lingering on long after their origins are forgotten, folklore and tradition are embedded in aspects of life that go unnoticed.

By drawing on both pagan and Christian associations, Jamie frames maternal transformation as something continuous with ancestral traditions. "St. Bride's" re-roots the speaker in Scotland, whose mythic presence can be traced back to pre-Christian belief systems, particularly the Celtic beliefs. When Christianity arrived in a Scotland "developed from the Picts, Scots, Caledonians, and other Celtic tribes" (Aardsma 159), it encountered a spiritual tradition that saw nature and spirituality as closely intertwined.

Gradually, Christian and Celtic traditions merged, and the latter's perspective was passed on to those early Christians who "eventually grew into a Celtic Church much different from the one influenced by the dominant Roman Culture" (Sellner 33). Thus, its existance persists inside the layers of Christianity itself.

The poem's title, "St. Bride's", alludes to the Christian Saint with the same name. Though never directly named within the poem, her presence is conjured through symbolism and tone; the opening line, "so this is women's work", establishes both weary irony and quiet reverence. Brigid occupies a complex cultural position: once a Celtic goddess associated with fertility, poetry, healing, and pastoral life, she was later canonised as Brigid of Kildare, "The Mary of the Gael". Her dual identity makes her especially significant, representing a cultural continuity that bridges spiritual traditions, for "churches were dedicated to her in every part of Ireland and over most of Scotland – more, so the evidence of place-names would suggest, than were dedicated to St. Patrick himself" (O'Riordan 89). It is argued that the saint's popularity may have stemmed from her relation to the goddess, for "it is not impossible, in view of the well-established Celtic doctrine of re-birth, that Brigit the saint was regarded by the people as a reincarnation of Brigit the goddess" (Watson 265). Just as Brigid was reshaped to persist in a Christian world, the speaker is reshaped by childbirth; her former self is not erased but reconfigured, and her transformation is the reason for her survival.

Through this layering of identities, Jamie evokes the fluidity of the maternal self. To become a mother is to fracture and expand, and the speaker is no longer only herself, but one of many who have birthed, bled, and endured. Her pain is not individual; it is collective, inherited, and shared. Yet the speaker resists the romanticisation of childbirth. The lines "a last sharp twist for the shoulders / delivers my daughter" (ll. 10-11) capture the violent nature of birth, and the next image, "the placenta / following, like a fist of

purple kelp" (ll. 11-12), conjures the immediate aftermath in a raw way, portraying childbirth in physical, grounded terms instead of metaphor or myth.

Jamie includes the placenta, a detail often omitted in artistic portrayals of labour. As Jones observes, "almost all mothers in the paintings gazed downward, while their children looked directly out of the canvas" (167). Though often present in art, mothers have been made symbolically invisible by tradition, but by representing childbirth in full, Jamie reclaims maternal visibility and accurate representation. Similarly, Rich reflects that the issue lies in "the mother's relation to childbirth, an experience in which women have historically felt out of control, at the mercy of biology, fate, or chance" (182). In contrast, "St. Bride's" speaker describes her experience directly. This naming asserts maternal subjectivity and challenges a culture of silence. The poem hands narrative authority to the mother, not to society, the infant, or a male figure. Birth does not happen to her; she survives it, and therefore it is her story to tell.

Nevertheless, the central image of the poem is the selkie. An enduring figure of Scottish mythology, selkies are shapeshifters caught between land and sea; in traditional tales, they shed their sealskins to become human, only to have them stolen and be forced into domestic life. Trapped on land, they have no choice but to become wives and mothers, their true selves repressed until they recover the skin and return to the sea. Hence, these creatures embody fluidity, liminality, and loss, while their tales are about oppression, longing and women's agency.

The selkie is directly invoked in the lines "folding / and unfolding, be it linen or a selkie- / skin tucked behind a rock" (ll. 1-3). Here, the domestic task of folding linen is paralleled with myth. The gesture of hiding the skin instead of having it stolen introduces a sense of agency: the selkie hides her weakness so she can maintain her freedom. Meanwhile, the mother has folded herself away and has become "as 'other' as fairies or

animals: alluring but ultimately incomprehensible" (Campbell 309) by suppressing her older self. However, selkies will always long for the sea, and will patiently wait until the opportunity to return arises. Thus, it becomes a metaphor for the mother's fractured self: both domesticated and yearning for her wildness, mythical and mundane at the same time.

The selkie resonates again in latter lines: "the placenta / following, like a fist of purple kelp" (ll. 11-12) returns us to the sea. As Jason Harris writes, water in folklore functions as witness to "the struggle to define the borders of the threatening forces of the outside and ambiguous identities of human nature and culture (23). The kelp links the body back to the sea, suggesting a return to her origins and gesturing towards freedom: like the selkie, the mother may one day reclaim her skin and return to herself.

Additionally, Jamie uses animals to reflect the emotional reality of maternal transformation. The sentence "the hare in jizzen" (l. 4) anchors this image in Scottish language. *Jizzen* is a rare Scots term for childbirth, now largely fallen out of use, and its inclusion draws attention to the cultural specificity of the maternal experience. Furthermore, it is also the title of the collection, which highlights its thematic importance: birth is not just a biological event but a site of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic reclamation. Its strangeness on the page mimics how maternal experience has often been culturally obscured or silenced. As Amanda Bell observes, Jamie's return to Scots reflects a deeper impulse to reconnect with the non-human world, suggesting that to move beyond inherited constraints, "it may also be necessary to transcend the official language" (Bell 47-48). In this way, *jizzen* becomes more than an archaic word; it is part of Jamie's effort to recover a forgotten maternal vocabulary rooted in her land, her ancestry, and alternative ways of knowing.

Moreover, the hare embodies self-sacrifice. Like rabbits, hares line their nests with their own fur to make their young comfortable; but unlike them, hares are solitary,

and their young, called “leverets” (l. 4), are precocial and require little care. This evokes a model of motherhood marked not by long-term nurturing but by swift separation; the speaker feels alienated and lonely. Furthermore, in extreme conditions hares have been observed scavenging from carcasses, even from their own kind. This detail challenges the idea of maternity as purely nurturing: by relating to the hare, the speaker offers a maternal figure who is self-sacrificing but driven by survival.

“Adders” (l. 7) stand in contrast to the hare. As the only venomous snakes native to Britain, they are viewed as dangerous, yet in reality they are shy creatures, as often prey as predator. Their presence reminds us that appearances deceive. In addition, adders hibernate through the winter in a state of brumation and “uncoil into spring” (l. 7), a cyclical rhythm that suggests renewal. Their slow reawakening mirrors the transformation of the maternal body: bleeding, stretching, and healing, but never returning to its original shape.

This symbolism is deepened by Celtic tradition, where snakes were revered not as symbols of evil or deceit, as in the Genesis narrative, but as sacred creatures linked to wisdom, healing, and transformation. Unlike the Christian association with temptation and fall, Celtic and other ancient cultures viewed the snake’s shedding of skin as a metaphor for cyclical renewal. Their coiled form was seen as perfect, a visual representation of eternity, and their movements aligned with natural rhythms of life, death, and rebirth. As Míċeál Ledwith notes, the snake, central lunar symbol “grew, flourished, then shed its skin and appeared to die, only to be reborn again with the coming of spring” (297). Moreover, snakes were often associated with the moon, the only celestial body, he argues, that appeared “to show some sympathy with human affairs” (297). This lunar connection strengthens the sense that transformation is not linear but cyclical, linking nature and the maternal body. Moreover, the snake’s symbolism extends beyond

Celtic belief: in classical antiquity, for instance, the snake was connected to medicine and healing, most famously in the Rod of Asclepius, an emblem that still represents healthcare today. Thus, the adder in "St. Bride's" is not simply an animal, but the representative of cultural threads from Celtic, Christian, and other traditions from the world, intertwining motherhood with life, death, and renewal.

In conclusion, through "St. Bride's", Jamie gestures towards a broader philosophical reimagining of human origins and maternal experience. Jones asks, "what kind of world could we imagine and create if, instead of pretending we were thrown into existence, as though magic, we truly consider our vulnerable, intimate, tactile, entangled, animal origins?" (235). The poem offers such a vision: by invoking the figure of Saint. Brigid, Jamie connects childbirth to an ancestral and spiritual lineage, suggesting that motherhood is not an isolated event but part of a long, mythic continuum. The visceral realities of labour are portrayed without sentimentality, reclaiming the grotesque as both natural and revelatory. Through the imagery of the selkie and the motifs of animal life, she reveals the psychological and ecological dimensions of maternal identity, its ruptures, instincts, and negotiations with otherness. In doing so, Jamie invites us to confront the layered, entangled nature of becoming: as mother, as human, and as part of a world in which transformation is both personal and universal.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

Ultimately, Kathleen Jamie's poetry refuses to simplify or romanticise the experience of motherhood. Across the poems discussed, she presents it as a process marked by conflict, transformation, and a constant reinventing of the self. In "Ultrasound" and "Bolus", the mother is both erased and reclaimed; her body is medicalised, surveilled, and stripped of agency. Yet through instinct and physical intimacy, she begins to assert her own way of

knowing and being. In “The Tay Moses” and “Thaw”, identity fragments further: the speaker is caught between fear and devotion, between holding and letting go. Nature mirrors this disorientation, offering not comfort but a reminder that everything is always shifting. In “St. Bride’s”, Jamie draws on folklore, myth, and ecological symbolism to explore how the maternal self is shaped, concealed, and passed down. Rather than offering resolution, she presents a sense of continuity, where motherhood exists within larger cycles of rupture and renewal.

Thus, Jamie’s speakers do not fit into fixed roles; they are porous, unstable, and in constant motion. Their identities are shaped by physical experience and cultural pressure, by personal instinct and collective inheritance. Through her careful attention to language and her layering of myth and landscape, Jamie gives form to what is often left unsaid. She makes visible the mental labour of becoming someone else, while also preserving what came before.

Therefore, through this study each poem has offered a different way of responding to the central question of how Jamie uses natural, mythological, and cultural imagery to reflect the instability of maternal identity. The close readings have traced how her speakers move through alienation, connection, fragmentation, and nostalgia. In doing so, the poems reinforce the central thesis of this dissertation: that Jamie portrays motherhood as a fluid and evolving state, shaped by physical experience, emotional labour, and symbolic meaning.

Despite the richness of her work, Jamie’s poetry remains under-researched. Most critical attention has centred in her ecological writing, and while these readings are valuable, they leave much of her work unexplored. Future studies might examine her use of Scots, her engagement with folklore, and her refusal to separate personal from the historical. There is also space to explore how her work speaks to feminist and posthuman

perspectives, as well as how her maternal themes intersect and expand beyond the ecological. As it stands, *Jizzen* opens a conversation that is still in its early stages, and the field remains open for the exploration of how Jamie's poetry resists easy categorisation.

If I were to continue this research, I would turn to poets writing outside the Scottish context to see how motherhood and nature are imagined in other cultural and linguistic traditions. I would be especially interested in how maternal experience is shaped by environmental loss or displacement, and wheteher natural spaces are written not only as sources of comfort, but also as sites of grief and recovery. Another possible direction would be to focus on how memory and place become linked in poems where mothers return to landscapes marked by personal or ancestral histories. These questions might begin to address how the connection between mother and land remains constant even when language, body, and earth all begin to shift.

In the end, Jamie offers not clarity but process. In her world, motherhood is not something to be solved or resolved. It is like the rivers and the seasons: flowing and reforming in an eternal flux. Like the adders uncoiling into spring, motherhood unfolds slowly, and women emerge altered, layered, and still evolving.

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5. Appendix

The following poems are reproduced from Kathleen Jamie's *Jizzen* (Picador, 2011).

5.1. "Ultrasound"

Oh whistle and I'll come to ye,

my lad, my wee shilpit ghost

summonsed from tomorrow.

Second sight,

a seer’s mothy flicker,

an inner sprite:

this is what I see

with eyes closed;

a keek-aboot among secrets.

If Pandora

could have scanned

her dark box,

and kept it locked—

this ghoul’s skull, punched eyes

is tiny Hope’s,

hauled silver-quick

in a net of sound,

then, for pity’s sake, lowered.

5.2. “Bolus”

So little of the world is bequeathed

through us, our gifts

instead, are passed among the living

– like words, or the bolus

of chewed bread

a woman presses with her tongue

into the gorgeous open mouth of her infant.

5.3. “The Tay Moses”

What can I fashion

for you but a woven

creel of river-

rashes, a golden

oriole’s nest my gift

wrought from the Firth –

And choose my tide: either

the flow, when, watertight

you’ll drift to the uplands –

my favourite hills; held safe

in eddies, where salmon, wisdom

and guts withered in spawn,

rest between moves – that

slither of body as you were born –

or the ebb, when the water

will birl you to snag

on reeds, the river-

pilot leaning over the side:

‘*Name o’ God!*’ and you’ll change hands:

tractor-man, grieve, farm-wife

who takes you into her

competent arms

even as I drive slamming

the car's gears,

spitting gravel on tracks

down between berry-fields,

engine still racing, the door wide

as I run toward her, crying

LEAVE HIM! Please,

it's okay, he's mine.

5.4. "Thaw"

When we brought you home in a taxi

through the steel-grey thaw

after the coldest week in memory

– even the river sealed itself –

it was I, hardly breathing,

who came through the passage to our yard

welcoming our simplest things:

a chopping block, the frost-

split lintels; and though it meant a journey

through darkening snow,

arms laden with you in a blanket,

I had to walk to the top of the garden,

to touch, in a complicit

homage of equals, the spiral

trunks of our plum trees, the moss,

the robin's roost in the holly.

Leaning back on the railway wall,

I tried to remember;

but even my footprints were being erased

and the rising stars of Orion

denied what I knew: that as we were

hurled on a trolley through swing doors to theatre

they'd been there, aligned on the ceiling,

ablaze with concern

for that difficult giving,

before we were two, from my one.

5.5. "St. Bride's"

(For Freya)

So this is women's work: folding

and unfolding, be it linen or a selkie-

skin tucked behind a rock. Consider

the hare in jizzen: her leverets' ears

flat as the mizzen of a ship

entering a bottle. A thread's trick;

adders uncoil into spring. Feathers

of sunlight, glanced from a butterknife
quiver on the ceiling,

and a last sharp twist for the shoulders
delivers my daughter, the placenta
following, like a fist of purple kelp.