

“Our Criminal, Our Tricoteuse, Our Muse”: Redefining the Muse as Inspiration, Critique, and Voice in the Poetry of Tom Scott, Vernon Watkins, and Eavan Boland

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Abstract: The Muse has long been a significant figure in poetry, symbolising divine inspiration or serving as a metaphor for the creative process. While traditionally invoked as a passive intermediary between inspiration and poet, the role of the Muse has undergone a transformation, reflecting broader shifts in literary, cultural, and feminist discourses. This paper explores the evolution of the Muse figure in poetry, focusing on its portrayal in Tom Scott’s “The Real Muse,” Vernon Watkins’s “Demands of the Muse,” and Eavan Boland’s “Tirade for the Mimic Use.” In Scott’s poem, the Muse remains a revered figure, embodying gratitude and love; in Watkins’s work, the Muse’s influence is acknowledged with ambivalence as she becomes co-responsible for creative production; and in Boland’s poem, the Muse is stripped of divine reverence, her faults and failings laid bare. By analysing these poems, this paper investigates the Muse’s shift from a symbol of passive inspiration to an active agent within power structures, highlighting how this transformation challenges traditional notions of creativity and gender. The ever-changing representation of the Muse serves as a lens through which the shifts in artistic agency, authority, and the role of women in the creative process can be examined.

Keywords:

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“Suçlumuz, Trikotözümüz, Müz’ümüz”: Tom Scott, Vernon Watkins, ve Eavan Boland’ın Şiirlerinde Müz’ü İlham, Eleştiri ve Söz Hakkı Olarak Yeniden Tanımlamak

Öz: Müz figürü, uzun zamandır şiirlerde ilhamın ilahî kaynağı olarak ya da yaratım sürecinin bir metaforu olarak önemli bir figür olmuştur. Geleneksel olarak, ilham ile şair arasında pasif bir aracı olarak çağrılan Müz figürü, zaman içinde büyük bir dönüşüm geçirmiştir ve bu dönüşüm, edebî, kültürel ve feminist söylemlerdeki geniş değişimlerle paralel bir şekilde ilerlemiştir. Bu makale, Müz figürünün şiirdeki evrimini, Tom Scott’un “The Real Muse,” Vernon Watkins’in “Demands of the Muse” ve Eavan Boland’ın “Tirade for the Mimic Use” şiirlerinde nasıl temsil edildiğine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Scott’un şiirinde Müz, minnettarlık ve sevgiyle yüceltilirken, Watkins’te Müz, yaratıcı üretimin ortak sorumlusu olarak kabul edilir ve Boland’ın şiirinde ise Müz’e yönelik geleneksel saygı ve sevgi tamamen kaybolarak Müz’ün kusurları ve eksiklikleri gün yüzüne çıkar. Bu şiirleri analiz ederek, makale, Müz’ün ilahî ilham kaynağından aktif bir eyleyici figüre dönüşümünü, bu dönüşümün yaratım ve cinsiyetle ilgili geleneksel anlayışları nasıl sorguladığını tartışmaktadır. Müz’ün

Anahtar Sözcükler:

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değişen temsili, sanatsal eyleycilik, otorite ve kadınların yaratıcı süreçteki rolüne dair anlayışların dönüştüğünü gözler önüne sererken, bu figürün edebî geleneği nasıl yansıttığını da incelemektedir.

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For centuries, poets of various genres and of various nations have been including the figure of the Muse in their poetry: while some choose to invoke their name to ask for their divine help in writing a literary work, others simply use their mythical image to talk about the process of writing. Their existence within poetry is so powerful that William Minton argues that the invocation of the Muses is a traditionally essential duty of the oral poet (292). Moreover, while the emphasis on the importance of this invocation and duty has been decreasing over the centuries, the use of the Muse figure/motif in poetry does not seem to lose significance or popularity anytime soon, as we can see from Tom Scott’s “The Real Muse,” Vernon Watkins’s “Demands of the Muse” and Eavan Boland’s “Tirade for the Mimic Use,” all of which are presenting the Muse figure in different forms. Consequently, this paper aims to shed light on the transformation of the meaning attributed to the Muse and underline how this impacts literary interpretation by shifting the focus from divine inspiration to an exploration of artistic agency, creativity, and power structures. While the Muse figure in Scott’s poem is put on a pedestal and welcomed with gratitude and love, in Watkins’s poem, the absolute adoration felt for her slightly decreases as the Muse becomes equally responsible for the creative production, and finally with Boland’s poem the traditional respect and love for the Muse disappears completely as all her faults and failings are brought to light. Furthermore, the transformation of the Muse from a divine source of inspiration to a contested, sometimes rejected figure reflects broader shifts in literary, cultural, and feminist discourse. Traditionally, the Muse functioned as a divine yet passive intermediary between inspiration and the poet, reinforcing the idea that creation was an external gift rather than an act of personal agency. However, as literature evolved throughout time, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, the role of the Muse began to shift in ways that mirror societal changes. This shift is highly significant since it not only challenges who gets to create, whose voices are legitimised, and but also how artistic inspiration is conceptualised. By analysing the treatment of the Muse in the works of Tom Scott, Vernon Watkins, and Eavan Boland, this paper examines not only a literary

motif but also a reflection of changing attitudes toward power, artistic control, and the relationship between gender and creativity.

Born in 1918 in Glasgow as the son of a working-class family, Scottish poet Tom Scott made a name for himself with his early translations of European poets into Scot language (McCaffrey 267) which were highly praised by significant literary figures such as Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) (“About Tom Scott”). Leaving school at the age of fifteen to help his family make money, Scott took part in World War II which caused him to be stationed in Lagos, Nigeria; after the war, he spent several years in London where he became closely associated with the members of New-Apocalypse literary movement that reacted against the literary political realism of the 1930s (McCaffrey 267; “About Tom Scott”). The poet returned to Scotland in 1952 and started to attend Edinburgh University where he graduated with a PhD on William Dunbar (1459/60–1530) and his works (“About Tom Scott”; “Tom Scott: Poet”). His poem “The Real Muse” was published in 1957, using heavy Scottish dialect in language. Addressing the “real” Muse, the poem starts by listing the things the poet is willing to gift to his Muse with the following words:

No for you my queyn, will I prepare
Some jewelled mansion in supernal air,
Nor cled ye in a queen’s imperial gown,
And get ye constellations for a croun:
But I sall mak a hame here in my briest
Whaur aer or late, ye’ll find some peace and rest
And real love sall be your wearless dress
A lown licht set aff ilk yellow tress. (Scott 1–8)

In this first stanza, the poet explains that rather than giving his Muse luxurious palaces or expensive jewelled crowns, he will be providing her with a safe haven where she could take shelter in his “real love.”

When we move to the next stanza, we start to understand that the poet’s dedication to begift the Muse with the things he considers to be “real” is a significant theme in the poem, as he emphasises it by saying that “Frae ilka thing that’s real I sall draw out / Some essence to wap in your ilka clout” (Scott 9–10); in continuation, he lists various elements of life such as the “tang of saut oil in the harbour air” and “reek of stale ammonia” (Scott 11–12) which help us understand that he is giving importance to all aspects of life. Richie McCaffery agrees with this point as he explains that Tom Scott, as a religious poet, had a certain understanding of the notion of idolatry because of which he believed in the veneration of all shapes and forms of life, as opposed to only religious aspects of it (277). This admiration of all aspects of life continues to be present throughout the rest of the poem; for example, in the third stanza, the poet once again addresses the Muse and suggests that the things that are mundanely beautiful parts of life “Sall all be made to yield some tribute til ye” as “The ritual sacrificie was ance your due” (Scott 19, 24). Considering

the fact that “the composition and delivery of poetry [was Scott’s] sacrament” (McCaffery 277), we can interpret these lines as Scott providing his Muse with the “real” aspects of life that can be felt through the five senses, in order to turn them into something sacred and divine through his poetry and through his Muse. This idea is confirmed in the last stanza where the poet promises the Muse that

Frae siccan things, my love, I’ll mak your gown
Leavand hevin and gell for the real toun,
And hame frae vaiging in the skies and seas,
Frae earth mak you immortal images[,] (Scott 33–36)

which clarifies that only when the divine Muse is able to leave the unreal, intangible heaven and hell for the real world to roam the skies and the seas of earth, will the poet be able to create a gown made up of these real beauties of life for her. Especially with the last line that says “Frae earth mak you immortal images” (Scott 36), the poet instructs the Muse to create immortal art from the facts of life and not from imaginary things, which is consistent with Tom Scott’s literary views as “he saw reality on earth as both concrete and transcendental, . . . and saw the mortal, suffering world as sacred” (McCaffery 282). In this sense, when we examine the way and purpose with which the motif of the Muse is used in the poem, we can say that in Scott’s poem, the Muse stands both as a figure to be revered and respected and as a means of relaying Scott’s views on literary subjects.

Similar to his contemporary Tom Scott, Vernon Watkins uses the figure of the Muse as a way to explain the creative process of writing poetry. While Scott’s Muse remains a revered figure, grounded in earthly realities rather than celestial myths, Vernon Watkins complicates this relationship by giving the Muse a more assertive role. Unlike Scott’s poet, who seeks to honour his Muse through his artistic process, Watkins presents a Muse who actively chooses her poet, creating a tension between inspiration as an external force and the poet’s need to assert creative control. However, despite this shift in the agency, Watkins’s Muse is still “mute” and reliant on the poet to articulate her vision, suggesting a lingering imbalance in creative power. This shift signals a transitional moment in the depiction of the Muse: one that begins to question the traditional hierarchy between poet and inspiration but does not yet dismantle it entirely.

Born in Maestey, Wales in 1906, Vernon Watkins is well known for being a close friend of the famous poet Dylan Thomas, whose fame, according to several accounts, had overshadowed Watkins’s (Mark Child qtd. in Turner; Mathias), as well as being one of the few metaphysical poets of the twentieth century (Mathias). Possibly, it is his interest in the metaphysical aspects of life that turns his work into a “complex fabric of myth” (Polk 5) as his work is known for its “traditional forms, metric innovation and invocation of Welsh history and myth” (“Vernon Watkins”). His “participation in this occult, mystical, mythic and bardic tradition” is seen in his poem “Demand of the Muse,” in which through the dramatic monologue of the Muse, the nature of responsibility for the creative production is questioned.

In the first stanza of the poem, the Muse speaks with certainty while she explains her role in the act of writing with the words “I call up words that he may write them down. / My falling into labour gives him birth” (Watkins 1–2) and thus, she not only takes partial responsibility for the creative product but also depicts the co-dependency between the poet and the muse. This co-dependent nature required for literary production is once again emphasised along with the mutually beneficent state of their relationship in the following lines “I learn from him as much as he from me / Who is my chosen and my tool in time” (Watkins 4–5). It is clear that just from this first stanza that the Muse—the narrator of this dramatic monologue—is as important as the poet himself for the act of creating a literary work; however, the second stanza clarifies that even though they are in a mutually beneficent relationship, the Muse is still at a disadvantage as she is mute, “dumb,” full of “undelivered words” (Watkins 6–7) and unable to take part in any sort of creation without the poet, as he is the one giving voice to her inspiration. Moreover, with the lines

... Why then must he
Wait through so many years before he knows me?
...
And make laborious all that's dear to him.
So he remains himself and not another[,] (Watkins 21–25)

it is explained that a poet must spend years practicing his craft and labouring over it before he reaches a stage where he can comfortably write in his own style rather than imitating the old masters, and it is not until this very stage that he gets to understand the nature of his muse. Furthermore, it is the last stanza that solidifies our understanding of the relationship between the Muse and the poet. The Muse emphasises the fact that she is the one who chooses the poet by saying that “it is he / I choose” (Watkins 31–32) while simultaneously clarifying that the poet who, as established before, has his own voice and style of writing, is uniquely qualified to serve her wishes as she ends the poem with the lines “It is by conflict that he knows me / And serves me in my way and not another” (Watkins 34–35). Through these lines and in light of the aforementioned ideas on the poet’s labour and their co-dependency, it is possible to gather that for the creation of a literary work, the Muse and the poet must be specifically compatible with each other as the production of a literary work requires their mutual consent and co-dependency in order to come into existence. Therefore, it can be said that while Tom Scott uses the Muse figure to help establish his beliefs about the subjects of literature, Vernon Watkins also utilises the Muse as a way to explore his views about the production of literature and the duties of the poet who must labour over his craft until he is able to find his muse.

Moreover, Watkins’s portrayal of the Muse in *Demands of the Muse* introduces a complex paradox: she actively selects her poet yet remains voiceless and dependent on him to articulate her inspiration. This creates an inherent tension between submission and control. The Muse, while seemingly asserting power through choice, is still ultimately

confined by the poet's ability to give her form. The line "I call up words that he may write them down" (Watkins 1) highlights this problematic dynamic and emphasises how while the Muse initiates inspiration, the poet remains the final authority over creative expression. This tension reflects broader and contemporary questions of artistic agency and gendered power dynamics since the Muse, like many female figures in literary history, is both central to and excluded from the act of creation. While Watkins complicates the seemingly simple nature of the traditional hierarchy by suggesting that the Muse is not a passive force, her muted state reveals the constraints placed on inspiration, particularly when associated with femininity. This is particularly striking when compared to Boland's outright rejection of the Muse's silence, revealing Watkins's position as an intermediary between classical reverence and modern critique.

When we look at Irish poet Eavan Boland's poem "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," we come across a harsher and furious approach to the figure of the Muse. Boland, who is known as "one of the foremost female voices in Irish literature," is also highly regarded for her works whose subjects are often "the fabric of domestic life, myth, love, history and Irish rural landscape" ("Eavan Boland"). In this poem too, Boland shows her tendency to use mythological concepts alongside feminist issues. Unlike Watkins, who portrays the Muse as a necessary but constrained partner in artistic creation, Boland directly confronts and condemns her for reinforcing male-centred artistic traditions. Through this deconstruction, Boland not only rejects the traditional Muse and the system she represents but also reclaims artistic inspiration as something that must belong to women themselves, free from the constraints of a historically oppressive literary canon. With this very goal, the poem "Tirade for the Mimic Muse" starts with what can only be described as a sublime invocation, with the lines:

I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout.
 So here you are fumed in candle-stink.
 Its yellow balm exhumes you for the glass.
 ...
 Anyone would think you were a whore –
 An ageing out-of-work kind-hearted tart.
 I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:
 Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse –
 Our Muse of Mimic Art. (Boland 1–10)

Right from the very beginning of the poem, this unusual invocation of the Muse clearly suggests that the previous awe and reverence shown for the Muse in Scott and Watkins's works are no longer relevant and acceptable. Considering this depiction of the muse, Laura Maria Lojo Rodriguez considers the poem to be a "subversive parody of the Miltonian invocation to the *heavenly muse* for poetic inspiration" (91; italics in the original); however, through the colourful adjectives with which the Muse is described, we can understand that the poem goes beyond being a parody. For example, by calling the

Muse a “criminal,” Boland is indicating that there is a crime or a fault whose responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Muse. This crime is further explained with the word “tricoteuse” which is a French word for the “women who sat and witnessed the public executions taking place during the French Revolution” (“Tricoteuse, N. (1)”) suggesting that the Muse is responsible of sitting and watching while an atrocity is committed right in front of her. The second stanza helps us understand this a bit further, by accusing the Muse of being covered by cosmetic products that can make her seem appealing to the naked eye while being unable to hide her faults and crimes, through the lines:

Eye-shadow, swivel brushes, blushers,
Hot pinks, rouge pots, sticks, / Ice for the pores, a mud mask –
All the latest tricks.
Not one of them disguise
That there’s a dead millennium in your eyes. (Boland 11–16)

According to Sylvia Kelly, these lines indicate that even though the Muse is surrounded by false identities covering her like cosmetics, the “dead millennium” (Boland 16) in her eyes cannot be hidden which stands for the “poetic tradition which excludes women writers and the lost female history” (Kelly 46). This suggests that with the following lines “The lives that famished for your look of love. / Your time is up. There’s not a stroke, a flick / Can make your crime cosmetic” (Boland 18–20), the poet is making the crime of the Muse clear: she is responsible of neglecting and even ignoring the female writers who “famished for [her] look of love,” who craved literary and artistic acceptance and acknowledgement from her. Moreover, by stating that her time is up, the poet confidently states that the Muse’s neglect and disregard for female poetics will no longer be accepted, just like the beauty standards set for women by men, since nothing can make up for her crime of indifference to the suffering and marginalization of women.

In the third stanza, the poet is once again accusing the Muse of abandoning women and only caring for herself; however, in doing so, it is also implied with the lines

You did protect yourself from horrors,
From the lizarding of eyelids
From the whiskering of nipples,
From the slow betrayals of our bedroom mirrors –
How you fled (Boland 26–30)

that the Muse stands for the symbolic woman who is a “female object of inspiration constructed by a masculinist discourse and within a masculine conception of aesthetic decorum” (Allen-Randolph 49), which suggests that while the women suffering from acts of violence and natural ageing in the real world are forced to face the changes in their bodies and in themselves, the Muse is not exposed to any such hardships since she is used as a representation of all ideals and expectations about women, made by men. Similarly, the fourth stanza lists the horrors real-life women have to face, with the lines:

The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
 The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
 The scream of beaten women,
 The crime of babies battered,
 The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief
 That seeks asylum behind suburb walls. (Boland 31–36)

According to Kelly, the domestic violence mentioned here in the poem both points to the social marginalization and victimization of women and to the disregard for literary and artistic products created by women as their figurative babies, since “this image of a passive victim decenters and removes the woman from high culture to the margins” (Kelly 46) to “behind suburb walls” (Boland 36). Therefore, from “The way [the Muse] latched [her] belt and itched [her] hem / And shook it off like dirt” (Boland 39–40), we can understand that the Muse is not a true representative of women who deal with pain and suffering on a daily basis, since instead of offering any sort of protection or help, she “offers her own body to the desires and whims of masculinist interpretation” (Kelly 46). The next stanza portrays the formal break and disconnection between the female poet and the Muse, as the poet confesses that she had spent her girlhood years waiting for the approval of the Muse with the lines “And I who mazed my way to womanhood / Through all your halls of mirrors, making faces, / To think I waited on your trashy whim!” (Boland 41–43). The mazed and mirrored halls mentioned here suggest that as a young woman growing up and trying to be an artist, the poet felt lost amongst the expectations and abstract models surrounding womanhood, which is an integral point Eavan Boland further explains in an interview with the words “I began to write in an Ireland where the word “woman” and the word “poet” seemed to be in some sort of magnetic opposition to each other” (“Q&A with Eavan Boland”). However, just like Boland who carved a place for herself in Irish poetry, the poet in “Tirade for the Mimic Muse” aims to “recreate the image of womanhood that the muse has betrayed” (Cannon 33) as it can be understood from the lines:

Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap
 Among your pinks, your stench pots and sticks.
 They scatter shadow, swivel brushes, blushers.
 Make your face naked.
 Strip your mind naked.
 Drench your skin in a woman’s tears.
 I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.
 I will show you true reflections, terrors.
 You are the Muse of all our mirrors.
 Look in them and weep. (Boland 51–60)

These last lines of the poem clearly put forward the intention of the poet, which is to take control of the poetic creation and remake the understanding of female poetics by showing

the world—and the Muse—what it means to write as a real woman as opposed to a symbolic one.

All three poems discussed in this paper deal with the idea of literary creation in one way or another by using the motif of the mythological, divine Muse. In his 1957 poem “The Real Muse,” Tom Scott uses the figure of the Muse to explain and expand on his views about poetic subjects and their connections to the realities of life; changing the narrative point of view, Vernon Watkins’s 1958 poem “Demands of the Muse” utilises the same figure as a means to talk about the process of creation, poets’ duty to their craft and the co-dependency between inspiration and the poet; and in her 1980 poem “Tirade for the Mimic Muse” Eavan Boland borrows the mythical character to give voice “to a myriad of women’s circumstances and experiences in order to complicate the idealization of women as muses or as Mother Ireland figures in such poetry” (Cory 976) while simultaneously exposing and explaining the reasons why literary creations of female poets have been going unnoticed for centuries.

Furthermore, the transformation of the Muse from a revered source of divine inspiration to a contested figure of power and exclusion reveals deep shifts in literary conceptualizations of creativity, gender, and artistic autonomy. The progression from Scott’s admiration of the Muse to Watkins’s ambivalence and Boland’s enraged rejection parallels the historical unravelling of traditional artistic hierarchies, particularly in relation to gender. This transformation is not confined to poetry alone. Similar re-evaluations of artistic inspiration appear in Virginia Woolf’s challenge to the “Angel in the House” in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she argues that women must kill the idealised feminine figure in order to create freely. Likewise, in visual arts, Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits reject the idea of the passive female muse, instead asserting her own image as both creator and subject. In contemporary literature too, writers and poets such as Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and Anne Carson continue to interrogate the male-dominated structures of artistic creation, questioning whether inspiration must remain tied to outdated constructs of power, gender and artistic dependency. In this regard, the poems analysed in this paper illuminate how the Muse continues to serve as a dynamic figure through which poets explore, challenge, and redefine the nature of inspiration and creation. By interrogating the Muse’s legacy, these poets compel us to reconsider the myths that shape both our literature and our broader cultural narratives.

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