

## CHERRY CLAYTON

### Lipstick: a cultural studies mini-essay for Canadian feminists, and new friends

"For there was never yet fair woman but she  
made mouths in a glass." Shakespeare, *King  
Lear*.

I sometimes leave a lipsticked kiss  
on tissue paper  
like a message to the Barbie doll  
I didn't have.

"Women will give up lipstick  
one day" my feminist husband  
once said, darkly,  
as I reddened my mouth in the car.

And he was right, in theory.

I myself have looked on in disgust  
as an older friend applied lipstick  
in a public restaurant  
grimacing, without a mirror.  
Oh, horror!

Yet an intelligent woman I know  
had a bad car crash  
because she looked too long  
in the rearview mirror  
to check her lipstick.

Think how much money  
would be saved, and lost,  
if all women forswore  
lipstick, forever.

Lipstick is, and is not  
a penis.  
It may be a phallus  
if anyone out there  
really knows the difference.

(I think the phallus  
like the shade of Hamlet's father  
is the ghost of its more cheerful,  
ruddier cousin, the irrepressible  
ubiquitous penis. The phallus  
on the other hand

is the invisible support  
of the whole sorry gender circus.  
But don't quote me on this.)

"Just keep wearing your lipstick"  
said my colour-coordinated  
ex-secretary, nodding sagely  
as I departed my country.  
It was her finest advice.

"As we grow older,"  
said the best hairdresser  
I ever knew,  
"we need colour."

Lipstick must be my poor reply  
to this wise and wordly warning.

Anything to ward off, forever,  
accreting grayness.

Besides, I like buying lipstick.  
I like those small mirrors  
where you see your mouth go  
by turns dusky beige straw-  
berry pink bronzed vermilion  
fire engine red.

Buying lipstick reminds me  
again, that I was once seventeen

and am now 54.

That the stupid girl I was,  
once (confused, ambitious, experimental,  
not confronting history, death, or  
biology or anything truly serious  
head on) is still there

curving her mouth  
pouting into the mirror

endlessly caught,  
foolishly, persistently  
in-between.

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