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“The Stories We Tell Ourselves to Make  
Ourselves Come True”: Feminist  
Rewriting in the Canongate Myths Series

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature

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I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed

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Date

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## Abstract

In 2005, Canongate, an Edinburgh-based publisher, launched the first volumes in the Canongate Myths series, a project which commissioned renowned authors to retell ancient mythologies for contemporary audiences. Securing novellas from authors including Su Tong, Philip Pullman, A.S. Byatt and thirteen others, the project explores what is understood by myth today and how mythology remains relevant for a twenty-first century audience. It also asked female writers to engage directly with ancient mythologies which have perpetuated misogynistic narratives for millennia, encouraging those writers to self-consciously consider representations of gender contained within their selected source myths.

This thesis uses the female-authored Greco-Roman mythologies in the series, from Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith and Salley Vickers, as a unique corpus in which to locate arguments regarding the efficacy and effect of a 'feminist' approach to rewriting mythology. Critical opinion has been split regarding whether a 'feminist rewriting' is, in fact, attainable, with some detractors asserting that any revision necessarily replicates the language and structure of the original. Yet by looking at the individual retellings and at the project as a whole, this project will argue that when viewed as a collaborative, ongoing process, engagements with ancient mythologies may in time yield results which are beneficial for representations of femininity and may, in turn, help to destabilise the masculinised model of the subject. The thesis contends that mythology can act as a framework through which female authors can evaluate the gendered implications of the personal, public and meta aspects of mythmaking and storytelling more generally, by considering the time and context-bound production of both the source myths - from Homer to Ovid, Sophocles to Freud - as well as the revisions themselves.

The Canongate Myths series also serves as a distinct source for considering the character of rewriting within a post-postmodern literary landscape. With all four texts indicating a preoccupation with questions of 'truth', 'reality', and 'authenticity', the Myths series contributes to ongoing critical discussions regarding the shifting critical climate of twenty-first century literature. In particular, the texts selected from the series suggest an ongoing relationship with modernism and its engagements with mythology; the thesis helps to advance current discussions pertaining to contemporary literature's relationship with its modernist past. These references, and each myth's presentation of a distinct theoretical perspective, indicates that despite Lyotard's assertions, we have not yet seen the death of all metanarratives. These self-consciously constructed novellas show that questions around

metanarratives of patriarchy and mythology are ongoing and that feminist rewriting continues to have a relevant role to play in their dismantling or recalibration.

## Lay Summary

In 2005, Canongate, an Edinburgh-based publisher, launched the first volumes in the Canongate Myths series, a project which commissioned renowned authors to retell ancient mythologies for contemporary audiences. Securing novellas from authors including Su Tong, Philip Pullman, A.S. Byatt and thirteen others, the project explores what is understood by myth today and how mythology remains relevant for a twenty-first century audience. It also asked female writers to engage directly with ancient mythologies which have perpetuated misogynistic narratives for millennia, encouraging those writers to self-consciously consider representations of gender contained within their selected source myths.

This thesis questions what may be understood as a feminist rewriting of mythology and whether or not the four female-authored, Greco-Roman myths included in the series (from writers Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith and Salley Vickers) are in fact feminist in their approach to revision. The broader implications of the process of rewriting myth are considered and these four novellas are also linked back to modernism, suggesting an ongoing relationship with our modernist past.

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*For Freddy*

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Lay Summary.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Introduction .....	12
What is a myth? .....	17
Feminism, Myth and Feminist Rewriting .....	30
Disentangling Penelope's Web: A Methodology for Feminist Rewriting of Mythology .....	51
"Witty Desecration": The Canongate Myths Project and its Reception .....	64
Chapter One .....	91
"No mouth through which I can speak": <i>The Penelopiad</i> and the Problem of the Postmodern.....	91
"A boy's game of irony and wordplay": Postmodernism and Feminism ....	95
"A stick used to beat other women with": Penelope within the Patriarchy	102
"The Maids all curtsy": Performed Femininity and the Case for Community .....	124
"Now you can't get rid of us": The Legacy of <i>The Penelopiad</i> .....	141
Chapter Two .....	144
"I can lift my own weight": Atlas Complexities, Autobiography and Authenticity in Jeanette Winterson's <i>Weight</i> .....	144
"Cover versions": The Importance of Autobiography .....	149
Authenticity and Postpostmodern Representations of Gender in <i>Weight</i>	161
Deconstruction: Masculinity, Violence and Distorting the Mirror .....	168
Reconstruction: The Burden of the Binary? .....	178
Chapter Three.....	182
"Thank God we're modern": Metamorphoses, Ecofeminist Ethics and Metamodernism in Ali Smith's <i>Girl meets boy</i> .....	182
"Nobody grows up mythless": Political and Personal Histories .....	183
"Ness I said Ness I will Ness": Culture and Nature in the Iphis Myth .....	193
"Going beyond ourselves": <i>Metamorphoses</i> and Metamodernism.....	213

Chapter Four.....	224
“Blessedly wordless birds”: The Talking Cure and Speaking Through Silence in Salley Vickers’ <i>Where Three Roads Meet</i> .....	224
The Oedipus Myth .....	227
Freud as Mythmaker, Freud as Mythology .....	242
Femininity Speaking Through Silence: Anna Freud, Antigone and Jocasta .....	255
I Tiresias: Myth and Meaning.....	271
An Ivory Shoulder .....	283
Conclusion .....	286

We would have written together, we would have been authors together, we would have drawn power from each other, we would have fought shoulder to shoulder because what was ours was inimitably ours. The solitude of women's minds is regrettable, I said to myself, it's a waste to be separated from each other, without procedures, without tradition.

Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*.

## Introduction

If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story. Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true.  
(Winterson, *Weight* 145)

I'm interested in myth because [...] they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree.  
(Carter, "Notes from the Frontline" 38)

Myth is endlessly in conflict with itself. We recognise it as a synonym for a lie, but when we consider ancient mythologies, we also assume that such stories contain some form of 'truth'. In Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, myth is, alongside science and history, another story, the construction of which aids the generation of identity. But for Angela Carter, the untruth of myth, the stories that we peddle as "extraordinary lies", far from creating possibilities of self, restrict and suppress us. This restriction has often been misogynistic in character; myth's inherent misogyny has been broadly discussed, as I will detail in due course. This paradox – an untruth designed to permit access or speak to truth, but which in turn can serve to perpetuate further untruth – lies at the heart of this thesis. When considered in light of myth's relationship to women and femininity, a challenging question emerges: despite the many efforts of women writers to revise myth in new forms, is a truly *feminist* rewriting of mythology ever possible?

The affirmative response offered by this thesis comes with many considerations and caveats. It is a complex issue, one which, as we will see,

has prompted divisive critical response. Yet, taking heart from Diane Purkiss's assurance that, despite the challenges of such an endeavour, "possibilities are endless" (455), and Liedeke Plate's hopeful endorsement of "the emancipatory potential of rewriting" (4), this thesis posits that the practice of rewriting ancient mythology *can* offer liberating pathways for the female writer and provide feminist revisions. This optimism is also informed by a certain form of pragmatism: women are continuously engaged with the act of mythological revision and such narratives often prove to be popular with the reading public. In 2018 alone, Daisy Johnson's retelling of the Oedipus myth *Everything Under* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, Madeline Miller released *Circe*, a *New York Times* number 1 bestseller, and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, a reworking of the myth of Antigone, won the Women's Prize for Fiction. Given such a persistent interest in the act of female mythmaking, I ultimately hold that feminist engagements with myth can, given its power as a dominant metanarrative at a time when our literary culture is renegotiating our relationships to such discourses, speak to broader questions about contemporary literature and the woman writer's place within that context.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Metanarratives are mentioned frequently throughout this thesis. Whilst acknowledging the essential definition of a story-about-a-story, the definition used herein extends this to include the overarching narratives which afford our beliefs and experiences some kind of structure. Stephens and McCallum refer to it as "a global or totalizing narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (6). Lyotard identified scepticism regarding metanarratives as the primary feature of postmodernism; such metanarratives according to his estimation included enlightened emancipation and Marxism (1984). Both myth and patriarchy may, therefore, be seen as global narratives attempting to "order and explain knowledge and experience". Their constructed nature, rooted in story, does not preclude them from being felt to be real and from having genuine impact upon the experience of those operating within or responding to such narratives.

The site for these questions is a unique collection of rewritten myths. The Canongate Myths series, a publishing project launched by Edinburgh publishers Canongate in 2005, will serve as a case study for these wider discussions. My interest in the Canongate Myths began during my Master of Studies in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford (2011-13). I had, rather foolishly, decided that my end of first year project would be to write a feminist epic poem (unsurprisingly, still unfinished). In support of this creative project, I undertook a critical study of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005). I found it to be an unusually provocative text, quite different from what I might have expected from a rewriting of the *Odyssey*. From there, my interest in the broader project of the Myths series grew.<sup>2</sup> I recognised that the Myths project served as a distinct corpus in which to locate debates regarding female engagements with mythology and potentially generate new contributions to this ongoing critical discussion.

Upon beginning this thesis, my intention was to survey all 16 of the constituent texts of this project.<sup>3</sup> This ambition proved to be far too great and a more refined scope was identified. This study will engage with the four female-authored texts using Greco-Roman sources produced during the Canongate Myths publishing project: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), a retelling of the *Odyssey*, Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005), the myth of Atlas and Heracles, Ali Smith's *Girl meets boy* (2007), the myth of

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<sup>2</sup> The contents of this essay differ entirely from the analysis presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> All of the Canongate Myths, including the languages in which they are published, are included in a more detailed discussion about the publishing process, found on pp69-70.

Iphis and Ianthe, and Salley Vickers' *Where Three Roads Meet* (2007), the myth of Oedipus. The selection of rewritten mythologies from the Greco-Roman Canongate pantheon did, unfortunately, preclude the inclusion of any writers of colour, and this absence is noted here as a weakness within the project. Yet there is a justification for this narrowing in scope; given the Greco-Roman tradition's prevalence within the Western canon and within western education, it was decided that concentrating on this particular subset of the Canongate Myths would allow for a more concise engagement with the issues at hand and the mythological trajectories in question.<sup>4</sup>

The four texts selected have proven to be rich as resources for advancing these discussions. They are, as we shall see in the unfolding of this project, all as provocative as Atwood's *Penelopiad*, albeit in distinct ways. A fascinating element of this study was the way in which each text demanded an engagement with a different theoretical approach. This thesis will, in its survey of these four titles, touch upon questions of postmodernism, 'post-postmodernism', metamodernism, ecofeminism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Ultimately, one factor which was found to underpin all four texts was a preoccupation with where we are *now* – how the female writer self-consciously situates herself in this time beyond postmodernism. Indeed, one of the most interesting findings of this thesis is that all four texts share a

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<sup>4</sup> Although I regretfully acknowledge the absence of authors of colour, I have done my best to, wherever possible, include critics of colour. I am also pleased to note that 50% of the authors in this thesis are queer (Winterson and Smith); I cannot take credit for this as my scope was shaped by the Canongate commissioning process but it is identified here as a strength, allowing for an engagement with feminism and femininity that moves beyond heteronormativity.

similar engagement with, albeit to varying degrees, modernist discourses and most particularly, modernist understandings of myth. This interrelation of ancient past, modernist past, uncertain present and a feminist future, has generated some fascinating subtexts within the four Myths in question.

Whilst individual texts from the series have engendered critical engagement, most particularly *The Penelopiad*, these four texts have never, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, been discussed alongside each other as part of a broader literary project.<sup>5</sup> The shared motivation espoused by the challenge of the Canongate brief connects the four texts in a unique way and allows us to consider how feminist mythological rewrites may operate in sympathy with or in opposition to each other, in keeping with an understanding of myth as a "palimpsest", composed of overlapping and obfuscating versions (Miles 4). This identification of the four texts as a group has informed my critical approach to feminist rewriting of myth, ultimately encouraging me to conclude that *all* feminist rewriting must be characterised and undertaken as part of a broader 'project'.

Before engaging directly with the texts themselves, some groundwork is necessary. A deeper engagement with what we understand as 'myth' is required; from there, a discussion of the debates surrounding feminist rewriting in general and feminist rewriting of mythology in particular will further serve to contextualise the body of the thesis. From there, a brief outline of the approach advocated by this study will be provided; a closer

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<sup>5</sup> The Myths as publishing project has been the subject of a Master's thesis, as discussed on p66, but has not been the subject of a sustained critical literary study.

consideration of the publishing and reception aspects of the Canongate Myths project will provide the final piece of context needed before delving into the stories themselves to see what ‘truths’ can be found.

### **What is a myth?**

Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human. *The Myths* series brings together some of the world’s finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way. (Foreword to each text in the Canongate Myths series.)

Myth, truth and lie, “universally timeless” yet time-and-context bound, structure of our unconscious and inspiration for acts of creation, contains multitudes.<sup>6</sup> A holistic discussion of the history, philosophy and theory of myth would demand many volumes and as such, we must acknowledge that the brief survey here of different theories of myth is necessarily approximate. An interesting departure point might be to note that the term ‘myth’ itself was first used as late as 1783 by Christian Gottlob Heyne, prompting Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone to warn: “Myth is therefore as much a product of the modern history of ideas from the end of the Enlightenment onward as it is an object product of [say] ancient Greece” (3).<sup>7</sup> It should be observed, therefore, that the definition of myth constructed within this thesis is a

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<sup>6</sup> For brevity and flow, ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’ are used interchangeably here. This is to accommodate the broader philosophical implications of myth within mythology’s definition as a collection of, or the study of, myth.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst “myth” was not used in this context prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the root of the term naturally extends back to the ancient world. The word “mythos” means word or tale in ancient Greek – a story conceived to be read aloud (Bremmer 4). Dowden and Livingstone are here acknowledging that the broader intricacies and relevance of myth as narrative did not begin to be formally theorised until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

pragmatic product of its moment of construction today in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is a position supported by Laurence Coupe, who suggests:

The mythographer [ought to] acknowledge that her own chosen emphasis is only one of many. For example, not all myths are linked with a ritual; not all myths are about gods, and not all myths concern a time outside of historical time. Exceptions to and contradictions of any particular paradigm are endless. (7)

As Robert W. Brockway has commented: "There is little consensus. The field is chaos" (9). The imperfection of the paradigm supplied herein is thus dutifully highlighted and from here, we shall attempt to find some order in this chaos.

In Sharon Rose Wilson's discussion of contemporary myths and fairy tales, she is content to use myths simply as intertexts rather than "language, speech or semiological system" (Wilson, *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* 1). In this she is referring variously to theorists such as philologist F. Max Muller, psychotherapist Nor Hall, semiologist Roland Barthes and others. Whilst the impulse to consider the purely narrative elements of mythology is tempting, it is my feeling that the discussions herein are advanced and supported by a brief engagement with some of the semiological and philosophical implications of mythology. However, having noted the need for a closer engagement with theories of myth, a further observation has fed into this survey. There is, both in contemporary and historical terms, a preponderance of male theorists working on myth as an abstracted concept, philosophy or structure. To dismiss the history of myth theory would be a misstep, but so

too would an attempt to consider too closely abstracted theories of myth which, as we will see, do not bear any obvious relationship with women's textual responses to mythological discourse. The responses themselves present varying kinds of theoretical engagement, suggesting a more organic relationship than a fully detailed survey would account for. Whilst the review that follows will attempt, through broad strokes, to consider some of the more pertinent contributions to this discussion, what this thesis characterises as a "myth" will be fleshed out more fully throughout an engagement with theoretical perspectives on feminist engagements with rewriting "myth" and through the responses to this process, which are themselves very telling. At this point, a formal acknowledgement of Susan Sellers' exhaustive survey of mythography presented in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2001) is necessary; her highly detailed discussion shines a great deal of light on a whole body of complex theories. What I present below has been shaped by her superior scholarship but also offers some deviation from her research.

I understand myth as a story conceived and told as a way of structuring or elucidating some intangible or incomprehensible aspect of human experience. Cupitt speaks to

Myth-making as [...] a primal or universal function of the human mind ... Both for society at large and for the individual, this story-generating function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story. (29)

Myth's oppositional relationship to truth and untruth is of crucial interest to many critics; Michael Bell considers myth to encompass "both a supremely

significant foundational story and a falsehood" (1). Myth's capacity to incorporate both truth and lie is a distinguishing characteristic and one which, according to Susan Sellers, was even recognised during Plato's lifetime (23). Sharon Rose Wilson defines "stories believed to be true and sacred, stories that are etiological explanations of creation and the world" (*Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction* 2). Thelma J. Shinn cites Eliade's response to myth's association with falsehood, claiming it also encompasses "the absolute truth, because it narrates a sacred history; that is, a transhuman revelation that took place at the dawn of the Great time, in the holy time of beginnings" (Shinn 23; Eliade 19). Whilst we ought to be somewhat sceptical towards any suggestion of "absolute truth", Eliade's description of myth suggests the truth-telling power associated with myth and its perceived capacity to contain a core of originary truth. Veronica L. Schanoes defines myth as "a sacred, unquestioned story, involving divine or semi-divine beings, which purports to be history and explains how the physical or cultural world came to take the form it has", whilst also recognising there are exceptions to even this designation (10). As Coupe has illustrated, many myths do not contain reference to divinity and, as Miles states regarding myth's palimpsestic nature, many myths have been questioned. Indeed, conflicting reports of its flexibility/fixity are something to which we will return. Schanoes does recognise these potential variants, but her definition serves to support an understanding of myth as a story tangential to but separate from history, a narrative designed to account for the world as we experience(d) it. David Leeming echoes myth's expression

of “any given culture’s literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality” (xi). Sellers cites Hans Blumenberg’s argument that myth was a way for populations who were newly bipedal to confront the anxiety caused by their own evolution. Whilst she is healthily sceptical of this blanket approach, she “cites it [...] as an illustration of the ongoing endeavour to connect mythology to human origins” (Sellers 3). Recognising myth as a repository for both truth and untruth is a vital task for the feminist mythographer; to accept that it merely expresses essential or primal truths which in turn inform narratives detailing the oppression, mistreatment or absence of women suggests that such treatment comes from some basic truth, which I forthrightly reject. Yet to dismiss them purely as story with no basis in experience or no access to understanding is similarly limiting. It is in the dialectical relationship between truth and untruth that we find myth.

Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth* was published as a companion volume alongside the first two texts in the Canongate Myths series. She raised five key points about myth, which may have in some way influenced the Canongate authors’ understandings of myth:

1. Myth is almost universally preoccupied with death and the possibility of extinction.
2. Myth cannot be understood separately from ritual.
3. Myths are about extremes; “they force us to go beyond our experience”.
4. Myth is not a story created for the sake of art, but contains within it moral direction.
5. “All mythology speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world and in some sense supports it [...] It has been called ‘the perennial philosophy’ because it informed the mythology, ritual and social organisation of all societies before the advent of our scientific

modernity and continues to influence more traditional societies today”.  
(3–4)

Whilst Armstrong asserts that myth is not created *for* art, it should be noted that Coupe considers myth to be inseparable from mythographic art and Sarah B. Pomeroy has stressed that the mythology we have received in the Western world has been preserved entirely by male art. Ritual may itself be understood as an act of creation and thus they are more inextricably bound than Armstrong may be suggesting here (Coupe 30; Pomeroy 10). The fixation upon death and interest in the possibility of extinction is interesting, particularly considering the prevalence of paradigms which inversely are preoccupied with fertility, the most prominent of these being Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), or Mircea Eliade’s interest in creation myths (1957).

Another similarly contradictory aspect of theorisations of myth pertains to its fixity. G.R. Manton has described the process of embellishment as myths were performed, each elaboration helping to allow that particular myth to achieve its optimum impact at that precise moment, something which Sellers ascribes to the ritualistic aspect of myth and its ability to be shaped by its audience (Manton 11–17; Sellers 3). Sellers’ own opinion, however, is that myth can be resilient and liable to withstand all but the most direct and violent attacks (8). Karen Armstrong has, like Manton, observed the way myth can change during the process of its telling, commenting on how Sophocles embellished the myth of Oedipus by adding him blinding himself (“The Truth about Myth” NP). Shinn discusses how oral myths were often altered during performance, but that texts detailing mythological narrative

can become cultural myths, asserting: “The internal tension of the cultural myth is between the story and its teller, between the ancient myth and the contemporary interpretation and expression of its meaning” (6). We can see here the layers of transmission involved in our approach to mythology today, dealing simultaneously with text(s) and surrounding cultural myths informing our readings of said texts.

This tension may be part of what propels what Coupe’s *Myth* describes as the “endless self-generating power of myth” (96). He says, building upon the theories of Kenneth Burke and Paul Ricoeur, that “both making and reading myths [implies] a drive towards completion, an insistence of seeing things through to as near their full development as possible”, a propelling force he relates back to Aristotle’s theory of entelechy (Coupe 6–7; Burke 100–05; Ricoeur 5). Coupe does warn that the drive for perfection identified by Burke can lead to totalitarian myths, but endorses Ricoeur’s use of this movement to gain a sense of myth’s “exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding”, leading to possibilities. Thus, Coupe asserts, whilst myth may indeed be paradigmatic and may contain implications of social and cosmic hierarchies and the ideal of, or quest for, perfection, it contains within its paradigms other potential modes of existence, to be achieved beyond our current moment (5). This approach, acknowledging the structures and horizons of myth whilst simultaneously identifying its capacity to hint at the spaces and possibilities beyond our experiences to date, is one which may appeal to women writers seeking to

revise ancient mythologies; the future possibilities implied by an inherent drive for perfection will be something to which we will return.

Myth's "self-generating power" could in part be attributed, if we are to believe Jung, to its presence within the structure of our unconscious mind. Freud and Jung, the father of psychoanalysis and his sometime collaborator, have completely altered how we perceive the function of myth. Freud's use of mythology is expanded upon in greater detail in Chapter Four. It would be expedient to note at this juncture Freud's engagement with Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Sellers observes how Freud's consideration of Frazer's fertility myths led him to "[equate] myth with the blissful ignorance of early infancy, religion with the developing awareness of childhood, and science with the fully mature adult who has come to terms with reality" (3). We can see that this three-tier process of gaining knowledge indicates a journey from mythos to logos. Yet this linear hierarchy seems to posit science at the top of the pyramid as pure logos, removed entirely from mythos; the pure objectivity and reason of science is something which has been denounced by many philosophers (see, for example, Haraway 1988). It is interesting, however, to note the association between myth and infancy (something clearly underpinning Freud's psychosexual theories and further considered in due course).

Jung's symbolist assertions about mythological archetype are worthy of consideration. To Jung, myth is a series of images embedded in our unconscious and make themselves felt, through dreams or narrative: "C.G. Jung's patients, we are told, were able to reconstruct Greek myths in their

dreams without knowing anything of ancient Greece, for the archetypes live within us in a timeless continuum that knows not before or after" (Fisch 1). The presence of mythical images, or archetypes, within our unconscious is an interesting premise and may account for certain similar mythological narratives emerging from different cultures, not to mention humanity's ongoing fascination with such tales. Jung wrote:

I have often been asked where the archetypes or primordial images come from. It seems to me that their origin can only be explain by assuming them to be deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity. One of the commonest and at the same time most impressive experiences is the apparent movement of the sun every day. We certainly cannot discover anything of the kind in the unconscious, so far as the known physical process is concerned. What we do find, on the other hand, is the myth of the sun-hero in all its countless variations. It is this myth, and not the physical process, that forms the sun archetype [...] The archetype is a kind of readiness to produce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas. (330)

Certainly, myth has a relationship to the experience of existence and the idea that it might be shaped by psychological deposits of repetitious features of human life is an intriguing prospect. Jung believes that archetypal images offer the potential for huge amounts of variation and different interpretations; as Segal establishes:

Because archetypes are innately unconscious, they can express themselves only obliquely, through symbols. Furthermore, not only does every myth contain multiple archetypes, but every archetype harbors inexhaustible meanings. (9–10)

This potential to access multiple avenues of interpretation once more suggests possibilities, yet the idea that these archetypes exist already within our collective unconscious raises questions about existing, potentially

essentialist feminine archetypes and what might be done to alter these. The 'readiness to produce over and over again' ignores elements of the time-and-context bound nature of myth which myth critics such as Yorke endorse.<sup>8</sup> However, Jung's identification of myth's presence within the unconscious and its connection to experience is a worthwhile addition to our understanding of the mythological paradigm.

Roland Barthes's seminal *Mythologies* has been a useful resource for this study. He expertly dissects the way in which humans carry out the mythmaking process beyond the telling of ancient stories, positing (and proving, through discussions of the cover of *Paris-Match* and "Steak and Chips") that anything can become a myth. Barthes, placing myth on the right side of the political spectrum, shows how despite its 'ancient' provenance, myth has a historical foundation. Unlike Frazer or Eliade, it is his contention that myth cannot possibly have come from the 'nature' of things and is thus itself a construct. It is, he claims, a type of speech – "a system of communication" and a "mode of signification" (Barthes, *Mythologies* 110;109). It is more than speech, however, it is also a stolen language which "transform(s) a meaning into form" (131). Barthes ascribes the construction of a myth to the dialectical relationship between form and concept, leading to:

The tri-dimensional pattern...the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative

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<sup>8</sup> See p56 of this introductory chapter

total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (114)

This suggests, however, that there is potential for altering the relationship between signifier, signified and sign, through what he terms the “halo of virtualities”, a term used later in this introduction to characterise the approach to feminist rewriting advocated herein (132). Barthes discusses how accepting myth can define all of literature; he defined “writing as the signifier of literary myth, that is, as a form which is already filled with meaning and which receives from the concept of Literature a new signification” (134). He has described the difficulty in trying to resist this process and suggests that “the best weapon against myth is to perhaps mythify in its turn and to produce *an artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology” (134). Whilst perhaps not an entire disruption of the second-order system of signification, the *Canongate Myths* does offer a form of ‘artificial myth’ and, indeed, a mythification of the process of mythmaking. The acceptance of the separation of myth from nature helps also to remove some of the more essentialising aspects of myth and draw attention to the processes by which myths are constructed. He highlights that

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but of a statement of fact. (141)

An approach to myth which exploits Barthes ‘halo of virtualities’ to use the space around myth to further sever it from nature and thus undermine its ‘natural and eternal justifications’ of visions of gender offers some liberating potential.

Lévi-Strauss shared the belief that myth is language; his structuralist outlook encouraged him to view myth as a yearning for order, a desire to fight back against perceived chaos (*Myth and Meaning* 12–13). He believes that history has almost supplanted myth and serves the same organising function (43). His breaking down of myth, into fixed parts called mythemes, distinct from units of language, moved beyond the symbolist inquiries of Jung and suggested that the relationship between those mythemes was where meaning might be found (*Structural Anthropology* 211). Whilst I deny the purely structural approach, a consideration of the relationships between myths has informed my position, as has Lévi-Strauss's assertion that "we define the myth as consisting of all its versions", hinting towards future versions ("The Structural Study of Myth" 435). This process continues until the intellectual work of the myth has been achieved and thus the stories we continue to re-tell may, in time, result in larger bundles of relations containing contemporary pertinence and including new and varying versions.

One avenue to definition many theorists choose to pursue is by judging myth in opposition to fairy tale; this method has often been used in an effort to advance fairy tales as an undervalued discourse, with *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* offering a fully considered evaluation of this relationship and suggesting that fairy tale has become, in a Barthesian sense, myth (Zipes). Myth and fairy tale are often studied side-by-side; Susan Seller's *Myth and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2001), Sharon Rose Wilson's *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (2008) and Veronica L.

Schanoes' *Fairy Tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale* (2014) offer three examples from the past 10 years where myth and fairy tale are used together within the same study to elicit similar discussions, albeit with acknowledged differences. Schanoes notes the sacred aspect of myth as distinguishing it from fairy tale, but in an increasingly secular world the myths we write today are often removed from that distinguishing sanctity. Susan Sellers writes:

I draw no distinction between myth and fairy tale as the terms seem currently synonymous, even though I recognise important differences in their historical evolution and I continue to see a happy ending as the peculiar province of fairy tale. I am also aware of the ongoing tendency to 'gender' the two, and the hierarchy which the equation of myth with masculinity and fairy tale with femininity produces. (16)

Whilst I acknowledge the impulse to conflate the two, Sellers's amendments to this equation seem to me to be too weighty to ignore. Certainly there is merit in identifying that despite the traditional perception of their provenance as children's tales, fairy tales share many of the organising principles and structural values of myth. Yet offering a direct equivalence, despite the ongoing association of fairy tale with femininity, may lead to an erosion of distinct discussions pertaining to why and how that association has been constructed. One of the authors in the Canongate Myths series interpreted their brief in such a way as to include fairy tale; Dubravka Ugrešić's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2007) is a revision of the classic story from Slavic folklore. I believe that a conflation of myth and fairy tale could serve to obfuscate the distinct 'historical evolution' Sellers identifies; it also could lead, inadvertently, to a continued lack of female theorists working purely on

myth, choosing instead to consider both together. Given the comparative lack in the literature, and those who work on myth's dependence on centuries of male-driven theories, this may continue to entrench masculine/feminine, myth/fairy tale divisions, rather than elide them. That being said, as a direct result of that lack, there will be moments herein when fairy tale criticism is deployed to highlight a particular point; there is, after all, a consanguinity between these two cousins and there are times where fairy tale criticism will best support a particular perspective.

Myth is thus a product of endlessly oppositional values. Ivan Strenski has called it "everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype" (1–2). Ultimately, the primary characteristic of myth must be understood as story; to Brockway this is the only common denominator in all myths, ancient and contemporary (10). Given the noted chaos of the theoretical field, the most expedient approach at this juncture would be to take a sideways step to look more particularly at discussions of feminist rewritings of mythology. This thesis's defining work has not yet been completed; understandings of what constitutes a myth will continue to be generated throughout, but it is hoped that this brief survey provides a basic underpinning for what will follow.

### **Feminism, Myth and Feminist Rewriting**

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a

chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves [...] A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich 18–19)

These words, written in 1972 by poet and feminist Adrienne Rich, still ring in the ears of anyone working on feminist revision in the twenty-first century. Her call to arms, her inciting challenge for women to use their creative capacities to revise and thus reconsider their situatedness in both literature and in the world, still holds true. Change is only possible through self-knowledge and revision is one way in which to interrogate “the assumptions in which we”, as subjects of patriarchy, “are drenched”. A note here on the terms revision and rewriting: they are, within the confines of this thesis, used interchangeably to facilitate a more lively readability, not to necessarily suggest that they are synonymous. Christian Moraru’s discussions on rewriting focus on what he considers to be “*intensive* rewriting – programmatic, thorough, and “over” (“straight”)” as opposed to what may be a more “coded” revision”; the Canongate Myths’ programmatic approach necessitates an understanding of this as an “intensive act” (xiii). Moraru’s additional caveat of rewriting being recognised as a text not merely reproducing an older narrative but providing “a notable, formal surplus and an ideological, revisionary difference to boot” offers a further useful distinction (7). Having acknowledged the difference in terms of output, it is

useful to note the similarities as regards process: rewriting first demands a form of revision.

However, for those female writers awoken by Rich's compelling mission statement, the act of revision is fraught with difficulty. There are some who believe that language, a system which is imbued with and perpetuates patriarchal values, cannot be used to effect political change and thus the act of revision is not a fruitful feminist endeavour. Others suggest that the use of a "female language" (to quote Christiane Makward) is the answer to this difficulty, promoting a language system that is "open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body I.E. the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or didactic languages" (96). Whilst the potential for some of these concepts is noted, it seems uncertain as to how this "female" language can operate alongside, or in opposition, to a patriarchal language, or if women will instead end up communicating in isolation, speaking only in fragments.

Using an imperfect language which bears the weight of millennia of patriarchal discourses, how do we conceive of feminist writing, much less feminist re-writing of stories transmitted over the course of those millennia? *The Penelopiad* offers a potent metaphor for the difficulties presented by such acts of revision.

The shroud itself became a story almost instantly. 'Penelope's web', it was called; people used to say that of any task that remained mysteriously unfinished. I did not appreciate the term web. If the

shroud was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, I'd merely been trying to avoid the entanglement myself. (119)

Atwood's Penelope, like Homer's before her, is using the traditionally feminine art of weaving as a means of self-protection. She cunningly tells the suitors swarming around the island of Ithaca in Odysseus's absence that she will only select one of them to marry once she has finished crafting a burial shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. She is able to circumnavigate this promise by secretly unpicking the day's work each night, the shroud never progressing. Weaving has often been associated with writing; Kirstin M. Bloomberg makes this point most particularly in her discussions of Arachne, the weaver-turned-spider, in *Tracing Arachne's Web: Myth and Feminist Fiction* (2001). Indeed, a tale is also often called a 'yarn', strengthening the connection between the two different crafts. Thus we can view Penelope's articulation of the process of deconstruction and reconstruction as reflective of the breaking down and recreating required in a rewriting project. For a feminist writer, the act of weaving becomes particularly precarious. The loom upon which she works and the threads she entwines may all be considered to belong to another – to a guild of male weavers who have themselves gone through this process for centuries. Should she make use of the same frames he has used, utilising his patterns to weave new works? Or are the threads themselves too frayed to accurately represent her truth? Is sitting at the same loom simply a way of keeping her entangled in an oppressive system?

Does feminist rewriting become another Penelope's web, a task mysteriously left unfinished, leading to accidental entrapment?

These are challenging questions, particularly within the context of rewriting mythology. Diane Purkiss warns that to talk of 'feminist rewriting of mythology' suggests that women were never involved in the mythmaking practice and that there are many cultures in which women are the primary storytellers. Yet as she has acknowledged, women have been "outsiders and latecomers [...] in classical mythology in western literature"; as noted above, much of what we know about classical mythology has been transmitted through male art and thus both the narratives themselves and the language they use are produced by and complicit in, perpetuating forms of patriarchy (441). Myth is misogynistic; Purkiss comments how "for feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in [...] the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators" (441). Amber Jacobs calls myth the "story of the origins of patriarchy", demonstrating how the matricidal myths of the *Oresteia*, the story of Metis and others all represent a denial of female capabilities in order to better serve the "masculine project of the colonization of knowledge and generative power" (62). Sellers says that it is myth's inherent misogyny that makes it a strange source of inspiration for contemporary writers, providing the kidnapping of Helen as one example of the sexism of mythic narrative (30). Zajko and Leonard say that "these myths are, after all, not only the products of an androcentric society, they can also be seen to justify its most basic patriarchal assumptions" (3). They cite the Oedipus myth as an example of a

violent narrative which normalises 'gender asymmetries', and comment how the post-structuralist Oedipus has "come to symbolize all modes of patriarchal authority" (10). A brief consideration of just some of the Greco-Roman stories inculcated within our cultural consciousness betrays their inherent misogyny; consider Zeus's assault of numerous women in his various guises, his powerful role as king of the gods allowing him to deny the autonomy and even the humanity of the mortal subjects of his desire. Medusa, inspiring image for Hélène Cixous, was cursed to have snakes instead of hair and turn all who gaze on her into stone for the 'crime' of being raped by the god Poseidon in the temple of Athena. These passing observations speak to a broader theme: the classics of western literature contain within them numerous accounts of women being enslaved, mistreated, or simply silenced. Alicia Ostriker believes it is "thanks to myth we believe that woman must be either 'angel' or 'monster'"(71). Not only this, but mythic paradigms have informed patriarchal construction and are part of its language. Mary Daly has called patriarchy itself a mythic paradigm (190).

Daly and some other feminist mythographers offer alternatives to an understanding of mythology as purely patriarchal, however. There is a distinct debate in some quarters about a mythological matriarchy which predates and has been suppressed by the patriarchy. Sellers' introduction spends a great deal of time discussing *The Great Cosmic Mother*, which argues that evidence of matriarchal cultures with a mother goddess at its core has been downplayed throughout history, deliberately obfuscated by science (Sjöo and Mor 1991). Robert Graves famously made similar

suggestions in *The White Goddess* and Jane Caputi has argued that patriarchy is a “historical phenomenon and ancient myth traces the existence of a gynocentric consciousness” (Graves 2011; Caputi 24). Yet, as Purkiss has commented, the deployment of a matriarchy as the shapeless and shadowy underside to the patriarchy has often served the purposes of men; she writes that for Graves, “truth-claims of myths as the hidden secret repressed by civilization are [...] truths *about femininity for men*” (441). As Purkiss elucidates, we find that as so often with depictions of women, they come into being at apposite times for the construction of male identities; Sellers may find Sjöo and Mor’s work to be illuminating, but I query this, informed by Purkiss’s warnings that such an “engagement depends on accepting some of the terms of what they engage with, even as they lay claim to an originary innocence or separatist integrity” (444). Cynthia Eller believes the myth of the matriarchy, which she considers to be untrue, is best understood as an “enormous thought experiment, a play with reversals” (8). Whilst appealing as a thought experiment, it is my contention that it simply establishes yet another binaried system of recognition in which male discourse is recognised, understood and transmitted and female discourse is shapeless, the subject of debate and constructed entirely in opposition to the former. Too close an engagement with myths of the matriarchy certainly does little to dislodge patriarchal myths from our cultural consciousness and beyond a tongue-in-cheek engagement with Graves’s *The White Goddess* in *The Penelopiad*’s anthropology lecture, and a potential subversion of the ‘Great Goddess’ in Winterson’s version of the goddess Hera, the Canongate

Myths speak to the female without using the 'mother goddess' or a repressed matriarchy as a significant icon or point of inspiration. Thus this thesis will continue on the presumption that, despite some variations visible beyond the Greco-Roman tradition, and the potential for there to have existed at some point matriarchal, mythmaking cultures which we now cannot, despite Caputi's claims, reliably trace, mythology contains and generates patriarchal thought and language.

If mythology is patriarchal it is, therefore, despite Sellers' surprise at their interest in its subject matter, an important point of enquiry for feminists. Before delving any more deeply into theoretical frameworks for feminist engagements with mythology or providing a methodology for rewriting myth, a brief discussion regarding what is understood herein as 'feminist' would be expedient. As with efforts to pin down an unequivocal definition of myth, feminism (often referred to as feminisms) is notoriously hard to outline in definitive terms (Beasley ix). For Diane Elam, this lexical slipperiness is simply evidence to show that feminism has not yet completed its political work (4). Feminism is understood within the scope of this thesis imperfectly but functionally as a group of multifarious movements with one common purpose: the promotion of women and the establishment of political, economic, social and sexual equality. I ascribe to Lykke's assertions of feminist epistemology as a "situated and partial knowledge"; in this I build upon Lykke's citation from Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* on vision. Lykke writes that Haraway plays on the words 'site' and 'sight' (in here I add the word 'cite', to emphasise that this is a shared, referential vision) and suggest

that we must “reflect on our siting and sighting thoroughly” in order to “talk with an authoritative voice about the *partial reality* that we can see” (Haraway 581; Lykke 6). This is worthy advice for both the female writer and critic. My knowledge, admittedly partial, is situated within the context of this body of work and I here will offer an authoritative definition of my own version of feminism which will be sited and cited herein. The feminism I support is an intersectional, non-essentialist, emancipatory approach built upon assumptions of gender as fluid, performative and positional; the politic advocated within this thesis denies a feminism which recognises only sexed femininity or which does not actively respond to intersectional oppressions based on class, race, physical form or sexuality. My vision of feminism, a situated knowledge and a product of twenty-first century discussions of gender and sexuality, believes that the erosion of the patriarchal structures and discourses which oppress women within society can only occur within a broader emancipatory project. To that end, this discussion will attempt always to consider intersectional concerns wherever possible and/or appropriate.

This socio-political basis underpinning my understanding of a feminist poetics takes its cue from Nancy Chodorow’s eschewal of essential difference, which she claims causes us to

Ultimately rely on the defensively constructed masculine models of gender that are presented to us as our cultural heritage, rather than creating feminist understandings of gender and difference that have grown from our own politics, theorizing and experience.(113)

In keeping with bell hooks, my feminism is

Defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, [centralizing] the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied or changed by political movements (25–26).

When I describe gender as positional, I am here echoing Linda Alcoff. She asserts that

Gender is not a point to start from in the sense of being a given thing but is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices and discourses [...] it seems both possible and desirable to construe a gendered subjectivity in relation to concrete habits, practices and discourses while at the same time recognizing the fluidity of these. (431)

She proposes:

If we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as nonessentialized and emergent from historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure. Thus we can say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical or essential and yet still claim that gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically. (Alcoff 433)

This nuanced suggestion, the pragmatic development of a foundation which is at once supportive and yet also capable of movement and flux, is the position from which I want this thesis to act politically: denying essentialism or any form of universal generalizing but occupying varying positions in order to appropriately interrogate different facets of patriarchal discourse. The feminist poetics at work here (a basic definition of which is given by Terry Threadgold as “a feminist work on and with texts”) is thus grounded in social and political reality as much as in literary discourse (1).

How, therefore, can we address these realities, attempt to erode said structures and dislodge patriarchal discourses through literature? Feminist

literary theory, the mapping of feminist movements onto the written word, offers some liberatory practices for feminist readers and writers. Whilst we could trace a history of feminism back much further, the socio-political movement of the 1960s and 1970s, advancing women's liberation and demanding equal rights operated in symbiosis with the emergence of feminist literary criticism. The roots of feminist literary criticism can be tracked back to writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and others, yet as the question of women's place and function in society became ever more pressing within social dialogues in the 1960s and 1970s, questions of female authorship, language and literary representation became increasingly important. Many early feminist critics acknowledged the adverse effects a male-dominated canon has had upon female creativity. Elaine Showalter commented on the female writer's lack of a history upon which to build, forcing her to "rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex" (12–13). Susan M. Gilbert and Sandra Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (1979) offered the blistering pronouncement that "patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women" (13). Judith Fetterley has written of the difficulty a female student of literature experiences when engaging with a predominantly male canon: "Intellectually male, sexually female, one is in effect no one, nowhere, emasculated" (xxii). The literary criticism of the 1970s having thus identified this gap in the canon and the significant effects the patriarchy was having upon both women's literature and women's lived experiences, efforts were made to attempt to find "potential foremothers for

feminist philosophy” and indeed literature (Gardner 41). Yet critics including Lillian S. Robinson believe that those efforts to simply inject women into a pre-existing canon that has not been properly scrutinised or realigned were misguided (145). Could such texts even enter that canon? The uncovering of repressed foremothers could ultimately contribute to the formation of a secondary canon, necessarily less prominent than the dominant western patriarchal tradition which, left directly unchallenged, would continue to remake itself in its own image. As with venerations of myths of the matriarchy often serving only to support the myths of the patriarchy, the creation of a secondary, reversed canon cannot in and of itself be understood as an act of decentring or decolonising. The identification of potential foremothers is here understood as an understandable and necessary impulse (and indeed, there is some discussion about the disconnection of mother from daughter in Chapter One) but it is not, in isolation, an act capable of truly dislodging patriarchy’s hold on our literary canon. It must function as part of a broader process of revision.

Robin Truth Goodman offered this summary of the history of feminist theory:

The standard historicization of the movement presumes that feminism’s early connection to socialism fractured because its tendencies to universalize the experience of “women’s oppression” and gave way to a “difference feminism”, hyphenization model, or an “identity politics” that sought a broader inclusion of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, age, ability and sexual orientation. It finally moved into a “postmodern feminism” that questioned the very possibility of reference and representation altogether in its broad philosophy of difference and its espousal of the “end of master narratives”. “Postmodern feminism” then itself came under attack because its aversion limited the possibility of representational politics

under the name of feminism, and so feminism turned back to a post-feminist, materialist orientation, or a “Third Wave”(6).

Goodman warns that the presentation of a systematic history like this, or discussion of ‘waves’, establishes a false coherence, but what we can build upon this framework are some other historically-bound responses from women writers to shifts in feminist thought. The era of difference feminism and identity politics saw overdue attention being finally paid to voices of colour, queer voices and women with other intersectional identities; whilst some of these works have been welcomed in from the margins, it would be entirely unfair to suggest that literature has fully incorporated the broad church of human identity to date. Indeed, as acknowledged by Goodman, talk of identity often consigns meaning to a false relationship between our biological bodies and a body of knowledge, a connection which can reduce meaning to surface level signifiers and further enshrines the primacy of the sexed body (4). Postmodern disintegration of the unified self led to a break down in textual practises, the shape and trajectory of which will be discussed in Chapter One. The textual implications of a post-feminist, materialist feminism might be seen in the proliferation of popular literature which forthrightly celebrates women’s choice to behave as consumers within a neoliberal context, detailing characters living sexually ‘emancipated’ lives yet still dictated to by the patriarchal goals of heteronormative relationships, beauty and capitalist consumption. As Rosalind Gill has commented, the issue of choice in a postfeminist context is that it sees “individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The

neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action” (436).

In 1993, Nina Baym commented that “Today’s feminist literary theory makes asking an act of empirical anti-theory, and hence a heresy. It is finally more concerned to be theoretical than to be feminist. It speaks from the position of the castrata” (155). She relates the ongoing, often polarising debates in feminist theory to Freud, relating it to his denial of original female thought, which she contends is still felt in academia (162). Whether or not we have sympathy for her rationale, her avowal to quit practising feminist theory, claiming being feminist is more important than being a theorist, speaks to the fragmentation in theory that existed in 1990s and 2000s. Yet *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Feminist Theory* believes there has been a rejuvenation in feminism since 2008; Susan Watkins observes that feminism never disappeared but had been absorbed “as a mantra of the global establishment” (Goodman 2; Watkins 5). The feminism of the past decade has been shaped by a growing proliferation of misogynistic ‘men’s rights’ activism, the issues raised by the #metoo campaign, the election of a number of prominent anti-female politicians to significant positions and the global rise of the populist right. Rejuvenated within this maelstrom, feminist theory, and by extension, feminist literature, still finds itself engaging with fraught questions of sex vs gender and of liberal vs radical politics. Many feminist issues remain unresolved and it often feels like the stakes are, within the global socio-political context, higher than ever. The texts studied within this thesis were written between 2005-9, but I will argue that they predict

and, in some instances, encourage this rejuvenation of feminist thought and support an ongoing feminist literary agenda, at a time where such a project had lost some of its cache. All four texts certainly indicate an interest in theoretical conceptions of femininity and seem to share a similar yearning for something beyond postmodern disintegration and neoliberal exploitation.

This rejuvenation brings us back, therefore, to revision. We are still are completely drenched in those patriarchal assumptions identified by Rich: subject to threats of the removal of sexual rights, the ongoing indignity of a gender pay gap, a growing awareness of the daunting prevalence of sexual abuse, misogynistic online trolling, genital mutilation, trafficking and slavery. Even in a (neo)liberal western society which attempts to peddle this lie that we are equal, like the UK, only 32% of its elected representatives serving in Westminster are female.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, having identified this stasis (or, if we are to believe Germaine Greer, this decline in female status and degradation of lived experience) it is time to again look backwards in order to better support a move forwards (Sanghani).<sup>10</sup> Particularly in light of current theoretical trends towards ‘reconstruction’ and ‘theory renaissance’ (see Funk 2015; Leitch 2014), the tension between this co-development of potentially worsening lived experiences for women and the emergence of an optimistic and restorative critical theory is worth consideration. This nascent theoretical preoccupation with re-evaluation and rejuvenation will be considered

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<sup>9</sup> See BBC News “Election 2017: Record number of female MPs” for a further breakdown of this (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Greer is cited here only as an example because of the media attention garnered due to her declaration that things getting are worse. I would not like to suggest any kind of support for her other recent interventions into gender debates, particularly regarding her transphobia.

throughout all of the texts within this study, whilst remaining mindful of Baym's assertion that it is more important to be feminist (and promote feminist ethics) than to ascribe entirely to dogmatic theories of feminism. This bricolage theory of feminism will continue to be built throughout the thesis, as we consider what may or may not be perceived as 'feminist' within the rewriting process.

Entering old texts from new critical directions, including the varying and sometimes conflicting critical thoughts generated since Rich first wrote those words, could offer the potential to reconsider some of the foundational issues of patriarchal discourse within literature. Atwood, Winterson, Smith and Vickers, aged 79, 59, 56 and 71 respectively, have all had to necessarily consider, at least unconsciously, the question posited in 1992 by Elizabeth Bronfen:

How do women constitute and establish themselves as authors within a culture that has not yet drafted this role, except as a blank, an aporia, a presence under erasure? [...] Because the historically real woman writer cannot articulate herself entirely devoid of cultural fictions of femininity, writing as a woman transpires into an act of reading cultural texts [...] critically, so as to enact the implied contradiction (404).

In the twenty-first century, whilst the blank space has begun to be filled by female writers eliding that aporia, we still retain the legacy of that lack and authors like those within this study still bear the weight of this absence.

Feminist writers still consider how to bring themselves into being without dependence upon those versions of femininity constructed within patriarchal narratives; Bronfen's suggestion of a critical reading of cultural texts

(including myth) critically, with an awareness of their contradictory essence, is a useful one. Hélène Cixous wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa* that

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (875).

A practice of revision – a *re-visioning*, to again endorse both Rich and Haraway – which includes critical reading of cultural texts would allow woman to *write* herself, counteracting the damage caused by a patriarchal society which distorts her relationship with her body and negates her political value by providing ‘authentic’ representations of her femininity, contributing to broader conceptions of femininities. The act of rewriting also means she will write *herself*, by undertaking that act of revision directly and personally.

But, if we are agreed that a process of revision as a principle and rewriting as its methodology is a relevant feminist pursuit in the twenty-first century, why rewrite myth in particular? Partly it is because, as Sam McBean suggests, that a consideration of the past will inevitably lead us back to myth: “it seems to be bound up in considerations of what it means to turn to the past – it seemingly always asks us to consider the relationship between past and present” (30). It may also be due to all of the reasons outlined in our discussion above: it informs our language, it has been an integral part of a certain class of rarefied western education and it contains within it stories which continue to be told yet indicate, if not perpetuate, elements of misogyny. This is a brief answer to Sellers’s question of ‘why myth?’ Yet it is a question she is right to ask. McBean has warned against the “counter-

transformative” trap of feminist revisions of myth – the Penelope’s web described earlier (30). Elizabeth Bronfen declares that rewriting walks the “fine line between terrorism and collaboration”(x). These are strong words and bestow an enormous pressure upon the female rewriter. But it is, as Purkiss has elaborated, a worthy warning. She offers a detailed description of the ways in which rewriting can serve to reaffirm myth’s power. She says that the most common strategy deployed by 20<sup>th</sup> century women poets was to give voice to previously silenced female characters from Greco-Roman myth. The issue is that in so doing, it does not necessarily examine the female writer’s position in both the myth’s creation or the status of myth in literature more broadly (445). She believes that the strategy of ‘images of women’ feminism, whereby negative female characters are revalued and represented as misunderstood or with new strengths simply insists that “‘positive’ images of women are somehow timeless” and it represents a “refusal to recognize the literariness of literature” (442).<sup>11</sup> Purkiss warns that changing the voice of a myth can serve to strengthen its power and thus we can see how the feminist writer may find herself charged with patriarchal connection. Camille Paglia does not recognise the necessity for feminist

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<sup>11</sup> Purkiss continues: “Most importantly, attempts to produce positive role models and tell feminist stories will repeatedly founder if we assume that stories can be excised from text, culture and institution, that their meanings are not circumscribed by their histories”. She goes on to elucidate this by discussing how the revival in feminist interest in the mother goddess “does not come straight to us from prehistoric women, but was invented by men earlier this century for reasons which had nothing to do with empowering women” (442). Thus the ‘literariness’ of myth may be understood as how myth has been transmitted and shaped by its formation into text, and how those texts have been received within cultures. Simple replication of a ‘bad’ mythological woman with a ‘good’ version of that character does little to engage with that process of transmission and cultural entrenchment. It does not also, in and of itself, alter the original text-based myth’s place within a literary canon.

rewriting as she essentially endorses the nature-feminine associations upheld by mythology (See *Sexual Personae*, 1992). Rachel Blau du Plessis considers the fraught process in women's rewriting of poetry:

The poems of new myth – the myths of critique – are necessitated by two central realizations [...] the position of the self-as-woman, and the position of the self-as-historical-actor in opposition to old myths. The new myths entail critical perceptions about the nature of the woman in traditional myths, and they recast long-sanctified plots [...] The poems are so strongly reevaluative that they may appear antimythological, for they record the realization that old myths are invalid and crippling for women [...] These myths of critique are so deeply self-questioning that the poems may appear to reject the mythic mode entirely: "No masks! No more mythologies!" Yet these poems are in fact reinventions of myth, appropriating and rediscovering the essential mythic experiences: journey, rebirth, transformation and centering. (212)

The inevitability of returning to mythic paradigm is Du Plessis's disheartening critique: even in self-consciously interrogative modes, she argues, myth eventually sustains itself even through reference. Ultimately the end goal of rewriting or revising myth, Du Plessis concedes, is a change in consciousness, a lofty aim (219). Yet I challenge the importance Du Plessis gives to acknowledging or approximating 'moments of eternal recurrence' as part of this conscious-changing process; to stress the need for such moments is to veer towards universalizing. Offering a further warning, Schanoes cites Joosen's assessment of fairy-tale rewriting: "at the same time it criticizes and reinforces the target text; it is simultaneously negative and affirming, de-escalating and resacralizing, rebellious and conservative" (Schanoes 16).

Is this a thankless task, therefore? Do female writers who attempt to recraft ancient mythologies necessarily strengthen their sources and thus

implicitly endorse the misogynies therein? If, as Purkiss warns, rewriting becomes a playing with patterns rather than a structural overhaul, can a rewriting project such as the Canongate Myths ever be considered feminist? Can, indeed, a capitalist project orchestrated by a commercial publisher ever escape its own desire for consumers in order to support the kind of feminist ethics and poetics outlined above? Purkiss's essay ultimately suggests that there are "endless possibilities" and it is this critical optimism I wish to now encourage.

Sellers's final response to the question 'why myth?' is that "its procedures enable the expression of more individually resonant, less easily co-optable, multifarious truths"(32). Truth again becomes, in its imperfect way, the impetus for telling stories. Schanoes believes that whilst postmodernism has disrupted our understanding of truth and the self, we continue to be fascinated by the prospect of a "true self"; she, like Winterson, suggests that stories can be a way to access this, even through "a kaleidoscopic, constantly shifting set of identities that are always in the process of being constructed" (5). In the twenty-first century, we find ourselves recognising this ongoing desire for the "true self" despite its impossibility and find ourselves piecing together coloured fragments from a variety of different sources. Myth enables this, allowing us to see ourselves, albeit through broken panels of stained glass. Schanoes also suggests that mythical revision does not necessarily require the "hostile or anxious" relationship which Du Plessis argues, becomes mythic itself, but her work instead suggests a "collaborative, affectionate relationship"(8). The model

she draws up for this is a psychoanalytic mother-daughter framework, whereby the female writer revises and thus “[rebirths] the dead” and becomes “simultaneously one’s own mother and one’s own daughter”(59). Even without engaging with the complexities of that relationship, the concept of collaboration, kinship and affection is useful. Her assessment is that “revision has the potential to expose the ideological underpinnings of the stories that shape our lives, not in order that we surrender to them, but in order that we can shape them in turn”(57). Zajko and Leonard believe that there is a crucial interdependence between feminism and myth, using Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa* as the first of many examples of how myth has been central to the development of feminist thought, as opposed to merely the subject of specific feminist revisions of individual myths (3). Lillian Doherty believes that gender is the central concern of all myth; if we accept that gender is myth’s dominant anxiety, then an application of feminist thought to myth is surely pertinent (“Putting the Women Back into the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women” 423). Myth, for all of the pitfalls and problematic threads it presents, threatening to entrap the female rewriter, still offers stories which “combine [...] imaginative fluidity with an authoritative force” (Doherty 422).

The following section of this chapter will attempt to suggest ways, whilst mindful of the difficulties indicated above, to make use of myth’s positive potential as a vehicle for feminist discourse. This is not a process underpinned by Ricoeur’s drive for perfection; it is an exploration of the possibilities suggested by Purkiss. She is correct in that no strategy will ever

truly manage to break myth away from existing discourse; this is not reason enough not to try. Instead, I advocate for the “political *nous*” she recommends and present a pragmatic, cautiously optimistic methodology for feminist rewriting of mythology which capitalises upon these possibilities within the shifting theoretical and socio-political contexts of the twenty-first century.

### **Disentangling Penelope’s Web: A Methodology for Feminist Rewriting of Mythology**

As we draw closer to at last analysing the constituent texts of this study, I offer below ten theses on what characterises a *feminist* rewriting of mythology. Given here in summarised form, I will in due course break down these items in order to account for their privileging within this framework. Any such list is necessarily imperfect and there will emerge smaller micro-strategies not identified here. There is also a certain amount of interconnection and interdependence between the different theses; viewing mythmaking as ongoing also demands recognition of myth as time-and-context bound. They also at times function in opposition to each other; there are instances where the consideration of a very personal mythology precludes a sustained discussion of that individual within her community (for example, the autobiographical sections of Winterson’s *Weight* do not necessarily allow for this). Yet the placement of that individual reappropriation within a broader, more communal context of rewriting allows

what is personally felt to retain public relevance. Theses number 2-10 all demand the primary deployment of thesis number 1: Feminist rewriters of myth are clearly seen as critical readers of myth. In summary, this is designed to be descriptive rather than prescriptive; this is not a checklist and it will not be applied to the texts in this study in an authoritarian or even linear way. In keeping with the spirit of this methodology, I identify these theses as just one iteration of an approach which is necessarily time-and-context bound and will hopefully see further versions and collaborations.

1. Feminist rewriters of myth are critical readers of myth
2. Myth engages with its personal and public significances

Consideration is paid to both the personal and public significances of the rewritten myth in particular and the concept of myth in general, as pertains to representations of women and gender.

3. Rewritten myths engage in 'metamythmaking'

In this way, they take part in the mythologizing of female authorship.

4. Mythmaking is a collaborative process

It is recognised as cooperative and continuous, with no definitive end nor one definitive voice.

5. Individual myths are time-and-context bound

Each myth becomes situated within the ongoing process of mythmaking whilst aware of its own moment.

6. Individual female subjectivities are presented within broader female communities

Myth is used to interrogate the relationship between the individual and her community, with the community's advancement of paramount importance.

7. Myths expand their own 'halo of virtualities'.

Myths do not accept their earlier editions wholly, nor respond purely with hostility, but use the narrative and textual methods within that narrative to expand the 'halo of virtualities' around each myth. This may be through direct or indirect means.

8. Myth is self-consciously literary

The literariness of myth is apprehended through a self-conscious consideration of the process of its construction, its transmission and place within a canon. This can also be demonstrated by a discernible awareness of myth's palimpsestic nature and considerations of 'truth' and 'authenticity'.

9. Myth uses both high and low culture

This elides the boundaries between the privileged domain of the classically educated and popular literature, so as to better represent varying female experiences and languages.

10. Myth engages with contemporary critical discussions

A consideration of contemporary discourse is not only ensures that myth is time-and-context bound, but it allows myth to be used to promote the female writer within her own critical landscape.

*The 'Significances' of Myth*

Fundamental to the development of my own attitude towards the prospect of feminist rewriting was Alicia Ostriker's essay *The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*. Ostriker characterises selected American female poets as thieves, plundering reserved language and dislodging primary meaning (71). The essay, whilst promoting a gynocritical approach veering upon linguistic essentialism not necessarily endorsed herein, acknowledges that initially, the connection between women and mythology seems to be irreconcilable, but that our "need for myth of some sort may be ineradicable" (71). Ostriker characterises myth thus:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible [...] Like the gods and goddess of classical mythology, all such material has a double power. It exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes "merely" of the private self. Myth belongs to "high" culture and is handed "down" through the ages by religious, literary and educational authority. At the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation – everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed or abominable. (72)

Ostriker here is using the dialectical, oppositional nature of myth to define itself and to useful effect, highlighting the contradictions and co-ordinations of

myth. Myth has, therefore, a “double significance” for women. It exists in the public domain, is integral to and indicative of “high” culture and is an intrinsic part of all of our patriarchal institutions and discourses. At the same time, Ostriker shows that its significance is not restricted to the public domain. It provides the colour and texture of our unconscious minds and offers endless inspiration. Whilst these contradictions do not exist merely for women, they are of particular relevance to women, given myth’s presence in our collective unconscious despite its misogyny and its modes of expression for experience and truth, always pressing issues for female representation. Liz Yorke, via Freud and Jung, has talked too about the importance of personal memory as accessed through mythology and she asserts that revision or subversion may take place:

Anywhere that experience, memory, fantasy or dream can be retrieved, whether in words or images, it may be revalued and re-presented. This effort of retrieval may permit different textures, colours, lights and shadings to be heard, seen and felt: such feminist transvaluation is a continual re-processing. (23)

These significances should be understood as symbiotic; the creation of experiences and memories does not occur in a vacuum. They are coloured and texturised by the cultures and institutions which structure lived experience. These significances cannot be discussed in isolation.

To this, my contention is that we need to consider a third ‘significance’ to female revisionist mythology, or in the context of this project, feminist rewriting of mythology. It is the significance of myth on a meta level. If Barthes is right and anything can become a myth, and the best way to

mitigate the pernicious power of myth is to mythify it in turn, then the process of women revising myth becomes itself another kind of myth, one that contributes to our understanding of what a female writer is and can be. It is this level which demands the affectionate kinship suggested by Schanoes; it is this level which suggests that considering mythological rewrites in isolation is fruitless. Angela Carter commented "most of the great male geniuses of Western European culture have either been depraved egomaniacs or people who lived most distressing lives" ("Notes from the Frontline", NP). Yet despite the miseries of their existence or the maliciousness of their personalities, these great geniuses have themselves become myths: symbolic signifiers of towering talent and cultural value. Female rewriters may be aided by a similar process of mythologisation (egomania and unhappy lives notwithstanding). This will in turn reposition woman from the passive subject of mythology to the active creator of mythology, in a circular process which will simultaneously decentre ancient myth and elevate contemporary female mythmakers. There are certainly elements of metamythmaking in all of the Canongate texts; the commissioned aspect of the rewriting project forced all of the writers to consider their role-as-mythmaker within the process and this is seen here as a real strength. Indeed, another strength of deliberate "metamythmaking" is that it demands that mythography cannot, or should not be, an individual endeavour for female writers, but a collective act involving writers, readers, publishers, critics and potentially (as with some of the Myths series not written in English) translators. All participants in the reading

process are contributing to a development of the source myth, through the construction of, as Barthes suggests, an artificial myth of mythmaking.

This collective act requires, however, iterations of rewriting which are themselves, to steal language from Yorke, “time and context bound”. They will be “constructed in the different light of understanding from a woman’s point of view”, incorporating some of the suffering experienced by women and allowing revision to be, as Rich promised, an act of survival (5). This seems to me to be key – the creation of “alternative truths that are time and context bound”. If we cannot remove the ultimate authority of the source myth, then a self-conscious awareness of its placement within a contemporary context can identify the elements of that source myth that are no longer ‘acceptable’, even as they endure as points of reference within our cultural conscious. This also helps us to map out our relationship to the past in a distinct way; no longer conceiving of myth as simply a direct route to an ahistorical, often nebulous past but as a configuration of our present moment in response to that past could allow for more liberatory narratives. Margaret R. Yocom would support this perspective, saying that “one way to see old texts anew is to highlight the process of creation instead of the product alone that traditional exchanges produce” (120). This can refer to the process of creation of the source myths, including paying attention to various versions or alternative traditions, or anchoring the text in the contemporary through a mindful awareness of the process by which rewritten myths are written. Purkiss believes that myth is often “caught up in contemporaneity”; by making a virtue of this facet of mythology, we can imbue ancient myths with

narratives pertinent to the struggles we experience in the here and now. Wickerson has observed that the way in which myth is placed within a contemporary setting can effect change in the way we construct temporal experience; from this we can conceive of a way for myths to connect to the past but remain distinctively of their moment of production so as to serve a feminist agenda, dislodging myth from its perceived universality and reminding us that constructions of femininity within such rewritings are both positional and contextual (127–28).

With such a self-conscious placement of myth within the here and now, despite myth's insistent character as agreed upon by many of the detractors of rewriting mentioned above, contemporary rewritings can present future benefits not necessarily even discernible within the texts themselves. Given myth's suggested relation to shaping our unconscious mind, as argued by many theories of psychoanalysis and many myth theorists, even when the effects of a rewriting are not felt immediately or register consciously, the rewritten text, its language, its remoulded symbols or altered structures, can feed into the unconscious mind which can, in turn, effect symbolic interpretations of myth in the future. Sellers comments:

My own experience of reading myth is that its knack of surviving all but the most sustained attacks can challenge us to confront issues we would rather avoid, force us to examine our prejudices, or perceive things in a new way. Myth's finely honed symbolism and form contribute to this process by lodging in the mind to emerge at unexpected, apposite, or occasionally unwelcome moments. (8)

Given this unpredictable manifestation of mythology within the mind, it seems important to acknowledge that reading a rewritten mythology can evoke responses not consciously felt but can in time feed back into conscious constructions of that same myth. A writerly awareness of this further significance of myth could see feminist rewriters seek to harness the “self-generating power of myth” in the present moment to help support change in the future. If this seems like a nebulous approach, perhaps it is; there is certainly no empirical way to judge such a consequence of rewriting. Yet even the idea of conceiving of myth’s power in this way could help the feminist rewriter to attune their mind to the repercussions of their interpretive choices.

The ultimate conclusion we should draw from a due consideration of these significances – of myth as both public and private, rewriting as metamythmaking, the ongoing significance of myth in the unconscious mind – is the necessity of a view of mythological rewriting as an ongoing and collaborative practice. When we consider myth as ‘public’, we are not speaking about a singular whole but a clustering of varying subjectivities, institutions and narratives. Awareness of myth’s public significance demands placing it within that space. To an optimistic feminist, it could be considered a space of community, even as it is shaped by the structures of the patriarchy. It is certainly something that is shared, and the communality of myth is an aspect clearly advocated by the Myths project. When we consider myth as personal, we are still placing an individual subjectivity in opposition to their community and seeing how the two interact. When we consider how female

writers of mythology can become metamythmakers and thus enhance the mythos of the female author, as male authorship has been constructed throughout the millennia, we are doing this through these shared significances and through our responses to each other's texts. Ultimately, when we acknowledge myth's unconscious power, we also accept that we, as individual readers, writers or critics, cannot be the ultimate judges of a rewritten myth's efficacy and thus we accept the cooperative aspect of the venture.

### *The 'Halo of Virtualities'*

Barthes's *Mythologies*, whilst not used here directly as a guide to semiology, has provided numerous sensitizing concepts for this project. One such heartening characterisation of myth is that "there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely" (*A Barthes Reader* 106) . One of the elements within this process is what he deems the 'halo of virtualities' in language. Barthes describes it thus:

But there always remains, around the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating: the meaning can almost always be *interpreted*. (*A Barthes Reader* 119)

This 'halo of virtualities' in structural language also seems to chime with Jung's symbolist approbation of mythical archetype as open to interpretation. If we consider the 'halo of virtualities' around each myth – the space around each story and in its language – then we may also be able to use that space

to create 'other possible meanings'. Barthesian purists must forgive this language robbery (although he may himself have predicted such an act) but for rewriters of myth to use the 'halo of virtualities' as a suggestive pathway to consideration of the language and symbolism of their myth of choice may encourage rewritings which capitalise upon that potential for interpretation.

This leads us in turn to consider, regarding interpretive choice, my final three theses. Purkiss takes issue with strategies which refuse to "recognize the literariness of literature" (442). Certainly, direct inversions of positive to negative or male to female, ignore the context of production and the politics of transmission and reception. Thus a self-conscious awareness of the literary canon and efforts to disrupt the canonicity of individual myths is recognised as a potential means of acknowledging that literariness.

Consideration of the palimpsestic nature of myth (its overlapping, continual processing again suggesting a form of collaboration) also prompts us to consider questions of authenticity, versions, and truth. Of course, truth is, as we have discussed, at the heart of why we write myth, of why we write all story. Yet by acknowledging the impossibility of universal truth whilst yearning for a positional, personal truth which does not only empower the individual but also inspires the collective, might help to draw attention to the way myth has been constructed as a fallacious avenue to truth whilst offering alternative possibilities. Using myth's truth/untruth tension to our own advantage, what I suggest is a rewriting that is at once earnest in its philosophies but ironic in its practices. Further supporting this challenge to the literariness of myth would be a dedicated erosion of the traditional

boundaries of high and low culture. Stealing language from its former, privileged sphere and imbuing it with the symbolism of all cultures and subjectivities will help to create, in the future, more feminist, emancipatory myths. Language also plays a vital part in this; the self-conscious deployment of both high and low registers also serves to dislodge myth's often grandiose authority.

Finally, I suggest that a feminist rewriting should engage with the contemporary literary moment of its construction in order to promote the female writer within that landscape. There are some fictions in which we can see revised mythology functioning almost like its own genre; the mythic register is used uncritically, the story may be altered but it is afforded the same zealous respect and the author seems to be making no attempt to fix their version of that myth in their own 'time-and-context bound' moment. These revisions are heavy and ultimately lacking in ambition. To capitalise on the relationship I prescribe between myth and its moment of production, a feminist rewriting ought to actively develop a considered relationship with the literary landscape in which it is operating. This may be assumed in the 'time-and-context bound' instruction of thesis 5, but it merits, I believe, closer attention. Zajko and O'Gorman claim that the mere mention of a myth can act as an intertextual moment; this is not enough (3). Rewritten myths must operate in connection with each other and with other fictions generated at that point in time, taking on the socio-political concerns of their era. This is something we will see very distinctly in the Canongate Myths project; all four texts within this thesis have something direct to say about what fiction, not

just mythological rewriting, has to say about life and literature in the twenty-first century. This engagement actively forces the texts produced as part of a mythological rewrite to participate in the ongoing, artificial but necessary, process of canon-building. When the Canongate authors engage with where we are now, in our socio-political and our literary moment, they are also evaluating their own position within that moment and promoting the role of the female author in an ongoing project of literary development.

Again I assert that these suggestions are not exhaustive, nor are they likely to be without their own problems. This methodology is used merely as a guide to suggest some pathways to enabling female rewriters to use mythology in a feminist way, avoiding some of the pitfalls of the past. I have sought to stress the potential encouraged by an emphasis on collaboration, community, and myth as both ongoing and of its moment. In time, these methods will be traced through the four constituent texts of this thesis.

One final piece of contextualising work must take place before we delve directly into those texts. The Canongate project itself needs some consideration. The section which follows will discuss its origins, its processes and will examine some of the critical reviews the texts generated at the point of their publication. This section is designed to help offer a grounded understanding of the public significance of myth and the role of gender within myth's construction.

## **“Witty Desecration”: The Canongate Myths Project and its Reception**

The idea for a series of rewritten myths first occurred to Canongate’s Managing Director Jamie Byng in 1998. He had been working on The Pocket Canons, which had invited a series of famous writers and thinkers to introduce the component books of the Bible; Bono penned an introduction to Psalms whilst the Bishop of Edinburgh handled Luke. A number of the Pocket Canons introduction writers would later go on to write for the Myths series.<sup>12</sup> Published by Canongate and produced by design studio Pentagram, the Pocket Canons were characterised as a “Radical repackaging of the Bible designed to reintroduce the texts to a contemporary audience”.<sup>13</sup> Pentagram’s mission statement interestingly highlights the commercial and aesthetic nature of these texts; referring to them as a “repackaging” deploys the language of marketing, perhaps intended as a means of making the component parts of the Bible seem relevant to more people in today’s increasingly secular world. The fact that the project was spearheaded by a design agency points to the continuing aesthetic value of ancient stories. Indeed, what the mission statement further stressed was the “contemporary” nature of the intended audience. These texts may go back millennia, but they retain, according to Pentagram and Canongate, pertinence for a twenty-first century audience. The Bible possesses, one may conclude, a sustained relevance even within an

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<sup>12</sup> The authors for both series are: A.S. Byatt (*Ragnarok* “Song of Solomon”); David Grossman (*Lion’s Honey* “Exodus”) and Karen Armstrong (*A Short History of Myth* “Hebrews”).

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.pentagram.com/work/the-pocket-canons>

increasingly atheistic society; the stories contained within each Pocket Canon offer interesting narratives which need only to be “repackaged”. Whilst not a rewriting project as such, the process of commissioning a cohort of well-known authors and celebrities would lay the groundwork for Byng’s later project. Using recognised authors as both a marketing tool and a channel through which to make ancient narratives that might be perceived as outdated seem current and important would stand Byng in good stead as he moved onto an even more ambitious endeavour.

In an interview with *Solander*, Byng commented that his ambitions for the Canongate Myths series extended “long after you or I have become food for worms”. He added “writers have been doing this for centuries, but as a publishing idea I felt it had real potential because it gives writers the broadest brief possible and myths provide inspiration rather than imitation” (NP). These remarks suggest once more the inextricable connection between the project as an artistic undertaking and a marketing campaign. Byng ties the project’s potential as a publishing scheme back to its aesthetics, positing that its unlimited inspiration, rather than star power and profile alone, are what could lead to its success. He also here emphasises the extensive tradition of rewriting within the Western canon; his endorsement of mythology as an inspiration rather than a prescription calls to mind Angela Carter’s desire to “extract the latent content” from her source tales when retelling fairy tales (“Angela Carter” 80). The process of extraction would be, Byng seems to suggest, liberating and his ambition for this undertaking was that it would be open-ended in every sense. This aspiration, for endless inspiration and

enduring success, seems to be reflected in the project's definition of mythology: tales which are "universal and timeless".

A brief consideration of the production of the Canongate Myths series and a closer look at its critical reception will function as a means of gauging how mythology has been understood and approached within this context. A more considered analysis of how the texts were themselves publicly received will provide insights into public discourses pertaining to mythology and issues of gender. An engagement with how the project was conceived and in turn understood, how its commissioned writers were characterised critically and ultimately, how mythology is defined by at least one tranche of the literati in the twenty-first century, will partially reveal some of the assumptions and presumptions readers take with them when they open the pages of one of Canongate's sixteen Myths. This approach takes a cue from Hans Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics, arguing that the aesthetic value of a work is the product of a dialectic relationship between the readers and the work in question, produced incrementally over time (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 1982). Jauss discusses the "horizon of expectation" of a body of readers, suggesting that deviation from the norm is what is most exciting to readers within this dialectic; any move away from the status quo represents an expansion of that horizon of expectation (59). A brief survey of some of the critical opinions commissioned and disseminated by the media will indicate the threshold of that "horizon of expectation" and allow us to consider where these demarcations are. If feminist rewriting, as contended in the introduction to this thesis, necessitates a concerted effort to expand myth's halo of virtualities,

establishing the horizon of expectation will help to identify places where that expansion may occur within the four selected texts of this project. Furthermore, as already identified within my critical framework, rewriting must be understood as an act which continues beyond the page and accommodates the time-and-context bound production of any individual text. Thus consideration of the paratexts of the series and critiques of the novellas in question forms an important part of evaluating the ongoing process of feminist rewriting.

### *The Largest Simultaneous Publication in History*

It took seven years for Byng to realise his goal; the first volumes in the Myths series were proudly presented in 2005. This section owes a debt to the research conducted by NA Perkins for her Master of Publishing thesis and benefits from the insights gleaned by Perkins during her time interning with Canongate. She notes that Canongate's identity had originally been that of a Scottish publisher for Scottish audiences before Byng's takeover and tenure as MD; Perkins also comments on how one of Byng's first acts following the takeover was to buy independent magazine "Rebel Inc", with its slogan "Fuck the Mainstream" (19). Yet by 2005 it was producing a publication project unmatched in scale and scope. This is indicative of what I perceive as a general contradiction in Canongate's ethos – there is a fiercely independent streak which seeks to support rebellion and innovation, yet it also produced the world's largest publishing project, built upon marketing authors we may consider to be mainstream.

Perkins summarised the financial approach of the project:

A *Myths* title is commissioned to be a *Myth*, and the contractual structure that was originally envisioned supported this – the author might receive less money than the usual advance, in the expectation that the book will become an important part of a project to advance new and unusual voices (36).

While this more co-operative approach to profit-sharing may suggest a potentially liberal outlook, it does not seem to have actually led to the advancement of any new or unusual voices. All of the female authors published by the series in English are white and had, prior to their *Myth* publication, experienced considerable critical and commercial success. The *Myths* project was not a testing ground for new, unheard or underrepresented authors.

According to Perkins, Byng entered partnership with three other publishers: Morgan Entrekin (Grove Atlantic, United States), Louise Dennys (Knopf, Canada) and Arnulf Conradi (Berlin Verlag, Germany) (11). This group worked together to secure authors for the project and to convince other publishers to commit to taking part. It was officially launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005 and Perkins noted in 2009 that the ambition was for it to last until 2038, suggesting that Byng's "food for worms" prediction may have been a dramatic flourish.<sup>14</sup> The authors were, according to Perkins, issued identical

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, when Perkins discusses the literary heritage of rewriting, she cites an extensive list of authors but includes only one female: "James Joyce, Robert Graves, Marion Zimmer Bradley, W.B. Yeats, Tomson Highway, Richard Wagner, Rainer Maria Rilke, Neil Gaiman, Ryunosuke Akutagawa" (23). She asserts that these names have been cited "at random", but this curious omission of female authors is again suggestive of the way mythology and its reproduction has been gendered in the past. I am loath to read too much into this list, but cannot help but wonder that if, given Perkins' close association with Byng and Canongate, if these were names cited as inspirational for the project. The first three *Myths* published were written by women, questioning whether or not this was a deliberate

terms and given advances that were on the lower end of the scale for British mid-sized publishers, intending to create a strong royalty-producing backlist rather than an immediate cash windfall for authors (22). The project was also dependent on a unique foreign rights selling approach; the money accrued by selling the rights was used to commission new works and the texts themselves were to be marketed by partner publishers all over the world, adding to the project's transnational approach (24). Indeed, a sliding scale for countries such with smaller markets was introduced, allowing Indonesia, Romania and others to join the fold (25).

When commissioning its authors, according to Perkins, the original author brief was simply: "Read Chapter Twelve of James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (16).<sup>15</sup> The Cyclops chapter of James's opus is a dense and intricate return to the Odysseus myth, the myopic giant offering insights into questions of mythology, nationalism and race. Thus Canongate could be said to have been, in those early commissions, looking for experimental and innovative prose designed to use mythology as a means to consider a variety of important sociological or linguistic concerns. Using *Ulysses* as the ur-Myth is noteworthy as it indicates the need for continued reinvention; going back to the earlier *Odyssey* is not advocated so much as extending the myth's trajectory in a creative and culturally relevant way. As we consider the Myths in question

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act of rebalancing. This may be a tenuous connection but remains an intriguing consideration.

<sup>15</sup> Although Perkins' referencing for this remains unclear, it is assumed that this is taken from the minutes of the Myths editorial meeting at Frankfurt, October 2006. These are included in her appendices.

more closely, the influence of *Ulysses* and other modernist engagements with mythology, will be seen in a marked way.

The first books to be published in the series were Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* and Karen Armstrong's companion guide, *A Short History of Myth*. Launched on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2005, the *Washington Post* characterised this as "the largest simultaneous publication in history" (*The New Muses* NP), with the three texts being released in different languages and by different partner publishers across the world. The three opening works were followed in due course; below is a list of the published titles in the Myths series to date.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date of Publication</b>
<i>The Helmet of Horror</i>	Victor Pelevin	2 <sup>nd</sup> March 2006 <sup>16</sup>
<i>Lion's Honey</i>	David Grossman	23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2006
<i>Dream Angus</i>	Alexander McCall Smith	5 <sup>th</sup> October 2006
<i>Anna In Grobowcach Swiata</i>	Olga Tokarczuk	2006
<i>Girl meets boy</i>	Ali Smith	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2007
<i>Binu and the Great Wall</i>	Su Tong	1 November 2007
<i>Where Three Roads Meet</i>	Salley Vickers	1 November 2007

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<sup>16</sup> Please note dates given are British publication dates; there are international variants but one date is given for each as a general point of reference. The exception to this is Olga Tokarczuk, as this text was never translated into English and was published only in Poland.

<i>Baba Yaga Laid an Egg</i>	Dubravka Ugrešić	21 <sup>st</sup> May 2009
<i>The Fire Gospel</i>	Michel Faber	2 <sup>nd</sup> July 2009
<i>The Hurricane Party</i>	Klas Östergren	6 <sup>th</sup> August 2009
<i>The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ</i>	Philip Pullman	22 <sup>nd</sup> October 2010
<i>Orphans of Eldorado</i>	Milton Hatoum	18 <sup>th</sup> February 2010
<i>Ragnarok: The End of the Gods</i>	A.S. Byatt	3 <sup>rd</sup> May 2012
<i>The Goddess Chronicle</i>	Natsuo Kirino	3 <sup>rd</sup> March 2013
<i>The Song of King Gesar</i>	Alai	7 <sup>th</sup> November 2013

With no titles having been released since 2013, 25 years earlier than Byng's projected end date of 2038, it seems that as a marketing tactic, the *Myths* series was not universally successful. Perkins commented:

While the *Myths* project was received well by booksellers and media alike, it is possible that the concept of the project is simply too amorphous for the marketplace to absorb, and that what is exciting as an idea may in actuality not have legs strong enough to carry the project through the next twenty-five years (44).

She also has identified that whilst *The Penelopiad* was the most successful title in terms of sales, it has underperformed Atwood's other texts, and indeed all of the high-profile authors in the series have had greater success with their independent titles than with their contributions to the project.

The *Myths* project as a publishing phenomenon is fascinating to consider and there is certainly scope for someone to build upon Perkins's

thesis and produce a more up-to-date and in-depth overview of the publication aspects of the project. However, within the confines of this particular investigation, a basic understanding of the way the scheme was set up, how it functioned, and how successful it was in the marketplace is crucial as a means of assessing how myth is understood, produced and consumed, by readers and authors alike. Whilst Perkins suggests the media and booksellers were all intrigued by this unique approach to publication, and whilst the project did certainly receive a great deal of press attention, it would not be true to claim that media responses to the texts themselves were universally positive. Indeed, turning now to consider some of those responses will indicate how in various ways, the Myths project contravened certain readerly expectations and what this says about the limits of our horizon of expectations for mythological rewrites.

### *Critical Responses to the Myths*

During an early stage of this doctoral research, I spent some time reading reviews of my chosen texts from respected magazines and newspapers. I was interested by the perceived failure of the project and wondered whether or not this could be attributed to a lukewarm critical response. Whilst many of the critiques of the Atwood, Winterson, Smith and Vickers were not overwhelmingly favourable, this means of introducing myself to the series also yielded some extremely useful insights. I was struck by a number of different qualities the reviews all seemed to share. The first of these is that many of the

ways in which they defined mythology were gendered. Secondly, there were many inherent contradictions in how each critic attempted to define mythology as a concept. Thirdly, many of the reviews betrayed a marked resistance to rewriting as a process and finally, all of the reviewers seemed to devalue the literary significance of the texts in question. Indeed, my own opinion of the merit of these texts was initially coloured by the challenging critical responses I was reading. Yet as we shall see, the four female-authored Greco-Roman myths of this series are all extremely provocative and complex inquiries, fascinating individually and even more so as part of a project.

Caroline Alexander, in her 2005 *New York Times* review “Myths Made Modern”, offers a variety of contradictions in her analysis of the three opening texts of the project. In the first lines of the review, she discusses the fluidity of myth and its potential for revision:

The survival of these myths, some of them immemorially ancient, is precisely due to the fact that they have been readdressed, readjusted and reinterpreted through the ages. The relationship between people and the mythic events they celebrate in story and ritual has always been fluid. (NP).

Yet later on, her review castigates the authors for this readjustment and reinterpretation, offering praise only for points where she can recognise the “mythical quality” of the rewrite. Take as evidence of this contradiction the comparative way in which she assesses *The Penelopiad* and *Weight*. Of the former, she writes:

Atwood has done her research: she knows that penelopia means “duck” in Greek; that ribald stories about a Penelope – whether “our Penelope” or someone else – were circulated; and that virginity could be renewed by the blood of a male sacrifice. Here, amid the moon cults and palace women and the returned king, “spattered over with gore and battle filth”,

as Homer tells us, is fabulous Atwood territory. Unfortunately she does not grasp this thorny nettle, but chooses instead to blow feather-light dandelions. There are a number of witty devices, like a recurring chorus of maids whose saucy songs fix attention on themselves as opposed to the royal subjects. Atwood tells the story in determinedly irreverent modern argot, apparently to dislodge her tale from its epic moorings.

Alexander, a Classicist who was the first woman to publish a full translation of *The Iliad*, praises the places where the classical tradition can be felt most keenly in Atwood's rewrite – her duck-based puns or her invocation of the blood and guts of battle. She appreciates Atwood's "research" and her acceptance of alternative versions – the "ribald stories about a Penelope". Yet despite Atwood's appeals to a form of classical authenticity through meticulous research, Alexander does not consider *The Penelopiad* a weighty retelling, denigrating it as "feather-light". The "witty devices" Atwood deploys are mentioned briefly before Alexander questions Atwood's linguistic irreverence. The idea that Atwood might be attempting to "dislodge her tale from its epic moorings" suggests that Alexander sees the source myth as some kind of anchored monolith and that any attempts to move the tale away from its own tradition results in a playful but ultimately frivolous engagement. Atwood, she concludes, is not capable of handling such an ancient, epic tale – "this thorny nettle".

Yet in comparison, when evaluating *Weight* in the same review, Alexander does not accuse Winterson of such sciolism. She writes:

The self-conscious jokiness of Atwood's "Penelopiad", the voice of the embarrassed modern in the presence of something acknowledged as profound, also informs Jeanette Winterson's "Weight"...the difference is that this tone exactly suits the boorish Heracles, who is a slayer of men and a ravager of women, dripping blood and sweat and semen, a

force of unassailable muscle that has always grabbed what it wanted. It is a portrait that would have been recognized and relished by the ancients.

Again, Alexander's value judgments come from how little the retellings deviate from the source myths, a curious perspective considering her own assertion that myth can only survive through "readjustment and reinterpretation". It's interesting too to consider that Heracles's behaviour – the blood, sweat and semen of it all – may have been accepted to the ancients but surely should not be to a modern audience. Winterson's interrogations of this behaviour, through hyperbole and an analysis of the toxicity of the masculinity at work in the Heracles myth, which we will discuss in Chapter Two, are not considered by Alexander. *Weight*, on an immediate and superficial level, tallies with Alexander's expectations of what a mythological rewrite should be: something which could be "relished by the ancients", rather than relevant to contemporary readers. She praises too Winterson's imagery and claims it signifies her "embrace of the mythic landscape", where Atwood's modern linguistic playfulness is deemed inappropriate in this context, phrases like Winterson's "kicking the stars like stones" are just epic enough to be acceptable.

Alexander's one point of criticism for *Weight* is that Winterson "mars" the text with "brief autobiographical pieces at the beginning and the end that are not integrated into the story. Still, this short novel fulfils a number of the criteria myth is meant to embody". Her critique of the autobiographical sections of the novella suggests that as with her criticism of Atwood, where the individual author interferes with the accepted classical tradition, through irony

and “witty devices” with Atwood or personal memoir with Winterson, this is an infringement upon the myth in question and thus seen as a weakness. Indeed, when she goes on to praise *Weight* for ticking several of the boxes necessary to comply with her clearly limited understanding of a myth, we see that the fluidity of myth she cites at the beginning of her review is simply an illusion. Alexander’s definition of myth is clearly more restricted than the understanding of either Atwood or Winterson, or indeed the vision of myth Canongate intended to proffer. She concludes:

Canongate’s series is an ambitious, risky project, potentially profound and potentially trivial. As its first productions reveal, an essential element is the genuine chemistry between the author and the chosen subject. As editors line up more writers for this series, they should ask a key question: Do you really, really want to tell this particular story?

This seems a rather strange commentary on the process, given that both Atwood and Winterson very clearly, in their respective forewords, specify their reasons for their myth selection. The texts themselves are full of self-conscious engagement with the story in question. The very refrain of *Weight* is “I want to tell the story again”. The question Alexander, as a Classicist clearly very invested in the source myths, should ask herself is if whether it is simply that these are not the stories that she wants to read.

As a counterpoint to this, the review penned by Simon Goldhill for the *New Statesman* offers a different perspective. Goldhill, like Alexander, is a Classicist and both highlighted the “risky” nature of the project, with Goldhill characterising it as a “primary school task” (NP). Yet unlike Alexander, he seems to be far more favourably inclined towards the texts and the project. His interpretation of myth does not seem to have as many “criteria” which need to

be met. Interestingly, he (like the Canongate brief) identifies *Ulysses* as the “great model...loom[ing] forbiddingly over any such venture”.

Of *Weight*, Goldhill writes that Heracles is:

[...] the archetypal he-man [...] Her Hercules [sic] is a raping, raging, wanking, hyperactive go-getter. The vulgar humour of the portrait offsets the reflective passivity of Atlas, and the beautifully rhythmic prose in which his inward-looking life has been described...Hercules's endeavours lead him relentlessly to his fated death, while Atlas's recognition of his own desire to shift the burden makes his passivity heroic. (NP)

Here, Goldhill identifies Winterson's playing with different forms of masculine strength and ideas of heroism, indicating some appreciation of a move away from restrictive archetype. Interestingly, Goldhill considers both texts in light of the authors' respective oeuvres, joking that *The Penelopiad* could have been called “The Handmaid's Tale”, highlighting its thematic connection to the earlier work by Atwood, and characterising the myth of Atlas as “perfect Winterson territory...the past weighing down crushingly on the developing self”. Where Alexander considers how *The Penelopiad* and *Weight* function as part of an extensive, ancient classical tradition, Goldhill considers how they function within the individual tradition of each author. He praises them for being brought home “inexorably to the here and now”.

Peter Conrad reviewed the first three texts for *The Observer* (23<sup>rd</sup> October 2005). The review is full of curious observations. He offers a general overview of the series and comments: “The authors are eclectic: as well as the usual Anglo-American suspects, they include Chinua Achebe, Su Tong and Natsuo Kirino. The Greeks are about to take over the world” (NP). None of these authors in fact wrote Greek myths for the project (indeed, Achebe never

completed his Canongate Myth). The assumption that the myths in question must be Greek is indicative of the relative value of Greco-Roman mythology over mythologies from elsewhere in the world.

Most tellingly, Conrad writes that “Myth, concerned with the fertile source of life, is a matriarchal affair. Canongate launches its series with small, beautiful books by three wise women”. This characterisation of myth as “a matriarchal affair” is curious. In his review, he does not, prior to this point, despite an extensive engagement with our history of mythological rewriting, mention a single woman, despite listing Freud, Jung, E.M. Forster, Wagner and Levi-Strauss, thus suggesting that myth is a matriarchal affair which has somehow been defined, propelled and maintained entirely by male artists and theorists. The matriarchal connections (something Mary Beard takes Atwood to task for in her review of *The Penelopiad*, claiming “most feminists I know think that matriarchy is itself invented by patriarchal culture”) are misleading, given our extensive discussions in the Introduction to this thesis regarding the patriarchal nature of mythological narrative and archetype.<sup>17</sup> The connection between “small, beautiful” books and “three wise women” seems also to suggest that beauty and brevity are connected to being a wise woman. He characterises the rivalry between Penelope and Helen as “a tabloid catfight”, revelling in the narratives which pit women against each other and which in fact, Atwood seems to be questioning throughout the text. Finally, he suggests that Atwood’s rewriting is, in essence, “witty desecration”. In this way, he

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<sup>17</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, I do not believe Atwood’s engagement with the myth of the matriarchy is sincere, but is instead part of an ironic attempt to create a series of alternative ‘versions’ of the myth.

confers a holy weight upon the original and suggests that Atwood's re-evaluation is sacrilege. Even in a generally positive review, Conrad betrays a similar thought process to Alexander, whereby the source myths are authoritative and the retellings are playful acts of disobedience in defiance of some ancient, accepted order.

This is something we see again in Catherine Taylor's review for *The Independent*. She discusses the "mischievous" title of *The Penelopiad* and comments upon Atwood's "typical audacity", in "reposition[ing] *The Odyssey* from the viewpoint of Penelope"(NP). Wit is another feature of Taylor's review, discussing "Winterson's wordplay" and claiming it is wittier than Atwood's. Taylor observes that the strength of both texts is their "strong evocation of the abhorrent nature of war and of casual slaughter" but fails to comment on how this is also a feminist evocation, considering particularly the female victimhood of this war and casual slaughter. She concludes that "larger than life stories will always be ripe for inventive plundering", once more suggesting that rewriting is in some way a criminal act.

Novelist and reviewer for the *London Review of Books* Thomas Jones raises a particular point. He claims that *The Penelopiad* is not a retelling of a myth at all, but a retelling of the *Odyssey* (NP). This distinction between the *Odyssey* as text and the story of Odysseus as myth is an interesting one, and it is worth pointing out that Atwood does not limit herself to retelling the *Odyssey*. In her foreword to *The Penelopiad*, Atwood comments:

Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, and also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have drawn on material

other than *The Odyssey*...The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. (xx)

What Atwood is in fact acknowledging is that the myth of Odysseus extends beyond the *Odyssey* and as a result of that vast and varying tradition, the tale has complexities with which she chooses to experiment – such as information about Penelope's parentage and rumours surrounding her fidelity. Jones is simply incorrect in his assertions that *The Penelopiad* is written "very precisely in response to" *The Odyssey*; it is inevitable, perhaps, that there are strong connections between the two texts but Atwood labours the point once again in her notes, when she discusses other sources (197). The assertion that the *Odyssey* is not myth is a strange one in and of itself; as Barthes asserts, anything can become a myth, and surely its narrative must be accepted as mythological, if anything can be.

A further point of contention for Jones is Penelope's commentary on modern life as seen from the underworld. He believes that "The narrator exists neither in the world she lived in nor ours, but in limbo somewhere in between – the ideal place from which to tell her story. The narrative moves between recollections of her life on earth and encounters in Hades with ghosts of the people she once knew". He believes the appropriate space for a mythological narrator is removed from the temporal, distant and unreachable. When Penelope intervenes on the contemporary world, discussing humans visiting historical palaces and then buying souvenirs of the artefacts they have seen in the palace giftshop, Jones believes "These criticisms are too laboured and sneering to have much force. I assume they are intended to reveal the distance

between Penelope's time and now. They don't succeed in making the familiar strange." The question of time is again interesting. Canongate asserts that myths are timeless, whilst others (including Atwood herself) note the time-bound shape and colour of a myth. Jones seems to believe, much like Caroline Alexander, that attempts to release the narratives from their "epic moorings" are weak or sneering. The insistent preference upon a nebulous, "mythic" time and place in which to retell mythological narratives is curious and speaks perhaps to a desire to further enshrine, rather than to alter or enrich, these ancient tales.

Famed Classicist Mary Beard offers an alternative perspective on this, however. She observes in her Guardian review that "there is, in fact, hardly a modern poet, playwright or novelist who has not engaged with, or meddled in, Greek myth". She details some of the discussions, from Samuel Butler and Dorothy Parker to Stesichorus, regarding the desires and motivations of Penelope and Helen, Atwood's "witty desecration" encouraging her to reveal some of the conflicted discourse which has surrounded this myth for many years. She also discusses Winterson's Heracles, identifying him as a "slippery figure in ancient myth" and acknowledging Winterson's navigation of this. Her review offers an inquiry into the very nature of mythological retellings. She says: "Reworkings and subversions of the classic tales are one thing; but what if you want the stories "straight"?" She acknowledges the ease with which myth is adapted for a younger audience, yet rightly contends that this is much harder to achieve when writing for adults. She surmises:

Ultimately the answer lies in the nature of the myths and the very idea of an orthodox version. Except for dull encyclopedias and stories told on grandmothers' knees, there was no such thing as a "straight" version of Greek myth, even in antiquity. Every literary telling we have is already a reworking, a prequel, a sequel or a subversion [...]

She then, in contrast to Alexander's critique of "irreverent modern argot", Conrad's "witty desecration", or Jones's accusation of modern reference being laboured, concludes:

No wonder the rhetorical register is so hard to find, the lapses into footnotes or sententiousness so easy. Paradoxically, the jokes, cunning, replotting and smart updating by the likes of Atwood and Winterson are the closest we get to the original orthodoxy of Greek myth.

Indeed, questions regarding the rhetorical register pervade these reviews, as do gendered assumptions. Descriptions of Penelope and Helen occasionally offer new archetypal qualifiers which may be updated but are just as limiting as the previous, epic offerings – Goldhill calls Penelope "a slightly dippy hausfrau" (Atwood's Penelope is highly intelligent and caustic, 'dippy' is a strange word to use here). Conrad, linking Atwood's Helen to Offenbach's, calls her a "predatory harlot" and characterises the entire story as "the domestic vigil of his [Odysseus's] long-suffering wife Penelope". Alexander seems to call out Atwood's character development, yet reveals in the process her own commitment to the *Odyssey's* original archetypes:

Atwood's Penelope...is wholly unconvincing. Each Odyssean landmark is inverted with a broad wink. In this telling Penelope is a dutiful but hardly love-struck wife; the treacherous maids were in fact her loyal allies; the faithful nurse, Eurykelia, was a controlling bag.

That Penelope is unconvincing because she is not love-struck and that the established characteristics of the maids and the nurse have been inverted

serve to advance Alexander's negative critique of the whole novel. Again, it seems that we find resistance to change in some quarters and that often that resistance is, at least in part, gendered. Winking at each Odyssean landmark is, as we shall discover in Chapter One, a very useful technique for redressing the myth's gender dynamics but is not recognised as such within the context of this review.

Whilst the majority of available reviews focus on *Weight* and most particularly, on *The Penelopiad*, Ursula K Le Guin provided an interesting review of *Girl meets boy* and *Where Three Roads Meet*. She defines myth as "stories we tell to assure ourselves of who our people are, how hard it is to make the right choice, and how transcendently inexplicable life remains even as we're telling stories to explain it" (NP). She compliments both Vickers and Smith for taking on their "majestic assignment with brio and aplomb", once again suggesting that a mythological rewrite is worthy but perhaps associated with risk. She comments that with the ending of her myth, Smith "cheats a bit...in the nicest possible way", and again we find that critics have approached these texts with rules in mind which the authors seem wont to break. Le Guin's complaint about *Where Three Roads Meet* is: "Maybe there are too many ironies in the fire?" and suggests that the novel has "not yet taken us one step past Sophocles". The idea of an onward journey, a mythological journey with marked and very apparent steps, is interesting. Many of the other reviewers seem to conceive of rewriting is a process of circling back through constant reference. Le Guin suggests it is a linear progression, where as surely neither are true and as Beard says, any form of orthodoxy is misleading.

Kirsty Gunn's review in the *Guardian* of the Smith and Vickers' myths offers further interest. It begins:

When I first heard about the Canongate Myths project, I thought it would never take off. The idea of "rewriting a myth" – what kind of writer would be interested in that? I thought. Rewriting poetry, translating or retelling old stories, as many of our great poets do, is one thing. Poetry, after all, is in itself the basis for poetry. But a writer of prose 'novelising', familiarising, making conscious and known one of the great ancient tales of old? I wasn't sure. Myths are, by their very nature, somehow unknowable and need to be that way – rearing out of our consciousness like boulders on the landscape or rocks in the sea. How do you turn that very unknownness into a chatty little novel by Margaret Atwood? (NP)

Whilst Gunn later acknowledges that she was wrong, there are a number of very clear and slightly concerning misapprehensions at work here. First is the value judgment attached to rewriting poetry as opposed to prose, crucially overlooking that, for example, the *Odyssey* and *Metamorphoses* were themselves once narrative poems occupying that liminal space between poetry and prose and thus open to exploration through either genre. More than that, however, the idea that myth is only an ancient tale is again given voice here, and the denigration of *The Penelopiad* as a "chatty little novel", as opposed to an unknowable rock just below the waterline, gives us insight again into some expectations of the register of myth. She does acknowledge her mistaken assumptions and asserts that myths have an ongoing presence in our lives, but it is a telling prejudice for a reader to bring to the table.

Of *Girl meets boy*, she says that "Smith is a gravely moral writer – and that is partly why her contribution to the world of myth is so powerful. There is nothing detached or ironic here". We find yet again an aversion to irony in the context of myth, yet it is surely misleading to suggest that there is nothing ironic

about a novel in which there is an entire imagined ending featuring the Loch Ness monster which ultimately gives way to the “real”, pared-back conclusion. The connection Gunn makes between Smith’s professed ethics and the impact of her rewrite indicates that mythology contains, for many readers, an expectation of morality. She closes her review with an observation: “With the bookshops stuffed with footballers’ autobiographies and the dieting secrets of their wives, and with book-buying habits dominated by trend and fashion, surely we need to have myths about us more than ever”. This statement is curious, seemingly avoiding the fact that the Myths project which produced the texts she now venerates was, in its way, a fashionable scheme which has in turn prompted a new trend in publishing projects. There is surely a classist element here in the discussions of “footballers’ autobiographies” as opposed to “the importance of storytelling”, which suggests that the line between “great ancient tales” and “chatty little novels” has not, for Gunn, completely disappeared. She is making another value judgment, one which places mythology in a rarefied space removed from fashion or superficiality, as opposed to its true roots as the original pop culture. She does not value the storytelling of footballer autobiographies and appeals instead to myth as a means of making book-buying in the twenty-first century a more considered, worthy process.

This very brief survey of some of the reviews of the Myths selected for this thesis has identified a number of key expectations which readers, or at least, the readers selected by major publications to review these texts, bring to a mythological rewriting. What is most striking is the repeated suggestion

that rewriting is in some way an illegitimate act. We have read of it being described as “desecration”, “irreverence”, “plundering”, “meddling” and “audacious”. The risk associated with such an endeavour has been repeatedly raised. There are a number of gendered assumptions too – that myth ought to be considered feminine, despite its intrinsically patriarchal values and that its characters must continue to be understood through their archetypal qualifiers. Many of the reviewers, particularly Caroline Alexander, offer praise only when they feel that Canongate’s offerings are in keeping with the epic register of the source myth; irony and joviality are particularly questioned throughout these reviews. Yet as Mary Beard has observed, “the jokes, cunning, replotting and smart updating” are in fact an intrinsic part of the mythmaking tradition, even if today we tend to regard it as fixed and worthy – rocks in the water.

These reviews, mixed in the main, are responding directly to the hype surrounding the project and are the product of a media interested more in the “story” of a rewriting project than the text themselves. The hype, which may have helped to drive sales initially, may also have been a means of devaluing the literary value of each individual novella. As Gunn says, book-buying has become driven by trend and thus a literary project which becomes fashionable or well-marketed might be denigrated for containing “chatty little novels”, held akin to footballer autobiographies. Whether the disappointing sales of these texts are a reaction to this hype and are indicative of a readership put off by lacklustre critical responses, or suggest that broader audiences share the same feelings of attachment to the perceived fixity of ancient myth, is uncertain.

What this thesis aims to prove, however, is that all of these responses are relevant to what may be understood as a feminist rewriting, helping to form the context of production of these texts. Furthermore, later chapters will show that this resistance to rewriting from some quarters has obfuscated the genuinely innovative and significant ways in which all four authors responded to their Canongate prompt. The repeated insistence that these texts are risky, witty acts of desecration further advances a narrative whereby the patriarchal values of the originals ought to be allowed to continue unchallenged. The collective nature of the project led to reviews which focus on the “bigger picture” of rewriting mythology as a concept; often these newspaper accounts have been commissioned from people with a vested interest in maintaining the status of mythology. The bigger picture is important and as discussed in the introduction, all of these printed opinions contribute to the significant meta-level of mythmaking. Yet it is to be hoped that through extensive analysis with the four chosen novellas, it will be seen that these acts of defiance yield fascinating results. Indeed, what is particularly remarkable about the *Myths of Atwood, Winterson, Smith and Vickers* is that they are not merely responses to the classical tradition. They are also vivid engagements with the modernist literary canon and valuable contributions to ongoing discussions about the generation of meaning in twenty-first century literature, nuanced points which the reviews detailed above failed to accommodate adequately.

*Feminist Rewriting in the Canongate Myths*

We turn now to the texts themselves, to find out to what extent the assertions made above hold true and to map out elements of feminist rewriting within the novellas produced by the Canongate scheme. The first volume, *The Penelopiad*, a rewrite of the myth of Odysseus and Penelope by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, shows the tension which can occur when the individual is separated from her community. Her version of the *Odyssey* problematizes truth and the idea of a single version, whilst also indicating some of the difficulties a female author may encounter when engaging with postmodernism.

Chapter Two looks at Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, the myth of Atlas and Heracles. Here I build on my argument that the Canongate Myths are all engaged in some way with the shifting theoretical ground of twenty-first century literature; Winterson's myth suggests an awareness of and involvement in 'post-postmodern' yearning for authenticity, even whilst acknowledging its impossibility. *Weight* also indicates the power of myth's personal significances; this chapter discusses how the myth of Atlas and Heracles enabled *Weight* to act as a bridging text between two different versions of Winterson's 'autobiography': *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

Chapter Three discusses Ali Smith's *Girl meets boy*, an uplifting update of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe from *Metamorphoses*. Smith's love story, at once encompassing all genders and none, uses ecofeminist ethics to examine the source myth in order to explore what is understood as 'natural'. I also argue that Smith is at moments indicating a metamodernist

approach, riffing against modernist literature in order to make sense of her twenty-first century context.

The final chapter will discuss Salley Vickers's *Where Three Roads Meet*. In this complex novella, Tiresias comes to Sigmund Freud in the final days of his life to tell the story of Oedipus. The text is an interrogation of Freudian psychoanalysis and a consideration of how Freud as mythmaker and Freudian psychoanalysis as myth did not always appropriately consider femininity in its paradigms. Again we find a preoccupation with modernist literature, prompting the final question: is twenty-first century literature enacting its own 'mythic method', to quote T.S. Eliot?

These texts all, to varying degrees, enact some of the theses identified above. They all also indicate an awareness of the tension currently traceable through twenty-first century literary theory. How do we talk about rejuvenation, restoration or a renaissance when the world is in flux? How can we use the past to inform the future? How does a feminist agenda operate within that programme and does all engagement with myth eventually lead us back to modernism? Within each chapter, we will find more layers of theory, more colourful parts to add to the bricolage already created within this introduction. These are not easy texts; they are certainly not the heavy, overly respectful mythological rewrites I cautioned against. Nor are they hostile. They suggest instead that feeling of kinship mentioned earlier. This affection perhaps comes as a result of the process of their commissioning; the self-consciousness of these works is no doubt due to the brief presented by Canongate as a publisher. Yet they all work in sympathy to help build a

version of myth that is at once fluid, contemporary and a vision of feminism that is simultaneously idealistic but grounded in the practical, political demands of the real world.

## Chapter One

### **“No mouth through which I can speak”: *The Penelopiad* and the Problem of the Postmodern**

*Now that I'm dead I know everything.* This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. Death is much too high a price for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say.

Since being dead – since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness – I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 1).

When, in *The Penelopiad*, we first meet Margaret Atwood's Penelope, she tells us she has always been “of a determined nature” (4). A pun on her archetypal literary genealogy and her famed forbearance, this Penelope's lonely waiting occurs within the underworld. From Homer to Joyce and in Atwood's own poetry, Penelope and her weaving have loomed large,

refracted through her archetypal qualifiers. Atwood's epigraphs cite Homer's descriptions of Odysseus's wife:

How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarus's daughter! [...]The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope. (xiii)

Her merit is here merely acknowledged in how it reflects upon her relations – her father and Odysseus are both elevated by their association with Penelope's constant fidelity. Yet this twenty-first century Penelope is not exclusively marked by her determined nature, and is in fact, a producer of, as much as a product of, multiple forms of indeterminacy.

In the underworld, death has not given her access to all the knowledge she hoped to attain. She instead has been able to pick up on a few scant nuggets of information. The things she has learned have all been gleaned through behaviour associated with deceit, likened to eavesdropping or snooping. Such a role, where she can only learn things she should not know, like "listening at windows" or "opening other people's letters", make her an observer of rather than a real participant in the generation of "truth" or understanding. She has been reduced beyond her own body – feminised even in its breastlessness – but even this breaking down into constituent parts has not permitted her to achieve a full understanding of her own life, let alone significant or absolute insights into the universe as a whole. Body and mind have become separated and the body has become isolated even from itself; the result of this disintegration is, for Penelope, further dissatisfaction following on from a life of disappointment.

Penelope describes how everyone in the underworld arrives with a sack containing words. These sacks host the words you have said and all that has been spoken about you by others (1). Even without the bones and musculature necessary to hold these sacks, everyone in the underworld must carry with them these repositories, of stories, lies, speech and song. Penelope, when faced with this sack, realises “how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jokes both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into several stories, though not the kind of stories I’d prefer to hear about myself” (3). She acknowledges in this moment how a person’s “determined” nature is the sum of the stories which have been told about them. Yet, despite being required to bear the weight of these narratives which misrepresent, mock or demean her, Penelope does not have the physical capabilities to respond or justify herself:

The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can’t make myself understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues, and fingers; and most of the time I have no listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may catch the odd whisper, the odd squeak, so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats and twilight, for bad dreams. (4)

Penelope associates being understood with the world “of bodies, of tongues, of fingers”, and there is a connection being formed here between comprehension and embodiment. Thus her disintegration, her bodily lack, becomes an impediment to accessing knowledge or any form of ‘truth’. Penelope becomes felt only through fragments of nature – squeaks, reeds and bats – or through the unconscious content of ‘bad dreams’.

This chapter contends that throughout *The Penelopiad*, Atwood's use of myth serves to problematize postmodernism's prioritisation of ambivalence, disintegration and lack. Atwood, an author repeatedly lauded as postmodern, deploys numerous literary techniques associated with the literary context, yet seems also to be suggesting that efforts to break down the self can lead to further isolation and misunderstanding.<sup>18</sup> Her exploration of the feminine voices silenced or sidelined in her source myth, Odysseus's wife Penelope and her twelve murdered maids, also provides an interrogation of how female voices can operate individually and in community with each other, to varying effects. Penelope, twisting her tales and redressing the "scandalous" rumours circulated about her, is established as a female entirely in isolation within a patriarchal society which separates her from other women. Conversely, her maids, speaking as a chorus which contains diverse voices yet also frequently comes together to speak as one, are better equipped to seek the textual justice Penelope cannot find.

In this, I will suggest that whilst *The Penelopiad* owes a great deal to the postmodern tradition in terms of form, tone and in its cynicism regarding totalising narratives, it also marks a step away from postmodern scepticism and suggests that in the twenty-first century, the "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness" of disintegrating postmodernism may not always be an avenue to understanding. Its distancing of the female self from her politicised body is one of the many ways in which postmodernism has been held to be

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<sup>18</sup> Atwood's postmodern credentials are discussed later in this chapter, on p101.

problematic for feminism; the first part of this chapter will consider how the dominant literary discourse of the end of the twentieth century has been held by some commentators to be incompatible with feminism. It will then move on to discuss how *The Penelopiad* interacts with these critical discussions and how it represents femininity through rewriting within this context. From this we will see how the practice of rewriting myth, within a project like the Canongate Myths, can interrogate broader literary debates whilst investigating particular stories and traditions.

### **“A boy’s game of irony and wordplay”: Postmodernism and Feminism**

At first glance, feminism and postmodernism, identified as two of the most significant bodies of thought to emerge from the twentieth century, may seem to be a perfect pairing (Nicholson 9). Indeed, Richard Rorty suggests that they spring from a similar impulse, as feminism serves as evidence that the philosophical tradition of the West has failed in its supposed quest to represent human thought and experience.<sup>19</sup> However, despite what may be considered in essence as a similar repudiation of Enlightenment thought, the relationship between these cultural theories has not been entirely harmonious.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Rorty (1979). Rorty breaks down what he believes are the central tenets of Enlightenment thought and asserts that nature cannot act as a mirror, nor is there a truth for us to discover. The flawed mirror of Enlightenment philosophy is what prevents us from being represented accurately. In this regard, his critique shares a perspective with some feminist theories which claim the Enlightenment has misrepresented women.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that this is not universally accepted; Nicholson, Theresa Man Ling Lee and others question this. Fraser and Nicholson (1990) suggests that scepticism of the Enlightenment is only partially shared by feminism and postmodernism (5); after all, an anti-Enlightenment impulse is not necessarily a feminist one (Lee Ling 35).

In his landmark treatise *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard defined the predominant feature of postmodernism as “an incredulity towards metanarratives” (xiii–iv; 5). Nicholson has expanded upon this, emphasising that postmodernists are looking for ways to proffer social criticism that is not built upon traditional, essentialist philosophies (100). Ten years after Lyotard highlighted this scepticism, Jennifer Wicke and Margaret Ferguson indicated that there was such a commitment to this prevailing mode of thought that, as of 1994, it should be understood as “the way we live now”(1). Later chapters will discuss postmodernism’s waning influence in the twenty-first century and how this shift manifests itself within other texts within the series, but this discussion will serve to establish how postmodernism developed and has been understood by feminist theorists.

The broadly accepted textual methodologies that arise from this supposedly ingrained incredulity have been identified as “pastiche, double coding, open-endedness, bricolage, fragmentation and so on” (Felski 4). The deployment of these techniques in fiction has been read as a means of collapsing (or at least, dislodging) totalising metanarratives and displacing truth and subjectivity as singular entities.

Aspects of this incredulity, both to metanarratives and to Western philosophy more generally, have been appealing to feminist and postcolonial critics, who have noted that the fragmentation of, or at least scepticism towards, overarching narratives has allowed figures previously marginalised to occupy alternative, more central spaces within the text. In *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Len Platt and Sara Upstone commend “postmodern

texts which challenge the grand narratives on which conventional racial ideologies rely”(1). It is unsurprising, therefore, that this method of challenging ideologies is appealing to some feminist literary theorists, considering the historic exclusion of women from both public life and the canon. In turn, a variety of female writers have themselves made use of postmodernism’s recognised textual aesthetics as a means of renegotiating their place within the text and the canon. Fraser and Nicholson have encouraged the development of a “postmodern-feminist theory” of identity which allows the replacement of male/female binaries through the acceptance of constructions of gender which are complex and multitudinous (34). Teresa L. Ebert has written regarding what she considers to be the necessity of “postmodern feminist theory” for social change, citing postmodernism’s “significant political, cultural and historical development” (886). Patricia Waugh has observed how both postmodernism and women’s liberation have rejected the “elitist and purely formalist celebration of modernism” and has stressed that both have celebrated the liminal and de-emphasised boundaries: “the traditional markets of ‘difference’ ”(*Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* 3). This relationship to modernism, this elitism and prioritisation of form, is something to which we shall return in later chapters.

Yet despite these evident similarities, upon closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that these movements are not in total sympathy with one another. As Nancy Hartsock has pertinently asked:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? (164)

It is not merely the moment of conception which is questionable, but also the way in which this has been theorised. We must also question why it is that despite the key male postmodern theorists saying “next to nothing about feminism”, feminists still feel obliged to sincerely engage with this discourse (Lee Ling 41). Waugh supports this, adding that there is a vacuum within postmodern theory pertaining to questions of gender (4). Felski has also queried the relationship, calling postmodernism “baggy and bloated [...] embracing a huge and disparate arrays of texts, theories and cultural phenomena [...] there is not much common ground in this scholarship” (4). This leads her to question: “Is the postmodern novel a boy’s game of irony and wordplay, remote from the concerns of most women? Or is women’s writing at the very heart of the postmodern?” (Felski 4–5).

Patricia Waugh has expanded upon this conflict at length, first in *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989) and again in *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (1992). She accepts that feminism and postmodernism have a number of shared concerns: derailing the established boundaries between “‘art’ and ‘life’, masculine and feminine, high and popular culture, the dominant and the marginal” (6). She emphasises their engagement with the decline of a “consensus aesthetics” and “the absence of a strong sense of stable subjectivity. Each expresses concern about the extension of technological and scientific modes of knowledge which cannot

be contained within traditional moral paradigms" (*Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* 6). Despite these shared preoccupations, she also eloquently raises a key point: it is not possible for women to have the same relationship with postmodernism as men.

This is due to a number of reasons. The first, and I would argue primary, of these is that the fragmentation postmodernism has theorised into both philosophy and artistic practice necessarily affects women differently. Waugh attributes postmodernism's destructive impulses to a recognition that the autonomous ideal of the Enlightenment cannot be achieved. It is this collective loss, she argues, that informs the "schizophrenic experience" of postmodernism which Frederic Jameson has described (26). However, as Waugh states, this is problematic for feminists as:

They are unlikely to bear this sort of relationship to history or to the ideal autonomous self central to the discourses of modernity. Those who have been systematically excluded from the constitution of that so-called universal subject – whether for reasons of gender, class, race, sexuality – are unlikely either to long nostalgically for what they have never experienced or possessed (even as an illusion) or to revel angrily or in celebratory fashion in the 'jouissance' of its own disintegration. To recognise the limitations of an ideal which was never one's own is to bear a very different relationship to its perceived loss. (*Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* 125)

This conflicted connection is something which has been echoed by Felski, pointing out that feminist scholars are unlikely to consider earlier stages of our history with nostalgia (145). It is, therefore, not a loss of subjecthood that women face, but a gap where subjectivity has never lived. This vital difference in experience leads to a disconnect between femininity (and by extension, feminism) and postmodernism. It could also, I suggest, lead to

further feelings of isolation for the female subject, encouraged to participate in the destruction of that which has never been experienced or understood by her.

Waugh suggests another reason for the fraught interplay between these ideologies. If we, as Lyotard and other postmodernists do, accept postmodernism as the end to all metanarratives, we must not forget that patriarchy itself is a metanarrative (*Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* 127). It becomes, therefore, problematic for a feminist to accept that the patriarchy has been subverted through postmodernism and leaves feminism, as an active movement with ongoing struggles, in a difficult position. The feminist writer, therefore, finds herself in a precarious position: should she ignore the prevailing contemporary literary style and risk being excluded from the canon? But if she does choose to adopt the recognised techniques of postmodernism – playfulness, pastiche, plurality and so on – is she engaging in a discourse which does not adequately represent her relationship to both herself and the world around her, or denies her and other women an avenue for political action, given that it would have us believe that the very structures which oppress her do not exist? After all, denying the patriarchy's existence does not remove its power.

Some critics have disregarded this paradox. Sharon Rose Wilson claims that women or other writers excluded from the canon may have, in fact, invented postmodernism, casually disregarding that its theorisation has been predominantly conducted by men (*Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* 3). She maintains

that techniques are not intrinsically “male” or “female” or belonging to any of the other designations of power and to believe so is essentialist, maintaining an adherence to realism. This ignores the fact that techniques may still be received and codified in gendered ways. It also ignores that realism, whilst flawed in its suggestion of total or unified realities, can be useful for exploring through the text social realities in need of interrogation. As this thesis shall prove throughout, a partial, flexible form of realism has its uses in the twenty-first century, and postmodernism did not manage to completely quell a desire for a return to the ‘real’. Suggesting that those who question the influence of postmodernism on revisions of myth and fairy tale as “still operating within dualistic binary oppositions” becomes itself ironically essentialising. Wilson does highlight a number of postmodern techniques which may be understood as useful for the deconstruction of myth and fairy tale, including gender reversal, the displacement of truth and the deployment of an unreliable narrator; this displacement of truth is one of my recommendations for a feminist rewriting and it is certainly true that these techniques are all at play within *The Penelopiad*.

Ultimately, if postmodernism is a response to the loss of the ideal of the single, unitary self – the kind of subjectivity that women have historically been denied – then how can the female writer engage with it as a movement? The simple answer for some critics is that she must. Nicholson writes that:

Postmodern-feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic. It would tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the

metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or epistemology. In short, this theory would look more like a tapestry of many different hues than one woven in single colour. (114)

After all, she continues, if we are to talk of feminisms, as is the current trend, it is already an implicitly postmodern theory (115).

This chapter will assess the postmodern elements of *The Penelopiad*, as previously discussed by a number of critics, but will expand upon this to suggest that with her rewritten mythology, Atwood is indicating alternative forms of critique beyond deconstruction alone. Whilst *The Penelopiad* is decidedly not a realist text, Atwood's fleshing out of the lived experience of Penelope speaks to broader experiences of women within patriarchy. Penelope's isolation – from herself, from other women and from the knowledge she wishes she could possess – serves to highlight how postmodern disintegration can lead to dislocated subjectivities who cannot connect. The choral voice of the Maids, conversely, acts as a counterpoint, showing that where communities are formed, questions may be asked and textual justice may be sought. *The Penelopiad*, written in 2005, incorporates postmodern techniques and scepticism, whilst also suggesting a twenty-first century desire for something to satisfy our enduring desire for justice and truth.

**“A stick used to beat other women with”: Penelope within the Patriarchy**

Atwood's credentials, as both postmodernist and feminist, have been repeatedly and variously asserted by a number of critics. Fiona Tolan's *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* has traced feminist theory throughout many of her major works (2007). Coral Ann Howells has agreed with this characterisation of Atwood as feminist (18). The interplay between her female protagonists and the patriarchies represented within her novels is a key characteristic of her work; *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) serving as the best representative of this. Charlotte Beyer has deftly mapped out feminist revisionist mythology in Atwood's poetry and cites *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye* (1988) as examples of a similar impulse in her fiction, incorporating revised mythologies into her work, "sometimes in an ironic or grotesque mode" (278). Yet despite the enthusiasm with which feminist critics engage with Atwood, she herself has resisted the feminist label. Indeed, in recent years, she has courted some controversy for this very issue and has most recently been the subject of a public backlash from feminists regarding her interventions into #metoo-inspired proceedings against a member of the University of British Columbia's Creative Writing faculty.<sup>21</sup>

Following the release of *The Edible Woman*, she said:

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<sup>21</sup> In 2018 Atwood wrote in *The Globe and Mail*: "It seems that I am a "Bad Feminist." I can add that to the other things I've been accused of since 1972, such as climbing to fame up a pyramid of decapitated men's heads (a leftie journal), of being a dominatrix bent on the subjugation of men (a rightie one, complete with an illustration of me in leather boots and a whip) and of being an awful person who can annihilate – with her magic White Witch powers – anyone critical of her at Toronto dinner tables. I'm so scary! And now, it seems, I am conducting a War on Women, like the misogynistic, rape-enabling Bad Feminist that I am." Her tongue-in-cheek, if somewhat tone-deaf, words here are the introduction to a detailed defence of her position regarding the dismissal of Steve Galloway. The article speaks to the backlash against her, as well as her own perspective on this fraught topic. Delving into this issue too deeply would lead to tangential discussions but suffice it to say that Atwood is not

I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that's what things were like in 1965 (Quoted in Kaminski 21).

This curious eschewal of a label which persistently seeks to attach itself to Atwood is significant. To suggest that social reporting does not serve a feminist function is misleading; for women to better understand the world in which they are operating and the experiences of other women, this kind of "social realism" can be extremely useful. This reference to realism is interesting too; despite her identity as a postmodern author, therefore, she maintains that at heart her books are driven by realist impulses – to portray the world as it is or as it should be understood. Also of note is the context bound nature of her assessment – *The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 and that is how things were, yet with the very recent announcement of a forthcoming sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, we can see that perhaps the issues at play within Atwood's novel do not simply speak to their moment of production and the gender issues at play have a life beyond their year of publication. Fiona Tolan counters this by saying that the feminism at work in Atwood's novel is not the same as we will find in feminist theory and we should understand that "the novelist has generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse" (3). She also points out that beyond being herself influenced, the author also has the power to, in turn, influence others; the persistent use of Atwood's work to elucidate women's issues and

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an unproblematic or simple feminist figure, although some critics would like to co-opt her as such (Atwood, "Am I a Bad Feminist?").

advance feminist discussion points to her capacity as a feminist ‘influencer’ (4). Tolan also notes that her work “demonstrably anticipates future movements within feminism”, a point which supports this chapter’s argument that Atwood is, through *The Penelopiad*, indicating a shift away from the predominant discourse of the late twentieth century (4).

Her postmodernism has similarly been discussed. In fact, Kathleen Gregory Klein believes that while Atwood’s analysis of femininity and the patriarchy may be feminist in impulse, this “urge to challenge is itself postmodern in nature” (27). This observation insinuates that it can only be postmodernism that prompts a writer to challenge “overly rigid categories of classification”, which is surely a key enterprise of third-wave feminism. This speaks again to the conflict between these two movements. Atwood has regularly been characterised as a postmodern writer, given her use of typically postmodern tropes such as unreliable and self-conscious narration, intertextuality, pastiche and the ontological enquiries that Brian McHale has attributed to the movement (10). *The Penelopiad* has also been specifically referred to as postmodern; “The Penelopiad: A Postmodern Fiction” advanced this argument in 2013 (Khalid and Tabassum). Rûta Slapkauskaitė writes that “Atwood is characteristically described as a postmodern female writer, who constantly experiments with different genres [...] Her writings are also acutely aware of the relations of power that construct our social roles and organise the discourses through which we imagine ourselves and others” (2). Yet Slapkauskaitė has questioned *The Penelopiad*’s postmodernism, stating that “the myth of Odysseus and Penelope seems to

be less of a grand narrative today than an interpretation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (142). A recent article on the MaddAddam Trilogy suggests that twenty-first century postmodernism is different to the dominant form of the postmodern experienced in the 1980s and 1990s (Raschke).<sup>22</sup> Seyla Benhabib discusses "strong" and "weak" versions of postmodernism; the strong version of the "Death of the Subject" and other theses of postmodernism are held to be "not compatible with the goals of feminism" but moderations of this are possible; whilst Benhabib's argument is convincing, it seems to me that postmodernism is itself too exhausted as a theory to allow 'weak' moderations of broadly understood theses to serve as supporting philosophies for feminism (215). When Slapkauskaitė suggests that *The Penelopiad* is seeking to go "beyond – beyond the present and the past, beyond the real and the imaginary", we see how critics have begun to map a move away from the disintegration of 'pure' postmodernism (145). Slapkauskaitė does suggest that "Atwood remains loyal to her postmodern experiments and her ideological views" (145), yet I contend that despite marked elements of postmodern experimentation, *The Penelopiad* does highlight a shift in the construction of feminine voices in twenty-first century literature.

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Debrah Raschke believes that the "postmodernism of the 1980s is not the postmodernism of the twenty-first century. The trilogy, in effect, dramatizes the postmodern condition gone amuck' (NP). Thus we see how Atwood has traditionally been understood as a postmodern author but her twenty-first century texts mark a shift from this, as this chapter similarly contends. Sharon Rose Wilson links Atwood's rewritings, from *The Robber Bride* (1993) to *Oryx and Crake* (2003) to postmodernism ("Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale: Postmodern Revisioning in Recent Texts", 2008)

In her rewriting for the Canongate series, Atwood's foreword states that "two questions [...] must pose themselves after any close reading of the *Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (*The Penelopiad* 1). Those seeking determinacy will be left disappointed, but the foregrounding of these questions points to a desire to destabilise the primary authority of her source. This is further served by her choice to remove power from Homer's omniscient narrator, giving voice instead to Odysseus's wife Penelope and her twelve maids, hanged by Telemachus in the climax of the *Odyssey*. This is an immediate and obvious deviance from the epic form of the original. Offering narrative authority to a previously marginalised character has been repeatedly designated as a postmodern technique; Wilson includes this method in her list of postmodern methodologies for myth and fairy tale (*Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction*). Purkiss has also recognised this as a methodology deployed by some feminist rewriters, in addition to general reversal and moral inversion – where what was negative is framed positively and vice versa (441–42).<sup>23</sup> Not only does Atwood serve a redundancy notice to Homer's narrator, but she also weaves into the subtext of *The Penelopiad* doubts about the veracity of the epic original. The question of what Penelope was "really up to", whilst remaining unanswered, establishes from the outset the existence of truths that the original source myth does not allow the reader

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<sup>23</sup> Purkiss does note, however, that this approach is not without difficulty (as discussed in the introduction to this thesis).

to easily access, or may in fact, not be understood by the characters themselves.

Homer's Penelope, wise and intelligent, has been received throughout the ages as refracted through her limited archetypal qualifiers. Indeed, Penelope had become synonymous with wifely forbearance, something that Atwood's Penelope comments upon wryly:

Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been?  
(2)

Here Atwood is drawing attention to the damage that feminine archetypes may cause, the idealised Penelope being used as an impossible standard against whom other women will be inevitably judged. Potential inaccuracies in the Homeric original are highlighted; the suggestion of an "official version" gives *The Odyssey* an established weight, but it also tantalisingly offers the possibility of alternative versions – versions in which Penelope may not be the flawless feminine figurehead that we have inherited through our literary tradition. She may not even be the inversion of this ideal, which Molly Bloom, the Penelope of *Ulysses*, may be said to represent. She is instead, a version of this 'Penelope' which casts questions of official, definitive 'versions' into question.

This interrogation is expanded later in the novella, when Penelope's own authenticity as a narrator is repeatedly called into question. In the chapter "Slanderous Gossip" she emphatically – rather too emphatically –

asserts that she was never physically intimate with any of the swarming suitors who assembled on Ithaca in Odysseus's absence (143). Indeed, by addressing this supposed gossip, the "various items [...] that have been going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years", she is not only destabilising Penelope's symbolic faithfulness, but is keying into critical debates pertaining to Homer's original and suggesting alternative narratives that have been marginalised throughout the history of this particular text. Atwood's rewrite is not merely an engagement with the textual source myth as we receive it today, but a response to a survey of oral traditions that have contributed to the Odysseus myth, thus undermining the grand narrative of the classical text in a classically postmodern way.

Atwood's chorus of maids further serve this destabilisation in their framing interludes. Their fate preoccupied Atwood and they are provided with a form of vengeance: helping to slay Homer's textual authority. The complimentary and contrasting voices of the Maids and Penelope, each casting each other into a liminal space of doubt, thus question the feasibility of authorial certainty. Yet there also occurs, due to this layering of oppositional voices, a questioning of how women's voices interact with each other. Penelope, in isolation, finds, despite her new position of authority, speech to be difficult: when she tries to scream, she sounds like an owl (2). Yet the Maids, performing a multi-genre chorus, are able to pursue a far more coherent and assertive line of narrative inquiry. This is a point to which we will return later.

*The Penelopiad's* engagement with time is also consistent with the postmodern aesthetic. Khalid & Tabassum have detailed the text's use of historiographic metafiction, using Linda Hutcheon's definition: "[it] installs and blurs the line between fiction and history and there is simultaneous and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries in a way which is intensely self-conscious" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History Theory, Fiction* 112). Rita Felski, in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, states:

History presumes a confident knowledge of what really happened in the past and an imperious urge to organize the chaotic flux of time into a single streamlined story. Postmodern thought shatters this apparently stable ground and radically alters our way of thinking about time (2).

Indeed, one is forcibly reminded of Penelope wandering through the asphodel when we read Felski's assessment of contemporary concepts of time: "We are no longer propelled into the future by the purposeful forward march of events. Instead, we find ourselves adrift, floating aimlessly in a sea of temporal fragments and random moments" (2). Atwood indicates an appreciation of the lost arrow of postmodern time – in life, Penelope observes the sun rising and setting and the moon "[doing] the same, changing from phase to phase" but in Atwood's imagined underworld, she notes "it's hard to keep track of time here, because we don't have any of it as such" (18). The text is not ahistoric – Penelope comments on how things have changed throughout history, even if she is unable to quantify it in terms of time – but the non-linear narrative is supported by an implied understanding of time as fluid. "I was very interested," Penelope says in the underworld,

In the invention of the light bulb, for instance, and in the matter-into-energy theories of the twentieth century. More recently, some of us have been able to infiltrate the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe, and to travel around that way [...] Perhaps how the gods were able to come and go as they did back then – they must have had something like that at their disposal. (19)

Here Penelope is showing an awareness of how technology has developed in a linear history but also subverts this with the suggestion that this technology must have been available to ancient deities. Atwood is therefore simultaneously constructing history as linear and as part of what Felski defines as “a posthistorical consciousness” (2). Alterations of time within the text, and Penelope’s ability to see beyond her time, are two further methods of disruption and progenitors of ambiguity within the text.

Atwood has thus been shown to use a variety of techniques recognised as postmodern as a method of disturbing the certainties of her Homeric source. To this end, Atwood may be understood as a ‘resisting reader’ of myth, to quote Fetterley’s epithet – she foregrounds uncertainties in previous versions of the myth and leaves open spaces within her own. Yet what I contend is that within this multi-layered retelling, where characters place each other on trial and call into question established behaviours, Penelope remains, to a certain extent, “determined”. The postmodern retelling is limited by its setting within patriarchy. While methods of storytelling may be adopted to inject resistance into the narrative, there remain unchallenged, fixed points of gender asymmetry which, Atwood seems to be suggesting, cannot be dismantled by irony or pastiche alone.

Wilson champions *The Penelopiad* as a feminist antimyth (*Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* 3).

She unpacks this:

Focussing on her personal odyssey in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope appropriates patriarchal myth and establishes her own identity as a wise Crone creator. Characteristically, Atwood re-visions old stories, in this case, Homer's canonical story, in a postmodern manner, emphasizing how history, myth and reality – yet other stories – are all constructions. Like Scheherazade without a mouth, Penelope is an archetypal woman writer: She creates, changes and perpetuates a world and herself for as long as she speaks. (59)

In her analysis of the text, Wilson argues that Atwood both parodies and symbolises the Great Goddess figure and tells the tale from her 'Crone' phase (55). Wilson is correct that she is both creation and creator – engaging in the “low art” of stories and her traditional artisanal weaving enterprises alike (1). Her characterisation of Penelope as Crone may also be accepted, though it seems to me that this role is far more convincingly occupied by Odysseus's aged nurse Eurycleia, whose particular brand of wisdom leads to the selection of which maids to hang, with Penelope occupying the 'Mother' branch of the trinity and the maids as a unified 'maiden' figure. What is curious is, however, that Wilson characterises Penelope within a different archetypal role, when Atwood has done so much to try and destabilise archetype within her rewrite. Does the female writer indeed “create, change and perpetuate a world and herself for as long as she speaks”? What if her speech is, as Luce Irigaray has extensively discussed, imbued with the masculine?<sup>24</sup> How, without a mouth, where she sounds like an owl, can

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *To Speak is Never Neutral* (Irigaray 2017)).

Penelope truly speak herself into being? As Penelope comments: “What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty” (3). The burden of speech is something Penelope feels keenly, and is quite literally something she has to carry around in a sack whilst in the underworld.

Ultimately, Penelope is deliberately restricted by the constraints of her patriarchal society; the irony with which the source myth is destabilised does in fact, ironically identify the structures and narratives which cannot be dislodged through word play, generic experimentation or parody. As Penelope says, “So much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadows, that sometimes it’s hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside” (8-9). When voices are so dislocated, it is hard to discern their origin and harder still to identify when they have become internalised.

Penelope is in fact herself a generator of patriarchal myth. She offers an abundance of pronouncements on how woman do or ought to behave, recommending crafts as a means of avoiding having to deal with inappropriate remarks and talking about how “goody-goody girls” are always secretly attracted to the criminal classes (8-9). Penelope cannot understand herself beyond her archetypal signifiers:

As for me...well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to tell me that because I was a princess [...] I was smart though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion. (20)

Penelope recognises that other people's opinions may not be accurate and are shaped by position or expectation, yet she continues to extol the same virtues as we were given by Homer. She seems to find it difficult to conceive of herself beyond what others say about her, or else, how she is constructed in opposition to her loathed cousin, Helen.

It is no wonder that Penelope finds herself limited in this way, when her society is revealed to be brutally misogynistic in its structuring. She comments:

Marriages were for having children, and children were not toys or pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you could have grandsons. (25)

The relative value of male versus female is expanded upon by the Maids. In the 'Lament of the Maids', they declare "We too were children [...] we were told we were fatherless. We were told we were dirty [...] we were the dirty girls" (13). Whereas Penelope speaks of the misogynistic reception of childbirth in ancient Greece in abstract terms: "if you had daughters instead of sons", the Maids as a group speak of their own experiences with a "we". The removal of the figure of a father as a standard by which a woman might be judged before having a husband renders the girls "dirty". This is later expanded in their Idyll, where they compare their births to that of

Telemachus:

His mother presented a princeling. Our various mothers  
Spawned merely, lambled, farrowed, littered,  
Foaled, whelped and kittened, brooded,  
Hatched out their clutch [...]  
He was fathered; we simply appeared,  
Like the crocus, the rose, the sparrows

Engendered in mud. (67)

“He” is presented whilst they, in animal terminology “spawned merely”, their lack of an identifiable father leaving them without an anchor in the world and also bodiless, excluded from a patrilineal society. This also furthers the long-established patriarchal motif of femininity’s association with nature, particularly flowers and birds. Thus whilst Penelope recognises some of these features in her society, she does not engage with this directly. There is certainly a class element at work and Penelope’s status as a princess protects her from many of the indignities experienced by the maids. Yet Penelope is also a woman whose father attempted to drown her at birth (7); she never learns precisely why, but she believes it is out of fear that she would weave his shroud. Female children, whether rich or poor, are thus of a lesser value and subject to male control.

The violence and toxicity of Atwood’s Ancient Greek patriarchy is emphasised repeatedly. The marriage between Odysseus and Penelope is described as her being “handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood pudding” (39). Whilst she contextualises this, establishing that meat was highly valued at a time, the transactional nature of the relationship, trading flesh, is highlighted. Penelope seems to internalise this consumerist attitude towards interpersonal relationships, commenting that Helen viewed Odysseus as a “less than delicious sausage” that she has rejected (34). Odysseus and Penelope, after their wedding ceremony, are forced to take part in a charade where she pretends to have been stolen:

The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood. (44)

Whilst Penelope and Odysseus circumvent this with pretend screams, the elaborately staged expectation of brutality as part of a marriage consummation speaks to the patriarchal context within which the *Odyssey* was situated. Even if this is an outdated game played by the wealthy, it is a game which still speaks to the relative power of man and wife within their new marital relationship.

One interesting point where the narrative remains moored to patriarchal assumption is with the famed bow contest. Marilyn A. Katz has provided, in *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in The Odyssey*, an extensive study of the static understanding of Homer's Penelope betrayed by many Classicists. As she writes:

Traditionally [...] including in the ancient tradition, the understanding of Penelope's *kleos* [glory or renown] is characteristically restricted to what we might call the simple or denotative meaning, to the level, at which it is identical with her capacity with her endurance and her faithfulness to Odysseus. (6)

She then lists a number of ancient commentators who emphasise her "discretion" and "chastity" (6). Thus, the incident of the bow contest, where Penelope tells the suitors she will marry whoever can string Odysseus's bow and fire it through twelve axe heads, has become a major source of contention for those critics, ancient and contemporary, who only appreciate Penelope's worth according to this framework. F.M. Combellack comments:

“Penelope, the model of cautious, shrewd intelligence, acts on this one occasion like a rash, precipitate fool. It is quite understandable that Homer’s readers have often wondered why” (11). The bow contest is seen as a threat to this unified image of Penelope as faithful and constant, as it invites the possibility of her remarriage, though many (including Atwood) have claimed that Penelope did this fully aware of its impossibility as a task for anyone other than Odysseus.

What the perennial question of the bow contest indicates, however, is what Richard Heitman calls “the assumption that Penelope is to be understood in terms of her sexual fidelity to Odysseus” (111). Indeed, F.I. Zeitlin has called it the principal narrative anxiety of the entire epic (122). Heitman has also raised the incongruous doubting of all of Penelope’s statements and behaviour – “Every time Odysseus lies, the epic audience knows that he is lying”, but, he contends, Penelope is accorded no such faith in classical scholarship (111). Lillian Eileen Doherty says that the bow episode and Penelope’s (or the narrator’s) failure to offer any motive provides an opening in a text she understands to be primarily closed, though the diverging groups of Homeric scholars seem to suggest that the text cannot be as closed as she would presume (*Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences and Narrators in The Odyssey* 32). However, the assumption that Penelope must account for her motives in order to maintain her chaste reputation is itself a misogynistic expectation.

Thus when Atwood engages with these ambiguities pertaining to Penelope’s fidelity, she is also contributing to nearly three millennia of critical

investigations and appraisals of her sexual virtue. In fact, Atwood 'closes' the opening of the bow episode by definitively confirming that Penelope recognised Odysseus:

The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident – or by divine plan [...] Now you've heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick. I knew that the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose. (139)

It is a complicated response to the bow question. On one hand, it gives Penelope an agency denied her in the source myth – she is definitively aware and acts autonomously to set the climax of the plot into action. Yet on the other hand, it leaves the primary uncertainty of the text as being Penelope's chastity. Was the "Scandalous Gossip" correct? Atwood is, on one hand, closing an ambiguity within the text by confirming Penelope's awareness of Odysseus and, on the other, reinforcing the ancient ambiguity regarding Penelope's fidelity. Atwood has shifted the lens of the tale to focus upon the hanging of the Maids but does not alter Zeitlin's "narrative anxiety": Penelope's sexual indeterminacy. In a novel full of play, mixing registers, and inventions, the points at which Atwood chooses to remain fixed to the original are particularly significant.

Atwood's imagination, never in doubt, chooses also not the fill in the time Penelope spends on Ithaca waiting for Odysseus in any great detail.

What can I tell you about the next ten years? Odysseus sailed away to Troy. I stayed in Ithaca. The sun rose, travelled across the sky, set. Only sometimes did I think of it as the flaming chariot of Helios. The moon did the same, changing from phase to phase. Only sometimes did I think of it as the silver boat of Artemis. (81)

Where Odysseus's adventures are the subject of discussion and debate, departure and invention, Penelope has little to tell us. She describes being told that Odysseus and his men had put wax in his ears to avoid the sirens, while being told by someone else that "it was a high-class Sicilian knocking shop – the courtesans there were known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits" (91). Thus while his exploits are open to interpretation or re-evaluation, the gap in Homer's narrative pertaining to Penelope's lonely occupation is left unfilled. Penelope simply does not have the language to articulate a life beyond her relationship to Odysseus and only sometimes can she view the world as anything other than literal, as the "flaming chariot of Helios". She wonders: "When would he come back and relieve me of my boredom?", her life defined by their interactions with each other (81).

Yet the primary example of what we may characterise as Penelope's internalised misogyny is her relationship with her cousin Helen. Rivalry between women is a repeated theme in Atwood's work, as highlighted by Earl G. Ingersoll, who comments:

As in her other work, Atwood offers here a portrait of a woman who seems unable to resist allowing another woman to dominate her. Indeed traditional feminists have had their difficulties with Atwood on this very point: much as she demonstrates that men dominate and abuse other women, she will not discount the fact that women are occasionally even worse in their abuse of each other [...] consciously or not, Atwood appears to be reminding her readers that women can be not only "sisters" but each other's worst enemies. (119)

Ingersoll derides this rivalry in the context of *The Penelopiad*, suggesting that it becomes something like "Penelope's Complaint", thereby turning tragedy

into what a less sensitive generation might have called a “cat fight” (117).<sup>25</sup> His derision of the “soap opera” elements seems to ignore that within the patriarchal context Atwood has built for Penelope, engagement with other women becomes very difficult.

Helen, the face who launched the thousand ships, is Penelope’s cousin and the main antagonist of her narrative. One chapter title succinctly summarises her judgment of Helen: “Helen Ruins My Life” (71). The pair have numerous meetings, both in life and in the underworld, and whilst Helen does make one unpleasant remark about Penelope and Odysseus both having short legs, it seems that Penelope can only interpret their interactions as antipathetic and that in fact, Helen’s speech does not necessarily provoke such a strong reaction at all times.

‘Never mind, little cousin,’ she said to me, patting me on the arm.  
 ‘They say he’s very clever. And you’re very clever too, they tell me. So you’ll be able to understand what he says. I certainly never could!’  
 (34-5)

Penelope describes this as being accompanied by a patronizing smirk, but certainly it could be read as a genuine compliment and hope for a success in the match. It could be understood as Helen’s acknowledgement of Penelope’s superior intellect. In the underworld, she even extends kindness to an isolated Penelope, inviting her to come and bathe, but Penelope is unable to appreciate this as anything other than spite (153). She holds Helen responsible for “ruining her life”, by running off with Paris and thus instigating the Trojan War. During the marriage contest for Helen’s hand, Odysseus

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly the very term used by Peter Conrad (see p78 of this thesis).

suggested to Helen's father Tyndaerus that to prevent any conflict after she had made her choice, they all would make an oath to defend Helen and whoever she married (36). Penelope thus believes Helen's contravening this oath through her infidelity resulted in Odysseus's departure and their separation. It ought to be noted, however, that the pact was made as a result of Helen's suitors being unable to behave themselves and as a means of stemming conflict between her masculine admirers. Some critics have questioned the role Helen played as ancient Greek Eve; other versions of the myth have suggested Helen was abducted or never really existed.<sup>26</sup> Yet here, Penelope establishes her as the root of her misery, describing "Paris and wicked Helen", ascribing blame entirely to her cousin (78).

She describes how in the underworld, she is not as interesting to the mystics and clairvoyants seeking commune with the dead as Helen is:

For some reason they didn't want to see me, whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. It didn't seem fair – I wasn't known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing if not infamous. Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she'd come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan. She was quite stuck-up about it, was Helen. I wonder how many of us really believed that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn't seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other. (20)

This diatribe reveals a number of interesting points. The first of these is that Helen is the product of rape, the result of Leda's violation by Zeus in the

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<sup>26</sup> Euripides, Stesichorus, and Herodotus all stated they did not believe Helen ever went to Troy, but stayed in Egypt. See Edmunds (2015) for full details of the varying versions of the Helen myth; Edmunds cites Euripides play *Helen of Troy*, in which Helen declares "I did not go to Troy; it was an image" (173). This is something expanded upon in *Cassandra* (Wolf 2013).

guise of a swan. Later in the novel she also mentions how Helen had been kidnapped as a 12 year old by Theseus. She is then sold to Menelaus and potentially abducted by Paris. Helen is, despite her fame and beauty, clearly a victim of the patriarchy and male violence. Penelope is not able to see this from her limited perspective, however. Penelope as an individual (“I wonder”) is querying the collective opinion of that story (“how many of us really believed”). There is a tacit acknowledgement of the weight and impact of group think, but also an indication of the fact that sexual behaviour is open to discussion and evaluation by others. Penelope later perpetuates the “story” herself perhaps inadvertently, describing her “sailing up, like the long-necked swan she fancied herself to be” (33). What is also key in this railing against Helen’s fame is that Penelope finds herself in an impossible position. She wants to be of interest and import, yet believes it is notorious behaviour which secures that status. Which version of Penelope is real and which is the version she wants us to believe? The Penelope who did secretly conduct affairs with the suitors behind her husband’s back, as the narrative occasionally suggests, or the version whose chastity remained ever intact? Penelope doesn’t wish to be judged as inferior within this underworld value system which prizes notoriety and beauty, and in this she is transposing the competitive, transactional character of relationships from the world of the living to the land of the dead. Helen, when conjured, also feels the weight of these expectations and in fact, dresses specifically to meet the tastes of whoever has summoned her:

She liked to appear in one of her Trojan outfits, over-decorated to my taste [...] Or she'd take on the form in which she displayed herself to her outraged husband, Menelaus, when Troy was burning and he was about to plunge his vengeful sword into her. All she had to do was bare one of her peerless breasts, and he was down on his knees, and drooling and begging to take her back. (20)

The male-driven violence of Helen's experience, rendered acutely phallic by the "vengeful sword" about to be "plunged into her", means that her only possible response to his rage is sexual manipulation. Yet her breasts are "peerless", unmatched in beauty but also isolating Helen from any other form of community. When her life has been lived adhering to the expectations or demands of men, no wonder she performs accordingly, leaving herself without a peer. Both Penelope and Helen are on opposing ends of the Whore-Madonna dichotomy, something Penelope emphasises: "If you were magician [...] would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust?" (21-2). Yet they are both similarly defined by their relationships with men and their isolation from others. When Penelope comments on Helen's lack of punishment, she closes the subject by saying "I had other things in my life to occupy my attention. Which brings me to my marriage" (22). This juxtaposition shows that these two things which have occupied Penelope's attention – her rivalry with Helen and her marriage to Odysseus – have both been produced by patriarchal structures, are both detrimental to her happiness, and crucially, are both to a greater or lesser extent faithful to our expectations from the source myth. It is also worth noting that Anticleia and Eurycleia, the other two

women whose identities are most clearly anchored to Odysseus, do not change a great deal from the source myth and are themselves antagonistic towards other women.

The establishment of these fixed points, this 'determined nature' amidst many new ambiguities, serves to emphasise that Penelope as an individual woman cannot, within the context of a purely postmodern novella filled with play and irony, actually move beyond patriarchal structures and archetypes. She can dislodge the authority of her source and call some of its essential premises into question, but there are barriers to complete disintegration. However, conversely, the female characters operating in commune, the choral collective of the Maids, are in fact given more liberty in terms of generic innovation and in the quest for textual justice.

### **“The Maids all curtsy”: Performed Femininity and the Case for Community**

Unfortunately one of them betrayed the secret of my interminable weaving. I'm sure it was an accident: the young are careless, and she must have slip a hint or a word. I still don't know which one: down here among the shadows they all go about in a group, and when I approach them they run away. They shun me as if I had done them a terrible injury. But I never would have hurt them, not of my own accord. (115)

Atwood's Penelope involves the Maids in her plot with the suitors, encouraging them to flirt with and manipulate them to better obfuscate her shroud trick. When the secret is discovered, she holds one of them accountable, though not knowing precisely who it was who told them of her

plans. The single figure in Penelope's imagination, the careless maid guilty of 'betraying' her, contrasts with the ever-united group of maids in the underworld, sticking together after life and refusing to approach Penelope as she wanders alone through the asphodel. Penelope's knowledge of and complicity in the Maids' execution by Telemachus is explored in many of the Maids' framing interludes. In Penelope's own words, she offers a qualified plea of innocence: she would not have hurt them if left to her own devices. Their murder, it is suggested, is the inevitable result of a patriarchal system wherein an individual female cannot act "on her own accord", leading to "terrible injury". This section will examine the performative aspects of femininity within the text, with the Maids' outright 'dramatic' performances in idylls, plays, sea shanties and videotaped court trials, juxtaposed with Penelope's individual performance of 'feminine' tropes. From this, an argument for the community of women's voices, as opposed to the isolation of disintegrating individual female subjectivities, will be presented.

Penelope repeatedly and ironically enacts behaviours which are suggested to be disingenuous, in keeping with the expectations of those around her. As a result, the inherent misogyny of the source myth is highlighted through Atwood's construction of femininity as a performed act, in keeping with a feminist understanding of gender as not biological but socially constituted.<sup>27</sup> These behaviours are also in-line with some of the repeated

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the works of Judith Butler. Butler writes: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and

archetypes associated with Homer's Penelope. The primary of these is her crying. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's son Telemachus comments: "I am going to town now to show myself to my mother; I am sure she won't stop her dismal weeping and lamenting until she sees me in the flesh", indicating that the maternal influence in his life has been left to cry whilst he, her son, has been free to go out and seek adventure (17, 5-9). His expectation is that she will remain in the domestic sphere and give into what is a predominantly feminine pursuit, weeping. This is later confirmed when he returns: "Mother," the thoughtful Telemachus replied, "do not bring me to tears or stir my emotions when I have just escaped from a violent death. But go upstairs with your ladies" (Homer 17, 45-47). Telemachus has to resist the impulse to cry and forbids his mother to evoke this emotion in conjunction with his more masculine adventures. She then does as she is told and continues upstairs to weep, with her ladies. The implication is, therefore, that one of most Penelope's obvious actions in the *Odyssey*, her weeping, is not only passive but restricted to the female sex and avoided by men. It may be done with companionship from other women, but it should occur somewhere away from the male members of the family or community.

Atwood's Penelope cries continuously, but her weeping serves to ironically highlight the strictures of her classical archetype. On the day of her marriage to Odysseus, Atwood's Penelope starts to cry, "as I would do so often in the future" and later "did some more weeping, and was comforted in

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sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness"(1988, 522).

ways that were suitable for a wedding night” (48). The passive verb and the subsequent intimacy between man and wife as a result of this behaviour is indicative of Penelope’s desire to be seen as traditionally feminine and is in keeping with her repetitive crying in the *Odyssey*. Yet Atwood’s insistence on the performative “did crying”, repeated also on page 7, highlights that her supposedly feminine weeping is a performed behaviour rather than a natural emotional impulse. Another interaction between Odysseus and Penelope shows her emulating the behaviours expected of the wife of a hero, though in this circumstance they are more genuine than her tears:

If word got around about his post, said Odysseus in a mock-sinister manner, he would know I’d been sleeping with some other man, and then – he said, frowning at me in what was supposed to be a playful way – he would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam.

I pretended to be frightened, and said I would never, never think of betraying his big post.

Actually, I really was frightened. (74)

The interplay between Penelope’s performed fear, to please Odysseus and gratify his simultaneously enacted (“supposed to be in a playful way”) masculinity, and her genuine fear of his potential violence towards her in this unsettling scene, draws attention to both Penelope’s pragmatic performance of feminine tropes of behaviour and her intrinsic fear of her husband’s capacity for violence. Later she imagines Odysseus’s return and “me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done” (89). Penelope’s repeated and ironic need to perform as a ‘feminine’ wife in order to meet the expectations of both her husband, and the society in which they are operating, as evidenced by the wedding night incident detailed earlier, draws

attention to how constructions of femininity occur within societies which demand a certain pattern of behaviour.

These performed behaviours are reiterated throughout the text, with “crying” appearing in the text 8 times, “tears” 13 times and “weep” 12 times; they are ultimately established as part of Penelope’s broader ‘performance’ as a dutiful wife. When Odysseus returns from his travels, Penelope informs the reader that “it is said” that he did not reveal himself as he distrusted her and wanted to test her faithfulness. Penelope counters this perceived explanation by saying “But the real reason was that he was afraid I would cry tears of joy and thus give him away” (145). Odysseus has, as far as Penelope can tell, accepted this as part of her behaviour and it is this performance which prevents him from being honest with her. Yet the tears are ultimately dishonest, which Penelope reveals, commenting: “But he knew me well - my tender heart, my habit of dissolving in tears and falling down on thresholds. He simply didn’t want to expose me to dangers and disagreeable sights. Surely that is the obvious explanation for his behaviour” (145). Her vague “surely” allows the reader to identify her uncertainty about this – a logical explanation to detract from the rumours circulating about Penelope’s fidelity. Upon his return, Penelope shed a “satisfactory number of tears” to convince Odysseus that she had not betrayed him (171) and later, after they have spent some time alone together, she tells him “how very many tears I’d shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I’d been” (173). She then asserts that they were both known liars and “it was a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said” (173). Tears are thus

the signifying behaviour she uses to indicate her wifely status, to assure her fidelity and to gratify Odysseus's expectation. Yet they are similarly here established as insincere and markers of that expectation rather than of a true emotional outpouring.

We find this reasserted on further occasions. Penelope comments: "When things get too dismal, and after I've done as much weeping as possible without turning myself into a pond, I have always – fortunately – been able to go to sleep" (123). Crying as much as possible and yet still being able to easily fall into slumber suggests once again a level of design in these outpourings. It is something Penelope does when no other recourse is open to her or whenever she feels the need to reassert her position as a female wife and princess: "What could I do but burst into tears?" (128) There are, for Penelope, no other pathways to agency. Indeed, there are even more oblique references to this conscious production of emotion later: "No sooner had I performed the familiar ritual and shed the familiar tears than Odysseus himself had shambled into the courtyard" (135). Penelope's crying is so regularly performed that it becomes ritualistic, performed to and for others.

Penelope's performance as a self-consciously constructed individual living according to patriarchal expectation leads her to feel isolated from the other women in the novella. We have discussed at length her conflict with Helen, a similarly isolated figure performing according to archetype, although in her case it is as the eternal seductress. Penelope is also separated from her Maids, not merely by class and status, but by their very language and

means of communication. The Maids do not cry, indeed, they comment: “It did us no good to weep. It did us no good to say we were in pain” (9). The method of performance which works for Penelope, in her position of relative power, has no utility for the lowly Maids. But what they are able to access instead is community with each other. Their comfort comes not from weeping but: “We laughed together in our attics, in our nights” (15). This reference to the famed Madwoman in the Attic, echoing at once Rochester’s wife Bertha Mason and the seminal feminist re-evaluation of Victorian women’s literature *The Madwoman in the Attic* suggests that the Maids, like Bertha in Jane Eyre, have been oppressed and othered within the Odysseus myth. Yet these “madwomen” are not, like Bertha, alone in the attic: they instead laugh together despite their oppression, free to communicate with one another instead of succumbing to insanity alone. In the subsequent chapter, Penelope’s loneliness in the Underworld is highlighted and she even often admits that she avoids speaking to others (15).

Penelope’s early characterisations of her Maids indicate that they have an access to knowledge that she will never have due to her position and the restrictive social mores which kept her ignorant. She states:

A couple of the maids were with me – they never left me unattended, I was a risk until I was safely married, because who knew what upstart fortune hunter might try to seduce me or seize me and run away with me? The maids were my sources of information. They were the ever-flowing fountains of trivial gossip: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as they pleased: no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs. (30)

For Penelope, the value of this liberty is primarily sexual freedom; their purity is not valued given their inferior status and the fact that this leaves them vulnerable to “worming between their legs” does not concern her. But she also identifies that their status permits them to gain knowledge and communicate in ways which she cannot, for her socially-ascribed purity constantly restricts and silences her, separating her from the conversations of others. Indeed, her position, both as an individual woman and as a princess, leaves her unable to understand or respond to the lewd jokes the maids make, leaving her “mortified [...] I had no way of making them stop” (32). When Penelope encourages the Maids to pretend to fall in love with the suitors, the deception ultimately results in their massacre. This pretence, these performed behaviours designed for to appease male desire, are thus characterised within the text as dangerous for women.

A further point at which the reader can recognise the disconnect between Penelope and her Maids comes when we consider the text’s disruption of feminine lineage and interrelation. Beyer discusses how some of the feminist success in, for example, Atwood’s poem “Metempsychosis”, comes through the forging of an “intergenerational connection between women” (284). In a second poem by Atwood, “Half-hanged Mary”, Beyer contends that she reflects “the need [...] for women writers generally to connect to a powerful female predecessor, who acquires a significance to her on the level of personal mythology” (287). We cannot trace a similar intergenerational connection through Penelope’s interaction with other women. Her mother, a Naiad, “was elusive. When I was little I often tried to

throw my arms around her, but she had a habit of sliding away” (11). Her mother had “a short attention span and rapidly changing emotions” (11). This particular intimation is followed immediately by “The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament” (13). In this, the Maids assert “We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents [...] We were told we were motherless” (13). This lack of a mother is then used as an excuse for their misuse by the sons of visiting noblemen, but the Maids do not see the same lack of parentage. Indeed, they claim their “various mothers” in a later interlude (67). Penelope’s fate is to flow in isolation; the Maids and their mothers traverse those seas together, united in body. Penelope, the ignored daughter of an “oblique” mother, struggles to identify the kind of relationship she ought to have with the maids (43). She behaves in a maternal way towards the younger maids, buying them as small children, bringing them up to play with her son, and training them to serve her (113). When the maids are raped, despite the part she plays in this turn of events, she comforts them (118). Yet the strongest kinship she can claim, despite this adoption of a maternal position within their lives, is that “we were *almost* like sisters” (114, emphasis own). Indeed, in Odysseus’s “trial” interlude, Penelope curiously states: “I’d brought some of them up, *you could say*. They were like the daughters I never had” (181, emphasis own). Penelope’s inability to unequivocally claim the Maids as either sisters or daughters speaks again to her distance from other women; *you could say* that they were like her daughters, but there is no true maternal connection there.

We could extrapolate a broader point from this – that when there is no intergenerational connection, actively constructed rather than necessarily organically occurring, the result is marked isolation and potentially, even tragedy. If we accept that postmodernism has called into question our literary genealogy through a disavowal of linear time, a scepticism towards the metanarratives of history and patriarchy, and a preponderance for fragmentation, paranoia and irony, this may result in the positive effects of increased consideration of intertextuality may becoming undone. This could be seen to engender a new form of Gilbert and Gubar’s “anxiety of authorship” – where memory loss, uncertainty, sickness and death are once again made vitally present within the text.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the response of the Maids to the denial of their mothers is to “laugh together in their attics” (14).

Taking a closer look now at the narrative of the Maids, we can see how the pragmatic, temporary unification of feminine subjectivities within one critical voice can interrogate dominant discourses and ultimately serve to destabilise existing preconceptions surrounding mythology. In their performance as a choral band, containing separate and distinct voices but singing the same songs, they are able to use the performative elements of their interludes to interrogate the very patriarchal values Penelope attempts to indulge. In “The Chorus Line: If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune”, this disparity in power is explored, “accompanied” by instruments generally seen to be lower class: “a Fiddle, an Accordion and a Penny Whistle”. The first

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<sup>28</sup> See “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship” in Gilbert and Gubar (2010).

Maid offers her assumption about the privileged life of a princess: "If I were a princess, with silver and gold /And loved by a hero, I'd never grow old (51).

Penelope the princess, with her silver and gold, is loved by a hero and at least, within the confines of this text, we do not see her grow old. Yet the Chorus intervenes to contradict the naïve wish of the first maid:

The water below is as dark as the grave  
And maybe you'll sink in your little blue boat  
It's hope, and hope only, that keeps us afloat. (51)

The "boat" metaphor is identified in other Chorus Line interludes as the self.

The princess, and the Maid wishing to occupy a similar position, is alone in her boat. The chorus, speaking together as an "us", are together, kept afloat by the hope provided by a shared experience. In "The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, an Idyll", they discuss how "Of troubling dreams he [Telemachus] sailed/ In his frail dark boat, the boat of himself" (65).

Conversely, the

twelve who were to die by his hand [...] sailed as well, in the dark boats of ourselves  
Through the turbulent seas of our swollen  
and sore-footed mothers. (66)

Telemachus is alone in his solitary boat, as the Maid who wishes to be a Princess is alone in hers. Yet the Maids are bound in the "boats of ourselves" and come to realise that it is this solitude which is dangerous. They realise that had they acted as or been perceived as a community, they may have been able to challenge the authority of Telemachus's status: "Twelve against one, he wouldn't have stood a chance" (69).

At the end of the “Popular Tune”, the “audience” is spoken to directly by “Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, passing the hat: Thank you, sir. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you” (52). This concluding note suggests a monetised performance with an audience which is at least, in part, identifiably male: “Thank you, sir”. Within the performance, the Maid performing her solo speaks of her desire for riches, wealth and fame. The other Maids function as a counterpoint to this fantasy, warning of the threat to the self which occurs when power and privilege isolate a person from others: “maybe you’ll sink in your little blue boat” (51). There is hope in the “us”, keeping afloat despite the threatening waters underneath.

In “The Perils of Penelope: A Drama”, the Maids add an extra layer to their performance, playing the roles of Penelope and Eurycleia respectively. The Maid-as-Penelope uses the dramatic form to directly explore the gossip surrounding Penelope’s famed fidelity, indicating both the extent to which Penelope’s sexual conduct has been a matter for public debate and also expanding possibilities regarding her behaviour.

PENELOPE

While he was pleasuring every nymph and beauty,  
Did he think I’d do nothing but my duty?  
While every girl and goddess he was praising  
Did he assume I’d dry up like a raisin?

EURYCLEIA

While you your famous loom claimed to be threading,  
In fact you were at work within the bedding!  
(148-9)

Penelope’s shroud for Laertes becomes, in this dramatic re-enactment, a decoy to distract from Penelope’s lustful interactions. The performed nature

of identity is reiterated, with the Maids dressed as Penelope recreating her story and speech according to their own interpretations of her character. The dialogue addresses the hypocrisy of Ithacan society's sexual strictures – why should Penelope not allow herself to engage in such pleasures, given Odysseus's own sexual adventures? The multitude of voices within these interludes cast each other into a liminal space of doubt, thus questioning the feasibility of a singular narrative authority. When the Maids as Penelope/Eurycleia plot to pin the suitors' destruction on the maids, they use a variety of different words to describe them: "jades", "slaves", "knaves" and "sluts" (151-2). These varying terms are interesting considered in light of the points Emily Wilson, classicist and the first female translator of the *Odyssey*, made in a viral Channel 4 interview in May 2018. She discusses how translators of the ancient Greek text repeatedly made choices about the kind of language they used and that their translations frequently made space for "visible misogynies". Her cited example for this is the description of the Maids, sometimes called "sluts" despite the fact, as Wilson asserts, that there is no term of abuse included in the Greek text and they are simply described as the women who had sex with the suitors.<sup>29</sup> Placing into the Maids' own mouths the words used by others to denigrate them make these misogynies all the more visible; by using Penelope and Eurycleia to amplify such terms, they are identifying the complicity other women can have in the

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<sup>29</sup> The video is available on Channel 4's Twitter account: @Channel4News. "A translator always makes choices." Classicist Dr Emily Wilson is the first woman to translate The *Odyssey* into English - and she found that many men before her added sexist or misogynist terms that never existed in the original Greek." *Twitter*, 28 Mar. 2019. 19:44pm. <https://twitter.com/channel4news/status/995659330581123072?lang=en>

processes of female oppression. They thus become fractured voices, simultaneously denying a unitary narrative truth whilst highlighting a social reality.

Despite this moment of polyphony, the Maids still function as one at key moments, and thus as a group of twelve are able to the access recognition and textual justice Atwood clearly feels has been denied them. During their Anthropology lecture (164), they indicate that it was no coincidence at all that there were twelve of them, discussing the symbolic relevance of the number 12 in legal proceedings and in Robert Graves's discussions of matriarchal cults (164). In the lecture, the Maids highlight how their number has abstracted them, removing them from the individual subjectivities with whom it is easier to empathise: "You don't have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice [...] Consider us symbol. We're no more real than money" (168). Yet in "The Trial of Odysseus", their number is felt as a weight, increasing the number of charges against their former master. Odysseus is in fact on trial for murdering the suitors and the Maids are not even included in the proceedings. The entire section could be read as a fictionalisation of the words of early feminist Poulain de Barre, as quoted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: "All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit" (10–11). The suitors themselves are quantified repeatedly as "give or take a dozen" (175, 176). Yet when the maids take their stand, they are unequivocal in number: "He hanged us in cold blood! Twelve of us! Twelve young girls! For

nothing!" (177). These young girls have now become far more real than money, their number no longer voluminous enough to lead to the kind of abstraction previously witnessed.

The trial contains numerous observations on the access to justice for women. The judge takes the *Odyssey* as "the main authority on the subject" and acknowledges, despite the Attorney for the Defence's attempts to demonise the maids, that the book itself clearly states that "The suitors raped them. Nobody stopped them" (180). He also identifies that Odysseus knew this, having said so himself. Yet when Penelope is brought in as a witness, she says: "I was asleep, Your Honour. I was often asleep" (181). Indeed, she claims "I felt so sorry for them! But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission" (181). Penelope's testimony undermines the text and the judge, fearful of being "guilty of an anachronism", dismisses the case. Using language feminists are all too familiar with due to its deployment in sexual assault defences, the Judge claims: "Standards of behaviour were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career" (182). Penelope's amplification of misogynistic values and defence of her murderous loved ones result in a denial of justice within the confines of the videotaped trial. Another channel for retribution appears, with the twelve Erinyes (Furies) "turn[ing] towards Odysseus. Their red eyes flash" (184). Vengeance appears likely and yet, the twelve Maids, supported by the twelve

Furies, are instead again undermined by the appearance of a powerful individual: this time the goddess Pallas Athene, Odysseus's greatest supporter, who whisks him away in a puff of smoke. Throughout the entire trial, we see how one woman in a relative position of power can contribute to the oppression of an entire body of women. Denied justice in the trial of Odysseus, the text itself offers a different form of justice. It demonstrates the isolation and degradation which occurs when women are separated from each other and how such individualism can lead to increased internalisation of a patriarchal agenda. Yet the final word comes from the Maids, who are given a broader jury in the form of a new readership, who ultimately call out:

Yoo hoo, Mr Thoughtfulness, Mr Goodness, Mr Godlike, Mr Judge! Look over your shoulder! Here we are, walking behind you, close, close by, close as a kiss, close as your own skin [...] We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row. (193)

These male figures of power – the godlike, the judge – cannot ultimately escape the presence of the vengeful maids who together, “all in a row”, haunt them. They play together with language, suggesting a trajectory from victim to avenger: “We're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right”. The repeated “we”, the closeness of the grouped female bodies in a row, establishes this Maids' chorus as a communal quest for some form of justice, for some interrogation of the act within the source myth that Atwood considered to be so cruel and unusual. Zina Giannopolou contends that the text ends with “female oppressors and a male victim”; yet we also have seen

how men can escape efforts to punish them, their crimes ignored for centuries or whisked away from courtrooms as if by magic (114).

Whilst the Maids are not, at last, afforded the justice they seek, their functioning together as a group within a variety of different genres, provides the reader with fresh insight into them as mythological figures; the generic playfulness of the choral interludes allows the videotaped trial to move beyond mere metaphor as a quest for justice. Ingersoll believes that

*The Penelopiad* reads like a very early Greek tragedy in which the dramatist has just invented the form by allowing a single named and therefore individualized member of the Chorus to speak away from the group to tell a story, while the Chorus continues its function of speaking choric odes, often in counterpoint to the voice of the tragic figure but without the sense that the chorus and the tragic figure are necessarily “communicating” with each other. (113)

Yet the very lack of communication between the chorus of Maids and the individual Penelope is making a precise and important point. Where female power is centred on one privileged individual, other women will in time become its victims. Penelope becomes like Woolf’s Angel in the House in purgatory: “Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure” (*Professions for Women* 140). Penelope, trapped in an outdated mode of femininity, and the Maids, whose collectivity and class allow them to be more honest, may not directly communicate with each other, but they are in communication with the reader, the source myth, and a longer history of mythological rewriting which has served to present unquestioningly a tale in which twelve innocent girls, victims of sexual

assault, can be raped by a man who we are supposed to still consider to be heroic.

**“Now you can’t get rid of us”: The Legacy of *The Penelopiad***

In the penultimate chorus, the Maids tell Odysseus: “Now you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives” (192). This is in part a reference to Odysseus’s choice to drink the Waters of Forgetfulness from the river Lethe, which are supposed to wipe away past lives from a person’s memories so that they might return to earth and live a new life. Odysseus and Telemachus both repeatedly choose to drink these waters and live out new lives, usually in positions of power and “it always ends badly, with a suicide or an accident or a death in battle or an assassination” (189-90). Yet Penelope and the Maids do not do the same, staying instead in the Underworld and retaining those same memories. This may be understood on a comment on male access to a kind of postmodern disintegration; one can indulge in living different lives, creating different endings, if one can be guaranteed returning to a life of masculine privilege. Yet, as Penelope establishes, this breaking down is ultimately an illusion: drinking from the Lethe “is only a theory. The Waters of Forgetfulness don’t always work the way they’re supposed to. Lots of people remember everything” (186-7). Indeed, despite the disparity of lives lived, for Odysseus, it “always ends badly”. Much as Odysseus and Telemachus may try to forget, choosing time and time again to live new lives, or much as

postmodernism would urge us to deconstruct and dismantle, Odysseus does remember, his individual male subjectivity never completely fragmented. The Maids and Penelope, all bearing the weight of their experience, may now be disembodied but remain fully cognizant of the past and are armed with an ongoing responsibility: to preserve their memories, either to wallow in them like Penelope, or to seek justice, for the Maids.

When the Maids speak of “any of [Odysseus’s] other lives”, they are not merely speaking of the extra lives he chooses through drinking those forgetful waters. They are also indicating a shift in how Odysseus’s life may be perceived by readership in the future. Now that their experience has been more fully represented through Atwood’s rewrite, it will be impossible for Odysseus’s future lives, through further rewritings or engagements with the source myth itself, to be free of the haunting presence of the Maids. Thus whilst perhaps Atwood’s conclusion, “that it always ends badly”, and that “people always remember everything”, may be considered to be a damning indictment of the limited potential of rewriting, the rejuvenated presence of the Maids will now haunt the myth, marking a true expansion of the halo of virtualities surrounding the *Odyssey*.

Atwood may never have fully answered the questions which were posed by the *Odyssey*. The Judge in trial of Odysseus comments, bewildered:

What’s going on? Order! Order! This is a twenty-first-century court of justice! [...] What’s this cloud doing in here? Where are the police? Where’s the defendant? Where has everyone gone? (184)

Attempts to bring Odysseus to justice in the twenty-first century may result in more questions and further appeals to “order”. Yet Atwood’s process of foregrounding these questions expanded the text, helping to reveal fixed points within the source whilst using a collective body of feminine voices to seek textual justice and redress for that ancient, literary crime. In so doing, *The Penelopiad* comes to represent many of the ongoing concerns which will be raised repeatedly throughout this thesis. In the next chapter, we see how an individual woman may use myth as a positive framework, whilst still contributing to a broader corpus of feminine mythmaking. We can also see, as *The Penelopiad* highlights some of the limitations of postmodernism for feminism, how other authors in the series have chosen to engage with the shifting literary context of the twenty-first century, and the implications this moving ground has upon the process of rewriting mythology. While Penelope likes to “see things through to the end” (4), the novella does not end with certainty, but the promise of further rebirth, death and haunting.

## Chapter Two

### **“I can lift my own weight”: Atlas Complexities, Autobiography and Authenticity in Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight***

“I want to tell the story again.”

What is it that you contain? The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut. Every minute, in each of you, a few million potassium atoms succumb to radioactive decay. The energy that powers these tiny atomic events has been locked inside potassium atoms ever since a star-sized bomb exploded nothing into being. Potassium, like uranium and radium, is a long-lived radioactive nuclear waste of the supernova bang that accounts for you.

Your first parent was a star.

(Winterson. *Weight*. 4–5)

Jeanette Winterson’s contribution to the Myths series, *Weight*, depicts a breaking down of the body into its smallest, infinitesimal parts. Whether her ‘you’ is self-referential or refers to the reader, this desire to consider the atomic roots of the body and valorise them over the merely human, physical

whole is reminiscent of Atwood's Penelope disintegrating into "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness". Yet where Atwood presents the negative where the body once lived, Winterson is instead interested in the particles that create that body and how they are constantly reformed. Winterson's rewriting of myth does not revel in ambiguity the way that *The Penelopiad* does. Her origin story for 'you', birthed by a star, is presented in terms that are once mythical and scientific. Indeed, as Freud commented in a letter addressed to Einstein, "Does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology?" (*Standard Edition* 21, 211). In *Weight*, history and physics combine to create the self; mythology provides both an allegory for that process and a language with which to express it.

*Weight* contains the dead, time and the light patterns of millennia as it depicts the myth of Atlas and Heracles from a new angle. The Titan Atlas was obliged to carry the world upon his shoulders in punishment for his role in the Titanomachy. Heracles came into contact with him when, as part of his famed Labours, he was obliged to fetch golden apples from Hera's garden, protected by Atlas's daughters the Hesperides. Atlas attempted to trick Heracles into taking his terrible burden but it was ultimately never truly relieved. Winterson's version is not just a mythological rewrite – as her authorial persona intimates in the novella's foreword, her revision "has a personal story broken against the bigger story of the myth we know and the myth I have re-told" (xviii-xix). Atwood and Winterson are both engaged in the disintegration of their source myths and, as we shall see, Winterson also successfully uses gender performativity as a method of achieving this. But

where Atwood allows her disintegration to lead to a deliberate interrogation of the implications or limitations of postmodern ambiguity, Winterson's tale indicates a move beyond this towards a desire for definitive conclusions, even though they remain ultimately unattainable. Penelope in the underworld finds herself severed from her mythological status and in a space where she has, paradoxically, become a contemporary character by becoming atemporal. Conversely, *Weight* is directly appealing to the extended history of myth – its roots may be in the big bang but its atoms remain inside both reader and writer. Winterson's impulse with myth is to appeal to its enormity and supposed universality as she considers what it is she contains as she rewrites her personal story; her nuanced vision of that shared story deconstructs both myth and the self to an atomic level before rebuilding that myth and that selfhood in a new format.

“I want to tell the story again” is the framing refrain of the novella; the authorial persona refers to it as its “recurring language motif” (xviii). *Weight's* immediate, self-conscious proclamation of its own status as a rewrite (“Rewritten.” xvii) serves to emphasise the text's preoccupation with choice, desire and inspiration. When the reader is informed of *Weight's* autobiographical dimension in the foreword, they are encouraged to question this urge to tell the story again (xvii-xix). From whence is her desire to retell the story of Atlas and Heracles derived? And what is it about the process of rewriting mythology that has encouraged or enabled Winterson to revisit her own story, first strongly hinted at in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985),

and then, after the publication of *Weight*, more frankly presented in *Why Be Normal When You Can Be Happy?* (2011)?

In *Weight*'s mission statement, Winterson declares:

Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. The writer must fire herself through the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements. I believe there is always exposure, vulnerability in the writing process, which is not to say it is either confessional or memoir. Simply, it is real. (xix)

The eschewal of autobiography, as a form or drive, in favour of authenticity, an abstract concept, is an interesting one. Winterson's authorial position is not taken here completely seriously; it is apparent that from the outset, Winterson is mythologising herself as a writer – an authorial Hephaestus acting as both the 'molten stuff' of the text and the smith capable of shaping that stuff. Yet the interplay between autobiography and authenticity, here postured into polarised positions, is indicative. In her appeal to authenticity and to that which is real – or, crucially, felt to be real – Winterson is hinting at a shift in her approach to representation. Coming at what has been called a "representational crossroads" in Winterson's work and as part of her self-defined "second cycle" of work, *Weight* betrays a repeated yearning for authenticity and reality, which is not present in her most postmodern works, such as *Written on the Body* (Keulks 147). Where *Written on the Body* courted ambiguity with its love story told by a degendered narrator, from its very beginnings, *Weight* suggests that there may be some level of authenticity possible within a text. More particularly, she suggests that authenticity is possible within a mythological rewrite. The effects of this

movement towards, or aspiration for, authenticity has implications for modes of gender construction. At times, Winterson's satirical approach to mythological masculinities may be seen to be dependent upon a binaried process of othering and opposition.

*Weight's* engagement with gender is, as we shall see, complex. Plate has discussed how Winterson, like Atwood, has had a fractious relationship with feminist theory, but as posited in the previous chapter, this does not preclude her works from being feminist or having something to say about women's writing (168). Plate curiously questions why Winterson, upon responding to the Canongate call to arms, chose a "male, even masculine myth", as opposed to the "female myth[s]" told by Atwood and Smith (173). This seems a strange observation; perhaps Plate means a rewriting with a female character at its heart but to characterise myth in this way seems not only essentialist but somewhat misguided, given that in the many (if not the majority) of their iterations the myths of Penelope and Iphis have been constructed by male authors as canvases upon which to project male expectations. Lest we forget, in the original myth of Iphis, Iphis actually became a man – hardly a "female" myth, if we can categorise myth with such certainty at all. Winterson's engagement with forms of mythological masculinity does not prevent this text from having something considerable to contribute to this project's ongoing interest in feminine rewriting. There are moments of complexity regarding its engagement with gender which at times, are suggestive of a potential return to the gender binary, but ultimately *Weight* is an indictment of our desire for forms of authenticity, even as we

remain mindful of the idiosyncrasies and paradoxes that render true authenticity impossible. Its interest in reconstruction is of note, not only to the practice of rewriting, but to contemporary theoretical discussions regarding the nature of literary representation.

*Weight* also provides a potent example of how mythology can be liberating as a discourse for the female writer. Winterson's "personal story", despite – or perhaps because of – its function as a secondary frame narrative, is in many ways more frank than her earlier foray into autobiography. Whilst Winterson's claimed desire for authenticity may come at the risk of reconstructing previously dismissed categories of identity, this post-postmodern urge does compel her to reconsider her own story once more. *Weight*, I argue, is a bridge between the 'fictional' semi-autobiography of *Oranges* and what she has called its "dark twin", *Why Be Happy*. In this way, *Weight* is aware of the many layers of significance of mythology. Winterson's act of rewriting the myth of Atlas and Heracles should, therefore, be understood as a ritual with implications for both reader and writer.

### **"Cover versions": The Importance of Autobiography**

Autobiography has long held considerable interest for feminist theorists. The form privileges a space for the amplification of female thought and lived experience. Cosslett et al. have remarked upon this fascination:

There has always been a strong feminist interest in the autobiographical, beginning with the attempt to connect the 'personal with the 'political', and the concomitant emphasis on women's

experience as a vital resource in the creation of women's knowledge.  
(2)

Yet the significant relationship between feminism and autobiography is not without tension. Despite autobiography's capacity for fostering intersubjectivity between women in disparate communities, Christy Rishoi has noted how dominant forms of feminism have failed to incorporate the autobiographical narratives of working class women or women of colour, thus allowing only one female demographic to document their experiences, although she does suggest that this is slowly changing (25). Furthermore, given autobiography's dependence upon memory, it is vulnerable to influence by memories that have been created, maintained, re-accessed, and indeed corrupted, within a patriarchal context. Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* refers to memory within autobiography as a necessary fiction; as with all fiction, memory is therefore a product of our unequal socio-political environments (45). Liz Stanley asserts that a more accurate term would be 'auto/biography', which problematises the idea that there is a generic separation between autobiography and biography; she believes that whilst there are significant differences between an individual writing about another individual and an individual penning their own story, these dissimilarities do not lead to function differences in terms of form (3). This nebulous genre is arguably present within any text, yet it seems to require a self-conscious declaration – a statement of intent – for it to be 'officially' recognised as such. Though many critics insist on reading texts biographically, without the provision of the caveat of 'autobiography', the

extent of the author's true intention to document their lived experience is always necessarily obfuscated by the fictional narrative. Given its dedication to the experienced realities of individual lives, it could be argued that autobiography is an inherently 'authentic' form; it may also be considered, conversely, naturally inauthentic, as autobiography may be viewed as a form which masks its inherent fictions with feigned 'truth' or 'reality'.

In response to her debut novel *Oranges*, Winterson has partially acknowledged the autobiographical nature of the narrative, stating repeatedly that it is only partly autobiographical. This limited admission led to the widespread assumption that it must be more fact than fiction, with even her mother questioning why, if it was fiction, had Winterson named her protagonist 'Jeanette' (*Why Be Happy?* 5). Even an incomplete admission of autobiographical intent colours a reader's experience of a text, but with the publication of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* in 2011, the distinct differences between *Oranges'* semi-fictional representation of the author's early life and her later, frank confrontation of those experiences became apparent. As she comments:

I suppose the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. I could not survive it. (*Why Be Happy?* 6)

This shift from partial to total autobiography is unusual and draws attention to the form's constructions and reconstructions of memory, the ways in which writers filter their conscious through to the reader and their legitimacy as factual accounts. As with mythology, autobiography is a narrative that cannot

ever be true in objective terms but is often recognised and felt to be representative.

*Weight* sits between these two, paired texts – light and dark twinned accounts of the same life. It also has, at its heart, many of the same struggles detailed in both *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy*: explorations of her identity as an adopted child, interrogations of her childhood and descriptions of the ways in which she used to escape that traumatic youth. But this ‘personal story’ is unfinished, dislocated in terms of form, and has been considered in some quarters to be the ‘weaker’ narrative strand – reviews even lambasted Winterson for distracting from her mythological rewrite by inserting an autobiographical thread.<sup>30</sup> Yet Winterson’s attempt to re-engage with the story she had already fictionalised is indicative of the importance of mythical narratives in structuring our unconscious thoughts and our conscious experiences. Myth’s metaphorical capacity is significant on many levels and in *Weight*, it facilitates a re-engagement with both Winterson’s own past and her current anxieties, even as it enables a re-evaluation of Atlas and Heracles.

In the foreword to *Weight*, Winterson comments upon her own process of myth selection:

These chance sightings, these portents, these returns, begin the unconscious connection with the subject, an unconscious connection that waits for an ordinary moment of daylight to show its face.

When I was asked to choose a myth to write about, I realised I had chosen already. The story of Atlas holding up the world was in my mind before the telephone call had ended. (xvii-xviii)

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter One for discussions of this

In her opening to the novella, Winterson's narrator is thus mythologising the very process of inspiration, as well as the commissioning and production of this narrative. The fated circumstance of this myth being preordained and then produced for the reader is emphasised, with fate operating as a consistent theme throughout the novella. Winterson comments later: "I am not a Freudian. I don't believe I can mine the strata of the past and drill out the faultlines" (139). Yet in *Why Be Happy*, there are frequent references to Freud and to Jung – it is a Jungian understanding of myth, waiting for unconscious content to meet with and be coloured by the individual consciousness – which she is demonstrating here.<sup>31</sup> Whether through a Freudian or Jungian approach to myth, Winterson foregrounds myth's relationship to psychoanalytic inquiry.

Winterson's entire approach to autobiography is mythical. Indeed, as stated above, mythology and autobiography share many characteristics, preoccupied as both are with felt truths and pragmatic untruths. In the following description from Cosslett et al: "Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary" (1), the exchange of 'autobiography' for 'mythology' would lead to little loss of meaning. Winterson presents herself

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<sup>31</sup> See 2011: 34; 58; 222. In one such referential moment, she writes: "Freud, one of the grand masters of narrative, knew that the past is not fixed in the way that linear time suggests. We can return. We can pick up what we dropped. We can mend what others have broken. We can talk with the dead" (58). Myth is for Winterson, as for Freud and later as we shall see, for Vickers, a therapeutic process.

as a quasi-mythological persona within the text, even as she diminishes the mythological status and allure of her distasteful Heracles. Her struggles echo those of the titan Atlas as they both bear the world upon their shoulders: “my girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex” (*Weight* 97). Mythology’s nebulous roots mirror Winterson’s own unknown genesis and she uses its associations to document that absence of knowledge: “I know nothing of my biological parents. They live on a lost continent of DNA. Like Atlantis, all record of them is sunk. They are guess work, speculation, mythology” (140).

In this, Winterson is employing intertextual referencing in a way that is quite distinct from her earlier works. No stranger to ‘cover versions’, whether of her own life or the lives of others, she commented in *Art Objects* about her use of fairy tale and folk elements as merely something she can deploy to decorate the text – as Lynn Pykett has commented, “shiny things which she deploys because she happens to have them about her person” (57). These intertextual moments become, Pykett argues, something Winterson uses merely to advance her writing to a higher cultural plane. But by the time we reach *Why Be Happy*, she seems to have re-evaluated this, describing her mother in fairy tale terms and acknowledging “Jung, not Freud, liked fairy tales for what they tell us about human nature” (31). This use of inherited narratives to make sense of experience was first presented in *Weight*, with its explicit desire to capture that which is ‘real’. We can, therefore, map a shift in the ‘weight’ she places upon such narratives, engendered at least in part by her Canongate Myth and also perhaps due to continuing changes in the literary landscape following the decline of postmodern scepticism.

Mythology is not, therefore, mere embellishment. It is the impetus for the whole text and it empowers future work. It is a framework which the author can use to explore her own unconscious experiences and, furthermore, to allow the reader to similarly make sense of those experiences.

Winterson discloses in *Weight*:

My mother had a war-time revolver she hid in the duster drawer, and six bullets waxily embedded in a tin of furniture polish. When things were bad, she took out the gun and the polish and left them on the sideboard. It was sufficient.

On revolver nights, I crept to bed and switched on my light-up universe. I used to travel it, country by country, some real, others imagined, re-making the atlas as I went. (138)

She revisits the revolver repeatedly in *Why Be Happy*: “She [her mother] was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge” (1); and who thought it was “normal to have [...] a revolver in the duster drawer” (4). During her final visit to her mother with her friend Vicky, the revolver is a gauge of how the visit is progressing. There is no sign of it when Jeanette first arrives in the house, which has been “reknitted” for her arrival, but when tensions escalate:

I checked the duster drawer.

“I think it’s time for us to leave,” I said to Vicky. (151)

The revolver is, in both *Weight* and *Why Be Happy*, symbolic of Winterson’s adoptive mother’s mental illness and the threat that is implicit in her oppressive behaviour. When the revolver is hidden in a drawer, Winterson feels safe to be at home and with her mother. When it is out, as a child she

escapes through imagined landscapes and remaps the earth; as an adult, she has the liberty to physically leave.

Yet this revolver, this remarkable facet of Mrs. Winterson's character, is noticeably absent from the author's earlier engagement with life-writing. There is no mention the revolver in *Oranges*. Despite, or because of its absence in the earlier incarnation, it is a prominent symbol of the dangerous relationship between mother and daughter. Winterson's appropriation of Atlas as a mythical character forces her to explore his burdens and his continued presence in our imaginations, in the form of a map. The connection between the presence of the revolver and the child Winterson's 're-making the atlas' is indicative of the connection between mythological reference and psychological self-evaluation.

This is further emphasised in *Why Be Happy*. Winterson uses, in the chapter entitled 'The Wound', multiple myth stories about 'wounds' to expand upon her emotional experiences. She questions: "How are you recognised? How do you recognise yourself?" and the answer, in the many myths and stories that she considers, is through the recognition of your own wounds. Listing numerous tales, from Harry Potter to Prometheus, she concludes her survey of wound stories as follows:

Freud colonised the Oedipus myth and renamed it as the son who kills the father and desires the mother. But Oedipus is an adoption story and a wound story too. Oedipus had his ankles pierced together by his mother before she abandons him, so that he cannot crawl away. He is rescued and returns to kill his father and marry his mother, unrecognised by anyone except the blind prophet Tiresias – a case of one wound recognising another. (222)

Winterson is here making use of the same myth Freud 'colonised' by arguing that it is a story of loss, trauma and the difficulty of self-recognition. What Winterson is suggesting is that it is not just by our own wounds that we come to that self-recognition, but through stories *about* wounds; most particularly, through mythological stories of wounding. Here we see how the 'halo of virtualities' of the Oedipus myth has been extended to characterise it beyond Freud's interpretation, to apply it directly to Winterson's own coming-to-terms with her traumatic past. It becomes, in this iteration, not just a story about the unconscious self at war with itself, but a story of the recognition of the self.

*Weight* as a creative exercise, I contend, forced Winterson to consider more closely the mythology of the self. She comments:

If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story. Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true. (145)

Mythology is also, in this context, the story that Winterson is telling to make herself come true. Atlas's plight – carrying the world upon his shoulders – is a metaphor for the burden of rejection and unknowing Winterson has carried with her. The repetitive nature of myth-making is also self-consciously explored – myth's "endless[ly] self-generating power", to quote Coupe, is what is allowing Winterson to reconsider the story she had herself told previously (58). As she writes in *Weight*, regarding her myth selection:

I chose this story above all others because it's a story I'm struggling to end. Here we are, with all the pieces in place and the final moment waiting. I reach this moment, not once, many times, have been reaching it all my life, it seems, and I find there is no resolution. I want to tell the story again. (137)

She does not wish to tell the story of Atlas and Heracles again for its own sake, but for the clarity and recognition that the myth affords the re-telling of her own story. An awareness of the never-ending, constantly reborn mythical narrative elucidates her own desire to repeatedly return to the same personal narratives.

It is not just the burden of Atlas that echoes Winterson's emotional conflict. The myth of Heracles details his adoption by Amphitryon (see, for example, Euripides' *Heracles* or Plautus' *Amphitryon*). Heracles is suckled by a woman, Hera, a powerful goddess who is not his mother. Indeed, the quasi-incestual and antagonistic interplay between Hera and Heracles in *Weight* could be perhaps viewed as, to some extent, a mediation on Winterson's fractious relationship with her own adoptive mother. His inability to process rejection – his vengeful murder of Hippolyte, for example – is presented throughout. Indeed, despite his brutality, there are moments of sympathy for Heracles. In his dreams, his unconscious projects him as “the whistling hiss of the Hydra [...] the whimper of a dog, he was the sigh of a dying woman” (79). In *Weight*, myth even shapes the dreams of a mythological character. His self-loathing and fear of repudiation are echoed by Winterson's confession that her early rejection has left her afraid of further abandonment and able to walk away from conflict (98).

It is curious that in all three of these life-writing texts – *Oranges*, *Weight* and *Why Be Happy* – the main focus of her analysis is her youth and childhood. In *Why Be Happy*, which is unflinching in many ways, she is still avoiding certain stories: “I am going to miss out 25 years. Maybe later...”

(154). These early memories are clearly of unremitting importance for her understanding of the self. I would suggest that the negative space provided by Winterson's ambiguous genesis and the precarity of childhood memory enables, and indeed, necessitates, her mythologising of the self. Freud and Jung have deployed myth as a means of making the unconscious, that part of the psyche we cannot know, understood. Winterson is using myth in a similar way. She is both trying to make her early life, the life she cannot know or guess, understood and attempting to re-evaluate and represent the traumatic yet unstable memories she does know. Her use of a mythical structure allows these indefinite narratives to be recognised by both herself and the reader.

The subsequent publishing of *Why Be Happy* has rendered *Oranges* a mythological version of Winterson's early life – an 'untruth' which represents far more than it declares. The palimpsestic nature of Winterson's own biographical writing is, too, mythological. From semi-autobiographical, to a 'personal story', to an openly acknowledged autobiography, Winterson is indicating a marked trajectory in her appetite for and approach to representing herself and her life. It is interesting to note that when Winterson took part in another rewriting project – the Hogarth Shakespeare – she selected *A Winter's Tale* for her next cover version, *The Gap of Time* (2015). *A Winter's Tale* is also an 'adoption story', with abandoned Perdita adopted by a shepherd before her ultimate reunion with her family. Yet *A Winter's Tale* does not feature the same confessional, autobiographical interjections – in many ways, despite its updated place and setting, it is a far more

conventional rewriting than *Weight*. Perhaps this may be understood as an indictment of the fact that myth, with its disembodied 'universality', is a more useful framework for self-evaluation than a stable text with a single, renowned author.

In the "Leaning on the Limits of Myself" chapter of *Weight*, the authorial persona repeats: "I can lift my own weight. I can lift my own weight. I want to tell the story again." (100). Whilst the urge to confront this weight does not abate and prompts endless reconsideration, *Weight's* status as a clear bridge between her two other autobiographical texts suggests that mythology is a framework which allows her to lift that burden. The metaphorical potency of the Atlas/Heracles myth provides a recognisable backdrop against which Winterson can project and manipulate her own creation story. In this way, within the layer of 'personal significance' for femininity, mythology is clearly a liberating metanarrative. It not only permits the unconscious content of the writer's imagination to be shaped, but it makes that amorphous form recognisable to the reader, due to an inherited and shared knowledge of ancient archetype and form.

Yet whilst rewriting mythology has allowed Winterson to re-evaluate the 'personal' significance of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, to what extent does it engage with its other layers of meaning and importance? After all, it is not merely the author's weight which this myth upholds. The subsequent section of this chapter will evaluate how Winterson's developing methods of representation effect the 'public' significances of *Weight's* source myth,

considering particularly what ramifications these methods may have upon broader engagements between femininity and mythology.

### **Authenticity and Post-postmodern Representations of Gender in *Weight***

In 2015, in an arresting paraphrase, Wolfgang Funk detailed how, in the twenty-first century, “the patient postmodern [lies] etherized upon the table” (2). If postmodernism is indeed incapacitated or irrevocably compromised – and many other critics seem to be in agreement with this assertion – then it is uncertain whether feminist critics should be in mourning; I have emphasised the fraught relationship between that discourse and feminist thought in the previous chapter of this thesis.<sup>32</sup> Yet now, as Funk cites Roger Rosenblatt’s famous declaration following the 9/11 attacks “The Age of Irony Comes to an End”, what is it that is left in its wake? Funk has declared that with postmodernism’s current comatose state, we may observe a widespread inability to theorise the future (3). Replacing postmodernism’s desire to disintegrate and destabilise, he claims that twenty-first century fiction has adopted authenticity as a key theoretical driver, as the title of his monograph indicates: *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium*.

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example (Hassan 2003; Hutcheon, “Gone Forever, But Here to Stay: The Legacy of the Postmodern” 2007). A list including these authors and others is available in Funk (2015, 3).

Winterson's earlier work has been repeatedly identified as postmodern, by critics including Pykett and Keulks. Keulks has attributed this reputation to Winterson's "high degrees of self-reflexivity, pastiche and intertextuality, in addition to frequent mimetic and temporal dispersions"; Pykett has commented upon her obsession with the time-space continuum (Keulks 147; Pykett 67). While these techniques are not absent within *Weight*, Keulks has asserted that *Weight* is one of three of Winterson's texts which mark the author's partial departure from postmodernism. *Weight* is, as with its autobiographical elements, in many ways a bridging text. Even as it endeavours "to [speak] of the life of the mind and the soul's journey" (xvi), a professed epic odyssey breathing life back into the notion of a unitary mind or soul, Winterson still recognises the constructed nature of truth and makes use of many of the postmodern techniques that are distinctive of her work. If texts today are currently operating in an era without theory, *Weight* is an interesting indication of the tone of contemporary theoretical entanglements.

Rosi Braidotti suggests, however, that Funk's depiction of contemporary theory's "speechlessness and lack of direction" is incorrect. She does not believe that postmodernism has left in its wake a vacuum without theory. She has suggested, instead, that postmodernism has ushered in new master narratives: "be it the neo-liberal or the genetic brand: the former defends the superiority of capitalism, the latter the despotic authority of DNA" (169). She has decried the media's joy at declaring the "end of ideologies", questioning their drive to do so, and she believes that this has been repeated so often that she has considered defining ideologies as constant movements

without end. She believes that this dismissal of theory has instead resulted in the dominance of self-interest, in keeping with an ever-growing neoliberal outlook. In gender politics, this has, she claims, led to the post-feminist wave turning to neo-conservatism as women, compelled by a desire to succeed within corporate frameworks, disavow any collective struggles in order to propel individual success (170). The new generations of commercially-minded businesswomen and celebrities eschew, Braidotti believes, any debt to or connection with the rest of their gender and, as a result, the gaps in status between women regarding access and wealth are widening substantially. Whilst I do not despair so entirely of this generation's feminist collectivism, it is worth noticing that feminism has become a multi-million pound business: from t-shirts proudly denoting the wearer's feminist credentials to singers, actors and bloggers emphasising the importance of sisterhood, there are many who are benefitting financially from feminist discourse.<sup>33</sup>

Bearing in mind this valorisation of the individual female self, as opposed to the collective feminine, this capitalist demand for individual success may be the source of the search for 'authenticity', as declared by Funk. Instead of the disintegration of the individual subjectivity advocated by postmodernism, the contemporary appetite for that which is 'real' has been fuelled by our cult of the individual. Haselstein, Gross and Snyder-Korber have commented that this has led to a rejuvenated fascination with 'real things' (2010). Certainly, a reignited interest in selfhood could answer many of the

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<sup>33</sup> A 2015 article in the Guardian commented: "Hashtag feminism has gone viral, with soap, shampoo and even energy firms launching social-media campaigns marketing feminism". ("Femvertising: how brands are selling #empowerment to women" Iqbal).

questions posed by the critiques of postmodernism posited by Waugh and others, particularly for marginalised groups. Yet 'authenticity' is necessarily a construct of privilege – for the belief that your own experience, your own religious practice, your own artwork is 'real' is to, in many circumstances, define your reality against the lived reality of others. It is also something that is demanded or expected from those same marginalised groups; Gayatri Spivak has warned that "demands for authentic voices" can be used to muffle calls for representation (63). Demanding authentic responses from groups, particularly underrepresented groups, becomes an act of appropriation, as the 'buyer' becomes the judge of that which is real, rather than the creator. Self-interest and self-determination become, therefore, an integral part of contemporary art and literature, if we are to believe Funk and the others. Charles Lindholm believes that "authenticity gathers people into collectives that are felt to be real, essential and vital, providing participants with meaning, unity and a surpassing sense of belonging" (1) but within the current socio-political context, the key word in this assessment must be 'felt' – these collectives may *seem* to be real, essential and vital. There may be a growing taste or demand for the 'authentic' – but this does not necessarily lead to a collective feeling or sense of belonging. Indeed, Braidotti believes the opposite to be true, and that otherness remains at the heart of counter-subjectivities (17). John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas have called authenticity "a naïve mimeticism which posits the truth of an anterior or pre-existing reality, of which art is then a 'true' representation" (138). Lindholm's cited public taste for authentic art, music and food may be understood as a commodification and

reappropriation of identities, rather than a desire to experience that which is 'objectively' real.

In terms of representations of gender in literature, contemporary writers seeking to produce authentic works need to be aware of this paradox. Funk believes that postmodernism's most enduring feature is the understanding we now have that however we try to fragment signifiers, we cannot escape our desire for "closure and congruence" (5). This ambiguity can be cultivated at a detriment to representations of femininity, because the spaces left when concrete meaning is erased can become filled by gendered assumptions. That being said, an overarching desire for certainty and coherence is equally limiting. Who is it, after all, who may be empowered to decide the boundaries for this closure? The privileged domain retains the right to ascribe such limitations. Whose narrative is to be accepted as the coherent one, when our processes of reason remain subjective? Optimistically, Funk cites Ihab Hassan's appeal "to discover new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers" (6). Funk believes that "reconstructive texts" can improve communication within relational structures. Yet many forms of feminism do not wish for better communication between the self, the margins and the centre – they do not wish for such delineations to exist. The choice cannot be merely between a dismissal or re-inscription of such relational structures.

Indeed, there is a danger that if such structures are to be accepted and reabsorbed into contemporary fiction, then previously 'disregarded' categories of identity may once more become predominant. If writing in the twenty-first

century does indeed display a desire for a 'return to the real', then it is important to consider that this remains dependent upon a process of opposition and othering. If this is a product of the decline of postmodern disintegration, one outcome may be a return to limiting binaries that are felt to be real due to their entrenchment, and are seen to lend meaning through opposition.

Returning to *Weight*, we have discussed previously how mythology can aid the representation of the self. The personal significance of the Atlas and Heracles myth for Winterson has been discussed at length, its recognisable framework lending support to the author's psychological inquiries into herself. Yet recalling Winterson's endorsement of authenticity, there are tensions to consider when analysing its public significances. Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce has commented that "Authenticity [as a concept] is called upon, summoned as it were, in much the same way that God or the Muses would have been in the past" (42). Authenticity has, therefore, its own mythological status. But the difficulty comes when considering the myth beyond Winterson's own psychological engagement. *Weight's* operation within this new critical landscape seems to correlate with discussions regarding authenticity and, at times, is victim to the pitfalls of this preoccupation. Indeed, a reading of *Weight* at times comes close to promoting the individual female over the collective feminine.

As mentioned previously, *Written on the Body* presented a supposedly genderless vision of love. Yet this was found by critics to be problematic, resulting in two camps of Winterson criticism. Brian Finney has commented on

the wealth of critics who “[chose] to assume that the narrator is a thinly disguised lesbian lover... [and] promptly foreclose a text that Winterson has deliberately left open” (25). Perhaps it was this polarising critical response which led Winterson to develop a different methodology for gender representation as she enters her self-defined ‘second cycle’ of work. Keulks has noted the tension in her recent fiction as she:

Resuscitat[es] love from postmodern exhaustion but also – especially in *Lighthousekeeping* and *Weight* – compound[s] that dynamic with reconstituted versions of history and mythology, restabilizing, in other words, both the emotional present and the historical past. (147)

Whilst Keulks believes that Winterson’s recent works do remain under the auspices of postmodernism, he acknowledges Muller’s assessment that they indicate a worrying “desire to reconstruct previously deconstructed categories of orientation and classification” (Muller 42).

It is, I contend, erroneous to suggest that *Weight* is a merely restabilising text, or that Winterson’s drive is to make the ‘historical past’ concrete to modern readers. In fact, *Weight* is engaged in a fairly thorough process of destabilisation, as it attempts to degrade mythological heroism and judge ancient acts of violence through contemporary moral frameworks. Yet at the same time, this realignment of the Atlas and Heracles myth and Winterson’s satirical depictions of gender are achieved primarily through a process of gender othering and are distorted by Winterson’s calls for authenticity. Winterson is seemingly aware of the public significance of her source myth and is making a concerted effort to rebalance this, but her method of doing so is dependent upon the use of femininity as a counterpoint to

mythological masculinity. Atlas's paradoxical problem – the whole world, without boundaries, is his prison – is underpinned by the novella's repeated plea for boundaries, for that which is infinite to become limited. Yet Atlas's ultimate freedom comes through his absorption into the limitless universe. Winterson's desire to better understand her own limits within this framework are perhaps the cause of limiting categories of identity being present therein. The rest of this chapter will chart Winterson's complicated response to the gender asymmetries of her source myth, analysing to what extent she destabilises mythological gendered archetypes and yet simultaneously reconstructs that which she previously attempted to nullify in *Written on the Body*.

### **Deconstruction: Masculinity, Violence and Distorting the Mirror**

Heracles was the pre-eminent figure in the ancient world; his legendary exploits remain a huge part of our cultural imagination.<sup>34</sup> He remains a famed figure of strength in Western society and his renowned labours are cited by those with seemingly impossible tasks in front of them. An animated Disney outing in 1997 (which, incidentally, began life as an attempted adaption of *The Odyssey*), *Hercules* presented the eponymous hero as a gentle giant cursed with superhuman strength (Thomas 156–57). One of the most popular subjects for artistic depiction in the Greek world, he is stereotypically macho in Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*. His characterisation in the ancient world, however, was not fixed. Whilst Barlow comments that the tragic elements of

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<sup>34</sup> See Barlow (1996).

the Heracles myth were rarely handled, later plays such as Euripides' *Heracles* offer commentary on his madness and the slaughtering of his children, again providing evidence of the changing nature of myth (Barlow 3). The character of Heracles, marked symbol of strength and cunning, whilst never as cuddly as his Disney incarnation, was a consistently rewritten and redrawn hero. His labours, Barlow contends, were seen as a civilising act in removing menacing monsters from the world (1).

Whilst his story does not have the same cachet as Heracles, not having been transmitted through plays to the same extent as the labouring strongman, Atlas too remains a prominent figure in our collective psyche. His name is more commonly deployed today in reference to a collection of maps, but in this way he continues to hold the world upon his shoulders. He served too as the inspiration for Ayn Rand's dystopian 'Objectivist' novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

In the earlier discussion of Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, performativity was presented as an effective means of deconstructing performed gender roles. I contend that Winterson also uses exaggerated performances of gender as a mode of critique. Conrad of the *Observer* may have praised *Weight* for its "blood and sweat and semen", rendering it "acceptable to the ancients", but I here contend that it is a form of hypermasculinity designed to parody rather than truly represent heroism. In this way, it exposes the false constructs of gender within the mythological context. Indeed, whilst Sophocles' incarnation of Heracles in *The Women of Trachis* may be, as Barlow contends, at times unlikeable, it is difficult to imagine a more unpleasant rendering of the mythical

figure than that which we are provided by Winterson. In overemphasising Heracles's legendary masculinity and virility, she reveals that it is a constructed falsehood – a myth in itself.

Her Heracles is an over-sexualised, brutish, yet deeply vulnerable misogynist whose brutal sexuality is matched only by his prodigious strength. His heroic acts, such as his Twelve Labours, are humorously diminished in a similar vein to Atwood's deflation of Odysseus's escapades; the Twelve Labours are here not an allegory of civilisation, simply the time Heracles spent working for "a wanker" (29). The Labours are listed (33), but they are a means of attempting to inspire Atlas, rather than to provoke the same response in the reader. Indeed, the main focus of the narrative is not the cleaning of the Aegean Stables or the killing of the Hydra, but the hero's years of decline and his eventual death due to poisoning. Repeatedly and ironically described as "The Hero of the World", Winterson's hero serves to subvert all that might be expected from him (35, 106, 107).

Indeed, as she considers the public significance of her source myth and in keeping with Atwood's handling of the brutality of her chosen myth, Winterson forces the reader to face and consider the brutal acts of this ancient hero within a contemporary moral framework. Her twenty-first century language, including profanity, serves to render the ancient action at best ridiculous and at worst, savage. One of the Twelve Labours ascribed to Heracles was the removal of the girdle of the Amazonian queen, Hippolyte. Barbara Smith has detailed how Amazons were known in ancient Greek society as "man-eaters"; in fact, they were believed to slaughter any male

children that were produced by their lascivious coupling with unexpecting men (81). Curiously, according to Smith, the oft-repeated myth that Amazons would cut off one of their breasts to accommodate their bow was never depicted in art and statuary, indicating how we have received a bastardised version of this particular source myth (81). Pseudo-Appollodorus detailed Hippolyte's death at the hands of Heracles and in Euripides' *Heracles* it is mentioned in euphemistic fashion: "the gold-embroidered dress of the warrior maiden, the dead quarry of a girdle? Greece received the famous spoils of the savage Amazon and they are kept at Mycenae" (51). This reduction of Hippolyte to her curated item of clothing indicates her dehumanised status, as both woman and foreigner, in ancient tales.

*Weight* confronts this slaying; Hippolyte's death is not simply included as part of Heracles' list of tasks. Hippolyte is not "savage" or a "man-eater", but quite clearly the victim of Heracles' violence. He and Atlas discuss her fate:

'You're holding up the Kosmos and I'm spending twelve years clobbering snakes and thieving fruit. The only good time was chasing Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, and she didn't want anything to do with me when I caught her. Independent women are like that. I don't know which is worse – the dependent ones who bleat at you all day, or the bitches who couldn't care less.'

'What happened to Hippolyte?'

'I killed her of course.'

'I knew her once.'

'Sorry mate.' (49-50)

Hippolyte is no longer reduced to her magic girdle as in Euripides's version, but is a flesh and blood human being slaughtered by Heracles in order to be

redeemed for the murder of his wife and children. That irony of killing being forgiven through more killing is not lost here. Atlas's simple "I knew her once" indicates that she was known and her presence felt as a human, not merely a girdle. This at once rehumanises the previously reduced dead queen and dehumanises Heracles, her murderer. Heracles spouts the clichéd rhetoric of the men's rights activist in his discussion of "independent women". Winterson's updating of his heroic diction makes him a man of this moment, as much as a 'hero' of the past.

Indeed, whilst Atlas's response to Hippolyte's death may be somewhat muted, it forces Heracles to reconsider her slaughter later in the novella:

Hippolyte had almost got away with it. He had felt pity as he stood over her exhausted body [...] He thought of marrying her [...] he realised she was just a woman like the rest, who would never know what was good for her. He hesitated, and then knocked off her head the way you open a desert cactus. (60-61)

Here the reader is forced to again confront Hippolyte's unfortunate death. Running away from him to the point of exhaustion as she tries to preserve her independence and her right to never marry, she becomes the inverse of how the ancients depicted the bloodthirsty Amazonian huntswomen. Hippolyte also occupies an irreconcilable position for Heracles: he doesn't want her to be easily caught, yet when he finally does wear her down, he is disappointed. By once again presenting the "just like all the rest" attitude towards women and juxtaposing it with such mindless brutality – as though one was peeling a plant – Winterson highlights how such negativity towards

the feminine can almost seamlessly lead to violence. *Almost* seamlessly – the consideration that occurs within his moment of hesitation actually compounds his crime. These are not heroic acts, and Heracles is no hero – from his dialogue to his small-minded misogyny, he may be considered by the contemporary reader to be the antithesis of nobility and honour.

Another telling example of Winterson's acknowledgement of the public significance of myth through the administering of textual justice may be seen in her depiction of the goddess Hera. In the ancient myth, Zeus is unfaithful (an all too regular slip-up for the sexually violent king of the Gods) with Alcmena, enraging Zeus's wife Hera. Hera's loathing for Heracles spurs much of the action of the source myths. Indeed, it is her accidental provision of mother's milk to the infant Heracles that bestows upon him his incredible strength and her endless taunting that causes him to murder his family. Whilst in *Weight* Hera is still Heracles' tormentor, and as I have suggested, at times her formidable and cold maternal presence is reminiscent of Mrs. Winterson, she is also Heracles' "dream". The almost incestuous lust he feels for her adds to the readers' distaste for him, particularly when he tells Atlas that contrary to the common story that after she suckled Heracles, it was semen rather than her milk that he spat out to create the Milky Way (52). Heracles reminds Atlas that his very name means "the glory of Hera", recalling his connection to the goddess (29). When they meet in the garden of the Hesperides, Heracles reiterates the fateful link he imagines exists between them. He tries to hold her accountable for his dreadful crime – the butchering of his wife and children. This is a responsibility she outrightly

denies, asserting that she did not tell him to do such a terrible thing (40). He tries to insist that they are each other's "fate". She tells him, however: "If I seem like fate to you, it is because you have no power of your own" (41). Despite his legendary strength, Heracles lacks agency and identity when he finds himself severed from the feminine. Hera, in her denial of Heracles's attempts to claim a connection between them, is refusing to act as a mirror for him. He may bear her name and have suckled from her, but he is, as she reminds him, not her responsibility or her 'fate'. In this, this 'great goddess' refuses to serve in the capacity dictated by a male hero. Despite his physical strength, Hera counters that "No man was ever weaker" (41).

Countless critics have commented on how in western philosophy and literature, the feminine has repeatedly functioned as a mirror for the masculine.<sup>35</sup> Yet in *Weight*, Hera will not permit this characterisation. Consider this refusal in contrast to Euripides' castigation of Hera: "Who could pray to such a goddess? Out of jealousy for a woman loved by Zeus she destroyed the saviour of Greece who was guiltless".<sup>36</sup> Barlow has also commented on Hera's immorality in the play (9). Rather than characterise Hera as a vicious and vengeful goddess scorned, Winterson's Hera is instead aloof and amoral, a stark reminder that Heracles' brutal choices are his own – he may not use her to try and understand himself. We are

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<sup>35</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments: "The stereotypes of women vary, but they vary in response to different masculine needs. The flattering frequency with which women appear in literature is ultimately deluding; they appear not as they are, certainly not as they would define themselves, but as conveniences to the resolution of masculine dilemmas" (207). In this, Hera is refusing to meet Heracles's masculine needs. Indeed, he resorts to masturbation as she refuses to entertain his desires.

<sup>36</sup> Translation taken from Thalia Papadopoulou (2005: 95)

forthrightly told that “he defined himself through opposition”, but Hera tries to resist this process (71). Despite this, however, Heracles is in fact ultimately defined by women – his treatment of them. As the narrator comments: “Poor Heracles. Hera’s milk and Hippolyte’s blood. A man bonded by women” (61). Though there is a sympathy for the hero, it is not sustained. The bond he uses in order to make himself known is either denied, with Hera, or destroyed, as with Hippolyte. This is not a functional mirror in which Heracles can view himself; it is a distortion of his efforts to other women to achieve an oppositional self-definition.

Winterson’s Heracles is clearly facing a crisis of the self. Not only is his brutal masculinity undermined by the dissonance between his idealised self and his connections with femininity (“poor Heracles”), his dreams, as detailed earlier, reveal a further deconstruction of his heroic machismo. To return to that dream in closer detail:

He was the chime of Ladon’s scales. He was the whistling hiss of the Hydra.

He was the hoof-beat of Artemis’s hind. He was a cattle bell, he was the bottom G of the boar, he was the singing sound of Diomedes’s mares, he was the operatic shriek of the Stymphalides, he was the bass of the Nemean lion, the bellow of the Cretan bull. He was the noise of running water through the Augean stables, he was the whimper of a dog, he was the sigh of a dying woman.

Then he was himself, and he was tearing at his flesh as though it were a shirt he could pull off. He was the sound of his own agony.  
(79)

Heracles’ dreams are filled with the sounds of his endeavours and they end with a return to Hippolyte and her death. This cacophony of his exploits leads to him rejecting his physical body, the source of his legendary strength, as he

embodies the dying breaths of the murdered Amazon. This description not only serves to foreshadow his eventual death, caused by his wife giving him a poisoned tunic to wear, but it serves once more to remove Heracles from himself, from his heroic identity. He becomes, in dreams, a monstrous amalgamation of the tasks he has faced; the 'heroic' pursuits of his Labours combine to make him a Hydra of monstrosities himself.

Heracles's exuberant masculinity has been established as burlesque in its construction (Staels 2009). Indeed, images such as attempting to balance Africa on his penis and it stiffening like a "kangaroo" at the sight of Hera are not only humorous but facilitate an overemphasis of his masculinity to the extent of parody. Throughout, the macho hero of old is presented as a bully who is at once a source of amusement and horror, ill-suited to his legendary strength in psychological terms (90). Hera's proclamation of his weakness eventually comes to pass; his inability to "be still" results in his affair with Iole, prompting wife Deianeira to inadvertently kill him with a poisoned shirt. His emotional weakness is ultimately his undoing (119).

Winterson's rejection of femininity as a mirror for masculinity is repeated in the relationship between Atlas's parents, further undercutting gendered expectations of 'mother' and 'father'. Atlas receives sustenance (fish and whales) from his father and precious goods from his mother (gold and jewels), suggesting that his father is ultimately occupying the more nurturing role (15-16). Indeed, his father treats him as an equal, whereas his mother merely indulges him (15). Atlas's mother may be the earth, with which women are traditionally identified, but his father, the sea, possesses a

lack of boundaries traditionally associated with the feminine.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, her power over his father assured, enabling her to whip him “into a storm in moments”, allowing her to shape him through her actions (12). Indeed, as Atlas comments: “there was always something feminine about my father, for all his power” (13). His father even operates as his mother’s “moving mirror”, with Winterson here othering the masculine Titan in a direct reversal of the classic gender binary, yet Poseidon acts not as a perfect reflection but a fluid casting back. He serves the perspective of the feminine but does not perfectly shadow her.

Atlas’s burden – the earth upon his shoulders – may also be understood as a parallel to the burden that upholding a structure such as the patriarchy places upon masculinity. Heracles thinks of Atlas as “lonely, aloft, holding up the Kosmos like a boy with a ball” (109). Prior to his punishment and the receipt of his burden, Atlas builds a walled garden, creating a connection with his mother the earth and his daughters, the Hesperides (17). His daughters lead to his expulsion from the garden, multiple Eves eating sacred fruits, but this is not the worst experience to befall him. After his war with the gods and his acceptance of the world upon his shoulders, he can no longer maintain any connection with the earth as he struggles to hold it aloft (20). Winterson seems, in these moments, to be speaking to the conflict of

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle provided details of the Pythagorean Table of Opposites. In the same column as “female”, are attributes such as “unlimited”, “many” and “motion”. “Male”, conversely, is associated with “limit”, “one”, “rest” (Lloyd 3). Woman thus becomes fluid and boundless, while man is fixed.

patriarchal privilege when she discusses Atlas's burden. It is at once a source of pride and a source of agony:

Would he now, this minute, change his life for hers, give the world and pick up her pestle and mortar?

He deceived himself. When he cried for any relief from his monstrous burden, he did not really mean it. He was still Atlas. He was Lord of the Kosmos, wonder of the universe.

His punishment was a clever one – it engaged his vanity. (70)

The crippling weight of upholding the heavy Kosmos echoes the toll that perpetuating the patriarchy has upon men. But forsaking that prestige and privilege is a difficult choice to make, as Atlas indicates. Indeed, it is when Atlas is again able to have a nurturing relationship (this time with Soviet space dog Laika, whom he rescues and keeps as a companion) that he finally feels able to reconnect with the earth and relieve himself of his monstrous burden.

### **Reconstruction: The Burden of the Binary?**

Winterson's "authenticity" vs "autobiography" statement at the beginning of *Weight* is essentially a feigned polarising of different versions of truth and reality. Authenticity, she suggests, in a world of pseudo-reality reality TV, is personal and something to aspire to. The artist may be authentic where the individual is not. Yet in this rewriting, there are times when the art – the shared mythological narrative - is ignored in order to explore its personal significance for the individual writer. The issue arises from Winterson's chosen method of gender deconstruction. It is successfully achieved through

a deployment of ironic hypermasculinity, designed to destabilise mythological archetypes of heroism and shine a light upon the inherent barbarity of her source. Yet as I have noted, this method is, at times, predicated upon the use of the feminine as a counterpoint. It is a shifting counterpoint, as with Poseidon-as-moving-mirror, but it remains the “opposite” of the masculine. Hippolyte is assigned the role of victim so as to emphasise Heracles’s brutality. Hera serves to elucidate his sexualised fear of women and his fractured sense of self, even as she denies their bond. When Atlas’s mother makes use of his father as a moving mirror, both parties are still occupying polarised positions with an ancient and entrenched binary, even if their places have been switched.

Thus I believe that rather than a purely deconstructive text, *Weight* is in many ways, one of Funk’s “reconstructive” texts, which indicates a yearning for boundaries. When we consider the narrative of *Written on the Body* and its space for readerly projections of a gender spectrum, we see that *Weight* is a text which offers closed understandings of gender. Twenty years after her genderless vision of love divided critics, Winterson seems, at moments, to be reconsidering this binary, even as she uses it to disrupt gender archetypes. This is necessarily a problematic approach for feminist critics. The gender binary has been long discredited as a genuine framework for understanding sex or gender, and for a contemporary novel written by an author whose works have been so informed by questions of gender to choose, in some part, to reconstruct the binary in this way, is significant. Winterson’s versions of masculinity and femininity may be poles apart from

their mythological sources, but if they remain polarised and dependent upon an outdated binary, this may be a difficult model for feminists to accept.

As she writes:

The Myths series is a marvellous way of telling stories – re-telling stories for their own sakes, and finding in them permanent truths about human nature. All we can do is keep telling the stories, hoping that someone will hear. Hoping that in the noisy echoing nightmare of endlessly breaking news and celebrity gossip, other voices might be heard, speaking of the life of the mind and the soul's journey. (xx)

Winterson's comment on 'permanent truths' is indicative of a dramatic shift from postmodernism's purported eschewal of absolute truth. Yet her suggestion that a story for story's sake should be heard above the story of breaking news due to its supposed authenticity is inherently paradoxical. Whilst Winterson's preoccupation with questions of authenticity and truth should not be taken entirely at face value, their foundational presence in *Weight* represents a change in her work. Ultimately, if contemporary literature is indeed striving for 'authenticity', it is important to consider that this remains wholly dependent upon a process of opposition and othering. If this is indeed a product of the decline of postmodern disintegration and a desire for a "return to the real", one outcome may be a return to limiting binaries which are felt to be real due to their entrenchment and are seen to lend meaning through opposition.

The resolution to this tension may come through the acceptance of pragmatic and temporary reconstructions, ironically deployed to suggest broader negotiations. Indeed, the attention Winterson draws to our atomic make-up at the opening of the text reminds us how we are temporarily

constituted in atomic form, ready to be remade in another shape, the very stuff of our being altering every time. In this rewriting, she uses myth as a means to re-engage with the mythology of herself as both individual and writer. In this, she draws explicit readerly attention to the writer-as-mythmaker.

Winterson's *Weight* presents a prime example of how mythology can help an individual to make sense of their experiences through recognised narrative structures and languages. The author actively engages with the personal significance of the source myth for her and for her unconscious processes. There is too a marked awareness of the public implications of her rewrite – her efforts to dislodge the heroic status of Heracles indicate her refusal to blithely accept a source which implicitly contains such savagery, particularly towards women. Yet there is too the tacit suggestion that this is best achieved through returning to the dichotomy of masculine and feminine. What is successful here for the individual may not be entirely beneficial to femininity as a collective, which is indeed an ongoing issue as we make sense of this post-postmodern theoretical landscape. Rewriting mythology at a time when the neoliberal master narrative is becoming increasingly entrenched becomes an ever more fraught, yet relevant, task for the female writer. Despite the complexities of this burden left upon our shoulders, *Weight* is perhaps best understood in the terms Plate uses to promote rewriting: “not as a kind of after-writing (rewriting implying some kind of repetition and secondariness) but as the life of writing itself: storing as it stories, transforming as it keeps and transmits, and so, preserving while

allowing change" (168). Winterson's version of the binary, used ironically and as part of a pragmatic, partial reconstruction, may be seen as a way of making use of that which we have long been trained to think of as real and fixed to positive effect. Indeed, this is also where its placement within a broader project becomes relevant, for as we turn now to *Girl meets boy*, a novel which distorts the gender binary, we see that there is space within this new literary landscape for multiple, overlapping and contradictory storytelling that still retains some form of sincerity.

## Chapter Three

### **"Thank God we're modern": Metamorphoses, Ecofeminist Ethics and Metamodernism in Ali Smith's *Girl meets boy***

It's a time for Greek tragedies, is what I sense – a shift back to the tectonic plate-quality that story has, in whatever form it is delivered (novels and stories can both do it, in their different ways, to move us at foundation and remind us how to live and understand what we experience, individually and en masse.

(Ali Smith, as quoted in Kostkowska 125)

I am thinking about the difference between history and myth. Or between expression and vision. The need for narrative, and the simultaneous need to escape the prison-house of the story – to misquote.

(Kathy Acker, as quoted by Ali Smith in *Girl meets boy's* epigraphs).

Whilst Ali Smith, perhaps Scotland's greatest living author, did not select a Greek tragedy to revise for her addition to the Canongate Myths series, her novella *Girl meets boy* certainly functions as a profound enquiry into "how we

live and understand what we experience".<sup>38</sup> Her concern for that which is experienced both as an individual and in groups within society is present throughout her chosen myth, that of Iphis and Ianthe, originally found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (first published in 8AD). This dual interest in both the personal and the public echoes the Myths previously discussed; throughout this chapter we shall see how she too attempts to address the varying significances of her chosen myth. Smith's reference here to tectonic plates also hints at another feature of her work – an examination of how humanity experiences and understands the natural world in which we operate. Her urge to "shift back" suggests that once more, we are dealing with a rewrite which does not conform with postmodern expectations, and in fact, constructively engages with both the past and the literature of the past in order to represent both the present and the future.

### **"Nobody grows up mythless": Political and Personal Histories**

Whilst Ovid's myth of Iphis and Ianthe takes place on the island of Crete in an ahistorical, 'mythical' time, Smith has contravened Winterson and Atwood by updating her rewritten myth's temporal setting to "present day" (early twenty-first century Inverness). Ovid's tale, identified by the characters within *Girl meets boy* as the most optimistic of the *Metamorphoses*, presents the unfortunate dilemma facing Iphis, born a girl despite her father's desire to have a boy (97). To save the ill-fated Iphis's life, her mother decides to

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<sup>38</sup> The honourable title of "Nobel Laureate in waiting" was bestowed upon Smith by Sebastian Barry in the Guardian ("Best Books of 2016 Part Two").

pretend that she is in fact a boy, and gives her a unisex name to aid the deception. All is well until Iphis falls in love with the beautiful Ianthe. The impossibility of their union causes Iphis a great deal of pain, until the gods take pity upon her and she is transformed into a man.

In Smith's contemporary version, Anthea (both a riff on Ianthe and an anagram of Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, often depicted as masculine and a virgin) falls in love with Robin Goodman, a play perhaps on Robin 'Puck' Goodfellow, a girl who is described as "the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life" (45). The joy of Anthea's love for Robin, simultaneously female and occupying a space of indeterminate gender, is dampened only by the prejudice and lack of acceptance shown through the parallel narrative of Anthea's twin, Midge. The novella ends with a celebration of love, with Midge allowing her sister's unconventional romance to liberate her own desires. At the end of the tale, both sisters, loved and seen by their partners, engage in varying forms of anti-capitalist and anti-misogynistic activism.

One of the novella's epigraphs comes from Joseph Roth, who declares: "It is the mark of a narrow world that mistrusts the undefined". This is followed by a disarming opening line, which supports this assertion and establishes the text's privileging of the indeterminate. The reader's world is expanded from the outset: "Let me tell you about when I was a little girl, our grandfather says" (1). This unexpected phrasing begins the grandfather's unreliable, yet compelling, account of both his own personal history and the political history of women's suffrage. The grandfather seems to have access

to a specifically feminine historical narrative, telling Anthea and Midge about campaigns regarding female membership of golf clubs, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 'Mud March', and the story of Burning Lil, an arsonist and activist (6-7). As his wife comments to the girls: "Your grandfather likes to think that all the stories in the world are his to tell" (17). The fact that he cannot possibly be describing his own experiences – as Midge points out, her grandfather is simply not old enough to have lived through the stories he is telling – doesn't diminish their power. Smith is, from the very beginning, questioning our access to history and the methods by which we choose to transmit important stories from the past. History is, as the girls' grandfather is suggesting, a constructed narrative, but this enhances, rather than negates, its relevance. The usefulness of a grounding in the past is reiterated throughout the novella.

The grandfather's access to and transmission of this history is dependent upon two layers of performance. He recreates a history where he is a girl pretending to be a boy, who then in turn encounters Burning Lil, who is that moment dressed as a boy. The grandfather comments: "I looked a bit like a boy. Yeah, Midge says, cause you were one" (13). The granddaughters identify their grandfather as male, yet the reader sees that by eschewing a singular, fixed identity he is given insight into histories he could not have personally accessed. In contrast, the girls' need to gender him suggests a childish desire for simplicity and clear delineation. Even if these are constructed insights, the stories that he is transmitting, of women's suffrage and equality, are important ones. Through his alternative history, the

grandfather becomes like Cilla Black, host of the dating show "Blind Date", an episode of which has just concluded before his story begins. As Anthea comments:

But what is Cilla Black, then, boy or girl? She doesn't seem to be either. She can look at the boys if she wants; she can go round the screen and look at the girls. She can go between the two sides of things like a magician, or a joke. The audience always laughs with delight when she does it. (4-5)

Cilla is emblematic of a liminal space between boy and girl where gender indeterminacy or fluidity provides access to knowledge. The grandfather endorses this: his "little girl" history, told by the living man in Midge and Anthea's past, has inserted himself into that liminal space. As a result, he is able to draw out history's mythical character, as Smith highlights the constructed nature of both kinds of narrative. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of the grandfather's gender within his story-within-a-story draws attention to the uncertain, distorted way in which both history and gender are themselves constructed. Indeed, Smith is demonstrating how the past transforms as it is told, a strong recommendation for the revolutionary power of rewriting.

This may be seen further when we consider how the grandfather's dual identity also seems to give him the power to alter long-established, canonical narratives. He alters the words of Kipling's famous poem "If", his version concluding with: "And – which is more – you'll be a woman, my daughter NO NO NO GRANDAD IT DOESN'T RHYME she [Midge] used to squeal" (21). Midge may be resistant to this regendering, but it is interesting that her grandfather's fluid, 'Cilla Black'-like status, occupying two sides, makes him a 'magician' capable of dramatically altering a famous poem. This

change speaks to rewriting as a methodology on a number of levels: addressing the resistance that rewriting may court, as evidenced by Midge's squeals, but also illustrating how abandoning fixed gender identities may lead to a liberation of narratives. Smith is here highlighting, in accordance with another of the text's epigraphs from Kathy Acker, the "power of misquotation" as an approach for rebalancing representation.

Indeed, this is supported by Smith's third epigraph, from Judith Butler: "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity [...] rather, gender is an identity constituted in time". The grandfather's past identity – or at least, the identity he constructed for himself in his stories – allowed him to be female. It is constantly reassessed and represented as he recounts his own history, through his own alterations and interjections from both the girls and his wife. The instability of his gender establishes from the beginning of the text that *Girl meets boy* will not depend upon singular, stable or binaried understandings of gender. Furthermore, it posits that the abandonment of such a framework is in fact emancipatory for the characters and readers alike.

Robin, Anthea's classmate and later her lover, occupies a similarly liminal space. She is female yet also male, something highlighted during her first encounter with Anthea and repeatedly reiterated throughout the narrative. She insists that the proper identifying word for her is "me"; this allows her to become the interlocutor of the myth of Iphis. Anthea's narration first provides a standard retelling of the myth, with little commentary upon its iterations of gender politics. There is then a second telling, the version that

"actually" took place. Throughout this "real" version of Robin's storytelling, they share and shape the myth together, interjecting both personal and political commentary. When Robin tells Anthea that the story is set in Crete, Anthea interrupts the flow of the tale to discuss her holiday to Heraklion and subsequent trip to the hospital due to her father's motorbike accident. Robin uses this to reframe the story, situating it "long before motorbike hire" (88-89).

Indeed, her retelling becomes a constant renegotiation between history and myth, both personal and political. She also gives Ovid's tale a more fixed historical moment, calculating this date with a historical event which informed a myth: "back before the great tsunami that flattened most of northern Crete and drowned the Minoan cities, which, by the way, was probably the incident responsible for the creation of the myth about the lost city of Atlantis" (89-90). Later, as Robin tells the story, Anthea constantly questions its veracity and is sceptical about much of its content, such as the idea that Iphis's mother suffered no pain when she was giving birth, or that Ianthe could not have loved Iphis as a girl (90, 93). Robin's indeterminacy permits her to be an authority capable of going beyond Ovid. Anthea asks: "Did their hearts hurt? [...] Did they think they were underwater all the time?", to which Robin responds: "Yes [...] All of that. And more", the "and more" suggesting the potential to expand the myth's halo of virtualities even further than has already been achieved (94). When Anthea questions the casual nature of the dialogue in Robin's retelling, she is told: "The gods can be down-to-earth when they want", and by so doing, Smith is lowering the

register of this myth to make it accessible, offering a contemporary dimension to these ancient deities. Neither equivocally girl nor boy in her characterisation, Robin is able to see beyond and through the source myth to flesh out contemporary answers to Anthea's critical questions. Whilst Robin, as the source myth's interlocutor, does acknowledge the "original story", she also, following Anthea's interjection that "Maybe her girl, what's her name, lanthe, *wants* a girl, I said. Clearly Iphis is exactly the kind of boy-girl or girl-boy she loves", Robin admits this could be right and that it is open to debate (95).

Robin's status as mythical revisionist, and the loving relationship between her and Anthea, permits Anthea to approach the myth, and the very concept of mythmaking, from an analytical and philosophical perspective. The myth of Iphis becomes, for Anthea, personal, as she considers the kind of boy-girl or girl-boy that she loves. She also wonders:

I mean, do myths spring fully formed from the imagination and the needs of a society, I said, as if they emerged from society's subconscious? Or are myths conscious creations by the various money-making forces? For instance, is advertising a new kind of myth-making? Do companies sell their water etc by telling us the right kind of persuasive myth? Is that why people who really don't need to buy something that's practically free still go out and buy bottles of it? Will they soon be thinking up a myth to sell us air? And do people, for instance, want to be thin because of a prevailing myth that thinness is more beautiful? (90)

Anthea considers all of the things that myth can be beyond just a story – it can be a representation of human consciousness, or a marketing tool for capitalist systems. The social myths constructed by market forces and human behaviour are similarly acknowledged. Whilst Robin gently silences

her questions, Anthea's comfort in her presence, and the way that Robin is constructing the mythological narrative allows her, and by extension Smith, to foreground these questions about what myth is and how we create, sustain, or challenge a myth. This also allows Robin's storytelling process to become something that Anthea can actively take a part in shaping, so that their retelling of Iphis and Ianthe ends as a mutual endeavour that accurately represents them as individuals and as a couple. The way Iphis and Ianthe feel – underwater, like their hearts hurt – echoes the emotions which Robin provokes in Anthea, and thus this version of the myth becomes as representative of them as of Ovid's ancient, archetypal characters. Smith is self-consciously offering an alternative form of mythmaking that is simultaneously collaborative and contemporary in its methods of representation. When waiting for the next part of the myth story to unfold, Anthea asks “What’s going to happen?” and Robin replies “What do you think?” Anthea’s understanding of the structure of myth helps her to predict what comes next but the shared questions show how the denouement of the story of Iphis is something being created and recreated at the moment of its retelling.

In addition to interrogating the misogynistic facets of Ovid's source myth, Smith also uses mythological reference as a way for Anthea to consider her own history. When she thinks about the tragic death of her grandparents lost at sea, she wonders:

Was the seabed dark? Was it cold? Did any light get down there from the sun? They'd been kidnapped by sirens, ensnared by Scylla and

Charybdis. Cilla and Charybdis. That's what got me thinking about Blind Date (23).

Anthea attempts to use myth to explain a part of her history she cannot know, again indicating myth's capacity for accommodating the uncertain and for offering a narrative means of structuring that which is unknown. Her play on words brings her back from myth to history, identifying language as a bridge between them. Smith's reference to the adjacent Scylla and Charybdis, two perils so close together that any passing sailor is forced to choose which to confront when sailing by, may also be read as a warning of the dangers of polarity. If the first pole is Scylla, a six-headed sea monster, and the second is Charybdis, a terrifying whirlpool, the space between is the only respite for sailors and navigating the liminal ocean between the two hazards is the ideal course for a ship. Smith's constant insistence on the importance of the space between is again repeated here.

Throughout the novella, with the death of the twins' grandparents and Robin's retelling of the Iphis myth retold to the reader through Anthea, there are multiple layers of rewriting and an emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between history and myth. With the grandparents' death, myth is used to explain that which history cannot. In Robin's retelling of the myth, history is used to contextualise a story that otherwise operates in an unfixed time. At the moments where history's 'pastness' is used as a consolation, for example, in Anthea's declaration of "Thank God we're modern", she is reading myth as a history we have moved beyond. Yet, as Robin reminds us, the issues faced by Iphis are still present in contemporary society; she reminds us that it's "still the way of the world in lots of places all over the

world [...] red ink for a girl, blue for a boy, on the bottom of doctors' certificates, letting parents know, in the places it's not legal to allow people just to abort girls" (91-2). Myth and history are thus provided with a sense of urgency and the reader is reminded that myth is a present, living force that still needs to be confronted, enshrined in our social institutions and our personal prejudices. There is a reminder also of that the danger associated with the female sexed body, the very threat which faced Iphis, still faces women around the world today. The presence of this urgency is considered again later in this chapter as an aspect of the text which makes it metamodernist in its approach, but it also underpins Anthea, Midge and Robin's later acts of activist rebellion.

Anthea attempts to assert that she "grew up mythless". But this is denied by Robin, who tells her: "No you didn't. Nobody grows up mythless, Robin said. It's what we do with the myths we grow up with that matters" (98). The pervasive nature of myth, in its many forms, is acknowledged throughout, but so too is myth's capacity for change. Smith's joyful, tender depiction of same-sex love and sex separates her from Ovid's original and thus Smith confronts ancient understandings of how love and sex operate for men and for women.

The privileging of the indeterminate foregrounds the depiction of Anthea and Robin's love as simultaneously sensual and degendered, rendered significantly:

It had been exciting, first the not knowing what Robin was, then the finding out. The grey area, I'd discovered, had been misnamed: really the grey area was a whole other spectrum of colours new to the eye.

She had the swagger of a girl. She blushed like a boy. She had a girl's toughness. She had a boy's gentleness. (84)

In this way, Smith is again firmly eschewing the gender binary by elucidating the "spectrum of colours" possible in that space between male and female. She also undermines our gendered preconceptions of behaviour by playing with the gendered meanings of these behaviours to defy readerly expectation.

Myth and history are simultaneously connected, expanded and destabilised within the text, the collaborative nature of their construction repeatedly emphasised. Myth is not a fixed concept but something that can be adapted, and the process of adaptation is something which can bring into being new understandings of gender and sexuality. Smith confronts the restrictions of the source myth to make space for contemporary representations of femininity and, furthermore, for contemporary politics.

### **"Ness I said Ness I will Ness": Culture and Nature in the Iphis Myth**

Anthea's River Ness-based invocation: "Ness I said Ness I will Ness" comes at the end of the text as Robin and Anthea make their declarations of commitment to each other (151). It is a play on Molly Bloom's climactic annunciation in *Ulysses* (1922): "Yes I said yes I will Yes" (Joyce 732). Smith is thus evoking previous literary engagements with myth. In *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom's final word in the epic novel is one of acquiescence – she is remembering when she agreed to marry Leopold Bloom. Her "Yes" has been

read as an act of submission and James Joyce referred to it as a “female” word (As quoted in Kenner 147). The final “Yes – yes – yes” of Sasha, protagonist of Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), has been read as an answer to Molly Bloom’s affirmative, as Sasha is, with her “yesses”, accepting further abuse and trauma. It has been described as “a response to and revision of Joyce’s version of woman” (Linett 171). With this play on words, therefore, Smith is toying with earlier stories – *Ulysses* being, of course, another rewritten myth, perhaps even the Canongate project’s ur-myth. Her wit connects to earlier incarnations of female acceptance, but in *Girl meets boy*, the affirmative is not given as a final indication of passive agreement but as a joint statement made by both Anthea and Robin: “Into the thin air, to the nothing that was there, with the river our witness, we said yes. We said we did. We said we would” (151). The yes that is uttered here is a shared yes, a promise made between two women. Molly Bloom’s ‘yes’ is made “under the Moorish wall”, a reminder of ancient civilisation. Where nature intervenes on her experience, it is used as an ornament – “the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used” (732). Sasha’s “yesses” are uttered within the confines of the Parisian urban landscape that has, for her, become corrupted. Conversely, Anthea and Robin’s “yes” is said collaboratively and in commune with the river Ness, which not only forms the basis of the word play but acts as a witness to and participant in their connection, in contrast with Molly’s man-made wall. The literary reference has been subsumed into nature and nature’s role has also expanded, affording the non-human an equal status ‘with’ the vowing women. All three texts use ‘Yes’ as a form of

ritual invocation – but where Molly and Sasha’s rituals lead to their capitulation, Anthea and Robin’s affirmatives lead to joy and mutual self-respect. Their mutual ‘yesses’ link them to the past – “we did” and a conditional future – “we would”, complicating Molly Bloom’s certain future tense which, as we know by the end of *Ulysses*, has been subverted by her infidelity with Blazes Boylan. Anthea and Robyn’s pledge to each other suggests that this a contingent promise, perhaps offering another level of indeterminacy whereby the commitment becomes conditional, based on it being shared and sustained. *Girl meets boy’s* interactions with the natural world not only suggest an ethical impulse and a form of literary sincerity, discussed later as a metamodernist approach, but they also help to further strengthen the text’s endorsement of liminality.

The River Ness’s intervention into and observance of Anthea and Robin’s promises to each other is one of many examples within the text where nature is proven to have its own agency. Nature comes from the Greek *natus*, meaning birth, its roots in biological reproduction perhaps explaining in part its sustained association with the feminine, referenced earlier in this study. Nature was defined by John Stuart Mill as “the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not all that happens, but all that is capable of happening” (5). This all-encompassing abstraction may be what compelled Raymond Williams to characterise ‘nature’ as the most complicated and nuanced word in English (219). Despite its complexities, he states:

It is relatively easy to distinguish three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality [sic] and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not human beings. (219)

Despite nature being intrinsic to the human experience, it can also mean that which humankind has not created. This has led to a binaried understanding of nature as opposite to culture. This oppositional understanding has often seen nature become subsumed into or made inferior to culture, within a capitalist framework that seeks to commodify the natural world. The polarising of nature/culture seems at times strange, given that culture springs from that which is intrinsic to humans, themselves products and subjects of the natural world. This conflict has been detailed by Gretchen T. Legler, who has warned of the two models of cultural engagement with nature: the “Walt Disney” version of anthropomorphization of the natural world and the Romantic “perversion model” of poetic objectification.<sup>39</sup> Deborah Kamen argues that for Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, that which is natural may be understood as that which is “culturally intelligible” (35). This was not always the case for myth – for when mythology was first used to explain the cycles of the natural world, they might instead have been characterised as intelligible *from* nature. In *Girl meets boy*, through the use of an approach that I assert should be considered ecofeminist, Smith is expanding nature beyond its purported opposition to culture, through a reconnection with the natural and ritualistic elements of mythology.

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<sup>39</sup> “In reconceptualising human relationships with nature (granting nature “agency”), how do you avoid the Walt Disney syndrome (anthropomorphizing the natural world) or the pitfalls of the Romantic “perversion model” (we were all right until Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon came along and separated us from our “natural” harmony with the world)?” (Legler 228)

Ecofeminism recognises that the power structures which oppress women, people of colour, the disabled and other minorities also mistreat and oppress the nonhuman world (Warren XI). Greta Gaard states that ecofeminism calls for an end of “all oppressions” and asserts that any attempt to liberate women cannot be successful if nature is not also liberated (1). Regarding how to achieve that liberation, Kostkowska, building upon observations from Val Plumwood, has highlighted the importance of considering the language used to describe the natural world, advocating a removal of hegemonic modes of language, seeking “connectivity instead of separation, equality instead of hierarchy, diversity instead of homogeneity” (1). The removal of those hierarchies and emphasis on connectivity are surely goals for feminist authors and thus an engagement with non-hegemonic language is a worthy pursuit. For Morton, ecology is about eliding “the distance between human and animal, society and natural environment, subject and object” (154).

This theoretical consideration of the shared oppressions of femininity and nature has lead Legler to identify that many canonical works continue to enshrine nature as a place fit for only individual men to find spiritual enlightenment and access to an individual self, thus further embedding “the humanist notion that the ‘authentic’ self is necessarily dependent on the managing of spatial boundaries, especially the boundaries between nature and culture, between the me and the not me, between the I and the other” (229). An ecological approach to feminist writing acknowledges that the natural world is something we all share and are affected by, but our desire to

control the nonhuman has led to damage and commodification. The natural world has long been used as a useful lens through which we see how people are positioned and how they connect, but ecofeminist writing uses nature not only as a source for metaphor but shows that it is a subject with its own agency, seeking too to shake off the malign influences of oppressive power structures. An endorsement of nature becomes, naturally, an endorsement of a collective understanding of humanity; yet active rather than passive considerations of nature are necessary to truly achieve this. As Gaard has stated, supporting discussions conducted by Gilligan and Warren, “ecofeminism [...] asserts the fundamental interconnectedness of all life [and] offers an appropriate foundation for an ecological ethical theory for women and men who do not operate on the basis of a self/other disjunction” (3).

To support literature which seeks to adequately represent this interconnectedness, Legler has offered a number of “emancipatory strategies” for contemporary women writers:

1. ‘Re-mything’ nature as a speaking, ‘bodied’ subject.
2. Erasing or blurring of boundaries between inner (emotional, psychological, personal) and outer (geographic) landscapes, or the erasing or blurring of self-other (human/nonhuman, I/Thou distinctions).
3. Re-eroticizing human relationships with a “bodied” landscape, or the introduction in Euro-American texts and the reconfiguration in some Native American texts of ritual sexual intercourse as a means of speaking with the land.
4. Historicizing and politicizing nature and the author as a participant in nature.
5. Expressing an ethic of caring friendship, or “a loving eye”, as a principle for relationships with nature.
6. Attempting to unseat vision, or “mind” knowledge, from a privileged position as a way of knowing, or positing the notion that “bodies” know.

7. Affirming the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of “bioregions”, and the locatedness of human subjects. (2007: 231)

I argue that Smith, throughout *Girl meets boy*, makes use of many of these “emancipatory strategies”. The focus on feminist revisionist mythmaking as an act which necessarily demands and creates connections and interdependence also serves to advance an ecofeminist approach, whereby hierarchies of gender, nature and story are all disrupted through liberatory practices.

Not only does Smith use her loving eye to re-eroticise nature, giving it an identity as a speaking subject, it also supports her dislocation of the gender binary within the text. This re-configured nature language sees Smith reconnect femininity with nature but also accommodates masculine sexuality within the same metaphoric field. The connection between femininity and nature is fraught and can lead to essentialist understandings of women as “closer” to nature due to their reproductive capacities. But Smith’s connection is here understood as a pragmatic act rather than an endorsement of essentialism. Lori Gruen, in “Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals”, discusses how understanding the relationship between women and animals not as a “natural” link but as a “constructed connection” is useful for considering the ways in which patriarchy has oppressed both femininity and the nonhuman (61). Whilst women are not essentially more ‘natural’ than men, the pervasiveness of that link between femininity and nature means that it is pragmatic to consider the ways in which that affiliation has been forged and how it continues to be

understood. Smith's repurposing of natural, mythical associations leads to representations of gender and sensuality that are more fluid and accommodating. In the context of a narrative whereby biologically essentially femininity is repeatedly called into question, the reappropriation of natural language becomes a necessarily "constructed connection".

We can see this re-eroticisation of nature throughout the lengthy descriptions of Robin and Anthea's love-making. The pair become entangled in each other's arms, unable to identify whose hand belongs to who, establishing the fluidity in their bodies that is continued as "her [Robin's] hand opened me" (101). We see here a disappearing of boundaries and a fluidity of subjectivity that leads to them becoming, through their coupling, "blades [...] a knife that could cut through myth" (103). Kaye Mitchell has identified the ways in which Smith uses metaphor that is traditionally associated with violence and masculinity: blades, snakes, stones (65). However, these associations are also "natural" – blades are forged using minerals from the earth, snakes and stones both being biological/geographical features of the earth. Such references are used too in conjunction with metaphors which might have traditionally conjured the feminine: "A bird, a song, the insides of a mouth, a fox, an earth, all the elements, minerals, a water feature" (104). The all-encompassing passion of their union is depicted in natural terms, from the unbound infinite to the granular. The distinction between the human and the nonhuman is blurred, as advocated by Legler. Not only are these metaphors natural, but many of them reappropriate mythical connotations. There are echoes of Leda and the

Swan in “Then everything about me became a wing, a single wing, and she was the other wing, we were a bird”, yet in this iteration, Robin and Anthea are two wings of the same bird rather than the female victim of Zeus-as-a-bird (101). There are references too to Zeus coming to Danae as a shower of gold, but when Anthea asks “Was I gold?” it is she who is occupying the magical, powerful role. Medusa and the Gorgons are present in their intercourse: “I was sinew, I was a snake, I change stone to snake in three simple moves, stoke stake snake” (102). In *Metamorphoses*, Medusa is raped in Athena’s temple by Poseidon and her curse was to bear a head of snakes which would turn those who looked upon her to stone – a punishment described by Perseus as merited for the crime of being defiled (Ovid 589). Smith’s Medusa-power is turned on its head, where stone becomes snake. The playful changing of stone to snake in three simple moves, “stoke stake snake”, indicates language’s capacity to manipulate meaning in slight but swift increments. The emotional and physical connection between Robin and Anthea allows them to be “the blade that cuts through myth” and to embody elements of the natural worlds. The deployment of mythological reference, in symbiosis with natural language, helps to create a genderless love which is both human and nonhuman, and eroticises the natural.

Smith, like Winterson and Atwood before her, describes a corporeal breaking down into parts. Anthea says:

I had not known, before us, that every vein in my body was capable of carrying light, like a river seen from a train makes a channel of sky etch itself deep into a landscape. I had not really known I could be so much more than myself. I had not known another body could do this to mine. (154)

Whereas Winterson and Atwood's breaking down is an individual act, for Anthea, it is precisely what allows her to connect to Robin. When she breaks her individualised self into natural components – light, like a river – she is able to find love and satisfaction in and with another, in a relationship which is not predicated upon domination. The removal of domination between the partners echoes a collapsing of the old hierarchies as Anthea recognises herself as constructed from these constituent parts. The natural elements of which she is comprised are foregrounded through this language, drawing attention to the symbiotic relationship between human emotions and the elements.

This inclusion and expansion of nature-based metaphor becomes particularly significant when we consider the construction of gender in Ovid's original. Deborah Kamen, in "Naturalized Desires and the Metamorphosis of Iphis", states that this myth is the only "mythological account of female same-sex desire, not only in Ovid but in all of classical literature" (2). Diane Pintabone has discussed the ways in which Ovid seems to briefly question heteronormative constructions of desire before ultimately endorsing traditional male/female binaries (256–81). Kamen provides an extensive engagement with the myth in the original Latin, and an analysis of the placement of the Iphis story within the broader structure of the *Metamorphoses* allows her to construct a framework for understanding how same-sex relationships might have been understood in ancient Rome. She cites scholars who have suggested reasons for the impossibility of Ianthe

and Iphis's mutual love: Kirk Ormand (2005) believes the mutual nature of their desire renders it impossible, whilst Jonathan Walker (2006) asserts that the absence of penetration is what threatens its viability. The mutuality and lack of penetration results in, these critics are ultimately suggesting, the negation of any kind of existing social hierarchy – if a relationship is mutual and without what is perceived to be physical domination through penetration, then it does not fit within a socially acceptable model. Kamen reads the Iphis story in its original context and applies known understandings of Roman attitudes towards the sexual act to establish her framework of what may be considered “natural”, what may be considered socially acceptable, and why same-sex relationships were understood, in both the context of classical Rome and the source text, as neither (22). Whilst Pintabone complicates this, suggesting Iphis believed herself and her feelings to be “natural”, she has also asserted that their love story is characterised by equality, which makes it something of an oddity in both Ovid's writing and within socially acceptable forms of ancient Roman sexuality (279).

Kamen asserts that “alongside the well-known ‘penetration model’ of Roman sexuality, in which sexual acts were defined by a differential between a (dominant and masculine) penetrator and a (subordinate and feminine) penetrated, there existed a separate scheme for characterizing sexual acts” (22). She develops a compelling argument as to why, in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's representations of incest may be understood as illegal, rather than unnatural. Incest as a union is unacceptable because it contravenes social conventions; it is still perceived as a “natural” sexual act as heterosexual

incest can result in reproduction, thus retaining a link with the natural. In this understanding, the unconventional element of an incestuous relationship is that society has characterised it as prohibited, rather than nature itself. The myth of Iphis follows, within the chronology of *Metamorphoses*, the story of Byblis, who falls in love with her own brother. The segue between the stories indicates that Iphis's experience would be, in fact, more shocking to an ancient Roman audience than incest: "The report of a new monstrosity [Byblis] perhaps would have filled the hundred Cretan cities, if Crete had not recently had its own miracle in the metamorphosis of Iphis" (Book 9. 666-8).<sup>40</sup>

The reason that Iphis's story is more worthy of discussion than the story of Byblis, is that not only is Iphis's love for Ianthe unconventional, it is unnatural. Kamen believes that unnatural here may also be a metonym for "culturally unintelligible" (26). Incest, in this model, is contrary to cultural convention, but homosexual love is not something that culture can rationalise due to its incapacity to naturally reproduce. She offers this example from the source myth:

Love does not burn a cow for a cow, nor a mare for a mare; the ram burns for the sheep, the doe follows the stag. Birds also mate thus, and among all the females no female is seized with desire for a female. (Book 9.731-4)<sup>41</sup>

In this excerpt, Iphis is ruminating the impossibility of her love and how it seemingly defies the natural order. This schema for gauging the acceptability

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<sup>40</sup> The translation here is Kamen's (24).

<sup>41</sup> Kamen (26).

of desire is based on models from nature. A female human loving another female human does not seem to fit into the behaviour the ancient Romans were able to observe in their world. Of course, Iphis's understanding of nature is based on limited observations; after all, homosexual behaviour has to date been recorded in over 450 species.<sup>42</sup> Iphis is using the natural world to try and make sense of human behaviour, and finds her desires to be contradictory to what she can see in animals. Iphis's love contravenes what society, and the version of "nature" that her society has constructed, expects.

Ultimately, Kamen argues that *Metamorphoses* contains three conceptual categories of sexual acts:

1) Natural and conventional

Pederasty etc

2) Natural and unconventional

Incest etc

3) Unconventional and unnatural

Non-penetrative sex. (32)

Mitchell has also highlighted the "perceived unnaturalness of lesbianism" and cites Judith Roof's comment on the "'inconceivability" of lesbian sexuality in a phallogocentric system" (245). Kamen's categorisation and reading of the text emphasises that Iphis's desires were not just unnatural, or just unconventional within a patriarchal hierarchy, but both.

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Bruce Bagemihl's research into animal homosexuality (2000).

Returning to *Girl meets boy*, we may see how directly Smith confronts and undermines not only Ovid's conceptualisation of sexuality, but the continued myths about homosexuality that are voiced to this day. By reforging the "constructed connection" between femininity and nature, she is creating a version of the "natural" which accommodates homosexual love. Her engagements with a culture which seeks to denigrate this relationship are also grounded in natural language, leading to a love story that challenges understandings of what is natural and what is conventional.

When Midge, still reeling from the discovery that her sister is in love with a woman, has a drink with Norman and Dominic, her loathsome colleagues from *Pure*, they talk extensively about femininity and lesbianism.

Freud defined it, Norman says (Norman did psychology at Stirling), as a state of lack. A state of lacking something really, you know, fundamental.

[...] Dominic says. I mean, never mind anything else. Never mind how weird it is. Like, what gets me is, there's nothing to do the job [...] And that's why Queen Victoria didn't make the rugmunch illegal.

How's that? Norman says.

It was on Channel Four. Apparently she said there was no such thing, like, it didn't exist. And she was right. I mean, when men do it, poofs, in sexual terms, I mean it's fucking disgusting and it leads to queer paedophilia and everything, but at least it's real sex they have, eh? But women. It's like, how can they? I just don't get it. (70)

Here, Dominic and Norman are betraying the same inability to conceive a non-penetrative model of sex. They are also conflating the unnatural ("how can they?") with the unconventional ("Apparently she said there was no such thing"). Lesbian intercourse is, for Midge's colleagues, culturally unintelligible

and thus unnatural. They are also endorsing the hierarchy of sexual categories posited by Kamen – male homosexual sex, including pederasty, is understood by these men as being more natural than same-sex female love, due to it being “nothing”. The opinions the two men are sharing are also formed from cultural myths. Norman’s understanding of lesbian sex comes from studying Freud, whose theories were framed by ancient mythology. It’s supported by the myth, circulated by Channel Four, that Queen Victoria didn’t understand lesbian sex and thus did not prohibit it. Indeed, according to the Scotsman, this myth was first circulated in 1977 when an equality march focussed on a statue of the Queen.<sup>43</sup> This interchange thus again reveals how damaging myths can be when misapplied. However, due to Smith’s careful endorsement of that liminal space between, discussed earlier in this chapter, this “state of lacking” has become populated with multitudinous somethings. Smith’s insistent reconstruction of the connection between female same-sex love and nature also allows that which has previously been “culturally unintelligible” to become viewed as an integral part of the natural world. Indeed, the novella concludes:

What I mean is, we stood on the bank of the river under the trees, the pair of us, and we promised the nothing that was there, the nothing that made us, the nothing that was listening, that we truly desired to go beyond ourselves. (159)

Here when they say “yes” (or “Ness”) to each other, they are communing with nature and the “state of lack”. But the nothing always signifies meaning

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, “Forget What You Think You Know about Queen Victoria and Lesbians” (2015), which cites Professor David Spiegelhalter’s discussions of the proliferation of lesbianism at the time.

and indeed, it is the space between that provides ‘true’ meaning. The pub in which Norman and Dominic make their offensive proclamations becomes a microcosmic society in which Ovid’s categories of sexuality still ring true. Yet the reader recognises the toxicity of this environment, in which Midge feels pressurised to drink and is treated with a lack of respect. It is also followed, a few pages later, by the previously cited description of Anthea and Robin’s lovemaking, constructed through natural, degendered, mythological metaphor. The “state of lack” is in fact populated by “an earth, all the minerals”, and pages of other intricate references. As Anthea notes, the supposed grey area is in truth a whole new spectrum of colours (84). When Robin tells Anthea the story of Iphis, not being able to be with Ianthe is the true unnatural act for her Iphis, who compares to standing in a stream, “dying of thirst, with my hand full of water, but I won’t be able to drink it!” (96) What has hitherto been understood as an unnatural union becomes a truly natural congress that defies convention – Midge’s surprise, Norman and Dominic’s bigotry – yet is ultimately rendered socially acceptable.

The “ecosystem” of the text does not just eroticise nature or use it as a frame of reference to problematise culture.<sup>44</sup> Nature has its own agency within the novella and ecological concerns form a driving role within the narrative, particularly through the plotline detailing Midge’s work for Pure. Stories, in particular, are characterised as elements of the natural world, as opposed to cultural products – what Smith describes as the “tectonic plate-

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<sup>44</sup> Laurence Buell asserts that all texts are ecosystems (44).

quality that story has”, cited at the opening to this chapter, whilst an acknowledgement of how they are constructed within culture shapes an understanding of how culture moulds and controls that which is natural.

Not only is nature used to describe Anthea falling in love with Robin, but the act of falling in love gives Anthea an insight into the natural world that she previously could not access:

I looked out at the hills at the back of the town, at the trees on the hills, at bushes in the garden, at the birds, at the brand new leaves on a branch, at a cat on a fence, at the bits of wood that made the fence, and I wondered if everything I saw, maybe every landscape we casually glanced at, was the outcome of an ecstasy we didn't even know was happening, a love-act moving at a speed slow and steady enough for us to be deceived into thinking it was just everyday reality. (105)

The landscape has been eroticised here and again, the line between the human and the nonhuman has been blurred through the narrative. Anthea's new feelings allow her consider the hills and to note the regeneration of leaves, but she is not merely using it as a canvas upon which to project her own feelings but to guess at the feelings of others and the ecstatic acts of creation continually at work within that bodied landscape. When the natural world is treated with such wonder and respect, the unethical activities of the Pure corporation become even more abhorrent to the reader.

Keith, Midge's boss at Pure in Milton Keynes, details his ambition to make it “not just possible but natural for someone, from the point of rising in the morning to the point of going to sleep at night, to spend his whole day, obviously, in Pure hands” (116). He lists a broad scope of activities which he wants to bring under the auspices of Pure – not merely the drinking water

that is “administered, tested and cleaned by Pure”, but the breakfast food, newspapers, baby nappies and pharmaceuticals that a person might use during a day would, according to his vision, all come from Pure companies. The blatantly unnatural nature of this desire emphasises the ways in which the water company is at odds with its natural product. The unethical desires of the company are repeated over and over – from denying Indians water for their crops to fudging statistics about water testing – but the most offensive is the idea that “water is not a human right. Water is a human need. And that means we can market it. We can sell a need. It’s our human right to” (124). The prioritising of the “human right” to business over the human need to drink water becomes particularly abhorrent in light of the reiteration of nature’s importance throughout the rest of the text. We are reminded of Iphis, standing in a stream of water, dying of thirst, unable to drink anything. Keith’s prominent erection, obvious to Midge throughout their discussions, and the sexist ways in which he speaks about her professional capabilities, unite in the reader’s mind a lack of respect for nature with a lack of respect for women.

Once Midge stands up to Keith and leaves the company, she takes the train home and is invigorated by her own act of rebellion. She passes by the Lowland sea and ponders the water, asserting that it “belongs to all of us” – “belongs to everyone” (129). Upon her return, she discovers that her sister and Robin have been painting feminist slogans upon buildings in town. The correlation between the issues of gender equality and ecology is thus stressed; Midge is inspired by their acts of irreverent activism to use nature

to spread its own message: “thought I might drive out to a garden centre first and buy some seeds and bulbs [...] planting a good slogan or two that’ll appear mysteriously in the grass of it [the river bank] next spring. RAIN BELONGS TO EVERYONE. Or THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A SECOND SEX. Or PURE DEAD = BRILLIANT. Something like that” (145). Midge’s idea would allow the natural world to advocate for its own protection through a reappropriation of the marketing language she has learned during her time with Pure. Midge is, like Anthea, drawn to a new appreciation of the natural world through her experience of love – after she sleeps with Paul, she comments: “I never knew how much I liked the rain until now” (139). Anthea’s desire to advocate for gender equality and Midge’s newly found, environmental anger, both impulses incited and propelled by non-hierarchical love, binds the two sisters together in a mutual desire for change and an end to varying but related forms of oppression, leading to the climactic “all together now” section of the novella (147).

This reconnection between the self, the other, the community and the natural world is also achieved through a consideration of ritual. Ritual, an intrinsic part of myth as stressed by Armstrong (3), was traditionally a way for humans to make sense of or to chart changes in nature. Early in the text, Anthea observes the surface of the Ness and the presence of floating petals. Beside the river sits the cathedral and other churches. She comments:

Maybe they thought it made a difference, all the ritual marryings and christenings and confirmings and funerals, all the centuries of asking, in their different churches each filled with the same cold air off the mountains and the Firth, for things to reveal themselves as having

meaning after all, for some proof the world was held in larger hands than human hands. (27)

The disconnect between ritual and nature seems to lead to Anthea's scepticism – the Ness is close to the bank but the churches have lined its path, and there is no organic connection between culture, represented by the church, and the river. The listed rituals have taken place beside the river, but to Anthea at this point, when she has not yet met Robin and not yet found her own connection to nature, the river does not play an active part. This is remedied at the end of the novella, when the river acts as a witness to their love, reconciled to the “nothing that made us”. They think they are alone but that moment of communion becomes also a moment for the creation of a community, as they imagine being joined by Midge, Paul, colleagues from Pure, the Inverness Constabulary female-voice choir and Midge and Anthea's lost grandparents. Whilst this is all in Anthea's imagination, ritual provides the scope for this when it is connected to the natural. The connection between the ritual of storytelling – the meta level of Smith's retelling of myth – and nature is also emphasised at the very end of the tale. Stories are “the rope we could cross any river with” and the constructed story of nature itself is considered, “ever-inventive, making one thing out of another” (161).

We are reminded in this way of how nature has been constructed as a story, drawing attention back to the “constructed connection” between nature and femininity. Self-consciously exploring the creation of such narratives of femininity and the non-human, Smith manages to present a complicated

engagement with ecofeminism which simultaneously valorises the natural whilst highlighting the way in which it has been and continues to be created and controlled by narrative. This ever-inventive quality that nature inherently possesses, through its cycles of growth and regrowth, allows the text to establish a dynamic relationship between nature and humanity. The landscape is bodied and eroticised and the “loving eye”, the caring friendship that Legler advocates, is carefully cultivated throughout, leading to a text where ethics of gender and sexuality are addressed simultaneously with ethics of the environment.

When Andrea and Robin say “Ness” at the river’s bank, playfully echoing Molly Bloom and Sasha, they are not just communing with nature. They are connecting to a modernist past, indicating contemporary fiction’s efforts to engage with that past as it moves away from postmodernism. They are acknowledging the meaning of the “lack”, and indicating their desire to “go beyond themselves”. The text is thus keying into a philosophy which has been gaining increasing levels of traction in literary theory, and art theory more generally: metamodernism.

### **“Going beyond ourselves”: *Metamorphoses* and Metamodernism**

Metamodernism was theorised formally in 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker in their now seminal essay “Notes on Metamodernism”. They consider metamodernism to be the cultural logic of the new century, noting how art produced in the post-postmodern landscape frequently expresses an “(often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned)

sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, imitating another discourse”

(2). Metamodernism is taken from ‘metaxis’, meaning the human state of being in-between described in Plato’s *Symposium*. Metamodernism is thus a contemporary critical theory based on this liminality, contending that in the post-postmodern world meaning comes from the oscillation between multiple poles. Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that this new modernism:

Is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment [...] For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism. (2)

In short, this theory suggests that many artworks produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century are, by virtue of their oscillation between the modern and the postmodern, in keeping with my earlier characterisation of successful rewritings: at once earnest in their philosophies but ironic in their practices.

Where *The Penelopiad* acknowledges the contemporary limits of postmodernism and *Weight’s* longing for a return to some sense of authenticity is indicative of some elements of the post-postmodern literary landscape, *Girl meets boy* directly and repeatedly displays tendencies which could be understood as metamodernist. The first section in this chapter discusses the ways in which a veneration of the liminal space between fixed understandings of meaning can lead to liberating representations of gender. The final section will show how the text amounts to metamodernism *avant la lettre* through this Scylla and Charybdis ontology, where the only way

*through* is to negotiate *between*. It will also discuss *Girl meets boy's* performed naivete, ultimately indicating an engagement with modernism and an optimistic yet realistic countering of postmodern deconstruction.

Whilst the term metamodernism was first mentioned in passing in 1975, and debates regarding the critical lacuna following the ebbing of postmodernism have raged for many years, it wasn't until Vermeulen and Van den Akker's aforementioned article that some of the trends in twenty-first century art were broadly recognised under this nomenclature. Whilst Vermeulen and Van den Akker accept that many of postmodernism's textual (or visual) strategies continue, metamodernism acknowledges the necessity of grand narratives, even whilst it appreciates their dangers. They comment that metamodernism creates meaning through a constant swinging between modernism and postmodern – between

A modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality [...] One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance, however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10 innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm. (6)

That meaning is created through reverberations between more than just binaried positions offers a potentially emancipatory framework for non-essentialist and positional representations of gender. It also seems that some of the failures of postmodernism as a feminist discourse – the dismissal of grand narratives, the disintegration of the self – might be checked and remedied through this process of oscillation between modernity and postmodernity. The carefully adopted construction of temporary

totalities, undertaken with knowing irony and undermined by an awareness of its construction, may permit political action without the establishment of new fanaticisms – the metamodern promises, with characteristic optimism, a way beyond extremity towards a nuanced future.

A recent special issue of *English Studies* attempted to map out how modernism is reasserting itself in contemporary fiction.<sup>45</sup> James and Seshagiri, whose conception of metamodernism differs slightly to Vermeulen and Van den Akker, and who have applied the term directly to literary fiction, have referred to modernism's place within metamodernism as an "aesthetic, and an archive". They caution the idea that "fading one domain into the other, we run the risk of assuming modernism to be inherently positive, transportable across time, and transferable to the work of contemporary writers" (James and Seshagiri 88). Yet Vermeulen and Van den Akker's construction of metamodernism, whilst inadvertently and erroneously bestowing upon modernism positive qualities such as optimism, commitment, hope and empathy through their ironically polarising definition, identify oscillation between multiple poles as a primary feature of the theory, surely off-setting this characterisation (2005). Rewriting is itself a form of oscillation, a negotiation with, through and beyond. The idea of metamorphosis – the constant promise (or threat) of change is a marked Modernist tendency, with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* offering just one example from a literary period shaped by and preoccupied with change. In the post-postmodern landscape,

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<sup>45</sup> See 99.7, 2018.

the dramatic technological change experienced over the past 30 years again foregrounds transformation. *Girl meets boy's* revision of myth enacts its own metamorphosis, both searching the modernist archive and oscillating between the multiple poles of the (post) modern.

Before Anthea meets Robin, she comments on feeling "so young, so stupidly knowing, so stupidly forgetful". She yearns to feel old, and clearly indicates a desire to ground her own identity in a past that will offer her access to something deeper than "a single fast-loading page on Facebook or Myspace" (23). Indeed, she worries about logging in to these metaphorical servers and finding that "not even that version of 'I' existed any more, because the servers all over the world were down. And that's how rootless. And that's how fragile" (23-4). This rootless fragility at the expense of a disappearing 'I' could be understood as an anxious engagement with the state of the subject following decades of postmodern disintegration. Anthea's yearning to be anchored by a past, and one with some depth, leads her to compare the links of the internet to "thin white roots on a broken plant dug out of the soil, dying on its side" (23). In more of the natural language discussed above, Anthea is clearly indicating a dissatisfaction with contemporary feelings of disconnection, digital superficiality and loss of subjectivity. This is later, as we know, remedied by her connection to Robin. Robin and Anthea's telling and retelling of the myth of Iphis seems to provide Anthea with that depth she has been searching to find. This longing to feel "old" is subdued by a connection to history – both in terms of Anthea's own personal history and in terms of a modernist literary history. Yet as our earlier

discussions have detailed, the history Anthea wishes to access, is a constructed narrative, mythical in nature. Her own history is rendered, through her grandfather, through truth and untruth. Her feelings of yearning are thus simultaneously felt to be real but acknowledged to be impossible – it is the thought of accessing that connection to the past that is comforting, rather than its achievement.

We see in Anthea's distress some of what Gilles Lipovetsky has highlighted in his treatise on "hypermodernity" as the intrinsic worthlessness of contemporary cultural practices due to their inability to connect to either past or future (2005) . But this position is not maintained here, and whilst Lipovetsky believes that this results in both anguish and ecstasy, we see that a regrounding can lead to a sincere joy that allows for fantasy but also tempers its excesses ("Uh. Okay. I know. In my dreams." 159). The text indicates that there is the potential for more than just the existential crises or wild hedonism Lipovetsky believes are the direct result of the hypermodern. Indeed, in this metamodernist text, the desire to go "beyond ourselves" is depicted with hope but also contains a realistic acceptance of the limitations of those desires.

Indeed, Anthea and Robin manage to "make" the myth of Iphis "new" three times within the story – when Anthea tells the story, when Robin tells the story through Anthea and once, when we consider the overarching arc of the narrative as a whole. Robin and Anthea's lovemaking, discussed above, follows a stream-of-consciousness format that could be read as another echoing of Molly Bloom's soliloquy. But more than this, *Girl meets boy* is

constantly searching to engage with themes and narratives that postmodernism had once dismissed. History is emphasised frequently, but always as a fluid concept and ultimately as a subjective construction. Indeed, Smith betrays in this novella what Kostkowska has identified in her other works as an "essentially modernist confidence in the redemptive, transformative value of art" (3), as we are left with the conclusion that storytelling is the ultimate tool for dealing with the rivers that we may be required to cross, even as we acknowledge its limitations, debates, and overlapping versions. After all, as Anthea and her grandfather both agree, stories can make you brave and change you (160).

This use of modernism as an archive, through direct textual reference ("Ness I said Ness") and theme (history, the individual and society, change and transformation) is not merely a hankering back to an early literary moment or attempting to transpose that moment to this. There is also distinct evidence of the oscillation Vermeulen and Van Den Akker describe. The text's resistance of one set binary is clear when Smith refuses to completely define Robin's gender, and allows the grandfather to claim to be both male and female. But there is also an oscillation in narration through the polyphonic narrative – the story moves between the two poles of the twins – I and "You", but then it becomes a story of "Us", "Them", and, ultimately is told "all together now". Indeed, as twins, Midge and Anthea were created in a natural binary, but the text overcomes their original, oppositional relationship, and shows, through a narrative that they share, how they are both capable of romantic and personal metamorphosis.

Raoul Eshelman has termed one of the most prevalent metamodernist practices "performatism", which he believes is a pragmatic choice to identify with something in spite of itself. Eshelman writes:

Performatist works are set up in such a way that the reader or viewer at first has no choice but to opt for a single, compulsory solution to the problems raised within the work at hand. The author, in other words, imposes a certain solution on us using dogmatic, ritual or some other coercive means. The coercive frame cuts us off, at least temporarily, from the context around it and forces us back into the work [...] On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame to believe in spite of yourself, but on the other, you still feel the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. (Eshelman NP)

*Girl meets boy's* self-conscious, wry happy ending may thus be understood as an act of performatism, whereby the 'single, compulsory' solution is presented within a 'coercive frame' which repeatedly reminds us of the process of identification. Earlier in the narrative, Robin comments on her desire to live "happily ever after, which is impossible, both in story and in life". Anthea responds that it's "a bit lightweight, as stories go" (86). Having thus foregrounded the impossibility of the happy ending, the final chapter begins thus:

Reader, I married him/her.  
It's the happy ending. Lo and behold.  
I don't mean we had a civil ceremony. I don't mean we had a civil partnership. I mean we did what's still impossible after all these centuries. I mean we did the still-miraculous, in this day and age.  
(149)

There is a political point being made here about the then, in 2007, illegality of gay marriage, but there is another point too about the perceived impossibility of a happy ending. An almost sarcastic beginning, with a degendered

reference to Jane Eyre, gives way to the kind of optimism that accommodates garlands of flowers and ceilidh dances. The wry "lo and behold" acknowledges the tiredness of the happy ending, battered and bruised by cliché and rejected by postmodernism, but Smith is also acknowledging the importance of ritual – handfasting, eating kola nuts and chestnuts to "symbolise righteousness, plenty, fertility, the thirteen gold coins to symbolise unselfishness". This is a happy ending that subverts domination or hierarchy, indeed, as Anthea says, "With these rings we us wedded" (150). They even say the traditional vows to each other, thus acknowledging the potency of recognised ritual. There is scepticism here, seen also in their contingent vows "yes we would", and eventually its optimism becomes fantasy, with the arrival of dead family members and singing police officers. But it is an effort to re-engage with and re-evaluate an ancient narrative trope, despite the fact it is tired, despite the fact it cannot, due to the law and structures of power, necessarily match our lived realities – it is asking us to identify with something which has previously been described as impossible. It is, therefore, a performatist version of a happy ending that once again indicates a countering of postmodern deconstruction and hints towards a new form of twenty-first century literary culture. This could also be extended to the idea of rewriting myth as a whole – the text may perhaps be seen ultimately as a performatist attempt to do this. Myth may be problematic, as we have discussed repeatedly in this thesis, but rewriting it – constantly revising it and making it about the us, not the I, as Anthea and Robin do in their marriage ceremony, may still be fruitful.

Vermeulen and Van Den Akker have claimed that "New generations of artists [are] increasingly abandoning the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis" (2). This interest in "aesth-ethical notions", aesthetic driven by ethics and seeking reconstruction whilst recognising its impossibility, can be seen throughout all of the text's ecofeminist elements, leading the text to function not only as a piece of art but a work of activism. It also informs Smith's reading of myth more generally, reconstructing the past to allow it to inform, without dominating the present. The dangers of reading myth as a counterpoint to contemporary reality are highlighted, when, upon Anthea declaring "Thank God we're modern now", Robin reminds her of the places in the world where baby girls are still abandoned at birth (91-2). Yet that distancing does not lead to dismissal, for the story still serves as an important informing parable for Anthea, and later for the reader, when they consider the thirsty Iphis and the commercialisation of water. Thus we begin to see how an aesth-ethical engagement with myth, in a performatist mode, might be possible within a metamodernist framework.

When Smith talks about that "shift back" in story, and endorses an exploration of what "move[s] us at foundation and remind[s] us how to live and understand how to live and understand what we experience, individually and en masse", she is essentially asking for the reader to do what Anthea and Robin promise to do: to go beyond themselves. This does not necessitate a return to the real – indeed, as we have seen, it can lead to flights into fantasy – but it does offer a space where the real might be

considered, along with other previously dismissed grand narratives, between a variety of poles. These narratives remain problematic and ever-changing, but they can still be present within twenty-first century fiction.

This approach makes for a truly ethical revision of mythology. Both Winterson and Smith have found ways to make mythology a liberating framework, but Smith's method of engagement expands myth beyond its roots, beyond its existing associations, to make it pluralistic and fluid, a narrative of both individual and communities. Her ecofeminist inquiries within the text help link myth back to ritual, which is impossible to escape in the text, but is also reappropriated within the text as a positive and potentially feminist marker of human experience, through manipulations of language – "with this ring us we wed". The text ultimately concludes that: "things can always change, because things will always change, and things will always be different, because things can always be different" (160). This is a consoling perspective for both mythographers and feminists; after all, it's "what we do with the myths we grow up with that matters".

## Chapter Four

### **“Blessedly wordless birds”: The Talking Cure and Speaking Through Silence in Salley Vickers’ *Where Three Roads Meet***

- No one hears the same story since your retelling, Dr Freud.
  - Is that a compliment or an insult?
  - Don’t get me wrong, Doctor. You got the size of the drama right, if not the entire point of it.
- (Sally Vickers 169)

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign. Heraclitus, as quoted by Vickers in the epigraph of *Where Three Roads Meet*.

In the eponymous short story from Salley Vickers’ 2010 collection

*Aphrodite’s Hat*, the protagonist, who has been conducting an extra-marital affair with an old love, visits the National Gallery with her paramour. She is entranced by Cranach the Elder’s painting “Cupid Complaining to Venus” and asks: “Why is she wearing a hat?” Her lover does not answer, but she narrates that “It was rhetorical anyway; posed for myself, for some future

enquiry” (75). She later, upon discovering that her lover’s wife has cancer, decides that “Aphrodite’s hat” was a means of self-protection, and he agrees, commenting “Perhaps it’s too dangerous if she’s completely naked” (82). The hat in the mythological painting becomes, for the narrator and her partner, the hat that must be kept on when people suggest that you “keep your hat on!” – a physical limit to indicate a necessary boundary placed upon emotion.

After the end of the affair, the narrator calls and speaks to an art historian at the National Gallery to uncover the truth about the hat. She is duly told that it is not a hat, but upon being given a rationalised description of what the item “is” or “means”, she hangs up. She remarks:

But I needed no longer to hear what anyone else thought or knew for I knew for myself why Aphrodite wore that hat. It wasn’t total mischief making. It was a recommendation to avoid total exposure. In case you give everything to someone who can’t give it all back. (84)

In this moment, the narrator is acknowledging that mythological interpretations can have different and distinct public and personal significances. She is also suggesting that myth’s generation of meaning is bound to time and context – Cranach’s motivations are not as relevant to her at this moment as her own extrapolations. The “true” reason for the supposed hat on Cranach’s Venus, displayed publicly for all to see at the National Gallery, has been collectively agreed upon by art historians and is disseminated over the telephone by the Gallery employee. Yet even this supposedly stable and extremely public interpretation of myth, filtered first through the painter then through the art historians, can be ignored or overwritten if necessary. We see, as we have seen throughout our

discussion of the novellas in this series, how myth, whether presented in a painting or in a work of literature, leaves itself open to a slew of readings and that these are often entirely subjective, fuelled by individual experiences, motivations and emotions. These are also, like the narrator's observations of Aphrodite's hat, dependent upon time and context.

This awareness and acceptance of myth's potential for multitudinous layers of interpretation and significance has, as repeatedly asserted, formed a repeated theme within the Canongate Myths project. "Aphrodite's Hat" succinctly indicates that our mythological understandings are driven by individual emotion, experience, and also the pragmatic needs dictated by context. It is more important for the narrator to have a sensitizing image to allow her to comprehend her grief than for her to understand the motivations of the painter or received art history discourse.

Vickers is thus pointing to myth's fertility as a framework for conceptualising emotion, whilst simultaneously acknowledging its fluidity and potential for variance depending upon individual subjectivities. A Jungian psychoanalyst, it is no wonder that Vickers is sensitive to myth's psychological power. We have seen thus far how a mythological rewrite can respond to the pragmatic needs of a variety of different women writers, and this chapter will detail how Vickers' engagement with her myth of choice is influenced by pre-existing public and personal significances, yet also functions as a prising apart of established narratives. *Where Three Roads Meet* suggests that myth, like the oracle at Delphi, neither reveals nor conceals, but can provide signs which are open to interpretation and thus

may be read, in the correct time, context and considering appropriate subjectivities, in a feminist way.

*Where Three Roads Meet* provides an enigmatic yet provocative engagement with the ways in which myths, and most particularly, myths about femininity, become embedded in our cultural conscious; it also provides an example of how those same myths can still become sites for enquiry and expansion. Most significantly, *Where Three Roads Meet* very successfully demonstrates how the way we choose to speak to or silence aspects of mythological narratives can have an impact on both the public and personal 'halo of virtualities' surrounding said myths, forcing the reader to at least acknowledge, if not fully redress, previous misconceptions of femininity.

### **The Oedipus Myth**

Considering Vickers' profession, it is not difficult to understand why she was drawn to rewriting the Oedipus myth, given its central importance in the historical development of psychoanalytic theory. The Oedipus myth, referenced in early fragments from Homer, Hesiod and others but most well-known from the trilogy of plays written by Sophocles, served as the foundational framework for Freud's (in)famous psychoanalytic theory.

In the myth, as detailed by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, King Laius (Laios in Vickers' text) and Queen Jocasta are having difficulty conceiving a child. Laius duly goes to the Oracle at Delphi, who provide signs which Laius interprets to mean that any child born to him and his wife will kill him. When Jocasta does give birth to a son, she thus binds his feet together and

abandons him to prevent the prophesy from coming true, the expectation being that he will die from exposure. Instead, he is rescued by a shepherd from Corinth, who presents him to his childless king and queen, Polybus and Merope. Later, as a grown man, Oedipus goes to the oracle himself and is told that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Appalled by this fate and unaware of his adoption, he flees Corinth. On his travels, he encounters his birth father Laius and kills him in a brawl, the fight occurring at the place “where three roads meet”, the source of Vickers’ title.

Subsequently, he encounters the fearsome Sphinx, who has been terrorising the city of Thebes, and following his successful solution to her riddle, he wins the crown of his home city and marries its now-widowed queen, Jocasta.

Years later, Oedipus and Jocasta are happily married and rule the city together, but increasingly, Thebes is cursed with infertility. Inspired by love for his people, Oedipus decides to eradicate this curse, and sends his brother-in-law Creon to Delphi for more wisdom from the oracle. The oracle declares that the city will only be relieved of its curse when the late king’s death is avenged. The denouement reveals Oedipus to be the murderer of Laius, and the tragic hero discovers in due course that Laius was his biological father and Jocasta his birth mother. Upon the discovery of this dreadful news, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch.

This tragic story has captured many imaginations throughout the centuries but none so markedly as Sigmund Freud. Freud believed that the fundamental curse of this story – to kill one’s father and marry one’s mother

– was representative of a symbolic, universally held subconscious desire and applicable to all human beings. He wrote that his discoveries regarding childhood sexuality and neuroses were

Confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. (*Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol 4, Part 1* 261)

This rather circuitous logic, that Freud's hypothesis elucidates the meaning of the play rather than vice versa, notwithstanding, Freud wrote that he believed the Oedipus Complex, its negotiation and its resolution, represented an inescapable and ubiquitous experience for humans in early childhood. Reactions to and modifications of the Oedipus complex have characterised psychoanalytic discourse since its inception.

Indeed, even beyond psychoanalytic circles, the term "Oedipus complex" is widely understood. Barthes posited that "every narrative lead[s] back to Oedipus", suggesting that "storytelling [is] always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflict with the Law, entering the dialectic of tenderness and hatred" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 47). Barthes seems to share the belief that the Oedipus myth has a universal application or at the very least, a universal interest, even if we do not extend it to psychosexual development. Any engagement with the Oedipus myth, therefore, particularly from a writer who works as a professional psychoanalyst, becomes a necessarily complex and fraught endeavour.

This chapter will discuss the many ways in which the Oedipus myth has been filtered through Vickers' novella. A complex text, the reader

experiences Freud tell the myth with a citation from *Interpreting Dreams*, Vickers-as-Freud discusses the myth and the legacy of Freud's theory, and Vickers-as-Tiresias retells the source myth from an alternative perspective, querying the first two retellings.<sup>46</sup> This multi-faceted undertaking is particularly relevant for feminist inquiry given both the prominence of Freud and his theories, and the challenges made by feminist theorists to Freud's work, criticising the ways in which the Oedipus complex fails to appropriately accommodate or interpret femininity or the female sexed body.

Psychoanalysis and feminism have a difficult relationship and thus the novella becomes a unique site for discussing feminist rewriting in connection with Freudian theory. This dense and intricate text shows how a feminist rewriting can engage with narratives we may recognise as limited or misogynistic and destabilise or alter received readings of those narratives.

Whilst a full and in-depth analysis of Freudian psychoanalysis is not possible or indeed appropriate within the scope of this project, a working understanding is necessary in order to gauge the ways in which Vickers manages to simultaneously honour the father of psychoanalysis, scrutinise aspects of his theories, and repeatedly insist upon the possibility of multiple, multi-dimensional interpretations of mythological narratives.

The significance of Sigmund Freud and his theories in Western culture is difficult to overstate. Freud himself aspired to be held equivalent to Darwin or Copernicus in terms of impact and importance (Freud, *The Penguin Freud*

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<sup>46</sup> Whilst more commonly referred to as *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Vickers chooses to translate the title as *Interpreting Dreams* and as such this is what will be used herein.

*Library, Vol.1* 326), indicating that he believed his theories were capable of engendering paradigmatic shifts on a remarkable scale, equal in magnitude to the theories of heliocentrism and evolution. Zajko and O’Gorman have highlighted that psychoanalysis’s lexicon, including terms such as “narcissistic” and “oedipal”, both of course mythological in root, are broadly understood and used today (3); this argument is corroborated by Jill Scott (3). Roger Horrocks, in his 2001 *Freud Revisited: Psychoanalytic Themes in the Postmodern Age*, notes that Freudianism had an overwhelming influence upon thought in the twentieth century, asserting that along with Marxism and Darwinism, Freudianism can be understood as one of the “climactic movements in modernity, that is, post-Renaissance thought” (8).

Having thus acknowledged the sheer impact of Freudianism upon both society and discourse, it would be beneficial to briefly characterise some of the key theories presented by Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud popularized the notion of the “unconscious mind”, the automatic and instinctual processes which occur within our minds but which we are not able to directly access. Freud believed our behaviour was rooted in these drives and attempts to access such drives leads to defence mechanisms such as repression, regression and fantasy. The conflict between the conscious and the unconscious can, he asserted, result in neuroses and other mental health issues. The unconscious, though not available to us through introspection can, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, make itself known through dreams or accidental behaviours. This ground-breaking theory suggested the existence of a self which was not the unitary, deep, Humanist self of the

Enlightenment and was instead, divided. This fragmented understanding of the human mind led to the psychic apparatus of the id, ego, and superego, first discussed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (first published in 1920). The formation of the superego comes when the conflict between the id and the ego is resolved and the child internalises cultural laws and behaviours to thus override Oedipal desires. These theories have become engrained in Western culture and left an indelible mark on the twentieth century; Erich Fromm wrote in 1980 that Freud, Einstein and Marx were the “architects of the modern age”, although he considered Marx to be a more significant thinker than Freud (11). Michael Bell has written about how both Marx and Freud were determined to remove “the unwitting mask[s]” which hide the, in the case of Marx economic and social, and in the case of Freud psychological, processes at work which need to be brought to consciousness. Bell has commented on how they were both preoccupied with the nature of myth, and even characterised them as simultaneously “mythopoeic de-mythologisers” (18).

The theories of the man Camille Paglia has called “Nietzsche’s heir” have had a profound impact upon our understanding of the self, early childhood development and mental disturbances (2). Yet these theories have courted a great deal of debate and controversy. The Oedipus complex has been a particular point of contention; Freud wrote that

With the progress of psychoanalytic studies the importance of the Oedipus complex has become, more and more, clearly evident; its recognition has become the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psychoanalysis from its opponents. (*Standard Edition* 226)

The level of Vickers' adherence to this distinguishing belief will be discussed further on in this chapter, but Freud's theories can thus be acknowledged as divisive.

A primary argument against Freudianism is that it is anti-scientific and not supported by empirical data, as argued by, for example, Bussey & Bandura (1999). Indeed, Storr has highlighted that Freud did not attempt to offer any quantitative support for his own theories after 1896 (23). Freud's own collaborator Breuer wrote: "Freud is a man given to absolute and exclusive formulations [...] this is a psychological need which, in my opinion, leads to excessive generalization" (Storr 13). Scott claims Freud is the source of "unprecedented controversy and debate" (3) and in 2003, *PMLA* published this blistering critique:

Historians and philosophers have shown that Freud's 'findings' were coerced, muddled and unsupported except by his own self-flattering anecdotes; that psychoanalytic inquiry, with its question-begging concepts, its open-ended rules of interpretation, and its inadequate precautions against suggestion, is always fatally circular. (Crews et al. 216)

Freud was anti-religious; Horrocks has asserted that Freud "describes religion as an 'enemy', which provides false explanations of reality and offers false comforts to those who are suffering" (11). Yet at the same time, as Storr's biographical account makes clear, Freud was also a highly superstitious man and retained a strong cultural association with Judaism (1). The comfort Freud himself took from superstition, not to mention the explanations of reality he provided to ease suffering which could not be quantified or proven true, indicate further certain contradictions in Freud's

approach. Freud found it deeply insulting that psychoanalysis was not considered scientific, characterising it a “gross injustice”, but refused, or was unable to adhere to, empiricist methodologies (*An Autobiographical Study* 42). Indeed, as Horrocks has observed, “It is not surprising that Freud has been criticized for being too rationalistic but also for being too irrational, since arguably he subverts reason whilst giving it a high priority” (13).

Nolan and O’Mahony have commented on the shared aims of feminism and psychoanalysis, seeking to challenge accepted norms and to go beyond society’s consciousness to better understand its resistance to change. They also indicate that psychoanalysis allows for a complexity of subjectivity and observes how traditionally performed roles of femininity can lead to neurosis (160). They assert: “It was Simone de Beauvoir who said ‘one is not born but becomes a woman’, and it is psychoanalysis which gives an account of that process of becoming” (161). However, Freud’s theories go beyond mere identification of the process of becoming a gendered human. They are predicated upon interpretations of our psychological relationship with our genitalia, which, if not necessarily in itself essentialist, can certainly lead to essentialist responses.

Nolan and O’Mahony’s accommodating response to Freud would be refuted by a large body of feminist critics who assert that Freudianism is at best, limited, and at worst, directly damaging to women. Shulamith Firestone has emphasised the metaphorical nature of Freud’s theories, acknowledging that sexuality is indeed a problematic issue in modern life which can lead to mental disorder, but denigrating Freud’s completely apolitical refusal to

acknowledge the socio-political context which leads to the construction of sexuality (1970). Paul Robinson even believes that the decline in psychoanalysis in the late twentieth century could be attributed to continued critiques from feminist writers (1–2). The key thrust of many feminist critiques of Freud is that he, as a writer and an analyst, does not understand femininity. Scott comments that Freud’s primary dissatisfaction with the female Oedipus complex was a result of its failure to effectively operate as a “convenient mirror image of the male process” (9). Scott builds upon Jung’s suggestion of an “Electra complex” to apply to women, claiming that “Unlike Oedipus, who wanders like a sleepwalker into his fate and commits his acts unknowingly, this Elektra is conscious of her task and goes about murder with a will” (6). The Elektra of this proposed complex is the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, who, along with her brother Orestes, murders her mother and her lover Aegisthus as revenge for their murder of Agamemnon. I would certainly challenge Scott’s reading of Oedipus, particularly her emphasis that he acts out of a desire for power. Sophocles repeatedly insists that Oedipus’s action is driven by a love for his people, in addition to a desire to learn the truth about his roots, rather than love for a power he has always had and clearly abdicated to save his parents when he left Corinth. Whilst detailed above, the myth existed in fragments prior to Sophocles, his is the most authoritative Classical version and was repeatedly mentioned in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, his use of *Oedipus* to elucidate the term ‘peripeteia’ – a sudden change in fortune (Aristotle 87). Marjorie Barstow (1912) discusses how *Oedipus Rex* was the ultimate tragedy, according to Aristotle (2-4).

I also find the figure of Electra a curious fit for any feminist psychoanalytic framework – she committed matricide in order to defend the honour of her father, the man who began the invasion of Troy by sacrificing her virgin sister Iphigenia and who brought the Trojan princess Cassandra home as a sex slave following the end of the bloody conflict. If anything, Electra could be read as a misled agent of the patriarchy, murdering her mother to re-establish the primacy of her cuckolded father. Her somewhat circular justification for promoting a new Electra complex is informed by the fact that “his [Oedipus’s] story is entrenched forever as a complex, [while] her story opens up to alternative avenues of discovery and adaptation. Electra is therefore an inviting blank slate” (Scott 11). Scott sees this as a way of accommodating Freud’s “eroticization of the familial axis [...] without the normative objectives of the psychoanalytic structures” (9). An alternative model which does not, in some way, challenge the model of interpretation dependent upon biology and removed from sociopolitical context, is no alternative at all. Indeed, the suggestion that Electra is a blank slate open to multiple interpretations while Oedipus is a fixed entity shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how myth operates and furthermore, re-establishes femininity as essentially fluid, as opposed to a fixed and stable masculinity.

Scott is correct, however, in asserting that the Oedipus model does not function adequately when used to treat women. Freud acknowledged a certain weakness in his analysis of women, suggesting female analysts may have more luck (from *Female Sexuality*, as quoted in J. Mitchell 1). Horrocks asserts that despite certain recent reconciliations between feminism and

psychoanalysis, “without doubt Freud’s theories concerning girls and women, and the development of feminine identity and female sexuality, are shot through with phallogentric and masculinist ideas” (127). The over-arching importance of the penis as the primary sex organ, to which the child reacts positively or negatively, places a weight of significance upon the visible male sex organ. Horrocks offers an interesting comment upon the limitations of Freud’s psychosexual model, noting the absence of the breast. He notes the importance of breasts in pornography and that children are often fascinated by breasts. He writes: “If little boys and girls are said to be fascinated by superior and inferior penises, one would also expect them to be fascinated by breasts, since many of them have an intimate contact with them from birth” (127).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the breast is often far more visible to the child than the penis. Freud does not comment on this and as a result, “the development of a feminine identity and of a feminine sexuality is completely overshadowed by the looming presence of the penis, and a universal phallic sexuality. According to Freud’s notorious words, ‘the little girl is a little man’” (as quoted in Horrocks 128). It is interesting to note that even in a critique of psychoanalysis that attempts to perform a feminist engagement, there are moments where Horrocks slips into binaried models of gender: “Freud’s creation of psychoanalysis strikes me as a kind of ‘feminine’ creation, for this space is contemplative rather than active, it nurtures reflection, feeling and intuition rather than extrovert aggression or action” (135). This disheartening

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<sup>48</sup> Certainly the contact between the breast and infants is necessary and nurturing, whereas the configuration of the penis is abstracted, but still it is a curious omission.

conclusion reminds us how difficult it is to escape the associations between femininity, emotion and passivity, and masculinity and aggression.

In other ways, Freud has indicated a certain hostility towards the feminine. Helen Block Lewis has pointed out that “Misogynist statements in Freud’s writings are not hard to find”, and provides one such example from his work on narcissism in 1914:

Complete object-love of the attachment type [...] is characteristic of the male. Women are by nature more subject to an intensification of their original narcissism. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that women love. (89)

Freud writes too of the “wound to her narcissism” caused by the female child’s realisation that she does not have a penis, an analysis that Horrocks summarises: “Freud could not really set out his position more clearly: women’s castration is universal and leads to a sense of inferiority and self-hatred – in fact, Freud is really stating that women are inferior!” (130)

Juliet Mitchell famously tried to rehabilitate Freud, claiming that “however it may have been used, psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one*” (XV). Certainly, there is merit in her argument which suggests that Freud was cognizant of the sexual limitations placed upon Victorian women and the damaging effects this could have, leading to neuroses (10). Freud also established normality as a continuum, suggesting a certain tolerance for different forms of behaviour and sexuality (13). Indeed, as Nolan and O’Mahony suggested regarding the process of “becoming”, Freud’s notion of sexuality denies the idea that sexuality is a completed or fixed ‘thing’, and instead asserts that sexuality is

forged “as it travel[s] over a long and tortuous path, maybe eventually, and even then only precariously, establishing itself” (17). This emphasis upon how sexuality, in general, is constructed, is a useful perspective, but it fails to fully acknowledge *how* female sexuality is constructed within patriarchy, contenting itself instead with dealing with the results of that construction. By the ages of 3-6, the Oedipal stage, particularly having experienced and witnessed the mother as the primary care-giver, it seems ludicrous to suggest that child has not, to a greater or lesser extent, through observation witnessed the social underestimation of women in practice and absorbed it into their process of “becoming”.

Freudian psychoanalysis may not be anti-feminist in essence, but it has been in application and it cannot be viewed as a theory which prioritises or emphasises femininity. Its language is inherently and inescapably patriarchal and neither Freud nor Mitchell make any effort to use neutral language. Mitchell offers an example which she claims is particularly offensive to feminists:

So far there has been no question of the Oedipus complex, nor has it up to this point played any part. But now the girl’s libido slips into a new position along the line – there is no other way of putting it – of the equation ‘penis-child’. She gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and with that purpose in view she takes her father as love-object. Her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. The girl has turned into a little woman. (Freud "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 26)

Mitchell says that the desire to have a penis is incompatible with actual possibilities, and is therefore repressed. In the subconscious, it becomes a

desire for a baby, and when in time the woman comes to have a baby, that deep repressed wish will be satisfied: "if it is a baby boy the reality offered will give even greater satisfaction as it will coincide more pertinently with the unrecognized wish" (8). Firstly, today the acquisition of a penis is not an impossibility for a girl, surely resulting in different responses to and contexts for that wish. Furthermore, the assertion that the desire to have a baby turns the girl into a "little woman" reduces a woman to her reproductive capacities. Ultimately, Mitchell's suggestion that a baby boy will be more pleasing to the woman because of her unsated childhood wish ignores the social reality that in many cultures and spheres, the arrival of a baby boy is more pleasing to a parent because of the higher relative value of a male child over a female, thus ignoring the sociological context which may contribute to this feeling of satisfaction.

Mitchell tries to justify Freud's characterisation of the libido as masculine, claiming "certainly he calls it 'masculine' but this is precisely because of his attempt to define masculinity as activity – a feature both sexes can and do share" (28). This supposed universality does not explain why activity has been thus associated so fully with the masculine. Why is it necessary for that association to continue, when instead Freud, who has generated so many terms we now use freely, could have proposed a different, less gendered nomenclature to denote something we are all supposed to be able to do and share? How do we practically overcome the historical connection between maleness and activity, and by way of opposition, femaleness and passivity? Freud's language precludes any true

equality of value for the sexes within his theories; whilst there are elements which admittedly remain useful and can perhaps be effectively appropriated for feminism, it is right for feminists to continue to challenge terminology and theories which encourage essentialism.

Having thus attempted a brief but nuanced engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis and feminist positions on Freud's theories, we turn to Vickers' literary assessment of the myth which informed the complex. What is fascinating about *Where Three Roads Meet* is that it manages to provide a subtle critique of Freud, the Oedipal complex, and psychoanalysis, whilst simultaneously mythologising and eulogising its creator in a markedly affectionate way. The topics of debate pertaining to psychoanalysis detailed here seem to act as pressure points in the tale, forcing Vickers' Freud to respond to his critics, whilst the silences the author creates at various points in the narrative speak to Freud's inability to understand or address particular issues. Overall, *Where Three Roads Meet* serves as an interesting example of the ways in which even an all-pervasive reading of a myth, symbolised by the Oedipus complex, can be expanded beyond its accepted limits. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Vickers is engaging in an Oedipal interrogation of her forebear, suggesting the "anxiety of authorship" theorised by Gilbert and Gubar, building upon Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (1979). Rewriting could be understood as a form of Oedipal conflict, yet Vickers' text indicates that a writer does not need to 'murder' her predecessor in order to question their authority or suggest alternative understandings.

## Freud as Mythmaker, Freud as Mythology

Where *Three Roads Meet* details the final years of the ailing Freud's life. The novella begins with an opening citation from *Interpreting Dreams*, detailing the section where Freud summarises the plot of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and offers the following assessment:

Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of the wishes so offensive to morality with which nature has burdened us and following the unveiling of which we should no doubt all rather look away from the scenes of our childhood. (xi)

We do not return to the scene of Freud's childhood and consider the scenes which he might rather turn away from. Instead, Vickers tackles the end of his life, querying perhaps whether Freud had, in his old age and infirmity, attained access to any previously elusive clarity. The conversational framework of the novel, where Tiresias and Freud act as each other's confessor and analyst, allows the reader to consider the ways in which Freud may perhaps have lived in partial ignorance about aspects of his life beyond childhood and the 'nuclear complex' for which he earned his fame. That is not to say that the Oedipus complex is not at the heart of the novella; however, Tiresias's retelling of his own life and the life of the ill-fated king returns to the source myth which inspired the complex, and there are moments where Freud is proven to have fatally misunderstood or overstated elements of that story. Neither a complete dismissal nor an endorsement of the Oedipus complex, Vickers instead problematizes the unitary reading of a

myth and suggests that the complex has further complexities which Freud either failed to apprehend or to theorise.

Thus, following the reference to *Interpreting Dreams*, Vickers opens the novella with a description of Freud's years of relative decline, paying particular attention to the numerous botched surgeries he endured as part of the treatment for mouth cancer, from which he suffered for 16 years until his (suspected) physician-assisted suicide in 1939. In Vickers' biographical summary, two main aspects are repeatedly stressed. The first is the physical pain and discomfort caused by Freud's cancer treatment, and the way it incurred upon his ability to speak and ultimately, the quality of his life. She lists the "series of traumas and discouragements" Freud experienced during this period; the deaths of his beloved grandson Heinz and Heinz's mother Sophie primary amongst these (7). Vickers vividly describes Freud's "monster", the prosthesis designed to aid speech given Freud's missing palate. The monster became, therefore, "a necessary function of his clinical work" (8). Also emphasised in this brief opening account are the classical antiquities collected as domestic adornments, particularly his statue of Athena, "singled [...] out among all his treasures [...] When the family finally reached England Freud wrote, 'We arrived rich and proud under the protection of Athena' (11). She writes of the decision to have his ashes interred in a Greek urn. Storr has written about Freud's collecting of antiquities, characterising him as a thoughtless and artless collector and ascribing his acquiring impulse to an obsessive personality (11). However, here they are identified as something more: the statue of Athena is

talismanic for a person forced to experience severe trauma (the loss of a child and a grandchild, fleeing Austria due to Nazi persecution, 33 separate mouth and nose operations). Vickers' reminds us that in this latter portion of his life, communication was extremely difficult for him:

The little bronze figure of Athena without her spear had pride of place on Freud's desk, with other precious relics of past civilisations. Here [...] Freud continued to work: to think, to write, to talk to colleagues and his many distinguished visitors, and to analyse a few patients, though by this time his ability to speak was severely impeded by "the monster" and talking at any length was painful and tiring. In addition, as a result of the many operations and subsequent infections, he was all but deaf in his right ear. (11-12)

The mention of Athena's lack of spear is interesting; the absence of that phallic image and weapon of war suggests an emasculated goddess. Indeed, Vickers refers to Athena as the goddess of wisdom, but this multi-faceted deity's purview also included warfare, handicrafts, the city of Athens, law and justice (Vickers 11; Cotterell 146) Athena is thus reduced, in Freud's domestic realm, as a symbol of rationality and reason, removed from the physical activity of warfare. Interestingly, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Mythology* claims she "always remained the energetic goddess of action", at odds with ancient Greek associations between femininity and passivity (Cotterell 147). It is all the more telling to see her thus estranged from the long characterisation of her as a "goddess of action". Perhaps, as detailed earlier, this is due to Freud's association of activity, particularly aggressive activity, with masculinity. Athena, as a notoriously chaste and virginal goddess, is also a curious mascot for a man who believed that anatomy is destiny (Freud and Freud 274) . Athena's symbolic 'rationality' is unusual,

given the connection in classical philosophy between masculinity and reason. However, later in the text, Freud repeatedly diminishes the significance of her power during discussions with Tiresias, calling her his “little goddess” (39) and “little Athena” (31). Tiresias, however, does not consider Athena to be an emasculated or inactive source of passive wisdom; he reminds Freud that “if you cross her she can be ferocious” (31). Yet in the opening autobiographical section, the reader is left with three distinct impressions: Freud is an unwell man, a patient who has endured trauma and is unable to adequately carry out his clinical work. He is also, it is suggested, a man who is in need of treatment for his own mental suffering. Furthermore, he is someone who has used mythology to embellish or make sense of his life. As Freud attempts to draw comfort from a mythological past or bestow upon himself a certain timelessness through the collection of ancient artefacts, he is revealed to be all the more human and, as indicated by Tiresias’s interjections, fallible in his understanding. This brief insight into Freud’s life sets the scene for his direct dialogue with a famed character from mythology, the seer Tiresias.

References to Freud’s ability, or inability, to communicate, continue throughout his discussions with Tiresias. He frequently comments upon his own powers of speech: “I’m in no shape to speak to you now” (16), “half my mouth has gone down the drain” (17), “And you’ll forgive me if I don’t say much? Talking tires me” (23-4). He mentions his emotional suffering at his inability to comfort his dog, Lün, with reassurances that she will shortly be removed from quarantine (21-2). His dependence upon speaking and his

failing verbal powers thus foreground the power of speech and the emotional and intellectual space left empty when it fails. The discussions between the two characters are subsequently rich in relevance, both in what is articulated and what is not, or cannot be, given voice.

The text speaks to Freud's renowned status on numerous occasions. Tiresias is frequently admiring, respectful, and even occasionally sycophantic in his discussions with the psychoanalyst, calling him "my dear Doctor" (102), commenting gratefully upon the "precious time" Freud has bestowed upon him (101) and occasionally making references to Freud's superior knowledge and work: "As you yourself have revealed, Dr Freud" (97). Tiresias even ascribes Anna Freud's bravery in facing the Gestapo to the fact that she has Freud for a father: "It is good to have a courageous daughter. But not surprising in your case, Dr Freud" (17). Thus Vickers' Tiresias is certainly respectful of the intellectual and cultural importance of the man he is speaking to. Freud even seems to be aware of his own mythos, stating "Forgive me, but it doesn't take Sigmund Freud to see that it was your own father you wanted to kill when you had that hallucination in Delphi" (104). Using his own name as a signifier for an acute understanding of the human psyche and as a culturally recognised metonym indicating intellectual insight is indicative of Freud's awareness of his own importance and status. Yet his self-valorisation is at times, a little overblown – he comments in welcome to Tiresias upon one of his visits "Introite, nam et hic dii sunt" (145). "Enter, for here too are gods": Freud seems to almost be suggesting that he too is a kind of god, in keeping with the parallels Tiresias draws between

psychoanalysis and literature. Thus Vickers is not Oedipus or even Electra, killing off their forebears, for her interrogation of Freud through conversation with Tiresias is at all times respectful and affectionate.

However, there are several key moments where Vickers makes gentle attempts to dislocate Freud's belief in the universal validity or primacy of his own interpretations of life and the human mind. On numerous occasions within the text, Tiresias tells Freud that he is incorrect, at least partially. He tells him "Think what you like", when Freud is trying to rationalise Tiresias's god Apollo as a "temporary psychotic inflation" (51). He is similarly, if not dismissive, sceptical, when Freud denies any similarities between the priests at Delphi and Freud's own psychoanalytic practices. Freud claims that psychoanalysis is an exact science and Tiresias tells him "Whatever you say, Dr Freud" (48), before insisting that there are parallels between the two (49). Given that one of the chief criticisms of psychoanalysis is its failure to adhere to the standards expected of an exact science, we could infer that Vickers is here speaking to Freud's failure to apprehend the elements of his "science" which defy empiricism and pure logic.

Angie Voela has stated that "Myth was considered by post-Kantian philosophers as an early form of human thought, the 'childhood of man' or 'fiction that preceded Logos [It was] seen as the condition that paved the way for the advent of the Spirit, the latter being bound to maturity, language and the philosophical notion of *arche* (origin)" (6). Whist Stiegler does allow that this understanding has been replaced in more recent years, citing Detienne (1986), Freud himself believed that myth predated firstly faith and then

science and is thus the discourse of a more primitive human and society. However, Tiresias seems to question this conception of a linear chronology of epistemology. It is important to note, furthermore, that this supposed opposition of science and belief is rearing its head particularly at a time where science has entirely failed to cure Freud's worsening condition. Freud has ultimately been let down by science and his work is not considered to be scientific, but he still is dismissive of Tiresias's theistic religion, calling it a "displacement for repressed infantile desires" and the "primitive need to rationalise natural justice" (31). Yet Tiresias is quick to identify that Freud has not abandoned 'irrational belief' entirely:

Whatever you say, Doctor. But I observe that you still treasure your "little Athena", to whom, not wholly humorously, I suspect, you attribute your own safe passage here.

- You are right to pick me up on that. The humour no doubt conceals some relic of superstitious animism. It is hard to surmount entirely our primitive mentality.

The conversation continues and Freud asserts

- My dear fellow, I have no god.

- But is it not a religious matter that took you from your home and brought you here?

- Please continue with your own story. I've had enough of mine. (31)

Tiresias is here referring to Freud's faith bringing him to England, escaping persecution in Austria. He is thus drawing attention to the fact that despite the anti-theism Freud has always endorsed, there is a religious cultural association which still has significant meaning for Freud and thus its dismissal seems simplistic. Freud's attempt to shut down this particular line of Tiresias's interrogation seems to speak to his inability to verbalise such conflicts within himself – unlike the "wishes offensive to morality" he seeks to

uncover, this wish of Freud's, to find some form of comfort or point of recognition in what he has always claimed to be irrational, seems to be a wish offensive to his own intellectual position. This moment of defensiveness also seems to suggest a certain liminality in terms of who is analysing who in this discussion. Freud is encouraging Tiresias, who has come to him to talk, to continue with his own story, but his reasoning is not that it is because the story is about Tiresias or that they ought to focus on only one story, but that Freud feels an exhaustion when it comes to discussing his own life. There is the suggestion here of ego defences coming into play and preventing Freud from adopting a more critical view of his own recent behaviour.

Vickers also speaks through Tiresias's commentary on Freud's lived, historical experience, particularly regarding Hitler. Freud died in 1939 and would not live to hear the full details of the brutality of the Nazi regime, particularly the death of four of his sisters in the Nazi camps. However, having been forced to flee his homeland, he was naturally aware of the damaging potential of the regime. He describes Hitler as "A narcissist with half a set of testicles, a colossal inferiority complex and a compensating grandiosity, that's our little Adolf. Paranoid" (23). The fact that this discussion quickly moves on to observations of Mrs Woolf (Virginia)'s mental health problems is indicative of a coping strategy which leads to a reductive engagement with contemporary politics. This deliberately underplays the enormous upheaval that he, and his entire family, had extremely recently experienced as a result of "little Adolf" (23). This speedy diagnosis of Hitler later leads to euphemism, when he bemoans the fact that the "little corporal's

activities” have prevented him from attending a performance of Mahler’s Ninth (145). His use of “little” seems to echo the diminutive qualifier he uses for Athena, indicating that perhaps, whether the power is used positively or malignly, Freud has an irresistible urge to diminish figures or ideas who, whether metaphorically in the case of Athena or literally in the case of Hitler, have power over him.

Hitler enters the conversation again when Freud and Tiresias discuss absolutist approaches to truth, which Freud characterises as “a dark horse”. Tiresias suggests the truth may offer differing perspectives, to which Freud responds: “In my view, our best hope of survival is that reason will establish a dictatorship, finally, over the human psyche”. Tiresias counters this with “‘Dictatorship’, Dr Freud? I see. Might not your little corporal agree with you there?” (50). Tiresias is thus underlining Freud’s intractability, whilst also clearly indicating that while the road to absolute reason leads to dictatorship, Freud himself is clearly not capable of behaving in entirely rational ways, as symbolised by his Athena statuette. These fleeting references to Hitler also seem to speak to a certain extent to Freud’s inability to firmly situate himself and his thinking in his own historical moment. Countless detractors of psychoanalysis have challenged the theory’s lack of engagement with the inevitable influence of a person’s socio-political environment upon their psychological state. As his theories progressed, as Matt Aibel has claimed, “Freud in effect disavowed the salience of cultural trauma” (16). Indeed, Aibel, drawing upon the research listed, endorses the view that the traumatic experience of growing up poor and Jewish in a society with deeply held anti-

semitic views may have led to him to become disassociated from “the sociocultural/political buffeting he himself suffered” (17). It may also, Aibel believes, have been part of his desire for his theories to be seen as purely scientific. Yet here, in his euphemisms, generalisations and avoidance of discussion of his “own story”, Vickers is revealing the limitations of Freud’s ability to speak to politics, history, and perhaps his own trauma. Indeed, the insistence upon science at a time when science was interpreted in such a way as to facilitate complete moral degradation, highlights Freud’s own hypocrisies, as well as offering a more general commentary on that which may be considered to be an “exact science”.

There is another interesting area where Vickers subtly reveals Freud’s confidence in his own interpretation to be misplaced. The novella is full of references to birds – their songs and behaviour are frequently mentioned. Tiresias often was said to gain his oracular insights from birdsong; he asserts their timeless importance when he says “Aeons before men spoke or walked on two legs the birds were here” (26). Birds are therefore, quite literally, pre-Oedipal creatures, and they are also often associated with the feminine. A bird is often, in colloquial slang, a word for a woman, and Blake’s painting shows Eve naming the birds, though the Bible attributed all naming rights to Adam (Genesis 2.20). Birds are for Tiresias a source of insight which goes beyond language. He chastises Freud for placing too much importance upon language, characterising words as a “fabrication, a reflection of things as they are. At the same time [...] words can shape our future, which is why the judgments of the oracle were ambiguous, riddling; though not, as some have

concluded, intended to confound” (57). Following this discussion, he intimates his desire to remove himself to the heath and the “blessedly wordless birds” (58). Birds become, therefore, symbolic of a higher form of meaning which cannot be adequately represented by language and must always be a fabrication.

Birds are the source of another conflict between Tiresias and Freud:

There were chaffinches “pinking” on the heath. Walking to you, Doctor, memories fly to my mind like returning swallows [...] You know the little finches with the scarlet polls and gold-barred wings?  
 - I’m afraid even in German I’m not conversant with the names of birds.  
 - Eight of them. A charm.  
 - What hocus-pocus are you proposing to confound me with now?  
 - Calm down, my dear Dr Freud. A “charm” is the term for a number of goldfinches. (69)

Freud admits that his awareness of language does not extend to an avian lexicon. Indeed, he misunderstands Tiresias’s use for the collective noun for goldfinches, and a defensive response protecting himself from the feared “hocus-pocus” is the result. Indeed, the use of “confound” here echoes Tiresias’s statement that the oracle was not intended to confound – Freud seems oversensitive to suggestions of mystical powers which he will not be able to make sense of. In this example, “charm” is just a collective noun and not intended to be indicative of anything more, yet Freud’s reaction is highly suggestive.

The acknowledgement of his lack of knowledge of the names of birds is significant for other reasons. When Tiresias discusses his early passion for birds and his grandmother’s recognition of his prescience, Freud observes:

You remind me of another man, who also believed that he was predestined to study the flight of birds. It was his fantasy that a vulture's tail brushed his mouth when he lay in his crib as a baby [...] The vulture, of course, was a disguised refashioning of his repressed adult desire for *fellatio*. (36)

This is referring to Freud's analysis of the writings of Leonardo da Vinci, and is in fact, representative of a proven error due to misinterpretation. Da Vinci's writings indicate homosexual inclinations and also detail an early memory of a large bird opening his mouth with its beak. Freud read this, as Vickers indicates, an expression of homosexuality. But Freud associated the bird with the mother, translating the bird in question as a vulture and citing numerous examples of the association between motherhood and vultures in Egyptian mythology. Yet this was a mistranslation on his part; the bird was in fact, a kite, which does not share the same mythological connotations (Storr 96). Thus when Vickers' Freud says that he does not know the name of birds, and when he misunderstands Tiresias's use of the word 'charm', the narrative is making visible the gaps in Freud's thinking and psychoanalysis's potential to misread memory. Later in the text, Freud claims to be beginning to read about birds and discovers that the goldfinch is a symbol of Jesus Christ. Tiresias responds and asks if Christ is the man who died and returned to life, like Dionysos? (89). This suggests again the ways in which symbols are time and context bound; in the Judeo-Christian world the symbols of Christ may be broadly recognised, but they are not for Tiresias and they would not have the same currency elsewhere in the world.

We will return to discuss birds, and in particular their connection with femininity, later in this chapter. But this section will conclude with a final

consideration of how Freud has, according to Vickers, read the Oedipal myth, the myth which inspired (or revealed) his most famous theory of psychosexual development.

Tiresias acknowledges the cultural significance of Freud's re-telling, acknowledging that he has forever shaped our interpretations of that story. Yet there is, from the perspective of Tiresias, something fundamental about the mythical narrative which Freud fails to appreciate. Freud asks Tiresias if he is insulting him or complimenting him when he says that no one hears the same story now. Tiresias answers:

Here in all the world was the one person you could safely say *didn't* have the complex you dreamed up for him. He was Oedipus, plain Oedipus. But not simple. What was complex about him was not that he wanted to sleep with his mother (as she herself said, that impulse is not so uncommon) nor even that he killed a man who had once threatened his life [...] What was so remarkable was that his own safekeeping was usurped by the need to know what he needed not to know. He needed to know it so imperatively that he pushed on, against everyone's effort to prevent him, even – most powerful – his own. It was as if his very life hung upon the thread of knowledge which could destroy it. (169)

Tiresias thus indicates that Oedipus's driving motivation is different to those suffering from Freud's Oedipus complex. He is not sublimating his desires for his mother or his aggression towards his father, for in all of his actions he is pushing himself constantly toward self-knowledge. Repression, prompted by social taboo, is not relevant here, for Oedipus has acted in direct response to the curse laid upon him. If Oedipus, therefore, did not suffer from his own eponymous complex, then could we not, by extension, infer that this is not the universal event Freud assumes it must be? Certainly there is a tacit suggestion in the text that Freud's mythos, whilst powerful, culturally

significant, and indicative of certain behaviours and practices, cannot be held to be a unitary and universal narrative.

Throughout the novella, Vickers draws parallels between mythology and psychoanalysis. They both attempt to make sense of the space between what we know and understand and what we cannot know and understand. They both have huge cultural importance and are both dependent upon their own status as narratives for survival. Yet what Vickers proves is that neither ought to be fixed or prescriptive, and that ultimately even Freud's deployment of mythology is not immune to an expansion or interrogation of meaning and significance. Freud's construction of the Oedipus complex is, more than anything, a 'gendering' narrative detailing how we come to be and recognise ourselves within our sexed bodies. Yet this gendering narrative does not fully explain how femininity comes to be. Vickers, as we shall now see, directly confronts this through the use of female silence and exclusion, and thus uses the wordlessness of her "blessed birds" as a silent chastisement to her muse, Freud.

### **Femininity Speaking Through Silence: Anna Freud, Antigone and Jocasta**

There are ways in which Freudian psychoanalysis has failed to make sense of or adequately represent femininity, female lived experience, and the female body. A primary example of this oversight is, according to Horrocks, its lack of consideration of the female breast. In another of the short stories

from her 2010 *Aphrodite's Hat* collection, interestingly called "The Sphinx", a passing mention is made of a psychoanalyst at a dinner party: "[he] had been lecturing the rest of the table on the manifestations, late in life, of addiction to the breast, shoved his oar in at that point [...] somewhat aggressively bringing up the Oedipus complex. But Sylvie was too intrigued by her young man to be led into the misty labyrinth of psychoanalytic theory" (134). The love affair between mature Sylvie and the far younger Jamie clearly has Oedipal implications but what is curious is the mention of the breast, which Freud tended to ignore but that this male psychoanalyst is certainly now pre-occupied with. It is interesting too that Sylvie likens psychoanalysis to the labyrinth, that mythological installation of entrapment and puzzlement. Where Vickers' dinner party bore speaks loudly about the breast, Freud himself was curiously silent.

Freud's limitations in terms of his theorising femininity are, like the labyrinth, both restrictive and puzzling. His famed failure with patient Dora was because, according to Nolan and O'Mahony, he failed to understand her femininity (2).<sup>49</sup> *Where Three Roads Meet* seems to make the reader aware, through very obvious gaps and a repeated questioning, of where psychoanalysis, as a conversation between analyst and patient, conscious and the unconscious, individual and society, falls silent.

A key example of this is how the novella depicts, or rather, does not depict, Freud's daughter Anna. Anna was the only one of Freud's children to

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<sup>49</sup> They add: "His description of women as more vain, more jealous, more dependent, more submissive and less moral, less active and less able to love than men was indeed far from friendly and bound to provoke a negative response" (2).

continue his clinical legacy and was certainly a psychologist of great importance. However, despite her significance in Freud's life and her importance in the history of psychoanalysis, she never once appears directly within the text. Her presence is constantly inferred and remarked upon, but she never makes herself known to the reader. In fact, when she does infringe upon the discussion between Freud and Tiresias, she is constantly established as disruptive to their dialogue.

The failed communication between father and daughter is established early in the novella. Freud does not tell Anna, or even his wife Martha, that he is going into hospital, and yet they are still expected to bring over his night things (3-4). As mentioned earlier, Anna's bravery in the face of Gestapo questioning is attributed by Tiresias to her brave father (17). We are told of Anna's faithful nursing and see evidence of this in her constant interruptions with the tea tray, but we never see this in action, nor do we hear the voice of Freud's famous daughter.

Anna's first appearance with the tea tray is established as something Freud must "warn" Tiresias about. He comments "I shall try not to interrupt again, though I must warn you that my daughter will bring in my tea tray at five. She is most punctual, my Anna. But till then we can make believe we are free men" (28). Despite Anna's punctuality, she remains a threat to warn Tiresias about, performing her timely duties for her father and preventing him, as he wryly suggests, from being a free man. Her entering into their masculine therapy space, Freud suggests, would restrict them both. Upon another occasion, Anna's interruption comes at a key moment. Tiresias

describes a visit to Daulis, one of the sanctuaries of Athena, and his association between the “wine-dark swallows” and his mother. Freud responds:

- My little goddess. And your mother [...] ah, I am sorry, this will be my daughter with the tray and the best china. The Viennese vagrants have transmogrified into bourgeois English already. (39)

The symbolic connection between Tiresias’s mother and the birds, as well as the mention of Athena, is something which Freud would surely wish to comment upon. Yet Anna serves as a useful interruption, preventing him from engaging with two things we can argue Freud had difficulty in interpreting: birds, femininity and particularly, motherhood. Anna is performing a ritual, one that Freud acknowledges to be an enactment of cultural expectations, but does this without us actually being able to observe or gauge her investment in the performance. She is reduced to the tea tray itself, Freud’s own “best china”. Later, Tiresias does not even mention her by name:

I hear the guardian of the tea tray beginning to snuffle. The sacred vessel is about to arrive.  
- I can send it away again. (107)

The casual disregard for Anna’s punctual administrations of care – “I can send it away again” – is further enhanced by their failure to even mention her now by name. Her arrival is heralded by the sniffing of a dog, and as soon as she enters their space, conversation is to desist. Indeed, when Tiresias refers to the “sacred vessel”, he could be referring to the tea tray itself or to Anna. The significance of reducing Anna to a vessel – of tea, of her father’s bravery, of his clinical work – suggest that this is how Freud, and by

extension Tiresias, have come to view Freud's primary caregiver. She is not a person, whose name or time is to be respected. She is instead merely a vessel. Indeed, she is merely a signifier of the cultural expectations of a daughter. It is possible to extend this reading of Anna to aspects of Freud's reading of women. They are vessels for children, objects for masculine children's psychosexual interest, and carriers of the meaning which men like Freud will give them. At other points, Anna's care is seen as reducing Freud, and he connects his weakness to femininity, calling himself an "old woman" when he wears the shawl Anna insists upon (59). We begin to see from Freud a pattern of fear or avoidance in the face of female-provided care.

The text silences Anna, but her presence silences her father. Her arrival ends his conversations with Tiresias and her administrations are seen as ways to entrap or weaken him. Femininity is, elsewhere in the text, seen as silencing; the part-female Sphinx is noted to impede speech and is compared to Freud's prosthesis (99). Tiresias discusses Pelops, who served his son in a stew for the gods, and remarks that "one of them, Demeter, was abstracted by the loss of a beloved daughter and took a bite out of the boy's shoulder which they couldn't restore", and attributes the beginning of the curse of the House of Atreus (including Laius, Agamemnon and later, Elektra) "to that rape" (103-4). It is interesting that Tiresias comments on Demeter's grief as abstraction, even as he describes the situation which befell her daughter Persephone in euphemistic terms – a loss. It is not merely Persephone's rape which caused the various curses and catastrophes caused and experienced by the House of Atreus, but its

abstraction. An inability to speak to such experiences leads to familial breakdown and Freud's failure to talk to his daughter in this context is even more interesting. Significant too is his reference to women as "gorgons in petticoats", prompting "a mere man to freeze into submission" (41). This reference, again to Anna, characterises her as another female monster. The gorgons are an interesting example of a mythological monster, given that their snake-heads and ability to turn men to stone were cursed upon them by Freud's "little goddess" for being raped in her temple.<sup>50</sup> Not only is Anna being unfairly characterised here by her father, but the most famous of the gorgons, Medusa, has become synonymous with evil intent due to being punished for her own victimhood. This statement contains layers of misrepresentation of femininity.

Later in the novella, Anna is about to "interrupt" once more, but Freud this time asks if he can introduce her to Tiresias. Tiresias declines, however, assuming that Anna will not see him in the recess: "if your daughter notices me at all she will take me for one of your precious antiquities" (155). Despite the offer of a flesh and blood introduction to Anna, she remains elusive and furthermore, it is assumed that she does not have the insight or gifts necessary to see what her father does. If Tiresias is a figment of Freud's morphine-addled imagination, then even his fantasies do not credit Anna with the perception or access to knowledge that he has. In the next paragraph, he "play[s] with a few crumbs of scone, for Anna's sake", acknowledging his part

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<sup>50</sup> See earlier discussions about Medusa (p35)

in the father/daughter performance which they are now enacting. Yet in this same section Freud is finally able to voice some of his trauma, acknowledging the pain he experienced at the death of his grandson, Heinz. He claims he would rather have lost an arm than this precious child, before remarking that he has “brushed the scone crumbs from my whiskers and am ready to listen like an obedient child” (156-7). This is how Freud views himself when being cared for by Anna, an obedient child consuming the scone she provides. Yet by accepting this position of obedience and submitting to Anna’s care, he is allowing himself to access traumatic memories. This confession of trauma from Freud also comes to the fore as Tiresias discusses Oedipus being bound and left as an infant. The point of recognition for Freud here, the moment of empathy which allows him to consider his own pain, is the thought of Oedipus being treated cruelly and abandoned. But Freud has not been abandoned, and is instead being cared for by the ever-present Anna, allowing him to continue with the story despite his pain. The fact that there is a clear psychological recognition here, beyond the Oedipus complex, is interesting. So too are his projections of motherhood onto Anna, indicating a different framework for familial relationships previously unaccommodated within the restrictive bounds of the Oedipus complex. After all, what defines Anna here is not her anatomy – she is not a bodied presence within the text. Rather, it is the gendered nature of the position she is occupying: daughter and carer. Ultimately, despite Anna’s primary importance within Freud’s life – she is, at this point, keeping him alive – she is still not afforded a ‘live’ space in the text and still not given the

same access to insight as her father. The position she has been allowed to occupy does not provide her with access to that – the absence of her body indicates that her destiny cannot be ascribed to her anatomy, but to her experiences.

Freud compares Anna to Antigone, Oedipus and Jocasta's daughter. Antigone is an enduring symbol of familial fidelity. In *Oedipus at Colonus* (Sophocles), she is a stalwart supporter of her father in exile, even in the face of her brothers' deathly quarrels. The plot of *Antigone* (also by Sophocles) focuses on her efforts to ensure the respectful burial of her brother Polynices. She is buried alive in a tomb as punishment for defying her uncle Creon's orders, and when he relents and goes to release her, finds that she has hanged herself.<sup>51</sup> The very name Antigone means "in place of a mother" in Greek, from *anti*- "opposite, in place of" and *gone* "womb, childbirth, generation", according to the Online Etymology Dictionary.<sup>52</sup> She is a character who is defined entirely by her familial relationships and when Freud compares his Anna to Antigone, he is casting her as both mother and daughter. Freud finds great comfort in this analogy, likening

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Euripides wrote a version of *Antigone*, where Dionysus intervenes to save Antigone. This version is now lost, bar some fragments (Paton). In *Where Three Roads Meet*, Tiresias suspects that it was not Apollo, but Dionysos (sic) who influenced the oracles at Delphi pertaining to Oedipus' curse (105). However, this version has been lost. In Euripides' other play on the subject, Jocasta does not kill herself after discovering that Oedipus is her son but at the mutual deaths of Polynices and Eteocles. Antigone ends her engagement to Haemon and accompanies her father into exile (*The Phoenissae*). Once again, it is obvious how different versions of myths can obtain primacy over others, but indeed, the existence of varying versions is surely testament to the desire to constantly re-tell these tales even early on in their reception history.

<sup>52</sup> [https://www.etymonline.com/word/Antigone#etymonline\\_v\\_13535](https://www.etymonline.com/word/Antigone#etymonline_v_13535) Accessed 14/03/2019.

Anna's faithful service to him in exile to Antigone's support for her father following his expulsion from Thebes. Freud and Tiresias discuss this:

- It was the daughters who stood by him?
- The girls, Antigone and Ismene. Especially Antigone.
- Like my Anna! (177)

For Freud, the point of comparison between Anna and Antigone is her faithful support of her father. But by extension, Freud is becoming Oedipus. Yet this Oedipal experience is not coming at the beginning of his life, between the ages of 3 and 6. It has extended beyond childhood and is instead occurring as he nears death. Indeed, with Anna functioning both as his daughter and as his mother, she is occupying plural roles; Freud-as-Oedipus' central role in this is of note. Perhaps the conclusion here is the inevitable circularity of all female familial relationships. If Anna is an aging Freud's maternal projection, even as she is also associated with Antigone, at once daughter and sister, then we see that the fraught and possessive male/mother relationship has not yet been resolved. It is not merely a matter of psychosexual development in the early years of life, but an ongoing renegotiation at different stages of our lives as each family member responds to and asserts different needs. Anna is not identified as Freud's mother due to her genitals, but to the care she is giving him. He becomes an "obedient child" when he eats the food she gives him. Thus we see that motherhood is not merely a matter of anatomy, but of performed feminine behaviour, particularly physical care. Indeed, Freud's identification here with Oedipus at a different stage of his life than the supposed Oedipal phase not only grounds the deeply personal connection Freud feels with the myth, but that

its simplicity and universality have been somewhat overstated. Tiresias characterises Antigone as Oedipus's "prop till the end", commenting that the exiled king "inspired loyalty" (179). Again, the connection between Oedipus and Freud is stressed, but so too is Anna/Antigone's usefulness merely as a support to her father and a reflection upon his good qualities. Indeed, Antigone's desire to stay with her father is attributed to her possessing "his stubbornness". Neither daughter is permitted, within the space of the text, to speak or act independently of her father; this is highlighted throughout by the obvious silencing of Anna Freud each time she visits with the tea tray.

Ultimately, it is Anna's behaviour and relationship to Freud which characterises her in a gendered way, rather than her physicality, which is noticeably missing from the text. What we are seeing is how gender is predicated upon positionality and relational behaviour; Anna is a woman because she is recognised as such and because she behaves in the ways expected of a woman. We do not witness the behaviour but instead receive it filtered through the male recipient of Anna's attentions and thus arrive at her construction as woman. This forces us to also consider the acts of definition Freud and Tiresias are undergoing when they relate to each other, suggesting that neither of them is the autonomous "free men" they would wish to be, with or without Anna's supposedly invasive influence.

The stifling of a second key female figure is repeatedly interrogated throughout the text, another female figure who is also defined by the gendered positions she occupies. However, whilst Anna's sexuality and sexed body are completely removed from the narrative, Jocasta's sexuality

and her body, are given a new importance, particularly her breasts. Jocasta, as Oedipus' mother and lover, is, as Tiresias notes, curiously missing from much of Freud's discussion of and extrapolation from the source myth. He says to his friend "I have thought of her so often and wondered why you made so little of her in your account of the story" (149). Vickers, on the other hand, foregrounds Jocasta's impulses and motivations from the outset, in her use of Spyros Harbouris' poem "An Old Story" as one of the text's epigraphs. The poem suggests Jocasta's awareness and sexuality, commenting on how she used a sexual relationship to keep her son close to her. Yet even more than being "Afraid of him should he choose free", her first concern is that she is "mistress in my house still", suggesting the importance she places on her powerful queenly role – a position she wishes to continue to occupy. Ultimately, "An Old Story" speaks to both Jocasta's understanding and her agency:

[...] This my subtle scheme.  
 You know the plot, here is the theme:  
 I, Jocasta, knowingly said  
 "Bring my son to my bed". (xii)

Thus we are presented initially with a version of the Queen who not only is aware on some level of her husband's identity, but in order to keep him close and to retain her important position, is willing to "scheme" and conduct their incestuous relationship. The importance of the "I, Jocasta" shows how she is now speaking that which has never been previously said and she is vocalising this truth for herself and on her own behalf.

Whilst the Jocasta discussed by Tiresias and Freud is not nearly so blatant in her machinations, she is still the subject of many of Tiresias's questions for Freud. This highlights Freud's curious avoidance of Jocasta in his initial theorising, but also demonstrates how incomprehensible her actions are to her male observers. She is presented as a riddle even more enigmatic than the Sphinx; whilst "An Old Story" offers one version of Jocasta, Vickers' Jocasta is remarkable not for her absence or her sexual agency, but for her inscrutability.

Tiresias confronts Freud's abstraction of Jocasta, but is not able to adequately account for her own mental processes himself, despite his unique ability to access knowledge. Of course, if he is a fantasy of Freud's, then this is simply an extension of Freud's own ability to understand her, but that Freud cannot even imagine a being who can make sense of Jocasta is noteworthy. Tiresias frames any discussion of Jocasta with questions:

So ask yourself this, Dr Freud. How could she not [...] have recalled another small-statured man with the same temper and copper-coloured hair, and not have asked herself a question? (107)

Who can tell what she was thinking by then, the woman for thirty-six years had a mortal secret to hide? (149)

Was it really regard for her husband's life – or that she cared so passionately for the boy she couldn't endure the prospect that he might ever leave her? (149)

But how, in the name of all that's sacred, how could she not have known that the man she lay with nightly, in the bed vacated by his father, was that same man's offspring, her own lost son? You are the expert, Dr Freud, but don't tell me she didn't know. [...] She knew all right. (161)

Here we see the ultimate riddle of Jocasta. How can she be understood without first judging whether she knew or did not know of the true identity of her son-husband? Indeed, Jocasta can be seen as the ultimate, single embodiment of the whore-Madonna complex, both lover and mother, the two identities in constant conflict and inevitable, circular recurrence. Yet despite Freud's assertion that "she knew all right", this is not something he considered of import within his earlier work on the Oedipal complex. The mother is a blank canvas upon which the Oedipal child can project their sexual feelings. Tiresias says that it is perhaps "the blank mind" which prevented Jocasta from knowing, and attributes her behaviour to the "apparent erasure of the terrible secret she had buried inside her" (107). While Freud believes Jocasta knew on the unconscious level, neither of the two speakers consider that Jocasta may be more than a "blank mind" upon which they can project, that she may have in fact behaved throughout with complete, conscious knowledge of her own behaviour. They can attribute it to her desire to be restored to her missing son, but despite acknowledging the sexual nature of her relationship, they do not understand or confront her sexuality as a potential motive. This speaks in part to Freud's failure to appropriately theorise female sexuality and sexual deviance. Jocasta becomes a cipher for all that Freud cannot, or chooses not, to try and comprehend. Tiresias says that to have Oedipus back was "her deepest, never-to-be-spoken desire: to recover to her womb her precious first-born son" (161). Yet "An Old Story" sees a Jocasta who plots to achieve this desire, and within the poem speaks of it openly. Jocasta becomes a cipher

for all that Freud cannot, or chooses not, to try and comprehend. Jocasta, like Anna, occupies more than one role and position, and her gendered identity ultimately derives from these positions, because with one version of the Queen who is forthrightly sexual and another who is ultimately unknowable, we discover that the only signs we can read regarding gender come from interpretations of positionality.

Returning to Horrocks's concern regarding Freud's lack of engagement with the breast as a sexual symbol, there are here two significant mentions of Jocasta's breast. One is the mention of her feeding Oedipus at her breast for three days before casting him out, highlighting that even if it was not included in Freud's phallic framework, the breast has an important role to play in child development.

Before he was taken from his mother's breast, Oedipus had lain with her three days and three blissful nights. She told us so herself, that dreadful day in the throne room, three days and three nights during which the thought of the male child, lying in bed with his mother, must have been a living death to his father. (173)

The fact that Oedipus' presence at his mother's breast brings her bliss indicates that she is not just a vessel emptying of sustenance but that mother and baby are engaged in a mutually beneficial act. Furthermore, this suggests that the 'Oedipal' relationship Oedipus had with his mother was in part attributed to the connection brought about by breast-feeding. The second mention of breast comes when Oedipus blinds himself with "two bronze brooch-pins from the breast of his mother-wife's dangling corpse". These brooch pins are the very same as those used to pierce his ankles as an infant. The reference to Jocasta's breast and the fact that the pins used to

blind him came from her breast could be read as a counter to Freudian psychoanalysis's blind refusal to consider the symbolic importance of the breast. Being removed from his mother's breast the first time led to Oedipus being maimed, and a second removal resulted in him maiming himself. This absence therefore becomes a charged space and prompts us to question once more Freud's omission of the breast from his discussions. Tiresias acknowledges that Jocasta and Oedipus were fated to endure this suffering, but he clearly acknowledges their connection through the breast: "It was in the blood of that mismatched couple's ill-starred son; imbibed with his mother's milk and drilled into his bone" (174).

Ultimately, despite their fluctuating judgments on Jocasta's motivations, they fail to entirely apprehend her character or behaviour. Tiresias can imagine her behaviour: "she, I could almost see it, all but danced in her little gold-heeled sandals for joy" (150); "I would bet on it she patted his hand" (151). Yet he cannot actually see how she behaves for he was blinded many years before Oedipus blinds himself. The behaviours he imagines are entirely stereotypically feminine – dancing in gold sandals, patting hands. But he can only almost see her. Despite the fact that she "enunciated with frightening precision", her voice was, to Tiresias, "all but unrecognisable". Then, when she is found dead, he narrates:

He found his mother-wife in the bedchamber, hanging from the massy upper beam of the royal bed by a noose of her own devising: a child's swaddling bands.

She had kept them those thirty-six years. Who can say for what purpose? (166)

Tiresias is making the assumption here that the swaddling bands belong to Oedipus; they could well have belonged to one of the four children they had together. He is attempting to project motive onto her yet he cannot, ultimately, answer her Sphinx-like riddle. Freud and Tiresias may speak endlessly about Jocasta, yet they cannot speak to her. As with Anna Freud, she is an important presence who the reader struggles to make sense of due to the two speakers' own ambivalence. The multiplicity of the gendered positions both women occupy lead to confusion on the part of the men who wish to observe them, and suggest the failure of limited archetypes to accommodate nuanced representations of gender.

Vickers' novella does not, as the epigraph from Heraclitus suggests, "conceal or reveal" feminism's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis. It merely provides "a sign". In this context, the silences created as Freud and Tiresias perform their talking cure are signs, spaces in their discourse which ought to be considered. Anna Freud's silent omnipresence, in addition to Freud's telling references to her in mythological terms, speaks to his failure to truly communicate with her or apprehend her femininity. The way she impedes his speech and makes him feel weak, or like a child, points to Freud's fear of feminine care, and the way he characterises her performed behaviours as maternal undermines his own assertions that anatomy alone must be destiny. Furthermore, whilst Freud and Tiresias talk around Jocasta, their ultimate failure to decipher the signs she gave – "Who can say for what purpose?" – indicates an inability to comprehend or theorise female motivations when they are complex or contradictory. The Jocasta of "An Old

Story” does not sublimate her desires; in fact, it is Freud and Tiresias who are here repressing the possibility of Jocasta as an actor with full agency and sexual desires beyond all recognised moral frameworks. Vickers’ loaded references to Jocasta’s breast highlights the breast’s absence from Freud’s theories and uses her mythological rewrite to expand and refocus psychoanalytic approaches to this most complex complex.

The final section of this chapter will address another way in which Vickers’ conversational novella speaks in signs: this time, to modernism and its methods of creating meaning through fragmentation and silence.

### **I Tiresias: Myth and Meaning**

A sign, like those provided by the novella and by the oracle, may be understood as a repressed emotion manifesting itself from the unconscious into lived behaviour. It could be a slip of the tongue, a dream, or as in psychoanalytic history, the need to urinate (Anna O.) or a cough (Dora). This thesis has hitherto suggested the ways in which the feminist rewritings in the Canongate Myths series indicate a shift from postmodernism and a yearning for that which might be perceived as “authentic”. This move away from postmodernism’s dismissal of unitary truth, and the series’ demonstrated interest in various mythological and critical metanarratives, extends to Vickers’ myth. *Where Three Roads Meet*, along with the other challenging texts in this series, could perhaps be considered a sign manifested by contemporary literature as it engages with all that it has repressed. It does

not necessarily present meaning, nor argue for its destruction, but is indicative of the ongoing meaning-making processes we are all engaged in and cannot avoid.

The previous chapter has suggested that *Girl meets boy* adopts a metamodernist approach, using modernism as both an archive and an attitude to riff against. *Where Three Roads Meet* is similarly haunted by the ghosts of literary modernism and Vickers plunders that archive to give weight to her rewriting. The text contains a number of significant references to modernist figures and works; one of its two protagonists, Tiresias, is an important and instantly recognisable figure within the modernist canon. Just as no one can hear the story of Oedipus the same way now that Freud has retold it, the character of Tiresias has been shaped by his primary role within T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A brief concluding consideration of modernism's engagement with mythology, and Vickers' use of that literary heritage, may help to advance one of the central arguments: that all of the Canongate Myths are suggestive of a new kind of twenty-first century literature. The Vickers' myth, much like *Girl meets boy*, also suggests that this new context may allow (or indeed prompt) female writers to connect with or speak to literary modernism. Furthermore, Vickers' Tiresias offers an additional point of gender enquiry: her decision to rationalise or undermine his famed gender-switching is of particular interest to the feminist critic.

Freud and modernism co-existed; indeed, many of Freud's theories (such as the unconscious) fed directly into modernism's fragmented approach to meaning and interest in the interior landscape of the mind.

Buchanan has referred to the “Freudian fad” in modernism (4). Meaning is not, in modernist literature or Freudian psychoanalysis, a fixed and immediately knowable concept but something which must be inferred by negotiating abstract symbols. It is interesting to note that there was a surge in interest in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* during the modernist period; Buchanan has attributed this to Victorian censorship of the play (4). Censorship may be perhaps understood as a form of repression, and perhaps this interest in the myth may have been understood as a means of expressing that which had been exiled to the cultural unconscious. Perhaps as the re-emergence of *Oedipus Rex* after censorship led to the Freud’s mythological retelling, the dismissal of singular truth and meaning integral to postmodernism has given birth to the feminist reappropriations we find in the Canongate series.

In *Where Three Roads Meet*, Freud refers to Virginia Woolf, commenting that the birds “speak Greek to her” when she is suffering from periods of mental illness (23). Freud’s life is thus clearly identified as situated within the Modernist period; in fact, Woolf was one of the people who greeted Freud when he arrived in the UK and he presented her, rather tellingly, with a narcissus (Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 202). In addition to locating Freud’s life within a literary history, it also draws attention to the fact that the birds speak Greek in Woolf’s literature: she, along with many other modernist writers, had an enduring preoccupation with mythology.<sup>53</sup> Bell has noted the importance of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, published in 1890 and cites John

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, discussions about mythologies in *To the Lighthouse* (Guth 2).

B. Vickery, who has observed that despite being a work of Victorian scepticism, *The Golden Bough* incited in modernist writers a keen interest in the mythological stories which had lost prominence (Bell 18).<sup>54</sup> Bell has characterised mythopoeia – mythmaking – as the “underlying metaphysic of modernist literature” (1–2). Within this modernist process of myth re-evaluation, the figure of Tiresias was of particular interest. Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) is the story of a man who becomes a woman and lives for 300 years – a Modernist Tiresias. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote a surrealist play entitled “The Breasts of Tiresias” in 1917. Tiresias is, perhaps most famously, a named speaker within T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and like Vickers’ Tiresias, against the landscape of the waste land he is still struggling to make sense of that which is revealed and concealed. *The Waste Land* will be used here as a lens through which to make sense of Vickers’ means of creating meaning, particularly meaning pertaining to gender.

The poem is significant in other works by Vickers; *The Other Side of You* (2003) has, as its epigraph, the section of the poem which reads:

Who is the third who always walks beside you?  
 When I count, there are only you and I together,  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 ...  
 But who is that on the other side of you  
 (Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* 79-80)

“The other side of you” is in Vickers’s text understood as the unconscious version of the self, as the novel details the psychiatric relationship between

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<sup>54</sup> Vickers comments: “What is most striking is the depth to which it has permeated the cultural strata of our time. In literature alone it touches nearly everything, from the most significant to the most ephemeral works” (3).

its protagonists. Published after *The Other Side of You, Where Three Roads Meet* also indicates an awareness of, and interest in, Eliot's most famous poetic work.

Eliot discusses James Joyce's use of mythology as "a way of controlling, ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history [...in] using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him" ("Ulysses', Order and Myth" 177). Jewel Spears Brooker has called the mythic method "a defining feature of this modernism, namely, the tendency to move forward by spiralling back and refiguring the past" (1–2). Myth becomes a framework which can order that which is felt to be chaotic and disordered, and allows a writer to access and understand a literary history, using that history to map the present and suggest the future. Eliot seems to follow his own advice, using mythological references which provide moments of order – or at least, recognisable tradition – within the "heap of broken images" presented throughout (*The Waste Land and Other Poems* 64).

The role Tiresias plays in this process is significant, as Marlowe Miller has observed. Tiresias is the "controlling sensibility" of the poem, "a blend of both male and female" (138). Eliot himself confirmed his importance in his notes on *The Waste Land*, claiming that "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest". Eliot also states that he believes all the women in the poem are one, and all the men are one, and together the polyphonic

community of speakers come together, united in the hermaphrodite Tiresias (*The Waste Land and Other Poems* 73). Nancy R. Comley has commented on the power of Tiresias (286), and in *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice 1888-2001*, Ed Madden comments on Tiresias' cultural significance: "There is something very queer about Tiresias. Blind seer, articulate dead, and mythic transsexual, he has always represented a kind of liminal identity, and the special knowledge attributed to – or acquired as a result of – the crossing of epistemological and ontological boundaries" (3). However, he notes that in twentieth century literature, the boundaries being transgressed or negotiated by the "Tiresian figure" are primarily sexual. The suggestion is that sexual or gender liminality can lead to a special level of access to knowledge (similar to what we see with Cilla "Scylla" Black in *Girl meets boy*). As Madden asks:

If the figure of Tiresias offers a fantasy of performative power that simultaneously depends upon and denies sexual meaning – that is, if the Tiresian figure evokes the sexual as an origin of corporeal and psychic particularity and yet constructs it as that which must be transcended in order to attain larger or more universalizing powers of vision – we must ask what is being marked, disavowed, displaced or refuted in representations of the Tiresian body and the Tiresian voice. (15)

Indeed, as Madden suggests, the Tiresian is

More often than not, a figure of the feminine located within or behind the male, temporally anterior or spatially interior: a feminine sensibility within the body of a male prophet [...] Nicole Loraux identifies Tiresias as an "eponym" for the feminine rather than "a generalized mediator" of sexuality (17).

What, therefore, does it mean when we have a Tiresias who is not a hermaphrodite or who has had the queer lived experience of sexual

transformation refuted? Vickers' Tiresias does not, after all, change genders.

He tells Freud:

I was a pretty boy and my mother's colouring marked me out as unusual. I learned soon that I could attain special favours by offering favours of my own. And believe me, I did so to protect my own skin. There has grown a rumour that I spent seven years as a woman. Well, in a manner of speaking I did. Make what you like of that!

Freud responds:

Bisexuality is an entirely natural phenomenon. I spent years analysing my own homosexual tendencies. (52)

There is a failure here in Freud's interpretation of Tiresias's descriptions of homosexual acts. At no point does Tiresias discuss homosexual or bisexual desire; rather, he quite clearly states that the sexual encounters he had as a boy were fuelled by a desire to protect himself from threatening older males. These relations are ultimately transactional and were dictated by the situation Tiresias found himself to be in at the temple of Apollo, something Freud fails to consider. His rather glib response – that bisexuality is natural and that he himself experienced bisexual desire – ignores the context which influenced Tiresias's sexual behaviour. This is not to suggest that Freud is incorrect here and the bisexuality is not an entirely natural phenomenon, but at no point does Tiresias actually talk about desire or pleasure. Rather, for him, bisexuality is an act he performed in order to receive certain privileges and to keep himself safe. The suggestion of coercion, oblique or otherwise, prompting Tiresias to enact these sexual behaviours to "protect his own skin" is rationalised rather than confronted by Freud.

What is also interesting is that Tiresias explains the reason why he has been identified as a woman is because he performed sexual acts upon men. We see once more the suggestion that what makes a 'woman' is not anything intrinsic or a magical force enacted upon a being, but performed behaviours and occupied positions. In a manner of speaking, Tiresias *did* spend seven years as a woman, not because he was cursed to change his body physically but because his disadvantaged position forced him to behave in a way that would have been recognised, in classical Greece, as 'feminine'. Freud's failure to appreciate this and to instead situate Tiresias's experience within his own frame of experience again suggests his observed inability to consider sociological influences upon sexual behaviour.

The Tiresias of *The Waste Land* is made flesh with two descriptions of his physical feminine signifiers. He is described firstly as an "Old man with wrinkled female breasts" and then again as "old man with wrinkled dugs", dugs an archaic word for the female breast (*The Waste Land and Other Poems* 74). The poem suggests that whilst Tiresias may have breasts, he remains an "old man" and this femininity is external to his internal, masculine self. Indeed, the repeated assertion that they are "wrinkled", suggesting age and obsolescence in terms of milk and sustenance, emphasises that while Tiresias may have been conceived as a liminal, unifying voice within the fractured poem, he is essentially male with the adornments of femininity. This supports Madden and Loraux's reading of the poem, whereby femininity is fixed "on top" of masculinity as an extra sensibility or symbol of an access to expanded understanding. Yet Vickers' Tiresias is not rendered in this way.

The symbol of the breast, discussed earlier and particularly significant within critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis, is never evoked and in fact, the physical, gendered aspects of Tiresias's liminality are removed. Instead, we find a Tiresias who supports a view of gender as positional and performed, an interesting departure from earlier retellings. Vickers' Tiresias is no longer a primarily male figure containing femininity within him in a "temporally anterior or spatially interior" way, nor is he used as an "eponym" for the feminine. What at first could be read as a dismissive rationalisation or scorning of hermaphroditism could instead be seen as a way of acknowledging that femininity is not something which can be contained within masculinity, in contradiction to Mitchell's argument about masculinity meaning activity and being accessible to all.

This emphasis of gender as positionality allows, therefore, other liminal aspects of Tiresias's character to be prioritised. He is the conduit between the gods and mankind, and sits between the past and the future. He is also the interlocutor between *Where Three Roads Meet* and the literature of the past. There are two other key shared intertextual references worthy of consideration: an allusion between Apollo and Cleopatra, and a reference to the myth of Philomela, whose tongue was cut out after she was raped by her brother-in-law. Regarding the first of these, Tiresias says that Apollo first appeared at Delphi as a dolphin. Freud quotes *Antony and Cleopatra* to make sense of this for himself: "His delights were dolphin-like; they show'd his back above the element they lived in"; Tiresias agrees with this characterisation (172). *Antony and Cleopatra* is one of the four Shakespeare

plays which are referred to within *The Waste Land*, where we find Cleopatra sitting on a “burnished throne” (77). It is interesting that these two points of intertextual reference relate to female victimhood: Philomela, who cannot speak her trauma, and Cleopatra, who cannot live with hers.

The novella’s direct engagement with the myth of Procne and Philomela is of particular interest. Vickers describes the myth as “the story of the pair of benighted sisters whose spirits were transformed at death, one into a swallow, the other a nightingale” (36). Philomel(a) is thus described in *The Waste Land*:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
“Jug jug” to dirty ears. (68)

In the classical myth, Philomela was raped by Tereus, the husband of her sister Procne. Defiantly daring to speak against him, he cut her tongue out. Unable to speak, she wove a tapestry to tell her story and sent it to her sister. In revenge, Procne killed their son Itys and served him to Tereus to eat. They fled Tereus’ brutal axe-wielding fury and were saved by the gods, who turned them into birds. Philomel became the nightingale, a bird rich in literary significance, with writers from Homer to Keats to Margaret Atwood all considering the tragic story in their works. Vickers’ fleeting mention of Philomela in *Where Three Roads Meet* when Tiresias discusses his mother draws attention to how his mother too was the victim of male violence. It also connects the text to *The Waste Land*, with Tiresias the “controlling sensitivity” of both texts, and Philomel’s sorrowful voice echoing within both.

Beyond reference, *Where Three Roads Meet* is speaking to modernism in a more profound way. Angie Voela has tied contemporary postmodern exhaustion to the Oedipus myth. She says that “Oedipus never doubted his ability to reach the truth and the Sophoclean drama never problematized truth, making it the only possible outcome of a rational inquiry” (4). Whilst Vickers’ version of the truth is not singular – Freud’s interpretations are often incorrect or open to discussion, Jocasta’s motivations are never truly understood – the drive to truth is similarly presented in *Where Three Roads Meet*, though the drive to pure rationality is, as Vickers points out, a “dark horse”. Voela states that in the twenty-first century, “We generally accept that contemporary individuality is constituted reflexively [...] the situation is made worse by the ongoing crisis of the financial and social institutions which are both unable and unwilling to support the individual as before” (4). This reflexive constitution is commented upon by Tiresias:

Who are any of us, “finally” Dr Freud? As the riddle suggested, he was both many and one.  
 - Of course we are all a crowd.  
 - Or a play. (186)

Here, the two speakers are acknowledging the ways in which we contribute to each other’s identity, the multi-faceted nature of individual identities, and furthermore, identity’s ultimate performativity. Voela, considering that postmodern exhaustion, agrees with Stiegler, who believes we need to find “new ways of re-enchanting the world and re-igniting hope” (4). Whilst *Where Three Roads Meet* is not necessarily a source of hope, it certainly may be

seen as a re-enchantment of a story and is clearly a subtle reassessment of both its subject and its source myth. Oedipus's life beyond Freud is considered and hints toward a return to, if not the unproblematized truth of Sophocles, a truth that is created and performed reflexively and communally. In the novella, for Tiresias and Oedipus, truth is something one must attempt to access, whatever the personal cost or even the ultimate futility of the endeavour. Eleven years after the publication of *Where Three Roads Meet*, we find ourselves concerned with the damaging effects of a post-truth world and the social media propelled threat of 'alternative facts'. But these novellas are all suggesting that the drive towards truth, even when it is damaging and uncomfortable, even when it is impossible, is something that we all experience.

Thus revising mythology becomes, rather like Freud's conceptualization of psychosexual development: something done continually, in a performed way, and only ever vicariously. Yet the drive to do this remains. The Canongate Myths' response to modernism, marking a stark move away from postmodernism, is varied and nuanced. Whether we ascribe to the 'metamodernism' seemingly at work in *Girl meets boy*, or consider the post-postmodern elements of *Weight*, modernism may be traced as a ghost haunting these works. Zajko and O'Gorman comment on how:

Even the very name of a mythic figure can function as a profoundly intertextual moment, which connects a text to a well-known set of important issues. The moderns have their own form of exemplary usage, where ancient myth enters the vocabulary in order to endow ordinary and everyday experience with a sense of more profound

significance. Myth becomes one of the means of narrating, comprehending, but also elevating human experience. (3)

In the post-postmodern world, literature's heap of broken images is more fractured than ever before. But we see how rewriting mythology becomes a performed act, acknowledging the ways in which we and our stories are constructed from these shards. After all, as Tiresias says to Freud, "stories are all we humans have to make us immortal" (174).

### **An Ivory Shoulder**

*Where Three Roads Meet* makes use of both the myths of Philomela, sad nightingale of *The Waste Land*, and of Pelops. These two myths share certain themes. As discussed, Demeter's "abstraction" following Persephone's abduction led to her taking a bite out of Pelops' shoulder. Philomela's rape led to Procne feeding her son Itys to his father. In the face of sexual assault, Philomela is left silent and Demeter is utterly preoccupied by her grief; both stories end in cannibalism. The aftermath of rape resulting in the consumption of male flesh may be read as a comment on the corrupting nature and inheritance of sexual violence. It is an interesting use of two such brutal tales. When discussing the myth of Pelops, Tiresias muses:

What is it to remember? Re-member. To put a body together again. But in the reconstruction what gets put in, or left out? An ivory shoulder for one of flesh and blood?

Freud responds:

It is all encrypted in the body. What is not recollected is ineluctably re-enacted. (124)

This refers to the piece of ivory used to replace the bite taken from Pelops' shoulder by Demeter. Pelops is never complete and his dismembering begins his family's curse. This discussion, which turns to Oedipus's suppressed memory of his mother being demonstrated through paranoia, could be read too as a metaphor for rewriting. Rewriting is a never-completed process of re-membering and reconstruction, with choices being made as to what gets put in or left out. It may be a process whereby writers replace fundamental stories, flesh and blood, with "ivory shoulders", yet as Freud comments, what is left out becomes encrypted in the body and leads to ineluctable re-enactment.

Thus *Where Three Roads Meet* may be best understood as a re-membering, a bringing to the surface of that which has been left out and become encrypted in the body feminine. The importance of that which is "left out" and its effect upon our unconscious and in turn our bodies, brings us back to the dominant silences within the text. By stressing Anna and Jocasta's silence and inscrutability within this context, the reader is being made aware of the process by which feminine narratives become suppressed or repressed. When we hear about the myths of Jocasta, Philomela, Demeter and Persephone, we learn about the dangers of silence and repression. When we see Anna caring for her father or Jocasta occupying her dual mother-wife role, we see a re-enactment of prescribed femininity which seems inescapable. Yet, as Eliot proved in *The Waste Land*,

the breaking apart and reconstructing of myths has a power of its own and can speak to different moments and occasions. *Where Three Roads Meet* stands upon the ivory shoulders of Eliot's Modernist poem and ultimately emphasises the success of rewriting as a "talking cure".

## Conclusion

Some stories always need telling more than others. Right, Anthea?  
Right, Grandad, I say.  
(*Girl meets boy* 17)

The conclusion of Diane Purkiss's essay "Women's Rewriting of Myth" emphasises that no approach to mythological revision is perfect. She does state, however

This does not imply that judgement must be suspended; it's more important to be wary and ironic about the strategies available when none are foolproof. A bit of political *nous* is useful too; it's self-evident

that there are occasions when one story will be more helpful than another. Women must continue to struggle to tell the stories otherwise. The possibilities are endless (455).

Anthea's grandfather, having told the tale of political firebrand Burning Lil, reminds his granddaughter of the relative value of telling some stories. The stories told herein are all narratives which attempt to make and represent something true, without ignoring the inherent problems that arise when we speak of universal truth. They are also, in their varying ways, struggles – each wrestles with a different aspect of mythology, with different bodies of thought, and with different versions of femininity. What they share is the “political *nous*” Purkiss advocates, perhaps espoused by the nature of their commissioning, and the results have often been presented in equivocal, ironic ways whilst continuing to strive for those endless possibilities.

Whilst these possibilities may be limitless, the scope of this project is not. There is so much more to be said about this unique collection of texts, this singular and highly revealing project. I invite other critics to make a palimpsest of my work and to consider perhaps the female-authored texts beyond the Greco-Roman pantheon, or look at the ways in which masculinity has been constructed by authors such as Daniel Grossman, Philip Pullman and Alai. Broader work on how feminist rewriting of mythology may be conceived as a collaborative practice using texts beyond the Canongate project would also be a worthwhile area of study.

The limitations of this thesis are many. The sheer density of the four novellas and their constant capacity to provoke thought and evoke broader philosophies have necessitated a fairly broad survey. This may similarly be

seen as a strength and I also identify my role as a critic as partial, pragmatic and positional, adopting positions to help advance a larger argument which may have inadvertently left unexamined more detailed or closer considerations. Wherever possible I have tried to include a broad array of secondary sources and incorporate as many women and critics of colour as I can; this may not be a perfect example of such a practice but it was a sincere attempt and part of my praxis which is always in development. Whilst class, as an intersectional concern, was touched upon briefly, it has not been considered in as much detail as I might have liked and it must be acknowledged that this thesis, its authors and seemingly its characters, are overwhelmingly white. These must be taken as lessons for the future. Yet it is hoped that despite these acknowledged restrictions, this thesis has affirmatively answered its primary research question: is a feminist rewriting of mythology possible?

I contend that all of the texts discussed in detail within this thesis represent examples of rewritings of mythology which can indeed be understood as feminist. This is not to assert categorically that their authors are necessarily themselves feminists; as discussed earlier, there are complexities in such characterisations, particularly regarding Atwood and Winterson. But the texts themselves approach mythology in a way which must be identified as feminist. They have all used the Canongate brief to explore, through various measures, the way myth has depicted and often maligned femininity. From this, they have generated four novellas which, in complicated ways, operate according to the ten theses I presented in the

introductory chapter, which I will repeat here as a departure point for the final evaluation of this thesis:

1. Feminist rewriters of myth are critical readers of myth
2. Myth engages with its personal and public significances

Consideration is paid to both the personal and public significances of the rewritten myth in particular and the concept of myth in general, as pertains to representations of women and gender.

3. Rewritten myths engage in 'metamythmaking'

In this way, they take part in the mythologizing of female authorship.

4. Mythmaking is a collaborative process

It is recognised as cooperative and continuous, with no definitive end nor one definitive voice.

5. Individual myths are time-and-context bound

Each myth becomes situated within the ongoing process of mythmaking whilst aware of its own moment.

6. Individual female subjectivities are presented within broader female communities

Myth is used to interrogate the relationship between the individual and her community, with the community's advancement of paramount importance.

7. Myths expand their own 'halo of virtualities'.

Myths do not accept their earlier editions wholly, nor respond purely with hostility, but use the narrative and textual methods within that narrative to expand the 'halo of virtualities' around each myth. This may be through direct or indirect means.

#### 8. Myth is self-consciously literary

The literariness of myth is apprehended through a self-conscious consideration of the process of its construction, its transmission and place within a canon. This can also be demonstrated by a discernible awareness of myth's palimpsestic nature and considerations of 'truth' and 'authenticity'.

#### 9. Myth uses both high and low culture

This elides the boundaries between the privileged domain of the classically educated and popular literature, so as to better represent varying female experiences and languages.

#### 10. Myth engages with contemporary critical discussions

A consideration of contemporary discourse is not only ensures that myth is time-and-context bound, but it allows myth to be used to promote the female writer within her own critical landscape.

Every one of the four Canongate Myths selected for this study represents an author who is responding to their source myth in a critical way. Whether it is an outward dismissal of the singular truth of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad*, where Atwood's foreword accuses Homer of "too many inconsistencies" and the Maids suggest multiple interpretations through their interludes, or

Tiresias illuminating Freud's reading of the Oedipus myth by suggesting he was the only man to not suffer from his eponymous complex, these texts have all problematised their sources in considerable ways. Heracles is removed from his heroic pedestal and Iphis does not become a boy, with Ovid's obsession with what people had under their togas humorously identifying us to that critical engagement with the source. These are considerable shifts, not merely in terms of narrative, but in terms of approach to established story.

Relevant too for each author are the questions of the personal and public significances of mythology, first identified by Ostriker and then expanded herein. The Canongate project engrained in the authors an awareness from the outset of the public significance of myth. At its most basic, it is significant within this context as a marketing ploy. This public significance was reasserted with every published addition to the corpus, with the Canongate thesis statement pasted atop each and every new rewritten myth emphasising this very facet. But none of these texts were content to simply use a recognisable ancient narrative to create something directly for the market; indeed, at times the recognised public significance of the rewritings flew in the face of expectation, as evidenced by the more critical reviews. This public significance is present in Penelope's self-characterisation as a "stick used to beat other women with"; Atwood's establishment of this accepted ideal of wifely loyalty then ironically subverted by her Penelope functioning more as an unhappy and troublesome individual than as a paragon of feminine perfection. In this way, *The Penelopiad*

indicates an awareness of Penelope's public reception and simultaneously expands her significance beyond those parameters.

The public significance of the Oedipus myth is unavoidable in *Where Three Roads Meet*. As Tiresias tells Freud, the story has never been the same since he told it, and we are reminded consistently of the effect one retelling of a myth has had upon the public psyche, and, indeed, upon our understanding of how that psyche works. Questions of the public significance of the Oedipal myth regarding gender are confronted too; through silence and a state of lack the reader is forced to acknowledge how the process of mythological transmission of this story failed to consider the motivation of its primary female character, Jocasta, and how Freud's inability to apprehend this informed, in part, his inability to adequately theorise the feminine, thus leading to the profound and symbolic female silencing within the text.

Smith's rewrite is also aware of the public significance, not just of Ovid's myth of Iphis and Ianthe but of all myths. The marketing myths of the Pure corporation and myths about lesbian sexuality perpetuated in the Inverness pub sit alongside an interrogation of the myths we construct about gender. Myths about our relationship to the natural world are similarly explored through a loving rejuvenation of the nonhuman landscape and an eroticization of natural language. Smith's connection of those myths to her source myth establishes all of these mythologies as significant within the public realm and something which, according to "the message boys" (Anthea and Robin) "MUST CHANGE" (133).

It's present too in *Weight*, felt in Winterson's considerations of authenticity and the 'real', opposing her "authentic" revision against "reality TV or the kind of plodding fiction that only works as low-grade documentary" (xix). An interesting dimension in Winterson's myth is that in addressing so particularly the personal significance of the myth of Atlas for her as a writer, she is in turn addressing the public myth of herself as writer, sharing with her public readership different versions of the events of her life presented in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* which had been assumed to be purely autobiographical since. But for *Weight* the primary consideration is the private significance of the myth; Winterson's exploration of the myth of Atlas clearly resonated with her in a deep, and I suggest, Jungian way, providing her with the language to articulate what had been previously repressed and paving the way to her writing *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

*Where Three Roads Meet* should also surely be seen as an engagement with the private significance of myth, given Vickers's profession as a psychoanalyst. Approaching the Oedipus myth, the narrative which lent itself to Freud's most famous theory and the "shibboleth" of all subsequent psychoanalytic enquiry, afforded an opportunity to reconsider the lynchpin of this most complex of complexes. For Atwood, *The Penelopiad* provided the opportunity to re-engage with themes and characters first explored in her poetry. For Smith, we can infer the personal significance of the embodiment and eroticization of her native landscape, the city of Inverness. Beyond these identified significances there are, of course, the personal significances that cannot be adequately mapped: the alterations on an unconscious level which

occur as a result of rewriting for both writers and readers. The expansion of myth's halo of virtualities, reiterated throughout, renders possible new mythological configurations within our personal unconscious which may in time become consciously felt.

Feminist metamythmaking, identified earlier in this study as the process of self-consciously identifying the process of mythmaking so that it in turn becomes a myth and thus simultaneously expands the myth's significance and draws attention to its nature as a constructed narrative, is present throughout all of these texts. From Winterson's mythologising of the phone call she received from Canongate, to the establishment of Anthea and Robin as mutual mythmakers and to Atwood's informative introduction where she details the research she conducted into the mythmaking process which supported her own mythmaking process, the novellas all betray a self-conscious awareness of the experience of creating and recreating myth and their authorial presence within that experience. Vickers is possibly the least present authorial voice in her novella, but even she cannot resist contributing an author's note which details her research and justifies her choices, detailing that like Atwood, she also attempted to draw on "other, more fragmentary, sources" whilst constructing her rewrite. These stories become enquiries as much as narratives and throughout, the female rewriter makes herself felt as she writes. The myth of the female mythmaker is thus expanded when we read these stories.

Another quality I identified earlier as positive within a feminist rewriting is the text's refusal to privilege absolute versions and the recognition of

mythmaking as an ongoing process in which not only one voice is heard. All four novellas draw upon many sources: fragmentary tales, oral traditions, personal experience, through epigraphs the works of E.M. Forster, Joseph Roth, Kathy Acker, John Lyly and Robert Graves, and of course modernist authors such as Eliot and Joyce. In this way, they are intertextual negotiations between stories, using other versions and other voices to influence their own voice. All four texts are themselves clearly polyphonic; in *The Penelopiad* we have Penelope and her chorus of maids; in *Weight* we have the voice of Atlas through indirect discourse and the voice of Winterson through direct confession; in *Girl meets boy* the me, you, them, us, all together now complement and the layering of storytelling that occurs between Anthea and her lover and in *Where Three Roads Meet* we have the voice of Freud himself from *Interpreting Dreams*, Vickers's own biographical account of Freud's later life and then the imagined Freud and Tiresias in constant dialogue. In all four texts, therefore, a plurality of perspectives is created by varying and often conflicting voices. This in turn forms these myths' prioritisation of connection and community, from the justice-seeking chorus of the maids to the elucidation of Atlas's lonely isolation as he holds up the Kosmos. Together, Anthea, Midge and Robin are able to create political messages, where before their connection there was unhappiness and misunderstanding. Vickers's establishment of the two key voices of Freud and Tiresias in turn draws attention to the voices still left unheard, Anna and Jocasta, appearing at the door with the tea tray but never admitted to the inner sanctum.

Without one single voice, the texts also do not offer definitive ends. *The Penelopiad* ends with the maids flying away as birds (196), *Weight* with “Atlas and Laika walking away” (151), *Girl meets boy* with the assurance that “death meets life meets end meets beginning all over again, the story of nature itself, ever-inventive, making one thing out of another” (160), and *Where Three Roads Meet* with the as-yet unknown experience awaiting Freud after his death, as he asks Tiresias what comes next (194), a question we do not learn the answer to. In this way, these texts betray that endless self-generating power discussed earlier, an awareness of the unfinished nature of story that is not purely postmodern in its desire for equivocality but instead acknowledges spaces to be filled by others; indeed there is the promise of ‘life after death’ in both *Girl meets boy* and *Where Three Roads Meet*, signalling the strive towards perfection that Ricoeur acknowledges as part of myth yet the texts understand can never be achieved. Instead, these are additions to an ongoing process, palimpsests which already predict the next layer of interpretation to be written on top of them.

This in turn informs their constructions as contemporary, time-and-context bound creations. Whilst *Weight* tends at times towards the ahistorical and the supposedly universal, it still acknowledges that it is a text produced in its moment and that the desire to “tell the story again”, repeated numerous times throughout, will continue to reassert itself in other contemporary moments. Furthermore, Winterson’s discussion of the need for authenticity in the time of reality TV indicates that it is, in part, a response to its own time of creation. Her satirical deployment of the modern men’s rights activists’

language to describe women similarly establishes it as a myth aware of its own contemporaneity. The modern diction of both the Atwood and the Smith rewrites place them entirely in their early twentieth-century moment, with Penelope in purgatory commenting on contemporary phenomena like the internet and people visiting museums and her descriptions of “Odysseus and Telemachus snuff[ing] the Maids” suggesting a shift away from more earnest, weightier mythological diction. Only *Where Three Roads Meet* does not forthrightly present its identity as a myth of its moment, but it is a myth *about* another, historical moment – the death of Sigmund Freud and a consideration of what informed the constructions of his time-and-context bound mythologies. We feel this acknowledgement of the contemporaneity of these rewritings also through their consideration of high and low culture; *Weight* and *Where Three Roads Meet* are less invested in their mythification of low culture but in Smith we see the mythological figure of Cilla Black loom large and at Anthea and Robin’s wedding the Inverness Police Force band sing an arrangement not only of the songs of Gilbert and Sullivan but “an equally beautiful choral arrangement of Don’t Cha (Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me)” (152). These novellas, produced by authors of literary fiction for a mainstream, middle-brow publishing project, perfectly represent a blending of cultures which help to disconnect Greco-Roman myth from its previously rarefied and privileged domain of the educated classes. Storytelling may be, as Penelope claims, a “low art”, but myth has long been considered to be the purview of the privileged (1). In these texts we find

instead an interesting navigation of associations and registers which helps to erode this distinction.

Ultimately, without exception, each of the rewritten myths in my selected pantheon contains within its being a mediation on where we are now in terms of literary culture. These myths are all trying to make sense of this time past postmodernism. We see Atwood's indication of the ebbing of the postmodern and how it has been at times limiting in terms of its engagement with questions of gender. Winterson shows us clearly in *Weight* that she yearns for authenticity and boundaries, for things which can be felt to be real, all concepts which postmodernism taught us to be sceptical of and yet which we are now, in the twenty-first century, reconsidering. *Girl meets boy* seems to predict what would shortly after its publication more formally theorised as metamodernism; its use of literary modernism as an archive, its oscillations between the modern and the postmodern, and its knowingly flawed re-enchantment of the happy ending through a performatist approach are all indicative of a moving through and beyond postmodernism and suggestive of the shape of things to come. *Where Three Roads Meet* seems to re-deploy Eliot's mythic method, what J.S Brooker calls "the tendency to move forward by spiralling back and refiguring the past" (1-2).

In all of these novels, this movement beyond and through considering what has come before is done with some form of ethical purpose and most particularly, a feminist purpose which redresses the asymmetries of gender Purkiss attributes to classical mythology. Atwood seeks justice for the hanged Maids; Winterson makes Hippolyte a flesh-and-blood victim whilst

her characterisation of Heracles holds him accountable for his crimes; Smith uses myth to explore the brutal commodification of our shared landscape whilst considering how women have similarly been misrepresented and Vickers offers a new consideration of a mythical interpretation which has at times led to misogyny and essentialism. These frank reconsiderations of how women have been depicted, these interrogations – of Penelope, the Maids, Hippolyte, Hera, Iphis, Ianthe, Jocasta, Anna – show that these rewritings have at their heart a feminist impulse to challenge misogynistic constructions of femininity. These women are all distinct individuals within their novellas but considered en masse they perform multiple and varying feminine identities operating as a collective within the project, a super-chorus speaking to broader questions about how we conceive and perpetuate our stories about women.

As Purkiss warns, there is no perfect revision. At times, the texts reveal the ongoing prevalence of the gender binary. There are questions too about the implications of this new literary context which may be called post-postmodern, metamodern, hypermodern or many of the other terms male theorists have been keen to coin. Does this identified yearning for the real, the renewed interest in that which might be considered to be authentic, and this reconsideration of modernism lead us perilously close to the reinstatement of old boundaries we thought had disappeared? It is certainly a worthwhile consideration. Regarding this interest in modernism, it is curious to note that all four authors are all graduates of English Literature, with Smith even beginning (but abandoning) a PhD in American and Irish modernism

(Germana and Horton 3). Thus all four authors have had, it is presumed, an education in modernism and its mythical method. Given the privilege of this education, could it be that modernist myth becomes, rather than a liberating discourse for the female writer, just another body of mythological literature held in reserve for those lucky enough to receive a university education? This is clearly a danger.

Yet there is something both rejuvenating and reassuring in texts which are so clearly in favour of the power of storytelling to achieve *something*. I earlier detailed Kostkowska's characterisation of Smith's "essentially modernist confidence in the redemptive, transformative value of art" and this is something I feel we could apply to all of these authors. There is confidence enough here to aspire towards the transcendental, and if tempered, it can allow the political and the ethical the space for expression they have struggled to find in the strongest days of postmodern disintegration and paranoia. Sometimes it is important to adopt a position; it is also important for that position to be shifting and responsive. This reconsideration of the power of art to shape and console exists simultaneously with the aforementioned revitalisation of the feminist movement post-2008; we find a kind of hope in all of these texts, the expectation of more to come. In 2019, the landscape has changed even more. In the post-truth era of fake news, the desire for that which can be understood as true, given the damaging consequences of multitudinous and nefarious untruths, becomes all the more understandable.

I suggest that what becomes necessary, therefore, is the adoption of, as detailed previously, a rewriting that is at once earnest in its philosophies but ironic in its practices. These philosophies must be continually reassessed but this paradoxical use of irony to promote sincerity may allow for ethical statements to emerge from transformative works of art. Susan Sellers writes hopefully in her conclusion that:

The increasing introduction of mechanical body parts will have a dramatic impact on the way we perceive gender, and the easy circulation made possible by computers will have equally radical implications for our myth-making. At best, the speed and facilitated interactivity of such communications will promote the collective and continual recreation exhibited as the way forward [...] Whether this will prevent the ensuing consensus from forming itself into a new authoritarianism is something only the future will reveal. (139).

Eighteen years after the publication of Sellers's monograph, we do see the development of new authoritarianisms; as I write these very words the world is reeling from a terrorist attack in Christ Church, New Zealand, which appears to have been informed by the mythologies of alt-right discourse. Yet if everything can become, as Barthes believes, a myth, then to avoid myth altogether leaves its creation to those who would continue to perpetuate asymmetries in gender, class, race and ability.

The strategies outlined within this thesis are offered as a recommendation for the pragmatic tempering of absolutism; a continued endorsement of myth's ongoing, palimpsestic and collaborative nature ought to help avoid the worst of its extremities. The female-authored Greco-Roman texts of the Canongate Myths series serve as four examples of how women writers can engage with the fraught, both true and untrue, slippery yet

seductive, power of myth as a creative force whilst simultaneously advancing a feminist position. Having thus satisfied the demands of this project, it is time now, like Winterson's *Atlas*, to place my burden down.

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