

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

RE-CHARTING THE PRESENT: FEMINIST REVISION OF CANONICAL
NARRATIVES BY CONTEMPORARY WOMEN WRITERS

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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In this thesis, I explore the textual strategy of feminist revision employed by contemporary women writers. After investigating Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a prototype of feminist revision, I focus specifically on Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" as a revision of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* as a revision of the Old Testament Flood narrative, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* as a revision of Homer's *Odyssey* and the Troy narratives, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* as a revision of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Through investigating the historical and literary contexts of each revisioned text, I identify the critical focus of the revision and analyse the textual effect produced by the revision. In each case, the feminist revision exposes the underlying ideological assumptions of the source text. By rewriting the canonical narrative from an alternative perspective, each revision extends beyond the source text, altering meaning and reinterpreting key symbols for feminist ends.

Key Words: Feminist Revision

Angela Carter

Michèle Roberts

Margaret Atwood

Ursula K. Le Guin

Polyphony

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This thesis is dedicated to
my Virgil and Beatrice –

Lynnette and Iain Provan –

guides along the
mysterious path.

The Other Side of the Story: an Introduction to Feminist Revision of Narratives

‘There is always the other side, always.’ – Antoinette Cosway

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 77.

Stories, while engaging the imagination and hinting toward what may be considered universal principles, are necessarily embedded in historical and cultural contexts. Stories are constructed, told and retold in different settings and at different times; they are created, adapted, translated, referenced, echoed and reinvented for new audiences in unrelenting proliferation. Karl Kroeber goes as far as to assert that stories are ‘endlessly retold, and told *in order to be retold*.’¹ Yet readers still find parameters to tales, limits to narrative retelling. Authoritative versions of tales emerge, circulate, and enter the cultural imagination. Indeed, many texts of the Western canon refer back to earlier texts, such as the *Aeneid* to the *Iliad*, the gospels to each other and to the Old Testament, *Paradise Lost* to the Bible, and Shakespeare’s plays to a range of sources. The retellings of tales may vary in more than setting or cultural specificity, but may differ in their approach, as well. Retellings may be benevolent or antagonistic toward an earlier telling. There is, then, a tension latent in all storytelling – the tension of the potential to perpetuate or subvert a canonical narrative.

To say that the outcome of a retelling – whether it reinforces or challenges the source narrative – is determined by the gender of the teller/author would oversimplify the complexities of human existence. However, literary critics can identify patterns of retellings which emerge along gendered lines. For example, men and women writers in

¹ Karl Kroeber, *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times* (New Brunswick: Rutgers university Press, 1992), 1.

Victorian England used ancient Greek and Roman narratives in their texts as images, allusions, and retellings. Indeed, the use of Hellenism became a cultural marker of education in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. However, as Isobel Hurst details in *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (2006), men had access to classical education in schools and universities that their women counterparts did not. As such, women had a different relationship with Greek narratives and language: as they did not have to memorize Greek and Latin or take formal examinations,² their learning was primarily self-motivated (though often influenced by the encouragement of a father, brother, or male friend).³ This differing relationship to Greek language and literature affects Victorian the author's usage. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of Hellenic allusion in *Aurora Leigh* suggests a different relationship to the tradition than her male counterparts, using both ancient poetic models and more contemporary Romantic texts in a manner which destabilizes parameters of genre, gender, and authoritative tellings. For Hurst, *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates 'what a woman with poetic ambitions might feel about her relationship to the masculine literary tradition.'⁴

Modernist writer H.D. similarly disrupts canonical narratives in her retelling of Helen's journey during the battle of Troy. In *Helen in Egypt* (1961), H.D. appropriates apocryphal narratives of Helen residing in Egypt rather than Troy during the infamous war to write a 'revisionary epic.'⁵ In contrast to male Modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and, in particular, Ezra Pound, H.D. questions narrative authority and ideology while highlighting 'the process of telling and retelling in which Helen and the

² Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 63-65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵ Robert O'Brien Hokanson, "'Is It All a Story?': Questioning Revision in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*" in *American Literature*, 64.2 (1992): 331.

poem are engaged.⁶ For Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, H.D.'s epic both parallels and critiques her male counterparts in her use of source materials, refusal to engage a messianic figure, as well as her alternating employment of prose and poetry.⁷ Ultimately, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* deviates from other Modernist narratives, especially Pound's *Cantos*, and, in so doing, participates in the gendered pattern of retelling.

This pattern of women rewriting canonical narratives is reaffirmed and further distinguished by feminist scholar Adrienne Rich. Situated in second-wave feminism in the United States, Rich asserts that women's political critique should incorporate a literary critique which would return to old texts – reread and rewrite them. This return, Rich termed 'Re-vision':

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women 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. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. 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, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh.⁸

Rich suggests in this definition that revision will entail incisive questioning of identity and representation, nomenclature and authority as they are performed in the literary tradition. Certainly the retellings that predate Rich – such as those by Barrett and H.D. –

⁶ Ibid., 340.

⁷ Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, 'Seaward: H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* as a Response to Pound's *Cantos*' in *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.4 (1998): 479.

⁸ Ibid., 167.

echo this description of revision. Yet Rich heralds a fresh return to rereading with the aim to rewrite, revision what has come before. Indeed, her now famous essay ‘When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ (1971) was first delivered at a feminist literary convention that was organised as a ‘subversive occasion’ against the ‘gentlemanly rites’ of the Modern Language Association convention.⁹ What may be recognised as a perennial return to retellings was, at the time, a radical assertion – that women have been misrepresented in literature, that language has both trapped and liberated women, and that a new identity and a feminist future can be created through revision. Rich’s call for survival is not a physical survival, but a survival within cultural history. Revision allows readers to see how ‘we have been led to imagine ourselves’ and how to shift that vision to something more liberating. *Revision* moves beyond rewriting a story – it identifies how women have been represented and shifts representation, allowing for women to be *seen* differently. By constructing alternative representations of women in literature, feminist revisionists seek to change how women live. As Judith Fetterley writes, ‘To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us.’¹⁰ Distrusting the political vision and ideology latent in traditional narratives, Rich’s revision is simultaneously a literary and political movement in which women are urged to commandeer and reappropriate problematic ideological claims. If we take seriously Louis Althusser’s claim that ideology is a material existence (enacted by subjects through participation in apparatuses and is reproduced in its re-enactment), then feminist critics are able to explore reproductions of ideology within the literary canon.¹¹ This thesis aims to participate in the perennial act of revision by critically

⁹ Gelpi, 166.

¹⁰ Judith Fetterley, ‘Preface,’ *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), xix – xx.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation’ (1977) in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 112, 113.

examining the works of contemporary women writers, to read afresh and see afresh, and to 'find language and images' for feminist futures.¹²

Rich's concept of revision has been taken up by other women writers. Feminist critic Sharon Rose Wilson, who furthered Rich's notion in relation to the works of Margaret Atwood, asserts that 'revision' – as it occurs within feminist literature – is a way to 'transform images that actually or seemingly constrict women and men's roles and lives.'¹³ Revision, then, implies a double vision: looking back upon narratives and images which have been negative for women in particular, and looking forward toward narratives and images which do not pose the same restrictions. Feminist critic Coral Ann Howells responds to Rich's theory of revision, writing, 'Revision involves a critical response to the traditional narratives of a culture and then a reinterpretation of them from a new perspective, which offers a critique of the value structures and power relations (the 'ideological implications') coded into texts.'¹⁴ As Howells' statement highlights, addressing and appropriating ideological codes within narrative is a crucial component of feminist revision. Feminist revisionists are, therefore, 'resisting readers;' as Fetterley writes, 'the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader.'¹⁵

In their introduction to Rich's essay, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi remark that Rich and her contemporaries are 'challenging the sacredness of the gentlemanly canon, sharing the rediscovery of buried works by women, asking women's

¹² Rich, 168. For more on Rich and the revision of sacred narratives, see: Heather Walton, 'Are the Words Really Lost? Feminist Revisionist Myth Making in the Work of Michele Roberts' in *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 79-80.

¹³ Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 1993), xxi. While Wilson concentrates her work on Margaret Atwood, her introduction broadly includes the work of many contemporary feminists.

¹⁴ Carol Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, Second Edition (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 9.

¹⁵ Fetterley, xxii.

questions, bringing literary history and criticism back to life.’¹⁶ Political resistance to male-dominance and the pursuit of self-knowledge for women are significant characteristics of feminist revision. Rich’s political method is literary: she seeks to interrogate old texts, atomize the canon, and enable the survival of women in cultural history.

While revision is historically rooted in second wave feminism, it is compatible with feminisms both preceding and succeeding late 1960s’ concerns. Feminist revision, I argue, is fundamentally feminist in that it is occupied with analysis that considers social, linguistic, and political constructs which affect women. Women writers from Wollstonecraft to Woolf have interrogated socio-political structures that cement inequality between sexes. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) – translated into English as *The Second Sex* in 1953 by H.M. Parshley – addresses the asymmetry of political and social access for women and theorized why such conditions persist, identifying prejudice against and marginalization of women. By tracing philosophical and theological definitions of women from Aristotle (who asserted that female nature is ‘afflicted with a natural defectiveness’¹⁷) and St Thomas Aquinas (who categorized women as imperfect men), Beauvoir identifies that woman has been defined only ever in relation to man.¹⁸ Woman, Beauvoir famously writes:

is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.¹⁹

¹⁶ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, ‘Introduction’ in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1993), 166.

¹⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) (trans) H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Beauvoir identifies man as the determining standard, the Subject, whereas woman is considered marginal, secondary. Her articulation of woman as sex, as opponent, as oppressed, as ultimately Other provides a way of understanding the position of woman in society. Beauvoir continues, ‘Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth.’²⁰ Legends, like those of Eve and Pandora, have been constructed as proof of the inferiority of women. Women have been excluded from religion, philosophy, and theology as well as science. Beauvoir cited both biology and experimental psychology as systems that reinforce patriarchal sensibility.²¹ Thus, there is no single claim for women to combat, no isolated declaration for women to rebut.

Hélène Cixous elaborates on Beauvoir’s discussion of the Other and unpacks the structural necessity of Other-ness. Cixous writes, ‘There has to be some “other” – no master without a slave, no economico-political power without exploitation, [...] no property without exclusion – an exclusion that has its limits and is part of the dialectic.’²² Cixous argues that there can be no patriarchy without oppressed women, that patriarchy is latent in all aspects of the Western tradition, and that women are oppressed in all aspects of the Western tradition. Phallogentrism is pervasive: masculinity is privileged in history, philosophy, literature, and law. In exposing this ‘intrinsic connection between the philosophical and the literary [...] and the phallogentric’ Cixous notes that the next task for those who wish to disrupt the structure will be to rewrite, re-see, revision the inherited traditions – literary, political, philosophical, and historical.²³ Cixous writes:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties’ in *The Newly Born Woman*, Theory and History of Literature 24 (trans) Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 65.

If some fine day it suddenly came out that the logocentric plan had always, inadmissibly, been to create a foundation for (to found and fund) phallogocentrism, to guarantee the masculine order a rationale equal to history itself.

So all the history, all the stories would be there to retell differently; the future would be incalculable. [...]

When they wake up from among the dead, from among words, from among laws.

Once upon a time . . . ²⁴

Interestingly, Cixous lobbies for the rewriting of not just History, but all stories, including fairy tales. For, as Cixous suggests, the reality of women in the fairy tale is the reality of women in History:

One cannot yet say of the following history ‘it’s just a story.’ It’s a tale still true today. Most women who have awakened remember having slept, *having been put to sleep.*

Once upon a time . . . once . . . and once again.

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable.²⁵

In as much as the discourses of history, philosophy, law, and literature – from fairy tales to classical literature – are phallogocentric, so there must be revision – re-entering the old stories and seeing them anew, being critical of male dominance and therefore, as Rich states, living afresh. Cixous’s articulation of phallogocentrism putting women to sleep and the subsequent need for awakening evokes Rich’s call for an awakening. Both Cixous and Rich – as authors and critics – recognize a pattern which silences and restrains women. A cultural movement which puts women to sleep – telling them how to behave (namely, passively), reinforcing that behaviour, and *normalizing* that

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

behaviour. It is this normalization which Cixous and Rich which to destabilize and, effectively, enable women to awaken.

Rewriting from the perspective of the marginalised is a feature that is not exclusive to feminist revision. Indeed, postmodernism is characterized in part by the rewriting of canonical texts. When working toward a definition of postmodern narrative theory, Mark Currie identifies four primary characteristics of postmodern texts, including intertextuality:

Postmodern novels are intertextual novels. They are highly aware of their condition in a world pervaded by representations, and of their place in a tradition, or a history of representations including other novels. They are citational, in the sense that they cite, allude to, refer to, borrow from or internalize other texts and representations, both real or fictional. They belong to a more general cultural condition in which cultural forms recycle, repeat, reshape and rewrite past forms.²⁶

Postmodernism in literature, then, examines previous texts through citation and allusion and plays with representation.

Linda Hutcheon discusses the commonalities between feminism and postmodernism. Postmodernism, Hutcheon explains, is concerned with de-naturalizing the natural, with ideology within representation, and with subjectivity (representations of the self).²⁷ She suggests that postmodernism and feminisms become conflated because both theoretical approaches share an interest in representation ‘that purportedly neutral process that is now being deconstructed in terms of ideology.’²⁸ Yet the two theories remain distinct. As Hutcheon articulates, feminism ‘resists’ being incorporated into postmodernism because their ‘political agendas would be endangered, or at least

²⁶ Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Second Edition. Transitions (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 3.

²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

obscured.’²⁹ Feminism differs from postmodernism by social practice: feminisms go beyond a critique of systems to changing the systems.³⁰ Postmodernism is political, but it is ‘politically ambivalent,’ whereas feminism is a political movement working for social change.³¹ Postmodernism, Hutcheon writes, has ‘no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*.’³² Postmodernism is eager to obscure representation and destabilize constructs, and therefore will only ever disfigure. Feminism, on the other hand, is anchored in political action and works to reconfigure. A postmodern text may manipulate the signification of an image, character, or event, but a feminist text will work to transform the signification of the image, character, or event. Thus, feminist revision is *feminist* in its concern for action.

Feminist revision is also *revisionist* insofar as it is preoccupied with returning to earlier texts and re-writing them in ways that cross-examine the previous texts and alerts the reader to this interrogation.³³ As such, feminist revision participates within Adaptation Studies. Adaptation – a ‘ubiquitous palimpsestic form’³⁴ – supplants straightforward allusion and ‘extends beyond fragmented allusion,’ becoming a ‘more sustained reworking’ of a source text.³⁵ Adaptation involves a double process for the adaptor: first interpreting the source text, then creating a new text. Adaptation also, as Julie Sanders describes, ‘is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text.’³⁶ For Sanders, adaptation ‘signals a relationship with an informing source text.’³⁷ Yet this process involves defamiliarization that ‘serves to reveal what is repressed or

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ As identified by Currie, postmodernism is also concerned with rewriting. Here, however, I am focusing not on postmodernism but how feminist revision functions within adaptation studies.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2013), 139.

³⁵ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2006), 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

suppressed in an original.’³⁸ There is also an interpretive doubling involved in adaptation which Linda Hutcheon explains, for the knowing audience, includes a ‘conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing.’³⁹ The reception of an adapted work, then, is not straightforward: it involves the context of the source text as well as that of the adapted text. Adaptation, and revision as a sub-category, involves a symbiotic relationship between source text and adapting text.

The reader’s interpretation of the adapted text is complicated by the historical context of the moment of reception. As Hutcheon states, ‘contemporary events or dominant images condition our perception as well as interpretation.’⁴⁰ Sanders, elaborating on the role of the reader in adaptation, writes, ‘Each moment of reception is individual and distinct, albeit governed by manifold conventions and traditions, by prior knowledge and previous texts: the old story becomes in this respect a very new one, told – and read – for the first time.’⁴¹ Thus, the reader’s reception of the adapted text is conditioned by elements external to the text.

Another component of adaptation is, for the knowing reader, an observable ontological shift between the source text and new text. Hutcheon regards this shift as especially apparent in literary or cinematic adaptations of historical events and the life events of an actual person.⁴² An historical event or person’s biography is given narrative shape by the adaptor. By varying emphasis and omission, the adaptor creates a disparity between the way the event/person may have been initially understood and how the event/person is constructed in the adapted medium. This reconstruction has

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ Hutcheon, 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴¹ Sanders, 81.

⁴² Hutcheon, 17.

a potentially disruptive effect. As Hutcheon observes, adaptations ‘disrupt elements like priority and authority’ as well as ‘destabilise formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations.’⁴³ This disruption is also identified by Sanders who discussed the ‘rewriting impulse’ as that which can ‘destabilize the authority of the text.’⁴⁴ It is from this ontological shift that adaptation acquires its subversive potential.

Some feminist critics read adapted texts as not fully dislodging the ideological assumptions of the source text, but as inevitably reappropriated by the source text. As Sanders writes, ‘Counter discourses, in seeking to challenge the values on which a canon is established, cannot help but re-inscribe the canon, but they do so in new, and newly critical ways.’⁴⁵ This position assumes that any reference to the canon necessarily reinforces the boundaries of the canon. However, the act of revision does not necessarily re-inscribe the authority of the canon. Indeed, the work of revision overall and feminist revision in particular includes an ontological reorientation of canonical texts. Such reorientation refuses re-inscription. This thesis assumes that the ontological shift made possible in adaptation is amplified in revision. Caught in the flipping back and forth process of reading a text which moves beyond allusion and intertextuality to an abrupt re-entry of the source text (the criteria for which I state below), the reader of the new text is necessarily informed by their contemporary historical context and immersed in strategies of defamiliarization.

This thesis will investigate contemporary texts written by women that respond to canonical narratives. Participating in the discipline of adaptation studies, the following texts highlight the symbiotic relationship between source text and adapting text, maintain subversive potential through the ontological shift inherent in adaptation, and

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁴ Sanders, 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

are informed by the context of the adapted text. As practising feminist revision specifically, these texts target ideology of male dominance and create a new way of seeing – a new vision – of representations of women.

There are earlier critical projects which ask feminist questions of texts by women writers who address canonical literature. Molly Hite's *The Other Side of the Story* (1989) examines four novels written by women that she reads as destabilizing traditional narratives. Hite begins her study by asking 'Why don't women writers produce postmodern fiction?' and quickly asserts that women have been writing 'innovative narrative strategies' which are distinct from postmodernism – 'equally concerned with the languages of high and low culture, for instance, but differently implicated in these languages, similarly aware of the material and cultural conditions of their own writing but calling attention to this status in more complicated and more ideologically charged ways.'⁴⁶ Hite uses the metaphor of the other side to describe the contemporary feminist narratives which enter and oppose a story 'purporting to be "the" story.'⁴⁷ In this text, Hite is concerned with fictions by women which she reads as employing 'decentering and disseminating strategies' that emphasize 'conventionally marginal characters and themes.'⁴⁸ Echoing Beauvoir, Hite states that this other side 'makes visible the association of alterity – otherness – with woman as a social, cultural, and linguistic construction: Other *as* woman.'⁴⁹

Hite's focus shifts from asking why women writers do not produce postmodern fiction to examining experimental fictions by women that share the decentering strategies of postmodern narratives, which also involve re-centring the value structure of

⁴⁶ Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 1, 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

the narrative.⁵⁰ Hite analyses four texts: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976). In inspecting them, Hite explores women's relationship to language as well as the feminist writer's relation to the narrative tradition, a tradition 'that works to inscribe her within its own ideological codes.'⁵¹ She examines how alternative tellings of traditional narratives may 'give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphasis and values;' therefore, providing new meanings.⁵² While Hite has been criticized for not including a larger sample of texts,⁵³ her study still maintains a rigorous exploration of the strategies of women writers.

Published just two years later, Gayle Greene's *Changing the Story* (1991) focuses on what she terms feminist metafiction – a movement which emerged in the early 1970s in British, Canadian, and US women's fiction which comprised a form of feminist fiction 'that concerns women writers' relation to "the tradition."'⁵⁴ Like Hite, Greene highlights the exclusion of women writers from postmodern analysis and writes her text as a corrective. With the telling sub-title of 'Feminist Metafiction as Re-Vision,' Greene explores feminist fiction in relationship to the tradition, that 'canon of "great books" that dominates the study of English Literature.'⁵⁵

Greene is interested in structural forms and strategies of 'other endings' which deviate from the conventional marriage plot, examining women's self-conscious fiction 'that explores women's efforts at liberation in relation to problems of narrative form.'⁵⁶ Greene investigates Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Margaret Drabble's

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ Ellen E. Berry, 'Postmodern Feminists,' *NOVEL* 24(3): 1991, 326.

⁵⁴ Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

The Waterfall (1969), Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) – focusing on narrative strategy and intertextuality. These four texts exemplify feminist metafiction as a 'form of feminist literary criticism.'⁵⁷ For Greene, feminist metafiction resolves a crucial debate in feminist criticism between those who regard adaptation of traditionally male dominated modes of writing and analysis to be a viable means to articulate female oppression and desire and those who rejecting these male dominated modes because they may reinscribe women's marginality. In opposition to critics who seek to maintain and perpetuate the canon,⁵⁸ feminist metafiction engages with revision of canonical texts and 'renaming of the world.'⁵⁹ Greene selects fiction which 'challeng[es] the ideological complicity of the signification process while also basing itself in that signification process.'⁶⁰ Greene concludes her study with an exploration of postfeminist fiction and identifying what she sees as a contemporary problem of severing political and social change.

Greene has been criticized for focusing exclusively on white authors,⁶¹ yet manages to 'bridge the Franco-American divide' and successfully engages with questions of language and representation.⁶² While it may be argued that Hite succumbs to the assumed trap that challenging the canon somehow reinforces the canon, Greene reads this challenge as characteristic of women's writing. Greene writes, 'We should, rather, view the *process* of appropriation as itself constituting an alternative: that is, it is the woman writer's engagement with the tradition that is distinctive about women's

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁸ T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and Harold Bloom contribute to the maintenance of the canon.

⁵⁹ Greene, 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, 'The Stories of Our Lives,' *The Women's Review of Books* 10.2 (1992): 11.

⁶² Ellen Cronan Rose, 'American Feminist Criticism of Contemporary Women's Fiction,' *Signs* 18.2 (1993): 364.

writing.’⁶³ This is a position that I share with Greene, namely that intertextuality does not necessitate affirmation of the source text.

Nancy Walker’s *The Disobedient Writer: Women and the Narrative Tradition* (1995), addresses the woman writer, marginalization, as well as the role of intertextuality. Walker, like Karl Kroeber in *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times* (1992), acknowledges that all stories are told and retold. Yet, Walker suggests, there has been an asymmetrical acceptance of retellings/adaptations by men and women: ‘Considerable evidence exists, however, to suggest that male and female writers have not participated in this appropriative and revisionary process in the same ways or for the same reason.’⁶⁴ Walker writes:

Because of the way in which Western literary traditions have been formulated, however, most male writers who have appropriated and revised previous texts have worked within a tradition that included them and their experience, whereas women writers have more commonly addressed such texts from the position of outsider, altering them either to point up the biases they encode or to make them into narratives that women can more comfortably inhabit.⁶⁵

One revised text by a male author is John Milton for *Paradise Lost* (1667) – a text which rewrites the Christian Fall narrative and is maintained within and perpetuates a tradition. As Marcia Landy writes, ‘Milton [...] believed fully in his mission as upholder of the domination of humankind by a male God, male language, male power in art and in society. In giving play to his imagination, he succeeded in weaving together a magnificent edifice of classical and Christian mythology which legitimizes male

⁶³ Greene, 21.

⁶⁴ Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and the Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

supremacy.⁶⁶ As Landy emphasizes, Milton's great literary contribution is a definitive text in Western culture transmits negative representations of women. There has not been, to my knowledge, a female counterpart to Milton – a woman writer whose imaginative work of art rewrites a prominent text and occupies a comparable place in the canon. This disparate reception of male and female writers is what Walker identifies as the crux of the problem with traditional narratives.

Walker responds to this inequality with a call for disobedient reading – a reading which 'resists sexist and racist formulations and that results in a new text that attempts to overturn these formulations which remaining sufficiently referential to the origin to make the point clear.'⁶⁷ Revision, for Walker, stems from this approach to reading and is disobedient because of its relationship to authority, namely working to 'expose or upset the paradigms of authority inherent in the texts they appropriate.'⁶⁸ Revisionary writers appropriate 'public domain stories' – including biblical narratives, historical events, and fairy tales – which readers are expected to know.⁶⁹ Walker acknowledges Hite and Greene as her predecessors and agrees with their assumption that changing the story has social implications, 'suggesting in narrative practice the possibility of cultural transformation.'⁷⁰ Likewise, this study is interested in the possible social implications of a literary interrogation of domination and exclusivity.

This project, like Walker's, is 'suggestive rather than comprehensive.'⁷¹ In the early stages of this thesis, I sought to establish feminist revision as a sub-genre of feminist literary criticism. After consideration, I have come to agree with Toril Moi that

⁶⁶ Marcia Landy, 'The Silent Woman: Towards a Feminist Critique' in *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, (eds) Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷¹ Walker, 11.

the process of canonization itself is problematic.⁷² To establish a sub-genre and create a canon of feminist revisionist texts fails to accommodate significant literary differences such as genre and socio-historical conditions. Therefore, instead of establishing an alternative canon or simply providing a catalogue of revisionist texts, I plan to investigate revision as a feminist strategy.

I have chosen texts based on a set of criteria which, taken together, allow for an appropriate cross-section of material for investigation. As my title suggests, my study has two primary components – contemporary female authorship and revision of traditional narrative. I am curious to understand how recent women writers respond to traditional narratives as outsiders. I seek to observe the way in which women writers employ strategies for Richian survival. Firstly, the texts I have selected engage with stories that Walker refers to as ‘public domain stories’ – stories which are latent in contemporary cultural consciousness. Specifically, I will be looking at women writers whose texts revision biblical narratives, fairy tales, and classical authors Homer and Vergil. Thus, I will not be looking at Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1967) even though it reanimates the characters of a well-known fairy tale and employs postmodern tactics of metafiction.⁷³ Likewise, I will not examine James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Secondly, I am interested in prose texts⁷⁴ that re-enter traditional narrative on the level of setting. Or, to use the terminology of Gérard Genette, I am focusing on texts written by women who engage the pseudo-temporal order of the source text.⁷⁵ This

⁷² Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1985), 78.

⁷³ For a discussion of Barthelme and metafiction, see: Larry McCaffery, ‘Donald Barthelme and the Metafictional Muse’ in *SubStance* 9.2 (1980): 88. While *Snow White* is not directly addressed by McCaffery, he notes Betty Flower’s discussion of *Snow White* when discussing metafictional elements of the role of the narrator.

⁷⁴ Contemporary feminist revisions have occurred in other genres, such as poetry. I have restricted my study to prose.

⁷⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 1972 (trans) Jane E Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34.

criterion excludes Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1992) which transfers Shakespeare's *King Lear* to a 1950s farm in Iowa.

My third criterion concerns plot; namely, I have chosen texts that maintain the events of the source text. Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997) provides insight into authority and representation of womanhood, especially female sexuality, through the technique of reframing, yet the actual events of the source text change in her rewriting. For example, in her retelling of Cinderella entitled 'The Tale of the Shoe,' Donoghue's female protagonist rejects the prince for the embraces of the fairy-godmother figure. Introducing a lesbian narrative certainly challenges heterosexual normativity as described by Rich.⁷⁶ However, I am interested in how new meanings are created by maintaining the events of the source text rather than altering the plot.

Fourthly, I am choosing to work with texts that retain the major characters of the source text. A key example which does not include all the major characters is Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984) or, as it was published in the US, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. Roberts's novel rewrites the synoptic gospels, retaining the plot of Christ's ministry and passion; however, Roberts omits the character Judas. Christ's crucifixion becomes, then, not a betrayal of a disciple but an expected course for his political views. By excluding Judas, Peter is reshaped into an antagonist, if not of Christ, certainly of Mary Magdalene. The shift in signification and development of new meaning arises, in Roberts's novel, from the change of characters.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, I have chosen texts that employ a first-person narration from the female protagonist. The text that I have selected revises the source text with a woman's voice and point of view. Frequently, the source text

⁷⁶ For a compelling reading on women's sexual desire and choices, see: Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, A Norton Critical Edition (eds) Barbara Charleworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1993), 203-24.

employs an omniscient narrator or first-person male narrator. The shift, therefore, in story-telling serves to interrogate notions of authorship, authority, and alterity.

In establishing these criteria, I have narrowed the scope of my project to an appropriate size while exploring a range of feminist concerns latent in Richian revision. I read Angela Carter's short story 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979) as a revision of Charles Perrault's 'Bluebeard,' Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) as a revision of the biblical story of Noah's Ark, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) as a revision of Homer's *The Odyssey*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2009) as a revision of Vergil's *The Aeneid*. Using these texts as case studies, I seek to examine more closely what is accomplished in the process of feminist revision. My initial goal for this project was to ask the following questions about feminist revision: what is feminist revision? How does feminist revision work? What texts are being revisioned? What ideology does the new text identify as encoded in the source text? How does the latter critique and/or correct the former? What restrictive and ideological effects are reoriented by revisioning? What alternatives do the revisioned texts propose? What do readers gain by reading these texts together? I engage with and posit answers to these questions throughout this thesis.

While reading and writing about these four texts, I observe how feminist revision is bound up with questions of authority, Otherness, and representation as well as canonicity, nomenclature, intertextuality, subjectivity and womanhood in narratives. In performing close readings of the above texts, I seek to investigate the decoding/recoding and defamiliarization strategies as interrogations of ideological codes.

One prominent element of revision is narration. In each feminist revision that I explore, the writer uses an overt, first-person narrator. According to Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short, first person narrators are considered more engaging and

personable, evoking empathy from the reader. The first person narrator (also referred to as the ‘I-narrator’) ‘produces a personal relationship with the reader which inevitable tends to bias the reader in favour of the narrator/character.’⁷⁷ The author’s choice to employ a first person narrator, then, creates the effect of relate-ability for the reader. Conversely, a third person narrator distances the reader, creating the effect of being impersonal. Leech and Short describe third-person narrators as appearing to communicate with the reader without an intermediary figure.⁷⁸ This distance allows for the supposition of authority; the reader assumes the third person narrator is reliable.

At times, the narrator becomes confused with the author. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth describes what he terms the ‘implied-author’ as the perceived figure behind the text. Booth acknowledges that the implied author can be either first- or third-person narrators, yet this figure is frequently employed in third-person narration and suggests minimal dramatization. For Booth, the implied author ‘creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his nails.’⁷⁹ Booth is careful not to confuse the implied author with the ‘real man.’⁸⁰ While undramatized third-person narrators are typically considered more reliable, the descriptive focus of the narrator – overt or omniscient – is still at work, enabling the critical reader to examine ‘a particular view of the fictional world.’⁸¹ Employing overt, first-person narrators, feminist revisionists communicate to readers without a perceived intermediary. As such, the narrator becomes a relatable figure. This increased access to the personal narrator

⁷⁷ Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short. *Style in Narrative*, English Language Series (London: Longman, 1981), 265.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷⁹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 151.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸¹ Leech and Short, 185.

begins to undermine authority by emphasizing perspective. Indeed, the descriptive focus of the narrator destabilizes the construction of perceived omniscience of a narrator. The stylistic choice of the author also exposes the constructedness of the narrative.

Concerned that the author is 'limited to those aspects of linguistic choice which concern *alternative ways of rendering the same subject matter*,' Leech and Short read for omissions and emphasis which construct the fictional world.⁸² Such omissions and focalizations allows for an analysis of the text regarding point of view.

The following chapters will read each revisioned text on its own terms. So far, I have primarily covered historical and theoretical material in this introduction. I will now add textual traction to the ideas submitted thus far by analysing Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) for strategies of feminist revision. Rhys's novel is not contemporary; however, it functions as a prototype of feminist revision. It meets all four of the above criteria and stands out as a touchstone text for feminist literature. For the purposes of this thesis, I will discuss Rhys's novella as a feminist revision. I will contextualize both the source text, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Rhys's revision. By performing a critical reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a feminist revision, I will identify patterns of feminist revision and discuss how they will be used in my subsequent analysis.

Rhys's novella, rather than functioning as 'just another adaptation,'⁸³ is a revision of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys's revision tells the other side of Bertha's story, renames the character Antoinette Cosway, and includes elements of her childhood to the overall narration of how she came to inhabit the attic of Thornfield Hall. Mary Lou Emery categorizes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*.⁸⁴

⁸² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸³ Sanders, 105.

⁸⁴ Mary Lou Emery, 'Modernist Crosscurrents' in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 168.

However, Rhys's text does not simply offer a possible reading of what may have happened before readers learn of Jane. Rather, the text re-enters the setting of *Jane Eyre* and occupies the pseudo-time within Brontë's novel by setting the third section of the novella in Thornfield Hall. Rhys makes key revisions to the source text: she maintains the setting but alters the dates from the 1810s⁸⁵ to 1830s, provides the background of Bertha as Antoinette, and undermines the assumption of Bertha's madness. In doing so, Rhys exposes the underlying epistemological conflict in *Jane Eyre*.

Charlotte Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* during the emergence of two reforms in England: colonial reform and asylum reform.⁸⁶ Both reform movements were invested in the rhetoric of morality and focused on sub-human behaviours, namely sexual promiscuity and the bestial. Within the discourse of colonial reform, the Englishmen in support of colonialism argued that natives would 'live in the wild' and, without proper management, would devolve into animals,⁸⁷ while others argued that the colonizing Englishmen were 'promiscuous commerce,' taking advantage what they saw to be the availability of black and creole women.⁸⁸ Carolyn Berman cites Edward Long's 1774 history of Jamaica, which identifies the sexual promiscuity of 'indulgent' Englishmen as the source of disease.⁸⁹ Creoles – the white colonizers who were no longer considered properly English – were criticized by reformers for their behaviour as both bestial and sexually promiscuous. Seen as 'degraded by their slave purchases *and* their familiarity with slaves' white colonizers became 'estranged' from the English and became identified as morally depraved.⁹⁰ Colonial reform, then, as defined in relation to

⁸⁵ Judith L. Raiskin, Footnote, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Norton Critical Edition (London: Norton, 1999), 31.

⁸⁶ Carolyn Berman, *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

morality of nineteenth century England, sought to address the perceived bestial nature of natives as well as the sexual morality of the colonizer.

Asylum reform was concerned with the treatment of patients and articulated a similar concern with moral rhetoric. Before the Lunatic Acts of 1845, asylum occupants were ‘caged like animals, and thrown together without moral regard in a promiscuous mingling of ages, sexes, and diagnoses.’⁹¹ Sexual promiscuity was also a concern: before the reform movement, inmates were organised into groups based on illness rather than sex; the reform worked to have inmates separated by sex.⁹² In the 1830s, madness took on moral dimensions. Moral madness was considered a new sub-set of the malady, and forms of madness that had been long established were seen to have moral causes.⁹³ Treatment reflected this assertion. Showalter records one doctor who observed ‘the causation of insanity everywhere, special organic disease apart, is an affair of the three W’s – worry, want, and wickedness. Its cure is a matter of the three M’s – method, meat, and morality.’⁹⁴ Within both colonial and asylum reformation movements, advocates actively asserted moral significance as a prominent consideration for maintenance of supervised groups.

Colonial and asylum reforms resonate in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* through the character of Bertha Rochester. In Brontë’s novel, the Creole woman was described in a bestial manner through her lack of speech and animalistic behaviour. Brontë introduced readers to Bertha first via sound: Jane hears a ‘curious laugh’ soon after she arrives at Thornfield.⁹⁵ Jane reflects that, while passing time at Thornfield, she ‘not infrequently’

⁹¹ Berman, 127.

⁹² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830 - 1980* (London: Virgo, 1985), 34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ J. Mortimer Granville as qtd in Showalter, 30.

⁹⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847) Penguin Classics. Michael Mason (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1996), 122.

heard ‘the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh.’⁹⁶ Brontë also described Bertha as a ‘creature,’⁹⁷ one who speaks ‘gibberish,’⁹⁸ as one with a ‘savage face,’⁹⁹ and like a ‘Vampyre.’¹⁰⁰ She was described as moving ‘on all fours’¹⁰¹ and making ‘wolfish cries.’¹⁰² While acknowledging the shocking nature of her Creole character and describing her in a dehumanized manner, Brontë conceives of Bertha’s behaviour as natural for the sinful, depraved person; and Bertha’s depiction as bestial ‘announces’ her malady.¹⁰³

Bertha’s madness is described in terms of morality, specifically sexual impropriety. When confessing his marital status to Jane, Rochester described Bertha in moralizing terms: ‘[Bertha] ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank. [...] What a pigmy intellect she had – and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me!’¹⁰⁴ Bertha’s ‘excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity.’¹⁰⁵ Rochester continues, ‘Bertha Mason – the true daughter of an infamous mother, – dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste.’¹⁰⁶ For Rochester, Bertha’s madness was an extension of (and inevitable consequence of) her immoral behaviour.

The moral depravity of Bertha shocked initial readers. Among Brontë’s contemporaries, W.S. Smith expressed vehement concern for Bertha’s behaviour, which

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁰³ Berman, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Brontë, 345.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

he read as quite scandalous. Brontë replied to Smith's concerns in a letter, conceding that Bertha is a deplorable character; however, Brontë justified her representation of the first Mrs. Rochester as a lunatic by qualifying her as sinful:

I agree [...] that the character is shocking, but I know that it is but too natural. There is a phase of insanity which may be called *moral madness*, in which all that is good *or even human seems to disappear* from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it [...] all seems demonized. [...] Mrs. Rochester indeed lived a sinful life before she was insane[...].¹⁰⁷

In this letter, Brontë acknowledges what Leech and Short call 'stylistic choice' – a choice to depict Bertha as a character with moral madness.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys removes Bertha from the context of asylum and colonial reform in England and places her in the context of historical and personal experience in post-Emancipation Jamaica. In utilizing the historical situation of post-Emancipation Jamaica, Rhys refers to the cultural complexity experienced by the young Antoinette. Rhys introduces the reader to the time period of the plot on the first page when Antoinette's neighbour Mr. Luttrell says, 'Still waiting for this compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed. Some will wait for a long time.'¹⁰⁸ While abolitionists campaigned earlier, it was not until the 'crowded convention' at Exeter Hall in April 1833 that the bill was introduced to Parliament.¹⁰⁹

The complexities of the historical dynamics in post-Emancipation West Indies are evident within Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette Cosway Mason was associated with the planter class due to her British ancestry, yet her family was poor. The Cosways' lack of wealth was signified by their tattered clothes, shabby house, and

¹⁰⁷ Charlotte Brontë, January 4 1848, as qtd in Carolyn Vellenga Berman *Creole Crossings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 122; emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Sir Alan Burns. *History of the British West Indies* (1954) (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1965). 627.

wild garden. The wildness of the estate is contrasted to colonial prosperity; Antoinette narrated, ‘All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery – why should *anybody* work?’¹¹⁰ As poor colonials, the Cosways were rejected by the other white planters on the island who refused to associate with them.

Thus, as a young girl, Antoinette experiences isolation and hatred. Like Jane, Antoinette feels unsafe at home. She prefers to spend her time in the garden that had ‘gone wild’¹¹¹ than play with Tia who stole her clothes.¹¹² She does her best to avoid the two children who shout at her and throw her books on the ground on her way to the convent, but she cannot.¹¹³ Antoinette and her mother Annette live in social isolation of the Coulibri Estate being shunned by the white upper-class in Jamaica and abhorred by the black workers on the island. This seclusion was sealed when Annette’s horse – her only source of transportation on the island – was poisoned. Annette’s second husband, Mr Mason, does not recognize the antagonism Annette describes. Antoinette narrates a disagreement between Mr Mason, who wants to stay on the plantation, and her mother, who is desperate to leave:

‘You imagine enmity which doesn’t exist. Always one extreme or the other. Didn’t you fly at me like a wild cat when I said nigger. Not nigger, nor even negro. Black people, I must say.’

‘You don’t like, or even recognize the good in them,’ she said, ‘and you won’t believe in the other side.’

‘They’re too damn lazy to be dangerous,’ said Mr Mason. ‘I know that.’

‘They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be dangerous and cruel for reasons you wouldn’t understand.’

¹¹⁰ Rhys, 11.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

‘No, I don’t understand,’ Mr Mason always said. ‘I don’t understand at all.’

But she’d speak about going away again. Persistently. Angrily.¹¹⁴

The disagreement brings attention to conflicting epistemologies. Annette cannot make Mr Mason understand the reality of post-emancipation Jamaica. For Mr Mason, ex-slaves are lazy and childish; Annette and Antoinette know them to be angry victims.

In this scene, the overt narrator highlights what is effectively an epistemological incongruity. Because he cannot understand, cannot recognize the agency of black community or perceive their hatred, Mr Mason refuses to leave the estate. Even when he hears a commotion outside, he believes the noise to signify a wedding. Antoinette narrates, ‘Now it started up again and worse than before, my mother knows but she can’t make him believe it. I wish I could tell him that out here is not at all like English people think it is. I wish...’¹¹⁵ Yet neither Annette nor Antoinette convince Mr Mason. This inability to communicate – the sheer disjuncture of understanding – led to tragedy.

As the house burns to the ground, one of the final images Antoinette sees is the pet parrot dying. The green parrot, Coco, ‘didn’t talk very well, he could say *Qui est là?* *Qui est là?* and would answer himself *Ché Coco, Ché Coco.*’¹¹⁶ But Mr Mason had clipped his wings and, though he tries to escape the fire, he cannot. Antoinette narrates, ‘He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire.’¹¹⁷ Annette tries to save him from the fire, but Mr Mason drags her away.¹¹⁸ Mr Mason’s actions of maintenance – clipping the parrot’s wings and keeping Annette at Coulibri – were insufficient. Pierre, Annette’s son, also dies in the fire.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

Annette is unable to forgive Mr. Mason for her son's death. Whenever he approaches her, she screams '*Qui est là? Qui est là*' then 'Don't touch me. I'll kill you if you touch me. Coward. Hypocrite. I'll kill you.'¹¹⁹ Annette echoes Coco's question and, ultimately, interrogates notions of identity within an ideological construct. The clipping of the wings becomes symbolic of Annette who is unable to leave her socio-political situation.

The epistemological incongruities take on national boundaries, and the discontinuity between Mr Mason and Annette is replicated and extended between 'Rochester'¹²⁰ and Antoinette. Both Mr Mason and 'Rochester' are figured in Rhys's text as English. Mr Mason, who is 'so without a doubt English,' chose an Englishman for Antoinette who, like her mother, is 'so without a doubt not English.'¹²¹ Mr Mason arranges for his step-daughter to meet the 'English friend' who becomes her betrothed.¹²² Throughout the novella, these characters are described in relation to nationality.

The national boundaries are emblemized in the perception of the weather. Rhys's reader first meets 'Rochester' when, newlywed, he, Antoinette, and their servants process to Granbois for their honeymoon. It is raining; 'Rochester' observes it was a 'heavy rain' and wants to stop to take shelter in a hut; Antoinette contradicts him, stating, 'It's only a shower.'¹²³ As they continue up the path, 'Rochester' was critical of Antoinette, constructing her in terms of otherness. 'Rochester' narrates, 'I watched her crucially [...] She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark *alien* eyes. Creole

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁰ Jean Rhys does not name the male character; however, his name is implied by the hypertextual reference to *Jane Eyre*.

¹²¹ Rhys, 21.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 38.

of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either.’¹²⁴

Further along the path, ‘Rochester’ complains:

‘What an extreme green,’ was all I could say [...] Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her [Antoinette]. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I had not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. I looked down at the coarse mane of the horse...¹²⁵

Frustrated by the arrangement of marriage that was made on his behalf by his father,

‘Rochester’ is unable to adjust to his new environment. When the group arrives at Granbois, the couple sit down to dinner; Antoinette asks ‘Rochester’ about England.

‘Rochester’ narrates:

‘Is it true,’ she said, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.’

‘Well,’ I answered annoyed, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.’

‘But how can rivers and mountains and sea be unreal?’

‘And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?’

‘More easily,’ she said, ‘much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.’

‘No, this is unreal and like a dream,’ I thought.¹²⁶

‘Rochester’ and Antoinette’s notions of reality are in conflict. Not only do they disagree about England, but what constitutes reality.

Just as Annette is unable to make Mr Mason understand the danger at Coulibri Estate, so Antoinette is unable to make ‘Rochester’ understand the circumstances of

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39; emphasis added.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

their betrothal. 'Rochester' receives a letter from Daniel Boyd claiming to tell him the truth about the Cosway family and the new bride Antoinette. The letter speaks of 'Rochester' being a fool for marrying Antoinette, who is mad like her mother, and eventually asks for money. Responding to the letter, 'Rochester' narrates:

I folded the letter carefully and put it into my pocket. I felt no surprise. It was as if I'd expected it, been waiting for it. For a time, long or short, I don't know, I sat listening to the river. At last I stood up, the sun was hot now. I walked stiffly nor could I force myself to think. Then I passed an orchid with long sprays of golden-brown flowers. One of them touched my cheek and I remembered picking some for her one day. 'They are like you,' I told her. Now I stopped, broke a spray off and trampled it into the mud. This brought me to my senses. I leaned against the tree, sweating and trembling. 'Far too hot today,' I said aloud, 'far too hot'.¹²⁷

'Rochester's' inability to acclimatize mirrors his inability to understand Antoinette. His desire for Antoinette has broken, along with the orchid. After reading the letter, 'Rochester's' behaviour toward Antoinette changes. He becomes cold, distant, and begins to call her 'Bertha.' Recognizing the shift in his behaviour, Antoinette seeks help from Christophine for her failing marriage. Antoinette narrates, 'Up and down. When he passes my door he says, "Good night, Bertha." He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name.'¹²⁸ Having read the letter, 'Rochester' goes on to break Antoinette as he had the orchid – having an affair, renaming her, and taking her to England. Antoinette confronts 'Rochester' about the shift in their relationship. Antoinette argues that 'Rochester' does not know the whole story of her mother's lunacy as he has only received information from her half-brother David Boyd. Antoinette insists, 'there is always another side, always.'¹²⁹

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

This confrontation at which Antoinette insists that ‘there is always another side’ is one of the longest dialogues in the novella and the only sustained conversation between the two characters.¹³⁰ ‘Rochester’ narrates:

I listened to the ceaseless night noises outside, and watched the procession of small moths and beetles fly into the candles flames, then poured out a drink of rum and swallowed. At once the night noises drew away, became distant, bearable, even pleasant.

‘Will you listen to me for God’s sake,’ Antoinette said. She had said this before and I had not answered, now I told her, ‘Of course. I’d be the brute you doubtless think me if I did not do that.’

‘Why do you hate me?’ she said.

‘I do not hate you, I am most distressed about you, I am distraught,’ I said. But this was untrue, I was not distraught, I was calm, it was the first time I had felt calm or self-possessed for many a long day.

She was wearing the white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too large for her. I watched her holding her left wrist with her right hand, an annoying habit.

‘Then why do you never come near me?’ she said. ‘Or kiss me, or talk to me. Why do you think I can bear it, what reason have you for treating me like that? Have you any reason?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I have a reason,’ and added very softly, ‘My God.’
[...]¹³¹

In this confrontation, ‘Rochester’ narrates his distaste for the Caribbean and Antoinette; even what he once enjoyed – the white dress – is now objectionable. It is as though ‘Rochester’ has already resolved to not believe Antoinette. When first considering the legitimacy of Daniel Cosway’s claim, ‘Rochester’ narrates, ‘How can one discover truth

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76-82.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me the truth [...] certainly not the girl I married.’¹³² Despite disbelieving her, ‘Rochester’ narrates:

‘Of course I will listen, of course we can talk now, if that’s what you wish.’ But the feeling of something unknown and hostile was very strong. ‘I feel very much a stranger here,’ I said ‘I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side.’

‘You are quite mistaken,’ she said. ‘It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else.’ [...]

‘You want to know about my mother, I will tell you about her, the truth, not lies.’¹³³

Antoinette tells of her mother’s experience in Jamaica and Pierre’s death and the fire of Coulibri. But ‘Rochester’ is unmoved and continues to call her Bertha. Eventually, Antoinette relents, stating, ‘I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed. [...] I will tell you anything you wish to know, but in a few words because words are no use, I know that now.’¹³⁴ Despite their direct references to reason, truth, and lies, ‘Rochester’ and Antoinette circumnavigates the events of her childhood blocked by the boundaries of their epistemological differences. What emerges for readers of the novella at this juncture is a recognition of the same story as Brontë’s text; yet, despite careful plot maintenance, Rhys’s text offers a different explanation for the events of the plot.

By renaming Antoinette, ‘Rochester’ asserts his way of knowing and understanding the world as primary. Laura Ciolkowski associates ‘Rochester’s’ act of renaming with colonial control, writing, ‘like the slave master who assigns to his slaves ‘new and often ridiculous names’ in an attempt to separate them from their exotic

¹³² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

cultures and dangerously alien social structures, Rochester renames Antoinette Bertha, blasphemously baptizing her the madwoman of Charlotte Brontë's Victorian attic.¹³⁵ In persisting to refer to his wife as Bertha, 'Rochester' marginalizes her speech and eventually silences her, denigrating Antoinette to the howling woman in the attic and rendering her speech unintelligible. Mona Fayad comments on the effect of 'Rochester's' actions, writing, 'He strips her of the possibility of speech by rendering her words meaningless, for once the words are discredited they lose all possibility of exerting any influence over reality.'¹³⁶ Although Antoinette resisted being renamed – retorting 'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name'¹³⁷ – 'Rochester' does not refer to her by her given name again. Rhys's decision to have 'Rochester' rename Antoinette signals what Hutcheon terms flipping – referring back to the known source text and reconfiguring its details in the established context of the revisioned text. In the moment of 'Rochester's' naming Bertha, Rhys inhabits and challenges Brontë's text. Shift in nomenclature becomes a metafictional moment in which *Jane Eyre* is remembered and Antoinette is inscribed as mad.

It is in rejecting Antoinette's name and her side of the story that 'Rochester' constructs her madness. After refusing to hear Antoinette's side of the story regarding her mother, 'Rochester' begins to take possession of her and call her mad. 'Rochester' narrates, 'She is mad but mine, mine. [...] My lunatic. My mad girl.'¹³⁸ As they leave Granbois he observed, 'She lifted her eyes. Blank lovely eyes. Mad eyes. My mad

¹³⁵ Laura Ciolkowski, 'Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.3 (1997): 341.

¹³⁶ Mona Fayad, 'Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.3 (1988): 448.

¹³⁷ Rhys, 88.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

girl.¹³⁹ ‘Rochester’ does precisely what Christophine accused him of – he constructs Antoinette’s lunacy. Christophine argued, ‘It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. The doctors say what you tell them to say.’¹⁴⁰ In constructing Antoinette as mad, he simultaneously asserted himself as sane: ‘I was exhausted. All the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left me wearied and empty. Sane.’¹⁴¹

In failing to accept the life in and reality of Antoinette and her home, ‘Rochester’ renames her and takes her to England. In both of these acts, ‘Rochester’ seeks to distance her from her mother and what he understands as lunacy. Yet his efforts to change Antoinette ironically make her more like her mother. It is not until Annette experiences the loss of her home burning and her son’s death that her hate for Mr Mason increases so that he has her taken to a different house and cared for as a madwoman. Antoinette experienced a similar loss: first, she loses ‘Rochester’s’ affection, her fortune, and her home country. Just as her mother spoke the words of the parrot after the fire, so Antoinette heard the parrot calling when she was in the attic at Thornfield Hall. On the final page of Rhys’s text, Antoinette narrates, ‘I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est la? Qui est la?* And the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha!’¹⁴² Here, Antoinette re-enacted the uprising on Coulibri Estate, setting fire to the ‘cardboard house’¹⁴³ which contained her.¹⁴⁴

Rhys’s revision maintains the plot of the source text, ending the novella with Antoinette burning down Thornfield Hall. Yet Rhys’s conclusion evokes the post-emancipation risings in Jamaica and, in turn, Antionette’s difficult childhood which

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 103. Interestingly, Rhys opens up the interesting possibility of reading ‘Rochester’ as mad, further problematizing the assumption of Antoinette’s madness. Interesting parallels can be drawn with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

paralleled Jane Eyre's. Thus, this final scene is not irrevocable proof of moral madness as it is in *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, the sexual propensities which Rochester attributes to Bertha in *Jane Eyre* are undermined by Rhys's revision. Firstly, in Rhys's text, 'Rochester' 'is thirsty for'¹⁴⁵ Antoinette at Granbois and copulated with Amelie.¹⁴⁶ The suggestion that Antoinette was sexually promiscuous comes from Daniel: 'I know what he told you. That my mother was mad and an infamous woman [...] and that I am a mad girl too.'¹⁴⁷ Rhys roots the famous description of Bertha from *Jane Eyre* – 'the true daughter of an infamous mother'¹⁴⁸ – in Daniel's version of events, which he posits in an effort to blackmail 'Rochester'.

The burning of the house, then, no longer confirms the woman's madness. Rather, the burning of the Hall signifies Antoinette's active resistance to 'Rochester's' cruelty. Rhys ultimately undermines the assumption of Bertha's madness in the source text. As Rachel Blau Du Plessis states in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 'Antoinette is driven, and then declared, mad, taken to England, and imprisoned by Rochester in an attic room, whence to haunt Brontë's novel. As Antoinette – a white and privileged but vulnerable child – she is traumatized by fire and a black uprising; as Bertha – a dark and enraged woman – she revolts by an act of destruction that mimics the arson of colonial uprisings.'¹⁴⁹ By placing the scene of the burning house in the context of post-Emancipation Jamaica, Rhys revisions the source text, criticizes the embedded colonization in Brontë's narrative, and reimagines the burning house as a liberating image.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴⁸ Brontë, 345.

¹⁴⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 46.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys creates a template for feminist revision. Rhys explores the historical context of the source text, namely asylum and colonial reforms with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This exploration is followed by identification of key revisions – alterations in the text other than plot which can affect the reading of the revisioned text. In the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's key revisions are the shift in time period and provision of Antionette's background. By allowing Antoinette to narrate her childhood and experience at Thornfield Hall, Rhys alters the descriptive focus of Rochester's first marriage in *Jane Eyre* and challenges the authority of the source text. By engaging with the historical and societal contexts of colonial and asylum reform, Rhys's text resounds with dissonances – truth, reality, Englishness, foreignness. The strategy of feminist revision unveils epistemological incongruities as the central conflict between Antoinette and 'Rochester.' In this sense, the two main characters enact the conflict between the source text and the revisioned text. Truth itself becomes a significant trope in feminist revision.

In the chapters that follow, I will approach the revisioned texts as I have with *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In each chapter I will discuss the author's stated reason for selecting the source text. I will explore the historical context and authorship of the source text. I will then unpack key revisions of the contemporary text. By utilizing the strategy of feminist revision, I will identify underlying ideological claims within the source text and suggest alternative meanings made possible by the revisioned text.

In chapter one, I analyse Angela Carter's short story 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979) as a revision of Perrault's fairy tale 'Bluebeard.' I first unpack revisionary practices within the genre of fairy tales as well as the historical and literary context of Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé avec des Moralités*. I will then discuss Carter's literary corpus and, in particular, her work with fairy tale translation and

cultural analysis of the work of the Marquis de Sade. Through an examination of Carter's intertextual and metatextual practises, I explore how she revises Perrault's text and traditional interpretations of the female protagonist as disobedient wife.

In chapter two, I investigate Michèle Roberts's experimental novel *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1986) as a revision of the Old Testament narrative of Noah's Ark. I first identify Roberts' selection of source text in relationship to her literary and educational background. I then discuss the source text – its literary context and critical reception. In viewing Roberts' text in relation to her corpus, observing textual strategies employed in other works, namely a disruption of a singular narration and asserting a polyphony of voices, I argue that *The Book of Mrs Noah* critiques the singularity of authority as upheld in Catholic theology and tradition.

In chapter three, I examine Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* (2005) as a revision of Homer's epic poem *Odyssey*. I identify Atwood's novel in reference to the Canongate Myth Series as well as the discourse of myth. I also situate *The Penelopiad* within her earlier works and use of fairy tale intertextuality. By observing the features of the Bluebeard tale type, I argue that Atwood shifts the characterization of Odysseus and Penelope. In altering the point of view, Atwood's novel challenges the literary canon.

In chapter four, I read Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *Lavinia* (2008) as a revision of Vergil's *Aeneid*. By unpacking Le Guin's stated reason for revisioning Vergil's epic and analysing Le Guin's novel in light of her earlier revisionary work, writing a fourth book in the Earthsea series, I argue that Le Guin addresses and critiques the monomyth of the hero's quest. By investigating the ways in which she disrupts the hero's journey and her deployment of the supernatural, I will explore Le Guin's revisioning within the genre of classical literature.

Throughout this thesis, I focus on textual practices. However, my investigation does not end there. As Hutcheon discusses, feminist theory is concerned with political and social ramification of literary texts. As Nancy Walker writes, '[Revision] is not merely an artistic but a social action, suggesting in narrative practice the possibility of cultural transformation.'¹⁵⁰ It is my hope that this thesis will open dialogue regarding the survival of women in cultural history.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 6.

In Defence of Curiosity: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' and Metatextual Interrogation

'Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs
our experience of flesh.' – Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 12.

The first genre which is revisioned that I will discuss in this thesis is the fairy tale. Admittedly, it is difficult to discuss revision of this genre since such tales could be said to be in a constant state of flux. Acknowledging this characteristic of fairy tales, Angela Carter describes them as 'stories without originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor.'¹⁵¹ Despite the evolving nature of the fairy tale, it is still possible to discuss the development of a fairy tale canon as well as contemporary tellings that pose as alternative stories to canonical variants. Often these contemporary revisions move beyond a straightforward retelling or adaptation and reconfigure images or characters for different ends.

Despite a proliferation of tale variants, there is an identifiable fairy tale canon comprised of a specific selection of stories as well as particular versions of these stories. As both Jack Zipes and Elizabeth Wanning Harris reveal, the selection and distribution of tales reinforce hierarchical societal organization. As Zipes states in *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*:

Fairy tales have always been part of culture or a civilizing process. They incorporate a moral code that reflects upon the basic instincts of the human being as a moral animal and suggest ways to channel these

¹⁵¹ Angela Carter, 'Introduction' in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (ed) Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1990), ix.

instincts for personal and communal happiness. The moral component of the fairy tales does not mean that the proposed morals or norms are good. Every moral code in every society is constituted by the most powerful groups in a community or nation-state and serves their vested interests.¹⁵²

The tales that are selected and disseminated reflect the ideology of those in power.

Focussing specifically on the *bourgeoisie* in France, Zipes discusses the ‘more stringent notions of *civilité*’ in the work of Charles Perrault.¹⁵³ *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* provides behavioural models for children and, as Zipes identifies, are divided into groups based on gender.¹⁵⁴ Thus, socialization through literature is ‘one way of disseminating [French bourgeois] values and interests and of subliminally strengthening its hold on the civilizing process’ while containing embedded gender expectations.¹⁵⁵ By comprising of the morally encoded tales of Perrault, the canon reinforces the hierarchical societal construction of the era.

These social constructs that are embedded and reinforced in the moral tale include demarcations of gendered behaviour. These false constructions of gendered behaviour are contested by Ellen Cronan Rose, who writes, ‘Women have come to recognize that neither in fairy tales nor in other patriarchal texts can we find true images of ourselves.’¹⁵⁶ I am not suggesting that all fairy tales are patriarchal; indeed, feminist critics such as Sharon Rose Wilson trace inhabitable representations of women in fairy tales.¹⁵⁷ I do, however, agree with Zipes that certain fairy tales have been utilized for the

¹⁵² Jack Zipes, ‘The Moral Strains of Fairy Tales and Fantasy’ in *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 130-131.

¹⁵³ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁶ Ellen Cronan Rose, ‘Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales,’ in *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* (eds) Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsh, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 211.

¹⁵⁷ Sharon Rose Wilson discusses myth and fairy tale in contemporary women’s writing which finds positive images for women within older texts, specifically the egg and lunar cycles. See: *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women’s Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

civilizing process and contain embedded ideology which is inimical to women. Cronan Rose goes on to explore three female authors who rewrite fairy tales, ultimately concluding, ‘What can fairy tales, retold by women, tell us about female development? That it has been distorted by patriarchy; that it is and must be grounded in the mother-daughter matrix; that it involves not only the discovery but the glad acceptance of our sexuality.’¹⁵⁸ Cronan Rose’s tone alerts contemporary readers to the time of its initial publication. She and other second wave feminist critics were concerned with recovering a women’s literary tradition. Yet Cronan Rose highlights themes that emerge in later feminism, such as the mother-daughter relationship and female sexuality. These topics inform the following four chapters.

Elizabeth Wanning Harries is likewise concerned with the roles of women in relationship to the fairy tale canon. Rather than focusing on characterization, Harries examines the process of canonization and female tale tellers. Perrault’s tales, in reinforcing the *civilité* of the *bourgeoisie* as described by Zipes, were privileged over those of the *conteuses* – women writers in the French salons during the 1690s. In *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, Harries discusses the development of the fairy tale canon and the exclusion of women writers from this canon.¹⁵⁹ By identifying the differences in style and implied audience, Harries compares the ‘chaste compactness’ of Perrault’s tales with the ‘complex style’ of the *conteuses*.¹⁶⁰ The compact tales associated with Perrault (and later the Grimm brothers) are presented as foundational or original and possess a ‘carefully constructed simplicity’ which becomes an ‘implicit guarantee of their traditional and authentic status.’¹⁶¹ The complex

¹⁵⁸ Rose, 227.

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

tales, conversely, are openly intertextual, and are often ‘long, intricate, digressive, playful, self-referential, and self-conscious.’¹⁶² While only the former has been granted canonical status, both styles have coexisted since the seventeenth century. In a tautological manoeuvre, the style of Perrault’s tales defined the canon and the canonical style validated Perrault’s acceptance into the canon. Thus, feminist revision of fairy tales has the potential to both undermine the gendered behavioural models of *civilité* as well as interrogate the succinct style privileged by male authors and validated as canonical. Indeed, Harries identifies a return to the *conteuses*’ style in contemporary rewritings. In recognizing the history of canonization of fairy tales, as Donald Haase acknowledges, critics find evidence of an ‘awareness of the fairy tale as a primary site for asserting and subverting ideologies of gender.’¹⁶³

Angela Carter’s role in the contemporary revision of fairy tales cannot be overstated. Stephen Benson goes as far as identifying contemporary revisionists as the ‘Carter generation,’ claiming, ‘Carter’s extensive work on the traditions of the fairy tale – as author, editor, and critic – was pre-eminently influential in establishing a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales, the influence of which has continued into the new millennium.’¹⁶⁴ Fairy tale allusions freckle the Carter corpus, and her text *The Bloody Chamber and Other Tales* is, for Benson, a ‘putative urtext of contemporary tale-telling’ of fairy tales.¹⁶⁵

Initial and subsequent criticism of Carter’s collection of fairy tale revisions has gathered various threads of inquiry and analysis including pornography, literary allusions, representation of women and genre. Each thread is pulled from opposing

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶³ Donald Haase, ‘Preface,’ *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), vii.

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Benson, ‘Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale’ in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (ed) Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

sides, creating tension throughout the critical response. In this chapter I will focus on Carter's short story 'The Bloody Chamber' as a revision of Perrault's 'Bluebeard' in the Richian sense, specifically targeting the representation of female disobedience in both the Bluebeard tale and the Judeo-Christian Fall narrative. Despite significant critical discourse on Carter's text, there has been surprisingly minimal critical attention to Carter's use of biblical allusions throughout her oeuvre. Carter's employment of a biblical intertext fits into her larger project of demythification of social fiction, which I will explain below. By focusing on key changes to the source text and her metatextual engagement with the Fall narrative, I will argue that Carter ultimately defends female curiosity and challenges male dominance and authorship/authority.

Before turning to Carter's use of biblical allusion, I will first discuss her larger project of demythification. In 'Notes from the Front Line,' Carter describes herself as a committed materialist, explaining '*this* world is all there is, and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality.'¹⁶⁶ In opposition to assumptions of transcendentally-bestowed knowledge, universality, and essentialist understandings of gender, Carter argues, 'Flesh comes to us out of history so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh.'¹⁶⁷ This statement emerges from Carter's controversial critical text *The Sadeian Woman* – first published in New York as *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978) and later in London under the title *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979) – in which she claims that the work of the Marquis de Sade (1740 – 1814) can be utilized by twentieth-century feminists because he exposes the cultural determination of the 'nature' of women. Carter summarizes her endeavour:

¹⁶⁶ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line,' (1983) in *Critical Essays on Angela Carter* (ed) Lindsey Tucker (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 25.

¹⁶⁷ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979) (London: Virago, 2009), 12.

This book, which takes as its starting point of cultural exploration the wealth of philosophically pornographic material about women that Sade provides, is an exercise of the lateral imagination. Sade remains a monstrous and daunting cultural edifice; yet I would like to think that he put pornography in the service of women, or, perhaps, allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women.¹⁶⁸

For Carter, all social and political structures are constructed and therefore capable of being changed. Sade is useful to the degree that he exposes the constructedness of the sexual encounter. Both pornography and fairy tales are vehicles for social fictions and can be interrogated and commandeered for feminist ends.

Carter's claims about the viability of Sade for feminists are heavily critiqued. Early feminist critiques of Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* come from two figure heads in the 1980s pornography debates – Andrea Dworkin and Suzanne Kappeler. Both specifically address Carter's use of Sade. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), Andrea Dworkin focuses on the power of men in pornography. She argues, first, that freedom is only relative to power and power is something possessed and protected by men.¹⁶⁹ Asserting that the power of men is demonstrated in pornography, Dworkin's writes, 'Male power is the *raison d'être* of pornography; the degradation of the female is the means of achieving this power.'¹⁷⁰ In her chapter on the Marquis de Sade, Dworkin provides a lengthy biography of Sade and criticizes his earlier biographers who either deny or de-emphasise Sade's (the man) violence. She focuses on Sade's violence toward Rose Keller – who he lures to his home under false pretences and beat severely until she manages to escape. Since Sade is newly freed from prison for other acts of violence and debauchery, his mother-in-law pays Rose Keller to not press charges to avoid his return to prison. This public scandal, Dworkin states, is overlooked by

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981), ii.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

biographers who seek to emphasise Sade as a literary figure. For Dworkin, Carter commits the crime of omission, stating that *The Sadeian Woman* is a 'pseudofeminist essay,' and criticizing Carter's description of Rose Keller as an opportunist who 'turned to blackmail.'¹⁷¹ Dworkin argues that Carter's portrayal of the Sade-Keller event is a 'flight of fancy'¹⁷² not located in the events as reported by the woman herself. The violent domination of Sade in actual events and an unquestioned representation of these events in his literature is the crux of the problem for Dworkin as they refuse real liberation for women. There is a real problem in forgetting the acts of Sade the person, the real pain, the real mutilation of bodies, frequently the bodies of poor women and girls. Dworkin argues that Sade is not an exception, but an Everyman, writing, 'In Sade, the authentic equation is revealed: the power of the pornographer is the power of the rapist/batterer is the power of man.'¹⁷³ For Dworkin, Carter fails to consider Sade in relation to real world conditions.

Suzanne Kappeler similarly critiques Carter's use of Sade. In *The Pornography of Representation* (1986), Kappeler argues that pornography is not a special case of sexuality; rather, it is a form of representation.¹⁷⁴ Kappeler's text focuses on what she calls 'representational practices' rather than 'sexual practices.'¹⁷⁵ Kappeler asserts, 'Representations are not just a matter of mirrors, reflections, key-holes. Somebody is making them, and somebody is looking at them.'¹⁷⁶ Kappeler problematizes the division between art and literature as aesthetic acts and events in the 'real' world as political acts. The choreographing of the 'real' that occurs in pornography, for Kappeler, must be considered. In her chapter entitled 'Playing in the Literary Sanctuary,' she argues that

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁷⁴ Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

Carter retreats from reality and hides in the arena of fiction, writing that Carter ‘as literary critic can claim Sade as virtual “forerunner” of feminist critics’ because he laid bare the mechanics of the pornographic scenario.¹⁷⁷ Carter withdraws into ‘the literary sanctuary,’ reading Sade as a literary artefact beyond the reach of politics.¹⁷⁸ Kappler’s critique of Carter is similar to Dworkin’s in the separation of literary criticism from real conditions.

For both Dworkin and Kappeler, the liberation of women from male dominance cannot happen in reality when the pornographic scenario – with its problematic representations of women – is unchallenged. Yet Carter herself, in line with postmodernists, does not see literature as separate from reality. Carter asserts that she is a committed materialist and is keen to expose social fictions. Carter shares this aim in *The Sadeian Woman*, which participates in her larger project of demythification of what is ‘natural’ (social fictions) within literature. Like Kappeler, who aims to ‘build up a critique of underlying assumptions which make the pornographic practice of representation “natural,”’¹⁷⁹ Carter examines Sade for representations of women that expose the ‘natural’ as constructed. Lorna Sage acknowledges Carter’s strategy as ‘high-risk’ and a point of contention for feminists at the time.¹⁸⁰ However, Sage also recognizes, ‘what [Carter] does is not to banish the unrealities, [...] but to rewrite them into *mutability*, pull them into a world of change.’¹⁸¹ When practises can be traced to an origin, given a history, they can no longer be maintained as universalizing principles. Thus, Carter’s efforts, like Foucault’s in *Madness and Civilization*, provide a history of

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁸⁰ Lorna Sage, ‘Introduction’ in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (ed) Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), 16.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 16; emphasis added.

social normalization. By addressing Sade's female characters Justine, Juliette, and Eugénie, Carter critiques the glorification of female suffering and female complicity.

Carter's literary text also comes to us out of history. Indeed, the historical context of Carter's commitment to materialism is vital for understanding the catalyst for her project of demythification. Sarah Gamble asserts, 'a consideration of the cultural environment of this decade *must* act as a basis for any examination of Carter's work.'¹⁸² This influential era was typified by resistance to the dominant culture. In *The Harvest of the Sixties*, Patricia Waugh describes the 1960s as characterized by 'enormous transformations in attitudes to authority, sexuality, censorship, and civil liberties.'¹⁸³ The changes occurring in society created an atmosphere of optimism. The mid- to late 60s in particular were, as Waugh perceives, a time in which there was a 'radical and popular optimism about the potential dawn of a new social order.'¹⁸⁴ In 'Notes from the Front Line' Carter writes, 'toward the end of that decade there was a brief period of public philosophical awareness that occurs only very occasionally in human history; when, truly, it felt like Year One, that all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings.'¹⁸⁵ The upheaval of the 1960s was fertile soil for the seeds of Carter's materialist critique.

Carter became concerned with the 'nature of reality' as a woman and how the social fiction of 'femininity' was created 'and palmed off on me as the real thing.'¹⁸⁶ As early as 1960, Carter was preoccupied with the 'investigation of social fictions that

¹⁸² Sarah Gamble, 'Introduction' in *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line' (1983) in *Critical Essays on Angela Carter* (ed) Lindsey Tucker (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 25.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

regulate our lives,’ and has conducted this investigation throughout the corpus of her fiction and non-fiction.¹⁸⁷ For Carter, the literary past was connected with ‘social fictions,’ particularly those of femininity. Carter’s work was simultaneously characterized by deconstruction and rewriting narratives, particularly, according to Alison Easton, ‘the master narratives of the Western World.’¹⁸⁸ Carter writes, ‘This [literary] past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions; further, it is a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based.’¹⁸⁹ For Carter, sexuality and political life are inseparable:

Since it was, therefore, primarily through my sexual and emotional life that I was radicalised – that I first became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to be, or expected to be – I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice. And I found most of my raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination.¹⁹⁰

Thus her political activity revolved around social constructs of sexuality, and it was through the literary tradition that she engaged with these.

Carter’s materialism interrogates fairy tales for the social fictions they construct and disseminate throughout culture, including other genres of literature. Carter’s hostility¹⁹¹ toward ‘social fictions’ – the lies which society maintains and perpetuates – and the vehicles for disseminating those fictions, namely fairy tales, is iconoclastic. Her work shatters the literary icons that have been established as authoritative and

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸⁸ Alison Easton, ‘Introduction: Reading Angela Carter’ in *Angela Carter New Casebooks* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 8; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹⁰ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line,’ 26.

¹⁹¹ Lindsey Tucker, describes Carter’s use of myth as ‘hostile’ in ‘Introduction’ in *Critical Essay on Angela Carter* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 13.

sacred. This iconoclasm relates to the literary past and is demonstrated in the manner in which she weaves intertextual references. In *Heroes and Villains* (1969), for example, the male protagonist Jewel is described as ‘the Messiah of the Yahoos’¹⁹² evoking both Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and the New Testament gospels. The two literary references, woven ironically, are effectively undermined of their authority. Thus, Carter’s intertextual practices evoke antagonism toward social fictions and disrupt claims to authority.

Carter’s efforts to undermine authority also occur on the level of authorship. Her use of intertextuality echoes and relies upon Barthes’s implicit refusal of authority in his theory of Death of the Author. Carter is invested in disrupting a single, authorial meaning by littering her textual corpus with intertextual references, creating ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings [...] blend and clash.’¹⁹³ She also uses irony and parody to undermine ideological underpinnings of source texts. Thus, as Rebecca Munford states, Carter ‘destabilis[es] authorial discourse’ and ‘enter[s] into dialogue with a specific literary and cultural past.’¹⁹⁴

Authorship, social fictions, and constructions of femininity are all interrogated in Carter’s revision of ‘Bluebeard.’ In the section that follows, I will discuss Carter’s source text, the historical background to ‘Bluebeard,’ her translation of Perrault’s tales, her response to Perrault’s tales in ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ and critical reception of the short story. After exploring key elements of Perrault’s ‘Bluebeard,’ I will discuss Carter’s revision – what she retains from the source text, what she alters, and how ideological underpinnings are interrogated specifically through the use of metatextuality.

¹⁹² Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (1969) (London: Penguin, 2011), 102.

¹⁹³ Barthes, 146.

¹⁹⁴ Munford, 12.

In 1976, Carter was commissioned by Victor Gollancz to translate a selection of Perrault's fairy tales into English.¹⁹⁵ According to Jacques Barchilon, Carter translated Perrault 'with accuracy and imagination.'¹⁹⁶ In the introduction to her translation, Carter discusses the life of Perrault and his publication of fairy tales. With what Carter identifies as the 'healthy opportunism' characteristic of Puss in Boots, Charles Perrault (1628-1703) studied law, wrote, and was later employed as secretary to French statesman Jean Baptise Colbert in 1657.¹⁹⁷ After Colbert's death in 1683, Perrault 'fell into disfavour' and 'opposed the official cultural policy of Louis XIV until his death in 1701.'¹⁹⁸ Of these later years Carter writes, 'An enthusiastic and loving father, he spent his retirement attending to his children's education, besides writing lives of the saints and little comedies, composing his own autobiography and defending the Moderns against the Ancients in the Battle of the Books, that reverberating argument about the relevance of classical literature that shook late-seventeenth-century literary life.'¹⁹⁹ It is during this time when Perrault began writing fairy tales.

'Le Barbe Bleu' was first published in 1697 along with other tales in the collection entitled *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé avec des Moralités*.²⁰⁰ From Perrault's compact style, Carter infers his didactic intentions, writing, '[Perrault's] tales retain the simplicity of form and the narrative directness of the country story-teller. His fairies do not have pretty-pretty, invented names like Merluche, Fleur d'Amour and Belle de Nuit [...] Perrault resisted all temptations to the affectation that *misses the point*

¹⁹⁵ Dutheil de la Rochere, 'New Wine in old Bottles' *Marvels and Tales* (2009), 1.

¹⁹⁶ Jacques Barchilon, 'Remembering Angela Carter' in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 26.

¹⁹⁷ Angela Carter, 'Forward,' *Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (trans) Angela Carter (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1977), 9.

¹⁹⁸ Jack Zipes, 'Introduction,' *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 6.

¹⁹⁹ Carter, 'Forward,' 11.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

of the fairy tale,²⁰¹ presenting a tale in a lean, straightforward fashion for civilizing ends. Carter reads Perrault's tale as spare and reductionist, writing, 'The wolf consumes Red Riding Hood; what else can you expect if you talk to strange men, comments Perrault briskly. Let's not bother our heads with the mysteries of sado-masochistic attraction. We must learn to cope with the world before we can interpret it.'²⁰² Carter finds Perrault's writing to be marked by 'concision of narrative (there is not an ounce of flab on any story); precision of language; irony, and realism.'²⁰³ Perrault's precision disallows deeper explorations of the latent content of the tale – such as sadomasochistic attraction – and leaves readers with a specific, succinct moral.

The format of his tales, which includes the moral, focuses the reading on a particular lesson to be learned. This addition provides a lesson of sorts for young audiences in particular. Carter writes, 'From the work of this humane, tolerant and kind-hearted Frenchman, children can learn enlightened self-interest from Puss; resourcefulness and courage from Hop o' my Thumb; the advantages of patronage from Cinderella; the benefits of long engagements from the Sleeping Beauty; the dangers of heedlessness from Red Riding hood; and gain much pleasure, besides.'²⁰⁴ Children may gain lessons and pleasure from these tales. However, the lean style of Perrault, combined with explicit morals, has a reductionist effect. The tales ultimately suggests that the meaning of the tale to a singular meaning, not unlike the 'single "theological" meaning' described by Barthes.

In "“New Wine in Old Bottles”": Angela Crater's translation of Charles Perrault's "La Barbe bleue,"" Dutheil de la Rochère, Ute Heidmann and Martine Hennard assert that her 'decision to rewrite several of Perrault's tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 13; emphasis added.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

Stories (1979) can [...] be seen as the logical development or counterpoint of her work as a translator.²⁰⁵ These critics suggest that Carter's revision of 'Bluebeard' is a way for her to 'pursue and develop a complex and productive dialogue with Perrault by engaging with aspects of his text that she couldn't integrate into her translation.'²⁰⁶ Jack Zipes encourages readers not to underestimate Perrault's influence on Carter, stating, 'If it were not for the fact that she was commissioned to translate Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des moralités* (1697) in 1976, she would probably not have conceived her unique, groundbreaking collection of feminist fairy tales.'²⁰⁷ Her translation laid the groundwork for her revision.

Carter's decision to rewrite fairy tales from the perspective of a female protagonist goes beyond simply updating Perrault. In her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) – her edited collection of fairy tales centred on women – Carter discusses the impulse to return to fairy tales. She discusses the work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as seeking to 'establish the cultural unity of the German people via its common traditions and language.'²⁰⁸ Similarly, claims Carter, Peter Christen Asbjornsen and Jorgen Moe collected stories in Norway in the 1800s and, in the 1900s, J.F. Campbell collected stories in Gaelic from the Scottish highlands before the 'encroaching tide of the English language swept them away.'²⁰⁹ After identifying other nationalities seeking unity via the collection of fairy tales, Carter writes, 'That I and many other women should go looking through the books for fairy-tale heroines is a version of the same process – a wish to validate my claim to a fair share of the future by staking my claim to

²⁰⁵ Dutheil de la Rochère, Ute Heidmann and Martine Hennard, "'New Wine in old bottles': Angela Carter's translation of Charles Perrault's 'La Barbe bleue'," in *Marvels & Tales* 23.1 (2009): 41.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁰⁷ Zipes, 'Introduction,' vii.

²⁰⁸ Carter, 'Introduction' in *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 1990), xvi.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

my share of the past.’²¹⁰ Hence, Carter’s revision of fairy tales as early as 1979 and in the wake of her translation of Perrault, suggests she is returning to the fairy tale canon with an eye for revisioning the socio-political reality for women. Revision of fairy tale in Carter, then, revolves around challenging the social fictions regarding femininity and interrogating representation for the purposes of survival. As Sarah Gamble articulates, Carter is ‘not only exploiting the potential inherent in fairy tales for demonstrating [...] social conditions, but also doing so through a specifically feminist sensibility.’²¹¹ Carter, after translating Perrault, takes up her pen to revision his narratives. She explores the latent content of the tales left unexplored in his economic style.

Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard begins by introducing a man with substantial wealth who has a blue beard. This man, Maria Tatar translates, ‘had the misfortune of having a blue beard, which made him look so ugly and frightful that women and girls alike fled at the sight of him.’²¹² Carter’s translation reads ‘alas, God had given him a blue beard which made him look so ghastly that women fled at the sight of him.’²¹³ This subtle difference alerts readers to the individuation of Carter’s translation, namely the introduction of an association between Bluebeard and God. As Rochère, Heidmann, and Hennard write, ‘Whereas in Perrault the blue beard is the result of mere misfortune (‘par malheur’), Carter attributes to God the protagonist’s characteristics and possessions, including his blue beard.’²¹⁴ While this association may be seen to reflect a conservative interpretation of the tale, the above critics suggest that Carter’s translation might not simply reflect the ‘pressure of a Christian interpretive framework on the story’ but ‘may

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²¹¹ Sarah Gamble, ‘The Bloody Chamber’ in *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 131.

²¹² Maria Tatar (trans), ‘Bluebeard’ in *the Classic Fairy Tales*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 144.

²¹³ Angela Carter (trans), ‘Bluebeard’ in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1977), 31.

²¹⁴ Rochere, et al., 48.

also deliberately associate material possessions with monstrosity and patriarchal oppression.²¹⁵ Bluebeard is not so much punished by God as the recipient of God's gifts – the blue beard along with wealth of possessions. Indeed, when Bluebeard returns – demanding the keys from the young bride and discovering her transgression – he states that nothing will save her from his *colère*. Frequently translated as 'anger,' Carter's translates the term as 'wrath,' further associating Bluebeard with God. Thus, Carter associates Bluebeard, who is later revealed as wrathful and violent, with the patriarchal oppression of God.

Marina Warner discusses the symbolism in the Bluebeard tale and argues that the beard represents strength, masculinity as well as virility, readiness and desire. Warner writes, 'beards came increasingly to define the male in a priapic mode.'²¹⁶ Beards were not common in late-seventeenth-century France, certainly not in court, and signified the people of the east. Warner continues, 'Well out of fashion in the court of the Sun King, the beard of Perrault's villain betokened an outsider, a libertine, and a ruffian.'²¹⁷ The blueness of the beard is more than a specific detail, like Cinderella's slipper being made of glass, but rather connotes frightfulness. Maria Tatar writes that the blue beard marks the husband as 'an exotic outsider.'²¹⁸ As Warner elaborates, 'By the blueness of his protagonist's beard, Perrault intensifies the frightfulness of his appearance: Bluebeard is represented as a man against nature, either by dyeing his hair like a luxurious Oriental, or by producing such a monstrous growth without resorting to artifice.'²¹⁹ As such, Bluebeard is both frightful and other – a stranger in the fullest sense.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

²¹⁶ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 242.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

²¹⁸ Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 242-43.

The wealthy stranger decides to marry one of the two daughters of his neighbour, so he approaches their mother. The mother, however, leaves the decision of which one of them will marry him to her daughters. Andrew Lang's translation describes the mother as 'a lady of quality,'²²⁰ emphasizing the social status of the family. Neither daughter is inclined to marry the man because of the blue beard; they are also suspicious that he has married before and no one knows what has happened to his previous wives. In an effort to become more congenial to the sisters, Bluebeard throws a grand party, inviting friends and neighbours. Eventually, the youngest daughter sees that the man 'all in all, is a very fine fellow.'²²¹ Maria Tatar's version reads, 'the beard of the master of the house was not so blue after all and that he was in fact a fine fellow.'²²² Tatar highlights the girl's interest in his material possessions in her translation.

Convinced the wealthy man is no longer so repulsive, the younger daughter marries him. After their marriage, Bluebeard tells his young wife that he must leave on business 'for six weeks or so' and that she should keep herself in good spirits.²²³ He gives her reign of the house and the set of keys, identifying which keys are used for which locks. Lastly, he states, 'Use these keys freely [...] All is yours. But this little key, here, is the key of the room at the end of the long gallery on the ground floor; open everything, go everywhere, but I absolutely forbid you to go into that little room and, if you so much as open the door, I warn you that nothing will spare you from my wrath.'²²⁴ She promises to obey; they kiss; he leaves. Her role is expected to be the patient wife of the absent husband, obeying him while he is away.

²²⁰ Andrew Lang (trans) 'Bluebeard' in *Blue Fairy Book* (1889) (Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1975), 290.

²²¹ Carter, 'Bluebeard,' 32.

²²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

As soon as Bluebeard leaves, the young wife's family, friends and neighbours come to visit. They had not wanted to visit while he was at home, for they feared him and found him too strange. Yet they were interested in his vast wealth and came to the house to explore his riches. Carter translates, 'They climbed into the attics and were lost for words with which to admire the number and beauty of tapestries, the beds, the sofas, the cabinets, the tables, and the long mirrors, some of which had frames of glass, others of silver or gilded vermilion – all more magnificent than anything they had ever seen.'²²⁵ Yet the young wife did not enjoy the abundance of his wealth with her friends. As Maria Tatar translates, the wife 'was unable to take any pleasure at all from the sight of these riches because she was so anxious to get into that room on the lower floor.'²²⁶ Andrew Lang is more antagonistic toward the young wife, translating, '[she] in no way *diverted herself* in looking upon all these rich things, because of the *impatience* she had to go and open the closet on the ground floor.'²²⁷ For Lang, the young bride is wilfully disobedient with an utter lack of self-control. She becomes 'so tormented [...] by her curiosity' that she abandons her guests and goes to the forbidden room.²²⁸

The prominence of her disobedience is crystalized by the illustration by Walter Crane, which identifies the young bride with Eve. The left side of the image shows the guests in the distance exploring the riches of Bluebeard; on the right side is the wife in the foreground, key in hand, walking down a staircase decorated by a tapestry. The tapestry depicts the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. As Warner describes:

Walter Crane, in his sumptuous full colour illustrations at the end of the last century, even shows the heroine against a wall painting of the Temptation in the Garden of Eden, making a direct analogy with Eve, and thus disclosing the inner structure of the fable: Bluebeard

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²²⁶ Tatar, 'Bluebeard,' 145.

²²⁷ Lang, 292, emphasis added.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

acts like God the Father, prohibiting knowledge – the forbidden chamber is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and [the bride] is Eve, the woman who disobeys and, through curiosity, endangers her life.²²⁹

While I consider Warner's reading of God the Father to be narrow, her meticulous interrogation of intertextual connections, identifying the Fall narrative as the inner structure of the tale, enlightens readings of translations and early interpretations of the fairy tale. In Crane's illustration, the young wife holds the key to the forbidden room in the same manner that Eve is grasping the fruit of the forbidden tree. [See Appendix 1] The young bride is presented as disobeying the highest authority and therefore worthy of suffering the mortal consequence.

Upon entering the room, the young wife sees the floor is covered with blood and the corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives. In her shock, she drops the key. She picks up the key and goes to her room to recover. Once she feels safe in the bedroom, she realizes the key is stained with blood. Despite her attempts to wash the blood off, she is unsuccessful. The key is magical and no amount of washing and scrubbing will remove the blood from it.

That night, Bluebeard unexpectedly returns. Stating his trip has been cut short, he demands to inspect the keys, requiring his bride to collect them immediately despite her attempts to delay. Again, Rochère, Heidmann and Hennard highlight Carter's individuation as a translator, noting:

when [the girl] has to give the stained key to her husband, the statement of bare fact ('il faut apporter la clef' [the key has to be brought]) is reinforced by an introductory phrase that encapsulates the bride's hopeless situation in a commonplace image: 'but there was no way out; she must go and fetch the key.'²³⁰

²²⁹ Warner, 244.

²³⁰ Rochère et al., 46.

Trapped in her husband's plan, the girl gives him the set of keys, including the one to the forbidden room. Seeing the bloody key – discovering her disobedience – Bluebeard vows that she will join his other wives. The girl begs for time to pray. While she is alone, she calls to her Sister Anne and asks if she could see their brothers, who were planning to arrive at the party that day. She asks three times; finally, Sister Anne sees 'a great cloud of dust drawing near from the edge of the horizon' and recognizes the riders as their brothers.²³¹ The young wife continues stalling for time, but Bluebeard calls for her and, at last, she cannot resist him. Her inability to resist him coupled with the revelation of Bluebeard's previous wives creates a sense of inevitability.

She comes down the stairs and '[throws] herself at his feet.'²³² He refuses to heed her pleas, tells her to 'prepare to meet your maker,' and raises his cutlass, about to chop off her head.²³³ His weapon of choice, the cutlass, also articulates the husband's foreignness. As he raises his weapon in the air ready to strike, there is a loud banging on the door; Bluebeard stops, recognizes her brothers, tries to run away, but is caught and killed by the young men:

Then, taking her by the hair with one hand and raising his cutlass with the other, he was about to chop off her head. The poor woman turned to him and implored him with a gaze that had death written on it. She begged for one last moment to prepare herself for death. 'No, no,' he said, 'prepare to meet your maker.' And then lifting his arm...

Just at that moment there was such a loud pounding at the gate that Bluebeard stopped short. The gate was opened, and two horsemen, swords in hand, dashed in and made straight for Bluebeard.²³⁴

In this scene, Bluebeard shows no mercy and is determined to enact the punishment he has prescribed. Carter's translation emphasizes this determination. Instead of writing

²³¹ Carter, 'Bluebeard,' 38.

²³² Tatar, 'Bluebeard,' 147.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 147.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘prepare to meet your maker,’ Carter translates, ‘Nothing you can do will save you,’ said Bluebeard. ‘You must die.

Because he had no children, Bluebeard’s estate is left to his widow. She uses the money to enable her sister Anne to marry, her brothers to have commissions, and to marry herself to an honest man who ‘made her forget her sorrows as the wife of Bluebeard.’²³⁵

This happy ending is followed by two morals. Perrault’s first moral states, ‘Curiosity is a charming passion but may only be satisfied at the price of a thousand regrets; one sees around one a thousand examples of this sad truth every day. Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive.’²³⁶ After which, Perrault writes a second moral: ‘It is easy to see that the events described in this story took place many years ago. No modern husband would dare to be half so terrible, nor to demand of his wife such an impossible thing as to stifle her curiosity. Be he never so quarrelsome or jealous, he’ll toe the line as soon as she tells him to. And whatever colour his beard might be, it’s easy to see which of the two is the master.’²³⁷

Carter’s translation²³⁸ omits the controversial line of the first moral. Rochère, Heidmann and Hennard write ‘[Carter] eliminates the reference to “n’en déplaie au sexe” [may the gentler sex not be offended] in the first “Moralité.”’²³⁹ For these critics, Carter’s exclusion ‘avoids associating curiosity with women, and thus repeating the old sexist topos, to address an ungendered reader.’²⁴⁰ While I do not agree that Carter’s

²³⁵ Carter, ‘Bluebeard,’ 40.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²³⁸ Maria Tatar’s translation omits this line as well. Andrew Lang’s translation omits the Morals altogether.

²³⁹ Rochère, et al, 49.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

implied reader is androgynous, Carter's text does strip away language that allows for problematic representation of women.

The flow of the narrative as well as the moral at the end of the tale centres the story on the act of disobedience. The tone of these morals are unclear; indeed, Marina Warner reads Perrault's two morals as tongue-in-cheek.²⁴¹ Regardless of Perrault's intentions, critical attention has focused on the disobedience of the wife and ignored the violence of the husband. In 'Demon Lover,' Marina Warner is careful to expose the disparity in narrative treatment, writing:

One of the many peculiar aspects of the familiar story of 'Bluebeard' is that the narrative concentrates on [the young wife's] act of disobedience, not on Bluebeard's mass murders. [...] In 'Bluebeard,' the initial weight of the story swings the listener or reader's sympathies towards the husband who instructs his young wife, and presents his request for her obedience as reasonable, and the terror she experiences when she realizes her fate as a suitable punishment, a warning against trespass.²⁴²

Warner's description acknowledges the lack of critical interrogation of the severity of the punishment. The tale itself focuses on the disobedience of the female character.

As Cristina Bacchilega states, the theme and 'crime' of 'Bluebeard' is female curiosity.²⁴³ This condemnation of curiosity is atypical in the folktale genre. As Stephen Benson describes, 'Bluebeard' is 'primarily concerned with female culpability and waywardness, as opposed to a folklorically sanctioned reading which sees rather the positive aspects of curiosity.'²⁴⁴ This unique pairing of curiosity with female disobedience in Perrault's 'Bluebeard' is further explored by Bacchilega who identifies

²⁴¹ Warner, 243.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁴³ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 106.

²⁴⁴ Stephen Benson, 'Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen' in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 35.

the fairy tale heroine primarily as bold, clever, and brave. Bacchilega writes, 'Bravery, not simply curiosity, lead her to unlock the forbidden chamber, especially when her husband tells her that her sisters are dead, and that she will be too if she disobeys.'²⁴⁵

Rather than focusing on the bravery of the heroine or the multiple murders performed by the Bluebeard, traditional interpretation has disproportionately focused on disobedience.

Like Bacchilega and Warner, Tatar highlights this disparity, particularly in light of the folkloric praise of curiosity: 'Rather than celebrating the courage and wisdom of Bluebeard's wife in discovering the dreadful truth about her husband's murderous deeds, Perrault and other tellers of the tale often cast aspersions on her for engaging in an unruly act of insubordination.'²⁴⁶ This asymmetry is evident in Perrault. As Tatar writes, 'Perrault devotes a good deal of space to judgmental asides about the envy, greed, curiosity, and disobedience of Bluebeard's wife and her intimates, but he remains diffident about framing any sort of indictment of a man who has cut the throats of his wives.'²⁴⁷ Perrault's lean style focuses on the disobedience of the young wife.

This disproportionate focus on female curiosity is better understood in relation to other tales of women and disobedience. Tatar considers Perrault's depiction of the young wife as 'underscoring the heroine's kinship' with Eve and Pandora.²⁴⁸ These 'underscored' stories suggest that curiosity is connoted with knowledge, sexuality, and violation. Tatar writes, 'Woman's problematic relationship to knowledge becomes evident in reading the stories of Eve and Pandora, two women whose curiosity leads them to engage in the transgressive behaviour that introduces evil into the world.'²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Cristina Bacchilega, "'Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold": Double Agents and Bluebeard's Plot' in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 110.

²⁴⁶ Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 142.

²⁴⁷ Tatar, *Secrets*, 20.

²⁴⁸ Tatar, *Classic*, 141.

²⁴⁹ Tatar, *Secrets*, 3.

Tatar also reads this disparity in nineteenth century printed versions of the Bluebeard tale, identifying emphasis on curiosity and disobedience. Tatar writes, ‘critics seem to speak with one voice in their commentaries on the tale. “Succumbing to temptation,” one representative interpretation tells us, is the “sin of the Fall, the sin of Eve.”’²⁵⁰ Tatar further demonstrates the prevalence of this interpretation, finding dramatizations of ‘Bluebeard’ which reflect the interpreters’ accusations. Ludwig Tieck’s play goes as far as having the young bride deliver the lines of her own condemnation and association with Eve:

Cursed curiosity! Because of it sin entered the innocent world, and even now it leads to crime. Ever since Eve was curious, every single one of her worthless daughters has been curious. . . . The woman who is curious cannot be faithful to her husband. The husband who has a curious wife is never for one moment of his life secure. . .

Curiosity has provoked the most horrifying murderous deeds.²⁵¹

Similarly, Warner writes that in the late seventeenth century, French fairy tale writers were ‘struggling against prevailing Christian conceptions of women’s contagious lustfulness, against the traditional blaming Eve.’²⁵² Thus, Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard centres on ‘transgressive desire’ and is a text that ‘enunciates the dire consequences of curiosity and disobedience.’²⁵³

Feminist scholars, such as Danielle M. Roemer, scrutinize the critical tradition of blaming the young wife while neglecting to condemn murderous Bluebeard: ‘patriarchally-oriented reception of male murderer tales such as “Bluebeard” where, historically, literary retellers have roundly blamed the young wife for her curiosity but

²⁵⁰ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (1987) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 159.

²⁵¹ Ludwig Tieck, as qtd in Maria Tatar, *Hard Facts*, 159.

²⁵² Warner, 277.

²⁵³ Tatar, *Secrets*, 7.

neglect to condemn Bluebeard for his serial killings.²⁵⁴ Warner writes, ‘Bluebeard is a Jack the Ripper. Who perpetrates his evil on young women in their sexual maturity.’²⁵⁵ She reads the figure of Bluebeard as ‘metamorphosed in popular culture for adults, into the mass murderer, the kidnapper, the serial killer: a collector, as in John Fowles’s novel, an obsessive, like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*.’²⁵⁶ Warner’s association with adult popular fiction highlights the characteristics of Bluebeard that seem to be overlooked by early interpreters, an omission which Carter addresses.

Carter’s early novels contain allusions to Bluebeard that highlight male violence over female curiosity. In *Shadow Dance* (1966), Emily, Honeybuzzard’s new girlfriend who has recently moved in with him, finds a single locked door and enters the restricted room; she explains to Morris, ‘I know, it was locked. I found this key in one of his trouser pockets, see, and I thought, you know, of Bluebeard. [...] And the locked room. I don’t know him very well, you know. And Sister Anne, Sister Anne, what do you see? Nothing but the wind blowing and the grass growing – you know?’²⁵⁷ Although the room contains Morris’s paintings rather than the corpses of women, she does learn shortly after that Honeybuzzard has cut the face of a previous girlfriend who he later kills. Similarly, in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), Melanie is frightened of her uncle, thinking of his house as ‘Bluebeard’s castle, it was, or Mr. Fox’s manor house.’²⁵⁸ When she thinks she sees a severed hand in the knife drawer, she said ‘Bluebeard was here.’²⁵⁹ In both cases, the violence enacted in the Bluebeard narratives creates a sinister

²⁵⁴ Danielle M. Roemer ‘Contextualization of the Marquis in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”’ in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 113.

²⁵⁵ Warner, 269.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁵⁷ Angela Carter, *Shadow Dance* (1966) (London: Virago, 2010), 103-104.

²⁵⁸ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) (London: Virago, 2010), 83.

²⁵⁹ Carter, *Toyshop*, 118.

effect. Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' in particular joins the critique, shifting the focus of the tale back onto what Tatar refers to as the 'homicidal impulses of the husband.'²⁶⁰

The latent content of the Bluebeard narrative, which is beginning to emerge as we explore Carter's intertextuality, revolves around violence, power, and sexuality. Zipes's critical reading of the Bluebeard tale exposes phallocentrism as the foundation of Bluebeard's behaviour as well as the subsequent critical asymmetry. In 'The Male Key to Bluebeard's Secret,' Zipes identifies Bluebeard's 'real secret,' namely, why he killed his wives and who he really is.²⁶¹ Ultimately, Bluebeard's secret, as with all men in phallocentric society, is that there is no secret. Indeed, Bluebeard's wife would have not seen dead bodies, just an empty room. Yet Bluebeard is still hiding something. Zipes writes:

Bluebeard, as do all men, knows there is no essential or rational proof of his superior power, nothing to justify male power, no real god or gods who ordain power. Men know and sense that power can only be obtained through calculating manipulation of the other, more often than not, females and their offspring, and by concealing this knowledge of power, storing it away, that power is arbitrarily determined and the male maintains the myth of superior power backed by brute force. Such force and violence must be ritualized and become sacred for males to keep their secret, and women must be kept out and prescribed a place in the symbolic order of things so that they will serve men docilely.²⁶²

Zipes's analysis demonstrates the pervasiveness of gender power dynamics. When read in conjunction with his discussion of fairy tales and the civilizing process, Zipes reveals the latent content of the tale to be particularly sinister.

²⁶⁰ Tatar, *Secrets*, 21.

²⁶¹ Jack Zipes, 'The Male Key to Bluebeard's Secret,' *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of A Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 155.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 163.

For Zipes, Perrault's tale shows a flaw, a hiccup, because Bluebeard miscalculates the circumstances of the fourth wife. Because the fourth wife survives, 'Bluebeard' becomes a cautionary tale for men attempting to maintain male dominance. As Zipes writes, Perrault's tale 'reflects a major crisis for the phallotocracy, and it also provides a template that all men will use to reinscribe and to contemplate this crisis time and again up through the present century.'²⁶³ Carter's revision of Perrault's 'Bluebeard' echoes Zipes's critical analysis. Male dominance is prescribed through myth and literature; to break the pattern of reinscription, Carter invades and alters traditional narratives, shattering the template that is an icon in itself. Carter's iconoclastic textual strategy includes disrupting religious images and texts. Like Penelope weaving and unpicking Laertes's shroud, so Carter's revision continuously interlaces and unravels the narratives of Bluebeard and the Fall that portrays the female figure as blame-worthy. Carter reveals the latent content of the Bluebeard tale, exposing the violence perpetrated by the husband. Through literary allusions and historical references, Carter's revision refocuses the narrative on the husband as serial killer and the cultural and political structures that reinforce male domination.

Two earlier texts that demonstrate Carter's strategy of exposing the social fiction by disrupting iconic religious and literary images are *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Preceding the publication of *The Bloody Chamber and other Stories* by ten years and two years, these texts provide touchstones for identifying the components and development of Carter's textual strategy.

In *Heroes and Villains* Carter dislocates Christian images by refiguring religious and secular images and texts. Set in a post-apocalyptic era, the novel directly addresses past social constructs and the use of literature within these constructs. Religious texts

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 163.

and practices are deliberately manipulated by Donally, an ex-professor who left the safety of the Professor colony to live with the nomadic Barbarians. He believes religion is a social necessity²⁶⁴ and conducts a kind of social experiment with a group of Barbarians. When the female protagonist first meets Donally, he explains his development of a new religion: “‘It seems to me that the collapse of civilization in the form that intellectuals such as ourselves understood it might be as good a time as any for crafting a new religion,’” he said modestly. “‘If they won’t take to the snake symbol, we’ll think of something else suitable, in time. I still use most of the forms of the Church of England. I find they’re infinitely adaptable.’”²⁶⁵ Donally selects images haphazardly and experiments with their use, forgoing any essentialist significance.

Donally not only arbitrarily extracts images and texts from the Christian tradition, but also from Jewish Mythology, Native Americans, and Ancient Egyptians.²⁶⁶ This cacophony of images is brought together with striking dissonance in the wedding scene. Donally selects an ancient chapel for the ceremony.²⁶⁷ Acting as a priest figure, Donally perches on the altar ‘like a grotesque bird’ wearing a garment made of feathers.²⁶⁸ With him is a cage with a snake inside. The male protagonist and groom, Jewel looks ‘strangely magnificent as an Antediluvian king of a pre-Adamite sultan,’ while his brothers, acting as groomsmen, have their hair ‘plaited and ringletted as the wigs worn by the kings of Ancient Egypt.’²⁶⁹ For the wedding ceremony, Donally hijacks the vows from Book of Common prayer. The female protagonist Marianne is made to wear a wedding dress ‘such as [she] had only seen in surviving photographs of the time before

²⁶⁴ Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, 34.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 136, 55, 79.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

the war.²⁷⁰ This event, orchestrated by Donally, strangely re-enacts multiple historical periods and social groupings simultaneously. Religion, for Donally, is an arbitrarily constructed yet powerfully effective structure that creates and maintains hierarchy. Within this new religion, Donally constructs himself as holy man as a way to control the Barbarian tribe. As Donally states, religion is a ‘device for instituting the sense of a privileged group.’²⁷¹ The dislocation of the symbols from an earlier signification becomes, for Donally, a political manoeuvre which enables him to manipulate the Barbarian tribe. Social construction is of primary importance to Donally.

The collision of images not only occurs through the characterization and actions of Donally, but throughout the novel. The Professor villages – small towns organized by professors who have survived the war – are described as ‘earthly paradise[s] with angels with fiery swords.’²⁷² The female protagonist, Marianne, flees the Professor village after the death of her father. As a young girl, Marianne is reminiscent of Rapunzel: living in a ‘white tower’ and kept in a high room with a window, she eventually cuts her hair as an act of resistance.²⁷³ When she first meets Donally he refers to her as Miranda, alluding to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, as well as a ‘little holy image’ and ‘our lady of the wilderness’ referencing the Virgin Mary of the Catholic tradition.²⁷⁴ At the end of the novel, Marianne is describes as both Eve and a ‘little Lilith,’²⁷⁵ creating impossible convergences.

The male protagonist is, likewise, a site of intertextual collision. Marianne thinks of Jewel as an anachronism and his name as a ‘corruption’ of a biblical name like

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 117; the Garden of Eden is protected by angels with swords of fire in Genesis 3 and *Paradise Lost* XII.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 18.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

Joel.²⁷⁶ After he rapes her, Marianne calls him a Yahoo, suggesting his lack of hygiene and manners are equivocal to Jonathan Swift's parodic characters.²⁷⁷ In an effort to fit Jewel into his new religion, Donally seeks to give him Messianic grandeur by tattooing him.²⁷⁸ When Jewel was fifteen years old, Donally tattooed the 'legend of the Fall of Man' on his back:

[Jewel] wore the figure of a man on the right side, a woman on the left and, tattooed the length of his spine, a tree with a snake curled round and round the trunk. This elaborate design was executed in blue, red, black and green. The woman offered the man a red apple and more red apples grew among the green leaves at the top of the tree, spreading across his shoulders, and the black roots of the tree twisted and ended at the top of his buttocks. The figures were both stiff and lifelike; Eve wore a perfidious smile. The lines of colour were etched with obsessive precision on the shining, close-pored skin which rose and fell with Jewel's breathing, so it seemed the snake's forked tongue darted in and out and the leaves on the tree moved in a small wind, an effect the designer must have foreseen and allowed for.²⁷⁹

The tattoo is simultaneously animated and static: it repeatedly re-enacts the temptation while refusing to move beyond that narrative moment. In so doing, Donally isolates a canonical narrative, makes it into an emblem on Jewel's back to be exposed at ceremonial events of Donally's choosing. For Donally, the tattoo signifies his talent as artist and political figure, referring to it as the 'last work of art in the history of the world.'²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63, 29.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-94

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

Marianne, alternatively, recognizes Donally's manipulation and reads the tattoo as a grotesque 'mark of Cain.'²⁸¹ When Jewel performs the task of punisher, he takes off his shirt, exposing Donally's 'masterpiece':

[Jewel] was nothing but the idea of that power which men fear to offend; his back flexed and his arm rose and fell. The snake on his back flicked its tongue in and out with the play of muscle beneath the skin and the tattooed Adam appearing to flinch again and again from the apple with Eve again and again leaned forward to offer him until it seemed that the moving picture of an endless temptation was projecting on Jewel's surfaces, an uncompleted series of actions with no conclusion, caught in a groove of time. And Jewel was also caught within a mask which covered his entire body, a man no longer.²⁸²

In this scene, Donally's masterpiece is two-fold: the tattoo and the development of a community that employs punishment. Fulfilling the duty as punisher prescribed by Donally, Jewel loses his subjectivity and becomes mechanized. Changing the focalization from the act of punishment to the image of the Fall narrative dislodges the notion of Eve's culpability and suggests a broader, systemic cause for suffering. Carter's protagonist enacts punishment as an extension of structural power. Reminiscent of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the public demonstration of violence functions to re-establish power disrupted by Precious's neglect of duty.

Carter's choice of the image of the Fall on Jewel's back suggests both the power of canonical narratives as well as their constructed nature. Donally is puppet master of this nomadic Barbarian tribe. With Jewel as agent of punishment, Donally becomes the man behind the curtain, making decisions and manipulating outcomes. After whipping his brother Precious, Jewel seeks to step out of his role as punisher and console his brother:

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 123.

He cut Precious down and caught him in his arms as he fell forward.

‘It’s not my fault,’ said Jewel. ‘I love you best.’

Either from pride or spite, Precious had not yet lost consciousness.

‘Then whose fault is it, you bastard?’ he said.

With his last remaining strength, he spat in Jewel’s face, staggered from his embrace and tumbled in a faint.²⁸³

Jewel’s identity, for Precious and the tribe, has been successfully fashioned by Donally. Precious makes Jewel the target and cause of his pain; Donally successfully masks his role as instigator. This scene of punishment is an exercise of power through violence that emerged first with Carter’s Bluebeard references within *The Magic Toyshop* and *Shadow Dance*, becomes more fully realized in *Heroes and Villains* since in this text Carter exposes the arbitrary construction of religion through displacing religious images. Through irreverently rearranging religious and secular literature, Carter destabilizes the link of signified and signifier, altering iconic symbols. With Jewel signifying Messiah of the Yahoos and executioner, the signifieds of Christ the Messiah, the parodic Yahoos, and an instrument of judiciary authority becomes confused, conflated, and displaced from set signifiers. Similarly, Marianne is imaged as Miranda, Mary, Eve, and Lilith. By using multiple and contradictory literary references for her characters, Carter creates a pastiche which – constructed by and exclusively intelligible to Donally – unravels the social fiction of authority.

Carter continues the textual strategy of rearranging imagery and expected meaning in *The Passion of New Eve*. Again set in a post-apocalyptic world, Carter’s protagonist Evelyn, like Gulliver, travels great distances, moving from the UK to New York, across the desert to the Californian coast. Evelyn undergoes surgical sexual reassignment

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 123-24.

against his will, the women of Beulah who conduct the transformation assert that they are creating Eve to be the Messiah of Antithesis and replace patriarchal rule and narrative. Eve(lyn)'s journey is a disordered Messianic journey, with images and references to incarnation,²⁸⁴ baptism,²⁸⁵ desert temptation,²⁸⁶ resurrection of Lazarus,²⁸⁷ cleansing the Temple,²⁸⁸ and the Last Supper.²⁸⁹ Also, there are non-gospel biblical references throughout the novel including allusions to Lot's wife,²⁹⁰ Samson,²⁹¹ fruit of the tree of knowledge,²⁹² and Old Adam.²⁹³ Eve(lyn) is varyingly figured as Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Eve of a new creation.²⁹⁴

The most cogent examples of Carter's use of myth specifically in relation to social fictions of femininity are in two scenes: Evelyn's transformation to Eve and the consummation of Eve and Tristessa's marriage. While a prisoner of the women of Beulah, Evelyn is first raped and then undergoes 'psycho-surgery,' a process by which Evelyn is re-educated to become a woman.²⁹⁵ The psycho-surgery involves watching movies of Tristessa (his favourite actress who aroused him in earlier scenes). Watching the films, Eve(lyn) begins to identify and empathize with Tristessa, narrating, 'your solitude, your melancholy – Our Lady of Sorrows, Tristessa.'²⁹⁶ Eve(lyn) is then shown artistic depictions of the Virgin and Child as well as videos of animals with their cubs, which s/he interprets as developing a maternal instinct.²⁹⁷ This is followed by a video

²⁸⁴ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) (London: Virago, 2002), 147, 119.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. Matt 4; Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 143; John 11.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 112, Matt 21; Mark 11.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 154; Matt 26, Mark 14; Luke 22; John 13.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180; Gen 19.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 155, Judges 16.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 146; Gen 2.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16; Romans 5.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67, 70, 75.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

compilation of ‘non-phallic imagery of [...] opening and closing.’²⁹⁸ The re-education process was accompanied by physical treatments of daily injections of female hormones and lectures on the history of female oppression and pain, including discussions of female circumcision.²⁹⁹ Eve(lyn) narrates, ‘hour after hour was devoted to the relation of the horrors my old sex had perpetrated on my new one until I would moan, in a voice that grew softer and, against my will, more musical with each day that passed, and I would try to snatch away her books with hands that continually refined and whitened themselves.’³⁰⁰

The final product of Eve(lyn)’s new body resembles a socially constructed ideal. Eve(lyn) narrates, ‘I saw Eve. [...] They had turned me into the *Playboy* center fold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head.’³⁰¹ This orchestrated feminization of Eve(lyn) exposes societal constructs of female sexuality as built around male desire. Indeed, the male gaze becomes the catalyst for the specificity of female desirability. Eve(lyn) learns that Tristessa, the actress of his fantasies, is biologically a man,³⁰² s/he has an epiphanic moment, recognizing Tristessa’s success as an object of male desire. Eve(lyn) narrates:

*That was why he had been the perfect man’s woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity.*³⁰³

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 128-29.

The religious language of ‘unbegotten’ ironically emphasizes the construction and malleability of the iconic beautiful woman.

The second scene in which Carter’s interrogation of myth is prominent is when Eve and Tristessa copulate. Again, biblical and secular images are reconfigured in a non-linear pastiche. Eve(lyn) narrates, ‘Here we were at the beginning or end of the world and I, in my sumptuous flesh, was in myself the fruit of the tree of knowledge; knowledge had made me, I was a man-made masterpiece of skin and bone, the technological Eve in prison.’³⁰⁴ In this instance, Carter disrupts relationships between signifiers and signifieds. Suggesting that the present moment can be either ‘the beginning or end of the world’ allows for the jarring relocation of the Garden of Eden within the apocalypse. The set images of the Fall narrative – the tree, the serpent, the woman – are likewise reconfigured. Eve(lyn) is both woman and tree. Wrapping their bodies around one another, Eve(lyn) and Tristessa become both tree and serpent. These disruptions of signifiers and subsequent signification problematize the traditional interpretations of the Fall narrative as associating female agency (eating the fruit) with culpability and destruction.

Later on, Eve(lyn) refers to Tristessa’s skull as Golgotha, the site of Christ’s crucifixion.³⁰⁵ As if the reference to Christ is prophetic, Eve(lyn) and Tristessa are interrupted by a band of boys who wear crucifix necklaces.³⁰⁶ The leader of the group, referred to as the Colonel, has Leonardo’s ‘Last Supper’ tattooed on his chest.³⁰⁷ He beats Tristessa and cuts off his/her hair, stating he is ‘not Samson’ and has ‘no strength to lose.’³⁰⁸ Eventually, one of the boys shoots Tristessa with a revolver. Tristessa is

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 149. Matt 27:33.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 155. In Judges 16, Delilah cuts off Samson’s hair which diminishes his strength and he is unable to defeat the Philistines.

buried in a shallow grave which Eve(lyn) narrates is ‘the destination of the false goddess.’³⁰⁹ Carter’s post-apocalyptic narrative resists singular representation and straightforward citation. The canonical stories are not sufficient, are not universal. Their lack of applicability exposes their particularity and construction. By fashioning Eve(lyn) as Gulliver, Eve, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Christ, the Virgin Mary and Tiresias, Carter continues to unravel the social fiction of authority evidenced in *Heroes and Villains*.

Carter’s use of intertextuality shifts in ‘The Bloody Chamber’ to the heightened critique of metatextuality. According to Gérard Genette, metatextuality ‘unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it. [...] This is the *critical* relationship par excellence.’³¹⁰ For Genette, metatextuality moves beyond intertextuality – a ‘relationship of copresence between two texts’ often practiced as allusion – in the critical element: the given text critiques another in its telling.³¹¹ Carter’s revision of Perrault’s ‘Bluebeard’ incorporates the Judeo-Christian Fall narrative in a manner which critiques the traditional portrayal of curiosity and disobedience at the crux of the fairy tale. Extended beyond a pastiche of biblical and secular images, ‘The Bloody Chamber’ focuses on the female protagonist and, simultaneously, Eve as disobedient female. Just as Sleeping Beauty is the archetypal passive woman,³¹² Eve is the archetypal disobedient woman. By interrogating representations of disobedience in Perrault, Carter simultaneously defends curiosity and reveals the constructed fiction of male dominance.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

³¹⁰ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982) (trans) Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 4.

³¹¹ Genette, 3.

³¹² Rebecca Munford, relying on the work of Hélène Cixous, makes this claim in *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 30.

My critique will unfold as I summarize and provide critical reflection upon Carter's short story. Rather than enumerating key revisions and addressing them point by point, I seek to maintain Carter's textual effect of defying curiosity through allusion and metatextuality.

Immediately juxtaposed with Perrault's tale which employs an omniscient narrator, 'The Bloody Chamber' is narrated retrospectively by the unnamed, piano-playing female protagonist. She begins her tale by reflecting how, on the night of her marriage, she was propelled to her new husband's ancestral castle by train, 'away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.'³¹³ Beginning *in medias res* the protagonist and readers are propelled into the unknowable. This mysterious journey with thematic inferences of innocence and knowledge resonates with Carter's 'Penetrating the Heart of the Forest' – a short story in which the carefree twins Emile and Madeline explore the forest behind the village. They go further into the forest than any of the woodlanders because 'their world, though beautiful, seemed to them, in a sense, incomplete – as though it lacked the knowledge of some mystery they might find, might they not? in the forest, on their own.'³¹⁴ Reaching a new place in the forest interior, Madeline sees a white water lily which, when she tries to touch it, bites her.³¹⁵ The next day, they found a tree; they agree it could not be the fabled Upas Tree – 'a mythic and malign tree within the forest [...] whose very shadow was murderous, a tree that exuded a virulent sweat of poison from its moist bark and whose fruits could have nourished with death an entire tribe.'³¹⁶ The tree smells inviting and has beautiful fruit

³¹³ Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber' in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) (London: Penguin, 1993), 7.

³¹⁴ Angela Carter, 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest' in *Fireworks* (1974) (London: Virago, 2013), 68.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

‘mysterious sphere of visible gold streaked with green, as if all the unripe suns in the world were sleeping on the tree until a multiple, universal dawning should wake them all in splendour.’³¹⁷ Madeline picks a fruit and eats: ‘the juice ran down her chin and she extended a long, crimson, newly sensual tongue to lick her lips, laughing.’³¹⁸ She then offers it to Emile with ‘inexpressible entirety the hitherto unguessed at, unknowable, inexpressible vistas of love. He took the apple; ate; and, after that, they kissed.’³¹⁹ In this short story, readers find the collision of images that occur in Carter’s other texts. The image of a mysterious, forbidden tree and its fruit is markedly associated with knowledge and sexuality. Madeline is figured as Eve and the serpent – curious in discovering the tree and offering the fruit to her male companion, yet also with flickering tongue licking her lips. Emile is figured as both Eve, curious about the tree, and Adam, as recipient of the fruit. Their journey into the unknown heart of the forest is laden with analogies to innocence and experience, desire and deviance. It is this journey into the unknowable that Carter’s female protagonist shares with the twins. But in ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ the protagonist’s journey is into the ‘unguessable country of marriage.’³²⁰ This journey, like that of Emilie and Madeline’s, is predicated on a desire for knowledge. For the knowing reader, the, ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ in its first few lines, is already informed by a discourse on sexuality and power, which problematizes female culpability.

The protagonist narrates that her father had been a soldier who died in war. Her mother is the daughter of tea planter in Indo-China who married for love. The protagonist muses on her mother, narrating, ‘My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

³²⁰ Carter, ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ 7.

junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I?’³²¹ Her mother is a sharp contrast from the ‘lady of quality’ in Perrault’s tale. In the source text, the mother approved of the marriage with Bluebeard. Carter’s mother, however, wants a loving marriage for her daughter. It is the daughter who is determined to marry the Marquis for his wealth, remarking he is ‘rich as Croesus.’³²²

Danielle M. Roemer connects Carter’s Marquis to three ‘Oriental’ tyrants: fourteenth century Warlord Timur, sixteenth century Persian Shah Abbas and twentieth century Parisian couturier Paul Poiret.³²³ Although they are ‘not Bluebeard figures per se,’ Roemer investigates the socio-political-historical contexts that represent ‘patriarchal agendas.’³²⁴ Poiret, described by Roemer as one who ‘strategically manages sensory experience, and exploits hierarchy,’ is specifically alluded to in the short story as the designer of the infamous white, muslin dress. His clothing not only contains the female body as art object but also displays the opulence of wealth; in this case, the wealth of the Marquis. Wealth and foreignness fold into the power dynamics at work in the narrative.

The name that Carter has given the husband – the Marquis – also connects the husband figure to the Marquis de Sade. Sarah Gamble describes ‘The Bloody Chamber’ as ‘shot through with a Sadeian sensibility.’³²⁵ The publication of her critical interrogation of Sade, *The Sadeian Woman*, is frequently used in Carter criticism to read *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. What is useful for the purposes of this thesis is the reminder that Carter’s use of Sade not only takes readers further into an intertextual

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²² *Ibid.*, 10.

³²³ Danielle M. Roemer, ‘The Contextualization of the Marquis in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”’ in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 107.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³²⁵ Sarah Gamble, ‘My Now Stranger’s Eye’ in *Angela Carter: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 157.

maze, but also associates her text with material reality, the historical figure of Sade and the violence he embodies. As Rebecca Munford writes, ‘The hellish realm of Sade’s fiction is not [...] in the ‘world of make-believe things’ but firmly grounded in the social realities of the material world.’³²⁶

In keeping with Perrault’s tale, the Marquis is much older than his new, seventeen-year-old bride. Of his age and appearance the protagonist states, ‘He was older than I. He was much older than I; there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane. But his strange, heavy, almost waxen face was not lined by experience.’³²⁷ His waxen face, to her, was a mask. She longed to see his ‘real face,’ to ‘see him plain.’³²⁸ Indeed, it is her desire to know her husband that fuels her entry into the forbidden room, as with Perrault’s text, the husband is an older, wealthy, stranger. However, Carter’s earliest descriptions, with the dark mane of a lion, construct him as a predatory figure. The theatrical is a recurring motif in Carter’s work – *Shadow Dance* is littered with costume and dressing up, the climax of *Magic Toyshop* is enacted on a puppeteer’s stage, one of the central figures in *The Passion of New Eve* is an actress, and the performance of roles within families and society are echoed in these portrayals. The mask of the Marquis suggests his participation in a role already written, already staged. In this case, the Marquis is the author of the narrative; in marrying the protagonist, he is setting in motion events that have already occurred, the reader later learns, with previous wives. Later on, as the protagonist seeks to unmask her husband, she is simultaneously seeking to expose the authorship of the script.

The opulence and allure of the Marquis is reiterated in the train journey: the stop is arranged specifically for his use. As the newlywed couple disembarks from the train,

³²⁶ Rebecca Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 9.

³²⁷ Carter, ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ 8.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

arriving at the isolated location of the Marquis's ancestral castle, the chauffeur recognizes the new bride by the opal ring – 'the size of a pigeon's egg' – on her finger.³²⁹ The ring had been his mother's; indeed, it had been in the family for generations, 'given to an ancestor by Catherine de Medici.'³³⁰ With this historical reference, Carter dislocates her fairy tale from the ethereal realm of 'happily ever after' and places it distinctly in reality. Carter simultaneously establishes a lineage for the Marquis connected to violence by evoking the controversial figure Catherine de Medici who is attributed with orchestrating the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572). While de Medici is varyingly depicted by historians as a villain or a sympathetic figure, her association with the massacre is unquestioned.³³¹ With the evocation of her name, Carter introduces the theme of historical violence and ancestral power.

Upon entering the castle, the protagonist reflects upon the night before they wed: the Marquis had taken her and her mother to see *Tristan*. On this occasion she wore the white muslin dress he bought her as well as a red ruby choker he gave her as a wedding gift. She noticed that the Marquis was looking at her 'with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh.'³³² The protagonist acknowledges how the Marquis might perceive her, which both reveres and refuses the male gaze. The protagonist narrates, 'I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.'³³³ At this point, the protagonist is becoming awakened to her own capacity for complicity in relationship to economic gain. Throughout this courting exercise, the Marquis's gestures are distinctly consumerist. This materialism, which

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³³¹ Robert Knecht, 'Catherine de Medici: Saint or Sinner?' in *History Review* 26 (1996): 3.

³³² Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber,' 11.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

drives both Carter's and Perrault's young woman to marry the stranger, is problematized by Carter through the retrospective narration of the protagonist as well as the use of mirrors. The mirror is a significant motif in Carter. Kathleen E.B. Manley discusses the significance of the mirror specifically within 'The Bloody Chamber,' noting its association with the protagonist's subjectivity.³³⁴ Yet, the protagonist sees more than herself in the mirror; she sees how her fiancé sees her – as an object. As Manley writes, 'This glimpse of herself provides not only the beginnings of subjectivity but also some honesty; she admits she previously might not have *acknowledged* her fiancé's lust [...]. At the same time, however, the mirrors at the opera encourage her to acquiescence in the story the Marquis wishes to write for her, for the dichotomy Carter sets up and that the Marquis favors is a dichotomy between innocence and debauchery, not innocence and experience.'³³⁵ There is collusion as well as recognition in this scene; a theme Carter continues to develop.

As the Marquis guides his bride around her new home, he shows her the music room furnished with a piano and a painting – another wedding present – of Saint Cecilia. The protagonist narrates, 'There was a Bechstein [piano] for me in the music room and, on the wall, another wedding present – an early Flemish primitive of Saint Cecilia at her celestial organ. In the prim charm of this saint, with her plump, sallow cheeks and crinkled brown hair, I saw myself as I could have wished to be.'³³⁶ The patron saint of music, martyred for refusing to give up her virginity, reflects the Marquis' perception of his bride. The saint's innocence and naivety appeal to the protagonist who is beginning to acknowledge her acquiescence to the economic and sexual dynamics of her marriage.

³³⁴ Kathleen E. B. Manley, 'The Woman in Process in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"' in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit; Wayne State university Press, 2001), 85.

³³⁵ Manley, 85.

³³⁶ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber,' 14.

As the night at the opera suggests, she already recognizes her lack of saintliness; she achieves a glimpse of self-awareness.

The protagonist's innocence and potential for corruptibility elicits the Marquis' desire, as exemplified by their first sexual encounter. He steers her up the stairs to her room and their 'grand, hereditary matrimonial bed' surrounded by twelve mirrors. Alone in their room he begins to strip her, 'as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke.'³³⁷ Bare, she again glimpses herself in the mirrors and sees:

the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together . . . the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb.³³⁸

Both aroused and repulsed, the protagonist stands erect while he examines her. No longer the Saint Cecilia who died perceiving her maidenhood, the protagonist becomes the gaunt victim etched by Rops. Once again, the mirrors reflect her acquiescence. And yet, with the reaction of the blush and the gesture of covering her face with her hands, there is also the introduction of shame. She is beginning to see her participation in his story as well as how he sees her – a double vision initiated at the opera which privileges the male gaze.

As abruptly as the sexual encounter began, the Marquis ceases his inspection and informs his bride that he will be leaving on business. He kisses her and withdraws from the room; she goes down to the music room only to find the piano out of tune and decides they needed a resident piano tuner.³³⁹ Interestingly, Marquis leaves the day after they are married rather than one month into the marriage, as in Perrault's text. In 'The

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Bloody Chamber,' the husband consummates the marriage *after* he tells her he will leave, perhaps emphasizing his impatience for the other consummation he has in mind.

Disappointed by his announcement, the young wife leaves the music room and enters his library, finding leather bound books, rugs from Isfahan and Bokhara, a glass-fronted case with a collection of Eliphaz Levy texts, and a 'slim volume' with no title containing violent pornographic scenes. This is the first reference to historical pornographic material. The explicit references to Levy's works locate the short story once again in the real world. As with the reference to Catherine de Medici, Carter restrains the reader from immersing into a fantasy with continual references to historical figures.

The protagonist does not abandon the texts but continues to examine them.

Exploring the pages the young wife narrates:

had he not hinted that he was a connoisseur of such things? Yet I had not bargained for this, the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the great globes of her buttocks on which the knotted tales of the cat were about to descend, while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like the scimitar he held. The picture had a caption: 'Reproof of curiosity.'³⁴⁰

This section echoes the exploration of the guests and friends of Perrault's fairy tale; however, it is the wife who lingers on the texts of her husband rather than guests exploring the house of a stranger. The addition of pornography here suggests a consumerist approach to women. The Marquis de Sade also lurks in this scene: themes of sexual education and accumulation of both wealth and debauchery are latent in the Sade corpus as well as this scene. The unsuspecting reader, like Justine, finds herself surrounded and antagonized by decadence and debauchery.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

This first explicit introduction of pornography coincides with the first explicit reference to the word ‘curiosity.’ Curiosity, which is associated with female disobedience in traditional interpretations of the Perrault text, is seen as a legitimate cause for punishment in the Rops volume. By using this weighted word at this specific point in her revision, Carter associates the strict punishment of women in the fall narrative with the violence of sadomasochism. For Carter, both discourses perpetuate a social fiction of female roles – the role the protagonist plays as the young wife, as well as the stereotypical roles of virtuous victim or whore. Curiosity becomes linked with the fictional roles and problematized in Carter’s telling.

As the female protagonist continues to explore the text and its images, she becomes increasingly disturbed and gasps at the violent images. She narrates, ‘My mother, with all the precision of her eccentricity, had told me what it was that lovers did; I was innocent but not naïve.’³⁴¹ The protagonist’s sexual education evokes and critiques Sade’s Eugénie, who in *Pleasures of the Boudoir*, is taught by instructors appointed by her libertine father, the protagonist. In the boudoir, ‘the three libertines initiate Eugenie into the arts of sodomy, masturbation and various contraceptive methods, through a mixture of orgy, tutoring and philosophic sermon.’³⁴² The mother in Sade’s text is the focal point of rage and violence. The climax of the piece involves Eugenie raping her mother with a dildo, infecting her with syphilis, and stitching up her mother’s ‘wound’ to fester without relief. As Rebecca Munford writes, ‘the boudoir thus becomes a Gothic inversion of the Garden of Eden, where no sexual knowledge is forbidden.’³⁴³ The mother as sexual educator inverts the Sadeian pedagogy and challenges associations between knowledge, power, and sexuality. Carter’s location of

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴² Rebecca Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 161.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 161.

sexual education with the mother not only antagonizes the masculine-centric pedagogy of Sade but also adds complexity to the notion of culpability in so far as the protagonist is becoming aware of the kind of relationship she has entered.

However, the young bride is surprised by the violence. The Marquis finds the disconcerted protagonist in the library, calling her his ‘little nun.’³⁴⁴ He kisses her and takes her to their bed. Requiring her to wear the ruby choker, the Marquis and his newly acquired wife consummate their marriage: ‘A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewling gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside.’³⁴⁵ Again, the mirror reflects the protagonist’s body and identity. In this scene, her identity is as object – both bride and harem. The use of multiple images of the bride also prefigures the sisterhood of dead wives that she will discover in the bloody chamber. The mirrors also continue to reflect the protagonist’s status as object and her acquiescence to the Marquis’s design.

When the Marquis announces his departure, he tells her that she should spend time in the gallery and begins to catalogue his treasures – including Moreau’s *Sacrificial Victim*, and Ensor’s *The Foolish Virgins*.³⁴⁶ Then he gives her the keys to all the rooms in the house, ceremonially describing the different doors each key could open: ‘Keys, keys, keys. He would trust me with the keys to his office, although I was only a baby; and the keys to his safes, where he kept the jewels I should wear, he promised me, when we returned to Paris.’³⁴⁷ Yet one key ‘remained unaccounted for.’³⁴⁸ The protagonist narrates, “‘What is *that* key? I demanded, for his chaffing had made me bold, “The key to your heart? Give it to me!’”³⁴⁹ He tells her that it is not the key to his heart but to his

³⁴⁴ Carter, ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ 17.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

enfer, later describing it as, a ‘private study, a hideaway, a ‘den’ as the English say, where I can go, sometimes, on those infrequent yet inevitable occasions when the yoke of marriage seems to weigh too heavily on my shoulders.³⁵⁰ There I can go, you understand, to savour the rare pleasure of imagining myself wifeless.’³⁵¹ The Marquis is both truthful and elusive in this statement: imagining himself without a wife is to once again be looking for his next bride/victim. In contrast to Perrault’s Bluebeard who provides his wife with a stern warning and establishes consequences if she disobeys, the Marquis does not warn his bride. In asking him about the last key, the young wife enacts the role the Marquis has written for her as well as reiteration of her desire to know him. In this scene, what is hidden is not the room so much as the Marquis’s true self. By having the protagonist ask about the key, Carter begins to dislodge curiosity from disobedience.

Before he leaves, the Marquis informs his bride that he has employed a piano tuner who was scheduled to arrive the next day. As an employee, this new character functions as a foil to the guests who explore Bluebeard’s riches in Perrault’s text. Later on, the reader discovers that the piano tuner becomes the protagonist’s second husband – the ‘very worthy man, who banished the memory of the miserable days she spent with Bluebeard’ from Perrault’s tale.³⁵² The piano tuner, already a foil for Bluebeard, offers a different model of masculinity – one that does not revolve around ownership and intimidation.

The protagonist sleeps poorly her first night in their bed alone, narrating, ‘I lay in our wide bed accompanied by, a sleepless companion, my dark newborn curiosity. I lay

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21. The word *enfer* translates as ‘underworld’ or hell.’ While it is possible that the Marquis is simply stating that the den is in the lowest part of the house, the implication of the space for his young bride is certainly hellish.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵² Tatar, ‘Bluebeard,’ 148.

in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me.’³⁵³ Carter’s use of the word curiosity is poignant. Here, curiosity revolves around sexuality comprised of both longing and disgust. The protagonist recognizes her own desire to participate with the Marquis in sadomasochism.

During the Marquis’s absence, the protagonist plays piano and wonders through the house. She takes a bath in the tub that had taps of ‘little dolphins made of gold, with chips of turquoise eyes.’³⁵⁴ Then, unable to defer the call any longer, she telephones her mother and ‘astonished myself by bursting into tears when I heard her voice.’³⁵⁵ Even though the connection was poor, the protagonist is comforted by their conversation. Despite the brevity of this scene, Carter weaves together more tightly images of the Marquis’s wealth and the protagonist’s increasing awareness of her own culpability in the relationship in which she later describes herself as being sold. This scene also reiterates the importance of the mother who – in her concern for her daughter marrying for money rather than love – functions as an alternative possibility for the protagonist.

With hours remaining before dinner, she decides to explore the house, turning on all the lights and opening all the doors. First, she goes into his office, looking for evidence of his real self. Despite rummaging through his mahogany desk, leather boxes, and jewellery safe, she finds nothing to indicate who he is: ‘Nothing. And this absence of the evidence of his real life begin to impress me strangely; there must, I thought, be a great deal to conceal if he takes such pains to hide it.’³⁵⁶ Unexpectedly, she bumped open a secret drawer in the desk which contained a file marked *Personal*. This thin file contained tokens from his previous wives: a paper napkin from the barmaid, page of a score of *Tristan* from the diva, and postcard with the caption ‘Typical Transylvanian

³⁵³ Carter, ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ 22.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

Scene – midnight, All Hallows’ from the Roman countess, Carmilla.³⁵⁷ The young wife finds hints of the Marquis’s true self in her search when she finds the tokens of his previous wives. The third wife, Carmilla, is the only named female character in the collection of short stories. Carter provides an evocative intertextual reference to Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871), an early vampire novella. This reference not only adds to the Gothic tone of the short story, but also suggests modes of female behaviour alternative to those the young wife is expected to obey in Perrault’s tale. Indeed, Carmilla actively seduces her victim, suggesting a literary history of women as active subject.

Leaving the office, the protagonist drops the key ring and all the keys fall on the ground. She narrates, ‘And the very first key I picked out of that pile was, as luck or ill fortune had it, the key to the room he had forbidden me.’³⁵⁸ Despite his request for her to leave the door unopened, she decides she must enter: ‘it was imperative that I should find him, should know him; and I was too deluded by his apparent taste for me to think my disobedience might truly offend him.’³⁵⁹ The imperative for the bride in this narrative is a striking contrast from the motive in Perrault’s text. In Carter’s revision, curiosity is not simply a trait which leads disobedience but a drive which propels the protagonist’s need to know her husband’s true self.

She begins her descent toward the passage way he had previously described, finding it was not dusty as he had claimed but well kept. With candle in hand (for there was no electricity in that part of the castle) she notices Venetian tapestries on the wall: ‘The flame picked out, here, the head of a man, there the rich breast of a woman spilling through a rent in her dress – the Rape of the Sabines, perhaps?’³⁶⁰ The direct reference

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

to a tapestry reminds readers of Perrault's house-guests who explored the tables, mirrors, and tapestries in the house while the bride was compelled to enter the forbidden room. Carter's description of a specific scene also reflects the Walter Crane illustration. Yet the image that accompanies her descent is not one of female disobedience but of male violence and assertion of power. [See Appendix 2] By inserting an image of male violence into this scene, Carter inverts the blame from female curiosity to the male exercise of power.

The protagonist continues her descent until she arrives at the 'worm-eaten oak' door and paused, not out of fear but 'hesitation, a holding of the spiritual breath.'³⁶¹ Upon entering the room, she sees first the instruments of mutilation – the Iron Maiden – and then the wives: the opera singer had been embalmed and 'on her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers;' the barmaid remained as a skeleton only, her skull strung by unseen cords; and countess was positioned in an upright coffin, her body punctured with the spikes of the Iron Maiden.³⁶² Rather than panic and run as Perrault's young bride, the female protagonist explores the room in the desire to know more. She attributes the courage she maintains in her endeavour to her mother, 'My mother's spirit drove me on, into that dreadful place, in a cold ecstasy to know the very worst.'³⁶³ Overcome by the sight of the third body, the protagonist drops the key in the countess's 'forming pool of blood,' and knows in that moment that she is bound to join them.³⁶⁴ Then a draught enters; the candle flares. The young bride narrates, 'The light caught the fire opal on my hand so that it flashed, once, with a baleful light, as if to tell me the eye of God – his eye – was upon me. My first thought, when I saw the ring for which I had

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

sold myself to this fate, was, how to escape.³⁶⁵ Careful to leave no trace of her visit, she snuffs the candles and collects the key with a handkerchief to keep her hands clean. Carter's description of the protagonist's movements echoes the courage and bravery cited by Bacchilega, Warner, and Tatar when critiquing earlier interpretation of Perrault's text. Indeed, this scene is radically different from Perrault's, in its length and its specificity. Carter's protagonist does not simply glimpse the blood and run away; she enters the room. Also, the protagonist discovers that the punishment for each wife is distinct, heightening the sense of the Marquis's construction: he has staged each proposal and execution. Again, Carter provides an historical reference: the Iron Maiden – a device associated with the Middle Ages but used through the centuries – which grounds the narrative in specificity absent from the source text. Carter continually refuses to let her tale disconnect from material, historical reality. Carter's protagonist succeeds in her quest to find her husband's 'true self;' she discovers he is a mass-murdering sadist and puppeteer creating scenarios for enacting his desires. The contrived nature of the room – its orchestrated layout and personalized executions – suggests the scenario in the Garden of Eden was equally staged. Bluebeard, in Carter's text, is both God the Father and the serpent, setting the stage for the protagonist's perceived failure.

After leaving the bloody chamber, the protagonist is unable to retreat to the bedroom, for the memory of him and their sexual encounter is too dominant. Instead, she goes to the music room to make plans for an escape. Realizing that she cannot rely on his staff or even possibly the people in the town nearby, she attempts to call her mother but the line is dead.³⁶⁶ Once again, the protagonist's mother is an identifiable

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

source of strength external to the Marquis and a possible source for freedom. Though unable to contact her mother, the protagonist remembers that the Marquis is boarding a plane for New York and supposing she will be able to leave the following day. She decides to play the piano for solace, narrating, 'I set myself the therapeutic task of playing all Bach's equations, every one, and, I told myself, if I played them all through without a single mistake – then the morning would find me once more a virgin.'³⁶⁷ She seeks not absolution but a reversal: she seeks to be Saint Cecilia – the virgin musician – rather than the girl in the Rops etching. The young bride's focus on her virginity as the source of innocence indicates that she is still participating in male-dominating stereotypes for women.

Yet her husband indeed returns. From the window of the music room, the protagonist sees him driving up the road to the house. She tries to wash the stained key, but to no avail. Jean-Yves offers to stay with her, but she dismisses him. She rushes to the ancestral bed, strips naked, and lies in wait for him to enter. Carter's protagonist employs strategic tactics for avoidance, attempting to delay him. Joining her, he tells her that he has received a telegram indicating that he does not need to take the journey. Yet she knows he is lying, that he has planned for this to happen all along; she realises:

I had been tricked into my own betrayal to that illimitable darkness whose source I had been compelled to seek in his absence and, now that I had met that shadowed reality of his that came to life only in presence of its own atrocities, I must pay the price of my new knowledge. The secret of Pandora's box; but he had given me the box himself, knowing I must learn the secret.³⁶⁸

The protagonist is now aware of the Marquis's manipulation, his construction of the trap. She sees him continue to play the role. The Marquis joins her on the bed, takes off

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

his pocket watch and pats his jacket in a feign search for the keys. ‘But, of course! I gave the keys to you’ he said, and asks for them back. Despite her attempts to delay her retrieval of the keys, he demands their return and that she fetch them. He sees the bloody key back on the ring with the others, removes it and says, ‘It is the key that leads to the kingdom of the unimaginable.’³⁶⁹ He forces her to kneel before him, and imprints the stain on her forehead, ‘like the caste mark of a Brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain.’³⁷⁰ Just as Donally tattoos Jewel’s back in *Heroes and Villains*, so the Marquis places the bloody key on his wife’s forehead, creating a permanent sign of power and control of the one bestowing the mark and acquiescence of the recipient.

The Marquis instructs his condemned bride to bathe, put on the white muslin dress and ruby choker, and wait in music room for his call while he sharpens his great-grandfather’s sword.³⁷¹ The weapon of choice moves beyond Perrault’s cutlass, which associates Bluebeard with foreignness, and confirms generational element of the violence. The Marquis is carrying on a tradition that can be traced to his great-grandfather. This generation component suggests long-standing nature of imposed male dominance. There is also an absence of prayer or a Sister Anne to look out for her brother’s to aid her escape. Rather, there is a dialogue about Eve. The protagonist narrates:

‘You do not deserve this,’ [Jean-Yves] said.

‘Who can say what I deserve or no? I said. ‘I’ve done nothing; but that may be sufficient reason for condemning me.’

‘You disobeyed him,’ he said. ‘That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.’

‘I only did what he knew I would.’

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

‘Like Eve,’ he said.³⁷²

In Carter’s version, Bluebeard is like God the Father who is portrayed as an unfair tyrant. The female protagonist’s phrasing evokes Marquis as the puppet master, like Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop* setting the stage for inevitable victimization. The metatextual reference simultaneously evokes and critiques the Fall narrative. There is a shift in emphasis from female culpability to the constructedness of the male figure. This shift validates curiosity: with the protagonist desire to know her husband’s real self, the legitimacy of his punishment is questioned, and, by implication, authority.

At the moment when the Marquis requires his bride to arrive in the courtyard, Jean hears ‘hoofbeats;’ the protagonist looks out the window and sees her mother on horseback. The Marquis calls for her three times, and, despite her attempts a delaying him, she and Jean come down to the courtyard. The Marquis takes back the opal ring and said, ‘It will serve me for a dozen more fiancées.’³⁷³ He makes her walk to the block, strips her of the muslin dress, the same gesture he made on their wedding night, kisses the ruby chocker and then her neck. In prefiguring the execution with gestures in marital bed, the Marquis reveals himself as grotesque engineer of the entire tale.

The Marquis’s confidence in his role as manipulator is for this first time assaulted: just as he raises the sword, there is a pounding at the gate; in that moment, the Marquis freezes and the naked protagonist leaps up to help Jean-Yves open the gate to let her mother in. When the mother enters, the Marquis roars and charges at all three of them. Then, with her dead husband’s service revolver, the mother shoots the Marquis in the head.³⁷⁴ The young bride describes, ‘The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves.³⁷⁵ The puppet imagery evokes the Bluebeard-esque character of Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop* as well as the theatrical nature of the Marquis's actions throughout the narrative. The religious connotation of the language in these lines – 'ordained' and 'since time began' – evoke prescriptive interpretations of the Fall narrative.

Carter's revision of the mother as rescuer is a reversal of the Sadeian narrative. Far from inflicting violence on the mother as Eugénie and Juliette do with relish, the mother enacts violence – killing the Marquis in an effort to free her daughter from their sadomasochistic relationship. As Sarah Gamble writes, 'Carter restores the mother to the narrative as an autonomous figure.'³⁷⁶ In doing so, Carter undoes the Perrault text. Carter's mother, just as Perrault's mother, allows the daughter to decide for herself whether or not she will marry the wealthy stranger. However, rather than allowing the mother to slip away from the narrative, Carter's mother becomes an example of an alternative trajectory of her daughter's tale.

Since the Marquis has no heir, all his wealth is given to the protagonist. Most of the fortune goes to charities, and the castle is converted into a school for the blind. The protagonist does, however, retain enough funds to set up a music school. She and Jean-Yves marry and live together with her mother. The female protagonist narrates her gladness for her husband's blindness: 'not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame.'³⁷⁷ These final words require the reader to identify her shame, acknowledging that it is located not with her disobedience but in her complicity. A noticeable movement away from the morals at the end of Perrault's fairy tale, Carter's conclusion enables the protagonist's subjectivity as

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷⁶ Gamble, 'My Now Stranger's Eye,' 160.

³⁷⁷ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber,' 41.

one who reflects on her own behaviour. The shame she experiences is not based on her disobedience but on her willingness to marry the Marquis. As Robin Ann Sheets writes, 'Reflecting on her experiences, the narrator feels ashamed of the materialism that drove her to marry the Marquis and of her complicity in sadomasochism.'³⁷⁸ Similarly, Cheryl Renfroe writes, 'The gripping sense of shame she must finally own is not born of her disobedience to her husband, but of her own susceptibility to the corruption he represents.'³⁷⁹

Indeed, Renfroe reads Carter's text as analogous to a rite of passage narrative, seeking to uncover what she calls liminal experiences for Carter's protagonist. For Renfroe, Carter's text allows for an alternative to the established paradigms of femininity on the female character. By emphasizing Gnostic Christian theology alongside rite of passage processes, Renfroe argues that Carter 'invites readers to critique long-held assumptions about the character of women assigned by conventional interpretations of the biblical Eve, thus encouraging an awareness that Eve's disobedience [...] did not, in fact, bring disaster upon the world. Instead, Eve's action in the garden can be interpreted as an ordeal of initiation resulting in the very first instance of the exercise of free will intended to fulfil human beings and set them apart from beasts and plants.'³⁸⁰ Renfroe's argument succeeds in eroding conservative readings of shame and blame in Bluebeard and the Fall narrative. However, her assertion of gnostic readings of Eve do not resonate with the Carter text. 'The Bloody Chamber' does not attempt to recast Eve as enacting free will; rather, the female protagonist uncovers the constructedness of the narrative. When Carter's protagonist suggests a parallel between

³⁷⁸ Robin Ann Sheets, 'Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber,"' *Journal of Sexual History* 1.4 (1991): 650.

³⁷⁹ Cheryl Renfroe, 'Initiation and Disobedience: Liminal Experience in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"' in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (eds) Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 97.

³⁸⁰ Renfroe, 98.

her situation and Eve (in the music room), she is identifying the Marquis's manipulation. Carter is not revisioning the Fall narrative; she is revisioning Perrault's 'Bluebeard' while employing metatextual references to the Fall narrative that effectively expose and deconstruct claims to authority.

The metatextual inclusion of the Fall narrative which critiques the embedded warning against female disobedience within Perrault's source text functions to dislodge disobedience from curiosity. Carter's continuous references to factual people and historical events repeatedly assert the material realities of violence and power. As Gamble writes, 'it is a real condition of our very existence, for Carter intends her audience to realize that these stories apply to the contemporary world and the way we live now.'³⁸¹ The corruption and complicity of the female protagonist both evokes and criticizes Sade for his limiting portrayal of women. For Carter, as with Zipes, the real secret of Bluebeard is the illusion of male power. Carter's revision critiques epistemological ownership, displaces female culpability, and replaces the Sadeian pedagogy by reinstating the mother as sexual educator. Carter's references to the Fall narrative participate in reclaiming knowledge for women without the stain of disobedience. Ultimately, Carter displaces the social fiction of women's disobedience and defends female curiosity in her revision of the 'Bluebeard' fairy tale via metatextual reference to the Fall narrative.

³⁸¹ Sarah Gamble, 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Bloody Chamber,' in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (ed) Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 38.

**The Assertion of Polyphony: Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* and
Palimpsestic Play**

‘By sleight of hand, women were deprived of creative power and speech.’

– Michèle Roberts, ‘The Flesh Made Word,’ 41.

The second genre which is revisioned that I will be addressing is religious literature, specifically, the Bible. Once again, discussing revision of this genre is difficult since reception, rewriting, and intertextuality of the Bible have proliferated into various disciplines and are integral within biblical scholarship. The Bible itself possesses numerous sites of intertextuality – the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament inform the gospel writers, Paul’s letter to the Romans includes references to the life of Abraham as a platform for developing theology (Romans 4), and the book of Hebrews includes references to the Psalms, the Law (Deuteronomy), and the Histories (2 Samuel; 1 Chronicles). As Harold Schweizer states, ‘Biblical revisionism is as old as Genesis.’³⁸² Furthermore, the Jewish practice of Midrash participates in reception and rewriting, providing interpretations for biblical stories as well as filling in gaps of narratives. Biblical allusion is found throughout the Western canon of literature texts. In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), Northrop Frye discusses the pivotal role of the Bible in informing Western literature, arguing that the ‘mythological universe’ – ‘a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from [...] existential concerns’ – of Western culture is derived from the Bible as a whole.³⁸³

³⁸² Harold Schweizer, ‘Introduction,’ *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, Alicia Suskin Ostriker (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), 15.

³⁸³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible in Literature* (London: Routledge, 1982), xviii.

Feminists have responded to biblical texts and interpretations in varying ways. In *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), Mary Daly criticizes Christian religion as irrevocably patriarchal, famously articulating, 'If God is male, then male is God.'³⁸⁴ Daly's stance is considered radical, and she denounces key theology such as original sin and salvation through the Messiah. Daly writes:

The idea of a unique male savoir may be seen as one more legitimization of male superiority. Indeed, there is reason to see it as a perpetuation of patriarchal religion's 'original sin;' of servitude to patriarchy itself. To put it rather bluntly: I propose that Christianity itself should be castrated by cutting away the products of supermale arrogance: the myths of sin and salvation that are simply two diverse symptoms of the same disease.³⁸⁵

On the far side of the spectrum, Daly rejects Christian tenets for feminist ends. A more moderate yet still critical response comes from feminist biblical scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Addressing theological interpretation and historic representation, Schussler Fiorenza interrogates oppression of women and reconstructs a previously overlooked female participation in Christianity.³⁸⁶ Schussler Fiorenza's approach is of recuperation rather than rejection, working as excavator of a women's history below the surface of canonical Christian theology. Phyllis Trible laments the oppression of women within Biblical narratives and warns against current readings of the text that reinforce latent misogyny in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*

³⁸⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973) (London: Women's Press, 1995), 19.

³⁸⁵ Daly, 71-2.

³⁸⁶ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983). For more on the influence of Fiorenza, see Heather Walton's 'Feminist Revisioning' in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (eds) Andrew W. Hass, David Jasper, Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 543-557.

(1984).³⁸⁷ Encouraging lament, Tribble circumnavigates rejection and encourages an awareness of difficult elements of the Christian tradition for feminists. On the other side of the spectrum, feminist theologian Alicia Suskin Ostriker returns to the sacred text in a way which can be described as amorous rather than antagonistic, arguing that sacred texts and traditions 'encourage and even invite transgressive as well as orthodox readings.'³⁸⁸ Ostriker seeks to revitalize the sacred text by recovering a lost female experience, small hints or suggestions of which can be detected, she argues, in the sacred text through rigorous rereading. As such, Ostriker, as well as Schussler Fiorenza and Tribble to different degrees, participate in a reclaiming of the Christian tradition.

Michèle Roberts's response to the biblical tradition resembles Daly more than Ostricker, that is, from outside the tradition rather than from its 'core'.³⁸⁹ Since I am engaging with Roberts's experimental novel *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), I limit the scope of my research to her own experiences with the Bible, Catholicism and Catholic theology. First, I will outline Roberts's relationship to Catholicism and her response to Catholic theology, specifically the doctrine of the Atonement. Second, I will unpack Roberts's use of biblical allusion and intertextuality in her early novels. Third, I will explore Roberts's textual strategy of feminist revision in *The Book of Mrs Noah*. By observing formal elements as well as the reappropriation of key symbols of the Biblical source text, I will argue that Roberts's revision asserts a polyphony of women's voices and recovers the previously deprived 'creative powers and speech' of women.³⁹⁰

Michèle Roberts, whose mother is French Catholic and whose father is English Protestant, responds to Catholicism in a complex manner. For Roberts, Catholicism is as

³⁸⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

³⁸⁸ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 31.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹⁰ Roberts, 'Flesh,' 41.

‘integral as the blood in my veins, passed onto me by my mother like milk.’³⁹¹ The Catholicism Roberts inherited is something she embraced in her childhood. Roberts now identifies as an ex-Catholic, stating, ‘I lost my faith over twenty years ago, easily, for the simple feminist reason, that I could no longer bear sitting in silence listening to male priests telling me how to feel and think.’³⁹² In a collection of texts written by women about spirituality, Roberts contributes a personal, autobiographical description of her negative experience with Catholic teaching and traditions. Roberts articulates how she became radicalized as a feminist and Marxist, rejecting Catholicism altogether because it involves, for Roberts, a ‘renouncing of myself, my femininity.’³⁹³ Roberts writes, ‘I saw the Christian God arrogating to himself all the functions of women, and so denying women’s part in life and creation.’³⁹⁴ Through reading Jungian feminists and participating in psychotherapy, Roberts found four interconnected female archetypes in the female psyche: virgin, mother, companion to man, and sibyl, which enabled her to recover her femininity and participation in creation.³⁹⁵ These distinct yet unified archetypes created a ‘system of imagery,’ for Roberts, which ‘helped me to see that sexuality and spirituality can be connected, need not be at war. Also, that a woman can be complete in herself, not just as a companion or a shadow of a man, but a distinct being, different to him, in her own right.’³⁹⁶ These archetypes which allow for multiple dimensions of femininity facilitate Robert’s integration of femininity and spirituality. The activities and elements of everyday life – eating, conversation, friendship, dancing – became avenues for participating in ‘the rhythms of creation.’³⁹⁷

³⁹¹ Michèle Roberts, ‘The Woman Who Wanted to be a Hero,’ in *Walking on the Water: Women Talk about Spirituality* (eds) Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland (London: Virago, 1983), 52.

³⁹² Michele Roberts, ‘The Place of Women in the Catholic Church’ (10 August 1994) reprinted in *Food Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing* (London: Virago: 1998), 32.

³⁹³ Roberts, ‘Hero,’ 55.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

Roberts's critique of Catholicism and resolution through alternative images of femininity is reiterated in her articles. In 'The Dogma that Had its Day,' Roberts speaks out against central orthodox theological tenets of Catholicism.³⁹⁸ Roberts criticises the doctrine of the Atonement – that 'we, as human beings, as in our nature so fallen, so evil, so alienated, that God had to put his son on the cross to rescue us' – as a doctrine which 'damages and stunts children's moral, psychological and emotional growth.'³⁹⁹ Roberts is suspicious of church authority, finding the claim that priests have a ' hotline to Him Up There' to be empty and arguing that sin is necessary to Catholic theology so that followers will be 'persuaded of their need for priestly advice and absolution.'⁴⁰⁰

The focus of Roberts's antagonism toward Catholicism has to do with the separation of the body and soul evident in the Catholic tradition. In 'The Woman Who Wanted to be a Hero,' Roberts describes this problematic dualism, writing:

the Judaeo-Christian tradition [...], to put it very crudely, operates within a dualistic and hierarchical system of concepts: soul is better than body; be guided by intellect, not by intuition. And since this tradition has designated and denigrated women as bodies and as bundles of emotion rather than as possessors also of souls and minds (traditionally reserved for men), my struggle has concentrated on *validating the body and the emotions*, exploring sexuality and emotion in order to assert their beauty and worth.⁴⁰¹

Roberts resists this imposition of binary oppositions, finding it absurd, for example, that celibate male priests should define the perimeters and control female sexuality.⁴⁰² The procreative power of women's bodies, then, is dismissed in favour of the potency of

³⁹⁸ Michèle Roberts, 'The Dogma that's Had its Day' *The Independent* (29 May 1994). Note: This is the earlier version of 'The Place of Women in the Catholic Church;' there are minimal differences between these two texts.

³⁹⁹ Roberts, 'Dogma,' 1.

⁴⁰⁰ Roberts, 'Place,' 32, 33.

⁴⁰¹ Roberts, 'Hero,' 51; emphasis added.

⁴⁰² Roberts, 'Place,' 33.

God. The implications of this are significant for women. Men, associated with God via rationality (the Word – *Logos* – made flesh), became creators and makers.⁴⁰³ Thus, Roberts focuses on the body, emotional life, and sexuality of women as a point of departure from the hierarchical structure she identifies in Catholic theology and tradition.

Roberts specifically interrogates the images used to portray God – that the divine is distinctly male. Echoing the work of Daly, Roberts reads the incarnation as affirming God's masculinity. For Roberts, God is the male impregnator of the virgin and 'the woman's body is merely a seedbed.'⁴⁰⁴ Roberts finds resonances of this within art, describing:

Christian iconography intriguingly depicts both the approved version of the myth [of the Incarnation] and its underside. Pictures of the male God's sperm, disguised as a dove, shooting into Mary's vagina, disguised as her ear, are very common. That was supposed to depict the Word being made flesh: the Logos substituted for the penis, becoming the phallus, and became fantastically important: what men said was *correct* and *true*, they were the creators, the makers. By sleight of hand, women were deprived of creative power and speech.⁴⁰⁵

Roberts's depiction emphasizes creation and epistemology in relationship to authority and access. Resonating with Rhys's depictions of epistemological incongruities in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as Cixous's critique of phallogocentrism, Roberts interrogates the symbolic exclusion of women. These traditionally correct images which have dominated religious usage are not ubiquitous. Roberts also finds art which resist images of virgin as seedbed.

⁴⁰³ Roberts, 'The Flesh Made Word' (1997) in *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing* (London: Virago, 1998), 41.

⁴⁰⁴ Roberts, 'Flesh,' 41.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

Roberts observes, there are still images that are ‘suggestive, inexplicable images that refuse to be neat mirror images of the official portrait of the dominant religious culture.’⁴⁰⁶ Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto* (1460) is one such painting. [See Appendix 3] This image of the Blessed Virgin – pregnant and haloed – reintegrates the divine and the bodily. Roberts writes, ‘Her swelling body is both the image of fertility, fecundity, hope and faith in the future; and also the symbol of the body as interior space, the site of imagination, God’s dark pavilion.’⁴⁰⁷ Francesca’s Virgin is ‘both maternal and sexy, both connected and free, both queenly and ordinary.’⁴⁰⁸ In her body, the bodily becomes numinous and holy, rather than a mere seedbed.⁴⁰⁹ God depicted in the female body as the pregnant Virgin portrays the divine as imminent rather than transcendent. When God is found through ‘images of the physical [...] God is not any longer simply Him Up There. God has become part of us.’⁴¹⁰ With the numinous presence of the divine in the person of the Virgin, the boundaries of authority become disturbed. Rather than a hidden, separate, sacred transcendent God guarded and interpreted by the religious tradition, creation and creativity can be broadly and naturally participated in. Roberts writes, ‘each of us participates in the Creation, the dance and flow of atoms of which the modern physicists speak, which goes on *now*, isn’t over once and for all. Each of us can join in the making and remaking of the world, feel part of the whole.’⁴¹¹ This integration of bodily humanity and divine occurring in the image of a pregnant woman – the very provocation of female divinity through maternity – has a prominent place in Robert’s fiction.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

The dualism of the mind and body within Catholic tradition and theology as well as the oppression of women that it enables is the crux of misogyny for Roberts. It is this intersection which becomes the site for Roberts's subsequent interrogation within her creative works. When discussing her journey toward spiritual integration and wholeness, Roberts explains the centrality of her creative work. Roberts writes:

The truest record and explanation of it is contained in my novels and poems. I became a writer through sheer necessity. I desperately needed to describe experience in order not to be overwhelmed by it, to name the conflicts inside myself, to imagine solutions to them, to *create images and meanings of femininity* that were not divisive, damaging, silencing.⁴¹²

Roberts's resistance to and critique of the Catholic Church – its theology and traditions, that she reads as hostile towards women – is expressed and enacted in her *oeuvre*.

In her first novel *A Piece of the Night* (1978), Roberts satirizes women's roles and Church hierarchy. The first scene is of novice nuns competing for the privilege of cleaning the chapel. The 'holy housework' gives them access to a sacred space, the sanctuary.⁴¹³ Within the convent, women are perceived as only useful in domestic work and given limited access. The novices themselves comply with their role, busily dusting and polishing the room. Such complicity is reminiscent of the female protagonist in Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' who acquiesces to her subjugation.

Roberts further critiques the roles of women in the family as ordained by the Church. Roberts comments on both hierarchy in the church and the fecundity of women's roles through the female protagonist, Julie Fanchot. Visiting her mother in France, she returns to the parish church of her childhood:

⁴¹² Roberts, 'Hero,' 51; emphasis added.

⁴¹³ Michèle Roberts, *A Piece of the Night* (1978) (London: Women's Press, 1984), 1.

Julie sits in the Fanchot pew at the far end of the church near the altar. She stares, as she has always done, at the carved choir. And beyond it, at the stained-glass windows behind the high altar. Up and up the eye is sucked, up through the hierarchy of the glittering inhabitants of heaven. [...] Ladders of archangels, cherubim and seraphim; tiers of prophets, saints and martyrs, each in his or her own place, serene. Here too is womanhood in glory: virgins, wives, mothers, widows, every aspect of human female life accounted for, named through its connection with the husband or the Lord. The progression of these categories leads the eye from Eve up further still to where the sin of woman is redeemed, to where the Virgin Mother reigns supreme, she who represents the impossibility that only more than saints achieve: motherhood without the taint of sinful sex, the flesh unassailed and incorrupted. Her finger, sternly and yet tenderly raised, points upward, out through the roof, beyond the clouds, towards the almighty presence that gives women life and will forgive them for their imperfections.⁴¹⁴

This passage weaves together the threads of women's roles in the family, expectations of women's behaviour in church, exclusion and hierarchy. The religious figures are tiered in order of significance. The prominence of the Virgin Mother at first appears promising; her 'reign' is authorial. However, she is simultaneously an unfeasible model of holiness. The impossibility of her station as both virgin and mother excludes women from religious participation. Julie's narration echoes Roberts's non-fictional critique of Catholic traditions, interrogating early Church figures and their commentary of women. The Virgin, in pointing to 'the almighty presence,' remains a secondary figure – a conduit for God's power. Roberts's creative work functions, then, to highlight problematic elements of Catholic tradition and theology and resists prescribed roles for women. Roberts's novel observes 'women's search for "stories that will not put them to

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

sleep”⁴¹⁵ and participates in rousing women from the slumber. Resonating with Cixous’s critique of phallogocentrism, Roberts’s novel participates in the Richian awakening.

In her second novel *The Visitation* (1983) Roberts uses biblical allusion and intertextuality to interrogate the mind/body dualism within Catholicism and the subsequent prescription of women’s roles in the Catholic tradition. A *künstlerroman* of a woman writer, the novel explores the female protagonist Helen ‘attempting to construct a unitary identity for herself’⁴¹⁶ within the context of a religious, patriarchal background. At the beginning of the novel, Helen is in an unfulfilling heterosexual relationship with George. In this relationship she attempts to perform the roles determined by masculine desire and neglects her body: ‘She is unable to tell him what she wants. He goes on writing his articles and reading them to her, he goes on coming quickly and falling asleep, and she goes on pretending, playing the perfect mother.’⁴¹⁷ Helen’s dissatisfaction in the relationship is linked with her sexual frustration, highlighting the need for an integration of the mind and body. It is with her female friendships that Helen is able to embrace the bodily, the emotional, the feminine. While on holiday with her best friend Beth, Helen visits a women’s hammam:

Women everywhere, everywhere, women of all ages, races and shapes, and every one different, and beautiful. Here, with no critical, classifying, dividing male eye upon their bodies, the women are relaxed, whole, belonging only to themselves. Helen feels pleasure surge up along with sweat and pour from all over her. She succumbs to wetness and heat, her skin a curtain between two hot seas, she lets

⁴¹⁵ Michèle Roberts, 2014. *Michele Roberts: My Books* [online] Available at: http://www.micheleroberts.co.uk/my_books.htm [Accessed 20 March 2014]

⁴¹⁶ Rosie White, ‘Permeable Borders, Possible Worlds: history and Identity in the Novels of Michèle Roberts,’ *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36.2 (2003): 74.

⁴¹⁷ Michèle Roberts, *The Visitation* (1983) Women’s Press Classic Edition (London: Women’s Press, 2002), 63.

go of language and thought and becomes all her sense, enriched
newly alive.⁴¹⁸

The leisure of the women contrasts with the performance which preoccupied Helen in her relationship with George. Helen's sensual, pleasurable experience of her body is contextualized by the absence of men and the male gaze. She is able to recover the bodily which she had previously neglected. In the heat of the hammam, women are no longer defined in relationship to men as wives, mothers, and widows. Embracing the bodily coincides with a rejection of prescribed roles.

The prescribed roles, which Helen had been occupying at the beginning of the novel, are informed by male privilege and experienced through religious narrative. As a child, Helen thinks of herself and her twin brother Felix as Adam and Eve:

Felix comes out first, the son so much desired, and Helen followed him. [...] The real baby because firstborn and male. Eve is made from the spare rib in Adam's side. Adam is wild and unruly, such a trouble to his parents, who therefore need to concentrate on him, put time and energy into chastising and retraining him. It is possible to be envious of punishments; these demonstrate the sinner's importance. Eve's sin is secret; on the surface she is hardworking, submissive, polite, nice, good. Only at night does a different Eve emerge, a different face, hissing through nightmares, wetting the bed, sleepwalking...⁴¹⁹

Jealous for love and affection, Helen undergoes being secondary as a distinctly female experience. The emphasis on appropriate female behaviour further contrasts expectations of gender roles. Yet the religious narrative is insufficient: the nocturnal Helen/Eve does not fulfil the expected roles. The reference to her hissing associates her with the serpent in the Fall narrative, suggesting further connections between women

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

and condemnation within the religious context. In this recollection, Helen begins to peel back the layers of gendered expectation. Whereas Carter dislodges signifier and signified of the Fall narrative to problematize female representation, Roberts exposes how women can be perceived (and even perceive themselves) as fitting into the patterns and characterizations within the Fall narrative.

Helen's recognition of male privilege, female exclusion and diminishment of the bodily are increasingly depicted in religious imagery. Toward the end of the novel, Helen is having an affair with Robert. Though she is still not able to climax during intercourse, she has increased sensual pleasure. She relishes the tastes, smells, and sounds of breakfast and sits in the garden reflecting on the night before: 'Last night still lies lightly like a shawl on her shoulders, persuading her that she is like Eve on the first morning of Paradise.'⁴²⁰ Yet her peace is disrupted by her recollection of a dream:

The brothel. Herself and her brother there. She goes running away over the grass, tripping over her dressing-gown, a long smear of red on the peaceful green view, the half-eaten apple rolling behind her down the steps. God and Adam and the angel stand under the apple tree, wiping their hands on their dungarees, jeering at her, and their faces are those of Felix and her father and Father Briggs.

You're a whore, their voices call after her as she sprints out of Eden: nothing but a whore.⁴²¹

In this scene, Roberts weaves together Helen's experiences of hostility, exclusion, and condemnation of the Catholic Church as well as the piercing observation of male access. For God, Adam, and the angel are eating the apples whereas she must flee. Her bodily pleasure is judged while Felix, though with her in the brothel, is still able to eat and sneer with their father and Father Briggs. The access granted to the three

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

men and Helen's exclusion emblemize the associations between divine authority and men. Using the Fall narrative as a template for understanding gendered behaviour, Roberts exposes the problematic disparity between roles and challenges representations of authority. In *The Visitation*, Roberts consistently interrogates mind/body dualism and the implications for women using biblical allusion to magnify how Catholicism constraints women.

In her third novel *Wild Girl* (1984), Roberts shifts from textual strategies of reference and allusion to rewriting. No longer punctuating her narrative with Biblical images, Roberts inhabits a biblical narrative – rewriting the synoptic gospels and creating the gospel of Mary Magdalene. Roberts excludes the character of Judas and reconfigures the passion and crucifixion of Jesus as the consequence of social tensions. Mary is Christ's lover and follower; she prophesies and teaches. Peter is depicted as her adversary who struggles to understand Jesus's teachings that sought to integrate the male and female. Peter, believing women are evil and 'not worthy of life,' asks Jesus to excommunicate Mary from the fellowship.⁴²² Jesus responds:

I myself [...] shall lead Mary in order to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male shall enter the Kingdom of heaven. And I shall lead you, Peter, in order to make you female, so that you may become a living spirit resembling these women. For every man who will make himself female will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴²³

Christ's teachings, in Roberts's novel, demolish hierarchy, male privilege and access. Gendered hierarchy within religion is personified in Peter who argues that 'women are the gateway to evil and to death.'⁴²⁴ Peter's voice, like to voice of the new catechism that Roberts criticizes in 'The Dogma That Had It's Day,' becomes dominant after

⁴²² Michèle Roberts, *The Wild Girl* (1984) (London: Methuen, 1985), 59.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

Jesus's death. It is Peter rather than Christ who is figured as establishing a religion which excludes women. Roberts's Peter fails to understand the teachings of Christ, rejects sensuality, excludes women, and creates a dualistic theology which becomes the apostolic tradition. Mary Magdelene and Mary the mother of Jesus, who question Peter and eventually leave his company to establish a 'little settlement just beyond the beach'⁴²⁵ with other women, voice Roberts's critique of Catholicism.

In her fourth novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Roberts shifts her textual strategy again – from rewriting to feminist revision. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, *Wild Girl* is not a revision because it alters the plot and main characters. By excluding the Judas character and shifting the motivation of Christ's crucifixion to political inevitability, Roberts alters the Biblical narrative in a way which excludes it from feminist revision. *The Book of Mrs Noah*, conversely, inhabits the Old Testament narrative of the Flood, maintaining all plot points and key characters, altering only the point of view. Roberts comments on her reason for writing *The Book of Mrs Noah*, stating, '[H]aving rewritten the New Testament, I then turned my attention to the Old, and began writing a novel about the goings-on aboard the Ark.'⁴²⁶ Roberts's novel employs the strategy which Elizabeth Wanning Harries calls 'continuing frame story' – a structure which 'strings the various tales along like beads on a narrative chain, moving from frame-tale to tales told by various characters in the frame – who often also embed further tales of their own.'⁴²⁷ *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights* famously use a continuing frame story. Roberts's revision of the Noah's ark narrative appears in a metadiegetic (or embedded) story or single bead of the narrative chain. Told by one of the sibyl's aboard the Ark, the story of a flood is narrated by the wife of Jack who, like

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴²⁶ Michèle Roberts, *Paper Houses* (London: Virgo, 2007), 265.

⁴²⁷ Harries, 107.

Noah, understands God as transcendent rather than immanent. As in her previous novels, Roberts problematizes what she identifies as a dualism between the mind and body in Catholic theology. In this revision, though, Roberts reasserts women's access to spirituality and creativity. In this metadiegetic tale, Roberts reinterprets key elements of the source text – the Ark, the rainbow, and authority – in a way that critiques and corrects the Catholic theology of Roberts's past. This reinterpretation of the flood narrative becomes the interpretive lens for the novel as a whole and, in turn, replaces the biblical story of Noah's Ark with a narrative of women's desire and self-discovery. With the metadiegetic narrative as an interpretive lens, symbols in the extradiegetic narrative of the novel change their meaning, including the significance of the Ark as library and archive.

Before exploring Roberts's revision, I will discuss the biblical account of the flood. By observing the source text and traditional interpretations, I will establish what Roberts is writing against. The flood narrative is situated after the story of Cain murdering Abel and a lengthy genealogy from Adam to Noah. After learning the name of Noah's sons, the reader is informed that humans increased in number and became corrupt: 'The earth grew corrupt in God's sight, and filled with violence' (Gen 6:11).⁴²⁸ However, unlike the wicked people on the earth, Noah 'was a good man,' who 'found favour with Yahweh' (6:9, 6:8). Thus, when God decided to destroy the earth and all people because of their wickedness, He chose to keep Noah and his family from destruction. God instructed Noah to build an ark:

Make yourself an ark out of resinous wood. Make it with reeds and line it with pitch inside and out. This is how to make it: the length of the ark is to be three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its

⁴²⁸ All references to biblical text are from *The Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, 1966); this was the version used in the Catholic Church in the 1980s in England and is most likely the text Roberts was working from.

height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark... put the door of the ark high up in the side, and make a first, second and third deck.

For my part I mean to bring a flood, and send the waters over the earth, to destroy all flesh on it, every living creature under heaven; everything on earth shall perish. But I will establish my Covenant with you, and you must go on board the ark, yourself, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives along with you. From all living creatures, from all flesh, you must take two of each kind aboard the ark, to save their lives with yours; they must be a male and a female. Of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of reptile on the ground, two must go with you so that their lives may be saved. For your part provide yourself with eatables of all kinds, and lay in a store of them, to serve as food for yourself and them. (Gen 6:14-21)

Noah was obedient: doing 'all that God had ordered him' (6:22). Noah preserves himself, his family and the creatures of the earth from annihilation.

The Lord instructed Noah to begin boarding the ark, telling him the rain would begin in seven days. Once all creatures had boarded the ark, the flood began: 'all the springs of the great deep broke through, and the sluices of heaven opened' (7:11). It rained for forty days and forty nights. The waters 'swelled' lifting the ark 'until it was raised above the earth' (7:17). Destruction was immense:

And so all things of flesh perished that moved on the earth, birds, cattle, wild beasts, everything that swarms on the earth, and every man. Everything with the breath of life in its nostrils died, everything on dry land. Yahweh destroyed every living thing on the face of the earth, man and animals, reptiles, and the birds of heaven. He rid the earth of them, so that only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. (7:21-23)

Water and death reigned on the earth. Eventually, the destruction ceased. The shift in the text is made through the act of remembrance. The text reads, 'But God had Noah in mind, and all the wild beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark' (8:1). God

sent a wind across the earth to make the water subside; the waters recede, the ground slowly dries. God commands Noah to disembark: 'Come out of the ark, you yourself, your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives with you. As for all the animals with you, all things of flesh, whether birds or animals or reptiles that crawl on the earth, bring them out with you. Let them swarm on the earth; let them be fruitful and multiply on the earth' (8:16-17). Next, Noah builds an altar to make a sacrifice to the Lord; God is pleased with the sacrifice and establishes a covenant with Noah, his sons, and every living creature, promising never to destroy all life with a flood (9:11). God 'set' a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant (9:13). The narrative ends with the rainbow – the sign of the covenant – between God and 'every living thing that is found on the earth' (9:17).

The story employs an omniscient narrator. While the narrator is not God (indeed, God is a character in the story), God is interpreted to be the grand author of the story, and the Bible generally.⁴²⁹ Within the text, Noah's obedience is emphasized with repetition of the phrase 'and Noah did all that was commanded' (6:22, 7:5). The Ark is that which saves the select few from the punishment of God. God commanded it to be built for salvific purposes, showing mercy in the midst of punitive destruction. The rainbow is a sign of God's promise to never flood the earth again, that is, to never punish the earth with that kind of magnitude again.⁴³⁰

A primary theme present in this text is the dual concept of punishment and redemption, which, in recent biblical scholarship, has been characterized as un-creation

⁴²⁹ Orthodox Christianity (including Eastern Orthodox, Catholicism, and Protestantism) consider Scripture to be inspired by God and have divine authority, as indicated in the Nicene Creed. For a succinct discussion of the debate surrounding Mosaic authorship, see Dillard and Longman 'Genesis' in *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 38-48.

⁴³⁰ Themes of sin and punishment persist in the canonical Scriptures. Just a few chapters later is the Tower of Babel episode. In this story, punishment is confusion – the inability to communicate by the creation of many languages – rather than a flood.

and re-creation.⁴³¹ Within the narrative, the cause of the flood is the corruption of humanity. Indeed, the flood is the climax of ‘God’s judgement against the rebellious people of the world.’⁴³² The people were corrupt, therefore God took punitive action.⁴³³ The punishment is manifest in a destruction of creation. In Genesis 1, earth is created by a separation of waters (1:6-8). The days of creation that followed included bringing into existence creatures in the sea and birds in the air (the fifth day), creatures on the land – cattle, reptiles, and every kind of wild beast – and human beings (1:24-25). Thus, in Genesis 7, the ‘waters rose and swelled greatly,’ resulting in ‘all things of flesh perished that moved on the earth, birds, cattle, wild beasts, everything that swarms on the earth and every man’ (7:21), there is a resounding un-making of the days of creation. With reference to the waters from below and above as well as the releasing of chaos, the story undoes the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis.

Yet, redemption is still present. Once God remembers Noah and those on the Ark, He ‘sent a wind across the earth, and the waters subsided. The springs of the deeps and the sluices of heaven were stopped. Rain ceased to fall from heaven; the waters gradually ebbed from the earth’ (8:1b-3). Once again the earth becomes habitable and all creatures and mankind are blessed to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (8:17, 9:1). As Bill Arnold writes, ‘Indeed, a re-creation is signalled by the renewed separation of sea and land, the receding of waters, and the gradual reappearance of dry ground in a way reminiscent of Genesis.’⁴³⁴ Thus, creation is echoed and reconstituted. Even the

⁴³¹ See Westermann and Cline in Dillard and Longman’s ‘Genesis’ in *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollo, 1995), 52.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³³ Bill Arnold, ‘Genesis 6:9 – 9:29 The Great Flood’ in *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 98.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

language of the blessing – to be fruitful and multiply – again echoes the creation story (1:22, 28), leaving theologians and scholars to consider this a re-creation.⁴³⁵

Another major theme explored by theologians is the covenant which includes blessing of subsequent generations.⁴³⁶ After the punishment, from which Noah and his family are saved, God promises never to flood the earth again, establishing a covenant with Noah.⁴³⁷ The significance of the Hebrew word for ‘covenant,’ according to Arnold, is difficult to translate into English. Arnold writes, ‘Unfortunately, our English “Covenant” is inadequate to connote the essence of the Hebrew concept, both in its narrower understanding of a binding relationship between two parties and in the much richer significance the concept acquires elsewhere in biblical theology.’⁴³⁸ Despite the difficulty of translation, Arnold goes on to clarify, ‘In this passage the covenant emphasizes the commitment of God to save Noah and his family from death in the floodwaters, while it implies certain obligations of Noah as well, contained in the imperatives to build the ark and follow God’s directives (more obligations will be stated when the covenant is formally instituted, 9:4-6).’⁴³⁹ God’s covenant, later extended to Abraham, is a demonstration of His commitment to and communication with the humanity He has created. Yet God is still distant – not directly in or effected by the Flood – as well as punitive – carrying out violence as punishment for corruption. These themes are echoed in the New Testament and Christian theology. Jesus Christ – Son of God, God Incarnate – is crucified to save humanity from sin (Heb 10:12). Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, canonized as sacred text, is used to establish the doctrine of the

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴³⁶ Dillard and Longman’s ‘Genesis’ in *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollo, 1995), 52.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³⁸ Arnold, 100.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

Atonement. Thus, the flood narrative, which includes a salvific component in the figure of Noah and his family, foreshadows the life of Christ.

In the story of Noah's ark and theology regarding convent portrays a God who is transcendent. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Roberts shatters these portrayals and rearranges them to create a mosaic of Catholic narratives which allow for an imminent God and include women as participating in creation. The action within *The Book of Mrs Noah* occurs primary in the unconscious of the main character's mind. As Linda Taylor succinctly summarizes, 'The Noahs, with their rocky marriage, go to Venice (a suitably watery place), where Mrs Noah jumps naked into the canal, is rescued by her husband and put to bed. The novel occurs in the space of her oblivion: in between taking off her clothes by the canal and waking up in her hotel room.'⁴⁴⁰ In her 'oblivion,' Mrs Noah constructs an Ark. It is a library⁴⁴¹ for Mrs Noah as Arkivist⁴⁴² as well as an ark for other women writers whom she invites to discuss questions of authorship. Five women writers – sibyls – arrive, as does a middle aged man, the Gaffer (God the Father), who crashes the floating writing group. Aboard the Ark, they eat, sleep, learn about themselves, follow their desires, and overcome writers' block. They also tell stories to each other; these stories within the novel are elaborate metadiegetic narratives within the larger frame narrative of the ark voyage. Mrs Noah also goes on outings to various islands along the way. On the last day of the voyage, it is too overcast for Mrs Noah to explore another island, so she joins the Gaffer and sibyls down to the lowest part of the Ark, the 'bowels of the Ark,' where she discovers her dead grandmothers, the baby she aborted, her literary mothers (including Woolf, Gaskell, the Brontës).⁴⁴³ It is here that

⁴⁴⁰ Linda Taylor, 'Possessed by the Past Imperfect: Review of four first-person narratives' in *Sunday Times* (14 June 1987) [Accessed 30 March 2011].

⁴⁴¹ Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (London: Methuen, 1987), 18.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 267.

Mrs Noah finds what she has needed: overcoming her writer's block and knowing herself more fully.⁴⁴⁴ The hold of the ark, rather than being a chamber of torture, a womb of death, is a metaphorical chamber of literary mothers, a womb of creativity.

The morning after the party in the hold, the ark docks in Venice. The group disembarks. Mrs Noah wakes in her hotel room with Mr Noah having just taken a shower. He goes off to his scheduled medical conference and she picks up her pen to write. Mrs Noah, once awakened, is able to write. Before the adventure in the canal and in her unconscious, Mrs Noah's diary was blank. Now she is able to write: '*My story, I write, beings in Venice.*'⁴⁴⁵ Echoing the early lines of the novel – 'My story begins in Venice.'⁴⁴⁶ – Mrs Noah's diary becomes the novel, creating a frame for the collection of metadiegetic stories.

At first glance, this summary indicates minimal parallel between Roberts's novel and the flood narrative in Genesis. However, by examining the metadiegetic story of the flood and using it as an interpretive lens for the novel, I aim to demonstrate how Roberts radically revises the source text through an assertion of polyphony. This polyphony occurs on the level of character as well as form. Roberts employs polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense of allowing different characters equal opportunity to speak and equal weight of spoken words. For Bakhtin, a 'genuine polyphony' is 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness' which are 'fully valid voices.'⁴⁴⁷ By not privileging a single voice but allowing for multiplicity, polyphony enables a democratic discourse. In Roberts's texts, each of the sibyls and the gaffer tell stories and disagree with one another in a way that permits and encourages discourse rather than

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Theories and History of Literature 8 (ed and trans) Caryl Emerson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

privileges a single voice. Polyphony is reinforced in the characters themselves; the women writers are sibyls. One of the four archetypes which provided Roberts with an integrated alternative to the prescribed women's roles within Catholicism, the sibyl is 'the woman who periodically needs to withdraw into what can be seen as depression or even madness but who is in touch with ancient memories, inspiration, who is an artist.'⁴⁴⁸ By naming each character a sibyl, Roberts validates each woman's journey as an artist as well as alerts knowing readers to participation in revision of Catholic traditions and theology.

This democratic discourse is also employed on the level of form. As described above, Harries's terminology of continuing frame is useful for discussing the structure of the novel. Yet Roberts herself uses a different term to describe the same form. In an interview with Fernando Galván, Roberts refers to the form of *The Books of Mrs Noah* as plaiting.⁴⁴⁹ In her 'Post-Script' to the collection *The Semi-Transparent Envelope*, Roberts discusses her process of writing, stating, 'I write novels to explore the form, to find out just what I can do. Different each time. The content (those images, those nagging questions) shapes the form; only that form can demonstrate that content. Yes, form is content.'⁴⁵⁰ Throughout Roberts's career as a writer, she has experimented with form as a way to express the problems she is considering. In her memoir, Roberts writes, 'All of my novels enact problem-solving, pose questions of content and form then try to answer them. You have to invent the form that best expresses the content. They are integrated; part of each other.'⁴⁵¹ The form of plaiting – of weaving together voices which are in dialogue but also which disagree with one another – identifies the

⁴⁴⁸ Roberts, 'Hero,' 62.

⁴⁴⁹ Fernando Galvan, 'Writing as a Woman: A conversation with Michèle Roberts,' *European Journal of English Studies* 2:3 (1998), 366.

⁴⁵⁰ Michèle Roberts, 'Post-Scripts' in *The Semi-Transparent Envelope* (London: Marion Boyers, 1994), 170.

⁴⁵¹ Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 198.

primary content of Roberts's revision of the biblical narrative of Noah's Ark. In contrast to the story of Noah's Ark as written in the Bible and interpreted by the Catholic Church as having a single reading, single meaning, single interpretation, Roberts's text is polyphonic. Roberts does not attempt to write a utopian feminist community on a boat that upholds a universal sisterhood. Rather, she explores differing female experiences and perspectives while retaining the common factor of being women. As Jeanette King states, 'Roberts does not set one woman's word against the voice of God, but attempts to convey the multiplicity of female experience as well as its common element.'⁴⁵² The voices do not carry one melody; they are in harmony and even create dissonance. Yet all these voices are heard.

Roberts uses a similar form in *Impossible Saints* (1997). In this later novel, the story of the female protagonist Josephine is interwoven with narratives of other female saints who respond to the Catholic Church in different eras. Each tale is centralized on the female protagonist and allows her 'side' of events to be heard as distinct from what was expected within orthodox Catholicism. As a kind of revision of *The Golden Legend* – a collection of hagiographic tales collected in the Middle Ages by Jacobus de Voragine – Roberts's novel tells of women's lives from their perspectives.⁴⁵³ Roberts's text maintains what seems to be omniscient, third person narration for the first 260 pages, then shift abruptly to an overt narrator who announces that she has been narrating the story of Josephine all along. Isabel, Josephine's niece, constructs stories of women's lives, piecing them together like the bones in the golden chamber built into the side of a cathedral chapel which she shows to her granddaughter in the first chapter. The image of the hidden chamber within the church is a strong image for Roberts's work overall.

⁴⁵² Jeanette King, 'Myth of the Flood: "In the beginning there is Mother" Michèle Roberts – *The Book of Mrs Noah*' in *Women and the Word* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 52.

⁴⁵³ In her 'Author's Note', Roberts discusses both the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila as well as *The Golden Legend* as sources of inspiration for the novel.

This golden chamber of saints' bones resonates with the hold scene – a secret place where women's stories have remained, although dormant, ever-present.

Roberts challenges the Catholic Church, but is able to align with unorthodox yet non-heretical movements such as mysticism. In having Josephine create her double house while making it appear as a standard convent with a Rule, she is able to survive the Inspectors. Her esteemed *Life* was written to avoid punishment from the Inspectors of the Inquisition rather than to proclaim her faith. Yet even in her supplication, with sentences which 'bowed down,' there are eddies of resistance:

[W]hen you read Josephine's *Life*, the one that saved her from being burned at the stake, if you read it very carefully, you start to get a smell, almost, of something awkward, something missing, a bulge under the graceful phrase here, a crack in the grammar there, one sentence that tails off and another that hastily starts, something left out, shouting from the margins, in the gaps in between.

The second *Life* was written between the lines of the first.⁴⁵⁴ This subtle presence of resistance is suggestive of an 'other' side to the story of the life of Josephine, the one presented by Isabel rather than in her *Life*. Roberts's explicit reference to Saint Teresa in her 'Author's Note' suggests that hagiography – such as *The Golden Legend* and other tales used to model and measure behaviour in the Church – produces a narrative of singular ontology. For Roberts, conversely, there is another side, written between the lines, which pulsates below the surface of the text: an 'other' side which signals the survival of women. The description of the underlying resistance is indicated sensually through smell and sound, reinforcing Roberts's impulse to unfetter the body from subjugated status.

Impossible Saints also demonstrates Roberts's persistent concern with the representation of women in the Christian tradition and writes an imagined 'other side' to

⁴⁵⁴ Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 34.

the lives of the women in the *Legend*. For example, in the *Legend*, the apostle Peter was known for preaching and travelling with Paul performing miracles. Saint Peter appears in Roberts's novel in the interwoven story 'The Life of Saint Petronilla.' Roberts's tale maintains the setting and time period of the ancient near east; she also maintains the characterization of Peter as prone to tears. Yet, instead of travelling with Paul, Peter has his friends over to reminisce about their time with the Lord. Petronilla, Peter's daughter, has to keep house, including cleaning the soiled handkerchiefs. The only 'miracle' Peter performs for his friends is to heal his daughter who, when she is ill and stays in bed is unable to clean the house. Later, the reader learns that Peter's 'prayer' of healing is really a threat: 'Saint Peter stood over his cowering daughter and thundered at her "Get up this minute you little whore or as god as my witness I will beat you so hard you will be sorry you were ever born."'”⁴⁵⁵ Peter's seemingly miraculous healing power, when seen from Petronilla's point of view, is not a miracle at all. Shifting the point of view enables a dramatic difference between the narratives of the *Legend* and *Impossible Saints*.

Similarly, in the *Legend*, Agnes ('whose name comes from *agna*, a lamb, because Agnes was as meek and humble as a lamb')⁴⁵⁶ is figured as an undoubting, innocent virgin who rebuffs a courtier (the prefect's son) by saying she is already betrothed to Jesus. Despite the prefect's coaxing, threats, and acts of violence, Agnes maintained her virtue with God's help: 'Then the prefect had her stripped and taken nude to a brothel, but God made her hair grow so long that it covered her better than any clothing.'⁴⁵⁷ In Roberts's text, Agnes is young, innocent, virginal. One unfortunate night she walks along the road after her bedtime, and her father, returning home drunk,

⁴⁵⁵ Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 59.

⁴⁵⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* (c. 1260) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 101.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

mistakes her for a prostitute. Realizing that he has begun to fondle his daughter, the father punishes the girl, cutting off her hair and sending her naked out of the household. Her journey is not one of miracles and martyrdom, but of working in a hairdressers and setting a trend for short hair in the region. Roberts's portrayal of Agnes challenges the virgin/whore binary of female representation within the Catholic tradition. By maintaining Agnes's virginity (she is not raped by her father and never marries) while constructing her as an outcast – a social position occupied by the prostitutes of the narrative – Roberts highlights the disparity between societal expectation and material conditions of women's everyday life. Like Carter, Roberts exposes the association between guilt and punishment of women as a construct.

The form of the novel, which weaves together the threads of Josephine's narrative as well as the narratives of the lives of the other women, creates a robust criticism of the Catholic tradition. In doing so, Roberts highlights the need for survival as well as depicting methods of survival, such as Josephine's first *Life*. Roberts constructs multiple stories which build on one another in a way that demonstrates women's continued survival in the context of male dominance. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Roberts is more experimental with the presence of multiple voices, allowing them to collide and contradict one another. By positing polyphony – writing multiple stories, multiple voices, and multiple meanings through the structure of plaiting – Roberts challenges the notion of singularity that is embedded in the discourse of the patriarchal institution of Catholicism. The linear construction of patriarchal authority is disrupted by the multiplicity of women's voices and experiences. With the use of a plaiting form, Roberts's text refuses the singular reading, singular meaning, maintained in the canonical text.

The metadiegetic story that revisioned the flood narrative is the first story told by a sibyl. It begins with the female protagonist as a young girl, describing her daily life and understanding of the world. She describes her first menstruation, being married off by her family, and her life with Jack. She then gives birth to three sons who later take on wives of their own. Jack and his wife age together. She comes to realize that she and Jack have a different understanding of God. Jack's God is up, distant, a Father in the sky, while 'Mrs Jack's' God is down, near, within everyday life.⁴⁵⁸ One night, Mrs Jack has a dream: the earth appears as a woman groaning in labour; when her water breaks, there is a great flood; when the water subsides, there is a child on her breast.⁴⁵⁹ Mrs Jack tells her dream to her husband, who leaves, talks to God, and says, 'God has warned me that he is about to destroy the world. People are so wicked that he is sorry he ever created us. There will be a great flood, and the whole race of mankind will be wiped out.'⁴⁶⁰ Mrs Jack has a second dream: the earth is again a pregnant woman but at the beginning of her pregnancy; her womb holds the entirety of creation, including Mrs Jack, Jack, and their family. Again, Mrs Jack awakens, tells Jack. He is concerned; Mrs Jack suggests they build a boat with a roof on it. Jack leaves, talks to God, and returns with a proclamation: 'God is willing for us to be saved, he [Jack] announces: since we are less wicked than the rest of mankind. What we have to do is to build a big wooden Boat with a roof and go into it without sons and their wives and all our animals and livestock. That way we can see it through.'⁴⁶¹ Recognizing the irony of this, Mrs Jack

⁴⁵⁸ Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, 72-73. Please note that Jack's wife is not named in the story, just as Mrs Noah is not named in the novel. Thus, I call her Mrs Jack to echo Roberts's choice with her protagonist.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

narrates, ‘That was *my* idea, not your God’s, I think. But I hold my tongue. This isn’t the time for a quarrel.’⁴⁶² They build the boat; the rain begins.

The time in the boat is difficult, but Sara, one of Mrs Jack’s daughters-in-law, manages everyone, organizing a rota for cooking and cleaning, and they survive. When the rain has stopped, they land on the top of a mountain. When the waters recede enough, they disembark. Jack wants to perform a sacrifice. Mrs Jack refuses: ‘The earth is a hard mother, I say: but she has delivered us, just as I dreamed she would, and we’ve been born onto this mountain for good or ill. She will cut that shining cord in her own good time. When she does, it’s up to us to get on with living. There is no need to kill an animal. I want no more death.’⁴⁶³ Jack leaves to pray and returns to announce that God will make a new alliance; He wishes a sacrifice and commands them to go forth and multiply.⁴⁶⁴ They are unable to reconcile their differences. Mrs Jack explores the new earth and begins to name things; she then creates words and writing:

I take dollops of wet mud in the palm of my hand, and shape them into little slabs. I sharpen the end of a stick into a point. Then, with the stick, I draw pictures on the mud slabs, one by one, of all the new words I’ve made up. I keep the pictures as simple as possible: a few strokes and curves. [...] When I’ve finished, I lay the slabs on the roof of the Boat to dry in the sun and grow hard. Then I collect them up in my apron and give them to Sara. And I give a name to what I’ve done: I call it *writing*.⁴⁶⁵

Mrs Jack gives the mud bricks to Sara and hopes she will give them to her children.

With the arrival of winter, Jack and the rest of the family go down the mountain to establish a settlement. Mrs Jack decides to stay on the mountain top and dies. In Mrs Jack’s final narration she states, ‘Welcome, death. In you I drown. Until I’m

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

reincarnated, born into the next story. I'm the ghost in the library, cackling, unseen, from between the pages of the sacred texts, waiting my chance to haunt a new generation of readers. I'm what's missing. I'm the wanderer.'⁴⁶⁶

In this embedded narrative, Roberts retains features from the canonical story, including a nameless wife, three sons with wives, and a named male protagonist who communicates with God directly. The man acts as mediator, hearing from God and then reporting a message to his family. Roberts also retains a warning of a flood, the building of the Ark, and the flood itself. There is still a long period of time on the Ark, receding of waters, landing on a mountain, disembarking from the boat, a rainbow in the sky, and a family that goes forth and multiplies.

Roberts does not, however, retain a cause for the flood. Jack's proclamations of God's will, paralleling the tone and actions of the biblical text, seems contrived. Neither does Roberts retain how humans are warned of a flood. The impetus for building the Ark is not a warning from God directly through the patriarch, but through a dream given to his wife. In both instances of alteration, the women play a significant role in the narrative of survival – a striking contrast to the canonical narrative in which no one other than Noah and God take an active role or even speaks. The ark, in the metadiegetic narrative, enables survival without being salvific. It is, instead, a gift from a maternal God who births a new creation.

Once they land on the mountain, Jack calls for a sacrifice, just as Noah did. Yet this time, the patriarch's wife defies the order. The rainbow, rather than symbolizing covenant, is imagined by Mrs Jack as an umbilical cord from the mother God to the delivered Ark, its disappearance marking humanity's initiation into society, or, as Mrs

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

Jack says, 'getting on with living.'⁴⁶⁷ With the new earth before her, Mrs Jack's first activity is naming. She calls for no more killing and establishes a worldview of her own, which includes respect for all animals and a belief in a maternal God who has delivered them through the flood. Interestingly, Roberts retains the sense of a new creation, echoing the creation story in Genesis by including nomenclature. Mrs Jack names the new creation and draws representative pictures of the names, creating writing, giving them to Sara — a matrilineal gift. Instead of establishing an agricultural community with her husband and sons and their wives, Mrs Jack stays at the top of the mountain, reflecting on her place on the periphery of patriarchy and patriarchy's arbitrary construction. Roberts's revision asserts an immanent God who disturbs the boundaries of authority and enables women's participation in 'creative power and speech'⁴⁶⁸ previously denied. Her death of the mountain top, which is a common feature of the hero's quest, making her the central figure of the narrative.⁴⁶⁹

Roberts also shifts point of view from omniscient narrator to the first-person narration of Mrs Jack. In doing so, Roberts alters motivations for actions taken in the story, suggesting there is no direct cause for the flood (no widespread wickedness of humanity), providing a different medium for warning (dreams), and emphasizing women's active roles in the narrative. With this revision, the primary symbols within the canonized text are dramatically re-constructed. The narrative of Jack and his mediation function as patriarch are subverted by Mrs Jack's dreams and her direct experience of God through dreams and in her everyday tasks. Roberts demonstrates that women do not need a male mediator to communicate with God. Roberts also demonstrates that this God is neither masculine nor distant. God is close, experienced

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁶⁸ Roberts, 'Flesh,' 41.

⁴⁶⁹ Joseph Campbell, 'Departure of the Hero' in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (London: Fontana, 1993), 306-313.

not through the male mediator but in everyday work. Mrs Jack articulates this closeness in contrast to Jack's distant, punitive God: 'Jack's God is different. He is a mighty father in the sky, who punishes us when we do wrong, and sends us disease and plagues and famines to show us his power. I can't understand why that's necessary when the terrible beauty of God shimmers as close to us as the raindrop on the end of a twig, burns in the grass. You only have to sit still and *see*.'⁴⁷⁰ Here, God can be found, and God can be found by women. In contrast to the expansive story of creation in Genesis, creation in *The Book of Mrs Noah* is more tangible and near, 'as daily as dusting or dreaming.'⁴⁷¹ Jack's God, like Noah's Yahweh, is transcendent. Describing Him as a Father in the sky echoes Robert's discussion in 'The Flesh Made Word' in which she criticises the Catholic construction of God as Up There. Similarly, Mrs Jack's God is immanent, a part of everyday life.

Roberts's assertion of the numinal accessibility of God recurs in other novels. In *Impossible Saints*, the everyday experience and availability of God was a revelation for Josephine who, re-entering the cathedral of her childhood, is overcome by the immensity of God: 'God was there, God shaped the cathedral which sprang outwards as the body of God, a great heart beating in darkness, a rounded interior in which you curled up, carried by God [...] God was not Father, not Lord and King. God was blackness, darkness, sweetness, limited to no one shape but *part of everything*.'⁴⁷² In this cathedral-cum-womb, the orthodox teaching of God as Father and King was no longer applicable for Josephine, just as Jack's distant Father was no longer viable for Mrs Jack. This rejection of the traditional notion of the God figure is a significant revision of the story of the

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-3.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁷² Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 182; emphasis added.

flood. Indeed, the idea of God as distant Father is exposed as a construction of Jack's making.

A similar critique of the Biblical Flood narrative is made by Jeannette Winterson. In *Boating for Beginners* (1985), Winterson writes a parody of life before the flood. Winterson's novel begins with an epigraph – an excerpt from an article in *The Guardian* on the 28 August, 1984, which focuses on items that some archaeologists believed to be relics of Noah's Ark. Winterson's novel takes up the theme of relics as evidence; it depicts the world before the flood as very much like our own and reveals the false notion of an 'ancient' civilization as one constructed by Noah himself. In Winterson's text, Noah is 'an ordinary man, bored and fat' who runs a little boating company called 'Boating for Beginners.' He takes tourists up and down the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to sight-see. Later, Noah becomes increasingly political and religious, critical of socialism upheld by the Ninivites. Having success with the first book, they decide to co-author a book entitled *Genesis, or How I Did It*.⁴⁷³ After selling out, they decide to write a second volume: *Exodus, or Your Way Lies There*.⁴⁷⁴ Due to their continued success, God and Noah 'decided to dramatise the first two books'; furthermore, to 'add legitimate spice and romantic interest' to the project, they invite the famous romance novelist Bunny Mix to join them.⁴⁷⁵ At the climax of the novel, two events occur: first, the reader discovers that Noah created God in a Frankenstein-like fashion; Noah, searching for the cause of the generation of life, studies and performs experiments. He writes in his manuscript:

Wearily I took out a slab of Black Forest Gâteau and a scoop of ice cream, not noticing in my feeble state that both were in a state of nauseating decomposition. As I picked up my spoon I glanced down

⁴⁷³ Jeannette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners* (London: Minerva, 1985), 14.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

at the filthy mess and, realising my error, turned to cast the substances into the bit. At that moment a fork of lightening shattered my window and blasted the plate in my hands. I dropped it and jumped back, thankful for my life. Then, before my eyes, a curious frightful, intoxicating motion rocked the plate back and forth, I saw new life forms struggle their way to the surface of what had once been vile slime. The bolt of lightning, more powerful than any current I had yet generated, had sparked off vital cells from aimless bacteria.⁴⁷⁶

After its initial creation, the substance grows and changes and eventually becomes known as God, the Unpronounceable. The second major event of the climax is that God decides to actually flood the world rather than just manufacture some rain for the theatrical performance.⁴⁷⁷ The Lord says to Noah, ‘Now listen, I’m going to start raining this place into a designer lake on Friday. You had better pack up your miserable belongings and prepare to be liquidated. Once we’ve got rid of the old world, we’re going to have a lot of work to do, and if you lot don’t come up with some ideas to make me coherent to future generations I’ll take your ocean-going ark and smash it.’⁴⁷⁸ So, Noah convinces his sons to board the ark and chloroform their wives to get them to come along. Noah proposes to Bunny Mix and together they rewrite *Genesis* to include the new events. Noah suggests, ‘we rewrite *Genesis* and make it look like God did it all from the very beginning, and we’ll put in a lot of stories about how mysterious he is, and how no one knows where he came from.’⁴⁷⁹ In order to support the narrative he has created, Noah brings gopher wood aboard the fibre-glass boat since ‘we’re supposed to be a primitive people according to the story.’⁴⁸⁰ Finalizing the rewriting of *Genesis*,

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

Bunny suggests ending the narrative with a romantic image: a rainbow. Bunny states, ‘if they’ve swallowed it this far [...] they’ll love the rainbow.’⁴⁸¹

Winterson’s novel ends with a discussion between two modern day archaeologists Soames and Gardener. At the excavation site on Mount Ararat, Soames finds the gopher wood, which ‘showed clear signs of ancient wet-rot.’⁴⁸² Gardener finds evidence of something other than primitive life fitting Noah’s narrative. Soames gets angry with Gardener shouting ‘What kind of cheap hoax is this?’⁴⁸³ Winterson’s use of irony critiques the biblical narrative as a hoax. For Winterson, the notion of the distant Father God represented in the biblical narrative of the flood is a construction.

It is this suggestion of the constructed nature of the canonical text which Winterson and Roberts share. Particularly with the metadiegetic story of Mrs Jack, the canonical version of the flood narrative becomes a one-sided account embedded with theological discourse in service of masculine authority. Authority and authorship become scrutinized as partial representations with masculinist ontology. However, their textual strategies dramatically vary. Winterson uses parody and literary allusions, such as Frankenstein’s laboratory and monster, to criticize a straight-forward reading of the biblical narrative. Roberts, conversely, re-enters the plot of the narrative, tells the other side of the story, and alters meaning within the text.

The revision in the metadiegetic narrative informs a reading of the extradiegesis – the novel as a whole as becomes a revision of the flood narrative. Just as in the metadiegetic narrative of Mrs Jack, so the novel as a whole, the Ark, rainbow, and authorship are dramatically different from the biblical narrative. Indeed, the interpretations of the key symbols are informed by the embedded narrative.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 159.

As in the metadiegetic narrative, the ark enables survival. It is the place where women writers assemble, brain-storm, write, and explore their own desire and provides each woman to have a room of her own. The ‘room,’ the space each woman claims for herself, corresponds with her desires. Deftly Sibyl falls ill and is given a sick ward in which she is cared for. She relishes not being required to meet everyone else’s need before her own. What’s more, she has her needs met without being asked of anything in return. It is here that she is able to rest and imagine.⁴⁸⁴ Babble-On Sibyl dreams up a communal bathroom elaborately decorated in red brocade. Here she thinks of her mother’s bedroom and bathroom and her mother’s body. It is here she is able to recall and construct meaning.⁴⁸⁵ Re-Vision Sibyl constructs a kitchen: a romanticized version of her grandmother’s kitchen in France while Correct Sibyl creates for herself an enormous wardrobe with carnivalesque clothes which create sexual and social confusion.⁴⁸⁶ Forsaken Sibyl constructs a garden on the roof made in a perfect circle so that no one else may enter or exit, refusing the gaze from another and maintaining her space and freedom.⁴⁸⁷ The Ark, then, becomes the Woolfian room, which enables the survival of women writers, as well as a womb – safely carrying women to their new lives as women writers.

The rainbow, in the embedded narrative and throughout the novel, is associated with the maternal. It appears in the climactic scene of entering the hold of the Ark. The first glimpse of the rainbow in this scene is not in the sky, but on the floor. On her way to the bowels of the Ark, Mrs Noah has to pass over streaks of oil, shining as a rainbow, as she goes down to the bowels of the Ark, passing ‘greasy puddles slicked with oil and

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 126, 172.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

smeary rainbows' into the company of women.⁴⁸⁸ The rainbow in the oil puddle not only reiterates that God is down, near, and in everyday life as was suggested in Mrs Jack's story, but represents the connection to the maternal and enables Mrs Noah to begin writing. Once Mrs Noah passes the rainbow, she enters the hold to find it is inhabited by women: her grandmothers, the child she aborted, Snow White, Charlotte Bronte, Katherine Mansfield, Catherine of Siena, H.D. All the women authors she has read are there busily talking, playing and writing. Mrs Noah is stunned, at first: 'I'm confused. All the books in the Arkhive bookstacks have come off their shelves and jostle as eager angry bodies in this room. Parents or writers? I can't sort them out. I can't tell one category from another.'⁴⁸⁹ Yet, despite the confusion, Mrs Noah recognizes this busy scene as the solution – the reason she constructed the Ark and sought out women writers in the first place. Mrs Noah narrates, 'My library skills fail me. I need new words. All this time I have been searching. All this time I have been wandering around the earth, going out, out, to look for a solution. Now at last I've found what I've been needing. Here.'⁴⁹⁰ This solution is as multi-layered as the novel, encompassing linguistic and matrilineal elements. Mrs Noah continues:

This is the house of language. The house of words. Here, inside the Ark, the body of the mother, I find words. [...]

Home is the body. The bone-house. The room of my own is inside me. Each day I build it and each day it is torn down.

Creation starts here, in the Ark. Love actively shapes the work. My mother nourishes me with words, words of such power and richness that I grow, dance, leap. But the purpose of the Ark is that I leave it. The purpose of the womb is that I be born from it. So that when I'm forced to go from her, when I lose her, I can call out after her, cry out

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

her name. I become myself, which means not-her; with blood and tears I become not-the-mother.

She points to the rainbow, umbilical cord connecting us. The curve of light in the rain joining belly to belly, the silver rope dangling earth, that mud baby. The symbol of the symbol, denoting the separation between worlds, the one I know and the one I have lost; also their connection.

Cutting the cord, she gives me speech. Words of longing for that world I've lost, words of desire to explore this absence-of-her. I must go further into absence, and find more words.

Ark. Imagination. Body. Home. Book.⁴⁹¹

The image of ark as womb, first pictured in the story of Mrs Jack, is reiterated in the novel. The maternal is linked to speech and creativity. The mother, as one of the four archetypes for women in Jungian feminism, is 'the woman who listens and receives and so conceives not just physical pregnancies but also spiritual ones.'⁴⁹² Thus, the mother shifts from being a woman who, in the Catholic tradition, cannot maintain her virginity or participate in creativity to the robust woman of ideas in Jungian archetype.

Roberts's portrayal of motherhood also interrogates Freudian theories, directly addressing the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex. In chapter 35, the Gaffer has a dream/memory of the Creation of the world which differs from his account which he wrote in the Bible. Sitting in the Reading Room of the Ark, the Gaffer tries to define men's writing.⁴⁹³ In his frustration, he looks out the window at the mermaids in the water. Seeing and hearing these mermaids sing, the Gaffer dreams/remembers an 'unauthorized version' of the creation story in Genesis.⁴⁹⁴ The Gaffer remember his

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 273-4.

⁴⁹² Roberts, 'Hero,' 62.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

mother and, in a trajectory which parallels the Oedipal drama, the Gaffer loves this mother, hates his father, and seeks to displace his father by making Himself the Father. To get revenge on his mother, he splits the notion of motherhood into bad (emblemized by Eve) and good (emblemized as Mary), thus, shifting the mother as a figure both maternal and sexual.⁴⁹⁵ In this revision of childhood development of the Gaffer, the cosmic mother is first imagined in her entirety, both maternal and sexual while the notion of mother as a functional role is a masculine construct – the adolescent Gaffer’s angst-ridden creation. Roberts replaces one creation story (the Gaffer’s first text, the Bible) with another – the Gaffer’s ‘memory’ of his mother and his desire for her. As with Winterson’s God the Father who is refigured as a monster created by Noah in a Frankenstein-esque experiment, so Robert’s God the Father is a false construction made by the Gaffer. In both cases, the parody reframes God as secondary, a creation rather than Creator.

With this scene, Roberts uses the Oedipus complex comically to interrogate the representations of women within psychoanalysis as well as Catholic theology. The first textual effect of this scene is to question the validity of Freud’s theory of child development. Roberts highlights the absurdity of rejecting the Mother for the primacy of the Father. Luce Irigaray offers an alternative reading of child development, which does not displace the mother. In ‘Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother,’ Irigaray asserts that Freud’s discussion of child development fails to account for the experience in-utero. An alternative theory that accounts for the in-utero situation has as its primary symbolic importance the umbilical cord rather than the phallus. Indeed, the phallus can be understood as a representation of the first primal link to the mother.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁹⁶ Luce Irigaray, ‘Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother’ (1987) in *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans) Gillian C Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp 14, 17.

Instead of entering into the law of the father and being assigned a proper name, the navel becomes the ‘irreducible mark’ of identity.⁴⁹⁷ Rather than constructing an identity of women’s sexuality that is associated with ‘anxiety, phobia, disgust, and the haunting fear of castration,’ there can emerge a positive, creative force associated with the maternal.⁴⁹⁸ Creative and procreative agency is reassigned to women – the ‘maternal creative dimension’: women bringing things into the world apart from children which is accompanied by an assertion of the female genealogy and a reorientation of the relationship between women as ‘secondary homosexuality.’⁴⁹⁹

This reassertion of love between women is, for Irigaray, ‘essential if we are to quit our common situation and cease being the slaves of the phallic cult, commodities to be used and exchanged by men, competing objects in the marketplace.’⁵⁰⁰ For Irigaray, the problem is ‘that when the father refuses to allow the mother her power of giving birth and seeks to be the sole creator, then according to our culture he superimposes upon our ancient world of flesh and blood a universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh and drills a hole through the female womb and through the place of female identity.’⁵⁰¹ For Irigaray, the role of mother within male dominant society is restrictive for women and denies them subjectivity. Irigaray argues, ‘Our urgent task is to refuse to submit to a desubjectivized social role, the role of mother, which is dictated by an order subject to the division of labour – he produces, she reproduces – that walls us up in the ghetto of a single function.’⁵⁰² Valentine Castagna finds this movement away from the singular, functional role of mother in Roberts’s text. Castagna writes, in *The Book of Mrs Noah* mothers ‘are not recognized by their biological or social

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18, 20.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 18.

functions as wives and mothers, nor appreciated for them; they are rather literary mothers, providing their disciples with tools of interpretation and transmission of their own experience in their own words.’⁵⁰³

It is this revision of the figure of the mother in psychoanalysis as posited by Irigaray that is evident in Roberts’s text. In Roberts’s novel, there is a primacy of the maternal and acknowledgement of creative powers of women beyond bodily procreation. The significance of the umbilical cord is asserted by Roberts with the image of the rainbow. In the metadiegetic story of Mrs Jack, the rainbow is the umbilical cord of the earth as ‘hard mother’ which has just birthed them into a new creation.⁵⁰⁴ For Mrs Noah, the rainbow connects her with her grandmothers and women writers in the hold of the ark, which is also the body of the mother. For both Irigaray and Roberts, there is a reallocation of the signifier of the phallus/patriarchal covenant via the umbilical cord.

The second effect of the satirical Genesis is that of exposing the constructed nature of female stereotypes and roles for women. The Gaffer – an angry child resenting the Mother’s love for the Father – creates the moralistic polarity of women’s roles emblemized by Eve and the Virgin Mary. By presenting these roles as the creation of an adolescent Gaffer, Roberts uses parody to expose the absurdity and constructed nature of these roles. As Marina Warner discusses in *Alone of All Her Sex*, Eve’s role in the Fall narrative was interpreted by the church fathers in a manner that declares all women are culpable and cursed with pain in childbearing. Warner continues, ‘Because of the curse of Eve in Eden, the idea of women’s subjection was bound up in Christian thought with

⁵⁰³ Valentina Castagna, *Shape-Shifting Tales: Michèle Roberts’s Monstrous Women* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 12-13.

⁵⁰⁴ Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, 84.

her role as mother and temptress.⁵⁰⁵ As such, women were excluded from some areas of religious experience and refused significant positions within the church.

The Virgin Mary, conversely, occupies an elevated position in Catholic theology and practise. However, as Warner articulates, the prominence of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church does not permit women's participation more broadly. As the mother who remained a virgin, as the woman without sin, as the Second Eve who assists in redemption – the Virgin Mary became an impossible model of the perfect woman; she became, as Warner states, 'an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection.'⁵⁰⁶ The holiness of Mary became ensconced in her virginity. Thus, virginity and self-denial became means of female participation in the Catholic Church. Warner continues, 'Through the ascetic renunciation of the flesh, a woman could relive a part of her nature's particular viciousness as the Virgin Mary had done through her complete purity. [...] Through virginity and self-inflicted hardship, the faults of female nature could be corrected.'⁵⁰⁷ Consequently, asceticism became revered and tales of persecution and stories of martyrdom (particularly virgin martyrs) were circulated. Like the life of the Virgin Mary, these lives of virgin martyrs which were elevated as models of behaviour did not elevate the view of women in the Catholic tradition, particularly in light of motherhood. Warner writes, 'the very conditions that make the Virgin sublime are beyond the powers of women to fulfil unless they deny their sex. Accepting the Virgin as the ideal of purity implicitly demands rejecting the ordinary female condition as impure. Accepting virginity as an ideal entails contempt for sex and motherhood.'⁵⁰⁸ Warner's discussion reiterates Roberts's critique of the mind/body dualism in

⁵⁰⁵ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 58.

⁵⁰⁶ Warner, 49.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 68 - 69.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

Catholicism that associates women with body and emotion and therefore hinders women's status. Thus, revisioning the role of mother includes problematizing the moral binary of sexuality, which emblemizes the good female as the virgin. In writing her revision of the flood narrative centralized on an alternative view of the mother, Roberts suggests an alternative theology for women.

Roberts, invested in the portrayal of women and motherhood in the Catholic Church, has written hagiographies of women's lives in a manner that exposes the problems of upholding virginity in particular and asceticism more broadly. In *Impossible Saints*, Saint Blesilla, finding inspiration from the preaching of St Jerome, turns to self-mortification, refuses food, and dies quietly on a mat in her room.⁵⁰⁹ Saint Petronilla, the daughter of Saint Paul, is not miraculously revived from illness by his holy entreaty to God, but threat of abuse.⁵¹⁰ Saint Thecla, previously frigid, learned to enjoy sex; yet after an affair with Paul (who leaves his wife not for her but for another more 'feminine soul') she retreats to a hermit's life in a cave.⁵¹¹ In writing alternative hagiographies, Roberts critiques the traditionally prescribed behaviour for women, exposing the extreme consequences of a theology which promotes female asceticism, deconstructing male holiness, and criticizing the inequality of social expectation of male and female sexual activity.

This critique of the problematic portrayal of women in theological interpretation of biblical texts present in Roberts's hagiographies is first asserted in her revision of Noah's Ark. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Roberts includes two hagiographies, which are presented as the second and third metadiegetic narratives in the novel. Both stories are set in historical periods of religious turmoil. The first takes place during the Inquisition

⁵⁰⁹ Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 28.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93, 95.

in the late thirteenth century in Bidwell, Kent, while the second occurs in England during the Restoration. In both narratives, the story is told by a first-person narrator who is also the female protagonist. Just as the story of Mrs Jack affirms an alternative understanding of the ‘events’ of the flood, so these narratives critique the traditional position and hint toward alternative ways of living and knowing apart from the authorized, orthodox position.⁵¹²

The second metadiegetic story takes the form of a hagiography and epistle. The female protagonist begins her narrative by reflecting on the restrictive perception of women, narrating, ‘Our parish priest, a holy man who does not keep a housekeeper-whore as so many clerics do, explains to me that women’s beauty evokes men’s lust, and drags them down to vileness, away from their search for God.’⁵¹³ She finds this particularly disturbing when her father ‘has told me how pretty I am.’⁵¹⁴ A pious girl, she goes to church every Sunday. After the death of her mother and her father’s remarriage, she goes to a Cistercian abbey in Bidwell.⁵¹⁵ Having witnessed four monks whip themselves in public, the female protagonist increasingly incorporates self-mortification practises into her daily life in the abbey, lashing herself ‘until the blood comes.’⁵¹⁶ The intensity of her asceticism increases; the protagonist narrates, ‘I can no longer rise above my throbbing and tormented body into that high pure place where God flies gaily in the green sweet-smelling garden. I live only in my dreadful body. I punish it, through redoubled fasting and mortification. I become very thin. My monthly bleeding stops.’⁵¹⁷

⁵¹² Here, I say ‘authorize, orthodox position’ rather than Catholic because Protestantism is privileged in the latter narrative. While the authority is different in the two narratives, Roberts’s critique is the same.

⁵¹³ Roberts, *Book of Mrs Noah*, 105.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107, 112.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

This unnamed narrator eventually rejects the orthodox teachings of the Church; she rejects the theology of penal substitution, narrating: ‘I can’t love a God who requires such suffering.’⁵¹⁸ When her sister Joanna visits her in the convent, she and her husband John tell the protagonist of a different group of sisters, the Beguines in the Low Countries of Europe.⁵¹⁹ The female protagonist narrates, ‘He tells me of the communities of holy women called Beguines whom he visited in Flanders and Brabant. He interests me particularly by his description of their goodness, their prudence and economy, for I have heard of them only as loose women, as heretics, and he insists instead that they are lovers of God and sisters to each other, bound by no vows, submitting to no rule except that of friendship, and collectively earning a living.’⁵²⁰ Joanna tells her sister that she and John have converted to the ‘true faith’ and are adherents of the Brethren of the Free Spirit and describes what the protagonist considers ‘incomprehensible doctrines.’⁵²¹ Joanna gives her sister a copy of a book their father translated into English – *Miroir des Simples Ames*, a text written by Marguerite de Porète, a woman who, Joanne continues, was ‘burned alive in Paris thirty years ago [...] in 1310, as a heretic who would not recant. Also, she was a Beguine.’⁵²² Like Marguerite, the female protagonist is condemned as a heretic; she has written her story in a letter to send to her sister, having bribed a lay sister’s nephew to make the delivery.⁵²³ The female protagonist, having initially chosen the ascetic life, renounces the practise of self-mortification and key Catholic doctrine in favour of a life like the Beguines. She reunites with her sister and desires the company of like-minded women. Ultimately, she rejects the construction of femininity evident in Catholic theology. An

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 124-5.

alternative theology is suggested by the Beguines: a theology which does not necessitate a rule, implying minimal hierarchy, and allows women to participate economically by earning their own wages. Like Josephine in *Impossible Saints*, the female protagonist finds rich spiritual life outside the Church. However, she did not write a *Life* or find a way to circumnavigate persecution.

The third metadiegetic story takes the form of an epistle – the female protagonist writes a letter to her daughter. She begins by describing her own childhood and the difficult relationship she had with her mother; her parents had wanted a male child and many children did not live long. Her mother ‘holds us at arm’s length, watches our growth with a harsh, suspicious eye.’⁵²⁴ Instead of seeking comfort from her mother, she relies upon her twin sister Margaret. As they grow, Margaret is ‘good’, succeeding at sewing and cooking, healthy with ‘beauty enough’ while the protagonist is ‘bad,’ pricking her finger and getting blood of the fabric she is meant to hem, daydreaming of playing outside, ‘often untidy and rude.’⁵²⁵ The female protagonist, dreading the loss of her sister through marriage, narrates, ‘I disdain marriage, that race towards the marketplace, young daughters sold off like cattle into endless; childbearing, sickness, early death.’⁵²⁶ Before she leaves, Margaret gives her twin a little wooden statue of the Virgin.⁵²⁷

In her grief, the narrator refuses to eat. She becomes thin, striking and, for the first time, beautiful. Her asceticism and submission to prescribed femininity bring her attention and affection. She narrates, ‘my new beauty frightens me: my flesh shrinking on my bones to bring me slenderness, my unruly hair so much neater now it is falling out

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 146, 150.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

and there is less of it, my wasted hands so elegant and pale.’⁵²⁸ Yet her mother eventually persuades her to eat and marry. She marries a musician named Will; despite their affection, they are childless for years. Their barrenness is understood as her failure; determined to succeed in childbearing, she has an affair with Will’s steward John Whittle. Her time with John is pleasurable to her; as a token of her affection, she gives him her statue of the Virgin.⁵²⁹ The happy new parents name their daughter Elizabeth ‘after the queen’ in hopes to maintain their position in society without renouncing their Catholicism.⁵³⁰ The narrator has a dream that Margaret asks for the wooden Virgin.⁵³¹ She and Will are in danger; John has betrayed them as Catholic and they must flee. The children are being sent with servants to Will’s cousin in France.⁵³² She writes this letter to her daughter Elizabeth: ‘Let this letter be a bridge between your future and my past.’⁵³³ This letter to her daughter, this bridge, initiates a female genealogy in the manner Irigaray describes. Will has been executed in London and John has gone missing; Elizabeth’s only link to her family is the letter. The letter becomes a confession and explanation in which the female protagonist lays bare her constraining circumstances. Her decision to become pregnant through John as a response to being trapped by her husband’s impotence and the societal expectation to procreate, she not only threatens the masculine economy of patrilineality but also denies the asceticism regarding sexual pleasure. Like Josephine and the protagonist who began to follow the Beguines, the mother of Elizabeth operates outside of conventional religious expectations. She, too, must flee.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 171.

Roberts's female protagonists in these two alternative hagiographic narratives seek the friendship of other women and attempt to construct a female genealogy. These two metadiegetic stories are woven together with the previous revision of the flood narrative, creating the fabric of Roberts's revision in her novel as a whole. In providing a revision of a biblical narrative, and two crucial time periods in the history of the Church, Roberts creates an alternative theology and history. In selecting the Reformation as the era for her second hagiography, Roberts highlights the historical and political contextualization of theology. The Catholic Church, which punished the Beguine nun in the 1400s, is perceived as heretical in the 1600s. Roberts consistently challenges authority and authorship. These metadiegetic narratives – woven together in the form of the plait, employing overt narrators and female protagonists – tell the other side of the story in crucial historical moments. In doing so, Roberts simultaneously uncovers a hidden women's genealogy and evokes a new tradition.

That Roberts's assertion should take place on an Ark as Arkhive is also evocative. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida asserts that an archive creates an 'essential history of culture'⁵³⁴ which necessarily includes the suppression and repression of the jurisdiction of power/authority. Derrida defines archive (*arkheion*) as that which is a house, 'a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who command.'⁵³⁵ The development of an archive, therefore, necessitates legitimizing those in power. The archive also creates a 'transgenerational memory' which supports authority and informs the future.⁵³⁶ Accordingly, to institute an archive is to simultaneously determine the future insofar as it determines memory and identity. The role of the archivist, then, is critical in both senses

⁵³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) (trans) Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

– in that it *interrogates* the validity of what is archived as well as in that it *is necessary* for such determining. According to Derrida, the archivist ‘institutes the archive as it should be, that is to say, not only in exhibiting the document but in *establishing* it. He reads it, interprets it, classes it.’⁵³⁷ The document(s) within the archive constitute authority. For Mrs Noah to be the archivist is therefore to usurp a place of authority and establish a subversive collection. The element of authority and authorship is reconstituted through the use of images which have been reinterpreted by Roberts in the embedded narrative. For there to be a feminist future, for Roberts, the act of creating an archive is an act of survival. Rich’s concern for the survival of a women’s cultural heritage is addressed and partially provided by Roberts in *The Book of Mrs Noah*.

Just as Schussler Fiorenza’s criticism addresses the gaps within the biblical tradition and Tribble seeks to acknowledge troubling misogyny within the biblical narratives and traditions, so Roberts contests the representation on women in the microcosm of the Noah’s Ark story and the macrocosm of Catholic texts and theology. In her revision, Roberts maintains alternative meanings for the symbols of the ark and rainbow with which she asserts, first, that the feminine is positive and active and, second, that the mother has been confined within a functionary role of reproduction. In doing so, she fulfils her critique in ‘The Flesh Made Word’ and establishes an ‘other’ reading of the canonical text. By reconstructing meaning of the pertinent symbols of the canonized text, Roberts’s revision effectually moves away from transcendent Father to immanent Mother. As in the metadiegetic story of Mrs Jack, the Ark in the entirety of Roberts’s novel signifies of motherhood and creativity. As the meeting place for the women’s writing group, the ark is the gestational womb of creativity for the sibyls and the archive that produces a future for women. As the hold scene exemplifies, the ark

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

also enables a female genealogy. In this revisioned context, the flood no longer represents punishment but the breaking waters of maternal body, and the rainbow becomes, as Susan Sellers describes, a ‘sign of divinity of creation and as the umbilical cord that fastens us to it.’⁵³⁸ Roberts’s novel escapes the traditional notions of punishment, redemption and covenant present in the canonical flood narrative and instead explores female spirituality and creativity, writing and language in relation to the maternal. In weaving together the narrative stories of the sibyls and the gaffer, Mrs. Noah creates a library of women’s peripheral experience in Catholic tradition and theology. In allowing each character to speak, Roberts asserts a polyphony, which contradicts the singularity of authorial biblical stories. Roberts effectively restores the ‘creative power and speech’ previously denied women. In conflating the biblical creation narrative with the psychoanalysis theory of the Oedipus complex, Roberts refuses authorial representations of women. Through palimpsestic play, epistemology is no longer owned; the ‘*truth*’ no longer exists within a specific set of religious boundaries, namely Catholic doctrine.

Ultimately, Roberts asserts an alternative theology which does not restrict or repress women. This alternative theology, which envisions God as immanent rather than transcendent, necessarily addresses authority and authorship in a manner which is tied to survival. On the last page of the novel, Mrs Noah writes, ‘How does a woman *survive*? I pick up my pen and write in my diary.’⁵³⁹ Writing as act of survival is a strategy which Roberts’s herself employed. It was through writing her novels that Roberts is able to interrogate to the dualism within Catholic theology and binary representation of women with the Catholic tradition. Through writing, Roberts as an author survived, finding a

⁵³⁸ Susan Sellers, ‘Becoming Gods and Umbilical Wordbows: The New Hagiography of Michèle Roberts’ in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 75.

⁵³⁹ Roberts, *Book of Mrs Noah*, 288; emphasis added.

way to live an integrated life and practice an alternative theology which centred on a God who is imminent rather than transcendent.

Haunting the Canon: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Alternative Characterization

'I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.' – Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction,' *The Penelopiad*, xv.

Margaret Atwood was approached by Canongate publisher Jamie Byng to write a novel for his proposed Myth Series. Issued in the first set of the Myth Series, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) was published and promoted alongside Karen Armstrong's introductory text, *A Short History of Myth* (2005) and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005) a story of Atlas and Hercules. Describing the project, Byng states, 'A list of starry writers has been commissioned to retell ancient myths for a modern audience, starting with Margaret Atwood on Penelope and Jeanette Winterson on Atlas. [...] The first two novellas make real sense of the return to the ancient world.'⁵⁴⁰ Byng began his series to engage in rewritings and retellings of myths from all over the globe. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the novels within it, including the first set of rewritings, engage with Greek mythology. Victor Pelevin's *The Helmet of Horror* (2006) rewrites the story of Theseus while Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) rewrites the myth of Iphis and Ianthe.

In this chapter I will first describe what I mean by the term 'myth' and Atwood's use of myth in her body of work. Then I discuss Atwood's key revisions of Homer's text, focusing on the shift in narration, discussing the implication of refusing an omniscient narrator. I then explore Atwood's characterization of central mythic figures,

⁵⁴⁰ Simon Goldhill and Jamie Byng, '[...] How it all Began' in *New Statesman* (31 Oct 2005) [Accessed 6 June 2011], 48.

particularly Penelope and Odysseus. I will argue that Penelope is no longer simply the loving, patient, and faithful wife, nor is Odysseus the clever hero. Instead, I argue, Atwood's uses fairy tale motifs to construct Odysseus as a Bluebeard figure. Lastly, I will explore Atwood's unveiling of a female community comprised of the maids and Penelope. As such, Atwood makes visible the hidden present of women. Just as the maids haunt Penelope and Odysseus in the novel, so Atwood's text haunts the literary canon, following it around, asking questions, and demanding to be heard.

Myths can be considered, as they are by Byng, as old stories.⁵⁴¹ However, myths are also inextricably involved with constructions of identity. Lillian E. Doherty, in *Gender and the Interpretations of Myth*, discusses the crucial element of identity that operates in myth, writing, 'A myth 'belongs' to the people who tell it, and it in turn shapes their sense of who they are. A myth is also unashamedly a *story*, with a plot and characters.'⁵⁴² Primarily concerned with the ways the modern critic understands myth, Doherty addresses critical issues surrounding the form. Doherty reads myth as containing a 'political dimension' and functioning as "'charters" or overt justifications for social practises.'⁵⁴³ Myths, then, are indeed old stories, but also stories that are located and localized – both politically and ideologically – within a community.

For Doherty, myths are also, paradoxically, both strange and familiar: strange in that they are set in a remote past, yet simultaneously familiar in their format. Doherty writes, 'the story patterns [of myth] are based on conflicts that arise within the familiar frameworks of the patriarchal family and the wider society in which authority and property are still distributed on patriarchal lines.'⁵⁴⁴ It is this paradoxical doubleness of

⁵⁴¹ Byng, 4.

⁵⁴² Lillian E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretations of Classical Myths* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 100.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101, 102.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

the familiar and the strange that allows for varying use of the tales. As Doherty writes, doubleness ‘allows [myth] to be used either to shore up traditional values or to contest them in an acceptable way.’⁵⁴⁵ Thus, the doubleness of myth allows for a potential for doubleness in terms of meaning, creating a point of entry for Atwood and the other Myth Series writers. Indeed, Doherty suggests that contemporary readers should expect to find retellings of stories, writing, ‘the self-consciously pluralistic culture of our time should make room for retellings of the myths from a wide range of perspectives, including some with the potential to unsettle the hierarchies that the stories assume.’⁵⁴⁶ In the retelling of myths – and feminist revision of myth – there are a sufficient number of familiar elements in the new tale for the source text to be identified. However, there is simultaneously adequate variation, or ‘strangeness,’ to provide a radical rereading of a traditional narrative. Feminist revision exploits this doubleness – maintaining plot points and altering perspective – in a way that alters the signifying process.

This disruption of signification can be understood through the work of Roland Barthes. If we take seriously Barthes’s claims that, first, myth is a form, a type of speech which functions as a system of communication,⁵⁴⁷ second, maintains social usage,⁵⁴⁸ and, third, that myth ‘presupposes a signifying process’ and functions as a semiological system,⁵⁴⁹ then we can explore the alternative signifying process in the revisioned text. Barthes claims that the process of signifying – on the macro-level of the duration of a collection of stories as well as on the micro-level of images within the narratives – becomes a key constituent of myth. For feminist revision, writing the story anew can alter the signifying process. Yet there is resistance to alterations of

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’ in *Mythologies* (1957) (trans) Jonathan Cape (London: Vintage, 2009), 109.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 110, 111.

semiological systems. According to Barthes, myths are protected from subversion through the procession of inoculation.⁵⁵⁰ Myths, in their telling, are solidified, reproduced, and maintained; this process, which is analogous to the canonization of literary texts, allows for stable versions of the stories of Odysseus as well as crystalized constructions of Penelope and Odysseus as characters.

Barthes, too, discusses the significance of myth for identity. He writes that a person understands himself and others in relationship to the myth and is 'unable to imagine the Other' in terms outside the myth.⁵⁵¹ Thus that person's access to 'social existence' is determined by the identities that are created within the myth.⁵⁵² Barthes registers myth as permeating society and effecting identification, stating:

Myths are nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image, eternal yet bearing a date, which was built of them one day as if for all time. For the Nature, in which they are locked up under the pretext of being eternalized, is nothing but an Usage. And it is this Usage, however lofty, that they must take in hand and transform.⁵⁵³

The usage of a myth is social, pertaining to the conditions and connotations of the delivery of the myth. For example, a tree, when used by a specific author, is not simply a tree but a tree adapted in a particular way, 'laden with literary self-indulgence.'⁵⁵⁴ If usage can be stripped away, then the myths, which are indeed ceaseless, insidious, and structurally identifiable, can be challenged. In this chapter, we will see the ways in which Atwood's revision refuses to accept the myth as universal and alters her usage for feminist ends.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

Atwood is a natural choice for Byng because her work has consistently integrated and interrogated myth, fairy tale, and legend. Indeed, Atwood's body of writing is renowned for its intertextuality, allusions, references, and adaptations. As Carol Ann Howells states, 'many critics have commented on Atwood's revision of traditional fictional genres as she draws attention to the cultural myths they embody and to the multiple inherited scripts through which our perceptions of ourselves and the world are constructed.'⁵⁵⁵ Atwood draws on images, tropes, and motifs from fairy tales, legends, and myths to weave a tapestry of meaning. Speaking specifically of the intertextuality of fairy tales, critic Sharon Rose Wilson writes, 'Fairy-tale intertexts function in nearly all of [Atwood's] work, including novels, short story collections, flash fictions and prose poems, poetry, children's books and essays; and some of these works are themselves meta-fairy tales.'⁵⁵⁶ Barbara Rigney extends Wilson's discussion of fairy tale intertextuality to include myth and magic in Atwood's texts.⁵⁵⁷ Rigney examines the function of these interwoven tales, arguing that Atwood's 'use of myth is a deconstructive one; she disassembles the myth to reconstruct it in terms of the modern female psyche.'⁵⁵⁸ Atwood's intertextuality, then, is deconstructive. She plucks threads from worn stories and weaves them into a new tapestry.

Atwood's use of myth can be empowering for women readers as it provides literary space for them to occupy. In *Rewriting Myths*, F. Tuba Korkmaz writes, 'Atwood uses mythic elements to tell women's quest stories,' the quest plot usually reserved for hero/men.⁵⁵⁹ In telling women's stories, Atwood creates a literary space for

⁵⁵⁵ Carol Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (1996) 2nd Edition (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 8.

⁵⁵⁶ Sharon Rose Wilson, 'Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale: Postmodern Revisioning in Recent Texts' in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (ed) Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 98.

⁵⁵⁷ Barbara Rigney, 'Maps of the Green World' in *Margaret Atwood, Women Writers Series* (eds) Eva Figes and Adele King (London: Macmillan, 1987), 8.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵⁹ F. Tuba Korkmaz, *Rewriting Myths* Saabrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), 20.

women. As Korkmaz writes, ‘By rewriting myths, one can create new spaces of existence and survival.’⁵⁶⁰ Korkmaz’s description of Atwood is reminiscent of Richian revision, recognizing the need for survival. In an interview with Margaret Kaminski, Atwood states, ‘I don’t think people should divest themselves of all their mythologies because I think, in a way, everybody needs one. It is just a question of getting one that is liveable and not destructive to you.’⁵⁶¹ Atwood, in revisioing Homer’s *Odyssey*, challenges a myth she finds destructive – the myth of the faithful wife.

The manner and purpose of Atwood’s intertextuality is not strictly defined, though it is associated with postmodernism. Sharon Rose Wilson writes, ‘Atwood employs all intertexts in a similar postmodern way, simultaneously seriously, ironically, and parodically.’⁵⁶² Wilson argues that, like other postmodern novelists, Atwood’s use of other texts can deconstruct them by using irony, parody and satire ‘alongside the tales’ original character types, themes, motifs and images.⁵⁶³ The effect of such textual strategies can, for Wilson, succeed in ‘turning fairy-tale plots upside down, reversing outcomes.’⁵⁶⁴ In doing so, Atwood’s work simultaneously undermines essentialist, colonial, and sexist assumptions.⁵⁶⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, feminist revision and postmodernism are compatible. However, Atwood’s concern for ‘liveable’ mythologies suggests she is concerned with a political agenda.

Atwood uses intertextuality, then, as a vehicle for exploring ideological concerns. Ideological underpinnings of canonical or traditional versions of texts, which privilege male voice, such as the hero narrative mentioned above, can be challenged and

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁶¹ Margaret Kaminski, ‘Preserving Mythologies’ in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (ed) Earl G. Ingersoll London: Virago, 1992), 32.

⁵⁶² Wilson, ‘Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale,’ 99.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

overturned in feminist revisioning. With this understanding of Atwood's technique as one which seeks to undermine ideological assumptions, *The Penelopiad* can be read as a revision which identifies and undermines patriarchal assumptions in *The Odyssey* as well as expresses concern for liveable mythologies for women. By shifting narration, altering characterization of Penelope and Odysseus, and unearthing a community of women, Atwood critiques Homer and haunts the literary canon.

Homer is a quintessentially canonical author.⁵⁶⁶ His epic poems the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* have been preserved and translated over the centuries and maintain a significant role in literature today.⁵⁶⁷ Laura M. Slatkin highlights the impact of Homer's poems, stating, 'Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* represents the culmination and refinement of a long antecedent tradition, and we might best approach it with at least a double vision: as a central cultural-poem of mid-eighth century BCE Greece, and as a poem that makes a bid to continue to be "ours."'⁵⁶⁸ Slatkin further identifies both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as foundational poems in western culture which have been translated, adapted, intertextualized, and revisioned.⁵⁶⁹ Working specifically with the *Odyssey*, Edith Hall recognizes the significant proliferating effect of Homer's epic. In *The Return of Ulysses*, Hall 'explores the reasons for the enormity of this poem's cultural presence.'⁵⁷⁰ While performing this immense task, Hall mentions various translations (including those of Alexander Pope, Alfred Tennyson and E.V. Rieu), modern adaptations (such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*) and even adaptations for children (including Charles Lamb's *The Adventures of Ulysses* published in 1808).⁵⁷¹ As a text

⁵⁶⁶ For varying reports of Homer's life, see: E.V. Rieu, 'Introduction' in *The Odyssey*. Homer. (Trans) E.V. Rieu. Penguin Classics (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), 9-21; W.A. Camps, 'Preliminary' in *An Introduction to Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1-2.

⁵⁶⁷ Rieu, 1-2.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁷⁰ Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 3.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

which ‘stimulates the production of others’ on such an enormous scale – traversing genre (comedy, tragedy, satire), mediums (plays, novels, films, poems), not to mention the centuries (from oral tradition in sixth century BCE to today) – there will be no way for this thesis to do justice to the immense Homeric tradition.⁵⁷² However, it is necessary to explore key factors concerning Homer’s *Odyssey* so as to create a starting point for examining *The Penelopiad*.

Homer’s *Odyssey* tells a tale of a man who fights in the Trojan War and struggles to make his way back to Ithaca, his kingdom, and his family, which are troubled in his absence. In the *Odyssey* as well as other ancient literature, Odysseus is consistently depicted as wily and clever, often described as an ambassador, good speaker, and mediator, particularly between Agamemnon and Achilles. His cleverness is typified in his innovation of the Trojan Horse as a means for breaching the battle lines.

His wife Penelope is not featured as prominently in ancient literature. Indeed, she is not discussed in the *Iliad* except as a reason for Odysseus not wanting to go to war. In Ovid’s *Heroides*, however, Penelope is depicted as the faithful wife longing for his return. Her voice is that of a forlorn and frightened wife: ‘When have I not feared dangers worse than all realities?’ (line 11). She is crippled by fear: ‘I fear everything, insanely, / and my anxieties are open to wide speculation. / Whether the sea contains the danger, or the land, / such long delays equally cause me to suspect’ (lines 91-95). She is pressured from all sides: ‘My father Iscarius forces me to leave my empty bed, / and rebukes me for my continual, endless waiting’ (lines 81-82) while ‘An insistent crowd of suitors comes to ruin us, [...] and they rule in your palace without restraint’ (lines 87,89). While she laments being ‘a wife with no strength’ (line 96), she remains

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 6. Indeed, Edith Hall’s text is a useful trailhead for further study of the many textual reproductions of the *Odyssey*.

faithful: 'I'm yours I should / be spoken of as yours: I'll be Penelope, wife to Ulysses, always' (lines 83-84). Building on Homer's tradition of Penelope as waiting wife, Ovid makes vivid the circumstances of the queen in Ithaca. Underneath Penelope's promise of faithfulness is a possible critique of his too-long absence. Yet, Penelope is ultimately characterized in the same way in both the *Heroides* and the *Odyssey*: immutably the faithfully waiting wife.

Odysseus and Penelope are also briefly referenced in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. When Vertumnus, in disguise, speaks to his beloved Pomona, he references Penelope as an example of a woman who is sought by many suitors but shuns them for her love of Ulysses.⁵⁷³ In a disguise, which recalls to the knowing audience Ulysses as a beggar, Vertumnus successfully woos his intended. Used as an illustration, Odysseus is figured as a husband longing to be reunited with his wife. In Greek tradition, however, Odysseus is not consistently depicted as faithful to Penelope. Robert Graves notes that Odysseus impregnated Circe, who is said to be the mother of Latinus.⁵⁷⁴ Stories of this nature reached Penelope's ears and are addressed in Atwood's novel as 'scandalous gossip.'⁵⁷⁵

The characterisation of Odysseus and Penelope in Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* is consistent with their portrayal in the *Odyssey*. In Homer's text, Odysseus is the war-torn hero who makes the epic journey back to his home island Ithaca. Opposed by Poseidon and supported by Athena to varying degrees of success, Odysseus encounters the seductresses Circe and Calypso, but never forgets his clever Penelope. As W.A. Camps identifies, Homer's Odysseus is 'distinguished by [his]

⁵⁷³ Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, book 14, lines 228-71. Mark Possanza discuss this passage and possible linguistic ambiguity in 'Penelope in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 14.671' in *The American Journal of Philology* 123.1 (2002), 89-94.

⁵⁷⁴ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myth: The Complete and Definitive Edition* (London: Penguin, 2011), 499.

⁵⁷⁵ Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 3.

mental abilities and physical prowess.⁵⁷⁶ A ‘persuasive speaker’, ‘straight thinker’, having a ‘cool head’ and ‘diplomatic nature’ Odysseus is a distinguished hero.⁵⁷⁷ After a remarkable and remarkably long journey – inhabited by monsters and goddesses, virgins and fathers – Odysseus finds his home occupied by impetuous and greedy suitors. Once again calling upon his wits and wiles, Odysseus infiltrates a land he once ruled that has been ruined in his absence. Revealing himself only to his father Laertes and son Telemachus, the patriarch successfully overturns the castle, killing the suitors. This pinnacle of Odysseus’s return and reassertion of authority is violently enacted: ‘[Eurycleia] found Odysseus among the corpses of the fallen, spattered with blood and filth, like a lion when he comes from feeding on some farmer’s bullock, with blood dripping from his breast and jaws on either side, a fearsome spectacle. That was how Odysseus looked, with the gore thick on his legs and arms.’⁵⁷⁸ In this scene, Odysseus is wily and clever, strong and fierce, just as in the *Iliad*. In reclaiming his throne, Odysseus is at his most severe, dispensing justice for actions committed during his absence. Eurycleia identifies for Odysseus twelve maids who have been disloyal in his absence, stating, ‘You had fifty women serving in your palace, whom we have trained in household work and to card wool and make the best of slavery. Of these there are twelve all told who have taken to vicious ways and snap their fingers at me and Penelope herself.’⁵⁷⁹ As punishment, Odysseus orders the twelve maids clean the entrails of the suitors he had slain and then kills them for their betrayal:

And then, like doves of long-winged thrushes caught in a net across the thicket where they come to roost, and meeting death where they had only looked for sleep, the women held their heads in a row, and a noose

⁵⁷⁶ W.A. Camps, *An Introduction to Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 22.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁷⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, (trans) E.V. Rieu (1950) Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 1977), 349.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 349.

was cast round each one's neck to despatch them in the most miserable way. For a little while their feet kicked out, but not for very long.⁵⁸⁰ This execution is, for Odysseus, a just retribution for their perceived betrayal. The readers, having followed the tale of adventure, rejoice in Odysseus's success in re-establishing his throne. In Homer's text, Odysseus remains the clever warrior that he was in the *Iliad* while Penelope is the patient, longing, wife at home. For Atwood, Homer portrays Penelope as 'the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy.'⁵⁸¹

The central theme in the *Odyssey* is homecoming – the return of the lost husband. The story's profundity, however, engages with more than the private and individual return of a man from war. As Laura M. Slatkin states, 'Return [...] becomes more than a private objective in the *Odyssey*: it becomes an instrument of justice, sanctioned by the gods, through which the social order will be rescued.'⁵⁸² Odysseus does not return to his home in an attempt to enter an idyllic domestic life; rather, Odysseus's return is about re-establishing his reign and asserting his patriarchal authority as master of the house. More broadly considered, Slatkin asserts, '[The *Odyssey* is] a sustained, albeit episodic inquiry into identity, paradigms of social order, the political economy of sex and the family, and civilization and its discontents.'⁵⁸³ With such a focus, Homer's *Odyssey* also functions to portray and perpetuate the assertion of male power and authority.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth describes the narration of Homer's *Odyssey* as that of 'artificial authority.'⁵⁸⁴ Booth contends that Homer reveals intentions to his readers and provides judgments of his characters. Booth asserts that in

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵⁸¹ Atwood, 'Introduction,' *The Penelopiad*, xiii.

⁵⁸² Laura M. Slatkin, 'Homer's *Odyssey*' in *A Companion to Ancient Epic* Ed John Miles Foley (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 318.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁸⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 4.

both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, ‘Homer is at our elbow, controlling rigorously our beliefs, our interests, our sympathies.’⁵⁸⁵ Homer clarifies the motives of Odysseus as well as the gods. Indeed, the gods are unreliable, whereas Homer is reliable.⁵⁸⁶ Homer exercises interpretive power and can both assert and maintain an authoritative position throughout the narrative determining the meaning of the text. The result of Homer’s determination of meaning is that the reader is encouraged to interpret Odysseus’s final actions as heroic. The reader, for Booth, is ‘unambiguously sympathetic toward the heroes and contemptuous for the suitors.’⁵⁸⁷ Indeed, when Homer returns and murders the suitors, the reader is expected to cheer. Homer is ‘glaringly present,’ affecting the reader’s interpretation of the action of his characters.⁵⁸⁸

Yet, Homer is unable to lead Atwood by the elbow. She resists the authorial guidance within the narrative and questions the source text. Stating in her introduction that she has ‘always been haunted by the hanged maids,’ Atwood’s engagement with the epic shifts from the political concerns of war property to the distaff concerns of the home.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood retains all major plot events of Homer’s text. Penelope is married off by her father to Odysseus. She goes with Odysseus to Ithaca rather than staying in her father’s home. They have a son. While Telemachus is still an infant, the Trojan War begins. Odysseus feigns lunacy to avoid fighting in the war, but he is exposed and required to leave. After the Trojan War ends, Odysseus still does not return. Penelope hears few reports of Odysseus and begins to despair as she is increasingly surrounded by suitors who have come from around the land to court her. While Odysseus endeavours to return, Penelope delays the suitors by weaving a shroud

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

for her father-in-law. The suitors wait, albeit impatiently and in a manner which violates social codes of hospitality. Eventually, Penelope is discovered to have been unpicking the shroud; she becomes hard pressed to pick a suitor, so she devises a contest: whoever can string Odysseus's bow and shoot the arrow through the twelve axes will win her hand. Fortunately, Odysseus has just returned, disguised as a beggar. Odysseus wins the contest, kills the suitors, and is reunited with Penelope.

Atwood's text also incorporates literary elements from the broader Homeric tradition. Atwood includes other tales of Penelope, such as her possible infidelity, by introducing them in the novel as 'rumors' which Penelope addresses and attempts to assuage. Atwood highlights Penelope's ancestry, making note of her father Icarius who threw her into the sea, her mother, and the infamous Helen of Troy as her cousin.⁵⁸⁹ Despite these inclusions, Atwood does not alter the plot of Homer's epic. As Guy Dixon wrote, '[Atwood] *didn't invent anything*, she says, other than dialogue and the occasional scene that transposes modern-day elements such as a brief mock trial held in the afterworld.'⁵⁹⁰ Atwood allows Penelope to tell her tale, and what emerges is a reinterpretation of events so that they take on different emphasis and meaning. Concerning Atwood's heroines, Carol Ann Howells states, 'Though not in control of the stories, Atwood's women insist on challenging the authority of classical myth by voicing their points of view.'⁵⁹¹ By telling her tale from her point of view, Penelope decentralizes patriarchal authority over knowledge and the 'true' version of events.

While the plot is maintained, the effect of Atwood's revision is striking. By allowing Penelope to narrate from the underworld, Atwood's text focuses on the

⁵⁸⁹ Atwood, 'Notes' in *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 197.

⁵⁹⁰ Guy Dixon, 'Desperate housewife in Ancient Greece' in *The Globe and Mail* (22 Oct 2005) 8 June 2011; emphasis added.

⁵⁹¹ Carol Ann Howells, "'We Can't Help but be Modern': *The Penelopiad*" in *Once Upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tale and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings* (Ed.) Sarah A Appleton (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 59.

characterization of Odysseus in a way which allows for reinterpretation of his behaviour in the source text. First, Atwood does not begin on Mount Olympus with a calling to a Muse. Rather, *The Penelopiad* begins in Hades: the shadow of Penelope occupies the land of the asphodel, from which she can finally tell her version of the tale of Odysseus' return to Ithaca. As an overt narrator, Penelope's telling is not positioned as omniscient, authoritative, or beyond reproach. Indeed, her telling is continually interrupted by the maids who provide alternative version of events. As such, Atwood employs narration in a way that is antithetical to Homer, encouraging her readers to question the source text.

Penelope's version of events surfaces after thousands of years of silence. She greets her reader from the Underworld:

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 to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say. [...]

Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of these sacks is full of words – words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. Some sacks are very small, others are large; my own is of a reasonable size, though a lot of the words in it concern my eminent husband. [...]

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. Hadn't I been faithful?⁵⁹²

From the Underworld, Penelope shares her side of the story. Beginning her story, she immediately undercuts Odysseus's authority and reliability as a narrator. She does not necessarily assert her own knowledge as an authoritative replacement. Indeed, she

⁵⁹² Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 1-2.

acknowledges that her knowledge is limited, albeit slightly still expanded since her death. Rather, Penelope asserts an Other side of the story.

Penelope goes on to describe her motivation for writing:

[A]fter the main events were over and things had become less legendary, I realised how many people were laughing at me behind my back – how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jokes both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty. So I wait some more.

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling.⁵⁹³

Having heard the gossip about her and the stories others have told, Penelope breaks her silence. Identifying her contribution as the 'low-art' of tale-telling, she decides she will 'spin a thread of my own.'⁵⁹⁴ In one quick introduction, Penelope resists the authoritative version of her life and asserts her own rendering. She breaks the silence. She confronts representations of herself within the Homeric narratives. No longer the faithful, patient wife, Penelope asserts herself, questions Odysseus's authority and authorship of his own narrative. Indeed, her voice subverts Odysseus as tale teller. In the *Odyssey*, the majority of the story is Odysseus narrating his tale to the king of the Phaeacians, King Alcinous. The narrative is steered by Odysseus. By employing Penelope as narrator, Atwood disrupts narrative voice of Odysseus and questions narrative authority.

In Atwood's revision, readers are provided with altered characterizations of key figures. Penelope, in her tale-telling, is more cunning than patient. Her version

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

focalizes on her predicament as ‘married off’ daughter and her cunning in handling the suitors. Yet the maids provide additional versions of the story, leaving the reader to question Penelope’s authority. In ‘The Perils of Penelope, A Drama,’ the maids suggest that Penelope has been unfaithful, and orders Eurycleia to kill the twelve maids so they do not tell Odysseus of her faithlessness. Even in the underworld, the tension between the differing versions of Penelope’s and the maids’ tales are not resolved. Even as shadows in Hades, the maids refuse to speak to Penelope. Rather, they haunt Odysseus, pretty maids ‘all in a row.’⁵⁹⁵ The form of the maids’ telling – a dramatic, parodic reenactment – suggests that the maids, too, are telling a story that benefits them as tellers. However, their alternative version exposes Penelope: the threads of her story are woven with trickery. Penelope’s narration attempts to characterize herself as knowing – she recognizes Odysseus dressed as the beggar – yet still faithful, never betraying the marital bed.

Atwood’s Odysseus is clever and tricky; however, he uses his abilities exclusively for economic gain. Odysseus succeeds in fooling the suitors into thinking him a beggar, granting him access to the castle without direct threat to his safety. He is indeed able to infiltrate and destroy them all. Yet he did so not in order to save his precious Penelope so much as to punish their consumption of his estate and reassert his authority in Ithaca. Odysseus proves more selfish than benevolent. This lack of benevolence is further demonstrated in Odysseus’s execution of the maids and elaborate dismemberment of Menanthus. The violence enacted by Odysseus, in Atwood’s telling, is questioned rather than celebrated.

It is Atwood’s portrayal of Odysseus’s violence that radically alters the interpretation of the source text. Atwood’s description of his violence highlights the

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

grotesqueness of the act. Odysseus's desire for violence and the valorisation of his acts are reminiscent of the bloodlust of Carter's Marquis. His pleasure in making 'mincemeat of every last one of the Suitors'⁵⁹⁶ and in disallowing 'such impertinent girls to continue to serve in the palace'⁵⁹⁷ as proper and desirable exercises of authority is evocative of Bluebeard. In the section that follows, I argue that Atwood constructs Odysseus as a Bluebeard figure. In the first chapter of this thesis, I explored Carter's revision of the Bluebeard narrative, focusing on key plot points and metatextuality. In this chapter, I will return to the Bluebeard tale type to discuss key features of the tale that Atwood uses in her corpus. I will look at three examples of Atwood's use of fairy tale intertexts by focusing on her engagement with the bluebeard tales – such as bluebeard, fitcher's bird, and the robber bridegroom – in her novel *The Robber Bride*, her short story 'Bluebeard's Egg', her novel *The Blind Assassin*. But before discussing Atwood's work, I will first address the common features of these tales. I will identify five features: an 'arranged' marriage, the husband as foreigner, the husband as having a female helper, the isolation of the female protagonist, and the dismemberment of women. In identifying the key features of Bluebeard and examining Atwood's employment of these features, I argue that the alternative characterization of Odysseus critiques the male-dominated violence in the source text.

Within the Bluebeard tale, the female protagonist is a girl of marriageable age; she is married to or kidnapped by a man who is an outsider of the community. The foreignness of the antagonist is a key feature of these tales. In 'The Robber Bridegroom,' the man's foreignness is defined by his status as an outlaw. In Perrault's 'Bluebeard,' the man's foreignness is emblemized by this blue beard. Foreignness is

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

also a feature in Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird,' in which the man is a sorcerer disguised as a beggar. In each case, the male character is an unrecognized outsider. Another component of the antagonist's foreignness is that his residence is outside the community. He may live in a den of robbers as in Grimm's 'The Robber Bridegroom,' a house in the dark parts of the forest as in Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird,' or several cottages in another town (indeed, other variants have him living in a castle in another country). Readers recognize this feature in Carter's revision, which has the Marquis living in a castle isolated by the tide. Notably, the bluebeard figure is not part of the community in which the girl was raised.

Occasionally, the antagonist has a female helper. In 'The Robber Bridegroom,' the old woman functions as a housekeeper or maid, boiling the water to make the stew for the robbers. Daniela Hempen is the first to acknowledge and critically analyse the 'ambiguous role' of the 'strange old woman' in Grimms' tales which was previously overlooked.⁵⁹⁸ Hempen identifies the old woman as having familiarity with the ritual murder of women and is trusted enough by the antagonist to aid the girl's escape. Her function in the tales is one of warning and rescue – ultimately, enabling the female protagonist's survival. In 'The Robber Bridegroom,' the older woman warns the bride that she is in a 'murderers' den' and prevents the robber from finding the girl hiding behind the barrel. In 'Bluebeard' Sister Anne is sometimes read into this role as she certainly warns her sister of danger and aids in her rescue from death.⁵⁹⁹ In Carter's short story, the figure of the old woman is split between the sinister housekeeper and the protagonist's mother. The Marquis's housekeeper, 'who kept this extraordinary machine, this anchored castellated ocean liner, in smooth running order no matter who stood on

⁵⁹⁸ Daniela Hempen, 'Bluebeard's Female Helper: The Ambiguous Role of the Strange Old Woman in the Grimm's "Castle of Murder" and "The Robber Bridegroom,"' *Folklore* 108 (1997): 45.

⁵⁹⁹ Rose Lovell-Smith, 'Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard's Female Helper,' *Folklore* 113 (2002): 198.

the bridge,' had been the Marquis's foster mother.⁶⁰⁰ Committed to the Marquis as much as Eurycleia is to Odysseus, the female protagonist would not be finding aid in her escape from the housekeeper.

Another key feature is the isolation of the girl and her new forged community being one of dead women. The girl has been taken out of her family community and kept in a castle/house/den. Once in the antagonist's house, the girl is warned against but then enters a forbidden space; here, sees the dead and dismembered bodies of her female processors (and in some cases her older sisters), and becomes aware that she is intended to join them.

The last key feature I will address is the dismemberment of the women. In some cases, the girl sees a finger on the floor; in other cases, the girl sees a room or basin filled with women's body parts. In all instances of this tale type, the women are distinguished by their disarticulation. It is this gruesome element of dismemberment that is the tale type's most striking feature.

In her own writing, Atwood uses features from the bluebeard tale type. For now, I will discuss three examples – *The Robber Bride*, 'Bluebeard's Egg,' and *The Blind Assassin* – looking for clues to inform a reading of *The Penelopiad*. Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride* (1993) alludes to its namesake tale, the Grimm Brothers' 'The Robber Bridegroom.' In this novel, Atwood changes the sex of the antagonist in the character of Zenia – the exotic woman of unknown background who seems to make men disappear. The fairy tale is directly referenced midway through the novel when Tony reads the tale to Roz's twin daughters who demand that every character in the story be female. Reflecting on her daughters' demands, Roz narrates, 'Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest,

⁶⁰⁰ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber,' 14.

preying on the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia.⁶⁰¹ The protagonist views the female antagonist as the Robber Bride with perhaps even more anguish than the other women in the story for it is her son (like the miller's daughter) who is becoming ensnared in Zenia disguised trappings.

Zenia is characterized as an outsider interjecting herself into the lives of the three female protagonists at different points in the narrative. Zenia is also characterized by what could be called the 'power of female sexuality,' as discussed by Carol Ann Howells, for men seem completely unable to resist her.⁶⁰² Furthermore, Zenia is chameleon-like, able to adapt and blend in to the very different lives of the three protagonists without seeming like a threat, at least initially. Lying about her background, Zenia creates a different personal history for each female protagonist. Neither the reader nor the main characters are made aware of any 'real' personal background. In shifting her history, she alters her identity for each of her female targets. Zenia is the ultimate stranger – never offering to reveal a 'true' identity. In this sense, Zenia is like Penelope, projecting a specific image of herself onto her perceived audience. With Penelope, as with Zenia, the audience is not provided with a definitive version, destabilizing claims to a single, authorial version.

Zenia also takes on the role of the Other Woman – competing for and ultimately succeeding in stealing away these men.⁶⁰³ Ultimately, it is Zenia's otherness – as outsider, stranger, and sexual competitor – which characterizes her as the robber bride. In this way, Atwood manages to stay within the confines of the tale type but playfully explore themes of female relationships and female sexuality in a contemporary setting. Through the character of Zenia, Atwood toys with intertextual expectations, altering the

⁶⁰¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (1993) (London: Virago, 1994), 295.

⁶⁰² Carol Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (1996) Second Edition (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 128.

⁶⁰³ Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 125.

sex of the antagonist. In doing so, Atwood questions the relationship between women, explores the need for female bonding in a patriarchal society, and unravels what options women have in fulfilling already written tales.

In the short story 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), Atwood approaches the tale type and explores similar themes from a different point of entry. In this short story, the female protagonist is a woman named Sally. She is middle aged and taking a night course called Forms of Narrative Fiction; Sally is married to Ed who is a 'heart man,' presumably a heart surgeon.⁶⁰⁴ The two have been married for a number of years, but Sally still finds there is a mystery to Ed, an inner world she cannot understand, and previous wives whose reasons for leaving are never made clear. Sally does not think these marriages necessarily failed because of Ed; she thinks of him as quite stupid; stupid, but attractive; a man who is oblivious to the women who fawn over him.

The intertext of Bluebeard is made overt in this short story by its retelling in the context of Sally's class. Sally has an assignment to write the story of bluebeard from another point of view. Sally tries to imagine how to go about writing: 'So far she's written nothing. The great temptation is to cast herself in the role of the cunning heroine, but again it's too predictable. And Ed certainly isn't the wizard; he's nowhere sinister enough. [...] (Ed isn't the Bluebeard: Ed is the egg. Ed Egg, blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid, too. Boiled, probably. Sally smiles fondly.'⁶⁰⁵ Yet after thinking she sees Ed graze the buttocks of her female friend Marylynn with the back of his hand during a dinner party, Sally is no longer convinced of Ed's innocence. She thinks something more 'sinister' could be going on, that she had been wrong about her perception of Ed for years.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983) in *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 141.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 156, 157.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

After this paradigm shift for the protagonist, the short story may be read for clues of the bluebeard tale type. Sally is certainly isolated, living with Ed in a forest-like landscape in a house he seems to own.⁶⁰⁷ Ed has had two previous wives;⁶⁰⁸ Sally is anxious about these other women because she does not know why the previous marriages failed; Sally thinks, ‘if he doesn’t know what happened with the other two, maybe the same thing could be happening with her and he doesn’t know about that, either.’⁶⁰⁹ Here, Sally begins to identify with the previous wives and anxious about following in their footsteps.

Ed is also briefly pictured as foreign. Sally and Ed are getting ready for their dinner guests; as Ed begins shaving, Sally observes, ‘Ed, lathered, is Assyrian, sterner than usual; or a frost-covered Arctic explorer; or demi-human, a white bearded forest mutant.’⁶¹⁰ Ed grows increasingly strange to Sally rather than increasingly familiar over the course of the story.

The forbidden room, then, which Sally cannot enter, is Ed’s inner world: ‘In [Sally’s] inner world is Ed, like a doll within a Russian wooden doll, and in Ed is Ed’s inner world, which she can’t get at.’⁶¹¹ Inside Ed’s inner world is the knowledge of what happened with his previous wives which he does not discuss with Sally. In a sense, Ed’s stupidity, then, functions as a barrier – it becomes the walls of the forbidden room of his inner world. Of Ed’s stupidity, the reader is told, ‘On good days [Sally] sees his stupidity as innocence, lamb-like shining with the light of (for instance) green daisied meadows in the sun. [...] On bad days though, she sees his stupidity as wilfulness, a stubborn determination to shut things out. His obtuseness is a *wall*, within which he can

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

go about his business, humming to himself, while Sally, *locked outside*, must hack her way through the brambles.’⁶¹²

It is possible within the narrative that Sally did not really see Ed touching Marylynn’s buttocks; she has an active imagination and could have misread the situation entirely. Indeed, Sally never seems to actually enter the forbidden inner world of Ed, though perhaps Marylynn functions as the key, allowing Sally to see into her husband’s deceptions. Admittedly, a quick romantic moment at a dinner party is not analogous to dismemberment. However, if Sally is the third wife and she glimpses Ed’s infidelity, perhaps there is a sinister motive lurking beneath Ed’s behaviour. In her portrayal of Ed’s serial monogamy, Atwood questions the non-physical violence experienced and other sinister dynamics in the everyday relationships between men and women.

In this short story, as in *The Robber Bridegroom*, Atwood explores the themes of female relationships and female sexuality in a contemporary setting. Yet to that she adds the ambiguity of an unconfirmed bluebeard. At no point in ‘Bluebeard’s Egg’ is Ed’s infidelity established. At no point does Sally escape him. The story strongly suggests that Ed is unfaithful and that his previous wives have undergone what Sally is experiencing now; yet this is never confirmed for the reader. This ambiguity is part of what Atwood is exploring in this text – that anyone could potentially be a bluebeard, even someone as contemporary and innocent-seeming as Ed.

A number of these characteristics of the Bluebeard tale are also echoed in *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Themes of the violent, possessive wealthy husband and naive young wife converge in 1930s’ and 40s’ Ontario. At the tender age of 18, Iris Chase married the older, wealthy, and politically prominent businessman Richard Griffin. Richard’s sister, Winifred Griffen Prior, is his constant companion; indeed, she is eerily

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 133; emphasis added.

close to her brother, often closer than Iris herself. Telling her story as an old woman, Iris narrates the events of her life with Richard and Communist sympathiser Alex Thomas. Iris reflects on the mysterious death of her sister Laura and later learns, through reading her journals, that Richard had been molesting Laura. Iris convinces Richard that Laura had an affair with Alex Thomas, which drives Richard to self-immolation. Like the protagonist's relationship with Jean-Yves in Carter's revision, Iris's affair with Alex provides a way out of her relationship with Richard. By appropriating the Bluebeard tale and setting the narrative amidst the Red Scare of Communism, Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* critiques a ubiquitous and normalized male dominance and violence.

In *The Penelopiad* (2005), Atwood continues this critique of male dominance and includes a critique of the absence of a female community. She accomplishes this in the manner in which she employs the key features of the bluebeard tale type. First, Odysseus himself is from Ithaca while Penelope is from Sparta. He enters Sparta as a foreigner to compete for Penelope's hand in marriage. The marriage between Odysseus and Penelope is arranged, certainly by her uncle and father but also by Odysseus himself: Odysseus bargains for Penelope's hand if he is able to settle the controversy of who marries Helen.⁶¹³ Penelope is also isolated; after her marriage, Penelope is quite alone in his large castle. She does not talk to Laertes, his father, or Anticleia, his mother who seems suspicious of her. The only other person who she interacts with is Eurycleia, whom she calls the 'trusted cackled hen.'⁶¹⁴ This old housemaid had been the nurse of infant Odysseus and remained highly regarded in the castle and considered 'intensely reliable.'⁶¹⁵ She continues to serve Odysseus, much to the frustration and exclusion of

⁶¹³ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 23-28, 35-36.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

Penelope. Penelope narrates, '[Eurycleia] talked all the time, and nobody was the world's expert on Odysseus the way she was. [...] Nobody but she must give him his baths, oil his shoulders, prepare his breakfasts.'⁶¹⁶ Eurycleia was single-minded in her service to Odysseus.

The most compelling evidence of Odysseus as bluebeard is his desire to dismember women and Penelope's newly-forged community with the maids. When Odysseus returns, Penelope's dialogue with Odysseus is to test his identity, challenging him with knowledge of his bed.⁶¹⁷ Once they are reunited, and 'after their love had taken its sweet course' husband and wife 'turned to the fresh delights of talk, and interchanged their news.'⁶¹⁸ Their dialogue is not recorded. Indeed, after Penelope's testing of Odysseus's identity, the only other recorded conversation between husband and wife is when Odysseus tells Penelope he must leave again.

Conversely, Atwood takes the readers behind the bedroom door and into the conversations between husband and wife. After their wedding ceremony, Odysseus and Penelope are behind closed doors. In a frightening situation for a 15 year-old girl, 40-something Odysseus reassures her. Penelope narrates:

Once the door had been closed, Odysseus took me by the hand and sat me down on the bed. 'Forget everything you've been told,' he whispered. 'I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both if you pretend. I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams? That will satisfy them – they're listening at the door – and then they'll leave us in peace and we can take our time to become friends.'⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶¹⁷ Homer, 347.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁶¹⁹ Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 44.

Though a seemingly tender gesture by Odysseus, Penelope reinterprets his words, stating:

This was one of his great secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two of them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome it. He could draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little conspiracy of his own making. Nobody could do this better than he: for once, the stories didn't lie. And he had a wonderful voice as well, deep and sonorous. So of course I did as he asked.⁶²⁰

Penelope's description highlights Odysseus's ability to seek his own ends with the collusion of another.

Another intimate conversation between the married couple exposes another side of Odysseus: as possessive. Odysseus's possessiveness is expressed when he reveals the secret of his bed to Penelope. Interestingly, Odysseus is not so much possessive of Penelope herself but of Penelope as one with access to his kingdom and regent during his absence. In guarding his bed, Odysseus is guarding his throne, and he communicates the importance of Penelope's loyalty in a threat:

This bedpost of his was a great secret: no one knew about it except Odysseus himself, and my maid Actoris – but she was dead now – and myself. If the 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.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 73-4; emphasis added.

In this scene, Odysseus seems less of a clever trickster and more of a sinister villain who will punish disobedience with death, specifically dismemberment. The confidence displayed by Odysseus followed by the threat of dismemberment is a unique insertion into the story of Odysseus and Penelope. In this interaction, Odysseus shows his possessive nature – he is one who has power and authority and will respond to dissent with violence. Odysseus’s assertion of violence as a way to punish dissention is echoed in the punishment of the maids. Initially, Odysseus seeks to dismember the maids. It is Telemachus who, ‘wanting to assert himself to his father, and show that he knew better – he was at the age,’ had the women hanged.⁶²²

Living in Ithaca, Penelope becomes increasingly isolated – her mother-in-law will not address her nor will Eurycleia let her raise Telemachus. To pass the time Penelope began to weave and keep the company of the maid girls. Familiarity with the maids buds into intimacy when the War begins, Odysseus leaves, and the suitors arrive. Abandoned in Ithaca, Penelope fends off the imposing suitors by weaving a shroud. To accomplish this, she recruits assistance; Penelope narrates:

[The maids] were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was them who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years. Though we had to do it carefully, and talk in whispers, these nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch – even – of hilarity. [...] We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. In the flickering light of the torches our daylight faces were softened and changed, and our daylight manners. We were almost *like sisters*.⁶²³

In the night a community is forged, a community of women who help delay the suitors while Odysseus is away. Just as Roberts’s arks enable female community, so the

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, 114; emphasis added.

domestic spaces in Atwood's novel house female relationships. Indeed, as Carol Ann Howell asserts, Atwood shifts the emphasis of *The Odyssey* away from the masculine and toward the feminine having 'invented a vividly female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer.'⁶²⁴

The signification of Penelope's weaving becomes altered in Atwood's revision. In Homer's text, Penelope's weaving was a cleaver tactic she employs to resist the impatient suitors. Penelope is depicted in a positive (albeit constrained) manner as the faithful wife. In 'What Was Penelope Unweaving?', Carolyn G. Heilbrun discusses the significance of Penelope's task. First, Heilbrun identifies weaving as an occupation closely connected to women's speech. Citing the stories of Arachne and Philomela, Heilbrun argues that women who have been silenced – whether by being metamorphosed into a spider or deprived of one's tongue by an attacker – are able to find a kind of 'voice' through weaving.⁶²⁵ Penelope, for Heilbrun, is in a unique position: she has a choice. She can choose to wait for Odysseus or the suitors. Heilbrun reminds readers, 'Because Penelope's choice has been one we might call conservative, we have, I think, failed to see how extraordinary Penelope is. What she must do is to live her life without a story to guide her: no woman before has been in this position.'⁶²⁶ Ultimately, for Heilbrun, Penelope is weaving and unweaving different stories, different possibilities. Penelope is writing and revising her own story. In this sense, Penelope is learning to 'become the subject of one's own life.'⁶²⁷ I would perhaps take one step back from Heilbrun and discuss the ways in which Penelope does not really have much choice – her choice is between men; however, what she has in the intermediary time –

⁶²⁴ Howells, 'Modern,' 70.

⁶²⁵ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, 'What Was Penelope Weaving?' in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 104.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

the time of waiting and weaving – is a unique freedom. There is a sense in which she is delaying the marriage to maintain her unique freedom for as long as possible, resisting pressure to conform to the marriage plot. Like Carol Ann Duffy's Penelope who shifts from looking 'along the road / hoping to see him / saunter / home' to amusing herself with a 'lifetime's industry'⁶²⁸ of sewing, Heilbrun reads Penelope's weaving as an alternative – not longing for Odysseus as much as spinning her own stories.

Penelope's weaving and unpicking is revisioned by Atwood to occur within an emerging community of women, asserting a polyphony of voices. Indeed, the maids are assisting Penelope in the weaving and unweaving process. In weaving and unweaving with the maids, not only is Penelope resisting the marriage plot, she is creating a community of women not based, in the phrasing of Luce Irigaray, on commodification. Polyphony is also present in the maids' choruses. Throughout the novel, the maids assert their own version of events in a diversity of forms, including a chorus, play, lecture, and courtroom scene. While Atwood does not present a class-less, utopian female community – indeed, Atwood's contradictory representation of Penelope through the maid's chorus suggests this is not utopian – it is a space less determined by patriarchal dominance. As Howells writes:

While Homer does not even bother to comment on the relationship between Penelope and her maids, leaving their fates to Eurycleia and Telemachus who hangs them, Atwood's feminist critique of Homer makes the relationship between these women at the centre of *the Penelopiad*.⁶²⁹

Atwood's inclusion of the maids – as co-conspirators and with alternative versions of events – destabilizes the assertion of a singular, authoritative reading.

⁶²⁸ Carol Ann Duffy, 'Penelope,' *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 1999), 70.

⁶²⁹ Howells, 'Modern,' 62.

When Odysseus returns, he understands the maids to have been disobedient to him in their service of the suitors. As such, he has them killed. Penelope narrates:

He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors out into the courtyard [...] and to wash the brains and gore off the floor, and to clean whatever chairs and tables remained intact.

Then [...] he told Telemachus to *chop the maids into pieces* with his sword.⁶³⁰

Although Telemachus hangs the maids, it was Odysseus's order to chop them into pieces, the same consequence for Penelope had she disobeyed him by betraying the secret of his bedpost. This desire for dismemberment loudly echoes Perrault's 'Bluebeard,' suggesting Odysseus is more sinister than previously thought. Sharon Wilson makes the initial observation that Odysseus parallels Bluebeard in his threat of Penelope and highlights his desire to 'chop the maids into pieces.'⁶³¹ There is a strong sense in which Odysseus must obliterate the community of women to fully reassert his return.

It is the community of women, destroyed by Odysseus upon his return, which is the final key revision that Atwood makes. *The Odyssey* is concerned primarily with male property and lineage. Odysseus must assert his masculinity in war; Telemachus must find ways to defend his inheritance, which the suitors are literally eating up; the suitors seek the hand of Penelope because marrying her allows for the legal exchange of property. Female characters rarely interact with each other and rely primarily on male assertion of authority. Even the powerful Juno interacts primarily with men, coming to Penelope only in a dream, yet speaking directly to both Zeus and Odysseus. Edith Hall elaborates on the construction of masculinity in *The Odyssey*. Men need the cooperation

⁶³⁰ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 158-159; emphasis added.

⁶³¹ Sharon Rose Wilson, 'The Writer as Crone Goddess in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*' in *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: from Atwood to Morrison* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 57.

of women to succeed – indeed, Odysseus would not have had a home to return to if Penelope had not performed her own trickery. Yet, men take up crucial roles, such as the hero, while women fulfil caricature positions in the text. Hall states, In the *Odyssey* as well as other ancient literature, Odysseus is considered ‘[*The Odyssey*] explores the male mindset that underpinned patriarchy by presenting varieties of the feminine – nubile (Nausicaa), sexually predatory and matriarchal (Calypso, Circes), politically powerful (Arete), [...] seductive and lethal (the Sirens), loyal, domesticated and maternal (Penelope).’⁶³² In Homer’s *Odyssey*, women were two-dimensional figures rather than complex, multi-layered characters.

Female characters in *The Penelopiad* are subjects unto themselves. This does not mean they have autonomy. Penelope, Eurycleia, and the maids are all disenfranchised in some way, unable to make decisions outside the constructions of patriarchal social conventions. (For example, the maids cannot just stop being maids because they would prefer to do something else.) Yet, what emerges in *The Penelopiad* – which is completely absent from *The Odyssey* – is the relationship between women.

When Penelope leaves her father’s house to join Odysseus in Ithaca, she is not warmly received. Describing her mother-in-law Anticleia, Penelope narrates, ‘My mother-in-law was circumspect. She was a prune-mouthed woman, and though she gave me a formal welcome I could tell she didn’t approve of me. She kept saying that I was certainly very young. Odysseus remarked dryly that this was a fault that would correct itself in time.’⁶³³ Odysseus’s old nurse Eurycleia showed Penelope around the house and taught her the customs of the place, but she also gave Penelope little to do. Penelope narrates, ‘[Eurycleia] left me with nothing to do, no little office I might

⁶³² Hall, 109.

⁶³³ Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 60.

perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus liked things done.'⁶³⁴ Even after adjusting to the palace, Penelope had no power or influence in her new space:

After a time I became accustomed to my new home, although I had little authority within it, what with Eurycleia and my mother-in-law running all domestic matters and making all household decisions. Odysseus was in control of the kingdom, naturally, with his father, Laertes, sticking his oar in from time to time, either to dispute his son's decisions or to back them up. In other words, there was the standard family push-and-pull over whose word was to carry the most weight. All were agreed one thing: it was not mine.⁶³⁵

Even as a mother, Penelope had a minor role, being told by Eurycleia to leave the rearing of Telemachus to her.⁶³⁶ So, Penelope began to weave: 'It was slow and rhythmical and soothing, and nobody, even my mother-in-law, could accuse me of sitting idle while I was doing it.'⁶³⁷

Penelope also spent her time thinking of Helen. Helen steals attention away from Penelope on her wedding day and teases her in the Underworld. Their rivalry, or at least Penelope's competitive urges against Helen, not only adds a human dimension to the almost saint-like portrayal of Penelope in Homer's text, but also shifts the focus of the narrative altogether. Helen is not the cause of the Trojan War so much as she is the cause for Penelope's strife. As Howells states, 'Refusing to consider the subject matter of the epic except as it affects her personally (Penelope's chapter on the Trojan War is called 'Helen Ruins my Life'), Penelope is concerned with the practicalities of domestic life.'⁶³⁸ Atwood alters the focalization of the narrative, re-centring the story on the

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶³⁸ Howells, 'Modern', 65.

distaff. By asserting her own personal life and tale and central and authoritative, Penelope decentralizes the patriarchal preoccupation with war and property. Abandoned in Ithaca – her husband gone because of the beauty of her rival – Penelope must fend off the imposing suitors by weaving a shroud. To accomplish this, she must have allies: she recruited the maids:

To help me in this laborious task I chose twelve of my maidservants – the youngest ones, because these had been with me all their lives. I had bought them or acquired them when they were small children, brought them up as playmates for Telemachus, and trained them carefully in everything they would need to know around the palace. They were pleasant girl, full of energy; they were a little loud and giggle sometimes, as all maids are in youth, but it cheered me up to hear them chattering away, and listen to their singing. They had lovely voices, all of them, and they had been taught well how to use them.⁶³⁹

The maids became a delightful company to Penelope in her loneliness and political allies in her increasingly desperate situation. Penelope narrates:

They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was them who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years. Though we had to do it carefully, and talk in whispers, these nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch – even – of hilarity. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks smuggled in treats for us to nibble on – figs in season, bread dipped in honeycomb, headed wine in winter. We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. In the flickering light of the torches our daylight faces were softened and changed, and our daylight manners. We were almost like sisters. In the morning, our eyes darkened by lack of sleep, we'd exchange smiles of complicity, and here and there a quick squeeze of hand. Their 'Yes ma'ams' and 'No

⁶³⁹ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 113-14.

ma'ams' hovered on the edge of laughter, as if neither they nor I could take their servile behaviour seriously.⁶⁴⁰

Behind the doors, in the night-time, the women came together. Their un-weaving of the shroud became the weaving of their own stories and their friendships with one another.

As mentioned above, Penelope's tale is interrupted and her trustworthiness is undercut by the maids. The maids' stories, as told in the Chorus Line and dramatic scenes, are subversive, to both masculine values and Penelope's version of the tale.⁶⁴¹ Suggesting that Penelope was not faithful to Odysseus, they implicate her for their deaths as much as they do Odysseus. Their implication of Penelope, however, does not negate their blame of Odysseus: it is he whom they haunt in the Underworld while snubbing Penelope. As Wilson articulates, what is undercut is 'the pose of truth, the illusion of reality.'⁶⁴² For Atwood, Howells reminds us, stories are always 'vicious / and multiple and untrue.'⁶⁴³ Not even Penelope offers a story of the real events. She merely tells her perspective of them. In this way, Atwood's epic heroine is stripped of authority just as Odysseus is stripped of his version, *The Odyssey*. In disrupting Penelope's reliability, Atwood further questions the reliability and authority of any single version. Thus, Atwood successfully denies any authoritative rendering of the tale, and, like Carter, seems to rely on Barthes for a disruption of authorship, authority, and meaning.

Ultimately, Atwood's critique is not so much Homer as a straw-man of male chauvinism, but rather patriarchy itself. Albeit in a mock-trial, Atwood puts Odysseus on trial, requiring him to account for his behaviour. Neither Odysseus nor the Judge see fit to accuse him with the deaths of the maids. In what Howells calls the 'most ferocious satirical thrust against patriarchal values,' the trial scene still finds Odysseus excused of

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁴² Wilson, *Myths and Fairy Tales*, 54.

⁶⁴³ Atwood, *True Stories* as quoted in Howells, 'Modern,' 66.

his behaviour.⁶⁴⁴ Yet, the maids are not silent. The maids speak out in the courtroom; they haunt Odysseus in Hades; they sing songs and perform dramas; cannot be easily dismissed. Agitated by their haunting, and believing their presence keeps Odysseus away from her, Penelope confronts the maids, shouting:

‘Why can’t you leave him alone?’ I yell at the maids. I have to yell because they won’t let me get near them. ‘Surely it’s enough! He did penance, he said the prayers, he got himself purified!’

‘It’s not enough for *us*,’ they call.

‘What more do you want from him?’ I ask them. But this time I’m crying. ‘Just tell me!’

But they only run away.

Run isn’t quite accurate. Their legs don’t move. Their still-twitching feet don’t touch the ground.⁶⁴⁵

In the courtroom scene, the maids are disenfranchised, having no power to compel the judge or effect Odysseus. However, they effectively have the last word; and the final image of them – with their feet not touching the ground – lingers with Penelope as well as the reader. The maids successfully haunt and elude both Penelope and Odysseus just as they had haunted Atwood.

Atwood’s Odysseus moves beyond being the clever trickster. Certainly, in Homer’s epic, Odysseus’s slaying of the suitors and hanging of the maids is seen as an appropriate albeit violent means for reclaiming his throne. Yet through intertextual references to the fairy tale motifs of the Bluebeard tale type, Atwood constructs an Odysseus whose violence is sinister and unjustifiable for the maids as well as the reader. Similarly, Atwood’s Penelope moves beyond being the archetypal faithful wife. Indeed, Sharon Wilson asserts that Penelope and the maids are figured as Artemis and twelve

⁶⁴⁴ Howells, ‘Modern,’ 69.

⁶⁴⁵ Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 190.

moons.⁶⁴⁶ Citing the anthropology lecture of Atwood's novel, Wilson uses Graves to discuss the possible matriarchal symbolism of the maids, asserting that Penelope functions as Crone Goddess in Atwood's narrative.⁶⁴⁷ Yet the diversity of voices already undermines a simple assertion of Penelope as authoritative storyteller. There is sufficient irony in the anthropology lecture to disrupt a straightforward reassertion of female dominance.

Atwood is not the only writer to address the character of Penelope. Other women writers have read Homer's character in light of a feminist critique. For example, Carol Ann Duffy's collection of poetry, *The World's Wife*, gives voices to silenced or marginalized women. Her poem 'Penelope,' likewise, provides the reader with an alternative rendering of the wife of Odysseus the trickster who enjoys her industrious weaving. In Atwood's novel the character of Penelope displaces her husband Odysseus as the central figure of the epic poem. It is Penelope's life in Ithaca which is told; she is the central character of her own story. It is Penelope and her heritage – as the daughter of a mother who is absent and a father who threw her off a cliff, and the cousin of the woman whose beauty drives men to war – which is central to the story. There is little reference to Odysseus's possible descent from Hermes, and his cunning – his defining characteristic in the *Odyssey* – is undercut by a Penelope who can see through his disguise. For, Penelope immediately recognizes the Beggar as Odysseus and pretends she does not know him so as to stroke his ego. Also, Penelope cultivates spies which Odysseus, tragically, never discovers are her agents. Written from the perspective of Penelope and occasionally her twelve maids, Atwood's novel manages to centralize the story around domesticity, alter the characterization of key figures, and challenge the

⁶⁴⁶ Sharon Wilson, 'The Writer as Crone Goddess in Atwood's *the Penelopiad* and Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*' in *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 54.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

notion of an authoritative version of the tale, even Penelope's, all without changing any of the plot events of Homer's *Odyssey*.

The way that women writers and feminist theorists have engaged with classical myth has varied. Yet, as Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard suggest in *Laughing with Medusa*, women writers expose the lacunae of the myth. While Zajko and Leonard specifically focus on Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres* and Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*, their assertion that there is a feminist desire to make visible and to fill in the gaps of the tradition can be perceived in revisionary texts such as Atwood's. For Zajko and Leonard, these women writers are self-consciously intertextual and are preoccupied with embodiment, which they describe as 'a desire to reclaim the materiality of experience from the abstractions of its literary representation.'⁶⁴⁸ By writing in the margins of myth, they 'not only alter its perspective but challenge its very meaning.'⁶⁴⁹ That women writers continue to engage with classical myth is paramount. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Luce Irigaray addresses the history of thought from Plato to Freud, and, as Zajko and Leonard assert, effectively 'demonstrates how the myths of the past continue to structure women's experience in the present.'⁶⁵⁰ Reflecting on the image of Medusa's head, Zajko and Leonard argue that Cixous challenges traditional meanings associated with the head and, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' requires us to 'look again at the hollow triumph of Perseus.'⁶⁵¹ Certainly, exploring Atwood's alternative characterization of Odysseus and Penelope from Homer's source text challenges the hanging of the maids as a hollow triumph of Odysseus regaining his throne. The lacunae of myth, then, like the hidden rooms and alternative stories discussed in the previous

⁶⁴⁸ Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard, 'Introduction' in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* Classical Presences (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

chapters, is a space in which women can challenge authoritative structures and narratives.

In her 2002 essay 'Negotiating with the Dead' Atwood writes:

All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile of the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change.

We could go on to make the explicit what have been implicit. We could talk about inspiration.⁶⁵²

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood has done just that. She has descended to where the stories are kept, reclaimed them, and had made explicit what had previously been implicit. By using the intertext of the bluebeard tale type to characterize Odysseus, Atwood constructs an argument that not only questions the character of Odysseus, but extends her critique to the epic tradition which so flippantly dismisses the murder of maids. In reclaiming the key features of the bluebeard tale type in her rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey*, Atwood pulls at the fabric of the epic tale, spreads wide its holes and fissures, steals its thread, and weaves a new tale which allows Odysseus to be read as something other than clever trickster, something far more sinister indeed.

⁶⁵² Margaret Atwood, 'Decent: Negotiating with the Dead: Who Makes the Trip to the Underworld, and Why?' in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago, 2007), 178-9.

Subverting the Monomyth: Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* and Numinal

Epistemology

‘To begin to imagine freedom, the myths of gender [...] have to be exploded and discarded.’ – Ursula K. Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned*, 24.

The fourth and final genre which is revisioned that I will discuss in this thesis is classical literature.⁶⁵³ Classical literature – like fairy tales, biblical narratives, and myths – has been received differently and used intertextually throughout the Western literary canon. As a revision of Vergil's epic poem *The Aeneid*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008) can be understood as participating in a tradition of classical reception. An example of classical reception and transmission, Le Guin's novel is an interesting text for reception theorists who analyze the varying intake and output of set, classical material in relationship to historical and sociological considerations. However, Le Guin's textual strategy of revision problematizes a straightforward reading. Le Guin's novel, like Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, tells the other side of the story; Le Guin writes of Aeneas's journey to Latium, the war in Latium, his marriage, and the establishment of Lavinium through the voice of Lavinia.

⁶⁵³ I recognize that Homer's *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid* are both considered classical literature as well as mythic. I have chosen to keep them separate because Atwood and Le Guin approach and appropriate these two epic poems differently. Atwood approaches Homer's text and the Homeric tradition as a myth. In her introduction to *The Penelopiad* she writes, ‘Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, and also local [...]. I have drawn on material other than *The Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her’ (xiv). As discussed in the previous chapter, Atwood uses myth in a Barthesian fashion. Atwood takes up the myth of Penelope as faithful wife and challenges Homeric representations. Le Guin, on the other hand, approaches *Lavinia* as a translation of Vergil's classical piece, and her appropriation is not combative. In her afterword to *Lavinia*, Le Guin writes, ‘This story is in no way an attempt to change or complete the story of Aeneas. It is a meditative interpretation suggested by a minor character in his story—the unfolding of a hint. [...] My desire was to follow Vergil, not to improve or reprove him’ (274, 275).

In contrast to Roberts and Atwood, Le Guin does not employ satire or parody in her text and does not create a tone of antagonism. This lack of perceived antagonism has led critics such as T.S. Miller to suggest that the novel is not a feminist revision at all. T.S. Miller argues that Le Guin's novel cannot be categorized with the 'recent rash of revisionist retellings,' namely, the Canongate series and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* specifically.⁶⁵⁴ Le Guin, for Miller, is not subverting a patriarchal myth like Atwood, but is 'up to something else.'⁶⁵⁵ For Miller, that 'something else' is an extension rather than a critique of the *Aeneid*. Le Guin's novel is not a new myth concerning Lavinia but an extension of Vergil's tale. Miller summarizes:

Not so much held captive but captivated by Vergil, Le Guin and her avatar in Lavinia seem too much in awe of the poet's accomplishment to assault the foundations of his epic, yet they recognize its limitations, gaps, silence. [...] These very silences have called out to Le Guin, who submits her meditative retelling as part of a process of working toward that whole truth [of the *Aeneid*].⁶⁵⁶

For Miller, then, Le Guin furthers traditional readings of Vergil without questioning or 'assault'-ing his work. Thus, by functioning within Vergil's parameters, her novel does not challenge male authorship and characterization. Overall, Miller reads Le Guin as having a fundamental 'reliance on Vergil for being and meaning.'⁶⁵⁷ In this way, Miller sees Le Guin in anti-feminist terms, captivated by the paternal Vergil.

Certainly, Le Guin is not antagonistic toward Vergil. Indeed, she discusses her novel as a translation of Vergil, writing:

[Vergil's] poetry is so profoundly musical, its beauty is so intrinsic to the sound and order of words, that it is essentially

⁶⁵⁴ Miller, 29. Miller seems to be referring to the Canongate Series.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

untranslatable. Even Dryden, even FitzGerald couldn't capture the magic. But a translator's yearning to identify with the text cannot be repressed. This is what urged me to take some scenes, some hints, some foreshadowings from the epic and make them into a novel – a translation into a different *form* – partial, marginal, but in intent at least, faithful.⁶⁵⁸

Le Guin acknowledges Vergil as 'one of the great poets of the world,' a 'trustworthy man to follow.'⁶⁵⁹ Yet she simultaneously identifies there were elements of the epic poem left unrealized. These unrealized elements, namely the role of Lavinia, are what Le Guin investigates in her novel.

Despite her appreciation of Vergil, Le Guin writes a revision of his poem that still interrogates the ideological underpinnings of the epic poem. In "'Our Debt to Greece and Rome": Canon, Class and Ideology,' Seth Schein explores the contingent nature of the 'classical' and its ideological underpinnings. Schein understands the 'classical' to be a figurative construct that participates in socio-political enterprise.⁶⁶⁰ For Schein, 'The power of the 'classical' does not spring, as is usually thought, from its relation to a real or imagined past, but from its relation to current social, political, and moral values that it helps to legitimate. In other words, the 'classical' is ideological.'⁶⁶¹ Classic, in this sense, is neither timeless nor a-historical; rather, it is contingent upon historical circumstances and cultural values. Schein argues, 'Since antiquity, the discourse of the 'classical' has functioned [...] to legitimate a social order and a set of institutions, beliefs, and values that are commonly associated with western civilization and 'our' western cultural heritage.'⁶⁶² Schein, then, warns that when classical texts are

⁶⁵⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Afterword,' *Lavinia* (2008) (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), 273.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 273, 274.

⁶⁶⁰ Seth Schein, "'Our Debt to Greece and Rome": Canon, Class and Ideology' in *A Companion to Classical Reception* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 78.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 75.

read in relation to each other, they become ‘mystified as timeless classics’ which ‘lose their critical edge, and become mere affirmations of a supposed cultural heritage.’⁶⁶³ He stresses the importance of observing how classics were composed and received, which cultural ideologies were embedded in the text, and what precisely is being translated in contemporary literature. Thus, Vergil, as well as Homer, should be studied with respect to their historical moments of composition. While a straight-forward reading of *Lavinia* may seem to not be subversive, a close-reading of Le Guin’s key revisions begin to expose Le Guin’s criticisms. By reading Vergil in relationship to Augustus and the politics of ancient Rome, readers can better understand the ideological underpinnings of the text and Le Guin’s critical engagement with the text.

In this chapter I argue that Le Guin’s novel is not simply retelling Vergil’s story in a non-critical way; rather, *Lavinia* is a feminist revision of her source text in which she actively subverts key elements of *Aeneid*, including the notion of the monomyth – the narrative of the hero and heroic quest. Instead of focusing on the hero and his quest, Le Guin writes the story of Lavinia in ancient Latium, evoking a rural scene of a numinal religion within the context of Vergil’s poem. In contrast to Vergil’s employment of anthropomorphized gods, the numen – the divine in ancient, rural Rome⁶⁶⁴ – influence Le Guin’s characters, informing the concept of duty (*fas*). I will explore the authorship and historical context of Le Guin’s source text as well as analyse the key symbol of the shield and implementation of the heroic quest narrative. I will then discuss the role of the hero, heroine and female hero and unpack the ways in which Le

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁶⁴ Le Guin discusses the religion of ancient Rome in contrast to Greek gods and Christianity. In the afterward to the novel, Le Guin writes, ‘I found my characters following the sacred domestic practices of that profoundly religious people the Romans. Such ways of worship were centuries old in Vergil’s day, and continued to exist in country places all through the Republic and the Empire, until the multiplication of the imported deities and Christian intolerance finally suppressed them. ‘Pagan,’ meaning a worshipper of the gods, is a Christian usage; originally, pagans were simply the people who lived on the pagus, the Roman farm: hayseeds. Such country folk clung longest to the old, local, earth-deep religion’ (276). The immanence of the divine of the numen is felt in profound contrast to the anthropomorphized gods.

Guin resists these categories for her main characters by introducing the concept of duty. I will simultaneously analyse other instances of revision in the Le Guin corpus and use them to interpret key revisions of the *Aeneid*, namely her inclusion of the numinal as well as characterization of Aeneas and Lavinia. By observing these critical revisions, I argue that Le Guin effectively subverts the monomyth and asserts an alternative epistemology based not on male privilege but built around the numinal.

The *Aeneid* was written in the first century BC by Publius Vergilius Maro, more commonly known as ‘Vergil,’⁶⁶⁵ for the ruler of the Roman world, Augustus.⁶⁶⁶ The epic poem concerns the founding of the Roman Empire, though set in ancient, Homeric times just after the Trojan War.⁶⁶⁷ In the *Iliad*, Aeneas is depicted as a strong, reliable warrior. As Robert Graves writes, ‘Aeneas proved a skilled fighter and even Achilles did not disparage him: for if Hector was the hand of the Trojans, Aeneas was their soul.’⁶⁶⁸ His divine ancestry was continually emphasized and his mother’s loyalty provided him with aid throughout the Trojan War. After the Trojan War, Aeneas’s journey as a hero truly begins. He is separated from his first wife and city and embarks on an adventure, which culminates in arrival in Latium, marrying Lavinia, and becoming the forefather of Rome.

The ‘germ’ for the idea of Aeneas being saved from the Trojans’ fate of destruction to found another city can be found in the *Iliad*.⁶⁶⁹ Certainly characters as well as plot structures were extracted from the *Iliad*. Not only does *Aeneid* reflect the

⁶⁶⁵ A note about spelling; while both ‘Virgil’ and ‘Vergil’ are acceptable spellings for the author, Le Guin uses ‘Vergil’ in her commentary on the novel. Therefore, I have decided to use this spelling throughout the chapter.

⁶⁶⁶ Robert Fitzgerald, ‘Postscript,’ *Aeneid*. Vintage Classics Series. (Trans) Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 411.

⁶⁶⁷ Duncan F. Kennedy, ‘Vergilian Epic’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Vergil* Ed Charles Martindale (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 146.

⁶⁶⁸ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (1955) The Complete and Definitive Edition (London: Penguin, 2011), 660.

⁶⁶⁹ Fitzgerald, 404.

story lines in Homer's work but they also recall events more contemporary to Vergil's readers. As Robert Fitzgerald notes in the afterword of his translation of the *Aeneid*:

[Vergil] re-created a Homeric hero in the Homeric age; he also deliberately echoed Homer in many details of the narrative, in many conversations and features of style. But his purpose was totally un-Homeric and drastically original: to enfold in the mythical action of *The Aeneid* foreshadowings and *direct foretellings of Roman history*, more than a thousand years of it between Aeneas and his own time. Most of all, the apparent Homeric pastiche, the ancient story, was to refer at times explicitly but more often by analogy to the latter centuries of that history, to the *immediate past and present*, and to such hopes and fears for the future as the record might suggest.⁶⁷⁰

Fitzgerald identifies the Homeric parallels and divergences as a way to investigate Vergil's text. Fitzgerald's reflection emphasizes a doubling dynamic in Vergil's piece: the first doubling dynamic is of the Homeric narrative. By including the Homeric narrative as a double within the *Aeneid*, Vergil's text emphasizes the element of the quest. The second doubling dynamic is of Augustus's authority – tracing descendants to the founding of Rome and its cultural heritage through narrative and rationalizing the recent past of Augustus's violent rule. For example, Aeneas's involvement with and bitter parting from African Dido anticipates the Punic Wars of the third and second centuries BC, while the war between the Trojans and Latins not only recalls the Trojan war, but also evokes Rome's civil wars in the first century BC.⁶⁷¹ Just as Augustus himself, who created the role of the principate, asks for neither kingship nor dictatorship, Aeneas asks for 'no kingdom' upon his entrance into Latium (XII, 256).⁶⁷²

⁶⁷⁰ Fitzgerald, 405; emphasis added.

⁶⁷¹ James E.G. Zetzel, 'Rome and its Traditions' in *The Cambridge Companion to Vergil*, (ed) Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 189. Also see, Fitzgerald, 406 and Tarrant, 179.

⁶⁷² Fitzgerald, 414-15. It is interesting to note that R.J. Tarrant goes as far as to read the *Aeneid* as a reflection upon the creation of the principate (177). Tarrant writes, 'Vergil can be said to have fashioned a literary myth to support the political myth of the principate' (178).

Additionally, the future empire is present in the text as prophecy – Jupiter’s explanations to Venus in the heavens, Anchises’s message to Aeneas in the Underworld, the shield presented to Aeneas on the land of future Rome. The shield – with this doubling dynamic – is a key symbol in the *Aeneid*. Converging the literary intertext and historical context of both narratives, the shield is a powerful image of authority and heroism. In *Lavinia*, Le Guin effectively alters the significance of the shield as a symbol, which will be discussed below. For now, it is crucial to recognize the connections between authority and the heroic quest, which are both emblemized on the shield.

While Vergil depicts a heroic past for the founding of the Roman Empire, the story is also concerned with the more immediate past and contemporary Rome. Indeed, it is the future which validates Aeneas’s decisions. As James E.G. Zetzel states, ‘Even though the action of the *Aeneid* ends with Aeneas’ killing of Turnus, *it is Rome and its destiny* that provide the retrospective justification for Aeneas’ actions and sufferings.’⁶⁷³ Ultimately, the Roman Empire is the teleological impetus for Vergil’s *Aeneid*. This is emblemized by Aeneas’s shield. Firstly, it recalls the shield of Achilles in Homer’s text, thus linking the narrative to this tradition. Yet, the divinely constructed images are entirely different. Aeneas’s shield contains an image of Augustus, both depicting and symbolizing his rule. For, it is the future, unknown and glorious city that is prophetically engraved on the metal surface. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles’ shield is a collage of images ranging from constellations in the sky, a ploughing of a field, reaping a harvest, and two cities: one peaceful the other in arms.⁶⁷⁴ It is a ‘large and powerful shield, adorned all over, finished with a bright triple rim of gleaming metal, and fitted with a silver baldric.’⁶⁷⁵ The shield is described in detail, as are the images that

⁶⁷³ Zetzel, 189; emphasis added.

⁶⁷⁴ Homer, *The Iliad* (trans) E.V. Rieu (1950) Penguin Classic (New York: Penguin, 1977), 349-53.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

Hephaestus creates. Achilles receives the gift, proclaiming, ‘this is indeed the workmanship we might expect from Heaven, No mortal could have made it. I will go to battle in it now.’⁶⁷⁶ Homer’s description, however, does not interpret the imagery of the shield for his readers. Instead, he depicts varying responses to the armour. In ‘Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight,’ Stephen Scully analyses these different reactions to the great armour within the epic poem. First, Scully identifies an early response to the shield by the Myrmidons and Trojans. For both groups the glare of the great armour is an ‘awful sight’ which Scully identifies linguistically parallels to the ‘severed head of the Gorgon’ on Athene’s aegis.⁶⁷⁷ This response of terror and fear is experienced only by these human agents. As a demi-god, Achilles reacts to his new gift of armour differently: first with anger then delight. For Scully, Achilles’ anger is linked with his desire for revenge.⁶⁷⁸ Yet anger gives way to delight. The pleasure Achilles experience is derived from viewing the shield as a whole.⁶⁷⁹ Hephaistos constructs the shield as he would the universe: starting with the earth, heaven and sea followed by sun, moon, and stars:⁶⁸⁰

The shield consisted of five layers, and he decorated the face of it with a number of designs, executed with consummate skill and representing, first of all, Earth, Sky, and Sea, the indefatigable Sun, the Moon at the full, and all the Constellations with which the heavens are crowned [...]⁶⁸¹

After this, his attention moves to human life and activity – weddings and banquets, litigants and armies.⁶⁸² Made by a god, the shield also projects the view of the gods, a

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁶⁷⁷ Stephen Scully, ‘Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight,’ *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003): 32.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 40; *Iliad* XVIII, 484-89. I think it’s interesting how this creation process parallels the Judeo-Christian Creation story.

⁶⁸¹ Homer, *Iliad*, 349.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 350.

vision of human life as small and transient. With ‘Olympian distance,’ Achilles takes delight in the shield and acknowledges the ‘sweetness’ of the Fall of Troy and war in general as an ‘affirmation [...] of the gods’ freedom from change, destruction, and death.’⁶⁸³ The gods of Homer’s text are active agents in the events of humans, yet view the human events as temporally bound, fleeting. The importance and power of the gods as persons is emphasized by their agency.

Aeneas’s shield, also a gift from a deity, is interpreted by Vergil as the sign of the prosperity of future Rome. It is the hero who is unable to read the shield. Vergil’s initial audience will recognize Augustus and other, seemingly incongruous, images on the shield. S.J. Harrison suggests that the key connection between the varied, individual scenes on the shield is survival. Harrison notes that the image ‘represents an escape from the greatest danger of all: had the exposed Romulus and Remus suffered the intended infanticide and not been found and suckled by the she-wolf, Rome would never have been founded in the first place.’⁶⁸⁴ This is the first image described on the shield and undergirds the Empire that follows. Indeed, one of the first images Aeneas sees is Romulus being nursed by the she-wolf. The image of the suckling twins is relevant to survival and significance of the role of she-wolf in the mythology and history of the Romans.

Like Aeneas’s shield, the interpretation of events in the text seems conditional if not impossible.⁶⁸⁵ Indeed, Vergil’s political stance can be interpreted ambiguously at best. Early interpretations of the political significance of Vergil’s *Aeneid* are as obscure as the shield it describes. Charles Martindale outlines some of these varied readings of

⁶⁸³ Scully, 41, 43.

⁶⁸⁴ S.J. Harrison, ‘The Survival and Supremacy of Rome: The Unity of the Shield of Aeneas,’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 71.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

Vergil's text as dependent upon the historical context of its reception.⁶⁸⁶ According to Martindale, seventeenth century readers understood the *Aeneid* as celebrating the 'merits of royalism and one-man rule.'⁶⁸⁷ This interpretation was challenged after the English Revolution: those following Whiggism and its 'commitment to British liberty' read the *Aeneid* as the work of a poet at the service of a 'tyrant and autocrat.'⁶⁸⁸ The politics of Vergil's audience directly informed their reading.

Though interpretive reception of the epic poem varies, Vergil's *Aeneid* unquestionably influenced subsequent texts and was canonized. As Tarrant writes, the *Aeneid* is a "“master poem”" containing the seeds of an infinite number of other poems.'⁶⁸⁹ Indeed, the stories within the *Aeneid* were the source of multiple tellings. According to Martindale, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is 'suffused with Vergilian reminiscence, often paraded rather than concealed.'⁶⁹⁰ Also, Ovid's *Heroides* uses the love plot of Dido and Aeneas as the source for his poem of lament in epistolary form from Dido to Aeneas. In Books XIII and XIV of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes Aeneas's exploits in the Trojan War as well as his journey after: staying in Africa, sailing to Sicily, and arriving on the shores of Latium, and meeting King Latinus who offers his daughter in marriage.

Focused on the Roman Empire, Vergil's text quickly entered the school curriculum and occupied the place of a 'dominant cultural authority.'⁶⁹¹ The *Aeneid*'s canonical status was established during Vergil's own lifetime and became, according to Charles Martindale, part of the 'furniture of the minds of educated Romans.'⁶⁹² While

⁶⁸⁶ Charles Martindale, 10.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁸⁹ Tarrant, 60.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁹² Martindale, 1.

current readers may never know the full extent to which Vergil genuinely supported the head of the empire, the *Aeneid* ultimately occupies a space within the dominant culture as at least partially, albeit ambiguously, supportive of Augustus. With its inclusion into the dominant culture, the *Aeneid* necessarily adheres to various ideological assumptions of the community. Ideological assumptions include male authority (women cannot rule without a man), socio-economic hierarchy (there are necessarily those who will inherit and those who will merely be farmers; those who row the boat and those who captain), the stories worth telling are those of the heroic quest (readers do not learn of domestic life or political matters other than what were central to the Roman empire). In 'Myth and Gender Systems,' Doherty discusses the gender system of a culture at work in mythology, a nexus of both symbols and assumptions about gender, which resonate with contemporary expectations.⁶⁹³ What is significant within the ideology of first century BC Rome is that the territory is ruled properly by the right ruler, a male ruler who will assert his authority to govern with the wealth to support his power. The work of Hardwick and Schein enables current readers to reflect on the ideological underpinnings of the *Aeneid* as a classical work and its current legacy.

The plot of Vergil's epic is a heroic quest, comprised of the events of Aeneas's participation in the Trojan War, his travels across the sea, and arrival in Latium. Joseph Campbell outlines the 'standard path' of the hero as 'separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.'⁶⁹⁴ The heroic quest, or monomyth, moves away from 'the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his

⁶⁹³ Lillian E Doherty, 'Myth and Gender Systems' in *Gender and the Interpretation s of Classical Myth* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 33.

⁶⁹⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Face* 1949 (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 30.

fellow man.’⁶⁹⁵ Aeneas’s journey, as with the journey of many heroes, includes a descent to the underworld. For Robert Graves, Aeneas’s underworld journey echoes Odysseus’s descent, as both were characterized by seeking a consultation with the dead for guidance. The phase of the journey is crucial for Aeneas in Vergil’s text as it provides him with a vision of his purpose. Campbell writes:

Aeneas went down into the underworld, crossed the dreadful river of the dead, threw a sop to the three-headed watchdog Cerberus, and conversed, at last, with the shade of his dead father. All things were to unfold for him: the destiny of souls, the destiny of Rome, which he was about to found [...]. He returned through the ivory gate to his work in the world.⁶⁹⁶

Eventually, Aeneas does arrive at Latium, battles Turnus, and establishes Lavinium – the city with citizens from Troy and Latium. Aeneas fulfils the call of his father: ‘you, Roman, must remember that you guide the nations by your authority, for this is to be your skill, to graft tradition onto peace, to shew mercy to the conquered, and to wage war until the haughty are brought low.’⁶⁹⁷ At the end of Vergil’s epic, Aeneas is successful. Though the text concludes with Turnus’s death, Roman readers are assured of Aeneas’s continued success as hero.

The role of the hero, which Aeneas successfully fulfils, is characterized by separation from a former community. As Coline Covington identifies, the hero’s story is ‘one of individuation, a striving towards self-determination, and the struggle to know the world, to become conscious.’⁶⁹⁸ His movement is one of separation and differentiation.⁶⁹⁹ The heroine, conversely, is characterized by waiting and sacrifice.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁶⁹⁷ Vergil, *The Aeneid*, (trans) W.F. Jackson Knight (1956), Penguin Classics (Hammondsworth, 1959), 173.

⁶⁹⁸ Coline Covington, ‘In Search of the Heroine,’ *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (1989): 244.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

She is ‘compliant and passive,’ her only actions being those of self-defence.⁷⁰⁰ The heroine stays in the community that the hero leaves behind.

Covington uses the Grimm tale of ‘The Handless Maiden’ as a template for exploring the heroine archetype, writing, ‘The king wanders while the queen rests – it is this juxtaposition that epitomises the dynamic relation between the hero and heroine.’⁷⁰¹ Often the heroine is a partner to the hero, such as Penelope who waits and defends herself from the suitors by weaving. The waiting period for the heroine is a time of ‘inactivity and incubation, in which inner processes are at work.’⁷⁰² Thus, the heroine occupies the space of the unconscious while the hero occupies the space of the conscious. Female characters such as Clytemnestra and Amata fail as heroines precisely because they do not wait: Clytemnestra taking a lover during her husband’s absence and Amata opposing both Aeneas and King Latinus by privileging Turnus. The heroine as counterpart to the hero necessarily has a trajectory of reflection and waiting rather than questing. Although Covington uses the archetypes of the hero and heroine to understand behavioural patterns and moves away from literature, her work is still useful for literary critics. Her recognition of key characteristics of the hero and heroine offer readers templates for exploring literary texts.

Covington also briefly mentions a third category: the female hero. The female hero is ‘essentially the woman warrior whose battles take place within the male world.’⁷⁰³ Feminist critics might be inclined to discuss her as a masculinized figure. Instead of being characterized by sacrifice and passivity, she fights in battles. Camilla is the quintessential female hero – a warrior virgin with her bow and arrow. However, the female hero ceases somehow to be seen as female. As Covington states, ‘She might as

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 243.

well be a hero.’⁷⁰⁴ Covington implies that the active character is normalized as male and leaves unexplored the assumptions of gender. She fails to question the characterization of the heroine – opposite of the active male hero – as necessarily passive. She fails to resolve tensions of what a female hero could be.

This canonical epic poem depicting the heroism of Aeneas is revisioned by Le Guin. In an interview with Lev Grossman, Le Guin reveals the impetus for writing *Lavinia*: she was reading the *Aeneid* in Latin and found Lavinia had no voice:

Just reading the *Aeneid*, and getting fascinated with the whole poem, but then finding this character that has no voice, and kind of wondering a little bit why Vergil, who’s good with women – look at Dido, and so on – why he didn’t do anything with her. And kind of realizing, it just wouldn’t fit in the structure of the poem. He couldn’t. He had to do the battles. But there she is, there’s a person who could be a character, obviously, and could be a strong one. She’s the mother of Rome.⁷⁰⁵

While Le Guin’s text gives voice to a previously speechless female character, she does not read Lavinia’s silence in the source text as malicious exclusion by Vergil in the same way that Margaret Atwood seems to read Homer. Le Guin, conversely, reads Vergil as simply not having room for another love story. Le Guin takes up her pen with a central character in mind – Lavinia, the mother of the Roman Empire. Le Guin retains the plot elements as well as the setting and main characters of Vergil’s *Aeneid*. The Trojans arrive at the River Tiber; there is a war between the Trojans and Latins; Aeneas’s goes up river to get help from Evander; Turnus dies by the hand of Aeneas; Lavinia marries Aeneas and is the namesake of their first town, Lavinium.

The first key revision is the employment of an overt narrator, Lavinia. The shift in narrator not only prioritizes Lavinia’s voice, but affects focus. The content of the

⁷⁰⁴ Covington, 243.

⁷⁰⁵ Le Guin, Ursula K. Interview with Lev Grossman. *Nerd World* 11 May 2009. 25 February 2011 <<http://nerdworld.blogs.time.com/2009/05/11/an-interview-with-ursula-k-le-guin/>>

novel, rather than being structured by Aeneas's battles and travels, contains Lavinia's childhood, her relationship with her parents, her relationship with the dying poet Vergil, and concludes with her non-death (a point to which I will return).

The second key revision is introducing Vergil in the story as a character. He is an apparition who appears to Lavinia in the sacred forest of Albunea. His wraith tells Lavinia of his poem: she listens to his lyrical telling, asking questions, learning about the past of Aeneas and about her future. Throughout the novel, Lavinia affectionately refers to Vergil as her poet. By having Vergil appear as a wraith, Le Guin suggests that Vergil may have finished the *Aeneid* differently had he the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, in having Vergil meet with Lavinia in Albunea, the female protagonist gains special knowledge of her circumstances and is linked with the numinal.

The knowledge that Lavinia gains from their conversations is the third major revision. She knows Aeneas by sight long before they are introduced. Also she is able to suggest things – like where to build Lavinium and the location of future Rome. Visiting the Etruscans and seeing the places she used to play with Pallas as a child, Lavinia narrates:

It was very sad to see the little settlement grown poorer, the houses settling into the mud of the riverbank, the women and children looking thin and weary. I looked around in wonder, for this was the place where my poet had said the great city of our descendants was to be. Among the thickets up on those rough hills were to stand the shining palaces and altars pictured on the shield; great crowds, great rulers were to walk on the marble pavement, here, between the thatched huts and the wolf's deserted cave, where a few lean cattle wandered seeking forage.⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁶ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 198.

Because of her conversations with Vergil, Lavinia knows the site of future Rome, is able to read Aeneas's shield. Aeneas respects her ability, acknowledging his lack of ability, stating 'You know how to read it, [...] I never have.'⁷⁰⁷

Le Guin's Lavinia is able to read the key symbol of the source text. Lavinia's ability to read the shield makes her like Achilles, associating her with the divine. Le Guin maintains the doubling dynamic of literary context and historical connection. She references Augustus 'the great august one'⁷⁰⁸ as the descendant of Aeneas. She also incorporates the literary context of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, having Vergil tell Lavinia of the Trojan War as well as Aeneas's journey to Latium.⁷⁰⁹ The shield's grandeur is not diminished in Le Guin's retelling, nor is Aeneas. Lavinia narrates, 'I have seen Aeneas war the armour several times [...] he shines as the sea glances and dazzles under the sun. There is in all the western world no work so beautiful as that shield.'⁷¹⁰ However, the shield's significance rests with Lavinia rather than Aeneas. The exclusive knowledge it requires and power which it symbolizes is dislodged from the narrative of the heroic quest and relocated to the girl 'ripe for a husband'⁷¹¹ barely mentioned in the source text.

Interestingly, Lavinia does not share her special knowledge, not with Aeneas nor with his son. At one point, Lavinia considers telling Ascanius her knowledge in hope to change his behaviour, but changes her mind, recognizing that Ascanius looked down on all things Latin, 'including our oracles and sacred places; and I had heard him say that the best thing about the Greeks was that they knew how to keep women in their place. Though I told myself it was just a boy talking, and believed Ascanius had a good heart under all his bluffing and sulking, still I could not trust him with my knowledge.'⁷¹²

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 25.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-47.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁷¹¹ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 176.

⁷¹² Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 203.

Reflecting on his character, Lavinia realizes she cannot trust Ascanius. Instead, she keeps the knowledge to herself – as private and sacred as Albunea. Just as she fulfils her sacred duty of tending the hearth, Lavinia receives and tends to the knowledge she received from Vergil with care.

Yet Lavinia's knowledge extends beyond the character of Vergil. She challenges Vergil's notions of her as a character as well as his view of the supernatural. The first occasion Lavinia challenges the knowledge of an authority figure is when her father does not understand his wife's madness. Lavinia is aware that Amata has gone mad with grief. Having lost two sons as infants, Amata clings to the idea of Turnus, a close relative, becoming king. In her desire for Turnus to rule, Amata resists Latinus's acceptance of Aeneas as future king and Lavinia's betrothed. Lavinia's reflection on her father's disbelief is a surgical incision to the underpinning ideological assumptions of male possession of knowledge. Le Guin's Lavinia narrates:

When the poet sang me the fall of Troy, his story told of the king's daughter Cassandra, who foresaw what would happen and tried to prevent the Trojans from letting the great horse into the city, but no one would listen to her: it was a curse laid on her, to see the truth and say it and not be heard. It is a curse laid on women more often than on men. Men want the truth to be theirs, their discovery and property.⁷¹³

In observing her father's inability to see her mother's madness, Lavinia becomes aware of the danger of women's speech and access to knowledge. While Lavinia is thinking specifically of her father's inability to listen to her regarding her mother's madness, the concept of women not being heard and of a closely guarded patriarchal ideology as present and exclusive is a prominent theme in the text. Instead of speaking, Lavinia

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

meditates on Vergil's words to herself. In these instances, Lavinia keeps the knowledge close – a silent Cassandra – and tends it like the Regia hearth.

Not only does Lavinia's knowledge exceed Vergil, but also Vergil's knowledge is occasionally imprecise. Upon their first meeting, Vergil is surprised by Lavinia's appearance and behaviour, later lamenting what he did not know about her: 'Perhaps I did not do you justice, Lavinia.'⁷¹⁴ His first inclination upon meeting her is to rewrite the poem. Lavinia narrates Vergil's response: "“She came to Albuea by herself,” he said, speaking into the darkness, “and knew the sacred names of the river, and had no wish to be married. And I knew nothing of all that! I never looked at her. I had to tell what the men were doing . . . Perhaps I can – ” But he broke off, and presently said, “No. No chance of that.””⁷¹⁵ At their second meeting, Lavinia thinks Vergil is omniscient:

‘You know everything, don’t you?’

‘No, I know very little. And what I thought I knew of you –
what little I thought of at all – was stupid, conventional,
unimagined. I thought you were a blonde!’⁷¹⁶

Vergil recognizes and laments the limits of his knowledge, exclaiming, ‘O Lavinia [...] you are worth ten Camillas. And I never saw it.’⁷¹⁷ By evoking Vergil's surprise, Le Guin shifts Vergil's role from implied omniscient narrator to character with limited knowledge.

Vergil's knowledge is later challenged by Lavinia, specifically regarding the portrayal of the supernatural. When Vergil tells Lavinia about her future husband and the trouble Juno stirred among the women after Anchises's death, Lavinia became confused by Vergil's personification of Juno. Le Guin writes:

‘What do you mean, Juno got into them?’

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

‘She hated Aeneas. She was always against him.’ He saw that I was puzzled.

I pondered this. A woman has her Juno, just as a man has his Genius; they are names for the sacred power, the divine spark we each of us have in us. My Juno can’t ‘get into’ me, it is already my deepest self. The poet was speaking of Juno as if it were a person, a woman, with likes and dislikes: a jealous woman.

The world is sacred, of course it is full of gods, numina, great powers and presences. We give some of them names. [...] But they don’t love and hate, they aren’t for or against. They accept the worship due them, which augments their power, through which we live.⁷¹⁸

After more debate, Vergil consoles Lavinia:

‘Great Homer of Greece says the god lights the fire. Young Lavinia of Italy says the fire is the god. This is Italian ground, Latin ground. You and Lucretius have it right. Offer praise, ask for blessing, and pay no attention to the foreign myths. They’re only literature . . . So, never mind about Juno. The Trojan women were furious at not having been consulted, and determined to stay in Sicily. And so they set fire to the ships.’

That I could understand well enough. I listened.⁷¹⁹

While gods were present as characters within Vergil’s text – both the *Aeneid* and the epic poem as spoken by the character of Vergil to Lavinia in the forest – they are decentralized and even replaced by numinal religion in Le Guin’s text. The world Le Guin creates is not inhabited by anthropomorphized gods who function as characters in the story. Rather, *Lavinia* is endowed with a ‘numinal quality’ within which the supernatural is embedded within the natural.⁷²⁰ Adam Roberts writes, ‘Lavinia’s world

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷²⁰ Adam Roberts, ‘*Lavinia* by Ursula K. Le Guin’ *Strange Horizons* 7 January 2009. 25 February 2011 <http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2009/01/lavinia_by_ursu-comments.shtml>

is interpenetrated with the supernatural.⁷²¹ Consequently, ‘The magic feels completely natural, and [...] the natural world becomes magical.’⁷²² Similarly Charlotte Higgins comments, ‘Le Guin does not marshal, as does Vergil, the gods as active characters; instead she give her characters a rough, homely religion that honours the spirits of the hearth and hill.’⁷²³ The absence of anthropomorphic gods as characters in *Lavinia* is a fundamental contrast from Vergil.

At first glance, Le Guin’s lack of anthropomorphized gods can be seen as simply a modernization of deities for a contemporary audience. However, elaborate descriptions of ritual and omens and Lavinia’s role in relation to them as present in the novel require a more thoughtful examination. The rituals are performed not only by King Latinus but by Lavinia as well. Indeed, as the daughter of the king, Lavinia has the crucial role of collecting, cleaning, and distributing the sacred salt before the hearth. The omens of bees and fire concern not only war, but the arrival of Aeneas as a husband and Lavinia’s life as a wife. The battle scenes – so prevalent and elaborately described in *Aeneid* – reside in Le Guin’s text as something external from Lavinia and the Regia. She hears of the battle from the wounded she tends in the Regia; she sees the battle only from the roof. Learning of the battles second hand and from afar is a common motif for female characters. Atwood’s Penelope and Helen observe the competition for Penelope’s hand in marriage from the house, recognizing Odysseus by his short legs. Helen of Troy, likewise, is often depicted as viewing the battles at a distance. Yet Lavinia’s observations occur while she is performing the sacred duties – tending to the wounded and maintaining the household.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*

⁷²² *Ibid.*

⁷²³ Charlotte Higgins, ‘The Princess with Flaming Hair’ Review, *The Guardian* 23 May 2009. 25 February 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/23/lavinia-ursula-le-guin-review>>

Lavinia also directly challenges Vergil regarding the supernatural, specifically when discussing the underworld. Vergil describes the underworld of the *Aeneid*, stating, ‘It is a terrible place. On the far said of the dark river are marshy plains, where you hear crying – little, weak, wailing cries, from the ground, everywhere, underfoot. They are the souls of babies who died at birth or in the cradle, died before they lived. They lie there on the mud, in the reeds, in the dark, wailing. And no one comes.’⁷²⁴ Vergil’s description in Le Guin’s novel restates Homer’s epic. W.F. Jackson Knight’s translates, ‘Aeneas dashed to reach the cave-entrance and swiftly escaped clear of the bank and the waves which allowed no return. Immediately cries were heard. These were the loud wailing of infant souls weeping at the very entrance-way; never had they had their share of life’s sweetness, for the dark day had stolen them from their mother’s breasts and plunged them to a death before their time.’⁷²⁵ This gruesome depiction is challenged in Le Guin’s telling through the response of Lavinia who contests:

‘You’re not thinking straight about the babies,’ I said. ‘Why would they be punished for not having lived? How could their souls be there before they had time to grow souls? [...] If you invented that marsh full of miserable dead crying babies, it was a misinvention. It was wrong.’

I was extremely angry. I used the second most powerful word I know, wrong, *nefas*, against the order of things, unspeakable, unsacred. There will be many words for it, but that was the one I knew. It is only the shadow, the opposite, the undoing, of the great word *fas*, the right. What one must do.⁷²⁶

Le Guin’s use of the terms *fas* and *nefas* resonate with the concept of duty: doing what is right, what one must. This duty is integrated into the numen. As Richard D. Erlich describes, Latin worship in *Lavinia* is directed ‘to the older powers of the earth and sky

⁷²⁴ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 61.

⁷²⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 160.

⁷²⁶ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 61-62.

and household, immanent in the world and woven inextricably into everyday life. We get an idea of what in this world it is right to do.⁷²⁷ He goes on to unpack a word which recurs in literature by and about Le Guin, the word ‘must,’ tracing Le Guin’s use of it in other literature including *The Farthest Shore* and *City of Illusions* and linking it with the Dao. Le Guin’s inclusion of the *fas* functions to confront and subvert the supernatural figures presented anthropomorphically in Vergil’s *Aeneid*. By inserting the concepts of *fas* and *nefas* into the text, Le Guin exposes epistemological incongruities between the glorified heroic violence of the source text and the earthy, rustic Latians who dutifully honour the numen.

It is through the numinous that Lavinia views the world and through which her actions can be understood. In the *Aeneid*, Lavinia is envisaged as dutiful and submissive. Even characters in *Lavinia* see the female protagonist as blindly submissive. After her mother, Amata, opens the War Gate, Lavinia requests to stay in a room in the men’s quarters. Lavinia narrates:

Those were strange days, when half my own house was foreign to me. I never entered the women’s quarters, my home for so long. I was entirely estranged from my mother, and on terms of embarrassment with women I’d known all my life. Most of them could not believe I was insisting on my betrothal to the foreign chief, the enemy, or could not understand why I did. Amata let them say that I was mindlessly, slavishly obedient to my father, and whisper that he was quite senile.⁷²⁸

Amata and the Latians cannot understand why Lavinia is insisting on her betrothal to the foreigner. They understand Lavinia’s behaviour as acquiescing to her father. Yet

⁷²⁷ Richard D. Erlich, ‘A Longish Note on Ursula L. Le Guin’s *Lavinia*,’ *Science Fiction Studies* 35.2 (2008): 350.

⁷²⁸ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 129.

Lavinia and the reader know that Lavinia is the one who encouraged her father to visit Albunea to receive the prophesy that his daughter will be married to a foreigner.

Likewise, Turnus does not view Lavinia as exercising agency. When he visited the house, he would barely speak to her; instead, he would engage her parents in discourse. For Lavinia, Albunea became an escape from Turnus and the other suitors. Lavinia narrates, ‘it was useful to me as my reason not to be always home, dressed in white, the meek garland sacrifice, while the suitors paraded through and drank their wine, and Turnus flattered my mother and laughed with my father and looked at me as the butcher looks at the cow!’⁷²⁹ Acknowledging her peripheral status and objectification, Lavinia seeks escape. Lavinia later reveals that she does not favour any suitor, including Turnus because he has no piety.⁷³⁰ She reflects that, had she been given to any other suitors rather than Aeneas, she would have felt insulted at being exchanged in a treaty.⁷³¹

When discussing suitors with Vergil, Lavinia asks, ‘Have you seen, when the young men have archery contexts, sometimes they catch a dove, and put a cord round her foot, and shinny up a high pole and tie her to the top, leaving just enough cord so she thinks she can fly? And then she is the target of their arrows.’⁷³² She laments the lack of freedom for women when they are married. If she were an archer, she would cut the string. Their discussion of arrows leads Vergil to tell Lavinia of Camilla. Yet, in marrying Aeneas, Lavinia understands herself as free. Lavinia narrates:

To hear myself promised as part of a treaty, exchanged like a cup of a piece of clothing, might seem as deep an insult as could be offered the human soul. [...] My liberty had been great, and so I had dreaded its end. So long as it could end only with Turnus or the other suitors, I

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 42.

had felt that insult, that bondage awaiting me, the only possible outcome. I had been the dove tied to the pole, flapping its silly wings as if it could fly, while the boys below shouted and pointed and shot at it till at last an arrow struck.

I felt nothing of that entrapment now, that helpless shame. [...] Things were going as they should go, and in going with them I was free. The string that tied me to the pole had been cut. For the first time I knew what it would be to fly, to take to my wings across the air, across the years to come, to go, to go on.⁷³³

Lavinia's freedom is described in terms of the 'should,' the right, the *fas*. Throughout the novel, Lavinia enacts *fas* – tending to the hearth, collecting the salt, performing the rituals. In this sense, Lavinia is a domestic Camilla, experiencing freedom of the cut string in her fulfilment of the prophesy.

The last key point of contention between Lavinia and Vergil that I will discuss in this chapter is the nature of war and the hero. Lavinia asks Vergil why there must be a war. He replies, 'Oh, Lavinia, what a woman's question that is! Because men are men.'⁷³⁴ He then tells her how the war will begin – with a boy killing a deer – and continues to enumerate the killings. He asks if she likes the poem. She says 'That might depend on how it ends.'⁷³⁵ He replies, 'With the triumph of the glorious hero over his enemy, of course. He will kill Turnus, lying wounded and helpless, just as he killed Mezentius.'⁷³⁶ Lavinia responds by asking:

'Who is the hero?'

'You know who the hero is.'

'He kills like a butcher. Why is he a hero?'

'Because he does what he has to do.'

'Why does he have to kill a helpless man?'

⁷³³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

‘Because that is how empires are founded.’⁷³⁷

Lavinia presses Vergil, despite knowing the answer, for she is dissatisfied with his explanation.

It is also through the numinous that Le Guin articulates Aeneas’s actions. After the war, Aeneas ‘dwelt’ on the ending of the war; it had ‘shaken and reshaped all his idea of who he was and what his duty was.’⁷³⁸ Aeneas understood the slaying of Turnus as a murder: ‘He had done *nefas*, unspeakable wrong.’⁷³⁹ Aeneas continues to grieve the bloodlust that overcomes him in battle. Indeed, Aeneas sees this savage fighting in battle as his ‘worst failing: the fury of bloodlust that overcomes him in battle, making him a mindless, indiscriminate slaughterer, “like a sheepdog gone mad among sheep,” he says.’⁷⁴⁰ Lavinia highlights the disparity between Aeneas’s perception and other Greek heroes, narrating, ‘Of course much of his reputation as a warrior rests on this battle madness. Men who faced him were terrified of him. And I cannot see how it differs from the courage he respects in his heroes, men he has told me of with such admiration – the Trojan Hector, the Greek Achilles. But to him it is unquestionably a vice, an abuse of skill, *nefas*.’⁷⁴¹ Aeneas’s struggle with the *fas* is in direct opposition to the Greek concept of the hero who is praised for acts of bravery on the battlefield. Through Lavinia’s criticism of the slaughter described by Vergil and Aeneas’s doubt of his own behaviour, Le Guin interrogates and supplants the assumptions of what makes a hero.

Aeneas tries to communicate this to his son Ascanius. In their discussion of manhood and virtue, Aeneas states he wishes that Ascanius and Silvius will learn ‘how

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 121-22.

to govern, not merely make war.⁷⁴² Yet, Aeneas dies before Ascanius is able to realize the truth of his father's piety and virtue in battle. Ultimately, Aeneas reads his slaying of Turnus as a failure, thus reinterpreting the source text. Because the poem was left unfinished, the end of Vergil's *Aeneid* – the slaying of Turnus – is ambiguous. Le Guin utilizes this ambiguity, asserting that Aeneas's desire for his son's behaviour and critiquing the Roman values of heroism.

Throughout the novel, Le Guin interrogates the characteristics of the hero without asserting a specific alternative. However, when considering Le Guin's previous revision of her *Earthsea* series, a subversion of the hero becomes possible. Eighteen years after publishing *The Furthest Shore* (1972), book three of the series, Le Guin returns to the Earthsea world as a revisionist. In *Tehanu* (1990), Le Guin recasts women's magic as not lesser than men's magic, but as feared by male magi and excluded from educational structures. Furthermore, the cause of the conflict in Earthsea is revealed as the lack of women's magic. Only when there is a reassertion of equality does the great conflict resolve. In writing the fourth book of the Earthsea series in a way that promotes equality, Le Guin participates in the practice of revision of her own work. Le Guin's textual strategy of revision for the canonical epic poem *Aeneid* can be best understood by examining her revision of the Earthsea series.

Le Guin's revisions revolve around feminist concerns. In *Ursula K. Le Guin's Journey to Post-Feminism*, Amy M. Clark provides a detailed account of the various developments in feminism from the early 1960s to the present and traces these movements in Le Guin's work. Clark locates the first three books of the *Earthsea* cycle as being written before Le Guin considered herself feminist. After embracing feminism, Le Guin returns to the *Earthsea* stories in a revisionist manner. A primary example of

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*, 218.

the lack of feminism in the Earthsea cycle is the structure of magical power as male. In these earlier books, men were mages, not women. Indeed, women's magic was primitive and something to be wary of.

In 'Earthsea Revisioned,' Le Guin discusses her choice for returning to the trilogy to add a belated fourth book, basing her decision on the restraints of the hero. Le Guin writes:

In our hero-tales of the Western world, heroism has been gendered: The hero is a man.

Women may be good and brave, but with rare exceptions [...] women are not heroes. They are sidekicks. [...] Women are seen in relation to heroes: as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim, or rescueable maiden. Women won independence and equality in the novel, but not in the hero-tale. From the *Iliad* [...] right up into our lifetime, the hero-tale and its modern form, heroic fantasy, have been a male preserve.⁷⁴³

Le Guin's words echo Covington's article, that the heroine is the partner. The roles available to women in the heroic tradition are regrettably minimal.

In *Tehanu*, Le Guin revises the Earthsea series in a way that unravels the assumptions of the hero present in the earlier texts. The fourth book focuses on Tenar, the young girl from Atuan in book two, as an adult. She is a widow of a farmer who stays home and looks after an injured/deformed child. Injured from battles past, she walks slowly though steadily along the steep path between her farm and the village. Magic in the first three books was exclusively accessible to men. In book *Tehanu*, men's magic is exposed as falsely restrictive. Women's magic – which was previously depicted as minor, irrelevant, or dangerous and described as witchery – is recognized as valuable and powerful. The heroism of Ged is still legendary, but Ged himself is old and

⁷⁴³ Le Guin, 'Earthsea Revisioned,' 5.

mourning his former power as a wizard. The former bearers of the ring of Erreth-Akbe now endeavour to protect a young, abused girl Therru. Their actions are governed not by political bodies as in the days of their youth, but by personal concern for one another and for the injured girl. Ged and Tenar have moved away from the old traditions of the wizards which valorise heroism. As Le Guin writes:

At the end of the book, both Ged and Tenar face the defenders of the old tradition. Having renounced heroism of that tradition, they appear to be helpless. No magic, nothing they know, nothing they have been, can stand against the pure malevolence of institutionalized power. Their strength and salvation must come from outside the institutions and traditions. It must be a new thing.⁷⁴⁴

In renouncing power, she embraces freedom. As Le Guin states, ‘What [Tenar] is and does is “beneath notice” – invisible to the men who own and control, the men in power. And so she’s freer than any of them to connect with a different world, a free world, where things can be changed, remade.’⁷⁴⁵ Tenar protects the girl ‘who has been destroyed by the irresponsible exercise of power, cast out of common humanity, made Other’ from the wizards who find her a threat.⁷⁴⁶ In doing so, Tenar enacts her freedom, resists institution and becomes ‘wolfmother.’⁷⁴⁷

The image of a wolfmother is a surprising alternative to the hero and must be understood in the context of the monomyth. Warren G. Rochelle discusses the monomyth in relationship to the work of Le Guin. Relying on the work of Joseph Campbell as well as Carl Jung, Rochelle reviews the monomyth by examining three components: the hero, the quest, and the return.⁷⁴⁸ For Rochelle, Le Guin challenges the

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁴⁸ Warren G. Rochelle, *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 34.

monomyth in each component. For Le Guin, the hero can be male or female, the quest does not necessarily entail a physical journey, and, therefore, the return can be understood differently. In *Tehanu* the 'hero' is Tenar, the quest is to care for a disfigured child. The return becomes a return to respecting the dragons. Examining her earlier work, Rochelle explores the nature of the hero. He argues that by shifting her hero from Shevek – a male scientist as protagonist in *The Dispossessed* (1974) – to Tenar – the female, farmer's wife as protagonist in *Tehanu* – Le Guin shifts the attention of heroic effort from public to private. Le Guin, in shifting the 'action' of her fiction from the public battles to the domestic scene indicates feminist ideology within her work. In her shift from *The Dispossessed* to *Tehanu*, Le Guin opens up the monomyth to include the feminine and domestic. In *Lavinia*, Le Guin goes further: she displaces the monomyth of Aeneas as hero by focalizing on Lavinia's domestic life and Aeneas as pious, dutiful father of Rome.

Initially, the character of Tenar appears to comply with Covington's archetype of the heroine. She stays at home, taking care of the land. However, she is not waiting for the return of a hero. Ged does return to her, but she is not structurally his opposite. His journey to the farm was not the great return described by Campbell for the hero. Ged is weak rather than powerful, and aged rather than virile. The basic models of hero and heroine do not fit. Rather, the dragon becomes an alternative model. The dragon is wildness as well as 'subversion, revolution, change – a going beyond the old order in which men were taught to own and dominate and women were taught to collude with them: the order of oppression. It is the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against misrule.'⁷⁴⁹ It is this wildness which Tenar experiences and enacts in her

⁷⁴⁹ Le Guin, 'Earthsea Revisioned,' 23-24.

resistance to Aspen and protection of Teherru. It is this wildness that allows Tenar to be free.

The possibility of freedom is significant to Le Guin who writes, ‘The deepest foundation of the order of oppression is gendering, which names the male normal, dominant, active, and the female other, subject, passive. To begin to imagine freedom, the myths of gender [...] have to be exploded and discarded.’⁷⁵⁰ Thus, the characteristics of the heroine as described by Covington are insufficient for Le Guin. Instead, Le Guin offers the wild image of the wolfmother.

In *Lavinia*, the hero as privileged figure is displaced by the wildness of Lavinia as she-wolf. Lavinia first sees a she-wolf as a child. She and Pallas are playing the land of Evander; the two explore; he takes her to the cave. Lavinia narrates:

The cave smelled very strong. It was black dark inside, and silent. But as I grew used to the dark I saw the two small, unmoving fires of her eyes. She stood there between us and her children.

Pallas and I backed away slowly, our gaze always on her eyes. I did not want to go, though I knew I should. I turned at last and followed Pallas, but slowly, looking back often to see if the she-wolf would come out of her house and stand there dark and stiff-legged, the loving mother, the fierce queen.⁷⁵¹

Le Guin introduces the strong image of an entity known from the source text and tradition. She is the great she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus. Later in the novel, Le Guin creates parallels between Lavinia and the she-wolf. After her first visit with Virgil in the forest, having seen the great city her descendants will inhabit, Lavinia becomes ‘ravenously hungry. A wolf,’ consumes the woodcutter’s food and thanks them for ‘feeding the she-wolf.’⁷⁵²

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁵¹ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 11.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, 47.

The next association between Lavinia and the she-wolf is after Aeneas's death, when Ascanius begins to rule as king from Alba Longa. Latinus warns Lavinia that Ascanius should not train Silvius. Lavinia reflects, 'How could I prevent Ascanius from taking over Silvius' upbringing, if he wanted to? I had no power.'⁷⁵³ When Ascanius invites Lavinia to return to her home in Latium while keeping Silvius in Alba Longa for training, Lavinia finds a way to resist. Lavinia concedes she will go, but not without Silvius; Ascanius is shocked; Lavinia narrates, 'He stared again. I was the she-wolf on the shield now. He saw my teeth.'⁷⁵⁴ Lavinia identifies herself as the wolf in the cave 'standing stiff-legged, silent, in darkness, ready' for fleeing with Silvius.⁷⁵⁵

Lavinia does indeed flee. She takes Silvius into the woods. The boy brings a knife, suggesting he must protect them from wolves. Lavinia replies, 'I think maybe we are the wolves.'⁷⁵⁶ During their staying in Albunea, Lavinia hears an owl's call; there was no poet to sing to her what would happen next. Though Vergil does not tell Lavinia the rest of the story, Le Guin relies on Vergil in these late scenes. Despite Lavinia's limited knowledge, she is able to read the shield and sees herself within it. Lavinia narrates:

I saw Aeneas' shield view clearly for an instant, the turn of the she-wolf's head to her bright flank. *I felt myself lying on a vault like a turtle's shell of earth* and stone that arched over a great dark hollow. Below me lay a vast landscape of shadows, forests of shadowy trees. Out beyond those trees I saw my son standing in dim sunlight on the bank of a river, a river wider than Tiber, so broad and misty I could not clearly see the other shore. Silvius was a man of nineteen or twenty. He was leaning on Aeneas' great spear and he looked as Aeneas must have looked when he was young. There were multitudes

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

of people all up and down the endless grassy bank. The grass was shadowy grey, not green. A voice near men, by my ear, an old man's voice, was speaking softly: '...your last child, whom your wife Lavinia will bring up in the woods, a king, a father of kings.' Then I had so strong a sense of my husband's presence, his physical body and being, with me, in me, as if I were he, that I woke and found myself sitting up, bewildered, in the dark.⁷⁵⁷

Despite her lack of guidance from Vergil, Lavinia still seeks to resist Ascanius and fulfils the plot set out in Vergil's text. In her dream-like state, Lavinia has heard the words Anchises speaks to Aeneas in the underworld:

I shall make clear by my words what glory shall in time to come fall to the progeny of Dardanus, and what manner of men will be your descendants of Italian birth, souls of renown now awaiting life who shall success to our name. The young warrior whom you see there, leaning on an unpointed spear, standing in his allotted place nearest to the world's day, and he is to be the first to rise into the upper air having an Italian strain in his blood. He has the Alban name of Silvius, and he is your son, [...] your queen Lavinia will rear him in the forests, and he will be king and sire of kings, and founder of our dynasty which shall rule from Alba Longa.⁷⁵⁸

Lavinia's refusal of Ascanius' will, specifically to raise Silvius and instead raise him herself in the forest, enables her to fulfil the prophecies from the source text. Beyond the words which Vergil sings to her, Lavinia is able to read the shield and identify herself within it. As the she-wolf, Lavinia becomes the Mother of Rome symbolically as well as literally.

The last reference to Lavinia as the she-wolf is during her exile in the woods. The people of Latium rebuild the old woodcutter's hut and help clear a space for a garden

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 253; emphasis added.

⁷⁵⁸ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 170.

and began to call her ‘Mother Wolf.’⁷⁵⁹ In refusing Ascanius’s command about teaching Silvius, Lavinia again enables the fulfilment of prophesy – that Silvius would be raised in the woods like his father. Ultimately, she is the she-wolf, the mother of Rome, the one who goes on and on. Like Tenar, she chooses freedom over power and finds the strength to resist the power of her son-in-law and the traditions of the Greeks.

Interestingly, her protection of Silvius, which characterizes her as she-wolf, is a fulfilment of her duty and prophesy. This enactment of duty, then, can be understood as participating in *fas*. By asserting the *fas* – asserting that what is noble, dutiful, good is that which one must do, is the true goal of all activity, and not merely triumph in battle – Le Guin displaces the monomyth. Lavinia, as a female character who performs her duties, can be read on the surface as a heroine, the waiting wife, or as the female hero, ‘worth ten Camillas.’ However, when acknowledging *fas* as displacing the hero and recognizing Lavinia’s protection of Silvius as an active fulfilment of prophesy, the templates of ‘heroine’ and ‘female hero’ fail. Le Guin does not produce a female character that can be easily situated into the current models of heroism. Instead she creates a she-wolf. In *The Aeneid*, Lavinia is identified in relation to the empire of Rome. Yet in Le Guin’s text, she is very much the mother and co-founder of the empire.

The last key revision Le Guin performs is Lavinia’s immortality. At the end of the novel, Lavinia does not die. Her existence is contingent upon the poet’s text. Lavinia narrates, ‘He did not sing me enough life to die. He only gave me immortality.’⁷⁶⁰ Through this textual indeterminacy, Lavinia is given the status of the immortal. Lavinia discusses her ‘current’ status at one point in the novel, narrating, ‘I am a fleck of light on the surface of the sea, a glint of light from the evening star. I live in awe. If I never lived

⁷⁵⁹ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 258.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

at all, yet I am a silent wing on the wind, a bodiless voice in the forest of Albunea. I speak, but all I can say is: Go, go on.’⁷⁶¹ Interestingly, the word *i* (‘go on’) is the last word Aeneas spoke to Lavinia. Lavinia narrates:

Go on, go. In our tongue it is a single sound, *i*.
It is the last word Aeneas said. So in my mind it is spoken to
me, said to me. I am the one to go, to go on. Go where?
I do not know. I hear him say it, and I go. On, away. On the
way. The way to go. When I stop I hear him say it, his voice, Go
on.⁷⁶²

In having Lavinia repeat the words of her husband, feminist critics might argue that Lavinia is only ever a male construction. Her repetition of Aeneas’s phrase symbolizes Le Guin’s reiteration of Vergil. However, Vergil is not portrayed as omniscient. And, the sound *i* resonates in the sacred place of Albunea. Vergil’s presence is punctuated by the sound of two owls.⁷⁶³ Furthermore, Lavinia’s sound is described as owl-like; Lavinia narrates, ‘Sometimes I call out, but not in a human voice. My cry is soft and quavering, *I, i, I* cry: Go on, go.’⁷⁶⁴ Thus, the repetition of *i* throughout the novel is not so much a reiteration of Aeneas’s words so much as the sacred encounters of Albunea. As an assertion of her selfhood, Lavinia’s narrative voice has the textual effect of emphasizing knowledge. Her voice, the same sound as the owls in Albunea becomes Minerva like, numinal, approaching omniscient.

The precise nature of Le Guin’s response to Vergil’s *Aeneid* remains debated. Critics such as Higgins, Miller, and Roberts understand Le Guin’s novel to be returning to the epic poem and working within its parameters. Yet *Lavinia* resists a straightforward reading. Rather, Le Guin’s novel is ‘disobedient.’ As Nancy Walker

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43, 50, 86.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

writes, 'To the extent that a narrative is referential to a prior narrative in its own construction, it calls attention to its own fictive and conditional character. Put another way, it becomes *a* narrative rather than *the* narrative, a construct to be set alongside other constructs.'⁷⁶⁵ Le Guin's text calls attention to the questions of authority and, in this case, the primacy of the monomyth. Le Guin's revision does not seek to antagonize Vergil; however, she still challenges the narrative structure of the hero-tale, interrogating the valorisation of violence. In supplanting anthropomorphized gods and asserting the numen and the *fas*, Le Guin explodes the stereotypes of both men and women.

Certainly, Le Guin's revision of Vergil may appear non-threatening. However, in contrast to Miller's observations, Le Guin is not captive to the patriarchal ideology which persists within Vergil's epic; rather, she revises the classical epic and asserts a manner of being, knowing, and meaning as altogether other.⁷⁶⁶ By giving voice to Lavinia, Le Guin does not fill in a few gaps in the near-perfect epic; instead, Le Guin provides another telling of the story, one which is centralized around the domestic life of the princess who becomes queen mother of her people and the mother of the Roman Empire.

⁷⁶⁵ Nancy Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 6.

⁷⁶⁶ It is worth noting that Le Guin herself considers her text a translation though 'into a different form' ('Afterword', 275).

Re-Charting the Present: Feminist Revision and Plotting Change

‘That, indeed, is the chief source of patriarchal power: that it is embodied in unquestioned narratives. [...] Whatever form or medium, these stories are what have formed us all, they are what we must use to make our new fictions. [...]

Out of old tales, we must make new lives.’

– Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women*, 109.

This thesis has engaged with four texts by contemporary women writers as case studies of feminist revision. In each of the four chapters, I unpacked the historical and literary contexts of both source text and revisioned text. After exploring these circumstances, I analysed key alterations in the revisioned text. In each case, the revisioned text both challenges the ideological assumptions embedded within the sources text and offers alternative interpretations of the canonical narrative. Just as Rhys’s novella exposes the epistemological incommensurability between England/Englishness of ‘Rochester’ and Mr Mason and the non-English(ness) of Antoinette, so the four revisioned texts expose underlying ideological assumptions of the source texts. Just as the revision reinterprets the burning of Thornfield Hall from a plot point enabling the marriage of Jane and Rochester to a revolutionary act on the part of the oppressed, so each revisioned text reinterprets key symbols, events, and characters in ways which alter meaning and enables survival for women in the Richian sense.

In chapter one, I explored the historical context of the 1960s and the literary context of the Marquis de Sade’s corpus for Angela Carter’s revision of Perrault’s ‘Bluebeard.’ Carter’s project of demythification, which originated in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, is an act specifically focused on the social fictions in Western

literature. Using intertextual referencing throughout her work, Carter destabilizes authority. Employing metatextual references to the Fall narrative in her 'Bluebeard' revision, Carter successfully interrogates the assumption of female curiosity as disobedience.

The relationships between men and women within Carter's corpus, however, are not proposed as models to emulate. While Carter recovers the mother-daughter relationship, particular in contrast to Sade, heterosexual relations are not resolved. Her female protagonists in particular are not presented as paragons for female behaviour. Certainly, Carter's critique of female models – the saint and the whore – in Sade's literature makes Carter readers wary of attempting to construct an exemplar. Instead of providing a model, Carter experiments with female representations, playing with different ways of describing and enacting gendered behaviour and deconstructing social fictions. As Elaine Jordan states, Carter is 'offering experiments in overcoming ideas, images, representations that have determined our options for thinking and feeling.'⁷⁶⁷ Certainly, *The Passion of New Eve* dismantles representations of sex and gender while *Heroes and Villains* blends literary imagery with social upheaval to test the boundaries of representation. In 'The Bloody Chamber,' Carter maintains the plot of Perrault's text yet experiments with representations of women – including a heroic mother, a consumerist protagonist, and previous wives who range from a bar maid to a Roman Countess. Introducing sadomasochism into the narrative, Carter identifies the latent content of the source text as well as magnifying female culpability and asserts that shame revolves around culpability rather than disobedience.

⁷⁶⁷ Elaine Jordan, 'Enthrallment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fiction,' *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), 34.

Carter also dismantles representations through blending and splintering characters. In Perrault's text, Bluebeard is associated with God the Father. Feminist critics such as Warner suggest that Bluebeard is instead a convergence of God the Father and the serpent of the garden scene. Warner's critique is portrayed in 'The Bloody Chamber' with Carter's Marquis figured as both God the Father – as puppet master setting the stage – and serpent, tempting the protagonist into marriage with expensive gifts. Yet Carter's Marquis is also both the Marquis de Sade and Perrault's Bluebeard. Carter's Bluebeard becomes, like Jewel, an amalgamation of literary allusions. Carter's Bluebeard is also a fragment of an allusion. The husband, coupled with Jean-Yves, can be read as different facets of Brontë's Rochester. Rochester, in his responsibility for the plight of Bertha and succession of wives, is a Bluebeard figure. Indeed, as Jane explores Thornfield Hall, she describes the upper hall as reminiscent of 'a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle.'⁷⁶⁸ Jane's allusion to Rochester's house as a Bluebeard castle is suggestive of Rochester's wealth as well as his secrecy. Yet Rochester is wounded in the fire – is crippled and blinded. He retreats from Thornfield Hall to the manor-house of Ferndean. Rochester, then, becomes the second husband of Perrault's 'Bluebeard' which Carter's text highlights with Jean-Yves's blindness. The convergences and splitting of literary figures in Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' parallels her earlier texts, including *Heroes and Villains*. These experiments in representation disrupt signification; in dislodging signifiers from signifieds, Carter transforms meaning.

While Carter's short story is dark in its exploration of sadomasochism, it is not necessarily bleak. The protagonist participates in the sadistic relationship with the Marquis, but she also, ultimately, resists him. Unlike the young victims in Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the protagonist escapes the remote castle with the aid of her mother.

⁷⁶⁸ Brontë, 122.

She also rejects the monetary inheritance from Bluebeard's death and marries the blind piano tuner. Despite maintaining the resolution of the source text – Bluebeard's death and the girl's remarriage – the so-called fairy tale ending of happily-ever-after achieved in Perrault's text is not repeated in Carter's short story. The second marriage in Perrault provides the joyous resolution; the girl marries 'a very worthy man, who banished the memory of the miserable days she spent with Bluebeard.'⁷⁶⁹ Carter's second marriage provides a different kind of resolution. The protagonist remarries and lives with Jean-Yves and her mother, but she also retains the stain on her forehead: 'No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame.'⁷⁷⁰ These final lines produce a different effect than Perrault's. Carter's representation of her female protagonist includes her subjectivity – a subjectivity which includes culpability. This representation may be adverse to feminists seeking positive portrayals of women in literature, but it is not necessarily antithetical to feminist pursuits. As Jordan writes:

Angela Carter's scenarios are sceptical but not pessimistic. They are ways of looking with lively intelligence and imagination at ideas of the individual and the social in terms of the interests of those who have been colonized and marginalized, driven to the edge of what is held to be reasonable and commonsensical, and turned into ideals or horrors there. The demythologizing business is not only a rational process but a *making of new fictions* which do not pretend to be more than that: to be of use in asking some questions of the contemporary moment in the light of historical possibilities before taking to the road again, thinking, writing, again.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁹ Tatar, 'Bluebeard,' 148.

⁷⁷⁰ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber,' 41.

⁷⁷¹ Jordan, 35; emphasis added.

Carter's texts and representations therein do not create a feminist future. However, Carter's text requires readers to rethink perceived stable identities and gender roles. As such, Carter participates in Richian revision.

Throughout her work and in 'The Bloody Chamber' in particular, Carter *exposes* social structures and representations as social fictions – especially the 'real secret' behind male dominance⁷⁷² – and *experiments* with other possible structures and fictions. Using the genre of the fairy tale, Carter's revision challenges the assumptions of universality of social fictions. Carter's fairy tale revision continually references historical figures and events – such as Rops, Catherine de Medici and the Saint Bartholomew's massacre, Parisian fashion designer Poiret – refusing a disconnect between the tale and historical, material reality. Indeed, Carter's consistent references reinforce her claim in *The Sadeian Woman*, that 'Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh.'⁷⁷³ Thus, Carter's text suggests that feminist revision necessarily resists universality in its interrogation of social fictions.

Michèle Roberts also exposes social structures and representations as well as experiments with other fictions. However, Roberts goes further than Carter by offering an alternative theology which she finds accessible to women. In chapter two, I identified the historical and literary context of *The Book of Mrs Noah*. Recognizing Roberts's own struggle with Catholicism, I traced Roberts's criticisms of Catholic theology and traditions and mapped them onto her fiction. For Roberts, the theology of the Catholic Church, namely the doctrine of the Atonement and understanding of God as

⁷⁷² Zipes, 'The Male Key to Bluebeard's Secret,' *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of A Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 155.

⁷⁷³ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 12.

transcendent, deprives women of 'creative power and speech.'⁷⁷⁴ This is accomplished through a two-fold process: first, by asserting a soul/body dichotomy and, second, by associating women with the body – emotional, irrational, needing to be managed. Roberts actively resists these theological parameters and writes texts in which the body is not denigrated and in which God is immanent. Inverting 'the Word was made Flesh'⁷⁷⁵ to 'the flesh made word,' Roberts unsettles the mind/body duality of the Catholic tradition, recovering creative power and speech for women.

From Roberts's body of writing, readers can discern that feminist revision as a textual strategy not only destabilizes representation but, in altering images, allows for the possibility for asserting alternative representations. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, in particular, these representations shift alongside the revision of narration. Roberts employs an overt narrator in her metadiegetic telling of the Flood. Mrs Jack tells the other side of the Old Testament narrative, challenges Jack's authority as well as the authority of the source text which his view emulates. Mrs Jack's telling offers an alternative view of God as immanent and associated with the maternal. Just as Mrs Jack rejects her husband's interpretation of the rainbow and his assertion of covenant to declare a rule for her new life and rename the world, so Roberts resists traditional representations of the silent wife on a boat. Roberts's alternative interpretation of the key symbols – the rainbow and the Ark – as maternal informs the extradiegetic tale of Mrs Noah. Mrs Noah's Ark is both womb and Arkhive in which women's voices are heard. These voices do not agree and Roberts does not seek to resolve the tensions they embody. As such, the voices in *The Book of Mrs Noah* are polyphonic in the Bahktinian sense – diverse and democratically represented. By asserting this polyphony, Roberts

⁷⁷⁴ Michèle Roberts, 'The Flesh Made Word,' (1997) in *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing* (London: Virago, 1998), 41.

⁷⁷⁵ John 1:14.

rejects the singularity of the texts and interpretations provided by the Catholic theology and tradition. That these polyphonic voices comprise the discourse in the Ark is a prominent concern for Roberts because it allows for women's survival as writers. This is depicted in the hold scene when the books and authors come to life and speak to one another without censor. The archive in the Derridian sense, as both the residence for those in command and the 'transgenerational memory' which informs the future, is a poignant site for feminist revision.

The role of the woman writer is prevalent and powerful in Roberts's text. Ultimately, Mrs Jack resists her husband and invents writing – passing on word-images on clay tablets to her daughter-in-law. Mrs Noah, after her dive into the canal, reaches for her pen and diary and begins to write. The metadiegetic tale, then, informs the extradiegetic tale. Roberts herself, in writing this novel, shifts the discourse of women's writing from the diegesis of the narrative to the real world. Survival for Mrs Jack, Mrs Noah, and Roberts is enabled through writing. Her act of resistance involves creativity which culminates in the act of writing. Mrs Noah, then, writes not a *bildungsroman*, but new life, a new narrative built on her experience and imagination. Having awakened, Mrs Noah, like Roberts herself, picks up her pen to write. Employing the feminist Jungian image of the sibyl as well as highlighting the connection between possession and nomenclature, Roberts models survival as a textual strategy – the strategy of feminist revision. Revising a biblical source text, Roberts challenges representations of women in the Flood narrative in particular as well as Catholic theology and traditions more broadly. What readers learn of feminist revision from Roberts is that women writers can begin to suggest alternative ways of being, challenging authorship and authority. By enacting creative power and speech, particularly polyphony, Roberts writes a flood narrative in a way which allows for an alternative theology. The

uncreation and recreation of the flood narrative is emblematic of the work of feminist revisionists who deconstruct the source text and reassemble meaning that allows for Richian survival for women.

Like Roberts, Margaret Atwood is interested in asserting multiple voices which challenge a single, authoritative version. In chapter three, I explored how Penelope's version of events challenges Odysseus's account as described in Homer's epic poem, and how the maids' continually interruption of Penelope's telling offers additional versions. Like Roberts's sibyls, Penelope and the maids offer differing tellings which are not resolved by Atwood. This polyphony also challenges authority and authorship. Authority is also effectively challenged in Atwood's use of alternative characterization. By inserting intertextual references to the Bluebeard tale type, Atwood reinterprets Odysseus's act of violence at the end of the epic from a heroic king reclaiming his throne to a sinister, violent man eager to regain control over his possessions, including his wife and the maids. By locating Atwood's revision in the context of her corpus, specifically her use of fairy tale intertext, readers find Atwood reinterpreting the climactic scene of *Odyssey* and haunting the literary canon.

Considering the genre of myth in Barthesian terms – namely, as a system of communication that 'presupposes a signifying process' and functions as a semiological system⁷⁷⁶ – the alternative characterization becomes a lynchpin for an entire signifying process which previously exalted Odysseus's behaviour as heroic. Such character distinction is made possible by alternative narration. By offering multiple overt narrators, Atwood criticizes the omniscient narration in Homer's text which steered interpretation of events as well as characters' actions.

⁷⁷⁶ Barthes, 110, 111.

By focusing on the ‘micronarratives of women at home’ rather than the ‘grand narratives of war,’⁷⁷⁷ Atwood asks what Penelope was weaving. Atwood suggests that Penelope was weaving deception into her tale while trying to imagine, as Heilbrun argued, a story alternative to the marriage plot in which she is ‘the subject of [her] own life.’⁷⁷⁸ Thus, Atwood’s text suggests the possibility of imaginative plot changing. Such alterations are central for Linda Anderson who argues that the stories women ‘inherit’ from culture are oppressive and ‘part of that oppression lies in their unitary character, their repression of alternative stories, other possibilities, hidden or secret scripts.’⁷⁷⁹ As such, Atwood constructs a narrative which traces the threads of hidden material in Homer including the possibility of Penelope’s infidelity, the community of women which emerged in Odysseus’s absence, and the sinister nature of Odysseus. Atwood’s novel, then, suggests that feminist revision necessarily involves a shift in perspective which restructures signification, ultimately questioning authorship and authority, challenging canonization itself.

Yet Atwood does not offer Penelope’s version as a suitable replacement. By asserting polyphony of voices via the maids, Atwood problematizes authority and authorship. Penelope is haunted in the underworld by the maids, yet her conscious is haunted too. Guilty of not protecting the maids from Odysseus’s wrath, Penelope is haunted by their demise. Atwood interrupts and haunts Penelope’s telling of the story with the maids, focusing on the myth of Penelope as faithful wife. Atwood’s success in challenging authority and authorship enables not only the maids to haunt Penelope but for *The Penelopiad* to haunt the literary canon – critiquing Homer’s brief treatment of

⁷⁷⁷ Howells, ‘Modern,’ 63.

⁷⁷⁸ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, ‘What Was Penelope Weaving?’ in *Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 110.

⁷⁷⁹ Linda Anderson, ‘Preface,’ *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), vii.

the maids' hanging and arguing that their punishment is as undeserved as Bluebeard's unfortunate wives.

Like Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* shifts attention from the grand narratives of war to the micronarratives of women at home. Yet the setting for Le Guin's narrative moves beyond domesticity. In chapter four, I discussed the significance of Lavinia's performance of household duties in terms of the *fas*. Lavinia's tasks were a fulfilment of duty, partaking in the numinal. It is this numinal way of understanding the world, or numinal epistemology, which determines the behaviour of Lavinia and Aeneas. Le Guin's inclusion of the numinal contrasts with the anthropomorphized gods in the source text. This revision alters the significance of Aeneas's defeat of Turnus, namely, a cause of shame and regret rather than a sign of his heroism. Aeneas communicates this to his son Ascanius, saying 'I want to know that you'll learn how to govern, not merely make war, that you'll learn to ask the powers of earth and sky for guidance for yourself and your people, that you'll learn to seek your manhood on a greater field than the battlefield.'⁷⁸⁰ By characterizing Aeneas as one who seeks the *fas* rather than greatness in battle, heroism itself is challenged in Le Guin's revision.

This challenge of the monomyth is enacted in the characterization of Lavinia as she-wolf. Using an animalistic image could be criticized by feminists as de-humanizing. However, Le Guin offers an alternative model of a female character, which a reading of the Earthsea series makes clear. Lavinia's protection of Silvius against Ascanius, like Tenar's protection of Therru against Aspen, is an active female role which effectively supplants notions of the hero, heroine, and female hero as asserted by Campbell, Graves and Covington. Thus, Le Guin challenges the monomyth of the heroic quest and

⁷⁸⁰ Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 218.

provides alternative female representation in the iconic figure of the she-wolf. And the ‘myths of gender’ which, for Le Guin, ‘have to be exploded and discarded’ if we are ‘to begin to imagine freedom’⁷⁸¹ have indeed shattered in *Lavinia*.

Lavinia, as silent Cassandra, retains all knowledge – that which she has received from the poet and that which she knows without him. Knowing but not telling preserved Lavinia from sharing the fate of Cassandra – being disbelieved and disregarded.

Lavinia’s knowledge is of both peace and war. She knows the peace of her father, the safety of his lands as a child; she knows the cries of the wounded in battle and the details of the Trojan War and Aeneas’s journey. What Lavinia seems to know best is that there will always be war: ‘So long as there is a kingdom there will be another Turnus called to be killed.’⁷⁸² The centrality of her knowledge is reiterated in her non-death – envisioned as an owl and not occupying Vergil’s underworld. Lavinia narrates:

I will not die. I cannot. I will never go down among the shadows
under Albunea to see Aeneas tall among the warriors, gleaming in
bronze. I will not speak to Creusa of troy, as I once thought I
might, or Dido of Carthage, proud and silent, still bearing the great
sword wound in her breast. They lived and died as women do and as
the poet sang them. But he did not sing me enough life to die. He
only gave me immortality.⁷⁸³

It is her lack of death, lack of occupying Vergil’s underworld is effectively supplanted by the numinal.

Though each of these four writers revision different genres of source texts, there are identifiable commonalities. In my introduction, I asserted that feminist revision is bound up with questions of authority, Otherness, and representation as well as canonicity, nomenclature, intertextuality, subjectivity and womanhood in narratives.

⁷⁸¹ Le Guin, ‘Earthsea Revisioned,’ 24.

⁷⁸² Le Guin, *Lavinia*, 271.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 271.

Each revisioned text bears this out. The four women writers use intertextuality to challenge rather than reinforce authority. In this sense, each woman writer addressed in this thesis utilizes adaptation which ‘signals a relationship with an informing source text.’⁷⁸⁴ Rather than attempting to ‘increase cultural capital’ by situating themselves in line with the ‘perceived hierarchy’⁷⁸⁵ of the source text, these writers resist the tradition and dislodge ideological assumptions of the source text.

Feminist revision involves fundamental shifts in perspective and focus, involving a break with traditional characterization. By focusing on the bride’s search for her husband’s true self, Carter’s young bride is brave. In resisting the traditional portrayal of the bride as disobedient, Carter defends curiosity. Atwood’s text, which concentrations on Penelope’s experience, employs an Odysseus who is more possessive than valiant; Telemachus is a defiant teenager rather than a prince of age to ascend the throne; rather than being disobedient sluts, the maids are indispensable company and intentional spies for Penelope. Le Guin’s Lavinia is a fierce she-wolf rather than passive ancestor of the Roman Empire. Such characterization irrevocably ruptures the representations within the source texts.

In each of the four revisions, the author has reinterpreted key symbols from the source text. In ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ the key is no longer the symbol of female disobedience but of discovery. The female protagonist, with bravery and resolve, uses the key to find her husband’s true self. She succeeds in discovering he is a serial murderer. Simultaneously, Carter exposes the key to the male secret of power, namely that it is a false construct. In *The Book of Mrs Noah* the rainbow is no longer a symbol of God’s covenant with Noah but an umbilical cord signifying the maternal and

⁷⁸⁴ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 26.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

imminent of the divine. The ark is no longer the symbol of God's salvific purposes for the elect, but space for women, a Woolfian room of one's own, and an Arkhive of women's genealogy enabling survival. In *The Penelopiad*, the hanging of the maids is no longer an expression of appropriate punishment for the reassertion of kingly power, but an act of unnecessary violence likened to the serial killer Bluebeard. In *Lavinia*, the shield is no longer a symbol of support from an anthropomorphized god depicting mysterious prophesies of the future roman empire. Rather, the shield is intelligible to Lavinia who finds the image of the she-wolf one she can embody as an act of survival.

For the knowing audience these symbolic shifts enable a reinterpretation of the source story. Yet the question still lingers as to whether this symbolic inversion ruptures the proposed meanings in the source text or 'merely creates a text that stands alongside the older ones, competing for social space but ultimately not displacing their authority.'⁷⁸⁶ I argue that, for the critical reader, there is necessarily a rupture, because the source text can no longer be read the same way again. The disruption is inevitable because it occurs on the epistemological plane. By telling the Other side of the story, these women writers have shifted how the readers *knows* a story – not just *what* one knows but *how* one knows. This epistemological shift enables feminist to resist institutionalized exclusions such as the canon of Western literature. In resisting their source text, these contemporary women writers question authority and explore Otherness. Their use of intertextuality experiments with representation and nomenclature, while challenging canonicity.

A persistent motif in these texts is an interrogation of prescribed roles for women. Carter investigates the whore/virgin dichotomy of female representation,

⁷⁸⁶ Cathy Lynn Preston, 'Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale,' in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (ed) Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 198-99.

specifically in response to the Marquis de Sade, and asserts female subjectivity which includes culpability. Roberts examines the same dichotomy in the Catholic tradition. In *The Book of Mrs Noah* as well as other texts in her corpus, Roberts employs female characters whose sexuality does not necessarily relegate them to one side of a spectrum. As mothers and childless women, homosexual and heterosexual, wives and lovers, the sibyls and female characters of the metadiegetic tales search through a range of experiences and identities which require a consideration of the individual. Atwood's text exposes the restriction of women's roles in *The Penelopiad*. As wife, nurse, or maid, all the women in the novel are defined in relationship to men and are restricted by how women are expected to behave. Proper behaviour is ultimately rewarded with their lives; indeed, the nurse survives and the maids are killed because of their perceived allegiance to Odysseus. These restrictions are also informed by class. In the maid's chorus 'If I was a Princess, A Popular Tune,' Atwood introduces class as an additional boundary. Le Guin introduces the constraints of class and race as well as gender. Lavinia finds freedom in her pity and exercising of choice enabled by her connection with the numinal.

The sources and traditions targeted by feminist revisionists are canonical narratives that take up residence in the cultural imagination. In each instance, the contemporary woman writer subverts the universalizing effect of the canon by inhabiting the same plot by shifting point of view. The ideologies within the four source texts vary, but in each case the contemporary writer reads them as inimical to women and responds with revisioning. Notably, in each chapter, the revision is of a different genre. Indeed, the contribution of this thesis is its inclusion of varying genres and authors. Rather than focusing on the intertextuality of a single author, such as Sharon Wilson's *Margaret Atwood's Fairy Tale Politics* or a single era such as Isobel Hurst's *Victorian Women*

Writers and the Classics, this thesis has engaged with the genres of fairy tale, biblical narratives, myth, and classical literature by contemporary women writers. As such, I emphasize the scope of feminist revision. By choosing texts which have been published in different decades, I have also implied the need to continually revision. The prevalence of phallogocentrism as described by Cixous requires resistance in all genres. As Carolyn Heilbrun writes:

That, indeed, is the chief source of patriarchal power: that it is embodied in unquestioned narratives. [...] Whatever form or medium, these stories are what have formed us all, they are what we must use to make our new fictions. [...] Out of old tales, we must make new lives.⁷⁸⁷

Through feminist revision, Richian survival becomes possible. Contemporary women writers are continually creating texts, stocking an alternative Arkhive, and enabling feminist futures. Despite being published forty years ago, Rich's call for revision remains pertinent as a perennial call for women writers to tell and retell, to become 'female Promethuses,'⁷⁸⁸ stealing language, images, and characters from the treasure room of the canon.

⁷⁸⁷ Heilbrun, 109.

⁷⁸⁸ Ostriker, 211.

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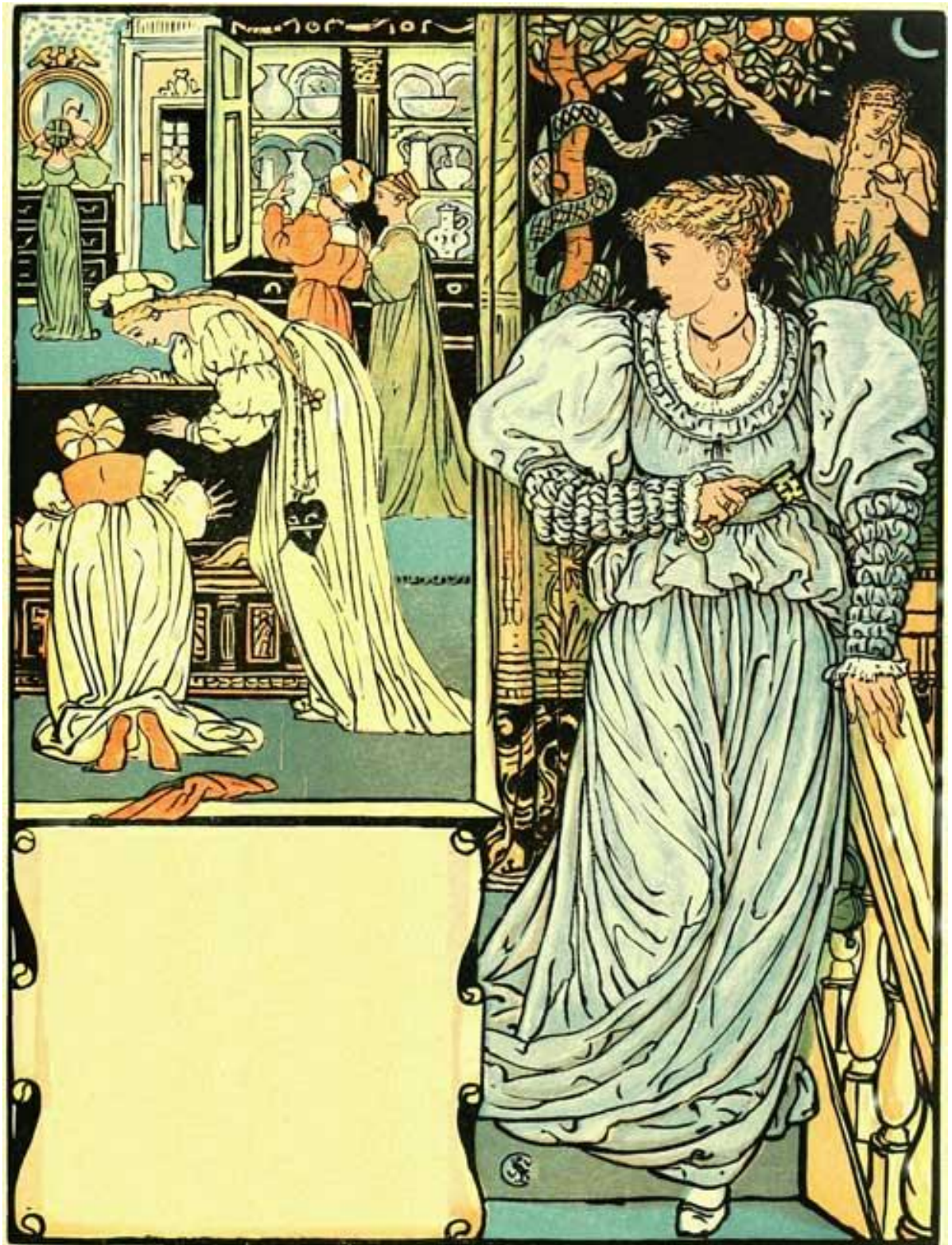
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Appendix 1: Walter Crane, *Bluebeard*, London, 1874.



Appendix 2: Pietro da Cortona, *Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1627-9



Appendix 3: Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del Parto*, 1460.

