



GAZİANTEP UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Journal homepage: <http://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/jss>



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

Rewriting “That Story:” Anne Sexton, Carol Ann Duffy, and Margaret Atwood

“O hikaye”yi Yeniden Yazmak: Anne Sexton, Carol Ann Duffy ve Margaret Atwood

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MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Makale Geçmişi:

Başvuru tarihi: 25 Ekim 2020

Kabul tarihi: 25 Şubat 2021

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Feminist yeniden yazım,

Mit,

Masallar,

Şiir

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received October 25, 2020

Accepted February 25, 2021

Keywords:

Feminist rewriting,

Myth,

Fairy tales,

Poetry

ÖZ

Bu makale Anne Sexton, Carol Ann Duffy ve Margaret Atwood’un revizyonist mit yazımı projelerinde erkek egemen toplumun norm ve kurumlarının kadınlar ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerini ortaya çıkarmak ve reddetmek için kullandığı stratejileri ele alır. Şairler klasik mit ve masalları bu kez tarihsel ve sosyokültürel anlatılardan dışlananların göz ardı edilen hikayelerini anlatmak amacıyla yeniden yazarlar. Sexton, Duffy ve Atwood’un yeni hikayeleri toplumsal cinsiyet kalıplarını mizahi öğelerle ve ters köşelerle altüst eder ve kadınlara tarih boyunca atfedilen ikincil rolleri reddeder. Şiirlerdeki kadın karakterler erkek şiddeti ve yetersizlik hissinden kaynaklanan içselleştirilmiş suçluluk duygularıyla yüzleşerek edebi (yeniden) üretim aracılığıyla güçlerini geri kazanırlar. Bu makale bahsi geçen stratejilerin kadınların bağımsız kimlik inşasına katkıda bulunabileceğini ve erkek egemen düzenin baskıcı söylemine karşı elzem bir eleştirel karşılık oluşturabileceğini iddia eder.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategies Anne Sexton, Carol Ann Duffy, and Margaret Atwood employ in their revisionist mythmaking project to disclose and denounce the detrimental impact of patriarchal norms and institutions on women and gender equality. The poets rewrite classical myths and fairy tales this time to tell the stories of those who have been excluded from historical and sociocultural narratives. The new stories of Sexton, Duffy, and Atwood unsettle gender stereotypes with humorous and purposely bathetic plot twists and enable women to reject secondary roles historically attributed to them. Female characters in the poems reclaim their power through literary (re)creation by confronting male domination and internalized guilt over feelings of incompetence. This paper proposes that these revisionist strategies may help to forge an independent identity for women, artists and non-artists alike, and to generate the necessary critical response against the oppressive discourse of patriarchy.

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Introduction

In one of her most renowned poems “Diving into the Wreck,” Adrienne Rich encapsulates the main challenge and endeavour of the female artists through the voice of a poet diving into the ocean of history to “explore the wreck” and “to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail” (1973, p. 23). These literary figures have countered the damage caused by the incarcerating ways of phallogentrism and patriarchy by salvaging and telling women’s own stories instead of being forced to read, again in Rich’s words, the “book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (1973, p. 24). In line with the rise of 1970s feminist criticism that scrutinizes reductionist cultural and literary representations of women, they undertake the artistic task of rewriting fairy tales and (classical) myths to problematize and denounce patriarchal norms and institutions detrimental to women’s empowerment and gender equality. This paper will examine the feminist revisionist mythmaking strategies in the selected poetry of Anne Sexton, Carol Ann Duffy, and Margaret Atwood. The feminist revisionist endeavour is a grand project that includes many other poets and writers. The scope of this paper, however, is limited to these three names due to the complementary perspectives they present and the common subversive techniques they adopt such as humorous and at times bathetic plot twists. Sexton, Duffy, and Atwood unsettle gender stereotypes and enable their female characters to embrace their power by confronting male domination and feelings of incompetence through literary (re)creation. This paper proposes that these revisionist strategies may help to forge an independent identity for women, artists and non-artists alike, and to generate the necessary critical response against the oppressive discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

Myths and Fairy Tales: Definitions and Issues

The word “myth” is derived from Greek *mythos*, which has various meanings such as “word,” “saying,” “story,” and “fiction” (Buxton, 2021). In the most common and literal understanding of the word, stories about origins, creation, metamorphosis, and annihilation featuring gods, goddesses or other supernatural entities are set in places beyond human reach outside historical continuum. These myths can be considered humanity’s building blocks of knowledge insofar as they both formulate and transfer beliefs and values through which humans make sense of the world. As Northrop Frye (1963) stated, there are in fact close affinities between myth and literature since “mythology as a total structure, defining as it does a society’s religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations -in short, the whole range of its verbal expressiveness- is the matrix of literature” (p. 33). Myths, in other words, function like an overall framework for literature with their compact form and thematic variety. At the same time, “once established in their own right, they may then be interpreted dogmatically or allegorically,” (Frye, 1961, p. 599) and this dual hermeneutic operation between formal fixity and contextual malleability has enabled writers, poets, and artists to revisit and adapt mythical content in various aesthetic forms, styles, and genres.

Fairy tales are similar to myths in that they also operate as meaning-making mechanisms and contribute to, if not shape, the identity formation process of children. According to Bruno Bettelheim (1977), with their overt and covert meanings, these tales carry “important messages to the conscious, the unconscious, and the preconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time” (p. 6). They also present ways of coping with life’s predicaments and difficult situations such as death and loss. Due to their representative function, fairy tales are built on simplistic patterns, which “permits the child to come to grips with the problem in its most essential form, where a more complex plot would confuse matters for him ... [Their] figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique” (Bettelheim, 1977, p. 8). This is why the characters are either pure good or pure evil;

the beautiful princess is saved from a difficult situation almost always by the prince charming, and they get married to live happily ever after. The order is further restored once evil and ugly stepmothers and witches receive their retribution. These plots may be useful for the socio-psychological development of children to a certain extent as they provide them with a sense social integration and hope in the face of problems, and Bettelheim's positive interpretation of fairy tales is based on this aspect. Jack Zipes (1994) echoes Bettelheim in recognizing the importance of fairy tales and myths in maintaining the process of socialization. Fairy tales and myths are similar insofar as they both function as social and ideological meaning-making mechanisms or cognitive frameworks for individuals. Those details omitted from the simplistic and totalizing pattern of myths and tales, however, more often than not contain equally significant and indispensable messages, rendering what Hans Blumenberg (1988) would call "work on myth" (*Arbeit am Mythos*) an urgent task for those who are satiated with one-dimensionality of the same old story.

Myths and fairy tales are first and foremost stories, but they are not *just* stories; they reflect a particular perspective and represent rigid social codes, norms, and stereotypes as they condense and embed their messages in the actions. Frank Kermode's caveat about the myth of the apocalypse in fact applies to all stories created and narrated with fixed, exclusive mindsets: "We have to employ our knowledge of the fictive" if we do not want to "sink quickly into myth, into stereotype" (2000, p. 124). Defining "myth" as a "mode of signification" laden with specific discourses, Roland Barthes (1972) similarly drew attention to the "fundamental character" of the mythical concept, which is "to be *appropriated [sic]*" (p. 119) so that cultural and ideological constructs pass as natural and unchangeable. While Zipes agrees with Bettelheim on the indispensability of fairy tales and myths, he, like Barthes, also acknowledges their culturally and ideologically constructed, reductionist formulation. He observed that they "reinforced the patriarchal symbolical order based on rigid notions of sexuality and gender," and the stereotypes depicted in them "tended to follow schematic notions of how young men and women should behave" (2006, p. 194). Zipes's comment is particularly relevant to the departure point of feminist criticism, which is the representation of women in literary and cultural products, notwithstanding different agendas and priorities within the movement.

Feminist Criticism and Revisionist Mythmaking

Feminist theory, which flourished in the aftermath of the 1960s women's liberation movement, has targeted texts written by male authors who attribute secondary roles to women and represent them in disempowering contexts. It thus resonates with women's simultaneous search for equal rights and opportunities in the socio-political arena. Hélène Cixous's seminal essay "Sorties" opens with a list of binary oppositions in which women are positioned as the inferior "other" of the descriptors historically associated with men: if he embodies "activity," then she embodies "passivity;" if he is the "sun," she is the "moon"; if he represents "culture," she is the voice of "nature" (1975/ 1986, p. 63). These hierarchical oppositions prevent women from articulating their own modes of expression, which should be the utmost priority for the intellectual and artistic emancipation of women. In another equally influential essay, "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous (1976) invited all women to "liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her-by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay..." (p. 878). Elaine Showalter (1979) seems to respond to Cixous's call by introducing "gynocriticism" to the feminist lexicon. She divides feminist criticism into two varieties according to their focal points: while the first variety is concerned "with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature," the second focuses on woman as "the producer of textual meaning," in other words, on woman who engages with female creative power and possibilities of a female language (p. 216). Gynocritics explore literary works through this second vision in order "to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of

female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories” (1979, p. 217). With her work whose title is inspired by Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own,” namely *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter (1977) herself set an example for the program of gynocriticism by analysing the works of British women novelists ranging from Charlotte Brontë to Lessing. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) re-read the works of major Victorian novelists and poets such as Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson to disclose the distinct aesthetic sensibilities they strived to forge amidst the male dominated creative circles of the Victorian era. The title they chose for their book is thus telling too like that of Showalter. *The Mad Woman in The Attic* is an allusion to Bertha Mason, who is held captive in an attic room by her husband Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

Feminist discursive practices championed by critics such as Cixous, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar have been conveniently employed by the pioneers of the revisionist mythmaking project in female mythopoetic writing as the checks and balances of sociocultural configurations. These practices could “re-appropriate” and reconstruct existing stories to go beyond gender stereotypes and binary oppositions perpetuated by what Cixous (1975/ 1986) described as the solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism (pp. 63-64), a duality that excludes women from the realm of reason and so-called meaningful creation. It is vital to erase the detrimental impact of this solidarity on women, and to avoid, in Kermode’s terms, sinking into the exclusionary myth of logocentric and phallogentric supremacy. If, as Barthes (1972) suggested, “myth is always a language robbery” (p. 131) conveniently catering to the interests of power holders, it is only legitimate that women writers counteract patriarchal oppression that has been permeating “his/tory” with their fresh stories. If (diverse) female perspectives are neglected in ancient myths and fairy tales as well as in novels written by men, and consequently women are trapped in limiting categories of angel vs. evil / which, or submissive vs. rebel / destructive, bereft of distinct voices, then, as Alicia Ostriker (1982) aptly stated, they must “steal the language” for genuine self-expression (p. 69). Following this subversive act of robbery described by both Barthes and Ostriker, the new stories composed “by female knowledge of female experience” could gradually replace the old ones that “stand as foundations of collective male fantasy” (Ostriker, 1982, p. 73). Defining revision as “entering an old text from a new critical direction,” and more importantly as “an act of survival,” Rich (1972) also underlined the significance of delving into the stock representations of existing stories since “until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (p. 18). This endeavour is thus valuable not only as an urgent response to male perpetuation of inequality but also as an opportunity to foster self-awareness, which would eventually lead to collective action by women. With a parallel lexicon and focus, Sandra Gilbert (1980) contended that the outsider position traditionally assigned to women could indeed enable them to “own only [their] own vision and therefore [they] can steal into the house of myth, *see [sic]* everything, and say, for the first time (and thus with the dearest freshness) what everything means to [them]” (p. 9). In this respect, the revisionist strategies adopted by Sexton, Duffy, and Atwood help to amplify women’s unique voices similarly to their predecessors and contemporaries in feminist criticism and female literary production.

Rising above the Myth through Subversive Poetry: Sexton, Duffy, and Atwood

As explained by Caroline King Barnard Hall (1989) in her comprehensive work on the poet, Sexton began to entertain the idea of rewriting fairy tales due to her daughter Linda Grey Sexton’s interest in the tales. The choice of tales to transform was “spontaneous and instinctive; she chose the ones she liked because they suggested to her a special or particular meaning” (Hall, 1989, p. 92). Sexton must have received the subliminal messages Bettelheim mentions in his analysis of fairy tales, but not without transforming those familiar messages through the

filter of her wit, which in fact permeates all her poetry, and not without disclosing the dark side of the familiar. *Transformations* is thus a fitting title for such an innovative poetic intervention. Hall (1989) contextualized Sexton's collection by pointing out the continuity in her voice and tone: "One salient characteristic of many Sexton poems is the straight, sensible voice that lends a hint of absurdity to the poems' treatment of their subjects. The humor in these 'transformations' works much in the same way, with perhaps a darker and more absurd emphasis" (p. 9). *Transformations* (1971) includes sixteen poems, which situate Grimms' fairy tales within new frameworks. In addition to the initial prologue that introduces the work as a whole, the first part of each poem acts as a mini prologue that presents its thematic core from a modern viewpoint and is followed by a retelling of the relevant tale.

In the introductory poem entitled "The Golden Key," Sexton, anticipating Gilbert, enjoys the advantage of her outsider position and identifies herself as the persona of the poems: "The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me-" (p. 1). She is the "witch" of the stories insofar as she invites her readers to be alert to cliché plotlines or happy endings of the traditional fairy tales. It is interesting that she introduces a sixteen-year-old boy to a group of people (supposedly her friends) rather than building her poem on a young female figure. This boy "wants some answers" and "he is each of us" (p.1). The golden key she symbolically makes the boy have "opens this book of odd tales / Which transform the Brothers Grimm" (p. 1). Sexton's wording here in this second line is intriguing in the sense that she seems to describe her endeavour as a woman poet through a metonymy. Her own "odd book of tales" becomes the representative of her career-long interest in overturning patriarchal codes embedded in familiar stories. The second line operates as another metonymy that functions at a different level: transforming Grimm Brothers hints both at transforming men in general and changing their problematic views on women, and at revisiting the tales they have created with stories that are told differently. The colloquial language that includes slang words and unusual similes contributes to the effect Sexton aims to create by deflating the tediously romantic component of the typical stories. As Ostriker (1982) also argued, the poet desentimentalizes fairy tales to identify the predetermined gender roles and the suffocating pressure of sociocultural constructs such as married life. In the prefatory stanzas of "Snow White and Seven Dwarfs," she sarcastically exalts virginity and female innocence:

No matter what life you lead
 the virgin is a lovely number:
 cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
 arms and legs made of Limoges,
 lips like Vin Du Rhône,
 rolling her china-blue doll eyes
 open and shut.
 Open to say,
 Good Day Mama,
 and shut for the thrust
 of the unicorn.
 She is unsoiled.
 She is as white as a bonefish. (p. 7)

This prologue portrays a stereotypical female figure that has dominated poetry and fiction for centuries as a reflection of what Ostriker (1982) would call "the collective male fantasy" (p. 73). However, Sexton depicts the so-called ideal (beautiful and delicate) woman with peculiar similes. In her humorous adaptation of the Petrarchan and Elizabethan blazon tradition that praises the body parts of the beloved with stock phrases such as "red cheeks" and "rosy lips," Snow White has cheeks "as fragile as cigarette paper" and "arms and legs made of Limoges" porcelain. The rest of the poem, like the original fairy tale, tells the story of Snow

White and her stepmother's attempts to kill her due to the former's surpassing beauty. As the slang word "dumb-bunny" suggests, Snow White fails to escape her stepmother's malice despite the help of the dwarfs. Finally, the stepmother makes her bite the poisonous apple, and she falls into a deep sleep from which she awakes thanks to the prince as expected. What is unexpected is the way Sexton depicts the rescue scene: "As the prince's men carried the coffin / they stumbled and dropped it / and the chunk of apple flew out / of her throat and she woke up miraculously" (p. 9). The scene is a complete bathos that subverts the dynamics of a typical romantic union between the prince and the princess. Sexton highlights the preposterousness of such easy solutions and rather writes her own bizarre finale through a bathetic twist. At the end of the poem, Snow White is yet again seen rolling her china-blue eyes "and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do" (p. 9). China blue-doll eyes connote a mechanical quality or a kind of inactivity on the female figure's part. She seems to have lost a "human" quality as nothing but a simple doll existing for the prince's pleasure. These last lines of the poem, which are reminiscent of the Evil Queen's words in the original story and which the speaker utters sarcastically in a matter-of-fact manner, can also be interpreted as Sexton's criticism against representation of women as obsessed with their beauty. Sexton implies that women have had to internalize the idea that their social standing depends on their beauty while the boundaries of where they stand are usually determined by the male gaze.

In another poem called "Cinderella", Sexton tells "that [classic] story" in which "Cinderella fit into the shoe / like a love letter into its envelope" (p. 56). This simile indicates celebration of love between the heroine and the prince, which is almost always crowned with a happy marriage in the end. Marriage indeed does take place in the poem too; however, Sexton's sarcastic straightforwardness and unusual imagery is at work again to signal that there is something wrong with that hackneyed mentality. The ball in which the two lovers meet is "a marriage market" (p. 54), and the prince has the liberty to choose any woman he wants for a wife as if he goes shopping. As in the most of Sexton's transformations, the most remarkable part of the poem is the closing stanza, which, after being introduced by the prologue, conveys the subversively humorous message with a punchline:

Cinderella and the prince
 lived, they say, happily ever after,
 like two dolls in a museum case
 never bothered by diapers or dust,
 never arguing over the timing of an egg,
 never telling the same story twice,
 never getting a middle-aged spread,
 their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
 Regular Bobbsey Twins.
 That story. (pp. 56-57)

It should be noted that in the process of marriage, not only Cinderella but also the prince turns into a doll in a museum. Similar to the engraved figures in Keats' Grecian urn, they are frozen in time with smiles on their faces. Sexton, however, employs the same image to stress the insufficiency of commonly accepted views on marriage, which overlook the deeper realities and hidden challenges of partnership and parenthood unlike Keats, who cherishes the power of art with the Grecian urn and his poetry. The twist that damages the much celebrated idea of marriage is that Cinderella and the prince have lost contact with life; they are doomed to silence without a change to discuss or an issue to solve together. Sexton demonstrates that simplistic patterns would fail in portraying and understanding relationships. Even if the characters and the actions remain the same, the novelty and the significance of Sexton's work lies in her attempt to capture and express the possibility of different ways of looking at social norms and practices that have been taken for granted, or in Barthesian terms, that have been naturalized in the course

of history. As Ostriker (1982) also observed, despite the “ruthless changelessness” and the “pre-determined plots” of the fairy tales, this time at least “the teller is mobile” (p. 86). This narrative mobility enables the poet to tell alternative stories to the reader, which would in return enable the audience to re-evaluate familiar themes and their restrictive hold on individuals, especially women.

Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* (1999), like Sexton’s *Transformations*, is suggestive of the poet’s thematic preoccupation in the volume from the very first encounter with the title. The British-English colloquial expression “the world and his wife,” that is “a great many people, especially in a particular place, at a particular time,” (dictionary.cambridge.com) acquires a new meaning with the slight change Duffy makes in its form. The dramatic monologues voiced by well-known female characters in mythology as well as by fictional wives of famous male literary, historical, and pop culture figures reveal women’s potential to “overturn the atavistic concept of woman as man’s accessory” (Dowson, 2016, p. 136). “Little Red-Cap,” the opening poem of the collection, is noteworthy in that it not only subverts the classic fairy tale with a feminist agenda but also allows Duffy to narrate a version of her own journey as a poet and describe the male pressure on women writers. The challenges she has encountered are indeed reminiscent of those explored by Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in the works of women writers who tried to find their own voice in androcentric Victorian literature. In this respect, that the young speaker in the poem is cajoled and captivated by the wolf’s poetry as he reads it out loud could be interpreted as an insinuation of male domination in art and literature, and greater publication opportunities men usually, if not always, have. Only ten years later, is the speaker able to realize “that a greying wolf / howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason” (1999, p. 4). Initial fascination is replaced with disappointment and an ensuing sense of artistic awareness as a woman poet. It is perhaps no coincidence that the poem closes with an unexpected twist which is the now wiser woman’s / poet’s symbolic murder of the wolf:

I took an axe to a salmon
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw
the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother’s bones.
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. (p. 4)

In a discussion of *The World’s Wife* with Barry Wood (2005), Duffy explained that the grandmother’s bones represent “the silent women who aren’t present in English Literature” (as cited in Dowson, 2016, p. 24). The wolf, or the male genius considered superior throughout the ages, feeds on female support and imagination while either misrepresenting or completely disregarding these characters in his art. Jeanette Winterson in her 2015 review of the collection emphasized the organic link between women and creative power and compellingly interpreted the same lines from “Little Red-Cap:” “the skeleton of language is female. Deeper, it seems, than our mother tongue.” It is thus a fitting piece to open a sequence of poems created with the now independent voice of the poet who wants to cherish the multiple manifestations of the female and women’s solidarity. The wolf has to be murdered, that is, the daunting presence of men has to be limited and their pressure on women in public and private spheres ended for women to reclaim their power that has been historically vilified as dangerous and demonic in line with the binary system establishing gender perceptions.

“Eurydice” revisits the theme of artistic creation through Eurydice’s retelling of what actually has happened in the underworld with her husband Orpheus, or “Big O,” as she calls him. Tired of silently staying in the background and seemingly acquiescing in all the descriptors that speak on her behalf, Eurydice would “rather speak for [herself] / than be Dearest, Beloved,

Dark Lady, White Goddess, etc., etc.” (1999, p. 59). She addresses her female friends and tells them the story of her suffocating marriage exacerbated by Orpheus’s inflated ego due to his fame as a poet (unlike the original myth in which he is a renowned musician). Orpheus is simply a different version of the wolf that tells the same story season after season in the previous poem.

Like it or not,
I must follow him back to our life –
Eurydice, Orpheus’ wife –
to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,
octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets,
elegies, limericks, villanelles,
histories, myths. (p. 60)

Eurydice, as a representative of all women who are made to fit into literary and sociocultural moulds, feels trapped in her relationship. Whereas in the classic myth Orpheus, despite being told otherwise, looks back at Eurydice in the underworld, fearing that the gods may be fooling him and not give his wife back, Eurydice of Duffy’s poem does everything she could to make him turn his head. She light-heartedly tells her friends what really happened: “Girls, forget what you’ve read. / It happened like this – / I did everything in my power /to make him look back (p. 61). This subversive twist disrupts the commonly accepted dynamics of marriage based on the passivity of women. It is Orpheus’s undying love that has been praised all the while, and yet by giving a voice to the ostensibly ineffectual woman behind the successful man, Duffy, as Dowson (2016) has also stated, overturns this romantic façade. Eurydice does not want to go back to her old life and simply wants to be heard. The following lines are remarkable too in the sense that this time she herself becomes a different version of the woman poet embodied in the figure of “Little Red-Cap:” “I was thinking of filching the poem / out of his cloak, / when inspiration finally struck. / I stopped, thrilled” (p. 61). Eurydice stops just because she finally finds her own voice thanks to Duffy’s poem. If women must first steal the language as stated by Ostriker (1982) and Gilbert (1980), now is the time to build distinct female perspectives with it.

The myth of Circe is another story Duffy re-fabricates to further empower its heroine and demonstrate the arguably justifiable causes behind the effects. Circe of the source story is an enchantress who can transform those that offend her into wolves, lions, and swine by magical potions. When Odysseus comes to her island Aea with his men, she changes the crew into swine. As she falls in love with him, she agrees to reverse the spell, and the two become lovers for a year. Duffy’s poetic frame, however, includes only Circe whom the poet portrays as utterly embracing her gifts as a sorceress and reclaiming her power through them. “One way or another, all pigs have been mine- / under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their backs, /in my nostrils here” (1999, p. 47), Circe says, as she tries new recipes with the bodies and relishes them with joy akin to erotic pleasure. Duffy employs the typical image of a woman in the kitchen, but the way Circe describes the ingredients implies more than a simple cooking arrangement:

Lay two pig’s cheeks, with the tongue,
in a dish, and strew it well over with salt
and cloves. Remember the skills of the tongue –
to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie
in the soft pouch of the face – and how each pig’s face
was uniquely itself, as many handsome as plain,
the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble,
sly or wise, the cruel, the kind, but all of them,
nymphs, with those piggy eyes. Season with mace. (p. 48)

Circe’s description of pigs with human attributions also hints at the pleasure of revenge: these men -turned pigs- with unique features seem to get what they deserve. In fact, Circe has

already made this clear when she says that all pigs have been hers in the preceding lines. The cooking instructions Circe calmly gives to the nymphs reveal the men's wrongdoings the most unforgivable of which is ignoring her feelings: "Look at that simmering lug, at that ear, / did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear? Mash / the potatoes, nymph, open the beer. Now to the brains" (p. 48). This half angry and half celebratory tone gives Duffy's work on myth its subversive twist. The final line of the stanza highlights the theme of revenge with its menacing tone that lies beneath the surface: "When the heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small" (p.48). Women have been unjustly labelled as witches and devious enchantresses so many times; so be it, Duffy defiantly says and writes the story of a woman who seems to cherish and does justice to these labels. Even though she, too, "once knelt on this shining shore / watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun / like myths," (p. 48), Circe does not passively watch anymore. She faces her past with her own myth and is now closing the case with men in a spirit of solidarity with her female companions.

Margaret Atwood, who is mainly celebrated as a novelist, but is equally accomplished as a poet, also rewrites the Circe myth in the "Circe /Mud Poems" sequence of her collection *You Are Happy* (1974 /1998). Her lifelong interest in the exploration of power dynamics that shape sociocultural norms and gender relations while fostering misconceptions and causing inequalities becomes manifest in her understanding of the past and revisionist mythmaking project. As Gordon Johnston (1980) claimed, the past for Atwood is not only historical and geographical but also mythic and personal (p. 167). Women are either prisoned within or completely excluded from history, and they are in fact overlooked and at best problematically represented in the mythic realm. This is why working through the malleable content of the myth and concomitantly analysing its exclusivist discourses has become an urgent task for female writers. The task requires that the "personal" becomes an inseparable part of the cultural and socio-political. Like Duffy, who invites her readers to listen to the same story from different voices, Atwood envisions women that could finally break their silence to defy incarcerating official *his-tories*. In accordance with the writer's vision, Circe becomes a significant figure in her poetry as a "powerful woman, living on an island, a figure of prophecy and of transformation, of inevitability and the possibility of change" (Johnston, 1980, p. 167). Contrary to the typical representation of Circe as cruel and lascivious, Atwood's Circe remarks in a jaded yet irritated manner:

I made no choice
I decided nothing
one day you simply appeared in your stupid boat,
your killer's hands, your disjointed body, jagged as a shipwreck,
skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual,
pretending to be — what? a survivor? (1974 /1998, p. 204).

Circe's lack of agency in Odysseus's involvement in her story is seemingly at odds with the idea of female empowerment. This version differs from Duffy's in terms of the opposite attitudes of two different Circes, one embracing, the other rejecting the role that is granted to them. There is something in common though: the myth has been constructed on their behalf at the expense of their wishes, choices, and decisions. Atwood's Circe declares that she is not actually interested in "men with heads of eagles" or "or pig-men, or those who can fly" because she, like Atwood in her mythopoetic vision, searches "instead for the others, / the ones left over, / the ones who have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives" (p. 202). For Circe, those who are excluded from mythologies of male dominated history are as real as, if not more real than, those whose stories have been circulated even though the former "think / of themselves as / wrong somehow" to such an extent that "they would rather be trees" (p. 202). Atwood may have a wider community of the excluded in mind, but it could be safely assumed

that women from all walks of life have been historically familiar with this deep-seated feeling of guilt insofar as they feel incompetent and inadequate when measured against the false standards of patriarchy.

The sense of internalized guilt adds an intriguing psychological layer to Atwood's reimagined characters. Unlike Duffy's heroine who is eager to cook the pigs with the help of the nymphs, Circe is horrified that she is on her own with so many animals. "It was not my fault," she keeps repeating in the poem along with her declarations of inaction: "I did not add the shaggy / rugs, the tusked masks, / they happened" (p. 203). Her ambiguous mood wavers between rejection and remorse: "I did not say anything, I sat / and watched, they happened / because I did not say anything" (p. 203). As stated before, these lines could be interpreted as indicating Circe's rejection of her assigned role – a heartless sorceress- and her supposed regret concerning her passivity, which Atwood channels into her own revisionist poem. The lines below, however, adds a new dimension to Circe's self-perception and understanding of the world without negating the abovementioned interpretations:

It was not my fault, these animals
who could no longer touch me
through the rinds of their hardening skins,
these animals dying
of thirst because they could not speak
these drying skeletons
that have crashed and litter the ground
under the cliffs, these
wrecked words. (p. 203).

These words allow the reader to consider the cast of the story not only as Circe vs. men that suffer from her power, but also as Circe and men suffering all together from patriarchal codes and/or as Circe and all the "others" of history, (perhaps even the non-humans themselves) who could not speak. Would things have been different had Circe said something? The question remains unanswered. When Circe looks around now, she sees not only the wrecked body of Odysseus but also the "wrecked words." As Estella Lauter (1984) pointed out, "Atwood's revision of Circe's story strikes us as true because it corresponds to centuries of partly-conscious experience of silent complicity in a myth we did not choose" (p. 65). But Atwood demonstrates that women should not completely take the blame on themselves. Out of Circe's upsetting confrontation with her own conscience and the outside world, new stories will eventually grow, this time composed of words she herself chooses.

Atwood alludes to the myth of Daphne as well while portraying feelings of responsibility and wrongdoing in her reference to those who would rather be trees than live in embarrassment. In the classical story, Daphne is chased by the god Apollo, but unwilling to reciprocate his love, she turns into a laurel tree so as to escape and hide from him. In the poem "Daphne and Laura and So Forth" from *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood (1995) builds a hermeneutic bridge between this mythical story and the modern day cases of sexual assault and issues of consent. In the poem, Daphne tells about the incident:

His look of disbelief-
I didn't mean to!
Just, her neck was so much more
fragile than I thought.

The gods don't listen to reason,
they need what they need-
that suntan line at the bottom
of the spine, those teeth like mouthwash,

that drop of sweat pearling
the upper lip-
or that's what gets said in court. (1995, p. 26)

The gods, like men, know no reason; they are simply after fulfilling their desires regardless of the choices or feelings of the other party. Daphne the female river nymph is not as powerful as the male god Apollo, and she has to relinquish her very existence to stop his unwanted advances. In modern context, Laura and many more women as stated in the title, experience terrible consequences of male violence, which men try to justify with absurd explanations such as the delicateness of a woman's neck. Helen, whom Atwood portrays, unlike her passive version in the Homeric epic, as an outspoken erotic dancer in "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing," bitterly tells a similar story of passion and violence: "My mother was raped by a holy swan. / You believe that? You can take me out to dinner. / That's what we tell all the husbands. / There sure are a lot of dangerous birds around" (1995, p. 35). It is actually not a holy swan that raped Helen's mother Leda, but the chief god himself. Helen believes that she will not be understood by anyone but "you," which may be the reader, if not one of the clients: "The rest of them would like to watch me / and feel nothing. Reduce me to components / as in a clock factory or abattoir" (1995, p. 35). Men could be as insolent as gods in their wishes and deeds. Yet, Helen exposes their hypocrisy while embracing her sensuality and the lucrateness of a dance career. Considering the criticism and judgmentality of even fellow women ("The World is full of women / who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself / if they had the chance," Helen opens the poem, p. 33), the journey from Circe's internal conflicts to Helen's unabashed femininity is tough, albeit necessary, as Atwood has indicated.

Conclusion

In her article on consciousness and myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser, Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1975) argued that all three poets explore what could be identified as "a double-consciousness" that operates between traditional perceptions regarding women and a critique of their limited / limiting viewpoints (p. 206). The poems aspiring to revise these faulty perceptions are "so strongly reevaluative that they may even appear antimythological, for they record the realization that old myths are invalid and crippling for women" (p. 212). Like DuPlessis, I have attempted to demonstrate the subversive potential of revisionist mythmaking strategies in the works of Sexton, Duffy, and Atwood- poets who too have explored the traces of this double-consciousness. These strategies as diverse as humorous depictions, purposely bathetic plot twists, and reclamation of power through confrontation and confession are essential to diagnose the damage done to the unique female voice(s) and experience(s). This will no doubt be an ongoing project as part of an ongoing struggle against inequality. It is difficult to uproot deep-seated beliefs and practices that have conveniently passed as the only truth for centuries. However, the challenge will not detract from the value of the endeavour. On the contrary, discourses and thus social perceptions will change one poem or one story at a time. As Ostriker (1982) effectively expressed, "with women poets we look at, or into, but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission" (p. 87). Only when women unlearn submission, may the possibility of a better world with better stories arise.

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