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The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking

Alicia Ostriker

I

What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallogentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies, another thinking as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society. [HÉLÈNE CIXOUS]¹

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves,
Our kind multiplies:
We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

[SYLVIA PLATH]²

1. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," in *La jeune née*, trans. Ann Liddle (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 10/18, 1975), quoted by Elaine Marks in "Women and Literature in France," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 832–42, esp. 841; appears also in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 92–93.

2. Sylvia Plath, "Mushrooms," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 139.

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A major theme in feminist theory on both sides of the Atlantic for the past decade has been the demand that women writers be, in Claudine Herrmann's phrase, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language, female Prometheuses.³ Though the language we speak and write has been an encoding of male privilege, what Adrienne Rich calls an "oppressor's language"⁴ inadequate to describe or express women's experience, a "Law of the Father"⁵ which transforms the daughter to "the invisible women in the asylum corridor"⁶ or "the silent woman" without access to authoritative expression,⁷ we must also have it in our power to "seize speech" and make it say what we mean.

Women writers have always tried to steal the language. What several recent studies demonstrate poignantly is that throughout most of her history, the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in code form, disguising passion as piety, rebellion as obedience.⁸ Dickinson's "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" speaks for writers who in every century have been inhibited both by economic dependence and by the knowledge that true *writer* signifies assertion while true *woman* signifies submission. Among poets, even more than novelists, the thefts have been filchings from the servant's quarters. When Elaine Marks surveys the *écriture féminine* movement in Paris, she observes that in their manifestos of desire "to destroy the male hegemony" over language, "the rage is all the more intense because the writers see themselves as prisoners of the discourse they despise. But is it possible," she asks, "to break out?"⁹

Does there exist, as a subterranean current below the surface structure of male-oriented language, a specifically female language, a

3. Claudine Herrmann, *Les Voleuses de langue* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1979).

4. Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," *Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974* (New York: Norton, 1974), pp. 148-51, esp. p. 151.

5. Jacques Lacan's term for the symbolic order of language is widely used by psychoanalytically oriented French feminists (see Jane Gallop, "Psychoanalysis in France," *Women and Literature* 7, no. 1 [Winter 1979]: 57-63).

6. Robin Morgan, "The Invisible Woman," in *Monster* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 46.

7. Marcia Landy, "The Silent Woman," in *The Authority of Experience*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), pp. 16-27.

8. See Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), which is, however, unsympathetic to the women writers discussed; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979); Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets in America, 1630-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). See also Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., "Introduction," in *No More Masks: An Anthology of Poems by Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973); Dolores Rosenblum, "Christina Rossetti: The Inward Pose," and Terence Diggory, "Armored Women, Naked Men: Dickinson, Whitman and Their Successors," in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 82-98 and 135-50.

9. Marks, p. 836.

“mother tongue”? This is a debated issue. A variety of theorists argue in favor, others argue against, while a number of empirical studies in America seem to confirm that insofar as speech is “feminine,” its strength is limited to evoking subjective sensation and interpersonal responsiveness; it is not in other respects powerful.¹⁰

The question of whether a female language, separate but equal to male language, either actually exists or can (or should) be created, awaits further research into the past and further gynocentric writing in the present. My argument in this paper concerns the already very large body of poetry by American women, composed in the last twenty years, in which the project of defining a female self has been a major endeavor.¹¹

10. Robert Graves argues—without much evidence—in *The White Goddess* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1948) that a “magical” language honoring the Moon-goddess existed in pre-patriarchal times, survived in the mystery cults, and was still taught “in the poetic colleges of Ireland and Wales, and in the witch covens of Western Europe” (p. x). Among French feminists, Herrmann claims that women use space and time, metaphor and metonymy differently than men, Cixous that women write with “mother’s milk” or “the blood’s language.” Most interestingly, Luce Irigaray moves from *Speculum d’autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), which deconstructs Plato and Freud to demonstrate the history of systematic repression of woman as a concept in Western culture, to *Ce Sexe qui n’est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), which attempts to transpose the voices of Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Lewis Carroll into a feminine language. Among Irigaray’s techniques is the rejection of the “proper” name along with “property” and “propriety” in order to recover the self as “elle(s),” a plural being (see Carolyn G. Burke, “Irigaray through the Looking Glass,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 [Summer 1981]: 288–306). This work parallels in many respects Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), discussed below. Julia Kristeva, on the other hand, argues that woman has no linguistic existence but a negative, preoedipal one. For details of the debate, which in part centers on the question of whether feminists should use male abstractions, see Marks and Carolyn G. Burke, “Report from Paris: Women’s Writing and the Women’s Movement,” *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 843–55. The most important American theoretical texts prophesying a woman’s language are Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) and *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978). *Per contra*, see Robin Lakoff, *Language and Women’s Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Mary Hiatt, *The Way Women Write* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1977); Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, eds., *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1975); and the empirical studies referred to in Cheris Kramer, Barrie Thorne, and Nancy Henley, “Perspective on Language and Communication,” *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 638–51.

11. Here and in other essays on contemporary American women’s poetry, I take 1960 as an approximate point of departure. Among the breakthrough works appearing between 1959 and 1965 are Mona Van Duyn, *Valentines to the Wide World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959); H. D., *Helen in Egypt* (New York: New Directions, 1961); Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Denise Levertov, *The Jacob’s Ladder* (New York: New Directions, 1961) and *O Taste and See* (New York: New Directions, 1964); Diane Wakoski, *Coins and Coffins* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962); Adrienne Rich, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (New York: Norton, 1963); Carolyn Kizer, “Pro Femina,” in *Knock upon Silence* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963); Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). It needs to be stressed, however, that the women’s movement in contemporary poetry is not confined to these and other well-known poets but includes hundreds of writers whose work appears in small press and magazine publications.

What distinguishes these poets, I propose, is not the shared, exclusive *langage des femmes* desired by some but a vigorous and various invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for “male” and “female” are themselves preserved. I have elsewhere examined the ways in which contemporary women poets employ traditional images for the female body—flower, water, earth—retaining the gender identification of these images but transforming their attributes so that flower means force instead of frailty, water means safety instead of death, and earth means creative imagination instead of passive generativeness.¹² Here I want to look at larger poetic structures and suggest the idea that revisionist mythmaking in women’s poetry may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture.

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to Mother Nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella. It is thanks to myth we believe that woman must be either “angel” or “monster.”¹³

Yet the need for myth of some sort may be ineradicable. Poets, at least, appear to think so. When Muriel Rukeyser in “The Poem as Mask” exclaimed “No more masks! No more mythologies,”¹⁴ she was rejecting the traditional division of myth from a woman’s subjectivity, rejecting her own earlier poem that portrays Orpheus and the bacchic women who slew him as separate from herself. “It was myself,” she says, “split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself.” To recognize this, however, is evidently to heal both the torn self and the torn god; the poem’s final lines describe a resurrected Orpheus whose “fragments join in me with their own music.” When Adrienne Rich in “Diving into the Wreck” carries with her a “book of myths . . . in which / our names do not appear” and declares that she seeks “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth,” while enacting a watery descent that

12. Alicia Ostriker, “Body Language: Imagery of the Body in Women’s Poetry,” in *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 247–63, esp. pp. 256–60.

13. The case against myth is exhaustively stated by Simone de Beauvoir in chap. 9, “Dreams, Fears, Idols,” of *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp. 157–223. A discussion of the usefulness of some myths for women writers is Susan Gubar’s “Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth,” *Women’s Studies* 6, no. 3 (1979): 301–15. Gubar argues that the figures of the Sphinx and the Mother-Goddess represent “secret wisdom,” which women identify with “their point of view,” and that they use the myth of Persephone and Demeter “to re-define, to re-affirm and to celebrate female consciousness itself” (p. 302). See also n. 22 below.

14. Muriel Rukeyser, “The Poem as Mask,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 435.

inverts the ascents and conquests of male heroism, she implies the necessity, for a woman, of distinguishing between myth and reality. Yet when Rich identifies with a “mermaid” and “merman” and says that “We are, I am, you are . . . the one who find our way / back to this scene,” the androgynous being and the fluid pronouns imply that “the thing itself” is itself mythic.¹⁵

When Circe in Margaret Atwood’s “Circe/Mud Poems” snarls at her lover, “It’s the story that counts. No use telling me this isn’t a story, or not the same story. . . . Don’t evade, don’t pretend you won’t leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless,” she too describes the depersonalizing effects of myths on persons, the way they replay themselves over and over and “the events run themselves through / almost without us.” But at the point of stating this, the poet declares that there are “two islands” that “do not exclude each other” and that the second “has never happened,” “is not finished,” “is not frozen yet.”¹⁶ In all these cases the poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior “myth” or “story” and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself.

Let me at this point therefore define the term “revisionist mythmaking” and sketch the background behind the work I will discuss. Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. Historic and quasi-historic figures like Napoleon and Sappho are in this sense mythic, as are folktales, legends, and Scripture. Like the gods and goddesses of classical mythology, all such material has a double power. It exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes “merely” of the private self. Myth belongs to “high” culture and is handed “down” through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority. At the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation—everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable.

In the wave of poetic mythmaking that broke over England in the Romantic period, we hear two strains. One is public antirationalism, an insistence that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of by Newton and Locke. The other is an assurance that the poets had personally experienced forces within the self so overwhelming that they must be described as gods and goddesses, titans, demiurges, and demons. But Romantic revisionists do not simply take seriously what the

15. Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” in *Poems* (n. 4 above), pp. 196–98, esp. p. 198.

16. Margaret Atwood, “Circe/Mud Poems,” in *You Are Happy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 45–70, esp. pp. 68–69.

Augustans took ornamentally. When Shelley invents for his defiant Prometheus an anima not present in any classical source, or when “knowledge enormous” of divine and human suffering makes a god and a poet of Keats’s Apollo, who then dies into immortal life with a scream: that is mythic revisionism. (The same scream, by the way, tears through the young throat of Edna St. Vincent Millay, in a poem many women loved as girls and later learned to despise; “Renescence,” too, is a poem about the genesis of a poet.)

Like the Romantics, the early Moderns—Yeats, Pound, Eliot—turned to myth as a means of defying their culture’s rationalism and materialism. But while the women poets I will speak of share a distrust for rationalism, they do not share the Modernist nostalgia for a golden age of past culture, and their mythmaking grows at least as much from a subterranean tradition of female self-projection and self-exploration as from the system building of the Romantics and Moderns.¹⁷

Since 1960 one can count over a dozen major works (poem sequences, long poems, or whole books) of revisionist myth published by American women, and one cannot begin to count the individual poems in which familiar figures from male tradition emerge altered. These poems generically assume the high literary status that myth confers and that women writers have often been denied because they write “personally” or “confessionally.” But in them the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead, as I hope by a few brief examples to show, they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival.

II

Women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. . . . To exist humanly is to name the self, the world and God. . . . Words which, materially speaking, are identical with the old become new in a semantic context that arises from qualitatively new experience. [MARY DALY]¹⁸

Since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on famil-

17. Discussion of the ways in which American women poets have used myth to handle material dangerous for a feminine “I” appears in Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).

18. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 8.

iar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them. Thus in the stroke of a phrase, Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* dismisses "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" as the two faces of a single authoritarian and domineering being for whom a woman's body is "your jewel . . . your valuable." Anne Sexton in "Snow White" disposes of centuries of reverence for the virgin "rolling her china-blue doll eyes. . . . Open to say / Good Day Mama / and shut for the thrust / of the unicorn." Jean Tepperman's "Witch" begins with the lines "They told me / I smile prettier with my mouth closed" and ends calling for a black dress, wild hair, and her broomstick. Of the passive Euridice who exists only as the tragic object of Orpheus' love, the poet Alta writes a motto for any woman poet:

all the male poets write of orpheus
as if they look back & expect
to find me walking patiently
behind them. they claim i fell into hell.
damn them, i say.
i stand in my own pain
& sing my own song.

Another solution to the male creator–female muse convention is Erica Jong's "Arse Poetica," a role-reversing prose-poem that contrives at once to deflate centuries of male aesthetic pretentiousness and to assert the identity of female sexuality and female creativity:

Once the penis has been introduced into the poem, the poet lets herself down until she is sitting on the muse with her legs outside him. He need not make any motions at all.¹⁹

With poems like these, one imagines the poets stepping out of the ring dusting their hands off. But revisionist poems do not necessarily confine themselves to defiance and reversal strategies.

A more central set of preoccupations concerns female–female relationships and the relation of the female to suppressed dimensions of her own identity. Kate Ellis's "Matrilineal Descent" uses the Demeter–Kore story as an aid in discovering how we may reconstitute lost families, becoming spiritual mothers and daughters for each other in time of need. Mothers, daughters, sisters must be recovered as parts "of the original woman we are"; after dreaming that a rivalrous younger sister is

19. Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," in *Collected Poems* (n. 2 above); Anne Sexton, "Snow White," in *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 3; Jean Tepperman, "Witch," in Howe and Bass, eds., pp. 333–34; Alta, "euridice," in *I Am Not a Practicing Angel* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1975); Erica Jong, "Arse Poetica," in *Fruits and Vegetables* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 27.

a daughter, and killing her in the dream, the poet movingly realizes that like Demeter she can “go down and get her / it is not too late.” Sharon Barba’s “A Cycle of Women” depicts women’s history before and during patriarchy as “that dream world . . . that dark watery place” presided over by a goddess, which each individual woman must try to remember, although the knowledge is locked from her. “Each one is queen, mother, huntress” and must reconstruct the past “until she knows who she is”:

Until she rises as though from the sea
not on the half-shell this time
nothing to laugh at
and not as delicate as he [Botticelli] imagined her:
a woman big-hipped, beautiful, and fierce.²⁰

Interlocked images of fertility and artistic creativity govern the poem-sequence “Eurydice” by Rachel DuPlessis. Here the heroine not only resents (like Alta’s Euridice) the loss of herself to a husband whose powerful sex and art define her “like a great linked chain” but is herself the snake “whose deepest desire was to pierce herself.” Withdrawing from her husband, far back into the moist, stony “fissure” and “cave” of herself, she becomes self-generating plant and finally, amid an efflorescence of organic images, her own mother, giving birth to the girlchild who is herself—or, since the sequence can be read as an allegory of female creativity, her poem. The idea of giving birth, unaided, to the self, is also the conclusion of Adrienne Rich’s “The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One,” and governs the “dry bulb” metaphor of “Necessities of Life.”²¹

All such poems are, I believe, aspects of an attempt by women to retrieve, from the myth of the abstract father god who creates the universe *ab nihilo*, the figure on which he was originally based, the female creatrix.²² And this is a figure *not* divided (as she is in C. J. Jung’s and Erich Neumann’s versions of her) into Sky Goddess (asexual) and Earth

20. Kate Ellis, “Matrilineal Descent,” in *US I: An Anthology*, ed. Rod Tulloss, David Keller, and Alicia Ostriker (Union City, N.J.: Wise, 1980), pp. 31–34; Sharon Barba, “A Cycle of Women,” in *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets*, ed. Laura Chester and Sharon Barba (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), pp. 356–57.

21. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Eurydice,” in *Wells* (New York: Montemora, 1980); Rich, “The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One,” and “Necessities of Life,” in *Poems*, pp. 193–95, esp. pp. 195, 60–70.

22. The feminist attempt to construct a redefined “Goddess” or “Great Goddess” is, of course, not confined to poetry or even to literature. See, in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women’s Culture*, no. 6 (1978), Gloria Z. Greenfield, Judith Antares, and Charlene Spretnak, “The Politics of Women’s Spirituality” (pp. 9–15); and Linda Palumbo, Maurine Reville, Charlene Spretnak, and Terry Wolverton, “Women’s Survival Catalog: Spirituality,” an excellent annotated listing of classic and recent texts, journals, and (a few) environmental artworks relating to “The Goddess” (pp. 77–99).

Mother (sexual but brainless).²³ Female attributes of flesh and spirit that traditional culture sets asunder, female writers commonly reunite. "The Goddess" for Denise Levertov is a furious woman who seizes the poet where she lies asleep in "Lie Castle" and hurls her against the walls. Prostrate outside the castle "where her hand had thrown me," the poet tastes the mud of a forest, bites the seed in her mouth, and senses the passing of "her" without whom nothing "flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,/ without whom nothing / speaks in its own tongue, but returns / lie for lie!" To identify an active, aggressive woman with Truth is to defy a very long tradition that identifies strong females with deception²⁴ and virtuous females, including muses, with gentle inactivity. In "Song for Ishtar," one of Levertov's most playful and most compact poems, a Babylonian goddess of both Love and War evokes images for what is divine and mundane, spiritual and animal, delicate and violent in female sexuality and female art:

The moon is a sow
and grunts in my throat
Her great shining shines through me
so the mud of my hollow gleams
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow
And I a pig and a poet

When she opens her white
lips to devour me I bite back
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire
we rock and grunt, grunt and
shine²⁵

A muse imagined in one's own likeness, with whom one can fornicate with violence and laughter, implies the extraordinary possibility of a poetry of wholeness and joy, as against the poetry of the "age of anxiety" in which Levertov was writing. That a sacred joy can be found within the self; that it requires an embracing of one's sexuality; that access to it must be described as movement downward or inward, in gender-charged metaphors of water, earth, cave, seed, moon: such is the burden of these

23. See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

24. Denise Levertov, "The Goddess," in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (New York: New Directions, 1959), pp. 43–44. Levertov treats the association of women with falsity in "Hypocrite Women," which redefines feminine deception (and self-deception) as compliance with male demands for mothering and with the male pronouncement that "our cunts are ugly," in *O Taste and See*, p. 70.

25. Levertov, "Song for Ishtar," in *O Taste and See*, p. 3.

and many other poems by women. To Stevens's post-Nietzschean formula "God and the imagination are one,"²⁶ they would add a crucial third element: God and the imagination and *my body* are one.

At the opposite pole from the creatrix is the destroyer, a figure women's poetry has been inhibited from exploring in the past by the need to identify femininity with morality. When they traffic in the demonic, women poets have produced some of the most highly charged images in recent American poetry. One thinks immediately of Plath's "disquieting muses," the three ladies "with stitched bald heads" who assemble around the poet, precipitated by the girl-scout cheeriness of a mother who attempts to deny reality's darkness; or the clinging "Medusa" who is at once classic monster, jellyfish, and the poet's mother; or her image of herself as avenging Phoenix-fiend at the close of "Lady Lazarus"; or the depiction of demonic possession in "Elm." In Anne Sexton, demonic images associated with madness, guilt, and death proliferate with increasing intensity, from the witches in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* to the set of "Angels" in *The Book of Folly* whom the poet acquaints with "slime . . . bedbugs . . . paralysis," to the staggering "death baby" who is the poet's alter ego in *The Death Notebooks*.²⁷

Plath and Sexton are dramatic portraitists, in contemporary poetry, of what Joseph Conrad called "the horror . . . the horror." Like Conrad, they imply that the hypocrisies of civilized rationality are powerless to destroy what is destructive in the world and in ourselves; indeed that "the horror" may well be the most devastating product of our demands for innocence and virtue. But what distinguishes their demonism from Conrad's, and from the standard personifications of "evil" throughout Western poetry, is the common characteristic of passivity. Wherever in these two poets we find images of compelling dread, there we also find images of muteness, blindness, paralysis, the condition of being manipulated.

Inactivity is also a motif in several poems written by women about classic female monsters. Of Medusa, a perennial figure in male poetry and iconography, Ann Stanford's sequence "Women of Perseus" and Rachel DuPlessis's "Medusa" both remind us of the key event in this female's life, though it goes unmentioned in either Bulfinch's or Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*: her rape by Poseidon. In Stanford's poem the trauma "imprisons" Medusa in a self-dividing anger and a will to revenge that she can never escape, though she yearns to. In DuPlessis's sequence the three Graeae—whose one eye Perseus steals—are conflated

26. Wallace Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 524.

27. Plath, "The Disquieting Muses," "Medusa," "Lady Lazarus," "Elm," in *Collected Poems*, pp. 74–76, 184, 244–46, 192; Sexton, "The Exorcists," in *To Bedlam*, pp. 22–23, and "Angels of the Love Affair," in *The Book of Folly* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), pp. 57–62.

into one mother-figure for Medusa; her rapist and killer are conflated into one male; and she herself becomes a static boundary "stone" and regresses to an infantile ur-language.²⁸

The Homeric earth-goddess and sorceress Circe, who turns Odysseus's fellow sailors to beasts and who throughout Western literature represents the evil magic of female sexuality, is transformed in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" into an angry but also a quite powerless woman. Men turn themselves to animals; she has nothing to do with it. "Will you hurt me?" she asks Odysseus at his first armor-plated appearance. "If you do I will fear you, / If you don't I will despise you." Circe is "a desert island" or "a woman of mud" made for sexual exploitation, and her encounters with Odysseus are war games of rape, indifference, betrayal, which she can analyze caustically, mounting a shrewd critique of the heroic ethos:

Aren't you tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and who are therefore dead already?
Aren't you tired of wanting to live forever?
Aren't you tired of saying Onward?

But this is passive, not active, resistance and cannot alter Odysseus's intentions. In Atwood's "Siren Song" the figure whose name still means "fatal seductress" sings a libretto of confinement turned vicious, "a stupid song / but it works every time." What Atwood implies, as do other women who examine the blackness that has represented femaleness so often in our culture, is that the female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else.²⁹

III

The short, passionate lyric has conventionally been thought appropriate for women poets if they insist on writing, while the longer, more philosophical epic belongs to the real (male) poet. [SUSAN FRIEDMAN]³⁰

If male poets write large, thoughtful poems while women poets write petite, emotional poems, the existence of book-length mythological poems by women on a literary landscape itself signifies trespass. Three such works are H. D.'s postwar masterpiece *Helen in Egypt*, Susan Griffin's extended prose-poem *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside*

28. Ann Stanford, "The Women of Perseus," in *In Mediterranean Air* (New York: Viking, 1977), pp. 34-48; Du Plessis, "Medusa," in *Wells*.

29. Atwood (n. 16 above), pp. 51, 38-39.

30. Susan Friedman, "Who Buried H. D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in 'The Literary Tradition,'" in *College English* 37 (March 1975): 807.

Her, and Anne Sexton's *Transformations*. They revise, respectively, ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology, the myth of objective discourse derived from the Western concept of a God superior to Nature, and a set of fairy tales. All of them challenge not only our culture's concepts of gender but also its concepts of reality.³¹

The *donnée* of H. D.'s three-part *Helen in Egypt* is that Helen of Troy—our culture's archetypal woman-as-erotic-object—was actually a male-generated illusion, a "phantom," and that "the Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion."³² H. D.'s sources are a fifty-line fragment by Stesichorus of Sicily (ca. 640–555 B.C.) and Euripides' drama *Helen*. According to these texts (themselves revisionist ones), "the real Helen" was transported by the gods from Greece to Egypt, where she spent the duration of the Trojan War waiting chastely for her husband Menelaus. In H. D.'s version Menelaus is a trivial figure, and the poet makes clear that sexual chastity—or any conventional morality—is no more to be expected of an epic heroine than of an epic hero. The poet radically transforms these sources as well as the vast body of Greek and Egyptian mythology of which she was mistress, and which she believed composed "all myth, the one reality" in the same way that she believed all history was a "palimpsest," a reiterated layering of changeless patterns. A more significant issue than the heroine's virtue is her relation to "the iron band of war"—meaning not only the Trojan War but the two world wars H. D. had lived through. Still more significant is the fact that the revised heroine is not woman-as-object at all, is not seen from the outside, but is instead a quintessential woman-as-subject, engaged in what is not a single but a threefold quest.³³

H. D.'s "real Helen" is a "Psyche / with half-dried wings" (sec. 166),

31. I have selected these three works for both their excellence and their diversity—including their diverse perspectives on female sexuality, from which much else, ideologically and formally, follows. H. D.'s orientation is (in this book) heterosexual, Griffin's lesbian, Sexton's (in this book) asexual. I believe that these works illuminate, in a profound way, both the common ground and the differences among these three orientations toward women's sexuality, and I believe it is vital for feminist critics not to "prefer" one perspective to the others; we have only begun to learn what sexuality means to us and how various our options may be.

32. H. D., *Helen in Egypt* (n. 11 above), sec. 1. Future references to this poem will be included in the text.

33. I am indebted to Susan Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), for her illuminating analysis of H. D.'s revisionist use of occult and mystical tradition in her quest for what she called "spirituality," and for her revisionist use of psychoanalytic doctrines and methods in her quest for self-affirmation. As Friedman makes clear, the quests and methods are projected onto the Helen of *Helen in Egypt*. I am also indebted to Rachel Blau DuPlessis's "Romantic Thralldom in H. D." (*Contemporary Literature* 20, no. 2 [Spring 1979]: 178–203) for the discussion of H. D.—Helen's need to construct a "sufficient family" as an alternative to "romantic thralldom." Helen's successful quest for (a) knowledge of the gods, (b) integration of self, (c) a family consisting of parent figures, siblings, lover, and progeny, might be related to a revisionist scheme of superego, ego, libido, in terms of what is sought and necessary for human wholeness.

a soul emerging from a chrysalis of ignorance and passivity. Spiritually her quest is to decipher symbols, beginning with the hieroglyphs on the temple of the Egyptian god Thoth-Amen, where we find her alone at the poem's opening. This Helen is an "adept," an initiate seeking knowledge of the gods. Psychologically, she is engaged in the recovery of her splintered selves, elements of her own character and past which, we gradually discover, because they are "hated of all Greece" (sec. 2), have been "forgotten" by herself. These two tasks are one task, because "she herself is the writing" (sec. 22). The goddess who manifests herself as Isis-Aphrodite-Thetis is at first a mother-goddess to Helen but ultimately an aspect of her own identity.

As avatar of Aphrodite, the heroine must reconcile herself with the "Helen of Troy" she has forgotten she ever was. That is, the spiritual seeker must accept the erotic woman within herself. These discoveries coalesce, again, with a third aspect of her quest: the reconstitution of a primal family, which among other things means that Helen must determine the meaning to herself of her Trojan and Greek lovers, the seductive Paris and the militant Achilles, and must choose (not be chosen by) a "final lover."

Achilles, the great protagonist of the *Iliad*, is H. D.'s paradigmatic patriarchal male as Helen is the paradigmatic female. Heroic, male-centered, immortality-seeking, Achilles ruthlessly leads a group of "elect" warriors dedicated to discipline and control, called (punningly) "The Command." To Achilles, woman is either sacrificial victim or sexual spoils. He has forgotten his boyhood love of the mother-goddess Thetis. Precisely for this reason, Thetis—that is, the repressed feminine principle within him—can cause him to fall in love with the figure of Helen pacing the Trojan ramparts, and, in a moment of carelessness over an ankle-greave, to receive the fatal wound from "Love's arrow" in his heel: "it was God's plan / to melt the icy fortress of the soul, / and free the man." Helen's first perception of him in Egypt is of a dim outline growing clearer, "as the new Mortal, / shedding his glory, / limped slowly across the sand" (secs. 9–10).

H. D.'s attitude toward conquest (including the conquest of Time) anticipates Atwood's "Aren't you tired of killing . . . ? Aren't you tired of wanting to live forever?" Her image of masculine defense against feeling as a hard armor that should be dissolved and melted, for the man's own sake, parallels Rich's question in "The Knight": "Who will unhorse this rider / and free him from between / the walls of iron, the emblems / crushing his chest with their weight?"³⁴ It is cognate as well with the fates meted out to the male protagonists at the conclusions of *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*. Brontë's and Browning's heroes are blinded in "fires" of sexual, and punitive, import. H. D.'s "arrow" penetrating a masculine chink is explicitly and evocatively sexual.

34. Rich, "The Knight," in *Poems*, pp. 43–44.

But the dissolving of male invulnerability in *Helen in Egypt* is part of a larger pattern. Helen's Trojan lover, Paris, while a less violent, more sensuous and woman-centered figure than Achilles, is ultimately assigned the role of "son" rather than "father" in a mother-father-son romantic triangle. Moreover, late in the poem Helen hears within herself "an heroic voice, the voice of Helen of Sparta," one who glories in "the thunder of battle . . . and the arrows; O the beauty of arrows" and must ask herself, "Do I love War? Is this Helena?" (secs. 176–77). The unveiling of this element in Helen parallels the release of Achilles' capacity to love. Replicating in mortal form the pattern of Isis-Osiris, Aphrodite-Ares (fecundity-knowledge, beauty-war), they link equal and opposite forces, generating a child ("Euphorion," pleasure or joy, equivalent of the Egyptian Horus and the Greek Eros) who will unite the attributes of both.

For the driving intellectual impulse in *Helen in Egypt* is the synthesizing of opposites. Typhon and Osiris, killer and victim of Egyptian myth, were "not two but one . . . to the initiate" (sec. 27); the daughter of Helen's sister Clytemnestra, and her own daughter Hermione, are identified as "one" sacrificial maiden (sec. 69); the Greek Zeus and the Egyptian Amen are "One," though manifested as "a series of multiple gods" (sec. 78). The same is true of some of the poem's key images or hieroglyphs: a beach of white "shells" and one of "skulls," the string of the lyre and the warrior's bowstring, the flaming brazier in the comforter's house and the flame of the burning Troy—these too are cognate, related forms, mutually dependent opposites. Eventually Helen intuitively that Love and Death, Eros and Eris (strife), unlike the Eros and Thanatos posited by the aged Freud as eternally dual principles, "will merge in the final illumination" (sec. 271).

At the same time, the poem is primarily psychodrama, and, to a degree paralleled by very few poems in our literature, nonmimetic of the external material world beyond the psyche. That world is represented in it to a great extent by men in ships or at war, and the relation of such "realities" to Helen's identity is only one of the enigmas she is solving in the poem. Thus the fascinating, flickering alternation between prose and verse in *Helen in Egypt* is that of a single mind having an urgent dialogue with itself, probing, questioning—an extraordinarily large portion of the poem's text takes the form of questions—and persisting despite confusion ("What does he mean by that? . . . Helena? who is she?") in the effort of feminine self-definition: "I must fight for Helena" (sec. 37). "I am not, nor mean to be / The Daemon they made of me" (sec. 109). "I will encompass the infinite / in time, in the crystal / in my thought here" (sec. 201). H. D. called the poem her "Cantos," and it is an implicit challenge to Ezra Pound's culturally encyclopedic *Cantos*, not only because it assails fascism and hero-worship, but also for its uncompromising inwardness, its rejection of all authority. For where Pound fills his poems with chunks

of authorized, authoritative literature and history, history and literature are for *Helen in Egypt* never authoritative but always to-be-deciphered, tangential to, incorporated within, the feminine mind.

Helen in Egypt is first of all personal, one woman's quest epitomizing the struggle of Everywoman. Its interior life comes to include and transcend the external historical world represented and inhabited by males—but it does not reject that world. In Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, male and female are again represented as polar opposites, but from a different point of view and with a different set of conclusions.

"Matter" and "Separation," the long opening books of *Woman and Nature*, offer a pastiche-parody of the history of occidental patriarchal intellect. Griffin quotes and paraphrases hundreds of works, ranging from the clean abstractions of theology, metaphysics, physics, and mathematics, through the material facts of history, to such practical subjects as forestry, agriculture, animal husbandry, mining, and office management. The collective and anonymous "paternal voice" she creates is emotionless, toneless, authoritative. It pronounces "that matter is only a potential for form. . . . That the nature of woman is passive, that she is a vessel" with supposed objectivity.³⁵

The attitude of this voice toward Nature ("matter") and toward Woman is the same. It conceptualizes both as essentially, ideally, and properly inferior, passive, intended for man's use; yet at the same time potentially dangerous, threatening, wild, and evil, requiring to be tamed by force. Extending in two directions, theoretical and practical, the analogy formulated by the anthropologist Sherry Ortner that "Woman is to Nature as Man is to Culture,"³⁶ Griffin on the one hand makes clear the connection between the myth (in the sense of metaphor) of active male God and passive female Nature, and the myth (in the sense of falsity) of rational objectivity in the life of the intellect and of civilization. On the other she composes a huge collage of the multiple ways in which male superiority, buttressed by its myths, destroys life.

To justify their exploitation and destruction, woman and nature must be seen both as morally evil and as metaphysically nonexistent. Thus of the "inordinate affections and passions" of Woman and the rich unpredictability of Nature, "it is decided that that which cannot be measured and reduced to number is not real" (p. 11). Scenes depicting

35. Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (n. 10 above). Future references to this work will be incorporated in the text.

36. Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1974). Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978) pursues the metaphor of land as "virgin" or "mother" in American history and literature, with findings parallel to Griffin's. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* might provide a gloss on much of Griffin; Griffin and Daly review each other's books in *Chrysalis*, no. 7 (1979), pp. 109–12.

depletion of nutrients in soil, courtship as a form of hunting, the extinction of species of beasts, the operation of clitoridectomy, the caging and drugging of a lioness, a woman muted by her husband's violence, the despoiling of forests, peasant women raped by invading soldiers, Karamazov's need to dispose of two female corpses, and the disposal of nuclear wastes become the logical extrapolation of such axioms. Though satiric, Griffin's portrait of the myth of rational objectivity is also playfully inventive with numerous sorts of male discourse, from logic to legalese, from Dantean mysticism to Einsteinian thought-experiment. At times it is also beautiful, as in the section called "Territory"; at times ironic, as in the section called "The Show Horse." Occasionally we hear whispers of the suppressed female/natural voice—confused, suffering, angry.

In the third book, "Passage," and the fourth, "Her Vision," this voice moves toward self-transformation. Through traditional female images of cave, water, earth, and seed, it gradually approaches images of light and flight. Altering from consciousness of "dreams" to knowledge of her body, her history, the body of the world; from passivity to rebellion, violence, dance, song; the "she" and "we" of this voice learn to accept "turbulence": "When the wind calls, will we go? Will this wind come inside us? Take from us? Can we give to the wind what is asked of us? Will we let go? . . . Can we sing back, this we ask, can we sing back, and not only sing, but in clear voices? Will this be, we ask, and will we keep on answering, keep on with our whole bodies? And do we know why we sing? Yes. Will we know why? Yes" (p. 222). Scenes from the first part of *Woman and Nature* reverse in the latter sections. Gynecologists become midwives. The lioness devours her captors. There is also a central asymmetry. Griffin portrays the relationships between mothers and daughters, midwives and birthing mothers; between women as friends, allies, and lovers; and between woman and earth as, in their ideal form, relationships of mirroring or interpenetration. Emotional closeness is derived from acknowledged likeness, not from the patriarchal relationship of dominance and submission, or from the dialectic between polarities envisioned by H. D. Consequently, in the last portion of *Woman and Nature*, the direct quotations are exclusively from women writers, and the male voice disappears from the book. At one point the "we" is a family of mourning elephants whose mother has been killed by a hunter and who vow to teach hatred and fear to their young: "And when we attack in their defense, they will watch and learn this too. From us, they will become fierce. And so a death like this death of our mother will not come easily to them. . . . And only if the young of our young or the young of their young never know this odor in their lifetime, . . . only then, when no trace is left of this memory in us, will we see what we can be without this fear, without this enemy, what we are" (p. 218). This pivotal passage offers a forceful metaphor for feminist separatism—man

is simply too dangerous, too much a killer, for woman to do anything but fear, fight, and avoid him. The passage also, by virtue of imagining a time “when no trace is left of this memory in us,” releases the author to conclude with a hymn of pleasure at once erotic and intellectual, a lesbian-feminist structural equivalent of the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the close of Blake’s *Jerusalem*, Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, or the Book of Revelation.³⁷

Like *Helen in Egypt*, *Woman and Nature* is a book about process and psychic struggle. In a recent essay Griffin writes that her initial attempts to organize her “scientific” material logically or chronologically failed. She had to learn to structure “intuitively, putting pieces next to one another where the transition seemed wonderful.” She also explains that “all the time I wrote the book, the patriarchal voice was in me, whispering to me . . . that I had no proof for any of my writing, that I was wildly in error.”³⁸ Thus the gradual disclosure of the female voice in the book reproduces the process of its creation.

Unlike both *Helen in Egypt* and *Woman and Nature*, and unlike most revisionist mythmaking by women, Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* is not structured around the idea of male and female as polar opposites and is consequently not gynocentric in the fashion of these books. Rather, it is a brilliant synthesis of public “story” and psychological revelation, revisionist both in its subversive readings of traditional plots, characters, and morals and in its portrait of a lady who exists beyond the plots, the female as creator.

Transformations consists of a prologue and sixteen tales from the Brothers Grimm, told in a wisecracking Americanese that simultaneously modernizes and desentimentalizes them. We have bits like “the dwarfs, those little hot dogs” (“Snow White”); “a wolf dressed in frills, / a kind of transvestite” (“Red Riding Hood”); or Sexton’s Gretel who, “seeing her moment in history . . . turned the oven on to bake.”³⁹ Under cover of entertainment, Sexton demolishes many of the social conventions, especially those connected with femininity, that fairy tales os-

37. Lest these comparisons appear outrageous, let me point out with respect to the most (apparently) outrageous of them that the ratio of “male” to “female” in the text of *Woman and Nature* is roughly equivalent to that between Old and New Testaments, with the “male” coming first. The “male” books of *Woman and Nature* cover a huge time span, are encyclopedic, multigenre, and polyvalent; they concern Conquest and Law but also contain Prophecy, like the Old Testament. Its “female” books cover a relatively brief time span, approach univocality, concern Salvation and Grace, and contain Fulfillment of Prophecy, like the New Testament. I do not suggest that Griffin intended the parallels; they are nonetheless visible and consonant with her overall purpose of retrieving from patriarchal discourse a woman’s language.

38. Susan Griffin, “Thoughts on Writing: A Diary,” in *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. Janet Sternburg (New York: Norton, 1980), pp. 112–13.

39. Sexton, *Transformations* (n. 19 above), pp. 6, 76, 104–5. Future references to this work will be incorporated in the text.

tensibly endorse. She mocks virginity and beauty as values; the former makes one a fool ("Snow White, that dumb bunny"), the latter cruel ("pretty enough, but with hearts like blackjacks"). Love, in Sexton's versions, is a form of self-seeking. The happy ending of marriage is treated ironically as "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk. / Is it not?"

An important source of Sexton's effectiveness is her striking ability to decode stories we thought we knew, revealing meanings we should have guessed. Her "Rapunzel" is a tale of love between an older and a younger woman, ultimately doomed by heterosexual normality. Her "Rumpelstiltskin" is about the naiveté and vulnerability of a dwarf manipulated by a calculating girl—or it is about the ability of the healthy ego to despise, suppress, and mutilate the libido. In "Hansel and Gretel," Sexton hints that the witch is a mother-goddess sacrificed by a female in alliance with the patriarchy.

Though Sexton is obviously indebted to psychoanalytic method in the retrieval of latent content, she is not limited by its dogmas. For example, psychoanalytical commentary on the "sleeping virgin" pattern in fairy tales interprets the theme as that of feminine pubescence.⁴⁰ Sexton in "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" takes this insight almost contemptuously for granted and organizes her version like a series of clues to quite another mystery. There is no mother in Sexton's version, only a father. The psychoanalytically sophisticated reader may speculate that the thirteenth fairy, "her fingers as long and thin as straws, / her eyes burnt by cigarettes, / her uterus an empty teacup" (p. 108) is a displaced mother figure, as evil stepmothers commonly are. The protective father who not only got rid of spinning wheels but "forced every male in the court / to scour his tongue with Bab-o" (p. 109) is apparently a possessive parent hoping to keep his young daughter sexually pure. But after the dénouement, the hundred years' sleep, and the arrival of the Prince, Sexton presents Briar Rose as a lifelong insomniac, terrified of sleeping. For when she sleeps she dreams of a dinner table with "a faltering crone at my place, / her eyes burnt like cigarettes / as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat." Why does the heroine identify with the crone? What betrayal? Only the last lines tell us just why the mother is not "in" Sexton's story. Waking from sleep Briar Rose cries, like a little girl, "Daddy! Daddy!" as she did when the Prince woke her—and what she sees is "not the prince at all,"

but my father,
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish.

[Pp. 111–12]

40. See, e.g., Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 225 ff. See Juhász (n. 8 above), pp. 118–32, for a discussion of "the psychoanalytic model" and Sexton's outgrowing of it.

This is, of course, a version of the Family Romance that neither orthodox psychoanalysis nor our legal system is ready to accept,⁴¹ but that countless women will recognize as painfully accurate.

In addition to the revivifying language and the revisionist interpretations of the stories, *Transformations* has another, framing element. The persona of the narrator-poet in the book's prologue is "a middle-aged witch, me" who talks like a den mother. Each of the ensuing tales has its own prologue, offering hints about the meaning of the story to come. The poet's personality alters with each prologue. In "Snow White" she is cynical, in "The White Snake," idealistic. Prior to "Rumpelstiltskin" she announces that the dwarf is the suppressed "law of your members," out of Saint Paul's epistles (p. 17), while in "One-Eye, Two-Eyes and Three-Eyes" she comments disapprovingly on the way parents with defective children "warm to their roles . . . with a positive fervor" where nature would sensibly let its malformed products die (pp. 59–60). In the prologue to "The Frog Prince" she addresses a "Mama Brundig" psychoanalyst, gaily declaiming:

My guilts are what
we catalogue.
I'll take a knife
and chop up frog.

But the gaiety plummets abruptly to horror: "Frog is my father's genitals. / Frog is a malformed doorknob. / Frog is a soft bag of green" (pp. 93–94).

Sexton as narrator is at times distant from the reader, at times intimate. She is unpredictably sensitive or brutal. What is important to notice here is that while the tales themselves are fixed—and Sexton stresses their ruthless changelessness, never letting us think that her "characters" act with free will or do anything but fill their slots in predetermined plots—the teller is mobile. She emits an air of exhilarating mental and emotional liberty, precisely because she is distanced from the material she so penetratingly understands. Thus the full force of *Transformations* lies not only in its psychosocial reinterpretations of Grimm's tales, however brilliant, nor in the fact that it expressly attacks literary and social conventions regarding women. Philosophically, the axis *Transformations* turns on is Necessity (here seen as fixed and damaging psychosocial patterns) versus Freedom; the "middle-aged witch, me" represents the latter.

41. See Florence Rush, *The Best-Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), esp. chap. 7, "The Freudian Cover-Up," which discusses Freud's conviction that incest is a female fantasy and the consequences of Freudian orthodoxy for incest victims today. See also Judith Lewis Herman (with Lisa Hirschman), *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), esp. the appendix, "The Incest Statutes," by Leigh Bienen.

IV

What all these poems have in common is, first, that they treat existing texts as fence posts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth but by no means identical to it. In other words, they are enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts.

Second, most of these poems involve reevaluations of social, political, and philosophical values, particularly those most enshrined in occidental literature, such as the glorification of conquest and the faith that the cosmos is—must be—hierarchically ordered with earth and body on the bottom and mind and spirit on the top.

Third, the work of these poets is conspicuously different from the Modernist mythmaking of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden because it contains no trace of nostalgia, no faith that the past is a repository of truth, goodness, or desirable social organization. Prufrock may yearn to be Hamlet, but what woman would want to be Ophelia? While the myth of a Golden Age has exerted incalculable pressure in the shaping of Western literature and its attitude toward history, the revisionist woman poet does not care if the hills of Arcady are dead. Or rather, she does not believe they are dead. Far from representing history as a decline, or bemoaning disjunctions of past and present, her poems insist that past and present are, for better or worse, essentially the same. H. D.'s concept of the "palimpsest" seems to be the norm, along with a treatment of time that effectively flattens it so that the past is not then but now.

Fourth, revisionism correlates with formal experiment. This is important not only because new meanings must generate new forms—when we have a new form in art we can assume we have a new meaning—but because the verbal strategies these poets use draw attention to the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of female re-vision. As it accentuates its argument, in order to make clear that there *is* an argument, that an act of theft *is* occurring, feminist revisionism differs from Romantic revisionism, although in other respects it is similar.⁴²

The gaudy and abrasive colloquialism of Alta, Atwood, Plath, and Sexton, for example, simultaneously modernizes what is ancient and reduces the verbal glow that we are trained to associate with mythic material. Even H. D., who takes her divinities entirely seriously, avoids the elevated or quasi-liturgical diction that, in the educated reader, triggers the self-surrendering exaltation relied on by the creators of such poems as *Four Quartets* or *The Cantos*. With women poets we look at, or into, but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission.

A variant of colloquial language is childish or infantile language,

42. For a discussion of formal experimentation and its aesthetic and political significance in women's prose, see Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe [Robbins], "Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," *Chrysalis*, no. 6 (1978), pp. 57–71.

such as T. S. Eliot used in the nursery rhyme echoes of "The Hollow Men" and at the close of *The Wasteland* to suggest a mix of regression and despair. In DuPlessis's "Medusa," passages of halting and sometimes punning baby talk become a way of revealing the power of sexual pain to infantilize, to thwart growth; the speaker's ultimate articulateness coincides with the growth of her avenging snakes. Regressive language also signals sexual trauma in Sexton. Another variant of the colloquial is the bawdy, a traditionally male linguistic preserve that women like Erica Jong have lately invaded.

The most significant large-scale technique in these poems is the use of multiple intertwined voices within highly composed extensive structures. In the three long works discussed here there is the alternating prose and verse of *Helen in Egypt*, with occasional interludes when one of Helen's lovers speaks, or she imagines him speaking; the male and female voices in *Woman and Nature*, along with the multitudinous direct quotations; and prologue and story in *Transformations*.⁴³ These balancings are crucially important to the texture and sense of the poems, just as the multiple voices of *The Wasteland*, *The Cantos*, or *Paterson* are. Insofar as the subject of the poem is always the "I" of the poet, her divided voices evoke divided selves: the rational and the passionate, the active and the suffering, the conscious life and the dream life, animus and anima, analyst and analysand. To read *Helen in Egypt* is uncannily like overhearing a communication between left brain and right brain.

In some ways, too, these poems challenge the validity of the "I," of any "I." Like the speaker of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," whose discovery of her submerged self is a discovery that she is a "we" for whom even the distinction between subject and object dissolves, the heroines we find in women's revisionist mythology are more often fluid than solid. But these are not books—or heroines—about which the authors are saying, as Pound tragically said of *The Cantos*, and his life, "I cannot make it cohere."⁴⁴ Although the divided self is probably the single issue women poets since 1960 most consistently struggle with, the most visionary of their works appear to be strengthened by acknowledging division and containing it, as H. D. says, "in my thought here."⁴⁵

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43. Similar techniques appear in Diane Wakoski's "The George Washington Poems," in *Trilogy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 113–66; and Robin Morgan's "Network of the Imaginary Mother," in *Lady of the Beasts* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 61–88. I cannot think of any major modern poem by a man in which the self is presented as split or plural while the total poetic structure remains cohesive rather than fragmented. In the closest approximation, John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), the "blackface" voice plays a distinctly minor role. *The Wasteland*, *The Cantos*, and *Paterson* are, of course, classics of personal, social, and aesthetic fragmentation.

44. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 796.

45. H. D., p. 201.

Appendix

The following are post-1960 myth-poems, listed alphabetically by author. Extended poems and poem-sequences are indicated by an asterisk (*). Readers of contemporary women's poetry will be able to supply other titles.

- Alta. "euridice." In *I Am Not a Practicing Angel*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1975.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Eventual Proteus," "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein," "Siren Song," "Circe/Mud Poems."* In *Selected Poems*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976.
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