Ana Paula Raspini Vieira

GODDESS OR COUNTERTOP DANCER: MYTHOLOGICAL FEMALE FIGURES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *MORNING IN THE BURNED HOUSE*

Dissertação submetida ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina para a obtenção do Grau de Mestre
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Para Nina.

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“Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father”
Virginia Woolf

“We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the one who find our way / back to this scene / carrying a knife, a camera / a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear”
Adrienne Rich

“You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing”
Hélène Cixous

“I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”
Donna Haraway

“Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings”
“I no longer feel I'll be dead by thirty; now it's sixty. I suppose these deadlines we set for ourselves are really a way of saying we appreciate time, and want to use all of it. I'm still writing, I'm still writing poetry, I still can't explain why, and I'm still running out of time”
Margaret Atwood

“We are temporary arrangements”
Alanis Morissette

RESUMO

Personagens mitológicas são referências recorrentes na escrita de Margaret Atwood e aparecem, frequentemente, de maneira revisitada, questionando o cânone, a própria mitologia clássica e atuando como metáforas complexas da sociedade atual. Este estudo analisa a recorrência de três dessas figuras mitológicas sob o prisma da crítica literária feminista numa seleção de poemas de Margaret Atwood intitulado *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). A análise busca verificar se e como elas podem ser entendidas como uma paródia auto-reflexiva sobre a condição paradoxical da mulher na sociedade ocidental contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Mitologia. Poesia. Feminismo. Revisionismo. Atwood

ABSTRACT

Mythological figures are recurrent references in Margaret Atwood's writing, and they frequently appear in a revisited way, questioning the canon, classical mythology itself, and functioning as complex metaphors of contemporary society. The present study analyzes, under the light of feminist literary criticism, the recurrence of three mythological figures in a poetry collection by Margaret Atwood entitled *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). The analysis aims at verifying if and how they can be taken as a self-reflexive parody of the paradoxical condition of women in contemporary Western society.

Key-words: Mythology. Poetry. Feminism. Revisionism. Atwood

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1 INTRODUCTION

Mythology is deeply rooted in human history. It is a product of language and of the human need to communicate and produce meaning. Mythology is also considered a communal practice, holding the power to "bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities" (Guerin 149). It is but a type of primitive fiction in which peoples put, symbolically, their hopes and fears (148). Moreover, mythology has served the useful purpose of explaining what the human mind cannot conceive, or cannot prove scientifically. Therefore, mythology shares one core feature with literature: classical myth "is a narrative [that] tells a story" (Montefiore 40). Additionally, as Roland Barthes argues in his book *Mythologies* (1972), according to etymology, "myth is a type of speech" (109), a concept that shall be further explored in the next chapter.

Poetry, in its turn, as a form of literary expression, can be likewise taken as an important repository of representations and beliefs, using myth to enhance cultural meanings, which can be either reinforced or contested. As Charlotte Beyer (2000) puts it,

> [f]eminist critics argue that poetry, as a literary and discursive form, lends itself readily to a scrutiny of women's attempts to challenge and revise dominant cultural discourses in an imaginative way which allows them to exceed the categories constructed by theoretical/critical thought. (277)

Within such context, the present investigation deals with the relation between classical myth and poetry in the collection of poems *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, in which several mythological female characters appear as what may be taken as metaphors of the social condition of contemporary women.

The problem to be investigated concerns the construction of myth, more specifically revisionist mythmaking. Using mythological female figures, both well-known and less famous ones, Atwood foregrounds and highlights the paradoxical nature of female myths, both as holders of power and as submissive common women. Such contradictory interpretations need to be examined in the context of the profound social changes that occurred in the literary representation of women from the second half of the twentieth century to the present.

As a general purpose, this investigation seeks to analyze the use of classical myth in the poetic representation of women by Margaret Atwood. For such, the following topics shall be pursued: a) Investigation of the overall relation between classical myth and poetry, or how mythical references work in the context of contemporary poetry; b) Revision of the feminist critique of classical myth and the rise of "revisionary mythopoesis"; c) Analysis of the use of myth in the poetry of Margaret Atwood.

The study holds as its central initial hypothesis that the depiction of the mythological female figures in Atwood's poems is intentionally subversive and paradoxical, possibly serving as a parody of and as a metaphor for the condition of women in contemporary Western society.

The corpus of investigation is the collection of poems *Morning in the Burned House*, published in 1995. The collection is divided into five sections, being the fourth part famous for being entirely dedicated to the memory of Atwood's father, who died after a long struggle against cancer. The collection is known for such elegiac mood, and the theme is discussed in several articles, such as "Mourning in the Burned House: Margaret Atwood and the Modern Elegy", by Sara Jamieson. Atwood holds over fifteen books of poetry, rendering it impossible to analyze all of them in the space allowed in this thesis. The selection of this particular work is due to its concentration of mythological references, both explicitly and implicitly. Also, the decision to shed light on some poems of *Morning in the Burned House* is due to the fact that few works have taken the effort to analyze mythology when it comes to this specific poetry collection and much is still left for scrutiny. In the words of Charlotte Beyer (2000), "[a]ll of section II in *Morning in the Burned House* is about deconstructing mythological figures and narratives as well as symbols of femininity, which are at the heart of patriarchal culture" (284). Thus, the major criterion for the selection of poems is the recurrence of mythological female figures and their correlation to contemporary social interactions, especially the social interactions which involve modern women and their role in Western society.

The close relationship between myth and literature has long been object of research and investigation. In terms of the criticism on Margaret Atwood, the use of intertexts, especially fairy-tales, as a form of social criticism has been widely examined. However, as Sharon Wilson remarks, "[d]espite hundreds of articles on Atwood published in the last few years, scholars are only beginning to recognize the variety and significance of her mythic intertexts" (215), affirming how little

critics have discussed Atwood's textual references, either apparent or unobvious ones.

In any way, the aforementioned critical works are mainly about Atwood's prose and very little is mentioned about her poetic production. Therefore, this investigation becomes relevant for specifically verifying the relation Atwood establishes between mythological female figures and common modern women in her poems. Beyer mentions, about an interview Atwood had with G. Hancock, which is in *Margaret Atwood—Conversations* (1990), "that poetic discourse allows for an imaginative exploration of [...] mythologies and discourses" (277). In the same interview, Atwood herself adds:

> If we had a sacred habit of mind, all kinds of things would be 'sacred'. Most are not at present. We would be able to see *into* things, rather than merely to see things. We would see the universe as alive. But you're more likely to find such moments in my poetry than my prose. (218)

Beyer goes on to state that "critics have generally appeared reluctant to explore in depth [the mythological] aspects of Atwood's poetry, or have not paid sufficient attention to them" (277). Hence, not only the issue of revealing more aspects of Atwood's poetry, but also the plurality of ways she deconstructs myth are relevant and shall be explored.

So far, Programa de Pós-Gradação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários has had three MA theses on myth and three others on the works of Margaret Atwood. Perhaps the thesis that is more closely related to the present investigation is the one entitled "The Use of Fairy-Tale Elements in Margaret Atwood's Novels", defended by Maria Cristina Martins in 1992 and advised by Susana Bornéo Funck, the same advisor of the present work. None of the above, however, has raised the issue of the relation between mythology and Atwood's poetry, nor has there been a work regarding specifically female classical myths and women's social representation.

As the proposed investigation concerns myth and poetry, critics such as Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood herself shall be used for the contextualization of myth and its relation to literature. Additionally, Roland Barthes's conception of myth as a form of discourse that hides the historical origin of ideas and beliefs, thus crystallizing some concepts as unquestionable truths, will also prove useful as theoretical background. Since the focus is on female mythological figures, feminist

critical theories will be examined, especially those dealing with revisionism and the use of classical myth. Especially relevant are critics such as Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich, Alicia Ostriker, Rachel Blau duPlessis, Sharon Wilson, and Coral Ann Howells. Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" shall be an important guideline for the first chapter. The concept of the trickster (Hyde, VanSpanckeren) will be needed for the analysis and will be developed in the second chapter. Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody shall help weave the final remarks.

The content of the present work will be arranged and divided into Chapter 1, Chapter 2, and Final Remarks. Chapter 1 will present the relation between myth and poetry, and the feminist critique of tradition as to provide the theoretical ground for the analysis. Then, in Chapter 2, the poems "Helen of Troy does counter dancing" (33-36), "Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war, violent storms, pestilence, and recovery from illness, contemplates the desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" (39-41), and "Daphne and Laura and so forth" (26, 27) will be analyzed as regards the mythological female figures and the representation of women. The strategies Atwood employs and the effects of the use she makes of myth in *Morning in the Burned House* will also be observed. The Final Remarks will comment on the analysis and its impacts on the representation of contemporary Western women.

2 MYTH, LITERATURE, AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

As a general concept, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1991) defines Myth as "a story which is not 'true' and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings—or at any rate supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to exist" (Cuddon 562). Robert Graves, in the introduction of the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (1959), defines mythology as "the study of whatever religious or heroic legends are so foreign to a student's experience that he cannot believe them to be true" (v). Graves reinforces how odd Classical Mythology may seem for contemporary readers and agrees with the previous concept that mythology is taken by contemporary audiences as not true, that is, as a fictitious narrative. Many authors, and also other well known figures such as Carl Gustav Jung, sustain that mythology is made of a universal matter and universal symbols; they believe that mythology has some characteristics to which any human being would relate. For instance, Alan Watts states that "[m]yth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (7). Robert Graves sustains a similar argument saying that "[m]yth has two main functions. The first is to answer the sort of awkward question that children ask, such as: 'Who made the world? How will it end? Who was the first man? Where do souls go after death?'" (v). With such affirmation, Graves reinforces the idea that mythology is somehow universal, for it answers questions any human being will ask him/herself at some point of their life.

Graves goes on to explain that "[t]he second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs" (v). In a similar way, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (2005) reminds us of the social aspects of mythology, its communal and human characteristic, which is embedded in language. David Leeming contends that "[m]yths might be considered the most basic expressions of a defining aspect of the human species–the need and ability to understand and to tell stories to reflect our understanding, whether or not we know the real facts" (xii). And as mythology is closely connected to language and to human cravings for story-telling, he mentions that it is, therefore, also enduring: "We are always aware of the journey aspect of our existence. So it has always been that adults have told stories to children to describe our journey, and leaders have told their people stories for the same reason" (xii). Mythology is, then, a

type of fiction in which social groups deposit their hopes, creeds, and fears. As previously mentioned, mythology shares one main characteristic with literature: the fact that it tells a story.

Moreover, still on the subject of the similarities between myth and literature, Northrop Frye states that "mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable" (*Stubborn* 102). Again, Frye grants universality to mythology, and consequently, to literature, claiming that these two are connected to the human condition, and for that matter, regard to any human being, in any place, at any period of time.

In spite of this generally acknowledged relation between myth and literature, the rise of feminist literary criticism and the dissemination of discourse studies in the second half of the twentieth century brought to the fore several other issues that must be dealt with. In his book *Mythologies* (1957), for example, Roland Barthes sheds new light on the discussion of myth, taking into account discourse analysis and presenting myth as an ideological construction, arguing that "myth is a type of speech" (109), to which I will come back later.

Feminist literary criticism deals with literature through the prism of gender representation in both literary texts and literary history. As Wilfred Guerin puts it, "Feminist literary critics try to explain how what they term engendered power imbalances in a given culture are reflected, supported, or challenged by literary texts" (182). Beyond that, feminist literary critics started out by analyzing what was taken as canonical literature and tested its claim that classic literature is universal. Once the dominant paradigms of classic literature were proven logocentric and phallocentric, further observations and, most importantly, further challenge of such constructs followed. Hélène Cixous, important French feminist critic, was one of the first to raise such issue, in the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976):

> I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural -- hence political, typically masculine -- economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner

> that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak. (879)

In other words, literary texts, in their different genres and types are not immune to social structures of power, as they bear ideological representations about the character and image of a given people or culture, or, in the case of women, a group of people.

Classical mythology, as an ancient type of fiction, a form of storytelling closely connected to literature, not only in form, but also in its patriarchal characteristics (Montefiore 40), is, like other types of mythology and most canonical literary works, androcentric. Hence, "[s]ince most myths are constructed and studied by men" (Guerin 206), women's representations in myths are usually stereotyped, repressed, and negatively related to nature. The archetypes mythology carries, such as the sun meaning the father principle, energy, and enlightenment while the moon stands for the female principle, with adjectives such as darkness, and passivity, to give one example, are according to Guerin imbalanced in terms of gender (150-153). As it shall be exposed later on, the mythological representation of women is usually flat, shallow and divided into only two aspects of the human character: good or bad.

Aside from the historically hegemonic aspect of classical mythology, it is important to consider the characteristics of mythological discourse that Roland Barthes addresses in his book *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes explains that anything can be turned into myth, however, no myth is eternal, "for it is human history which converts reality into speech" and "myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (132), a speech whose "intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized" (145). Therefore, it is possible to perceive that myth has an ambiguous nature and "the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (149), for "myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection" (150).

To solve this paradox, Barthes states that the method used by myth is "[t]he elaboration of a second-order semiological system [that] will enable myth to escape this dilemma", and thus "[w]e reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature". This *naturalization* is responsible for transforming myth into a crystallized, universal truth, and only one at that. Myth, then "is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (150),

"imperfectible and unquestionable" (151). Therefore, myth holds its ideological power by means of representation, for it becomes an irrefutable type of representation.

Classical Mythology is usually understood as Greco-Roman mythology, which is the totality of myths, figures and stories from ancient Greece and ancient Rome (Grafton, Most & Settis 614). However, as Northrop Frye reminds us, "[t]he word myth is used in such a bewildering variety of contexts that anyone talking about it has to say first of all what his chosen context is" (*Myth* 3). Therefore, I must make clear what is meant by Classical Mythology in this study. I propose the definition of myth as the following: "symbolic narratives that are connected to belief systems or rituals and are undeniably androcentric in content" (Dörschel 7).

The way Greek mythology–and other types of classical mythology–created stories to explain the origins of the world or natural phenomena and how such stories were taken as truth by the Greek people, for instance, illustrate such *naturalization*. Actually, the very state of Classical Mythology as a corpus of study, distant and immutable as the concept shown previously (Grafton, Most & Settis), foments such *naturalization* and petrifies it as truth, differently from the other concepts mentioned (Cuddon, Graves, Montefiore) which compare it to fiction.

In terms of gender representation, myth has been responsible for crystallizing a male centered discourse, from which women have for a long time been absent (Guerin 182). That is, as feminist literary critics highlight, a female language has been missing in mythology, as well as a female imagery and a history for women. As previously mentioned, mythical images of women are often, if not always, presented as twofold stereotypes developed by male ideals. In fact, that form of representation which shows women in an 'either/or' position does not occur only in mythology, but also in most female characters in literature. According to Alicia Ostriker (1985), "[i]t is thanks to myths we believe that woman must be either 'angel' or 'monster'" (12). It is also important to mention that in such binary representations there is not only opposition, but also a type of hierarchy, where "one leg of the binary is always superior to the other", and where "one term requires the other's absence for its presence" (Korkmaz 8). Hélène Cixous sees this binary concept as negative from both viewpoints, affirming that "[t]hey riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (885).

This binary pattern appears recurrently in fiction, where women are depicted either as good mothers, kind wives, or as cruel godmothers

and treacherous whores, seldom something in between. Moreover, for lacking depth in character, such gendered stereotypes "lock women into a subordinate role. In such roles, women tend to be portrayed either as vulnerable victims, lacking verve or imagination, or hags, stepmothers and rivals" (Wisker 58). However, as we shall see, several women writers, among them Atwood, have challenged and deconstructed this duality, for as she notes in the poem "Spelling" from *True Stories* (1981), "There is no either/or" (63).

Since the nineteenth century, revisionist (or revisionary) mythmaking can be perceived in some literary works by women writers, among which the play *Proserpine* (1832) by English writer Mary Shelley stands out. The play is about Ovid's tale of Proserpine and Pluto, which was based, in its turn, on the famous Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. Mary Shelley's revision concentrates on the female characters. In Shelley's feminist revision, Ceres is given a voice and tells the story through her viewpoint.

In poetry, this practice seems to have been more frequent in the twentieth century, as stated in *Writing beyond the Ending* (1985), by Rachel Blau DuPlessis: "[t]wentieth-century women poets turn again and again to rewrite, reinterpret, or reenvision classical myth and other culturally resonant materials, such as biblical stories and folk tales" (105), thus illustrating how revisionist mythmaking is a recent yet already widely spread activity.

According to Liz Yorke (1991),

> Revisionary mythmaking often attempts to shift the coherences of patriarchal language, not into incoherence but rather into something more, breaking against and exceeding the symbolisations of patriarchal discourse. The difficult process of re-making meaning involves the questioning and undoing of patriarchal propositions, codes, and positions. (111)

In order to fight the dominant patriarchal culture in literary texts, especially in mythology, female poets are inventing and revising myths so as "to forge an anticolonial mythopoesis, an attack on cultural hegemony" (DuPlessis 107). By questioning standard patterns of representation and thereby questioning the dominant cultural discourse, female writers are coming up with new perspectives regarding female imagery. By retelling mythological tales from a female perspective, "[r]evisionist mythmaking in women's poetry may offer us one

significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (Ostriker 11). In the case of classical mythology, the act of envisioning a new viewpoint to the mythological narrative redefines a literary format, "the high epic genre", an ancient and traditional type of narrative in patriarchal cultures, calling "attention to its conventions and limitations by putting it in a new, contemporary context" (Staels 101). Such limitations in the male narrative shall be the core of the female rewriting of myth. The blanks left out by canonical literature provide the starting point from which women writers question and deconstruct not only such blanks, but the whole genre.

In the words of Jan Montefiore, in *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), revisionist mythmaking is "so attractive to poets" for two reasons:

> Certainly it is the awareness, derived from the insights of psychoanalysis and anthropology, of myths as representing and defining human consciousness, that has made it so attractive to poets; it is not accident that the revival of myth in poetry post-dates the appearance of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Golden Bough*. But what defines a myth as such is not only its status as a repository of meaning, but something simpler if more recalcitrant: it is a narrative (oh dear yes, a myth tells a story). (40)

Especially for women poets, one of the main purposes of changing traditional representations and stories is to put women back in literary discourse and, consequently, back in history. "In all these cases the [woman] poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior 'myth' or 'story' and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself" (Ostriker 12) along with her own experience and her own language. The myths and tales envisioned and constructed by women poets are, thus, more fair and plural, for "[t]hey 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" (Ostriker 14). Such new representations show, as in the case of the ones analyzed here, multiple features and depth, approximating these figures to more human attributes, rendering endless materials for researchers and critics to work on.

What the revisionist poem tries to do is reevaluate the social, political, and philosophical principles of humankind, long carved in the stone of history (Ostriker 27). Not only classical mythology, but also

other ancient texts as biblical and folk narratives are being currently revised. In fact, DuPlessis mentions that some "blasphemous female author[s]" such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar chose mythology because it is a less intense subject, for it only bears "the authority of school, not God" (107). As Ostriker defends, "[w]ith women poets we look at, or into, but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission" (28).

Atwood herself, in the book *Survival: A thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), comments on the importance of revision in a cultural and national context:

> Even the things we look at demand our participation, and our commitment: if this participation and commitment are given, what can result is a 'jailbreak,' an escape from our old habits of looking at things, and a 'recreation,' a new way of seeing, experiencing and imaging—or imagining—which we ourselves have helped to shape. (292)

Another important feminist critic, Adrienne Rich, also writes about the importance of revision in her essay "When we dead awaken" (1971): "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (35).

As the present investigation deals with the relation between classical myth and its revisions in poetry, specifically in the poetic work of Margaret Atwood, I shall shift the discussion to an Atwoodian focus now. Since her first works, Atwood has widely exploited mythology and its figures, both implicitly and explicitly (Wilson). Myth is an important theme already in her very first book, which was privately published in 1961 and was a collection of poetry entitled *Double Persephone*. In this work, it is already possible to perceive revisionist aspects of mythology among the seven poems in the collection. For instance, there is a reference to the mythical figure of Medusa represented by a girl (Davey). Besides this example, Atwood goes much further in the use of mythological intertexts. Atwood's works which make use of mythology at some level range from novels (see *The Robber Bride*, for instance), to short stories (see *Good Bones*), to poetry (see *Interlunar*, *Circle Game*), and several others, not to mention the ones previously referred to here.

Atwood, however, does not merely use mythological figures; she deconstructs and transforms them in different ways with different

purposes. In a way, it is possible to say that concomitantly to the act of revising classical mythological figures, Atwood creates modern myths. She does not create new ones from scratch, but she turns existing ones into something else, reiterating Barthes when he says an old myth cannot be killed, only replaced by a new one. According to Klaus P. Müller (2000), "[t]raditional myths are destructive for Atwood because they annihilate human freedom and the possibility of creating something new" (247). About the discursive power myth has of petrifying truths, Müller states that "Atwood criticizes the strong influence [myths] have had on people's perceptions of reality, and adds new perspectives and new possibilities by reversing roles, changing solutions, etc" (247).

Going back to Barthes's paradoxical conception of the myth—its characteristic of being, at the same time, true and false—Atwood herself engaged in a similar discussion in her novel *The Penelopiad* (2005), as Hilde Staels highlights in her essay "The Penelopiad and Weight" (2009). Differently from *The Odyssey*, by Homer, the main character of the novel is a female mythological character, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who, according to Staels, "states that classical myths are merely narratives, of which many versions exist, and that the truth can never be known" (109).

As critical and theoretical works on the revisionism present in *The Penelopiad* are abundant, some parallels between Penelope and the mythological female figures that shall be discussed here may prove relevant and shall be drawn if and whenever reasonable. One main connection between the female figures analyzed here and Penelope is the fact that the characters are narrators of their own stories. Gina Wisker (2012) affirms that when telling a "tale of woman as storyteller" the female character is "constructing and weaving her own versions of events" (142), or, if we may, "a female insider's version of events" (146). Again, here is the issue of a female discourse and the prospect of adding, consciously, women in history, or, in this case, versions of history, for mythology bears, like history, several versions.

As Atwood mentions in *Lady Oracle* (1982), "every myth is a version of truth", meaning that every narrative takes the narrator's point of view and thus becomes her/his truth, even when it comes to ancient stories such as classical mythology. About rewriting myth, she explains in the Notes in *The Penelopiad* that she is not simply retelling *The Odyssey*, but also regarding other sources, for there is not only one version of ancient Greek myths: "a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another" (xiv). To support the matter on history—as well as myth—being one viewpoint of truth, Coral Ann

Howells states: “We live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of large memory we call history, is being called into question” (25)

Conversely, Marina Warner sustains in the book *Six Myths of Our Time* (1995) that rewriting and deconstructing myths, as she herself and several other writers have done, does not mean that myths are lies and must be completely dismissed. She asserts that myths are more inspirational and influential than people think (xix). Obviously, myths have been serving as inspiration to many writers, and Warner invites everyone to collaborate with this endeavor, in an excerpt where she also refers to Barthes and his contribution to the subject of myth:

> I believe the process of understanding and clarification to which Barthes contributed so brilliantly can give rise to newly told stories, can sew and weave and knit different patterns into the social fabric and that this is a continuous enterprise for everyone to take part in. Ancient myths of the kind I describe, dangerous mothers, warrior heroism, are perpetuated through cultural repetition, transmitted through a variety of pathways. But this does not mean that they will never fade, to yield to another, more helpful sets of images or tales. (xx)

Warner also calls attention to the thin line between lie and truth, fiction and reality, affirming that myths, “[l]ike fiction, can tell the truth even when they’re making it all up” (28).

Similarly to Warner, although rewriting myths and trying, with this, to fill in the gaps mythology carries for representing women so flatly and dubiously, Atwood does not mean to banish myths either. As she explains in an interview, she does not “believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies”, for she thinks “everybody needs one. It is just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you” (Ingersoll 32).

Sharon Wilson, who holds relevant works on Margaret Atwood’s intertextuality, has been investigating Atwood’s extensive use of myth and fairy tales, especially in novels. In her essay “Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood’s Works” (2000), Wilson states that Atwood uses mythology and its symbols “not only to provide a mythic resonance and polyphonic melody, but to parody or undercut narrative authority in a postmodern way” (Wilson 215). Staels also mentions the

parodic aspect of Atwood's revisions of mythology, maintaining that "Atwood […] transform[s] classical myths by means of parody and burlesque travesty" (100). Further conceptualization of parody and the part it may play in Atwood's poetry shall be presented in the Final Remarks.

Sharon Wilson raises an interesting hypothesis about Atwood's use of mythological intertexts, dividing the purposes into five categories:

> As can be seen in Atwood's use of fairy tales and other folklore, myth intertexts generally serve at least five connected purposes throughout Atwood's works. One, they indicate the quality and nature of characters' cultural contexts; two, they signify characters'—and readers'—entrapment in pre-existing patterns; and three, they comment self-consciously on these patterns – including the embedded myths, fairy tales, and related popular traditional stories – often by deconstructing constricting literary, folkloric, and cultural plots with transgressive language, thus filling in the gaps of female narrative. Four, myth and other intertexts comment self-consciously on the frame story, on themselves, and on their intertexts. When used in metafiction, intertexts call attention to themselves as intertexts, highlighting their shortcomings or celebrating the power of language and story. Finally, five, and most important, mythic intertexts structure the characters' imaginative or 'magical' release from externally imposed patterns, offering the possibility of transformation for the novel's characters, for the country they partly represent, and for all human beings. (225-226)

As these assumptions are about Atwood's novels, I shall focus along the development of this thesis on the first four aspects Wilson provides, once the last one does not directly apply to the poems under study here because the mythological figures, or the personae of the

poems, do not transform their lives or their country, they do not have endings, and do not necessarily wish to. Yet, they remain in a fragmented and dissatisfied situation, perhaps to relate more closely to real aspects of life.

To illustrate such premise, I shall analyze three of the most important female characters present in *Morning in the Burned House*. According to Wilson, "[i]n *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Helen of Troy, Daphne […], and Sekhmet survive a phallocentric culture that dismembers and burns goddesses while still expecting them to heal and caress" (221). For representing two major types of classical mythologies, Greek and Egyptian, Helen of Troy, Daphne, and Sekhmet are to be the figures under study in this thesis. They belong, respectively, to the poems "Helen of Troy does counter dancing" (33-36), "Daphne and Laura and so forth" (26, 27), and "Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war, violent storms, pestilence, and recovery from illness, contemplates the desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" (39-41).

It is worth pondering the reason why Atwood chose these myths to compose *Morning in the Burned House*, which also makes us question what led her to choose the myths she has written about so far, male or female. In different occasions Atwood has shed some light on the matter. In her book *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), Atwood affirms that "[y]ou can't keep a good myth down" (34). Furthermore, in the essay "The Myths Series and Me" (2005) about the Canongate Myth Series, which encouraged her to write *The Penelopiad*, Atwood ponders further on the subject mentioning that "[s]trong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings" (35).

It is possible here to build a bridge between Atwood's statements and Barthes' theory, which sees myth as something which suffers a kind of *naturalization* and is, for that matter, transformed into a crystallized truth. Perchance, this *naturalization* is what keeps a myth from dying out. On the other hand, Atwood's, and many other writers' appropriation of those myths may be the exact reason why they do not "die out". As also mentioned before, Barthes suggests that there is no way to kill a myth, except creating a new one. Hence, revisionist mythmaking does not help destroy myths *per se*. It helps create new myths, contemporary myths, like the ones Marina Warner investigates in *Six Myths of our Times*.

Helen of Troy appears more than once in Atwood's works. Helen of Troy has had her legacy perhaps more present in contemporary contexts than any of the other figures chosen, for Helen has been reincarnated many times in movies. Especially relevant is the recent motion picture "Troy", directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Coral Ann Howells observes, in "Five Ways of Looking at *The Penelopiad*" (2006) that

> [i]n Atwood's poems and short fictions there are many women who speak out of ancient myths and legends, given a voice for the first time through her literary imagination to dissent from the cultural myths imposed upon them: Circe and the Sirens in 'You Are Happy' (1974), Eurydice in 'Interlunar' (1984), Athena, Daphne, and Helen of Troy—who goes counter dancing—in 'Morning in the Burned House' (1996), Helen of Troy (again) and the Cumaean Sybil in *The Tent* (2006). All of these women's voices are sceptical, irreverent, and assertive as they refocus the grand narratives of ancient myth. (5)

The recurrence of these myths shall be further discussed in Chapter 2 along with the analysis of the mythological figures. For now, let us take an initial brief look at how they are traditionally viewed in our culture.

It is known in classical Greek Mythology that Helen of Troy was the daughter of Zeus and Nemesis and wife of Menelaus; her abduction by Paris is usually seen as having brought about the Trojan War (Guimarães 167, 168). Daphne is a minor character in Greek Mythology. She is described as a nymph, chaste and beautiful. She is the daughter of rivergod Pineios (Graves 117, 118). As for Sekhmet, she is the only representative from classic Egyptian Mythology in the collection. She is depicted as a lioness and considered the warrior goddess and goddess of healing (James 221-225).

Atwood, however, shows such mythological figures in very different positions from those depicted by classical mythology, reiterating her opinion that myths do not vanish, but "take on other meanings" (Myths 35). One of these other meanings is their historical displacement and the "postmodern scepticism" which usually permeates them (Howells 10). Howells also terms Atwoodian revisions as

"postmodern domestification of myth" (65). In *Curious Pursuits* (2009), Atwood talks about writing historical fiction, and seems to agree with Howell stating that "whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age" (210). In other words, it is virtually impossible to rewrite ancient fiction without letting contemporary opinions influence it, for it is being written by a contemporary mind. *The Penelopiad*, like the poems mentioned here, for instance, encompasses culture and belief in ancient Greece as displayed in *The Odyssey*; however, Atwood writes it "while recognizing the gap between that world and our own" when she acknowledges a "twenty-first-century court of justice" (184). In the poems analyzed here, there is no court of justice, but there are strip clubs, museums, and other references to contemporary western world.

Furthermore, Howells asserts that this practice "is both a celebration and a subversion of myth in a self-conscious revisioning process, as Atwood enmeshes mythic patterns in a recognizable network of contemporary human relations" (Howells 10). It is possible to say the same about the mythological characters and their poems that are to be studied here. Moreover, coming back to what concerns private relations, there is a clear connection between Atwood's affirmation and the feminist motto that "the personal is political". Atwood seems to agree, as she mentioned in an interview for *The Globe and Mail* (Dixon 2005): "Whether ancient Greece or the contemporary world, it's all just the usual family dynamics. Remove the fancy language, and that's what it is" (R12).

While rewriting myth, Atwood also deconstructs the patriarchal binary distinction of women as being either "angel" or "monster", mentioned before. Such deconstruction of the twofold aspect of female myths is one of the main points of the analyses carried out in the next chapter. About Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, the work to which many critics relate Atwood's revisions and that claims that all mythology based on patriarchal aspects and gods actually came to replace previous matriarchal beliefs, Atwood states:

> It was in this frame of mind that I read Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, which further terrified me. Graves did not dismiss women. In fact he placed them right at the center of his poetic theory; but they were to be inspirations rather than creators, and a funny sort of inspiration at that. They were to be incarnations of the White Goddess herself,

> alternately loving and destructive, and men who got involved with them ran the risk of disembowelment or worse. (Van Spanckeren & Castro xv)

In the book *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), Atwood engages in a similar discussion about the recurrent dual representation of women in Canada, which she sees to be often connected with the Canadian North. In the four essays in the book Atwood discusses issues of "the North" and its many representations and meanings. To begin with, she explains "'The North' is thought of as a place, but it's a place with shifting boundaries. It's also a state of mind. It can mean 'wilderness' or 'frontier'" (10). Additionally, Atwood brings up a long coined relation between The North and women: interpreting "the Canadian North as active, female, and sinister". She goes on to illustrate such representation by mentioning important literary works of Canadian Literature which carry the same pattern. In most of these works, The North is a "demonic ice-goddess who will claim you for her own". On the other hand, in some examples, it can also be "the repository of salvation and new life" for those characters who wish to 'go native' and become one with nature (43).

Interestingly, the pattern of "the North as a mean female – a sort of icy and savage *femme fatale* who will drive you crazy and claim you for her own" (108) works especially for male characters, in stories by male writers. It is also curious to mention that, in these male writers' stories, the female characters follow the same pre-established duplicity, either good or bad:

> For instance, there are no stories about female explorers, which is perhaps linked to the absence of female explorers in real life. Women, when they appear in male explorer stories, are not explorers themselves, but explorees: wives of the Natives, features of the newly discovered terrain. The Robert W. Service North of popular image is assumed to be a man's world; even though the North itself, or herself, is a cold and savage female, the drama enacted in it – or her – is a man's drama, and those who play it out are men. There are no Robert Service women mushing their dog teams, staking their claims, being driven crazy, and freezing to death. There are

> some women in Service's Yukon, of course, but they are not protagonists; they are ladies of the night, like the thievin', cheatin', seductive 'LadyWho's Known as Lou' of Dan McGrew fame, or downtrodden and debauched Native women, and the occasional pure, sweet wife who exists to be abandoned when the lure of the North gets too much and the husband goes off to do the required mushing, prospecting, and freezing to death. (110-111)

For female characters, on the other hand, in Canadian female writers' stories, the depiction of the woods may vary, according to their motivations. The women may hate the forest, for being dragged there by their husbands, or they may find peace there, for having chosen to go to the forest by themselves, running away from men or by some other chance. In either way, in none of these cases the wilderness is depicted as female by 'second wave' Canadian female writers. As a matter of fact, it is not male either. It becomes neutral (132).

In the poems under study here, Helen, Daphne, and Sekhmet are no longer important goddesses, absolute holders of power, or capable of atrocities; instead, they are "fragmented goddesses" (Wilson 220), also submissive and exploited, supporting Wilson's argument that "[s]ome of Atwood's creator-goddesses are failed or parodic" (217).

As the depictions in the poems are paradoxical, Wilson goes on to affirm that "because of gender reversal or shifted context, many [of the myths] are simultaneously serious and parodic, tragic and comic" (220). The shifted context Wilson points out for all the three mythological figures is due to their being placed in contemporary social environments. About such modern scenery and the new roles the mythological figures take on, VanSpanckeren affirms that "Atwood's poems introduce pop culture stars or burlesque artists voicing psychic truths in comic deadpan" (159).

For instance, Helen's poem has allusions to countertop dancing in a strip club and focuses on the misleading nature of advertisement. Daphne suffers for showing "too much leg". Likewise, Sekhmet's poem puts her in a museum, being daily displayed to children, "reduced to a static image" (Beyer 285). As Wisker contends, in Atwood's revisionism the "relationships are unkind, apathetic, following lines set down in romances and fairy-tales but revealing the dullness and psychological cruelty beneath their structures and moves" (61).

The reversing role mentioned by Müller applies here to Helen, Daphne, and Sekhmet. Differently from some mythological shifting Atwood applies to characters in her novels, these three personae from her poetry do not necessarily "consciously change [myths] into positive constructions" (Müller 248). Actually, they remain fragmented, incomplete, and dissatisfied. As Müller puts it, for Atwood, "every story suggesting final solutions, absolute happiness, the truth, etc., is a negative myth, because it avoids the duality and complexity of life" (248).

There is one more correlation I would like to draw here, and that is the theory of the cyborg. Donna Haraway's famous chapter "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's" (1990) questions, among other things, the effort some feminists made to categorize women in a group, with common specific features, an attempt that, according to Haraway, only ended up excluding other women. In fact, she even extends such critique to both women and men, reflecting and rejecting the need to set boundaries and divisions, saying that "[t]he dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically" (205).

To illustrate her theory and critique, Haraway relies on the image of the cyborg, a cybernetic organism, constituted by both organic and mechanical elements, part human and part machine. However, the cyborg is not seen as human and does not carry the morals and creeds humans do. Haraway explains that "[t]he cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (192), meaning that a being detached from previous prejudice and myths is more free of thought, less limited, and that if we all faced the world as the cyborg does, it would mean "a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end" (191-192).

Similarly to the present discussion, Haraway reminds us that the representation of the female cannot be a fixed one, or a binary one, and that is why the cyborg proves to be a suitable representative for women. However, she does not deny that "'We' did not originally choose to be cyborgs" (218), that is, that the reinvention of female identity is a current need, not a choice. Women certainly did not choose to be oppressed and secluded from history.

Haraway also reminds us of the importance of language and systems of meaning for human identity:

> One important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code (205)

According to her, boundaries should no longer limit our identity.

When Haraway states that the cyborg presents no border line, we immediately think of the ultimate boundary-crosser which will be further discussed in the next chapter: the trickster. The cyborg appears to be quite similar to the trickster, especially when Haraway says that

> [t]he cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange (193)

Such range of possibilities that emerge from free thinking detached from limits is celebrated by Haraway: "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (196).

One of the possibilities of this political work is what she terms "cyborg writing", the use of revisionist narratives to subvert myths, as Atwood does:

> The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse. […] Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding

> communication and intelligence to subvert command and control. (217)

However, Haraway acknowledges that it is not easy for women to rebuild their identities at a time of new technologies, for "there is no 'place' for women in these networks, only geometries of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities." But, certainly, it is not impossible for women to find a place of their own, provided that "we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions (212).

Another crucial issue Haraway raises, and that is closely related to revisionism, is the issue of language. Of course we all agree women must write their own stories, narrate their experiences through their own voice, retrieve their own images and representations by their own mirrors. However, feminists must remember that each experience is unique, and that the longing for a single "female language" is a type of oppression as well. In Haraway's words: "The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one" (215).

In her acknowledgement of contradiction and irony, as illustrated by her depictions of mythical female figures in a contemporary world, Atwood engages in a revisionism that disturbs and challenges ready political solutions, as shall be seen in the analyses that follow.

3 ANALYSIS

Mythology possesses an endless range of meanings, which enables a large scope of approaches to analyze it--socially, historically, ideologically, among others. As a narrative form, mythology is intertwined with literature, in the sense that both use story-telling to create meaning. The representation such narratives carry is what made me want to embark on the adventure of shedding light on mythology through the prism of revisionism in a twentieth-century work of feminist writing. Feminist literary criticism has provided us, throughout the previous chapters, with the necessary theoretical backbone so that now we may carry on an investigation of Atwood's use of mythological female figures in *Morning in the Burned House*. Such use of mythological characters will eventually stir theories in the next pages and they will be useful tools in the process of speculating the meanings and intentions in Atwood's poetry.

In this chapter, I will focus on each of the three previously mentioned characters–Helen, Daphne, and Sekhmet–in each of their corresponding poems: "Helen of Troy does counter dancing" (33-36), "Daphne and Laura and so forth" (26, 27), and "Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war, violent storms, pestilence, and recovery from illness, contemplates the desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" (39-41).

3.1 – Helen of Troy

"Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing" (see appendix), originally simply "Counter Dancing" (VanSpanckeren, "Crone" 163), is situated in part II of the collection *Morning in the Burned House*, between pages 33 and 36. If compared to the other pieces in the collection, this is quite a long poem and it is divided in three long stanzas. The lines show free verses without rhyme or meter. It is written in the first person singular, which is already an intentional move, as I shall point out with further details later on. The present tense is perceived throughout the poem and has the objective of bringing Helen to the contemporary world. Also related to contemporaneity is the setting: Helen is at what appears to be a strip club, performing on a counter. It is just appropriate to the scenery that the language is informal, nearly vulgar, being "ass", "tit, and nipple" (34) some of the examples. "Helen of Troy does counter dancing" is an appropriate title, for that is exactly what is delivered: goddess Helen, apparently still with her former known qualities of beauty and seductiveness, dancing on top

of a counter, at a strip club. But as we shall see, with Atwood, what you see is not necessarily what you get.

Immediately in the title of Atwood's poem the mythological character, Helen of Troy, appears in a rather controversial conception if compared to her commonly given definition. In Greek Mythology, Helen of Troy–also known as Helen of Sparta–was the daughter of Zeus and Nemesis–also known as Leda. Helen was born from an egg, conceived by Leda because Zeus had taken the form of a swan and sought refuge with Leda, gaining her affection, which led to their intercourse. Helen was married to Menelaus, but she was later abducted by her admirer, Paris, a fact which initiated the Trojan War (Guimarães 167, 168). There is controversy, when it comes to Helen's seduction by Paris, as to whether she was taken by force or ran away with him of her own will. However, the fact that she was considered one of the most beautiful women among the goddesses is clear in Greek mythology. Helen's remarkable beauty was the "shiny object", the "consumption product" which triggered the male obsession and led to the war.

Atwood, however, shows this character in a different position from the one depicted by classical mythology, deconstructing the patriarchal binary distinction of women being either "angel" or "monster", as discussed by Ostriker (1985). In the poem, Helen is no longer a goddess in the canonical sense, powerful and revengeful. Although she is still beautiful and sensual, she is instead depicted as a fragmented goddess, also submissive, and exploited, supporting Wilson's argument that "[s]ome of Atwood's creator-goddesses are failed or parodic" (217).

We may thus infer that Helen of Troy is an instance of what Atwood considers "a good myth" or a "strong myth", for Helen appears more than once in her works. Helen of Troy has become a famous character in cinema as well. There have been at least two motion pictures names "Helen of Troy", one in 1956, directed by Robert Wise, and a TV movie in 2003, directed by John Kent Harrison. Most recent and most famous is certainly "Troy", directed by Wolfgang Petersen, where Helen is a major character.

As previously mentioned, Helen of Troy is cited in different situations throughout Atwood's works. However, some characteristics collide. Throughout *The Penelopiad*, Helen is shown as a beautiful, ambitious, vain, coldhearted but rather stupid temptress. In *The Tent* (2006), in the mini-fiction essay "It's Not Easy Being Half-Divine" (47), she is beautiful and vain, and a dishonest type of temptress as well. Some of these features coincide when it comes to the Helen built in

Morning in the Burned House. Helen is depicted as a kind of trickster. To put it shortly, “trickster is a boundary-crosser” (Hyde 7), the one to confuse the lines between opposites, between any pattern, “[t]rickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (7).

Kathryn Van Spanckeren makes an interesting point in the essay “Humanizing the Fox: Atwood’s Poetic Tricksters and *Morning in the Burned House*” (2003), illustrating with personas from the collection how Atwood manages to create trickster characters and trickster texts. Helen is one of the tricksters she mentions:

> Only Ava Gardner, speaking from the dead and longing for "the flesh, the flesh" and "the joy" (32), is vulnerable. She softens us up for the next poem, "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing," a classic trickster text modeled on Atwood's "Siren Song" from *You Are Happy*. (112)

VanSpanckeren goes further, asserting that Atwood not only uses trickster characters, who can influence the reader. She also takes advantage of this poetry collection to employ the “trickster text”, which is the kind of text that confuses the reader:

> Trickster texts are effective insofar as they manipulate the reader. They are witty and thought-provoking, and generally they are short enough to "trick" the reader in one reading. Atwood's novels are too long and complex to do so […] Her subversion of convention is nowhere better revealed than in her poetry, in which she is free to play with language, the primary tool of the trickster. (103)

In the very title of the poem the controversy of depicting Helen differently from popular concept flickers: the affirmation that Helen “does counter dancing” baffles the reader (33). The setting in which Helen is placed, a strip club, is also symbolic. The figure of Helen is taken from the highest palaces in mythology and placed in a strip club, not only another reference to the contemporary world, but also a subversive and polemic place. However, in the strip club, Helen has an outstanding position just as the one of a goddess. She also maintains her pride, as we shall see below.

Countertop dancing is a type of dance performed by women on top of a counter, usually at dance clubs or strip clubs, with the purpose of entertaining and/or seducing men with the intention of receiving financial reward, known as "tips". According to society's standards of "morality", this activity is believed to be degrading for women. There is also a reference to "pole dancing" in the excerpt that says: "Look – my feet don't hit the marble! / Like breath or a balloon, I'm rising, / I hover six inches in the air / in my blazing swan-egg of light." (36), which reinforces the scenery of a strip club while making an explicit reference to her godlike origins (swan-egg). In classical Greek mythology, Helen was a goddess, a married woman, admired by many, yet her being seduced by a single, young man sparks off a famous story of passion, with violent consequences. Her being compared to this type of nightlife performer initiates a double image which will be developed over the four pages of the poem, her being a goddess and a countertop dancer at the same time.

After the reader is puzzled with the title of the poem, s/he faces the first lines, and all the hints they bring: "The world is full of women / who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself / if they had the chance" (33). From these three lines, it is possible to observe that the poem is written in the first person singular and that the persona is Helen herself. Helen is given a voice of her own so she is able to tell a story of her own. Helen is confessing about the prejudice she suffers for being a counter dancer, yet she is not a reliable narrator or in a position of victimization, as we shall see.

Intriguingly, Helen does not only complain of "people's" prejudice, she specifies it is women's prejudice she suffers from more. The fact that this is the very first information we have of the character is emblematic. According to VanSpanckeren, who had access to Atwood's manuscripts, that was not her first choice. She says that Atwood decided to change that part afterwards on purpose:

> Other changes in "Helen of Troy . . ." make it more pertinent to women. The first line originally read, "The world is full of people / who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself." The book version changes "people" to "women." ("Crone" 163)

When Helen acknowledges that women judge her perhaps more than men, we immediately think of two things. The first is the fact that in Greek mythology she was very much envied and criticized by other women/goddesses, as we may also notice in *The Penelopiad*, in the

several times Penelope criticizes her. The second is the more recent fact of women's history: women's lack of unity as a "minority" group, as thoroughly worked by feminist critics such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet.

De Beauvoir mentions such lack of unity in the women's movement in *The Second Sex* (1949), comparing them to other "minorities" such as Jewish or black people (12-14). Millet also develops such theory in her famous work *Sexual Politics* (1970), affirming that patriarchy confines women in a position of rivalry, making them envy each other, for qualities such as beauty and age:

> One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her 'security' and prestige while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world. Through the multiple advantages of the double standard, the male participates in both worlds, empowered by his superior social and economic resources to play the estranged women against each other as rivals. (38)

The role of power in social contexts is commonplace in Atwood's writings. In the poem, power is one of the main themes; however, it is shown in a very ambiguous way, for there are different kinds and degrees of power. Helen is seen as both having it and not having it. On the one hand, she is a powerful character that has influence over men, and these men admire her. This becomes clear when she underappreciates them with words that bear the connotation of her feeling of superiority, while she diminishes the men for being drunk, which may give the idea of stupidity: "my beery worshippers!" (34). However, as mentioned above, it is also possible to perceive some sort of authority or a certain judgment of character that men, or in this sense patriarchal society, hold over the character: "Quit dancing. / Get some self-respect" and "*Exploited*, they'd say" (33). Such dichotomy of power the character carries, being simultaneously powerful and powerless, is present throughout the poem.

Although acknowledging other people's critique and judgment, representatives of society's standards of "morality", the persona does not seem to feel embarrassed or ashamed of her position. In fact, she questions her voyeurs about how delicate it is to classify certain jobs as degrading and others as respectful, and how thin the line that separates them is. We may observe such inquiry in the excerpt that reads:

> Get some self-respect
> And a day job.
> Right. And minimum wage,
> and varicose veins, just standing
> in one place for eight hours
> behind a glass counter
> bundled up to the neck (33)

And to prove that she is not embarrassed, that she was not forced to take up such occupation, she warns the reader: "but I've a choice / of how, and I'll take the money" (33).

VanSpanckeren compares Helen and other Atwoodian personas with famous and symbolic poems of Sylvia Plath, because of their powerfully sarcastic, almost haunting aspect:

> "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing" is a pivotal poem in this sequence because, like Plath's "Daddy," this curse poem, overflowing with bitter humor, acknowledges female power. Helen's whole female identity is squeezed into a sexual role that she wields like a laser. Like Atwood's much earlier poem "Siren Song," this seductive trickster text draws the reader into a fiery doom. ("Crone" 162)

Still according to VanSpanckeren, "Helen of Troy does counter dancing" can also be associated with another one of Plath's emblematic poems. She says that "[t]he poem recalls Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'" especially because of one important reference both poems share. "Lady Lazarus" ends with: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (Plath 9). VanSpanckeren ("Crone" 163) contends that, after several drafts, Atwood's final version of the poem is quite similar to Plath's:

> Look—my feet don't hit the marble!
> Like breath or a balloon, I'm rising,
> I hover six inches in the air
> in my blazing swan-egg of light. (36)

VanSpanckeren goes on discussing Helen's sexuality and how she came to be in her current position. She mentions how Helen uses sarcasm as a tool of power and self-affirmation against society's judgment, saying that "Helen's objectification by male voyeurs has dehumanized her and emptied her of all feeling except rage" ("Crone" 163).

However, we must not forget that Helen is not only judged for being beautiful and desired by men--and the envy that such features stir in women; we may also remember how Helen came to be associated with war, and most importantly, how war is associated with death and ruin. "The cause of the wars in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, the three great epics of Western literature, Helen—like Pandora and Eve in other foundational myths—is blamed for introducing destruction to the world" ("Crone" 163), states VanSpanckeren, reminding us that not only mythological, but also biblical female personages are related to destruction. As a matter of fact, the issue of women being related to destruction is not new, and I may say that all three characters analyzed here are blamed somehow for some type of ruin as well.

Mihoko Suzuki, who has written extensively about the myth of Helen of Troy and her several versions and approaches in literature, has also addressed the roles of Helen in two of Atwood's novels and in her poetry. In the essay "Rewriting the Odyssey in the twenty-first century: Mary Zimmerman's *Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*" (2007), Suzuki suggests "that Helen in the *Iliad* functions as a scapegoat onto whom the warriors can project their ambivalence toward the Trojan war that brings both glory and death" (243). In other words, Suzuki also believes Helen was blamed for much more than just being beautiful or famous. Moreover, in her book *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (1989), Suzuki reflects on how not only Helen, but also her descendents were blamed for triggering epic wars.

In the aforementioned essay, Suzuki goes even further, acknowledging not only the presence of Helen in *The Penelopiad*, as I have already discussed here, but also defending the hypothesis that in *The Robber Bride* (1993) Zenia is a Helen-like persona, a hypothesis that Suzuki herself claims has never been raised by any other critic so far: "In Atwood's feminist rewriting of the Iliad set in contemporary Toronto, World War II has replaced the Trojan War, and the novel is focalized through three women--Tony, Charis, and Roz--and their vexed relationship to Zenia, who is, like Helen, glamorous and mysterious". However, the similarities between Zenia and Helen are not the only ones

she mentions; Suzuki also acknowledges the trickster aspects of both Helens:

> Zenia, like the Iliadic Helen, crosses borders, her nationality in doubt; her multiple stories recall the foregrounding of uncertainty surrounding Helen in the classical tradition, in particular whether or not she assented to her abduction and hence the degree of her responsibility for instigating the Trojan War.

Going back to "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing", Suzuki, like VanSpanckeren, comments on the objectification of Helen by men, and how the Helen in the poem is full of rage, which enables her to confront her voyeurs:

> While Zenia remained a phantom-like figure throughout *The Robber Bride*, represented only through the subjectivities of the three protagonists, in this poem Atwood imagines how a contemporary Helen might talk back to those who have constructed her as a projection of their fantasies.

Suzuki also defends that such objectification and fetishizing end up fragmenting the female body: "Atwood's Helen exposes the violent underside of male fetishizing of the female body as tantamount to dismemberment" as in the excerpt: "They gaze at me and see a chain-saw murder just before it happens, / when thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit and nipple / are still connected" (35).

In the poem, just as a good trickster, Helen seduces the reader/voyeur, who "is first flattered and drawn in" (Van Spanckeren 112), lured into the poem by a technique of creating empathy: "Not that anyone here / but you would understand" (35). Atwood seems to find such strategy worthy of use. "The Siren Song", in *You Are Happy* (1974), shows a similar tactics: "This song / is a cry for help: Help me! / Only you, only you can, / you are unique" (39). However, such artifice of luring is built so that the reader is challenged, "quickly victimized" (Van Spanckeren 112) or even tortured afterwards: "Try me. / This is a torch song. / Touch me and you'll burn" (36). This works to reinforce the image of the character as a powerful and dangerous goddess.

The persona of the poem questions men, and society, about their disbelieving her power and consequently intimidates them by mentioning that punishment is the price to pay for their incredulity (36). In Greek mythology, as well as in other classical mythologies, the gods

and goddesses are known for their intolerance, freely punishing those who disobey their will. Atwood also reminds us of that in *You Are Happy*, "Book of Ancestors": "So much for the gods and their / static demands. our demands, former / demands, death patterns" (94).

The archetypal force and persuasion of Helen is used to depict women in a strong image, yet sometimes powerless and judged, in a paradoxical frame. However, either powerful or powerless, she does not regret or disbelieve her choice. The persona of the poem questions the readers if they doubt her power, her title of goddess, the spotlight position as a performer, probably for her being in a performing and believed to be degrading place, on a counter: "You think I'm not a goddess?". Then, she invites the misbelieving reader to test her authority, which may bring, as previously mentioned, hurtful consequences.

In the poem, it is possible to see that, although Helen is the narrator, she is not a completely reliable one. She threatens the reader and confuses her/him, as typical of tricksters. We may also doubt her testimony when she says "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" (35), inferring that she is lying and that lying is a necessary practice for women in her position. This takes us back again to Penelope, from *The Penelopiad*, who is not a consistent narrator either, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Again, we are reminded by the character that truth is a matter of perspective.

Sharon Wilson says that "[a]lthough themes of sexual politics predominate, and patriarchal oppression is everywhere apparent, Atwood is always ready to reverse genders, giving us female 'oppressors' and male 'victims'" (226). However, the shifting goes further. We can perceive more than the obvious inversion, of women as oppressors and men as the oppressed ones. Both roles, oppressor and oppressed, change rapidly and frequently. This may take us back to the trickster type of text, confusing the reader, but more than that, deconstructing social and gender roles.

These contradictory images build an intricate metaphor about gender empowerment which is closely related to a critique of consumerism. On the one hand, the character is depicted as a mere piece of flesh, as in the passage "naked as a meat sandwich" (33), and serving as a decorative device to sell products: "I sell vision, / like perfume ads, desire / or its facsimile" (33-34). On the other hand, in the very previous passage in the poem, and in the following one, the power the character

has over her addressees while she influences them to buy things becomes apparent.

The things she is selling are not only material – "gloves" or "perfume ads" (33), but also abstract ones: "I sell vision" (33). There is a clear reference here to marketing, which, besides selling goods, also "sells" ideology. Atwood takes the consumerist idea overboard, assuming that not only objects but also ideologies and beliefs are consumption items: "I sell men back their worse suspicions: / that everything's for sale" (34). In other words, the persona of the poem says she is also negotiable – "I'll take the money" (33) –, and so is the buyer, who consumes the illusions she is selling – "I sell vision […], desire or its facsimile" (33, 34). The frightening "suspicion" that "everything's for sale" sold by the character, who is a woman, implies that not only the products or the advertisers are negotiable but also the people selling and buying them.

In the poem analyzed here the confrontation and criticism she develops against Western patriarchal society becomes clear. Such iconic mythological figure, as Helen of Troy, is a powerful image Atwood employs in a revisionist process, so that the classic figures themselves and mythology itself may be deconstructed and demystified. Nonetheless, Atwood also criticizes society's consumerist culture and the banality of endlessly increasing levels of consumption. Such consumerism foments the idea that everything, either object or subject, is purchasable, ephemeral and rapidly replaceable.

Atwood seems to understand the urge of self identification that comes from facing other identities, that is, we situate ourselves in our culture every time we are exposed to a culture that is different from ours. That is the exercise Atwood seems to be proposing here: an ancient figure from an ancient time is confronted with our time and with the oppression women suffer nowadays, not only the oppression of marketing and beauty patterns, but also the oppression of patriarchy and "morality".

I believe the character of Helen of Troy, as shown in *Morning in the Burned House*, is almost as complex as those from *The Penelopiad* or *The Tent*, not to mention Zenia from *The Robber Bride*. Perhaps, the one analyzed here had more room for complexity. Obviously, none of the other Helens are flat or plain, since they range from seductive, to misleading, to, surprisingly, a bit dumb. Helen from *The Tent* is also placed in a contemporary realm, with contemporary troubles: "her picture gets in magazines […] and she's looking at a career in the movies" (48). Yet, the fact that this Helen is not only in the twentieth

century, but also at a strip club, certainly adds some awe to it. What is interesting to observe is that all three Helens, in fact, all of Atwood's characters, play with the endless varieties in between good and bad.

3.2 Sekhmet

There is not, unfortunately, as much material about Sekhmet as there is about Helen of Troy. As previously mentioned, Helen of Troy became a popular character in movies and permeates popular culture, while Sekhmet has fewer references, being a game, Curse of the Pharaoh: Tears of Sekhmet (Big Fish Games 2009), one of the few examples. Also, while Helen has, at least, three major allusions in Atwood's work, Sekhmet does not share the same frequency.

Sekhmet is the only Egyptian mythological figure to be named in *Morning in the Burned House*. "Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war, violent storms, pestilence, and recovery from illness, contemplates the desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" (see appendix) is a three-page poem included in part II of the collection, between pages 39 and 41. Is is not as long as Helen of Troy's poem and it is divided in five smaller stanzas. The verses are free and have no rhyme or meter.

The poem is written in the first person singular, similarly to the other poem analyzed here, being the character's point of view, her voice, one of the main objectives of revisionism. It is also written in the present tense, like the previous poem. The language may be considered informal, not far-fetched. The setting, as the title of the poem already presents, is the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where Sekhmet--or her statue, as we may presume--sits and observes the passers-by.

According to Egyptian Mythology, the name Sekhmet originated from the Ancient Egyptian word "sekhem" and means "power" or "the powerful one". Sekhmet is depicted as a lioness and considered the warrior goddess and goddess of healing. Sekhmet is the eye of sun god Ra and was sent as a symbol of Ra's punishment for the people's disobedience and conspiracy against him. Although Sekhmet was supposed to punish only a few people, she became so furious that she nearly extinguished the entire human race. Ra had to intoxicate her with some alcoholic beverage resembling blood to prevent her from doing so (Borgeaud 12). She is the goddess of diseases and she is also the goddess of cure, but interestingly, only the cure to the disease she caused herself. It was believed that her breath formed the hot winds of the desert. She was said to protect the pharaohs while in battle and to destroy their enemies using arrows of fire (James 221-225).

Atwood begins the poem applying a writing technique she has been using since her first works, and that is particularly relevant in this poem: enjambement. Enjambement, or enjambment, is the technique of dividing the syntactic structure of a sentence into two or more sentences, usually without any punctuation, thus giving a meaning of continuity. However, Atwood has been broadly using such technique to switch meanings, thus shocking the reader with an unpredicted piece of information afterwards. Perhaps Atwood's most famous poem, "You fit into me" from *Power Politics* (1971) is the perfect example of enjambement used to baffle the reader: "You fit into me / like a hook into an eye / a fish hook / an open eye" (1). We are about to see how enjambement is used here to trick the reader and surprise her/him with unexpected information in every new line.

The poem starts off referring to a man, in the very first line. However, the image we are given is not a traditional masculine and "patriarchal" one, for the character is not a strong, outspoken man. "He was the sort of man / who wouldn't hurt a fly" it says, pointing out his benevolence, his kindness, yet what comes next shifts the focus: "Many flies are now alive / while he is not" (39). Now, the man's kindness is turned into mockery, assuming that what he is, actually, is just naïve. Also, we may assume that "the flies" possibly mean more than real flies, they may mean people, or may I say, annoying people, who may have taken advantage of this man.

The next line of the poem says: "He was not my patron". After being told the man was kind yet naïve, now we are told he was not her patron, not her supporter or sponsor. "Patron" can also stand for "patron saint", which gives a sense of superiority as much as "supporter" or "sponsor" do, and which also reminds us that what we call "mythology" nowadays was once considered religion. So "patron" might also have a religious connotation. The persona goes on explaining what he was like, and then we are informed where they are: "He preferred full granaries, I battle. / My roar meant slaughter. / Yet here we are together / in the same museum" (39). The persona--Sekhmet, we presume--tells us that, although the man was kind, nurturing yet easily fooled, and she was strong, belligerent and audacious, they had the same fate, and we notice she does not think such fate is fortunate.

As we already know, Sekhmet was the eye of the sun god Ra, sent by him to deal with the revolt of men against Ra. Apparently, the people were not honoring Ra as they should, and that made Ra furious. When Ra sent his eye, Sekhmet, to fix the rebels, she was so "consumed with rage and drunk with blood" that she "lost all self-control" and

practically wiped out humanity (Borgeaud 12). We may suppose, then, that the man who is cited in the poem is Ra, and that Sekhmet blames him for being so benevolent protecting humankind from the massacre Sekhmet wished for.

There is plenty of resentment in Sekhmet's tone in Atwood's poem, and she borders on nostalgia as well. It is clear she finds her new position humiliating, she thinks that going from powerful goddess to a statue to be looked at in a museum is not appropriate for her position. She also offers some ironic comments and proud flash backs from her past. At all times, the persona reminds us she used to be a cruel and powerful goddess: "I see the temple where I was born / or built, where I held power" (39).

However, such attachment to the past shows another important feature. As Sekhmet says, they are in the same museum, the man and she, but she also says that the people who go to the museum to learn and stare at them is not what she sees: "That's not what I see, though, the fitful / crowds of staring children / learning the lesson of multi- /cultural obliteration" (39). It is possible to presume here that by saying she does not see the children, that she does not acknowledge their presence as a sign that her own culture is dead and irrelevant, but she sees the "temple" where she "was born / or built", she is actually evading present reality and retrieving the past. Instead of experiencing an unpleasant situation, she prefers to day-dream and to fill her head with nostalgic thoughts.

Sekhmet mocks the believers, the people who actually thought she was kind and would grant them wishes. Yet she also criticizes how, after some time, people changed their creeds from animal, or half animal gods, to human gods and goddesses. She affirms the new gods were not necessarily better, not only defending her position, but also questioning what may have gone wrong with their religion, as opposed to simply replacing the gods for better ones:

> What did you expect from gods
> with animal heads?
> Though come to think of it
> the ones made later, who were fully human,
> were not such good news either (40)

As mentioned previously, Sekhmet was not only the goddess of diseases and pestilence, but she could cure them as well. Such reference from Egyptian mythology can be perceived in the excerpt of the poem which says: "that the deity who kills for pleasure / will also heal" (40, 41). It is prudent to cite here again critic Sharon Wilson's observation

that, "[i]n *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Helen of Troy, Daphne, Athena, and Sekhmet survive a phallocentric culture that dismembers and burns goddesses while still expecting them to heal and caress" (221). There is ambivalence, therefore, both in Sekhmet's original power to harm and heal, and in contemporary society's attitudes and expectations towards women.

Encyclopædia Britannica reminds us that "Some deities, notably such goddesses as Neith, Sekhmet, and Mut, had strongly ambivalent characters" (2012). However, the persona of the poem does not seem to be willing to end people's misery as they wish, at any time they wish. She makes clear she has the power to grant such favors, but she is not so noble in her generosity: "But if it's selfless / love you're looking for, / you've got the wrong goddess" (40).

The poem offers another reference to mythology in an allusion to Ra who, as the sun god, was responsible for making the day bright, but who would succumb to Sekhmet's care during the night: "There was day, while the sun shone bright upon the land, and there was night, when Ra was swallowed by the goddess and carried safely through the night on wings of darkness 'till he was born again heralding the new day" (Scully). This is clearly echoed in the following excerpt from Atwood's poem:

> that in the midst of your nightmare,
> the final one, a kind lion
> will come with bandages in her mouth
> and the soft body of a woman,
> and lick you clean of fever,
> and pick your soul up gently by the nape of the neck
> and caress you into darkness and paradise (41)

Besides being a direct reference to the Egyptian myth (a goddess with the body of a woman and the head of a lion), such allusion may also be connected to the contemporary expectations of the nurturing and life-giving nature of women.

It is also interesting to observe how the representation of the "soft body of a woman", "a kind lion [...] with bandages in her mouth" conflates the two views of womanhood in patriarchal society: wilderness and domestication. This double image of woman, many times rendered as a dichotomy, has as we have seen been projected in the literary tradition.

Sekhmet's poem also discusses the apparent selfishness of the human race when it comes to religion and deities. "*Favour me and give me riches*, / *destroy my enemies*. / That seems to be the gist. / Oh yes: *And save me from death*" (40) is one of the references the poem brings about the endless requests people make to their divinities. The persona tells us what she is given back: "In return we're given blood / and bread, flowers and prayer, / and lip service" (40), yet that does not seem to be enough.

"For some, Sekhmet came to be associated with notions of destruction; of power gone awry, drunk with its own potential, for its own sake" (LeBrun) and that is highly emblematic. The correlation that a goddess with enormous power lost control of it and nearly destroyed humanity is almost a moral bed time story told to little Egyptian girls in mythological times. The moral message this heavily displays of a woman not being able to keep up with her potential, and her father being the one who had to "put her in her place" is conspicuous. VanSpanckeren contends that "Sekhmet embodies power without compassion (40–41) and is imagined as a sardonic ancient statue in the Metropolitan Museum with a crone's sense of humor" ("Crone" 162). Especially illustrative of this is the passage that reads: "if it's selfless / love you're looking for / you've got the wrong goddess" (40).

Differently from VanSpanckeren, Beyer observes about Sekhmet that "Atwood presents the reader with a goddess who is fierce but gentle, human but also animal, and possesses feminine as well as masculine qualities", thus disagreeing that Sekhmet is completely evil, and reinforcing the idea that Atwood breaks the dichotomy of women characters being either good or bad. Moreover, in this particular case, Atwood even breaks the gender dichotomy, offering a goddess who is feminine and masculine at the same time. Also, Beyer goes on to assert that "[n]otions of war and aggression are typically associated with the masculine domain, yet in this poem they are given a female goddess" (285), reiterating the complexity of the poem as regards Sekhmet's revision as a character and a woman.

In the analysis of Helen, I mentioned her connection with the theory of the "trickster", not only the trickster as a persona, Helen herself, destroying boundaries, confusing the reader/voyeur; but also how Helen's poem relates to the type of trickster text, subversive, inviting and then baffling the reader/voyeur. VanSpanckeren affirms, in the essay "Humanizing the Fox" (2003), that not only Helen, but also Sekhmet is a trickster: "The last poem of the sequence returns to the trickster, this time seen as a gigantic cat, the sphinx" ("Humanizing"

112). Actually, the whole essay develops the hypothesis that all of the characters in *Morning in the Burned House*, whether human or not, are poetic tricksters, in the sense that they are all subversive, transgressive and shape-shifting (118).

Sekhmet, not only in the mythological sense, but also in the poem, "represents the simultaneous presence of good and evil; creation and destruction; the ability and willingness to nurture and protect life, and the ability and willingness to take it away". Atwood seems to take the "good or bad" notion to another level. The character is not only good or bad, and it is not in a place between the two: Sekhmet embraces every one of those possibilities at the same time.

3.3 Daphne

"Daphne and Laura and So Forth" (see appendix) is a two-page poem situated in part II of the collection, from page 26 to page 27. This is the smallest poem to be analyzed here, one of the smallest poems in the collection, and it is divided in seven small stanzas. Similarly to the other poems in the book, the verses are free and have no rhyme or meter. The poem is written in the first person singular, just as the other poems analyzed before. Again, the character's voice is what differentiates it from mythology, and it is the main theme of the poem.

According to VanSpanckeren's research on Atwood's manuscripts of the book, the disdainful title "Daphne and Laura and So Forth" was originally named "The Origin of Laurel," making allusion to the tree ("Crone" 163). As we have already seen in "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing", Atwood decided to make such changes so that the poems would be "more pertinent to women" (163).

Differently from the previous poems, it is not entirely written in the present tense. The poem starts in the past tense, ranging to conditional perfect tense, and ending in the present tense. The language resembles the other poems, that is, informal. The setting does not present itself as obviously as in the other poems. It is not clear where the persona—Daphne—is in the beginning of the poem. We are progressively told what happened to her, and where and how she is now.

According to Greek mythology, Daphne is a minor character. She is described as a nymph, chaste and beautiful. Daphne is the daughter of rivergod Pineios. The god Apollo admired her so much she was almost ravished by him. So as not to be raped by Apollo, Daphne pled to Gaea to save her. In order to save Daphne, Gaea swallowed Daphne from the earth and in her place a laurel tree appeared. Apollo made that tree sacred to him (Graves 117, 118).

Apollo, in his turn, "was the son of Zeus and Leto and the twin brother of Artemis". He was the "sun-god or god of the light", while Artemis was the goddess of the moon (Graves 109). It is inevitable to make a connection to a prior citation from Chapter 1, where the bias of the common mythological archetypes for men and women is discussed. At that point, I illustrated the imbalances of male and female representations mentioning that the sun used to mean the father principle, which included energy and enlightenment, while the moon implied the mother principle, being related to darkness and passivity. Apollo and Artemis, "the virgin huntress" (Graves 110) could not be more suited examples for such dichotomy. The images attributed to Apollo are usually the same, of a young and athletic man (116).

Before analyzing the poem itself, I find relevant to ponder on the title, which is quite symbolic in itself. Daphne is not the only character mentioned in the title of the poem, the character Laura is also there. Laura is not a mythological character, but who is she then? When searching for Laura, we can find at least three interesting references, and I shall illustrate how they are all possibly related to Daphne.

Firstly, Laura may refer to the novel *Laura*, published in 1943 by Vera Caspary, and which was turned into a film[1] noir in 1944, directed by Otto Preminger. The novel deals with the investigation of a crime, interestingly, the murder of title character, Laura. Laura was a successful advertiser who ends up killed, and with her face disfigured, in front of her fancy apartment in New York. The two main suspects of Laura's murder are her fiancé and her ex-boyfriend. Certainly, the allusion to advertisement takes us back to "Helen of Troy does counter dancing", but that is not the only thing Laura has in common with Helen: they both had success and power which caused envy on the people around her. Laura's story is easily compared to Daphne's as well: they both were beautiful women who suffered male violence because of their looks, culminating in the loss of their beauty---Laura having her face disfigured and Daphne becoming a tree.

Secondly, "Laura", or "Portrait of a Young Bride", is a painting from 1506 by Italian Renaissance painter Giorgione (1477-1510). In the painting, Laura, a young bride, is sitting in front of a laurel tree, which is a symbol of chastity. As we have seen previously, Daphne was chaste and was turned into a laurel tree by Gaia to escape from being raped by

[1] As regarding motion pictures, other two films are entitled "Laura": a French movie from 1979, and a Spanish movie from 1987, yet none of them resemble the plot of the novel by Caspary.

god Apollo. That is why the laurel tree means chastity. In the painting, Laura is involved in a fur coat, which she is slightly opening, showing part of her right breast. Such display of flesh could mean fertility and maternity (Brown, et al. 2006).

Finally, Laura may also refer to the poet Petrarch (1304-1374). Laura was the muse of Petrarch's poetry. It is said Petrarch renounced the clerical life because of his love for Laura, after lying eyes on her in church. However, they did not have any contact with each other, for Laura was already married. Throughout his life, Petrarch wrote about love and, antagonistically, about his disdain towards men who pursue women. For him, Laura was always chaste.

Still covering all the contemporary references about the characters, we may find that not only Laura, but also Daphne have references outside mythology. Daphne is the name used by the European Comission of Justice for a funding program called "Daphne III Funding Programme". According to the European Commission web site,

> [t]he Daphne III programme aims to contribute to the protection of children, young people and women against all forms of violence and attain a high level of health protection, well-being and social cohesion. Its specific objective is to contribute to the prevention of, and the fight against all forms of violence occurring in the public or the private domain, including sexual exploitation and trafficking of human beings.

Daphne, in the mythological story, had to plead for help to escape imminent sexual violence, and the fact that the European Commission chose her name for such program is quite appropriate.

The poem begins with what we immediately consider to be Daphne explaining how her story with Apollo happened. We are informed how he spotted her and how she became a tree: "He was the one who saw me / just before I changed, / before bark/fur/snow closed over / my mouth, before my eyes grew eyes" (26). "Before I changed" and "bark" are especially important to relate to her transformation into a laurel tree.

As regards Daphne's opinion on Apollo's harassment, we may infer she feels actually guilty in relation to his attempt to rape her: "I should not have shown fear, / or so much leg" (26). This is probably a criticism on the societies which condemn women who display parts of

their bodies, assuming that such display is what causes arousal in men; especially the societies which force women to cover themselves.

According to Graves, Apollo did not succeed in ravishing Daphne. Graves asserts that Apollo "overtook [Daphne] and she already felt the eager arms of the god around her when she called upon the venerable Gaea to aid her" (118). However, in Atwood's poem, Apollo apparently ends up killing Daphne in the attempt to rape her: "His look of disbelief --- / *I didn't mean to!* / *Just, her neck was so much more* / *fragile than I thought*" (26).

Again, in the following line, Daphne seems to be defending Apollo's crime, validating his acts because as a god--or a man--he is accustomed to getting whatever he wants: "The gods don't listen to reason, / they need what they need" (26). This is a reflection on how patriarchal society deals with male sexual needs, asking women to cover themselves and behave in order not to be raped, as opposed to teaching young boys that they must control themselves and respect women's wishes over their own bodies.

I have previously commented on how Atwood uses revisionism to retell the stories of these mythological figures by giving them their own voice and point of view. Nonetheless, Daphne seems so ashamed of her story she barely declines of her right to a voice: "Why talk when you can whisper? / Rustle, like dried leaves" (27). About Daphne's (and Laura's) refusal to blame men and seize the opportunity to accuse them, Van Spanckeren says that "[s]afely transformed into trees, they have lost their voices and even the desire for articulation" (112).

Curiously, in Atwood's poem, Daphne is not only transformed into a tree, she is apparently turned into a spider as well: "Under the bed. / It's ugly here, but safer. / I have eight fingers / and a shell, and live in corners" (27). Not only as safe from violence as a tree, as a spider she is also able to hide. Her hiding place is ugly, but she does not care, as long as it is safe.

The persona, now a spider, plans her fate: "I'm working on / these ideas of my own: / venom, a web, a hat, / some last resort" (27). Now we are finally faced with some effort, we finally see some action. The character is taking a stand to protect herself, even if with few alternatives. She is no longer a victim, she is a survivor: "Only tricks, strategies for survival, remain interesting for them" (Van Spanckeren 112). In other words, Daphne decides to trick, to deceive and hurt as well ("venom"), since she has been hurt, as a way to survive.

To properly finish the analysis we must close the circle and go back to the title. My hypothesis is that neither Daphne nor Laura is the

protagonist here. They simply represent women, contemporary or not, and the problem with sexual violence women have faced since the beginning of humankind. Van Spanckeren affirms that "'Daphne and Laura and So Forth' portrays the fate of women harassed by men" (112), reinforcing my hypothesis that Daphne and Laura are the same, that is, they are portraits of women, many other women (So Forth is capitalized as a proper name), leading similar lives, dealing with the same prejudices and dangers, regardless of their time. "Daphne and Laura and So Forth" may mean, then, an invitation to denounce and question what Daphne, or Laura, or any woman has been through.

4 FINAL REMARKS

In the previous chapter we engaged in the endeavor of observing, analyzing, and pondering on Margaret Atwood's use of three mythological female figures in three poems from her collection *Morning in the Burned House*. As we saw, Atwood re-envisioned these three figures rendering them in contemporary settings, with their pains and pleasures, not forgetting, however, to account for their previously famous stories. Additionally, perhaps the main feature of the poems was that all three figures had their own voices, and thus told their stories through their own prisms.

One of the main characteristics I mentioned throughout the analyses was how paradoxically Helen, Sekhmet, and Daphne were portrayed. In every poem, some more than others, the mythological figures were both powerful and powerless, both oppressors and oppressed. I believe such paradoxes have to do with two main objectives: playful revision by means of parody; and something that is intimately connected to parody: a metaphor for humanity.

One of the best ways of discussing parody in times of postmodernism is by referring to Linda Hutcheon's key work *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985). To briefly synthesize parody, Hutcheon says that it is "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (xii). She also takes time to explain how parody is different from pastiche, burlesque, travesty, and satire. Hutcheon's corpora comprise modern works of art like music, film, and architecture, to mention a few. According to her, parody works by means of ironically subverting tradition, combining creativity with social critique.

Hutcheon acknowledges being fascinated by parody, and she raises the issue time and again in her works. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), she refers to the subject again maintaining that postmodernism uses parody to "both legitimize and subvert that which it parodies" (101). Moreover, she identifies parody as "one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity" (*Parody* 2), and that is exactly what I mean by parody being related to my second hypothesis: the metaphor for humanity, to which I shall come back in the end of this chapter.

Hence, based on Hutcheon's theory of parody, we may conclude that Atwood indeed uses parody to subvert the ancient tradition of mythology. She does this ironically not only because of the vulgar language, the questionable settings, but also because the goddesses ironically represent modern women and critique society's values and

ideologies. Not to mention that, with a dash of irony, these issues become more interesting and play with the readers' common knowledge and prejudices.

Especially applicable to mythology and its revisions is Hutcheon's argument that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (*Politics* 93). I believe everyone agrees when Hutcheon affirms that present representations of virtually anything come from other representations already formed and solidly based in our conscience, because it is hard to say something is totally new; people usually depart from some already existing idea to create new ones. Also, it is easy to agree with Hutcheon when she mentions the ideological point of view which is inevitably expressed every time we either maintain a previous story—or myth, if I may—, or make it different from its past representation.

Hence, by "installing and ironizing" mythology through means of revision and modernization, Atwood brings forward her own ideology, which in this case is drawn out of a feminist criticism of mythology itself, of the literary "canon" in the form of the "epic", and of patriarchal society in general. As I have already mentioned, giving the female mythological figures a voice of their own means at least two things. At the same time, it is an act of rebellion against the institution of "History", which is essentially biased for portraying one singular point of view—the one of white middle-class men. Also, it is an act of inclusion, making history more fair and plural, not by excluding men, but by adding women and their experiences in the history of the world, which also involves the world's religions and creeds, hence, mythology. Mythology is especially suitable for such revision and inclusion, as in Susanna Braund's words: "myth permits endless reinvention, revisioning, refocalization, renewal. It is always available to articulate both the certainties of the dominant culture and the challenges to those certainties" (206).

On the other hand, Diane Purkiss, in her essay "Women's Rewriting of Myths" (1992), which addresses female poets' rewriting of myths—H.D, and Sylvia Plath, among others—, discusses the three most common strategies used by twentieth-century poets when revising myths: a) changing the focus from a male to a female perspective; b) reversing the characteristics that were considered negative into positive ones; and c), one of the main features discussed in this study, allowing a minor character to tell her tale. The last strategy, however, may not be

applicable to Helen, for she is not a "minor" character in Greek mythology nor in popular culture, yet it surely applies to Sekhmet and Daphne. Either way, Helen is also given a voice of her own. Purkiss believes that the use of postmodern strategies such as irony, parody, high/low art, and the combination of myth with popular culture may break the illusion of the timelessness of myth, and she warns us:

> I want to close by suggesting that *no* possible strategy of rewriting myth (or anything else) can really constitute the kind of absolute, clean and revolutionary break with discourse and order sought in the days of feminism and poststructuralism's greatest confidence. This does not imply the judgment must be suspended it is more important to be wary and even ironic about the strategies available when none are foolproof. A bit of political nous is a useful tool; it's self-evident that there are occasions when one story will be more helpful than another. Women must continue to struggle to tell the stories otherwise. The possibilities are endless. (455)

The second hypothesis I want to defend here has also to do with parody: Hutcheon sustains that "[p]arody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity" (*Parody* 2). Therefore, besides being "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance" (xii), parody also serves the purposes of self-reflection, that is, the reflection on our own condition. I find that especially relevant, for that may be the most important objective of parody, if not of literature or art itself.

A similar discussion had already been triggered by the end of Chapter 1, and it shall be retrieved here. I believe the paradoxical representations Atwood delivers of those three mythological characters function as self-reflection. They are but a representation of women's condition in contemporary Western world. The "powerful/powerless" contradiction reminds us of how Western women have climbed some important steps towards equity, but at the same time, how far we all are from the top, if such a thing actually exists.

However, we have also seen that Atwood does not portray only the binary opposites as regards the mythological figures' personalities and situations, but also all the complexity that is in between. For Beyer, "[t]hese apparent contradictions" render these figures "a complex symbol, but also rather a human one, multifaceted and open to a

plurality of interpretations" (285), apparently sharing Müller's view of complexity being related to richness and humanity.

As I see it, contradiction, paradox, and complexity are not features which belong exclusively to the female domain. Nevertheless, Maggie Humm (1986) believes that women indeed bear more contradictions than men, and she blames that on self-image: "Inevitably the ideology of women critics is likely to encompass more contradictions than the ideology of men since women are provided with many more confusing images of themselves than are men" (7). Humm's theory is indeed interesting, for women actually have contradictory images of themselves, being feminist revisionism, that is, the construction of new identities for women, an example of that.

Of course, features of contradiction and complexity apply to both men and women, being, one could say, the ultimate self-reflection on the human condition. But the contradictions of the so-called universal subject (mostly male) are well known. Walt Whitman, for example, explicitly dealt with the issue in *Leaves of Grass* (1855): "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then… I contradict myself; / I am large… I contain multitudes" (55). It is time, therefore, as Atwood recognizes, to give voice to the contradictions of women, for as feminist critic Sandra Gilbert asserts, "[r]eason tells us, after all, that if, transcending prejudice and special pleading, we speak to, and focus on, the woman as well as the man--if we think *ad feminam* as well as *ad hominem*--we will have a better chance of understanding what constitutes the human" (xii).

Another important characteristic of the poems analyzed here that I mentioned previously was the trickster aspect of both the mythological figures and the poems. Similar to the discussion of contradiction and complexity being related to humanity is the idea that the trickster is highly associable to the human as well. VanSpanckeren reminds us that "we are all shape-shifters, moving through our lives and our changing bodily states" (117). More than that, she observes that in all the poems from *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood delivers the idea that "[n]ature is revealed as the great shape-shifter, the ultimate artist/trickster who cannot reverse time or restore individual life, but can console if we will become emotionally open" (118). She concludes her essay affirming that "Atwood sees in the trickster a profound humanity" (119), reinforcing the hypothesis that Atwood represents the human in her poems by portraying contradictory, dissatisfied personas.

The theory of the cyborg, discussed in Chapter 1, is also related to the trickster and to plurality. Therefore, I also think the cyborg theory, as well as the trickster theory, are appropriate means to fashion a new,

more plural and fair rewriting of history. Haraway finishes her essay with a remarkable quote, ratifying her choice of the cyborg image, and also defending the importance of revisionism:

> Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. […] It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space, stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (223)

It is interesting how she defends the image of the cyborg, hybrid and, therefore, plural, over the image of the goddess, which I suppose she means the one from classical mythology, which is certainly limited to adjectives such as divine, beautiful, revengeful.

One could say that Atwood invests in what Donna Haraway has termed cyborg writing, acknowledging the need to break with well established dualities and patterns of thought through the use of irony and trickster figures. By rejecting existing boundaries and divisions, her characters detach themselves from previous narratives and challenge the systems of myth and meanings which structure our imaginations. In their hybridism and contradictions, her Helen, Sekhmet and Daphne are indeed closer to cyborgs than to goddesses, as they have historically been presented.

Consequently, I believe it is correct to affirm that Atwood presented us, through the three characters we analyzed, goddesses that superbly subverted not only classical mythology, but also history. The three figures were boundary-crossers as much as the trickster or the cyborg. Be it by rage, deceit, fear, revenge, or any other of the dozens of features they displayed to us, they all told us their stories from their own viewpoints. Revisionism grants literature an ideology that carries self-reflection and inclusion. Hence, such activity proves vital to our constant need for reinvention, for we are "shape-shifters" with ever-changing language, and thus, literature must evolve with us and represent us in different periods.

Atwood has been revising ancient stories for a long time, yet hardly half of all the intertextuality she used has been acknowledged by critics so far. There are vast references still unaccounted for, not to

mention that Atwood is still alive and writing. Feminist revisionism shall continue, as well as feminist critics of those narratives. Therefore, I hope the present study may have helped feminist criticism by covering at least a small part of such an inspiring, still uncharted territory that is the revision of classical mythology. This research shall not end here, for I am daily amazed by the plurality and contradictions which are inherent to Atwood's characters and, if I may, are the very core of the human condition.

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APPENDIX

1 Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing

The world is full of women
who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself
if they had the chance. Quit dancing.
Get some self-respect
and a day job.
Right. And minimum wage,
and varicose veins, just standing
in one place for eight hours
behind a glass counter
bundled up to the neck, instead of
naked as a meat sandwich.
Selling gloves, or something.
Instead of what I do sell.
You have to have talent
to peddle a thing so nebulous
and without material form.
Exploited, they'd say. Yes, any way
you cut it, but I've a choice
of how, and I'll take the money.

I do give value.
Like preachers, I sell vision,
like perfume ads, desire
or its facsimile. Like jokes
or war, it's all in the timing.
I sell men back their worse suspicions:
that everything's for sale,
and piecemeal. They gaze at me and see
a chain-saw murder just before it happens,
when thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit, and nipple
are still connected.
Such hatred leaps in them,
my beery worshippers! That, or a bleary
hopeless love. Seeing the rows of heads
and upturned eyes, imploring
but ready to snap at my ankles,
I understand floods and earthquakes, and the urge

to step on ants. I keep the beat,
and dance for them because
they can't. The music smells like foxes,
crisp as heated metal
searing the nostrils
or humid as August, hazy and languorous
as a looted city the day after,
when all the rape's been done
already, and the killing,
and the survivors wander around
looking for garbage
to eat, and there's only a bleak exhaustion.
Speaking of which, it's the smiling
tires me out the most.
This, and the pretence
that I can't hear them.
And I can't, because I'm after all
a foreigner to them.
The speech here is all warty gutturals,
obvious as a slab of ham,
but I come from the province of the gods
where meanings are lilting and oblique.
I don't let on to everyone,
but lean close, and I'll whisper:
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.

Not that anyone here
but you would understand.
The rest of them would like to watch me
and feel nothing. Reduce me to components
as in a clock factory or abattoir.
Crush out the mystery.
Wall me up alive
in my own body.
They'd like to see through me,
but nothing is more opaque
than absolute transparency.
Look--my feet don't hit the marble!

Like breath or a balloon, I'm rising,
I hover six inches in the air
in my blazing swan-egg of light.
You think I'm not a goddess?
Try me.
This is a torch song.
Touch me and you'll burn.

2 Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war, violent storms, pestilence, and recovery from illness, contemplates the desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

He was the sort of man
who wouldn't hurt a fly.
Many flies are now alive
while he is not.
He was not my patron.
He preferred full granaries, I battle.
My roar meant slaughter.
Yet here we are together
in the same museum.
That's not what I see, though, the fitful
crowds of staring children
learning the lesson of multi-
cultural obliteration, sic transit
and so on.

I see the temple where I was born
or built, where I held power.
I see the desert beyond,
where the hot conical tombs, that look
from a distance, frankly, like dunces' hats,
hide my jokes: the dried-out flesh
and bones, the wooden boats
in which the dead sail endlessly
in no direction.

What did you expect from gods
with animal heads?
Though come to think of it
the ones made later, who were fully human
were not such good news either.
Favour me and give me riches,
destroy my enemies.
That seems to be the gist.
Oh yes: And save me from death.
In return we're given blood
and bread, flowers and prayer,
and lip service.

Maybe there's something in all of this
I missed. But if it's selfless
love you're looking for,
you've got the wrong goddess.

I just sit where I'm put, composed
of stone and wishful thinking:
that the deity who kills for pleasure
will also heal,
that in the midst of your nightmare,
the final one, a kind lion
will come with bandages in her mouth
and the soft body of a woman,
and lick you clean of fever,
and pick your soul up gently by the nape of the neck
and caress you into darkness and paradise.

3 Daphne and Laura and So Forth

He was the one who saw me
just before I changed,
before bark/fur/snow closed over
my mouth, before my eyes grew eyes.

I should not have shown fear,
or so much leg.

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.

Why talk when you can whisper?
Rustle, like dried leaves.
Under the bed.

It's ugly here, but safer.
I have eight fingers
and a shell, and live in corners.
I'm free to stay up all night.
I'm working on
these ideas of my own:
venom, a web, a hat,
some last resort.

He was running,
he was asking something,
he wanted something or other.