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From Culturazing Nature to Naturalizing Culture: The Differing Function of Animal Imagery in Defining Bodies from Homer's Odysseus to Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad

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Abstract

Feminist authors have long been trying to alter the patriarchal structure of the Western society through different aspects. One of these aspects, if not the strongest, is the struggle to overcome centuries long dominance of male authors who have created a masculine history, culture and literature. As recent works of women authors reveal, the strongest possibility of actually achieving an equalitarian society lies beneath the chance of rewriting the history of Western literature. Since the history of Western literature relies on dichotomies that are reminiscences of modernity, the solution to overcome the inequality between the two sexes seems to be to rewrite the primary sources that have influenced the cultural heritage of literature itself. The most dominant dichotomies that shape this literary heritage are represented through the bonds between the concepts of women/man and nature/culture. As one of the most influential epics that depict these dichotomies, Homer's *Odysseus* reveals how poetry strengthens the authority of the male voice. In order to define the ideal "man", Homer uses a wide scope of animal imagery while forming the identities of male characters. Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, is not contended with Homer's poem in that it never narrates the story from the side of women. As a revisionist mythmaker, Atwood takes the famous story of Odysseus, yet this time presents it from the perspective of Penelope, simultaneously playing on the animal imagery. Within this frame, I intend to explore in this paper how the animal imagery in Homer's most renowned *Odysseus* functions as a reinforcing tool in the creation of masculine

identities and how Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* defies this formation of identities with the aim of narrating the story from the unheard side, that of the women who are eminently present yet never heard.

Keywords: Body Politics, Feminism, Culture, Nature, Animal Imagery

Introduction

"In the beginning there was nature"

Camille Paglia

Women's facts today are bound to the fiction of the past. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, women authors have been trying to change fiction in the very ancient times in order to free women from their handcuffs and give them back their voices, which were silenced for so long. In their celebrated work *No Man's Land* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the place of women authors in the twentieth century and from the very beginning they detect that women, even though implicitly or explicitly oppressed, have the power to fight back this "destiny" that has been set upon them. "The plot of sexual battle is of course as old as literature itself" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1988, p. 55) they write to reveal their perspective of the long-accepted version of human history. Their history, unlike the Christian Western Patriarchal ideology, begins with "legendary Lilith, who resists Adam's (and God's wish) to control both her body and her language" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1988, p. 5); giving the high role to Lilith as the first women ever to resist the oppression against the male authority over her. In a quite interesting article entitled "Feminist Ecocriticism: A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory", Serpil Opperman (2013) further explains the illusionary binary oppositions of body and mind, matter and discourse, anthropocentric-phallogocentric and gynocentric world views created by the patriarchy of the Western world and further discusses how feminist struggles could be linked to ecological struggles since both counter all social systems of domination (p. 32-3). Nevertheless, the image of women never really changed since Lilith, with all the wide variation of examples from myths, fairy tales to epics which have inspired a male dominated world to carry on with the similar points used in poems, plays and novels which aided the forces who needed the women to be kept under control, without the ability to talk back, resist or runaway to their own quests in their lives. Literature is the perfect device for women to find the power they need, by using "narrative as a discourse of authority and legitimation" (Brewer, 1984, p. 1145) women may establish their own place in the society, finally being able to have "a room of one's own" as Woolf had so insisted upon.

As one of the prime epics of the Western culture, Homer's *Odysseus* not only represents the defining myths of the Western patriarchy, but also reinforces the social order that attains the story-teller as the main male author(ity) who holds the power

to construct the reality surrounding him. Providing solely the voice of Odysseus, a manner not surprising considering the patriarchal Greek society who only cherishes the male nobility, Odysseus leaves the story of a major character, Penelope, untold. As Robinson Crusoe, another Western "Cultural Hero" who also mentions the existence of a wife but never tells her story, Odysseus, too, only refers to Penelope when it suits his patriarchal desire of establishing an image that portrays a faithful wife, strictly respecting his authority and protecting his household even during his absence. As Toril Moi (1985) suggests with her underlying argument based upon Helene Cixous, "patriarchal binary thought" that creates a polar opposition between such concepts as "activity/passivity", "culture/nature", "father/mother" and "logos/pathos", "each opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy where the feminine side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance" (p. 104). Within this frame, fused by the enlightening perspective provided by a postmodernist outlook, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* narrates the story of Penelope from her side, deconstructing the male authority over language and storytelling while giving insight to Odysseus' story from the female perspective. What is further interesting in both tales is the use of animal imagery while defining female and male bodies. The continuous matching of the male body with metaphors and images as connotations of nature –specifically predators– in both works suggest an interesting fact that reveals Atwood's revisionist narrative technique not only reconstructs the epic of Odysseus but also leads readers to become aware on the issue of how the perception of the female and male bodies have changed by shifting these definitions from *Odysseus* to *The Penelopiad*. Notwithstandingly, "[t]he identification of woman with nature is the most troubled and troubling term in this historical argument" writes Paglia (1991) and asks, "[w]as it ever true?" (p. 9). The changing outlook on nature, once upon a time demonized for the sake of humanism as it was cherished during the age of enlightenment that led to the "modernity project" in the west, yet purified through ecocritical approaches to culture and literature also has an effect on the perception of the female bodies which can be seen within *The Penelopiad*. Therefore, I intend to explore in this paper how this perception of the female and male bodies change from the narrative echole in *Odysseus* to Atwood's *The Penelopiad* by analyzing the animal imagery used in order to define male and female bodies within both works.

The ideology of the modernity project, accelerated by the thoughts that were revived with renaissance and later on had gained extreme importance with the age of enlightenment, took humanism at its core and argued that the humans were the centre of the universe. Susan Bassnett (1993), in her *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* writes "[t]he notion of cultural history as the story of progress towards modernity derives in part from a belief in superiority of the present. From that position, critics have looked back and constructed a canon of great works what stand like beacons along the road to enlightenment" (p. 137). Even though it was labelled "humanism" the term itself merely suggested white western males, never giving place to any other group at the centre. This marginalization of the others was not only

reserved for class or race, but more interestingly gender. Any member of the society outside the core remained underneath the social hierarchical level. Holding this patriarchal gaze at the centre, this anthropocentric ideology was bound to push binary oppositions to its extreme. Not only did it deepen the gap between the female and male bodies but also reinforced gender roles between women and men. Assigning the role of perfecting human nature to men, this perspective held culture, the road to perfect civilization above nature, the wilderness that had to be controlled and dominated. Forgetting the mother Gaia, the myths were reinterpreted to give power to the "father" Zeus. As Paglia states (1991), "[t]he evolution from earth-cult to sky-cult shifts woman into the nether realm. Her mysterious procreative powers and the resemblance of her rounded breasts, belly and hips to earth's contours put her at the centre of early symbolism. She was the model for the Great Mother figures" (p. 8). Nevertheless, since Greek culture was held as the core of civilization, the myths and epics that influenced the society to such advanced philosophy were inescapably effective upon the founding of the anthropocentric view of humanism. Within this frame, *Odysseus* is remarkably significant in explaining and reflecting the Greek culture that was thought as the model for cultural development for the Western civilization. Since it reinforces the cultural myths of a culture that led to present western civilization and state of mind, one can assert in a much structuralist manner that *Odysseus* captures the spirit of a society which holds male as the authority that can construct reality through his own language. While using images such as "stallion", and "lion" to define "heroic" Odysseus, one finds that Penelope is rather described through words that have submissive connotations such as "chaste" and "discrete" which cuts a role for her nothing but the "wife" in a hero's story. In his definition translated by William Cowper (1791), one reads only the definition and matching of Odysseus with nature, never giving place or importance towards Penelope herself. Indeed, Odysseus is defined as;

[. . .] divine Ulysses from beneath

His thicket crept, and from the leafy wood

A spreading branch pluck'd forcibly, design'd

A decent skreen effectual, held before.

So forth he went, as goes the lion forth,

The mountain-lion, conscious of his strength,

Whom winds have vex'd and rains; fire fills his eyes,

He find, he rends them, and, adust for blood,

Abstains not even from the guarded fold [. . .] (VI. 154-162)

As can be seen, Odysseus is decribed as the "king" of predators and nature itself which only suits a male hero. He has the power to control and "devour" any other living

creature since he stands as the centre of power while other female characters in the epic are left undescribed in terms of imagery, usually depicted with abstract words that signal their chastity, purity, seductive or cunning qualities with an exception of certain female characters defined with plants that also reveals how the male perception of the female body expresses the need to "cultivate" women.

Indeed, when scrutinized Homer's narrative reveals how he uses nature's hunters such as the "lion" to depict the male hero while attaining plant names such as "Sage Euryclea" to give insight to the female "nurse". This depiction, however, drastically changes from Homer's narrative to Atwood's. The more the gap between humans and nature deepened, the more the definitions of the bodies changed. Defining female bodies with animal imagery may once be considered as inferiorating since the male body was the core of everything beautiful and noble; Nevertheless, in the present century as some ecocritical feminists as Serpil Opperman argue, nature itself should not be underestimated, yet be respected. What Margaret Atwood does in *The Penelopiad* is again using animalistic adjectives to shift the power of the hero to the heroine. Penelope and other women are now at the core of the story, therefore their story is to be told through the close relationship with nature. Interestingly, while the male bodies in *Odysseus* are defined by the hunters and wild animals that try to control others to be the "king" of nature, female bodies in *The Penelopiad* seem to be in perfect harmony with nature.

This hunter/prey dichotomy is also reflected in Atwood's narrative with the lines that depict a nightmare of Penelope's which "concerned [her] flock of lovely white geese, geese of which [she] was very fond [. . .] pecking around the yard when a huge eagle with a crooked beak swooped down and killed them all, whereupon [she] wept and wept" (Atwood, 2006, p. 139). Furthermore, Atwood mocks the patriarchal power of the father by revealing the strength of the matriarchy by stating how politically and economically Penelope is the source of power. "[I]f I stayed in Ithaca" utters Penelope, "and married one of the noble puppies, that puppy would become the king, and his stepfather, and would have authority over him" (Atwood, 2006, p. 110), underlying her own power while taking away the "natural" power given to men to rule. Notwithstandingly, Atwood cherishes this bond with nature changing the connotations of these metafors and, further, deconstructs the hierarchies and illusionary detachments that declare humans and nature as two distinct beings. One reads in Atwood at the very beginning of the story how Penelope "know[s] everything" once she is "dead" (p. 1) and when she screams she "sound[s] like an owl" (p. 2) and at the very end how "[t]he maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls" (p. 196). The maids are at this point crucial in understanding Atwood's perspective of the story: "Though the comic (and satiric) chorus immediately recalls those in Aristophanes, through their debunking, light-hearted burlesque Atwood makes a more serious point; the maids function as a tragic chorus, commenting on the actions of the hero, Odysseus (and in a later chorus, Penelope)" (Suzuki, 2007, p. 272). Thus, the "owl" as an animal with connotations of wisdom, and mourning, suggests that

usually too much wisdom brings suffering, as Cassandra who can foresee the future but neither can alter nor persuade anyone to believe herself. "[t]oo wit too woo" cry the maidens in *The Penelopiad*, who have "no voice", "no name", "no choice" but "one face" (Atwood, 2006, p. 195), offering a pun that "too" much "wit", or in other words awareness and wisdom, is only to "woe". They see and perceive everything around them while serving the noble men, yet noone actually pays attention to their knowledge. As the owls of the society, they stand aloof, symbolizing wisdom and sadness simultaneously. It can be inferred in parallel with Hilda Staels' (2009) argument that by placing the maids as the chorus, "[t]he threshold with the real, contemporary world of the biographical author is even transgressed, when Atwood makes explicit in the paratextual 'Introduction' that she has 'always been haunted by the hanged maids' (XV) like Odysseus and Penelope in the main text" (p. 106).

In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau Duplessis (1985) writes that "[w]hen a women writer chooses myth as her subject she is faced with material that is indifferent or, more often actively hostile to historical considerations of gender, claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural or even archetypal status" (p. 106). Therefore, one can claim that Atwood's attempt to give Penelope's perspective of the story aims to demolish the fixed archetypes in the Western patriarchal society that cannot be shaken unless cannonical works, such as *Odysseus*, are rewritten, as she does in *The Penelopiad*. In "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" Sherry B. Ortner (1982) suggests that "universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement" is "something very profound, very stubborn" (p. 67). This profound, "stubborn" subordination of women has been established since the very ancient times ever since culture was held above nature. Since the female body was regarded as being closer to nature, it was also regarded as being more vulnerable to oppression and needed to be controlled and manipulated. According to Camille Paglia (1991) feminism "has exceeded its proper misson of seeking political equality for women and has ended by rejecting contingency, that is, human limitation by nature or fate" and we are but "hierarchical animals" at core (p. 3). In Odysseus, one indeed has very little information towards female bodies, yet there are many references that empower the male body as the more "beautiful" and "strong" one when compared to the female body. The case of Calypso is here of importance since even though she is defined as a "divine nymph", she seems like a *femme fatale* with her mesmerizing effect upon Odysseus. Furthermore, "The awful Circe, Goddess amber-hair'd" whom Odysseus depicts as a bewitching character that forces him to stay on the island is also defined through a plant which can be raised and controlled (X, p. 166). In *The Penelopiad*, however, the relationship between Odysseus and Circe is juxtaposed by revealing the female side of the story in which Odysseus and his men forcefully disturb the peaceful island of Circe and use both her and her maids for the service of his crew. Atwood (2006) illustrates this scene by writing "[o]n the island of Circe we were turned into swine, /The he ate up her cakes and he drank up her wine, /For a year he became her blithe lodger!" (p. 95).

Even though Atwood does not give detailed reference to Circe in *The Penelopiad*, she creates a mud woman in her *Circe/Mud Poems*. It can be stated that "Bakhtin's formulation of the dialogic quest does not see: how to liberate oneself from the dominant languages that have silenced the female" (Larson, 1989, p. 30-31); Nevertheless, Atwood seems to find a way to break through the formulations. By rewriting the story of Circe in the *Circe/ Mud Poems*, only this time from the notorious goddess Circe's perspective, Atwood gives the misunderstood, or rather the misjudged goddess her long silenced voice back; she gives her the chance to address Odysseus directly as "you". Circe's tongue may not have been cut out in a brutal manner, but her voice was taken away by other means, by cutting her side of the story off the pages of the history of literature. There are twenty-four poems in *Circe/Mud Poems* with occasional paragraphs written in prose as if defying the twenty-four chapters of Homer's *Odysseus.* With Circe's resisting, even mocking language of Odysseus, Atwood sets her stance against the traditional male dominated perspective in literature. Furthermore, the mud woman becomes a symbol for women, gathering all the features of subjugation carried out by men in just one body. Atwood (1976) writes:

When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials. Every sunny day they would row across the island where she lived, in the afternoon when the sun had warmed her, and make love to her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted. They would take turns, they were not jealous, she preferred them both. Afterwards they would repair her, making her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone nipples. (p. 214)

The boys prefer to "stick to the essentials" for the woman does not need a head, hands or legs, for the head would mean her own thoughts, and a tongue to express them, hands would mean resistance to push back and the legs would allow her to run away to whenever she wanted. If she was complete, she would be free in her own decisions, not paralyzed and confined to the earth. The society has been tying the women to the nature since the ancient times as Sherry B. Ortner (1982) argues in her essay *"Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?".* Therefore, according to the ones who "shape" her, the only function of the mud woman is to lie there on the ground, vulnerable to any kind of abuse by men, and without any breath to inhale freedom. Similarly, in *The Penelopiad*, one reads that Penelope is only free when she is set free from her physical body: "Since being dead – since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness – I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters" (Atwood, 2006, p. 1).

When one searches the roots to the differing representations of female and male bodies while analzying two works that have been written in a lenght of time that widens through ages, one finds that the reason to this state could be found within the

phallocentric state of mind of the West that protects the patriarchal society through binary oppositions that cherishes the male mind and body. What is further worth mentioning is that this protection is not only provided by the males but also by the females, too, who find the only option of escape in trusting the masculine state of power. Euryclea, for instance, is the invisible matriarchal force behind Odysseus, ever hiding her importance yet always fierce in revealing her support and "fandom" of Odysseus himself. In *The Penelopiad*, this shift of Euryclea's character is quite interesting with her positioning as the "mother-in-law" against Penelope herself which suggests the modern day stereotype of the mother embracing her son against the daughter-in-law trying to control her husband. What Atwood tries to deconstruct in *The Penelopiad* is these stereotypical relationships and representations of women while offering a gynocentric perception towards art and literature, as Elaine Showalter would also argue in terms of gynocriticism. "The program of gynocritics" states Showalter (1986), "is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (p. 131). She further explains the importance of such a deconstructive approach to a phallogocentric world view by stating that "Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the new visible world of female culture" (p. 131).

In alliance with Showalter, in order to deconstruct and reinvent the cultural myths, Atwood initially changes the linear epic form into that of a circular form of a novella with its many chapters, assigning a procreant function to the genre of novel itself. According to Hilde Staels (2009),

*The Penelopi*ad both spatially and temporally sets contemporary against ancient times, which is a common feature of the menippea. The idealization of the distant past is destroyed when the contemporary female narrators discursively cross the threshold between the present 'here' in the Greek Underworld and 'there, ' the readers' contemporary world, [. . .] The boundary between the time of the ancient epic and that of the contemporary novel is also crossed when the maids summon twelve angry Furies to take revenge on Odysseus during the twenty-first-century trial. (p. 106)

Moreover, while Homer's *Odysseus* is quite linear, one finds that *The Penelopiad* is quite cyclical, a perspective quite close to what Paglia (1991) states in her *Sexual Personea* by writing that "[n]ature's cycles are woman's cycles" (p. 9). The novel indeed starts with the "death" of Penelope with a time perception that transgresses all borders that provides the reader with multiple aspects, even that of the maids' who play an important yet usually overlooked role in the story of Odysseus. While Eurycleia describes these maids as "[t]he impertinent ones. The ones who'd been rude. [. . .] They were notorious whores" (Atwood, 2006, p. 159-60), Penelope redefines this sentences by saying "[t]he ones who'd been raped", "[t]he youngest. The

most beautiful. [. . .] My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow white geese. My thrushes, my doves" (p. 160). The interpretation of Penelope's dream by Odysseus in disguise suggest suggest that the maids have been slain as a sacrifice to Odysseus and Penelope. In Homer's version, it is written that, "[t]he slaughter'd geese/Denote thy suitors. / I who have appear'd/An eagle in thy sight, am yet indeed/Thy husband, who have now, at last, return'd, /Death, horrid death designing for them all" (XIX. p. 161-6). Hence, it can be concluded that,

Atwood thereby revises the Odyssey where Odysseus's men constituted 'the many' in contrast to Odysseus as 'the one' so that in *The Penelopiad* it is the maids who constitute 'the many' of Greek epic and tragedy. But Atwood endows the maids, though outsiders, with a privileged perspective and voice as satirists who eloquently critique the ideology of the dominant order that normalized their slaughter by condemning them as unchaste and disloyal. They debunk the gender privilege that Odysseus holds over them, complaining about the sexual double standard that condones his adultery while finding their liaisons deserving of deadly punishment, and his possession of 'the spear' (Suzuki, 2007, p. 272)

Atwood uses such a technique to further display the fragmented representations of the female body. Dragged between either being a virgin, a mother or an evil seductress, the female body depicted in Odysseus reveals the perception of patriarchal societies of the West that try to subordinate women, whereas in the female bodies in *The Penelopiad,* brings together all distinct representations as a patchwork, attempting to reunite all fragments of the female body and its connotations together to form a depiction that strengthens the hand of women trying to gain equality in the present century.

Having considered the change between the two works, it can be inferred that the Western civilization formed upon epics such as *Odysseus* reveals the major premises upon which female bodies have been subordinated and silenced. With *The Penelopiad*, on the other hand, Margaret Atwood, as a successful revisionist mythmaker, shakes these "stable" grounds that patriarchy relies on by deconstructing a whole tale narrated by the "father tongue" and instead constructs "mother tongue(s)" to provide a more objective and equal picture of women and their role in the society which can never be limited to being a daughter, a wife and a mother but in every case a maid.

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