



Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
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Paula do Amaral de Souza Cruz

**Can the dead speak? Appropriation and rewriting of the canon in
Angela Carter's nights at the circus and in Margaret Atwood's the
Penelopiad**

Rio de Janeiro
2012

Paula do Amaral de Souza Cruz

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

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DEDICATÓRIA

Este trabalho é dedicado ao meu irmão, Tarso, com amor e profunda gratidão.

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A todos vocês, um sincero muito obrigado.

Turn the pages of your Greek models night and day.

Horace

Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know.

T. S. Eliot

All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them.

Margaret Atwood

Men have every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.

Jane Austen

RESUMO

SOUZA, Paula Curz. *Can the dead speak? Appropriation and rewriting of the canon in Angela Carter's Nights at the circus and in Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad*. 2012. 109f. Dissertação (Mestrado Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2012.

Esta dissertação visa estudar como autoras pós-modernas se apropriam e reescrevem textos canônicos em uma tentativa de trazer à tona e desconstruir as metanarrativas patriarcais, que informam tais textos. Tal objetivo pretende ser alcançado através de um estudo sobre a formação do cânone literário, dos conceitos de mito e principalmente das estratégias narrativas utilizadas por essas autoras em seu processo criativo. Para tal, um estudo sobre intertextualidade, a paródia e a intertextualidade paródica é levado a cabo nesta dissertação. Dois romances figuram como objeto de investigação neste trabalho. O romance *Nights at the Circus*, da escritora inglesa Angela Carter, é o primeiro a ser analisado. Nesse romance, as estratégias de apagamento das fronteiras entre os gêneros e a intertextualidade paródica entre textos e mitos clássicos como formas de apropriação e subversão do cânone, são privilegiadas. O outro romance que se faz presente nesta dissertação é a obra da autora canadense Margaret Atwood intitulada *The Penelopiad*. Nesse romance, personagens que antes eram marginalizados ou não tinham voz figuram como personagens principais, como é o caso de Penélope e de suas doze criadas. Esta dissertação visa, assim, mostrar como essas apropriações de textos canônicos exercem um papel fundamental no questionamento da artificialidade de discursos que são naturalizados e dos valores propagados pelos mesmos.

Palavras-chave: Cânone. Apropriação. Reescritura. Feminino.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims at studying postmodern women writers and the way they appropriate and rewrite canonical texts in an attempt to bring to the foreground and deconstruct metanarratives, especially those informed by patriarchy, which figure in such texts. In order to do so, a study of the canon formation, the concepts of myth, and the narrative strategies used by these authors in their creative process is made necessary. To achieve such goal, a research on intertextuality, parody and parodic intertextuality is carried out in this dissertation. Two novels figure as object of investigation in this work. British writer Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is the first to be analysed. In this novel, the strategies of the blurring of the genres, and of parodic intertextuality between classical texts and myths as a means of appropriation and subversion of the canon are carried out. The other novel that figures in this dissertation is *The Penelopiad*, by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. In this novel, characters that were once marginalized or voiceless figure as main characters and tell their version of events, as it is the case of Penelope and of her twelve maids. This dissertation intends to show how the appropriation of canonical texts plays a fundamental role in the questioning of the artificiality of the discourses that are naturalized and of the values propagated by them.

Keywords: Canon. Appropriation. Rewriting. Feminine.

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INTRODUCTION

The word canon has been used for many years in reference to texts considered to be 'High Literature' by literary scholars and critics. To become part of a literary canon, texts should comply with a set of rules and criteria which have, in general terms and for a long time, been based on a one-sided view of reality, that of Western white male writers and critics. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in his groundbreaking work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, implies that up to the mid-twentieth century we lived in the so-called era of the 'Grand Narratives', a period during which it was believed that there was one Truth – with capital T – which everyone was bound to seek and live by. Literary canonical texts played an important role in the establishing and searching for this Truth because, for many centuries, certain literary texts were considered to be able to provide readers not only with aesthetic enjoyment, but also with universal values. In such a context, women were normally marginalized and voiceless, and their subjectivities and experiences were mostly represented through the eyes and experiences of male writers, who were marked by patriarchal values and norms.

However, with the advent of postmodernism there has been, according to Lyotard and other critics, a questioning of the Grand Narratives and of hegemonic discourses of various natures. Among those who questioned these values were female writers, theoreticians and critics, many of whom had and have been writing as an attempt to bring patriarchal values and its prejudiced view on women under scrutiny, as well as to bring to the foreground feminine oppression under such system of representation. In order to do so, these writers have used, among others, the strategy of appropriation. They make use of canonical texts to, in Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon's terms, install and subvert the very concepts they are trying to challenge.

In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 - 1978*, American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich states that "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (RICH, 1979, p.35). Rich also claims that "We need to know the writings of the past,

and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (RICH, 1979, p. 35). It is through the appropriation of canonical texts that many postmodern female writers attempt to deconstruct patriarchal representations of women and to give them new signification in a re-contextualized scope.

I have chosen two authors who I consider representative of this female attempt to re-signify and re-contextualize female experience through the light of postmodernism, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. In order to break the hold of tradition over them and to subvert canonical texts, both authors have applied a wide variety of strategies such as the use of parodic intertextuality, irony, polyphony, blurring of the genres and the carnivalesque, to name a few. Both authors have found their way of subverting hegemonic discourses privileging and giving voice to figures, especially female ones, who were once denied the right of speech or, at least, whose experience had been shown through the eyes of male writers.

When I first read the novel *Nights at the Circus*, written by the English novelist Angela Carter, I was baffled by the vast amount of intertextual references the novel presented. Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* is packed with intertextual references to canonical texts. In these and other works, the author establishes a dialogue with myths, fairy tales, as well as with a wide range of literary genres and works.

As an undergraduate student, the book was a challenge to me, but a real pleasant one, for each time I could identify the references she made to other works of literature, to paintings, philosophical theses, and so on, it gave me great pleasure. It was like a game to me. I found the book so fascinating that I decided to write my monograph paper at the end of my ‘Specialization Course’ on it. After that first contact with Carter’s work, I was more than curious to read, study and explore more of her writing.

My encounter with Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood was smoother, but no less pleasant. The first novel I read by her was *Alias Grace* and I was amazed at the way Atwood felt comfortable to question the fictionality of official history and to fill the gaps, as a fiction writer, left by it. I simply loved her easy-to-read style and I felt an urge to read more novels by her. Then I came into contact with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and, finally, with *The Penelopiad*. *The Penelopiad* presents an explicit intertextual dialogue with Greek poet Homer’s *Odyssey*. In her novel, Atwood gives voice to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids who are able to give their

own account of what happened to them. Penelope and the maids speak from Hades in present times and, therefore, from a twenty-first century perspective. According to Brazilian scholar Sigrid Renaux, they speak from “an observant, ironic and subtly feminist” standpoint (RENAUX: 2009, p.204).

The main aim of this research project is to investigate and analyze the narrative strategies used by Carter and Atwood when it comes to the appropriation and subversion of canonical texts. I tried to show that such strategies are installed by these authors in order to subvert hegemonic discourses, especially the patriarchal ones. The question I intended to answer was: how do such strategies contribute to the questioning of hegemonic discourses and, therefore, to the shedding of some new light on the re-signification and re-contextualization of the female experience in the light of contemporaneity and of literary postmodernism?

In order to achieve such goal, I started my work with a research on the concept of canon and its formation. This research led me to the contemporary debate over canon formation and how exclusionary the process has been. I have used authors who argue against the traditional canon and propose its extinction or its replacement by various other canonic lists that would be more inclusive, as it is the case of American scholar David Richter. Another author I came in contact with, and who immensely enriched the debate, was American critic Harold Bloom, who contrary to Richter, argues in favor of the literary canon as it has been formed to this day. In this debate, one thing cannot be denied and that is how the canon has had a key role in the shaping and propagating of certain myths, as well as in the production of the so-called Grand Narratives that permeate our society.

Since the canon has had this role in propagating myths and Grand Narratives, I felt the need to explore a little deeper the concept of myth and, as a result, I found out that there are many different concepts in relation to this word. On the one hand, myths can be seen in a more traditional sense. Through this perspective, myths would be connected to rituals of certain societies and would be a way through which such societies found to legitimize these rituals. On the other hand, the other concept of myth would be that in which myths have the function of naturalizing constructed discourses through repeated narratives. In compliance with this later approach, I studied the works of the following French philosophers: Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-François Lyotard.

After that, I investigated the role women writers have played in exposing metanarratives and how their works have become agents of change. I have drawn on Linda Hutcheon's work on how these women writers have worked within the postmodern scope to appropriate and rewrite canonical texts as an attempt not only to denounce but also to seek societal changes through their work. Such investigation led me to the study of appropriation, and the realization that it is through the appropriation of traditional texts and genres that women writers have found their way of breaking with tradition and its value systems and hierarchies. To develop this issue further, I have used theoreticians and critics such as British scholar Julie Sanders, American essayist Rachel Duplessis, Adrienne Rich among others.

The study of appropriation and of re-writing inevitably made me turn to the investigation of the strategies many contemporary women authors use in these processes and the concepts of intertextuality and parody came ashore. In the study of intertextuality, I briefly traced its origins and, to that purpose, I delved into the works of Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin and French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva. Then, I used once again the works of Linda Hutcheon to understand how several postmodern writers make use of such concept in their works. While I was analyzing this issue, the concept of parody came to my attention. Hutcheon helped me to understand how intrinsically connected the two terms are when it comes to postmodern strategies of looking at the past with fresh eyes: "Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with significant change – the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture." (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 130).

After this theoretical investigation, I started exploring the novels I had chosen to work with. I open the dissertation chapter on Carter's *Nights at the Circus* with a brief biography of Carter as I believe it is important to know how her personal life led her to her creative one. Then I decided to make a short summary of the novel with some comments on the work under investigation. Only after this brief detour, I felt it was time to delve into the analyses of the strategies Carter uses in order to demystify hegemonic discourses.

I start my analyses studying how Carter was part of a group of women writers who "was engaged in re-imagining archetypal and mythical images of women or retelling the narratives associated with them" (STODDART, 2001, p. 18), as Scottish scholar Helen Stoddart would put it. I chose to analyze, in depth, how two very clear

intertextual references present in the novel are exposed by Carter in *Nights at the Circus*: the references to Dickens and to the Greek myth of 'Leda and the Swan' that encompasses the birth of Helen of Troy.

After this exemplification of how Carter makes clear appropriation and subversive rewritings of canonical myths or texts, I analyze how she subverts texts that do not have a clear counterpart, or a defined contrasting work. I propose the analyses of how Carter parodically subverts traditional genres and how the genre boundaries end up blurred in her novel. Her novel escapes any strict classification, for Carter seems to aim at denouncing the formalities and restraints of traditional literary genres as well as at exposing the biases of these genres and showing how they are informed by patriarchal metanarratives.

The last part of my work is dedicated to the study of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. As I did with Carter, I provide first a brief biography of Atwood before delving into the novel itself. When I started analyzing the novel, I did so by trying to find out why Atwood decided to appropriate and rewrite *The Odyssey*, amongst so many other classics, when she was invited to take part in the Canongate project.

Atwood herself gives us a clue to what in *The Odyssey* called her attention. She says that Penelope's story is filled with inconsistencies and that she had always been very much intrigued by the hanging of the twelve maids. Atwood seems to launch herself into the task of filling the gaps and tackling inconsistencies in the source text, while providing a context for the maids to give their own accounts of the facts. In order to do so, Atwood chooses to use a literary genre clearly different, in many aspects, from the original one. If the source text was an epic, Atwood's choice is that of a novel. How do such differences in genre affect her project of giving voice to the women who were silent and silenced in the original text?

In order to provide such an answer, I felt impelled to study the epic and its conventions to see how Atwood subverts them in her novel. To perform such a task, I made use, once again, of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, very specifically, of his essay "Epic and Novel". In this work, the theoretician compares the novel to other genres especially to the epic. This work proved itself to be very useful in my analysis. Throughout this part, I try to show how Atwood deconstructs myths of femininity that have been built around the character of Penelope.

The result of this research is the present dissertation, which has involved a lot of hard work, but a work that brought great pleasure. I hope I have been able to

contribute to those who are interested in the study of appropriation and rewriting by contemporary women writers as well as in their attempts at debunking myths and metanarratives that have been informing canonical texts for so long.

1. DEBASING THE ASSUMPTIONS IN WHICH WE ARE DRENCHED

1.1. The Canon War: A Heated Debate on the Canon Formation

When most people think of the study of literature, some names immediately come to their minds – Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Dante, just to name a very few. It does so because in the majority of schools and university courses on literature these are the authors who figure in the programs. Why is that so? Are there not any relevant new authors? How does the choice of authors to be studied take place? Are there not authors that do not come from the Western society? Is the number of women writers really so inexpressive? What about African American, South American, Asian or African authors? These are questions that have been part of a heated debate over the canon formation for the past fifty years or so.

Since the 1960s, when Feminism, Cultural Studies and relativistic literary theories started to figure, though very unsubstantially, in university courses, there has been a constant questioning of the status of the ‘canon’. In his book *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*, English scholar E. Dean Kolbas sheds some light on the debate and states that the Western canon, “has been dominated by ‘dead, white European males’, excluding authors and artists from social groups that have historically been marginalized or that do not conform to the interests of the dominant culture” (KOLBAS, 2001, p. 1).

According to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, the word canon has its origins in ancient Greek and originally meant one of two things, a measuring rod or a list. Some important insights might be drawn from these two original meanings: “from the first is derived the idea of a model or standard which can be applied as a rule, law or principle. [...] From the second comes the concept of canonization, the Roman Catholic practice of admitting an individual to a ‘list’ of saints” (MAKARYK, 1993, p. 514). Both assumptions show the almost religious authority status of canon and its prescriptive nature. In order for a literary work to be part of the canon, and consequently achieve such ‘holy’ status, it has to be in compliance with a set of rules. Which authors are chosen to be a part of this ‘holy list’?. Once again, Kolbas is very critical on the formation of such a list as he states that it is “condemned as an elitist, patriarchal, racist, or ethnocentric construction” (KOLBAS, 2001, p. 1).

Canon in that sense meant a list of required books prescribed mainly for elites. The question we may want to answer is: which criteria are used to make a book part of the canon? In his book *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, David Richter traces a brief history of the making of canonic lists and questions their formation. First of all, Richter claims that this whole debate traces back to the time when poets realized that when it came to fame, they were competing not only with their contemporaries but also with their predecessors. Therefore, one aspect we must take into account is that a canonic list has to be thought as capable to fit the short span of human life, i.e. one has to be capable of reading the books prescribed on that list throughout his/her life. Therefore, the length of the list is one of the relevant criteria for the canon formation. For a book to become part of the canon, another one has to be left out.

Just as exemplification, let us go over the main criteria mentioned by Richter in his article when it comes to canon formation. In the classical times, Middle Ages and Renaissance [Richter's terminology], literary excellence was a criterion for adding a book to the canonical list and it was regarded as an objective predicate. It was believed that there were universal standards of Truth, Goodness and Beauty and that any "disagreements over taste were considered reflections of defective nature of human perception and intelligence" (RICHTER, 1998, p. 1527). In the mid-eighteenth century, this idea was replaced by the notion of taste as a 'subjective universal', i.e. a supposedly universally shared agreement which depends on "an objective Idea of the Beautiful" (p. 1527). On the other hand, by the nineteenth century, the universal taste gave place to the idea that high literature was the one that enriched the human spirit.

Richter, however, is fully aware that literary quality is far from being the main criterion in the choice of prescribed literary works as it had always been believed. He argues that the criteria and set of rules used to make a book part of the canon is and has always been based on a one-sided view of reality – the reality of Western white *male* writers, a reality closely related to the dominant Western ideology.

John Guillory, in his *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Canon Formation*, also contributes to the debate as he links the canon formation to class issues, stating that schools have an important role in defining what is the basis of high Literature but also in defining what literacy itself is, thus reproducing class distinctions. Guillory states that:

The problem of what is called canon formation is best understood as a problem in the constitution and distribution of cultural capital, or more specifically, a problem of access to the means of literary production and consumption. The "means" in question are provided by the school, which regulates and thus distributes cultural capital *unequally* . . . by regulating access to literacy, to the practices of reading and writing. (GUILLORY, 1993, p. x, author's emphasis)

Richter also implies that up to the mid of the twentieth century we lived in the so-called era of the "Grand Narratives", a term coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. According to Lyotard, the Grand Narratives convey the idea that there is one Truth, with capital T, that everyone was bound to seek. Canonical texts played an important role in the searching for this single Truth, for they were considered to be able to provide readers with universal values. In his groundbreaking book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, first published in 1979, Lyotard claims that from the end of the 18th century, the brink of modernity, up to approximately the 1960s, Western civilization had lived governed by certain dominant metanarratives. Such metanarratives were said to be large scale philosophies of the world, such as positivist science as the bearer of progress to mankind, hermeneutics as the key to human self-development, Marxism and its reliance on the emancipation of mankind through class struggle, and so on. Such metanarratives were used to legitimize knowledge.

However, from the 1960s onwards, with the advent of postmodernism, according to Lyotard, there has been an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (LYOTARD, 1984, p. XXIV). In the postmodern era it is not possible to believe that there is one single form of discourse. Lyotard believes that in postmodernity there is not one form of knowledge that is privileged and serves as the grounds for other forms of knowledge. Instead, Lyotard believes that metanarratives have been replaced by a multiplicity of *language games*, a term that taken from the work of Austrian-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. By language games Lyotard means that if one wants to know the meaning of a term, a phrase or sentence, one has to look at "how it is utilized, how it functions in human interaction" ¹. Lyotard believes that science can give us one account of reality, but there are many others. According to him, knowledge is fractured and multiple, there can't be one absolute or universal rule that that is valid for all statements.

¹ Online at: <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/holocaust/lyotaddiff.html>, accessed on 01/23/2012

Richter seems to be fully aware of the socio-political dimensions and implications of the canon, as well as of their connection to the maintenance of the so-called Grand Narratives, as he states that “strong conservative forces – including the very *idea* of a canon – operate to keep the canon constant” (RICHTER, 1998, p. 1529, author’s italics). Keeping the canon constant means keeping its ability to propagate that one-sided view of reality, which means maintaining the Grand Narratives alive.

In her book *Contingency of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, North-American theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith attempts to situate various different views of "values" within an economically influenced theoretical approach. Smith uses her theory to address literary, aesthetic, and other types of values, attempting to discern whether any objective standards may be applied to values and canons. Smith raises interesting and challenging issues when she argues that “all values are radically contingent, being neither an inherent property of objects nor an arbitrary projection of subjects but, rather, the product of the dynamics of an economic system” (SMITH, 1983, p. 12). Smith concludes that:

a text’s acceptance into the canon is and has always been a political decision that can be influenced by interest groups with social and cultural agendas. The Western canon is (consciously or otherwise) a product of Eurocentrism and patriarchy (p. 115).

Nowadays, it is well known that the canon of Western literature is not the only possibility. A great number of authors who had never been read are now being (re)discovered and their texts are available for anyone to read. However, we seem to have come to a crossroads, since there are so many groups that actually have a voice and who want to be heard, how can these works be selected? Since there is a problem of time limit, how can a person read everything that is at offer? Should a person read everything? Should a person read what is directly related to her personal reality? These are questions we have to try and answer these days.

If we create a canon of African American writers, for instance, which works should be selected? By creating such a specialized canon, aren’t we ‘ghettoizing’ such writers? In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, North-American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. prioritizes writers that follow the African oral tradition and leaves aside many writers who, according to him, wrote in the language and the tradition of the oppressor. However, it could be argued that the writers who

have been excluded from the anthology write from the point of view of people who are neither African nor white Americans. They have a hybrid identity and so do their texts. Gates, however, had to establish a criterion for his selection and that was his justification.

As to a canon of women writers, we could mention the publication, in 2007, of the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: Traditions in English*. The success of the two previous editions of the anthology (1985 and 1996), led the Norton company to publish this substantially extended coverage of English-language women writers worldwide. This third edition includes 219 women authors from all over the world, presenting writers of diverse racial, ethnic, and regional origins, in a span of time that covers the past six centuries. In the anthology, the time and geographic diversity is matched by a great variety of literary genres.

The war of the canons, as Richter puts it, goes on with another question, if we have many canons instead of one as we used to have in the past, one that had the status of a Holy Book, we may run the risk of being too specialized and the readers of such texts would be the only ones to be interested in that specific type of literature. This would not be really enriching, for the main objective of these counter-canons seems to be the establishment of a dialogue between different viewpoints.

Kolbas believes that nowadays the dispute among the polarized views of the canon debate tends to remain unresolved for “When one critic speaks of the loss of standards of judgment, another reacts by emphasizing the exclusions that those standards have reinforced” (KOLBAS, 2001, p. 3). A conciliation between very distinct approaches seems far from reach, for while some critics insist on analyzing literary works strictly for their aesthetic qualities, others will claim that we need to situate texts within a social and historical context and to reverse the relation of centrality and periphery about these texts.

The debate goes on and it is far from getting to an end for the word canon has in its core meaning the idea of rule and prescription. As anything that is prescriptive it will be inherently exclusive. If something has to be chosen, something else has to be left out. The main problem persists, for who are the ones to choose the texts that are to take part in the different canons of the different minority groups? If one person is responsible for doing so, the decision will be taken top down and it will be believed, as it has already happened before, that if a person in authority has chosen such books, they are undoubtedly good.

Maybe we should not be discussing which canon we must teach and study, but we ought to discuss the very existence of the concept of canon itself. Do we really have to be told what to teach and what to read? Having a canon is really mandatory in the academia and elsewhere? We have to be very careful not to fall in the very trap we are trying to escape from – the dictatorship of a single canon.

Critics such as Harold Bloom, who argue in favor of a Western literary canon, seem to fail to acknowledge the political and social consequences of praising solely literary works that provide readers with the propagation and perpetuation of the dominant values. In his book *The Western Canon – The Books and the School of the Ages*, Bloom shows his opposition to what Richter, Kolbas and Smith defend - multicultural canons that encompass all the minority groups that have been left out for centuries - as he states that “cultural criticism is another dismal social science, but literary criticism, as an art, always was and always will be an elitist phenomena” (BLOOM, 1994, p. 17).

Bloom takes Shakespeare as an example of what he believes to be the two main features of canonic works - desire for immortality and originality. Bloom believes that the literary work acquires almost human anxieties as it fears to be mortal and seeks immortality through its canonization, “to join communal or societal memory” (p. 19). He also believes that the main quality a literary text must possess in order to be part of the canon is originality and once again he takes Shakespeare as an example. But what is it to be original? Bloom not only does not give objective explanations on such a matter but also states that the attempt to find reasons why Shakespeare was chosen by the dominant class over his contemporary, Ben Jonson, for instance, should be replaced by the much simpler realization “that there is a *qualitative* difference, a difference in kind, between Shakespeare and every other writer” (p. 25, author’s italics)

Bloom believes that the canon formation has always been based on aesthetic choices but acknowledges that nowadays this is a difficult standpoint to defend since the canon formation has become extremely politicized:

Ideological defenses of the canon are as pernicious in regard to aesthetic values as the onslaughts of attackers who seek to destroy the Canon or “open it up”, as they proclaim. Nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded upon severely artistic criteria. Those who oppose the canon insist that there is always an ideology involved in canon formation; indeed, they go farther and speak of the ideology of canon

formation, suggesting that to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act *in itself* (BLOOM, 1994, p. 22, author's capitals and italics)

Bloom vehemently disagrees with the proposition that the canon has placed itself in the service of social aims – dominant ideology. For him, aesthetic values are the features that allow a literary work to join the canon and such values are constituted primarily of: “mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (p. 29). Can we really completely disregard social values? It is well known that we live in a society that is built upon myths and such myths are so strong that acquire the status of natural, unquestionable facts. The idea of a canon is embedded with the values of such a society. It would be interesting to comment on how these myths are founded and circulate among us.

1.2. Transforming History into Nature: The Power of Myths

The Greek word *μυθος* is a combination of two verbs: *mytheyo*, which means to tell, to narrate; and *mytheo* which means to talk, to announce, and to designate. In *A Greek English Lexicon*, myth is defined as a “*tale, story, narrative [...] without distinction of true or false, [...] professed work of fiction, children’s story, fable*” (LIDDELL; SCOTT, 1996, p. 1151, author’s italics). As we may perceive the etymology of the word gives us a hint of the function and the status of myths in our society. The Brazilian philosopher Danilo Marcondes helps us understand such function by defining myths as the means through which a given people explains essential aspects of reality in a particular way – through a specific form of discourse, the mythic discourse. Both definitions highlight the discursive aspect of myths regardless of their reliability. The better it is narrated, the more successful a myth is. So a myth operates in society through its capacity of explaining reality through a narrative.

In his book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, British scholar Robert Segal highlights the importance of the myth-ritual theory, which connects the existence of myths to ritual. Some theoreticians who follow this trend go even further claiming that myths exist to legitimize and explain rituals. For Segal, William Robertson Smith, a nineteenth-century Scottish Biblical and Arabist, was the first scholar to come up with

such a connection. According to Smith, ancient people started performing rituals for some reason, which was not related to myth. The ritual was mandatory while the myth was not. For him, myths primary function was to explain rituals. Without rituals, myths would not even exist. Smith believed that people try to account for the ritual by creating a myth and later the same myth that was invented was said to be the reason why they were celebrating a certain event. (SEGAL, 2004, p. 63)

According to myth scholars, Scottish social anthropologist James G. Frazer is another important name in the study of myth and in his famous work, *The Golden Bough* (1890), he develops some of Smith's ideas. Frazer believed that myths were a misinterpretation of magical rituals and that magical rituals stemmed from equivocal ideas on natural laws. In his book, Frazer traces how man progresses from magic through religion to science. According to him, man first believes in magical laws and then he realizes that his applications to such laws are useless. It is then that man starts to believe in personal Gods who control nature. Finally, man figures out that nature does not follow any law, and starts to believe in science, which ends up making myth obsolete. (p. 67 - 68)

Both Smith and Frazer, just like other scholars who studied myth in the nineteenth century, had a somewhat negative view on myth, for they framed it as an obsolete mode of thought and interpreted myth as primitive as opposed to modern science. The twentieth century, however, brought with it another perspective on myth as the new theories rejected the dichotomy between myth and science. Discussing the different perspective of myth studies in the nineteenth and the twentieth century, Segal presents us with a didactic account:

There is one genuine difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories. Nineteenth-century theories tended to see the subject matter of myth as the natural world and to see the function of myth as either a literal explanation or a symbolic description of that world. Myth was typically taken to be the 'primitive' counterpart to science, which was assumed to be wholly modern. Science rendered myth not merely redundant but outright incompatible, so that moderns, who by definition are scientific, had to reject myth. By contrast, twentieth-century theories have tended to see myth as almost anything but an outdated counterpart to science, either in subject matter or in function. Consequently, moderns are not obliged to abandon myth for science. (p. 3)

In the twentieth century, important scholars of different areas of knowledge had myths as their object of study. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, for instance, throughout his work and most specifically in *Symbols of Transformation* (1967) and *Man and His Symbols* (1968), studied the psychology that permeated myths and their

relation with the unconscious, differently from nineteenth-century scholars, who tended to focus on the material aspects of myths. Jung coined the term archetype to designate innate psychological forces that human beings share and which could explain the similarities between myths in different cultures. Jung exercised great influence on scholars who either forwarded or broke with his work. Just to name a few, we can cite American mythologist Joseph Campbell and his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), his most influential work to this day. In this book, Campbell discusses his theory of the journey of the archetypal hero in several cultures and literatures and popularized the idea of comparative mythology. Another important theoretician who drew from Jungian psychology is the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye. In two of his most important works, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *Fables of Identity* (1963), Frye appropriates Jung's concept of the archetypes and theorizes it in purely literary terms, ascribing to different sets of myths different corresponding literary genres as, for example, birth/romance, marriage/comedy and idyll, death/tragedy and elegy (GUEDES, 1994, p. 39-40). Frye breaks with Jung's psychoanalytical perspective because he was not interested in the unconscious, he was interested in the function and effects of archetypes, differently from Jung, whose main concern was the origin of archetypes.

As we may perceive, there are innumerable and conflicting definitions and approaches to myth. English theologian Don Cupitt acknowledges such a fact and advises us to avoid any kind of absolutism when it comes to the choices a mythographer should make. Cupitt believes mythographers have to acknowledge that their emphasis is just one among many. Let us turn to his definition on myth to clarify such an idea:

So we may say that myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked to a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological [i.e. last ultimate] time or in the supernatural world, or may deal with comings and goings between the supernatural world and the world of human history; that the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic [i.e. humanly formed] ways, although their powers are more than human and often the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams; that the whole body of a people's mythology is often prolix [i.e. lengthy, wordy], extravagant and full of seeming inconsistencies; and finally that the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. Both for society at large and for the individual, this story-generating function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life

by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story. (CUPITT, 1982, p. 29)

Cupitt's ideas seem to be in compliance with that of Marcondes, for the Brazilian philosopher also reminds us that myths tell of the origins of a given people and, therefore, are intimately related to and are produced by a cultural tradition, and it is precisely this tradition that builds the individuals' world view. So the myth is at its onset interconnected with a people's world view and, because of that, people accept it and adhere to it without questioning or discussing it. To be part of a given community the individual must believe in their myths otherwise he/ she does not belong to that community. Marcondes's ideas on myths can also be associated with the concept of ideology proposed by Algerian Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser who states that:

it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation that is at the centre of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the world. (ALTHUSSER, 1971, p. 164)

Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, interweaves myths and ideology and sheds some light on the matter. In the chapter entitled "Myth Today", the author poses the question - what is a myth, today? Barthes provides a plain answer: "Myth is a type of speech [...] but what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message" (BARTHES, 1991, p. 107). Barthes focuses on the discursive power of language in the creation of myths and states that everything can be a myth.

Barthes's definition of myth goes beyond the traditional one. According to him, a myth is also a narrative, but unlike the traditional definition which claimed that a myth could be a fable or a fictional story, Barthes's definition implies that myths are true stories and play an important role in the propagation of these constructed truths in our society. He states that "myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" (p. 128) and reaches what he believes to be "the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature" (p. 128).

Roland Barthes sees this transformative nature of myths as representative of the bourgeois society:

everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world [...] practiced on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order - the further the bourgeois class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become. (BARTHES, 1991, p. 139)

Although we perceive these myths as natural, Barthes, in his *Mythologies*, aims at denaturalizing them and insists that a myth is “a semiological system” (p.130) and, as such, it is “a system of values” (p. 130). When Barthes uses the term ideology, it is to Marx’s concept of ideology he refers to as he argues that “it is the bourgeois ideology itself, the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature” (p. 140). Barthes uses his theory to explain the function of myth in the bourgeois society, but the operation of myths can be applied to any semiological system which naturalizes constructed discourses through a repeated narrative.

A discourse that has been naturalized over centuries is the role women have to play in our patriarchal society. In her article “The Politics of Reality”, American feminist theorist Marilyn Frye comments on the fact that women are oppressed for being women and contrast such an oppression with that of other racial and economic groups that are also oppressed, be them men or women, but the men who belong to those groups are not oppressed simply for being men (FRYE, 1997, p. 102). French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Masculine Domination*, sheds some light on how metanarratives operate to legitimize such naturalization of social practices:

The biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and a biologicization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction (‘genders’ as sexually characterized habitus) appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division which underlies both reality and the representation of reality and which sometimes imposes itself even on scientific research. (BOURDIEU, 2011, p. 3)

The French philosopher highlights the strength of the masculine order for, according to him, it is so deeply-rooted and naturalized that it needs no justification: “the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aiming at legitimizing it” (p. 9). Womanhood is a concept which is constructed within such a view, that is, with the oppressor’s ideals. The problem arises when the oppressed can only see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor, as Bourdieu claims:

The dominated apply to what dominates them schemes that are the product of domination, or to put it another way, when their thoughts and perceptions are structured in accordance with the very structures of the relation of domination that is imposed on them, their acts of cognition are, inevitably, acts of recognition, submission. (BOURDIEU, 2011, p. 13)

Bourdieu believes this is the strongest and most effective kind of domination for the dominated “apply categories constructed from the viewpoint of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural” (p. 35). Such adherence to the dominant view point is nominated by him as *symbolic violence* for the dominated cannot even perceive the kind of subjugation and violence they are undergoing. According to Bourdieu:

Symbolic violence is instituted through the adherence that the dominated cannot fail to grant to the dominant (and therefore to the domination) when, to shape her thought of him, and herself, or rather, her thought of her relation with him, she has only cognitive instruments that she shares with him and which, being no more than the embodied form of the relation of domination, cause that relation to appear as natural; or, in other words, when the schemes she applies in order to perceive and appreciate herself, or to perceive and appreciate the dominant (high/low, male/female, white/black, etc) are the product of the embodiment of the – thereby naturalized – classifications of which her social being is the product. (p. 35)

1.3. The Demythologizing Business: Bringing Patriarchal Metanarratives Down

The concept of symbolic violence is intrinsically connected with the concept of mythology proposed by Roland Barthes and the concept of metanarratives proposed by Françoise Lyotard. Their theories aim at exposing and questioning the processes of naturalization that constructed discourses go through. Among those who questioned these values were women writers, many of whom have been writing as an attempt to bring patriarchal values and its prejudiced view on women under scrutiny, as well as to bring to the foreground feminine oppression under a system of representation. Linda Hutcheon, commenting on the various forms of feminist theories and how they focus on metanarratives from a particular angle, states that “the metanarrative that has been their [feminists’] primary concern is obviously patriarchy, especially at its point of imbrications with the other major master narratives of our day – capitalism and liberal humanism” (HUTCHEON, 1994, p. 187).

In her article “Incredulity toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms”, Hutcheon focuses on the call for change that feminisms have in their agendas in contrast with Postmodernism, whose main objective, according to her, is to expose the mechanisms of metanarratives. Feminisms have turned their attention to the way female subjects are represented in our society and have suggested ways to challenge such representations:

They have taught us that to accept unquestioningly any fixed representations – in fiction, film, advertising or whatever – is to condone social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women (or blacks, Asians, gays, etc.) and not others. Cultural production is carried on within a social context and an ideology – a lived value system – and it is to this that feminist work has made us pay attention. (HUTCHEON, 1994, p. 189)

Postmodernism also works “toward an awareness of the social nature of cultural activity, but feminisms are not content with exposition: art forms cannot change unless social practices do” (p. 188), as Hutcheon puts it. The Canadian theorist goes on stating that:

feminist and postmodernist artists do share a view of art as a social sign inevitably and unavoidably enmeshed in other signs in systems of meaning and value. But I would argue that feminisms want to go beyond this work to *change* those systems not just to “de-doxify” them (p. 188, author’s italics).

In her article, Hutcheon argues that many feminisms refuse to fully align with postmodernism because they simply want to go beyond exposing and deconstructing ideology, they seek to change such ideology and believe it can only be realized with a transformation of patriarchal social practices. To that matter, postmodern female writers seem to have the best of both worlds, for they make use of the narrative strategies of postmodernism and seek societal changes through their work: “Postmodern parodic and ironic representational strategies have offered feminist artists an effective way of working and yet challenging dominant patriarchal metanarrative discourses” (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 190). In order to incorporate postmodern strategies in their agenda, women writers have been appropriating and re-writing canonical texts of the past as a way of giving agency to women.

The term appropriation has its origins in Marxist discourse, but it has also been used in literary theory to refer to the ways in which contemporary women writers defy patriarchal values that have always been an integral part of canonical

texts. As postmodern writers, they know it is impossible to be completely apart from the dominant culture and its grand narratives, so a way they found to contest it was to re-read and then re-write texts from the past or from this dominant culture. However, such a rewriting is far from being neutral. They do so in a subversive way, as an attempt to bring to light the unfair treatment women have been receiving under a patriarchal society that has always denied them their own voice and their own representations.

Julie Sanders, in the introduction to her *Adaptation and Appropriation*, demonstrates she is aware of the political dimension of such an enterprise. She argues that in appropriation: “the intertextual relationship may be less explicit, more embedded, but what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (SANDERS, 2008, p. 2).

Through a re-contextualization and re-signification of the common stereotypes used to portray women, contemporary women writers have been able to represent the female experience and articulate new identities as well as different forms of representation and expression, which without a doubt have a political dimension to it.

In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 - 1978*, Adrienne Rich states that:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves (RICH, 1979, p.35).

Rich also claims that “we need to know the writings of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (p. 35). It is through the appropriation of canonical texts that postmodern female writers attempt to deconstruct patriarchal representations of women and to give it new signification under a re-contextualized scope.

Women writers use the strategy of appropriation in order to install and subvert the system of values they are bound to challenge. Appropriation implies a turning to the literary past as a source of inspiration and therefore it breaks with the idea of originality that Bloom referred to as a quintessential characteristic for a text to achieve canonical status. Once again we may turn to Roland Barthes, for his praised

article “The Death of the Author” questions the originality of literary texts and questions the authority “author-Gods” have in the capitalist society as he believes that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. [...] starting with the very identity of the body writing” (BARTHES, 1977, p. 142)

Barthes believes that in the capitalist society the individual, the private person of the author, his biography, his tastes and passions are given too much praise. Instead, he proposes that for writing to take place it is paramount to replace language itself for the person who was supposed to own it. Barthes refers to French poet Stéphane Mallarmé when he states that “it is language which speaks, not the author, to write is, thorough a prerequisite impersonality [...] to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (p. 143).

For Barthes, the removal of the author transforms the modern text and changes its temporality. Before the author was conceived of as the past of his own book, he was supposed to make use of his life experience to ‘feed’ his book; it was a father-son relationship. However, “now the modern scriptor [note that he does not use the word ‘author’] is born simultaneously with the text [...] there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now” (p. 145). By declaring the death of the author, Barthes, at the same time, debases the concept of originality.

The author no more relies on his own life to ‘feed’ his work, but he relies on other works to do so:

a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author- God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture [...] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings (p. 146).

By declaring the death of the writer and, along with it, the undermining of literary criticism, since its main function had been believed by many to be the deciphering of the author, Barthes, at the same time, announces the birth of the reader. Since, today, “in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*” (p. 147), the reader comes to the foreground, as he creates his own network of intertexts, becoming the one who can understand the double meanings of a text: “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its *origin* but in its *destination*” (p. 148, my italics).

After this brief detour, let us go back to the discussion of appropriation. Julie Sanders believes that in the study of appropriation “the creative import of the author cannot be easily dismissed” (SANDERS, 2008, p. 3). However, she acknowledges that Barthes’s essay is of great importance in this discussion, for it destabilizes the authority of original texts, however radical his propositions might be.

On the other hand, Sanders brings to the foreground problems that adaptations and appropriations may arise. Since these two modes of writing are based on canonical texts, wouldn’t they be working in favor of a perpetuation of such a canon? In order to illustrate the discussion she refers to English poet and essayist T.S. Eliot and his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as essential reading in the discussion of appropriation.

In his essay, Eliot rejects the censorious connotations that tradition received at his time as he criticizes “our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (ELIOT, 1993, p. 2171). Eliot criticizes our insistence on finding and praising something original in a text and also in a poet’s difference from his predecessors as if it were possible to write in a vacuum. Instead, the critic praises tradition and states that a writer should have a historical sense, a perception of the presence of the past in his writing. Eliot claims:

the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (p. 2171).

Eliot’s concept of the ‘historical sense’ supports the idea that meaningful writing can only be possible in its relationship, comparison and contrast with texts from the past. He was fully aware that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (p. 2171). Eliot was not, however, as Sanders put it, “advocating blind adherence to precursors texts or ages [...] his notion of ‘the individual talent was that it created new material upon the surface and foundation of the literary past” (SANDERS, 2008, p. 8).

As much as Eliot praises ‘the new upon the surface of the past’, he has been much criticized, according to Sanders, for he ended up corroborating the literary canon. She reminds us that adaptations run the risk of becoming a propagator of canonic status, for any time a work is cited, it is being conceded authority. Therefore,

adaptation could be considered “an inherently conservative genre” (SANDERS, 2008, p. 9). However, Sanders reminds us that adaptations, as much as appropriations, don’t have necessarily to pay homage, as Eliot implies, to their source texts, they can, in fact, be oppositional and even subversive.

Sanders compares Eliot to Adriene Rich to illustrate her point. She says that both critics are fully aware of the importance of the past in the fostering of creativity, but they part ways when it comes to what it is to be done with that tradition. While Eliot seems to praise tradition, Rich urges us to break with it and its value-systems and hierarchies. Sanders states that the main aim of re-writing is “not the replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than concentration” (SANDERS, 2008, p. 12).

In her article “Perceiving the Other Side of Everything: Tactics of Revisionary Mythopoesis”, Rachel Blau Duplessis reminds us of the importance of myth in the revisiting of canonical texts performed by women in the twentieth century. Although in her article she focuses on poets, her ideas may well be applied to novelists as well to writers such as Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, who are constantly revisiting and re-writing mythic material. Duplessis is aware of the status of myth in our society as something that “regardless of its loose ends, states cultural agreement and coherence” (DUPLESSIS, 1985, p. 106). Myths are held as natural and provide a repertoire of causes and effects that many times goes unquestioned. What does it mean to be a woman and appropriate myths in your writing? Duplessis believes that:

To face myth as a woman writer is, putting things at their most extreme, to stand at the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation, and to rehearse one’s own colonization or “iconization” through the materials one’s culture considers powerful and primary. (p. 106)

Duplessis believes that myths have a special status for women writers, for the special status of myth is intrinsically connected to institutions of cultural recruitment such as canons, censorship and schooling. She believes that “the classics are a tool of consolidation” (p.106), so “women poets invent revisionary myths in the attempt to forge an anticolonial mythopoesis, an attack on cultural hegemony as it is”. In short, Duplessis’s point is that “making a critical mythopoesis goes against the grain of a major function of myth: the affirmation of dominant culture” (p.107)

1.4. Conversation with the Dead: Parodic Intertextuality

As it has been implied above it is impossible to talk about appropriation without talking about intertextuality. British scholar Simon Dentith, in his book entitled *Parody*, provides us with a definition of intertextuality and characterizes it as:

the interrelatedness of writing, the fact that all written utterances – texts – situate themselves in relation to texts that precede them, and are in turn alluded to or repudiated by texts that follow. ... At the most obvious level it [intertextuality] denotes the myriad *conscious* ways in which texts are alluded to or cited in other texts: the dense network of quotation, glancing reference, imitation, polemical refutation and so on in which all texts have their being. At a still more profound level, intertextuality refers to the dense web of allusion out of which individual texts are constituted – their constant and inevitable use of ready-made formulations, catch phrases, slang, jargon, cliché, commonplaces, unconscious echoes and formulaic phrases (DENTITH, 2000, p. 5).

The term has its origins in the work of French scholar Julia Kristeva who draws her conception of intertextuality from the seminal work of the Russian literary theorist and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. The linguist defies Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of parole, which refers to language in use, for Saussure never really studied language in the context of its use, his theory worked upon more abstract aspects of language. Bakhtin's work focuses its attention on the impossibility of dissociation between language and its social and interpersonal dimensions. He proposes the concept of utterance to fill the gap left by Saussure. Bakhtin's most important concept is that of dialogism in which he states that no utterance is in itself singular and that each utterance necessarily depends or calls for another utterance:

The word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. [...] In this process a word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered. When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others uninhabited by others' voices. No, he receives the word from another's voice filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited (BAKHITIN, 2003, p. 201).

Bakhtin believes that the novel has a dialogical character in its core. It is precisely his arguments concerning the novels that brought about another important

concept of his work: 'polyphony'. The Russian critic believes that a novel is inherently polyphonic, for in a novel we may perceive that each character has a "personality which involves his or her world view, typical mode of speech, ideological and social positioning, all of which are expressed through the character's words" (ALLEN, 2000, p. 23). Each character speaks for himself, but Bakhtin reminds us that the author:

Constructs the hero [character] not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, not a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and the world. (BAKHTIN, 2003, p. 53, author's italics2003)

Therefore, in the polyphonic novel we are presented with different discourses, that of the characters and even the narrator himself, and each one of them has his or her own consciousness. Irish scholar Graham Allen reminds us that, in this kind of novel, all these discourses are intermingled and are interpretations of the world, therefore, they are embedded in and call for other discourses.

Bakhtin plants the seeds for the development of Kristeva's work and enables her to take it further by focusing on how texts are constructed in dialogue with or out of pre-existing discourses or texts. Kristeva believes that "a text is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text" (KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 36). In his *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen sheds some light on Kristeva's work as he states that:

texts are made up of what is at times styled 'the cultural (or social) text', all the different discourses, ways of speaking and saying, institutionally sanctioned structures and systems which make up what we call culture. In this sense the text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality. Individual text and cultural text are made from the same textual material and cannot be separated from each other (ALLEN, 2000, p. 35-36).

Kristeva takes Bakhtin's work a step forward for while his focus was on the human employment of language in specific social situations, hers was on more abstract terms such as text and textuality, although she insists that texts are constructed out of larger cultural or social textuality and cannot be dissociated from them. The movement of which Kristeva was a part was later classified as poststructuralist and they had as their main agenda the investigation of literature as a site of political and philosophical thought. Other important theoreticians who were part of that group were Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, French philosopher Michel Foucault, as well as Roland Barthes. Their work pointed out that:

the text becomes the site of a resistance to stable signification [...] there is an attack on the very foundations of meaning and communication, a celebration and investigation of that which resists the stabilization of the signifiers/signified relation. This is understood in Marxist terms as an attack on the commodification of thought and writing (ALLEN, 2000, p. 33)

These theoreticians' seminal works and their distrust of stable meanings within texts paved the way for postmodern theories which, by principle, disregard any totalitarian metanarrative and to which intertextuality is a major theme. Linda Hutcheon, who has as one of her main concerns the relationship between Postmodernism and intertextual theory and practice, in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, compares and contrasts Modernism and Postmodernism relationship with prior texts. When it comes to this intertextual relation with past forms, Modernism presents a certain nostalgic feeling towards it, while Postmodernism presents an ironic distance. Hutcheon argues that what characterizes Postmodern Literature is its double-codedness for it works within the very system it attempts to subvert (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 4). On the contrast between Modernism and Postmodernism, Hutcheon writes:

When Elliot recalls Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity. Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumption (p. 11).

Linda Hutcheon, once again, sheds some light on the role intertextuality and postmodernism have in the exposing of the grand narratives of our society. She emphasizes the impossibility of escaping the canon but praises postmodernism's ironic twist in relation to it:

Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with significant change – the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot. Post-modernism signals its dependence by its use of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it. (p.130)

Hutcheon insists on the indissolubility between intertextuality and parody in postmodern texts. Of course there are numerous intertextual references to past works that do not necessarily intend to subvert or mock the original text. However, when it comes to the postmodern relationship with the past, parody is a key element

in such a relation. In his book *Parody*, Simon Dentith provides us with a plain summary of what parody consists of:

Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice. [...] I include the word 'polemical' in the definition; this word is used to allude to the contentious or 'attacking' mode in which parody can be written, though it is 'relatively' polemical because of the ferocity the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody. [...] So far I have been stressing the importance of parody as *rejoinder*, or mocking response to the word of another. But many parodies draw on the authority of precursor texts to attack, satirize, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world. (DENTITH, 2000, p. 9)

At its origins, parody was connected to the ridiculing and mocking of the original text. The Greek origins of the word reinforce such an approach. "Para" means counter, and "ode", means song or an ode. So the Greek meaning of the word is a counter-song or an imitation of the original. Aristotle's *Poetics* provides the earliest use of the word *parodia* when he referred to the writer Hegemon. In such a context "a *parodia* is a narrative poem, of moderate length, in the meter and vocabulary of epic poems, but treating a light satirical, or mock-heroic subject" (p. 10). In such a scope, we can already perceive what was going to be one of the most important features of postmodern literature: the mix of high and low art forms. *Parodia* applied the epic form, i.e. high art, to low subjects of everyday life to give it a comic effect.

As we can perceive, every parody is necessarily intertextual, but not every intertext is parodic. To be parodic, a text has to have a more direct relation to the original text, be it through satire, irony or simply a playful reference. So the question we may want to ask is what is the novelty in the postmodern parody since parody, in its beginnings, already had a sometimes humorous, sometimes satirical or even critical relationship with the source text. In Postmodernism, there is necessarily a critical intent in parody, which is not always the case in parodies from other periods. Once again, Linda Hutcheon comments on the subject. In her *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the scholar states that:

For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention. [...] but this parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always *critical*. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, 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. (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 93)

Hutcheon focuses on the multiple allusions to the past and how parody is able to bring to the present the historic weight and specificity of the target style by putting it at an ironic and critical distance from the contemporary context into which it is inserted (DENTITH, 2000, p. 157). In Postmodernism, parody has a political dimension to it, for it is through parody that postmodern writers, most of the times, are able to expose the biases of the metanarratives that works of the past carried within themselves.

For contemporary women writers, the use of parodic intertextuality plays a crucial role in their process of appropriation and rewriting of canonical works and metanarratives. In *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*, North-American Marxist theoretician and critic Teresa Ebert offers a powerful definition of parody. She claims that parody is:

a mode of knowing that inquires into what is not said, into the silences and the suppressed or missing, in order to uncover the concealed operations of power and the socio-economic relations connecting the myriad details and representations of our lives (EBERT, 1996, p. 7)

Teresa Ebert's very ideological definition of parodic intertextuality offers us a guideline for the investigation and understanding of the concepts and strategies discussed in this chapter in relation to the novels by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter that will be our object of study in the next chapters.

2. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPEND A FEW NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS?

2.1. Angela Carter: A Brief Biography

Angela Carter, née Angela Oliver Stalker, is one of the most intriguing and original writers of our time and to know the path that led the author to such geniality is something which is really worth tracing. What made this woman have such a singular viewpoint on life and art? According to Welsh critic Lorna Sage, “in fact you cannot, in the end, separate the woman and the writer” (SAGE, 2007, p. 1) and Carter herself refused to make any distinction between art and life for “she was inventive in reality as well as in creating plots and characters for her books” (p. 1). Carter’s work and her life are inextricably linked and Sage states that:

Carter’s life is the story of someone walking a tightrope. It’s all happening ‘on the edge’, in no-man’s land, among the debris left by past convictions. By the end, her life fitted her more like a glove, but that was because she had put it together, by trial and error, *bricolage*, all in the (conventionally) wrong order (p. 4).

Carter was born in the town of Eastbourne, Sussex, England, in 1940, after her mother had moved away from London to escape the war bombings of the city. Carter was then brought up in Yorkshire at her maternal grandmother’s house, a place which was, dominated by strong women. By the time the war was over, Carter’s family was finally able to go back to London, to live in a low middle-class area. Such a brief account of Carter’s early life already shows some important influences that marked the author’s work. In her book *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, British critic Helen Stoddart traces a parallel between Carter’s origins and the issues dealt with in *Nights at the Circus*. According to her, questions of birth and origins are central in the novel as well as in Carter’s own biography. Stoddart spots some points of convergence, such as “London as a point of departure and return, the displacements caused by personal and historical change or conflict, the material and emotional protection offered by women and matriarchs” (STODDART, 2007, p. 3), just to name a few.

In 1959, Carter started working as a junior reporter for the *Croydon Advertiser*, following the footsteps of her father. According to British critic Sarah Gamble, it was about this period as a reporter that Carter claimed that “her career

was hampered by a ‘demonic inaccuracy as regards fact’” (GAMBLE, 2001, p. 1). Carter had a preference for other forms of journalism and became, later in her life, a prolific reviewer and essayist. Stoddart reminds us that “her journalism was marked by the same playfulness, sharp-witted style which is discernible throughout *Nights at the Circus*, as well as a facility for moving through a wide range of extremely diverse subject areas and cultural values” (p. 3-4). The period as a reporter surely had great influence on Carter’s work. She was suspicious of every fact and learned that there were at least two sides to every piece of news. Carter had a particular way of describing the so-called facts of the world as she clearly showed that she was particularly fond of the unofficial versions of every story and that was what she preferred to tell in her work.

Sage points out that one of the great influences on Carter’s generation and on Carter’s writing was the work of Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. Coincidentally, Márquez began his career as a journalist and confessed to have suffered the influence of his grandmother. He often told interviewers that “he arrived at the style of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by modeling himself on his grandmother’s story-telling technique.” He said that his “grandma would make the transition from realistic events to impossible imaginings without any change of expression” (SAGE, 1995, p. 1). Márquez’ magic realism certainly came as the support Carter needed at the time to describe the world the way she did. For both authors, the dividing line between the so-called real and the so-called magical was a thin one, they were both discursive constructs, they knew it well. Such influence can be clearly perceived in the retelling of fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and, later on, in two collections of fairy tales she edited for Virago: *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992). In the Introduction to another book of fairy tales that she edited for Pantheon, Carter comments on the role of fantasy in our lives:

Fairy tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imagination of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world... Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? ‘this is how I make potato soup.’ (CARTER, 1995, p. 2)

The sixties were a time of ups and down for Carter. When she was twenty years old she married Paul Carter and the couple moved to Bristol, where she graduated in English from Bristol University in 1965, specializing in the medieval period. In 1966, Carter published her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, and in 1967, her second one, *The Magic Toyshop*. For this novel, Carter was awarded The John Llewellyn Prize and, in 1968, her third novel, *Several Perceptions*, won her the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1969, Carter published her third novel, *Heroes and Villains*. (GAMBLE, 2006, p. VIII).

Also in 1969, Carter separated from her husband and, with the money she got from the 1967 and 1968 awards, she left Britain and moved to Japan, a country which had a great influence in the way she perceived herself, the world and in her writing as well. British scholar Linden Peach regards this two-year period as a watershed in Carter's literary career for she believes "its impact upon her writing was pronounced because it encouraged those aspects of her work, such as the sense of the foreignness of her own culture and her interest in the blurred boundaries between realism and illusion" (PEACH, 1998, p. 4). In Tokyo, Carter worked for a broadcasting company and as a bar hostess and she had to come to terms with her own self for her own body – white, tall, with big feet – denounced her foreignness. In Carter's own words, it was in Japan that "she learnt what it is to become a woman and became radicalized" (CARTER, 1982a, p. 28). Sage commented on this experience of Carter's saying that:

she compounded her oddity when she stepped into the looking-glass world of a culture that reflected her back to herself as an alien, 'learning the hard way that most people on this planet are not Caucasian and have no reason to either love or respect Caucasians'"(SAGE, 1994, p. 26).

This feeling of not belonging, of being a freak had great influence in the up-coming novels of the author, most particularly in the creation of Sophie Fevvers, the giant aerialist of *Nights at the Circus*, who resembles the way Carter supposedly perceived herself and was perceived by others in Japan.

After the period she spent in Japan, Carter found some difficulties in having her work published for she had been apart from the British literary scene for three years and it took her some time to meet her early success again. In 1971, she published *Love*, a novel she had finished writing in 1968. The novel Carter had

written abroad, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, was published in 1972 and did not sell well. *The Passion of New Eve*, published in 1977, followed the same pattern. Sarah Gamble sees, at this point of Carter's literary career, a clear break in Carter's fiction writing and she claims that the two abovementioned novels "mark the beginning of Carter's more overt use of her interest in unofficial forms of storytelling". Gamble also argues that it was this interest that led Carter, later in the decade, to the rewriting of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. (GAMBLE, 2006, p. 127)

With the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979, Carter draws considerable critical and public attention to her work and, according to Gamble, "initiates the first critical examinations of her work by feminist critics" (GAMBLE, 2001, p. 7). According to Gamble, this happened especially because the stories in the collection consist of the appropriation and re-telling of fairy tales in which sensual and even pornographic elements are incorporated into the texts, while biases of patriarchal dominant view-points and cultural stereotypes of gender roles are exposed. Together with the non-fictional *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is considered by Lorna Sage as a turning point in Carter's career for, as she claims, with these two works Carter "finally explained herself, unpacked her gifts" (SAGE, 2007, p. 6). Sage also points out that Carter's work, then, began to be widely read and were fundamental in clearing the way "for a new-found lightness and levity of tone that characterized her last two novels" (SAGE, 2007, p. 6)

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Angela Carter spent long periods, as a writer-in-residence in many universities in England and abroad. In 1977, Carter married her second husband, Mark Pearce, and had her only child, Alexander, in 1984. By the time Carter published her eighth novel, *Nights at the Circus*, in 1985, she was well-known as a writer and this novel, unlike many other novels of hers, received widespread praise and really favorable reviews. The author's popularity and critical acclaim reached international level for the first time. Carter died of lung cancer in 1992, a few months after publishing last novel *Wise Children* (1991).

Using Sarah Gamble's *Angela Carter: a Literary Life* as my source of information about other works by Angela Carter, I list Carter's long and varied production. In addition to the works already mentioned in my text, it would be important to add three other collection of short stories, *Fireworks: Nine Profane*

Pieces (1974), *Black Venus* (1985) and, the posthumously published, *American Ghosts & Old-World Wonders* (1993). Carter's stories were collected in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (1995). Carter's non-fiction works, besides the already mentioned *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, include *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (1982) and *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (1992). Carter's most celebrated essays were collected in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (1997). Carter wrote also seven children's books, a work in verse, *Unicorn* (1966), and four radio plays, collected in *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (1985). Carter also wrote numerous film scripts, including the ones for the adaptations of her story "The Company of Wolves" and of her novel *The Magic Toyshop*. Carter's scripts are collected in *The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera* (1996), which includes the four radio plays mentioned above (GAMBLE, 2006, p. 230). Commenting on the relevance of Carter's involvement with editing and translating, Linden Peach claims that the fact that Carter edited fairy stories is quite significant for the development of her fiction (PEACH, 1998, p. 23). Besides the already mentioned fairy tale collection written by Carter, it is important to add here that Carter translated into English and edited *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977), *Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales* (1982), as well as two collections for Virago: *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992).

2.2. *Nights at the Circus: A Short Summary with a Few Comments*

Nights at the Circus is probably one of Angela Carter's most emblematic works when it comes to her engagement with postmodernism and feminism. It tells the story of Fevvers, an aerialist who intrigues everyone for she claims to have real wings. The story takes place at the turn of the century, the year 1899, and the novel is divided into three parts: London, Petersburg and Siberia.

The first part – London – opens with Fevvers, together with her foster mother and long-last friend, Lizzie, giving an interview about Fevvers's life to the American journalist Jack Walser. Walser's main aim is to expose Fevvers and her wings as a fraud or a hoax and, since he is a journalist, he is committed to facts and, basically, by facts he understands, things that can be proved. Fevvers tells Walser that she had

been abandoned as a baby at the doorstep of Ma Nelson, the owner of a brothel, and found by Lizzie, one of the women who worked there. She was brought up by this community of prostitutes and, in a clear deconstruction of the preconceived ideas we might have about a community of prostitutes, Fevvers claims: “I was reared by these kind women as if I was the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers” (CARTER, 2006, p. 20).

Despite having been raised in a brothel, Fevvers did not work as a prostitute. When her wings started to emerge, her role in that house was, at first to pose as a lithe Cupid in the drawing-room: “So, with my wreath of roses, my baby bow of smouldering guilt and my arrows of unfledged desire, it was my job to sit in the alcove of the drawing-room in which the ladies introduced themselves to the gentlemen. Cupid I was” (p. 22). That was the time when she “served [her] apprenticeship in being looked at – at being the object of the eye of the beholder” (CARTER, 2006, p. 23). It was also in the brothel, that at the age of fourteen, her wings, together with her first period, fully emerged and she made her first attempt at flying, to the delight of Ma Nelson and her foster mother Lizzie: “that night we threw away the bow and the arrow and I posed, for the first time, as the Winged Victory” (p.26). Although Ma Nelson’s house was a brothel, the women who lived there lived in perfect harmony and before customers arrived, “a subtext of fertility underwrote the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh available within the academy” (p. 42).

When Ma Nelson dies, the brothel closes and Fevvers has to wander in search of her future, which she is sure is grand:

For as my legs grew, so did my wing-span; and my ambition swelled to match both.
[...] Cockney sparrow I might be by birth, but not by inclination. I saw my future as
criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes;
I only knew my body was the abode of limitless freedom (p. 45)

Fevvers seems to be aware of two important facts that are bound to happen in her life: first that the world imposes a lot of hardships on her and second that she could not be contained, she was born for grand feats. After her apprenticeship at Ma Nelson’s in the art of being looked at, Fevvers found employment at Madame Schreck’s Freak Show Museum of Women Monsters, the terrible museum of death where women, as traditional objects and victims, are on display to satisfy the sadomasochistic fantasies of visitors: the Sleeping Beauty who scarcely ever wakes up, the miniature woman who never grows up, the woman with two eyes where she

should have two nipples, and many other female freaks. There, Fevvers is forced to join the other 'unnatural' women in a perverted nightly sex show. During the day, however, the women establish a loving female community in their freakishness. Later on, Fevvers finds out that, in fact, the women who worked for Madame Schreck, were in fact prisoners, for "the moment that the front door, shut behind you, you were her prisoner, in fact you were her slave" (p. 70).

It was at Madame Schreck's house that she met the man who abducted her, Christian Rosencreutz. Later we find out that, in fact, Fevvers had been sold to this man by Madame Schreck. Rosencreutz believed that Fevvers was Azrael, the Angel of Death, and wanted to perform a ritual in which she would have to die for him to extract some kind of essence from her body, which would make him young forever. Fevvers, obviously, managed to escape. Escaping vile men was going to be quite common in her life after that. After this episode, Fevvers decides to join the circus and earn her living as a trapeze artist, on the high wire.

Fevvers's performance as a winged aerialiste is the main attraction in the great variety shows of all European capitals. As a trapeze artist, Fevvers is an emblematic figure of contradiction: a big, heavy and fleshy woman who pursues, in her aerial acrobacies, an ideal of freedom. She keeps her audience enthralled about her reality status. Her slogan, featured in posters all over Europe is: "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (CARTER, 2006, p. 7). This question also fascinates Jack Walser, who interviews Fevvers for his article series "Great Humbugs of the World" (p. 11), and hopes to expose her as a fraud. Walser is in London not to find out *who* Fevvers is but *what* she is. He is there to observe, to objectify, to define and label Fevvers, ignoring her as an individual human being.

Fevvers's and Lizzie's control of the narrative in this part of *Nights at the Circus* is clearly associated with the power of the gaze, appropriated by them and used to signify control over their story, "Lizzie fixed Walser with her glittering eye and seized the narrative between her teeth" (p. 32); "Fevvers lassoed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her" (p. 60). As a consequence of the two women's control over the narrative, Walser feels prostrated, without any energy, "The hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinge of the wrist" (p. 78). Walser is left temporarily unable to write, that is, to take hold of Fevvers' narrative and put it in his own,

patriarchal terms. The first part of the narrative is undoubtedly female, even militantly feminist when Lizzie – as a Leftist – speaks up on the condition of women at the time.

The chapter ends with Fevvers inviting Walser to spend a few nights at the circus, and this leads us to the next part of the book.

In the second part of the novel – St. Petersburg – Fevvers is seen performing as the main attraction in the circus run by American Colonel Kearney. This part of the novel takes place in St. Petersburg, Russia. When Walser was still in London, he had been to the Ritz Hotel, where Colonel Kearney was a guest, to ask him for a job in the circus. He wanted any job there, as his real intention was to keep writing about and listening to Fevvers's stories. It was Sybil, the Colonel's pig who decided that Walser could join the circus and what he was going to do. Sybil decided that Walser was going to be a clown. This new activity, the use of heavy make up, no doubt a kind of mask, was the beginning of Walser's process of freeing himself from the old concepts and certainties he had:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognize himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom that, during all the time that he spent with the Colonel, never quite evaporated [...] he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque (CARTER, 2006, p. 119)

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter engages with the postmodern desire to privilege what Linda Hutcheon calls the “ex-centric”. The cast of characters in Carter's circus are all “ex-centrics”, outsiders in several senses. They border on the inhuman, and they are outside the social sphere of privilege. The circus functions, self-consciously or metafictionally, as a symbol of life, a microcosmos of life. Colonel Kearney's circus includes, among others: the Professor and his educated chimpanzees; the dancing tigers; the cowardly Strong Man Samson; the violent Ape-Man; the depressed clowns, --those “whores of mirth” --, led by Buffo the Great ; a modern version of Goethe's Mignon, and the tiger-tamer, the Princess of Abyssinia (p. 119). This part is polyphonical, the strange and fascinating life of the circus is unfolded by an omniscient narrator or through the consciousness of the circus members, and the narration of the adventures of these figures often takes a dynamic of its own and develops into rather lengthy stories which are complete in themselves.

So that we do not forget that the circus and the feats performed there are often based on illusion, it is worth mentioning here what academic scholar and playwright

Peta Tait, in “Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom”, claims about the nature of the circus:

The transitory nature of the circus evoked a social fantasy of liberation from regulatory systems of order. The presentation of circus acts, however, was designed to maximize the impression of extraordinary facts. The trick could only be accomplished within the circus. The tantalizing appeal of the circus performer depended on maintaining the illusion of unrestricted physical freedom in performance (TAIT, 1996, p. 18).”

In this chapter, as mentioned above, numerous episodes that happen with the characters in the circus are narrated but a special emphasis is given to the clowns. Buffo, who is the clowns’ leader, is a saddened man. He once tells Walser: “Under these impenetrable disguises of wet white, you might find, were you to look, the features of those who were once proud to be visible” (CARTER, 2006, p. 137-138). At some point, Buffo loses his reason and tries to kill Walser, but ends up being taken away in a straight jacket: “from the coffin of your madness there is no escape” (p. 209). Amidst everything that happens to the members of the circus we get to know that Walser has fallen for Fevvers and that she is starting to have feelings for him as well.

Troubled by what is taking place at the circus, Fevvers decides to have supper with the Grand Duke of St. Petersburg, out of pure greed, maybe unaware of the danger she was putting herself in. However, she was only thinking about the diamonds he had promised her: “She was feeling supernatural tonight. She wanted to eat diamonds” (p. 213). The Grand Duke was a collector of “marvellous and unnatural artifacts” (p. 220), but little did Fevvers know that he wanted her to be part of that collection. She managed to escape once again in a fantastic way as she jumped into a miniature train in the Grand Duke’s house and ended up in the circus’ train heading to Siberia.

The last part of the novel – Siberia – takes place in the icy vastness of Siberia. By the time the train moves into a remote area, it is blown up by a bunch of outlaws. In this incident Fevvers ends up breaking a wing and she, Lizzie and some other members of the circus are turned into prisoners of the outlaws. Walser is not part of that group, as he was buried in the wreckage of the train and rescued by a group of women who had just escaped the penitentiary and who aimed at founding a lesbian community. With the explosion of the train, Walser loses his memory and

consequently his identity: “Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank“ (CARTER, 2006, p. 262).

Fevvers and Lizzie find out that the men who captured them had killed someone from the government and wanted Fevvers, due to her prestige, to persuade Queen Victoria to help them gain the Tsar’s forgiveness. At some point, the clowns go outside to entertain the outlaws and while they are busy with such a task a whirlwind spirits them all away. In the meantime, at another part of Siberia, Walser had met a primitive tribe of bear worshippers and had become an apprentice to their Shaman.

Lizzie, now asks Fevvers what she is going to do when she meets Walser again and to Lizzie’s surprise she wants a “happy ending” with him, but she wants a New Man too and she believes she will help him become this man:

Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself that he was unhatched Lizzie; very well – I’ll sit on him, I’ll hatch him out, I’ll make a new man out of him. I’ll make him into a New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, an onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century”(p. 334)

When Fevvers actually meets Walser, he is not the man she expected to find. He sees her through the spectacle she used to be: “only a bird in a gilded cage” (p. 343). Fevvers felt what her readers had been questioning since the beginning of the novel: “Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” (p. 344). The novel ends with Fevvers and Walser, who had his reason restored, together.

As Walser and Fevvers prepare to make love, with Fevvers in the “woman on top position”, the only one nature had equipped her for, Fevvers breaks one more myth, that of her virginity. Walser, “smothered in feathers and pleasures as he was” (p. 349), asks: “Fevvers, only the one question ... why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time to convince me that you were the ‘only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world’?” (p. 349). Fevvers laughs and laughs and then exclaims: “I fooled you then! Gawd, I fooled you”(349). On the other hand, when Walser discovers “without surprise” that Fevvers has no navel, the only proof she had been born from an egg, he knows better than to feel certain about anything and leaves the readers as doubtful as the spectators of Fevvers’ shows had always been (p. 347). Fevvers also leaves it up to Walser -- and to us -- to decide the initial query: “As to questions of whether I am fact or fiction, you must answer that for yourself!” (p. 346).

2.3. An Unsolvable Proposition: Is it Fact or is it Fiction?

As it has been discussed in the previous chapter, postmodern women writers have been appropriating and rewriting canonical texts from the past as an attempt to reclaim a past from which women have been mostly banished. Not only do these writers rewrite the texts but they are very much interested in the myths that inform them. That is certainly the case of British novelist and essayist Angela Carter, who is considered by many critics, a representative of this female attempt to re-signify and re-contextualize female experience through the light of postmodernism. In her 1980 essay "The Language of Sisterhood", Carter acknowledges that sisterhood tended "toward a study of myth because of the paucity of historical references to that statistically rather more than half the human race to which we belong" (CARTER, 1980, 227). With such a statement Carter seems to be questioning the fictionality of historical discourse, for most of the times such a discourse is a version of the so called facts which does not account for the ones who constitute half of our race - women. In order to reclaim such past it was imperative not only to study the myths but to rewrite them and produce specifically feminine narrative forms. Carter comments on the miscegenation that is produced with these rewritings:

We feel a compulsive need to rewrite those myths, since myth is more malleable than history, in order to accommodate ourselves in the past. In this way, cross-disciplinary bastards are born.

Therefore a book like Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* looks, at first sight, like some monstrous hybrid, a legendary obstetrical autobiography which, because of its impurity of form, its lateral interpretation of the chronology of gynecology, necessitates a new area of speculation to accommodate it: so the nascent discipline of women's studies accretes its set texts. It is, after all, very rarely possible for new ideas to find adequate expressions in old forms. (p. 228)

Carter is interested not only in myths in the Barthesian sense, that is the naturalized constructed narratives by which we live, but she is also interested in how traditional myths, such as Greek mythology or fairy tales, play an important role in the naturalization of the hegemonic discourses. Carter is particularly interested in the rewriting of fairy tales. In her *oeuvre* there are numerous examples of such enterprise, but perhaps her most explicit work, when it comes to the appropriation of fairy tales, is her collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber*. In this book, Carter appropriates and rewrites traditional fairy tales, exposing the patriarchal

metanarratives in which they are embedded and offering a parodic counterpart of such texts.

Why is Carter so interested in fairy tales? What role do they play in her demythologizing business? Myths and fairy tales seem to be intrinsically related as North-American scholar Jack Zipes astutely comments on such interconnectedness:

myths and fairy tales seem to know something that we do not know. They also appear to hold our attention, to keep us in their sway, to enchant our lives. We keep returning to them for answers [...] we refer to myths and fairy tales as lies by saying, "oh, that's just a fairy tale," or "that's just myth." But these lies are often the lies that govern our lives. (ZIPES, 1994, p. 3-4).

Zipes goes on explaining how the process of naturalization of myths takes place: "paradoxically the myth acts to deny its historical and systematic development. It takes material that already has a signification and reworks it parasitically to make it suitable for communication in an ideological mode that appears nonideological" (p. 6). Carter seems to be fully aware of how these myths operate and her business is to bring such operations to the foreground. She seems to know that classical myths and fairy tales are also contemporary myths and that they pervade our lives in the way Barthes describes in his work. In his essay "Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today", Barthes once again clarifies the idea of myths as being cultural representations which are determined socially and then inverted so as to become a cultural artifact:

Myth consists in overturning culture into nature, or at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural'. What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural, and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a 'matter of course'; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General opinion, in short the *doxa* (which is secular figure of the Origin) (BARTHES, 1971, p. 165).

Barthes's focus is on the naturalization of class division, but his theory can be well applied to any other kind of division that pushes individuals, or the so called "minorities", to the margins, which would be the case of women, blacks, natives and so on. Carter is interested in the marginalization of such groups, though her main focus is generally the treatment women receive in such a scope.

Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* seems to be in compliance with a mode of thought, for at the time it was published it was regarded by reviewers and critics as

a shift in her literary career. British scholar Paulina Palmer, for instance, believes that the novel moves away from the analytic and “demythologizing” impulse in her early works to a more celebratory and utopian atmosphere (PALMER, 1987, p. 180).

Helen Stoddart comments on Palmer’s view:

Palmer is critical of what she sees as the way in which patriarchy is presented in these early fictions as a set of closed but ever renewable institutions [which] Palmer had regarded as being somehow too exclusively focused on patriarchy: so caught up in offering accounts and critiques of patriarchal tyrannies and sexual violence that it forgets to offer alternatives or escapes and risks simply reinforcing the male power it elaborates (STODDART, 2007, p. 46).

Palmer’s opinion on Carter’s earlier works may come out as controversial but her account on *Nights at the Circus*, as being a novel which offers an alternative to women is much less problematic, for the novel, just like Carter’s early works, denounces the abuses and marginalization women had suffered within official history and the literary arts, but it also provides readers with a character, Fevvers, that is an agent of change, therefore, an alternative to the roles women had been ascribed so far. British scholar Elaine Jordan, in her essay “The Dangers of Angela Carter”, corroborates such an account as she reminds us that: “[Carter’s] work exposes a history, a process of change which involves a series of honorable attempts to be an agent of change- part of the solution, rather than contemplating a problem of which she is a part” (JORDAN, 1992, p. 120).

Carter has been very interested in the myths that inform our literary past. She writes about everyday experiences and the “system of imagery derives from subterranean areas behind everyday experience” (CARTER, 1981, p. 133). British critic Janet Wolff believes that Carter’s “commitment to engage critically with contemporary culture” (WOLFF, 1990, p. 96) is an essential feature of postmodernism, for Carter is constantly exposing and debunking the myths that regulate our lives, especially when it comes to women, though not exclusively. According to Stoddart, Carter is part of a group of British and American women writers who began writing in the late 1960s and who “was engaged in reimagining archetypal and mythical images of women or retelling the narratives associated with them” (STODDART, 2001, p. 18). Gender issues were at the heart of such group’s concern as their main aim was “to expose the ways in which myths have worked to consolidate Western conceptions of restrictive gender relations, disguising as essential what are in fact historically or socially prescribed gender roles”

(STODDART, 2007, p. 18). However, when commenting on her role as a demythologiser and how, since the 1960s, the ground has been paved for such an enterprise to take place, Carter denies affiliations of any sort:

Truly, it felt like Year One... all that was holy was in the process of being profaned ... I can date to that time ... and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a woman. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing (CARTER, 1982, p. 70)

In order to break the hold of tradition over her and her writings as well as to subvert canonical texts, Carter has applied a wide variety of strategies such as the use of parodic intertextuality, irony, polyphony, blurring of the genres and the carnivalesque, to name a few. Carter has found her way of subverting hegemonic discourses privileging and giving voice to figures, especially female ones, who were once denied the right of speech or at least whose experience had been shown mostly through the eyes of male writers.

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is packed with intertextual references to canonical texts. The author makes reference to myths, fairy tales, as well as allusions to a wide range of literary genres in order to denounce the fictionality or artificiality of hegemonic discourses and provide an alternative role for those who have been oppressed for centuries not only in art but also in real life, having a special focus on women.

2.4. An Intertextual Conversation with the Dead

In the previous chapter we mentioned the importance of intertextuality in the agenda of women writers, more specifically, in their project of appropriating and rewriting texts and myths from the past. We also got to know that in his book *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen traces the origin of the term and reminds us of the importance of Saussure, Barthes and the Russian structuralisms to the contemporary notion of what a text is. Allen quotes Barthes and the ideas developed in his 'Death of the Author' to argue that there is no original text, as we have previously mentioned, that the meaning of every text originates in a given cultural system and therefore:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them. (BARTHES, 1977, p. 146-7)

Stoddart makes reference to Julia Kristeva to conclude that every text can be understood as intertextual because they all are "to a certain extent, a 'transformation' of existing language terms references, myths and so on" (STODDART, 2007, p. 32). Stoddart explains that intertextuality goes further than noticing a writer's influence on another or a writer's explicit reference to another, she argues that it refers to "a broader sense that writers and their readers are themselves 'written' by the networks of culture, language, history and representation that have produced them" (p. 32).

Such a conception is crucial to understand Angela Carter's work for her work is packed with intertextual references, not only to canonical literary texts, but also to other constructed hegemonic narratives. Intertextuality, in Carter, takes place within the postmodern culture. Linda Hutcheon, on an issue, states that:

Willfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. [...] There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. It can only problematize what Barthes (1973) has called the "given" or "what goes without saying" in our culture. History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts - these are some of the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as "natural" or unproblematically commonsensical. And these are what get interrogated. (HUTCHEON, 1990 b, p. xiii)

It is, therefore, appropriate to say that Carter's novel is highly intertextual, not only due to the enormous amount of literary references to texts from the past, but also because, as Stoddart reminds us, "with its deliberate meshing of the contemporary and the historical, fact and fiction, it actively promotes critical detachment and reflection on the shifting and perpetually renewable processes through which texts produce meaning" (STODDART, 2007, p. 32).

As the focus of this chapter is on *Nights at the Circus*, it is paramount to mention that in this work Carter does not simply allude, echo, paraphrase or make references to pre-existing texts, her novel is parodic in its intertextuality. Linda Hutcheon, once again, sheds some light on the role of parody in postmodern texts as she states that: "it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of

continuity, difference at the heart of similarity. Parody is a perfect postmodernist form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (HUTCHEON, 1990, p. 251)

Having these concepts in mind let us briefly go over an intertextual reference which is parodied by Angela Carter in *Nights at the Circus*. According to Stoddart "the most striking literary influence, though he is not mentioned or alluded to in *Nights at the Circus*, is Charles Dickens" (STODDART, 2007, p. 13). Stoddart is aware of the contradiction since Dickens is considered one of the greatest realists of the nineteenth century while Carter has always been regarded as an anti-realist or even a magic realist. Dickens is associated with realism for portraying in a vivid way some political and social issues of his time. Carter's text dialogues with his but in a way that is not so direct, maybe one of the reasons for such a reference having been so overlooked. Stoddart reminds us that "although her [Carter's] writing is also socially and politically engaged, it tackles issues more indirectly (through allegory, fantasy and myth)" (p. 13).

What Carter does is exactly what Hutcheon had suggested: she incorporates and challenges that which she parodies. She also portrays the political and social issues of her time but she does so by a completely anti-realistic way. Let us take Dickens's *Hard Times* as an example for comparison – the way the author portrays his characters is a very important feature of his work. Although he gives us a faithful account of reality, he depicts his characters as caricatures. Mr. Gradgrind, for instance, is depicted as a man who had a "square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodities cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall" (DICKENS, 2001, p.1). Everything in his appearance resembles something tough, lifeless, stiff, a kind of room for storing facts. He was as inflexible as his outlook on life. In Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, her heroine is not depicted as merely a caricature; she is at the same time a caricature, a mythological being, a circus star and freak, a grotesque and sublime figure. In a positive note, Fevvers is described as a winged woman, an aerialist, as *l'Ange Anglaise*, as a Cockney Venus. At the same time, in a grotesque note, her smell which is called the 'essence of Fevvers' is described as "a powerful note of stale feet" (CARTER, 2006, p. 5).

Carter treats the issue of how women are expected to follow pre-established roles in society through a character who is an allegory. Fevvers' birth, her wings, her

nicknames, her adventures are all allegories that aim at entertaining and instructing, as Carter has said, the readers. Just like Dickens, Carter is aware of the issues of her time, but she tackles them through “a late twentieth-century consciousness or sensibility” (STODDART, 2007, p. 17)

Another important intertextual reference that emerges and is parodied in *Nights at the Circus* is the Greek myth of “Leda and the Swan”. The first chapter of the novel opens with Fevvers telling Walser the unusual circumstances of her birth. She goes like this:

‘As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky London, didn’t I! Not billed the “Cockney Venus”, for nothing, sir, for they could as well ‘ave called me “Helen of the High Wire”, due to the unusual circumstances in which I came ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*. (CARTER, 2006, p. 3, author’s italics)

Fevvers compares her birth, or as she puts it, her ‘coming ashore’, to that of Helen, which is found in the myth of ‘Leda and the Swan’. According to the myth, Leda, wife of king Tyndareus, was seduced or raped by Zeus, who was disguised in the form of a swan. On that same night Leda had slept with her husband. The result was the laying of two eggs, from which four children were born, among which was Helen of Troy. When describing Ma Nelson’s drawing room, Fevvers talks about a picture that calls her attention: “But there was one picture I shall always remember, for it is as if engraved in my heart. It hung above the mantelpiece and I need hardly tell you that its subject was Leda and the Swan” (p. 28). Fevvers also describes the feelings that picture brought about in her:

So I always saw, as through a glass, darkly, what might have been my own primal scene, my own conception, the heavenly bird in a white majesty of feathers descending with imperious desire upon the half-stunned and yet herself impassioned girl (p. 29)

Why does Carter open her novel with a reference to Sophie Fevvers’ coming to the world being hatched out of an egg? She begins her novel informing her readers that her main character was not born via conventional channels. Some lines down the same chapter, a question that comes to mind throughout the whole novel and which is Fevvers slogan emerges: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (p. 3). These two features are masterfully interconnected, for Carter seems to be playfully informing her

readership that she is about to question and debunk all the conventional ideals posed on what it is to be a woman. Her main character was not born, but hatched and as such she is not bound to follow the prescribed roles women had been ascribed so far. British scholar Aidan Day believes Carter made use of the notion of 'hatching' as a metaphor for "the idea that gendered identity is something that is not given but is made and can be remade" (DAY, 1998, p. 181). British Professor Ricarda Schmidt believes that Fevvers "fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle, outside the Law of the Father" (SCHMIDT, 1989, p. 67). If Fevvers was born outside the 'Law of the Father', without both a belly button and an umbilical cord, does it mean she is not bound to follow patriarchal laws, that is, she does not have to swallow the imposed roles that society has ascribed for women, but she can construct her own identity? This is a challenging possibility that is signaled, undoubtedly, by the narrative.

By being born via unconventional means, Fevvers is able to be the one responsible for the deconstruction of prescribed roles and, at the same time, for the construction of her own identity. Helen of Troy, had her fate decided by men. First and foremost, her birth was a result of her mother's being seduced and fooled by Zeus. Later on, she had to marry a man chosen for her since, in ancient Greek society, women had no rights over their choices or even their bodies. Even her relationship with Paris was a result of his kidnapping of her. Fevvers who is also called "Helen of the high Wire" is a parodic counterpart of that mythic Helen, for unlike the Greek figure, she chooses to construct her identity, in a picaresque adventure towards the coming of being the New Woman the New Century was about to testify.

Fevvers becomes the symbol of the New Woman, who was being born, together with her, with that new century. Once again Aidan Day contributes to that discussion as he emphasizes the constructedness of Fevvers's identity:

Fevvers is the New Woman because she has been constructed as the New Woman. Her slogan as the winged trapeze artist reads: 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' This is a question repeatedly asked of her by members of her audience, not least, when he first meets her, by Walsler. But the teasing question is misconceived, because she is both fiction *and* fact. She has constructed herself; she's been composed or written into being and in that sense is fictional. But that composition, that 'fiction', is now true and the fact. She's the new, the reconstituted woman (DAY, 1998, p. 181)

The story takes place at the dawning of a new century, the end of the nineteenth century, the year 1899. It was around this moment that the women's movement was gaining grounds and a consciousness about women's rights was being raised. Fevvers is inevitably associated with that movement as Ma Nelson, the mistress of the brothel where Fevvers grew up, wisely puts it: "the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (CARTER, 2006, p.25).

The end of the nineteenth century was the time when the seeds were planted for what was going to become reality only in the following century. In 1865, British philosopher John Stuart Mill was elected Member of Parliament and had in his agenda the matter of women. He was greatly influenced by his wife, the philosopher and women's right advocate, Harriet Taylor. Mill proposed numerous bills or amendments to bill that aimed at granting franchise to women, all of them were refuted at the time. In 1884, the liberal W.E. Gladstone, to women's disappointment, refused an amendment that granted women's suffrage. It was only in 1918 that women who were thirty or over were finally granted the right to vote. In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers announces the changes that were only going to be consolidated in the following century. However, Fevvers is a character that proves that women can be responsible for the writing of her own history, or better saying, *herstory*.

2.5. Exploding Boundaries: Filling Old Bottles with New Wine

When reading Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* we may wonder whether the narrative is a picaresque, a metafictional, a Gothic or a magical realist one, just to name a few. In fact, as a prototypical example of a postmodern piece of work, Carter's novel flirts with all these genres, yet it does not stick to a single one. Her novel presents what has been called *blurring of the genres*, for, according to Lorna Sage, the novel "levitates out of the clutches of classification, thus escapes the gravitational pull of realism's settings' because it is a book with hardly any houses at all" (SAGE, 1992, p.176). *Nights at the Circus* is packed with elements of various literary genres and at the same time the same genres are twisted and subverted. Carter does what, according to Linda Hutcheon, is one of the main characteristics of

postmodernism – she “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts [she] challenges” (HUTCHEON, 1990, p. 243). It is important to pinpoint and analyze some of these genres discussing the points of convergence and divergence, that is to say, how the author installs the traditional genres and how she manages to subvert them. English Critic Jeannette Baxter believes Carter makes use of postmodern strategies in order to “create new critical perspectives that place official, male-authored versions of history and culture on trial” (BAXTER, apud STODDART, 2007, p. 95). Such reworking and renewed version of traditional genres relates to the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque.

The term was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin and it denotes a literary form that subverts the postulates of the traditional literary canon, debunking its hierarchies and traditional values through the use of humor, mockery and grotesque elements. According to Bakhtin, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, “at the heart of carnival is the idea of shifting and the ‘process of replaceability’; it matters not, therefore, what the item to be replaced might be, only that it is part of a cycle in which everything will shift” (BAKHTIN, 2003, p. 125). Bakhtin states that in carnival there is no negation or destruction, but the key concept is the idea of renewal. What is at disposal to be renewed? Bakhtin believes that “what is suspended first of all is the hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it” (p. 123).

In her book, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, Helen Stoddart studies the connection between the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque and the way such a concept is applied in Carter's novel. Stoddart points out that Bakhtin is fully understands that “carnival ... ‘itself is not, of course a literary phenomenon’ – on the contrary it is a ‘pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators ‘ which is communal, live, impulsive, beyond contemplation and , as such, is inimical to the novel” (STODDART, 2007, p. 27). In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin compares the traditional sense of the carnival, the one that originates in popular culture, to literary activity. The Russian scholar believes that during carnival many boundaries are crossed: the distance between individuals who are separated due to social hierarchies or class divisions are suspended; a new form of interrelation between people emerge; the sacred and the profane, the fool and the wise, which would normally be apart from one another, are brought together; finally, there is an impulse for profanation, which results in a debasing of that which is considered high

or sacred (STODDART, 2007, p. 27-8). Bakhtin also believes that novels can present a 'carnival sense of the world' and that they are the vehicle which allows different and alternative voices to be heard. Bakhtin believes this is a way of resistance to the holy status and authority of the canonical literary culture, not to mention that through the novel not only cultural but also political change may take place.

In *Nights at the Circus*, works or authors that figure as examples of high culture, such as classical myths, Shakespeare, Poe, Swift, Yeats, Marx, Foucault amongst others, are alluded to and parodied in a carnivalistic way. Carter desacrilizes their status of high or sacred as she mixes their voices with the voices of characters that have a low background. Such miscellanea of voices brings together the serious and the comic, the high and the low and subverts the hierarchy that separates them.

Paulina Palmer, in her essay "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", states that Carter goes beyond the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque. Palmer believes that what Carter does is a feminist usage of the carnivalesque impulse (PALMER, 1987, p. 199). Carter uses the carnivalesque to approach feminist themes, as she brings the patriarchal system of representation under scrutiny and proposes a new form of representation of the feminine associations.

Another concept that is intrinsically linked to that of the carnivalesque is the grotesque for its transgressive, carnivalistic and anti-authoritative nature. In her book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Mary Russo sheds some light on this connection as she states that:

The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the "high" or official culture of the Renaissance and later with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation. (RUSSO, 1994, p. 8)

Grotesque realism is another genre whose account has been provided by Bakhtin. The Russian theoretician believes that in this genre the body is social and representative, that is, it is a body that is always in the process of becoming and that is constantly being renewed. In the grotesque realism everything that is high, spiritual and abstract is degraded down to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity. Bakhtin explains the ambivalence that is at the heart

of this genre, when he makes reference to the irrefutable renewal that derives from the death of the human body:

Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation, and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 21)

In *Nights at the Circus*, The grotesque genre is undoubtedly brought forth. Fevvers's body is certainly grotesque. References to her size and body functions are constantly made by Carter, as in "her face, broad and oval as a meat dish, had been thrown on a common wheel out of coarse clay" (CARTER, 2006, p. 9); or when Fevvers takes off her stockings and the "powerful note of stale feet" or "the essence of Fevvers" (p. 5) clogs the room. Helen Stoddart believes that the fertility that Bakhtin claims to be related to the grotesque is purely symbolical in *Nights at the Circus*. Stoddart states that "with Jack Walser as her partner and 'amanuensis', she [Fevvers] plans to give birth to 'the histories of those woman [sic] who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten'" (STODDART, 2007, p. 30). Fevvers represents renewal and the dawning of a new era for women.

After all this discussion on the carnivalesque and the grotesque we may be sure that what Carter is up to in her novel is precisely what Bakhtin had theorized almost half a century earlier – she does not renounce the traditional genres and forms of the past, she renews them. She wants to expose the hierarchies and reverences to the patriarchy which are a constant presence in traditional genres. She appropriates traditional genres and rewrites them through her contemporary and female oriented eyes. For practical reasons, choices had to be made in relation to the genres that are about to be analysed here. But one thing these genres have in common they all privileged a male oriented view of reality. What Carter does is to give these genres a fresh and feminine touch. As she has said elsewhere: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the wine makes the old bottles explode" (CARTER, 1983, 69). The old bottles are filled with new wine and this new wine certainly makes the bottles explode, for they are questioning the myths and metanarratives that inform these old bottles.

2.6. Metafiction: Examining the Nature of Textuality

As soon as we begin reading *Nights at the Circus* we come across a question, which is in fact Fevvers's slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (CARTER, 2006, p.3). This is the question we first want to be answered. However, as the text goes on we perceive its irrelevance and what really strikes us is the way Angela Carter calls our attention to the very nature of her fiction. The narrative itself comes to the foreground and the way the story is told becomes more important than the story itself. The question we then ask is 'Is a narrative fact or is it fiction? Is official history more factual than Fevvers's story?'

As we ask ourselves these questions we are intrigued by a feature of the novel, a possible reading of it. We realize the novel can be read as a metafictional one, for the novel "employs devices that constantly remind us that what we are reading is fictional; it does not allow us to enter a believable or familiar world in which we would lose sight of the novel's textuality" (STODDART, 2007, p. 33). According to British scholar Patricia Waugh, a metafictional novel is one in which "characters suddenly realize that they do not exist, cannot die, have never been born ... [o]r they start to perform impossible acts" (WAUGH, 1984, p.71). This definition seems to fully apply to Fevvers's description. First of all, because she says she was born in a most unconventional way, she tells Walser she was "hatched out of a bloody great egg" (CARTER, 2006, p. 3). The character performs impossible acts. Fevvers is not only a winged woman, which is quite impossible, but a huge one, which makes the deed of flight even more unlikely to happen.

Besides being born via unconventional means and having wings, Fevvers was born by the turn of the century. Sarah Gamble argues that all these features are quite symbolic, they seem to call the readers' attention to the fact that this new century is about to testify the birth of a new woman. A woman who can fly, who can get rid of the patriarchal clutches that were impairing their flight in the previous century. Fevvers represents an alternative to all women who follow a role which had been imposed on them longer before they were even born. However, Gamble reminds us that the image of the winged woman is more complex than it appears for:

Though it is predominantly an image of liberation, the male protagonists impose on it stereotypical representations of femininity, invented by a patriarchal culture. 'Angel of

death', 'queen of ambiguities', 'spectacle' and 'freak' are some of the feminine roles they attribute to Fevvers in the novel (GAMBLE, 2001, p. 141).

Gamble is also concerned about the image of the egg which according to her may mean psychic rebirth but that at the same time provides "a vehicle for Lizzie to theorize about the oppressive nature of reproduction and child-care under patriarchy" (p. 142). When Lizzie suspects that Fevvers is about to surrender to marriage and domesticity she tells the heroine: "I've raised you to fly up to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs" (CARTER, 2006, p. 225)

Carter did not want her novel to be a political pamphlet, but through Fevvers she was able to address a subject with which she had always been involved. She seems to be trying to tell us that that woman is as much a creation as the roles assigned to women in the century before her heroine's birth. The winged protagonist is there to remind us that women can create their own histories. She was born at the dawning of a new century and she is telling women that that century is theirs, everything is possible.

Metafiction serves this purpose pretty well for, according to Patricia Waugh, it is a genre which

Self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary text (WAUGH, 1985, p. 40)

Another device commonly used in metafictional narratives is the fact that it repeatedly refers to real facts, verifiable documents and journalism. In Carter's novel some brand names are also used to create verisimilitude such as "Germoline" and "Argyrol". Some other facts that imply Fevvers' reality are the fact that she was born in London, was acquainted with Toulouse Lautrec, and was given a skipping rope by the King of Portugal. When she explains about Toussaints's operations, she tells Walser that he would "find a full account of the operation in for June, 1898" (CARTER, 2006, p. 67).

Besides, Walser is, not by chance, a journalist who is there to interview a woman who can fly. Obviously, he is totally skeptical at first, because "as a journalist, Walser is concerned with 'truth', with facts and with 'uncovering' the story. When he leaves her room and flicks through his notes he thinks to himself "What a

performance! Such style! Such vigour!" (CARTER, 2006, p.104). Walser is there to call our attention not only to the fictionality of Fevvers's narrative but to the fictionality of the novel itself. Can we believe what we read?

Carter is also constantly drawing the reader's attention to the fact that that is a piece of writing by making the narrator address the reader as in "Let me tell you something about Fevvers, if you haven't noticed it for yourself" (p. 217) or in "you'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash register. Even Walser did not guess that" (p. 9). By doing so, Carter sheds some light in the readers' active role in the process of writing and reading. At the same time the author is creating new characters and new worlds, by talking to the reader "the narrator declares an awareness of the reader that implicates the reader's interpretative role in 'constructing' Carter's novel" (STODDART, 2007, p. 73).

The question we may want to answer here is why the author chose to use all these techniques in her text. As mentioned earlier in the text, she seems to be (in) directly proposing a reflection on the fictional nature of all the discourses that surround us. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that postmodernist culture does not deny the dominant culture; it contests it from within its own assumptions. She also argues that the systems of representation produced within the hegemonic culture are "indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory" (HUTCHEON, 1990, p. 247). The discourses proceeding from such culture are as fictional as the aerialist's story. Carter seems to be telling us that, just like Fevvers, we, too, can be owners of our own narrative. By using metafictional devices she might be telling us to look carefully around and dare to contest all these constructed discourses and choose not to abide by it. We can dare to believe in the impossible and question what is said to be the only possible way. When the narrator talks to the reader, he is making us aware of our role not only in the construction of meaning in the novel itself, but also in the construction of our own identity and role in society.

2.7. On the Road: The Picaresque Novel

Another possible reading for Carter's novel is to take it as a picaresque one. The classical picaresque novels date back to the seventeenth century and are:

Typically episodic in structure, humorous or satiric in tone, and their content features a slightly hapless or roguish hero, often of low or questionable origin, engaged in a sequence of detailed and disreputable adventures in a society marked by corruption and greed. (STODDART, 2007, p. 63)

Angela Carter installs this genre only to subvert it. The typical picaresque novel is episodic in structure, so is Fevvers's narrative. As she tells Walser her story, she does so by unveiling, little by little, different pieces of her personal history. She tells him some episodes of her life: she tells him about her staying at Ma Nelson's brothel, at Madame Schreck's Museum of Horrors and then at the circus and about all the adventures that took place in each of these places.

According to Carter, the picaresque "is a genre in which people have adventures in order to find themselves in places where they can discuss philosophical concepts without distractions" (CARTER apud STODDART, 2007, p. 63). As the story progresses further and further away of the so called civilized world the possibilities of change and renewal increase. From London, where social roles are well defined, where freaks have no alternative besides being part of a circus, a brothel, or an inmate at Madame Schreck's, to a place like Siberia, which is, as its landscape, a blank page. Siberia represents the place where philosophical concepts can not only be discussed but be put into practice.

Every place Fevvers has been to is important in her process of self-discovery, and, just like what happens to the *pícaro*, the adventures she goes through help her see herself not as a spectacle but as woman who is free of all labels, including the label she and society had imposed on her. By the end of the last chapter she laughs and this laughter is the culmination of her process of self-acceptance. Sarah Gamble points out that Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the subversive potential of laughter helps elucidate its meaning in such a context. Gamble reminds us that Bakhtin points out that "that laughter signifies 'the defeat of power, of earthly kings and of all that oppresses and restricts ... It liberates not only from external censorship but, first of all, from the great interior censor'" (GAMBLE,

2001, p. 147). Fevvers's laughter " began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing" (CARTER, 2006, p. 350). Her laughter freed her own mask. She was now free to be her true self, because Walser was already in love with her true essence.

Stoddart also reminds us of the origin of the word *pícaro*, which is Spanish and means rogue, someone who is deceitful and who should not be trusted, for he (mostly a male protagonists) has a questionable origin. Nevertheless, Angela Carter re-imagines and recreates the idea of the *pícaro*. First and foremost because her protagonist, unlike the traditional *pícaro*, is a woman. Has the author chosen a woman because traditionally women are seen as untrustworthy? Maybe, we don't know whether what Fevvers tells us is true or not. She has been hatched, besides she has lived and worked in places which are designed for outcasts. However, this choice seems not to have been made by chance. Carter chooses a woman for her *pícaro*, for this outcast woman is to prove that the prejudiced view on the ones who live on the margins is unreasonable. Carter's character plays with the reader's pre-conceived ideas on what is right and what is wrong. She wants the story to be told from the mouth of a questionable woman. Stoddart alludes to the interview Carter had given to John Haffenden in Aidan Day's *Angela Carter*, in which she talks about her intention to pick up on the picaresque tradition- "it offers her the opportunity to both 'entertain and instruct' within it" (STODDART, 2007, p. 63). By the middle of the novel we don't question Fevvers anymore for the truth of her narrative is irrelevant; we become interested in her quest and the outcome of it. She invites the reader to be a part of that quest and free him/herself from all the pre established concepts they might possess. The reader is entertained and instructed, just like Carter wanted.

2.8. Feet on the Ground, Riding the Air: Magical Realism

Magical realism is another genre that permeates the whole novel. In more general terms magical realism "denotes a combination of the fantastic and the realistic, specifically informed by a narrative tone of banal response to the fantastic elements, treating them as equally real to those that are apparently more realistic"

(STODDART, 2007, p.35). Critics Zamora and Ferris, in their book *Magical Realism*, are concerned with the role myths play in the agenda of such genre. According to them, “magical realist texts’ primary narrative investment is often in myths or collective practices” (ZAMORA and FARIS, 1995, p. 3). The myths that Carter uses in her work generally derive from textual sources. On such matter she states that “I use other people’s books, European literature, as though they were that kind of folklore – the folklore of the intelligentsia” (HAFFENDEN, 1985, p.82). Many times the textual myths Carter uses are fairy tales as she regards them as “the lumber room for the Western European imagination” (CARTER, 1983, p. 172) and Carter through the appropriation of these myths finds her way of engaging critically with contemporary culture and the questioning of such cultural structures is particularly important for women, because from them “investigating the social fictions that regulate our lives becomes an important political activity” (p. 70)

In magical realism there is a constant tension between what is real and what is magical. The fact that Fevvers has wings at first causes some kind of strangeness to the reader. However, many more unreal facts are spread all over the novel. For instance, when Fevvers is entrapped at the Grand Duke’s gallery she manages to escape by getting on a miniature train which belonged to the Duke’s collection and suddenly she is being held by Lizzie, who is inside a train which is heading to Siberia.

This episode exemplifies a striking feature of magical realism, which is the manipulation of time and space. In chapter five, the characters are “translated into another world, thrust into the hearts of limbo to which we had no map” (CARTER, 2006, p. 265). Right in the first chapter Big Ben, which is a ground in reality, i.e., no one could doubt its preciseness, strikes midnight three times. Again we are faced with the idea that that is a piece of writing, it is a fictional work and, because of that, time can be stretched or compressed at the author’s whim.

Another interesting episode related to the idea of time is when Lizzie and Fevvers lose ‘Father Time’ and Olga and Vera come across it. They realize that “wherever we go, we’ll need no more fathers” (p. 261). The figure of Father Time represented not only the idea of time as the western society knows it but also, as Olga put it, the idea of a father, and having a father in a patriarchal society means having someone, especially a man, telling you what to do and when to do it. Father time could no longer have control over those women. Once Fevvers was not under

Father Time's control she was moving into the unknown and, by doing so, bound to face new challenges, which eventually led her to get in touch with her real self.

The description of the animals is another feature of magical realism present in the novel. The animals can think, predict the future or be delighted by good music. In the novel there are apes that are able not only to write a note to the colonel, but also to propose to take over the business Monsieur Lamarck was incapable of running. There is also Sybil, a pig which is a kind of oracle and orients the colonel when he is doing business. The tigers in the circus are tamed by the music played by the princess of Abyssinia and Mignon.

Marginality, transgression and hybridity are some of this genre's features. Lizzie is an icon of transgression. She comes from a family of bomb-makers, she does not conform in being at men's disposal at Ma Nelson's brothel and she is really witty. Fevvers is the symbol of hybridity. She is half a bird and half a woman and because of that she is impelled to live by the margins of society, she has to live in a whorehouse, in a brothel that is also a museum of freaks at Madame Schreck's and in a circus. A person who does not fit in any ready-made category of that society is relegated to the margins and it is there, among the outcasts and freaks, that Fevvers reigns. Unlike the other freaks she has wings, and that makes her unique and at the same time symbolic. She may represent an escape from that world of humiliation and relegation in which they all live.

The circus is in itself a place for marginal citizens but at the same time it

Provides such an arena, and the magic of the circus, where the audience routinely suspends disbelief, creates a parallel effect to that of magical-realist fiction. It is not so much that a sense of reality is lost, but we understand that its rules are being defied (STODDART, 2007, p. 77).

At the circus people believe that a woman can have wings but no one notices that Buffo is really in trouble by the time he is going crazy.

Stoddart believes that "in Carter's novel the miraculous facilitates a skepticism towards inherited concepts – nothing can be taken for granted when anything seems possible" (p.79). Within the magic realism scope she finds room to bring to light some themes such as gender and feminism. The author seems to be telling us that Fevvers is an alternative to the male dominated society, that a woman can be the mistress of her own life and destiny and subvert the rules of a patriarchal society. In magic realism "ordinary events are treated as if they were fantastic (in a

revision of what is 'normal' or 'real') and extraordinary events are treated as if they were entirely 'ordinary'" (STODDART, 2007, p. 35). Being free as Fevvers may be seen as the real thing while following the prescribed roles are actually the illusions.

2.9. Drinking her Brew

As the present text has discussed, *Nights at the Circus* does not fit any single category. It is a novel packed with elements characteristic of many genres. This choice of flirting with all these genres tells us something about the author's ideas. She seems to be telling us that pre-established roles can and must be subverted. There are always various possibilities and it is not necessary to be enslaved by a single one. Like Fevvers, we can all be hybrid creatures, and a range of possibilities lies just ahead of us.

Why do we get so interested in Carter's *picaro's* adventures? In the several steps and roads that map out the apprenticeship of Sophie Fevvers? Maybe we do so because in *Nights at the Circus* we get in touch with a possibility of change. We perceive that it is through her adventures that Fevvers undergoes her quest for self-identity. We perceive that, although Fevvers saw herself as a liberal and as the owner of her own destiny, she was attached to that role and did not imagine that there were other possibilities for her. She could cease being the flawless aerialist and simply be a flawed creature.

Carter appropriates innumerable canonical and non-canonical texts as well as several different literary genres, and she mixes them in her own rich cauldron. Anyone can drink of the resulting brew and be inebriated by its power. Carter's text is there to question and it invites the reader to question every institution, every discourse that they come across. It is there to remind us that fact and fiction are hard to tell apart. Can we trust Fevvers's tale? We can trust the character and her tale just as much as we can trust official discourse. They are all narratives which have been created with a purpose, to unveil or veil ideas and ideals.

3. *THE PENELOPIAD*: PENELOPE'S ACCOUNT OF HER ODYSSEY

3.1. Margaret Atwood: A Brief Biography

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, on November 18, 1939. She was the second daughter of Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist and Margaret Killan Atwood, a dietician and nutritionist. Her early childhood was quite unusual for, due to her father's occupation, she had to spend several months of her early years in the backwoods of Northern Quebec. Such an unordinary condition led Atwood and her brother, Harold, to learn to live an alternative lifestyle. Atwood and her brother lived away from the contact with other people and for many years were not able to attend a regular school. Atwood developed an alternative way of educating herself – she got very much interested in literature, which, most of the time, consisted of books from her father's library, and consequently the books were above her age level. According to British scholar Heidi Macpherson, “this eclectic reading has certainly had an influence on her work, from fairy tales (in their original and harsher versions), to myths and legends from a variety of cultures” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 2). About the books she used to read, Atwood comments: “No one ever told me I couldn't read a book. My mother liked quietness in children, and a child who is reading is very quiet” (ATWOOD, 2002, p. 7).

Atwood's parents were both connected to science, in one way or another, and unlike many parents in the 1950s, they did not pressure their daughter to marry, on the contrary, they wanted her to be as educated as possible. (STAINES, 2006, p. 12). Her parents were both avid readers and although they wanted their daughter to follow into their footsteps, little did they know that that support would lead her to become a writer and a very successful one. When recalling the support she got from her parents, Atwood states: “they gave a more important kind of support; that is, they expected me to make use of my intelligence and abilities, and they did not pressure me into getting married” (OATES, 1978, p. 45)

Atwood started writing, at the age of sixteen, going against odds, for at first she thought she was going to be a botanist or a home economist. Canada, in the 1950s was not very promising for writers especially if you were a woman:

There was nothing in Leaside High School to indicate to me that writing was even a possibility for a young person in Canada in the twentieth century. We did study authors, it's true, but they were neither Canadian nor alive ... I contemplated journalism school; but women, I was told, were not allowed to write anything but obituaries and the ladies' page (ATWOOD, 1982, p. 398)

In order to pursue her dream of becoming a writer, in 1957, Atwood enrolled in the English Language and Literature Honors Program at Victoria College, in the University of Toronto, where she obtained a degree. It was there that Atwood met two important and influential figures in her life, Professors Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. It was in Macpherson's extensive library of Canadian poetry that Atwood got into contact with the works of poets such as Margaret Avison, P.K. Page and James Reaney for the first time. Canadian scholar Coral Ann Howells believes these two professors nurtured Atwood's imagination when it comes to her inclination to appropriate and rewrite myths. Howells says that "Frye regarded myth as the key to 'the integral meaning[of a poem] presented by its metaphors, images and symbols' {Bush Garden, ix} and Macpherson's poems of the mid 1950s like "Sybilla", "Sheba", and "Isis" prefigure Atwood's, in which women speak out of ancient myths and legends" (HOWELLS, 2008, p. 59).

In 1961, while still an undergraduate, Atwood published a collection of poems entitled *Double Persephone*, for which she won the E. J. Pratt medal. Atwood's first enterprises as a writer were in the field of poetry. Before her first novel was published, Atwood had written two more collections of poetry: *The Circle Game* (1966) and *The Animals in that Country* (1968). After her graduation, she began her Master's program in English Literature at Radcliff College, in Harvard University, USA, where she studied Victorian and American literature and started her Ph.D dissertation, which she did not complete, on 'Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the 19th and 20th Centuries". It was at that time, while she was away from Canada, that Atwood started to see her country with different eyes:

It [Harvard University] was the place where I started thinking seriously about Canada as having a shape and a culture of its own. Partly because I was studying literature of the American puritans, which was not notable for its purely literary values – if one can study this in a university, I thought, why not Canadian literature? (you must understand that at the time Canadian literature was simply not taught in high schools and universities in Canada) – and partly because Boston was, in certain ways, so similar, in climate and landscape, to part of Canada, One began to look for differences. (OATES, 1978 - 79, p. 9)

It was also during her stay in the United States that Atwood realized that, for Americans, Canada was practically non-existent. Atwood commented on this perception of hers, saying, “It’s not that the Americans I met had any odd or ‘upsetting’ attitudes towards Canada. They simply didn’t have any attitudes at all. They had a vague idea that such a place existed – it was that blank area north of the map where the bad weather came from” (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 78). Such a new perspective on her own land seems to have impelled Atwood to write one of her most important non-fiction works, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). The book was, supposedly, an easy-access book, a kind of a guide to announce to her fellow countrymen that Canadian literature did exist and it was of good quality. In the introduction to the 2004 edition of *Survival*, Atwood explains one of her motivations to write such a guide. She explains that while she was travelling around Canada, giving poetry readings, she was amazed at the absence of views on the subject of Canadian literature that most Canadians had and she realized this was a kind of colonial mentality, which led Canadians, Australians and other colonial subjects to devalue their cultural production:

The two questions I was asked most frequently by audience members were, “Is there any Canadian literature?” and, “supposing there is, isn’t it just a second rate copy of *real* literature, which comes from England and the United States?” In Australia they called such attitude Cultural Cringe; in Canada they were termed the Colonial Mentality. In both – and in many smaller countries around the world – they were part of a tendency to believe that the Great Good Place was, culturally speaking, elsewhere (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 5, author’s italics)

Atwood played a key role in the development of what is now known as ‘CanLit’, both as a critic and as a creative writer. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969. In 1972, Atwood published one of her most widely read novels so far, *Surfacing*, which also tackles the matter of Canadian cultural nationalism. In this novel, however, we can perceive how Atwood brilliantly mixes the complex of victimization that Canadians and women share. In an interview to Graeme Gibson, Atwood talks about such interconnectedness:

What I’m really into in that book is the great Canadian victim complex. If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault – it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. It will always be somebody else’s fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life. And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one. Look what a mess I am and it’s all their fault. And Canadian do that too. Look at poor innocent us, we are morally better than they. We do not burn people in the Vietnam,

and those bastards are coming in and taking away our country. Well the real truth of the matter is that Canadians are selling it. (GIBSON, 1973, p. 22-23)

From the 1970s on, Atwood's work has been marked by very clear concerns and Howells believes that "her novels have focused on contemporary social and political issues" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 6). For Atwood, political issues meant the way "people relate to a power structure and vice versa" (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 185). Howells believes that this all-encompassing definition of politics accommodates Atwood's main thematic concerns:

Her scrutiny of relations between men and women, which she has always constructed as form of power politics; the representation of women's lives, their bodies, their fantasies and their search for identity; her engagement with questions of national identity and Canada's international relations especially with the United States; her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human rights, and her environmental interests and increasingly urgent warnings about global warming, pollution and the risks of biotechnology. There are strong thematic continuities as Atwood refigures the same topics with different emphasis and from multiple perspectives in different narrative genres (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 6).

Although the majority of the criticism on Atwood's work is marked by a feminist standpoint, the author has consistently refused to publicly align herself to the movement. When asked about her affiliations, Atwood has stated that she was a writer who happened to be a woman, she was not primarily a woman writer. From her point of view, she is primarily a writer (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 221). In an interview to Bonnie Lyon, back in 1987, Atwood set her views on this matter: "I'm a writer who is female and therefore I write from the point of view of a woman. In other words, I don't see myself as a woman who is writing to promote certain things" (p. 221).

When it comes to the formal aspect of her writing, Atwood is in constant intertextual dialogue with a variety of literary genres and cultural forms: fairy tale, Gothic, science fiction, historical novel, detective story, epic, and myths, among others. She takes up the conventions of these genres, subverts and reshapes them. Howells believes that "her [Atwood's] writing insistently challenges the limits of traditional genres, yet this experimentalism is balanced against a strong continuity of interests, which are both aesthetic and social" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 6).

In this process of appropriation and giving new shapes to old forms the function of language itself is paramount. Howells believes that Atwood focuses on "the slipperiness of words and double operations of language as symbolic

representation and as agent for changing our mode of perception” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 8). Atwood, herself, corroborates what Howells has stated providing an example:

The word *woman* already has changed because of the different constellations [of meaning] that have been made around it. Language changes within our lifetime. As a writer you're part of that process – using an old language, but making new patterns with it. Your choices are numerous. (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 112)

Atwood seems to be fully aware that the themes and the language used in a piece of writing are interconnected and when asked what an ideal reader would be like, she replied:

The ideal reader for me is somebody who reads the book on the first read-through to see what happens... I read the books to see what happens to the people in them. And after that I can sit back and admire how well it was done and what great skill was brought to bear. But the first time through I want to read the book. (p.168)

Atwood is a very prolific writer who has written several volumes of poetry, numerous novels, a few short-story collections, children's books and non-fiction works. Despite her vast production, when it comes to the writing of novels, Atwood states that it is hard physical work, for you get pains all over your body when you do it. However, she has written thirteen novels so far: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Penelopiad* (2005) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Atwood's short-story collections include *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), *Wilderness Tips* (1991), *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994), *The Labrador Fiasco* (1996), *Moral Disorder* (2006), and *The Tent*, which has been characterized as an experimental collection of fictional essays.

Atwood is best known for her fiction, but she has also published numerous collections of poetry, most of which have intertextual dialogues with myths and fairy tales: *Double Persephone* (1961), *The Circle Game* (1964), *Expeditions* (1965), *Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein* (1966), *The Animals in that Country* (1968), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Procedures for Underground* (1970), *Power Politics* (1971), *You are Happy* (1974), *Selected Poem* (1976), *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Interlunar* (1984), *Selected Poems II: Poems Selected*

and *New 1976 -1986* (1986), *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) and *The Door* (2007).

Atwood's non-fiction works include: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *Days of the Rebels 1815 – 1840* (1977), *Second Words* (1982), *Literature* (1996), *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1996), *Two Solicitudes: Conversations* [with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu] (1998), *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1984 – 2002* (2004), *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008) and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011).

Atwood has also written children's books, which include: *Up in the Tree* (1978), *Anna's Pet* (1980), *For the Birds* (1990), *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (1995), *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* (2003), *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda* (2006), and *Wandering Wenda and Widow Wallop's Wunderground Washery* (2011).

For this vast body of work Atwood has been nominated and won 55 important awards in Canada and worldwide. They include: The Governor General's Award, which is conceded by the Canada Council of the Arts; the Arthur C. Clarke Award, which is a British award given to the best science fiction novel published in the United Kingdom during the previous year; the Booker Prize, which is granted for the best original full-length novel written in the English language; the Orange Prize for fiction, which is awarded to a female writer of any nationality for the best original full-length novel written in English among many others.

Atwood has also written television scripts, librettos for operas, and she has also edited five major anthologies of Canadian literature.

3.2. Myths Retold: Atwood Joins the Canongate Project

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus* is a novel in a series entitled *The Myths*, published by Canongate Press in 2005 in The United Kingdom and thirty-three other countries simultaneously in which renowned contemporary writers were asked to retell a myth "in a contemporary and memorable way" (ARMSTRONG, 2005, epigraph). The other two books published in the same

year were Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth*, which is a kind of introduction to the series and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, which is a rewriting of the myth of Atlas and Heracles. The project has been regarded by many in the press as "ambitious" and "bold" for a partnership has been established with many international publishing houses which allowed the novels to be published in several countries at once. *The Metro* even called it "one of the most ambitious acts of mass storytelling in recent years"

In an interview given to Lucinda Byatt for the literary journal *Solander*, back in 2006, Jamie Byng, managing director of Canongate, explained how he came up with the idea for the project:

The idea for the series came when I was thinking about the Bible and the way we republished it back in 1998 which was to break it up into its component parts and get a range of writers to introduce these individual volumes. The Pocket Canons featured introducers as diverse as Doris Lessing, Will Self, the Dalai Lama, Ruth Rendell, Nick Cave, Karen Armstrong and Bono. It was only after we had commissioned the second series of introducers that I began to think how interesting it would be to approach writers to retell myths. As you say writers have been doing this for centuries but as a publishing idea I felt it had real potential because it gives writers the broadest brief possible and myths provide inspiration rather than limitation.²

In the same interview, Byng stated that he wanted to have the hundredth book published by 2038. At first, such ambitious statement came out as a joke, but after only six years of the publishing of the first three books, seventeen other retellings of myths have been published and the supposedly joke may well become a reality. Contributing authors add to the international appeal of the project for they include writers such as the Russian novelist Victor Pelevin, who contributed with his *The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur*, which brings the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur to the twenty-first century having internet exchanges as its background. Another international name that figures in the project is the Israeli writer David Grossman and his *Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson*, in which he locates the setting of the biblical narrative in Israel and Palestine. Another important contribution to the project is the Brazilian author Milton Hatoum's *Orphans of Eldorado*, which is a retelling of the myth of the Eldorado taking place in the Amazon forest. The most recent novel of the project is the one by the renowned English author A.S. Byatt,

² Interview can be accessed at <http://textline.wordpress.com/solander/reviewsinterviews-jamie-byng-and-canongate/>

Ragnarok, published last September, which is a retelling of the final battle of the Gods of the Norse mythology.³

Some of the myths in the series are retellings of traditional and classical myths. The myths that have been appropriated and rewritten in the series seem to be in compliance with the conception of myth that Karen Armstrong uses in her book – *A Short History of Myth*. In this book, Armstrong works with a more traditional concept of mythology which is related to narratives human beings have created to help them come to terms with the consciousness of mortality. According to such a view, human beings, as meaning-seeking creatures, use their imagination to “place [themselves] in a larger setting” (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p. 2) to give themselves a sense that against the chaotic evidence to the contrary, life is meaningful and valuable. Armstrong defends the idea that we need myths and their rituals to live a full life as she states that “a myth is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information [...] A myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do to live more richly” (p. 10). Armstrong insists on the truthfulness of myths as she says “as our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth” (p.11)

Margaret Atwood has been interested in the revision and demythologizing of classical myths since the dawning of her career as a writer as we perceive by the title of her first book – *Double Persephone*, a self-published poetry collection in which the author first flirts with the rewriting of myths, although her protagonist back in the seventies did not have her own voice yet. Atwood seems to be intrigued by the power myths have upon our perception of reality, especially when it comes to the way women have been portrayed in canonical literary works which are, most of the times, informed by patriarchal grand narratives. Unlike Armstrong, Atwood does not regard myths as timeless truths, on the contrary, her business is to bring to the foreground the constructedness of values and ideas regarded as universal truths. Maybe Atwood and Armstrong are just dealing with two different conceptions of myth. While Armstrong deals with a more traditional concept, Atwood seems to be concerned with myth in the sense Barthes uses it in his *Mythologies*, which is intrinsically linked to the concept of ‘symbolic violence’ as used by Bourdieu, as it has

³ All the information on the novels published by Canongate Press can be accessed online at: <https://themyths.co.uk>

been exposed in Chapter one. Atwood's interest seems to be in accordance with that of many other women writers of the twentieth century who engaged in the process of appropriation and re-writing of classical texts. American poet and essayist, Rachel Blau Duplessis, comments on such atmosphere in her "Perceiving the Other Side of Everything': Tactics of Revisionary Mythopoesis", stating that, in the twentieth century, many women writers "turn again and again to rewrite, reinterpret, or reenvision classical myths and other culturally resonant materials, such as biblical stories or folk tales [...] reformulating a special kind of persistent narrative that is the repository of many dimensions of representation" (DUPLESSIS, 1985, p. 105).

3.3. Breaking the Hold of Tradition Over Us: Bringing Old Myths on Women to the 21st Century

In the introduction to her book, *Margaret Atwood*, Coral Ann Howells, reminds us of the importance of the intertextual dialogue Atwood establishes with traditional genres as "she [Atwood] draws attention to the cultural myths they embody and to the multiple inherited scripts through which our perception of ourselves and the world are structured" (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 8). Howells acknowledges that the appropriation and rewriting of traditional narratives involves a critical response to and a "reinterpretation of them from a new perspective, which offers a critique of the value structures and power relations coded into texts. Revision does not break with tradition though it aims to 'break its hold over us" (p. 9).

In her article, "*The Penelopiad and Weight: Contemporary Parody and Burlesque Transformations of Classical Myths*", scholar Hilde Staels reminds us that postmodern authors make use of parody and burlesque travesty as transformative tools, as they [the authors] "create a continuity with a tradition of rewriting classical mythology", but she also highlights that "they however also establish a discontinuity with the past in employing a technique of (metafictional) parody that the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon discusses as specific to contemporary literary practice" (STAELS, 2009, p. 101). What contemporary authors aim at is not simply a rescuing of a lost past or its worshipping, they are interested in investigating how past narratives inform us and influence our outlook onto the world, and, therefore,

they question such influences. Most of the times, parody is the strategy they use in order to do so.

In her *Theory of Parody*, Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon emphasizes parody's critical intent, defining it as "repetition with critical difference" (HUTCHEON, 1985, p. 32) in which ironic inversion is used to imitate or transform a text or genre convention. She admits that parody, burlesque and travesty are related but she differentiates the first from the other two due to its lack of ridicule or comic intent. Parody, according to Hutcheon, does not necessarily involve the mocking or ridiculing of the source text:

There is nothing in parodia that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or burla of burlesque. Parody, then, in its ironic "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive (p. 32)

Margaret Atwood seemed to be fully aware of the critical intent Hutcheon discusses in her article when she decided to take up the challenge of taking part in the Canongate project. It is by following into the footsteps of her own literary tradition that Atwood chose to rewrite the *Odyssey*. Why did she choose to rewrite Homer's epic, among so many other classics? The answer may be given by the author herself in the introduction to the novel when she admits that she had always been intrigued by the inconsistencies in Penelope's story and myth, not to mention the hanging of the twelve maids, which in the *Odyssey* is a minor event that is described in no more than seventy verses in book twenty-two.

The *Odyssey* has been regarded by many as the quintessential classic when it comes to the representation of the Western man, and consequently of the Western woman, representing Penelope as an example of fidelity and virtue to be followed by all women. Homer's epic portrays a time and a place in which, according to French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, in his *Homer's World* (2000), women were completely excluded from political life, a condition that led them to live a subordinate life, mostly confined to the realm of home and subject to the male power and to the pleasing of men. Women in ancient Greek society, still according to the French historian, did not own their own bodies. In the *Iliad*, for example we may perceive some examples of the objectification of women's bodies for the main reason for the Trojan War is the kidnapping of Helen, who could have been *given* back at any time putting an end to

the war. Another example of objectified bodies is the feud between Agamenon and Aquiles over Briseis, whom Aquiles had *won* in a battle. In both cases, the women were not asked where they would rather be. It was up to men to decide their fate. They were not given voice or power over their own bodies.

The *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, presents readers with more feminine archetypes which, for many, seems to have been created to please a feminine audience. Perhaps because of this unusual characteristic, the English Victorian writer Samuel Butler, who published a translation of the *Odyssey* in 1900, developed a theory that the text of the *Odyssey* came from the pen of a young Sicilian woman, and that the scenes of the poem reflected the coast of Sicily and its nearby islands. Butler described the "evidence" for this theory in his *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) and in the introduction and footnotes to his prose translation of the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey*, however, still according to Vidal-Naquet, seems to, very traditionally, divide women into two categories: warming and welcoming versus seductive and dangerous. As examples of the first category some passages may be cited. The mermaids who may mesmerize a man with their singing and then have "their skin hung on their hedge of bone" (HOMER, 2002, p. 234), Circe, who obliges Odysseus to be her lover, or even Calypso, who falls in love with the hero and also refuses to let him go. Example of the second category may be found in Nausicaa, a good-hearted woman who helps Odysseus when he ends up naked in her island. The strongest opposition of such a binary view on women is the contrast made between Penelope and Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, who had betrayed and murdered her husband to live with her lover, while Penelope remained faithful to her husband during his twenty-year absence. Both women are taken as examples to be and not to be followed, respectively.

The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus, as a revision and rewriting of Homer's the *Odyssey* seems to have given Atwood the opportunity to retell the story through a feminine perspective, since she gives voice to characters who had only been portrayed through the narrator's voice in the Greek epic. Different from the *Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* is narrated in first person by Penelope, who tells her story from Hades, three thousand years after her death, therefore, from a twenty-first century perspective of the events narrated in the classical epic. Atwood, however, does not give voice to Penelope alone. She also gives voice to the twelve hanged maids who make a parodic counterpart to what Penelope narrates. The novel

is divided into twenty nine chapters, eighteen of which are narrated by Penelope and eleven other chapters, which are intertwined with those of Penelope's, and are presented by the Maids, who form a chorus line and make use of various different genres – a lament, a popular tune, an idyll, a sea shanty, a ballad, a drama, an anthropology lecture, a videotape and a love song – to provide their version of the events.

In the introduction to the novel we have a hint of what is about to take place. Atwood opens it with a brief reference to the *Odyssey*, stating that Odysseus has been much commented on not necessarily because of his exploits but because “he’s noted as a persuasive liar and disguise artist” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. xiii). This is a significant approach to the hero who, in the traditional myth and epic, had endured a great deal of hardships and was forced to spend twenty years away from home fighting in the Trojan war and then on his way back to Ithaca. Penelope, in the *Odyssey*, Atwood declares, “is portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy” (p. xiii) for the twenty years that her husband was away, she remained faithful to him coming up with strategies to keep away the suitors who wanted to marry her and take over Odysseus’s kingdom.

However, Atwood debunks the authority of the epic stating that:

But Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only *version* of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, and also local - myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have drawn on material other than the *Odyssey*, [...] I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of the *Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in the *Odyssey* does not hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. xiv –xv – my italics)

In order to debunk myths that have been prescriptive in relation to what it means to be a good woman or a good wife - the myth that revolves around Penelope's behavior, Atwood makes use of several transtextual elements that allow her text to dialogue and demystify the source text. In her article “Margaret Atwood and the re-invention of myth in *The Penelopiad*”, Brazilian scholar Sigrid Renaux examines these transtextual elements characteristics present throughout Atwood's narrative and their relationship with the *Odyssey*. To begin with, Renaux comments on important paratextual elements that shed some light on the relationship between

Atwood's narrative and the source text. She quotes Genette's definition of the term, in which he defines paratextuality as:

that relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within totality of the literary work, to what can be called its paratext: a title, a subtitle, prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, marginal and terminal notes, epigraphs, illustrations, book covers, and other signals, which provide the text with a (variable) setting and a "commentary", which even the purist among readers cannot always disregard. (GENETTE, 1997, p. 3)

According to Renaux, an important paratextual element that deserves our attention is the title of the book which establishes a contrast between Atwood's text and the title of classical epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. If in the *Iliad* we are bound to read about the heroes and adventures involved in the founding of Ilium (Troy) and, in the *Odyssey*, about the adventures of heroic Odysseus and of his companions during the Trojan War and in Odysseus' many years spent in his return to Ithaca, in *The Penelopiad* we are about to read the story of Penelope, now told through her own perspective, a perspective that aims at breaking away from the formal restraints the epic imposed.

Right from the beginning we may perceive the subversive nature of Atwood's text for epics were meant to be about wars, male heroes and great exploits. Atwood is able to parody a text about a man who faced several hardships and who had been to innumerable places and met numerous kinds of people and beings. How can she write about a woman who had waited for her husband for twenty years and who barely left her home? Atwood will demonstrate throughout her narrative that domestic life may provide women with lots of material for an epic even if this epic is about a sentimental or mental journey. In doing so, Atwood questions the very nature of an epic.

The other two most important paratextual elements of the novel are the two epigraphs for they seem to guide the author throughout the narrative. The whole narrative revolves around these two epigraphs. The first one is about Penelope:

...Shrewd Odysseus! ...You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarus' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of constant Penelope. (ATWOOD, 2005)

Atwood's business with her text seems to be the questioning and deconstruction of the classic myth, not to dishonor Penelope, but to free her from the burden of being a paradigm of virtues, to show her as more humane character, who has flaws, is inconsistent and bound to make mistakes. Once again, Coral Ann Howells sheds some light on the novel for she believes that "Atwood is playing with two levels of myth here: the Homeric myth of the 'faithful Penelope' and cultural myths about women as either submissive and domestic, or as duplicitous schemers and *femmes fatales*." (HOWELLS, 2006, p.9). Atwood is up to playing with the contradictions found in Homer's text. Just as she did in her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, in which she feels free to fill the gaps found in the story of the real case of the supposed murderer Grace Marks.

The other epigraph, which is about the hanging of the twelve maids, is also of high relevance to our understanding of Atwood's motivation to write the novel:

...he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare ... so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (ATWOOD, 2005)

Atwood is not only interested in giving voice to Penelope to demystify the patriarchal myths present in the *Odyssey*. Had she done that, the book would have been sufficiently interesting. However, Atwood also chooses to give voice to the maids who were hanged and, as she stated in the introduction to the novel, had always haunted her. The maids' voices, as a chorus line, are interwoven with that of Penelope's and represent a parodic counterpoint to Penelope's narrative and which, according to Renaux, make the demystification even more powerful for not only does Atwood bring the whole patriarchal system from Homeric times under scrutiny, by deconstructing the images of Odysseus and Telemachus, but she also questions the very figure of Penelope, not the Greek one, but her own protagonist (RENAUX, 2009, p. 205). Since we do not know Penelope's real intentions, Atwood's Penelope becomes more ambiguous and complex. By casting such doubt upon Penelope's innocence, Atwood deconstructs the idealized figure presented in the *Odyssey*.

In Homer's narrative, the slave girls have been relegated to the margins of the narrative. Nonetheless, in Atwood's novel, their plot is brought to the foreground in a really subversive way as they question not only the masculine values that

dominated the Greek ideals in Homer's time but they also shed some light on class issues, for they were doubly silenced and their bodies were doubly objectified, for being women and for being slaves. Atwood is fully aware that the category "Woman" is not a monolithic block. Women are human beings and as such, they have their own idiosyncrasies. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Atwood comments on such issue: "As for Woman with capital W, we got stuck with that for centuries. Eternal woman. But really, 'Woman' is the sum total of women. It doesn't exist apart from that, except as an abstract idea" (INGERSOLL, 2006, p. 101). The only thing the slave girls have in common with Penelope is the fact that they are women, but they know they cannot truly bond.

3.4. Whose Tradition is it Anyway?: The Novelization of an Epic

The source text Atwood chooses to appropriate and re-write is an epic, which is a typically masculine genre and which was, in its origins, composed and narrated exclusively by men. The epic genre was originally oral and could deal with myths, heroic legends, edifying religious tales, animal stories or philosophical or moral theories. It has been used by many peoples as a form of transmitting their traditions from one generation to another without the aid of writing⁴. Austrian critic Otto Maria Carpeaux comments on what he calls the pedagogic function of the epic. Carpeaux believes the epic functions as a means to create ideal examples which are extracted from myths. In his opinion, the heroic *pathos* of the *Iliad* and the aristocratic ethics of the *Odyssey* represent images of life ideals as they have exercised great influence in the Greek reality (CARPEAUX, 2010, p. 51). It is reasonable to say that such influence goes beyond Greek society, such ideals may perfectly have influenced all Western society.

⁴ Information on the epic genre found at <http://britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/189625/epic>, accessed on 01/20/2012.

Following in this logic of a poem that sets the standards of high morals and ideals, Carpeaux reminds us that never has any other classic author gained such indisputable fame as Homer. Homer's name equated with "poet". In ancient times, as well as in modern, Homer, and the ideals presented in his work, gained the status of a Bible. Passages from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* were used to support philosophical theses, literary opinions, religious feelings and even sentences in courts of law. Homer meant tradition, as the word is used by the Roman church, meaning rules for the interpretation of their doctrine and life. (CARPEAUX, 2010, p. 46-47).

Epic poems are closely related to memory. First of all, in the beginning of an epic poem, the poets generally invoke the muses for inspiration. According to Greek mythology, the Muses are the nine daughters of Zeus and the Mnemosyne (memory personified). The Muses are considered the goddesses who inspire literature, science and the arts. In epic poems they are invoked for inspiration and such inspiration may well be equated with memory for the poem the poet is bound to recite requires a lot from his memory for it is way too long and complex. The *Odyssey*, for instance, opens with an invocation of the Muse: "The Man, O Muse, inform, that many a way / wound with his wisdom to his wished stay" (HOMER, 2002, p. 13). Besides the invocation of the muses, the poet also made use of another important device, the use of a lofty tone and a lot of set phrases, which helped in the memorization of such long poems. These set phrases generally described recurrent ideas and situations. The dawning of a new day, for instance, was constantly referred to as "rosy fingers". (p. 33)

Heroic life is the main feature in epic poems, and heroes are generally of noble or semi-divine origins as the men who go to war in the *Iliad*, or the noble warrior trying to find his way back home in the *Odyssey*. Supernatural forces and the world of the gods are interconnected with that of humans. French Hellenist Jean-Pierrre Vernant argues that it is through the voice of the poets that the world of the gods is presented to humans. He also believes that it is in and through poetry that the fundamental traits of a common Hellas (Ancient Greece) is expressed and fixed, by means of verbal forms that are easy to memorize. (VERNANT, 2009)

Another interesting feature of epic poetry is that, in general, it opens in *media res*, that is, the events narrated start in the middle of the plot, earlier events may appear later in the narrative in the form of flashbacks. In the *Iliad*, for instance, we do not know much about some characters' background. What really matters is the heroic

deed the characters perform, their strength and their victories. The setting is another important element of the epic. It usually covers vast geographical distances, if what is described in the poems is the great deeds of great heroes, the setting could not be different. Even if the *Odyssey* presents the audience with domestic life in Ithaca, the hardships Odysseus goes through take place in various and vast locations.

What is important to highlight about the epic genre, which Atwood decides to appropriate, is that for many centuries the epic and its high moral values have been taken as examples to be followed. Carpeaux reminds us that “the aesthetic, religious and political Bible for the Greek could be turned into a literary Bible for the entire western civilization” (CARPEAUX, 2010, p. 53)⁵. Atwood decides to write an ‘epic’ about a woman in prose, since what she is writing is a novel. She also intertwines with Penelope’s narrative the chorus of the maids, being the chorus a typical feature of Greek tragedies. In this chorus – more of a chorus line, traditionally associated with musicals, but here exerting a graver and more sinister function, namely to witness and to woe – Atwood mixes many literary forms, most of them deriving from folk genres such as laments, rhymes, songs, ballads and so on. Atwood, thus, gives voice to figures whose lives did not figure in the epic – high-born women and slave girls – and provides them with expression in literary genres that are traditionally associated with subjectivity, with the expression of feelings, emotions and fears.

In his essay “Epic and Novel”, Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin compares the novel to other genres, especially the epic. He provides us with a good starting point to shed some light on the deed Atwood has achieved. First and foremost, it is important to highlight some marked characteristics of the epic, so that we may realize the conventions that have been subverted in Atwood’s novel. To begin with, the Russian theoretician lists three main characteristics of epics:

(1) a national epic past-in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past"-serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (BAKHTIN, 1988, p. 13)

When Bakhtin comments on the epic as a genre that deals with the “absolute past”, he means it deals with a time that is inaccessible to the contemporary reader. The singer and the listener of an epic may be located in the same time, but “the

⁵ My translation

represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time- and- value plane, separated by epic distance” (BAKHTIN, 1988, p. 14). Bakhtin also comments on the fact that the epic, as a genre, gets to us completely finished, that is, “constitutive feature is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times” (p.15). The past is always better than the present, the really good things took place only in the past and “the epic ‘absolute past’ is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well”.(p.15)

Another feature highlighted by Bakhtin that deserves attention is the role of memory in the epic. According to him, in ancient literature, it is memory, not knowledge, that plays an important role as the source and power of creativity. Things happened this way and that is it. The past is sacred and as such they have no consciousness of a possibility of relativity of the past. The past cannot be questioned. The epic “absolute past” “lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present [...] There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy.” (p. 16)

Bakhtin also points out that the epic is handed down to us by means of tradition, that is to say, “past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation” (p.16). What Bakhtin calls tradition could easily be translated as mythic discourse, according to him, it does not matter the factual source, the content or the historical event upon which the epic is based what really matters in the epic is:

its reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view which excludes any possibility of another approach-and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition.” (p. 16-17)

The epic distance from the contemporary, its lack of openendedness and all the other abovementioned features connect the epic world to that of the myth. Just like the myth, the epic is handed down to us not as something in process and to which we can add personal values and experiences or even questions; on the contrary, the epic, just like myths, is “impossible to change, to re-think, to reevaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value” (p. 17)

Bakhtin compares the novel to other genres, such as the epic and points out that the novel parodies other genres especially exposing the conventionality of their

form and language, “it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them” (BAKHTIN, 1988, p. 5). The theoretician even suggests that in the heyday of the novel all the other genres go through a process of ‘becoming’, that is, they are “novelized”:

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally-this is the most important thing-the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the opened present).(p. 7)

Why has the novel become the dominating genre, capable of novelizing all the other genres? First and foremost, still according to Bakhtin, the novel is the only genre that is in development so it best reflects a world still in progress. In the process of becoming the new dominant genre, the novel, impregnates other genres with “its spirit of process and inconclusiveness” (p. 7)

Another important factor inherent to the novel that is very relevant to our study of Atwood’s novel is the fact that the novel, unlike the epic, is grounded in the present. Bakhtin lets us know that from the onset the novel developed as a genre that had at its core a new conceptualization of time: “from the very beginning the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality” (p. 38). Atwood’s Penelope tells her story from a contemporary point of view, since she is speaking to readers from Hades in the present time. She tells her version of the story, but her version is impregnated with twenty-first century issues, so her version is in process. Atwood could not have chosen another genre to re-tell her heroine’s story. She needed a genre that allowed her protagonist to relativize and to be able to add personal accounts to the absolute past the novel tries to draw away from.

Atwood also deconstructs the heroic dimension of the epic as she debunks the heroic figure of Odysseus. In her novel, Odysseus’s grand deeds are many times questioned or diminished as the following passage illustrates:

Rumours came, carried by other ships. Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men mutinied, said some; no, said others, they’d eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships. Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others, with ear-biting and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations. Odysseus was the

guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she'd turned his men into pigs – not a hard job in my view – but had turned them back into men because she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 83-84)

If in the epic the setting is vast in its geography, Atwood's novel presents readers with a domestic scene. The problems Penelope had to face as a woman are not that of a hero's, for she had to care for her absent husband's land, the problems with her mother-in-law, the raising of her son and so on. Atwood's novel is not about grand deeds, but the everyday situations that Penelope had to deal with for being almost a prisoner of her fate. The epic poem starts in *media res*, Penelope's narrative starts centuries later and she decides to tell her story from the beginning, that is, from her birth onwards. *The Penelopiad* focuses on Odysseus return home and little, if no, emphasis is given to the heroic deeds he performs, on the contrary, as it has just been mentioned above, his deeds are diminished. The other focus of the novel is on the fact that Odysseus murdered all Penelope's one hundred and twelve suitors and also ordered the hanging of her twelve maids, a vile deed since the maids, as they claim throughout the narrative, were guilty of nothing.

In the epic, the poets recur to the muses for inspiration. The muses help the poets to be accurate and, as Bakhtin puts in his essay, there is no relativization, memory is reliable, and the poets are aided by the muses in the telling of the heroic deeds, so the poets were believed to have access to the facts as they really happened. Atwood's Penelope is fully aware that memory cannot be blindly trusted, she warns readers that she is about to give *her* account of facts, and such an account is purely based on *her* memories. Stephen Bertman's account on memory is fully seems to corroborate the concept of memory Atwood may have resorted to when portraying Penelope's memory as unreliable. Bertman believes that:

Memory is the construction or reconstruction of what actually happened in the past. Memory is distorted by needs, desires, interests, and fantasies. [Memory] is subjective and malleable rather than objective and concrete, memory is emotional, conceptual, contextual, constantly undergoing revision, selection, interpretation, distortion, and reconstruction. ... Personal memory represents the memory of a single individual, contained within a lifetime, often found on first-hand experience. (BERTMAN, 2000, p. 27)

3.5. A Low Art?: The Art of Story-Telling

Penelope chooses what she wants to tell according to her desires and interests. It is the memory of her life and the events she deliberately chooses to narrate are the ones portrayed in the novel. It is even appropriate to say that *The Penelopiad* is a fictive autobiography for, as bell hooks puts it, an “autobiography is a personal narrative, a unique retelling of events not as much as they happened but as we remember or invent them” (HOOKS, 2001, p. 430). As she tells the story of her life, Penelope is all the time reminding her reader that she is telling *her* version of events, the way she remembers they took place. She is in constant doubt of her own narrative. Throughout chapter III “My Childhood”, Penelope questions the reliability of her own story as for example: “Perhaps, this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better. [...] It is hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside of my own head” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 8-9). She, once again, questions the reliability of her story when she lets us know that we are what we are told we are. Our identity is also a product of what people’s account on us:

Do I remember the waves closing over me, do I remember the breath leaving my lungs and the sound of bells people say the drowning hear? Not in the least. But I was told the story: there is always some servant or slave or old nurse or busybody ready to regale a child with the awful things done to it by its parents when it was too young to remember. (p. 9)

In her article, “Setting the Stories Straight: A Reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*”, Canadian scholar Shannon Carpenter Collins calls our attention to the fact that the *Odyssey*’s main topic is storytelling itself: “a recitation of a blind poet, who recounts the stories told by a famous liar and adventurer, the poem contains narrative nested within narrative” (COLLINS, 2006, p. 57). The scholar reminds us that in Atwood’s novel there are three main characters whose stories we are bound to get to know: Odysseus’, Penelope’s and the Maids’. Each of them tells their stories making use of a different medium: Odysseus’s adventures are narrated in Homer’s epic poem, Penelope narrates her own life story in Atwood’s novel, and the maids, as a chorus line, offer a counterpoint to Penelope’s narrative. Such different media are

embedded with gender and class issues which are brought to light in Atwood's narrative, as Collins points out:

Epics are essentially a masculine genre, while many theorists consider the novel a feminine, or at least, a feminized genre – but both are legitimate and legitimating narrative structures. Folk genres, on the other hand, are not taken as seriously, and are not considered to be repository of truth, either universal or cultural. Like slave songs and chain gangs songs, they tell stories, but most of the time no one of importance pays attention to them. (COLLINS, 2006, p. 59)

The first chapter of *The Penelopiad* is entitled “A Low Art”, the art of story-telling which has been regarded as something feminine, therefore low. In this chapter Penelope acknowledges that Odysseus's version of the story has always been considered the true and only one. She had been silent for thousands of years but now she admits: “It's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 4). Penelope also knows she owes that to other women who couldn't be as patient, trustworthy and considerate as she had been. She knows she had been turned into a myth, “an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with” (p.2). Now that she appropriates her own story she is able to demystify the legend and myth that have been built around her. Further in this section the myth of the faithful and patient wife will be explored in more details.

Penelope has now been dead for more than three thousand years and is speaking from Hades. She is very witty and ironic when she says “Now that I'm dead I know everything. This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes, it failed to come true” (p. 1). She is fully aware that what she is about to do is considered low, as she states: “I've had to work myself up to it: It's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children” (p. 4). However, if story-telling is the weapon women have to fight back years of oppression and oppressive narratives, that is what she is going to use.

In the subsequent chapter, “The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme”, the Maids present a burlesque version of their hanging, blaming Odysseus for it. It is interesting to notice that Atwood does not make use of a chorus as it can be found in Greek tragedies, she parodies the convention of the chorus as well. The maids in the novel form a *chorus line*, which is, as already mentioned, typical of musicals. At this point, their jumping rhyme makes Penelope's questioning of Odysseus's virtues much more powerful:

We are the maids
The ones you killed
The ones you failed

We danced on air
Our bare feet twisted
It was not fair

With every goddess, queen, and bitch
From there to here
You scratched your itch

We did much less
Than what you did
You judged us bad

You had the spear
You had the sword
At your command (ATWOOD, 2005, p.5-6)

Now that they are dead, the maids are able to speak and more than that, they in a counterpoint to Penelope's account of Odysseus, when she questions the veracity of his version. The maids' account is sharper and it denounces the double standard present in that society. The maids' rhyme brings to the foreground gender and class issues that had been overshadowed in the *Odyssey*. The maids question the fact that they had been hanged for sleeping with Penelope's suitors, but they accuse Odysseus of doing worse, for he had slept with goddesses, queens and so on while he was away. They knew they had done much less than him. The maids, however, know they are the ones to be punished because Odysseus "had the spear", which is not only a symbol of superior physical strength but also a phallic symbol of masculinity, which in ancient Greece meant superiority in relation to women. They are to be punished because their bodies belong to their master, because they are slaves and because they are women. This rhyme twists the original version in which Odysseus feels he had been cheated by his maids. Here, the maids are empowered enough to admit he had failed them. They were the ones who had been cheated by their master.

The following two chapters are quite interesting for we can clearly see how the maids' story counterpoints and parodies Penelope's. In chapter III, "My Childhood", Penelope tells us how difficult her childhood was. To open the chapter Penelope asks "Where shall I begin?" (p. 7). She can choose to start with the beginning of the world, a creation myth, but as "there are differences of opinion about that" (p.7), she decides to begin with her own birth. Instead of providing readers with one more grand narrative concerning the creation of the world,

Penelope decides to offer a personal story, the story of her life. She tells us that she is the daughter of King Icarus of Sparta and a Naiad, a kind of sea nymph. She also tells us how her father ordered her drowning because he had heard from an oracle that she would weave his death shroud, and how she survived with the help of a flock of ducks. This is the beginning of her mistrust in relation to man. She learns to preserve a calm *façade* when her father, after her survival, becomes too affectionate towards her. It is also the beginning of her weeping: "I spent at least a quarter of my earthly life crying my eyes out" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 10)

The maids, now, use a lament, which, according to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, is an expression of grief, misfortune, especially at the loss of someone or something, which includes among its topics complaints about the cruelty of fortune and the purposefulness of life (PREMINGER & BROGAN, 1993, p. 675), to counterpoint Penelope's narrative. They seem to grieve the loss of their own childhood and their own lives so prematurely:

We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents; slave parents. Peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk as children. If we wept, no one dried our tears. If we slept, we were kicked awake. We were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherless. We were told we were lazy. We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse. It did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain. [...] Our bodies had little value. (ATWOOD, 2005, p.13-14)

The maids' lament adds another dimension to Penelope's all-suffering childhood. If Penelope was objectified for being a daughter, a girl, a condition which automatically avowed her father to kill her, the maids were also objectified for being women but their lament adds another important factor to the story, they were slaves, so they were properties. Unlike Penelope, they did not weep. Weeping would do them no good. However, just like Penelope, their identities were based on what they were told. They were told they were dirty and so dirt became their business, they became dirty.

With these two chapters, Atwood seems to be concerned with the importance of narratives in the construction of one's identity. Penelope's identity has been built around what has been told about her - the edifying legend found in the *Odyssey* or in

Atwood's alleged source for the slanderous gossip registered in myth scholar Robert Graves's book, *The Greek Myths*. In both versions, Penelope's character and identity revolve around her fidelity towards her husband. According to Graves:

Some deny that Penelope remained faithful to Odysseus. They accuse her of companying with Amphinomus of Dulichium, or with the suitors in turn, and say that the fruit of this union was the monstrous god Pan – at sight of whom Odysseus fled for shame to Aetolia after sending Penelope away in disgrace to her father Icarus at Mantinea, where her tomb is still shown. (GRAVES, 1992, p. 735-736)

In both versions, Penelope does not own her story. What we, contemporary readers, know about her is what has come to us through these two versions. Now, with *The Penelopiad*, Penelope was granted the opportunity to give us another one which, according to her, is just another version. At the same time that she wants to offer her view of events, she has to rely on what she has been told. Her relationship with her father, for instance, is based on what the servants told her. She could not remember the episode in which she almost drowned, but that event becomes true to her and so do the feelings that came along with it. It is precisely these memories that define her whole personality as part of who she is.

3.6. Setting the Story Straight: Debasing the Myth of Penelope

Penelope, as a character in *The Penelopiad*, is not willing to accept the mythologizing version of her personality provided by Agamemnon, which is quoted in the epigraph of the novel. Nor the one provided by Graves in his *The Greek Myths*. Agamemnon's version praises Penelope while it diminishes the qualities of his wife, Clytemnestra. According to Agamemnon's account Penelope is an example of virtue, for she, unlike his wife, was able to wait for her husband for twenty years. Penelope remained loyal and performed the role expected from women in ancient Greek society.

If Penelope is regarded in such high esteem, why did Atwood choose to deconstruct and demythologize her figure? Atwood's Penelope does not want her example to be used as a stick to beat other women with. Because of this, according to Renaux, Penelope is ready to show that:

Agamemnon's account was only one part of the reality, for it revealed the version of a man imbued with a patriarchal vision, in which the social organization was hierarchical: men maintained the dominant positions in terms of power, status and prestige, while women were excluded from power. Consequently, women's behavior should be regulated by what men expected or demanded from them: virtue and obedience. (RENAUX, 2011, p. 75)

Penelope does not support Graves's version either. In chapter XIV, "The Suitor Stuff their Faces", she does not admit to having slept with the suitors, although she admits that: "I can't pretend that I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this. Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don't believe them" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 104). She also admits that: "I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that" (p. 105). These two passages illustrate how Atwood deconstructs the myth of Penelope. Penelope is human after all. She admits that she enjoyed the suitors' attention, that she even desired them. She was not as virtuous as Agamemnon believed her to be.

In chapter XX, "Slandorous Gossip", Penelope questions the rumours about her sexual conduct that have been going on for more than three thousand years: "At this point I feel I must address the various items of slanderous gossip that have been going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years. The stories are completely untrue." (p. 143). Once again, Penelope wants to show us that she is dealing with "versions" of what really happened and that she is bound to present us with a different account of the events. The first version she comments on is the one that states that she slept with Amphinomous:

The charges concern my sexual conduct. It is alleged, for instance, that I slept with Amphinomous, the politest of the suitors. The songs say I found his conversation agreeable, or more agreeable than that of the others, and this is true; but it's a long jump from there into bed. (p. 143)

The other version she comments on is the one that says she gave birth to the Great God Pan, after having slept with all the suitors:

The more outrageous *versions* have it that I slept with all of the suitors, one after another – over a hundred of them – and gave birth to the Great God Pan. Who could believe such a monstrous tale? Some songs aren't worth the breath expended on them. (p. 144, my italics)

Penelope also refutes the charges raised against her that claimed that Odysseus distrusted her and that is the reason why he did not reveal himself to her when he first returned. Penelope explains the real reason for his not revealing himself to her right away:

He distrusted me, it is said, and wanted to make sure I wasn't having orgies in the palace. But the real reason was that he was afraid I would cry tears of joy and thus give him away. [...] He simply didn't want to expose me to dangers and disagreeable sights. Surely that is the obvious explanation for his behavior. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 145).

Such versions are found in Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, which attempted at compiling and explaining the Greek myths whose sources were scattered throughout ancient literature. Atwood's Penelope, however, is not satisfied with either version. She is outraged by them. That is why she is now telling us her version of accounts from the graves.

Once again, the maids play an important part in counterpointing Penelope's account. In chapter XXI the chorus of the maids perform "The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama", in which they enact a play that contradicts Penelope's indignation in the previous chapter. The prologue sets the scene and opens up telling readers that there is yet another story. This one is more in compliance with the version Graves presents:

As we approach the climax, grim and gory,
Let us just say: There is another story.
Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour,
Who's sometimes in a good, or else in bad, humour.
Word has it that Penelope the Prissy
Was – when it came to sex – no shrinking sissy!
Some said with Amphimonous she was sleeping,
Making her lust with gales of moans and weeping;
Others, that each and every brisk contender
By turns did have the fortune to upend her,
By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan
Was conceived, or so the fable ran.
The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain –
But let us take a peek behind the curtain. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 147-148)

In traditional plays, the prologue is a device used by dramatists to announce the theme of the play in a way that what is announced by the prologue is a hundred percent reliable. The maids' prologue, however, shows awareness that there are many versions of the story, so readers are, invited to see for themselves:

As we approach the climax, grim and gory,

Let us just say: There is another story.
 [...]

The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain –

But let us take a peek behind the curtain (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 147-148)

In Atwood's version, Eurycleia, who is the nursing maid that raised Odysseus and Telemachus and who recognized Odysseus on his return because of his scar, is not very fond of Penelope. In the maids' play, Eurycleia is seen as Penelope's accomplice, the one to whom Penelope turns for help. In the lines of the chorus, Penelope's virtue, in her words and in her dialogue with Eurycleia, is placed in doubt:

[...]
Penelope:
 And now, dear nurse, the fat is in the fire –
 He'll chop me up for tending my desire!
 While he was pleasuring every nymph and beauty,
 Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?
 While every girl and goddess he was praising,
 Did he assume I'd dry up like a raising?

Eurycleia:
 While you your famous loom claimed to be threading,
 In fact you were at work within the bedding!
 And now there's ample matter for - beheading! (p. 148-1449)

This play is very important for it fills the gaps left by the *Odyssey* and by Graves's accounts. In both versions the hanging of the maids was so low regarded that there is no explanation for, or any account of their hanging whatsoever. Atwood's novel not only explores that episode but it also raises the possibility of Penelope's involvement in the crime. Penelope, now, asks Eurycleia who were the maids who knew she had been sleeping with the suitors, and Eurycleia answers:

Only the twelve, my lady, who assisted,
 Know that the Suitors you have not resisted.
 They smuggled lovers in and out all night;
 They drew the drapes, and then they held the light.
 They're privy o your every lawless thrill –
 They must be silenced, or the beans they'll spill! (p. 150)

The maids' play not only confirms Penelope's adultery but it also blames Penelope's for their hanging. In order to keep her reputation as a model wife intact, she has the maids hanged:

Penelope:
 Oh then, dear Nurse, it's really up to you
 To save me, and Odysseus' honour too!
 Because he sucked at your now ancient bust,

You are the only one of us he'll trust.
 Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal,
 Snatched by the Suitors as unlawful spoil,
 Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be
 The dotting slaves of such a Lord as he!

Eurycleia:
 We'll stop their mouths by sending them to Hades-
 He'll string them up as grubby wicked ladies!

Penelope:
 And I in fame a model wife shall rest –
 All husbands will look on, and think of him as blessed!
 But haste - the Suitors come to their wooing,
 And I, for my part, must begin boo-hooing! (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 150-151)

The chorus now perform a tap-dance, which is a burlesque way of showing how their feet twitched when they were hanged. Just like Penelope, the maids are dead and now they have a voice of their own and are allowed to blame Penelope for their death. However, once more readers are given another version: who are they to believe - Penelope or her slave girls? It does not seem to be Atwood's intention to provide us with definitive answers. She aims at showing us that every myth, and every history privileges one version of the story, and that we should always look for, or at least be aware of, other possible ones.

3.7. Crossing Borders: Old Feuds, Contemporary Concerns

Another important feature of this novel is the contemporaneity of Penelope and the maids. The characters share contemporary concerns with the readers and update myths and the medium by which the myth is questioned. There is a passage in chapter V, "Asphodel", in which Penelope brings to light the customs and rituals performed to make it possible to contact the underworld. When she comments on how the dead may have a glimpse of the living world, she lets us know that even the rituals are not sacred for they change according to time. She begins talking about the rituals of her living time: "Once upon a time", which is a set phrase traditionally used to open fairy tales and that indicates that what she is about to tell us is just as fantastic as any fable or fairy tale. Penelope begins her story saying that in her living time people used to consult the dead by slaying a goat's throat. She then admits that after thousands of years people did not go to the underworld anymore, "customs changed [...] our abode own was upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road [...] a great many special effects" (ATWOOD, 2005, p.

18). Such treatment of the rituals conforms with what French Philosopher Guy Debord denominates “the society of the spectacle”, in which “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (DEBORD, 1994, p. 12).

Another important element that shows how Atwood crosses the boundaries of time and even space in her narrative, is the trial that takes place in chapter XXVI, “The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids”. Odysseus is brought to a contemporary court of law and is tried for the slaughtering of the hundred and twelve suitors. The chapter opens with Odysseus’ defense attorney justifying why Odysseus had to kill them in self-defense and the judge tending to agree with him. However, the formality of the trial is broken when there is a commotion in the back. It is the maids that are outraged: “*The Maids*: You’ve forgotten about us! What about *our* case? You can’t let him off! He hanged us in cold blood! Twelve of us! Twelve young girls! For nothing!” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 177). The attorney states that Odysseus was in his rights because the girls were his slaves. The judge then takes the volume of the *Odyssey* in his hands and states:

It’s written here, in this book – a book we must needs consult, as it is the main authority on the subject – although it has pronounced unethical tendencies and contains far too much sex and violence, in my opinion – it says right here – let me see – in Book 22, that the maids were raped. The Suitors raped them. Nobody stopped them from doing so. [...] Is that correct? (p. 179)

The judge parodically links the past with the present when he consults the *Odyssey* as the main authority in the case. Atwood mocks justice as she equates the authority of the epic to the authority of the *Bible*, since both books present unquestionable male authority as the bearers of the Truth. However, when the judge asks the attorney if it was not correct that the maids were raped and unprotected, he simply states: “I wasn’t there, Your Honour. All of this took place some three thousand years before my time” (p. 180). Penelope is then summoned to give her account. She sides with the maids, and says:

I knew them well, Your Honour. I was fond of them. [...] I felt so sorry for them! But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn’t the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It’s that they were raped without permission. (p. 181)

Although Penelope’s speech aims at defending the maids, it ends up finding resonance in gender and class issues that are still present in the current day. Crime

against property overpowers crime against the individual. The maids, before being human beings, were regarded as property, and as such, Odysseus could dispose of them as he liked. The judge's decision shows how things have not changed much, as he dismisses the case because:

[...] your client's times were not our times. Standards of behavior were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career. Also I do not wish to be guilty of an anachronism. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 182)

The maids' rape and hanging are not important enough to stand as a blot in the judge's career. The times were different but the maids' status remains the same. They do not deserve justice for their bodies were objects that belonged to their masters. The judge is also a powerful man and so he has to side with Odysseus's attorney and dismisses the case. The maids, nevertheless, demand justice and evoke the *Angry Ones*, twelve Erenies, the Greek goddesses of revenge, and implore them to inflict some punishment upon Odysseus.

At this moment in the trial all conventions and formalities have been dismissed and the attorney summons Pallas Athena "to defend property rights and the rights of a man in his own house" (p. 184). In this clear parodic reference to the right of men in a patriarchal system, and how the law and even the Gods – not to mention a woman Goddess – side with such a system, Odysseus is once more "saved", as Athena spirits him away in a cloud. At a first glance, it seems that patriarchy remains powerful, for Odysseus was able to escape, the last two chapters seem to demonstrate that although the powerful metanarrative of patriarchy has remained strong in informing even twenty-first century trials, now at least women and maids are able to have their voices heard.

The last two chapters of the novel are given to the maids. In Chapter XXVIII, "The Chorus Line: We're Walking Behind You, A Love Song", the maids show that they are not willing to forget or even forgive what had happened to them. They tell Odysseus that he will not be able to get rid of them, wherever he goes, they will follow him down:

We can see through your disguises: the paths of day, the paths of darkness, whichever paths you take – we're right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls, heavy as memory, light as air [...] Yoo hoo, Mr Thoughtfulness, Mr Goodness, Mr Godlike, Mr Judge! Look over your shoulder! Here we are walking behind you [...] We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row. (p. 193)

The maids are there to deconstruct the heroic aura that has been woven around Odysseus. They are there at least to remind him – and us – that he cannot, and we should not believe in the myth that he has become. They will follow him down through eternity. By giving the telling of the tale to Penelope and especially to the twelve maids, Atwood's main objective seems to be to question and parodically debunk the authority of the epic and of all the conventions of patriarchal and classicist ideals it carried throughout the times within its text and its form. Atwood seems to have been fully aware that the epic poems and, especially, Homer, have been regarded as bearers of the Truth and that there is always another side to every story.

4 CONCLUSION

After having investigated the role the traditional literary canon has had in the propagation of and dissemination of metanarratives that privilege a one-sided view of reality, that of the Western, white, male authors, I realized that such narratives are intrinsically related to the construction of myths upon which our views and even behaviors are, most of the times, based.

My focus was primarily on the way these discourses are informed by the patriarchal system and, therefore, how women have mostly been left out of the canon for many years. Not only authors were excluded, but female characters were denied voice or agency. I investigated, then, how postmodern women writers have been appropriating and rewriting canonical texts and myths in order to not only expose the patriarchal metanarratives that inform those texts, but also to offer a feminine perspective as a way to offer alternatives to women.

Before investigating the different strategies these women use I felt the need to study the various concepts of myth that circulate in the academic field. I came to the conclusion that these concepts are roughly divided into two types: the ones that are based on a material aspect of myth, and that, therefore, connect myth to rituals; and the other concept, which is more connected to the unconscious aspect of myth and, therefore, it was, in my view, more related to the works developed by Barthes, Bourdieu and Lyotard.

The work of these theoreticians was crucial to the understanding of how constructed discourses are naturalized and transformed into universal truths in our society. Bourdieu's work was of great importance to realize how the patriarchal ideology is formed and propagated. I came to the conclusion that these theoreticians' works are intrinsically connected to the ideology and metanarratives that have been propagated in the literary canon, as we know it today.

Something else that I could perceive in my research was that in order to offer an alternative to what had been produced for centuries, when it comes to literature, postmodern women writers felt the need to dialogue with the past. They seem to know that it was impossible to break completely with tradition, and that a better way of having their voices heard was to use tradition in their favor. The strategy they felt would serve that purpose was the appropriation and rewriting of canonical texts. This

appropriation, however, is not simply a naïve retelling of a plot, but they install their conventions just to subvert them.

The study of intertextuality and parody helped me realize that intertextuality and parody have always been present in the construction of any text. So my question was: what is the novelty in the work of postmodern writers when they are said to use parody and intertextual references in their work? Kristeva stated that every text was an intertext, so what was the great news? It was Linda Hutcheon that helped me obtain an answer. Hutcheon believes that in postmodernism there is always a critical or even political intent when it comes to the appropriation of canonical texts. In order to obtain such an effect, the use of parody is paramount. The use of parody by postmodern writers is able to bring to the present the historic weight and specificity of the target style by putting it at an ironic and critical distance from the contemporary context into which it is inserted (DENTITH, 2001, p. 157).

After this theoretical journey, I delved into the study of the two novels I chose to be the object of my research: *Nights at the Circus*, by Angela Carter and *The Penelopiad*, by Margaret Atwood. After having studied these two novels and their writers in depth I realized that at a first glance we may believe that they simply shared the fact that both of them were postmodern women writers. But a closer and more careful look showed me that both authors have a lot in common.

To begin with, both authors have been very much interested in the roles of traditional myths and how they contribute to the propagation of patriarchal metanarratives. In *Nights at the Circus*, the main character, Fevvers, is a parodic counterpart to the myth of 'Leda and the Swan'. Carter subverts that myth by at times, comparing Fevvers to Helen, the woman who was born out of an egg, after her mother had been seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan; at other times Fevvers plays the role of the swan itself, when in the end of the novel she is making love to Jack Walser on top position in an allusion to the paintings that portray the myth of 'Leda and the Sawn'.

Atwood's novel is even clearer in its allusion to mythology. Her novel is based on the *Odyssey*, and her enterprise is to deconstruct the myth of Penelope, a myth on virtue and fidelity that has been used as a stick to beat other women with. The myth of Penelope has always been propagated through the voice of men, be it through the *Odyssey*, whose supposed composer was Homer, be it through Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*. In neither books Penelope has no voice. She is known

and described through the eyes of the narrator. Atwood's novel is narrated in first person by Penelope, therefore, for the first time Penelope can give her account of the events.

I also found out that both Carter and Atwood are very much concerned with women who have been marginalized for reasons others than that of just being women, which would be a fair enough reason. In *Night at the Circus*, there are numerous supporting characters that live in the margins of society: prostitutes, freaks, circus performers and so on. In *The Penelopiad*, not only does Atwood give voice to Penelope, but she also gives voice to the twelve hanged maids, to whom only a few verses had been dedicated in the source book.

I also realized that both authors masterfully make use of intertextual parody to fit their purpose of exposing patriarchal metanarratives. Neither of them, however, publicly aligns herself with the feminist movement. This feature may be perceived in *The Penelopiad*, for Atwood could have just given voice to Penelope and offer readers her account of the events. However, the chorus formed by the maids function as a parodic counterpart to what Penelope narrates. This insertion of the maids in the novel, in my view, adds to the complexity of the novel. Atwood seems to be willing to show us that any blind allegiance to any totalitarian ideology may end up in the replacement of one grand narrative for another.

Carter's Fevvers also makes an interesting point when it comes to the showing of a more humane side to women, leaving behind that idealized image that if you are a woman writer, you can only portray women as flawless beings. Fevvers is a flawed creature, who is greedy, who farts and burps, who does not have a perfect body and who deceives. All these features that may seem negative at a first glance are the features that make her human, and, therefore, adorable.

Both authors also share an interesting characteristic: they cross gender boundaries with their work, though in very different ways. Carter appropriates the conventions of traditional genres and subverts them in a way that a reader has to be very attentive to realize, due to the subtlety of the subversion. For instance, she takes the picaresque genre and gives it a feminine perspective, since the protagonist of her novel is a woman who goes through a series of adventures and ends up acquiring self knowledge and a more reconciled identity by the end of her journey. However, such a reference is not that clear as it is in the case of Atwood's subversion of the epic genre.

Atwood draws from a very clear reference – the *Odyssey*. It is known that the *Odyssey* is an epic and it is clear that Atwood, from the onset, subverts the genre for what she writes is a novel. In the chapter dedicated to Atwood's work I studied the conventions of the epic and realized that Atwood was able to subvert almost all of them. As an example, I may cite the fact that the epic was considered bearer of the truth. The heroic deeds narrated in the epic were believed to have happened the way they were narrated. Atwood's Penelope, however, is constantly questioning her own accounts of events, not to mention that the maids offer different versions of the events narrated by Penelope.

The main conclusion we may extract from this study is that both Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood seem to have in their agendas the denouncing of the fictionality of discourses and institutions. Their works seem to be telling us that fact and fiction are hard to tell apart. They show us that it is up to women to be the owners of their lives and the ones responsible for the construction of their own identity. There are numerous version of the so called truth, it is up to us to choose what we want to believe or, even, to create another version of it.

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