THREE SIBYLS ON A TRIPOD:
REVISIONARY MYTHMAKING IN THE POETRY OF
H.D., SYLVIA PLATH, AND ADRIENNE RICH

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by

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In loving memory of

Cem Görey

my guardian angel

I took the road we stood on at the start together, I
took it all without you as if
in taking it after all I could most honour you.
Abstract

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This thesis aims to explore the strategies of revisionary mythmaking employed by H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. Although I also turn to their prose writings, the main focus remains on poetry. The analysis of their poetry draws its insights from French feminist theory, particularly the theories of Luce Irigaray. The relationship between myths and construction of identity is explored through detailed reading of the poetry of these three poets. It investigates traditional patriarchal myths, such as classical, religious, historical, myths created and perpetuated by psychoanalysis, myths of womanhood and motherhood, as well as their function in organizing our perceptions of what constitutes reality. The thesis contests these myths' claim to universality.

The poets not only challenge patriarchal myths in their poetry, but they also seek to present alternatives to established traditions. They work towards the rejection of clearly defined patriarchal binary oppositions, and instead propose a different kind of difference which is non-oppositional and non-hierarchical.

Through detailed reading of their poetry, which is informed by theory, I suggest that the idea of a changeless and static self is rejected by the poets. In their work they deal with the lack of articulation of female subjectivity within patriarchal constructs, and identify the broken mother-daughter bond as a very important aspect of this impossibility. They repeatedly return to the semiotic where this vital bond is still intact, and patriarchal binary oppositions has not been established yet. Hence, multiplicity and ambiguity are always foregrounded as a key theme.

The three poets ultimately posit that patriarchal myths are neither 'natural' nor 'compulsory'. They challenge patriarchal myths and language through their revisionary mythmaking and their articulation of female experiences that have been unheard, denied validity, and devalued. These strategies contribute to the ongoing process of subverting established myths, and ultimately, construction of alternative modes of imagination.
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Introduction

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, “I want to ask one question. Why didn’t I recognize my mother?”

“You gave the wrong answer,” said the Sphinx, “But that was what made everything possible,” said Oedipus. “No.” she said.

“When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn’t say anything about woman.”

“When you say Man,” said Oedipus, “you include woman too. Everyone knows that.” She said, “That’s what you think.”

‘Myth’, Muriel Rukeyser¹

Myths play a crucial role in the way we perceive reality, our understanding of the world and our selves. Even though women have been disseminators of myths throughout their history, as in many cultures women are story-tellers, they have rarely contributed to the development of the symbols through which they are described. Mythology has traditionally been a hostile territory for women. The conquering gods and heroes of traditional mythology have always had the central stage, defining reality from their own, male, perspectives. In Frank Kermode’s words, myth “short-circuits the intellect and liberates the imagination.”² However, it can be argued that

patriarchal myth offers neither liberation nor imagination to women. On the contrary, as Mary Daly posits, mythical symbols “close off depths of reality which would otherwise be open” to women.\(^3\)

Hence, one of the most significant developments to emerge out of the feminist movement in the twentieth century is the quest to claim the power of myth by women writers. This quest involves the subversion of the myths and paradigms that create and maintain phallocentric ‘reality’, and ultimately, an attempt to imagine, discover, invent the female self from a feminine perspective.

I am using the term ‘myth’ in the context of this study to signify patriarchal presuppositions and messages encoded in myths. Throughout the thesis, I employ the concept of myth as a complex system of beliefs and images constructed by the society in order to sustain and perpetuate its coherent sense of being and the construction of its system of meaning. These myths are many-folded: classical, religious, historical, myths created and perpetuated by psychoanalysis, patriarchal myths of womanhood and so on, all of which function to organise our perceptions of what constitutes reality. Ultimately, myths play a very important role in the assertion of who we are and what we want. Keeping these definitions in mind, feminist theories of identity and language, which constitute a very important part of this thesis, can offer an alternative imagination of myths from a female perspective.

Roland Barthes writes that “mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.”\(^4\) However, somewhere in this complex process, myth is

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1Daly, Mary, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, p. 44.
transferred to the plane of a timeless reality, closing off the alternative values which consequently leads to the pretense of universal truth. Any other version is not accommodated and is ultimately obliterated, creating in this case an exclusively male vision.

Marina Warner describes the way myths produce meanings. She states that a myth is a kind of story told in public, which people pass on to one another. Hence, it is surrounded by an air of ancient wisdom, which makes it very seductive. It also offers “a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context.”5 Ultimately myths interpret reality for us, but at the same time, they construct that reality for us.

An essential aspect of myth is its claim that it represents universal truths. Such a viewpoint presupposes that there is a universal truth to be represented, and that the notion of truth is unitary. This presumption plays an important role within the context of this thesis, and has been disputed by many writers. As Angela Carter writes:

Myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of patriarchal circumstances. In no area is this more true than in that of relations between the sexes. ... There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals.6

Simone de Beauvoir in her The Second Sex, the great godmother of all feminist texts, as it came to be regarded, argues that social, economic, and intellectual...

structures of patriarchy deny women access to material and intellectual resources. Without the power to name and claim themselves women are trapped within the imaginary truths regarding their womanhood. Patriarchy “did invent her”, de Beauvoir exclaims.\textsuperscript{7} She goes on to say that such an invention, this myth of woman, authorises, justifies, and perpetuates the negation of woman within patriarchy, since this is the way it is “intended by Nature”.\textsuperscript{8} She explicitly undermines this notion of unitary truth when she writes that “[r]epresentation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”\textsuperscript{9} Hence, the nature of the ‘reality’ of womanhood, “[h]ow that social fiction of my [Carter’s] ‘femininity’ was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing” needs to be questioned.\textsuperscript{10}

The three poets discussed in this thesis, H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, are all revisionary poets who explore the hidden agendas behind the dominant myths surrounding women. At this point, I would like to define the term ‘revisionary mythmaking’ within the context of this study. When a poet employs a figure or a myth which has been traditionally accepted and defined to be ‘universal’, the application of which is presumed to be valid for all humanity, there is always the possibility that it will be revised according to the individual need and vision of the poet. Revisionary mythmaking is not simply the task of re-telling old stories from the female point of view, neither it is restricted to exchanging the roles of the male and female characters of the story. It is a strategy which creates an opportunity for

\textsuperscript{8}de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, p. 285.
\textsuperscript{9}de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, p. 175.
women to redefine themselves and to undermine the foundations of the imaginary truth concerning women, which consequently extends to changing the social and political structures of the patriarchal world. Mythological symbols and tales are used to open up new possibilities for imagination, new ways of seeing this quest. In the much quoted lines of Adrienne Rich:

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. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.¹¹

The task of the women poets who employ revisionary mythmaking in their poetry is to investigate the terms on which myths are predicated. Their mythopoesis is the appropriation of the patriarchal myths through which women can define themselves in feminine terms. This is a complex task as myths are continuously confirmed and perpetuated by patriarchal authorities: language, religion, literature, education. As complicated as it is, women poets regard this strategy rewarding as underneath myths lie power and authority. Alicia Ostriker defines the term ‘revisionist mythmaking’ as "the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible."¹² So re-vision entails the process of revising and reinterpreting patriarchal myths from a

female point of view. Angela Carter chooses to use the same words to describe this process when she says that she is "all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode." This is a project that subverts patriarchal formations and allows the poets to imagine different alternatives for the future cultural changes. As will be seen in the poetry of H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, once these writers reach a certain point they will not only fill old vessels with new wine, but will not be content with keeping the old bottles either. They will explore new ways of understanding and imagination.

The complex process of revisionary mythmaking involves not only the re-evaluation of patriarchal myths, but also the creation of alternative myths to replace them as it is not enough to simply undermine the existing myths. Myths do not simply cease to exist when they are proven to be untrue. One strategy among the poets has been to resurrect and restore history in the woman's domain. Re-reading existing works by women from a new perspective has been a valuable endeavour. Rachel Blau DuPlessis emphasizes the importance of ideological and cultural critique in revisionary poetry. She writes:

The act of critique guides the central acts of perception in the poems. Their poems analyze women's assumptions and patterns of action, revealing the cultural norms that uphold traditional consciousness of women. The poets discuss the role of the individual in history, especially in the creation of social change. Their myths have an unusual dimension, for critique becomes the heart of the myth. Their myths are

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13 Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line', Wandor (ed.), On Gender, p. 69.
critical of prior mythic thought; they are historically specific rather than eternal; they replace archetypes by prototypes.\textsuperscript{14}

The poets' critiques are directed at the culturally defined attributes deemed to be eternal in their truths and carried through patriarchal language. As can be seen in the lines quoted above as well, the aim is not to replace existing patriarchal myths with matriarchal ones as this would only work to establish another type of hierarchical canon. Instead, in women poets' revisionary mythmaking, there are no fixed realities. It entails constant transformation as 'truth' is always subject to change. Rachel Blau DuPlessis distinguishes between two different strategies for tackling such a project: namely 'narrative displacement' and 'narrative delegitimation'. Narrative displacement enables the female figure in the story, who is traditionally mute, to speak for herself. Narrative delegitimation, on the other hand, changes the sequence and therefore breaks through the traditional values.\textsuperscript{15} These two strategies are valuable tools for the poets discussed in this study.

The careers of H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich extend over the twentieth century. Hence, different social and historical experiences of the time inform their use of myth. In the early decades of the twentieth century, in a world devastated by war, the use of myth came to be seen as a "step toward making the modern world possible for art."\textsuperscript{16} Myth was regarded as a way out of a wasteland with its possibilities for imagination.

The First World War brought with it immense changes for all human beings, leading to, in the phrase of Gilbert and Gubar, "radical sexchanges". Although they still remained in areas deemed to be 'feminine', throughout the war women began to venture into areas they would not have dared before. As the prescriptions of femininity began to lose validity, masculinity was deeply unsettled. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that masculinity was in crisis, as men "all have become not just no-men, nobodies, but not men, unmen." From women's perspective, the war meant loss of faith in male dominance, and achievement of authority to a limited extent. This accompanied a major crisis in gender relations, which alarmed certain writers, like D. H. Lawrence, who wondered whether there was an imminent threat of female conquest of men. Whether there was any such threat realistically is debatable, but it cannot be denied that the First World War, the War to end all wars as it was referred to, opened up a new world in front of women.

On the literary scene, with the rise of modernism newness became the keyword of the time. Everywhere the ambition was to "Make it New", as Ezra Pound named a volume of his essays. Myth was also included in this sweep and was employed by the major writers of the time. T. S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets of the modernist era, employed myth as a means of reaching beneath the level of the conscious, and his conception of poetry involved "sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end." In *The Waste Land* (1922), there is the quest for meaning in the unconscious mind depicted by allusions to ancient myths. James Joyce's

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Ulysses (1922) also employs the ‘mythic method’. Eliot defended the novel and its use of mythological parallels defining it as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” Although the parallel is not explicitly underlined, the world of the novel is a transformation of the Homeric world, with the modern Ulysses, Mr. Leopold Bloom. Both of these canonical writers regard the patterns of myth as universal and coherent, and therefore, a solution to the meaninglessness of modern life.

There is one issue that male modernist art failed to include in its sweep of newness, namely the reconsideration of male dominance. Male privilege in every aspect stayed securely in its place. Suzanne Clark argues that women were automatically dismissed from modernism because “sentimentalism” was a short-hand for everything modernism would exclude. Since sentimentality and women are traditionally thought to be inseparable, women artists were not included within the scope of modernism. On this account, modernism could be said to have remained quite conservative, contrariwise to its radical claims.

The political, historical, and social pressures during their lives no doubt inform the work of all three poets. The developments mentioned above are particularly important for H.D.’s career as she was part of the literary circle of modernism. However, I also think that the historical and literary context of the early twentieth century should not be dismissed for Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich as the impact of modernism continued to be felt later in the century. H.D. also lived through

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21 Cited in Feder, Ancient Myth, p. 483.
the Second World War which saw the gender prescriptions further unsettled. With
the Second World War came the fact that many young men, who had previously been
of the working class, were entering the army and travelling overseas. So women were
able, sometimes required, to take over their jobs. During these years millions of
women entered the paid work force and were employed in the war industry. Hence,
traditionally male jobs were occupied by women. With the end of the war, however,
women had to leave the work force even if they did not want to. The ones who
stayed were forced back to traditional female jobs. Women’s lives were yet again
thought to be limited with domestic containment. D. H. Lawrence has argued that
"the moment woman has got man’s ideals and tricks drilled into her, the moment she
is competent in the manly world - there’s an end of it." This view, however, was to
be opposed as gender roles were unsettled with the war. Voting rights for women
was an indicator on this issue.

Plath and Rich were born in this environment of the post war era. Although
Plath was young at the time, she makes widely noted and controversial references to
the Holocaust and Hiroshima in her final *Ariel* poems. Plath and Rich were part of a
society which lived through the Cold War as well. Rich herself declares that the Cold
War “had occupied so much of the political horizon of my life”. Unlike Plath, Rich
also lived through the Vietnam War and makes explicit references to it in her poetry
and prose. Hence, it is not surprising that all three poets, H.D. and Rich in stronger
terms, see a causal link between patriarchal rule and war and destruction.

\[\text{Lawrence, D. H., quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land* vol. 2, p. 152.}\]
As can be seen, the lives of H.D., Plath, and Rich were politically dominated by the most influential events of the twentieth century. The disillusionment that began with the outset of the Great War was sustained throughout the century, and was shared by men and women alike. However, the male artists employed the theme of nostalgia in their work underlining the belief that civilization had been declining since the ancient ages. Hence, there is a longing for that past. Women artists, on the other hand, do not share their nostalgia. They are not willing to go back to that golden age, mainly because that past excludes them and was never theirs to start with. Trying to create a mythology for the twentieth century, inspired by a golden age of ancient times, was not the opportunity for real change as far as women writers were concerned. This approach would not offer anything different for women. Although Eric Gould suggests that the twentieth century is not strikingly original in its attitude towards myth, I would argue that women’s strategy of revisionary mythmaking is an innovative one. It is innovative in its perspective of demythologising and questioning universality. Women writers reject the notion of universal truth. They centralise female experience, instead of keeping it securely in the margins as the male modernists did. Their aim is to create a space in which they can imagine themselves in their own feminine terms, rather than repeating the prescriptions of this long lost golden age, as it was not golden for them. They do not fix their ideas in reference to one static point, but rather they work towards multiplicity.

This thesis draws many of its insights from French feminist theory on women poets’ quest of demythologising patriarchal myths in order to achieve self-definition.

of female identity, particularly the theories of Luce Irigaray. Throughout the chapters, Irigaray’s theories play a major part. French feminism rejects the traditional assumptions about truth and reality. Hence, it does not advocate one single plan for women to follow in order to achieve liberation from oppression within patriarchal systems of thought. Instead, it explores the internal contradictions in the patriarchal system which gives the illusion of being perfectly coherent, and subverts the ‘universal’ notions of identity and selfhood. Irigaray is particularly interested in reinterpreting Freudian psychoanalytic theory which describes how our notions of gender come into being, and in finding new psychoanalytical models and myths to articulate female subjectivity. In this quest she makes use of the double-edge nature of Freudian theory in so far as it implies that sexual identity is a cultural construct rather than a stable biological essence. The feminist appropriation of psychoanalytic theory allows the reader the space and freedom to float between ideas. Irigaray’s critique of male psychoanalytic theory focuses on the negative constructions of feminine identity within a repressive patriarchal system of language. Instead, her celebration of multiplicity of the female body and the loving bond between the mother and daughter can provide different accounts. Such a stance would be necessary for the exploration of alternative understandings and creation of female oriented myths, and provides a useful starting point in this quest.

At this point, I would like to give an outline of Irigaray’s theories that are used in the thesis. According to Freudian theory, we are born biologically male or female, but without the masculine and feminine gender identities encoded in us. The sexuality of the infant is polymorphous and unconfined to one specific body part. Hence, what constitutes ‘normal’ masculine and feminine sexuality is neither natural
nor inherent. This aspect of Freudian theory is very important and liberating in terms of French feminist thought, as it does offer the possibility of subverting existing compulsory gender patterns. However, from this point onwards Freudian theory becomes problematic from the feminist point of view, as it centralizes ‘castration’ as the major determinant in the path of ‘normal’ adult sexuality. For both the male and the female child the first object of love is the mother. This pre-Oedipal phase of the child’s life is dominated by the body of the mother experienced as a continuance of his or her own body. There is plenitude in this continuum. However, in order for the child to acquire his or her own identity, this continuum must be broken, as subjectivity must be defined in relation to objectivity. In order for a ‘me’ to exist, there must be a separate ‘other’.

What resolves this crisis is the Oedipal complex. When the boy realizes that not every human being possesses a penis, he fears the threat of castration from the father. He represses his love for the mother and identifies with the father as the figure of authority. He then can aspire to possess a woman of his own when he is an adult.

For the girl however, this path is not as straightforward. On discovering that she is already castrated, she blames the mother for her physical inferiority, and adopts the father as her love object. From this point onwards her quest in life, according to Freud, becomes the search for a penis substitute. The girl still identifies with the mother, but only as a rival for the father’s love. According to briefly outlined Freudian theory, the penis is the determining factor in the construction of sexual identity.

Jacques Lacan rereads Freudian theory in the light of linguistics. According to him, it is only through the system of language that we can make sense of the world.
He declares the stage of separation from the mother as the ‘mirror’ stage in which the child acquires a sense of the self. Separation from the mother is completed with the child’s entry into language. Lacan terms language the ‘symbolic order’ which represents the total structure of meaning. He argues that once the child is separated from the mother he or she has the need to speak to ask for whatever is needed. Hence, Lacan argues, language is based on lack. He centralizes the phallus as its primary signifier, which forces women, who are the ones that lack the penis, into the margins of language. As they cannot identify with the language of the Father they are always alienated from language. Femininity is forced into exile as the only language available is a masculine one. The only language available to them is alienating because it cannot accommodate them as female subjects. Women have a very problematic relationship with patriarchal language. Hélène Cixous summarizes this problem as follows:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away - that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak - even just open her mouth - in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.\(^{27}\)

Adrienne Rich explains how women’s poetry moves towards the necessary transformation of language: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male

to female pronouns, in the relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension."

Another strategy is proposed by Alicia Ostriker when she writes that women poets have to raid patriarchal language and become "thieves of language, female Prometheuses". Women must be able to have a language through which they can define themselves and their experiences in feminine terms. They must, in Cixous's words, "steal into language to make it fly". Since "myth is always language-robbery", as Barthes states, women poets adopt this strategy in their work. This act of theft would enable women to make language mean what they want to mean, because "language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation." Revisionary mythmaking is a major step in this strategy of stealing and transformation of language, because "[m]yths are the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are stored", and therefore "to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning."

The definition of the construction of language in terms of lack and loss is the underlying principle of binary oppositions which French feminists struggle to destabilize. Since the phallus is deemed to be the primary signifier, woman is locked into the Other side of the binary opposition Self / Other, which is always defined in relation to the male subject. However, instead of trying to delete this Otherness,
French feminism strives to emphasize the positive aspects of it. Otherness might allow women, as they are marginalised anyway, to be able to stand back and criticise the norms and values that patriarchal systems of thought try to impose on everyone as if they are ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. Hence, this notion of Otherness is turned upside down, emphasizing its possibilities for non-hierarchical difference and plurality. It has the potential to imagine a different kind of difference, non-oppositional and non-hierarchical. Only in this way can femininity, which exists at the level of potentiality, still to be imagined, defined, articulated, find a space of its own.

Patriarchal thought divides the world into oppositions. Hélène Cixous names some of these mutually exclusive and hierarchical binary oppositions as Activity / Passivity, Sun / Moon, Culture / Nature, Day / Night, Father / Mother.\(^3^4\) All these dichotomies spring from the ultimate binary opposition Man / Woman. It is also the feminine side of these oppositions that always carries the negative attributes. But French feminism rejects these traditional oppositions as universal definitions, and challenges the traditional boundaries between them. It explores the idea that Man is the Self, and Woman is his Other. This Otherness is the only possible location for female existence. The other alternative is to be completely unthought. Luce Irigaray writes: “Let them have their strange division by couples, in which the other is the image of the one, but an one’s image only. For them being drawn to the other means a move towards one’s mirage: a mirror [woman reflecting man to himself] that is (barely) alive.”\(^3^5\)


Irigaray also suggests that multiplicity begins at the level of the anatomy of the female. In her writing the multiplicity that the female sexual organs imply are foregrounded. Opposing the establishment of a single primary signifier she writes: “So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality always at least double, goes even further: it is plural.” Instead of defining sexuality in a priori masculine terms, as in the Freudian theory, Irigaray proposes multiplicity. She exposes the link between the myth of the unitary notion of truth and the male valorization of a single sexual organ within the phallocentric system. She also emphasizes the importance of the sense of touch over the masculine valorization of sight. She argues that touching cannot lead to the definition of female sexuality in terms of absence and lack. Rejecting the Freudian idea that women are forced to abandon clitoral pleasure in favour of vaginal pleasure in order to become ‘normal’ women she writes:

In fact, a woman’s erogenous zones are not the clitoris or the vagina, but the clitoris and the vagina, and the lips, and the vulva, and the mouth of the uterus, and the uterus itself, and the breasts... What might have been, ought to have been, astonishing is the multiplicity of genital erogenous zones (assuming that the qualifier “genital” is still required) in female sexuality. 

Hence, Irigaray proposes a writing practice which is multiple and fluid. She suggests to reconstruct an account of feminine imaginary and feminine symbolic - a different order of meaning - so that women could be able to represent themselves.

16 Irigaray, Luce. ‘This Sex Which is Not One’. This Sex, p. 32.
37 Irigaray, ‘Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look’. This Sex, pp. 63-4.
For this project the mother-daughter bond has immense importance in French feminist theory.

Luce Irigaray advocates a return to the pre-Oedipal phase of development, a time before patriarchal divisions have taken place to recover the bond between the mother and the child. According to French feminism, lack of positive feminine representation stems from the severed mother-daughter bond. In Freud’s understanding, the girl child must abandon her mother as her primal love object in order to transfer her attachment to the father. However, although she must abandon her, she still must retain some identification with her in order to acquire the necessary feminine attributes. Her identification is with the submissive mother who is powerless and passive under the law of the father. This cannot provide the female with an adequate space for female subjectivity.

Irigaray proposes a re-exploration of the dominant myths of the mother-daughter relationships, and the imagination of different models. First and foremost in such a quest should be the separation of womanhood from its maternal function. This may also be a basis for the creation of a maternal genealogy, a history of relations and female connections that has been effaced under patriarchal system. The maternal function of woman has overshadowed the imagination of the woman as subject, reducing only to terms of reproduction and nurturing. So Irigaray’s project is to try to imagine and reconceptualise woman’s identity independent of her reproductive and maternal function.

The existing imprisonment of the mother within motherhood is harmful not only for the mother but for the daughter too. For the mother the implication is the impossibility of self-definition and subjecthood. According to Freudian theory, the
only way for her to attain love is through her child - the penis substitute. As tending
her children is the only channel available to her for expression of love, her vital need
for autoeroticism is completely obscured. Her existence as woman becomes
unimaginable. Irigaray explores this need of the mother to smother her child with love
in order to have some validation of herself in the following lines: "You've prepared
something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me / yourself. But you feed me / yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You
put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at
you."\textsuperscript{38}

This chain of events leads the daughter being an alien to the mother, and
through her identification with her, to herself. She cannot realise her own potential as
a woman, as she does not have any model with which to identify. She can only be
validated as a mother herself. Hence, the vicious cycle keeps repeating itself
generation after generation.

Irigaray also calls for the creation of a genealogy of women through which
women can relate to each other outside their maternal functions. Reinstating women
to history and history to women creates the possibility of strengthening the bond
between them, allowing them to exist as a community. This strategy might allow the
woman to create a space through which she can be defined in terms of womanhood, a
location where they would not have to continually sacrifice an integral part of
themselves.

All the strategies mentioned above inform the readings in this study. The main
point in them all is the lack of clear-cut definitions and rules. The aim is not to

\textsuperscript{38}Irigaray, Luce. 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other'. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel (trans.).

replace one set of rules with another, but to destabilise and subvert them. Only in this way might there be a possibility of woman as subject, defined by herself, in her own terms.

The poetry of H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich was chosen for this study because I think they form a ‘tripod’ which extends from the 1920s to the present. ‘Tripod’ is the symbol of prophecy in Greek mythology. The most famous of the Sibyls, Pythia in Delphi, sat on a tripod while uttering her prophecies. Hers was the most important oracle in the Greek world. Although she was at times referred to as being mad, her power of giving oracles to the Greeks was taken very seriously indeed. The lives and poetry of H.D., Plath, and Rich can be thought of as a tripod in this sense. Although they lived in different eras of the twentieth century, the main concerns that inform their poetry remain quite similar.

One common fact of their biography can be mentioned firstly in this context. H.D., Plath, and Rich were all born and raised in the United States. Rich still lives in America, but H.D. and Plath chose to live their adult years mainly in Great Britain. This biographical information can be interpreted as a reaction on behalf of the poets against established values and a fixed national identity. Their position allows a hovering of identities and a refusal to be contained in standard definitions of nation and gender. Even though Rich lived in America all her life, her approval of such a stance is evident in her work. It could also be seen as rejection of central values of patriarchy which promotes clearly defined boundaries. The nationality of the three poets is indeed a common theme linking them together. But within the context of this thesis the central focus will be on their work as twentieth century women poets.
Another important issue bonding H.D., Plath, and Rich is the development in their careers as poets. As will be seen in the course of this thesis, all three poets approached the issues they were uncomfortable with very timidly in their early poetry. Their discomfort with traditional ideals of womanhood is readable between the lines. H.D., for instance did not feel comfortable enough to write about her bisexuality, about her feelings of anger and disagreement in her works which were to be published. Instead, she preferred to explore these issues in her private writings which were made available for her readers with the efforts of feminist critics in the 1970s. Similarly, Plath could explore her ‘unfeminine’ feelings of anger and violence only in her final outburst of Ariel poems. Rich, too, felt she had to follow in the steps of the canonical male poets in her early poetry. However, she consistently felt more and more comfortable to write about her sexuality as a lesbian in her later poetry. I think the fact that Rich was able to participate in the feminist movements of the twentieth century had an impact in this respect. Perhaps Plath, who was a contemporary of Rich, would have been able to imagine alternatives had her life been affected by the changes of the time. No doubt feminism changed the lives of many women. Although one would like to believe that the traditional conflict between the perceived role of a woman in the society and that of a writer, which has deeply affected the lives of the three poets, has begun to fade at the dawn of the twenty-first century, I argue that the struggle to define their identity as a woman and as a poet is a major theme in the poetry of H.D., Plath, and Rich.

I also connect the poets through the theories of Luce Irigaray. H.D. and Rich repeatedly return to the semiotic, the pre-Oedipal phase of human development, a time before the mother-daughter bond has been severed forever, and where there is
multiplicity within the continuum. Both of these poets seem to advocate such a journey in order to be able to achieve self-definition. Although Plath does not openly return to the semiotic as the other two poets, her consistent exploration of the mother-daughter bond, the impossibility of a female subjectivity that is not defined by the reproductive function of the female body, and multiplicity are very important aspects of her work in terms of Irigarayan theories. Irigaray's theories work towards the subversion of patriarchal myths, and the imagination offer alternative modes of understanding. The poets, like Irigaray, seem to connect the lack of positive female representation with the broken mother-daughter bond. Hence, the return to the semiotic would be a good starting point in the conception of female centred myths.

One of the central issues that connect H.D., Plath, and Rich in the context of this thesis is the prophetic character of the tripod. The revisionary mythmaking employed by the three poets is a project which has consequences for the future. Each poet employs revisionary strategies in her poetry, subverting established myths of womanhood under the patriarchal system. The realities of being a woman and a poet, trying to live and write within a phallocentric system, are dominant themes in their work. Ultimately, I perceive a sisterhood between these three poets in terms of their womanhood which remains a central theme explored throughout their work.

Finally, they are joined on their tripod through a maternal genealogy. All three poets. Rich in particular, and Irigaray advocate the necessity of a positive genealogy between women, which establishes a connection among them. H.D., Plath, and Rich constitute a maternal genealogy in themselves.

H.D. was mostly known for her Imagist poetry. Chapter One of this thesis, 'H.D. and the Tiny Box of Imagism', investigates her early Imagist poems. I argue
that even though she was labelled 'the perfect Imagist', her early work refuses to be circumscribed within this label. Her poetry opens up the tiny box of Imagism by her portrayal of women retelling patriarchal myths from their own point of view. In 'Eurydice', for instance, she allows the female character to speak for the first time in her history. The main theme of the chapter is H.D.'s strategy of subverting patriarchal binary oppositions. By placing her personas on thresholds, she blurs the explicit divisions between boundaries, hence proposing an alternative way of imagining difference without oppositions or hierarchies. H.D. also blurs the detachment between the semiotic and the symbolic, allowing her to work from her own bisexual position.

The second chapter, 'I was Angry at the Old Man: H.D. and Sigmund Freud', deals with H.D.'s revision of myths created and perpetuated by psychoanalysis through her self-exploration during and after her analysis with Sigmund Freud. H.D. had a very close relationship with Freud and they enjoyed each other's company. H.D. clearly did not agree with all Freud's theories, especially regarding female sexuality, as will be seen in the discussion of her poem 'The Master'. She investigates patriarchal myths of female sexuality, and subverts the binary oppositions of male / female, reason / intuition. She imagines a different realm of meaning where female attributes, such as intuition, as opposed to logic are valorised.

Chapter Three, 'I go where I am Loved: Prophetic Utterances in H.D.'s Trilogy', reads H.D.'s epic-style work as an anti-epic. H.D.'s ambition in this book of poems is to change the focus of traditional epics in which the male heroes are centralised, and give voice to muted female alternatives. She goes on a quest to recover the healing female principle as an answer to the barrenness of the modern
world. But for H.D. the collapse of Western civilisation is not a cause for mourning. She differs from mainstream modernism with her presentation of images of growth and regeneration. Working with Christian myth, she resurrects the goddess and creates a new and alternative base for civilisation. Her mythmaking celebrates femininity with her resurrection of the prophetess.

The fourth chapter, ‘I Tell and Re-tell the Story: H.D.’s Own Legend in Helen in Egypt’, explores an alternative epic to The Iliad, the father of all epics. As Greek myth forms the foundations of patriarchal mythology and needs to reassure itself constantly of its masculinity, it plays an important part in H.D.’s revisionary mythmaking. Instead of the male hero, the experiences and feelings of Helen is central to H.D.’s work. She revises the representation of Helen who has been misread throughout history from a fresh point of view. Helen is no longer marginalised with H.D.’s treatment of her. With this strategy H.D. disrupts patriarchal myth’s claim to universal truth. Fear and hatred of women is also explored and undermined. Love and regeneration constitute the main concerns of H.D. in her epic. Instead of alienating the male, her syncretist strategy embraces man and woman alike. She advocates accepting the other with an open mind, without destroying neither.

Chapter Five, ‘What Girl Ever Flourished in Such Company?: The Early Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, deals with the pre-Ariel poems of the poet. The section deals with the myth of Sylvia Plath, with all the interest in her death, perhaps more than her life. Although Plath did not enjoy as lengthy a career as H.D. and Adrienne Rich, she engaged in a struggle to define herself as a woman. For Sylvia Plath her writing was a medium for exploring the contradictions within herself, and she had faith and conviction in the power of writing to transform. It is through her early poems that I
discuss her struggles to conform, and mould herself according to social and cultural prescriptions. She occupies the uncomfortable space of in-between in the poems, trying to be a ‘normal’ woman and a poet. The two positions are mutually exclusive under the existing patriarchal system. Hence, she attempted to conform to dominant patriarchal myths of womanhood, through which she tried to tailor herself according to her needs in her struggle against patriarchal stereotyping.

The sixth chapter, ‘Speaking like a woman / Speaking as a woman: Exploding Myths of Femininity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, sees Plath in her rebellious mode. In her *Ariel* poems, the poet abolishes the notions of what traditionally constitutes a feminine way of speaking and feeling, and ventures into the uncharted territory of hatred, aggression, anger, and grief on behalf of women. These feelings are considered to be taboo under patriarchal prescriptions. Hence, Plath is revisionary in her disintegration of such boundaries between masculinity and femininity. Her violent female characters centralise the unrepresentable female hatred and anger. They do not internalise their violent feelings toward themselves, but instead direct them against representations of themselves within patriarchy. It is the necessity of the ability to imagine the female self with all its ambiguities and contradictions. Identity, in the case of Plath’s poetry, is represented as being fragmented and multiple.

Chapter Seven, ‘My Mother, My Daughter: The Dyad within Sylvia Plath’, investigates patriarchal myths of womanhood, and the complex relationship between a mother and her daughter. It deals with the alienation of the mother starting from pregnancy, surrounded by patriarchal myths of maternal function. The impossibility of female identity for the mother is explored through Plath’s poems, journals, and letters to her mother. I trace the masks she learnt to wear through her mother, and her
frustration in the mutual exclusivity of identification with the mother and female subjectivity. As a daughter, she watched her mother for clues as to what it is to be a woman and found prescribed notions, such as self-sacrifice, that suffocates the woman.

The eighth chapter, ‘A Thinking Woman Sleeps with Monsters: The Early Poetry of Adrienne Rich’, deals with the poet’s struggle for transformation which has been a constant theme throughout her lengthy career. I made attempts to communicate with Rich in order to discuss some of the issues explored in this thesis, but I was not successful as the poet was not well.

Although Rich’s subversive attitude towards gender stereotypes is not clearly defined, it still is apparent in the early poems discussed in the chapter. In her poems, there is the struggle of a woman split between the role of the poet who creates and the woman who has to be defined in relation to man. Her efforts to write as a woman within patriarchal language, which denies the possibility of feminine existence to be articulated, is explored. Also, her increasing lack of faith in heterosexual relationships is discussed.

Chapter Nine, ‘Any Woman’s Death Diminishes Me: The Necessity of a Maternal Genealogy’, explores Rich’s search for a maternal genealogy through which women can relate to themselves and to each other through their exclusively female experiences. To achieve this, she argues that the myth of the selfless woman, woman as the guardian of love for everyone else but herself, should be undermined. She emphasizes the essentiality of destabilising stereotyped gender attributes which cannot accommodate the idea of love without domination, possession, or destruction. She proposes a maternal genealogy - not a genealogy of mothers, but of women - as
an alternative. She resurrects women whose lives and work have been effaced under patriarchal rule. She also identifies the cause of the impossibility of self-love on behalf of the woman as the non-identification of the daughter with the mother as a woman. Hence, for Rich, the reconnection to the broken bond between the mother and the daughter offers possibilities of regeneration. She offers this regeneration with her proposal to return to the semiotic.

The final chapter, ‘Conceived of Each Other: Towards a Whole New Poetry’, traces Adrienne Rich’s struggles to find a location for herself to exist as a woman as a desiring being. She argues that it is a very difficult task within patriarchal language. The only way out of this dilemma is the return to the semiotic where the bond between the mother and the daughter has not yet been effaced. She emphasizes the multiplicity and plenitude of woman. It is in this pre-Oedipal space that change can be initiated, where the only positions available to women are not limited to being a sexualized male or asexualized other. She distances herself from the masculinity surrounding her with this action. She also undermines the myth of romantic love in her poems and turns her gaze towards love among women. She suggests that love in masculine terms is akin to brutality and violence, and that the desertion of the feminine is destructive to both sexes.

Other critics have explored revisionary mythmaking through the theories of Luce Irigaray in the work of these writers before. Claire Buck, for example, reads H.D.’s work under this light. Also Liz Yorke, and Jan Montefiore, as well as Alicia Ostriker, investigate twentieth century women’s poetry from a revisionary perspective. This thesis, however, concentrates exclusively on the theories of Irigaray and the three poets. It aims to contribute to the understanding that revisionary
mythmaking is a powerful tool and a continuous process, and that the strategies of
revisionary mythmaking that H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich explore in their
poetry are multi-folded. One underlying component in all their works discussed is the
impossibility of female subjectivity under patriarchal definitions. They attempt to
destabilize the binary oppositions that are the foundation stones in patriarchal
thought. By doing so they occupy the uncomfortable positions of woman and poet
simultaneously. They also advocate the healing of the mother-daughter bond. They all
argue that the marginalisation of female experience has profound implications for all
humanity. Overall, I read their poetry as a mode of writing through which they strive
to transform their relation to prescribed cultural norms. Women’s thralldom to
patriarchal constructs, myths of womanhood, romance, motherhood, subjectivity, are
neither ‘natural’ nor ‘compulsory’, and poetry is a powerful medium to explore these
issues from the female point of view. These three poets subvert patriarchal myths and
language through their poetry with the fact that their writing is rooted in centralising
women’s bodies, lives, experiences, and sexuality. They offer alternatives to existing
polarities in their acceptance of multiplicity and ambiguity, and bonding with the
maternal. They are revisionary in their articulation of women’s experiences that have
been unheard, denied validity, and devalued. In this thesis I seek to make overt some
of the strategies they employ in working towards these goals.
Chapter One

H.D. and the Tiny Box of Imagism

Mythology plays a very important role in H.D.'s work. In her poetry she particularly makes use of Greek mythology, but approaches it from a revisionary perspective. H.D. was fascinated by the Greek myths and applied them according to her individual vision as a poet. Even in her early career, which is better known as Imagist, her use of classical Greek myths offers alternative ways to traditional patriarchal myths. Hence, I would argue that her early poetry should not be regarded only in relation to the strict rules of Imagism, as H.D.'s revisionary mythmaking is at play from the beginning of her career.

I think at this point it is important to examine how H.D. came to be regarded as 'the perfect Imagist', a label which stayed with her throughout her career. 1911 was one of the turning points in H.D.'s life. She embarked for Europe with Frances Gregg and her mother. Prior to the journey she had withdrawn from Bryn Mawr College, and her engagement to Ezra Pound had already been broken. In the autumn of the same year, after touring Europe, H.D. decided to settle in London. This was to be a permanent separation from the United States and her conventional middle class family life. It was during this period that she seriously began pursuing her literary career, a career which was dominated by literary people - mostly men - and Imagist poetry. Pound 'discovered' her poems and labelled them "Imagist" in 1912. Looking back at this phase of her life in End to Torment, H.D. recalls the moment as follows:
"But Dryad," (in the Museum tea room), "this is poetry." He slashed with a pencil. "Cut this out, shorten this line. 'Hermes of the Ways' is a good title. I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I’ll type it when I come back. Will this do?" And he scrawled "H.D. Imagiste" at the bottom of the page.1

From then onwards H.D. came to be known as the poet discovered by Ezra Pound and she was labelled as ‘the perfect Imagist’. In this chapter I will discuss the place of H.D. within the Imagist movement and the role of revisionary mythmaking in her early poetry. Even though her early work seems to comply with the rules of Imagism, the underlying themes are much stronger than the images they present. Her poems explore binary oppositions which are the foundations of patriarchal thought. The boundaries she creates in her poems are not clearly defined, but instead are all embracing in their acceptance of either side. By destabilizing binary oppositions, she explores alternative ideas rather than clearly defined spaces.

As far as the place of Imagism in literary history is concerned it is necessary to mention two trends. First practice is to see Imagism as insignificant and applaud H.D. as “the perfect, and ... the only true imagist”2. The other approach is to acknowledge Imagism as a crucial moment in modernist poetry and minimise the role of H.D., regarding her work as “excellent ... but minor”3. When Hugh Kenner discusses the significance of the ‘image’ in The Pound Era he does not mention the

crucial role of H.D. in the development of the concept. Moreover, he does not contest Pound’s claim that “the whole affair [the Imagist movement] was started not very seriously chiefly to get H.D.’s five poems a hearing without its being necessary for her to publish a whole book”, and refers to Imagism as the movement “invented to launch H.D.”. However, recent studies have shown that it is more appropriate to see H.D. as the innovator of the group rather than “the perfect Imagist” who was discovered and promoted by Ezra Pound. Janice Robinson claims that Pound has already been trying to establish a new movement in early 1912, and the term ‘Imagism’ was part of his propaganda even though there were no ‘Imagist’ poems written then. She also adds that Pound founded the Imagist movement on the first two poems of H.D., namely ‘Hermes of the Ways’ and ‘Priapus’, published in Poetry in January 1913. Cyrena D. Pondrom also demonstrates that H.D.’s poems were the cornerstones on which the definition of Imagism was based. She proves with dates that Pound first saw the poems of H.D. and then established the precepts of Imagism.

The guiding principles of “Imagisme” were formulated by Pound in 1912 as follows:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

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3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.⁷

He also added a list of “a Few Don’ts” for the ‘Imagists’ to follow. These rules were more or less adhered to by H.D. in some of her poems in *Sea Garden*. However, her early poetry should not be regarded in a manner limited by the listed formal rules of Imagism. Her work opens up the tiny box of ‘Imagism’ with its use of myth from a revisionary perspective.

‘Hermes of the Ways’, ‘Priapus’, and ‘Epigram’ were three of her poems to be published in January 1913 in *Poetry* magazine, the first of which was the poem Ezra Pound signed with the initials “H.D. Imagiste”. Even though the main focus of the present study is on H.D.’s later work, a closer look at some of H.D.’s earlier poems is rewarding and provides an insight into her poetic development. The foundations of her interest in searching through myth and history in order to imagine a rebirth for the female are rooted in her early poems.

H.D.’s revisionism lies in her rejection of existing mythical representations of gender, and her efforts to rethink traditional characteristics of what constitutes male and female. These attributes are organized as binary oppositions within patriarchal system of thought. Each side of the opposition male / female has connotations of positivity / negativity, activity / passivity encoded in them. In these couplings the female side is considered to be somehow inferior to the male which makes it impossible for woman to validate herself as a thinking subject in relation to her own sex. In her search for a location in which woman can imagine her self as subject, Hélène Cixous names the binary oppositions that currently shape our understanding,

all of which have the couple man / woman as its foundation. This "double braid", almost like the double strand of DNA, is encoded deeply in patriarchal systems of thought. Realizing these binary oppositions, and trying to look through them is an important issue to consider:

Where is she?
Activity / Passivity
Sun / Moon
Culture / Nature
Day / Night

Father / Mother
Head / Heart
Intelligible / Palpable
Logos / Pathos
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave, ground - where steps are taken, holding - and dumping - ground.

Man
Woman

Such a system of organization takes man as its measure in defining everything, including woman. Luce Irigaray too, like Cixous, believes that only in a different order of meaning might it be possible to construct a positive representation of feminine identity. This requires the rejection of the ever powerful notion of universal truth, as its universality is a fallacy; it is universal only from the male perspective. With these ideas in mind, I read H.D.'s 'Hermes of the Ways' (CoP, 37)

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which opens on the borderline of two conflicting worlds. The persona of the poem is located at cross-roads where sea and land meet:

The hard sand brakes,
and the grains of it
are clear as wine.

Far off over the leagues of it,
the wind,
playing on the wide shore,
piles little ridges,
and the great waves
break over it. (CoP, 37)

In Greek mythology Hermes was the inventor of the alphabet, numbers, and music. He was also protector of travellers, and small statues of him were left on the roads. H.D. might be using him as a figure to protect her in her own explorations. The Greek Hermes closely resembles Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian god Thoth - the god of writing, learning, intelligence, and wisdom. He is a figure who will emerge again in the later poetry of H.D. Hermes of the poem is waiting for travellers from all roots. He is “facing three ways, / welcoming wayfarers” (CoP, 38), offering his protection. The speaker greets the god in this boundary world. The word “boundary” implies the edge of a territory before the next one begins. But in H.D. ’s poem Hermes is not limited with the binary, as he is “facing three ways”. I think here H.D. is imagining an alternative thought based not on duality, but multiplicity.

In part II, the speaker is still standing on the borderline, but this time turns towards the land instead of the sea.

Small is
this white stream,
flowing below ground
from the poplar-shaded hill,
but the water is sweet. (CoP, 38)

The sea is traditionally associated with the female side of the binary
oppositions. In the opposition fluidity / solidity, it is the female which occupies the
former. In the poem even though the sea is more powerful, it does not destroy the
land with the small stream, but accepts it. This boundary is between the fearsome
power of the sea and the sheltering safety of the land. The poem ends with the image
of Hermes still offering his protection in this borderland.

Hermes, Hermes,
the great sea foamed,
 gnashed its teeth about me;
 but you have waited,
 where sea-grass tangles with
 shore-grass. (CoP, 39)

Throughout the poem the invocation of the feelings are achieved through
images. There is no straightforward declaration about the emotions of the speaker.
This goes against the fundamental credo of Imagism: direct treatment of the ‘thing’.
Instead of the orderly necessity of this rule, H.D. employs a strategy that denies
boundaries. The persona in her poem is a subject who is looking either way at the
same time, a stance which implies rejection of boundaries and an emphasis on
multiplicity. In the terms of Julia Kristeva, the subject of the poem is a subject ‘in
process’, existing in a threshold between boundaries.10 This is a location which
enables her to be multiple and mobile.

I think this stance can also be traced in H.D.'s personal life at the time. It is important to keep in mind that H.D.'s writing underwent significant changes in relation to her personal experiences. Even though her engagement to Ezra Pound had already been broken when she arrived in London, he still occupied an important part of her life. In the meantime she was also involved with Frances Gregg with whom she travelled to Europe. She was caught between her love for a man and a woman. In her autobiographical novel Her, completed in 1927, H.D. deals with her love for another woman. The novel is also a study in her rejection of defined boundaries. The protagonist of the novel is stuck between heterosexual and homosexual love which emphasizes the idea that H.D. rejects the concept of heterosexuality as the only or the most natural sexuality. However, as Friedman and DuPlessis have demonstrated, while H.D. concentrated on heterosexual relationships in her published works at the time, she explored her passion for women in her works that she kept private. Publishing them would entail the disclosure of her sexuality and the taboo surrounding homosexual relationships must have been a good reason for H.D. to keep such straightforward writings to herself. Hence, in Bid Me To Live, she concentrates on the heterosexual aspect of her life. Her relationship with the men in her life is dealt with in detail; her husband Richard Aldington whom she married in 1913, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound. This is also the work in which H.D. looks back on the World War I era which had a great impact on her emotional being, an era in which sexual politics was affecting her personal and professional development deeply. So it is not surprising that in a lot of H.D.'s poems the personae are trapped in conflicting situations, between boundaries, at intersection points. This refusal of a

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single identity or of unitary meaning would be seen by Hélène Cixous as part of a feminine writing practice as she encourages “to admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between”. She defines such writing as:

A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn; but that’s his other story).\textsuperscript{12}

Referring to her position of bisexuality, H.D. declares how difficult it was for a woman to exist in this threshold at the time. She writes in \textit{Bid Me To Live} that it “was then a very, very thin line to toe, a very, very frail wire to do a tight-rope act on”.\textsuperscript{13} This stance of H.D. rejects the fixed definitions of meaning and identity imposed by patriarchal tradition. She also evokes the pre-Oedipal stage where the child is not yet separated from the body of the mother and is at the threshold of entering into the symbolic order. At this stage the binary opposition of self / other has not been established, and woman has not been defined in terms of lack yet. This idea allows the poet to imagine her multiplicity, like the persona of ‘Hermes of the Ways’ who can exist on this boundary without crossing to either side.

Another poem in which H.D. explores the idea of an alternative to binary oppositions is the second poem that she handed to Pound to be published in \textit{Poetry}, ‘Priapus’, titled ‘Orchard’ in the \textit{Collected Poems (CoP, 28-9)}. The poem is a prayer

to Priapus who is the god of fruitfulness, the protector of the bees, the vine, the
garden. It is in this garden, through nature, that H.D. places her persona on a
threshold again.

‘Orchard’ opens with the scene in the orchard that is under the protection of
the god Priapus:

I saw the first pear
as it fell -
the honey-seeking, golden-banded,
the yellow swarm
was not more fleet than I,
(spare us from loveliness)
and I fell prostrate
crirying:
you have flayed us
with your blossoms,
spare us the beauty
of fruit trees. (CoP, 28)

Priapus is a variation of Hermes in Greek mythology, and was traditionally
presented as the god with a small body and a disproportionately large penis.\(^\text{14}\) It
could be argued that the male genital organ personified as a god may be an ironic
remark on Ezra Pound and his phallic stance towards poetry as expressed in his
translator’s postscript to *Natural Philosophy of Love*. He believed that the “mind is

an up-spurt of sperm” which is “the form-creator”\textsuperscript{15}, and that “[p]oetry speaks phallic direction.”\textsuperscript{16}

‘Orchard’ is dominated by conflicting emotions from the beginning. It is harvest time and the fruits have ripened and started to fall from the trees. This is the time when the fruit is in its sweetest state. But the moment it is separated from the branch is also the moment when the decaying process starts. So it is both the moment of maturity and decay. These notions are not mutually exclusive in H.D.’s treatment, but they can exist simultaneously. This is a notion which is not acceptable within the binary oppositions of patriarchal system, as it demands either one or the other - one being male, the other being whatever man is not, hence, female. In ‘Orchard’, however, H.D. refuses to be circumscribed by such terms. Once again at this intersection point, the speaker presents an offering to the god of the orchard:

these fallen hazel-nuts,
stripped late of their green sheaths,
grapes, red-purple,
their berries
dripping with wine,
pomegranates already broken,
and shrunken figs
and quinces untouched,
I bring you as offering. (\textit{CoP}, 29)

The process of decomposition has started in these offerings. Moreover, these offerings can immediately be recognised as traditional symbols of female sexuality.


The moment of ‘in-betweenness’ caught at the end of maturity and start of decay is full of strong and conflicting feelings. From this point of view, the poem could be related to H.D.’s personal experiences. As was mentioned earlier, H.D. was going through intense clashes in her life when these poems were written in 1912. She was between heterosexual and homosexual love, between Ezra Pound and Frances Gregg.

Another issue of boundaries for H.D. was between the roles of the poet and the muse. She was struggling to be the poet not the muse, the way Ezra Pound would ‘naturally’ prefer her to be as he explicitly connected poetic creativity with the phallus. When H.D. looks back upon this time of her life in *End to Torment*, she recalls “Ezra would have destroyed me and the center they call ‘Air and Crystal’ of my poetry.”17 But H.D. clearly defies definitions which locate poetic creativity in the male realm. In her poem once more the subject is not static, she is not confined to limited spaces. The conflicting phases of maturity and decay reject the idea of a single universal meaning, opening up further ways of seeing.

‘Oread’, published in 1914, became the best known and much anthologised poem of H.D., and was regarded as the exemplary Imagist poem. I would suggest that the poem deals with boundaries again.

\[ \text{Whirl up, sea-} \]
\[ \text{whirl your pointed pines,} \]
\[ \text{splash your great pines} \]
\[ \text{on our rocks,} \]
\[ \text{hurl your green over us,} \]
\[ \text{cover us with your pools of fir. (CoP, 55)} \]

The poem, like many of H.D.’s early poems, could easily be read as one about nature - description of a storm at the sea, like the reading by Vincent Quinn for

17H.D., *End to Torment*, p. 35.
instance.\textsuperscript{18} However, Friedman points to the deeper meaning of ‘Oread’ suggesting that the poem is about consciousness. Her reading of the poem directs us to the perceptions and emotions of an oread - a nymph of the mountains.\textsuperscript{19} Here H.D. brings together the sea and the land in the boundaries again. Instead of merely meeting at the threshold, the sea and the land form a union. There is no contradiction in this image, but simultaneous and harmonious existence of two different beings.

One of the important structural elements of ‘Hermes of the Ways’, ‘Priapus’, and ‘Oread’ is that the emotions in the poems are never stated directly, they are never described. There is no use of simile. This becomes more important when we compare them with the first Imagist poems of Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington. Cyrena D. Pondrom contrasts Aldington’s “I have sat here happy” from ‘Au Vieux Jardin, “Pity my sadness” from ‘To a Greek Marble’, and Pound’s “vague invariable delight” from ‘Middle-Aged’ to H.D.’s “I fell prostrate, / Crying” from ‘Priapus’.\textsuperscript{20} Instead of describing the emotions H.D. prefers actions which stand for the emotions, like the one in ‘Oread’. This strategy seems more in line with the Imagist credo, but not limited by its prescriptions. Within binary oppositions women are usually aligned with emotion, whereas men with action. Here H.D. dissolves the clear-cut distinctions between binary oppositions as she juxtaposes emotion and action. She blends them together, a strategy which unsettles the foundational binary opposition masculine / feminine.

Andrew Thacker draws attention to the revisionary design in the Imagist poetry of H.D. through which she problematizes the detachment of Imagism from the
object. ‘Oread’ is an example of this questioning where she does not refrain from physical contact and embraces the sea to “cover us”. Instead of simply gazing, a passive stance, H.D. calls for touch and welcomes the “pools of fir”. In ‘The Pool’ this call is more evident (CoP, 56). H.D. strives to become one with the object, blurring the boundary between objecthood and subjecthood. Bergson argues that there are two ways of knowing reality. One is to adopt a point of view in relation to an object and the other is to seek an intuitive identification with the object, the aim being to possess the original. H.D. follows the second way:

Are you alive?
I touch you.
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you-banded one? (CoP, 56)

In these lines H.D. anticipates French feminists, like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. She privileges senses other than sight. Both Irigaray and Cixous criticise the role given to sight in definitions of sexuality by Freud and Lacan. According to Freud, the girl sees that she does not possess a penis and therefore he defines female sexuality in terms of lack. Upon this point Irigaray confirms H.D.’s view. She writes:

Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching that from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again,

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her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation.23

To refute the Freudian definition of female sexuality, both theorists concentrate on the pre-Oedipal phase of the child’s life where s/he can be regarded as bisexual. H.D. refers to this “child consciousness” as being “sexless, or all sex” (*BMTL*, 62). In this phase the most important sense between the mother and the baby is the sense of touch. According to Irigaray, the social order demands that the mother should be excluded and therefore the “father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother”.24 So, our origins in the womb of the mother have to be disclaimed in order to achieve a successful entry into the symbolic order. Getting in touch with the mother’s body, on the other hand, would enable us to redefine female sexuality because, as Irigaray points out, touching cannot lead to any understanding of female sexuality in terms of lack. So, giving priority to touching instead of seeing enables the author to foreground a feminine identity. H.D. privileges the semiotic over the symbolic.

The revisionist mythmaking of H.D. stretches throughout her whole literary career, and this strategy is deeply involved with classical mythology, so much so that she was accused of escapism to an ideal world. However, it could be argued that she used classical mythology as a mask thorough which she had a means of exploring deeper experiences. She always wrote as a woman, from a woman-centred point of view. In the early poems discussed so far she made nature speak. Nature has

23Irigaray, Luce, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Catherine Porter (trans.), New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 25-6.

traditionally been associated with femininity and therefore has been silent. H.D. blurs this distinction and lets the silenced speak.

‘Eurydice’ is an example of H.D.’s use of this mythic mask (CoP, 51-55). Here H.D. gives voice to a character which has been left mute throughout history. By placing Eurydice at the center of the story she enables us to hear the woman’s side of the mythical story. In the Greek myth, Orpheus convinced Hades with his music to enter hell in order to bring back his dead wife Eurydice. The only condition Hades made is that Orpheus could not look behind him until she was safely back under the sun. Eurydice followed Orpheus up through the dark passage, guided by the sounds of his lyre. Only then he reached the sunlight himself and turned to see whether she was still behind him and hence, lost her forever.\(^{25}\) Eurydice has no say in this story which defines her own destiny. But in H.D.’s poem the “arrogance” and “ruthlessness” (CoP, 51) of Orpheus makes her angry. In H.D.’s version, Eurydice accuses him of diminishing the presence of herself.

you who have your own light,
who are to yourself a presence,
who need no presence... (CoP, 52)

The presence of Orpheus entails the absence of Eurydice, thus highlighting the strong binary opposition that underlies the definition of human sexuality from a patriarchal point of view. However, Eurydice offers us her own understanding of the situation, her side of the story when she says:

At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence

\(^{25}\)Graves, \textit{The Greek Myths}, p. 112.
and my own spirit for light;

and my spirit with its loss
knows this;
though small against the black,
small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;
before I am lost;
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass. (CoP, 55)

In the poem H.D. introduces a different Eurydice in contrast to the traditional definitions of her. She is not passive, on the contrary, she is prepared to withstand. Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads the last lines of the poem as a proposition suggesting that “a change of paradigms - from classical to Christian, from male to female, from heterosexual love to self-love - will make valid the other side of the story”.26

H.D.’s strategy in ‘Eurydice’ could be described as “narrative displacement” where the poet breaks the sentence. This, therefore, offers the possibility of speech to the female character in the story who has been muted.27 As a result, a new sentence will inevitably be formed, which in this case develops when Eurydice declares that the loss of man is “no loss”.

In ‘Helen’ H.D. attacks the conventional attributes surrounding Helen, one of the most famous - or rather infamous - figures symbolising female beauty that destroys.

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,

27DuPlessis, Writing Beyond, p. 108.
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,
God’s daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funeral cypresses. (*CoP*, 154-155)

H.D.’s ‘Helen’, dated 1923, symbolises the situation of women in a male
dominated culture. She is in front of “All Greece” that is watching with hateful looks.
Greece will offer her love to Helen only when she is dead. She is helpless and there is
nothing she can do for herself. As the poem proceeds she is slowly dying. In the first
stanza, she is alive and standing. In the second, her face grows “wan and white”, and
finally in the last she has “cool feet / and slenderest knees” (*CoP*, 155). She will be
loved when she is dead because only then she will not be blamed and regarded as a
threat. Susan Stanford Friedman points out that H.D.’s ‘Helen’ is a revision of the
Medusa myth, according to which if a man saw Medusa, with her hair of snakes, she
would turn him into stone. Here instead, the hatred of a fearful masculine tradition is
turning the woman into a beautiful state, that is a dead stone. In ‘Helen’ H.D. highlights the male gaze again. Greece is watching Helen without any pity, her smile does not move them. In Greece, a metaphor for patriarchal culture, once again privilege is given to sight. The only possibility of touching hinted at in the poem is after the death of Helen, when her feet tun “cool”. Here H.D. anticipates Irigaray’s point that “all of western culture rests on the murder of the mother”. The patriarchal symbolic is established on the sacrifice of the female, thus enabling the supreme rule of One Law. As Kristeva posits, “monotheistic unity is sustained a radical separation of the sexes: indeed, it is this very separation which is its prerequisite”. To preserve this so called ‘universal unity’ female sexuality is not only separated but also sacrificed as the only sexual value is the phallic erection. So if female sexuality does not abide by phallic norms it will be sacrificed. This is what H.D.’s Helen, turning into a statue, embodies.

In ‘Callypso’ (CoP, 388-396), H.D. moves a step further from ‘Helen’ and this time makes Callypso speak. She consistently questions conventional patriarchal myths. According to the myth, Callypso is the nymph who took in and welcomed Odysseus to her island and cared for him for seven years. She fell in love with him. But Odysseus eventually got bored of her embraces, and tired of having nothing to do other than stare at the sea. Finally, under Zeus’s orders and against her own wish,

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29 Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 7.
31 At this point it may be interesting to remember the feelings generated by the death of the late Princess of Wales. As a woman, she was often criticised regarding her life style, and much pursued in order for her images to be published. But after her death she became an icon. It can be seen that the same patterns are repeated over and over again in our era. Hence, H.D.’s treatment of Helen in this poem is still relevant.
Callypso let him go with a boat that she has filled with provisions. As Friedman has noted "most probably for the first time in cultural history 'Callypso speaks' her own story". As in 'Eurydice', the narrative is displaced in the poem, a strategy which allows the unspoken story of the female to be articulated.

In the first section of the poem, Calypso states her case. She says that she did not ask for Odysseus to come into her life. Unlike Helen, Calypso is capable of speaking and is self-sufficient, a stance which does not please Odysseus. "All men are fathers, / kings and gods" he says, and orders her: "You will do as I say". But Calypso is "[n]ot at the command of men" (CoP, 393), and she is looking for vengeance.

In section II, Calypso's song of vengeance tells the reader about her experiences as a woman. She commands the forces of nature to destroy Odysseus. Her wish is to "drown all men in slow breathless / suffocation", "to beat his sails flat", "to run counter to his oars" because only "then they may understand" (CoP, 394). These lines all allude to the feelings of a woman within patriarchal tradition and are uttered by the same Calypso who was mute until now.

Then the voice of Odysseus is heard and his speech is selfishly centred on himself and his own needs, praising Calypso for giving him everything. He has taken everything, has left, and "never looked back" (CoP, 396). The final judgement of Calypso is that he "will not understand" (CoP, 395).

This structural change in the traditional roles is also repeatedly underlined by Angela Carter. Referring to her own writing, Carter says that she dealt "with the shifting structures of reality and sexuality by using sets of shifting structures derived

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32Graves, _The Greek Myths_, p. 655.
33Friedman, _Psyche Reborn_, p. 236.
from orally transmitted traditional tales".\(^3\)\(^4\) H.D. also pictures a very different Calypso than the one we are accustomed to. Instead of the submissive Calypso helplessly crying after Odysseus’s departure, she presents us with an angry woman who wants revenge, therefore challenging the traditional portrayal by shifting the focus from Odysseus to Calypso.

Here H.D. once again anticipates an issue which is very important in French feminist thought. The lack of representation of woman within the social and symbolic order sustains the existing status quo. In order to discover, or imagine, female identity Irigaray’s insistence is on “finding new psychoanalytical models and myths to articulate what is at present indefinable: that is, the existence of women in language whose terms currently efface female being”.\(^3\)\(^5\) The method of H.D., giving voice to the unheard woman is a step in this direction of re-definition.

The revisionist strategy of H.D. is firmly rooted in her early poetry. Although her early Imagist group had broken up by 1918, she and her career were labelled as “the perfect Imagist” from then onwards. H.D. should be given due importance for her crucial role in the formation of the concept of image and objectiveness which became milestones of modernist poetry. Her early poems fulfil the strict requirements of Imagism but nevertheless they were not confined within Imagism. She tried to write the other side of the story, from the feminine perspective. She attacked traditional representations of women, problematizing classical and traditional mythology. Even though one of the forerunners of modernism, Ezra Pound, shared the same concerns as H.D. (“I want a new civilisation”, he declared), his


determination to “make it new” remained quite conservative in its aspirations, as it failed to be all-embracing and concentrated only on male anxieties. H.D., however, struggled to go further back in order to discover alternative foundations on which a ‘new civilisation’ could be established. While T.S. Eliot and his fellow modernist poets used the classical myths as their reference for objectivity and the universal truth, H.D. disputed these false universals. She refused man-made myths and strove, like Bergson, to overthrow “the conventional and socially accepted generalities”. The gradually changing H.D., as will be discussed in the following chapters, pursues her quest to resurrect the goddess in her later poetry in order to create a matriarchal base for the whole of western civilisation. H.D. at first begins this quest by working towards destabilizing established binary oppositions and trying to imagine multiplicity in their place. She also resurrects mythical female characters and reverses their prescribed roles, giving them a voice of their own. This is the necessity of going back to sources, back to a time and place where the patriarchal binary oppositions have not been securely established and there still might be new ways of seeing. It is at the sources, where there is still a continuum with the maternal, that the divisions between the subject and the object have not taken place yet. The same issue occupies the mind of Hélène Cixous as she posits the following question:

"'What have I in common with women?' From Brazil a voice came to return the lost orange to me. 'The need to go to the sources. The easiness of forgetting the source. The possibility of being saved by a humid voice that has

\[\text{Kumar, Bergson, p. 24.}\]
gone to the sources. The need to go further into the

birth-voice."

Chapter Two

"I was Angry at the Old Man":: H.D. and Sigmund Freud

When H.D. looks back on her Imagist poetry in *Tribute to Freud*, she thinks that "[t]here is a feeling that it is only a part of myself there"¹. Indeed, her very powerful epic poetry was to follow her analysis by Sigmund Freud. Their time together helped H.D. to explore herself, even though she clearly did not agree with his descriptions of female sexuality and development. Indeed, H.D. works towards undermining the patriarchal myths of womanhood created and perpetuated by psychoanalysis which is the main focus of the present chapter. I will also discuss H.D.'s strategy of subverting patriarchal binary oppositions of male / female, logic / intuition. In the new way of thinking that H.D. proposes, one side of the equation is not valued over the other, and the myths of female sexuality defined in relation to the male are not valid. H.D. is after the rebirth of another world where the clear-cut distinctions between the sexes are blurred, and in this exploration she gets help from Sigmund Freud.

H.D. first went to Freud as a patient - or student - for a period of "between three and four months" (*TF*, 4), starting on March 5, 1933. The second stage of their meeting was shorter, from the end of October 1934 to December 1, 1934. These sessions were not her first encounter with psychoanalysis. Prior to her trip to Vienna, she had already been analysed by Havelock Ellis, Mary Chadwick, and Dr Hanns


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Sachs who had recommended Freud to her expressing his view that "it would be better to continue to work, if possible with a man and preferably one superior" to H.D. (*TF*, 150). These two series of sessions with Freud eventually had a very significant impact on H.D. herself and therefore her writing.

Before H.D. travelled to Vienna she had apparently been suffering from writer's block. The prospect of a Second World War was also very alarming for her since the First World War had affected her deeply. She went to Freud to fight her "own personal little Dragon of war-terror" (*TF*, 94). She had already undergone one war and this time she wanted to be prepared for what she thought lay ahead in the foreseeable future. She reflects: "I had begun my preliminary research in order to fortify and equip myself to face war when it came, and to help in some subsidiary way, if my training were sufficient and my aptitudes suitable, with war-shocked and war-shattered people" (*TF*, 93).

*Tribute to Freud* is the embodiment of Freud's technique of analysis carried out by H.D. in her writing, namely free association. In the beginning of her memoir she says "I wish to recall the impressions, or rather I wish the impressions to recall me" (*TF*, 14). Throughout her "impressions" she applies the basic rule of analysis to be able to interpret the "hieroglyph of the unconscious" (*TF*, 93). In Friedman's view "the hieroglyphs of the unconscious were hieroglyphs of the self." After decoding the images of her dreams and fantasies with Freud, "H.D.'s poetic use of the image frequently became a form of self-exploration." To be able to read her self and accept it was the major outcome of her analysis with Freud. There were disagreements, of course. H.D.'s interpretation of the female self is fundamentally different from

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Freud's, particularly regarding his views on "how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition".3 As will be discussed, while Freud explained the path to 'normal' womanhood in terms of lack, H.D. rejected this notion completely. Through her revisionist strategy the poet investigated myths created and sustained by psychoanalysis. Ultimately, however, she was not disappointed in her analysis with Freud. He acted as a catalyst in H.D.'s career and played a major role in her coming to terms with her bisexuality. Hence, it would not be wrong to refer to H.D.'s encounter with Freud as a milestone in her career. After analysis with him H.D.'s progressive revisionism took a leap forward, leaving us with works like Trilogy and Helen in Egypt.

Throughout Tribute to Freud H.D.'s relationship with Freud can be characterised as a submissive one on H.D.'s behalf. We see H.D. as a student, rather than a patient, who is trying to grasp as much as she can from him. There can be little doubt that "the Professor" had a very special place in H.D.'s life and she loved him dearly. She regarded him as the master. She may even have come to Vienna to find this master:

I envied these women who have written memoirs of D. H. Lawrence, feeling that they had found him some sort of guide or master. I envied Bryher her hero-worship of the psychoanalyst Dr Hanns Sachs. I cannot be disappointed in Sigmund Freud, only I have this constant obsession that the analysis will be broken by death. (TF, 140-141)

Even though this was the special place of Freud in H.D.’s life - a guide or a master - she had deep disagreements with him regarding his theories of female sexuality. However, in this account of their relationship there is not even a discussion of these theories between them, not to mention a critique. Whatever has been disputed between H.D. and Freud stayed between them. In *Tribute to Freud*, she preferred not to confront him but to keep her silence. I think the answer to H.D.’s silence on this issue lies in her posthumously published poem ‘The Master’ (*CoP*, 451-61).

In the poem, written between 1934-35, H.D. presents a different angle on her relationship with Freud. She refused to disclose the poem in her lifetime and it was not published until 1981. Here H.D. conveys her conflicts of opinion with Freud much more explicitly. As DuPlessis and Friedman posit in their article, where ‘The Master’ was published for the first time, it is “a poem where that difference and confrontation [between H.D. and Freud] are precisely and frankly the subject”, whereas *Tribute to Freud* merely hints at these issues. In the same article, DuPlessis and Friedman explain this lack of confrontation and anger by the fact that *Tribute to Freud* was intended for publication whereas ‘The Master’ was not, so the difference between the two is that of public and private. Even though she prefers not to confront Freud openly in the public domain, she conveys through her text in *Tribute to Freud* that she opposes the biological essentialism of Freud. Both *Tribute to Freud* and ‘The Master’ hold many clues to H.D.’s revisionary stance in her work.

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Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis who “reinvented the soul for C20”⁵, is a major controversial figure within the context of feminist thought. The first reaction of many women, and for that matter many men, when they encounter Freud’s theory on female sexuality is disbelief and outrage. So it is not surprising that Freud, especially in the USA, has simply been dismissed as a sexist, misogynistic enemy to be treated accordingly. But his theory has aspects that are useful for feminist theory.

According to Freudian theory, human beings are born male or female, but not with the entailing gender attributes. This is the most important and liberating aspect of the theory as far as the feminist thought is concerned. The viewpoint that the children are born with a bisexual disposition is the one that Freud holds. Also, according to Freud, the first love object of both the male and female infant is the mother. However, from this point onwards Freud’s theory enters a complicated area. The *raison d’être* of becoming “normal” men and women, to use Freud’s own term is the famous, or rather notorious, Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex, explaining the procedure of sexual differentiation, is mainly based on the male infant (it must be noted that Freud’s patients were mainly women). Even though at first he assumed that there was a symmetry between boys and girls during this phase, he gradually abandoned this view. Ultimately, he based his theory on the male infant and explained the process the female goes through in terms of the male.

The Oedipal phase of the male infant is briefly as follows. The boy, whose love object is initially the mother, wants her only to himself, but he also feels threatened by the father who symbolises the Law. This threat is realised as the threat

of castration. At this stage of his development he also has the belief that the girls possess a penis as well. At this point the question of the differentiation of the sexes arises and Freud's theory runs into difficulties. This issue constitutes a great concern for the child, and "[a]n answer to this is that girls have lost a penis." It can be said that Freud is very clear-cut and simplistic in his explanation when he says: "We are now obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man." He also argues that it was a surprise to him "to learn from analyses that girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being thus put at a disadvantage." Once this judgement is made the rest follows; the girl will spend the rest of her life looking for a substitute for the lost penis. As far as the little boy is concerned this discovery materialises the castration threat. The little girl, on the other hand, discovering that the mother is also castrated, blames her, abandons the mother as the love object and directs her love to the father instead. She desires his baby as substitute for the penis. So, ultimately in Freudian terms, female sexuality is defined by the lack of a penis and the 'inevitable' envy of it. According to psychoanalysis then, women are penis-less men, bearers of the lack. The girl is a "little man" says Freud. As the natural outcome of the Oedipus complex, of the "fact [note, not fantasy] of her being castrated", women belong to the devalued sex.

So psychoanalysis takes back with one hand whatever it gives with the other. Still, however, the bisexuality of human beings at birth is a liberating idea for women. It saves us from biological essentialism which has always sought to justify the existing status quo. But straight after this, it enslaves women through the Oedipal stage.

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within a lifelong search for the penis, confining them back to their biology. In a nutshell, the ‘reality’ and the ‘threat’ of castration, according to Freudian theory, is the term that defines both male and female sexualities. Freud “made it the focal point of acquisition of culture; it operates as a law whereby men and women assume their humanity and, inextricably bound up with this, it gives the human meaning of the distinction between the sexes”.  

Rereading Freud, Jacques Lacan postulates that the Oedipal crisis is the phase through which the child’s entry into the social order takes place. However, his description is in linguistic terms in relation to Freud’s biologism. Lacan resolves the Oedipal crisis with the child’s entry into the system of language, whereas Freud’s resolution was submission as the outcome of the fear of castration. Lacan perceives language in terms of lack and loss, what is visible and not visible, and of opposition. Within such a system the phallus is regarded as the transcendental signifier, hence the male body is defined positively as the proud possessor of the phallus, and the female body negatively as the one lacking the phallus. So, in this binary opposition the side which does not display a visible sexual organ, i.e. the penis, is automatically categorised to be in a devalued position within the symbolic order. The ‘real’ organ to own is the penis, and since the woman does not have and cannot hope to achieve one, she is condemned to be interpreted as the bearer of lack, as minus-phallus. She will never be able to be predominant, simply because she lacks the penis. Men are in a favourable position because they can identify with the father (the phallus), but for women there is no such option. Not only she does not identify with the mother, she

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comes to hate her as well, blaming her for being castrated. Therefore she is destined to be marginalised and downgraded within the symbolic order.

Given the positions Freud and Lacan hold, it does not come as a surprise that feminists concentrate on the pre-Oedipal stage of the child’s life where there is an intense love relationship with the mother, rather than the Oedipal phase as Freud and Lacan do. Taking the Imaginary stage, to use Lacan’s term for the pre-linguistic phase, as a starting point it would be possible to imagine a different order of meaning where femininity would be represented in its own terms, positively, and not in a negative correlation to masculinity. A feminine order of things where male physiology is not made the measure of everything.

Luce Irigaray, criticising the investment made in male sexuality writes:

The feminine is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known ‘penis-envy’. How can we accept the idea that woman’s entire sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus be her longing for... the male organ? Does this mean that women’s sexual evolution can never be characterised with reference to the female sex itself? All Freud’s statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own ‘specificity’.

So the conviction that women are biologically destined to be marginalised and dominated by the other sex is furiously opposed by feminists. “Anatomy is destiny” is not valid. Irigaray envisages the symbolic order as a mirror of the male image.

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reflecting men to themselves. Women are not visible in this mirror. Hence, the binary
oppositions surrounding the foundational categories male / female lead us to “be /
become, have / not have sex (organ), phallic / non-phallic, penis / clitoris or else
penis / vagina, plus / minus, clearly representable / dark continent, logos / silence or
idle chatter, desire for the mother / desire to be the mother etc.” 12 Within such a
logic women cannot be represented in their own terms. Thus the existing patriarchal
order totally ignores the possibility of the specificity of the female, reducing her
sexuality to definitions of ‘lack’ and ‘other’ to man. Hence, Irigaray attacks the
symbolic order fiercely:

   The symbolic, which you impose as a universal innocent of
any empirical or historical contingency, is your imaginary
transformed into an order, into the social. ... What you are
trying to impose as a universal law is therefore your
response to your requirements, reducing sexual difference to
nothing in an endlessly repeated gesture.13

If there is to be any hope for a change for the future, it is essential for women
to reconnect with the pre-Oedipal phase of sexual development where patriarchal
divisions have not taken place yet. This strategy would allow them to be able to
represent themselves in female terms. Since it is not possible to have such a chance
within the existing system, women must be able to imagine a different realm of
meaning, a feminine symbolic order, where femininity is not represented in terms of
lack, free from binary oppositions quoted above, but on the contrary where the
multiplicity of female sexuality can be celebrated.

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13 Irigaray, Luce, ‘The Poverty of Psychoanalysis’, Whitford, Margaret (ed.), The Irigaray Reader,
With this intention in mind, I will return to H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*. As was mentioned before, there is not an explicit disagreement between H.D. and Freud throughout the memoir. However, the implicit “wordless challenge” is there to be read between the lines (*TF*, 99).

In their first ever meeting, along with Freud H.D. also meets his dog Yofi. The Professor warns her not to touch Yofi because “she is very difficult with strangers” (*TF*, 98). But H.D.’s “intuition challenges the Professor, though not in words” (*TF*, 99). She thinks to herself “[i]f this dog and this woman ‘take’ to one another, it will prove that beyond your caustic implied criticism - if criticism it is - *there is another region of cause and effect, another region of question and answer* [my emphasis]” (*TF*, 99). H.D. is envisioning another realm of meaning where intuition, which is traditionally regarded to be a feminine attribute, is not necessarily devalued, but on the contrary privileged. She challenges the binary opposition of reason (logic) / intuition, in which male-attributed reason is deemed to be superior. Hence, according to H.D., “the Professor was not always right” (*TF*, 98). Alluding to the “Tree of Knowledge” (*TF*, 98) she privileges her own roots “with hair-like almost invisible feelers, [which] sometimes quivered a warning or resolved a problem” over Freud’s “great giant roots of that tree” (*TF*, 99).

It seems that H.D. also draws attention to the pre-Oedipal stage of a child’s life. In *Tribute to Freud* when she reflects on her mother she recalls how much she wanted to be near her. Complaining that her mother likes her brother more than herself she says “[i]f I stay with my brother, become part almost of my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to *her*” (*TF*, 33). Here, in traditional psychoanalytical terms, she can be interpreted as longing to get closer to the mother but cannot achieve it
because she is a girl, and not a boy. She is barred from the mother because she does not possess the penis. Hence, the mother’s preference lies with the brother since the brother possesses what the mother herself actually longs for. However, H.D. values the mother-daughter relationship very much. She concentrates on a time when the mother was the primary object of love and there was an intimate liaison between them. “If one could stay near her always, there would be no break in consciousness” (TF, 33). So, if the phase where the mother and daughter bond is at its strongest could be re-established and maintained then it would be possible to imagine a different realm where this relationship could be celebrated.

As can be seen in the lighted candle scene, however, Freud is quite insistent in his resolution that the girl transfers her affections to the father in order to compensate her lack. H.D. recounts to Freud a Christmas service in her childhood where girls along with boys had a lighted candle to hold. H.D. is surprised with Freud’s reaction. “There is no more significant symbol than a lighted candle. ... The girls as well as boys had candles?” (TF, 124) he asks. According to his theory, the root of all the problems is the ‘fact’ that women do not have a penis and they will be searching for one all their lives. So the answer for him is not very complicated. “If every child had a lighted candle given, as you say they were given at your grandfather’s Christmas Eve service, by the grace of God, we would have no more problems” (TF, 124). Perhaps this was the reason why he gave H.D. an orange-tree branch, symbolically to help her recover a long lost penis (TF, 109).

Norman N. Holland seems to agree with Freud that the meaning of a woman’s sexuality is the search for what is missing, namely the penis. Freud holds the view that as far as the woman analysand was concerned “her strongest motive in
coming for treatment was the hope that, after all, she might still obtain a male organ, the lack of which was so painful to her”.14 Basing his argument on this, Holland goes on to say that H.D.’s aim was to identify with the phallic power of Freud because apparently “[f]usion with a man insures against deficiency: thus H.D. found it easy to project into and identify with Freud”.15

Furthermore, Holland posits that according to psychoanalysis “in a woman, the wish to make her own body or another’s into hard, exact, and real parts derives from a wish to replace something that was lost - penis, mother, father, love - something”.16 He reaches this conclusion with the argument that H.D.’s “oral” wish to be united with the nurturing mother is the reason behind her “wish to set herself in a timeless union with a past”.17 Hence, Holland appears to suggest that H.D. is the proof of Freud’s theory. However, H.D.’s longing for a timeless point in the past could guide us to a reverse direction, too. It is a part of her revisionism that looks back at a time when the existing structures of male dominance had not been established yet. Then her writing could not be read as an example of Freud’s theory of penis envy, nor a proof that it is true.

Even though H.D. is silent on this issue in Tribute to Freud, her anger is very explicit in The Master. The opposition between them is demonstrated in the scene when Freud invites H.D. to the room that was adjacent to the one where the analysis took place. Perhaps his aim was to make H.D. realise that what she was really looking for was something to substitute the lost penis with. He shows her a small

The Statue of Athena

1st or 2nd century AD, after a Greek original of 5th century BC.

From Sigmund Freud’s Collection

statue of Pallas Athene with one hand extended as if “holding a staff or rod. ‘She is perfect,’ he said, ‘only she has lost her spear’. I [H.D.] did not say anything” (TF, 69). H.D. does not confront Freud here but she clearly disagrees. Her answer is in *The Master*:

I was angry with the old man
with his talk of man-strength,

I was angry with his mystery, his mysteries,
I argued till day-break;

O, it was late,
and God will forgive me, my anger,
but I could not accept it.

I could not accept from wisdom
what love taught
woman is perfect. (*CoP*, 455)

Like Irigaray, Hélène Cixous also centralises the pre-Oedipal stage in the development of the child. Along with the mother-daughter bond, she concentrates on the bisexuality of the infant, when the boy and the girl are not yet forced to be categorized, and in the case of the girl marginalized, as masculine and feminine. After the pre-Oedipal stage, women are forced into this quest for penis / phallus and are alienated from their own sexuality. So, to concentrate on the pre-Oedipal stage is ultimately rewarding for women. It also allows women to subvert Freud’s description of female sexuality as the ‘dark continent’. Cixous also opposes this Freudian concept when she writes:
The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. - It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss.18

I would like to return once again to Holland's article in the context of psychoanalysis. He writes that: "Medusa's head is a virtual universal: it represents the child's trauma at the sight of the female genitals accompanied by the horrifying fear that castration is indeed performed".19 This view is in line with the whole traditional mythology in which women are represented as destroyers or as helpless creatures. But Cixous does not think so. "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing."20 She argues that women have been made strangers to themselves, barred from knowing themselves by terms that belong to them. Like the Medusa passage from Cixous, they have to look straight to their own selves, to be able to explore their own sexualities, and to reject the prescriptive terms which are imposed on them. Women have to be explored by themselves in their own terms. It is inevitable that women will be branded the 'Dark Continent' since the definitions are in male terms that are alien to women. Hence, she is doomed to be a mystery to the world, and to herself.

20 Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 255.
But how is woman going to explore her own sexuality within a system based upon male terms which lacks positive signifiers of female sexuality and of love between women? Cixous thinks that for women to write their own bodies is a sortie, a way out. In this way they can reclaim the bodies that they have been alienated from, and also heal the bond of mother and daughter, and therefore woman and woman:

It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her. Touch me, caress me, you the living no-name, give me my self as myself.21

Like Cixous, the following passage from Irigaray can be read as a celebration of the female body, and also as a direct counterattack on the investment made in the penis / phallus within psychoanalysis. She advocates multiplicity as the feminine trait which enables women to rejoice in their bodies and sexualities together:

I love you: our two lips cannot part to let one word pass. One single word that would say ‘you’ or ‘me’. Or ‘equals’: she who loves, she who is loved. Open or closed, for one never excludes the other, our lips say that both love each other. Together.

Let’s be neither husband nor wife, do without the family, without roles, functions, and their laws of reproduction. I love you: your body, here, there, now. I / you touch you / me; it’s quite enough for us to feel alive.”22

At one point in *Tribute to Freud* H.D. also explores the necessity for claiming her self by the woman. Her career has been surrounded by male colleagues in a patriarchal literary tradition. She has always worked within this ruling mentality. And now she is in front of Sigmund Freud. As was previously mentioned, from the material available it can be understood that H.D. and Freud never discussed their disagreements on the issues of female sexuality. As the poet writes: “About the greater transcendental issues, we never argued. But there was an argument implicit in our very bones” says H.D. (*TF*, 13), and referring to the tradition that is surrounding her she goes on “I wanted to free myself to repetitive thoughts and experiences - my own and many of my contemporaries” (*TF*, 13). She dissociates herself from the world encircling her by imagining herself as a “narrow birch-bark canoe” wrapped by the “great forest of the unknown” (*TF*, 13). She rejects the myths surrounding her sexuality as a woman and argues that she must be able to imagine and discover her identity as a woman in female terms.

H.D. had a strong feeling of alienation and loneliness during the war. In her work, she clearly associates patriarchal dominance surrounding her with the culture of war that affects her so much. This is a link that will be encountered again in her later poetry, especially in *Trilogy*. In *Tribute to Freud* she questions the destructive logic of the existing patriarchal rule: “Where is this taking you, I wanted to shout at both parties. One refused to admit the fact that the flood was coming - the other counted the nails and measured the planks with endless mathematical formulas, but didn’t seem to have the very least idea of how to put the Ark together” (*TF*, 57). It was the destruction of London which particularly distressed her. She describes the
city as "a city of ruin, a world ruined, it might seem, almost past redemption" (TF, 84). The futility and meaninglessness of war frustrated and disturbed her enormously.

The war period can be regarded as deadly for H.D.. She had lost loved ones and could not comprehend the logic of destruction. This period, however, was also followed by the subsequent rebirth of the epic poet H.D.. Remembering a caterpillar that she acquired as a child, she says "This was my own worm" (TF, 127). This caterpillar that will one day become a butterfly will be a powerful image in Trilogy, along with the process of metamorphosis. In Tribute to Freud "for her persona she chose Psyche, the mortal woman whose search for Eros has frequently been interpreted as the soul's quest for divine immortality. The name 'Psyche' comes from the Greek word for 'soul', often portrayed in Greek art as a butterfly that leaves the body at death". So H.D. regards herself as the Psyche that goes through metamorphosis to become the butterfly. She is referring to this stage when she says "your psyche, your soul can curl up and sleep like those white slugs" that she had seen under a log in her childhood (TF, 31). Hence, the war period is a stage which affected her deeply and one in which she went through enormous changes.

H.D. seems to think that there is a causal link between patriarchal rule and war. This is quite essentialist on her part, but she also goes on to draw attention to another angle, through which the prospects of remaking the world instead of destroying it could be imagined. She talks about a new, different religion that does not operate in line with traditional religious myths. In a memory from her childhood, H.D. is standing beside her brother against her mother even though she is terrified to do so. Years later in adulthood, she admits that "it has not even occurred to her that

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Friedman, Psyche Reborn, p. 9.
she might throw her small weight into the balance of conventional behaviour by following her mother and leaving her brother to his fate” (TF, 29). Instead of trying to follow the Mother and the Son in the traditional religious sense, she tries to imagine the Mother and the Daughter as an alternative base for religion. In this scene there is again roots of H.D.’s revisionism, her desire to subvert and rewrite the myths of femininity. It might be a starting point for her “lifelong Isis search”. In line with this, throughout her later work H.D. concentrates on the almost religious role that she attributes to art, revealing revisionist opportunities. In her Notes on Thought and Vision she talks about this aspect of the art when she writes that “[c]ertain words and lines of Attic choruses, any scrap of da Vinci’s drawings, the delphic charioteer, have a definite, hypnotic effect on me. They are straight, clear entrances, to me, to over-world consciousness”.

With this in mind, I would like to focus on H.D.’s vision of art as a religion with liberating opportunities. Rather than allegiance to the traditional religious myths, H.D. revises these myths and proposes alternative systems to the Western religions. While discussing her “dream of the Princess” (TF, 36) with Freud, H.D.’s representation of the Princess is strikingly familiar in religious terms. It is a reminder of Virgin Mary. However, there is an outstanding difference. This Princess “has nothing in her arms, there is no one with her” (TF, 36). She does not have the son who is always depicted with her, this time she is alone. This is not the familiar image of Mary. This Princess is the Lady that we will encounter in Trilogy later on. Emphasizing, once again, the possibility of another realm of meaning, H.D. wanders

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"is it possible that I sensed another world, another Princess?" (TF, 39). The reader realizes the seeds of a future Prophetess: "Do I wish myself, in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being, to be the founder of a new religion?" (TF, 37). This outlook is further enhanced with her vision, the writing on the wall in Corfu, which Freud thought was a "dangerous 'symptom'" (TF, 41), but for H.D. was more of an "inspiration" (TF, 47). In the writing on the wall experience, she envisages the tripod of Delphi at one point. H.D. herself explains that "the tripod, we know, was the symbol of prophecy, prophetic utterance or occult or hidden knowledge" (TF, 51), and she leads the reader to a way of understanding her writing as "a suppressed desire to be a Prophetess ... - a hidden desire to 'found a new religion'" (TF, 51).

Again, in the writing on the wall vision she sees an angel which "you may find on an Easter or Christmas card", but once more, like the Princess, she is different, "she is not flat or static", she is real (TF, 55). These visions are products of H.D.'s yearning to be able to imagine another realm where patriarchy is not the prescriptive rule to which we have to conform: She writes: "perhaps I will learn the secret, be priestess with power over life and death" (TF, 117), because "god-the-father ... is a stranger" (TF, 121).

Her revisionary attitude leading to rebirth is explicit in the writing on the wall experience. While she is going through this apparently exhausting vision she feels: "I must drown completely and come out on the other side, or rise to the surface after the third time down, not dead to this life but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly" (TF, 54). The dominant water imagery can also be read as an allusion to the pre-Oedipal stage of
development. The time and place that the poet goes back to is the semiotic, where the binary oppositions and divisions of a patriarchal system have not been established yet. With this journey, H.D. aims to blur the severe distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. This watery immersion allows the poet to reject patriarchal norms, and recover lost feminine principles which will not be devalued within this new understanding. This point is further enhanced in ‘The Master’. Once again opposing Freud, H.D. establishes her own truth about women:

for she needs no man
herself
is that dart and pulse of the male,
hands, feet, thighs,
herself perfect. (CoP, 456)

So, H.D. goes on to dwell on this desire to founded a new religion based on different values and the possibility of being born again. In her later poetry she sets out to construct a different, matriarchal, rather than patriarchal, foundation for Western culture. In ‘The Master’ she gives us a glimpse of the future. Here the definitions prescribed to the male and the female are not valid:

no man will be present in those mysteries,
yet all men will kneel,
no man will be potent,
important,
yet all men will feel
what it is to be a woman,
will yearn,
burn,
turn from easy pleasure
to hardship
of the spirit,
men will see how long they have been blind,
poor men
poor man-kind
how long
how long
this thought of the man-pulse has tricked them,
has weakened them,
shall see woman.
perfect. (CoP, 460)

Even though her anger and disagreement with Freud is the theme of this poem, there can also be little doubt that he had a very special place in H.D.’s life. She loved and respected him. Most importantly, Freud helped H.D. come to terms with her sexuality, even though he was not encouraging in his attitude to discuss the bisexuality of H.D. openly in their sessions. On the contrary, H.D. writes:

When I told the Professor that I had been infatuated with Frances Josepha and might have been happy with her, he said, ‘No -biologically, no’. For some reason, though I had been so happy with the Professor (Freud - Freude [joy in German]), my head hurt and I felt unnerved. (TF, 152)

However, his understanding of bisexuality of desire helped her towards a feeling of wholeness. The explanation of Freud makes resolution and unity possible for her. Like the persona of her poem who embraces the “dart and the pulse of the male” (CoP, 460) H.D. is able to embrace opposites within herself.

In her autobiographical novel Her, H.D. deals with her bisexuality explicitly. Having been forced into compulsory heterosexuality and keeping her bisexual feelings

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secret, she preferred to keep *Her* private and unpublished. The protagonist of the novel Hermione Gart, nicknamed Her, is a thinly disguised H.D. confused between her attraction to George Lowdnes (Ezra Pound) and Fayne Rabb (Frances Joseph Greg). This confusion is the main theme of the novel and it does not end in any preference of one over the other. Her reaches out from the boundaries and loves a man and a woman. She does not make any choice and sees herself as an “unsexed warrior” (*Her*, 187), but obviously her relationship with Fayne mesmerises her. Together they become “[p]rophetess to prophetess on some Delphic headland” (*Her*, 180). Her feels that she knows Fayne better that George. “I know her. Her. I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her. She is some amplification of myself like amoeba giving birth, by breaking off, to amoeba. I am a sort of mother, a sort of sister to Her” (*Her*, 158). In these lines H.D. once more blurs the boundaries between the binary opposition self / other, subject / object. She actually breaks them down, and by doing so proposes a new conception of self and identity. In this proposal, instead of exclusion there is embracing of the opposites without the hierarchies. In the novel, however, the patriarchal character of George clearly cannot understand Her’s new understanding as she says: “George doesn’t know what I am” (*Her*, 84). So Her’s relationship with a woman is more liberating and inspiring for her. The unity between women is also realized when they become one in this image: “George had said, ‘Oh rot, what rot is this you’re talking’ when for a moment she had realized her head - the bit here, the bit there, the way it fitted bit to bit - was two convex mirrors placed back to back became one mirror ... as Fayne Rabb entered” (*Her*, 86).

In the mirrors quoted above, H.D. blurs the separation between the image and the self. Two women become one in the same image. Irigaray, too, depicts woman
within patriarchal system as the mirror reflecting man’s image to himself. Otherwise the supremacy of male sexuality would not be sustained, she argues. To achieve the compulsory deletion of the mother, woman has been forced to mirror male sexuality. However, in this instance the two convex mirrors of H.D. reflecting female sexuality leads to unity and harmony. Irigaray does not agree with H.D. on this point, as she argues that bisexuality does not offer much for women. Within a monosexual economy, she argues, “all there is is a double polarity within the economy of a single sex”\textsuperscript{27} and such a position will only threaten the existing patriarchal order.

Hélène Cixous, on the other hand, takes an opposite point of view. She calls for a reconsideration of bisexuality in which:

> every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallocentric Performing Theatre, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality - that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this ‘permission’ one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire’s inscription on every part of the body and the other body.\textsuperscript{28}

This fusion will be advantageous especially for women because woman does not condemn the other as man does and is already multiple and diverse whereas man is trapped in his phallic monosexuality. In \textit{Her} we see H.D.’s bisexuality along the lines described by Cixous. Even though \textit{Her} is fascinated by Frances Gregg, she does

\textsuperscript{27}Irigaray, Luce, ‘The Poverty of Psychoanalysis’ in Whitford, (ed.), \textit{The Irigaray Reader}, p. 100.
not make a final choice, and this seems to have been her position throughout her life.

In a letter to Bryher in 1934 H.D. writes:

I have gone terribly deep with papa. He says, 'you had two things to hide, one that you were a girl, the other that you were a boy.' It appears I am that all - but extinct phenomena, the perfect bi-. Well, this is terribly exciting, but for the moment, PLEASE do not speak of my own MSS., for it seems the conflict consists partly that what I write commits me - to one sex, or to the other. I no longer HIDE. It is not quite so obvious as that - and no doubt, before I leave, we will come to some balance.\(^9\)

And apparently they did as H.D. acknowledges in *The Master*:

I had two loves separate
God who loves all mountains,
alone knew why
and understood
and told the old man
to explain

the impossible

which he did. (*CoP*, 453)

H.D.'s time with Freud proved to be invaluable for the poet. She took help from him, but included his theories regarding female sexuality in her revisionary mythmaking, with her critique of myths created and perpetuated by psychoanalysis.

Ultimately, H.D. considered Freud to be the “guardian of all ‘beginnings’” (TF, 106), and “the midwife to the soul” (TF, 116), but when her Psyche is born she has a distinctive voice of her own.
Chapter Three

“\textit{I go where I am loved}”: Prophetic Utterances in H.D.’s \textit{Trilogy}

In her autobiographical novel \textit{Her} H.D. refers to herself as being “then no prophet”.\footnote{H.D., \textit{Her}, London: Virago Press, 1984, p. 17. Hereafter cited in the text as \textit{Her}.} Following her analysis with Freud, H.D. found herself free of the writer’s block that had been haunting her, and went on to create her powerful poetry. Her prophecy and vision, although present in her earlier poetry, were to reach maturity in her later work. In this respect one of her most ambitious projects is the \textit{Trilogy} (1973), which is a critique of patriarchal myths, in particular the Greek myths. At the end of \textit{Trilogy} H.D. proposes a matriarchal base for all Western civilization. The ultimate intention of this epic style work is to change the focus of the traditional myths and sacred stories and therefore to give voice to muted alternatives that have been presented as non-existent. H.D. proposes a new perspective and illustrates that the act of revision is a fruitful path to follow in order to create a better future, not only for women but for humankind.

The structure that is used in \textit{Trilogy}, couplets, could be the starting point in the examination of H.D.’s revisionism. In \textit{Tribute to Freud}, H.D. mentions the tripod on which the Priestess or Pythoness of Delphi sat “while she pronounced her verse couplets, the famous Delphic utterances which it was said could be read two ways” \textit{(TF, 51)}. With the use of this form in \textit{Trilogy}, H.D. alludes to the prophetic words of the Priestess, whom she regards to be her guide. The most important characteristic of
these words is not only that they are prophetic but that they can also be read two ways. With this in mind it could be argued that H.D. is aiming to show reality from a different perspective, with an invitation to re-think the dominant myths and binary oppositions upon which patriarchal systems of thought depend. She explores the possibilities of a different kind of difference, one in which the hierarchies and oppositions of patriarchal thought would not be valid. In a nutshell, she is offering an alternative point of view.

The first section of *Trilogy, The Walls Do Not Fall*, begins the journey of the reader backwards in time from London towards Karnak, during the German bombings of the city during the Second World War, the Blitz. The desperation of the city, which is the first scene in the long journey ahead, sets the mood for the woman poet in the midst of war. With the parallels between Karnak and London, H.D. presents the state of London as a temple without any walls left: “there, as here, ruin opens / the tomb, the temple” (*WDNF*, 3), and in the middle of this “ruin everywhere” (*WDNF*, 3) is the woman poet. She is not, however, by herself in this scenery as she regards her fellow poets as “the bearers of secret wisdom” (*WDNF*, 14) as well as “the keepers of the secret, ... // that binds all humanity // to ancient wisdom” (*WDNF*, 24). They search for a divine presence that will give a meaning to the existing state of contemporary destruction and chaos:

so, through our desolation,

thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us

through gloom. (*WDNF*, 3)

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However, the divine presence H.D. is looking for is quite different from that of her male counterparts. She is a visionary poet as she says in *Her* that "mythopoeic mind (mine) will disprove science and biological - mathematical definition" (*Her*, 76). This view places her in a 'science versus art and vision' opposition. In patriarchal terms, science would be valued over vision. H.D. unsettles this opposition and blurs its boundaries. Her vision is not limited by clear-cut definitions, her open mind proposes further thinking and new possibilities. At a time in literary history when the modernist poets were trying to create new meanings and reporting the decline of Western civilization, H.D. goes to the core of the collapse, patriarchal thought and the divisions it entails, and offers the feminine principle as an alternative. H.D. supports the view that the obliteration of the feminine principle has resulted in the destruction and violence surrounding her at the time. Complaining about the absence of H.D. in the literary canon of her time, Adrienne Rich states:

> We did not read, and courses in modern poetry still do not teach H.D.'s epic poem, Trilogy, in which she confronted war, nationalist insanity, the ruin of the great cities, not mourning the collapse of Western civilization but turning back for her inspiration to prehistory, to a gynocentric tradition.³

H.D. does not simply mourn the state of the world but, looking into the future, opens new paths to follow. In her view, because of the existing hierarchy of the world, the female has been devalued and male domination has led to destruction. As was discussed before, H.D. sees a causal link between patriarchal rule and violence and destruction. She criticizes the base of patriarchy and goes in search of

the maternal principle to counterbalance the inadequacies and unfairness of the status quo. So she suggests “let us not teach / what we have learned badly // and not profited by” (WDNF, 46).

Hence, H.D. resurrects effaced femininity in order to be able to break the recurring cycle of destruction. The move towards female centeredness in Trilogy starts to emerge at the very beginning of the poem:

but gods always face two-ways,
so let us search of the old highways

for the true-rune, the right spell,
recover old values. (WDNF, 5)

Like the prophetic couplets that could be read two ways, H.D.'s revisionist strategy suggests that the world should be seen from a different angle. In order to recover the old values, the ones that have been lost to make space for the new; the forgotten healing power of the feminine versus destructive masculinity, a two way journey is necessary. With this proposition H.D. deconstructs hierarchies. She argues for a different understanding of difference, non-oppositional, non-hierarchical, one in which the feminine could also be represented without being devalued. To achieve such a difference H.D. goes backwards for a better future. She says that the female principle will be “the latter-day twice born” (WDNF, 22). H.D. symbolizes the destructive force of masculinity with the phallic imagery of the Sword. The Sword, she writes, is “the younger brother, the latter-born” (WDNF, 17), and he buried the older sister in order to establish complete authority. But H.D. reminds the Sword that:

your Triumph, however exultant,
must one day be over,
in the beginning

was the Word. (WDNF, 17)

In this context, Gerardine Meaney touches upon the Medusa myth as discussed by Joseph Campbell. Campbell traces the signs of an earlier mythology within the Medusa myth and posits that “the story of Perseus’s slaying of the Medusa marks the overthrow of that earlier mythology and culture and the relegation of the female principle to a secondary position.” Such a position, however appealing, might lead to simply replacing the existing patriarchal system with another, which may continue to rely on the binary oppositional thought the other way around. The only difference would be the exchange of the sides within the hierarchies. I think H.D. avoids this kind of exchange with her advocation of the rejection of boundaries and oppositions. Also, in her words on Lilith, the Sword, the Word, patriarchal power and language fused in the (S)word, H.D. seems to agree that a prehistorical feminine mythology valorizing the female might have pre-existed the patriarchal systems of thought. And, if Trilogy is taken as a whole, it will not be very difficult to see that she writes in a syncretist tradition, one which is all embracing and based on understanding and acceptance, rather than exclusion. Such a strategy helps her occupy an androgynous space, especially in the first section where she confronts war and destruction. Her standpoint is not one of replacing the old system with another of the same kind, but one which proposes motion and transformation. However, H.D. also acknowledges the difficulties of reconstructing an alternative for the binarism of patriarchy:

The Christos-image

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is most difficult to disentangle
from its art-craft junk-shop
paint and plaster medieval jumble

of pain-worship and death symbol... (WDNF, 27)

She goes on to ask “how can you scratch out // indelible ink of the palimpsest
of past misadventure?” (WDNF, 6) Moreover, the patriarchal gods have made the
rules very clear. Patriarchal religion is powerful and has many images to perpetuate
itself. Biblical authority will not tolerate any deviation from its Word and its demands
are very clear: “Thou shalt have none other gods but me” (WDNF, 50), and “if any
man shall add // God shall add unto him the plagues” (TA, 65). But H.D. does not
lose hope “for gods have been smashed before” (WDNF, 15).

In the existing misogynistic tradition female deities, which in H.D.’s view
would be an alternative to the above mentioned gods, have been presented as
destructive, dangerous or evil. They have always been regarded as the destroyers of
men. This view, of course, could only be valid in relation to male values because any
powerful female deity would be regarded as a threat to the patriarchal power: “... they shout out, / your beauty, Isis, Aset or Astarte, // is a harlot” (WDNF, 5). As an
alternative to the gods whose rules are very strict and unforgiving, H.D. proposes the
revision of these female deities, and the recovery of their healing attributes.

In the patriarchal system of binary oppositions, the female body has always
been described in terms of lack and inferiority. Female sexuality has been regarded as
the Dark Continent, as was discussed in the previous chapter. The menstrual cycle
(thought to be connected with the moon (female), as opposed to the sun (male)), has
been condemned. H.D. says “they continue, and / your rhythm is the devil’s hymn” (WDNF, 6). Instead of celebrating this cycle as a ritual of fertility and creativity, patriarchal culture has implemented disgust and linked this cycle of regeneration to evil. With these lines H.D. also draws attention to the alienation of the woman from her own body. Luce Irigaray touches on this issue of fertility and birth: “The empire of the phallus - the Phallus - is necessitated by the establishment of a society based upon patriarchal power in which the natural - maternal power to give birth comes to be seen as the phallic attribute of god-men and establishes a new order that has to appear natural”.\textsuperscript{5} Hélène Cixous is also very alert to the issue of the woman’s body. According to her woman must “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her”.\textsuperscript{6}

H.D. goes on her quest by trying to give strength to “we” who are “nameless initiates, / born of one mother, // companions / of the flame” (WDNF, 21). H.D. has always felt and has been regarded as a marginal character throughout her life. She was the fiancée of Ezra Pound, and struggled to write poetry on her own in a male-centred literary tradition. Now in the midst of war, she is again a marginal, middle-aged woman poet. She feels “too old to be useful / ... not old enough to be dead” (WDNF, 24). She knows the feeling of entrapment very well: “my shell-jaws snap shut / at invasion of the limitless, ocean-weight” (WDNF, 9). In a world where everything is defined in androcentric terms, H.D. would seem to agree with Luce Irigaray’s address to patriarchal thought: “What you are trying to impose as a universal law is ... your response to your requirements, reducing sexual difference to

nothing in an endlessly repeated gesture.”⁷ So man, by transforming the penis into an instrument of absolute power, has dominated every aspect of female sexuality.

H.D. tells her companions to be strong because at the end of her quest she will go for the “resurrection myth / and resurrection reality” (WDNF, 54) and try to “uncover cankerous growths // in present-day philosophy” (WDNF, 54). Patriarchal philosophy has lead to the devaluation and obliteration of female values and brought the world to its present state, in H.D.’s view. As many feminist critics have argued, “Graeco-Roman myths are often masculine constructs whose narratives only reflect the anxieties of male psyches”.⁸ Mythology, being both private and public, reaches wide audiences and plays a very important formative role. Hence, it is a powerful tool for H.D..

... I in my own way know
that the whale

cannot digest me:
be firm in your own small, static, limited

orbit and the shark-jaws
of outer circumstance

will spit you forth
be indigestible, hard, ungiving. (WDNF, 9)

As a bisexual woman poet in the middle of war, this sense of being trapped in a hostile environment governed by patriarchal values is frequently encountered in

H.D.’s work, and the exact imagery of entrapment will be used again years later by Adrienne Rich.

Along with the shell imagery in the first section of Trilogy, H.D. also uses the image of “the industrious worm” (WDNF, 12) frequently as a symbol of her quest. The persistent worm is eating its way out of every calamity (WDNF, 6) and gives the reader the feeling of silent strength. Indeed this “worm-cycle” (WDNF, 15) symbolizes the quest of H.D. towards resurrecting buried or devalued female attributes. In this quest “for her persona [H.D.] chose Psyche, the mortal woman whose search for Eros has frequently been interpreted as the soul’s quest for divine immortality. The name ‘Psyche’ comes from the Greek word for ‘soul’, often portrayed in Greek art as a butterfly that leaves the body at death”.9 So, this “industrious worm” of H.D. will transform into the Psyche, the butterfly, a process symbolizing re-birth. Another image of re-birth is “the phoenix, your *bennu* bird” (WDNF, 35) that can rise from its ashes and start a new life over and over again. H.D.’s strategy in achieving this aim is to reach back towards the past and try to establish a sense of identity for the female. She declares her project to be: “reversion of old values / oneness lost, madness” (WDNF, 43).

In order to overcome the lack of representation of women within the patriarchal system, and to be able to represent the feminine within the symbolic order truthfully, which cannot be done currently, H.D. resurrects mythical women that other women can relate to as role models. In a patriarchal system which is based upon binary oppositions, a position which entails one side of the opposition being positive (male) and the other negative (female), women must be defined in relation to

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male norms in order to be represented. As Irigaray points out, "'equal' tends to mean 'equal to men' and therefore equivalent to the imposition of the male norm". To be able to fill this gap one way is to resurrect the mythical models to which women could relate themselves. H.D., I think, advocates this point. At the end of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, she makes clear that her intention is to "recover the secret of Isis" (*WDNF*, 54). Isis is the perfect role model for H.D.'s project. She is an active, autonomous, powerful female who is a symbol of life, quest and renewal. Through Isis we are granted access to a realm which the creative power belongs to the female. She is "the goddess who builds, who is the trickster, who holds the key to knowledge and the words of creative power." H.D. saw Isis as the female deity that possesses magic female wisdom and healing power. In her unpublished novel *Pilate's Wife*, the protagonist speaks of Isis as follows:

Isis was a magician and a goddess of wisdom. The Greek, for all their immense pragmatism and logical philosophy, had had to split the perfect image of the perfect Woman, say here is Love, faithless and here is Wisdom, loveless. Yet even Aphrodite and Athene remodelled, flung into some blasting furnace, to return, one perfectly welded figure, would yet lack something - something of the magic that Isis held in Egypt.12

Greek mythology forms the basis of traditional patriarchal mythology, and it constantly needs to reassure itself of its masculinity. So the female deities have been altered and shaped accordingly so that they will not be a threat to the patriarchal ego.

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10Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 23.
11Troy, Mark, 'Secret Name: The Creative Realm of the Female Modernist', Moderna Språk, vol. 82, no. 3, 1988, p. 219
For H.D. the first step towards change is to resurrect the female deity with her original attributes of wisdom and healing power. Once such a figure has been resurrected, H.D.’s poetry suggests that she and her companions will be stronger to continue their quest. The poet writes:

we are voyagers, discoverers
of the not known,

the unrecorded;
we have no map;

possibly we will reach haven,
heaven. (WDNF, 59)

After underlining the need for redefinition and transformation in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, in the second part of *Trilogy, Tribute to the Angels*, H.D. continues her quest to establish an alternative tradition and moves towards cultural metamorphosis. She finds this alternative in the figure of “Hermes Trismegistus / who is the patron of alchemists” (*TA*, 63). He is a fusion of alchemy and poetry, and is a combination of Hermes and Thoth, Greek and Egyptian inventors of written language. She aims to recover “what the old church / found in Mithra’s tomb [light]” (*TA*, 63), and so starts her quest of uncovering “what the new-church spat upon” (*TA*, 63).

collect the fragments of the splintered glass

and of your fire and breath,
melt down and integrate.

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88
re-invoked, re-create
opal, onyx, obsidian,

now scattered in the shards
men tread upon. (TA, 63)

Within a system where the Law of the Father represents the absolute authority, the language system is also organized by male terms and needs. Both Cixous and Irigaray argue that it is impossible for woman to be represented in such a system because the Phallus is the object with which female sexuality is defined as well. In binary oppositional thinking, since Phallus is the positive norm, female sexuality inevitably becomes negative. Hence, the lack of representation, imposed on language by the underlying Oedipal structure of it, leads to negative attributes being attached to women. Irigaray explains this point as follows:

It is not a question of biology determining speech, but of identity assumed in language within a particular symbolic system known as patriarchy and described by Lacan, in which the only possible subject-position is masculine. Within this system, the only feminine identity available to women is that of ‘defective’ or ‘castrated’ men; women are not symbolically self-defined.14

It is not surprising, then, that many women writers associate the act of writing by women with the act of stealing. Alicia Ostriker argues that women must steal the language from the established tradition in order to be able to write themselves.15 Also Hélène Cixous plays with the French word ‘voler’, meaning both ‘to steal’ and ‘to fly’. “For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate,

14Whitford (ed.), The Irigaray Reader, p. 3.
but rather to dash through and to ‘fly’. Flying is woman’s gesture - flying in language and making it fly’. For H.D. too, the act of writing poetry involves stealing. She writes “steal then, O orator./ plunder, O poet” (TA, 63). Existing in a linguistic system that has been constructed according to masculine needs, woman must steal the language so that she can have a claim for her imagination.

In a system where having a different view means no view at all, and if something is not seen it becomes non-existent, and if female sexuality is not as visible as the male then it ‘necessitates’ to be defined in terms of the ‘powerful’ Phallus, then the need for the change H.D. is after is imminent. H.D. chooses to synthesize different elements, including masculine figures, such as Osiris, Hermes, and Gabriel, with feminine figures, and at the end of the process creates something new in order to aid this project. This is a regenerative transmutation. For example, she transforms the negative concepts as ‘marah’ and ‘mar’ which mean ‘bitter’ and ‘salty’. These words immediately bring to mind the sea, traditionally linked with femininity. H.D. transforms them into something positive as can be seen in the following lines of her poetry. This is the act of stealing, flying away with language, and eventually changing it:

Now polish the crucible
and set the jet of flame

under, till marah-mar
are melted, fuse and join

and change and alter,
mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

---

Star of the Sea,
Mother. (TA, 71)

Another instance where H.D. repeats the process is when she transforms the
deity Venus. She writes “Venus as desire / is venerous, lascivious” (TA, 74), and
proceeds to change the negative venery into positive “venerate”:

    return, O holiest one,
    Venus whose name is kin

to venerate,
    venerator. (TA, 12)

So Venus, whose name was “desecrated” (TA, 75), is given the positive
attribute of “venerator”. Since the negation of the female is the foundation stone of
patriarchal thought, it is not surprising to read that Freud, the most influential figure
in the description and perpetuation of the myths of psychoanalysis regarding female
sexuality declared:

    It seems that women have made few contributions to the
discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there
is, however, one technique which they may have invented -
that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be
tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the
achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the
model which this achievement imitates by causing the
growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the
genitals.17

vol. 22, p. 132.
Concealment of the genital deficiency of the female is presented in these words as a natural phenomenon. Since the phallic erection is the only sexual value, the woman without a penis becomes the deficient one. The multiple nature of female sexuality is not taken into consideration and ‘woman’ is loaded with negative associations. But, as in the case of Venus, H.D. uproots the traditional attributes and transforms negativity into positivity.

With the alchemical transformation of language, H.D. retrieves the feminine signs, empties them of negative connotations and re-uses them with positive associations. She aims to distil the figure of the Mother out of history and myth, and free her from the patriarchal linguistic and cultural systems. This is a major undertaking as describing the feminine within patriarchal language is difficult to achieve:

I do not know what it gives,
a vibration that we cannot name

for there is no name for it;
my patron said, “name it”;

I said, I cannot name it;
there is no name. (TA, 76)

Once again the reader encounters the lack of representation within language. This is a crucial point in French feminist thought, according to which, the relationship of the daughter with the mother is not represented within patriarchal language. Irigaray argues that “[a]ll Western culture rests on the murder of the mother”18, and asks “the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and the first bodily

18Whitford (ed.), The Irigaray Reader, p. 7.
encounter with the mother... Where are we to find them?"19 So, H.D. looks beyond patriarchal language towards the semiotic space for other possibilities. According to French feminist thought, a re-vision of the Mother and the relationship with the Mother could be the starting point in subverting patriarchal representations. What is severely lacking in the patriarchal system of thought is the perspective of woman, who is always regarded as the Other. Hélène Cixous thinks that there is an urgent need to re-establish the originally positive relationship with the Mother which would lead to freeing women’s bodies, and gaining power. She writes: "There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother too is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her".20

The climax of Tribute to the Angels is the synthesis of the female deity, the Lady. Here H.D. follows the same route to purification as she did in the case of Venus. The first step is to remove the Lady from her patriarchal mythical attributes. The poet first repeats the forms in which she is traditionally depicted:

We have seen her
the world over,

Our Lady of the Goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,

Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
Our Lady of the Chair. (TA, 93)

This is a very familiar image in the forms described by H.D.: “the painters did very well by her; / it is true, they missed never a line” (TA, 94). It is difficult to miss her as her images surround us: “you find / her everywhere (or did find), // in cathedral, museum, cloister, / at the turn of the palace stair” (TA, 94). However, all these depictions are inadequate. When the poet looks carefully, she (and the community she is with, as she uses “we” throughout the section), realizes that there is a different Lady in front of her eyes now. “But none of these, / none of these / suggest her as I saw her” (TA, 96). This Lady bears “none of her usual attributes; / the Child was not with her” (TA, 97). By shifting the emphasis from the Son to Mother, H.D. presents her as the new symbol of love by herself. Unlike the Virgin Mary, whose identity is dependent on her son, this Lady has an identity of her own.

The Lady is denied the fixed identity of a symbol, “but she is no symbolic figure”, she is not still, “but she wasn’t hieratic, she wasn’t frozen” (TA, 103). Even though she is the colour of snow, it is “snow in the act of falling” (TA, 106). The Lady is a mobile character, she is more like a process, the process of revision and transformation. H.D. proposes that white, the colour of snow and the Lady, is not the colour of blankness, emptiness, or absence but a sign of plenitude.

... white is not no-colour,
as we were told as children,

but all-colour;
where the flames mingle

and the wings meet, when we gain
the arc of perfection

we are satisfied, we are happy,
we begin again. (TA, 109)

Here H.D. employs a transmutation from lack or absence to fullness and presence. This economy of lack is the underlying Oedipal structure of language and culture which define woman as ‘minus-phallus’. This unitary notion of truth is only true for the patriarchal mind. As a visionary poet, H.D. looks at the issue from a different perspective and via her alchemical process in the crucible leads the reader towards an imagination of new meanings that will offer a fresh beginning. The Lady also comes with this promise:

this is the new Eve who comes

clearly to return, to retrieve
what she has lost the race,

given over to sin, to death;
She brings the Book of Life, obviously. (TA, 101)

This “Book of Life” in the Lady’s hand, is not eternally fixed, but is still in the process of being written: “the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new” (TA, 103). The Lady too is free from negative and inadequate representations, and she is free to imagine her own identity: “She is not shut up in a cave / like a Sibyl; she is not // imprisoned in leaden bars” (TA, 103).

Throughout history powerful women have been regarded as a threat to men and have been treated accordingly. Women have either been represented as passive and therefore angelic, or active and powerful, therefore evil. H.D. does not attach any attributes to the Lady. She does not want to fix her. When she describes her she is quite hesitant: “what I mean is ..., what I wanted to indicate was ..., I did not mean” (TA, 106). The Lady is in a constant process of becoming and H.D. refrains from
entrenching her, because this is the strategy of the androcentric tradition where everything is based on the sole authority of the phallus, whereas, in H.D.'s view, femininity entails multiple meanings and the continuous process of change. The Lady is “Psyche, the butterfly, / out of the cocoon” (TA, 103). She brings with her metamorphosis, like a butterfly shedding an old identity and transforming into a new one. As she has become a butterfly, now she has the capacity to fly into language, and make language fly.

*The Flowering of the Rod*, the final section of *Trilogy*, is the “tale of a jar or jars” (TA, 105), retelling the biblical myth of Mary of Bethany bringing the precious myrrh to bathe the feet of Jesus. In this section, H.D. completely rejects the ‘death-cult’ of patriarchy and distances herself from the destruction which, in her view, patriarchal thinking entails.

but this is not our field,

we have not sown this;

pitiless, pitiless, let us leave

The place-of-a-skull
to those who have fashioned it. (*FR*, 115)

She leaves death, destruction and chaos behind, and moves forward towards a time, a place where the healing female principle is at work:

I go where I love and where I am loved,

into the snow;

I go to the things I love

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96
with no thought of duty or pity (FR, 115)

H.D. regards this process as a sort of “resurrection” (FR, 113), which involves replacing traditional male-centeredness with female-centeredness, and a feminine reality strong enough to counterbalance the phallic power. To do this, she reveals “what men say is-not” and reminds what “you have forgot” (FR, 121). H.D. moves backwards and forwards in the telling of the story, once again like the prophetic Delphic utterances. She writes: “I have gone forward, / I have gone backward” (FR, 124). And so starts her serio-comic account of Kaspar the Magian and Mary Magdalene. Kaspar who is a traditional ‘wise man’ does not approve of Magdalene in their first meeting:

it was unseemly that a woman  
appear disordered, dishevelled  

it was unseemly that a woman  
appear at all. (FR, 137)

Kaspar seems to be annoyed with the independent Magdalene who refuses to contain herself under the veil. He is also offended when she ignores his remarks. Kaspar symbolizes the patriarchal world which can only tolerate women if they are under the control of men. H.D. defines such a world as one full of “the twisted and tortured individuals, // out of line, out of step with world so-called progress” (FR, 129). But Kaspar is suddenly converted with a shining light in Magdalene’s hair towards worship. He has a vision of Atlantis revealed to him, the paradise that has been lost because of man’s wish to have sole power. H.D.’s image of Atlantis is impressive: the migrating birds (flying again) “who still (they say) hover / over the lost Atlantis; // seeking, what we once knew” (FR, 117). Here H.D.’s syncretist
strategy is again at work. This is a paradise not only for women, but also for men, for humans to pay tribute to each other. So Atlantis is not like a long lost time which the male modernists nostalgically sought to restore, but rather a state of mind that has to be regained for woman to reclaim her original power. All the imagery H.D. uses to describe this long forgotten land points to the necessity of remembering the semiotic, where hierarchies are not valid. It is a location of continuum with the maternal and multiplicity.

For Kaspar, who sees “the fleck of light” (*FR*, 152) on Mary’s hair, everything is suddenly revealed. “In that point or shadow, / was the whole secret of the mystery” which opened like a flower in front of him (*FR*, 152). H.D. gives the account of what Kaspar envisions. He sees “Atlantis”, “his and our earth before Adam” (*FR*, 153, 154), and “Paradise / before Eve...” (*FR*, 155). He looks into the “depth of pre-history” (*FR*, 165). H.D. alludes to a time unrecorded in history when everything was ideal, the semiotic. Although in the beginning Kaspar was a part of the exclusively male tradition which assumes that “no secret was safe with a woman” (*FR*, 133), now with the ungiving attitude of Mary Magdalene, and the vision he has had, he is ready to yield his precious jar of myrrh to her. He then receives a message through which he understands that Mary Magdalene is a goddess. He proves that he is capable of change and that he is wise enough to start a new beginning. His brain translates the message as:

*Lilith born before Eve*

*and one born before Lilith,*

*and Eve; we three are forgiven,*

*we are three of the seven*

*daemons cast out of her. (*FR*, 157)*
This is a very enigmatic message, but it seems to refer to a time when female power was not regarded as non-existent or evil, when female sexuality (open, abundant, multiple) was not defined in opposition to the masculine valorization of a single organ (the phallus). As Susan Gubar points out, this message implies “that a matriarchal genealogy had been erased from recorded history when this ancient female trinity was exorcized as evil, cast out of human consciousness by those who would begin the garden with Eve.”22 In Alice Walker’s *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, the character of Irene, the old Greek dwarf, also remembers this mythical time when she says: “The lily is the flower of Lilith, the first mother. The rough one who was bored by Adam and went off to have adventures elsewhere. The one before Eve.”23 She also reminds the reader of the necessity to remember this long forgotten past: “I think the human spirit needs to believe that someone has escaped the general pressing down of life that passes for the male notion of civilization.”24 In Trilogy H.D. is that spirit who struggles to remember and to remind.

Once again H.D. guides the reader towards motion and transformation. Like the Lady of *Tribute to the Angels*, the process of becoming is at play here. In Irigarayian terms this process is what is needed:

> What we need, we who are sexed according to our genre, is a God to share, a verb to share and become. Defined as the mother-substance, often obscure, even occult, of the verb of men, we need our subject, our noun, our verb, our predicates, our elementary sentence, our base rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy ... Woman

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24Walker, *By the Light*, p. 141.
needs a mirror to become a woman. Having a God and becoming his / her genre go together. God is the other of which we are totally in need. We need to have the feeling of an achievement in order to become. Not that of a rigid objective, of a One immutable postulate, but of a cohesion and a horizon which assure us of the present which remembers, is not pure loss into the forgotten, nor the crumbling of our existence, in particular by dereliction.”

H.D. proposes to follow this route. She first went for the purification of the language, which would create space for the woman to exist as herself and would not be alienated. Then she shows the way to re-cover what has been lost under patriarchal rule. She is a poet who dares to “re-invoke / re-create” (TA, 63), and her Trilogy, even though it starts with death and destruction, ends at the very beginning, the genesis.

she said, Sir, it is a most beautiful fragrance, as of all flowering things together;

but Kaspar knew the seal of the jar was unbroken.
he did not know whether she knew

the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh
she held in her arms. (FR, 172)

Throughout Trilogy there is a constant drift away from a male perspective and towards a female perspective. Contesting traditional mythology, H.D. presents woman as the searcher and conqueror instead of an object of masculine thought.

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More importantly, in her work woman is the creator with healing powers instead of the evil destroyer. She brings forth mythic maternal principle with which she strengthens the bond between women, contesting the patriarchal idea that there must be a rivalry (for the penis) among women.

H.D.'s modernism serves the purpose of going backwards, but this going back is for the future, a future where female values are not cast away by androcentric tradition. Adrienne Rich, who was deeply influenced by H.D., writes: "What the male poets were mourning and despairing over had never been ours, and, as H.D. saw, what we have yet to create does not depend on their institutions; would in fact rather be free of them."26

Chapter Four

"I Tell and Re-tell the story": H.D.'s Own Legend in Helen in Egypt

dive deep, deep courageously down into some unexploited region of the consciousness, into some common deep sea of unrecorded knowledge and bring triumphant to the surface some treasure buried, lost forgotten.

H.D., Palimpsest, 1926

Over thirty years after H.D. wrote these lines, Helen in Egypt was published in 1961, the year H.D. died. Like her previous epic-length poem Trilogy, Helen in Egypt is an ambitious revisionary project, the span of which covers the received sign systems of myth and language, and the hidden meanings they convey. Both of these works by H.D. are invasions of an exclusive and hostile male territory, namely epic writing. However, it would be more appropriate to call Helen in Egypt an anti-epic rather than epic in its traditional sense. This is because H.D.'s scheme is to center less on heroes, whether it is Achilles or any other male hero, and more on the experiences of the heroine Helen, a character who has had a profound influence on western culture. H.D. refuses to marginalise Helen, and in her epic she is centralised. With her revision of Helen, H.D. also disrupts the claim of patriarchal myth for universal truth. In doing so, she does not simply reverse existing hierarchies but works in a syncretist fashion, the aim of which is to embrace all.

Helen was the wife of Menelaos, but she was seduced by Paris who then abducted her to Troy. It was to revenge this act that the Greeks pursued war against
Troy and ultimately destroyed the city. Hence, within patriarchal myth Helen came to stand as the ultimate symbol of destructive femininity. There are different endings to Helen’s story. At the end of the war “some say that, despite his anger at her infidelity, Menelaos took one look at the face that had launched a thousand ships, fell in love with her all over again and returned her to Sparta.”\textsuperscript{1} A variation of this ending is the one adopted by H.D. in her epic. It is argued that “Helen never went to Troy at all, that she had been spirited away [...] to Egypt and that what Paris had taken to Troy was a \textit{daidalon}, merely an ‘image’ of Helen.”\textsuperscript{2} This ending allows the poet to argue that the traditional representations of Helen within patriarchal myth are mere images, phantoms, and have possibilities for revision.

H.D.’s epic undertakes a mythical journey with Helen whose search is for a way for her identity to be represented more truthfully. H.D.’s intention of presenting this very famous - or rather infamous - woman in a revisionary way is clear from the first sentence of the epic. She declares: \textit{“We all know the story of Helen of Troy but few of us have followed her to Egypt.”}\textsuperscript{3} The poet goes on to acknowledge her predecessors who also did not present Helen as the one to blame for the Trojan war, namely Stesichorus and Euripides. But H.D.’s treatment of the mythical events is much more complex and particularly concentrates on the female identity and experiences of Helen. As a woman poet, H.D. is not content with superficial representations and she goes deeper for possible multiple meanings and alternative realities, as H.D.’s revisionism is not single, but multiple-folded. Firstly, she challenges male authority by embarking upon her journey in the realm of epic writing, 

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an area which since the time of the ancient Greeks has been dominated by male authors. Secondly, she refuses to accept the traditional subjects of epic writing at face value and instead presents the reader with an alternative epic. This strategy allows her to criticise the foundations of the concept of myth, its patriarchal origins and to disrupt its claim for universal truth. Finally, with the character of Helen in *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. advances her progressive revisionism further. The short poem ‘Helen’, as was discussed earlier, presented the female character as a muted, statue-woman who would be loved only when dead, whereas Helen of *Helen in Egypt* is the protagonist who is in search of her identity which would be free of patriarchal descriptions and prescriptions. Early on in the epic H.D. makes clear that this is an alternative epic. Alluding to *Iliad*, she writes:

Is Fate inexorable?
Does Zeus decree that, forever,
Love should be born of War? (*HE*, 32)

In the *Iliad*, the father of all epics, Love is represented as the reason for war and woman is the one who leads men to death and cities to destruction. H.D. refuses to follow the same route, and the choice of Helen as her protagonist is the first step in H.D.’s revisionism in her treatment of this classical Greek myth. Here is a character who is the embodiment of the opposition woman represents from the patriarchal point of view; beauty and destruction. She comprises the double nature of patriarchal definition of beautiful but evil woman within herself. In *Helen in Egypt*, however, this well-rehearsed story will not be repeated by H.D. again.

Luce Irigaray, like H.D., also advocates new ways of thinking, and an alternative language. In her influential work ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’ she calls for difference. Her article begins with these lines: “If we continue to speak the
same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again".4 Even though this article is in translation, it is clear that Irigaray is aiming to disrupt the rules of the language ignoring the basic grammar rules as in the second ‘sentence’ of this quotation. Irigaray’s insistence is on the awareness of a gendered discourse for women writers because if women continue to work within the patriarchal language system, they will only be able to create another version of the same old story.

In this context Helen in Egypt is not simply an old story re-told. It is the myth of re-birth and creation told from a female perspective. Helen of Troy is presented in a fresh, clear light as the woman with her visionary powers restored, disrupting the prescribed story of herself within the literary tradition. The implications of such revisionary tactics are, of course, not limited to the ancient story-line of Helen of Troy. H.D.’s “critique becomes the heart of the myth”, enabling her to propose new approaches.5 From the beginning of the epic, H.D. establishes that Helen “herself is the writing” (HE, 22). Helen is identified as the “hieroglyph” that has been misread throughout history and therefore not understood. The following lines make clear that Helen is aiming to read herself. She needs to discover her own identity which until now has always been defined by others:

I said, “there is mystery in this place,
I am instructed, I know the script,
the shape of this bird is a letter,

they call it the hieroglyph” (HE, 13-14).

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H.D. asserts that this hieroglyph “represents or recalls the protective mother-goddess. This is no death symbol but a life-symbol” (HE, 13). This idea of woman reading herself is certainly disruptive and subversive. It is totally in contrast with the patriarchal linguistic system that sees woman as the sign to be read by the male and circumscribes female identity within male terms. H.D.’s text refuses to treat the phallus as the privileged signifier, as such a standpoint annihilates the idea of the expression of female experience, relating reality only to the male. In this context, in the opening lines of her epic, H.D. declares patriarchal language to be an “invective against Helen”, and adds that “[t]he Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion” (HE, 1), thus undermining the claim of patriarchal language to reality. For H.D., the established tradition was fighting for an illusion which was not the reality but a phantom of their own creation.

The first movement of Helen in Egypt is appropriately named ‘Pallinode’, literally meaning ‘song against’. This section will be “a defense, explanation or apology” for Helen who has so often been misread, “transposed or translated” (HE, 1). Here once again, it is emphasized that Helen has always been confined within another language that does not belong to her and therefore makes it impossible for her to talk about her own identity. “Helen, hated of all Greece” (HE, 2) is aware of the misreadings she has been subjected to. As the epic proceeds she disputes these claims in no uncertain terms as she declares:

I am not nor mean to be
the Daemon they made of me. (HE, 109)

These lines point to the complete absence of control on Helen’s part in her own representation. The images of herself are alien to her. But instead of silently
succumbing to these representations H.D.'s Helen emphasizes the need to rethink the underlying values. Otherwise, she feels that woman cannot have any claim to subjectivity. She is strong enough to assert that “they will never understand” (HE, 110) Helen, the woman as subject.

In the introductory prose sections preceding poetry, H.D. speaks in plural and creates a feeling of community. “She and we need peace and time to reconstruct the legend” (HE, 11) she says. These prose sections have been read as authoritarian and as “representing the ideological stance that devalues Helen and her experience” by Hokanson. However, I would argue that this voice in the prose sections is embracing rather than authoritarian, aiming to guide and not to impose. These sections are not patronising, prescriptive, or divisional, but all embracing.

Misreading of Helen by the male characters occurs frequently in H.D.'s poem. Achilles, for instance, does not seem to be capable of understanding Helen. His idea of Helen is limited by what has been imposed on him by the patriarchal culture to which he belongs. Within such a system Helen cannot be recognised as a subject in her own right, with all her multiplicity:

knew not yet, Helen of Sparta,
knew not Helen of Troy,
knew not Helena, hated of all Greece. (HE, 14)

Unable to read the true Helen, as he is not equipped to do so, Achilles snaps at her in a manner typical of patriarchal thought, declaring her as a “sign” or a “name” to be read by himself. The question he puts forward is paradigmatic: “are you a witch?” (HE, 16). So when he sees Helen on the walls of Troy he has no hesitation

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in presenting her as the cause of the war. To blame the woman is what he has learned and became accustomed to. He asks “why does she hold us here?” (*HE*, 49). His idea of the evil woman is further revealed when he is questioning “how she enchanted us?” Is she “a Daemon’s heart? a devil?” (*HE*, 50)

Misreading of Helen plays an important part in one of the recurring scenes of the epic, namely the point where Achilles attacks her. Helen meditates on this instance over and over again and struggles to understand it. Achilles feels very uncomfortable and threatened with the fluctuations concerning Helen’s self and resorts to attacking her in order to place Helen within her former and static self. For Achilles and the patriarchal order he represents, female subjectivity is limited by being the object for the male.

Paris also declares Helen an “adultress” (*HE*, 123). The soldiers attack and blame her as well for the war in a passage where the double image of the woman, beauty and evil, is once again presented.

O Helen, Helen, Deamon that thou art,

*we will be done forever*

*with this charm, this evil philtre,*

*this curse of Aphrodite ...* (*HE*, 4)

Ultimately, the epic reaches a point where even the name “Helena” becomes a “simple password” for Achilles which reduces Helen to almost nothing in linguistic terms (*HE*, 248). She only has a meaning in relation to and as a service for the male subject. These are the perceptions and prescriptions of the dominant male-oriented tradition. So, it is no wonder that Helen feels trapped in her surroundings. The narrator asks “She may perceive the truth, but how explain it?” (*HE*, 5). It is not
possible for woman to explain her identity in truthful terms within the patriarchal linguistic system. This is why Irigaray insists that we have to "[g]et out of their language". She finds it useless trying to imagine female identity as long as it is defined in relation to male subjectivity. Patriarchal language is not capable of accommodating feminine experience as it is based on the concept of unitary meaning from the male perspective. Feminine experience, on the other hand, is akin to multiplicity and fluidity. It cannot be defined in terms of either / or, and hence, cannot be expressed within patriarchal language. This is another issue that H.D. reverses. In her epic the male heroes appear only in relation to Helen herself. The emphasis is on Helen’s experience and understanding compared to the traditional representation of women’s experience as trivial and marginalised by the glorified male epic heroes. In H.D.’s poem, woman is drawn from the margins of the epic right into the central action.

Fear and hatred of women is one of the underlying foundations of patriarchal thought. The system uses it as a means to sustain and perpetuate itself. In psychoanalytical terms, according to Nancy Chodorow, the following components are necessary to attain masculine gender identity:

First, masculinity becomes and remains a problematic issue for a boy. Second, it involves the denial of attachment or relationship, particularly of what the boy takes to be dependence or need for another, and differentiation of himself from another. Third, it involves the repression and devaluation of femininity on both psychological and cultural levels.8

7Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips’, p. 69.
This hatred is evident in the soldiers of Troy as well. While pursuing Helen after the fall of the city, they reach a stairway. Their description of it is an alarming reminder of the patriarchal vision of female sexual organs:

- it’s only a winding stair,  
a spiral, like a snail-shell”;

“- a trap- let the others go-”  
“- into the heart of earth,  
into the bowels of death - stand back ...(HE, 128)

It is this line of thought that alienates woman from her own body and sexuality. In these lines it is as if the soldiers are travelling back to the ‘dark continent’ that is female sexuality. It is deemed to be dark as it is not visible like the male sexual organ. Female sexuality cannot be accommodated with its specificity, as it is defined in male terms. How can it be understood and enjoyed if women are defined as, in Lacan’s terms, the ‘not-alls’? In a system where the phallus and erection are privileged and every other alternative is defined in relation to it, women do not have the means to express their specificity. Hence, the multiplicity of the female cannot be comprehended within the existing rules. It is this aspect of woman that Achilles fails to comprehend as well when he says “Helen upon the ramparts, / together yet separate?” (HE, 63) Once again H.D. refutes binary oppositional thought in these lines. Instead of clear divisions, she advocates blurring the boundaries. This is the mutual existence of autonomy and togetherness at the same time, an existence which cannot be accommodated within patriarchal rules. This issue is also raised by Irigaray with her emphasis on exchange. She writes: “I would like us to play together at being the same and different. You / I exchanging selves endlessly
and each staying herself." 9 This entails the capability of being more than one thing at the same time, without destroying the other. It also means the rejection of solidity, as Irigaray writes: "Between us, ‘hardness’ is not the rule. We know the contours of our bodies well enough to appreciate fluidity. Our destiny can do without the sharp edges of rigidity. We are not attracted to dead bodies." 10 Irigaray’s dismissal of ‘solidity’ as the basis of meaning gives a breathing space to ‘fluidity’ which is appropriate in terms of describing femininity. Since within patriarchal binary thinking the male needs to identify and devalue the female as the ‘other’ in order to constantly appraise himself in relation to her, the introduction of fluidity subverts this distinction between the one and the other and opens up new and alternative ways of meaning. Achilles, however, cannot distance himself from the traditional way of thinking when he talks of “[a]nother” and declares her as the one who “betrayed” (HE, 61). But what exactly was betrayed? The female protagonist betrays the patrilinear and hierarchical structure of the Greek “Command” (HE, 61). When the feminine force upsets the patrilinear social structure it inevitably excites hatred.

This feminine force also connects the ever powerful “Command” with war and destruction, displacing the masculine and the feminine, as in the traditional rendering of the story it is Helen who is the cause of war. H.D. will concentrate on the issue of the causal link between masculinity and death as the epic progresses, but ‘Pallinode’ mainly concentrates upon Helen’s coming to terms with her own past. She will use this as the starting point in her quest for self-identity. The question she asks herself more than once is “Helena? who is she?” (HE, 37) She will try to

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deconstruct her prescribed identity by going back to the roots and look for “H-E-L-E-N-A” (*HE*, 8). This is the preparation for the second and third movements of *Helen in Egypt*. It is the basis from which H.D. starts to build her “own LEGEND” which was so important for her as she repeatedly writes in *Tribute to Freud*. However, this process of revision and finding oneself is not exclusive to Helen. As the poem progresses the healing power of the feminine will embrace Achilles too, as he also needs to reconsider himself. Helen prays for him:

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let him forget
Amen, All-father,
let him forget. (HE, 12)
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Achilles starts to be disillusioned with the “Command” (*HE*, 52) and “to tire of or distrust the original oracle of the purely masculine ‘iron-ring whom Death made stronger’” (*HE*, 55). He will reach the understanding that being the “destroyer” also involves being the “destroyed” (*HE*, 27). Boundaries are again blurred by H.D. here. She deconstructs the binary opposition destroyer / destroyed, and reveals that the ruin surrounding the world of the epic is harmful to both parties in the war. There are no victors in this scenario, since the victor ends up as the victim too. In a culture that promotes destruction and annihilation with myths of victory, it is not surprising that “his very self was lost, / himself defeated” (*HE*, 27).

Within the syncretist strategy of H.D., the inclusion of Achilles in the revisionary process is necessary. Every character in the epic needs to unlearn what they have been taught under patriarchal rule so that the healing powers of the feminine that will embrace everybody can be accommodated. This seems to be H.D.’s ultimate message. But this is not a fixed and inherent message. On the contrary, it implies multiplicity and acceptance without destruction.
Throughout *Helen in Egypt* the two conflicting worlds of man and woman are constantly compared and contrasted. In H.D.'s view, the feminine force occupies a realm where peace and love reigns, whereas death, war, and destruction belong to the masculine realm. Helen, like H.D., is also aware that such a realm would be a better place for everyone. She thinks that "magic [is] greater than the trial of arms" (*HE*, 5), and goes on to compare the two worlds:

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does he remember
the unreality of war,
in this enchanted place?

his fortress and his tower
and his throne
were built for man, alone:

no echo or soft whisper
in those halls,
no iridescent sheen,

no iris-flower,
no sweep of strings,
no answering laughter,

but the trumpet's call ... (*HE*, 30-31)
```

In this section it is maleness that is described in terms of lack. In phallogocentric terms, it is the sexuality of the female which is defined in terms of absence and lack. But now H.D. refers to masculinity in terms of lack and underlines how it excludes everything that belongs to the feminine. However, the feeling in the
above section is that man is alone in his masculine tower, he excludes himself from life.

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. tells us that “Eros and Death, those were the chief subjects - in fact the only subjects - of the Professor’s eternal preoccupation” (*TF*, 103). H.D. is also interested in this opposition but takes it a step further. She clearly identifies Eros with the feminine and Death with the masculine. But she does not reinforce binary oppositions in her epic. Her revisionism does not simply consist of reversing the values and replacing one set with another. By blurring the divisions, she includes the masculine in her project as she brings the oppositions together in a syncretist tradition. She does not exclude masculinity, but strongly disagrees with the exclusion of femininity from its systems. This exclusion, in her view, ultimately resulted in the war and destruction of her time. H.D. has written many times that she abhorred war and that she saw a causal link between dominant patriarchal systems and war. She regarded war as utterly futile, as Helen says: “You may win a thousand wars / and not one Victory” (*HE*, 80). She regards war and the destruction that it involves as part of male territory.

so they fought, forgetting women,
hero to hero, sworn brother and lover,
and cursing Helen through eternity. (*HE*, 4)

When H.D. is describing Achilles’s position of power she uses vocabulary that expands her offensive on war. The “holocaust of Greeks” clearly carries Nazi overtones (*HE*, 5), and links the past with the present. Achilles is referred to as the “dictator with his select body-guard” who shares “the Command”. Also the terms “secret agreement”, “world leadership” and “allies” (*HE*, 51) reminds the reader of
the Second World War, as Friedman has pointed out.\footnote{Friedman, Susan Stanford, \textit{Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.}, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 259.} Perhaps the reason that H.D. acknowledged her epic as her "Cantos" was to highlight her position against fascism compared to Pound’s \textit{Cantos}. In H.D.’s opinion “the answers [will be] given / by the Writing”, not by killing (\textit{HE}, 38). Here H.D. again writes about the difference between the masculine and feminine worlds in terms of the Word against the Sword, a theme which was also dominant in her \textit{Trilogy}. There is no doubt in H.D.’s mind that the Word is mightier than the Sword.

The explanation of the patriarchal social structure, given by Achilles, is worth noting in this context. He says:

\begin{quote}
The Command was bequest from the past, 
from father to son, 
the Command bound past to the present 

and the present to aeons come, 
the Command was my father, my brother, 
my lover, my God ... (\textit{HE}, 61)
\end{quote}

This logic answers Achilles’s own question. He asks “what had happened? / was the command / a lure to destruction?” (\textit{HE}, 56) Questioning the existing Command is a good starting point for the process that Achilles goes through during the course of the epic. Gradually, he begins to distance himself from conventional attributes of maleness, and moves closer to a feminine understanding of the world. Achilles becomes a new man and he, “the new Mortal, / shedding his glory, / limped across the sand” (\textit{HE}, 10). This understanding comes through his getting closer to his mother, Thetis, “recalling, remembering, invoking / his sea-mother” (\textit{HE}, 14).
This revelation that Achilles has is very different from his understanding until now. In the tradition to which he belongs the female has always been treated as a sacrifice for the male cult: “the ships shall never leave Aulis, until a virgin is offered to Artemis” (HE, 87). H.D.’s vision of overcoming this fate is not to use the same destructive weapons of masculinity. In her view, the fight against the cult of destruction should not lead to more destruction. Her vision is based upon love and regeneration which she finds in the healing powers of the goddess:

if a woman fights,
she must fight by stealth,

with invisible gear;
no sword, no dagger, no spear
in a woman’s hands

can make wrong, right ... (HE, 97)

The idea is not to follow the futile path of male war, but base the defense on love and healing, otherwise, H.D. posits, this vicious cycle of war and death will be perpetuated and repeat itself forever. It is exigent to disrupt the existing order. However, the strategy should be drastically different. In Notes on Thought and Vision, H.D. gives an account of how the poet Lo-fu meditates on a branch of an apple tree in 184 AD. From the act of seeing, Lo-fu moves towards a visionary practice. He looks at the branch but does not touch it.\textsuperscript{12} This act is strikingly similar to Irigaray’s vision of the way forward when she is talking about Buddha gazing at the flower. She writes: “This contemplation is also a training in finding pleasure while respecting what does not belong to me. Indeed, Buddha contemplates the flower

without picking it. He gazes at what is other to him without uprooting it."¹³ So, the first step is to respect what is other to us and cherish the difference. This strategy is completely different from that of the male tradition, since patriarchy cannot tolerate difference and diversity to exist within its systems.

Once Helen comes to terms with her past, she is ready to move on in ‘Leuke’. The section opens with the determination of Helen to go through the process of reconstructing her identity in her own terms:

let them sing Helena for a thousand years,
let them name and re-name Helen,

I can not endure the weight of eternity,
they will never understand
how, a second time, I am free ... (HE, 110)

This section also sees the entrance of Theseus into the storyline. The character of Theseus has similarities to Sigmund Freud, who came to be a very important figure in H.D.’s life. She loved him dearly, and his influence in her life was immense as he helped her to come to terms with her bisexuality and overcome the writer’s block she had for years. Keeping these biographical facts in mind, the character Theseus, the healing therapist in Helen in Egypt, can be identified as Freud, the other healing therapist in H.D.’s life. He appears half way through the poem, consoling Helen with his gentle and comforting ways. In his character he combines wisdom and tenderness, respectively seen as male and female traits in traditional terms. In the following passage Theseus is talking to Helen when they meet while Helen is running away from the soldiers.

what cruel path have you trod?
these heavy thongs,
let me unclasp them;

did you too seek Persephone’s
drear icy way to death?
your feet are wounded

with this huntsman’s gear;
who wore these clumsy boots?
there- there - let the fire cheer you;

will you choose from the cedar-chest there,
your own fleece-lined shoes?
or shall I choose for you? (HE, 151-152)

As tender and ‘motherly’ as he is, Theseus is still under the influence of the traditional patriarchal thinking of which he is a part. When he is talking about his adventures “[t]he love stories, he tells us, have grown dim and distant, but the memory of the heroes, the Quest and the Argo is still vivid and inspiring” (HE, 149). Even though he is aware of the existence of love stories, the heroes seem to inspire him more. He also cannot help remarking that Helen’s “feet are wounded” (HE, 151), a comment which is repeated again by the narrator of the poem (HE, 153). Evidently, Theseus still sees Helen as a limping man, alluding to the ‘lack’ of female sexuality. The narrator, who could be read as the voice of H.D., also adds that Theseus laughs at Helen “and her borrowed ‘gear’” (HE, 153). It is as if Helen needs an extension to be complete within herself. Freud was deeply preoccupied with penis envy, and believed that women struggled to obtain a substitute for it all their lives. H.D.
describes another incident in *Tribute to Freud* that illustrates Freud’s views on the
issue. H.D. writes:

The wall with the exit door is behind my head, and
seated against that wall, tucked into the corner, in the
three-sided niche made by the two walls and the back
of the couch, is the Professor. He will sit there quietly,
like an old owl in a tree. He will say nothing at all or he
will lean forward and talk about something that is
apparently unrelated to the progression or unfolding of
our actual dream-content or thought association. He
will shoot out an arm, sometimes somewhat
alarmingly, to stress a point. Or he will, always making
an ‘occasion’ of it, get up and say, ‘Ah - now - we
must celebrate this,’ and proceed to the elaborate ritual
- selecting lighting - until finally he seats himself again,
while from the niche rises the smoke of burnt incense,
the smoldering of his mellow, fragrant cigar. ... Length,
breadth, thickness, the shape, the scent, the feel of
things". (*TF*, 22-23)

As Nora Crow Jaffe says, “[s]ometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes
it isn’t.” In Freud’s case it certainly isn’t. Although H.D. never confronted Freud on
his views, she clearly was aware of his subtle ways of alluding to penis envy. The
traces of this preoccupation is evident in the character of Theseus in *Helen in Egypt*.

Helen, however, like H.D. and her silence about certain issues with Freud,
will not argue with Theseus. The guiding narrator of the poem posits that "Helen
must be re-born, that is, her soul must return wholly to her body. Her emotional
experience has been ‘too great a suspense to endure’” (*HE*, 162).

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14Jaffe, Nora Crow, ‘‘She herself is the writing’: Language and Sexual Identity in H.D.’’, *Literature and Medicine*, 1985, vol. 4, p. 103.
Woman’s relationship to her own body has been a very important issue for feminist philosophy. Always described in terms of lack, woman has been regarded as a lacking man. Within such a line of thought the unique bodily experience of the female is bound to be marginalised. So for Helen’s “suspense” to come to an end, she must try to discover herself starting from the body. Only in this way “[t]he female ‘all’ will come” with all its multiplicity.\(^{15}\) Woman will be able return to the maternal body and discover it not in relation to the Phallus but in its own right.

Helen is also determined that she should continue in her own way. She knows that she must find a location in which she can begin to imagine herself as a subject. Otherwise, the “flame-tipped”, “destroying arrow of Eros” will destroy her as well (\textit{HE}, 183). She says:

\begin{quote}
I can not go on, on, on
telling the story
of the Fall of Troy ... \textit{(HE}, 153)
\end{quote}

Helen is not affected by the earlier remarks of Theseus. Like H.D. and Freud, Helen and Theseus have a relationship that is comforting for Helen and her request from Theseus is for him to understand her. She says “there is a voice within me, / listen - let it speak for me.” \textit{(HE}, 175). She wants to be understood in her own terms and not to be circumscribed within alien definitions. She desires to speak with her own voice that comes from within her body. Eventually, Theseus will be the one who will help Helen in her re-birth.

\begin{quote}
there is nothing to fear,
you are neither there nor here,
\end{quote}

\(^{15}\)Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips’, p. 75.
but wavering
like a Psyche
with half-dried wings. \(HE, 166\)

Theseus, although more androgynous than belonging to any gender, exists in
relation to Helen in this epic. The limelight is always on Helen, her search and her
meditations. As Theseus says, Helen is:

- beyond all other, the Child,
- the child in the father,
- the child of the mother,
- the child-mother, yourself ... \(HE, 187\)

Here Helen is represented as a woman who is giving birth to and mothering
her own self. Theseus cannot participate in this process apart from providing comfort
for Helen. Finally, towards the end of Leuke he reveals the secret and shows her the
way to reconciliation. His speech eliminates the opposites, and brings polarities closer
together:

Thus, thus, thus,
as day, night,
as wrong, right,
as dark, light,
as water, fire,
as earth, air,
as storm, calm,
as fruit, flower,
as life, death,
as death, life;
the rose deflowered,
the rose re-born;

Helen in Egypt,
Helen at home,
Helen in Hellas forever. (HE, 190)

After this point, the reader sees a self-confident Helen who is ready to go on with her quest. She will "see further", "renew the Quest" and "read here / in my crystal, the Writing" (HE, 205).

The third and final section of Helen in Egypt, ‘Eidolon’ presents Helen with more challenges. In line with the tone of the whole poem, this section does not have clear-cut answers. The moment we think that Helen has reached her understanding, she is thrown into more confusion. Her task is not easy. But at least she knows that reality lies "in another dimension" (HE, 83, 112). This a dimension where the power of speech is not denied to women and where they have some say in their destiny. At the moment, however, they "have no choice in the matter of the already-written drama or script" (HE, 230). This is what Irigaray describes as “the order prescribed by the masculine”.16 To be able to disrupt this order, Helen concentrates on her own experience. Her own story will consist of:

the million personal things,
things remembered, forgotten,

remembered again, assembled
and re-assembled in different order
as thoughts and emotions ... (HE, 289)

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16Irigaray, This Sex, p. 81.
She will gather the scattered experience that has always been considered to be trivial and unimportant. H.D. questions the traditional understanding of what constitutes value.

... none of these came into the story,

it was epic, herdic and it was far from a basket a child upset
and the spools that rolled to the floor ... (HE, 289)

Such an exclusion of female experience leaves woman a stranger to herself, and leads to her being defined in relation to the dominant male norm. Irigaray is very sensitive on this issue and urges women to search for their own identity and define it themselves when she writes: “How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don’t need to be produced by them, named by them, made sacred or profane by them.”17 In other words, woman has to be defined only in relation to her own self, not in relation to man who is other to her. She has to distance herself from supposed ‘facts’ imposed on her and must “break through the legend” (HE, 259).

Helen is not the only party who suffered under the dominant patriarchal system. Achilles is harmed as well. In one of the major scenes of Helen in Egypt, where he attacks and tries to strangle her, the reader sees a man who turns violent when he is ‘threatened’ by a woman. It could also be argued that Achilles regards Helen’s search for her self as a threat to his masculinity. Helen asks herself over and over again what causes Achilles’s anger:

... was this his anger,
that something forgotten or lost,

and he only remembered it,
remembered and wanted it back,
when it was gone? (HE, 282-283)

So, Achilles feels that his identity is threatened along with his sexual potency. Such an intimidation is not acceptable within the culture to which Achilles belongs, thus he has to act in the manner he believes to be right. Again within this culture we read how Achilles’s worship of his mother Thetis (HE, 284) is transformed into fear of his mother (HE, 271), and the mother’s name becomes “unspeakable” for him (HE, 253). Freud, no doubt, would argue that Achilles is afraid of his mother because of her castrated genitals. This line of thought is far from beneficial for a man whose life is also ruled by patriarchy and therefore war and destruction. H.D. says “... with the ‘lure of war’, the hero forgot ‘the magic of little things’” (HE, 286). But at the end of Helen in Egypt, Achilles will emerge as the “New Mortal” (HE, 300) for whom Helen says “we are One, / not for each other” (HE, 269). They are One, but they are also autonomous. Helen and Achilles come to understand that male and female are part of one, and the female does not exist for the male. Achilles and Helen are human beings. With this statement, patriarchal binary oppositions, in which the male term invariably obscures the female term, do not apply any more. As Irigaray writes, “[a]n encounter between a woman and a man may reach a dimension of universality if it takes place with each being faithful to their gender”.\textsuperscript{18} To this, H.D. adds that the “brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18}Irigaray, \textit{i love to you}, p. 143.
Helen in Egypt ends with the reference to “a memory forgotten” (HE, 304). I would argue that here H.D. is referring to a pre-Oedipal stage where the maternal bond has not been severed yet in order to achieve entry into the symbolic order. This is the memory of the feminine that has been erased and ultimately effaced. H.D. tries to recover the feminine principle which she believes to be healing. This is the “Message” (HE, 303) Helen is after. As was pointed out earlier, there are no straightforward conclusions in the poem. It does not provide us with answers. Helen is involved in a continuous process of becoming. She holds on to her particulars as a woman, and her universals as a human.

Helen in Egypt is a myth of constant exploration, and an open mind. These are issues that are alien to patriarchal myths as they claim to be universal and unchanging. The subject of H.D.’s epic is neither heroism nor romance, but rather healing, regeneration, and respect. This is the secret H.D. hands to her readers.
Chapter Five

“What girl ever flourished in such company?”: The Early Poetry of Sylvia Plath

[Plath] lays bare the forms of psychic investment which lie, barely concealed, behind the processes through which a culture - Western literary culture - evaluates and perpetuates itself.¹

Sylvia Plath’s mythmaking differs from H.D.’s in a very important aspect. H.D. is all embracing and works in a grander scale with her use of classical mythology and epic style writing, whereas Plath is more self-centered. Her mythology could be regarded to be more a myth of the self. Although Plath too wrote some poetry using classical mythological figures, she was ultimately more involved with the experiences of the woman in modern society. However, they both wrote within the marginalized position of women in our culture and their identity as women is crucial to their work.

The story of Sylvia Plath attracts one immediately after becoming acquainted with the poet and the controversy surrounding her. She grasps her readers and unknowingly we find ourselves being subjective and judgmental. The “feminist icon”² of our times, as she is sometimes referred to, has the status equivalent of a star, and every detail of her life is sought after frivolously. It cannot be denied that the suicide of this talented and beautiful woman at the age of thirty played a major role in

achieving and adding the mystery to her world-wide fame. Even though her poetry is still to be fully understood, her place in the canon as a significant forerunner of women’s poetry is secured.

In this chapter, I will examine how Sylvia Plath deals with patriarchal myths of womanhood in her early poetry. While she seems to reinforce these myths on the surface, she also seems to be very uncomfortable with them. Throughout her life and her work Plath tried to locate herself in a position of *in-between*, a place where not only she could be regarded as a ‘normal’ woman and hence, respected, but also a space where she could perform her art. To achieve this she struggled to conform to dominant patriarchal myths of womanhood, trying to become accepted, however untruthful such a stance might be. This division will be dealt with in her poetry, as well as her subversion of binary oppositions. Plath wavers between these separate positions (the subversive poet and the successful mother / wife / daughter) quite strongly. At certain times her dedication to both seems to be equally strong. However, I would argue that even though she tries to subscribe to myths of womanhood, in the final analysis, she ends up subverting them from within with her treatment of myths from a revisionary perspective.

A biographical approach to Sylvia Plath’s poetry at certain times seems inevitable. Perhaps because of the manner of her death she has acquired a special status in the literary world. The interest in her life has been so great that she herself has become a myth. Her life has also been used to endorse existing myths about the woman poet, that these terms are mutually exclusive. We cannot pretend that the life of the poet does not influence her poetry but in the course of this study I will try not to fall into the trap of justifying all her career and life in terms of and as a preparation
to her suicide, since reading her poetry with the intention of reading her life leads to a patronising understanding of her work. Even though it is a fact that she suffered from periods of depression throughout her life, there were also times when she was bursting with vitality and optimism. As will be seen in certain poems, especially the bee sequence, she cherished womanhood and rebirth, her grasp of life was fierce and she wanted to be "a rejoicing woman".\(^3\) She was not an escapist and accepted that "[t]he constant struggle in mature life, I think, is to accept the necessity of tragedy and conflict, and not to try to escape to some falsely simple solution that does not include these more sombre complexities" (\textit{LH}, 202). This outlook, however, did not haunt her as Ted Hughes wrote: "It is impossible that anyone could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than she was."\(^4\) No amount of research will uncover what went through her mind when she decided to go into the kitchen and turn the gas on. Maybe it was as her mother Aurelia Plath says at the end of \textit{Letters Home}: "Her physical energies had been depleted by illness, anxiety and overwork, and although she had for so long managed to be gallant and equal to the life-experience, some darker day than usual had temporarily made it seem impossible to pursue" (\textit{LH}, 500).

Two major trends have been influential in the criticism of Plath's work since her death in 1963. The first is to read her poetry to find out more about her life. This is the underlying motive of the plentiful studies that base their reading of Plath's poetry on her biography. Unfortunately this approach leads to another kind of


determinism, namely biographical, presuming that Plath totally lacked creative authority of distancing herself. This approach labels her a ‘confessional’ poet. Is it acceptable to conclude that “[h]er works did not only come to us posthumously. They were written posthumously: between suicides”?\(^5\) I do not agree that Plath’s entire life and work was an “extended suicide note”.\(^6\)

The second trend is to treat Plath as the frustrated victim of an era when feminism was not around to show a way out. Her death coincides with the publication of the influential *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in USA in 1963, from which Plath could not benefit. Taking Plath’s pathology as the *raison d’être* of her life and work pushes us into a polemic of guilt. The whole issue becomes one of finding out who is to blame, one which I think is fruitless. The only point such an approach proves is the impossibility of objectivity once again. One of the recent contributions to Plath bibliography, a patronising one in my opinion, Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame*, illustrates a combination of these two trends.\(^7\) However, Stevenson’s point of view regarding the feminist readings of Plath’s work is very critical. As is the case in many instances in the book, for Stevenson everything has a very simple and straightforward answer: a feminist point of view towards Plath leads to vandalizing her gravestone. Throughout the writing of her book, which caused her deep anguish as she declares in her introduction, she tells her readers about ‘facts’ and ‘truth’, dismissing any other possible points of view as ‘untruth’. Is this not yet another way of circumscribing Plath?

One issue that all Plath's critics would agree with, I think, is the importance of writing in the poet's life. Through her writing Plath attempted to conform to the dominant myths and used them to create an identity, a point of reference for herself. She used writing "as a proof of my identity", and felt that writing alone could give her "a name, a meaning". She also saw a clear connection between her writing and her health. In her *Journal* she wrote "Writing is my health" (*J*, 235), and "[m]y health is making stories, poems, novels" (*J*, 165). When her writing failed her images of sickness, barrenness, disintegration, even death began to threaten her, she felt "oddly barren" (*J*, 319). This conviction is overtly evident throughout her *Journal*: "I felt I couldn't write because she [her mother] would appropriate it. Is that all? Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don't love me, love my writing and love me for my writing. It is also much more: a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience" (*J*, 280). In Ted Hughes's words, Plath experienced "a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one". Through her writing she was all powerful and controlled her own life. In a much quoted early *Journal* entry written when she was seventeen she explains her ambition: "I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God'" (*LH*, 40). It was the naive dream of a young girl who vainly assumed that she could be everything she wanted to be, satisfying both herself and the establishment she belonged to. However, I think during these early years of her life, her belief that her writing was her own, that she had complete power over it, was quite dominant. Her wish was to

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appropriate and internalize male power which she thought would serve her in the quest for validation.

Without victimising Sylvia Plath, one should be aware of the social conditions surrounding her. She was brought up in 1950s America, a society dominated by conservatism and clearly defined paths for young women to follow. In such an environment, the role of women was also very clearly defined. The desire of every girl, no matter how educated she was, was the security of marriage and domesticity. Betty Friedan sums up the general feeling of the era when she is referring to a fellowship she had won:

I came to a frightening dead end in my own vision of the future. ... I felt the future closing in- and could not see myself stretching beyond college. ... I had begun to know who I was and what I wanted to do. I could not go back now. I could not go home again, to the life of my mother and the women of my town. ... But now that the time had come to take the deciding step, I suddenly did not know what I wanted to be.10

She eventually rejects the fellowship, succumbing to unseen pressure to conform. These feelings were felt acutely by the gifted poet Plath. The following passage from The Bell Jar discloses how confused she was:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig

was a famous poet and another fig Ee Gee, the amazing editor... .

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."[11]

The heroine of the book, Esther Greenwood, a thinly disguised Plath who, along with the women of her generation, had this feeling of being paralysed about the future direction of their lives. The “fat purple” figs in the quotation above are described in terms of female fecundity, and Esther is sitting in the “crotch” of this tree, suggesting that she is within the tree, like the womb. Hence, her femaleness seems to hold her down. The speaker knows that she is capable of reaching for the fruit, however, the necessity of losing others when one is chosen forces her to delay her decision while starving to death. In such an environment, intellectual achievement and sexual fulfillment seemed incompatible for a woman. According to a friend of Plath at Smith College on their graduation day, their roles were described as “wives and mothers”.12 On the surface they did not object to such a destiny. Throughout her life, Plath was torn apart by her desire to be a career woman and to be ‘ordinary’. The use of the term ‘ordinary’ in the sociological conditions of the time was very straightforward; to conform, no matter how vicarious, was the route to happiness and fulfilment for a woman. Plath’s fears that she would not be able to find a man, and

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write her poetry at the same time occupied her thoughts. In an entry dated 27 April 1953 in her *Journal*, she writes of her dread that she will be the only one left unmarried while “everyone else is very married and happy”:

Let’s face it, I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren’t many around, I often unconsciously manufacture my own. And then, I retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward value is tangible and accepted. I really do not think deeply, really deeply. I want a romantic nonexistent hero. (*J*, 78)

At one point in her life, when Plath was doubting her ability to bear children, she describes this scene that seems as if it jumped out of the pages of a fairy tale book:

I want a house of our children, little animals, flowers, vegetables fruits. I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me. ...I have come with great pain and effort, to the point where my desires and emotions and thoughts center around what the normal woman’s center around, and what do I find? Barrenness. (*J*, 310) [*my emphasis*]

Plath has struggled to be an ‘ordinary’ woman and conform to dominant patriarchal myths of womanhood. Myths of what constitutes a ‘normal’ woman, however, are ideological constructs, and they circumscribe woman. Plath admits that to follow such a strategy of conformity was a conscious decision on her part which required great effort. Hence, it did not come ‘naturally’. At this point in her life when she had a husband that she adored, not being able to have a child caused her much
anxiety, since according to the rules of the society a woman without a child could not possibly be fulfilled. Motherhood is the ultimate goal of a woman's entire life, and the barrenness Plath finds within herself is very painful. This blow to her femininity will inevitably lead to punishment; she will lose the foremost prize - her husband: "How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren woman?" (J, 311) In such a society the paradox is the assumption that these stereotypical roles came naturally and if one failed to fulfill the requirements this was a symptom of abnormality. The same logic applies to the era of *The Bell Jar* regarding the success of a woman in business life. In the novel Jay Cee, the editor of the magazine *Mademoiselle*, is presented as a successful career woman. Plath's choice of name for her editor is interesting, as it is an androgynous name. Inevitably Jay Cee is unattractive, and Esther cannot combine the thought of a career and full sexuality in her mind: "I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it" (*BJ*, 80). So, the woman can choose only a single fig from the tree, a necessity that she was obviously not happy with. Plath has a double-edged attitude. At certain times she is everything the society asks for from a woman, at other times the effort she uses to conform, and more importantly her anger, is obvious:

*Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it? It is (omission)… all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images. I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don’t want to. (J, 271)*
Pretension, wearing a mask to suit the occasion is a strategy for Plath which she employed in different stages of her career. For a good part of her life Plath tried to wear her mask gracefully. Only in her last poems can she be seen discarding this mask and writing from the core of her being. This involved not hiding her feelings even though these feelings were not permitted for the woman, such as her anger and violent feelings. Even as early as 1952, when she was with a friend and overcome by tears, she wrote in her *Journal* about her desire to unmask herself: “There, on the bed, she touched the soft spot in the hard, frozen, acrid little core in me, and I could cry. God, it was good to let go, let the tight mask fall off, and the bewildered, chaotic fragments pour out” (*J*, 64).

To articulate rage against the established traditions of what is expected of women in society is disruptive on Plath’s part. She is revisionary because she is willing to criticise the deeply rooted ideological assumptions of the society. As Alicia Ostriker has underlined “the articulation of female anger, like female body language, is culturally taboo, and a woman who breaks this taboo does so at her own peril”.13 Her frustration stemmed from wanting *both* a career / an intellectual life and to be a wife / mother. She was angry, but also confused; “sitting here as if brainless wanting both a baby and a career” (*J*, 295). She routes this anger towards the patriarchy surrounding her everyday life:

> I have hated men because I felt them physically necessary; hated them because they would degrade me, by their attitude: women shouldn’t think, shouldn’t be unfaithful (but their husbands may be), must stay home,

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cook, wash. Many men need a woman like this. (J, 290)

These were her feelings in 1958. However, as early as 1950 she was dissatisfied with the prescribed female roles. In an early entry in her Journal she wrote of her struggle to locate a different subject position than the one allotted to her by patriarchy and the deep unrest it caused:

I am jealous of men - a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life - his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent.

(J, 35)

For Plath, the biological reality of her femaleness was a constant source of anguish because of the restrictions that were imposed on her. However, in the words above she also seems to be uncomfortable with her feelings towards this position. She regards her envy almost as evil, and feels guilty of her jealousy. Once again, she tries to make believe to satisfy her need to conform. Plath strongly felt that her biology was her destiny. In another early entry she wrote: “Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity” (J, 30). It is interesting to note that Plath does not seem to be distinguishing between femaleness and femininity. The two notions are inseparable in her eyes.
In a 1956 poem ‘Tale of a Tub’ (CP, 24-25), the woman’s discomfort concerning her naked body is explored by the poet. She feels a stranger within herself and experiences fear of the unknown: “the stranger in the lavatory mirror / puts on a public grin, repeats our name / but scrupulously reflects the usual terror” (CP, 24). Towards the end of the poem, her horror and embarrassment is overwhelming. She feels the need to cover herself and once again put on a mask to hide her angry, and perhaps violent self. What she uses to hide out is the myths that are the products of long established traditions. She has to pretend that she fits perfectly into the myths.

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge  
the fabrication of some cloth to cover  
such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:  
each day demands we create our whole world over,  
disguising the constant horror in a coat  
of many-colored fictions; we mask our past  
in the green of eden, pretend future’s shining fruit  
can sprout from the navel of this present waste. (CP, 25)

Plath’s conviction that she must fit into the existing hierarchy is the product of her exclusive identification of power with masculinity and the possibility of the female existence only in relation to the male. She is indoctrinated by a patriarchal ideology of power. In this rationale the binary opposition of male / female also insinuates a conceptual clash of mind / body limiting the female desire to her reproductive functions. So, for Plath, the struggle to find a common ground to be able to enjoy her creative potential and her female sexuality is deeply rooted and draining her energies. In other words, as Irigaray argues:

a woman’s love is defined as familial and civil duty.  
She has no right to singular love nor to love for herself.  
She is thus unable to love but is to be subjugated to
love and reproduction. She has to be sacrificed and to
sacrifice herself to this task, at the same time
disappearing as this or that woman who is alive at the
present time. And she must disappear as desire, too,
unless it is abstract: the desire to be wife and mother.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus for Plath, as for every other woman, the universal is defined by the
universal of man. Her own reality has to be reduced within the limits prescribed by
patriarchy, has to be a fragment of it. Her singularity, therefore, cannot be articulated.
Self-sacrifice becomes a part of her identity. By the time Plath went to Cambridge
and met Ted Hughes she was determined to tailor herself according to the prescribed
notions of the society and be like, not different, from other women. The cost of trying
to be her own self must have been high. Even so she channelled her energies into
achieving what she thought was the only satisfactory way of life for a woman.

In ‘Two Sisters of Persephone’, written in 1956, this notion manifests itself
strongly. Here Plath’s desire to assimilate the ethos of her society so that she could
be happy is clearly evident. The poem explores the idea that a woman needs to be
loved by a man to be fulfilled. One of the girls in the poem who “works problems on /
A mathematical machine” is the intellectual one, whereas the other is loved by a man.
The relationship between them is “a duet of shade and light”. The first girl is in a
“dark wainscoted room” and what she is struggling to do is a “barren enterprise”
which seems to consume her. The latter, I understand, is surrounded by light, she is
“bronzed as earth” under the blaze of the male sun.

... Lulled
Near a bed of poppies,

\textsuperscript{14}Irigaray, Luce, \textit{i love to you: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History}, Martin, Alison (trans.),
She sees how their red silk flare
O petaled blood
Burns open to sun’s blade.
On that green altar

Freely become sun’s bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor’s pride,
She bears a king. Turned bitter

And sallow as any lemon,
The other, wry virgin to the last,
Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman. (CP, 31-32)

The woman who cannot be loved by a man, become his bride, and bear him (preferably male) children is “flesh laid waste”, her life has been squandered without any worthwhile end product. The poem derides any intellectual activity of other women and elevates the traditional feminine principles to almost a sacred status. The prescribed dichotomy in Plath’s mind is one of fulfillment and waste. At the time, her conviction that being productive within the stereotypical norms was the only way forward was so strong that she confided in a college friend, according to whom: “She [Plath] had decided that her husband would be a very tall man and she spoke, half-jokingly, of producing a race of superchildren, as superlatively large as they were intelligent. The children, she predicted, would all be boys.”

However, beneath such conformity there is another scenario at play. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, “female authors dramatise their own self-division, their

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desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them."\textsuperscript{16} These two positions, of acceptance and rejection, are mutually exclusive, and present themselves as contradictions when Plath's work is considered as a whole. Her poetry and her personal writings, letters and journals, illustrate this point. It is as if two different women are the authors of these documents. Yet another binary opposition, acceptance / rejection, the will to accept versus the need to reject, point to the problematic relationship of Plath as a woman poet to the patriarchal establishment.

It has been argued that "Sylvia Plath has been portrayed as the champion of feminist causes, even though in her own life she was anything but a feminist."\textsuperscript{17} Another very striking view, which I cannot pass without quoting, is from David Holbrook:

A phenomenological analysis suggests that, while knowing well outwardly that she was a woman, Sylvia Plath could scarcely find within herself anything that was feminine at all. She is, perhaps, the most masculine poetess who ever wrote, yet, since masculinity requires the inclusion of the anima, she is not that either: she is sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists.\textsuperscript{18}

It seems that Plath, and in Holbrook's case all of us who are reading her poetry, are doomed to be labelled 'feminists' and failed women who had to turn to feminism because of the incapacity to be 'normal' women, and hence, aspire to masculinity. However, there can be little argument that Plath explored her own femininity and thought about patriarchal stereotyping. The contradictions she displays

(as any human being does) should be accepted, and the impossibility of consistency and objectivity should be understood, and move beyond the patronising attitude. These contradictions are crucial as they are an important step in undoing binary oppositions on which patriarchal thought so heavily relies.

One point that must be concentrated on is her faith and conviction in the power and ability of writing to transform herself and maybe other women. She was interested, at least at certain periods of her life, in a shared experience with other women, as she writes in her *Journal*: “I must move myself first, before I move others—a woman famous among women” (*J*, 259). For Plath, her writing meant power:

> Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower,: they like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. (*J*, 271)

The reason Plath is considered to be revisionary within the context of this study is that she was ready to cross the boundaries and enter into areas considered to be taboo under the patriarchal system. She was totally conscious of being in a female body and was willing to examine the established norms through her writing which was sacred for her. The fury that is evident in some of her poems is that of a woman in despair. Such a project would be greeted with hostility, especially in the atmosphere of her life time. Even so she is one of the poets who eventually dares to venture beyond the established norms. Plath acutely felt that she was standing in this no man’s land where one is both an insider and an outsider simultaneously. Such a
confusion is ever present in her poems written prior to her final outburst. In *The Bell Jar*, this position is clearly evident: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at the same time, then I am neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (*BJ*, 76).

Plath was ready to venture into territories which are not traditionally considered to be part of the female realm. This strategy is one of unsettling binary oppositions, introducing contradictions into the system.

As Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous argue, the prescribed binary oppositions constitute the foundation of patriarchal order. Therefore the dissatisfaction of women with the existing language is understandable. In an early poem, ‘Sonnet: To Time’, published in the ‘Juvenilia’ section of her *Collected Poems*, Plath’s conflicting thoughts about sex roles within society are manifested.\(^\text{19}\) This was written at a time in Plath’s career when she saw herself as an apprentice, and was working very hard on the structure, rhyme, and imagery of her poetry. This meant that she was following in the footsteps of the great masters, “the god-eyed tall-minded ones” (*J*, 76). Even so, this crafted early poem displays her discomfort with the clearly defined and dictated female stereotyping.

But outside the diabolic steel of this
Most plastic-windowed city, I can hear
The lone wind raving in the gutter, his
Voice crying exclusion in my ear.

So cry for the pagan girl left picking olives
Beside a sunblue sea, and mourn the flagon
Raised to toast a thousand kings, for all gives

Sorrow; weep for the legendary dragon.

Time is a great machine of iron bars
That drains eternally the milk of stars. (CP, 311)

The central conflict in the poem is plainly evident. In the generic modernist city of destruction the wind, devilish and furious, could be seen as embodying patriarchal rule. He has rejected the speaker who I read as female. The woman is excluded by this roaming wind and left abandoned. The male (machine, iron) and female (milk, star) imagery in final couplet of the poem leaves the female powerless and drained of her life-giving energies by the great Time described in virile terms.

As Kristeva argues, our notion of reality depends upon the interests of the dominant power, that is patriarchy. Our values are determined by the hierarchy within which they exist, and through language these notions become real and true for us. This imperative exclusion of the female is Plath’s theme in ‘Snakecharmer’ (1957). The poem starts with the creation of a world:

As the gods began one world, and man another,
So the snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere

(CP, 79)

In this creation the speaker has no place. The world that has been created is an exclusively male world. Here the snake charmer manifests its ever forceful phallic power and rules with “his snakehood and his might” within his “snakedom” (CP, 79). The female poet has to abide by the rules of this “snake rooted” patriarchal mind (CP, 79). The utterance of the female has to be shaped “around his songs”, her creativity revolves around this father figure. However, as powerful as he is, the snake
charmer does not have a solid foundation: “He pipes a place to stand on, but no rocks, / No floor: a wave of flickering grass tongues // Supports his foot.” Even so, in his arrogance when “yawns // Consume this piper and he tires of music”, everything under his domain comes to a standstill. Thus the speaker’s needs and wishes become secondary to the will of the snakecharmer.

In ‘Magi’ (1960), Plath explores the power relations between the sexes. She introduced the poem as follows: “Abstractions, by definition are withdrawn from life and formulated in despite of life’s minute and vital complexities. In this poem ‘Magi’, I imagine the great absolutes of the philosophers gathered around the crib of a newborn baby girl who is nothing but life.” In the opening lines of the poem she gives the description of patriarchal logos.

The abstracts hover like dull angels:
Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye
Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
Snow, chalk or suchlike. They’re
The real thing all right: the Good, the True -

Salutary and pure as boiled water,
Loveless as the multiplication table.
While the child smiles into thin air. (CP, 148)

These abstractions have distinct negative connotations. Their “ethereal” faces are heavenly, but they might also have anaesthetic properties. They are dull, lifeless, and out of touch with material reality. They might be pure but they do not have any

love in them to give. The basic principles of patriarchy have gathered around the crib of the baby girl, and they are getting ready to impose their destructive and deathly logic on the vitality of the female. The central conflict of the poem is between the Fathers of patriarchal Western philosophy, whose truth is not to be questioned, and the baby girl representing a female economy trying to survive in such an oppressive environment. However, she does not have much chance of avoiding “the heavy notion of Evil” (CP, 148) being attached to her womanhood, a label which will be with her throughout her life.

The only property defined in material, not theoretical, terms in the poem is “Love the mother of milk”, who is also attending this gathering around the crib. However, as “these papery godfolk” with their cold white faces “mistake their star”, her presence becomes of secondary importance. Female subjectivity becomes an impossibility. Yet again, Plath attacks the value systems of patriarchy, and displaces the guiding star of patriarchal logos. In the poem the female principle is valorised over the male with its healing and life enhancing properties. As will be seen, Plath was deeply concerned about the political issues of her time. She attended protest marches and had strong opinions. She linked destruction and war with patriarchy, although not as strongly as H.D. did. The “terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military”21 scared her. Still, she believed that writing poetry could play a part in changing people’s lives: “I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far - among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescription of a

doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime.” This combination of her belief in the power of writing, and her unhappiness within the existing norms is why Plath is a revisionary poet. She was aware of the impossibility of female subjectivity defined within the dominant patriarchal myths of womanhood. As she writes in the final line of 'Magi', which could be read as a call for transformation: “What girl ever flourished in such company?” (CP, 148)

The dominant themes in Sylvia Plath’s early poetry are dealt by the poet in quite timid terms, as was discussed in the previous chapter. These themes continue to preoccupy Plath, but as she matures in her work, she becomes more daring and begins to venture into areas which are not traditionally deemed to be feminine. In particular, myths about non-violent woman are explored forcefully in her poems.

In a letter to her mother dated 29 April 1956, just before her marriage to Ted Hughes, Plath wrote:

I know that within a year I shall publish a book of 33 poems which will hit the critics violently in some way or another. Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine; they are strong and full and rich - not quailing and whining like Teasdale, or simple lyrics like Millay; they are working, sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said...

In her early years of writing Plath felt ambivalent about her identity as a poet. This ambiguity was due to the fact of her being a woman and a poet at the same time, as the two are considered not to be totally compatible and poetry did not fall into women’s domain. This was the perception of Plath at the time. It was only later when

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she crossed the boundary and threw away her restraints that her “blood jet” (CP, 270) poetry came through and really did hit the critics violently.

When Plath’s poetry, prose, and journals are read as a whole, it can be seen that they complement each other and move towards the revelation of a multiple and fragmented identity. Her project of challenging the traditional attributes of the woman poet led to her exploration of the realities of her femininity that would have made the presumed respectability of her era very uncomfortable. Progressively, she became more and more outspoken and ventured further. In her poetry there is the hatred, anger, and grief of the woman who will not be silenced and is striving to articulate feminine experience in all its multiplicity.

The similarities between Plath and the hysterical woman described by Irigaray are instantly evident in this context. Irigaray writes: “[w]hat she ‘suffers,’ what she ‘lusts for,’ even what she takes pleasure in,’ all take place upon another stage, in relation to already codified representations.”2 The experience of the woman cannot be represented in relation to herself but in relation to already existing patterns encoded within the society. The reality we perceive is already preconditioned and excludes the feminine. This is the struggle of the woman poet who tries to drag the unrepresentable within the realm of representation. Plath’s writing also strives to build and represent her fluid and multiform identity as a woman poet. This means exploring the feelings of the woman including anger, rage, aggression and hate which are not allowed to be expressed by women and not deemed feminine by patriarchal thought. As Irigaray argues, women suffer from “drives without any possible

representatives and representations."³ Even though Plath explodes the prescribed myths of femininity and undermines the monosexuality of patriarchal culture in *Ariel*, her earlier poetry, as was discussed in the previous chapter, reflects her ever-present discomfort. In this section I will discuss how Plath tries to explore these unrepresentable drives in herself through her poetry.

I think it is important to discuss how Plath becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the masculine world she lives in, as reflected in her poetry. She starts to present masculinity in inferior terms, as if she gave up on her fairy tale ideals mentioned in the earlier chapter. She tries to venture further than the available myths, to see through the so-called realities of the self. Plath is a revisionary poet in this sense because she is ready to enter and explore her own rage, anguish, and desire. What comes through in her poetry is a fragmented and ambiguous self, quite contradictory at times. The same poet who feels frustrated in certain lines also feels powerful liberated in others.

In the poem ‘Poems, Potatoes’⁴, written in 1958, Plath explores her experience of frustration and limitation:

The word, defining, muzzles; the drawn line
Ousts mistier peers and thrives, murderous,
In establishments which imagined lines

Can only haunt. Sturdy as potatoes,
Stones, without conscience, word and line endure,
Given an inch. (*CP*, 106)

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The poem as a whole sounds quite restrained. It is very different from the poems of *Ariel* which possess a sense of freedom. But when the reader takes a closer look and concentrates on individual words, then the underlying theme emerges. The unwritten story of the female is trying to be heard and recognized in the poem. The poet attacks “the word” (always deemed to be masculine) which is responsible for the murder of the “[u]npoemed, unpictured” feminine and feels haunted by the imaginary lines that circumscribe her. Language (the word), through which we structure our perceptions of reality is in an exclusively male domain. Woman, as defined by masculine terms, is included in this domain only as an the article to be possessed and exchanged. She lacks a home (a language) where she can feel secure. Instead she finds herself struggling to conform to the perceptions of reality that are totally out of tune with her own.

Around the same time ‘Poems Potatoes’ were written, Plath made the following entry in her Journal:

I, sitting here as if brainless wanting both a baby and a career but god knows what if it isn’t writing. What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing ... and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-dam fancy-facade of numb dumb wordage.”

*(J, 295)*

The problem of meaningless words is evident here as well. Plath seems to be very uncomfortable with the fact that she cannot express her true feelings with the means available to her. The “wordage” she must use is “numb” and “dumb”,
therefore she is feeling imprisoned. She is trying to think of a radical action (inner murder, prison break) to break free and find her own voice.

This sense of being blocked and circumscribed by the masculine values surrounding her is frequent in Plath's poetry. Over and over again she writes about the effort she has to make to conform to the demands of patriarchal society, so that she could reach a compromise. Her representation of masculinity moved from relatively static figures of power, which are barren and lifeless, to more and more aggressive, violent, and destructive figures. As the figure of statis, she introduces Colossus to us early in her poetry in 'Letter to a Purist'. She refers to him as "That grandiose colossus who / Stood astride" (CP, 36). This figure emerges again in the 1958 poem 'The Colossus' (CP, 129-130) as an extended metaphor for the marginalization of women within patriarchal culture and language, and the conflicting feelings this position caused in her. At first glance the speaker seems to be unwillingly defeated by this huge statue. She "crawl[s] like an ant" (CP, 129) whereas the Colossus is vast. But the poet is also aware that this seemingly all powerful Colossus can only utter "mule-bray, pig-grunt" from his "great lips" (CP, 129). It is as alien to her as animal talk. She seems to be mocking him, the one who considers himself "an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other" (CP, 129). Even though the poet has struggled to make sense of the patriarchal order that the Colossus represents, she is "none the wiser", and remains confused (CP, 129). The overall sense of the poem is that the individual woman's struggle is against a huge and well-established tradition which is not open to any other possibilities. Her desire to fulfil her duty (one that has been assigned to her by this establishment), to understand and belong is apparent. She even describes her relation to the statue in terms of domestic
work which traditionally falls in the domain of women. However, she does not take
the pretentious immortality and power of the statue as granted as she can see cracks
that will eventually lead to the collapse of the statue. Decay and ruin are the essence
of the Colossus:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It’s worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser. (CP, 129)

The foundations of the statue are very well established and secure as “it
would take more than a lightning-stroke / To create such a ruin” (CP, 130). Even at
the very beginning, at the time of creation, instead of birth and regeneration there is
ruin and destruction. Rising through her powerlessness the poet decides to turn her
gaze elsewhere: “No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones
of the landing” (CP, 130). So, she refuses to be marginalized within this archaic
tradition, a tradition which is shaped by the language it is structured upon.

The ironical and witty treatment of male figures, as a strategy of subverting
received myths is also present in ‘Full Fathom Five’ (CP, 92-3). Here Plath criticizes
“[t]he old myth of origins” which she finds “[u]nimaginable” (CP, 92). It is
unimaginable for her because patriarchal myths and Western religions, cannot
accommodate women within their boundaries. Patriarchy is also very well set in its own rules and is not all-embracing but self-centered, the self being the male self:

You defy questions;

You defy other godhood.
I walk dry on your kingdom’s border
Exiled to no good. (CP, 92)

Here once again the poet is emphasizing one of the underlying principles of patriarchy. Woman’s access to divinity is strictly limited. She cannot locate any positive female model with whom she can identify. The halls of patriarchal religion are crowded with all-powerful male gods and heroes and there are only two traditional stereotypes for women: the Virgin Mary or Magdalen the whore. So it is not surprising that the poet feels an exile within this kingdom. She has to accept the godhood of the other, become subservient to him, a position which the poet finds unbearable: “Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe ware” (CP, 93). She feels helpless in trying to locate herself.

There are also survivors in Plath’s poetry. One such figure who is revised by the poet is the character of Medea. In ‘Aftermath’ (CP, 113-114), the enchantress who was branded a traitor, who murdered her own children, is presented under a different light. She is depicted as a victim of the society she lives in. The scene of the poem is one of destruction, and Medea seems to be lost in this place of ruin. The picture of Mother Medea utterly lost and confused is the climax of this poem:

Mother Medea in a green smock
Moves humbly as any housewife through
Her ruined apartments. (CP, 114)
The crowd, however, has no sympathy or help to offer this woman, instead it “sucks her last tear and turns away” (CP, 114). Like H.D.’s Helen, Plath’s Medea is also in front of a crowd who desires her death. But in Plath’s case, even though Medea is presented as if she is just a victim, she is still a survivor as in the poem she is alive and surveying the damage done to her house. Plath locates the source of this suffering not in the female character, but in patriarchical society in which destruction of woman is ever present. She sets Medea, and other women in her poetry “against the whole world falling apart, away” (J, 165).

Plath, however, moves forward from this helpless position, and transcends her torments into anger and finally release. In ‘Purdah’ (CP, 242-244), she even exacts revenge. In this poem, written at the end of October 1962, Plath transforms the feeling of resignation and despair into the strength to fight back. The short and clear-cut lines of the poem present a woman who is circumscribed, and the title alludes to the eastern practice of the segregation of woman. The persona is so well contained that she has been reduced to being an object. She is a statue:

Jade -
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities. (CP, 242)

The Old Testament idea of woman as a physical part of man is clearly readable here. The poet alludes to the biblical myth of woman being derived from
man again in ‘Getting There’ (CP, 247-9) as she writes: “There is mud on my feet, / Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam’s side, / This earth I rise from, and I in agony” (CP, 248). ‘Purdah’, however, is dominated with this sense of restriction: “I / Revolve in my / Sheath of impossibles” (CP, 243). The woman belongs to her master as any other possession, and she cannot move freely, and cannot rise yet. But, even though she is restricted, she is still alive as she can breathe: “I breathe, and the mouth // [v]eil stirs its curtain” (CP, 243). From this small breath of a movement, the poet suddenly exclaims the line which she will repeat over and over again in the poem: “I shall unloose” (CP, 243). This will be achieved in small steps: “One feather, like the peacock” (CP, 243), which will be followed by the full female strength of a lioness. She transforms herself from the peacock, which must be male here as it is the male of the species that possesses the glorious feathers, into the awesome female power of the lioness. Here Plath associates feminine power with destruction as she aims to destroy her master:

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose -
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart -

The lioness,
the shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes. (CP, 244)

Once again, like H.D.’s Helen, woman is turned into a statue, but Plath’s ending of the poem differs from H.D.’s dramatically. She is not a statue carved of
jade any more by the end of the poem, but a woman in possession of her full powers. She is after revenge for her own imprisonment.

This revengeful attitude is also the theme of 'Lady Lazarus' (CP, 244-247), written during the same time as 'Purdah'. The poem draws heavily on Plath’s own suicide attempts: “I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it” (CP, 244). These attempts are described in figuratively foetal terms:

I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (CP, 245)

But this time the crowd that watches her resurrection show for their entertainment will have to pay: “there is a charge, a very large charge” (CP, 146). This large charge is the wrath of the persona. Here she is even more aggressive and angry because she keeps coming back to the male world of brutality in which she is merely an object:

So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable. (CP, 115)

The persona describes her own destruction in terms of a Jew’s death at the hands of Nazis. Even though she is turned into ashes, and all that is left of her are the objects that will not burn, like a gold filling or a wedding ring, she still manages to rise out of the ashes like the Phoenix. She is almost indestructible and comes back again, like she has done before. It is important to note that in the following lines,
Plath fuses God and Lucifer. The maleness of God, and the devil is emphasized with her address to them as "Herr":

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (CP, 246-7)

When she was introducing this poem for BBC radio, Plath said: "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gist of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain resourceful woman" (CP, 294). So Lady Lazarus is not treated only as a mythical character, but has its roots in a woman who is 'ordinary'. She is a survivor who is able to fight back at the restrictions and enemies surrounding her. Myths are included in these restrictions as they prescribe and sustain the notions of what constitutes femininity. Hence, Plath chooses to emphasize the 'ordinariness' of her character, rather than her mythical status. The female hatred and anger of the speaker is foreign to the patriarchal domain, as violence is not supposed to be feminine, and it upsets the established order. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément suggest that:

This feminine role, the role of the sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms - the attacks - revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited. ... The hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into
the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason. These roles are conservative because every sorceress ends up being destroyed, and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces.⁵

Plath, I think, resurrects these mythical traces in her poem and makes them the central theme of it. Her Lady Lazarus ends up destroying the establishment that tries to destroy her. She drags the unrepresentable into the agenda and forces it to be reconsidered by force.

The anger of the poem is directed against the patriarchal establishment which denies woman her own space to exist. This is quite an interesting point, as the persona of the poem does not internalize anger and violence, but instead channels it towards the traditional representations of herself within the patriarchal domain. Irigaray argues that the aggression which children of both sexes exhibit in the anal stage of their development is dealt with differently by the boy and the girl. While man can protect himself against self-aggression within the structure of patriarchy, this route is not available for the woman. Hence, she internalizes her aggression and turns against herself:

You will have realised also that the ‘sexual function’ requires aggressiveness from the male, and that this authorizes an economy of death drives disengaging and protecting the ‘subject’ by exercising itself on the ‘object’. And, by continuing to be the ‘object’ pole in the sexual act, the woman will provide man with an outlet for his ‘primary masochism’, dangerous not only for the ‘physical’ but also for the ‘organic’, threatening

to 'life'. Now, Freud states that this 'primary' or 'erogenous' masochism will be reserved to woman, and that both her 'constitution' and 'social conventions' will forbid her any sadistic way to work out these masochistic death drives. She can only 'turn the round' or 'turn them inward'.

As Margaret Whitford argues, in this scenario man is guarded against his own self-destructiveness at the expense of woman. The violent unsymbolized drives of woman has no other path to follow, and hence, can only be directed towards her own self. Plath, disrupts this analysis in her poem, when she externalizes her wrath and directs these 'masculine' feelings back towards the male subject. Therefore, she revises the idea of the self-sacrificial object, exchanging it with the violent female whose aggressiveness does not harm herself but results in release. In The Bell Jar, Plath emphasizes the necessity of accepting the multiple and fragmented aspects of identity. Anger is one of these aspects:

I remembered everything.

I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig-tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull.

Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them.

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6Irigaray, Speculum, p. 54.
But they were part of me. They were my landscape.  

‘Fever 103’ (CP, 231-2) is a poem in which Plath talks about a different part of her landscape; her power to transcend. It is a poem about descent into hell, and it was written at a time when the poet herself was suffering from high fever (LH, 468). Hence, it is dominated by hellish images of fire. Her voice burns with intense heat - of sin, lust, sexuality, sickness. The movement of the poem is again from blockage to release when the woman takes control. The first line asks the question: “Pure? What does it mean?” (CP, 231) The persona questions one of the necessary attributes of a woman prescribed by patriarchal establishment. She must be pure (a virgin) in order to be accepted into the system which is dominated by images of doom and destruction. But the poet, with her use of a bitter comic tone does not seem to take these ever powerful images too seriously as the persona distances herself from this inferno. After a period of not being able to eat or drink for three days she feels that she has become “too pure for you or anyone” (CP, 232). And when finally she decides to leave, it is under the role of the Virgin, but this Virgin is not the one that has been defined through the centuries in relation to her son, as she is alone:

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise -
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

---

By kisses, by cherubim,
by whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)-
To Paradise. (CP, 232)

The Virgin as depicted by Plath is strikingly similar to H.D.’s ‘The Lady’ at the climax of Trilogy. Both poets seem to agree that religious myths describing woman only in relation to ‘The Son’ are not valid, and that the Virgin, the Lady have to be presented in their own terms, defined in relation to only themselves. Hence, they both choose to revise this character and concentrate on her as an individual.

In a note regarding her BBC reading of this poem Plath said that it “is about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second” (CP, 293). From the agony and despair of the first kind of fire which is “dull, ... / Incapable / Of licking clean / ... the sin” (CP, 231), the persona transcends to fire that leads to purification. She manages this by herself, for herself, dissolving her old selves into one. She is a survivor, and in the poem her destination is paradise.

This transformation of woman from passivity into activity is explored also in ‘Tulips’ (CP, 160-2). The poem deals with a woman’s task of learning submissiveness, of accepting the compulsory passivity of femininity, allowing herself to be mastered. But tulips upset things in this sterile environment, as the first line of the poem hints: “The tulips are too excitable” (CP, 160). The excitement of the tulips is contrasted with the stillness surrounding them. There is a desire for movement and action. The speaker, however, seems to be trapped:
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day - clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

(\textit{CP}, 160)

This helplessness is extended throughout the poem as the speaker says: “They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff” (\textit{CP}, 160). Then finally her passivity becomes permanent as her body becomes a “pebble” (\textit{CP}, 160), she cannot feel herself as she has turned into a stone. The establishment that surrounds her has the duty to anaesthetize her so that she will not upset the order as the tulips do with their excitement and activity:

\begin{quote}
My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
\end{quote}

(\textit{CP}, 160)

In this picture of whiteness, numbness, and sterility, the tulips are the only living beings that disturb the scene: “The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me”, “The vivid tulips eat my oxygen” (\textit{CP}, 161), and they “should be behind bars like dangerous animals” (\textit{CP}, 162). Finally, she must look at the tulips and see them for what they are, an invitation to leave this state of passivity. She sees them as a force of life that is an integral part of herself. She manages to lift herself from her deadly state, and embraces the awareness of life:

\begin{quote}
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blossoms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health. (\textit{CP}, 162)
\end{quote}

This new awareness is defined in definite female terms with water imagery. The place she describes is like the womb. It is warm, salty, and secure, like the
amniotic fluid, and has its roots in a very distant place which has a direct relationship with her well-being. Once the speaker claims the lost connection between the mother and daughter, the memory of this bond seems to give her hope for the future.

What is important and revisionary in the poems discussed so far is Plath’s strategy of exploring the traditional myths of femininity, and exposing what has been left out. She subverts what has been traditionally deemed to be the female domain, merely consisting of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, and expands it to include woman by herself without her traditional attributes. Her characters, however, are not depressive and locked within their circumstances as they manage to transcend their suffering and achieve a sense of freedom.

Plath’s criticism of patriarchal notions of femininity is also the theme of ‘Electra on Azalea Path’ (CP, 116-7). Here the poet retells the myth of Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon, she “borrow[s] the stilts of an old tragedy” (CP, 117), and revises it from the female point of view. She takes on the persona of Electra, and recounts the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the gods by her father Agamemnon, in order to have favourable winds to sail to Troy. She also recounts her mother Clytemnestra’s murder of him on his return.9 In the beginning of the poem, the daughter evidently laments the death of her father. However, she comes to realize that her idolization of him was a childhood fantasy:

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.
Nobody died or withered on that stage.
Everything took place in a durable whiteness.
The day I woke, I woke on the Churchyard Hill.
I found your name, I found your bones and all

---

Enlisted in a cramped necropolis,
Your speckled stone askew by an iron fence. (*CP*, 116-7)

The poem is dominated with images of death whereas the title seems to promise a journey through a flowery road. This is similar to the speaker’s disillusionment concerning the paternal myths and the subsequent realization of their hollowness. She finds when she visits her father’s grave that it is unkempt and unadorned, even though the grave next to it has been decorated with “plastic evergreens” (*CP*, 117). This scenery might be eternal but it is also dead: “in this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead / Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower / breaks the soil” (*CP*, 117). The persona, speaking as Electra, realizes that she has overdramatized her father’s death:

*The day your slack sail drank my sister’s breath*

*The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth*

*My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.*

I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy. (*CP*, 117)

“*The truth is*”, she adds, her father was not the hero she thought him to be, but he “died like any man” (*CP*, 117). This is the final realization of the poem which allows the speaker to sever her paternal ties. The figure of Electra evolves from the grieving daughter overpowered with the image of an idealized father-god into one who comes to realize the destruction and death surrounding this obsession. More importantly, Plath tells this ancient myth from the daughter’s mouth, instead of the accustomed paternal point of view.

The rebellion of the daughter against the father reaches its climax in Plath’s ‘Daddy’ (*CP*, 222-224). She conveys a sense of extreme loathing against male power
in this poem. Adrienne Rich comments on this fear, and its final claiming when she writes of Plath’s work:

It strikes me that in [Plath’s] work Man appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and the terror is, simply Man’s power - to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman. The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him. And, […] it is finally the woman’s sense of herself - embattled, possessed - that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy. Until recently this female anger and this furious awareness of the Man’s power over her were not available materials to the female poet, who tended to write of Love as the source of her suffering, and to view that victimization by Love as an almost inevitable fate.10

In ‘Daddy’, Plath’s bitter and angry voice emerges forcefully against the gendered hierarchies of patriarchy. The images that she gathers in the poem are all symbolic of the male power which dominates and tyrannizes; war, fascism, torture, concentration camps, vampires, death. In the middle of this deadly imagery is the female self who is strongly repetitive and unrelenting in her complaints of abuse. She refuses to be silent as even the fact that she speaks constitutes a violation of Daddy’s power. However, she has difficulties in speech as she is trying to talk in a language that is alien to her:

I could never talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak. (*CP*, 223)

Following this affirmation the speaker transforms herself and is in complete control. She appropriates brutal masculine power over the female and becomes the violator instead of the violated. The following lines create an atmosphere of witchcraft, a scene from a voodoo ceremony, in which the female unleashes her power to reclaim herself:

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I’m finally through.
The black telephone’s off at the root,
The voices just can’t worm through. (*CP*, 224)

Instead of the traditional acceptance of changing hands from the father to the husband in a wedding ceremony, with the words “I do, I do”, the speaker of the poem affirms her own self and freedom, rather than having her identity defined for her. The phallic “stake in your fat black heart” implies the victory of the sorceress over the paternal power which dominates her.

The results of the cruel treatment of woman within patriarchal system is further emphasized by Plath in ‘Elm’ (*CP*, 192-3). In this poem, she investigates the female identity which splits, fragments, flies apart, and disintegrates: “I let her go. I let her go / Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery. / How your bad dreams possess and endow me” (*CP*, 192). In ‘Stings’ (*CP*, 214-5), however, she makes a
valiant attempt to recover this self that has been battered as she explicitly states: “I am in control” (CP, 214). While she is searching through the beehive the speaker wonders: “Is there any queen at all in it?” (CP, 214) The “I” of the poem representing the woman/queen bee might be dead or merely asleep. But she is determined as she has “a self to recover, a queen” (CP, 215). When she finally finds the queen bee, her self, she is like an avenging angel:

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her -
The mausoleum, the wax house. (CP, 215)

This scene can be read as the flight of the female self outside the symbolic order in order to establish a place of identification where patriarchal prescriptions of femininity do not apply. It is also an attempt on the poet’s part to construct a dynamic of becoming, of imagination of the self with all its contradictions and ambiguities. This would be a location in which she could recover “the sunk relics of my lost selves that I must weave, wordwise, into future fabrics” (J, 196).

The poems discussed so far all investigate the female who transcends the hardships surrounding her and comes to realize the extent of her own powers. The final poems of Plath, which are usually read as if they were written as her own epitaph, present a woman who has abandoned any hope of survival. I find these
poems, in particular ‘Edge’, very sad to read as there is no hope in them only silence and death. ‘Edge’ (CP, 272-3) is narrated in third person singular referring to somebody as “the woman”. Once again, this woman is very much like H.D.’s Helen. In both poems the women become a statue, beautiful to look at, but not alive, as this is the only way they can be perfect within the prescribed notions of womanhood:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity... (CP, 272)

The moon in the poem, always associated with the female, seems to be used to this kind of deadly transformation as she watches the scene from the skies: “The moon has nothing to be sad about, /.../ She is used to this kind of thing” (CP, 273). It is almost as if this ending was always expected. This is the voice of a woman who has given up on her struggle and accepts the finality of death.

Plath’s poems like ‘Edge’ are no doubt poems about surrender. But her work is dominated with female characters who are not afraid to raid their own psyches to discover different aspects of their identities. Various female roles and identities are explored in her poems, even though they are deemed not to be within the female domain by patriarchal thought. This makes Plath’s poetry subversive. I would like to end this section with Margaret Uroff’s words, who writes of Plath’s achievement in Ariel as the exposure of different female identities and the ultimate acceptance of these fragment to be a part of multiplicity.

Her final poetic accomplishment was not to transcend these hardships, but to face them directly and to leave a record of that confrontation. In the image of the rising
lioness / Virgin / red comet, she identified a female figure violent enough to triumph in a world that Plath imagined would reduce the woman to a jade statue - but a female also with creatively violent powers of her own.¹¹

Multiplicity and acceptance of diversity plays an important role in Plath's work. In the poetry discussed in this section, Plath deals quite strongly with the myth that violence, anger, and hatred are not female attributes. Through her revisionary mythmaking, she reveals female characters who are willing to own these feelings and are capable of transcending them. More importantly, instead of internalising their anger and hatred, her characters are able to direct them towards patriarchal myths which deny women such violent feelings. This strategy employed by the poet undermines the myth of the self as a static and unchanging subject, emphasizing multiplicity.

Chapter Seven

My Mother, My Daughter: The Dyad within Sylvia Plath

You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks?

Luce Irigaray

The masks Irigaray refers to in the above quotation could be interpreted as the myths defining the institution of motherhood within patriarchy. Motherhood is perpetually surrounded by myths which dictate the attributes of what constitutes a ‘good’ mother. Such is the power of myths that they have the power to transform “history into nature.” Hence, motherhood has ultimately been subsumed into nature. This nature, however, incorporates two contradictions. The primary myth that informs all of them is that the ‘perfect mother’ is a mother and a virgin at the same time, as in the case of the Virgin Mary (Supernatural) who is unique in her embodiment of these two mutually exclusive qualities within herself. In this context, one can also think of the twentieth century mythical figure of the ‘independent’ mother who has the ability to combine caring, working, and perfect motherhood in herself.

Sylvia Plath is occupied deeply with these issues and her dilemmas inform her poetry. In the previous chapter her revisionary strategy in relation to the myths of ‘normal’ womanhood, and her treatment of unexplored female anger and violence was discussed. In this section, I will concentrate on Plath’s approach towards motherhood, and also will examine how she tried to accommodate conflicting emotions of the woman as a mother.

The relationship between a mother and a daughter is an acutely complex one in all human relationships. This bond that, in an ideal world, has the potential to be the most intimate, becomes deeply problematic within the cultural discourse of patriarchy. On the surface, society encourages and condones motherhood. However, motherhood, as defined in patriarchal terms, has very clearly defined signification, and has adapted to serve existing political structures.

The alienation the mother feels is a very strong part of pregnancy. Pregnancy, which could be seen as the embodiment of female creativity, is manipulated within the power structure. The ultimate experience of pregnancy and childbirth belongs not to the woman herself, but is regarded to be a service provided by the woman to the society. Yet again, she is denied claim to her own body and experience. Since the ancient Greeks, the womb of the woman has been considered to be cause of many mental illnesses that did not fit within the rules and practice of medicine, a field dominated by men. It is interesting to note that the surgical removal of the womb is termed hysterectomy as the word ‘hysteria’ has its roots in the Greek word for ‘womb’. Also, the understanding of the womb as the underlying cause for number of illnesses (physical and psychological) is a long established tradition. Following this
thought one step further, it is not surprising then that pregnancy is perceived as a state of unhealth. Iris Marion Young emphasizes that:

The dominant model of health assumes that the normal, healthy body is unchanging. Health is associated with stability, equilibrium, a steady state. Only a minority of persons, however, namely adult men who are not yet old, experience their health as a state in which there is no regular or noticeable change in body condition. ... Yet medical conceptualization implicitly uses this unchanging adult male body as the standard of all health.³

Hence, pregnancy is dealt with as a state of unhealth that has to be interfered with by the use of drugs, monitors, instruments. The woman is robbed of her experience and ultimately becomes a passive case of study. The notion of looking for risk factors has been influential in this patronising attitude. Constant investigation of possible risks creates an obsession with ‘normality’, which may drive women to the point of obsession in their need for reassurance regarding their pregnancy. Anne Quériart argues that there is “an increasing tendency to hold the woman responsible for the quality of the ‘product’ of pregnancy, while neglecting other influencing factors and issues related to women’s own well-being.”⁴ Once the baby, or the ‘product’ of her anxiety of nine months, is delivered the path for the mother becomes more complicated, especially if the baby is a girl. Within such a logic then, the exclusive female experience of pregnancy and birth becomes lost, not only for women but for all human experience.

This feeling of alienation carries on particularly in the relationship between the mother and the daughter. If the female is ‘the dark continent’ as Freud labelled her, then Irigaray goes one step further and terms the mother-daughter dyad as “the dark continent of the dark continent.” She argues that this bond constitutes one of the explosive issues, and offers it as a basis for rethinking the symbolic order. For women to try to begin to imagine this relationship in their own terms is going to be subversive. But how is woman going to start to imagine her identity as mother, lover, daughter in her own terms? It has been stated that the symbolic order cannot accommodate the drives of women, except as its “waste” or “residue”, therefore her body and her identity as a woman have to exist in the left-over margins of the dominant culture which defines her in terms of negation. If the mother cannot articulate her own identity as a woman, then her legacy to her daughter is the continuation of this lack of identity. Irigaray, of course does not propose to condemn the mother in this cul-de-sac. Mothers tend to replicate what they have seen themselves from their own mothers. Hence, to be able to escape from this deadly spiral, the woman needs to recover her own identity as a woman. The dominant culture honours the reproductive role of the woman, but does not tolerate woman as lover with her own specific drives and desires:

If the mother is the alienator, it is because she has no identity as a woman. And this effectively plunges the mother and the little girl in the same nothingness. But the problem is neither to accuse the mother nor to say that it is the father who comes to liberate the little girl. The mother has to find her identity as a woman, and

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from that point she could be able to give an identity to
her daughter. But this is the key point to which our
system is most blind.⁷

Within the symbolic order, therefore, it is not possible for the mother and
daughter to imagine their relationship in anything but patriarchal terms. Male children
have a much less problematic relationship with the mother as the establishment of
male identity as subject is pregiven, and consequently objectifying the mother is not
dangerous to their subject position. However, if the female child learns her identity in
the same way, Irigaray argues, this becomes a very dangerous path to follow for her.
She cannot objectify the mother without objectifying herself as well. Hence for the
daughter, identification with the mother and at the same time possessing her
subjectivity are mutually exclusive, unless she remains completely outside the
symbolic order. Irigaray presents this dilemma as the underlying crux of the mother-
daughter relationship. Moreover, this issue dominates all human relationships in her
view: "It is necessary for a woman to be able to speak her identity in words, in
images and in symbols within this intersubjective relation with her mother, then with
other women, in order to enter into a relation with men that is not destructive."⁸

Sylvia Plath’s mother Aurelia Plath describes her relationship with her
daughter as "a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and
comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy."⁹ Even after Plath

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⁷Irigaray, Luce interviewed in Ideology and Consciousness, 1977, no. 1, p. 75, quoted in Jan
Montefiore, Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing, London,
Pandora, 1994, p. 58.
⁸Irigaray, Luce, Sexes at parentés, Paris: Minuit, 1987, p. 211, quoted in Whitford, Luce Irigaray,
p. 45.
32.
moved to England and married they stayed very close. The letters that Plath wrote to her mother (which were quite abundant) are testimony of another Sylvia Plath. Her “Sivvy” letters are full of vitality and eager urgency. Aurelia Plath was an extraordinary woman in her own right, and like so many mothers she had given up her own dreams and ideals to cater for those of her husband and children. Plath felt that she could, and perhaps should, reward her mother for the sacrifices she had made, so much so that reading the letters there is a sense that she displays an obsessive need to be approved by her mother, as well as to reward her after “extracting her life blood and care for 20 years.”10 “Sivvy” recreated herself anew for her mother. She is a woman who can cope with anything, who presents her achievements (published work, ideal husband, beautiful babies) to her mother one after another. The letters read as compensation for the sacrifices her mother has made for her. However, the mask she puts on for her mother in the letters cannot wholly contain and control her, as she emerges as a very different daughter in her poetry.

For Plath, at certain times, motherhood was the ultimate expression of female creativity. She felt that it was very important to be able to bear children, for her womanhood would not be complete otherwise. She was also acutely aware of the anguish and discomfort women feel in terms of childbirth and motherhood within the existing power structure. This is clearly evident in the verse play ‘Three Women’ written in 1962 to be broadcast on the BBC (CP, 176-187). The play explores the possibilities that were available for a pregnant woman in the early sixties. The three women, all products of male governed society, explore their ways of coping with the different physical and psychological realities of childbirth. Even though these three

10Plath, Letters Home, p. 113.
women are the only characters in the play, each of them is self-absorbed in her own experience only. There is an apparent lack of communication and interaction between them.

The “First Voice” delivers a healthy son and as a result her achievement is a celebration for others. “When I walk out, I am a great event” (CP, 176), she observes. Sandra Gilbert has argued that this voice of the “First Woman, the healthily golden and achieving mother” is “obviously the poet’s own, or at least the voice for which the poet strives.”¹¹ Plath had always been an overachiever and a perfectionist. Motherhood was no exception; she wanted to be the best. Hence, she would have identified with the “First Voice”. Unfortunately, the high goals she set for herself made her disappointments so much the greater. In the play, however, even the perfect “First Voice” seems to be disturbed by her own ready acceptance of the patriarchal images of ideal womanhood. Her perception of the environment surrounding her is not positive:

The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks.
Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs
Flatten to parchment screens to keep the wind off.
They paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese! (CP, 179)

Here the patriarchal establishment is represented as colourless, static, and flat. They keep a safe distance away from the unknown and guard their secrets. The speaker feels that she is not part of the establishment. She is rather a stranger who is required to stay outside. The secrets that are kept from her makes her feel “dumb and

brown”, like a potato. Even though the world outside is celebrating the son that she
gave birth to, she has contradictory feelings:

There is no miracle more cruel than this.
I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.

... I am the center of an atrocity.

What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering? (CP, 180)

Her experience of childbirth is very different from the celebratory mood
surrounding her. The mother’s experience is claimed by others, whereas she is left
feeling invaded and used. Ultimately, she is treated as a container that provided a
necessary service. Her position as object in this process is underlined when she says:
“[t]hey are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material” (CP, 181). In fact, she is
the object in giving birth to the Son and this is the logic with which the patriarchal
order justifies the position of woman under its rule. The woman adapts to her new
state very quickly by pushing her contradictory feelings aside and starts to
concentrate on her son. She fantasizes how she will love and protect this Christ-like
boy child. She will “[b]e a bandage to his hurt, and [her] words / [b]right birds in the
sky, consoling” (CP, 185). Already she has appropriated herself to sacrifice her self
and justifies her existence through her son who possesses a rightful place within the
patriarchal order. She shuts her mind to the unpleasant realities of the world
surrounding her that haunt her like “terrible” children. She will only concentrate on
her duties as a wife and mother as she is “drummed into use”. Her last words in the
play show her projecting her wishes on to her son: “I will him to be common, / [t]o
love me as I love him, / [a]nd to marry what he wants and where he will” (CP, 186).
The mothers within patriarchal discourse unknowingly work towards strengthening the existing rule, as the first mother exemplifies. The mother sacrifices her life to her children and husband, losing her own identity in the process.

The story of the “Second Voice” displays another aspect of female reality within male-dominated culture. The poet describes the persona with the stereotypical attributes of a secretary sitting at an office desk “in my stockings, my high heels”, who feels intimidated by the “ideas, destructions” of the “flat” men “in the office”. Her pregnancy ends in miscarriage and she is profoundly shaken by this experience:

When I saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,

The flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
Endlessly proceed -and the cold angels, the abstractions.

(CK, 177)

The male atmosphere surrounding her is one-dimensional and is too preoccupied with itself to be aware of her problem. Unlike the first mother, as there is no end product in her service to society, she does not attract any attention. She keeps on doing her job mechanically with her “alphabetical fingers”, but thinks: “I am dying as I sit” (CK, 177). In this state she perceives the uncaring world surrounding her with its “faces of nations, / [g]overnments, parliaments, societies, / [t]he faceless faces of important men” (CK, 179) as sick with a disease that one could catch. But what is it that she wants when she says “I am found wanting”? Is it her genuine desire to have had the baby or is it her lover’s want she is referring to? Have his wishes and
hers become one? The following lines disclose how hard (perhaps too hard) she tried to please her lover and to conform:

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.
I have stitched life into me like a rare organ,
And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.
I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.
I have tried to be blind in love, like other women. (CP, 178)

The ‘natural’ woman in the context of patriarchal tradition is one who can be, or pretend to be, fulfilled within the margins that have been allocated to her. With the line “I have tried to be natural”, the poet emphasizes her struggles regarding this issue. However, no matter how hard she tries the “Second Voice” still ends up being “accused” (CP, 180), and starts blaming and “hating myself” (CP, 181) as well. She internalizes the hatred that male dominated tradition projects onto her by accepting the label of the failed mother: “I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses” (CP, 182). In her struggle to come to terms with her “lack” (CP, 182) and confront what is waiting for her outside the hospital, she decides that the best strategy is to accept her marginality. Therefore, once she wears her old clothes she feels that she can also put her identity back on. She recreates her self according to the prescribed guidelines. As a final touch, she draws her mouth with the lipstick and the mask to face the world and is ready. She goes back to her house and begins the process of trying to be content all over again: “I am myself again” (CP, 184).

The “Third Voice” is certain about her feelings towards her pregnancy. She repeats over and over again that she is not ready. Her priority is to gain further education, which is not compatible with motherhood. She has had to make a decision and regards it as a struggle for survival: “I should have murdered this that murders
me” she says. It is important to note that the baby she has given up was a girl. The symbolic rejection of the girl child is a strong component of the patriarchal tradition. Apart from the actual murder of female children still occurring in some parts of the world, the exclusion of women is one of the foundation stones patriarchal establishment.

The opening poem of Ariel, which was also the first poem in the original sequencing by Plath herself, was written one year after the birth of her first child. ‘Morning Song’ (CP, 156-157) deals with the relationship between the mother and her baby which is very much cherished as a “[n]ew statue. / In a drafty museum”. In the ‘Barren Woman’ (CP, 157), written two days after this poem, Plath introduces the woman without a child with the same imagery, “museum without statues”. In the ‘Morning Song’ immediately after giving birth the reader sees both the parents quite confused and not sure of what to do, as they “stand round blankly as walls” (CP, 156). The mother in the poem is alienated in her attempts to relate to her child, which is in contrast to the myth which prescribes that it is normal and almost unanimous that new mothers feel an immediate, exhilarating, all-consuming passion for their new baby. The mother says:

I am no more your mother

Then the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow

Effacement at the wind’s hand. (CP, 157)

As the poem progresses the initial awkwardness between the mother and the child gives way to familiarity. The almost comical figure of the mother who is “cow-heavy and floral in [her] Victorian night-gown” (CP, 157), begins stumbling towards her crying baby every night.
It cannot be disputed that Plath loved her children dearly and they were always a source of delight for her, even though towards the end of her life she was alone, ill, and under financial strain. She wrote in her letters: “I adore the babies and am glad to have them, even though now they make my life fantastically difficult” \((LH, 473)\). Indeed, after the birth of her daughter, her letters tell us the story of Plath the over-achiever trying to organize herself between being the perfect mother and at the same time concentrating on her writing. She tries to stick to a “rigid housework schedule - laundry and market on Monday, iron Tuesday, etc., to counteract the otherwise helter-skelter days” \((LH, 391)\). Even so, she has “little energy for writing in anything but my diary and a few light poems” \((LH, 391)\). Her words raise the practical issues of the strain of motherhood on the woman. She reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf when she writes: “I really hunger for a study of my own out of hearing of the nursery where I could be alone with my thoughts for a few hours a day. I really believe I could do some good stories if I had a stretch of time without distractions” \((LH, 392)\). Even with all the practical difficulties Plath felt childlessness to be akin to death. In the delightful poem ‘Nick and the Candlestick’ \((CP, 240-242)\), which was written for her son Nicholas, the mother is a “miner”, and the son is the precious “ruby”. The image of the Christ-like boy child that we encountered in the ‘First Voice’ of ‘Three Women’ once again recurs here:

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on envious.
You are the baby in the barn. \((CP, 242)\)

In the BBC reading she did Plath said of this poem: “a mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the
world’s ill, does redeem her share of it.”\textsuperscript{12} Here emerges a picture in front of the reader which is almost like a religious icon surrounded by candles. The ever-protective mother, trying to guard her child from evil, is a sacred image. This image can be considered a cliché, as it is used to perpetuate myths of motherhood. It is interesting that Plath wrote such a poem for her son rather than her daughter who was born earlier. Perhaps the poet also felt that through her son she would be able to conform. Even though it is a positive image in the poem, it is still circumscribed within patriarchal myths of maternal function.

In ‘Childless Woman’, written in 1962, she describes the plight of the woman who has not borne a child:

\begin{quote}
The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go. (CP, 259)
\end{quote}

The body of the woman cannot serve any purpose, but live in a state of barrenness. The released ovum is not used and therefore is going to be wasted thorough menstruation. Her body will be “[u]ttering nothing but blood” (CP, 259). Bleeding, which is one of the fundamental bodily functions of the female body, is dismissed as waste, loss, nothingness. Plath’s belief in motherhood was strong until the end of her life. “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children”, she wrote in the 1963 poem ‘The Munich Mannequins’ written a fortnight before her death (CP, 262-263). The idea of womanhood as waste is repeated: “The tree of life and the tree of life / Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose” (CP, 263).

In ‘The Disquieting Muses’ (CP, 74 - 76), written in 1957, this theme of self-sacrifice of the mother clearly causes resentment in the daughter. In the poem there is

a carefully crafted play going on between the mother and the daughter. It is the play of both parties in order to locate themselves in a position from which they can experience love, but they cannot escape destruction. As Irigaray writes on behalf of the daughter: “[T]he more I love, the more I become captive, held back by a weightiness that immobilizes me”. The mother in Plath’s poem is trying to keep up appearances as a strong woman in control. However hard she tries, though, the daughter is aware of the muted anger and resentment that comes through:

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother whose witches always, always
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head. (CP, 75)

Here the mother trying to be strong, courageous, and even heroic for her children, like Plath’s mother who created “The Adventures of Mixie Blackshot” (based on Plath’s brother’s teddy bear). It is a very familiar portrait of the mother who sacrifices her own self for the sake of her children. In traditional terms, this is the essence of motherhood. However, in Plath’s poem, as much as the mother tries to keep up her act, her resentment somehow shows through. These feelings get “baked into the gingerbread.” Adrienne Rich posits that “[i]nstitutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self.”

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1Irigaray, ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other’, p. 60.
definition of the sacred calling of motherhood, there is no imaginable space for love and anger to exist side by side, as maternal love should be unconditional and demands complete sacrifice. In the poem, the daughter has an inkling of her mother’s conflicting (unmotherly) feelings. In her thinly veiled autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist Esther shows us how perceptive the daughter is towards her mother’s plight:

My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn’t trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I’d have a practical skill as well as a college degree. “Even the apostles were tentmakers,” she’d say. “They had to live, just the way we do.” (*BJ*, 40-41)

As an obedient daughter herself, the mother had behaved the only way she knew how. She had learned how to disguise her own feelings because the mother is the icon of self-sacrifice in the established patriarchal tradition. She is the ever-protective, selfless woman willing to sacrifice her own life for the happiness of her children.

In her *Journal* Sylvia Plath feels like a “new person” when Dr. Ruth Beuscher, her therapist, tells her that she gives her “permission to hate your mother” (*J*, 265). The impact of this revelation on Plath is happiness and relief: “It is as if R.B. ... also said ‘I give you permission to be happy’” (*J*, 275). “[I]t makes me feel good as hell to express my hostility towards my mother, frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and my typewriter” she wrote and wondered “(why?)” (*J*, 266). She discloses her hostile feelings towards her mother and the flow of her thoughts leads
her to the resentment she feels towards her mother’s efforts. She summarizes as follows:

She ... had to work. Work, and be a mother, too, a man and a woman in one sweet ulcerous ball. She pinched. Scrapped. Wore the same old coat. But the children had new school clothes and shoes that fit. ... In all honesty and with her all unhappy heart she worked to give those two innocent little children the world of joy she’d never had. She’d had a lousy world.

(J, 266)

In a letter that she had written to her brother in 1953, Plath discloses the extent that her mother would go to for her children: “Mother would actually kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. ...deadly disease” (LH, 112). Plath’s mother confirms this scenario when she writes about abandoning her dreams of teaching, “yield[ing] to my husband’s wish that I become a full-time home-maker,” and her realization “that if I wanted a peaceful home - and I did - I would simply have to become more submissive [to her husband], although it was not my nature to be so” (LH, 10, 13). The mother tries to mould herself to live a more ‘comfortable’ life without conflicts. As an extension of this attitude, she goes on to teach her daughter the same strategies as a guide for survival. This guide, however, leads to a destructive relationship between the mother and the daughter. Adrienne Rich highlights the “matrophobia” of the daughter, her fear of “becoming one’s mother.”16 Every daughter, at one point or another in her life, promises herself that she will not be like her mother. As time goes on, however, she catches herself

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following the same path that her mother has followed after her own mother. The intense rejection of the mother by the daughter is a struggle to be one’s own self. Rich sees the daughter’s hate of the mother as an effort to keep hold of her own identity:

Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely.  

This is a relationship that both parties play in carefully crafted pretence. There is a constant presence of hiding, lying, wearing masks that become recurring features throughout a woman’s life. Hence, instead of teaching her daughter strength and courage as intended, she demonstrates the necessity of hiding one’s own self in a web of prevarication. Irigaray also emphasizes this point when she writes about the necessity for mothers to have a self of their own, defined independently of their maternal function, so that the daughters can imagine themselves as such: “Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you”. In ‘The Disquieting Muses’ (CP, 74-6), Plath explores the attitude of the mother which almost paralyzes the daughter as she too learns to lie about her true feelings:

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons

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18 Irigaray, ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other’, p. 61.
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable. (CP, 75)

In another early poem from 1957, ‘All The Dead Dears’ (CP, 70-1), Plath’s uneasiness with the dominant perceptions of motherhood is readable. Gazing at a stone coffin with the skeleton of a woman, the speaker feels uneasy in the museum:

This lady here’s no kin she is: she’ll suck
Blood and whistle my marrow clean
To prove it. (CP, 70)

She feels a destructive force within the female ancestors. When she looks at the mirror she sees her mother, and all her female genealogy “reach[ing] hands to haul me in” (CP, 70). Even so, she is aware that this destructive force precedes the mother, and stems from culture. In the ‘Aftermath’, Plath introduces the reader to her Medea, as was discussed in the previous chapter, as a victim of the dominant culture who “sucks her last tear and turns away” (CP, 114).

The anxiety of losing her mother’s approval was ever-present in Plath’s poetry. Throughout her life she struggled to maintain a fusion with her mother. Their relationship could be termed a symbiotic one. However, even as a teenager she was uncomfortable with the prescribed notions of femininity and motherhood. One night, while she was still a teenager, she wanted to get away from their house that was “so snug and stale-aired”, but could not manage to unlock the door. She wrote in her diary: “I felt suddenly breathless, stifled. I was trapped, with the tantalizing little square of night above me, and the warm, feminine atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery smothering embrace” (J, 11). She mentions the
same feeling later in her journals: “The little white house on the corner with a family full of women. So many women, the house stank of them. ... A stink of women: Lysol, cologne, glycerine, cocoa butter on the nipples so they won’t crack, lipstick red on all three mouths” (J, 67). As Plath associated power so exclusively with men it is not surprising that she felt the suffocating heaviness of femininity in her home. It is not the restrictions of the authority that make her so uncomfortable but prescribed femininity that was imposed on her.

‘In Plaster’ (CP, 158-160) is a poem in which we read the persona being trapped in the deadly opposition between maternal expectations and humiliation. Plath’s repudiation of maternal conventions is strongly felt in this poem. Adrienne Rich underlines this dead end in her discussion of mothers and daughters:

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, “whatever comes.” A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother’s self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter.”

The poem describes a relationship between the self and a plaster cast. In the first stage of the poem the poet introduces the two main characters. The plaster is the “new absolutely white person” who is “certainly the superior one”, almost a “saint” (CP, 158). The self, on the other hand, is “the old yellow one” who is “ugly and hairy” (CP, 160). The speaker is feeling trapped within this plaster and in the opening

[20] The poem was written when the poet herself was in hospital with appendicitis.
line of the poem exclaims: "I shall never get out of this!" (CP, 158) Even so she cannot help but realize the fact that "she was shaped just the way I was" (CP, 158), a fact that scares her. The poem could be read as a metaphor for the relationship between the mother and her daughter. The daughter is paralysed with the need of the mother to be useful, ("You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality" (CP, 159)). More importantly, the mother feels the need to mould the daughter into her own shape. Mother and daughter, like the personae of the poem are very alike, they have a troubled relationship. As the poem progresses the exchange between them becomes more disturbed. The daughter starts resenting her mother's conformist attitude:

I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer.
I couldn't understand her stupid behavior!
When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist. (CP, 159)

The daughter is acutely aware of the mother's position in relation to her. Children, in the dominant culture, are promoted as the justifying cause of a woman's life. Patriarchal myths dictate that women must bear children to be able to have a fulfilled life. Irigaray underlines this issue when she says that woman has to abandon her singular desires, and limit her love as duty towards her husband and children. "She has to be sacrificed and to sacrifice herself to this task, at the same time disappearing as this or that woman who is alive at the present time. And she must disappear as desire, too, unless it is abstract: the desire to be wife and mother."21 In this poem, too, the mother needs the daughter to be able to justify her own self: "Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful. I gave her a soul"

The poem progresses with the deterioration of their “relationship [that] grew more intense”. There is a constant play of dependency and passivity exchanging places. The daughter slowly begins to be moulded into her mother’s shape and to lose her own abilities:

I wasn’t in any position to get rid of her.  
She’d supported me for so long I was quite limp-  
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit. (CP, 159)

Even though the relationship is very close, the daughter’s need for the mother is strong: “Living with her was like living with my own coffin: / Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully” (CP, 160). She dreams that she will be able to break free and be independent. However, as the opening line of the poem indicates, the odds are not in her favour. The only identity she hoped to aspire to is circumscribed within the confines of the maternal function.

In ‘Medusa’ (CP, 224-226) the obsessive need of the mother to be useful finally paralyzes the daughter. In this poem, which was originally titled ‘Mum: Medusa’, the reader meets the counterpart of the father-figure in ‘Daddy’ which was written four days earlier. Critics have pointed out the fact that another name for the common medusa jellyfish is ‘Aurelia aulita’, which immediately suggests Plath’s own mother Aurelia Schober Plath. The poem is dominated by serpentine imagery; umbilical cords, cables, snakes, and eely tentacles of the jellyfish which can inflict pain. The words of the poet stand as the embodiment of the daughter’s anger towards her mother, whose interference in her life is not wanted at all.

I didn’t call you.  
I didn’t call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralysing the kicking lovers.
Cobra light
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath. (CP, 225)

The daughter feels suffocated by her mother’s position in her own life. The mother is always trying to be useful, but the daughter feels her intrusion as a threat to her subjectivity. The mother, on the other hand, can only justify her own existence through the service she provides for her children as she has not imagined her identity separate from them. The daughter’s life, however, which was nourished by the mother, is deeply threatened by her now. Mother’s body “[b]ottle in which I live” is not welcome any more. There is a clear wish to break free from the stronghold of the mother. These rebellious feelings carry with them a strong sense of guilt in the daughter, as she feels obliged to repay her mother’s sacrifices:

Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.
Off, off, eely tentacle! (CP, 226)

The speaker is very tired of being criticised by the mother who constitutes a constant obstruction to the daughter’s life as the daughter feels the need to satisfy the mother as a repayment for her past sacrifices. Irigaray argues that the mother and her daughter are not able to relate to each other as the relationship between them is not symbolized within the dominant system of discourse. This alienation experienced by the dyad is the result of this lack of articulation. She writes that “there is no
possibility whatsoever, within the current logic of sociocultural operations, for a
daughter to situate herself with respect to her mother: because, strictly speaking, they
make neither one nor two, neither has a name, meaning, sex of her own, neither can
be ‘identified’ with respect to the other.”23 This lack is destructive not only for the
woman but for all human relationships. The only way to dissolve this destructive
fusion is the imagination of the female identity independent of patriarchal
prescriptions and expectations.

Sylvia Plath intended ‘Wintering’ (CP, 217-219) to be the closing poem of
Ariel. Unlike the end of the volume published posthumously, this would have closed
her book on an optimistic note with her prediction of her survival both as a mother
and a poet. Dominant culture dictates that motherhood should be the ultimate
vocation of a woman. Plath, however, was determined to be the best, in both
motherhood and poetry. Her ending poem stands as a symbol for her ambition and
her optimism. Ted Hughes recollects that at the time “she pointed out that it began
with the word ‘Love’ and ended with the word ‘Spring’”.24 However, as Susan R.
Van Dyne has demonstrates in Plath’s manuscripts, the poet was not as assertive as
the final version of the poem:

Snow water? Corpses? (Thin, sweet Spring.) (A sweet
Spring?) Spring?
(Impossible spring?)
(What sort of spring?)
(O God, let them taste of spring.)25

23Irigaray, Luce, This Sex Which is not One, Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (trans.), Ithaca:
14.
25Van Dyne, Revising Life, p. 115.
After her revisions, Plath did not ask herself so many questions as she did in this manuscript, and went on to assert herself in the last line: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.” What she wanted from her mother was this: “that in giving me life, you still remain alive.”26 She concluded her collection with words that could give hope for a future where motherhood would be experienced not as a service provided by the woman’s body to the society, leading to her loss of identity, but as a unique phenomenon that enriches woman and man alike, a future when the mothers will not advocate the suffocation they went through to their daughters, and will not advise them to conform in order to lead a ‘comfortable’ life, when a woman’s sole duty will not be to “[g]et a nice little, safe little, sweet little loving little imitation man who’ll give you babies and bread and a secure roof and a green lawn and money money money every month” (J, 267), have babies and tuck them into “a white little / [t]ucked-in-tight-little / [n]ighty-night little / [t]urn-out-the-light little / [b]ed!”27 If woman can begin to imagine the mother-daughter relationship in feminine terms, rather than mythical prescriptions, each woman may start to discover her own subjectivity in her own terms, instead of trying to give a meaning to her life through a man and children.

26Irigaray, ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other’, p. 67.
Chapter Eight

“A Thinking Woman Sleeps with Monsters”: The Early Poetry of Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich was a contemporary of Sylvia Plath. The two women knew each other as promising young poets. Plath had regarded Rich as one of her closest rivals and often compared herself to her.\(^1\) Like Plath, Adrienne Rich followed the social prescriptions of her time and in 1953, at the age of 24, married Alfred H. Conran, an economist then teaching at Harvard. The birth of her three sons followed soon after. From this point onwards, however, the lives of these two women took very different paths. The self-destructiveness that led to implosion in the case of Sylvia Plath, manifested itself as explosion in the case of Rich’s poetry and personal life. In terms of biographical data, however, the information available regarding the two poets has to be treated differently. Today, every detail of Sylvia Plath’s life has come under close scrutiny by biographers, journalists, and critics alike, whereas what we know about Adrienne Rich consists of selective information she chooses to reveal, and comes directly from the poet herself. For instance, she never openly talked about the suicide of her husband. In ‘Sources’, one of the few poems in which she mentions her husband directly, she explains that her silence aims to protect him and not to use him “merely as a theme for poetry or tragic musings”.\(^2\) I think this silence should be respected. Rich’s attitude, however, should be viewed not as

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detrimental but as providing more space to work from. As in the case of Sylvia Plath the biographical data can lead to superficial interpretations of the poet’s work.

Adrienne Rich has been an influential figure in the arena of the feminist movement for decades not only with her poetry, but with her prose, and her person. She was born on May 16, 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland. Her mother, Helen Elizabeth Jones, was a pianist, and her father, Arnold Rice Rich, was a physician. Her mother gradually gave up on her music to fulfil her more traditional duties as a wife and mother, and this had an effect on Rich. It was her mother who taught her how to “fascinate” men, and the necessity to be “mysterious” in her relationships with the opposite sex. “Survival tactics, of a kind,” Rich termed these strategies later in her life.\(^3\) Until the fourth grade she was educated by her mother at home, and her father had a great influence on her as a reader and writer. He was the person who insisted that she use “‘grown-up’ sources”, criticised her poems for “faulty technique and gave [her] books on rhyme and metre and form.”\(^4\) His influence on her daughter regarding order and form is visible in the early poems that I am going to discuss in this chapter. But my main focus will be on her revisionary mythmaking, and the strategies Rich employs in her poetry to explore patriarchal myths regarding prescribed gender roles and the institution of marriage, all of which surround her as a woman and a poet.

One underlying theme in Adrienne Rich’s work and life that has been constant is the struggle for transformation and revision which will be the focus of this section. Even in the very early stages of her poetic career, when she was trying to fit into a

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male canon, revision is in the heart of her poetry. Throughout the decades she transformed herself from a wife and mother in a conventional Jewish marriage into a radical lesbian / feminist. Years later, Rich reflects on her earlier self as follows: “Because I was also determined to prove that as a woman poet I could also have what I was then defined as a ‘full’ woman’s life, I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three children before I was thirty.”\(^5\) Hence, in her early years, Rich tried to conform to the myth of the woman of the twentieth century who can have it all. However, from such a traditional outlook on life, Rich moved on to declaring herself a lesbian, and a committed radical feminist. The metamorphosis within Rich’s personal life also manifests itself in her writing. Her later work reveals a more confident and liberated style in contrast to her early volumes which were dominated by a formalist style - a style which, Adrienne Rich tells us, was formed by “the men [she] was reading as an undergraduate - Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, MacNiece, Stevens, Yeats.”\(^6\) Like H.D. and Sylvia Plath, her introduction to poetry was via a predominantly male literary canon. Even when she encountered women poets, her perception of them was formed in relation to the poets she regarded as masters:

I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness, and ambivalence: Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H.D. ... But even in reading these women I was looking in them for the same things I had found in the poetry of men, because I wanted women poets to be equals of men, and to be equal was still to be confused with sounding the same.\(^7\)

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Adrienne Rich’s initial superficial acceptance of the male literary tradition brought her success within the establishment. In 1951, her first book of poetry, *A Change of World* received the Yale Younger Poets Award. As can be read in the introduction W. H. Auden wrote to the volume, the prevailing attitude towards women poets was quite patronizing. He wrote: “The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume, is a good deal.”8 He sounds as if he was surprised to read good poetry written by a woman. The attributes he values in Rich’s poetry are exactly the traditional feminine attributes which women should possess in his eyes, such as neatness, modesty, silence, and respect.

On the surface, Adrienne Rich’s first three volumes, *A Change of World* (1951), *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), seem to articulate the dominant ideology surrounding the young poet during her early career. In Adrienne Rich’s personal life as well, this period is marked by her acceptance of the traditional female roles, and her commitment to fit herself into the traditional ‘Daughter-in-Law’ mould. Even so, it is possible to read the strain and the suppressed emotions of the poet are readable, as a subtext, between the lines of her poetry. Later on in her life, looking back at her early poetry, Rich explains her reasons for writing in the formalist style of her early volumes: “In those years formalism was a part of the strategy - like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up barehanded.”9 Such a strategy obviously allowed the

woman poet to write from a position of safety without exposing herself too much. Therefore, contrary to the assertion of W. H. Auden, her early poems did contain “lies” since the communicated feelings of the poet were concealed and adjusted. These poems are made up of a double strand, one of which is in accordance with the dominant tradition (the woman poet who writes with respect for her predominantly male elders and without challenging them), and the other, a muted story, which gives us glimpses of the feminist vision which will be encountered in her later poetry.

Decades later, Rich identifies this double strand within the early volumes written by a young woman poet:

Looking back at the poems I wrote before I was twenty-one, I’m startled because beneath the conscious craft are glimpses of the split I even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men.¹⁰

Twenty years after she wrote this first volume of poetry, Adrienne Rich regarded it as “a book of very well-tooled poems.”¹¹ Indeed, the poems are crafted very carefully which, I would argue, works as a strategy of concealment and distancing by the poet. These static poems do not seek to reveal deeper aspects of one’s consciousness, but rather labour towards masking them. As Rich herself explains, they are “poems in which the unconscious things never got to the surface.”¹²

Behind this facade, however, the poet’s other feelings, such as dissatisfaction and alienation, which will dominate her future career emerge unconsciously.

The opening poem of *A Change of World*, "Storm Warnings" is ruled by a sense of vulnerability which will emerge over and over again throughout the volume. The speaker of the poem is trying to create a safe space for herself against the storm brewing outside. Her anxiety and the struggle to contain this feeling is the theme of the poem. She needs an interior space as a haven for self-protection against the imminent doom, so she envelopes herself with "closed window[s]", tight "shutters", drawn "curtains". As a woman, the only form of defense available to her is to shut herself away from the outside forces that are out of her control:

This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions. (*CEP*, 3)

She has to adjust herself according to the environment in which she lives in order to conform, and all her emotions have to be internalized. These surroundings are exclusively male and hostile to women, hence the woman's need to mould herself into a shape that will be acceptable by the outside world.

After she has introduced the vulnerable woman trying to protect herself against the imminent doom, Rich moves on to 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' (*CEP*, 4) in which we see the woman-as-artist through the eyes of the artist. Aunt Jennifer's art of embroidery, however, is deemed a mere craft - a lesser form of art, as it is mainly in the domain of the female. Even so, the woman tries to make the best of what is available to her, and pours her feelings out to her tapestry. This status of inferiority is allocated to every female activity within patriarchal tradition. Irigaray underlines the

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binary oppositions of superior / inferior, activity / passivity, and ultimately male / female:

Man has been the subject of discourse whether in theory, morality, or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always masculine and paternal, in the West. To women are left the so-called minor arts: cooking, knitting, embroidery, and sewing; and, in exceptional cases, poetry, painting, and music. Whatever their importance, these arts do not currently make the rules, at least not overtly.¹⁴

Compared to ‘Storm Warnings’, even though the protagonist is again in a powerless state, this is a much bolder poem. It takes a further step by acknowledging the anxiety and the fear of the woman. It is possible to read Aunt Jennifer’s dissatisfaction with her allocated role in life between the lines and we can sense her restrained anger throughout the poem. The tigers she embroiders on the canvas are virile, certain and not afraid, that is they are everything she is not, yet longs to be. However, her allocated role as a married woman weighs her down: “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand” (CEP, 4). She is securely tied down to her submissive position by the dominant male establishment. Nonetheless, she does not run away, and instead of shutting herself off she challenges the experience with her creative output. Her only legacy outlasting death becomes the virile tigers onto whom she has projected all her expectations:

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.

The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (*CEP*, 4)

A strategy Adrienne Rich employs in *A Change of World* is to be as distant as possible from the protagonist. In this poem the author is not only a mere spectator of the action, but the persona of the poem is also older than her by many years, too. Re-reading this poem decades later, Rich touches upon this point. She writes: “It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible - distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone - even by putting the woman in a different generation.”15 In doing so the poet creates a space for herself in which she can manoeuvre more easily. The split that she feels as a woman who wants to write, and a woman who wants to conform within the established traditions can be examined more comfortably if it is seen from an outsider’s standpoint.

‘Mathilde in Normandy’ (*CEP*, 29) is another poem in which Rich presents the reader a woman who transcends the prescribed deficiency of the female by means of her craft. In this poem once more the persona projects the experiences denied to a woman onto her “patient handiwork”. Here Rich deals with the legend of the wife of William the Conqueror, Queen Mathilde, who embroidered the Bayeaux Tapestry depicting the Norman Conquest of England. Mathilde who stays behind when her husband is out in the man’s world, occupies herself with a “pastime” deemed suitable for women. The poet, however, finds this stereotypical distribution of roles problematic and as a result distances herself from the protagonist. This time, there is even more distance between the two women; they are from different eras. Hence the

poet creates a space for herself, explores the suppressed feelings of Mathilde, and struggles to rationalize Mathilde’s obedience from afar:

That this should prove
More than the personal episode, more than all
The little lives sketched on the teeming loom
Was then withheld from you; self-conscious history
That writes deliberate footnotes to its action
Was not of your young epoch.

But the last stanza of ‘Mathilde in Normandy’ takes a forward step by disclosing the dilemma Mathilde finds herself in. Even though she pretends to be content with her circumscribed life, the poet discloses her underlying anxiety. The peaceful picture she had painted earlier turns out to be only superficial. As her anxiety gradually grows, it causes her distraction:

Say what you will, anxiety there too
Played havoc with the skein, and the knots came
When finger’s occupation and mind’s attention
Grew too divergent. (CEP, 29)

The split Adrienne Rich feels as a young woman and a poet, however discreet it is, can still be read. The feelings of Mathilde and Aunt Jennifer catch the essence of the common experience of many women, the poet herself included. Women struggle to give meaning to their own lives as their fathers’ daughters, their husbands’ wives, their sons’ mothers. Even though this is a costly strategy to woman, she is led to believe that she employs it for love. These are issues with which Adrienne Rich will deal more openly in her future career. At this early point in her work, however, her protagonists remain silent, even though their creator is aware that what they are going through is “more than a personal episode” (CEP, 29).
Rich carries through the theme of embroidery as a space for the woman where she can express herself in ‘Design in Living Colors’ (CEP, 41-42). The poem opens with the embroidered portrait of a woman surrounded by greenery. But this tableau is not a peaceful one. There is uneasiness in the air, as in this “eternal summer afternoon” the “birds are without a tune” and the trees have a “formal attitude”. The speaker, who I read as a woman, goes on to disclose to us the underlying cause of this discomfort:

So you and I in our accepted frame
Believe a casual world of bricks and flowers
And scarcely guess what symbols wander tame
Among the panel of familial hours. (CEP, 41)

The struggle of the woman to mould herself into permissible form in order to be accepted by society is an integral component of her life. As long as she can be in an “accepted frame” her life will have an appearance of contentment, even though the reality is very different. This strategy is the basis of the patriarchal discourse about the feminine. As Irigaray posits: “the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects.” So, the woman is not capable of thinking herself in feminine terms, as the only path to her imagination is via masculine terms, which leads her to impossibility. Adrienne Rich also mentions how women refrained from talking about their discomfort: “I have a sense that women didn’t talk to each other much in the fifties - not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations.” By refusing to talk about these issues women become vital perpetuators of the system which actually suppresses and defines them in foreign terms. This is the reason why feminist thinkers like Hélène Cixous, as well as Adrienne Rich, insist upon the

16Irigaray, ‘Così Fan Tutti’, This Sex, p. 86.
17Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken’, On Lies, p. 42
necessity of speaking up for women. They present speech as the most important way forward. In Rich’s case this thought has started to emerge even in this early volume of poetry as can be seen when the protagonist of ‘Design in Living Colors’ starts to see a pattern in the embroidery in front of her which, until now, she did not comprehend. She writes: “And every flower emerges understood / Out of a pattern unperceived till now.”

‘The Kursaal at Interlaken’ (CEP, 8-9) is a poem in which Rich explicitly deals with the problematic relationship between woman and language. Here the reader is left to deduce that the speaker is actually a woman, when she says: “You will perhaps make love to me this evening”. In the poem, she is surrounded by objects which she finds stranger to herself:

Reality is no stronger than a waltz,
A painted lake stippled with boats and swans,
A glass of gold-brown beer, a phrase in German
Or French, or any language but our own.

... 

Sonntag and vendredi, unreal dimensions,
Days where we speak all languages but our own? (CEP, 8)

Here the poet gives a glimpse of the importance of the alienation of women from language. Patriarchal discourse which takes the male subject as its underlying foundation marginalizes the feminine and defines femininity in masculine terms. Hence, there is no subject position available for the woman. This is an issue which, Irigaray argues, needs urgent transformation. If we think of language as a home, this is a home which women - even though they are instrumental in the construction and perpetuation of it - do not have a space of their own. She goes on to state that: “men continually seek, construct, create for themselves houses everywhere: grottoes, huts,
women, towns, language, concepts, theory, etc.” According to her, women also need a language in which they can feel safe and comfortable: “[T]hey need language, a language. That house of language which for man even constitutes a substitute for his home in a body ... woman is used to construct it but (as a result?) it is not available to her.” The seeds of this standpoint are present in the early poems of Adrienne Rich, as she will articulate in her later career. She will refer to the act of writing, using the language by women, as “re-naming”.

In ‘Reliquary’ (CEP, 10) Rich articulates her perception of the way the patriarchal system works:

Brooding upon the marble bones of time
Men read strange sanctity in lost events,
Hold requiem mass for murdered yesterdays,
And in the dust of actions once reviled
Find symbols traced, and freeze them into stone. (CEP, 10)

The poet recognizes an underlying theme of patriarchy which is to glorify the past as if it had been a universal golden age, and to surround itself with myths to perpetuate this belief. However, Rich does not move forward from this point. She just makes a point, but does not make any suggestions. This theme of static and aloof patriarchy is repeated in ‘A View of the Terrace’ (CEP, 12). In this poem the poet refers to “the porcelain people” who do not care for the speaker at all. These “bright enamel people” are also “[i]mpervious to surprise”. As the situation of the woman under such a rule is marginal she is surrounded by images which she replicates and internalizes. This system is very difficult to penetrate and not easily influenced by

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ideas except the ones perpetuating its own power position. Once again the poet merely states what she observes, and does not try to improve on it.

In this first volume of poetry, Rich also touches upon the lack of divinity and religious myths in feminine terms, which is an important issue in Irigarayan thought. In ‘Air Without Incense’ (CEP, 15), for instance, the poet describes the rituals of the church as meaningless and out of touch with reality. The persona follows the ceremonies mechanically, but is unable to achieve any spiritual relief. She writes: “There are questions to be answered, and the sky / Answers no questions, hears no litany” (CEP, 15). Religion, which is instrumental in the perpetuation of patriarchal rule, also excludes women. God is aloof and unreachable for the female. She has no access to divinity, unless it is in male terms. The poet realizes this issue when she writes: “We seek, where lamp and kyrie expire, / A site unscourged by wasting tongues of fire” (CEP, 15). So, in the search of the woman for a space in which she can be in her own feminine terms, religion does not offer a way out. Rich is still quite timid in her thoughts at this stage, but the poet eventually abandons this static discourse, one which merely observes and reports, and offers women possibilities of change through her poetry instead. Irigaray also agrees with Rich on this issue of religion. Her main points in this discussion can be summarized as follows. Firstly, the religions of the West offer a purely male genealogy, in which the relationship between mothers and daughters, as well as women, have been effaced. Secondly, the only possibility of woman’s existence within patriarchal religion is as the Mother of God. Hence, she is subsumed within paternal genealogy as mother / wife, both positions defined in relation to man. Thirdly, these major religions also advocate female sacrifice, presenting it as if it is inevitable. Irigaray argues that there must be symbolic
alternatives to sacrifice. Fourthly, as a result of the binary oppositions of man / woman, mind / body, only the relationships between men have been spiritualised, leaving women with no access to spirituality.\textsuperscript{20}

Apart from ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’ and ‘Mathilde in Normandy’, ‘An Unsaid Word’ is the only other poem in Rich’s first volume in which the speaker is immediately identified as a woman, whereas the rest of the poems leave us to deduce the sex of the speaker. At first glance ‘An Unsaid Word’ (\textit{CEP}, 28) could be read as a manual for sexual relations between men and women in the 1950s United States. The didactic tone of this single-line poem creates the atmosphere of a mother preaching to her daughter:

\begin{quote}
She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone,
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
And when his thoughts to her return
Stands where he left her, still his own,
Knows this the hardest thing to learn. (\textit{CEP}, 28)
\end{quote}

Here the woman is once again presented as utterly dependent on the male to validate her own existence, and traditionally perceives it as a female duty to give “her man” his unconditional freedom no matter how costly it is to her own self. This necessity leads her to believe that to succumb to the freedom of the man is actually a position of power. Indeed, the dominant voice advocates this subservience of the woman to her man. The power she thinks she has is limited with only what the dominant rules allow her to have. Therefore, her complaint has to be an “unsaid word”, since the only way to keep her man and lead a ‘normal’ life is to be quietly

\textsuperscript{20}Whitford, \textit{Luce Irigaray}, p. 147.
content with her allocated role. Hence, she struggles to live up to the male fantasy of the silent woman who willingly and gladly sacrifices herself, lets him explore freely, where she awaits “where he left her”. Underneath this preaching, however, the muted voice of the poet can be heard. The admission that to have such an insight is indeed “the hardest thing to learn” goes to show that the woman is actually aware of the effort she has to put in towards moulding herself into a socially acceptable form. She moves towards the realization that “to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.” Irigaray also advocates the urgency and necessity of the woman’s existence in her own terms, independent of male criteria. “It is essential that she no longer depend on man’s return for her self love. Or at least not absolutely. But a whole history separates her from the love of herself.” Such a realization will emerge strongly in the later stages of Rich’s career. For now it can be noted that the poet was already feeling uncomfortable with the existing power structures within the dominant culture. Later on Rich will capitalize on the power of the “unsaid word” of the woman. As she writes in the title poem of the volume, ‘A Change of World’: “They say the season for doubt has passed: / The changes coming are due to last” (CEP, 39).

1955 was the year when Adrienne Rich published her second volume of poetry, The Diamond Cutters, the reception of which was along the same lines as her first book. Randall Jarrell, in his review in the Yale Review, finds the poet “enchanting” like a “princess in a fairy tale”. He acknowledges Rich’s potential, however patronizingly, when he writes: “It seems to me that she herself is, often, a

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good poet who is all too good - one who can afford to be wild tomorrow; meanwhile, today, she is also an endearing and delightful poet, one who deserves Shakespeare's favorite adjective, *sweet*." The myth of the woman poet is at play here; she is good, but not too good, obedient, and sweet.

In his review Donald Hall, too, acknowledges Rich's talent and draws attention to room for improvement in her poetry. He writes that young poets sometimes are "plagued by not always sounding quite like themselves. Adrienne Cecile Rich falls into [this] category, but she does not fall far." Rich herself has mentioned in her later years, that in the beginning of her career, she tried to imitate the poets who were regarded as the masters. However, as Hall points out, her own voice still comes through. It can be argued that this strategy of mimicry provided the poet with a secure place to work from. It allows the woman poet to explore the system she has to operate in. For Rich, as will be seen in her mature poetry, mimicry worked as a stepping stone in the quest for finding her own voice as a female poet.

Like its predecessor, *The Diamond Cutters* is charged with feelings of strain on behalf of the poet. Throughout the book, Rich seems to have resigned herself to the prescribed female roles in the society of which she is a part. This outlook, however, is only superficial. Her anger is constantly lurking behind her carefully crafted lines. At this point in her life, the poet was trying to find her place in life as a traditional wife and mother, and trying to satisfy her creative urge to write poetry at the same time. Since these roles are deemed to be mutually exclusive, there was great strain in her personal life and, consequently her poetry. Although the volume received

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The Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America, Rich herself was never satisfied with it. She explains the background of *The Diamond Cutters* in an interview in 1994:

It's a very bad book for the most part I think - it feels very derivative to me and like a tremendous effort. ... Then at that point I married, and my first child was born when the second book was in proof. This has something to do with both the cautiousness of that book, and the fact that I realised that I had to break out of this formal mode of doing things. Life had gotten really messy and anarchic. Domesticity never seemed safe to me - it seemed very dangerous!\(^{25}\)

This cautiousness prevents Rich from exploring issues that were disturbing to her and she suppresses her anger forcefully. In 1964 Rich touched upon her avoidance of 'dangerous' issues:

Only gradually, within the last five or six years, did I begin to feel that these poems, even the ones I liked best and in which I felt I'd said most, were queerly limited; that in many cases I had suppressed, omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain that perfection of order.\(^{26}\)

Despite Rich's efforts, the suppressed emotions, the "unsaid word[s]" of the female poet always hover between the lines of her poetry. At this point in Rich's career, as Robert Boyers writes, "[i]t was not as though the young poet were entirely unaware of the abyss of uncertainty, but she had a confident way of holding it off, of

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handling it elegantly so that it seemed a most a mildly threatening idea.” 27 To express disillusion and anger would shatter the illusion of security for the woman poet. Hence, she tries to avoid it by denying the existence of her unpleasant feelings.

The world Rich presents in *The Diamond Cutters* is a “fallen world” 28 in which the poet feels more and more alienated, and has difficulty acknowledging it. Her deep disenchantment is revealed in moments when she writes, for instance in ‘The Snow Queen’: “To love a human face was to discover / The cracks of paint and varnish on the brow” *(CEP, 111).*

The opening poem of the volume ‘The Roadway’ gives the reader the first glimpse of the denied awareness on behalf of the poet. She can sense her alienation, but does not feel that she possesses the power necessary to explore and overcome it.

> Nowhere evil is spoken,
> Though something deep in the heart
> Refuses to mend the bridge
> And can never make a start. *(CEP, 63)*

Moreover, her powerlessness is perpetuated as she has inherited this fallen world in which the despairing prophecy of the fathers must be believed. In ‘Orient Wheat’ Rich writes:

> Our fathers in their books and speech
> Have made the matter plain:
> The green fields they walked in once
> Will never grow again. *(CEP, 65)*

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The woman herself sustains her own powerlessness when she says "We had to take the world as it was given" (CEP, 69). She is not yet equipped to question the situation she is in, and accepts it as given. This is her strategy in order not to upset the status quo, which, ironically, holds her securely in her feeble position.

‘Autumn Equinox’ (CEP, 95-99) introduces the reader to a woman over fifty, married to a professor named Lyman. The poet depicts her while she is gathering leaves outside during the change of season. Meanwhile, her husband is in his study reading Satires. Metaphorically, the husband and wife live in different worlds. Lyman is the insider, whereas she is an outsider to his world. This is a dominant theme throughout the poem which Rich explores further when she writes:

I thought that growing old  
Returned one to a vague Arcadian longing,  
To Ovid, Spenser, something golden-aged,  
Some incorruptible myth that tinged the years  
With pastoral flavours. (CEP, 95)

The woman thinks of a golden age she feels she should long for, but this utopia of the masters does not include her. She is once again the outsider, and does not feel nostalgia for a time she was never a part of. Moreover, the "incorruptible myth" of the prescribed roles handed down by the patriarchal establishment have always taken male as its reference point, and hence, does not include her. Once again, her lack of power and belief in her own self is highlighted as she regards the myth as indestructible.

The woman also carries the burden of frustrated creativity with her throughout ‘Autumn Equinox’. In the first part of the poem she says: “I've never

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29 It may be beneficial to keep in mind that around this time in her life, Rich herself was a woman married to an academic.
been a scholar - Reader, perhaps at times, but not a scholar” (CEP, 95). Yet again, she is the outsider, this time in the field of creativity. She feels that she has to be content with reading what men have written. Her frustration can be observed when she remembers herself as a young girl:

Father would have me clever, sometimes said
He’d let me train for medicine, like a son,
To come into his practice. (CEP, 96)

Rich herself was deeply influenced by her father’s attitude of treating her as a genderless son. Years later she wrote: “I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred: the eldest daughter in a house with no son.”30 In order to gain access to her father’s realm she has to be treated like a son, otherwise she would not be able to enter into the male world. Instead, she does what was expected of her traditionally and chooses to marry Lyman, the college Professor. Her transition into the establishment of marriage is not smooth though. “I can see myself again, / Correct and terrified on our wedding-day, / Wearing the lace my mother wore before me” (CEP, 97). Even though she thinks that she is doing the right thing, she still feels afraid. The scene of the wedding Rich describes reminds the reader almost of a sacrificial ceremony. There is a bride in white lace, following in the footsteps of her mother who travelled the same road before her. She represses her fear and even manages to feel proud as she is marrying a professor. At least she will try to give a meaning to her self via her husband. Then she goes on to mask her frustration by demeaning the girl she used to be as “[r]ead too much”, “raw and silly”. She explains the situation of women when she says “I was never a scholar, but I had / A woman’s love for men of

intellect, / A woman’s need for love of any kind” (CEP, 96). So, she never thinks of pursuing her own dreams and expectations and instead tries to fill the void with love. But what is this undefined love? Love of husband and children? As Irigaray argues, women cannot have love for their own selves unless it means self-sacrifice. In Irigarayan terms, as the woman’s identity is defined in terms of man, she cannot possess love for her own self unless it is in relation to man. Therefore, she tries to find a secure place within an exclusive system by denying her own femininity and pretending to be in harmony with the establishment. Hence, the protagonist and her female neighbours avoid talking to each other, in the real sense of the word, in order not to disturb the status quo and endanger their relatively safe positions. They are unwilling to move forward and cross the boundaries of each other’s fences, and instead opt to judge each other on the basis of their husbands.

Sometimes I call to Alice Hume
And meet her at the fence as women meet
To say the weather’s reasonably fine,
Talk husbands, bargains, or philosophize -
The dry philosophy of the neighborhood.
She thinks perhaps how sharp of tongue and quick
I used to be, and how I’ve quieted down,
Without those airs because I’d married Lyman,
Professor at the college, while her husband
Was just another farmer. (CEP, 96)

According to Irigaray, this lack of connection between women is a characteristic of patriarchal society. Lack of communication between women prevents them claiming a common experience, and hence perpetuates their position as the outsiders. Irigaray writes:
It is a society which excludes between-women sociality, separates women from one another and hence does not have a female culture. The only thing it does have is training for motherhood. In such a culture, it is to be expected, or at least it is understandable, that there will be no female identity models. This is a civilization without any female philosophy or linguistics, any female religion or politics. All of these disciplines have been set up in accordance with a male subject.31

This issue of relationships between women occupies Rich’s later career, but throughout ‘Autumn Equinox’, perpetual silence plays an important role. What the persona does not say is more important than what she actually articulates. For instance, she and Lyman do not have any children, a fact about which the poem is curiously silent. In a society where children are explicitly regarded as the only manifestation of a woman’s creativity, the speaker will be deemed an unfulfilled woman who has failed to realize her life’s aim. Another point where the importance of silent words is highlighted is when the woman has a breakdown one night. Her husband tries to calm her down but his efforts cannot penetrate her real concerns. “why can’t you ever say? / I’m here, you know” (CEP, 99) he asks despairingly. There is a severe lack of communication between them and he cannot get through to her. The wife is aware of this fact as she thinks that her husband’s “love cannot understand” (CEP, 99) why she is unhappy. She tries to comprehend why her husband’s love is not enough for her, but rather like Rich, she is not equipped to face the underlying issues yet. Hence, she chooses to retreat back into the security of the familiar and reassures her husband that:

I must be crazy, Lyman - or a dream
Has made me babble things I never thought.
Go back to sleep - I won’t be so again. *(CEP, 99)*

Hence, she prefers everything to be back to ‘normal’ and protects her husband from her own unhappiness. She even thinks that there is something wrong with her, after all, she should be content: “I’m sick, I guess - / I thought that life was different than it is” *(CEP, 98)*. She represses her thoughts about her own self not to upset the fragile world they both live in.

I will conclude the discussion of ‘Autumn Equinox’ by focusing on a positive aspect which Rich attributes to woman. At the beginning of the poem, the poet describes the husband and wife in contrasting terms, however, she upsets the traditional binary oppositions. The husband is described in static, automaton-like terms. He sits in his study alone, his “[e]yes alone moving / [l]ike a mended piece of clockwork” *(CEP, 95)*. The woman, on the other hand, is described in terms of life, motion, and light. She is mobile, working outside, and she is the one turning the lights on. As can be seen, Rich’s revisionism, however discreet, is already present.

Another poem which deals with the rigidity of prescribed sex roles, and the suffocation of woman in marriage is ‘The Perennial Answer’ *(CEP, 103-108)*. The protagonist is a woman who feels increasingly alienated within her marriage. After she has lost her child, her situation becomes more unbearable as the poet writes: “Her marriage as a room so strange and lonely / She looked outside for warmth” *(CEP, 104)*.

So, she befriends Evans, the preacher, a man of God. However, Evans cannot warm her heart. The differences between the two surface interestingly when they are
discussing religion. Here Rich touches upon woman’s discomfort within patriarchal
religion as she did in ‘Air Without Incense’ (CEP, 15):

“Neither you nor I
Have lived in Eden, but they say we die
To gain that day at last. We have to live
Believing it - what else can we believe?”

Why not believe in life?” I said, but heard
Only the sanctioned automatic word
“Eternal life -” perennial answer given
To those who ask on earth a taste of heaven. (CEP, 106)

In this poem, Rich presents the reader with a woman who is disillusioned by
the institutions in which she has to live. For her, marriage has led to death, both of
marriage and in marriage. She has lost her child, so the only channel through which
she could exercise her creativity is not available. Religion cannot relieve her either, as
it cannot accommodate her as a woman with her own specificity. In the poem, Evans,
representing the patriarchal religion, concentrates on a future Eden, which can be
achieved only after death. His life on earth is merely a waiting period, whereas the
woman is concerned about the fulfillment of life on earth. She cannot long for a
future Eden as she is not welcomed there and will once again be the outsider. She is
interested in living while she is alive.

This is an important issue within Irigarayan thought in the context of Western
culture and religion. Under the patriarchal religion, the main concern is about life
after death. This thought in turn leads to losing sight of our future on earth, and lack
of respect towards the planet we live in. Rich, at this early point in her career,
underlines this issue which Irigaray also draws attention to. “The patriarchal order”,

Irigaray writes, “is based upon worlds of the beyond: worlds of before birth and especially of the afterlife, other planets to be discovered and exploited for survival, etc. It doesn’t appreciate the real value of the world we have and draws up its often bankrupt blueprints on the basis of hypothetical worlds.” Hence, it is not surprising that the perennial answer, “Eternal life” does not offer much to our protagonist, since religion does not empower her.

In her marriage, too, the woman associates power with her husband so much that she is not able to react when her husband rapes her after her time out with Evans. She finds her freedom only after her husband loses his power forever, after he dies. She can claim her own self only when her husband releases her through his own death. Rich’s progressiveness is at play here. Instead of “stand[ing] where he left her, still his own” (CEP, 28), as in the unsaid word of A Change of World, the said word of The Diamond Cutters empowers the woman to a limited extent: “at last I was alone / [i]n an existence finally my own” (CEP, 107).

In her early years Rich, like Sylvia Plath, regarded creativity as belonging to the sphere of man. This is evident in her treatment of the subject in ‘Living in Sin’ (CEP, 94). Here the reader meets a couple living a bohemian life. Even though from the title it can be assumed they are not married, their relationship is stereotypical. The woman is the one striving to sustain the creativity of man. She tries to prepare the conditions for him to practice his art, compose his music; she looks after him and does the housework. She is servile in every sense. Although this inferior lifestyle does not satisfy her, every night she convinces herself that she is in love and pretends everything is back to ‘normal’, hence perpetuating the conditions she lives in.

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32Irigaray, Luce, Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference, Alison Martin (trans.), London: Routledge, 1993, p. 27.
In the title poem of the volume, ‘The Diamond Cutters’ \((CEP, 131-2)\), Rich assigns limited creativity to the female sphere. It is limited because the female artist is still not independent. She receives instructions from a superior voice. As this voice is authoritarian and demanding it can assumed to be male. Perhaps Rich presents female creativity as being inferior to that of the male. The young female poet is trying to follow her male masters who have set clear guidelines for her to follow. It can be argued that even though Rich was aware of her discomfort with established traditions, she still did not have the power to break free of suffocating norms. Her early poetry indicates that she has started to explore her traditional dependency, and her need to discover her own self. However, she still regarded the institutions as too well-established to shake, as she says in ‘Villa Adriana’:

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\text{We came like dreamers searching for an answer,} \\
\text{Passionately in need to reconstruct} \\
\text{The columned roofs under the blazing sky,} \\
\text{The courts so open, so forever locked. (CEP, 83)}
\]

Adrienne Rich produced this third volume of poetry in 1963 following a gap of eight years during which she gave birth to three sons. It is a transitional book as Rich begins to employ a different style and attitude compared to her earlier books. Here Rich is bolder and more daring, ready to risk her safe position in order to discover and explore her anger. This, of course, is a threatening strategy for the woman artist to employ. It is threatening to her own sheltered place, and also to the establishment she lives in. Philip Booth realizes the difficult situation of Rich in his review of Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law. He understands that “her agony is the quiet agony of what she calls ‘rethinking the world’”, and adds that “[t]he risk this
book quietly takes and impressively fulfills, is no less than to get life said."\textsuperscript{33} Even though Booth’s review was encouraging and the volume received \textit{Poetry} magazine’s Hokin Prize, many critics regarded the book as disappointing. Rich herself explains the underlying reason for this reception by her departure from the earlier role of “a dutiful daughter, doing my craft right”.\textsuperscript{34} According to her “[i]his book was ignored, was written off as being too bitter and personal. ... I was also very conscious of male critics, then, and it was like flunking a course. It was as though they were telling me, ‘You did well in book two, but you flunked book three’”.\textsuperscript{35}

The task that Rich sets out for herself in this book is to locate her anger and uncertainties, and then go on to explore them. It is also a volume exploring the possibilities of crossing boundaries, trying to be two mutually exclusive things at the same time. Rich explains this point when she writes:

In a long poem written in 1960 [‘Readings of History’, (\textit{CEP}, 161-165)], when I was thirty-one years old, I describe myself as ‘Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, / Yankee nor Rebel’. I was still trying to have it both ways: to be neither / nor, trying to live (with my Jewish husband and three children more Jewish in ancestry than I) in the predominantly gentile Yankee academic world of Cambridge, Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{36}

These attempts are bound to be painful and disturbing for her, as will be seen when her poems are read closely. \textit{Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law} contains timid

\textsuperscript{33}Booth, Philip, “‘Rethinking the World’”, Cooper (ed.), \textit{Reading Adrienne Rich}, p. 215.
footsteps of an author who is preparing to leave a secure and familiar world behind and venture into an unknown territory in which she will try to find “[a] way to make the grass mean what you mean” (CEP, 137). She warns her readers quite openly of the decision she has to make in ‘Prospective Immigrants Please Note’. For her it is a categorical choice between the illusion of security or dangerous passage into the unknown, as she will be entering into an unexplored area. I will quote the poem in full as it represents the gist of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*; the necessity of crossing over boundaries.

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door. (CEP, 188)

With this volume Rich started to date her individual poems which enables the reader to put them in context in terms of Rich's poetic development. ‘Prospective Immigrants Please Note’ was written in 1962. The distance she has come from her earlier poems can be seen here. The necessity of change has always been the underlying theme in her poetry. However, she is not as brave about venturing into unknown territory and discarding 'proper' gender roles in ‘The Knight' (CEP, 138) from 1957. Rich’s knight is not the accustomed knight in his shining armour depicted in glorified terms. In the first stanza, he is riding towards the sun in his grandeur. But in the second stanza this scene of external glory is juxtaposed with the inner reality. The knight is in fact trapped in his armour while he is decaying inside. What he believes is the source of power for him is indeed what causes his ruin. The irony is that he becomes both the victimizer and the victim of his own forces. In the final stanza of the poem Rich concentrates on freeing the self which is imprisoned behind the armour. No matter how weak the knight is, the poet recognizes the necessity of liberation for the inner self. The hypocrisy of the armour symbolizes the bankrupt institutions of patriarchal culture which are deadly for both man and woman. They force men and women into wearing masks rather than exploring their own selves. In the poem, however, Rich cannot find a way of breaking out from the armour. The fear of the repercussions of such an act still has a restrictive power:

Who will unhorse this rider
and free him from between
the walls of iron, the emblems
crushing his chest with their weight?
Will they defeat him gently,
or leave him hurled on the green,
his rags and wounds still hidden
under the great breastplate? (CEP, 138)

The poet is not very optimistic about the outcome of the desire for freedom. She even feels that no matter how hard the knight tries he will not be able to break free from the “emblems” that hurt him deeply, and that the quest may be bound to fail. Even though the poet herself must be hurting as well, she chooses a male persona from a bygone era to convey her feelings. This underlines her need to distance herself from the character in order to write more freely. In 1957 Rich is prepared to go only so far.

The armour of the knight can be compared to the institution of traditional marriage in Rich’s other poems. Like the armour, marriage too suffocates women and causes inner decay. Quite early in the volume Rich begins her exploration of the vicious circle of marriage for women in ‘The Loser’ (CEP, 139-40). The poet once again chooses the mask of a man for her persona and gives us two snapshots. The caption reads: “A man thinks of the woman he once loved: first, after her wedding, and then nearly a decade later” (CEP, 139). Through the eyes of this man we witness the transformation of the woman from a “golden apple” into a “squared and stiffened” woman whose “intelligence / flung into that unwearied stance” (CEP, 140). Her mind has become numb out of the necessity of protecting herself and surviving in this institution. After a while, as the persona of ‘Peeling Onions’ discovers, she cannot ascertain the reason for her tears apart from the onions as she is not in touch
with her own self. So she exclaims: “Only to have a grief / equal to all these tears!” *(CEP, 183)*

Marriage takes a more violent form in ‘Apology’. The housewife in this poem has a nightmarish existence. She is not in control of her own life or her own emotions. Hence, she directs her violent feelings towards her own self. She:

is a woman
with a mindful of fog
and bloodletting claws
and the nerves of a bird
and the nightmares of a dog. *(CEP, 177)*

These women all have confusion as their common ground. Their lives consist of the daily routines of housework and suppression of every emotion that does not fit within this frame. Rich underlines the confusion of these women as well as herself, as at this point in her life she also was trapped within the vicious circle of traditional marriage. So her call is for getting back in touch with repressed womanhood. The poet has to kill the demons that haunt her and break free of the masks she has to put on in order to make a claim on her femininity. In ‘Double Monologue’ she gives us a glimpse of these demons:

Since I was more than a child
trying on a thousand faces
I have wanted one thing: to know
simply as I know my name
at any given moment, where I stand. *(CEP, 175)*

The confused woman is trying to make sense of the masks she has to wear in order to feel relatively secure. However, it becomes obvious this is not satisfactory any more. These poems reveal a deep sense of being isolated as well as being very
angry about her status of an outsider. These poems were written at a time when the poet herself was going through a difficult time with her marriage and children. To begin with, her ideas were quite different as she recalls that she had the dream that she could lead a "full life: the life available to most men, in which sexuality, work, and parenthood could exist".

The title poem of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is a poem constructed in ten parts (*CEP*, 145-149). It gives the reader images from the lives of several women in different situations. Their common characteristic, however, is their anger towards and discontent with being classified as beautiful objects reserved for the pleasure of men, while their experiences are discounted.

According to Rich, ‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’ was written over a period of two years, the completion of which brought the poet “extraordinary relief.” It was a time when she was trying to cope with looking after her children and she could spare only brief pauses for her writing. “Yet”, Rich writes:

I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be “universal,” which meant, of course, nonfemale. Until then I had tried very much not to identify myself as a woman poet.”

In this long poem, Rich presents the images of the women against a background of cultural and historical expectations conveyed through quotations from canonized masters. The first five sections show women quietly bearing their fates,

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37Rich, ‘When We Dead awaken’, *On Lies*, p. 44.
39Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken’, *On Lies*, p. 44.
whereas the final sections put forward the idea that there may be alternatives. In the opening part of the poem, the “belle of Shreveport” is described in terms of her beauty to the male eye. She cannot have an existence in her own terms apart from her physical beauty, and compromises by being reduced to a distant memory in the mind of the man. She is almost invisible, her experience is “useless”. She is “nervy” but does not have the power to act.

The woman of the second part is constantly haunted by voices which tell her to react and claim her own self. Instead of trying to understand these voices, she thinks that she is going mad. Rich repeats the feelings of this woman years later when she writes: “I was looking desperately for clues, because if there were no clues then I thought I might be insane”. As she thinks that she is going mad, she starts hurting herself with the household appliances. In order to elicit some of these disturbing feelings she masochistically turns on to herself. And finally, the feminine disease of guilt takes its toll on her, and she resorts to ignoring the voices: “They are probably angels, / since nothing hurts her more, except / each morning’s grit blowing into her eyes” (CEP, 145).

The persona of the third stanza is also haunted by her thoughts: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes” (CEP, 146). Her intellectual and imaginative powers serve to cripple her, instead of liberating her. The tensions she feels inside erupt in her relationships with other women. Lack of communication and solidarity between women is an important factor for Rich which perpetuates the repression of women.

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40Rich ‘When We Dead Awaken’, On Lies, p. 44.
Section four presents women with a different point of view. This time the quoted line "*My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -*" is from Emily Dickinson who had a big impact on the poet’s thoughts. It is a poem in which Dickinson presents woman in terms of everything she is taught not to be; cruel, nasty, hard, strong and, most importantly, the one who has the power to destroy and kill. The woman in this section reads this poem amidst her chaotic daily routine of housework. But now she takes the initial uncertain steps towards discovering female anger.

In section five, against the quotation from Horace, the woman shaves her legs until they are shining and ready for male approval as Rich describes them in phallic terms; they are like "mammoth tusk[s]".

This image is perpetuated in the sixth section where we meet “Corrina” who is singing. But her song is not her own, neither does she sing for her own pleasure. She does it to please others; she is “[p]inned down for love, for you the only natural action”. This kind of love - love of husband, children, others - is the only path for love available for women without repercussions. Woman is not allowed to feel love for other women, and more importantly for herself in within the traditional institutions. If she strays from these established rules she risks being “labeled harpy, shrew and whore” like the woman in the seventh section. A woman who dares to disclose her uniqueness becomes non-female, loses male approval, and hence, is immediately perceived as threatening.

Sections eight and nine concentrate on the accomplishment of women against male disapproval. Diderot says “You all die at fifteen” underlining the conception that women are delicate, and that femininity necessarily precludes any accomplishment. This is followed by Samuel Johnson’s view and his surprise about the preaching of
women: “Not that it is done well, but / that it is done at all?” So women are not even eligible for serious critical judgement. For the situation they find themselves in Rich lays some blame on women themselves as they are the ones who perpetuate the existing conditions by their lack of action.

The final section contains prophetic words by the poet. She foresees deep changes that will occur both in her own life and also in the understanding of woman by herself. These are changes that are long overdue: “Well, / she is long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history.” Rich paraphrases Simone de Beauvoir in her description of this coming, as the image of the “helicopter” is cited by both authors. However, Rich still cannot identify her prophecy as completely female. She says that it is “as beautiful as any boy”. She chooses to put a safe distance between herself and this prophecy as well as the women in the poem. She never uses “I”, but always “she”. At this point, the poet feels more secure if she writes about other women rather than herself.

A common theme linking these sections is the seclusion of women from each other. They do not have any ground to stand on together, their experiences are common but they do not share them. Irigaray underlines this lack of shared female experience as one of the important factors perpetuating patriarchy. She writes:

It is a society which excludes between-women sociality, separates women from one another and hence does not have a female culture. That only thing that it does have is training for motherhood. In such a culture, it is to be expected, or at least it is understandable, that there will be no female identity models. This is a civilization without any female philosophy or linguistics, any female
religion or politics. All of these disciplines have been set up in accordance with a male subject.41

Centrally, ‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’ is a poem about deep anger beneath quiet surfaces. Every section contains a cutting edge: knives, blades, razors. There is a sense that female violence is waiting to erupt, rather than continuously being (mis)directed towards the self.

The poem also works towards undermining the myths surrounding women. The poet protests against the prescriptions women must live their lives by, not only because of the way they are regarded by men, but also because of the way they perceive themselves as women. They have to acquire the awareness that women themselves are also responsible for suppressing their own imaginative and creative powers. These are powers which a woman wants but fears at the same time, as claiming them means going against established patriarchal traditions. Rich, however, regards these powers as the only way towards transformation and increasingly feels herself writing as a woman. Breaking free of the myths which prescribe the attributes of a ‘normal’ woman is a very important step in this direction. In her early poetry, Rich’s revisionary mythmaking involves a gentle critique of the myths of prescribed gender roles. If woman is going to claim her identity outside of the male imagination, this search for an independent female identity has to be carried out by women in their own terms, free of the sovereignty of men. This is a task which has become the life’s work for the “pioneer, witness, and prophet”42, Adrienne Rich.

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41Irigaray, *i love to you*, p. 44.
Chapter Nine

"Any Woman’s Death Diminishes Me”: The Necessity of a Maternal Genealogy

One of the constant themes throughout the ever transforming career of Adrienne Rich has been the urgent need for the creation of a maternal genealogy. As was discussed in the previous chapter, in her early poetry her strategy was subtle and she whispered her ideas about change gently. In the present section, I will concentrate on poems in which she begins articulating her ideas more clearly and strongly, and channels her energy towards her search for alternatives. The focus will be on the shift in the consciousness of the poet from an allegiance to the male principle towards a quest and affirmation of the female principle. For this quest Rich’s main guides will be other women whose lives have been forgotten. I will discuss how the feminist imperative to propose new ways of conceptualizing women’s relationship to each other individually and as a community serves as an significant guideline for Rich in her revision. At the core of all these issues Rich, like Irigaray, places the mother-daughter relationship, and in her poetry she demonstrates how the abandonment of this relationship results in the impossibility of self-love on behalf of the woman, and also becomes the foundation for the myth of the selfless woman.

One important step in this shift has been the resurrection of female role models with which the woman as an artist can bond. Her disruption and revision of the myths surrounding her as a woman and an artist enabled her to convey her
dissatisfaction and disbelief in them. By looking to the words of other women poets, artists, critics for meanings the poet finds ways in which to identify and validate her own position. This is a point which Rosi Braidotti strongly argues when she writes:

In order to make sexual difference operative within feminist theory I want to argue that one should start politically with the assertion of the need for the presence of real-life women in positions of discursive subjeecthood, and theoretically with the recognition of the primacy of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting both the traditional vision of the subject as universal, neutral, or gender-free and the binary logic that sustains it.¹

Luce Irigaray also underlines the necessity of recovering the broken - or rather forgotten - bond between mother and daughter, as well as between women as sisters. However, this bond is very hard to establish within patriarchal thought. In order to be regarded as a ‘normal’ woman, Freud tells us, the girl’s Oedipus complex must lead to abandonment of her attachment to her primary love object, her mother, in favour of the father, and divert her love and desire towards the man-father. However, she must also retain some identification with the mother in order to acquire the necessary feminine attributes. Hence, she must retain a degree of identification with the ‘castrated’ mother, a position which cannot enable her to possess an autonomous identity. What needs to be contested, in Irigaray’s view, as well as the author of this study, is not the description of this model, but the necessity and inevitability of it. According to this model, the abdication of the mother as the primary love object, serves as a vital gesture that sustains the male-oriented

understanding of the concept of love in which love between women cannot occupy a
space of its own. In ‘Love of Same, Love of Other’, Irigaray tries to construe this
impossibility in terms of the competition between women for the maternal function
which is the only female trait that is universally valued. She argues that since the
mother has a unique place, and being a mother means to occupy that place, the
relationship with the mother becomes an impossibility. Hence, the issue evolves into
an either / or, her / me requirement. Even this specifically female rivalry is played out
in terms of the male, as Irigaray posits:

If we are to be desired and loved by men, we must
abandon our mothers, substitute for them, eliminate
them in order to be same. All of which destroys the
possibility of a love between mother and daughter. The
two become at once accomplices and rivals in order to
move into the single possible position in the desire of
man.

This competition equally paralyzes love among
sister-women. Because they strive to achieve the post of
the unique one: the mother of mothers, one might say.\(^2\)

The need for a genealogy of women, a history of maternal connections and
relations, is clearly embraced by Adrienne Rich as will be seen in the discussion of her
individual poems. A caveat seems to be necessary here. What both Irigaray and
Adrienne Rich are struggling to envision is not a project limited to the maternal
function, but rather a genealogy of women which is based on the recovery of
maternal connections that have been effaced throughout patriarchal history. It is vital
for a woman to be able to identify and take strength from other women who were

\(^2\)Irigaray, Luce. ‘Love of Same, Love of Other’, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, Burke, Carolyn and
also living in inhospitable terrain like herself. Once Rich became aware of this calling
to exist as a woman and an artist in her own right, she could not become unaware
again. This, of course, is a very alienating stance for the woman poet within the
established canon, and hence, the need to establish the lost link between women.

Looking back at *Necessities of Life* (1966), her fourth volume of poetry, years later
in 1994, Rich emphasized the reality that for her as a woman and a poet there was no
turning back:

I think it is notable that, although in a lot of the poems
in *Necessities of Life* I went on doing certain similar
things [to her work in *Snapshots*], those poems are
much more obliquely personal, and a lot of them are
about death. I really was thinking, “I can’t go back to
what I used to do; if what I’m doing now, and feel I
must do, is increasingly going to alienate me as a poet,
then what do I have?” I felt very despairing during the
time those poems were written.³

This despair and struggle to manifest a transition from “poems about
experiences to poems that are experiences”⁴, as she declared them to be in a poetry
reading given in 1964, was not appreciated by her critics of the time. Instead of
recognizing the urge to cross boundaries innate in them, Robert Lowell, for instance,
gave an ovation to the poet’s “modesty without mumbling”.⁵ This timidity, a
becoming attribute for a woman poet, was also applauded by John Ashberry in the
New York Herald Tribune Week when he wrote: “[I]n this hard and sinewy new

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Charlesworth, and Albert Gelpi (eds.), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*, London: W. W. Norton & Company,
1975, p. 89.
poetry she has mastered the art of tracking between alternative resolutions of the poem’s tension and of leaving the reader at the right moment, just as the meaning is dawning."6 This, however, will not be a valid point in the career of Rich, as she dares to go further instead of leaving the reader at the dawn of the meaning, but articulating her ideas strongly and in no uncertain terms, and she derives strength from other women claiming the transforming power of the feminine.

The first poem I have chosen to illustrate how Rich finds solace and strength in other women is the title and the opening poem of the book *Necessities of Life*. The central theme of the poem is the creation of the woman by herself. It is a powerful poem in which the persona becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the myths circumscribing her and takes control of her own birth. This process, however, is not straightforward as she rejects alien guidelines and strives to be in control of her becoming. The first step in this long journey is to claim the first person pronoun. ‘Necessities of Life’ (*CEP*, 205-6) is one of the first poems in which Rich claims the “I” for herself:

> Piece by piece I seem 
> to re-enter the world: I first began 
> a small, fixed dot (*CEP*, 205).

Following this entrance the persona, whom I choose to read as she, goes on to describe her own creation by using both sexual and painterly images: “a hard little head protruding // from the pointillist’s buzz and bloom” (*CEP*, 205). Nonetheless,

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this “small, fixed dot” that she is, finds it impossible to stay static and fit neatly into the arranged picture and “begins to ooze”. She realizes the difficulties involved in taking her destiny into her own hands. First and foremost she has to tackle the powerful myths that pre-exist her. Therefore, her approach of blurring the overall picture is a timid one. This strategy is regarded by Irigaray as one belonging to a female realm of communication. She advocates the recognition that woman’s speech is fluid and therefore unstable. It is not ever-fixed, but changing and becoming as she writes:

Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. Blurring. And she is not listened to, unless proper meaning (meaning of the proper) is lost. Whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the “subject.” Which the “subject” then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow.8

The persona of this poem also feels the same predicament. As soon as she distorts the overall picture by beginning to “ooze”, the power of deeply rooted myths pulls her back into her previously allocated place: “whole biographies swam up and / swallowed me like Jonah” (CEP, 205). Once again, she is manipulated back into the status quo by the tradition that is so much stronger than her. She tries to take strength from the fact that she has predecessors in her rebellion, and acknowledges the roles Wittgenstein and Mary Wollstonecraft played before her.

At this point her subversion takes a quieter turn, and manifests itself in a subtler way as she reaches a point where she discovers that in order to protect herself

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from being devoured and annihilated the best strategy is to withdraw from familiar contexts and look inside herself:

Till, wolfed almost to shreds,
I learned to make myself

unappetizing. Scaly as a dry bulb
thrown into a cellar ... *(CEP, 205)*

With these lines the poet highlights the struggle between the internal process and the external threat. The speaker resolves this dilemma temporarily by making herself ugly. This is an act which, under the compulsory female social code, is a cardinal sin. However, Rich chooses to disrupt the prescribed myth of the beautiful woman and by doing so unsettles fixed images. At this juncture in the poem, she asserts control over her own life, even though she can only claim this within her bondage. This restricted power alienates her inevitably but it is not a state without its future promises as the “dry bulb” carries the seeds of regeneration, a new lease of life. Therefore, she does not show any signs of wavering when she declares: “I used myself, let nothing use me”, and “What life was there, was mine” *(CEP, 206)*. There is a tone of rebellion in these assertions which are uttered only after the persona went through various shapes, colours, and stories in the poem. Henceforward, she starts to concentrate on this realization of her identity in process. Once she apprehends her potential, the poet moves us towards the finale of the poem where she reveals her vision of the future. She endorses a conception of selfhood based on connection with other women and the environment that encompasses all of us:

... I have invitations:

a curl of mist steams upward
from a field, visible as my breath,
houses along a road stand waiting

like old women knitting, breathless
to tell their tales. (CEP, 206)

With her use of images from nature, Rich also underlines her protests against patriarchy’s lack of respect for the environment. Like Irigaray, she thinks that the system is not only bankrupt but also dangerous to its surroundings. She draws attention to this point through her identification with the motion of “an eel”, and the solidity of “a cabbage head” (CEP, 206). By establishing a connection between the environment within a community of women, the poet declares respect for nature to be within the feminine realm. Rich also undermines the myth about the old wives’ tales and presents them in a different light. Old wives’ tales, by tradition, are thought to bear connotations of falsehood and ignorance. The poet, however, invites us to hear the stories of real women in them by acknowledging the common experience that is readable within these tales. This is a realization which is extremely important in the poetics of Adrienne Rich: the idea of selfhood in more communal rather than egocentric terms. In the last analysis, the potential for rebirth lies within the acceptance of one’s personal experience which is shared by and lived within a community.

Adrienne Rich explores this theme of connection with women’s past further in her poem about Emily Dickinson which has Dickinson’s own words from a letter “I am in Danger - Sir -” as its title. Here Rich explores the difficulties in destabilizing myths and establishing the actual facts about women’s writing and their history. This area of history has always been difficult to substantiate, as women’s reality of their
own lives has traditionally been unrecorded, misrecorded, or misinterpreted. By
drawing attention to the personal aspects of women’s lives, and specifically to
Dickinson in this poem, Rich introduces the idea that feminist texts and readings can
be based more upon personal materials and experiences. Letters, journals, accounts
of oneself and of other women, areas which traditionally have been devalued by
patriarchal studies, could all be included.

“I am in Danger - Sir -” (CEP, 232) begins with Dickinson’s contemporary
Thomas Higginson’s reference to the poet as “[h]alf-cracked”. He might have been
referring to the voluntary seclusion that Dickinson chose as her way of life. Rich,
however, explores Dickinson’s choice with an open mind, and tries to find out what it
was that made the genius poet create such a cocoon for herself. Ultimately, the
central issue of the poem is Rich’s search for the answer to her question: “who are
you?”

In the opinion of the poet, the nature of patriarchal language and the role it
plays in the establishment of identity is an integral part of the answer to the question
above. I try to understand these issues that are central to the poem with the guidance
of Luce Irigaray’s ideas. Irigaray regards language as a house from which woman has
been banished. Even though she is instrumental in the establishment of it, nevertheless
there is no appropriate place for her to occupy within this language. This thought
leads to the realization that the poverty of language in the articulation of female
experience results in the dearth of communication amongst women:

We lack, we women with a sex of our own, a God in
which to share, a word / language to share and to
become. Defined as the often obscure, not to say
hidden, mother-substance of the word / language of
men, we lack our subject, our noun, our predicates: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy.9

Like Adrienne Rich, I also think that Emily Dickinson chose her retreat in order to create a ‘safe haven for herself. I think she was acutely aware of the power of language and the fact that it was not available to her in her own terms. Since the house of language could not accommodate her and her experience, then she formed her own house where metaphorically she could have power, however limited. Hence, she opted for what she thought to be the only possible path for the woman poet and retreated from the “spoiled language” (CEP, 232):

And in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises. (CEP, 232)

Rich explains her understanding of the intellectual power of Dickinson in an essay devoted to the nineteenth century poet; ‘Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson’, the title of which emphasizes the potentially explosive power present in her poetry:

I have a notion that genius knows itself; that Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. It was, moreover, no hermetic retreat, but a seclusion which included a wide range of people, of reading and correspondence. ... [Dickinson] has increasingly struck me as a practical woman, exercising her gift as she had

to, making choices. I have come to imagine her as somehow too strong for her environment, a figure of powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a house.”

Instead of regarding the seclusion of Dickinson in terms of passivity and powerlessness, Rich looks at the issue from a completely different point of view. Through her revisionist standpoint, she reveals the power inherent in Dickinson’s choice, and locates her in a relative position of control. She emphasizes this silent power once again in the poem ‘Face to Face’ (CEP, 248). She writes that for Dickinson seclusion was a form of protection from the destructive madness surrounding her:

never to hear prairie wolves
in their lunar hilarity
circling one’s little all, one’s claim
to be Law and Prophets (CEP, 248).

Here Rich also touches upon the male ideology of circumscribing the world so that dominion can be established over it. In order to achieve and sustain such supremacy, laws and religion have to be constituted accordingly. As the religious myths of the West offer a purely male genealogy, the mother-daughter relationship, and hence the relationship between women has been effaced. Also within dominant mythology, the pairing of man with mind, and woman with body (and the production of children as its only function) circumscribes the relationship between women. Keeping these issues in mind, it does not come as a surprise that a genius like Emily Dickinson chose this particular form of defence. However, Rich refuses to see

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Dickinson’s solitary existence in terms of stereotypical passivity and powerlessness of women, but instead transforms it into a state of quiet power with the potential to explode. According to the poet, there is “a loaded gun” which is “burning under the bleached scalp, behind dry lips” (CEP, 248).

In “I am in Danger - Sir -” Rich highlights the bond that connects a nineteenth century poet to contemporary women dedicated to writing. She continues with this quest in Leaflets (1969) which is a consciously political work compared to her earlier work. The political upheavals of the 1960s are clearly documented in this volume, such as the turmoil of the Vietnam War (“All wars are useless to the dead” (CEP, 287)), and the student revolutions in France and United States. In ‘In the Evening’ (CEP, 287) she voices these concerns when she writes:

The old masters, the old sources,  
haven’t a clue what we’re about,  
shivering here in the half-dark sixties. (CEP, 287)

Perhaps it was this political edge of the volume that disturbed Robert Byers when he regarded Leaflets as a “decline” in the career of the poet with its “reflections of a will to be contemporary”, and observed “how charged she has become with the nauseous propaganda of the advance-guard cultural radicals.” His conclusion that Rich “is neither a radical innovator nor the voice of an age” is debatable because I think that she gave voice to many women of her age. This was an uncomfortable time for a poet who has tried to be a “careful arriviste” and kept quiet until recently. She had tried to mould herself into the prescribed notions of femininity, as well as struggled to follow in the footsteps of her masters in terms of her poetry. However,

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her vision became clearer and she was determined to make herself heard in her own terms. Hence, Rich’s choices in the search for female precursors for identification are poets who address political issues. This exploration is a way of extending the transformation through art beyond the self. She underlines the urgent need for an awareness of a poetic tradition for women. The shift in her consciousness from an allegiance to the male principle to a quest for the female principle and power already had its roots in her work, and her definite transfer and affirmation of the female principle manifest themselves in no uncertain terms in this volume.

Among the poems where Rich identifies with female precursors are ‘Charleston in the 1860s’ (*CEP*, 297) which is derived from the diaries of Mary Boykin Chestnut, ‘There are Such Springlike Nights’ (*CEP*, 299) from the Yiddish of Kadia Molodowsky, ‘Two Poems’ (*CEP*, 306-7) adapted from Anna Akhmatova to name but a few. For this discussion, I have chosen ‘For a Russian Poet’ (*CEP*, 300-2). This time her model is Natalya Gorbanevskaya who made an impact on Rich with her poetry and person. She has written about the importance of Gorbanevskaya for herself as a poet and political activist in ‘Caryatid: Two Columns (1973), outlining the career and struggles of the Russian poet.13 Gorbanevskaya was a contemporary of Rich who was imprisoned for her political activities and declared mentally unstable by the system under which she lived.

The first section of the poem, ‘The Winter Dream’, establishes Gorbanevskaya’s importance in Rich’s life and deals with the similar visions and political concerns the two of them have shared throughout their different lives. They are both struggling for survival, and for them “Life’s the main thing” (*CEP*, 300).

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The second part, ‘Summer in the Country’, describes their mutual despair at the contemporary social and political breakdown that they can both observe around them in their corners of the world. Rich can identify with the alienation of the Russian poet as she herself feels the same loneliness:

but this year we both
sit after dark with the radio
unable to read, unable to write

trying the blurred edges of broadcasts
for a little truth, taking a walk before bed
wondering what a man can do, asking that
at the verge of tears in a lightning-flash of loneliness. (CEP, 300-1)

This loneliness and powerlessness is transformed into action in the final section of the poem, ‘The Demonstration’, which is based on Gorbanevskaya’s account of her participation in a non-violent protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Here Rich imagines herself together with the Russian poet and her little boy at the demonstration in the Red Square. Although Gorbanevskaya was later arrested, Rich looks back on the occasion with a degree of satisfaction since they were no longer mute and passive:

a great jagged torn place
in the silence of complicity
that much at least
we did here. (CEP, 301)

This identification of the two poets with each other constitutes the finale of the poem. A kinship is formed between them which is deeply rooted and extends towards the future. Here, Rich celebrates and takes strength from this far away woman whose life is so different but still so similar to her own. She preserves her
actions in writing so that it can be a reference point for and inspiration to all women, and presents her as a role-model in transforming powerlessness into a statement of power and action:

I'm a ghost at your table
touching poems in a script I can't read

we’ll meet each other later (CEP, 302).

I find these lines very touching as there is the creation of a bond in them between two women who are from very different parts of the world, but clearly share the same concerns. Even though they are unable to understand each other’s language in literal terms, they still are able to communicate between themselves. It is interesting that the persona is “touching” the poems, rather than simply looking and reading the lines with her eyes. According to Irigaray, touching is a predominantly female activity. Predominance of the visual, on the other hand, lies in the realm of patriarchy:

Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. 14

Hence, Rich, along with Irigaray, prioritizes touch rather than sight. Later in the volume she refers to ‘touch’ again. This time she refers to the sensation as being powerless as it is female: “oh futile tenderness / of touch in a world like this!” (CEP,

14Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which Is Not One’, This Sex, pp. 25-6.
This prioritizing of touch shifts the attention away from the ‘nothing to see’ attitude towards female sexuality. Establishing a woman-to-woman relationship with her precursors and choosing to relate to them in a different manner are examples of Rich’s commitment to the female principle. This term, in my understanding, involves love of self as well as love of other without domination or destruction. These are issues which both Irigaray and Rich are deeply committed to in their work.

The task of trying to establish a maternal genealogy is a wide ranging and difficult one to accomplish. In Irigarayan terms, in order to displace the father from his central place, such a quest is necessary even though it might be impossible as it is a history which has been rendered invisible by the patriarchal system. As Irigaray writes: “Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don’t have any. We exchange names as man exchange us, as they use us, use us up.”

Therefore, the task of the poet is not only to clear up the rubble under which women have been buried and forgotten, but to try to create a genealogy through which they can relate to each other as women, a maternal genealogy. As was mentioned before, this should not be a genealogy of mothers but of women. A genealogy of mothers would again circumscribe woman within motherhood and would constitute the same hierarchy which women are trying to break through, only the reference points would be different. Irigaray once again draws attention to this when she writes about the urgent need of trying to imagine an identity for woman and rejecting such restricting representations:

So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other. They have wrapped us for so long in their desires, we have adorned ourselves so

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15 Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’, This Sex, p. 205.
often to please them, that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin. Removed from our skin, we remain distant. You and I, apart.16

Rich tries to close this gap which she regards as deadly amongst women by bringing them closer, highlighting the issues that are common to their lives, and praising the courage of the extraordinary women who challenge the existing system in their own unique ways, whether it is the voluntary seclusion of Emily Dickinson or the outright protest of Natalya Gorbanevskaya. She writes: “Like Akhmatova, Gorbanevskaya, a woman living in the jeopardy shared by all women, in a society as ruthless in its way as our own, continues to throw her weight on the side of those who have no voice in that society.”17 In such a culture, which is not equipped to imagine, and hence articulate, the possible relationships between women, Rich uses the power of poetry to transfer the personal into the arena of the political and claim a voice for herself. Women’s lack of access to each other in real terms is an issue which Irigaray deals with also: “The possibility that the female could be many; that women would form a social group”, is one of the lifelines which the two authors agree upon. Since this is not an attainable goal as yet;

- they are abandoned to a state of neither knowing each other nor loving each other, or themselves;
- they have no way to meditate the operations of sublimation;
- love remains impossible for them.18

16Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’, This Sex, p. 218.
This idea of love of self for a woman is quite subversive, as traditionally woman is the bearer of selfless love for everyone but herself. She has been the epitome of love as a mother, wife, and daughter. These are all positions that are defined in relation to the male, and therefore, historically she has been the building block of man’s love for self. This role as the ‘guardian of love’, however, is a very restricting one denying woman access to love for her own self. Therefore, seeking other women out and associating with them is a very important step towards discovery of the female love for her self.

Adrienne Rich lays bare the idea of love as lived by women in her poem ‘Translations’, when she connects with another woman poet. She underlines how the issue of love becomes defined in terms of other and how woman’s desperate need for the myth of “love” defined in patriarchal terms rules her life:

You show me the poems of some woman
my age, or younger
translated from your language

Certain words occur: enemy, oven, sorrow
enough to let me know
she’s a woman of my time

obsessed

with Love, our subject:
we’ve trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if it were a helicopter

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bringing food to our famine ... \textit{(FD, 169)}

Within the boundaries of their domestic environment the women, referred to in collective pronoun "we", cling on to an idea of love as a saviour. Even though what they long for is alien to them, and holds them even more secure in their confinement, they still long for it, and give it to everyone surrounding them but their own selves. Of course, even if such love were imaginable on behalf of the woman, as the poet writes, it still has to be "translated from your language", as it is inevitably foreign to her.

With this issue of love of self and each other in mind, I would like to read the poem 'Orion' \textit{(CEP, 283-4)}, which Rich has described as being a turning point in her career.\footnote{Montenegro, D., and Rich, A., 'Adrienne Rich: An Interview by David Montenegro', \textit{American Poetry Review}, vol. 20, no. 1, 1991, p. 12.} Written in 1965, 'Orion' is a moving display of the experience of the woman as a creative artist and the subsequent exhilaration and despair she feels, at the heart of which is the need for re-definition of love.

A Winter constellation, Orion rises in the Western sky. In Greek myth he has been described as being "the handsomest man alive", the image of whom was placed among the skies by Artemis.\footnote{Artemis shot Orion in the head by mistake, and in grief, implored Apollo's son Asclepius to revive him. But before Asclepius can accomplish his task he is destroyed by the thunderbolt of Zeus. Artemis then sets Orion's image among the stars. The belt and the sword mentioned in the poem are stars in the constellation. Graves, Robert, \textit{The Greek Myths}, vol. 1, London: The Folio Society, 1998, p. 147, 148.} Huge and warriorlike, Orion provides a fitting image for Rich's metaphor of the male principle within herself, her "fierce half-brother".

The poem opens with a glance back towards the past. The persona, who I read as being female, reminisces about a time when she looked up to Orion as "my genius, you / my cast-iron Viking, my helmed / lion-hearted king in prison" \textit{(CEP, 283)}. The very masculine imagery reveals how Rich still regarded the nature of
power as masculine and projected her own sense of power onto Orion. However, this was in the past, and as the poet moves to the present she gradually recognizes that Orion was not as perfect and powerful as she thought him to be:

    a sword
    the last bravado you won’t give over
    though it weighs you down as you stride

    and the stars in it are dim
    and maybe have stopped burning. (CEP, 283)

The power of the sword, and the word, have always been within the domain of the male. Even though the speaker once looked up to Orion as a muse, she desires his power for herself now. The brilliance that was Orion, male, powerful, erotic, and energizing, does not impress her as much any more. As the centre of the poem reveals, the real reason for this disillusionment is the fact that Orion’s impressive energy does not extend to the domestic life that the persona finds herself trapped in. Within her own boundaries she feels extremely powerless. There is also a sense of decay when she writes: “Indoors I bruise and blunder”, like a rotting fruit. Amidst this disintegration her creativity resembles “a dead child born in the dark” (CEP, 283). Domesticity seems to be surrounding her entirely and leaves her feeling consumed. Ultimately, the speaker’s human dealings are also extremely sterile and fruitless resulting in barrenness in every aspect of her life:

    A man reaches behind my eyes
    and finds them empty
    a woman’s head turns away
    from my head in the mirror
    children are dying my death
    and eating crumbs of my life. (CEP, 284)
Here the speaker underlines the alienation she feels not only from the life surrounding her, but also, and more dangerously, from her own being. She sees the woman in the mirror as a complete stranger to herself. This feeling of alienation and sterility extends to the final part of *Leaflets*, ‘Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)’ (*CEP*, 337-55). In ‘7 / 13 / 68’ (*CEP*, 340) Rich writes:

Sleeping back to back, man and woman, we were more conscious than either of us awake and alone in the world.

These words are vapor-trails of a plane that has vanished; by the time I write them out, they are whispering something else.

(*CEP*, 340)

This alienation surfaces once again in ‘7 / 12 / 68’, written for Sheila Rotner, in the following lines:

When I look at that wall I shall think of you
and of what you did not paint there.

...   

When you read these lines, think of me
and of what I have not written here. (*CEP*, 339)

I think it is important to note at this point that the poems discussed until now were written at a time when Rich was still married. Her understanding of her sexuality and her openness about it will become stronger later in her career. Even so, in the following lines, she is able to articulate the alienation of herself and her borderline status she finds herself trapped in: “To live outside the law! Or barely within it, / a twig on boiling waters, enclosed inside a bubble” (*CEP*, 346). Finally comes the ultimate realization of the necessary change: “I can’t live at the hems of that tradition - / will I last to try the beginning of the next?” (*CEP*, 347).
The connecting link between these questions of alienation is the impossibility of self-love on behalf of the woman. Luce Irigaray attempts to explain this complex issue with the idea of visibility. Since the male sexual organs are external, self-love remains attainable for man as he has a validated relation to exteriority, whereas this is not valid for the female. The female does not have the same relation to exteriority as the male, whose sexual organs are continuously on display. The woman’s experience, on the other hand, is limited to the production she achieves through her body. Irigaray writes: "Woman is loved / loves herself through the children she gives birth to. That she brings out."\(^{22}\) This statement is particularly valid for the relationship between a mother and her son, the most perfect configuration love can take Freud tells us. This, by definition, cannot result in self-love in the true sense, but only to love for her production. In Rich’s case in ‘Orion’, the children she produces present a danger to her as a woman when she writes that they are "eating crumbs of [her] life." The poet senses the danger of her life being ultimately consumed by the love she feels for her children. Looking back at ‘Orion’ six years later, Rich defines the dilemma she was feeling at the time as follows:

The choice still seemed to be between “love” - womanly, maternal love, altruistic love - a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism - a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For weren’t they men, and wasn’t that their destiny as womanly, selfless love was ours? We know now that the alternatives are false ones - that the word “love” is itself in need of re-vision.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\)Irigaray, ‘Love of Self’, An Ethics, p. 63.

Being the guardian of love for everyone but herself is indeed a very costly duty for the woman. In order for the act of re-vision to be achieved, woman has to be free of the complete reliance on man for the return of self-love. Self-love, by definition, has to come from within the woman’s body. First and foremost, it has to be by her self, for her self. As was mentioned above, self-love can be attained in relatively simpler terms for man. He has to renounce his mother so that he can love himself. This act of renunciation does not forbid him to love himself. However, the path is quite different in the case of woman. As Irigaray demonstrates, she not only has to renounce her love of her mother, but also her own identification with her. She is obliged to follow this path so that she can love a man, the father figure. Given these descriptions, Rich’s strategy of re-establishing a lost or forgotten link between women is an important step towards women defining their own identity. Without this endeavour the future does not promise hope as the poet writes: “no archives, / no heirlooms, no future, / except death” (CEP, 313). Finding out about other women and associating with them, sharing the common experiences drawing them together, discovering the principle of female multiplicity are fundamental aspects of the complex process of loving oneself in female terms.

Another woman whom Rich writes about in her endeavour to unearth active and successful women is Caroline Herschel (1750-1848), the sister of the astronomer William Herschel, and a highly capable astronomer in her own right. The woman astronomer and her accomplishments, buried under the fame of her brother, are used by the poet to evaluate her own life and place in the history of her times. In ‘Planetarium’ (CEP, 361-2) from the volume The Will to Change (1971), she places Herschel in a position of subjectivity as a woman who can have power. The poem is
about the transformation that Rich aspires to. The poem begins with the familiar representations of woman as the “monster” (Medusa):

A woman in the shape of a monster
a monster in the shape of a woman
the skies are full of them... (CEP, 361)

The first half establishes Herschel’s extraordinary achievement in the male dominated world of astronomy. But her womanhood is strongly emphasized when Rich embraces her in a community of woman sharing their bodily function of menstruation: “she whom the moon ruled / like us” (CEP, 361). Subsequently, Rich develops a witch metaphor not in its accustomed way but more positively; instead of riding a broom, Herschel is “riding the polished lenses” of her telescope. Images of the witch as an eccentric or unusual woman are rejected, and instead she draws attention to the heavens where “[g]alaxies of women, there / doing penance for impetuousness” (CEP, 361), recalling the persecution of women who have defied social expectations and myths. To see Herschel as a witch, but moving to see her in a positive light, is a new way of viewing the “monstrous” energies of women. The traits of Herschel in particular, and women in general, that are deemed to be “virile” are celebrated instead of suppressed. The poem is an attempt to reconcile this split, and to reject the myth that a “truly female” woman does not exhibit the so-called masculine traits. As she writes in ‘The Antifeminist Woman’:

It is easy to say that we cannot ever know what is truly male or truly female. There is much we can know. We do know that these principles have been split apart and set in antagonism within each of us by a male-dominated
intellectual and political heritage. This is at least a starting point.\footnote{Rich, ‘The Antifeminist Woman’, \textit{On Lies}, p. 78.}

I think in ‘Planetarium’, Rich moves towards overcoming this split. She identifies her aggressive and creative spirit with a woman. The speaking “I” of the poem not only becomes a subjective self, but also an instrument to transmit energy for the community of women of which she is part:

\begin{center}
I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind. (\textit{CEP}, 362)
\end{center}

The issue of female collectivity is carried on strongly in \textit{Diving into the Wreck} (1973). Her words become more forceful in this volume, and her themes are concentrated around issues that are integral to womanhood, such as giving birth and living in a female body. In order to understand how strongly Rich feels about female collectivity, I think we should look at the speech she gave when she won the National Book Award for this volume in 1974. She rejected the award as an individual, but accepted it together with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, the two other nominees, in the name of all women:

\begin{center}
We ... together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain. ... We symbolically join here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women. ... We dedicate this
\end{center}
occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification or derived class ... the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.  

The enthusiasm and idealism of Rich is still moving and relevant after a quarter of a century when there is still a need for special quotas for women to be able to participate in areas of our everyday life, such as politics. Instead of celebrating women who are deemed to be ‘extraordinary’ or ‘uncommon’, Rich proposes to emphasize what is ‘common’ in all women, and to search the so-called extraordinariness in everyday lives of ordinary women. She argues thus:

For us to be “extraordinary” or “uncommon” is to fail. History has been embellished with “extraordinary,” “exemplary,” “uncommon,” and of course “token” women whose lives have left the rest unchanged. The “common woman” is in fact the embodiment of the extraordinary will-to-survival in millions of obscure women, a life-force which transcends child-bearing: unquenchable, chromosomatic reality. Only when we can count on this force in each other, everywhere, know absolutely that it is there for us, will we cease abandoning and being abandoned by “all of our lovers.”

This understanding of the necessity for women to be “uncommon” and touch the lives of other women can be illustrated with two poems. This is a communal

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power which women should aspire to in their lives. At this point it is useful to underline the fact that for Rich power does not mean “the old patriarchal power-over, but the power-to-create, power-to-think, power-to-articulate and concretize our visions and transform our lives and those of our children”.27 ‘Power’ \((FD, 225)\) explores the solitary power of Marie Curie. Curie is a “famous woman” who possesses power to a certain degree. This feminine power is “no mere will for mastery” but consists of “only care for the many-lived unending forms.” Significantly, however, Curie fails to realize that her solitary power is also her destruction as her discoveries do not help other women and she denies the “common” woman in herself. Rich concludes that, in the case of the famous scientist, her discovery serves only to ensure her own fame, and does not help her to connect with other women. In a field dominated by male scientists her loneliness and her fame become her downfall:

She died a famous woman denying her wounds
denying her wounds came from the same source as her power... \((FD, 225)\)

In ‘Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev’ \((FD, 225-227)\), on the other hand, Rich presents a women climbing team all of whom died in a storm on Lenin Peak in August 1974. The speaker in the poem is Shatayev, the leader of the team. Her words are directed towards her husband who later found the women and buried them. Even though the themes of ‘Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev’ and ‘Power’ correspond, the contrast lies in the nature of the power between the women involved. Curie’s solitary attempt to power is contrasted with the group of climber’s collective effort. Rich seems to be valuing the efforts of the climbers over Curie’s, even though the

story of both parties ends with death. She argues that love and power shared improves everyone involved:

\begin{quote}
What does love mean \\
what does it mean "to survive" \\
A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies \\
burning together in the snow we will not live \\
to settle for less We have dreamed of this \\
all of our lives (FD, 227).
\end{quote}

Hence, despite the deaths of every woman in the team, Rich celebrates their attempts as a representative of the achievement that can be possible for women in community, particularly in terms of love. Unlike the traditional definition of female love based on self-sacrifice, the love between these women climbers is united with power. The efforts of these women carries promises for the future as they “stream / into the unfinished the unbegun / the possible” (FD, 226-7).

As was discussed before, for Rich and Irigaray, women’s lack of a community between themselves is the direct consequence of their banishment from the mother. This is a compulsory exile under the dominant system as the daughter has to shift her love and affection towards the father from the mother. Hence, the primary allegiance of the daughter to the father results in the undermining of the mother, and consequently her own self. For Rich, the primal relationship between the mother and the daughter is the relationship we should concentrate upon, and in the final poem that will be discussed in this section, she explores this vital relationship in detail.

‘Sibling Mysteries’ attempts to present the mother-daughter relationship from a prepatriarchal historical perspective.\(^{28}\) The speaker reminisces about her own past

and separation from her mother and sister, and is reconciled with both of them. The women presented in the first section of the poem are powerful and have strong connections with each other. They do not deny their connection with nature and they are aware of the creative powers of not only circumscribed motherhood but also in terms of art and culture:

Remind me how we walked
trying the planetary rock
for foothold

...smelling the rains before they came
feeling the fullness of the moon
before moonrise

...Remind me how the stream
wetted the clay between our palms

...how we traced our signs by torchlight
in the deep chamber of the caves ... (DC, 47)

The strength of this community comes from their connectedness to each other as a community and their positive relationship with nature. However, at present, women have forgotten this erased history of strength and have succumbed to the rules which deny them power unless it is limited to the prescriptions of patriarchal rule.

In the second section the poet remembers the original relationship between her mother and the daughters which was full of tenderness and security:

Remind me how we loved our mother’s body
our mouth’s drawing the first
thin sweetness from her nipples
... how she floated great and tender in our dark
or stood guard over us
against our willing ... (DC, 48)

She, like all women, indeed needs to be reminded of this pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother, as she becomes forced to abandon this first love in favour of the father. What she finds there is very different from her experiences with her mother. Here Rich reverses Freud’s Oedipal theory and creates a new realm in her imagination. The rules of this new realm are based on taking instead of giving and sharing of the mother. To her male “taking seemed a law” (DC, 48). In the following sections, Rich builds up the estrangement of the daughter and dwells on the male domination and devaluation of women as she writes: “how beneath / the strange male bodies / we sank in terror or in resignation / and how we taught them tenderness -” (DC, 49). However, the final lines of the poem promise a better future if women can claim a communal relationship between themselves and exchange their life experiences. The past unity could be claimed again if women are willing to work on it:

The daughters never were
true brides of the father

the daughters were to begin with
brides of the mother

then brides of each other
under a different law

Let me hold and tell you ... (DC, 52)
These lines carry connotations of myths and tales that have been handed down from generation to generation, but here women tell their own stories to each other, instead of being dictated to. Rich proposes a system in which women in general, mothers and daughters in particular, can share each other’s experience. Though her recollections of the past, and by returning to a time before the abandonment of the mother, she seems to achieve this unity in a scene which resembles a scene from a ceremony.

Rich believes strongly in the essentiality of a maternal genealogy, and her poetry advocates this need. As she writes:

For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us. In the false names of love, motherhood, natural law - false because they have not been defined by us to whom they are applied - women in patriarchy have been withheld from building a common world, except in enclaves, or through coded messages.29

By unearthing women whose lives and work have been erased she attempts to establish a history through which women can relate to each other. In order to be able to break through the values and behaviours that seem to be repeated generation after generation, Rich proposes to re-establish our union with the mother and with other women. Irigaray terms these relationships ‘vertical’ (daughter-to-mother, mother-to-daughter) and ‘horizontal’ (among women, or among “sisters”).30 This

simultaneously vertical and horizontal connection will enable us to name and claim self-love for ourselves as daughters and mothers, instead of succumbing to the myth of the selfless woman.
Chapter Ten

"Conceived of Each Other": Towards a Whole New Poetry

Adrienne Rich pays particular attention to the vital importance of a maternal genealogy, as was discussed in the previous chapter. The creation of myths in which the feminine could be accommodated is a necessary act in view of the poet. Even though this is an act of looking back to the past to discover alternative myths, the ramifications of it no doubt belong to the future. In this future the untheorised relationship between mother and daughter has to be imagined, valued and articulated by women themselves. This project is not only vital for women, but it has a deep impact on all human beings, as it involves a different perception of the myths, the prescribed ‘truths’, in our lives. In this project, Rich concentrates on revising patriarchal myths, such as romantic love and power. Only by understanding the deep impact such myths have in our lives, women could be able to imagine alternatives. This attitude encompasses humanity as a whole. As Rich posits, the point “is not the ‘exclusion’ of men; it is that primary presence of women to ourselves and each other [...] which is the crucible of a new language.”¹ Hence, in her later poetry, Rich centralizes the healing power of the feminine.

The struggle for a “new language” is also deeply important in the work of Luce Irigaray. She suggests that patriarchal language claims to articulate the universal, but this claim does not go further than mere pretension. According to

Lacan, whose theories, along with Freud, form a context for Irigaray and other French feminists, language is fundamental to our entry into the symbolic order and our recognition of ourselves as speaking subjects. Within this order, woman is not able to occupy a space of her own, and is condemned to be defined in male terms. He posits: "As negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth."\textsuperscript{2} Hence, woman is confined within definitions that take man as their reference point, becoming whatever man is not. Within such a linguistic system, in the opinion of Irigaray, a realistic representation of sexual difference is not possible. She emphasizes this issue in \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One} as follows:

\begin{quote}
I am a woman. I am being sexualized as feminine. I am sexualized female. The motivation of my work lies in the impossibility of articulating such a statement; in the fact that its utterance is in some way senseless, inappropriate, indecent. Either because woman is never the attribute of the verb \textit{to be} or \textit{sexualized female} a quality of \textit{being}, or because \textit{am a woman} is not predicated of I, or because \textit{I am sexualized} excludes the feminine gender.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

Under these circumstances, there are two possibilities available for feminine discourse. Either woman will speak as a sexualized male subject, or she will be forced to occupy the position of the asexualized female other. In the former case, she has to conform to the system under alien guidelines, and in the latter, she will remain alien to herself. Neither of these options are satisfactory as they both require repression on


woman’s behalf, according to both Rich and Irigaray. However, this is a reality in which we live in as Rich declares it in no uncertain terms when she writes: “this is the oppressor’s language // yet I need it to talk to you” (*FD*, 117).

These assertions pose complicated questions. How does a woman speak as a woman? How can it be possible for a woman to be represented in female terms within the boundaries of a language that is specifically based on the assumption of the anatomical inferiority of her sex? How can she create a space for her economy of desire within a debilitating system? What are the consequences for the relationship between men and women if they do not work on the necessary changes? What is the impact of these issues on the future, and what kind of changes does the poet foresee for humankind? In this chapter, I will discuss how Rich employs revisionary mythmaking in the exploration of these struggles in her poetry drawing on the theories of Luce Irigaray.

The first step Rich deems essential in this struggle is the necessity of understanding the nature of the culture we live in and the language we employ. In ‘Diving into the Wreck’, the title of which serves as a metaphor for the remnants of Western culture, she explores these issues. The poem is an allegory of a modern hero reaching back towards the past. This time, however, the hero is a woman, and the whole watery submersion in the poem becomes a subversion of traditional male conquests. The speaker, who I read as being female, begins this journey “not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team”, but “alone” (*FD*, 162). By the end of the poem, however, she will realize that she has not been alone in this journey and is a part of a

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female community who shares her concerns. Her preparations for this hazardous
descent into the depths of the ocean in the beginning of the poem echo archetypal
male heroic quests:

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask. (FD, 162)

She prepares for her journey with equipment in which she is not very
comfortable. Her flippers are “absurd”, and the mask, which is compulsory for her to
survive under water, feels “grave and awkward”. But as she descends in her journey
towards the depths of the ocean, the speaker feels somehow liberated, as “there is no
one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin” (FD, 163). Already, she begins to shed
the received ideas as the realm below the water becomes freer of conventions that
label reality for the speaker. Following these lines, in the middle section of the poem,
when the diver is crossing a boundary, Rich gives the reader her view of both
masculine and feminine worlds. She writes:

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and the green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power (FD, 163).

In the masculine world she has to wear a mask to try to control the effects of
nature. She must do this in order to be able to survive. Rich always regards the
dominant masculine power as power-to-control. Such power in masculine sense can
only carry the diver until the middle section of the poem. Following this, the poet abandons it and the transforming power of the feminine is introduced:

    the sea is another story
    the sea is not a question of power
    I have to learn alone
    to turn my body without force
    in the deep element. (FD, 163)

She has to learn to adjust herself to being under the water but no battle in the sense of a male heroic quest takes place here to achieve this. On the contrary, there is tranquillity and ease. Rich is working on a new myth that is not based on the power to dominate, but on the alternative understanding of the power of the feminine to transform and heal. She writes “you breathe differently down here” (FD, 163). Under the water, instead of the ‘terrible mother’ there is the peace of the ‘womb of the mother’. With the image of breathing water, just as in the womb, the diver finds the power necessary to move along with her quest:

    I came to explore the wreck.
    The words are purposes.
    The words are maps.
    I came to see the damage that was done
    and the treasures that prevail. (FD, 163)

Even though she says “it is easy to forget / what I came for”, the diver is quite certain of her objective and determined to find out an alternative to the prescribed notions she has had to live her life with. She emphasizes this when she clarifies that “the thing I came for” is “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth” (FD, 164). When she reaches the wreck itself what she finds is different to what she has been used to, as in the depths of the ocean there seems to be
a unity between the mermaids and the mermen. She writes: “I am she: I am he” (FD, 164). Such a statement emphasizes the poet’s idea that the wreck under the ocean symbolizes a time which pre-dates the dualities, divisions, and binary oppositions of the Western psyche. The oppositions of subject and object, mind and matter, male and female are neither hierarchised nor valid in this realm. It is here at this point in time, in the pre-Oedipal stage “where the spirit began”. It is here that possibilities for change can be initiated. This is not an easy task and it gives relief to the diver to realize that at the end of this journey which she has ventured alone, she finds herself in a community of women like herself who have come for the same thing. Their aim is to revise the patriarchal book of myths which cannot accommodate them:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (FD, 164)

Like H.D., Rich also aims to re-write a history that has not included woman in its context apart from a marginalised position. Since even that margin is defined in male terms, it condemns woman to an existence of negativity in opposition to the male. Rich rejects this margin and advocates the necessity of women claiming their own stories in their own words. In this particular poem, with the crossing of the boundaries, the poet tries to identify the ‘inevitable’ Oedipal break that occurs between the mother and the daughter. This is her heroic quest in the poem, and as
Irigaray explains, it is an important step in understanding the lack of meaning which woman suffers:

Everything happens as though there were a necessary break between the earliest investments, the earliest desires, the first narcissism of a little girl and those of a ‘normal’ adult woman. In the place of those who would be in a position of continuity with her pre-history she has imposed on her a language, fantasms, a desire which does not ‘belong’ to her and which establishes a break with her auto-eroticism.⁵

In Of Woman Born, Rich asserts this point strongly when she writes that the “cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story.”⁶ The poet Rich and the theorist Irigaray share the same concerns over this vital issue. The effacing of the mother-daughter bond is the point where revision has to begin if there is to be a better future for all human relationships.

At this point I would like to give a few examples of Adrienne Rich’s declining faith in heterosexual relationships as a direct result of the points outlined above. The impossibility of identification of the daughter with the mother, and the lack of self-love as its outcome, is deadly not only for woman, but in the final analysis, for man as well. The desertion of the feminine leads to the sterility of both sexes. Male dominance and, according to Rich, the inevitable destruction it brings, is a consequence of the ignorance of this reality. Quite often in Rich’s poems, the relationship between the sexes is interchangeable with war and devastation. In

‘Nightbreak’ (*CEP*, 326-7), for instance, the poet investigates the unsatisfactory interaction between man and woman, and the myth of romantic love understood in masculine terms. The lines of the poem are constantly broken by the use of blank spaces to symbolize the lack of communication between the couple. Their relationship is viewed against the backdrop of a menacing and violent world. She describes the lovers’ bed as a site of war and the woman’s body in terms of physical pain. Sex, therefore, is a destructive experience. In this particular poem, the likening of heterosexual relationships to war is also a specific reference to the Vietnam War:

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In the bed pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else
my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown open by planes
that did not finish the job... (*CEP*, 326-7)
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Rich regards the current relationship between the sexes as doomed as a result of the faulty premises on which it is built, namely the presumption of the supremacy of the male over the female. In ‘From a Survivor’ (*FD*, 176-177), she describes this foundation as follows: “The pact that we made was the ordinary pact / of men & women in those days” (*FD*, 176). This ordinary pact is common practice but it should not be natural or intrinsic to woman’s idea of marriage. A poem with clear autobiographical undertones, ‘From a Survivor’ lays bare the limitations of her husband, whose body, far from being superior in the psychoanalytic sense, is “no longer / the body of a god / or anything with power over my life” (*FD*, 176).

In a system in which love cannot be defined in any other terms but male, where the female and the male have lost touch with the feminine principle, war and
destruction are inevitable end results. This is the case in personal relationships as well as our relationship with the world. Rich feels quite strongly in terms of military war and destruction in the name of patriarchal myths and sees it akin to brutality in sexual relationships. Women’s sexuality is also an integral part of these myths and serve their purpose in the perpetuation of them. As Rich explains, since military war has always been in the male domain, women cannot escape being used as weapons:

Rape has always been a part of war; and rape in war may be an act of vengeance on the male enemy “whose” women are thus used. ... Rape is a part of war; but it may be more accurate to say that the capacity for dehumanizing another which so corrodes male sexuality is carried over from sex into war. The chant of the basic training drill: (“This is my rifle, this is my gun (cock); This is for killing, this is for fun”) is not a piece of bizarre brainwashing invented by some infantry sergeant’s fertile imagination; it is a recognition of the fact that when you strike the chord of sexuality in the patriarchal psyche, the chord of violence is likely to vibrate in response; and vice versa.⁷

Rich scrutinizes this violent streak she finds in the patriarchal psyche with her violent and pornographic images in ‘The Images’ from the volume A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far.⁸ She contrasts these disturbing images with long lost ancient civilizations where the worship of the ancient goddess is not yet effaced and forgotten. In this ancient culture, instead of the “violence and woman loathing” prevalent in patriarchal world, there is joy and healing power understood in feminine

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terms. Here the maternal goddess reigns supreme and Rich describes her deep felt
desire to unite with this goddess. In the following lines, she describes the joy she feels
emanating from her. This goddess is not threatening or deadly, she is the ‘Laughing
Medusa’ of Hélène Cixous:

When I saw her face, she of the several faces
Staring, indrawn, in judgment, laughing for joy
her serpents twisting, her arms raised
her breasts gazing
when I looked into her world
I wished to cry loose my soul
into her, to become
free of language at last. (WP, 5)

These images of female love are very different from the poet’s representation
of masculine love. In ‘The Phenomenology of Anger’ (FD, 165-169), she dwells on
this issue of the proximity of love in male terms to violence. With its specific
references to the Vietnam War, the poem describes the futility and destruction of the
masculine world, in which woman cannot locate herself. She feels an outsider to the
violence surrounding her and feels doomed to “a life lived in exile” (FD, 166). She
does not feel capable of ending the violence surrounding her nor can she run away
from it. “Madness. Suicide. Murder. / Is there no way out but these?” (FD, 166),
she asks. She fantasizes about reciprocating the violence in the hope that it will have
a cathartic effect and purge the world from the brutality that man and woman suffers
alike when she writes:

raking his body down to the thread
of existence
burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
According to Rich, love in male terms is akin to brutality and violence. She does not fail to see the heavy costs of this attitude not only for women but for all humanity. I think the reality and validity of these issues for man and woman alike is a very important aspect of Rich’s work. She writes in ‘Merced’ of “masculinity made / unfit for women or men” which forms the foundation of the culture she lives in. The poet finds it impossible for either sex to live under these circumstances as this man-made society has:

a cold center, composed
of pieces of human beings
metabolized, restructured
by a process they do not feel
is spreading in our midst
and taking over our minds
a thing that feels neither guilt
nor rage: that is unable
to hate, therefore to love.9

The phallocentric system, then, debilitates man and women alike. She emphasizes this point once again when she writes:

Denying his own feminine aspects, always associating his manhood with his ability to possess and dominate women, man the patriarch has slowly, imperceptibly, over time, achieved a degree of self-estrangement, self-hatred, and self-mutilation which is coming to have

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almost irreversible effects on human relationships and on the natural world.\textsuperscript{10}

After the establishment of the impossibility of wholeness and unity under these circumstances the poet rejects the destruction and aridity of the masculine world which classifies women and nature as the lower orders of being compared to the male. In ‘August’ for instance she writes: “His mind is too simple, I cannot go on / sharing his nightmares” (\textit{FD}, 178). And in ‘Hunger’ (\textit{FD}, 229-232), written for Audre Lorde, she accuses the male establishment outright of being the cause of the suffering in the world:

... that male god that acts on us and our children, that male State that acts on us and on our children till our brains are blunted by malnutrition, yet sharpened by the passion for survival, our powers expended daily on the struggle to hand a kind of life on to our children, to change reality for our lovers even in a single trembling drop of water. (\textit{FD}, 230)

The only way out of this nightmarish existence for the poet is to return back to the maternal embrace and try to re-establish what has been effaced by the phallocentric system. Hence, she turns towards love between women, which she believes is healing and transformative.

How can a system which defines love only in heterosexual terms accommodate love between women? Is there a space for woman’s need to exist as a desiring being and articulate her love in words within the current symbolic?

In ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’ (FD, 236-246), the first ever poem in which Rich openly writes as a lesbian poet, she explores these struggles. At this point, I would like to explain the term of lesbian in the context of this study using the words of Adrienne Rich:

I mean the term ... to include a range - through each woman’s life and throughout history - of women-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or has consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to include many more forms of primary intensity between women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical political support ... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of ‘lesbianism.’11

Within this understanding of the term ‘lesbian’, the existence of sexual practice is irrelevant. What is important is the loyalty and love between women within the notion of ‘lesbian continuum’. Hence, in my understanding (and I think in Rich’s), the term comes to describe all the positive relationships between women, the alliance between them and the love and security that result from this unity.

With this definition in mind, I return to discuss ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’ which could be read as an alternative to the myths of romantic love in its traditional sense. The poems concentrate on the simple details of everyday life, rather than an idealised world where everything is perfect: “I wake up in your bed. I know I have

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been dreaming. / Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other, / You have been 
at your desk for hours” \((FD, 237)\). The poems emphasize the ordinariness and the 
tenderness of the moments that the lovers share with each other, rather than 
concentrating on the mystery or unattainability of the lover as in a traditional love 
poem. These “two lovers of one gender” are “not heroines” who are required to 
sacrifice themselves for each other: “No one’s fated or doomed to love anyone. / ... / 
Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story, / women at least should know the difference / 
between love and death” \((FD, 244)\). These lovers will not be forced to suffer, even 
die, in order to experience love. Instead it is a feeling of joy that is the centre of their 
togetherness. The lovers, however, are aware of their differences. Instead of 
regarding these as obstacles, they seem to cherish their multiplicity, looking for 
alternative ways of loving:

But we have different voices, even in sleep, 
and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different 
and the past echoing through our bloodstream 
is freighted with different language, different meanings - 
though in any chronicle of the world we share 
it could be written with new meaning 
we were two lovers of one gender, 
we were two women of one generation. \((FD, 242)\)

This is a new experience for the speaker of the poem, and she is aware that 
this is not an easy love. It is a new and unexplored territory and there are not going 
to be straightforward traditional fairy tale endings here. It is a constant process of 
discovery and struggle:

If I could let you know - 
two women together is a work 
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness (FD, 245).

These lines refer to the immense difficulty in achieving love without sacrificing love for either lover’s own self. The concept of such love is new to the woman and she will not achieve it easily, it will require “work”. This is a choice that she consciously makes, as it is the only way forward for her. In these following lines, the poet makes it clear that she is intent on pursuing this path. By placing herself in a setting like Stonehenge, she also gives the words a ritualistic and mythical character:

I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle. (FD, 246)

Here Rich gives the scene a pre-historic sense, as if she is once again discovering her historical roots. The nature imagery emphasizes the proximity of the female principle to nature, like the connection between the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle. Rich suggests in her poetry that woman is more akin to the nature, and the poet feels the need to reclaim that healing connection. The body of the woman needs to be reclaimed by herself, as she writes in ‘Natural Resources’, linking the landscape to the female body: “The core of the strong hill: not understood: the mulch-heat of the underwood” (FD, 256). Unlike the requirements of traditional (masculine) love, which demands the dominance of the male, and the subservience of the female, in ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’, the love between the two women is based on mutuality and exchange, and togetherness in that exchange. Neither of the women, as a desiring being, are required to resign all her self-love, in order to accommodate
the other. Rich presents a paradigm of female sexuality that is not defined by men or the male-dominated system we live in. Since this economy cannot be defined by men, it has to be free of the prescribed notions of love and hence cannot be understood in relation to the masculine economy. Rich is conscious of the importance of this accessibility, as she writes:

I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain
smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod,
I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,
ever failing to note the small, jewel-like flower
unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her... (FD, 241)

Rich identifies the female body with the flower and the mountain “smoking within”, thus establishing a lost link between woman and nature. This body is full of potential energy waiting to erupt. ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’ uses strong erotic images like the vaginal “rose-wet cave” and the clitoral “jewel-like flower”, renaming and reclaiming woman’s body. It is also through her body that woman remembers this pre-Oedipal past, her wholeness with the mother. “Your body remembers. There is no need for you to remember. No need to hold fast to yesterday, to store it up as capital in your head. Your memory? Your body expresses yesterday in what it wants today”, Irigaray writes.12 This is an area that is specifically female, and Rich tries to delve into a subject that has long been a taboo. In Rich’s view, this is where women’s efforts can “help the earth deliver” (FD, 263), give birth to a new and alternative understanding, as she writes in ‘Natural Resources’:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

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I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world. (*FD*, 264)

She continues this theme of identification of the female body with nature and explores their unity in ‘Transcendental Etude’ (*FD*, 264-269). In this fine poem, Rich praises the fertility of the earth and the body of the woman by their identification. This act of reclaiming the maternal body is a revisionary one allowing the poet to appreciate “this green world already sentimentalized, photographed, / advertised to death” (*FD*, 265). She looks beyond the images that bombard her and instead discovers the multiplicity and the plenitude of what lies in front of her:

I’ve sat on a stone fence above a great, soft, sloping field
of musing heifers, a farmstead
slanting its planes calmly in the calm light,
a dead elm raising bleached arms
above a green so dense with life,
minute, momentary life - slugs, moles, pheasants, gnats,
spiders, moths, hummingbirds, groundhogs, butterflies -
a lifetime is too narrow
to understand it all, beginning with the huge
rockshelves that underlie all that life. (*FD*, 265)

Instead of concentrating on one or the other aspect of this picture, the poet takes delight in the landscape as a whole, rather than concentrating only on the end product. As Irigaray argues, this is a point that masculine thought misses completely. Within this dominant thought nature is reduced to mercantile exchanges. Instead of
regeneration, the relationship between man and nature is one of exploitation. She writes:

Man cultivates nature and manages its conservation, but often at the price of birth and growth. The cultivation of nature becomes exploitation, which risks destroying the vitality of the soil and the fertility of the great cosmic rhythms. This is the danger we incur when we forget what we have received from the body, our debt toward that which gives and renews life.\(^3\)

In Rich’s poem, this need to repossess the life-affirming link with nature and the body is strongly emphasized. The wholeness and unity of the landscape also symbolises the long lost maternal bond that has to be re-established. In the poem Rich contemplates this primordial bodily love between the mother and daughter with nostalgia. The bodily contact between them is still intact when she writes:

\[\ldots\] that acute joy at the shadow of her head and arms cast on a wall, her heavy or slender thighs on which we lay, flesh against flesh, eyes steady on the face of love; smell of her milk, her sweat ... \(FD, 267\)

These tender maternal images can be contrasted with the maternal images after their bond is severed in ‘Night-pieces for a Child’ \(CEP, 223-4\). Instead of the security and utter happiness of the above lines, there is terror and nightmares when the child looks into her mother’s eyes:

\[\text{Wider, they fix me -}
\text{- death’s head, sphinx, medusa?}
\text{You scream.}\]

Tears lick my cheeks, my knees
drop at your fear.
Mother I no more am,
but woman, and nightmare. (FD, 67)

Instead of the first bodily pleasures that the daughter feels with the mother
that provide joy, tenderness, warmth, and security, in these lines their bond is
severed. The daughter had to abandon all order to complete her entry into the
symbolic. Returning to ‘Transcendental Etude’, the poet explains how this
abandonment of the mother will also result in the abandonment of woman’s own self:

At most we’re allowed a few months
of simply listening to the simple line
of a woman’s voice singing a child
against her heart. Everything else is too soon,
too sudden, the wrenching-apart, that woman’s heartbeat
heard ever after from a distance... (FD, 266)

Over and over again in her poetry, Rich returns to that space before language,
before the Law-of-the-Father takes control with a cruel “wrenching-apart”. From that
moment on the mother and the daughter are alienated from each other; the mother
becomes “that woman” and everything shared a distant memory that only leaves its
traces within the body. Once the girl child enters the symbolic order this primal love
will be considered “most dangerous” (FD, 267), and its memories will have to be
repressed. Hence, the poet evokes the need for reclamation of this as yet untouched
and unspoiled space before being uprooted forever, and tries to work from there:

But in fact we were always like this,
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.
Birth stripped our birthright from us,
tore us from a woman, from women from ourselves
so early on
and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears
like midges, told us nothing, nothing
of origins, nothing we needed
to know, nothing that could re-member us. (FD, 267)

The memories of this long forgotten love among women evokes very strong
sentiments of yearning and nostalgia in the poem. The speaker feels that the
restoration of the severed link between mother and daughter, between sisters and
women, is the only way forward in the establishment of self-love and respect on
behalf of the women. She writes:

_This is what she was to me, and this_
_is how I can love myself -
as only a woman can love me. (FD, 268)_

This recognition is extremely important. The love that is shared between a
mother and daughter, and in its extension between women, is the foundation stone in
woman’s love and integrity for herself. The only way to achieve this goal is by the
restoration of the relationship between them as it continually validates the identity of
the woman as a loving, loved, and desiring being. However, it is not enough to only
remember these feelings as the poet seems aware of the difficulties involved in
working on them under the phallocentric system. She offers a reminder that it is a
difficult task requiring serious work:

_No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength_
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence, take the chance
of breaking down in the wild arpeggio
or faulting the full sentence of the fugue. (FD, 265)

An ‘étude’, a musical term derived from ‘study’ in French, is a “composition intended either to train or test the player’s technical skill.” An étude in trying to imagine alternative ways of articulating love among women. This is a force that has traditionally been regarded as a disturbing one in our culture, and one that still faces powerful obstacles. It is almost “perverse” as Rich refers to it in ‘Natural Resources’ (FD, 264). First and foremost, it is woman herself who shows resistance to the idea of love among women, as she cannot articulate her love within the patriarchal system which reduces female love into simple terms of rivalry. Irigaray argues thus:

Traditionally, therefore, this love among women has been
a matter of rivalry with:
-the real mother,
-an all-powerful prototype of maternity,
-the desire of man: of father, son, brother.

The necessity of woman’s existence as a subject, her need to be a subject within a community of women cannot be articulated within such parameters of rivalry, every aspect of which is defined from a male reference point. In terms of Irigaray, this love of same needs to be articulated if there is any possibility for women to exist as desiring beings. In Rich’s poetry it is this love of same that has the potential for change and holds the hope for the future. Irigaray defines this love as follows: “Love of same is love for that which primevally and necessarily has

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14Chambers Dictionary.
conceived, given birth, nourished, warmed. Love of same is love of indifferentiation from the earth-mother, the first living dwelling place.”

It is to this nourishing, warm, secure place that Rich wants to escape in ‘Splittings’ (FD, 228-9). The poem is about the compulsory divisions that are deemed necessary for a woman to go through in order to be able to fit into the patriarchal norms. The speaker regards her life at present as being painful and tries to imagine alternatives. Her ally in her struggle is the “first dwelling place”, in the words of Irigaray. She refuses to forget a primordial time where she felt love and was secure, where she had the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother before being introduced to the symbolic order. In the following lines, the poet is quite certain she has to hold on to this relationship if she is going to survive:

I choose not to suffer uselessly
to detect primordial pain as it stalks toward me
flashing its bleak torch in my eyes blotting out
her particular being the details of her love
I will not be divided from her or from myself
by myths of separation... (FD, 229).

The supposedly necessary separation from the mother divides the speaker of the poem not only from the first object of her love, but also from her own self as well. It also robs woman of the possibility of entering into language as a subject, since it is not possible for her to make a female identification with the mother without objectifying herself. Rich dreams of a system in which love between women - whether it is actual love or as mothers, daughters, sisters - can be articulated and in which subject-to-subject relationships between women can exist. She fantasizes going back

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to the womb of the mother where the above mentioned dream has a chance of being realized, and where power in its (masculine sense) can change places with love:

I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head in the space between her breast and shoulder abnegating power for love as women have done or hiding from power in her love like a man I refuse these givens the splitting between love and action I am choosing not to suffer uselessly and not to use her I choose to love this time for once with all my intelligence... (FD, 229)

Here Rich forcefully declines to accept the prescribed binary oppositions that are crucial to sustain patriarchal thought. The well known binary opposition of activity / passivity is traditionally coined with masculinity / femininity. In the poem Rich uses the word “love” synonymously with passivity, as if to love and to be active are two mutually exclusive concepts and cannot live side by side. In ‘Transcendental Etude’, she shatters this opposition: “I am the lover and the loved / home and the wanderer” (FD, 268). Love in the prescribed patriarchal sense requires utter passivity and surrender on woman’s behalf and paralyzes her, but in the above lines this notion is rejected. The poet refuses this “splitting” and chooses to renounce love in masculine terms, opting for her own understanding of the term which, she believes, will not cause her pain.

By imagining the reconnection between mothers and daughters, by resurrecting the links between women as a community, Adrienne Rich’s poetry celebrates women’s strength, their bodily and psychic connections to each other. She
uses the term ‘lesbian’ in this context to describe women who are aware and can command their energies without being dependent on a masculine ideology. I must emphasize that in my view, Rich does not reject men, but destructive masculinity. As was discussed, in her poetry Rich repeatedly emphasizes the fact that women are not permitted to have control over their lives within the patriarchal system. This restraint also applies to their pre-Oedipal experiences with the mother. In her work she tries to imagine and re-establish this vital link between mother and daughter by portraying a woman-centered consciousness and using this consciousness to connect women to each other as sisters. Her vision is based upon the identification with the mother and with sisters within a relationship which is not based on giving in masculine terms but rather sharing. This flow between women can enable them to shed the prescribed myths of themselves, such as passivity, self-sacrifice, and love of other rather than the self. This horizontal and vertical identification is the only way the poet can imagine regaining her subjectivity as a desiring woman in touch with her body. She concludes Of Woman Born with this vision:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence - a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed.

This is where we have to begin.\[^{17}\]

\[^{17}\text{Rich, Of Woman Born, pp. 285-6.}\]
This vision of the poet involves understanding the traditional patriarchal myths which describe and prescribe the 'nature' of women. Only by unmasking them, and imagining new alternatives that women can claim their identities as desiring and loving beings.
Conclusion

The twentieth century has witnessed immense changes in terms of women in society. The feminist movement has been a major force in these changes. However, patriarchal gender stereotypes have stayed securely in place and continue to affect women, and men, deeply. These stereotypes are perpetuated constantly by the myths surrounding us. The definition of myth, in the context of this study, encompasses classical myths, myths created and universalized by psychoanalysis, myths about womanhood, sexuality, and motherhood. These issues play a central role in our conceptions of what constitutes a ‘normal’ woman. Moreover, myths also claim that the notions perpetuated through them are unitary and universal. But they are gendered and take the male as their reference point. The symbolism of the binary opposition Male / Female does not refer to two different halves of humanity, but it has been used to express and maintain the hierarchical and oppositional relationship between the sexes which is divided and based on the subordination of the female. One strategy that is used to criticise these traditional binary oppositions and boundaries in twentieth century is that of revisionary mythmaking.

The strategy of revisionary mythmaking is not simply a reversal of old myths, replacing one set of hierarchies with another. Although male poets have also employed this strategy in their work, their mythmaking differs from the women’s in an important aspect. Male poets argue that civilisation has been in decline since the ancient times and therefore look back towards the past for retrieval. Woman poets,
on the other hand, do not share their nostalgia. Their aim is to investigate the terms on which patriarchal myths are predicated and reject their pretentious universality. At the heart of revisionary mythmaking lies the critique of established ‘truths’. The knowledge comes from the personal and intuitive experiences of the poet as a woman, never derived from a prior authority that dictates. This is evident in all the three poets included in this study. They are constantly engaged in the act of exploration and discovery.

H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich do not aim to discover a static or unchanging female self. Instead, they should be distanced from the idea of the ‘changeless and static self’. Hence, multiplicity is always foregrounded as a key theme in their work. The female subject cannot be clearly and finally defined since it is constantly changing, it is a subject in process of becoming. This idea of multiplicity is in opposition to the clearly defined notions of patriarchy. It allows the woman poet not to be imprisoned within binary oppositions, and imagine alternative systems of thought.

Destabilising binary oppositions is an important factor in the mythmaking of the three revisionary poets discussed in this study. Binary oppositions are instrumental in the establishment of patriarchal thought. They divide the world into well-defined territories. By blurring the boundaries between these territories the poets subvert the foundations of oppositional systems of ideology. By doing so, they offer new alternatives for imagination through which female identity can be imagined, defined, articulated not in relation to the male, but in feminine terms. The alternatives they offer are based on difference. But this difference is not to be thought in oppositional terms. It can be defined as a different kind of difference. It is to be based
upon non-oppositional, and non-hierarchical thinking. The poets question binary oppositions in order to make a connection between the two sides. I would argue that, however utopian, such a strategy might work towards healing the severe split between binary oppositions.

In order to attempt to comprehend and articulate the unique and multiplicious qualities of female self-consciousness, French feminist Luce Irigaray advocates the refusal of the gender descriptions which dictate the presence or absence of the phallus as the reference point. She posits that the culture of the West is monosexual and that the status of women can be defined as lesser men: inferior, or defective men. According to her, there is no neutral in patriarchal culture as what is taken to be neutral is in reality gendered, it is the discourse of the male. She strives to imagine another way of defining sexual difference, one in which the female symbolic can be represented. However, the ‘two lips’ metaphor that she uses to refer to the multiplicity and irreducibility of the female body does not intend to claim a privileged position for the female sex, but endeavours to imagine a different construct of difference. This strategy would present the woman with an alternative possibility of discourse than the ones currently available under phallogocentrism. These two positions require women to speak either as a sexualized male, by imitating the discourses of patriarchy, or as the sexualized other and to be mute since she cannot have her own language with female specificity.

In order to create a possibility for the feminine to exist in its multiplicity, Irigaray suggests a return to the female imaginary which has been excluded from the patriarchal order and finally effaced. This is the point in a child’s development before entry into the language, before patriarchal definitions and divisions have been
established. At this stage, the child is in a continuum with the mother, and the bond between them has not been severed. There is still the possibility of identification with the mother in terms of womanhood in this imaginary state, as once the entry into the symbolic order has taken place the mother’s identity is restricted by her reproductive and maternal function.

This thesis explores the subversion of myths by three twentieth century women poets; H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. Taken as a whole, their careers form a ‘tripod’, the span of which embraces the twentieth century. I tried to investigate the strategies that these poets employ in their struggle to destabilise patriarchal myths and present alternatives to established traditions. One important aspect that is common to the revisionism of all three poets’ is the refusal to treat female experience as marginal. They write as women and centralise their experiences in their poetry.

H.D. embraces classical mythology in her poetry, but not in its traditional terms. Her Imagist poetry, for which she was famous, refuses to be confined within the strict rules of Imagism. It blurs the traditional boundaries between the male and the female realms, and works from a threshold position of in-between. She gives voice to muted characters from Greek mythology. Her two epics, which I read as anti-epics, do not have conquering heroes, but instead centralise the female characters’ pursuit for self-definition. Perhaps for the first time, she allows Helen to tell her story of the Trojan war, and gives an account of her struggles to find a location for herself in which to exist independent of the patriarchal definitions which branded her as the beautiful destroyer of men.
Throughout her career H.D. tried to accommodate her own sexual position of bisexuality within her writing. Her analysis with Sigmund Freud helped her in this aspect. She felt that the aspect of his theory of sexuality, which posits that human beings are born without gender attributes, that they are bisexual, was useful for her. Hence, in her poetry she repeatedly returns to the pre-Oedipal stage in human development. This strategy allows her to imagine an alternative realm of meaning where she can accommodate her sexuality, a realm where the female side of sexuality is not devalued and described in terms of absence.

Sylvia Plath’s mythmaking differs from H.D.’s in that Plath attempted to conform to dominant patriarchal myths of womanhood. It could be argued that through the manner of her untimely death, she also became a myth herself. Her life and work has been used to perpetuate the patriarchal myth of the woman poet. Plath struggled very hard to abide by the existing cultural prescriptions of her time. She found it very difficult to exist as a woman and a poet, which are deemed to be mutually exclusive. She wrote about this dilemma extensively in her poetry.

Plath particularly explored the conflicting feelings she felt as a woman, such as anger, hatred, and violence. The violent feelings of women cannot be accommodated within the patriarchal system. As they do not have an outlet for these emotions, women tend to internalise their aggressiveness. Hence, they turn to their own selves in violence. One way these unrepresented feelings manifest themselves is in the form of self-sacrifice. Plath explores the necessity of woman to sacrifice her self in order to validate her identity. Her characters at first do not act too strongly, but ultimately, Plath moves towards exploring female aggression, hate, and violence
in her *Ariel* poems with very strong poems. She works towards undermining the patriarchal myth of love and sacrifice.

Female self-sacrifice reaches its ultimate form in the identity of the mother. According to Freudian theory, in order to join the path to ‘normal’ womanhood, the daughter has to abandon the mother as her primal object of love. This requirement makes it impossible for the daughter to identify with the mother as a woman without devaluing her own identity at the same time. Hence, she can exist only in relation to the male. She has to be a child’s mother, a husband’s wife, or a father’s daughter. The mother can only validate her existence to a certain degree through her children by sacrificing herself for them.

Patriarchal myths of maternal function perpetuate this ‘necessity’ of maternal self-sacrifice as this is the only available role for a woman. Plath explores this impossibility of subjectivity of woman outside her role as a mother. In her poetry, there is the daughter who looks up to her mother for clues to what it is to be a woman, but what she finds is only the mother who can have an identity through her children.

Adrienne Rich’s career could be defined as a constant struggle for transformation. From a girl who can only define herself by her relationships with others, she transforms herself into a lesbian feminist during her career. Like H.D., and Sylvia Plath, she also explores prescribed notions of femininity. Her early poetry, which brought her critical acclaim from the literary establishment, contains the first timid steps of the poet toward subversion and destabilising established norms, and also the seeds of her outspoken words regarding the place of the woman and the poet as a desiring and loving being.
One of the issues that Rich feels very strongly about is the lack of a maternal genealogy. This is not a genealogy of mothers, but rather a genealogy of women who aspire to claim an identity in their own rights. By resurrecting women from the past whose lives and works have been buried and forgotten she aims to create role models to which women can relate. She argues the existence of such a genealogy and community would empower women in their quest for self-definition.

Rich also returns to the semiotic frequently in her work, a time and place where female multiplicity is still dominant in the child’s life. She employs this strategy in order to accommodate herself as a woman who is desired and desires in female terms. In the semiotic, woman can claim a sexual identity without being circumscribed with the compulsory choices of patriarch, namely to exist either as a sexualized male or asexualized other. Only in the semiotic phase can a change be initiated. Bodily contact with the mother, in its intact form, enables the woman to experience love in feminine terms. Rich, H.D., and Plath argue that this is different to love in male terms which they regard as akin to brutality and violence. All three poets seem to link the war and destruction surrounding the world with male-dominated rule. Hence, they distance themselves from masculinity surrounding them, and move towards feminine principle which they believe to be healing.

Taken as a whole the poetry of H.D., Plath, and Rich work towards questioning the prescribed myths that affect their lives and work as women poets. Their revisionary mythmaking encompasses a wide range. Greek myths are employed from a revisionary perspective in the poetry of all three poets. H.D. pays particular attention to this issue, but Plath also uses it when she revises the myths of Colossus, Medea, Electra, Medusa. It is also critisized by Rich when she employs the character
of Orion, for instance. In the context of this study, however, the critique of psychoanalytic myths about female sexuality plays a major part in their poetry. All three poets defy the prescribed notions of female sexuality and strive to imagine alternative ways of defining themselves. Patriarchal myths of womanhood, too, is examined under a critical light, and ultimately rejected. They all employ a revisionary and subversive strategy when dealing with such myths which define and prescribe womanhood.

There are also some differences in the work of these three poets. H.D. for instance, particularly made use of Greek mythology, with her choice of personas and adaptation of epic style writing. Plath and Rich, on the other hand employ it occasionally. Even though Plath was also thinking about the relationships between women as a community, H.D. and particularly Rich are more outspoken on this issue in their poetry. Another difference is one that is related to social status. Although Plath and Rich repeatedly write about the material difficulties of being a mother, this is not dealt with by H.D.. She had a daughter, but was in a position to allow time and space for herself to write as her child was looked after. Among these poets, Plath has a unique place as she has become almost a superstar of the literary world. Hence, her life and her death inform the reader in no uncertain terms when reading her poetry. But overall, all three poets are preoccupied with the critique and revision of patriarchal myths, and their approaches in this quest are quite similar in my opinion.

This study relied heavily on the theories of Luce Irigaray in its investigation of revisionary mythmaking in the poetry of H.D., Plath, and Rich. However, this approach also has its limitations. At certain points, an Irigarayan approach does not
allow the reader a gap to manoeuvre from, especially in the case of trying to create a space within language.

I think that the exploration of these issues by the poets underlines the fact that it is not only necessary, but essential to rethink these issues if women are ever to achieve self-definition on their own terms. I do not know whether by speaking and writing, by breaking the silence women can overcome and perhaps initiate some change regarding phallocentrism, logocentrism, and binary oppositions. But I do think that it is vital to destabilise the policy of exclusion, based on the issues discussed in this thesis, which impoverishes the human community as a whole. I also believe that discourses have power and consequences. We cannot be all One, the same. But perhaps we can find a way to accommodate Many, the diverse, which would ultimately enrich the lives of women and men.
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