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Feminism, Revisionism, and 'Dethronement' in Margaret Atwood's *Circe/Mud Poems*

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'All these I could create, manufacture,

or find easily: they swoop and thunder

around this island, common as flies,

sparks flashing, bumping into each other' (Atwood 12)

Margaret Atwood's *Men with the Heads of Eagles* is part of a feminist re-imagining of Book 10 of Homer's *Odyssey*, and the second poem from the series *Circe/Mud Poems*, published in the 1974 collection *You Are Happy*. Through its embedded postmodern metacriticism of the structural and conceptual conventions of classical poetry, it is successful in its critique of the sexism found in the epic mode. Although the poem does not adhere entirely to the typical voice of contemporary feminist poetry, it is all the more progressive for its subversiveness.

The poem self-consciously draws upon the customs of classical Greek poetry, both in its content and its structure, as Atwood subverts tradition as a means of the simultaneous appropriation and undermining of convention. She hints at, but ultimately withholds, metrical regularity, sometimes falling into a pattern reminiscent of unrhymed dactylic hexameter: the typical form of epic poetry. Dactylic stress' effect of emphasis and gravity demands the reader's attention from the very first line—"Men with the heads of eagles" (1)—formed of a dactylic foot, followed by two iambs. Thematically, too, an immediate masculine focalisation calls critical and readerly attention into question, examining those whose stories take precedent in literature and critical study. Rather than adhering to the strict formality of the epic poems to which she alludes, Atwood deliberately undercuts the reader's expectations of genre, reminding them that this re-imagining does not aim to fulfil the requirements of a conventional retelling of *The Odyssey*. By adopting features of the classical poetry it aims to disparage, the poem explores the satirical postmodern irony of employing a form's structure to ultimately criticise it. This appropriation is emblematic of the reclamation trend seen in 1970s feminist poetry; produced against the backdrop of Second Wave Feminism, female-authored literature often used the revisionism of traditionally misogynistic forms to reclaim them and condemn

their inherent sexism. The androcentrism of classical poetry offers a rich foundation for reclamation; by reorienting Circe as the central figure of a myth that previously cast her as a sidelined villain, Atwood endows a traditionally patriarchal form with a contemporary feminist criticism.

From the outset, the poem's defiant voice redefines canonically valued mythological heroes as superfluous. The speaker's immediate, offhand dismissal of the "Men with the heads of eagles" (1), "those who can fly" (3), and "those with claws" (9), strips male protagonists–here, Icarus, for example–of the reverence typically attached to their tragic downfalls; they are plainly "no longer [of] interest" (2) to the speaker. Assuming this is the voice of Circe, the poem opens with her active refusal of the male figures that dominate the mythology from which Atwood has taken her central character. The diminishment of male mythological heroes amplifies Circe's position of narrative authority and empowers her within a form that traditionally disenfranchises her. Considering a reflexive commentary, the poem's voice can also be interpreted as that of Atwood herself, making it a personal, metacritical comment on the sexism embedded in the study of literary myth and a critique of the canon's androcentrism.

However, the poem's voice complicates a traditional feminist reading. Within the context of the collection as a whole, Circe's status as speaker has not yet been explicitly established; *Men with the Heads of Eagles* is preceded in the series only by an untitled, expositional poem. Although in this preceding poem Circe's voice is implicit in her direct address to Odysseus—"You move within range of my words / you land on the dry shore / You find what there is" (Atwood, 1974, p. 46, 10-12)—there is still room for ambiguity, and it is not until the self-assured first line of

the following poem, “It was not my fault, these animals” (Atwood, 1974, p.48, 1), that the reader can conclusively place Circe’s voice through the allusion to her transforming Odysseus’ men into pigs. Read in isolation, then, the voice of *Men with the Heads of Eagles* can be interpreted as a genderless one. Rather than employing the self-observing female speaker typical of feminist revisionist literature, the poem does not gender its voice. It is context from surrounding poems that informs the reader’s assumption that the speaker is female, and thus belongs to the late 20th-century tradition of female writers using female voices to expose the invisible struggles of womanhood. The feminist movement’s demand for this style of poetry, exemplified in Adrienne Rich’s 1972 essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision*, calling for “a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse” (Rich 18), led to an influx of poems denouncing patriarchy with a wry awareness of its complexities, criticised through the voice of a woman. Underpinned by the ‘personal is political’ ideology that pervaded contemporary discussions of identity politics, a feminised voice, a confessional tone, and the use of autobiography as subject have become expectations of feminist poetry. The tension between the genderless text and its gendered context creates a subtly feminised voice that draws into the realm of critical attention the universality of patriarchal issues. By straying from the expected narrative and voice of 1970s feminist poetry, the poem is all the more progressive.

Through the technique of metanarrative, Atwood draws attention to the fabricated nature of poetry and myth, highlighting its artificiality. Engaging with poststructuralism’s focus on the destabilisation of meaning and understood frameworks, her critique of the patriarchal assumptions embedded in language and form (Sewell 110) manifests in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

All these I could create, manufacture,
or find easily: they swoop and thunder
around this island, common as flies,
sparks flashing, bumping into each other

on hot days you can watch them
as they melt, come apart,
fall into the ocean
like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes. (12-19)

By highlighting the formal artifice of classical poetry and by claiming a personal ability to "create, manufacture, / or find easily" (12-13) the characters so central to poetic study, the speaker undermines the reverence built into the epic mode and, by extension, the cultural and academic importance of the study of classical myths. The objectifying, belittling simile "common as flies" (14), and the clumsy image of these heroes "bumping into each other" (15) are suggestive of a wry feminist humour and mockery of the way in which male characters, whose hubris and ego led to their unnecessary deaths, maintain such a central position in the canon. The speaker references a previous allusion to Icarus–the epitome of tragic pride and a concomitant downfall–by describing his death as his wings "melt, come apart, / fall into the ocean / like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes" (17-19). This simile and asyndetic list draws together in turn images of disease, loss of power, and the failure of an anachronistic human technology, establishing both a defeated and reflective tone. Found too in the line's relatively equal syllabic stress, in which successive, short clauses slow the pacing of an

otherwise heavily enjambed and scarcely punctuated poem, the speaker's dejection at this moment of pause encapsulates the poem's intent: the "dethronement" (19) of hierarchy. Through imagery of downfall and deconstruction, Atwood reveals in this section an interrogation of repressive social frameworks that goes beyond a wry satirisation, instead offering an active subversion.

Structurally, too, Atwood deconstructs the conventional presentation of Homeric heroes, challenging their cultural importance. In the first three stanzas, the poem's use of rolling enjambment establishes a resigned, casual tone, emphasised by the complacently repetitive use of "or" at the beginning of successive lines. The speaker's indifference when itemising anonymous allusions to mythological heroes subverts the glory and acclaim with which their stories are typically freighted. This offhand, wry mockery of literary traditions and tropes is typical of feminist, revisionist poetry of the time. Although progressive in intention, these poems often become problematic; as expressed in Marshall McLuhan's contemporary critical assertion 'the medium is the message' (13), revisionism often fails when it mistakes the satirisation of an unjust structure for its active condemnation, ultimately perpetuating its cultural validity and functioning as a Trojan horse for the sexism and stereotypes embedded in its content. Atwood, however, avoids this collusion by offering an alternative approach to the contemporary critical focus within classical poetic study. She presents a metacriticism of our fixation on such recurrent stories, instructing the reader to look instead to "the ones left over, / the ones who have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives" (21-22). The penultimate, heavily indented half-line creates a jarring fracture in the poem's visual structure, isolating "the ones left over" (21), who do not fit structurally within the poem,

or symbolically within the framework of mythology. Atwood defamiliarises a literary mode almost archaic in its traditionalism and demands attention for those who “have real faces and hands, [who] think / of themselves as / wrong somehow” (24-26), expressing of these characters a critical self-awareness that stands in stark contrast to the speaker’s previous condemnation of the ego and hubris of central mythological protagonists. Culminating in the final assertion that “they would rather be trees” (26), Atwood uses a familiar, natural image to align her alternative approach to literary attention with a material reality that transcends the fabricated cultural importance of the male protagonists with which literary study is so preoccupied.

Through her poem’s subtle metanarrative, its politically charged voice, and simultaneous appropriation and subversion of a classical poetic form, Atwood presents a piercing critique of the patriarchal assumptions embedded in mythology and its canonicity. She masterfully avoids the pitfalls of contemporary feminist revisionism’s tendency to place a wry self-awareness at the heart of its poetry. Instead, she deconstructs literary hierarchy, questions the validity of the canon, and defamiliarises an archaic form to create a poem that offers a truly progressive, committed subversion.

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