

---

Myth-taken Identity: Margaret Atwood and  
Carol Ann Duffy's Feminist Revisionist Mythology

---

Haley Taylor

HON 4956: Honors Thesis

May 1, 2017

In the Western literary canon, Greco-Roman mythology acts as the foundation that all subsequent texts are built upon. For better or for worse, these ancient texts continue to perpetuate harmful ideas about gender, authorship, and storytelling. The reification of these texts simultaneously reinforces misogynist ideas about women's voices and serves to further exclude women from the legacy of Western literary history. Using the work of contemporary feminist authors, this paper will focus on ways in which we can reimagine our history to be one of inclusion rather than exclusion. Within Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy's body of work, both authors use feminist revisionist mythology to reclaim women's voices that classical mythology mistreated or left out altogether. In doing so, their writings provide a form of literary justice to the women left out of Western literary canon and suggest a new way of approaching canonical texts.

### **Retracing the Path: Primary Texts and Theory**

The body of Carol Anne Duffy's (b. 1955) work reveals a deep abiding feminist concern with women's voices and cultural stories. A brief glance at her collection titles illustrates the depth and breadth of her fascination with reworking legendary tales—from her 1977 retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, 1996's *Grimm Tales*, 1997's accompanying *More Grimm Tales* are all examples of early forays in recreating cultural artifacts in a new image. Duffy's collections also reveal a deep concern with women's voices; from taking the perspective of female models in her 1985 collection *Standing Female Nude*, her explorations of communication in *Thrown Voices* (1985), to her work editing the 1992 collection *I Wouldn't Thank You For A Valentine: Poems for Young Feminists*, Duffy has continually centered her work around women and women's storytelling. This interest is reflected in the very medium of Duffy's work. Carol Ann Duffy is famous for her preference

for dramatic monologues, a genre that grants the (often female) speaker the authority to directly address her listeners.

While all of Duffy's work reveals a proclivity for feminist revisionist mythology, this theme becomes fully realized in her collections *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*. First published in 1999, *The World's Wife* is Carol Anne Duffy's first themed collection of poetry. Within this collection Duffy voices the women behind the famous men throughout history. While *The World's Wife* features a wide scope of personas, ranging from the biblical ("Mrs. Pilate") the scientific ("Mrs. Darwin"), to even the pop cultural ("Elvis's Twin Sister"), this paper is most invested in examining the elements of classical mythology within the collection. Some figures within the text are extremely memorable characters from Greco-Roman mythology, but many focus on the unknown women behind our most popular stories. Emphasizing just how little we know about these women, many of the personas throughout the collection are nameless, bearing only their titles in relation to men such as "Mrs. Midas," "Mrs. Sisyphus," and "Pygmalion's Bride." The collection shifts the focus from the known history of men to the speculative history of women.

Duffy's 2002 collection *Feminine Gospels* builds upon the themes established in *The World's Wife*. The first half of *Feminine Gospels* reads as a continuation of *The World's Wife*, with more poems retelling the stories of historical and mythical figures from Western history. This aspect of the collection is perhaps best encapsulated in "Beauty" a poem focused on the ways society praises and punishes beautiful women. By alluding to a wide array of famous beautiful women—Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana—Duffy connects the mythic to the present, giving new, subversive life to ancient ideas. In contrast to the clear allusions of the first half of the text, the second half of

*Feminine Gospels* features more abstract personal poems. Situated among pieces reflecting on Duffy's girlhood and relationships with other women are pieces like "Anon," a poem on the anonymous women who have shaped Western literary history and "History," a poem that personifies history as a woman abused and forgotten by time. In moving from more universal poems to intensely personal pieces, Duffy illustrates the profound effect of myth on our everyday lives.

Margaret Atwood's (b. 1939) prolific body of work reveals a similar obsession with feminist revisionist mythology. In flipping through an anthology of her early poetry, *Selected Poems 1965-1975*, readers cannot help but be struck by Atwood's intense concern for female voices and feminine creativity. In poems like "I Can't Tell You My Name," "Tricks with Mirrors," and "Corpse Song," Atwood hauntingly plays with conceptions of female identity and women's historic silence. However, Atwood's early poetry articulates its feminist revisionism most clearly in her poems about Greek mythology. In "Siren Song," the speaker subverts the traditional Petrarchan love model that is based on women's assumed inferiority—the siren lures men to their deaths by playing into their fantasies of rescuing a damsel in distress. "Cyclops" questions society's definition of "monstrousness." Her 1974 collection *Circe/Mud Poems*, featured in *Selected Poems 1965-1975* in its entirety, details a speaker reliving the experiences of Circe. The speaker begins recounting the animalistic, pig-like men of her youth, and then details the traveler who came to her island to become her lover. The collection also draws from the myth of Pygmalion, with the speaker likening herself to Pygmalion's statue bride. Much like Carol Ann Duffy's poetry, this collection of feminist revisionist mythology focuses on themes of inherited or collective memory and the ways in which our past is intrinsically tied to our future.

Atwood's 2005 novella *The Penelopiad* has similar intentions to *The World's Wife*. As the title suggests, *The Penelopiad* acts as a counter tale to Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the epic poems featuring Penelope's husband Odysseus. Penelope narrates her account from the afterlife, detailing to the reader the intense isolation she felt in Ithaca. Her sole confidantes are her twelve maids who assist her weaving and perform reconnaissance work for her with the suitors. When Odysseus finally makes his way home, he murders the maids for what he sees as disrespect. The maids are represented as a traditional Greek chorus, with interludes of "The Chorus Line" strewn throughout the text that force readers to confront the injustice of their deaths.

Both Carol Ann Duffy and Margaret Atwood are situated within the larger intellectual practice of feminist revisionism. Feminist revisionist mythology revises old texts to create new ones in which female voices are prioritized. Alicia Ostriker, one of the seminal figures in the field of feminist revisionism, writes that this act blends both creation and destruction, as writers "simultaneously deconstruct a prior 'myth' or 'story' and construct a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself" (Ostriker 212). The focus of this literary practice is to recover the voices lost or suppressed throughout millennia of patriarchy. Feminist revisionist mythology is a practice targeted at reforming the Western literary canon, intent on viewing the construction of culture as an inherently politicized act. In her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Toni Morrison deftly summarizes this argument, stating

Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the

sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested (132).

Although those in privilege classes have the luxury of viewing their art as unpolitical, disenfranchised classes are able to plainly see that art is one of the primary tools for the oppressor classes to disseminate and reinforce cultural mores. The canon, reinforced in classrooms across the world, has traditionally operated as a means to enforce racist, patriarchal, and imperialistic notions of whose art matters. Feminist revisionist mythology, then, attacks the very foundation of this canon, and in doing so asserts the validity of women's authorship.

Early attempts at such revisionism can be seen in Mary Shelley's *Midas* and *Proserpine* plays or Virginia Woolf's musing on Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own*. However, the practice as we know it today truly began in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of second-wave feminism and such authors as Mona Van Dyun, Alta, and Adrienne Rich. Unfortunately, this also means that, as a practice, feminist revisionism often suffered from the same problems of second-wave feminism—namely, its white, Eurocentric focus. This is not to imply that women of color were not writing in this practice—indeed, authors like Toni Morrison and Suniti Namjoshi's writings continue to define the tradition to this day. Rather, this criticism of feminist revisionism points to the tendency of the practice to focus overwhelmingly on Western literature, to the exclusion of non-Western, non-white texts.

According to Ostriker's formative book on the subject, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, there are four unique characteristics that distinguish a feminist revisionist work from other authors' interactions with mythology.

First, these works “treat existing texts as fence posts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth but by no means identical to it” (Ostriker 235). Secondly, they involve a reevaluation of the cultural values instilled in Western literature. Thirdly, feminist revisionisms lack the nostalgia for the “Golden Age” often found in male modernist mythmakers. Finally, they experiment with new forms (Ostriker 235-236). These features mark feminist revisionism as a unique way for women writers to craft a new tradition in response to the canon. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revisionism,” Adrienne Rich stresses the importance of this work, stating

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (Rich 18)

According to this quotation, women writers cannot begin to craft their own tradition until they fully comprehend the tradition and stories that were forced upon them. However, the end goal for this practice is not as clear. For Rich and others, especially radical feminists, this process was a way of breaking with the old. For other authors, it is a way of reconciling with the canon and crafting a way forward. Regardless, all writers of feminist revisionist mythology are invested in exploring the lasting impact of past stories on modern women.

### **The Tropes That Bind Us: Women’s Voice in Greco-Roman Mythology**

Therefore, before we look ahead to contemporary retellings, we must first explore the depiction of women’s voices within Greco-Roman mythology. Woman’s silence is continually stressed throughout ancient stories. The ways in which a woman exercises her

voice marks her character on either side of a strict moral dichotomy. Throughout Greek mythology, bad or morally dubious characters are those who are characterized as loud and sexual. *The Odyssey* is filled with dangerous women who use their voice and feminine wiles to prevent Odysseus' journey. The most obvious example are the sirens, who use their beautiful singing to lure men to their deaths. Odysseus' divine paramours Circe and Calypso are similarly associated with this power. Both of their introductory descriptions draw attention to their power and their voices. When Odysseus' men discover Circe, the danger is apparent from the moment

they heard her singing, lifting  
her spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth  
at her great immortal loom, her enchanting web  
a shimmering glory only goddesses can weave. (X, 241- 245)

Similarly, the first time readers confront Calypso within the text, the narrator notes that "deep inside she sang, the goddess Calypso, lifting/ her breathtaking voice as she glided back and forth/ before her loom" (V, 68-70). Significantly, both women are introduced as beautiful, singing, and weaving; their magical looms foretell the ensnarement they will weave for Odysseus, and their voices serve only to further emphasize the danger awaiting the men falling into their traps. These descriptions mark Circe and Calypso as not just seductive, but "a danger too," one so great that "no one, god or mortal, dares approach her there" (VII, 282, 285). Both women weave a web to trap Odysseus with their powerful voices.

This relationship between a woman's voice and her morality also functions in the other direction; if bad women are women that transgress their boundaries, good women

are those who know how to stay silent. Female characters who are coded as good are those are associated with subservience. According to Judith Fletcher in “Women’s Space and Wingless Words in *The Odyssey*”, “There is a sustained metaphor in the *Odyssey* linking speech and sexuality, doors and chastity, which is supported by the idea that a word has a physical nature, and that to speak is to let a word cross a boundary” (Fletcher 89).

Penelope and the nursemaid Eurycleia are held up as ideal women because of their willingness to remove their voices and their bodies from men’s spaces. The nursemaid Eurycleia is associated with chastity of silence. She brags about being one of the few serving girls who Laertes never slept with and holds the responsibility of locking the other women of the house in their quarters. Most tellingly, Eurycleia makes multiple vows of silence throughout the texts to Telemachus and Odysseus. In doing so, she agrees to keep their secrets from Penelope. The text rewards her for this behavior by making her the only mortal woman allowed to help Odysseus kill the suitors.

If Eurycleia aligns herself with male power through her willingness to enforce silence upon others, Penelope is characterized as moral through her willingness to cede power. Although Penelope’s deception of the suitors indicates her ability to exercise power behind the scenes, her public appearances are marked by her subservience. Penelope graciously accepts her son’s accession to power. Three times in *The Odyssey* Telemachus orders Penelope to stay silent and

go back to [her] quarters. Tend to [her] own tasks,  
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women  
working hard as well. As for the bow now,  
men will see to that, but I most of all:

I hold the reins of power in this house. (I, 409-414)

Telemachus' orders to Penelope serve a dual purpose throughout the epic. First, his ability to usurp his mother's place of head of the house indicates his burgeoning masculinity and leadership. As Fletcher explains, "public spaces are repeatedly defined and emphasized as masculine by articulating other domestic places where women are silent; by acknowledging this distinction the poem shows us how Telemachus eventually takes his rightful place in this masculine public world (Fletcher 79). Secondly, Penelope's willingness to cede power marks her as an ideal mother and wife. For the narrative of *The Odyssey* to work, for Odysseus to want to come home, Penelope had to be an easily identifiable Good Wife, and therefore, she had to be silent.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. Athena, goddess of wisdom, is one of the strongest characters in the text, the sole reason Odysseus is allowed to return in the text. However, as is usually the case, the many qualifiers of the exception only further prove the ubiquity of the rule. While Athena does wield considerable power within the narrative, a careful examination of the text reveals the limitations placed on her as a symbol of female power. One of three virgin goddesses and associated with the "masculine" pursuits of wisdom and warfare, Athena is in many ways unsexed throughout mythology. That Athena was born by her father Zeus without a mother is evidence of the degree to which Athena is removed from womanhood. Her divinity further separates her from mortal women. In book fifteen of *The Odyssey*, she demonstrates little faith in womankind when she warns Telemachus not to trust his mother and to

Quickly, press Menelaus, lord of the war cry,  
to speed you home at once, if you want to find

your mother still inside your house...

She must not carry anything off against your will!

You know how the heart of a woman always works:

she likes to build the wealth of her new groom—

of the sons she bore, of her dear, departed husband,

not a memory of the dead, no questions asked.

So sail for home, I say!" (XV 16-18, 23-27)

Athena's misogynistic invective here against not only the irreproachable Penelope but also all of womankind is startling. It is an argument that mortal woman, apparently, are not human—they have no heart or loyalty to their families, only materialistic thoughts for their next husband. Important, too, here is the notion Athena reinforces that women are unable to own property. Although Penelope has managed Ithaca for the past twenty years, Athena suspects that she will steal from *Telemachus'* estate, to build "the wealth of her new groom." Athena's power should thus not be mistaken for women's power; she takes great pains to mark herself, the unsexed goddess, from the likes of greedy mortal women. She is powerful not because of her womanhood, but despite it.

Athena is marked as an exception to the rules of female behavior not only in why she is powerful, but also by how she is powerful. Even though she is one of the most powerful deities in the pantheon, Athena power is still marked as lesser by sexist tropes that need to mark her as nurturing and subservient. In Book I, she needs to acquire her father's permission before she can help Odysseus on her own accord. Furthermore, her actions toward Odysseus often fit the trope of a nurturing mother—putting him to sleep, bathing, dressing, and feeding him. That Athena is tasked with these mundane, feminized

tasks, so far from her supposed dominion of warcraft, displays Ancient Greece's great discomfort with the concept of powerful women. In order for Athena to have a significant role in *The Odyssey*, she had to be virginal, a deity, have masculine pursuits, obtain her father's permission, and perform feminized emotional labor for a mortal man. She does not shatter the rules for women's power—she illustrates just how hard it is to transgress them.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* also portrays women into regressive dichotomies. The female characters of Ovid are either virginal, powerless women susceptible to sexual violence or malicious, powerful women set on revenge. These two sets of women are often paired against one another: Juno punishes Io, Diana punishes Callisto, Clytie kills Phoebus' lover, Medea kills Jason's new wife. The message of the Roman poet is the same as Homer's: women with power are overwhelmingly bad. The pernicious implication of this statement is that, in using power to hurt other, more sympathetic women, powerful women are betraying their sex. Power is thus established as antithetical to womanhood. Even more troubling is the way in which violence in which women is normalized in the text. If women are not to wield power, the natural assumption is that they are to have power wielded over them.

Innocence, silence, and subservience to male authority are all traits that become fetishized and naturalized in *The Metamorphoses*. Although Proserpine does not love her rapist Pluto, she is forced to accept his company and only lets her "countenance betray anxiety and grief, a queen [that otherwise] reigned supremely great in that opacus world queen consort" (Book V). Eurydice, forced to die a second time because her husband Orpheus failed Pluto's instructions, is but a minor character in her own tale. She even has the grace to die quietly,

Again she dy'd, nor yet her Lord reprov'd;  
 What cou'd she say, but that too well he lov'd?  
 One last Farewell she spoke, which scarce he heard;  
 So soon she drop'd, so suddain disappear'd.  
 All stunn'd he stood, when thus his Wife he view'd  
 By second Fate and double Death subdu'd. (X)

In the passage of Eurydice's death, it is Orpheus who the audience is supposed to sympathize with. After all, what did Eurydice have to complain about—she was only dying. Orpheus, on the other hand,

Seven days he sat upon Death's river bank,  
 in squalid misery and without all food—  
 nourished by grief, anxiety, and tears. (X).

While of course Orpheus' grief as a widower is considerable, it is indicative that Ovid only prioritizes his emotions and ignores Eurydice's pain. After all, Orpheus was the musician of the two. He was meant to be heard, and she to listen.

*The Metamorphoses'* portrayal of men as active and women as acted upon is perhaps best represented in Book X's tale of Pygmalion and the Statue. In the most literal example of objectification in all of Western history, Pygmalion carves his perfect woman out of marble and has Venus animate her so that he may wed the her. Of course, neither Pygmalion nor Ovid saw fit to name the figure, only referring to her as "statue-bride" (Book X) throughout the task. Much like Homer's Athena is higher than all mortal women, the man-made nature of the statue means that "no woman of the world has ever equaled" (X)

her in either beauty or chastity. Even before she was brought to life, the statue exhibited her morality by being

A very virgin in her face was seen,  
 And had she mov'd, a living maid had been:  
 One wou'd have thought she cou'd have stirr'd, but strove  
 With modesty, and was asham'd to move. (X)

The statue's innocence is part of her desirability: it renders her a woman fit for her sculptor who "abhor'd all womankind" for their "lascivious life" (X). Thus, *The Metamorphoses* establishes a clear dichotomy between real women, who are by their very nature sinful, and artificial and immortal women, who are created by men. As a creation of Pygmalion, the statue inherently lacks autonomy. She is created entirely for her artist's pleasure. She is silent through the entire story, even after she comes to life. Readers are privy to no reflections on her new life or the man who made her. The only detail the reader is given about her is that she gives birth within ten months of her wedding. The statue truly is the perfect woman according to Greco-Roman standards: beautiful, subservient, chaste, fertile, and above all, silent.

### **Digging Ourselves Deeper: The Historical Ramifications of Greco-Roman Influence**

Unfortunately, cultural notions of Greco-Roman gender roles were and are felt long after the dissolution of the Roman empire. As numerous feminist historians and theologians have illustrated, early Christianity was propagated throughout the West by using witchcraft as an excuse to silence women who worshipped pagan gods. The label of witchcraft was defined so broadly that "any female rejection of male authority was potential evidence of witchcraft. Any woman could be a witch. Any look or word that

offended a man, any angry speech, any unnecessary fraternization with other women, any sexual activity outside church-approved relations — all could trigger a charge of witchcraft” (Chart). A close linguistic study, like that done by Max Dashu in her 2016 book *Pagans and Witches*, reveals that the old words for witches often literally simply meant words like “healer” and “prophetess” (Dashu ii). Looking at primary texts, like *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), a text published in 1485 by Catholic authorities, allows scholars to understand that “witch” often just meant “woman,” for

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman... What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil nature, painted with fair colours...When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil...

Women are by nature instruments of Satan — they are by nature carnal, a structural defect rooted in the original creation. (qtd. in Chart)

Women’s very nature—and thus, women’s thoughts and women’s voices, were represented as against God. In the transition period from a polytheistic society to a Christian monotheistic society, the Church also needed to convert or silence individuals worshipping female gods to accept a system of male clergymen worshipping a male God. However, despite their supposed hatred for all things pagan, these texts are striking in their similarities to Greco-Roman depictions of womanhood. Like Circe and Calypso, women’s voices branded them both powerful and evil. However, unlike the fictional ladies of Homer, Catholic conceptions of women’s voices resulted in murdering women. According to conservative estimates of later witch trials, in “the 160 years between 1500 and 1660, Europe saw between 50,000 and 80,000 suspected witches executed” (Drymon 169). It

would seem the deadliest thing about women's voices is the potential harm it could cause themselves.

By the Early Modern era of the Elizabethan period, ideas of women's silence had been codified into the English language as we now know it. While English is not as overtly gendered in the way, say, Spanish and French are at the grammatical level, it is no less focused on catering to a patriarchal perspective. One core area through which gender roles are perpetuated is through phallogocentrism—the centering of language around men. For example, imagine if instead of

the man “penetrat[ing]” the woman, we were to say that the woman's vagina “consumes” the man's penis. This would create a very different set of connotations, as the woman would become the active initiator and the man would be the passive and receptive party. One can easily see how this could lead to men and masculinity being seen as dependent on, and existing for the benefit of, femaleness. (Serano 329)

Femininity is defined in relation to masculinity; as the privileged term; the cultural meaning of femininity is deferred as the opposite of the privileged term—masculinity. Masculinity is the default from which femininity is marked as the Other. The relationship between these paired term is especially apparent in the issue of sexuality: men pursue, women are pursued. Men act, women are acted upon. Given that the role of masculinity is an active one, femininity by default is passive. Absence, invisibility, submissiveness: such is the deferred meaning of femininity.

The phallogocentrism of Elizabethan English can be seen in examinations of descriptions of women's bodies and sexuality. *Much Ado About Nothing's* titular pun is the quintessential example of this tendency, with “nothing” or “no thing” being common slang

for women's genitalia. In "The Virgin Knot: Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare," William C. Carroll catalogues an endlessly amusing list of Elizabethan euphemisms for vagina, including "the O, the pit, ring, case, box, casket, the subtle hole, her C's U's, and T's, the lake, pond, swallowing tomb, the placket, chimney, the fault, and so on" with all of these being "a variant of the patriarchal metaphors of absence or containment" (Carroll 18). Euphemisms like these also suggest a fear of a vagina dentata, a superstition that vaginas were toothed and capable of eating and castrating male genitalia. As a subject defined entirely by what it lacks, female anatomy becomes an object of mystical suspicion: a deep, dark, and treacherous swamp as capable of destruction as it is creation.

In some ways, men's fear towards female genitalia and desire is entirely justified. Women's bodily autonomy and sexual freedom would be and still a direct threat to patriarchal family dynamics and the root of male power. Far better to erase the possibility of women's sexuality. William C. Carroll's claim, therefore, that "female sexuality is, in patriarchal discourse, unrepresentable—conceptually available only as lack, invisibility, or negation" (Carroll 14), grants new light to the association between women's bodies and silence. Womanhood was conceptualized with silence as the default and the ideal. An examination of Shakespeare's comedies reveals the ubiquity of women's silence in supposedly happy endings. Isabella's silence at the end of *Measure for Measure* is largely read as acceptance of the Duke's proposal. Hermione speaks only once in Act Five of *The Winter's Tale*. Celia no longer speaks on stage after she is introduced to her "love" Oliver. Much as Penelope heroically bore her silence in waiting for her husband to return, women's silence in the Elizabethan era was idealized.

Even after the battles for women's literacy had been waged throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century—for of course, reading leads to thinking, and thinking very often leads to speaking—fears over women's voices persisted. Some of these fears were still enshrined in law. For example, the laws of coverture that continued in the United States and England for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century prevented married women from testifying in court, as they were legally subsumed into those of their husbands and did not, legally, exist as persons themselves. However, most of the rules governing women's speech were cultural, not legal, forces. Fanny Fern, 19<sup>th</sup> century satirist, mocks the perspective of her would be critics,

When we take up a woman's book we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and that lovely reliance on the patronage of our sex which constitutes a woman's greatest charm. We do not wish to be startled by bold expressions, or disgusted with exhibitions of masculine weaknesses...Thank heaven! there are still women who *are* women—who know the place Heaven assigned them, and keep it—who do not waste floods of ink and paper, brow-beating men and stirring up silly women...How much more womanly to have allowed herself to be doubled up by adversity and quietly laid away on the shelf of fate, than to have rolled up her sleeves, and gone to fisticuffs with it. Such a woman may conquer, it is true, but her victory will cost her dear; it will neither be forgotten nor forgiven—let her put that in her apron pocket. (Fern 94-95)

Fern's comments aptly demonstrate the social climate women wrote in. While the Victorian period brought a new wave of women writing in the new genre of novels, there were still strict doctrines of what was considered acceptable subjects for female writers. Women writers were supposed to be governed by what are now called the four virtues of the Cult of

True Womanhood: Piety, Purity, Domesticity, and Submission. Those who strayed from their proper sphere of influence faced social and often economic backlash.

While women's circumstances have drastically changed around women's writing in the intervening centuries, modern women are still shackled by a legacy of silence. Despite the prevailing cultural belief that women talk more than men, numerous studies in the last several decades have proven this notion categorically untrue. A 1993 comprehensive study by Deborah James and Janice Drakich reviewed sixty-three studies that examined the amounts of male and female talk in different settings. Out of sixty-three studies, women talked more than men in only two papers. More recent scholarship confirms that this trend still prevails. Adam Dudding notes a

2012 Princeton study that shows women on average talk 25 per cent less than men in meetings; and a 2013 study of two-way conversations which found that women were far more likely than men to be interrupted; and a 1998 study showing female doctors were interrupted by patients more often than male doctors were, and another 1990s study showing boys called out in the classroom eight times as frequently as girls" (Dudding).

The ubiquity of men's speech over women is especially startling when one considers that women are perceived to talk *more* than men. In her 1980 book *Man Made Language* examining the phallogocentrism and misogyny at the heart of the English language, Dale Spencer proposes a compelling argument for this paradox. She states the "talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence. Women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women" (Spencer 42-43).

Adopting Spencer's argument is a compelling reading of the Western canon. If the literary canon is our collective inheritance from our ancestors, millennia of patriarchy has robbed modern and future women of our foremothers' stories. From the first recorded stories of Greco-Roman society, female voices have been robbed of their agency. Subsequent eras have only built upon the tradition first enshrined by these early authors. Until the cycle is disrupted, women will be haunted on both sides. On one, by the ghosts of our foremothers, yearning for their daughters to remember them. And on the other, by the potential futures we are leaving for our own daughters.

### **Controlling the Narrative: Atwood and Duffy's Use of Voice**

Given that Atwood and Duffy's source materials are heavily invested in suppressing women's voices, it is fitting that their own works are so focused on reclaiming those voices. Both texts are structured around the significance and power of voice. Duffy and Atwood do not merely let their characters back into the narrative—they enable them to seize control of it. *The World's Wife* is a collection of dramatic monologues, meaning that each poem's speaker is directly addressing an unseen listener. By using dramatic monologues, Duffy grants her personas the ability to claim their own story by speaking in the first person, responding to previous versions of their tales, and forcing readers to question the authority of these canonical texts. Atwood accomplishes a similar effect by centering Penelope and her maids as the narrators of the novella. In the opening pages of *The Penelopiad*, Penelope justifies adding her voice into the fray. According to her, she would not have spoken on her own account, but she was compelled to speak because her legacy has turned into "an edifying legend/ A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the

singers, the yarn-spinners... Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself" (*The Penelopiad* 2-4). Restoring the voices to these women thus grants them power to both correct the past and prevent future women from being thusly wronged.

Duffy and Atwood first must adjust readers' notions about objective truth in order to make room for these women's voice. Both authors resist an objective or even a complete truth in favor of embracing chaos and conflicting perspectives. When dealing with myths and texts that have been so widely accepted and ingrained in our cultural memory, it is first necessary to disrupt the authority of these texts. In Duffy's poem "Mrs. Beast," the speaker urges readers to question the tales they hold sacred or authoritative. She asserts that "These myths going round, these legends, fairytales, / [she wi]ll put them straight; so when you stare/ into [her] face.../ ... think again" ("Mrs. Beast" 1-3,6). Duffy's retellings often contradict their source material, either through changing the plot of the tale or simply undermining the heroism of the male leads. Both "Mrs. Icarus" and "Penelope" feature speakers unconcerned with their husbands' adventures; Duffy's Penelope is more concerned with her weaving than Odysseus' return, and Mrs. Icarus views her partner as a "total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock" ("Mrs. Icarus" 5). Duffy's personas glibly dismantle the culturally romanticized images of Grecian heroes. Knocking these figures off their pedestal creates room for new interpretations.

In "Beauty" from *Feminine Gospels*, Duffy continues to destabilize long edified legends of mysterious women and the men who conquered them. The poem imagines the title of Beauty, the most beautiful woman in the world, being passed down to famous women throughout history. Although the title brings them fame and pain, the personal

thoughts of the women are shielded from the reader. This opaqueness marks a sharp departure from Duffy's usual style of intimate dramatic monologues. Instead, readers are only privy to the rumors of the women that "some said," "some swore," and "some vowed" they heard about her. The change from Duffy's regular style marks precisely how little we actually know about historical women, and reminds readers how much of history is filtered through the eyes of men.

In the court of "The Long Queen," readers are privy to a glimpse of what may flourish in these new spaces for interpretations. In her female-centric court, the queen listens to

Her pleasures were stories, true or false,  
 That came in the evening, drifting up on the air  
 To the high window she watched from, confession  
 Or gossip, scandal or anecdote, secrets, her ear turned  
 To the light music of girls, the drums of women, the faint strings  
 Of the old. (5-10)

In this passage it is revealed that while the queen loves stories, the accuracy of them is not her greatest concern. Her ambivalence toward objective truth should not be taken to mean a proponent of an alternative-fact frenzy; rather, she simply acknowledges that the accuracy of a story does not influence its artistic worth. Even more interesting is the way female creativity is prioritized in this stanza. Oral storytelling is linked with femininity, a subversion of the masculine storytelling of Homer's time. Furthermore, the forms of stories told in the queen's court are precisely those associated with feminine and thus "lower" art

forms: gossip, scandal, anecdote, the music of girls, the drums of women. In disregarding the supposed accuracy of a tale, Duffy is able to craft new spaces for female orality.

Atwood achieves a similar objective by establishing conflicting narrative accounts throughout her texts. Atwood further complicates ideas of truth and authority by revisiting stories in different texts throughout her career. Her portrayal of Penelope shifts drastically from poems to novella, and even within the novella depending on the narrator. In her 1973 poem cycle “Circe/Mud Poems,” Atwood adopts the persona of Circe, who contemplates her lover’s wife in disparaging terms. The speaker suspects that

She’s up to something, she’s weaving  
 Histories, they are never right,  
 She has to do them over,  
 She is weaving her version,  
 The one you will believe in,  
 The only one you will hear. (150-155)

Circe’s perspective is not overly kind to Penelope. She suspects Penelope keeps as many secrets from Odysseus as he keeps from her, and uses Penelope’s iconic weaving as a metaphor for her deceit. The speaker’s musings on Penelope, however, are also a metaphor for the way history is recorded. Although all of recorded history is only a “version” of the whole truth, it quickly becomes the “only one [society] hear[s].” This passage illustrates the biases of history—women are less likely to be recorded in general, but the histories of rich, privileged women like Penelope were granted much more authority than a woman like Circe, who is admittedly powerful but isolated and marginalized from the rest of civilization. However, the wonderful thing about this passage is that highlighting history’s

biases reminds readers that they are reading an unreliable reader—Circe, who is sleeping with Penelope’s husband, has every reason to paint her in a negative light.

Understandably, Penelope imagines herself in quite a different light than her husband’s lover does. Throughout *The Penelopiad*, she paints herself in a way meant to maximize reader’s sympathies, playing into tropes of a long suffering wife and a wronged woman with a heart of gold. However, the novella also encourages readers to resist the simplistic, one-sided truth by drawing attention to meta-narratives surrounding truth and storytelling. In the *Penelopiad* readers are exposed to the original confusion around Odysseus’ journey. Singers and gossips endlessly debate the validity of each other’s’ texts, arguing that

Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another .... Odysseys was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle... she’s fallen in love with him... and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam.” (*Penelopiad* 83-84)

Both Penelope and Atwood refuse to speculate on the ‘real’ truth of these events. Instead, the narrative rejects objectivity in favor of competing and often contradictory voices. Even Penelope is not above having her account questioned. In her chapter “Slanderous Gossip,” Penelope addresses the rumors that she was unfaithful with several of her suitors, stating that she was aware of the “slanderous gossip that have been going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years. These stories are completely untrue” (*Penelopiad* 143). If we are to believe Penelope’s side of the story, she was faithful to her husband during his two-decade absence and was heartbroken when he killed her beloved maids.

However, this chapter is followed by an interlude of the Chorus line that directly contradicts Penelope's lament. According to the vengeful maids, Penelope and Eurycleia conspired to kill them to prevent them from sharing their knowledge of her cheating. Neither account is presented as more factual than the other, leaving the reader with more questions than answers. Are Penelope's tears false, an attempt to save her own reputation and marriage? Or are the maids, angry that their mistress was unable to prevent their deaths, lashing out by creating vicious falsehoods about her? The text's meaning changes wildly depending on whose authority you accept. After all, the maids remind us, there is always "another story. / The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain" (*Penelopiad* 147). In drawing attention to the own inconsistencies in her own text, Atwood compels readers to reexamine the assumptions that accompany accepting the meta-narratives of canonical texts.

In that previous quotation, the maids allude to a significant feature of both works: there is an implicit listener to these tales. Almost every speaker addresses the auditor or reader of their narratives: Penelope implores "Don't follow my example, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours!" (*Penelopiad* 2), Circe addresses her fellow "nereids and nymphs" ("Circe" 1) in pork-themed cooking show, and Eurydice pleads for "Girls, [to] forget what you've read" ("Eurydice" 78). These women are all, to varying degrees, performing. In the case of Duffy's speakers, the performance is ingrained in the very structure of the text; dramatic monologues are inherently public by virtue of the implied listener. The texts' meta-awareness of itself as a piece of storytelling casts even more doubts on the "objectivity" of the speakers. If they are aware that they are performing, how are they adjusting their rhetoric to be better received by their listeners? There is only one thing the

reader can be sure of: after so long in the shadows, these orators are not going to waste their chance in the spotlight.

These stakes become increasingly obvious to the reader once they realize that several of these speakers are sharing these stories from the afterlife. Both “Eurydice” and *The Penelopiad* are overtly situated in Hades. Setting these stories in the afterlife emphasizes that language is so powerful not even death can weaken it. Eurydice delights in the fact that the underworld is “a place where language stopped, / a black full stop, a black hole / where words had to come to an end” (“Eurydice” 4-6). However, this has more to do with the fact that she associates the afterlife with freedom, a place free of her husband’s incessant poetry. Indeed, the underworld is the first place she is granted the power of self-expression, as evidenced first by her reclamation of poetry, her husband’s medium, and the avid audience she has found among fellow women in Hades. Free to take control of her own narrative, it is no surprise that Eurydice reveals that, “in fact, girls, I’d rather be dead”. *The Penelopiad* shares *The World’s Wife’s* association of death with language and freedom. The only thing the dead bring with them are “sacks of words- words you’ve spoken, words you’ve heard, words that have been said about you” (*Penelopiad* 1). While Penelope’s sack, and perhaps Eurydice’s too, is full of more of words spoken about her than words spoken by her, all of that can change in the afterlife. Language grants these narrators a new life beyond the grave. Denied agency within their own lifetimes, death has given them one last opportunity to settle the score.

### **Girls to the Front: Decentering the Male Perspective**

If language grants characters new life, it is the structure of Duffy and Atwood’s texts that grants these narrators the space to seize control. The novella and poetry collection

bring those on the margins of history to the center of narrative power. This structural subversion is first seen in the way the narrators shift from object to subject by rejecting the idea of a “muse.” In Greco-Roman culture, the muses were the nine goddesses who presided over the creation of arts and sciences. Traditional poetry, including both of Homer’s epics, begins with an invocation to the muses to bless the storyteller with artistry. The concept of a muse persists in modern culture, from an artist’s favorite model to the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” of recent lore. However, the persistent concept of a passive muse holds troubling implications for the women who are given these roles. In both the traditional and contemporary understanding, muses can inspire art, they can become art, but they themselves can never create art. Women help creative geniuses, but will never be one themselves. If one follows this line of reasoning, it implies that the best female creatives can hope for is a shout-out in the acknowledgements section.

In the early days of Penelope’s marriage to Odysseus, she acts both as muse and audience to her husband. Their conversations were incredibly one-sided, as “Odysseus wanted to talk, and as he was an excellent raconteur [she] was happy to listen. [She] think[s] this is what he valued most in [her]: [her] ability to appreciate his stories” (*The Penelopiad* 45). However, in his twenty-year absence, Penelope learns to match and even surpass him in artistry. In contrast to their earlier conversations, their reunion has them both sharing the half-truths of their time apart. “The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other” (*The Penelopiad* 173). In addition to her weaving and her deception of the suitors, Penelope’s creative is evident in her capacity as a storyteller. She constructs a narrative that is pleasing to her husband:

one that compliments his ego, hides her pain at the death of her maids, and paints herself as his willing supplicant. Her transformation from muse to artist had to remain secret in her life, but in Atwood's text it moves from the shadows to center stage.

Duffy has her personas engage even more directly with the concept of muses. Several speakers choose to reject the title outright. In "Mrs. Midas," Duffy explores a perspective unseen in Ovid's original text: that of a wife now unable to touch her lover. Despite her love for her husband, Mrs. Midas rightly prioritizes her own wellbeing over his desires, insisting on "Separate beds. In fact, I put a chair against my door, / near petrified/... /I feared his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn my lips into a work of art" ("Mrs. Midas 37-38, 41-42). Fearing that her husband will turn her into an object against her wishes, she leaves him, happier as a lonely subject than a gilded decoration.

"Eurydice" tells the tale of a muse escaping her artist. Her mortal life was marred with a husband who "calls her His Muse, / and once sulked for a night and a day/ because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns" (12-14). Orpheus needs her for his art, but Eurydice is not allowed to have an opinion on its merits. The gods force her to return to the mortal life with him, despite Eurydice's insistence that "given my time all over again, / rest assured that [she would] rather speak for myself / than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess, etc., etc" (47-49). By tricking Orpheus into letting her go, Eurydice prevents that unwanted fate, and by crafting this poem for her eager listeners, she appropriates her husband's work for herself. According to Jeffrey Wainwright, Eurydice's flight from Orpheus "undercuts one of the most enduring hero myths" (Wainwright 51) in order to prioritize Eurydice's own poetic voice.

In an even more literal example of a muse, in “Standing Female Nude” Duffy takes on the persona of a female model posing for a male painter. His painting is framed as a type of robbery, as she stands “belly nipple arse in the window light, / he drains the color from [her]” (2-3). However, unlike the silent, renderable figures throughout art and literary history, the power of the dramatic monologue has given the model her voice back. After the long hours of the artist objectifying her, she doubts that his painting is worthy of being called Art, and gains the final last word when she utters that “it does not look like [her]” (28). Despite the painter’s attempts to capture her on canvas, the speaker maintains her personhood even as she is forced to sell her body.

Duffy’s “Anon” poem from her *Feminine Gospels* collection also reclaims the role of muse and author for women. The premise of the poem is the idiom that “for much of history, anonymous was a woman.” The poem personifies the identity of the Anon as a mantle, “passing down her pen / like a baton /down through the years” (19-21) to women who have a lot to say but no avenue to express themselves. Like so much of women’s history, the specifics of Anon’s life have been lost, and even

she'd forget who she was,

it's been so long,

maybe nurse, a nanny,

maybe a nun (2-5)

but the legacy of her work remains. Thus, both Duffy and Atwood subvert the traditional dynamic of muse and artist to place their disenfranchised characters at the center of artistry.

Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy further subvert traditional literary dynamics by prioritizing women's relationships with other women over their relationships with men. The popular Bechdel test can confirm that even in modern media it can be exceedingly difficult to find stories that focus on the relationships between women that are not centered around men. In contrast, familial, platonic, and romantic love between women comprises the center of both of these texts. This is especially true in *The World's Wife*, where, despite the titles' implied focus on heterosexual marriages, men are at best an afterthought and at worst abusers in many of the pieces. The tongue-in-cheek nature of the collection, and especially the titles of the unnamed "Mrs." poems, draw attention to the fact that we historically know so little about women except in their relations to men.

Instead, *The World's Wife* chooses to highlight the relationships between women. The structure of the collection hints at the primacy of women's relationships; the text opens with "Little Red Cap," a poem about a young girl being taken under control by an older male poet, and closes with "Demeter," a poem in which an older woman welcomes home her daughter. Thus, the collection progresses along with the life cycle of a woman leaving puberty and entering adulthood. This maturation is also associated with the speakers' change from prioritizing relationships with men to her more fulfilling relationships with women. The collections' interest in women's relationships further supported by the fact that the assumed listener to the monologues is a woman. Throughout the collection, speakers make constant reference to the "girls" they are talking to. In radical inversion of the traditional gendered dynamics of art, these are poems crafted by female orators specifically for female listeners.

*Feminine Gospels* shares those same intentions with *The World's Wife*, focusing explicitly on female solidarity. This is perhaps best seen in "The Long Queen," a fairytale of an omnipotent, benevolent queen who rules over

...Women, girls,

Spinsters and hags, matrons, wet nurses,

Witches, widows, wives, mothers of all these.

Her word of law was in their bones, in the graft

Of their hands, in the wild kicks of their dancing.

No girl born who wasn't the Long Queen's always child. (20-25)

Her mythical court unites all women together, both the respectable wives and mothers and the ostracized hags and witches. Far from the typical heteronormative fairytale that ends with a union of man and woman, "The Long Queen" presents an idealized world of sisterhood that protects girls one and old.

Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" cycle also has a persona eschewing male company in order to prioritize female solidarity. The poem begins with the speaker detailing a catalogue of "men.../ [that] no longer interest [her]" (1-2). Through this litany, the reader understands that the speaker is no longer interested in traditional, heroic masculinity. She scorns both "those who can fly/ with the aid of wax and feathers" (3-4) and those that are "golden and flat as a coat of arms" (8). Instead, she searches for

for the others,

the ones left over,

the ones who have escaped from these

mythologies with barely their lives;

they have real faces and hands, they think of themselves as  
 wrong somehow, they would rather be trees. (20-25)

While the phrasing here is ambiguous, there is ample evidence suggesting that the “others” the speaker refers to are fellow women. The speaker refers to the fact that the “others” have had their lives threatened by mythology, and, as this paper demonstrates, Margaret Atwood has devoted numerous texts to exploring precisely how mythology has affected women. However, even more indicative is the fact that the speaker knows the others “would rather be trees.” This statement reflects a trope in Greek mythology of women turning into trees to escape men. Philyra turned into a linden tree out of shame for being forced to bear a centaur child, Lotis became a lotus tree to escape Priapus, Adonis’ mother Myrrha turned into a myrrh tree after having sex with her own father, and of course Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape Apollo’s advances. There are also the dryads, tree nymphs who are shy around all except Artemis, and the frequent victim of god’s sexual violence, including Pitys who transformed into reeds to escape Pan’s lust, and Dryope who transformed into a polar tree to escape Apollo. There is a long and tragic history of women turning to trees either to escape or be punished for sex. Atwood’s use of the phrase reinforces that the speaker wants to turn her attention away from men to prioritize relationships with other women. In seeking a kinship between other women injured by mythology, the speaker forms a healing community between women.

*The Penelopiad* also focuses on the importance of relationships between women. With an absent husband, an immature son, and hordes of selfish suitors, Penelope’s preference for the company of women over that of men is unsurprising. Her son Telemachus’ petulant behavior often causes her to “wish there would be another Trojan

War so I could send him off to it and get him out of my hair" (*The Penelopiad* 170). By comparison, Penelope finds community and acceptance in her young maids during her early life. In contrast to her relative isolation, Penelope has a surprising intimacy with her attendants "in the flickering light of the torches [when] our daylight faces were softened and changed, and our daylight manners. We were almost like sisters" (*The Penelopiad* 114). However, that is not to suggest that these relationships between women are always peaceful; after all, the maids would argue Penelope was complicit in their deaths. *The Penelopiad* is by no means intended as a model for ideal female friendships. In fact, Penelope's life and afterlife is dominated by her fraught relations with other women. With her catty rivalry with Helen, her terse relationship with her mother, her plays for power against Eurycleia, and her ambiguous complicity in her maids' deaths, Penelope is unlikely to win her any "Miss Congeniality" awards.

Some critics might believe that Penelope's behavior detracts from the feminist message of the text. Indeed, in her essay "Revisi(Ti)Ng The Past: Feminist Concerns In Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*," Sudha Shastri argues that Atwood "subverts [the novella's] feminist impulse by polarizing the voices of the women in the novel" (142). The fact that "women are not there to stand by each other in times of crisis seems to [her] as grave (if not graver) a feminist issue than the fact that they are objectified" (144). In particular, Shastri takes umbrage with Penelope's relationship with the maids. She claims that Penelope's blame in her maid's death is a "rending apart [of] the feminist perspective with a class-based one, or at least, causing a divide by an uneven balance of power between Penelope (the Queen), and the Maids (her servants) (145). I agree with Shastri that Atwood's exploration of classism problematizes *The Penelopiad*'s interest in gender

dynamics. However, we differ in the conclusions we draw from this observation. The novella's examination of how class barriers disrupt women's solidarity is an important intersectional representation of the ways women can be complicit in the oppression of other women. While we as readers might wish for Penelope to prioritize her servants over her husband, *The Penelopiad's* plot draws attention to the fact that many women, especially white wealthy women, historically aligned themselves with patriarchy to maintain their individual privileges. Besides, *The Penelopiad* does provide an example of female solidarity—even after death, the twelve maids stay together to support one another. While women associated with power do betray other women throughout the text, poor women are consistently shown to stand in solidarity with each other and demand systemic reform.

“True” feminist literature is not only that in which women consistently love and support one another. While women's behavior in the novella is at times frustrating, to insist that female characters should always be harmonious with one another denies authors the ability to explore the full humanity of women. Furthermore, to insist upon this portrayal of women reinforces essentialist ideas about gender. Homer's Penelope was only allowed to be good and supportive. Surely a more dynamic examination of Penelope is one that also illustrates her failings. Atwood's Penelope is, at times, petty and self-pitying. Her unreliability as a narrator exaggerates these traits, leading readers to doubt her objectivity. However, the novella's feminist core is illustrated in that the complexity of these relationships between women is allowed to dominate the center of the text. While Penelope herself may fail other women, *The Penelopiad* as a book focuses on the intricacies of their relationships. Even in the afterlife, Penelope still seeks closure with the women she knew. Largely indifferent to Odysseus and Telemachus' persistent abandonment of her, Penelope

is haunted by Eurycleia and the maids' refusal to talk to her, crying and "yell[ing at them] because they won't let [her] near them" (*The Penelopiad* 190). In exposing the flaws as well as the virtues in women's interactions with one another, Atwood's text marks a radical shift from the way women's relationships are traditionally marginalized in literature.

### Poetic (In)Justice

Through centering the woman's perspective and highlighting the power of their voices, Duffy and Atwood use their respective works to bring poetic justice to those history has maligned. In Duffy's "Pygmalion's Bride" and "Medusa" poems, the speakers detail their way out of unhappy or abusive relationships. In contrast to the lack of agency women have historically possessed in their relationships, Duffy's personas emphasize their autonomy. "Medusa" focuses on a *Gone Girl*-esque woman leaving a relationship, asking her partner

Are you terrified?

Be terrified.

It's you I love,

perfect man, Greek God, my own;

but I know you'll go, betray me, stray

from home. So better by for me if you were stone. ("Medusa" 11-17)

In contrast to Medusa, who turns men into stone, "Pygmalion's Bride" details a woman's journey from stone to human, literally from an object to subject. While the statue of the woman at the beginning of the poem is subject to her abuser's rough touch, she melts from marble to candle wax, and slips through his touch. Jeffrey Wainwright notes, "traditionally, the statue grows warm and comes to life and this is Pygmalion's reward for his skill and his pure faithfulness" (Wainwright 51). Though Duffy's statue grows warm too, it is for her

own reward, not her creator's. Duffy allows her speakers to seize control of their own fate in order to correct the historical imbalance of power.

The issue of justice is central in Margaret Atwood's prose and verse. In her poem "Tricks With Mirrors," the speaker toys with the myth of Narcissus by adopting the conceit of comparing herself to various objects to contextualize her relationship to a man. While at first the speaker is happy to objectify herself, reflecting back her lover and insisting that "mirrors / are the perfect lovers" ("Tricks with Mirrors," 6-7), she quickly grows discontented with having her entire identity subsumed into his. Foreshadowing Atwood's famous lines about male fantasies in 1993's *Robber Bride*, the speaker tries to find something of her that exists outside of him, begging to please focus on the mirror's frame, for it, too, "...is important, / it exists, it does not reflect you, /it does not recede and recede, it has limits / and reflections of its own" (24-27). By part four of the poem, the speaker realizes that she "wanted to stop this/ this life flattened against the wall, / mute and devoid of colour" (48-50). The conceit of the mirror serves as a metaphor for the patriarchal relationship between men and women in a sexist society. As a mirror for her partner's image, she lives constantly under the male gaze. The female speaker, drained by her male counterpart of her energy and life force, denied her own humanity outside of him, is trapped within a cycle that has made her complicit in her own erasure.

Were this a sadder poem or a different poet, "Tricks With Mirrors" would end with the persona still trapped within this self-destructive system. However, the poem continues on to restore justice and personhood to the speaker. She reveals that it "is not a mirror, / it is a door/ [she is] trapped behind"(54-56). In changing the conceit of the poem, the speaker has crafted a way out for herself. While she is currently trapped behind a door,

there is the promise that she will be able to free herself. In doing so, the speaker makes a powerful statement of female autonomy and the importance of existing outside of relationships to men.

Having proclaimed her independence outside of her partner, the speaker devotes part five of the poem to reaping justice to the man who thought of her as lesser. No longer his mirror, she tells him that she is now “a pool” (65) and that he should “think about pools” (66). Recalling the imagery of Narcissus, who drowned in a pool trying to kiss his reflection, the speaker’s pool is a vastly different image than the calm mirror she was before. While she plots her escape through a door, she has cursed her partner to destroy himself through his own egotism.

Atwood takes a different approach to the issue of justice in her novella. In the original narrative, Odysseus’ murder of the maids is treated as justified due to their supposed promiscuity and their disrespect shown towards Odysseus when they thought he was a beggar. It is first worth noting that while several of the maids are sexually involved with the suitors, their consent is dubious at best. Although the epic describes them as flirtatious, it also specifies that they were raped. The power imbalance between the two parties also limits the maids’ ability to consent. However, the maids are quite rude to Odysseus upon his homecoming. Melantho, the only named maid, enrages Odysseus with such cruel comments as “Wine’s got to your wits? — / or do you always play the fool and babble nonsense?” (XVIII 375-376). Always known for a proportionate response, the epic hero replies, “You wait, / you bitch/ I’ll go straight to the prince with your foul talk. / The prince will chop you to pieces here and now” (XVIII 380-383). True to his word, after his massacre of the suitors Odysseus pulls Telemachus aside and instructs him to discipline the

disobedient maids. Telemachus is to “hack them with [his] swords, slash out all their lives—/ blot out of their minds the joys of love they relished / under the suitors’ bodies, rutting on the sly!” (XXII 462- 470) after they finish scrubbing the hall of the suitors’ blood.

This punishment already seems cruel, but Telemachus, determined to prove himself to his father, takes it upon himself to change their punishment. He decrees that there will be “No clean death for the likes of them, by god! /Not from me—they showered abuse on my head, / my mother’s too! You sluts—the suitors’ whores!” (XXII 487-490). The choice to hang the maids instead of hacking them down does not always read as a worse death for modern audiences. However, Laurel Fulkerson argues that the original intended audience would have immediately registered the difference. In her article “Epic Ways of Killing Women, Gender and Transgression in *The Odyssey*,” Fulkerson explains that, in comparison to the honor of dying in battle, hanging was viewed as a “dishonorable means of death” (Fulkerson 342), not least because it was associated with female suicides. She argues that hanging the maids simultaneously proves Telemachus’ maturity while emphasizing that the servants “do not *deserve* to die by the sword because they are not themselves clean” (Fulkerson 341). However, this new information implies that the maids deserved a less honorable death than their rapists, men who had also been disrespecting Odysseus’ estate and family for more than a decade. This insight changes the interpretation of both the suitors’ and the maids’ deaths into one of the most disturbing passages in all of Homer’s work.

The disparity between how the original audience and how modern audiences interpret this scene provides a challenge for those adapting Homer to the silver screen. In the 1997 film adaptation of *The Odyssey*, Melanthe chooses to run to the slaughter to try

and save her lover Odysseus' arrow mistakenly kills her while she is in her beau's arms. This vastly changes the implications of the scene as the premeditated murder of twelve women is changed to the involuntary manslaughter of one. The choices of this movie are indicative of Hollywood's choice to erase the moral complexity from this encounter. In fact, out of all of the adaptations the 1997 production best addresses the issue of the maids. In all other versions of *The Odyssey*, including the 1911 and 1954 films, the 1968 mini-series, and looser filmic adaptations such as *Cold Mountain* and *O Brother Where Art Thou*, the maids and their punishment are not addressed at all. While it is understandable that filmmakers would want to minimize Odysseus' culpability in order to maximize the emotional payoff of he and Penelope's reunion, in doing so they simultaneously prioritize the likeability of one man over the unjust deaths of twelve women.

Sadly, academia also seems willing to erase these maids from the narrative. As Fulkerson notes, "in contrast to the numerous detailed studies of the morality of the suitors' deaths", "critics of the *Odyssey* pay little attention to the hanging of the twelve unfaithful serving maids in Book twenty-two other than to discuss the mechanics of the death" (Fulkerson 335). Indeed, while many scholars debate the realism of the hanging scene, they overwhelmingly refrain discussing the literary or moral implications of the passage. The cultural reluctance to discuss the incident is represented in *The Penelopiad's* "Trial of Odysseus." Despite the maids' pleas for justice, the judge uncomfortably insists that the "client's times were not our times. Standards of behavior were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career." (*The Penelopiad* 182). In both mass media and intellectual circles, the erasure of the maids is preferable to acknowledging the

wrongdoings of the West's most iconic hero.

Fortunately, Atwood is devoted to making sure no one forgets this part of the story. In the closing chapters of *The Penelopiad*, the maids swear to haunt Odysseus and force him to recognize that "We're here too, the ones without names. The other ones without names. The one with the shame stuck unto us by others" (191). Denied justice or peace in their own life, they devote themselves to making sure Odysseus has neither in the afterlife. They say, "We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row" (193). For better or for worse, the maids' legacies are inextricably tied with Odysseus', and they'll be damned if they let him (or us) forget it.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist revisionists like Duffy and Atwood are participating in a battle against a venerated tradition with vested interests in maintaining its hegemony. In undertaking classical mythology, Duffy and Atwood must also address the millennia of literature afterwards that sanctified and institutionalized these messages. In her satirical examination *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ succinctly summarizes millennia of strategies in suppressing women's writing, including

"informal prohibitions (including discouragement and the inaccessibility of materials and training), denying the authorship of the work in question...belittlement of the work itself in various ways, isolation of the work from the tradition to which it belongs and its consequent presentation as anomalous, assertions that the work indicates the author's bad character and hence is of primarily scandalous interest or ought not to have been done at all...and simply

ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition, the most commonly employed technique and the hardest to combat. (Russ 5)

The employment of these patterns explains not only the lack of women in the traditional canon but also the treatment of the female authors allowed into the canon. Echoes of these strategies are still present in how 'canonical' women are often taught today: Sappho's fragments are the exception that proves the rule, Jane Austen could only write about the fanciful feminine, and *Frankenstein* was only a success because of Percy Shelley's influence. Women's writing has, been prevented, ignored, or belittled in order to maintain the hegemony of wealthy white men's supposed superior talent.

Unfortunately, these attitudes towards woman's writing failed to magically dissipate after the passing of the nineteenth amendment. The annual analysis published by the VIDA: Women in Literary Arts group breaks down publishing by gender and race to highlight the continuing inequities in recognition. In 2010, for example, *The New York Times Book Review* reviewed only 283 books by women as compared to 524 books by men ("The Count 2010"); by contrast, in 2015 *The New York Times Book Review* covered 398 books by women and 590 books by men ("The 2015 VIDA Count"), marking a rise in coverage of women's writing from 35% to 40%. This, obviously, is still not ideal, but it is progress. While more women are publishing than ever before, the disparity between their treatment as compared to their male counterparts still persists. The Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to 113 participants over 109 years, but of that women have only been awarded a staggeringly low fourteen times ("All Nobel Prizes in Literature"). This statistic cannot be dismissed as product of the early twentieth century; in the past twenty years, women have only been awarded the prize five times. Similarly, the Man Booker Prize, first

awarded in 1969 and thus at least ostensibly aware of second-wave feminism from its onset, has only awarded seventeen women out of the total fifty recipients (“The Man Booker Prize for Fiction Backlist”). Despite the growing awareness of women’s rights and women’s writing, ancient attitudes continue to influence the perception towards that writing.

In the face of a system that methodically silences women’s voices, feminist revisionist mythology acts as disruptive force—a way of, as Ostriker’s title suggests, *stealing* the images that would be used against women and then subverting it to represent them. However, that fails to address the question of the end goal of not only feminist revisionist mythology, but feminist literary theory in general. Is the utopian vision one of a separatist “women’s canon”? A more inclusive, integrated canon? The radical abolition of a canon at all?

At the risk of being presumptuous, I would imagine these questions weigh heavily upon Carol Ann Duffy and Margaret Atwood as well. In the past decades, both authors have found themselves at the helm of the very tradition their works push against. Both continue to be two of the most respected and awarded contemporary writers, with each belonging to their respective countries’ Royal Societies and National Orders. *The Penelopiad* and *The World’s Wife* thus become a way for Atwood and Duffy to navigate their dual perspectives of both outsider and insider of the Western canon. Viewing these texts from this perspective thus provides some insight into the questions of an end goal. The path set forth by these texts is one where traditional texts are not abandoned, but rather removed from their pedestal. In other words, an improved pedagogical approach would be one that fully addresses the legacy, both positive and negative, that formative texts have on the Western

canon, and then focuses on ways that legacy has been reaffirmed and challenged throughout literary history. If we teach the received canon with a focus on both its flaws and its recreations, we honor the voices lost to history while crafting a future where all voices have the chance to be heard alongside Homer.

---

Works Cited

---

Primary Sources

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005.
- . *Selected Poems, 1965-1975*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. *Feminine Gospels*. New York, Faber and Faber, 2003.
- . *Standing Female Nude*. London, Anvil Press Poetry, 1985.
- . *The World's Wife*. Faber and Faber, 2000.

Secondary Sources

- "All Nobel Prizes in Literature." *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB,  
[www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/).
- Braund, Susanna. "'We're Here Too, The Ones Without Names' A Study of Female Voices as Imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar." *Classical Receptions Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2012, pp. 190-208. *DiscoverRoux*. Accessed 21 Sept. 2016.
- Carroll, William C. "The Virgin Knot: Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare." *Shakespeare and Sexuality*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Chart, Natasha. "This Is How They Broke Our Grandmothers." *Feminist Current*, 6 Oct. 2016, [www.feministcurrent.com/2016/10/04/this-is-how-they-broke-our-grandmothers/](http://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/10/04/this-is-how-they-broke-our-grandmothers/). Accessed 1 May 2017
- Dashu, Max. *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1100*. Veleda Press, 2016.

Doniger, Wendy, and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. *Off With Her Head: The Denial Of Women's Identity In Myth, Religion, And Culture*. University of California Press, 1995. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Accessed Sept. 2016.

Drymon, M. M. *Disguised as the Devil: How Lyme Disease Created Witches and Changed History*. South Portland, ME, Wythe Avenue Press, 2008.

Dudding, Adam. "Are Men Really Talking Too Much? We've Done the Maths." *Stuff*, [www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/89851118/are-men-really-talking-too-much-weve-done-the-maths](http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/life/89851118/are-men-really-talking-too-much-weve-done-the-maths). Accessed 1 May 2017.

Fern, Fanny. "Fresh Leaves by Fanny Fern" in *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. 1854, pp. 92-95.

Fletcher, Judith. "Women's Space and Wingless Words in The Odyssey." *Phoenix*, vol. 62, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 77-91. *JSTOR*. Accessed 07 Sept. 2016.

Fulkerson, Laurel. "Epic Ways of Killing a Woman: Gender and Transgression in 'Odyssey'" *The Classical Journal* vol. 94, no. 4, 2002, pp. 335-350. *JSTOR*. Accessed 08 Nov. 2016.

Heitman, Richard. *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope & The Plot of Homer's Odyssey*. U of Michigan, 2005.

Holownia, Olga. "'Well, Let Me Tell You Now': The Dramatic Monologue Of The World's Wife." *Poetry and Voice: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge Scholars, 2012, pp. 62-75. *MLA International Bibliography*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Viking, 1996.

- James, Deborah, and Janice Drakich. "Understanding Gender Differences in Amount of Talk." *Gender and Conversational Interaction*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1993, pp. 281–312.
- Jung, Susanne. "A Chorus Line": Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad At The Crossroads Of Narrative, Poetic And Dramatic Genres." *Connotations: A Journal For Critical Debate* vol. 24, no. 1, 2014, pp. 41-62. *Supplemental Index*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- Magro, Karen. "Gender Matters: Revisiting Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale And The Penelopiad Through The Lens Of Social Justice." *Notes On American Literature*, vol. 22, 2013, pp. 20-28. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- "The Man Booker Prize for Fiction Backlist." *The Man Booker Prize*, Man Group, [themanbookerprize.com/fiction/backlist/2015](http://themanbookerprize.com/fiction/backlist/2015).
- Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Women's Press, 1987.
- Ovid. "Metamorphoses ." Edited by Brookes More, *P. Ovidius Naso*, Perseus Digital Library , [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028). Accessed 1 May 2017.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* vol. 34, no. 1, 1972, pp. 18-30. *JSTOR*. Accessed 14 Sept. 2016.
- Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Rūta, Šlapkauskaitė. "Postmodern Voices From Beyond: Negotiating With The Dead In Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad." *Literatura*, vol. 49, no. 5, 2007, pp. 138-146. *Directory of Open Access Journals*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl*. Berkeley, CA, Seal Press, 2016.

Shastri, Sudha. "Revisi(Ti)Ng The Past: Feminist Concerns In Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*." *Sites of Female Terror: En Torno a la Mujer y el Terror*. Aranzadi, 2008, pp. 141-149. *MLA International Bibliography*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London, Pandora, 1990.

Suzuki, Mihoko. "Rewriting the 'Odyssey' in the Twenty-First Century: Mary Zimmerman's 'Odyssey' and Margaret Atwood's 'Penelopiad'." *College Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 263-278. *JSTOR*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.

VIDA. "The Count 2010." *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*, VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, 16 May 2011, <http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count-2010/>.

---. "The 2015 VIDA Count." *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*, VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, 30 Mar. 2016, [www.vidaweb.org/the-2015-vida-count/](http://www.vidaweb.org/the-2015-vida-count/).

Wainwright, Jeffrey. "Female Metamorphoses: Carol Ann Duffy's Ovid." *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: 'Choosing Tough Words'*. Manchester UP, 2003, pp. 47-55. *MLA International Bibliography*. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.