

Women of World Mythology and Folklore: A Poetic Re-imagining of Cultural Stories and Figures



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Abstract

Women of World Mythology and Folklore: A Poetic Re-imagining of Cultural Stories and Figures

This thesis focuses on uncovering stories concerning female figures from world mythology and folklore. The creative component of my thesis, the poetry collection *The Island Witch*, explores, interprets, and reassesses myths, legends, and folktales from around the world through a feminist lens, interrogating themes of female agency, marginalisation, sexual assault, transformation, voicelessness, and ecofeminism, amongst others.

My collection is accompanied by three creative-critical essays: 'Dissected Bodies'; "After a while, you'll see her when you think of me": The Crafted Woman and Female Agency'; and "Wearing the open flowers and withered flowers upon my body": Myth, barbaric feminism, and ecofeminism in Hiromi Itō's *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*. Each of these essays investigates how female authors (and, in the case of 'The Crafted Woman', artists and filmmakers) have interrogated myths and folktales as a means to analyse both contemporary and historically documented female experiences. The essays examine how fragmentation is recognised as an act of gendered violence, as well as how it is used as a critical mode; how art has been used as an oppressive pedagogical tool against women; and how ecofeminism and barbaric feminism can be used to understand women's relationships with nature.

My research is designed to have a clear public impact in the form of my collection. In particular, it expands upon the current Western publishing trend of feminist retellings of mythological texts by interacting with stories and figures from all over the world in order to address the current imbalance caused by an overwhelming focus on classical Greek mythology. These include stories from Chinese, Japanese, South American, Greek, Scottish, and Indian myths, legends, and folktales, among others.

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The Island Witch

[REDACTED]

Dissected Bodies

Out of the corner of your eye they can often be seen. Light fractures through the bus, and as you look through the window between bodies wrapped in winter coats or summer patterns, season depending, she looks back at you. A woman trapped in glass at the bus stop next to the timetable, her lips a nude bow, eyes glazed, hooded in glittering, smoky shades. She's laughing about something, but the bus moves on before you find out what.

In the shopping centre another calls out: a siren in a perfume shop window next to the water fountain. A veined hand presses on her throat. Her eye is sly, looking off to the side, her mouth open, curved at the corner in a controlled smile. In the opposite window, pointed legs fall over the shoulder of a brooding actor—Jimmy Choo Man—the owner cut off at her breasts, her face unimportant.

The night is cold as you roll out of the restaurant in a cloud of chatter, one friend too tired to hold her bag, another animated, wide-eyed over possibly the best moussaka ever? The walk to the tram is lined with caged shops, and as you wait at the stop you see another behind bars: an Aphrodite, a perfectly twisted form.

*

The dissection of women's bodies is a staple of the ways in which women are hyper-sexualised and scrutinised, both in daily life and within media.¹ Nathan A. Heflick and Jamie L. Goldberg

¹ H. B. Kozee, T. T. Tylka, C. L. Augustus-Horvath and A. Denchik, 'Development and psychometric evaluation of the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31 (2007) 176–189, and D. Archer, B. Iritani, D.D. Kimes, M. Barios, 'Face-ism: Five studies of sex differences in facial prominence', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45 (1983), 723–735, cited in Nathan A. Heflick and Jamie L. Goldberg, 'Seeing Eye to Body: The Literal Objectification of Women', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23:3 (June 2014), 225–229

state that the psychological consequence of this fragmentary focus is the creation of concern with the physical over the mental. For example, when an advert cuts a woman off at her breasts, removing her face entirely, a physical response is stimulated in the viewer that reduces a focus on the mental (i.e. the woman's mind, personality, experiences), and makes her an object (and often, when depicted in relation to a man, a possession). This is indicated by 'visual-recognition and neural responses consistent with nonhuman-object perception.'²

Fragmentation appears as a recurring theme in feminist texts which write back to and dissect this hyper-sexualisation, with formal fragmentation serving as both a mirror to this phenomenon, as well as a way in which to radically reinvent past texts and ideas. I want to explore how formal fragmentary methods relate to the exploration of the dissection of female bodies in both fiction and reality, and in particular how female authors writing back to this use fragmentation in their responses. Angela Carter, Helen Oyeyemi, and Fiona Benson all draw upon and implement fragmentation in their reinventions of fairy tales and myths as a means to challenge the subjugation of women, interrogating the hyper-sexualisation of women, the artistic commodification of female death, rape culture, and patriarchal control of narrative and society.

The didactic quality of myths, folklore, and fairy tales lends itself to the exploration of contemporary concerns. As Domino Renee Perez states, '[f]olklore [and, I would argue by proxy, mythology and fairy tales were] once the primary means used by cultural groups to convey their

<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721414531599?journalCode=cdpa>>

[accessed as a webpage on 24 March 2023].

² Nathan A. Heflick and Jamie L. Goldberg, 'Seeing Eye to Body: The Literal Objectification of Women', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23:3 (June 2014), 225-229

<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721414531599?journalCode=cdpa>>

[accessed as a webpage on 24 March 2023].

attitudes, beliefs, and concerns'.³ These stories have anthropological value, representing and enforcing cultural ideals and principles throughout history, often illustrating the roles and expectations various members of society were expected to fulfil. The use of them to explore our own contemporary attitudes, to renew and reshape their anthropological value, appears a natural extension of the genre. This idea is explored by Jack Zipes, who notes that fairy tales maintain relevance by becoming unfrozen, rather than remaining as stagnant, static tales that have been canonised in a form that reflects the 'hegemonic interests of the [bygone] bourgeoisie'.⁴ Even these versions of texts, which have often been 'hardened into [a Christian, patriarchal] script', have undergone a 'motivated process of revision, re-ordering, and refining' to produce something distinct from their previous versions, those which belonged to 'archaic societies...pagan tribes and communities'.⁵ There is a fluidity to the format of both fairy tales and myths that fosters (maybe even provokes) innovative reimaginations, the best of which according to Zipes 'take sides, are partial, [and] name their class allegiance'.⁶ They are malleable in a way that allows us to rework a tale on our own terms, to investigate and convey ever-changing modern concerns.

Alicia Ostriker notes the value of feminist 'revisionist mythmaking' in particular, which she defines as a poet appropriating myth for 'altered ends': 'the old vessel [is] filled with new wine,

³ Domino Renee Perez, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p.19.

⁴ Jack Zipes, 'Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1 (1987), 107-110 (PDF) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254933625_Fairy_Tale_as_MythMyth_as_Fairy_Tale [accessed 11 January 2023], p.2.

⁵ Ibid., p.3.

⁶ Ibid., p.9.

initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.⁷

Ostriker asserts that feminist revisionism challenges and changes stories so that they ‘can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy’ by repurposing characters and story beats to reflect feminist concerns.⁸

the old stories are changed utterly by female knowledge of female experience...they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival.⁹

Like Zipes, Ostriker indicates how re-examining and reshaping stories changes our understanding of current social issues, and can even lead to vital societal change, or act as ‘instructions for survival’ for certain groups of readers.¹⁰ Throughout this essay, I will examine how Carter, Oyeyemi, and Benson engage in feminist revisionism by repurposing myths and folktales to reflect feminist concerns.

Angela Carter interrogates folktales to explore the hyper-sexualisation and violence faced by contemporary women, utilising the bones of a previous tale to tell a revised one, often from a female, first-person perspective. Carter’s short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* contains several stories that have a ‘direct ancestor’ in the work of Charles Perrault, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

⁷ Alicia Ostriker, ‘The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking’, *Signs*, 8:1 (1982), 68-90 (p.71).

⁸ Ibid., p.73.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and Madame Leprince de Beaumont.¹¹ The eponymous story, ‘The Bloody Chamber’, is a descendant of Perrault’s *Le Barbe Bleu*, a seventeenth-century *conte* (a ‘short tale, often recounting an adventure’)¹² and the first written version of the Bluebeard tale, wherein a young girl is disgusted by her older suitor’s blue beard and suspicious about his mysteriously vanished former wives.¹³ However, as Zipes notes, Carter ‘did not accept [Perrault’s work] as a docile and obedient goddaughter’, but instead as ‘an unruly, mischievous ‘child’’, with ‘many of her own fairy tales [acting as] subversive renditions of his classical tales.’¹⁴ Zipes further notes that Carter’s own translations of Perrault’s work in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* could be considered to be bold appropriations of his work, reshaping and abstracting his tales into something new, something remoulded.¹⁵ Shattering Perrault into fragments to rearrange.

In ‘Bluebeard’, Carter’s translation of Perrault’s *Le Barbe Bleu*, a wealthy man finds that despite his riches, women revile him for his blue beard. He seeks to marry one of his neighbour’s daughters, but both are suspicious of him, as his former wives have mysteriously vanished. However, following one of Bluebeard’s lavish parties, the younger daughter begins to find his

¹¹ Melinda G. Fowl, ‘Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” Revisited’, *Critical Survey*, 3:1 (1991), 71-79 (p.71).

¹² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘Conte’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/art/conte>> [accessed 24 April 2019].

¹³ Robin Ann Sheets, ‘Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1:4 (1991), 633-657 (p.643).

¹⁴ Jack Zipes, ‘Introduction: The Remaking of Charles Perrault and his Fairy Tales’, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, trans. by Angela Carter (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.vii-xxii (p.vii).

¹⁵ Ibid.

beard 'not so very blue' after all.¹⁶ A month into their marriage, Bluebeard leaves for business. He gives his wife the key to every room in his mansion, but orders that she must not enter the little room at the 'end of the long gallery on the ground floor'.¹⁷ Unable to shake the thought of the room, she opens the door to find the corpses of Bluebeard's former wives lying murdered within. Horrified, she drops the key in blood. When Bluebeard returns he asks for his keys, noticing that the one for the little room is missing. The wife reluctantly fetches it. Bluebeard asks why it is stained with blood and, when the wife denies any knowledge, declares that she has been to the forbidden room, and now she may take her place inside it. She begs for forgiveness, but Bluebeard is unwavering. She asks for some time to pray, using this to get her visiting sister to climb to the top of the tower and see if their brothers are coming, as they had promised to call. The wife buys time until the brothers can be seen, then throws herself upon Bluebeard's feet, desperate for mercy. As he pulls her up by her hair and raises a cutlass to chop off her head, the brothers enter and murder Bluebeard.

Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' follows the same narrative arc as a young woman marries a wealthy, older Marquis and moves into his home. He leaves her for urgent business, stressing that she must not enter 'a little room at the foot of the west tower', but her curiosity has to be satiated. She enters the room and finds the corpse of her husband's former wife.¹⁸ The key is dropped and stained, the stain is discovered, and the bride is found out. The Marquis nearly kills the bride, but she is saved at the last moment, this time by her mother riding in on horseback.

¹⁶ Angela Carter, 'Bluebeard', *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, trans. by Angela Carter (London: Penguin, 2008), p.5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁸ Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1979), pp.1-61 (p.27).

Carter uses the framework of Perrault's folktale and builds around it a nuanced and detailed exploration of how objectification and the sexual desires of men can impact and affect women, examining the connection between male aggression and sexually violent imagery throughout, conveying this through setting, action, and imagery.¹⁹ Discomfort around being objectified is illustrated early in the text when the bride notices the Marquis watching her when they visit an opera house:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire...for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.²⁰

'[H]orseflesh' and 'cuts' are particularly evocative of this dissection of the female body into parts that creates the distance between the physical and the mental that objectification requires to thrive. For the first time, the bride sees herself as others might: as something passively sexual to be consumed. The disconnect between her self as she understands it—young, uncertain, perhaps

¹⁹ Sheets, 'Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"', p.643.

²⁰ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', pp.8-9.

naïve—and the body in the mirror—with the potential for ‘corruption’—is first realised.²¹ She begins to understand the dissecting power of a gaze.

*

Colours play with the darkness of the theatre, catching on the faces of strangers. A brief glimpse at their forms and they're gone again. You know they're there, but not really. It never really feels like they're there.

On screen, the camera lingers on a woman's stomach, stretched taut beneath an orange crop top that bathes the faces peach. A white belt barely holds up faded denim shorts. She drapes herself over the hot insides of a busted car.

A Friday night cult film in the dim of 10pm: a boa constrictor curves around the breast of a dancer, slithering up her neck and into her hair. Her eyelids are grey hoods, betraying no fear; her lips part at the sensation.

80s Classic: the bad boy under the school desk looks up at the soft white crotch of the girl's underwear, crisp under the blurred florals of her skirt, her thighs pink. He moves his head up between her legs and wait how old is sh-

She is a Venus in the fountain beckoning—Marcello!—her body sculpted and held in a wet black dress (Italian, existential).

She is voluptuous, sequined breasts outshining the jazz band, vivacious ('59, three years before her death).

She is red lips blowing smoke in the dark; a push-up bra in space; split and spread on the playroom carpet.

²¹ Ibid.

She is legs, eyes, lips, hips, breasts, arms, parts.

*

In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey posits that one of the many delights cinema offers viewers is scopophilia, the pleasure in looking. She notes that Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* singled out scopophilia as 'one of the components of sexuality which exist as drives...independently of the erotogenic zones'; associating scopophilia with the act of 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.'²² Objectification and its focus on the body is a clear facet of scopophilia, using an individual as 'an object of sexual stimulation through sight.'²³ However, in cinema, where Mulvey has directed her attention, scopophilia is not simply present in the reaction of a viewer, but rather controlled, elicited through the very cut of the film itself. Directors and editors can choose where a camera is focussed and for how long, as well as how the shot's subject is depicted; actors can be moulded and shaped to fit a vision. The camera can fragment, cutting subjects into pieces: an eye here, a thigh there. It can seek to stimulate, to cause sexual arousal in its viewers with its focussed and lingering gaze. The evocation of scopophilia is frequently not merely a by-product of a film, but rather an aim. Sex sells, after all.

Mulvey further extrapolates that '[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female': women have been given an exhibitionist role, 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact' in order to connote a 'to-be-looked-

²² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, collated by. Scott MacKenzie (California: University of California Press, 2014), p.362.

²³ Ibid., p.363.

at-ness.²⁴ In film, the purpose of a woman's sexual spectacle is two-fold; she is both the erotic object for the other characters in the film, and for audience members in the theatre, with the tension of looks shifting between these groups.²⁵ There is an underlying threat in this fragmentation of a passive woman, a sexual violence that seeks only to concern itself with silent pieces of flesh.

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In 'The Bloody Chamber', rooms are built with a fantastical quality: insidiousness lurking beneath the surface. For example, the bedroom the bride and her husband share is filled with refracting mirrors:

Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before. He'd filled the room with them, to greet the bride, the young bride. The young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades, for travelling, madame, or walking.²⁶

The mirrors dissect the bride, lacerating different parts of her body's image with their 'contorted gold' frames, replicating her to the Marquis' liking: violently deconstructed, focussed on her segmented and distorted body. This not only illustrates the control the husband seeks to have over his wife's body, but the way in which the distortion of our own image can create an unease within ourselves. There is a linguistic distancing in this scene: the first person 'I' that views the 'white lilies' suddenly transforms into the third person 'young bride' and 'multitude of girls I saw in the

²⁴ Ibid., p.364.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', pp.14-15.

mirror'.²⁷ We as readers know the 'bride', the 'multitude of girls', and the 'I' are the same individual, but the heroine herself has made a distinction between the them, indicating a feeling of distance between her inner self (the 'I') and the reflections in the mirrors.²⁸ She appears unrecognisable to herself. That the girls she sees have set activities such as 'travelling...or walking' suggests a further dissociation from her own body and agency.²⁹ Just as we would see an actor on film playing a part, framed to a director's liking, the bride finds herself in a new role dictated by her husband where her own image, and indeed her life, is being reshaped and reframed. The mirrors themselves parallel the 'gilded mirrors' of the opera house in which the bride first saw herself as something other, as how the Marquis views her, suggesting that through these bedroom mirrors he is perhaps seeking to recapture that sexualised image of her.³⁰ The bride's new role further takes on the exhibitionist quality of erotic spectacle during the bride and her husband's first sexual experience together, with the mirrors reflecting the violence of the act: '[a] dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides.'³¹ '[I]mpaled'³² not only illustrates the violence and pain manifested in the act, but further evokes the 'active/male and passive/female' dynamic Mulvey exposed, where the bride passively becomes a receiver, a vessel that must endure her husband's active, sexual violence.³³

Indeed, the act of sexual intercourse itself is something the bride appears to have viewed as inevitable, anticipating it since their train ride to the castle, feeling that 'sharp premonition of dread' when the Marquis' eyes, 'dark and motionless as [those] the ancient Egyptians painted upon

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p.8.

³¹ Ibid., p.20.

³² Ibid.

³³ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p.364.

their sarcophagi, fixed on [her]', uttering '[s]oon' in a 'resonant voice...like the tolling of a bell'.³⁴ Carter illustrates that the bride is not used to wielding or enjoying a sexual agency of her own, yet there is also the sense that she is falling into a form of complicity. Carter's bride seems to be partially aware of her role as the ingenue married to the older man, that she is expected to be sexually passive, that there is something desirable about her naivety. She acknowledges the omens of the sarcophagi-like eyes and the white lilies, both of which connote the Marquis and the bedroom with death, but she remains in the relationship, participating in her narrative role. She lets the omens herald the death of her former self, and develops, whether by choice or through necessity, a new performance. That of the submissive bride, destined to flirt with death, destined to turn the key.

The desirability of violence in their relationship is also hinted at and understood by the bride earlier in the text, during the scene at the opera when the Marquis gifts the bride with a wedding present:

His wedding gift, clasped around my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.

After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance! That night at the opera comes back to me even now . . . the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels around her throat, bright as arterial blood.³⁵

³⁴ Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', p.10.

³⁵ Ibid., p.8.

This heirloom acts as a haunting, a premonition of how the Marquis intends to behead the bride, the same fate of those at the guillotine. However, the evocation of this mark of violence through an accessory holds another, darker connotation, particularly when worn by the young bride and not a defiant aristocrat: the idea that violence committed against women may heighten a woman's beauty, or assist someone in claiming it for themselves by removing a woman's agency.

*

Her face emerges, angular, jutting out of the darkness. Lips straight, head back. Her grey eyes, hooded by smoky shadows, have a slightly bored quality. Beneath her jaw, a red slash runs across her neck; an open slice, meticulously crafted, deep crimson at its centre, pink veins sprouting out. So what? say the eyes.

*

In 2012, the Bulgarian fashion magazine *12* ran a beauty layout titled 'Victim of Beauty', shot by photographer Vasil Germanov. Comprised of six photographs, each depicted a beautiful woman with glamorous make up bearing the marks of physical violence. A black eye shimmering in the light, a purpling galaxy; piercings ripped from the ear and nose; a slice in the throat for a choker.



Photograph from the Victim of Beauty campaign, depicting a woman wearing glamorous makeup with her throat slit³⁶

Following a backlash as viewers criticised the violence in the photographs, the editors at *12* stated that they ‘do NOT support violence of ANY kind, and this [was] NOT a shoot glamorizing, or encouraging, or supporting violence against women.’³⁷ They further proclaimed that ‘what is beautiful about fashion and photography in general [is] that anybody can understand it their own way, and fill it with their own meaning.’³⁸ While this statement is partially true—art does hold space

³⁶ Karrin Anderson, “Victim of Beauty’: Glamour of Violence (Once Again)”, *Reading the Pictures* (2012) <<https://www.readingthepictures.org/2012/06/the-victim-of-beauty-buzz-more-glamour-of-violence/>> [accessed 12 April 2020].

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

for interpretation—it also shifted responsibility away from themselves as a form of damage control.

There is a clear and underlying insidiousness to such imagery, stemming from a long history of women being portrayed as sex objects and abuse victims in advertising. In her book *Domestic Violence: A Reference Handbook*, Margi Laird McHue notes that many fashion adverts from the late 1980s featured women who were ‘abused, bound and gagged, or in body bags.’³⁹ This continued into the 2000s and 2010s, with women being depicted as victims of assault and in some cases even murder. 12’s editorial is just one of many. Indeed, the campaign name, ‘Victim of Beauty’ deliberately provokes, suggesting that the women depicted were abused for their beauty, that this is the price of beauty; that someone will always want to lay claim to it through violence. Alternatively, the violence could be seen as designed to accentuate the women’s beauty. Violence as beauty’s accessory.

*

Carter understands the connection often made between violence and beauty, particularly violence as a means through which to claim beauty, to fragment the body into controllable pieces. The ‘choker of rubies...like an extraordinarily precious slit throat’ that the Marquis gives the bride to wear echoes the likes of contemporary photoshoots and film shots.⁴⁰ The act of bequeathing it (and of wearing it) mixes the visual pleasure of looking that Mulvey explores and connotes it dangerously with violence.

³⁹ Margi Laird McHue, *Domestic Violence: A Reference Handbook* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008) quoted in Jenna Sauers, ‘Violence Against Women Disguised as ‘Fashion’’, *Jezebel* (2012) <<https://jezebel.com/violence-against-women-disguised-as-fashion-5916650>> [accessed 26 April 2020].

⁴⁰ Carter, ‘The Bloody Chamber’, p.8.

This link between the pleasure of looking and violence is a theme that Helen Oyeyemi explores in her novel, *Mr Fox*. Set in 1938, the book follows fiction writer St. John Fox as he seeks to repair his relationship with his wife, Daphne, and intellectually battles with his invented muse, Mary Foxe—a figure through which Oyeyemi interrogates the artistic representation of women by a male creator. Re-imagining and fragmenting the Bluebeard tale, Oyeyemi depicts a ‘ghostly sisterhood’ between Mary Foxe and Daphne Fox, the imagined and real wives of Mr Fox, and casts the deceased former wives of Bluebeard as female characters murdered in Mr Fox’s stories.⁴¹ Using fragmentation as a formal tool, Oyeyemi creates a disorientating tale filled with the various perspectives of Mr Fox, Mary, and Daphne, as well as short stories that draw upon existing fairy tales. Throughout, Mary appears as a central figure trying to navigate these fragments and ultimately assert her own personhood by escaping the control of her creator.

The opening of the novel establishes a central conflict, as Mary appears before Mr Fox for the first time in seven years with an agenda: to force him to assess the misogyny that permeates both his relationship with Daphne and his fiction. ‘You kill women. You’re a serial killer. Can you grasp that?’ she says. Mr Fox replies: ‘It’s ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It’s not real...It’s all just a lot of games.’⁴²

Throughout the novel, Oyeyemi inserts short stories written by Mr Fox, some of which relate to Mary, and others which extrapolate upon existing folklore and fairy tales, featuring the tragic and untimely death of female characters. The women in Mr Fox’s work are killed violently and gratuitously, often in cruel, sometimes borderline comical ways, and for no justifiable reason.

⁴¹ Heidi Yeandle, ‘Re-imagining Bluebeard’s Wives: Helen Oyeyemi’s *Mr Fox*’, *Alluvium* (2016) <<https://alluvium.bacls.org/2016/01/05/re-imagining-bluebeards-wives-helen-oyeyemis-mr-fox/>> [accessed 26 May 2022].

⁴² Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2012), pp.4-5.

Examples include a character who ‘saw[s] off a hand and food and bleed[s] to death at [a] church altar’, a woman who falls to the ‘ground riddled with bullets’, and a Mrs McGuire who ‘hang[s] herself from a door handle because she’s so afraid of what Mr McGuire will do when he gets home and finds out that she’s burnt dinner.’⁴³ When Mary questions whether the latter was strictly necessary (‘From a door handle? Really, Mr Fox?’), Mr Fox replies by saying that she has no sense of humour. ‘You’re right...I don’t’, says Mary.⁴⁴

In the short story ‘Dr Lustucru’, Oyeyemi draws upon the popular French folk figure of Lustucru, who emerged in 1659 as a ‘blacksmith turned brain surgeon’ (‘opérateur cephalique’), whom men would bring their wives to so that their brains could be reforged, ‘purged of all screechy, angry, lunatic, obstinate, rebellious, willful [sic] and lazy ways.’⁴⁵ His name, Lustucru, was derived from the slurring of the phrase ‘*L’esses-tu-cru?*’ used by theatrical fools, meaning ‘Would you have believed it?’, ergo, ‘Would you have thought a woman’s head could be fixed?’⁴⁶

Mr Fox’s Dr Lustucru beheads his wife, even though she was ‘not particularly talkative’, believing that ‘he could replace her head when he wished for her to speak.’⁴⁷ He stores her body in a ‘bare room’ intended to be a nursery, and, because she had been a ‘good woman...her body remained intact and she did not give off a smell or decay.’⁴⁸ Later, when Dr Lustucru misses the

⁴³ Ibid., p.4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Jé Wilson, ‘Lustucru: From Severed Heads to Ready-Made Meals’, *The Public Domain Review* (2019) <<https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/lustucru-from-severed-heads-to-ready-made-meals>> [accessed 26 May 2022].

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, p.6.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

domestic labour his wife provided ('[n]o one to warm his slippers, etc.'). he decides to place her head back on her body.⁴⁹ As he reaches for his suture kit in order to stabilise her head, the body puts its hands up and holds the head on at the neck. But, much to Dr Lustucru's surprise, her brain is not what it was, and she can only repeatedly ask whether he thinks there will be another war, which she finds unlikely after 'the widespread damage of the Great War'.⁵⁰ Disturbed by this, he tries to remove her head again, but she clings to it, and he locks her away in the nursery. The next night, she breaks the window and escapes. Dr Lustucru dreads her return, fearing that she will treat him exactly as he had treated her: 'What got him the most was the idea that her vengeance would be fast, that he would suddenly be dead without a moment in which to understand.'⁵¹ But he never heard from her again.

The story examines a male desire to fragment the female body: to disassemble and reassemble it as convenient, and without protestation from the body itself, deliberately separating the desired, physical body from any sense of personhood. It is revealed in the following scene that the story of Dr Lustucru is based on Mr Fox and Mary's own experiences, as Mary covers Mr Fox's eyes to maintain her dignity when her own head falls off:

She didn't need to tell me it was bad. Put it this way – she was close, right in front of me, but her voice was coming from another direction entirely, from my far left.

...

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.7.

I missed her hands when she took them away. ‘Don’t look – I mean it,’ she warned.

A moment passed, I heard a clicking sound, and she gave a ragged gasp. I kept my eyes closed.

‘Mary – that’s just the way the story went. I didn’t know that was us. Maybe if you’d explained beforehand—’

‘Oh you knew. Of course you did.’ Her voice was thin.⁵²

In addition to the literal fragmentation of Mary’s physical body here, Oyeyemi also indicates an emotional fragmentation of her in the way that Mr Fox gaslights her, saying that he ‘didn’t know that was [their story]’, before placing the blame for his ignorance at Mary’s feet: ‘Maybe if you’d explained beforehand—’.⁵³ This creates a clear link between physical and emotional abuse and fragmentation, in which Mr Fox tries to control or manipulate parts of Mary’s memory as he does her physical body.

Oyeyemi has stated that *Mr Fox* was written as a reaction to the many news stories she read about male violence against women:

There was a point when every other news report concerned the death or injury of a woman or girl, at the hands of her husband or lover or ex-lover or father. I started to think about how such events are normalized [sic]...and started looking at the narrative structure of violence against women in fairytales [sic].⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., p.9

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Beatrice Rothbaum, ‘Mr Fox – Helen Oyeyemi’, *Full Stop* (2012) <<https://www.full-stop.net/2012/01/27/reviews/beatrice/mr-fox-helen-oyeyemi/>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

Whether we believe that Mr Fox truly forgot that he decapitated Mary, or whether we, like Mary, believe he did know but attempts to hide this, the way in which Mr Fox tries to play down the situation and even blame Mary for his apparent lack of knowledge of it parallels the normalisation of violence committed against women Oyeyemi observed in the news. Much like the Dr Lustucru of Mr Fox's story, it is only when forced to consider the murder through an empathetic lens, aligning with the fear and confusion the victim may have experienced, that Mr Fox truly realises the consequences of his actions. Prior to this, his fragmentation and subsequent dehumanisation of women seems to have stripped them of all emotional and personal life; they were simply objects to dissemble or project onto.

The commercial aspect of Mr Fox's life as a fiction writer further complicates the violence of his stories: these are not the societal tragedies reported in the news, conducted by a distant third party; these are stories crafted and designed for an audience, to fulfil a particular opening in the literary market. To some degree, Mr Fox is aware of the scopophilic quality that can be derived from gendered violence. He anticipates the voyeurism of his readers, allowing them to indulge in their darkest thoughts and visions, to justify their own misogyny. As Mary explains to Mr Fox:

‘What you’re doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, “Yes, he is talking about things that really happen,” and they keep reading, and it makes sense to them. You’re explaining things that can’t be defended, and the explanations themselves are mad, just bizarre – but you offer them with such confidence. It was because she kept the chain on the door, it was because he needed to let off some steam after a hard day’s scraping and bowing at work, it was because she was irritating and stupid, it was because she lied to him, made a fool of him, it was because she had to die, she just had to, it makes dramatic sense, it was because “nothing is more poetic than the death of a beautiful woman”,

it was because of this, it was because of that. It's obscene to make such things reasonable.⁵⁵

The increasing absurdity of the women's deaths in Mr Fox's work correlates with a perceived and continued need to fill a quota: it becomes reasonable to him to have a woman hang herself from a door handle because he must continually reinvent causes of death in order to keep his work fresh. At the same time, Oyeyemi further critiques the 'poetic' resonance associated with 'the death of a beautiful woman';⁵⁶ an idea which stems from Edgar Allan Poe, who is quoted as saying that 'the most poetical topic in the world' is 'the death [of] a beautiful woman.'⁵⁷ An idea that implies that a woman's death is somehow bequeathed meaning when framed by a male artistic lens.

*

Her body lies still, cradled by the warped roof of the car she punctured in her fall. Her hands are curled in their white gloves, one resting on her heart, the other folded above her head. Her eyes are closed, as if in sleep. Her ankles are crossed, bare feet spread like wings. Broken glass dots her face and chest like rain. Something about the photograph's age, its black and white world, makes her feel like a dream. There's not a scratch on her.

*

On 1 May 1947, photography student Robert C. Wiles snapped a photograph of the body of 23-year-old Evelyn McHale, four minutes after she had committed suicide by leaping from the 86th-floor observatory of the Empire State Building in New York. The image of McHale held by the damaged roof of the United Nations limousine that broke her fall, still wearing her white gloves

⁵⁵ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, p.120.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ J. Alexandra McGhee, 'Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease', *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 14:1 (Spring 2013), 55-70, p.59.

and pearls, legs crossed, eyes closed as if in sleep, was published on 12 May in *Life* magazine, where it was dubbed ‘the most beautiful suicide.’⁵⁸ In the decades since her death, the image has been widely circulated, commodified by popular culture, and even coloured. Even after the discovery that McHale’s suicide note stated that she ‘[didn’t] want anyone in or out of [her] family to see any part of [her]’ and that she wanted her body to be ‘destroy[ed]’ via ‘cremation’, Wiles’ famous photograph, and McHale’s image, has persisted.⁵⁹

Co-opted and echoed by male artists such as Andy Warhol in his 1962 piece ‘Suicide (Fallen Body)’⁶⁰ and David Bowie in his 1993 music video for the song ‘Jump They Say’ in later decades, the aesthetic of Evelyn McHale’s death has become divorced from the true nature of its tragedy and indeed her own wishes, becoming a modern, gothic haunting.⁶¹ The deceased body of a beautiful woman seemingly becomes not just public property, but art, echoing Poe’s idea that Oyeyemi critiques, that ‘the most poetical topic in the world’ is ‘the death [of] a beautiful woman.’⁶² Evelyn McHale’s image is perceived and accepted as more important than her own testament.

⁵⁸ Rare Historical Photos, ‘Named by Life magazine as “The Most Beautiful Suicide” – Evelyn McHale leapt to her death from the Empire State Building, 1947’, *Rare Historical Photos* (2022) <rarehistoricalphotos.com/beautiful-suicide-evelyn-mchale-leapt-death-empire-state-building-1947> [accessed 20 May 2022].

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Public Delivery, ‘Andy Warhol’s paintings of death & disaster’, *Public Delivery* (2022) <<https://publicdelivery.org/andy-warhol-death-disaster/>> [accessed 30 May 2022].

⁶¹ David Bowie (YouTube Channel), ‘David Bowie – Jump They Say (Official Video)’, *YouTube*, (June 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPZWgCLMsW8&ab_channel=DavidBowie> [accessed 30 May 2022].

⁶² McGhee, ‘Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease’, p.59.

Oyeyemi draws upon the widespread commodification of women's deaths by casting Mr Fox as a figure who profits from the aestheticization of it; from the scopophilic quality of a woman whose beauty is preserved in death. She acknowledges that this process too is a form of fragmentation, one that divests the body of its personhood, its right to be more than poetic imagery. Just as Bluebeard dissected his brides, Mr Fox dissects his characters and muse, Mary Foxe. Oyeyemi indicates that Mr Fox too derives scopophilic pleasure from the fragmented female form, making it clear from the first scene that Mr Fox desires Mary:

‘I’m crazy about you, okay?’

‘Oh, you don’t love me,’ Mary said. She undid the collar of her dress and bared her neck. ‘You love that,’ she said. She unbuttoned further and cupped her breasts. She pushed her skirt up past the knees, past the thighs, higher, and we both looked at her smoothness, her softness, her lace frills.

‘You love that,’ she said.

I nodded.

‘This is all you love,’ she said, pulling her own hair, slapping her own face.

If it wasn’t for the serenity in her eyes I would’ve thought she’d lost her mind. I stood up to stop her, but the second I did, she stopped of her own accord.⁶³

In the early sections of the novel, Mary’s actions are sometimes, but seemingly not always, distinct from Mr Fox’s will, blurred by her nature as a fictional creation who is yet to completely break free of her creator. The link between them is indicated here when Mr Fox stands up to stop Mary from slapping herself, but as he does so, she stops of what Mr Fox perceives as ‘her own accord’,

⁶³ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, p.3.

but might actually be of his own will.⁶⁴ As such, it is difficult to know whether Mary's sexual performance is conducted to deliberately undermine Mr Fox, or whether she is carrying out actions he himself imagines for her, casting her in the passive, exhibitionist role detailed by Mulvey.⁶⁵ Either way, his sexual desire for Mary, as well as his desire for control over Mary, is clear.

Mary appears throughout the novel's fragmented and reordered Bluebeard reimagining as an agent of change, desperately attempting to break through its narrative structure and assert her personhood, giving herself a voice. Where Carter's heroine in 'The Bloody Chamber' always recounts her own story in the first person, Mary Foxe's first-person voice only narrates three of the chapters in *Mr Fox*. She is otherwise most often seen through Mr Fox's point of view, a lens in which she is painted as troublesome as much as she is sexually desirable. Under Mr Fox's control, Mary is subject to physical distortion, with Lustucru's influence re-emerging in the latter half of the novel, as a weary Mr Fox asserts his dominance over Mary by stripping her of her voice: '[s]uddenly I was getting to be a little tired of Mary Foxe...I closed up her voice in my hand.'⁶⁶

Equally, Mary's true voice is also not always connoted by the 'I' with which she speaks. In Mr Fox's short story 'what happens next', Mary appears as a first-person narrator recounting her initial meeting and subsequent relationship with a fictionalised Mr Fox. Though she speaks in the first person, the echoes of her creator are present, particularly when it comes to how she perceives their sexual relationship:

I lay down at his feet, my breasts against the rug. I turned the pages of a cookbook and pretended to read, but really I was imagining him walking across my back; his heel grinding into the base of my spine, the next step pushing the vertebrae away

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p.362.

⁶⁶ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, pp.231-232.

from each other; by the time he reached my neck I'd be in pieces. He wouldn't do it – but he could – he had the ability. With his lips and hands he refigured me, coaxed me into moving so closely with him that we disappeared and left a trail of sighs behind us. Not just in the bed. Against walls, across tables, on floors with my heels dancing the same two pleading steps over his shoulder blades.⁶⁷

This version of Mary connotes violence and sexuality, seemingly relishing the idea of her own fragmentation, enjoying the idea of the heel that would separate her vertebrae. This is further implied in the playful ways in which she acknowledges her own body and sensuality: the breasts pressed against the rug; feigning reading the cookbook; the thought of her 'pleading' heels.⁶⁸ She seems to welcome the 'refigur[ation]' of herself through, as she perceives it, their sexual relationship, playing into Mr Fox's own fantasy for her.⁶⁹

In chapters where Mary does speak in the first person outside of the confines of this short story, it can be difficult to truly know where Mr Fox's control over her ends and where her own thoughts begin. It is telling, then, that Mary finally makes her escape from Mr Fox's mind and fiction and steps into reality in a chapter seen through the eyes of Daphne, Mr Fox's wife, away from Mr Fox's ever-present influence.

Unlike Mr Fox—who often treats Mary as an object to be manipulated—Daphne seeks to understand Mary. She initially does this by trying to understand Mary as the figure with whom she competes for her husband's attention, comparing and contrasting herself against Mary. However, she ultimately seeks to understand Mary as an individual; as who Mary would like herself to be. Oyeyemi clearly asserts that there is a key difference in how the male and female gaze operate in

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.167.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

her novel, with Daphne functioning as both a mirror of Mary, but also an example of an independent, realised woman whom Mary can take after. When Daphne and Mary first begin to speak to one another, Daphne notices their similarities, such as the fact that they are the same dress size, while also becoming aware of Mary's independent potential.⁷⁰ Oyeyemi lends Daphne an interiority that meditates on particularly female concerns. She notices Mary's wispy plait and thinks '[s]omeone should show her how to plait her hair'; she thinks about whether she is 'too proud to stay' with a husband who emotionally cheats on her with an imagined muse; she then considers her mother's disappointment if she did leave, which would mirror the look she received when she quit college: *'Messed up again, Daphne? Just what I expected.'*⁷¹ Daphne, for better or worse, doesn't want to become the archetype of a woman whose marriage failed, knowing that the fault will fall at her feet in the eyes of her society.

Despite her predicament and her own reservations, Daphne begins to feel a kinship with Mary: 'What was this, me finding myself wanting to look out for this girl, thing, whatever she was?'⁷² In using both 'girl' and 'thing', Oyeyemi suggests that Daphne sees Mary as something unformed, warped by the male imagination, not quite yet whole. It's clear that because Daphne and Mary share a set of experiences as women, Daphne realises a sisterhood could be formed between herself and Mary. She observes that Mary 'seemed a girl barely in her teens, mentally speaking.'⁷³ While she wonders at first whether she can teach Mary a 'difficult attitude and [send] her back to her master with it',⁷⁴ perhaps as a form of revenge, she soon softens in her goal when she spends time with Mary: 'I wanted to see a smile on her face – some people make you want to

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.242.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p.243.

⁷³ Ibid., 244.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

see them smiling. And I like a project. I do like a project.’⁷⁵ In recognising that Mary appears to have the mind of a teenager, we can perhaps infer that Daphne does not seek to benefit from Mary’s mental pliability as Mr Fox might, but instead views this as an area in which Mary should have the autonomy and right to develop as her own woman. This is a crucial difference.

Under Daphne’s gaze, Mary breaks free of Mr Fox to the extent that she can form her own friendship with Daphne, with the two of them going to dinner together, and Daphne later assisting Mary in her departure from the house. Finding that more unifies than separates them, the two women begin to support each other, with Mary encouraging Daphne to pursue a writing career, and Daphne arranging for Mary to live in Mr Fox’s family’s old lighthouse. At dinner, they discuss the new books Mary has been reading:

We changed the subject. Mary told me she had been doing some reading of her own. *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Three Musketeers*, so far. ‘The women in these books are killers!’ she said, her voice escalating with each word so that by the time she reached the last one the diners around us were looking around for the killers.

‘Did you think they couldn’t be?’ I told her about one of my favourite villainesses, a flame-haired woman called Lydia Gwilt, who died changing her ways.

‘Of course she did,’ Mary said, frowning. ‘This is worse than I thought. If you make the women wicked then killing them off becomes a moral imperative.’ [...] I devised the title for the book I was going to write – ***Hedda Gabler and Other Monsters***, and she cheered up at the assurance that everyone would survive.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.245.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.251-252.

Much like Oyeyemi herself, Daphne and Mary turn to writing to subvert and challenge the ideas that ensnare women in both male-dominated fiction and society, with Daphne singling out Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* as her new heroine to reinvent. Both Daphne and Mary understand that a vital difference can exist between the male and female gaze, and that under the female, women can become fully realised as autonomous identities, just as Mary herself has through Daphne's perception. Oyeyemi illustrates here the value of fragmentation as a feminist tool and as a critical strategy: how the restructuring of past texts to emphasise female voices creates spaces and ideas that had yet to exist under male artistic control.

In her essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', Adrienne Rich states: 'We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on tradition, but to break its hold over us.'⁷⁷ Carter, Oyeyemi, and Benson (as will be examined shortly) address this within their work by taking old, lingering tales, such as that of Bluebeard and those in Greek mythology which have been framed through a male lens throughout most of their incarnations, and not just reinventing them, but breaking apart the stories' patriarchal structures and language in order to better serve a female viewpoint. For Rich, this methodology is more than just a means through which to critique and develop art and culture: '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.'⁷⁸ This echoes Ostriker's idea that revisionist texts can act as 'instructions for survival'.⁷⁹

To move forward in the creation of a new future with greater social equality, where women can comfortably not just survive but thrive by wielding greater autonomy and control over their

⁷⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34:1, Women, Writing and Teaching (Oct. 1972), 18-30, p.19.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', p.73.

daily lives—be this by escaping violence, pursuing intellectual pursuits without limitations, or having greater economic support—one must break down and critique the past and its artefacts. The reconfiguration and/or destruction of past ideas is fundamentally what has propelled all societal developments, and is, as Rich and Ostriker put it, innately linked to ‘survival’ for many groups, especially those which have been oppressed throughout history. Revision is fundamental to this process.

Rich also offers many interesting ideas around fragmentation as not just a critical and literary tool, but as a uniquely female one. Discussing life in her twenties, which for Rich was marked by marriage and the birth of three children, Rich examines the fragmentary way in which she had to write because of her responsibilities as a mother, and the labour she had to undertake that society often designates to women:

I was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, and work that others constantly undo, small children’s constant needs.⁸⁰

[...]

For about ten years I was reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments...⁸¹

Fragmentation pervades female life, be it through the ways in which the female body is fragmented and distorted both physically and metaphorically, or through the ways in which female lives are often forcibly splintered by the various caretaking roles and social obligations women undertake

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.23.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.24.

and are impacted by. This is not to say that this social aspect of female life is inherently at odds with the furthering of the individual self and mind, or that it is not without its own merit; Rich herself notes that it was hard for her to truly acknowledge her frustration with her life in her work because she cared deeply for both her husband and her children. It can, however, mean that the female artist has less time to dedicate solely to her craft and, in turn, the pursuit and coalescence of knowledge:

Most, if not all, human lives are full of fantasy—passive day-dreaming which need not be acted on. But to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well, is not to fantasize, or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.⁸²

While Rich is speaking of the artistic process here, what she details applies to the wider methods through which women come to understand, rally against, and critique certain social injustices; through a coalescence of thoughts, images, and ideas, understood in snatches that then form a cognitive whole, becoming something to assert back. Oyeyemi and Benson in particular draw upon this idea in their work, using fragmented literary forms as feminist strategy. Oyeyemi's Mary slowly escapes the control of Mr Fox and enters reality through a series of disparate chapters, and it is hard to know when she is closest to making the leap into the real world before she suddenly achieves it in a coalescence that occurs all at once. The fragmentary structure of the novel facilitates this, as Mary's actualisation is slowly rendered almost in the background of the main plot threads,

⁸² Ibid.

before coming to the fore towards the end of the novel. Like Rich, it is when Mary escapes the patriarchal distractions imposed on her female life by Mr Fox that she is able to think for and assert herself in ways that were previously impossible, creating her own female identity.

This idea, posited by Rich, that fragments and the coalescence of them is a place in which particularly female identities exist is also explored by poet Fiona Benson in her collection *Vertigo & Ghost*, wherein she uses fragmentation as a critical and structural framework. In *Vertigo & Ghost*, Benson presents a series of poems that centre around the Greek god Zeus as a serial rapist and the women he assaults throughout various myths. The poems feature several different voices, from Zeus himself to Cyane to an unnamed victim meditating on Zeus' crimes against figures such as Medusa, Semele, and Callisto. Interrogating themes such as the correlation between scopophilia and violence, and the ways in which female community handles trauma as a collective, Benson's poems take fragments of individual experiences and present them in a way that creates a resonance across the pieces, with each piece building upon the last, allowing the reader to draw out their own understanding and conclusions around the insidiousness and prevalence of rape culture.

Benson opens with '[Zeus] days I talked to Zeus', where a recent victim of Zeus goes to visit him in prison, the 'bullet-proof glass / and a speaker phone' the only things between them.⁸³ Yet, this barrier, this protection, is no match for the god. The victim feels the 'blood bubble and burn / under [her] skin', later finds 'blisters / on the soft parts of [her] body'.⁸⁴ She continues:

thunder moved in my brain

tissue-crease

haemorrhage

⁸³ Fiona Benson, '[Zeus] days I talked to Zeus', *Vertigo & Ghost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), p.5.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

I kept the Dictaphone running
it recorded nothing
but my own voice
vulcanised and screaming
*you won't get away with this*⁸⁵

Even incarcerated, Zeus is still powerful and narcissistic enough to enact some form of control over this implicitly female victim, targeting her body, the 'soft', potentially intimate parts of her.⁸⁶ Benson intimates in '[archives] Zeus on parole' that, for Zeus, pain, power, and erotic pleasure are inextricably linked:

NO FUN
THIS ANKLEBAND
TAZERS ME
EVERY TIME
I BRUSH THE BOUNDS
AND YET IT IS
SHALL WE SAY
EROTIC?
ITS SUDDEN CURSE
ITS THRILL⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Benson, '[archives] Zeus on parole', p.6.

We learn that suddenness, the unexpected, is what Zeus finds most thrilling of all; that for him, the lack of consent given by his sexual assault victims is specifically what gives him pleasure. This equates to a sense of power and control, where actions require victims in order to be satisfying. Zeus wants to act as the taser, yet also reap, as he sees it, the erotic benefits. The disassociation required to act in such a predatory way, where the feelings of a victim are not only disregarded, but their pain and fear is integral to the action's success, is accompanied by the deconstruction and fragmentation of the body through objectification, the targeting of 'parts'.⁸⁸ Benson's Zeus also enjoys contemporary magazines, in particular the way in which they zero in on sections of the body, airbrushed into an unattainable, youthful beauty standard:

I LIKE THESE MAGAZINES

YOU BUY HER A

YES I LIKE THEM

LOOK AT THIS ONE

HER BIRD-FINE COLLARBONE

HER NIPPED IN WAIST

*LITTLE BABY-FACE*⁸⁹

The '*BIRD-FINE COLLARBONE*' and the '*NIPPED IN WAIST*' emphasize the thinness that has typically been praised in western women, but also suggest a smallness and a fragility to these women that appeals to Zeus—how bird-like they are, how their '*BABY-FACE[S]*' suggest naivety, an innocence that would be easy to target and manipulate. There is a sense of sinister contemplation, the formal gap between '*YES*' and '*I LIKE THEM*' illustrating a careful pause

⁸⁸ Benson, '[Zeus] days I talked to Zeus', p.5.

⁸⁹ Benson, '[Zeus] *I LIKE THESE MAGAZINES*', p.9.

where Benson lets us imagine all the factors Zeus might be contemplating in that moment before landing on an assured and definitive '*I LIKE THEM*'. The choice to depict Zeus' speech through entirely capitalised words lends him an equally authoritative and ominous quality that simultaneously makes him feel both villainous and representative of a wider patriarchal collective. Indeed, as head of the ancient Greek pantheon, one can see why Benson would use him as an avatar to explore socially entrenched and systemic gendered violence.

Benson continues to depict a series of scenarios in which Zeus assesses and assaults his victims, taking on the forms of predators present in contemporary, western society, and the forms of animals that Zeus is known for taking throughout Greek mythology. In '[surveillance: track and field]', Zeus takes the form of a sports coach training female runners, where Benson provides what could either be the direct speech of Zeus to the girls, or his internal monologue:

I WILL MAKE YOU AS FAST

AS SHOCK LIGHTNING

MY BEAUTIES

IF YOU LISTEN

*IF YOU GROOM WELL*⁹⁰

Here, Benson indicates the potential for (and, in Zeus' case, the desire for) an abuse of power over those in his care. The deployment of the line break between '*IF YOU LISTEN / IF YOU GROOM WELL*' acts in a similar way to the aforementioned gap in '[Zeus] *I LIKE THESE MAGAZINES*'; much happens in the spaces, in the unwritten, in Benson's pieces.⁹¹ The break emphasises the reveal of intention in the final line, the truth of Zeus as a calculating groomer. As this is written in Zeus' voice, the pause before this final line feels knowing, deliberately punctuating

⁹⁰ Benson, '[surveillance: track and field]', p.7.

⁹¹ Ibid.

the double meaning of ‘groom’, referring to both the shaping of the girls’ athletic potential, as well as the predatory behaviour through which Zeus will attempt to abuse them. Benson’s Zeus seems to revel in the theatrical, pausing for effect, unafraid of showing his true meaning.

In ‘[surveillance: bull kneeling]’, Benson presents a scene through an omniscient voice in which we see a bull, implied to be Zeus, stalking the banks of a river at dusk, looking for a victim:

like a storm out at sea bull on its knees was it
 was it flies? staggers up white bull smirched
 lightning in his horns phallus scarlet and engorged
 thunder crackles on his suede as he bellows
 and the ground gapes to the underworld and all the dead
 scream out girl walking by the river
 drops her flowers and her phone turns starts to run ⁹²

Here, Benson echoes the abduction of Europa in Greek mythology, in which Zeus appears to her among her father’s cattle as a white bull. Once she approaches the new animal and deems him calm enough to ride, Zeus kidnaps her, taking to the sea and swimming to the island of Crete as Europa clings to his back. There, he reveals himself and rapes her. Benson’s Zeus returns to this *modus operandi*, looking once again for success.

We sense in this poem the true, animalistic nature of Zeus, no longer hidden behind the human guises of the running track coach or the incarcerated man due to go on trial. This bovine disguise is free of the intricacies of social status and public expectation, and reveals a threat of violence, of brute force. The ‘phallus scarlet and engorged’, ready for use, lying in wait.⁹³ Intention

⁹² Benson, ‘[surveillance: bull kneeling]’, p.8.

⁹³ Ibid.

clear. The fragmented form of the poem, the gaps which permeate sentences, causing them to be both unpredictable and lingering, forces the reader to remain vigilant, piecing together words and phrases, looking for turns in their meaning, a change in the scene's direction. This mirrors the vigilance of a woman walking alone close to dark, like the girl walking at dusk in the poem, assessing small details for hints of danger, listening out for changes in the atmosphere to understand any shift in her situation. Fleeing at the sound of Zeus 'bellow[ing]' and the 'dead / scream[ing] out', dropping her 'flowers and...phone', symbols of both innocence and modernity.⁹⁴ This vigilance mirrors the same fragmentary process through which women come to understand certain ideas, experiences, and, in this instance, dangers: assessing each piece of a scene, each fragment. Benson develops analysis of this process by identifying at least one of its causes: the subjection of women to threat and violence.

The sequence of Benson's poems requires this same vigilance, as Benson reveals information to us through fragments that can be cross-referenced and used to inform our understanding of both the individual poems and the collection's wider themes and chronology. We learn more about what motivates Zeus, the ways in which he elicits erotic pleasure, the extent of his reach and crimes, and the reactions to them. At the same time, we slowly begin to learn about and hear the voices of victims and their relatives, from an unnamed observer to Cyane and later Callisto's mother. In receiving these different perspectives juxtaposed alongside each other, we begin to get a better sense of the course and impact of events, as well as the themes that Benson is drawing out.

Benson develops a running critique of the objectification of women in contemporary society, and in particular the growth of rape culture, defined by Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth as:

⁹⁴ Ibid.

[A] complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women...where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent...A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm...In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable...⁹⁵

In '[archives] Zeus given light sentence', Benson interrogates the way in which male rapists and their academic, athletic, or professional potential is often seen as worthy of outweighing their sexual assault crime(s):

Zeus given
light sentence,
temporary gaol.
The judge delivers
that he is an exemplary member
of the swimming squad;
look at his muscular shoulders,
the way he forges through water;
as for the girl⁹⁶

This piece clearly echoes the real-life, high-profile case of Brock Turner, a former US college student who sexually assaulted an unconscious woman, artist and writer Chanel Miller, outside a

⁹⁵ Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth, *Transforming a Rape Culture*

(Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1993) (PDF)

<https://sgc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/sopb/conference2017/mccarthy_presentation.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2021], p.2.

⁹⁶ Benson, '[archives] Zeus given light sentence', p.6.

Stanford University fraternity house party in 2015, and was convicted of three charges in 2016. Turner was sentenced to six-months of prison time, serving three before release. This sentence was scrutinised for being too light, especially as prosecutors had demanded a sentence of six years. The judge cited Turner's remorse over his actions, his positive character references, and his lack of previous criminal record as mitigating factors,⁹⁷ stating that a harsher punishment would have a 'severe impact' on Turner.⁹⁸ Turner's father, Dan Turner, prompted outrage when he stated that his son should not have been jailed for '20 minutes of action'.⁹⁹ Brock Turner was also a swimming champion.

Benson interrogates the discourse around Turner, in particular the idea that his potential was being prioritised above both the law and the suffering of Miller, with Miller becoming collateral damage, seen as a misguided mistake in a man's bright future: a piece of Turner's life to be swept under the rug. Not a woman whose own life had been impacted, and to whom justice was owed. There is an echo here of the 'horrible kind of logic' that Oyeyemi points to, the logic that prioritises a man's desires, and in particular his wholeness, his life beyond his crime, compared to the woman, whose life is treated as a fragment of the man's, whose wholeness is not viewed as equal, if at all.¹⁰⁰ Benson's work also touches upon this through the fragmentary nature and positioning of the poems, as well as the ways in which Zeus is shown to discuss women. This is particularly evident

⁹⁷ BBC News, 'Brock Turner: Stanford sex attack swimmer freed from jail', *BBC News*

(September 2016) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-37259537>> [accessed on 6 December 2021].

⁹⁸ Stephanie Webber, 'Brock Turner's Stanford Rape Case: Everything You Need To Know', *US Magazine* (June 2016) <<https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/brock-turners-stanford-rape-case-everything-you-need-to-know-w209237/>> [accessed on 6 December 2021].

⁹⁹ BBC News, 'Brock Turner: Stanford sex attack swimmer freed from jail'.

¹⁰⁰ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, p.120.

in '[Zeus: Semele]', where Zeus, while speaking to either the reader or an unknown figure, says in an offhand manner, '*DID I MENTION / SEMELE? DIED / IN FLAMES, / COULDN'T BEAR MY / TRUE IMMORTAL FORM.*'¹⁰¹ The short, monosyllabic '*DIED / IN FLAMES*' unfeeling, his '*TRUE IMMORTAL FORM*' transformed from cause of death into a machismo-filled brag, the implication being that she was too weak for him, so he isn't truly to blame.¹⁰² He sweeps her away into the past.

Benson further develops her critique of rape culture in '[archives] Zeus given light sentence' by detailing her judge's admiration for Zeus' physical prowess, which hinges on an implied sexual and romantic prowess: Zeus forging through water 'as for the girl'.¹⁰³ This changes the admiration of Zeus' swimming capabilities from the simple awe one might have for a dedicated and impressive athlete into something more lascivious, placing the imagined 'girl' in the role of a prize.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the judge imagines a young woman cheering on Zeus at a swimming race, delighting in his success, hoping that just a little bit of his effort is to make her proud. Or perhaps his thought is less innocent; perhaps in the movement of Zeus' body he sees the motions of sex, of a man moving up and towards an intimate partner. Perhaps he thinks such athleticism could never be criminal, or that such a man could never be unwanted. And why shouldn't a man like that pursue what he wants? As in other pieces, Benson deploys the line break deftly, particularly between the lines 'the way he forges through water / as for the girl', leaving 'as for the girl' to be both the poem's final, lingering utterance, but also seemingly an afterthought of the judge's dialogue: an additional consideration, reflecting the treatment of victims like Miller.¹⁰⁵ Here, we

¹⁰¹ Benson, '[Zeus: Semele]', p.15.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Benson, '[archives] Zeus given light sentence', p.6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

can see the spread of an ideology akin to that of Zeus' seen in other poems; the filtering down of certain ideas and values from a patriarchal figurehead, with both the judge and Zeus mirroring each other, acting as twin godheads of the same patriarchal lineage of oppression.

By dissecting modern rape culture, Benson allows us to glimpse a mindset that has prevailed since the early recounting of Greek mythology, that has excused Zeus' actions throughout various tales and that parallels the excusing of men of their crimes in contemporary society. The fragmentary structure and order of Benson's poems highlight the various places in which gendered violence and oppressive ideologies continue to permeate, from the judicial system to the gym to the corner you might just be about to turn around on an evening walk. Like Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox*, the poems have a cumulative effect that echoes how understanding can occur through the coalescence of multiple, disparate experiences and examples, particularly for women, whose lives are often fragmented by societal obligations and distractions, and who come to understand a wider whole through the combined knowledge of particular events and stories. It is notable that Benson chooses to focus upon rape as a key theme in her work when women have frequently had their assaults silenced and swept aside by various judicial systems and patriarchal social norms, meaning that in many ways, knowledge of these cases that pointed to a wider endemic issue had to first be understood in snatches. Benson can be considered to be echoing the ideas behind Rich's identification of the fragmentary acquisition of knowledge, actively pointing to suppression and violence as its cause.

Just as Carter and Oyeyemi indicate that female community can provide if not a solution then certainly respite from patriarchal oppression, so too does Benson. Like Carter's heroine's female relations and Oyeyemi's Daphne and Mary, it is through the female gaze that Benson's female subjects are seen and understood.

'[transformation: Callisto]' examines the tragedy of Callisto, a companion of the goddess Artemis who had sworn to remain unwed, but who was raped by Zeus. In some versions of the

story, Callisto is turned into a bear, either by Zeus as a means to hide his crime, or by Hera or Artemis, who are angered by Callisto's perceived sexual activity. Callisto is later killed by Artemis, after Hera tricks Artemis into believing Callisto is a real bear.¹⁰⁶

We meet Benson's Callisto once she has already transformed into a bear, her remaining humanity only witnessed by her mother, who attempts to provide Callisto with love and home-cooked comforts to help her feel like herself again:

Her mother takes her home, coaxes her to eat,
roasts chicken with potatoes, herbs and salts the skins.
Callisto picks the carcass clean, moves on –
pork chops, dumplings, chouquettes, quenelles¹⁰⁷

However, it becomes clear that Callisto, struggling with her new body and how it functions, is turning her newfound, larger appetite into a weapon to punish her body, clearly disconnected from her former self. She forces herself to eat:

past repletion, through to the distended gullet,
forced stomach, goose with a funnel down its throat
and the grain shovelled in with a scoop,
beak tied shut, liver warped.
She holds herself down, clamps her mouth,
piles on flesh like upholstery¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Callisto', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2022)

<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Callisto-Greek-mythology>> [accessed 21 February 2022].

¹⁰⁷ Benson, '[transformation: Callisto]', p.35.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

She continues to wilfully neglect her hygienic wellbeing and at times even commits acts of violence against herself: ‘cuts, infected sores / squats to shit does not wipe does not wash / her hair down her back in a matted clump.’¹⁰⁹ Here, her actions echo forms of self-harm that can emerge following trauma, becoming both a punishment against her new body and an aspect of her life she can control. She begins to isolate herself, running away from home, taking herself out into the city, into the wild, much to her mother’s dismay:

Her mother searches in the dark –
every doorway and underpass.
Finds her daughter mite-ridden and stubborn.

*Callisto I love you come home.*¹¹⁰

Benson’s heroines are often only really understood and cared for by their mothers, those who are also subject to the same patriarchal systems and social dynamics as their daughters. It is as if they share a shorthand understanding with their daughters’ pain that their male counterparts cannot grasp, particularly when coming to terms with male violence. Much like Oyeyemi’s Daphne, their gaze functions completely differently to the male gaze; able to see something the men either can’t or won’t, able to provide fellow women with a particular kind of recognition. This is particularly explored in Benson’s ‘[not-Zeus: Medusa 1]’ and ‘[not-Zeus: Medusa 3]’: two poems in a series that explores Poseidon’s raping of Medusa and the aftermath she experiences. These pieces explore how an unnamed, implicitly female speaker (possibly Benson herself) through learning of the assault against Medusa and how she was punished for it, comes to understand how the aftermath of sexual assault is often wrongfully handled:

Poseidon the sea god

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

raped Medusa
where she prayed
in the temple of Athena

and Athena
cursed the girl
with a head full
of snakes.

I came to understand
rape is cultural,
pervasive;
that in this world

the woman is blamed.¹¹¹

Benson reiterates the prevalence of rape culture here by saying that ‘rape is cultural’, indicating that it is something that is learned, even promoted, excused, and anticipated. The idea that ‘the woman is blamed’ is further interrogated in ‘[not-Zeus: Medusa 3]’, a poem which grapples with how victims of rape can be treated as a burden to their family, someone who cannot be reconciled with in their post-assault state. Benson imagines Medusa’s family setting fire to her, gripped by some religious or social fervour:

Daughter bound
and doused

¹¹¹ Benson, ‘[not-Zeus: Medusa 1]’, p.26.

in petrol

her brothers

red-eyed

and crazed

her father

jumping back

from the flames

as he drops

the lit match.

Her screaming flesh.¹¹²

It is only the male members of Medusa's family, her brothers and her father, who respond to her assault in this way, as if she has betrayed them, shamed their family. Perhaps they see her as promiscuous; perhaps they are angry such an act would take place in the Temple of Athena. Somehow, they have separated their sister and daughter as they knew her, as they loved her, from the person before them (now in her cursed gorgon form). Benson allows the cruelty of this fragmentation and dissociation to resonate, especially as it mirrors the dissociation that can often be experienced by victims of trauma. It is not clear what reason or right Medusa's family would have to react in this way to an attack that was not committed against them, and because of this, Benson allows us to view it as the unreasonable reaction that it is. The unfathomable is left to be unfathomable.

¹¹² Benson, '[not-Zeus: Medusa 3]', p.28.

Much like Callisto's mother, it is Medusa's mother that understands, that can connect the Medusa of the past with the Medusa of the present. Benson provides us with an italicised section in the poem which represents Medusa's mother's inner thoughts:

My darling one

who laughed

like a woodpecker,

who loved

to lick the bowl

when I baked,

who stroked my back

when I cried,

my soft little child.

What mother

could walk

into that inferno now.

*Still I try.*¹¹³

It is her mother who is able to comprehend Medusa as a whole, who is able to recollect the child she once was, she who loved simple pleasures like 'lick[ing] the bowl clean' and 'who laughed like

¹¹³ Ibid., pp.28-29.

a woodpecker'.¹¹⁴ She who comforted her mother, each in touch with the other's emotions. This stands in stark contrast with the men of the family, who seem to have wilfully divorced the Medusa they knew from her current identity; allowing one fragment of her experiences to overwhelm their perception of her. Benson's juxtaposition here, alongside other pieces in this collection, allows us to understand the cyclical patterns of male violence, and in particular how various processes of fragmentation, of both the physical and emotional aspects of women, feed into one another.

Throughout their work, Carter, Oyeyemi, and Benson respond to different facets of contemporary female experiences. From critiquing the dissection and dissociative aestheticization of the female body and the correlation of violence, beauty, and death that permeates modern media, to the pervasive nature of rape culture, all employ fragmentation as a critical, feminist strategy in their work. Each author's use of fragmentation can be viewed as expanding upon Rich's observations about the fragmentary nature in which women by necessity accrue and develop knowledge, piecing together ideas and thoughts in the pockets around social distractions (and, in some cases, deliberate obfuscations). In addition, Carter, Oyeyemi, and Benson all engage in 'revisionist mythmaking' by dismantling their source material and reconfiguring it in a way that centralises and asserts female experiences by utilising fragmentary structures.¹¹⁵ This deliberately immerses readers in a kind of mindset that many women experience by placing the female character as the dominant perspective, purposely providing readers with an insight into a form of female gaze that recontextualises previously male-centred tales and mythology. As Rich notes, this is an essential 'act of survival' for groups with a history of marginalisation: in developing and

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', p.71.

critiquing art in this way, we rewrite the codes for acting around and thinking about certain topics, plights, and taboos in order to better social understanding and equity.¹¹⁶

Rich also notes that, for her, a lack of writing equated to the 'loss of contact with her own being'.¹¹⁷ Consequently, we might surmise that although writing in fragments was a concession, such writing sessions—however brief—were spaces in which Rich could return to her own sense of identity. This use of fragments as a space in which to reform the self, specifically the female self, is something that the work of Oyeyemi and Benson in particular draws upon. It is within fragments that Oyeyemi's Mary comes to gain her identity, just as it is in fragments that Benson's heroines are finally able to express themselves or be seen by their female communities. Their wholeness, which has been denied by both society and past narratives, is slowly built within the fringes of formerly male-centric narratives, here brought to the forefront. The coalescence of these is what then allows us to see these women in their entirety, recognising them as thinkers, writers, artists, survivors, loving daughters, and more.

The female gaze and community also play a large role in Carter's, Oyeyemi's, and Benson's work, posited as an antithesis to the male gaze and male-driven violence. While each writer addresses endemic social issues such as hyper-sexualisation, the visual and literal dissection of women, and rape culture, it is the spaces around these issues, where female insight and community can develop, that provide hope. Often, the female gaze is one through which women can be truly realised, seen, and accepted in these works. Ultimately, by deconstructing their source materials and using fragmentation as a formal strategy, each author develops a text in which female experiences and interiority can come to the fore.

¹¹⁶ Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', p.19.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.23.

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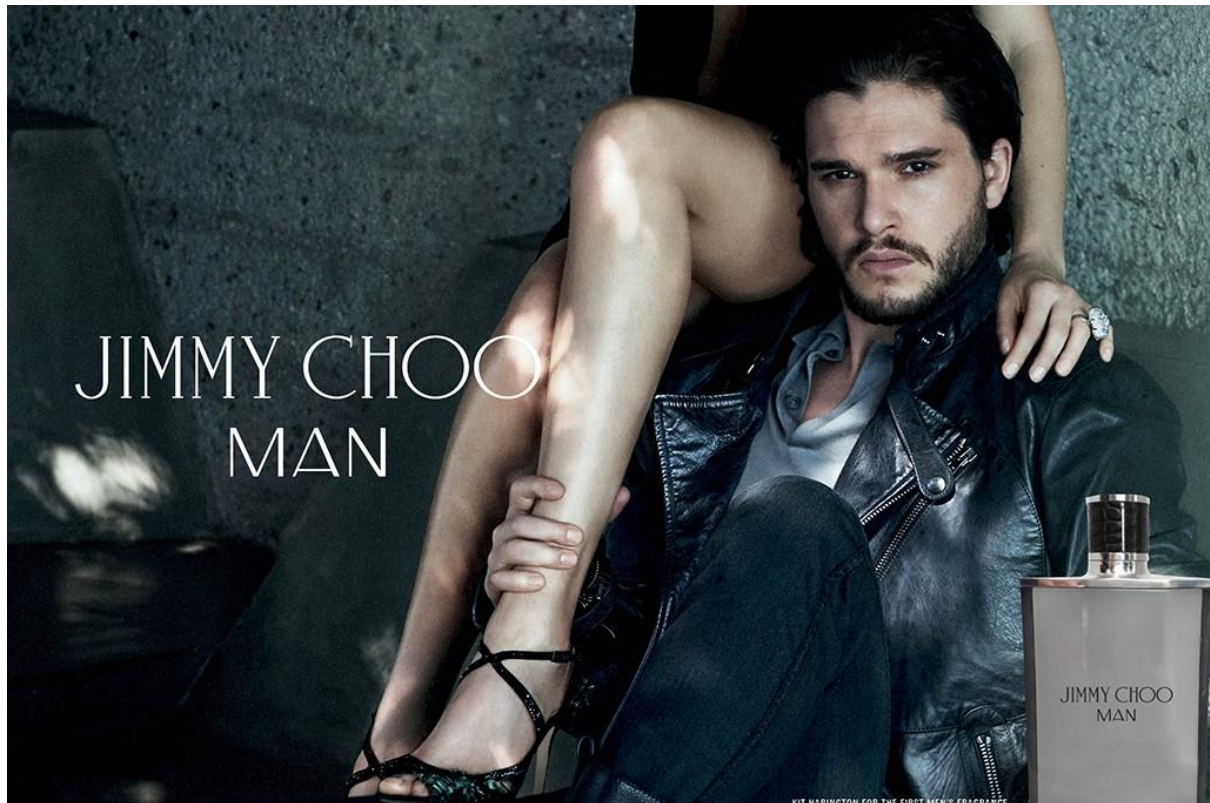
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Notes

The following advert was referenced as part of the prose section beginning 'Out of the corner of your eye...':



The Fashionisto, 'Kit Harrington Fronts Jimmy Choo Man Fragrance Campaign, *The Fashionisto* (2014) <<https://www.thefashionisto.com/kit-harrington-fronts-jimmy-choo-man-fragrance-campaign/>> [accessed 10 April 2020].

The following films were referenced, in order, as part of the prose section beginning ‘Colours play with the darkness of the theatre...’:

Transformers, dir. Michael Bay (Paramount Pictures, 2007) [on demand].

From Dusk Till Dawn, dir. Robert Rodriguez (Miramax Films, 1996) [on demand].

The Breakfast Club, dir. John Hughes (Universal Pictures, 1985) [on DVD].

La Dolce Vita, dir. Federico Fellini (Cineriz, 1960) [on demand].

Some Like It Hot, dir. Billy Wilder (Mirisch Company, 1959) [on DVD].

Blade Runner, dir. Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982) [on DVD].

Star Trek: Into Darkness, dir. J. J. Abrams (Paramount Pictures, 2013) [on DVD].

The Wolf of Wall Street, dir. Martin Scorsese (Paramount Pictures, 2013) [on demand].

‘After a while, you’ll see her when you think of me’: The Crafted

Woman and Female Agency

Fingers reach for the vaulted ceiling, light falling on perfectly poised breasts, a Roman nose almost caught on the sternum between. He lifts her—at first glance it’s balletic, at another it’s hungry—veins running down his muscular, marble back. He straddles a crouched man, screaming, vulnerable. This is theft. The Sabine woman arches and writhes, twisting her head away from her captor. Her mouth curves, lips almost trembling. Her eyes are stark, wildly looking for someone, anyone. A stain in the marble streaks tear-like down her sculpted cheek.

The gallery houses many bodies. The quiet duck-egg walls hold golden frames that glimmer between spectators, catching the glass face of a watch, the laminated bend of a museum map. The baby blue folds of a woman’s robe draw you in, creased in the tight grip of a man. Her pale, bare feet dangle like limp wings. Another claws the air, her eyes cast toward a grey sky. A man on a rearing white horse reaches for the yellow robes at her back; another wraps his arms about her legs, forearms nestled in the backs of her thighs. The town square is chaos, a tangle of limbs. The architecture—beautiful balconies, arches, columns—holds the heaving scene. The gentle touch of civilisation. A mother on her knees throws her arms wide.

Another: a garlanded faun formed in rough brushstrokes holds down a woman by her neck. Her eyes are lost to shadow, her naked body twisted: a hand pushes on the faun’s shoulder, her legs cross in defence of his wandering knee. They struggle in a void.

And on. Peering out between the shifting bodies.

And on.

*

According to art history scholar Diane Wolfthal, for most art historians, ‘the word “rape” brings to mind [Nicolas] Poussin’s [painting] *Rape of the Sabines*’ and its second iteration, *The Rape of the*

Sabine Women.¹ These are pieces in which the depicted assailants are deemed to be Roman heroes, and illustrate what Susan Brownmiller terms ‘heroic’ rape.² While Poussin’s representation of the Romans capturing the Sabine women in *Rape of the Sabines* and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* makes clear the distress and horror of the women being taken against their will, they also legitimise the act in accordance with Roman ideology by subscribing to the concept of *raptus*: a crime of property theft that is deemed to be committed against a woman’s husband or guardian, not the woman herself. Indeed, traditions of art criticism further this idea that the painting depicts an act of heroism, with art historians often focussing on the work’s classical style or Poussin’s inspirations stemming from ancient literature, declaring the piece ‘heroic’ or citing it as ‘an embodiment of Poussin’s belief that the highest goal of art is the depiction of noble human action.’³ Poussin scholar Jane Costello noted that when creating *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, Poussin ‘synthesized into a heroic style the influences and ideas [...of] the art and literature of ancient, [as well as] the paintings and traditions then current.’⁴ The story of the Romans’ abduction of the Sabine women was often presented as one of triumph: the Romans, needing wives and unable to procure them peacefully, captured the Sabine women who went on to become the lauded mothers of the first Romans.⁵

¹ Diane Wolfthal, ‘Images of Rape: The “Heroic” Tradition and its Alternatives’, *Excerpts from Diane Wolfthal* (2020)
 <http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arh/arh200/Heroic_Rape.html> [accessed 27 October 2020].

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jane Costello, ‘The Rape of the Sabine Women by Nicolas Poussin’, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 5:8 (April 1947), 197-204, p.204.

⁵ Diane Wolfthal, ‘Images of Rape: The “Heroic” Tradition and its Alternatives’.

The story of the Sabine women often appeared on wedding banners, marriage chests, and in the apartments of noblewomen as recently as the seventeenth century in Italy. The rape and later reconciliation of the Sabine women with their Roman captors served to provide three lessons: submission to one's husband, personal sacrifice for the greater good of one's country, and women's desired role as the peacemaker in the family.⁶

The intention of many rape depictions in art is to instruct, to set an expectation for women's behaviour to be emulated in real life. Illustrating such actions within renowned, high art forms can serve to glorify them in alignment with ancient notions of heroism. I want to consider what this blurring of reality and art, in particular these instructive representations of rape, means for women when they are asked to become art itself—with parameters that limit their agency—and how we might interrogate concerns around this instruction through literature, art, and film. Writers Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy, artist Artemisia Gentileschi, and filmmaker Céline Sciamma are illustrative figures in this context, interrogating mythology, art-making, and art's role as a pedagogical tool through a feminist lens.

Counterposing literature, paintings, and film allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the artist and their art across multiple forms, and in the case of Atwood, Duffy, Gentileschi, and Sciamma, the use and value of mythological symbolism, and how this is employed both linguistically and visually to interrogate feminist issues, with each artist using layers of mythical and historical revisionism to present contemporary concerns around visual art as pedagogical instruction. The setting and characters depicted in each of the works discussed in this essay are a means through which each artist can explore these feminist issues, either by examining issues from the past, or by projecting contemporary concerns onto historical and/or mythical spaces and icons. The various forms (literature, painting, film) allow us to understand how social

⁶ Ibid.

and artistic ideals, as well as challenges to these, permeate not just one artistic pursuit, but many. This is important, as it gives us greater insight into the ways in which the public can be impacted by particular messages when confronted with them across multiple platforms, and how artists are asking audiences to engage with and deconstruct these, using their art to instruct in a way that enables viewers to be critical of past traditions and assertions.

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In her novel *The Penelopiad*, Atwood interrogates how the instructive and performative qualities of literary and artistic depictions of rape extend back into ancient Greece. On the night of Penelope and Odysseus' wedding, Penelope details the ritual and symbolism woven into the consummation of their marriage:

The bed had been garlanded, the threshold sprinkled, the libations poured. The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood.⁷

The *kleos* (renown, glory) Greek heroes pursue weaves itself into romantic relationships, framing them through the lens of conquest and achievement, apparent in the creation of the 'sanctioned rape' and the militaristic 'trampling of a foe'; even intimate relationships are expected to contain elements of violence and masculine dominance.⁸ While Atwood's Penelope would be considered lucky, with Odysseus telling her to 'forget everything [she's] been told' and that he won't hurt her,

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005), p.44.

⁸ Ibid.

it is clear that others would not be so fortunate.⁹ Atwood's Penelope shrewdly deconstructs the expected performance, wryly noting that '[t]here was supposed to be blood'.¹⁰ The use of 'supposed' acknowledges that, in Penelope's society, this appearance of blood is not merely a possibility, but an expectation.¹¹ While Atwood imbues this with irony by paralleling the blood with the blood of an enemy, there is also the implied history of performance. For Penelope to be able to perform as expected at the consummation of her marriage, she has to have performed her role as an ancient Greek woman up until this point by remaining a virgin. The act is bodily as well as social. Judith Butler, notable for her vital discourse on gender and performativity, argues:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures.¹²

Atwood's Penelope is surrounded by various literary, artistic, and social gender cues designed to cause certain behaviours and expectations to become second nature to her—so that she might feel they are innate qualities of herself and her gender to remain unquestioned. Atwood's recognition that women still grapple with this is at the heart of *The Penelopiad's* very existence as a feminist deconstruction of *The Odyssey*. By harnessing and critiquing such a canonical text, Atwood

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Judith Butler, 'Preface 1999', *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p.xiv.

examines and challenges the place of women within literary and artistic spaces, as well as within canonised mythology, to create new critical modes.

Where Atwood uses mythology to dissect the social cues surrounding gender that are imposed upon a body, Carol Ann Duffy uses myth to interrogate further the implications of a body's literal construction and how this dictates the gendered performance it is expected to enact. Through the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, wherein Pygmalion sculpts his intended lover, Galatea, Duffy examines the ways in which certain performance expectations, particularly sexual expectations, can be woven into the very shape of the female body by patriarchal influence.

Duffy's poem 'Pygmalion's bride' draws upon the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, perhaps one of the more direct examples of the relationship between women and art in Greek mythology. In some versions of the myth, Pygmalion is depicted as being in love with the goddess Aphrodite, but because she would not sleep with him, he makes an ivory image of her and places it in his bed, praying that she might take pity on him. Aphrodite enters the image, bringing it to life as Galatea, who was to be Pygmalion's wife.¹³ Alternative versions, including the one told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, suggest that Pygmalion, upon seeing Propoetus' daughters (the Propoetides) conducting sex work, rejects the existing women around him and opts to design and create his own image of a woman from ivory.¹⁴ Ovid describes this woman as Pygmalion's 'image of perfect / feminine beauty'.¹⁵ Falling in love with his creation, Pygmalion names her Galatea, and Aphrodite brings her to life in answer to Pygmalion's prayers. These latter accounts, wherein Pygmalion

¹³ Robert Graves, 'Pygmalion and Galatea', *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition*, 1955 (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2011), pp.211-212 (p.211).

¹⁴ Ovid, 'Book 10', *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004), p.394.

¹⁵ Ibid.

rejects women after being disgusted by the Propetides' sex work, seem to suggest that Pygmalion is fearful of women's capacity for sexual pleasure and control of their own sexuality and agency, or that he sees female sexuality as something that evokes disgust. This is a fear Duffy dissects in 'Pygmalion's Bride'.

The poem begins as Galatea is brought to life and immediately forced to experience Pygmalion's unwanted sexual advances: 'Cold, I was, like snow, like ivory./ I thought He will not touch me, but he did.'¹⁶ She attempts to deter him, lying still 'as though [she]'d died' when he kisses her 'stone-cool lips', but he 'stay[s]', 'thumb[ing] [her] marbled eyes' as if still adjusting her image.¹⁷ When she doesn't respond, he begins to speak to her, uttering words she finds 'terrible': 'blunt endearments, what he'd do and how', implicitly sexual and potentially violent language.¹⁸ Pygmalion attempts to bribe Galatea into a response, bringing 'presents, polished pebbles,/ little bells', 'pearls and necklaces and rings...girly things'; when this fails he '[runs] his clammy hands along [her] limbs' but still she 'play[s] statue, shtum.'¹⁹ This is when Pygmalion attempts to elicit a physical reaction through inflicting pain upon Galatea, 'let[ting] his fingers sink into [her] flesh...squeez[ing]...press[ing]', but she fails to bruise.²⁰ 'His nails [become] claws' but she shows 'no scratch, no scrape, no scar.'²¹ He talks to her all night, but still her lack of response doesn't deter him. She decides, finally, to 'chang[e] tack' and perform sexual interest:²²

¹⁶ Carol Ann Duffy, 'Pygmalion's Bride', *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 1999), p.51.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p.52

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

So I changed tack,
grew warm, like candle wax,
kissed back,
was soft, was pliable,
began to moan,
got hot, got wild,
arched, coiled, writhed,
begged for his child,
and at the climax
screamed my head off –
all an act.²³

Galatea notes that following this alteration in her behaviour she ‘ha[sn’t] seen [Pygmalion] since’.²⁴ Duffy leaves us to interpret whether Galatea chose to engage in sexual activity with Pygmalion and feign interest and her ‘climax’ in the hope that giving Pygmalion what he desired would cause him to leave her alone, or whether she knowingly exaggerates a sexual performance, becoming ‘hot’, ‘wild’, ‘arch[ing], coil[ing], writh[ing], begg[ing] for his child’, ‘scream[ing] her head off’ as a way of using her own sexual agency and power to unnerve Pygmalion.²⁵ This second reading indicates the revulsion towards female sexual agency Pygmalion exhibits in some accounts of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth. There is perhaps a known irony in this second interpretation of Galatea’s performance that resonates with the self-awareness of Atwood’s Penelope. There is a sense that both understand the need to reject the social expectations placed on their performance of gender

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

and their bodies in order to wield agency. In Galatea's case, this involves intentionally enlivening her limbs, making that which was intended to be stiff (sculpture) lithe. It is suggested that Pygmalion is drawn to her stillness, her silence, as 'play[ing] statue' did not deter him, and so it is through the subversion of this expectation that Galatea is finally free of him.

Another theme runs parallel to the reality of Galatea's agency as a living person: the expectation that, carved by and to the liking of Pygmalion, she would be as silent and compliant as an inanimate piece of art. Both versions of the Pygmalion myth outlined previously suggest that Pygmalion dislikes existing women and goddesses because of their ability to choose for themselves, be this to reject his advances or to profit from the desires of other men. He uses art-making to circumnavigate this problem, creating a sculpture, an art piece, that will embody the qualities he desires. He seeks to transfer the control one has as an artist over one's work to control over a life, specifically a female one. Galatea's purpose is determined for her in her very creation: she is made to unquestioningly love Pygmalion, or at least submit to his sexual urges and possibly procreative demands. Duffy extrapolates that Pygmalion, while seeking to forge a sexual and romantic relationship, would prefer his partner to remain as silent and as passive as a sculpture, evident in his disgust with Galatea's performed sexual pleasure. With the expectation of silence of course comes the issue of consent; Galatea was perhaps (if one was to lend Pygmalion a generous view) created so that she could be one half of a loving relationship, but she was definitely at least created to satisfy Pygmalion's sexual desires. There is a clear and insidious didactic link between art-making and the expectations placed on women, with art being used by typically male artists to set the parameters and ideals women are expected to perform within.

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Something different hangs in a mustard room. Two women in lavish dresses—one Aegean blue, the other gold—force a man down on a bed. His naked body is only partially covered by a mess of red and white sheets. The golden woman, Judith, firmly grips his hair in her hand, pushing his head back to expose his neck. His eyes roll towards

you. His final sight. Judith slices at his neck, sword orientated like a cross. Her face is set, but the truth of her eyes is concealed by her downcast gaze. Blood trickles down the bed.

*

Artemisia Gentileschi was one of the most accomplished Italian Baroque painters of the seventeenth century. She was the first woman admitted to the Accademia di Arte del Disegno in Florence and worked for an international clientele. In 1611, Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia's father, was working with fellow artist Agostino Tassi, painting frescoes in Palazzo del Quirinale and Scipione Borghese's Casino delle Muse.²⁶ During their partnership, Orazio asked Agostino to teach Artemisia about painting perspective, and during these lessons Agostino raped Artemisia.

*

I scratched your face and pulled your hair. The weather was wet when you came by. I was painting. You grabbed the palette and the brushes, threw them from my hands. Around the room. A handkerchief to the throat, to the mouth, so I could not scream.

*

Artemisia was seventeen at the time. Agostino promised to marry her, and under this expectation, she began a sexual relationship with him. He later broke this promise.²⁷ When Orazio learned of this from Artemisia, he pressed charges against Agostino, as Agostino had taken his only daughter's virginity. If Artemisia had not been a virgin at the time of her rape, the Gentileschi

²⁶ The National Gallery, 'Orazio Gentileschi', *The National Gallery* (2016-2021)

<<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/orazio-gentileschi>> [accessed 26 February 2021].

²⁷ The Art History Archive, *Artemisia Gentileschi* (2021)

<<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/baroque/Artemisia-Gentileschi.html>> [accessed 26 February 2021].

family would have been unable to take legal action. During the trial, Artemisia was accused of not having been a virgin when Agostino raped her and instead of having had many lovers. She was examined by midwives to determine whether or not she had lost her virginity recently.²⁸ The trial lasted seven months, during which it was discovered that Agostino had planned to murder his previous wife (who had been missing, presumed dead), and that he had raped her as well as his sister-in-law. Agostino was said to be obsessed with Artemisia, having prevented her marriage to another man, Modenese, who Orazio had arranged for her to wed. Agostino had hired spies to watch Artemisia, jealous of her interactions with other men. He had also bragged about taking her virginity. During the trial, Artemisia was tortured with thumbscrews, which involved having rope tied around her hands and pulled tightly. This was meant to prove that she was telling the truth, and seriously injured her. When she was asked whether Agostino had raped her, she responded with 'I have told the truth and I always will, because it is true and I am here to confirm it wherever necessary.'²⁹

*

These are your promises, this ring that you gave me. I was hoping to have you as a husband. I have told the truth, and I always will. I am here to confirm it. It is true. What I was doing with him, I did so that he would marry me. I was dishonoured. I was hoping he would marry me. I was hoping to have you as a husband, but now I don't. You have a wife. I have told the truth. It is true.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The National Gallery, 'Artemisia in her own words', *The National Gallery* (2016-2021)

<<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/artemisia/artemisia-in-her-own-words>>

[accessed 26 February 2021].

Agostino was found guilty, but following her disgrace, Artemisia had to leave Rome. She moved to Florence at the age of nineteen as a newly married woman, where her career took off. Gentileschi set up her studio at her father-in-law's home, on the Via del Campaccio, and like many Florentine artists, sought the patronage of the city's ruling family, the Medici. Her status as a female painter of religious work was unique among her contemporaries and soon earned her the attention she desired. Her patrons came to include the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo II de' Medici, his wife Maria Maddalena of Austria, his sister Caterina de' Medici, as well as other members of court.³⁰

Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is perhaps her most famous, depicting the story of Judith from the Jewish canon. The Assyrian king, Nebuchadnezzar, sends his general Holofernes to besiege Bethulia, a Jewish city. Judith, a beautiful widow, slays Holofernes in order to save her people. She sneaks into the Assyrian camp, finds and charms Holofernes, encourages him to drink enough wine for him to become intoxicated, then decapitates him with his own sword, saving the Israelites. She is sometimes depicted as being assisted by her maid.³¹

Gentileschi's Judith is capable, strong willed, and skilled. She holds Holofernes down with her knee, pushing his head back with her left hand to slice with her right. Her maid, similar in age to Judith, grips and restrains Holofernes' arms, leaning over him to push down with her body weight. Their eyes are downcast, focussed. Holofernes' legs seem to strain, angled as if to push

³⁰ The National Gallery, 'Artemisia's Florence', *The National Gallery*

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/mAXB-tT_zsB_Ww> [26 May 2021].

³¹ Angelica Frey, 'How Judith Beheading Holofernes Became Art History's Favourite Icon of Female Rage', *Art* <<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-judith-beheading-holofernes-art-historys-favorite-icon-female-rage>> [accessed 27 February 2021].



Judith Slaying Holofernes by Gentileschi, c.1612-1613

himself upwards, but he cannot counter the women's strength. There is divinity here: the sword angled like a cross, a sign of righteousness. Dark blood spatters Judith's and the maid's forearms, their fine gold and blue dresses rolled up at the sleeves; trickles down the bed, red and lush as the sheets. These women are dirty. They are confident. They are unleashed.

There is a marked difference between Gentileschi's work and that which came before it. It is particularly useful to contrast her *Judith Slaying Holofernes* with a painting by a male artist that also

depicts Judith's story, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Gentileschi's father was greatly inspired by Caravaggio, and his signature use of chiaroscuro (the contrast of light and dark that suggests the 'volume and modelling' of a painting's subjects) is surely from where Gentileschi's takes its lead.³²



Judith Beheading Holofernes by Caravaggio, c. 1598-1599 or 1602

In Caravaggio's composition, Holofernes lies inebriated on the bed, while Judith stands to the side, holding his head toward her by his hair, slicing at his neck with her right hand. Judith's face is illuminated, her expression a mix of fear, hesitation, reluctance, and disgust. She seems ill-prepared to carry out the murder. Her maid holds back her golden dress, saving it from the blood splatter.

³² The National Gallery, 'Chiaroscuro', *Glossary*

<<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/chiaroscuro>> [accessed 10 January 2023].

The maid is considerably older than the young Judith and looks directly at the dying Holofernes, eyes wide, face harsh. Holofernes' eyes roll towards Judith, hands clawing at the sheets. The painting has Caravaggio's signature dynamic use of chiaroscuro: the vibrant red, gold, and green accents emerging from the darkness, suggesting the scene is illuminated by candlelight; the deed carried out in the depths of night. Yet for all the painting's drama, the hesitancy in Judith's expression and how she holds the sword at arm's length undermines this. The act seems lacklustre, carried out by an unsure woman, unused to violence, not entirely comfortable in her own plan. This seems at odds with the story of Judith, who set out to seduce and murder Holofernes at the behest of no one but herself. Caravaggio's Judith is a patriarchal comfort: evidence that when women step out of their expected performance of the dutiful and quiet citizen, they will find discomfort, unpleasantness, and seek a swift return.

*

'[W]ith me Your Illustrious Lordship will not lose and you will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman'

- *Artemisia Gentileschi*

Letter to Ruffo

1649³³

*

Gentileschi was determined to be seen as an equal of any of her male peers, famously asserting to the collector Ruffo 'I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do.'³⁴ This resolve translates into her work.

³³ National Gallery, 'Artemisia in her own words'.

³⁴ Ibid.

Caravaggio's piece presents a scene that is closed off, where the characters only acknowledge each other; we as viewers are merely observers. Gentileschi's painting anticipates an audience. Some have suggested that Gentileschi's Judith looks like Gentileschi herself, which might



Left: Self-Portrait as a Lute Player by Gentileschi, c. 1615-1617; right: Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting by Gentileschi, c. 1638-1639

suggest that she was initially catering to a specific audience of people who knew about the trial against Agostino Tassi. Indeed, the composition for the piece was devised at the time of the trial.³⁵ Examining Gentileschi's self-portraits, there is some resemblance between herself and her Judith: both have similar builds, both are brunette, and there are perhaps similarities in their facial

³⁵ The National Gallery, 'Judith Beheading Holofernes', *The National Gallery* (2016-2021) <
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/artemisia/judith-beheading-holofernes>>
[accessed 27 March 2021].

structures. However, it is reductive to simply associate Gentileschi's own experience of rape and the trial with her work, and to view this piece as a straightforward outlet for revenge.³⁶

Gentileschi's piece holds within it a deep understanding of the expected physical and social subordination of women within her society and the rage this incites. *Judith Slaying Holofernes* deliberately contrasts that which came before, exposing without reservation the anger and determination of women like Judith without the patriarchal and social lenses we find in Caravaggio's work. A female truth. There is the knowledge that this is not simply a singular, personal anger, but a collective one. How many women have felt like this?

The viewer is implicated by Gentileschi, made witness. Caravaggio anticipates an audience through the lesson he appears to convey: that there is an innate meekness in women. But Gentileschi has Holofernes' eyes roll towards us, as if asking will you stop this—can you? Should you?

We are made a paralysed spectator rather than intervener through the very medium. There is a helplessness to Holofernes in Gentileschi's painting that we are asked to tap into in tandem with our feelings about Judith and her maid (a mixture of awe and horror). Holofernes is in some ways a representation of reversed gendered violence, intended to shock, to make us question, to make us think about the violence enacted against women behind closed doors, in the dark. To make us think about repercussions. Whose truths matter? Whose truths are recognised?

*

The blues scatter in pristine pixels, reach out and touch the dust motes, your hair, the fire exit sign at the back of the cinema. Waves that wash a Breton shore and crack upon the rocks, foaming out into the liminal space between fiction and you, where you can almost feel the sea spit. A woman stands rooted in the sand, striking in an emerald

³⁶ Ibid.

dress that's due to betray. She stares out at the water, her back to the audience. Holding onto her time, before she has to turn.

*

I want to talk about truth.

In Céline Sciamma's film *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), the role and intention of art-making is multitudinous and often in question. Set in France in the late eighteenth century on an undisclosed Breton island, the film follows artist Marianne as she is commissioned to paint a portrait of the elusive Héloïse. This portrait is to be sent to Héloïse's Milanese fiancé ahead of her arrival and marriage to him. Héloïse, not wanting to marry, initially refuses to sit for the painting, but over the course of the film and her central romance with Marianne, she relents, as the sessions become a fringe space between public view and Héloïse's future for the two women to explore their relationship. There is the sense that Héloïse trusts Marianne to imbue the portrait with a sense of herself that was lacking in previous artists' attempts, even commenting upon its completion that she likes Marianne's version much better than the others. The painting itself is designed to act as an introduction to Héloïse, to her beauty and her expected behaviour (silent, ornamental) before she can present herself on her own terms. It treats Héloïse as a commodity and sets a precedent she herself must follow. A passive image to fall in love with, rather than her true, headstrong self. Héloïse turned Galatea.

Truth only seeps into this piece by Marianne's hand, through the choice of brushstrokes, the way in which she angles Héloïse, the understanding she subtly imbues in Héloïse's expression. Sciamma elects never to show this portrait in its entirety in frame, choosing instead to pan up the painting as Marianne adds the final touches. The only time we get a glimpse of the full painting is when it is quickly boxed up for travel, angled away from us as the lid closes above it.



The final portrait of Héloïse, constructed from two shots in 'Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu', sourced from the online streaming platform MUBI

It is the works that aren't commissioned, those Marianne creates from choice, that are perhaps the most interesting in the film, offering us a look at female agency in art-making. The titular portrait, *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*, is a surreal piece in which Héloïse is depicted with the skirt of her dress on fire, inspired by a moment at a bonfire gathering Héloïse, Marianne, and maid Sophie attend, where Héloïse's outfit catches fire. The moment itself is so fleeting, Héloïse initially seemingly unmoved before collapsing as another woman puts out the flames, that at first it is neither frightening nor overly shocking. There are a few seconds where Héloïse simply acknowledges the fire and stands tall in it, locking eyes with Marianne. Perhaps she would be happy for the fire to take her. Perhaps she is simply stunned. Perhaps she understands what Marianne



Héloïse on fire, shot sourced from MUBI

sees, the artistic vision of it all. Sciamma's direction doesn't guide us towards a particular conclusion, although it is notable that the diegetic music in the form of a choir of women singing at the bonfire turns almost angelic at this point, signalling perhaps the pivotal moment of artistic inspiration.

Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu is the antithesis of the commissioned portrait of Héloïse. Here, Héloïse is depicted on the isolated plains of the island, turned away from the viewer, with her dress ablaze. She stands resolute, mysterious, intentions unknown. Her face, the main feature of the commissioned portrait, is hidden. There are many possible interpretations of this painting, and it is only through its surreal qualities that we can come to understand the many possible truths being conveyed. The flames could symbolise Héloïse's true, fiery nature, showing her to be at one with the element. They could also symbolise the end of the Héloïse that Marianne and the film's audience experience on the island: the Héloïse that was briefly free of social restrictions and expectations. Burning up.



The painting Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu, shot sourced and edited from MUBI

Marianne and Héloïse's performance of gender is simultaneously Butlerian and non-Butlerian: there is a question of audience. Where Butler argues that gender is performed to a present, continuous social audience, Marianne and Héloïse are almost off-stage, preparing a performance for a specific, future audience: Héloïse's Milanese fiancé and all who surround him, and the expectations of a heterosexual marriage Héloïse is intended to fulfil. The liminal quality of the island, in which Marianne and Héloïse are unobserved, acts as a place in which gender performance and sexuality are free from public scrutiny, where the truth of their natural inclinations and expressions can surface in both themselves and their art.

Myth is a mirror of this truth in the film. In one scene, Marianne and Sophie listen to Héloïse reading the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Orpheus is allowed to bring Eurydice back from the underworld and up to the surface for a new life, provided he doesn't look back to check that she is following him. If he does this, she will be lost forever. The women debate the meaning of the story. As Madeleine Pelling argues: 'For Marianne, Orpheus makes the "poet's choice", turning on purpose to condemn Eurydice and electing instead

to retain only the memory of her. For Héloïse, it is Eurydice who calls out to Orpheus, choosing to die again rather than return with him to the surface and life.³⁷

Marianne and Héloïse relate their own relationship to that of Orpheus and Eurydice. Throughout the film, Marianne has spectral visions of Héloïse in her wedding dress. The figment is always behind her and when she turns, her look dispels it, condemning it to its fate, just as Orpheus condemned Eurydice. Indeed, Marianne and Héloïse's responses to the story illuminate their feelings on the inevitable ending of their relationship, with Marianne only able to retain the memory of Héloïse, often recalling her through artistic expression, and with Héloïse only able to exert agency and choice in how and when she says her goodbye. The moment Marianne has been visualising becomes reality when Héloïse's mother returns to pay for the portrait and to gift Héloïse her wedding dress. In the middle of her wedding dress fitting, Héloïse chases after Marianne, who is leaving having completed the commissioned portrait. In what Pelling terms the 'liminal, transitory space of the hallway', with Marianne almost out of the door and Héloïse on the stairs, Héloïse calls out for Marianne, asking her to turn around, just as she imagines Eurydice calling to Orpheus.³⁸ Marianne does so, 'acknowledging Héloïse in her wedding clothes...cementing their respective, separate fates.'³⁹

Later, we see Marianne at an exhibition of her father's work, among which is a piece of her own that she submitted secretly under his name, depicting Orpheus and Eurydice's fatal goodbye.

³⁷ Madeleine Pelling, 'Recentring Peripheral Queerness and Marginal Art in Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019)', Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies, University of York, *Humanities* 2021, 10 (2), 73, (May 2021), p.6.

³⁸ Ibid., p.11.

³⁹ Ibid.



Marianne with her painting of Orpheus and Eurydice, shot sourced and edited from MUBI

An attendee comes over and talks with her, and when he compliments the painting she admits it is her work. He discusses how the piece differs from previous depictions: ‘Usually, he’s [Orpheus] portrayed before he turns or after, as Eurydice dies. Here, they seem to be saying goodbye.’⁴⁰

The resonance of Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship is hidden within the painting: a secret truth embedded at the core of its meaning. By harnessing mythology, Marianne is able to express her feelings and experiences as a queer woman, even if the depths of her truth are unknown to the public. Sciamma even has Marianne wear the same royal blue as the painted Orpheus, creating a visual alignment. Marianne’s use of the myth legitimises her relationship with Héloïse by showing it to be as important and valid as heterosexual love at a time when queer relationships bore serious social and religious repercussions.

⁴⁰ *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*, dir. by Céline Sciamma (Pyramide Films, 2019) [on demand].

There are layers to the feminist explorations of Sciamma's film, as indeed there are in all the texts discussed, and which centre upon historical and mythical revisionism. Each setting and character is a vehicle for each artist's exploration of feminism, be that to pull out issues from the past, or to project their present concerns upon, providing an audience with a visual or written parallel. Sciamma presents this concept within Marianne herself—just as Sciamma uses eighteenth century France as the backdrop of her story, Marianne uses ancient Greece: each reaches back, revises, seeks terms within which to express the new.

There are a series of private artworks within the film as well, which only Sciamma's audience, rather than Marianne's, are privy to. The first is a quick, unpolished painting Marianne creates at the behest of Héloïse, depicting maid Sophie's abortion, where Héloïse poses as the woman performing the procedure.



Painting of Héloïse and Sophie, shot sourced and edited from MUBI

Sciamma has stated that this was inspired by writer Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement*: an autobiographical novel within which Ernaux discusses an illegal abortion she had in 1963, and how it led to her thinking about depictions of this act, how there were no 'great' artworks that represented it, that could be seen by the public, hanging on gallery walls across the world.⁴¹ The moral debate surrounding abortion is omitted from Sciamma's film, leaving a simple provocation: the thought that niggles, thinks of the many other difficult subjects put to canvas, and wonders why this one, this female experience, should be unable to be among them. Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie all know the painting will never be seen, meaning it simply acts as an expression of something important to them, an experience they make a commitment to remembering, rather than hiding it away under the taboo and unpleasant. Reframing the action.

The second and third pieces are portraits Marianne sketches for herself and Héloïse to keep. Marianne makes a pocket-sized replication of the commissioned portrait of Héloïse for herself.

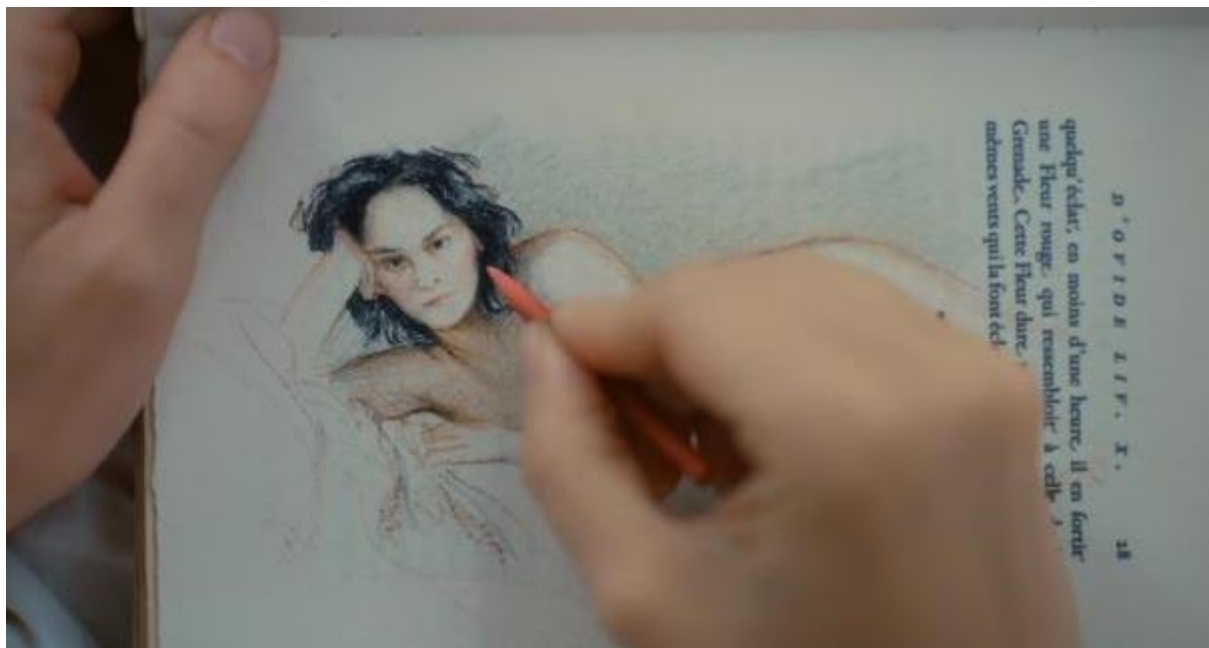


Replication of the portrait of Héloïse, shot sourced from MUBI

⁴¹ Pelling, 'Recentring Peripheral Queerness', p.9.

Though it is a copy of the commissioned portrait, something Héloïse distances herself from by saying to Marianne ‘[a]fter a while, you’ll see her when you think of me’, noting their separate natures, the size of the portrait highlights its private and personal nature, intended for only one set of eyes at a time (and, as is the case for a lover’s portrait, for one set of eyes only).⁴² By copying the official portrait, the piece becomes inconspicuous; were it ever to be seen by anyone other than Marianne it could be passed off as a practice piece, or a small sketch that influenced a larger, commissioned piece. Much like Marianne’s painting of Orpheus and Eurydice, its resonance with Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship is hidden within it, known only to the artist.

Héloïse’s choice is bolder, asking for a sketch of a nude Marianne. This is produced on page twenty-eight of Héloïse’s copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: a still hidden but more explicit allusion towards Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship.



Portrait of Marianne, shot sourced from MUBI

⁴² *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*, dir. by Sciamma.

In many ways, this piece is the one that holds the clearest truth of their relationship. The drawing itself is almost a hybrid of the two women, as Héloïse holds the body's pose as a reference for Marianne, while Marianne uses a mirror propped against Héloïse to capture her own face. Their bodies become fused on the page.

The private and the public collide artistically in another commissioned portrait of Héloïse, painted by a different artist, which Marianne sees at the gallery exhibition years after their time together on the island. Here, Héloïse is depicted with her child, the product of her marriage to her Milanese husband. On Héloïse's lap lies Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She holds her place in the book with her finger, paused on page twenty-eight. A private truth, and signal to Marianne were she ever to view it, of a memory held close.



Left: Portrait of Héloïse and her child; right: close-up of Metamorphoses and page twenty-eight, shots sourced and edited from MUBI

There is knowledge here of the ways in which women have hidden their truth within art displayed for the public; how this is sometimes the only option left to artists and subjects when their truths are taboo, or would endanger them in their society. Héloïse plants a message within this painting, a piece of her own, personal truth, just as Marianne does in her painting of Orpheus and Eurydice. Gentileschi's work functions similarly, using mythology as a guise for her own experiences, her own exploration of oppression and the desire to bring justice to the marginalised. Duffy's Galatea breaks free of her own artistic constraints by subverting her desired form into the powerful and uncontrollable.

In many ways, each of these pieces of art function in the way Penelope's famous shroud does. Penelope's shroud, detailed in Homer's *Odyssey* and Atwood's *Penelopiad*, is a device Penelope uses to delay having to choose a suitor to marry. She weaves the shroud each day and claims that once it is completed, she will marry. What she keeps hidden, the truth woven into its very fabric, is that every night she unpicks sections of it so that the work will take her longer and she can delay her decision.

Each piece discussed in this essay is imbued with a hidden truth by its (real or fictional) female artist. When faced with set parameters for gender performance, be they through social or artistic cues, each woman finds a way to break free of or subvert the mould laid out for them. Atwood, Duffy, Gentileschi, and Sciamma set up this analysis within their work to provide readers and viewers with the critical tools to move forward with their own dissection of contemporary gendered constructs, to break free of them yet again, and further the process of feminist liberation. Art once again becomes a public tool. Art instructs in a new way.

*

In this one she is a broken column, spine cracked marble, body held together by white leather straps. Medical. Face full of nails, bleeding. In another she is dual, twinned with herself. One of her wears a white lace dress, spotted with blood that drips from a severed artery, from her torn-apart heart that lies open at her breast, wounded. The other

wears a bold blue, yellow, and olive Tehuana dress, heart full. She holds hands with herself. Both look to you. Sometimes she is a wounded deer.

The exhibition guide draws you down corridors of soft eggshell and rich azure walls, along face after face after face. One looks out at you, canvas ready and brushes to hand. She is angled in blue and red, contrasted by swirls of cropped black hair and a gold hoop earring. Another raises her slim eyebrows at you, coral lips pressed together, as if judging the moment, considering speech. Another is swathed in strokes of cobalt and sky blue, dress sleeves billowing. She looks out; hands poised over an easel.

In this room she is with you; sitting face to face in the gallery space. Ambromović, the pamphlet informs. Her lush red dress pressed into a wooden chair. Plait gently lopped over one shoulder. Breathing. Staring. An artist ready to meet your gaze. Ready for you to look.

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Notes

The following sculptures and paintings were referenced in order in the opening section beginning '[f]ingers reach for the vaulted ceiling...'

The Rape of the Sabine Women by Giambologna (sculpture)

The Rape of the Sabine Women by Nicolas Poussin (painting)

Faun and a Girl by Max Slevogt (painting)

The following painting was referenced in the section beginning '[s]omething different hangs in a mustard room...'

Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi

The following paintings and performance pieces were referenced in order in the final section beginning '[i]n this one she is...'

'The Broken Column' by Frida Kahlo (painting)

‘The Two Fridas’ by Frida Kahlo (painting)

‘The Wounded Deer’ by Frida Kahlo (painting)

‘Self Portrait’ by Lois Mailou Jones (painting)

‘Self Portrait’ by Georgette Chen (painting)

‘Self Portrait (5)’ by Amrita Sher-Gil (painting)

‘The Artist is Present’ by Marina Abramović (performance piece)

The sections beginning ‘I scratched your face and pulled your hair’ and ‘These are your promises’ are radically paraphrased from Artemisia Gentileschi’s own comments at her trial. The record of these was found at the National Gallery webpages ‘Artemisia’s Rape Trail’ and ‘Artemisia in her own words’.

‘Wearing the open flowers and withered flowers upon my body’: Myth,
barbaric feminism, and ecofeminism in Hiromi Itō’s *Wild Grass on the
Riverbank*

Hiromi Itō’s long-form narrative poetry collection, *Kavara Arekusa*, translated as and hereafter referred to as *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, draws directly from traditions and elements found within Japanese mythology and folklore. In particular, Itō reinvents the sekkyō-bushi folktale, while also echoing figures from Japanese myths such as female yōkai. A modern, subversive, and feminist take on the sekkyō-bushi format, *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* follows (and is told from the perspective of) a young, unnamed, female protagonist as she grapples with life as a migrant, shuttled between Japan and America as her family is moved back and forth by her mother, a narcissistic and neglectful poet. Although the young girl remains unnamed throughout the text, Jeffrey Angles, who translated *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* into English, notes that Itō often refers to her in essays and conversation as Natsukusa, and so I shall refer to her using this name throughout.¹

Wild Grass on the Riverbank takes after many Japanese myths and folktales by being concerned with the fringes of society: both the literal, in-between spaces, such as the edges of towns which are caught between wilderness and civilisation, and the people and creatures who inhabit these spaces. The folk stories known as sekkyō-bushi stemmed, as Nobuko Ishii states, from a ‘culture of outcasts’² as they are stories that were told by ‘performers [...] described as

¹ Jeffrey Angles, ‘Translator’s Preface’, *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, trans. by Jeffery Angles (Indiana: Action Books, 2014), p.11.

² Nobuko Ishii, ‘Sekkyō-bushi’, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 44:3 (Autumn 1989), 283-307 (p.286)

beggers who sang or chanted their tales' in the medieval period.³ Angles notes that sekkyō-bushi also focus on outcast and young protagonists, and are 'elaborate, extended folktales' where 'frequently children or adolescents [despite] their young age [...] undergo appalling hardships, and in some cases are even sold into slavery.'⁴ The stories are often resolved by the protagonists transcending these difficulties, sometimes assisted by divine intervention, and on occasion they are even able to 'punish their torturers.'⁵ Many of these children are a mōshigo: a child given to noble parents in response to their prayers to a Buddhist deity, whose fate it is to be cast out of the family and lose their 'wealth and position', later to seek vengeance on their tormentors.⁶ Their transformations from the downtrodden into the vengeful often happen in natural, liminal spaces on the edge of civilisation, caught between the urban and the wild.

In many sekkyō-bushi, the natural landscape is a place in which protagonists can disappear from society, can enter a state of in-betweenness, caught between their past and the future that is fated for them. It is the freedom of this liminality which allows them to forge new identities. In the famous sekkyō-bushi, *Sanshō-dayū*, protagonist Zushiō-maru escapes his and his family's abusive captor, Sanshō-dayū, after being aided by his sister, Anju. He then spends his days wandering the countryside as a beggar until he is able to exact his revenge, cutting off Sanshō-dayū's head with a humble bamboo saw.⁷ A similar fate befalls the titular character of *Shintoku-maru*, who—following a curse cast by his stepmother that leaves him blind, suffering from leprosy, and an outcast—is advised in a dream to seek the Kumano Shrine (which enshrines the three Kumano mountains, Hongū, Shingū, and Nachi). He navigates life in the countryside, assisted by

³ Ibid., p.298.

⁴ Angles, 'Translator's Preface', p.10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ishii, 'Sekkyō-bushi', p.288.

⁷ Ibid., pp.289-290.

his former fiancée, Princess Oto Z, before eventually managing to restore his health and behead his stepmother.⁸

In addition, many supernatural figures, creatures, and apparitions in Japanese folklore exist in a liminal state; between life and death, between civilisation and total wilderness. For example, a yōkai, which may take the form of a ‘mysterious creature...monster or fantastic being, a spirit or sprite’, is partly defined by their liminality.⁹ As Michael Dylan Foster notes:

They are creatures on the borderlands, living on the edge of town, or in the mountains between villages, or in the eddies of a river running between two rice fields. They often appear at twilight, that gray [sic] time when the familiar seems strange and faces become indistinguishable. They haunt bridges, tunnels, entranceways and thresholds. They lurk at crossroads.¹⁰

It is notable that there is a large subset of yōkai who take the form of women. As author Aoko Matsuda notes, Japanese folklore is ‘riddled with female ghosts and spirits’ who ‘[deviate] wildly from the way that women are demanded to be by Japanese social norms’.¹¹ These include figures such as the kuwazu nyobo, also known as futakuchi-onna (“the wife with a small appetite” who has a second mouth in the back of her head);¹² the yuki-onna (the “snow woman” who preys on

⁸ Ibid., pp.290-291.

⁹ Michael Dylan Foster, ‘Introducing Yōkai’, *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (California: University of California Press, 2015), p.5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Aoko Matsuda, ‘Female Ghosts and Spirits from Japanese Folklore Ranked’, *Electric Lit* (October 2020) <<https://electricliterature.com/female-ghosts-and-spirits-from-japanese-folklore-ranked/>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

¹² Ibid.

weary travellers);¹³ and the rokurokubi (a woman whose neck stretches in her sleep, causing her head to roam freely). Many of these creatures have the ability to appear normal, but constantly exist alongside a shadow version of themselves.

Between the female yōkai and the adolescent protagonists of sekkyō-bushi, quite a significant portion of Japanese folklore concerns itself with the experiences of historically marginalised, oppressed, and seemingly powerless social groups. Further to this, natural landscapes and the animalism of supernatural creatures appear to be posed in direct contrast to patriarchal society, creating a flexible, malleable otherness that allows marginalised groups to express their inner feelings and desires, or grow into the person they need to become, free from society's gaze.

Wild Grass on the Riverbank draws heavily upon the themes of liminality, migration, and identity found in sekkyō-bushi, as well as the troubling of social expectations for women that is embodied by female yōkai. The text also examines ideas explored in ecofeminism, investigating through the characters of Natsukusa and her mother how—for better and for worse—female figures interact with and exert control over natural landscapes as a means to create and protect both an identity and a space in which they can be free from patriarchal society. Within ecofeminist thinking, the link between women and the natural world has often been posed as an antithesis to patriarchy. As Carolyn Merchant posited in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, in the context of a Western, capitalist society, 'the rise of modern science, technology, and capitalism produced and relied on the death, domination, and exploitation of a nature gendered female', and that the 'cultural subordination and exploitation of women' in this culture

¹³ Zack Davisson, 'Yuki Onna — The Snow Woman', *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai: Translated Japanese Ghost Stories and Tales of the Weird and Strange* (December 2013) <<https://hyakumonogatari.com/2013/12/18/yuki-onna-the-snow-woman/>> [accessed 1 November 2022].

‘reinforced and reflected’ this view.¹⁴ Ecofeminism has a history of drawing upon the celebration of women and their bodies, particularly of cisgender women’s ‘putative life-giving’ qualities which are often seen as translating to an holistic ‘ability to care for and protect the earth...from ecological disharmony.’¹⁵ Thus, the domination of the environment becomes synonymous with the domination of women’s bodies, and the reclamation of it a defiance of patriarchal capitalism.

However, the theory has previously leaned towards universalist ideologies that caused it to lose favour. In the 1980s, Angela Davis (amongst others) argued against the ‘oneness and benign nature of shared womanhood’ posed by early ecofeminist theory, noting that the oppression of women across a wide spectrum was far more complex and tied to ‘other kinds of stratification’, such as racism.¹⁶ This highlighted the idea that because no woman’s experience could be considered to be consistently similar or equal to another’s due to the different forms of oppression that might affect different women, their ‘ways of being and thinking’ could not, as previously thought and argued for, be indicative of a universally shared experience of womanhood.¹⁷ Charis Thompson notes that certain ideas about or ‘visions of nature’, in particular those which evoke a ‘pristine nature [...] have been used — implicitly and explicitly — in legislation against immigrants’.¹⁸ Third-wave feminists have also been deeply critical of the previously ‘white, middle class ethos and uptake’ of ecofeminism, which was irrevocably damaged by essentialist ideas about

¹⁴ Charis Thompson, ‘Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms’, *Isis*, 97:3 (September 2006), 505-512 (pp.505-506).

¹⁵ Ibid., p.506.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.507.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.506.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.510.

women and ‘regional-, class- and ethnocentrism’ which failed to recognise certain aspects of society.¹⁹

Fortunately, in recent years, ecofeminists have rightfully made strides in increasing the number of voices heard in and contributing to ecofeminist theory. As Elizabeth McNeill notes, ‘through “allyship”, ecofeminist activism has seen increasing efficacy in the last two decades by becoming more inclusive of Indigenous women’s perspectives’.²⁰ Equally, Karen Warren asserts that

an ecofeminist ethic...Not only recognizes [sic] the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, ethnic considerations, it centralizes [sic] those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses [...] developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature.²¹

Warren also notes that ecofeminist theory must be ‘contextualist’, accounting for the difference in ‘material realities’ of women across the world, which are frequently not comparable.²² Building upon this, Ash Değirmenci Altın concludes that ecofeminism must ‘take into account the differences among women from postcolonial geographies without homogenizing [sic] them into a single category’ if it is going to succeed in asserting both a wider range of voices and more nuanced

¹⁹ Ibid., p.507.

²⁰ Elizabeth McNeill, ‘Indigenous and Ecofeminist Reclamation and Renewal: The Ghost Dance in Silko’s Gardens in the Dunes’, *Humanities*, 11:79 (June 2022) (PDF), p.2.

²¹ Ash Değirmenci Altın, ‘Postcolonial Literature and Ecofeminism’, *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. by Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023), p.357.

²² Ibid., p.358.

arguments.²³ Delving further into the woman-nature relationship, Nelam Jabeen considers that this must be portrayed as ‘multifaceted, determined by the material conditions of...characters’.²⁴ Jabeen is also critical of previous, idealised Western views which only saw the woman-nature relationship as symbolic, rather than as a reality for many women across the globe whose ‘bodies are treated as land where their only function is to reproduce.’²⁵ It’s clear that nuance was and still is required in ecofeminist theory, and an intersectional approach must continue to be applied going forward.

In many ways, Itō’s work follows on from Davis’s, troubling the pristine vision of ecofeminism—in which some women are often viewed as the ‘natural...inhabitants and guardians of Mother Nature’s garden in an antipatriarchal and [often] prelapsarian imaginary’—to present something more nuanced and in alignment with Jabeen’s viewpoint.²⁶ Indeed, Itō’s work also echoes some of the complex themes present in the Gothic genre, evoking what Catherine Spooner terms ‘barbaric feminism.’²⁷ This is a feminism which relates ‘the story of the wild girl’, echoing what Ellen Moers termed ‘the savagery of girlhood’ found in Gothic texts such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (in which Catherine Earnshaw’s ghost takes the form of her childhood self,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p.360.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Thompson, ‘Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms’, p.507.

²⁷ Catherine Spooner, ‘Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of the Gothic’, *Edinburgh University Press* (May 2019) (PDF) <<https://academic.oup.com/edinburgh-scholarship-online/book/30975/chapter-abstract/263919785?redirectedFrom=fulltext>> [accessed 29 January 2023], p.7.

drawing a link between her youth and the haunting supernatural).²⁸ Barbaric feminism is offered as a contrast to the pristine and maternal connotations of some ecofeminist theory, presenting ‘savage girlhood’ instead as a ‘freedom and oneness with nature prior to assuming the burdens of adult femininity’ which resists ‘reason, modernity, and enlightenment’ in favour of ‘wild, unconstrained, [and] violent passions.’²⁹ Barbaric feminism rejects an enforced, tamed morality connoted with ‘adult femininity’, in which women might be expected to revoke any sense of wild and youthful freedom in favour of embracing the patriarchal standards of ‘reason [...] and enlightenment’ that serve the righteous visions of womanhood and motherhood that they are expected to embody as adults.³⁰

Throughout this essay, I will explore how Itō invokes barbaric feminism in conjunction with ecofeminist theory in *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* in order to provide a more nuanced view of the relationship between women and nature. In particular, I will explore how Itō recognises that this relationship is shaped by various factors, including migrant status and the liminality of migrant life. I will also investigate how Itō challenges the early ecofeminist visions of a pristine and morally righteous link between women and nature by presenting two differing models of this relationship in her characters Mother and Natsukusa, and in particular how the tenets of barbaric feminism are echoed within each of them.

The text opens during a period of immigration with the poem ‘Mother leads us on board’, as Mother tries to take Natsukusa and her little brother, Zushiō, to somewhere currently unknown (it is worth noting here that Zushiō is named after the younger brother in *Sanshō Dayū*; Itō wears

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p.8.

³⁰ Ibid.

her influences clearly).³¹ They board a series of ‘cars and busses / [t]hen...planes / [t]hen...more busses and trains and cars.’³² Eventually, they end up in an immigration hall where Natsukusa, in her child’s mind, can only understand that they seem to have ‘bad passports’,³³ before they continue to travel seemingly without destination: ‘no matter how many times we arrived, our journey still did not end.’³⁴

Finally, they arrive in what appears to be California, a dry land at the mercy of the Santa Ana winds which Natsukusa thinks of as ‘the wasteland.’³⁵ At the airport, they are met by a man with whom Mother, unbeknownst to the children, is romantically involved with, and the family goes to live in his house. Despite the urban setting of a bricks-and-mortar home, it is in the wasteland where Itō first develops a connection between Mother and the natural landscape. In ‘We live in the wasteland’, Natsukusa considers the Santa Ana winds:

The winds of Santa Ana blew

The winds that blew from the desert

Were strong, hot, and dried up everything

They burned the mountains, burned the forests, and clouded the skies with ash

And who was she? Who was Santa Ana?

Where did she come from?

Why did she burn everything

³¹ Angles, ‘Translator’s Preface’, p.10.

³² Hiromi Itō, ‘Mother leads us on board’, *Wild Grass on the Riverbank* (Indiana: Action Books, 2014) p.23.

³³ Ibid., p.27.

³⁴ Ibid., p.28.

³⁵ Itō, ‘Mother takes us to the wasteland where we settle down’, p.29.

With such savage ferocity?

Was there something she hated?

Was she someone's mother?³⁶

This section not only imbues the environment with a female identity, referring to the winds using she/her pronouns as drawn from the feminine Santa Ana, it also aligns Natsukusa's understanding of the winds with her understanding of her mother. Natsukusa identifies in the wind a 'ferocity', an ability to 'burn everything', something that hates, and then wonders whether she is 'someone's mother', clearly associating these emotions with what she understands a mother—her mother—to be.³⁷ Itō further develops this understanding of Mother by indicating the ways in which she openly neglects her children, seemingly prioritising her own needs and desires instead. This is evident when she immediately begins to speak English to the children when they reach the wasteland, saying to them '[l]et's not use Japanese any more' despite it being unclear how much English the children may or may not know.³⁸ It is also apparent in how she openly prioritises her sex life above her children, sometimes causing them to see or hear things of a sexual nature.³⁹ Equally, the children never seem to enrol in school; in fact, later in the text when the children return to Japan and live on the riverbank, Itō makes it clear that 'school' is an unknown word to them: 'Leftover bones were scattered on the riverbank, human shapes would / flicker there like flames / They were talking about something called 'school''.⁴⁰ One could view Mother's behaviour as simply destructive: that like the Santa Ana winds, Mother prioritises only her own path and does

³⁶ Itō, 'We live in the wasteland', p.34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Itō, 'Mother takes us to the wasteland where we settle down', p.30.

³⁹ Ibid., p.29.

⁴⁰ Itō, 'We make our way in', p.63.

not care how much of her children's past, present, or future she burns up in the process. However, Mother's behaviour could also be seen as an act of survival. Like an uprooted plant, she is trying to naturalise herself in the US as quickly as possible by speaking the dominant language (English) and engaging in a procreative act with a US native (who she later has a child with). Itō presents Mother's actions in a way that is often free of an internal, textual morality, instead allowing us to see the emotional duality of Mother's experience and how external factors impact her choices. The text, like barbaric feminism, rejects the "righteous" 'reason, modernity and enlightenment' of patriarchal thinking, presenting a nuanced image of womanhood and motherhood: one that isn't idealised, but rather that simply is—subject to change and built in response to the pressures Mother faces, particularly as a migrant.⁴¹

The connection between Mother and the ecological environments the family inhabit becomes even more apparent and direct when she proceeds to purchase and grow vines that trail all over the house:

The potted plants mother bought were all tropical vines, their leaves were thick, and they grew with water and light, the ends of the vines grew long, eventually the vines began to climb up on their own, if you supported them on a pole, they'd climb up and up without stopping, if you didn't support them, the vines would crawl all over the house⁴²

The prose nature of this section of the text imitates the growth of the vines—seemingly continuous and without much pause (as indicated by the lack of full stops), conveying just how overwhelming Natsukusa finds the experience. The speed with which the growth seems to happen also lends this action a disturbing, supernatural quality, while Mother's involvement in the process creates a

⁴¹ Spooner, 'Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of the Gothic', p.8.

⁴² Itō, 'We live in the wasteland', p.34.

deeper sense of the link between her and natural environments: both her desire for them, as well as her ability to control them. As Natsukusa considers the vines, she notes that their new ‘father’ soon proceeded to ‘[get] sick’ and began resting in bed, saying that he said ‘when Santa Ana’s winds blew and dried out the air, he felt like his whole body was coming apart.’⁴³ Soon, father, who was once ‘tan and strong’ becomes ‘thin as a rail’, and can no longer stand up.⁴⁴ It isn’t long before he becomes a desiccated corpse that Mother decides to keep in the basement.⁴⁵

The suddenness of his decline seemingly correlates with the growth of the vines, the strength of the winds, and thus Mother’s domination of the house. What at first could be considered a simple attempt by Mother to make part of the house her own by introducing and nurturing the plants becomes more insidious, as Natsukusa witnesses increasingly confusing and disturbing interactions between Mother and the vines:

The vines writhed their way across the house

Mother squatted and watered them

The vines sucked up the water, grew bold, and slid their way inside her vagina

Mother walked around with the vines dangling from her vagina⁴⁶

Mother’s relationship with the vines could be interpreted as one of co-creation, which has both a sexual aspect and a birthing aspect. The vines that ‘[grow] bold’ and enter Mother mirror penetrative sex, while the vines that ‘dangl[e]’ from her evoke the imagery of birth, as if they are rooted in and grown from Mother’s womb.⁴⁷ It could be that this relationship Mother has with the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.37.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.35.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

vines is procreative and collaborative, and is why Mother is the only figure who tends to and controls them. However, it also seems that, in some way, the vines are an extension of Mother: both her physical body and her emotional expression. Like the *yōkai*, she exists alongside a hidden, interior version of herself, that which desires natural environments as well as a sense of control, and this begins to reveal itself through the vines. Through an ecofeminist lens, the vines are how Mother asserts herself over what was previously a predominantly masculine, ecologically-free household. By combining the natural and the urban, Mother creates a liminal space in-between civilisation and nature in which to exist—which Japanese folklore (particularly *sekkyō-bushi*) suggests is where the marginalised groups of women and children typically thrive and find (brief) respite from their troubles. Mother is arguably creating, under this logic, her perfect environment.

Throughout the book, Mother also seems to consistently use and dry up her male lovers, often using them to obtain a level of security in the form of property ownership, then discarding them as she creates her own space around the bones they have provided her with. In many ways, these men act as the foundation—the soil to Mother as a metaphorical plant which she dries out but never nourishes in return. This becomes especially apparent when Mother, Natsukusa, Zushiō, and little sister (an unnamed sibling who is the product of Mother's relationship with the American) travel back to Japan, after mother tires of their life in America and the environment which constantly dries things up, desiring the richness of Japan's cherry trees: 'Mother dreams of seeing the cherry trees again [...] But let's go home, let's go home, and see the cherries in full bloom.'⁴⁸ When they return to their house in Japan, they find the shrivelled corpse of Natsukusa and Zushiō's father, seemingly holding down the property in their stead.

It is worth noting that, throughout the book, death in humans functions much like death in plants does, where even though one form of the plant may die, if you give it time and if the

⁴⁸ Itō, 'Abandonment', p.43.

roots are good, it may grow and return again the following year. Figures who Itō tells us have died are also reminiscent of the folkloric *yūrei* ('ghosts'): people who have a 'lingering attachment' or 'unfinished business', and who can walk through the world as if they were still alive.⁴⁹ As Foster notes, '[i]f you did not know they were dead, you might not notice anything odd about them.'⁵⁰ Though Natsukusa's various fathers are labelled as corpses, and though they are not as physically capable as some *yūrei*, they can often wheeze or move in a way that suggests speech and motion; trapped in a stasis somewhere between life and death. This again appears to be Mother's doing, and though the method by which she causes this is unclear, it does mirror the way in which a skilled horticulturalist may leave a plant alone until it is the correct season to promote that plant's regrowth. In the case of Mother, she leaves behind her various husbands almost as if to give them some time to recover and regrow, before she can begin to use up their resources once more. This process too rejects the nurturing idealised vision of womanhood, instead embracing barbaric feminism's wilder, more violent tendencies. When the family returns to Japan, they find the house in a state of disrepair:

We thought we would be going back to that house

Then when we finally reached it

The house was abandoned and overgrown

The roof and walls were crumbling

The grass was overgrown

Behind it was the riverbank.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Foster, 'Introducing *Yōkai*', p.24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Itō, 'We leave the wasteland and go home to the riverbank', p.44.

However, Mother doesn't seem to view this as a problem, reacting very differently to everyone else:

As mother walked into the abandoned, overgrown house, she called out, we're home, we heard the barking of dogs, lots and lots of dogs, we were frightened out of our wits...but mother didn't budge, she fixed her gaze triumphantly on the pack of dogs and raised her voice, it's me, it's me, and when she did, one of the big male dogs shook his back and laid down in front of mother, she said look, it's Atlas, you remembered me, what a good boy, what a good boy, and the insanely huge dog started whimpering, covered its ears, and rolled over on its back, pretending to be powerless⁵²

Mother approaches the pack of dogs, which may or may not have once been domesticated, and knows that she can subdue them. It is clear that she has held power here before, having created a hierarchy of command which she sits at the top of. Once again, the prose nature of this section and its run-on sentences mirrors both the anxiety Natsukusa feels—flitting from one detail to another and another, making rapid observations—as well as the speed at which Mother operates, how quickly she takes over and dominates a space once more.

This home is also covered in vines, a staple of Mother and her preferred, liminal environments: 'Vines in the grass caught at our feet, vines dangled over our heads / As mother tried to slide the door open, the vines that coated it tore away / And the door came out of its track and broke / Grass had grown inside too, creeping across the tatami.'⁵³ This is clearly Mother's territory. Inside they find their first father (another partially alive 'corpse'), and they proceed to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p.45.

live in the house for a period of time.⁵⁴ However, it isn't long before Mother, restless as ever, decides that the house isn't enough:

Mother, who was having so much sex
With the vines inside, left the house and said,
I want to live on the riverbank,
I want to become the riverbank
I hate living in a house that doesn't let the breeze move through,
It hurts, it itches later, it even makes me swell up,
I don't want to have sex with the vines anymore,
I hate my life of vines⁵⁵

It is notable that Mother wants to 'become the riverbank', to seemingly assimilate fully with the natural landscape.⁵⁶ That she doesn't want to 'have sex with the vines anymore' confirms that the actions Natsukusa observed in the wasteland were a form of sexual intercourse, but also suggests that this is how Mother has so much control over both the environment and its reproduction, as if she has entered into deal with it (which may or may not be consensual) that she now seeks to transcend.⁵⁷

Mother moves the children, the corpse, and the pack of dogs into the riverbank, and at first they live in an overgrown 'gateball [sic] court'.⁵⁸ She explains that this is much better than the house: 'The house where we were just now was no good, / The breeze doesn't move through it at

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Itō, 'We live at the riverbank', p.49.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.51.

all, / It has a roof and walls and little else, I don't understand why it should be so hard to live there, / Open places are better, they feel fresher, they're brighter...I wish we could live here forever, / Surrounded by the grasses.⁵⁹ The way in which Mother states that she '[doesn't] understand why it should be so hard' to live in the house suggests that, in some ways, she herself can't understand why she is so drawn to the natural, why she cannot make herself conform to urban living.⁶⁰ Perhaps Itō is suggesting that a love of the natural is something so integral to her feminine interiority that it simply cannot be denied.

Equally, it could relate to Mother's status as a migrant, always moving from place to place, with only the natural world—free from social structures and judgements—to claim as truly her own. The riverbank as a location, caught between the town and the wildness of the river itself, also echoes the in-between spaces which *yōkai* typically inhabit ('the borderlands, living on the edge of town'), as well as the countryside in which the protagonists of *sekkyō-bushi* roam.⁶¹ If we consider Mother as akin to the *yōkai*, and Natsukusa as the lead of a feminist *sekkyō-bushi*, it becomes clear that the riverbank will be a place of either comfort or transformation for both respectively.

It is also at the riverbank where Itō truly begins to explore how the natural environments of Mother and Natsukusa's world connect with and relate to the feminine through a series of narrative themes and characterisations. Firstly, the male characters do not thrive at the riverbank. The current father is of course already a corpse, but the living Zushiō reacts extremely badly to riverbank, as if he is allergic to the plants: 'He had spots all over his body like he'd been bitten, he was scratching / His eyes were bloodshot, his face and hands had swollen up like balloons.'⁶² It is

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.51-52.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.52.

⁶¹ Foster, 'Introducing *Yōkai*', p.5.

⁶² Itō, 'We live at the riverbank', p.52.

clear that the natural landscape of the riverbank does not connect to or bargain with the masculine as it does the feminine. Secondly, it is at this point in the tale that Natsukusa, perhaps as a psychological reaction to the turmoil and neglect she is experiencing, invents an imaginary friend, a girl called Arekusa, translated into English as Alexa. Personified from the made-up plant that Itō created for the piece, *Kawara arekusa*, literally ‘riverbank’ (kawara) and ‘wild grass’ (arekusa), Alexa represents the riverbank itself in a female form. However, it is worth remembering that this is Natsukusa’s perception of the riverbank, as something which is an embodiment of womanhood, rather than an innate truth posed by Itō outside of Natsukusa’s point of view.

What is perhaps most notable is how the plants on the riverbank become slowly drawn to Natsukusa as she begins to age. Throughout the text, Natsukusa acts as Itō’s feminist sekkyō-bushi protagonist, embodying both of the popular main character types that Angles observed, as she begins the tale as a child who then grows up into an adolescent.⁶³ In many ways, *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, while being a dark, adult tale filled with themes of placelessness, liminality, migration, and sex, is also a coming-of-age story.

In *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*’s world, Natsukusa’s puberty (it’s difficult to say what her exact age is at any point, though it’s clear that she does age) is connected to this idea of the female and the natural. She obsessively begins to learn the names of the plants on the riverbank, translated in the English text from their katakana syllabary names to their Latin names: *Verbena brasiliensis* (Brazilian verbena), *Conyza sumatrensis* (Fleabane), *Solidago altissima* (Tall goldenrod), *Sorghum halepense* (Johnson grass), and *Erigeron canadensis* (Horseweed).⁶⁴ She picks up this knowledge with ease, having learned some of it from her mother, and some of it from a book on plants. She often plays with their names, inventing figures from them, as if they are living friends (clearest in her

⁶³ Angles, ‘Translator’s Preface’, p.10.

⁶⁴ Itō, ‘A guide to the plants in this book’, pp.98-100.

invention of Alexa). However, as the family continues to live on the riverbank, and as Natsukusa likely ages into a teenager, the plants of the riverbank take a more sinister, sexual interest in her:

I heard something slithering along abruptly, no sooner had I heard this than a tendril trapped my heel, it hit me, and knocked me on my back into a bush...the tendril stretched all the further, crawling onto my body...creeping into my vagina, I inhaled and exhaled again and it slid further in, my body was turned this way and that like the leaves of the kudzu, my body opened and closed over and over⁶⁵

This assault mirrors the sexual way in which mother connects with the environment, and raises the question of whether, in this world, in this family, in order for women to connect to or gain control over a natural space, they have to do so through the meeting of the feminine (themselves) and the masculine (the phallic plants). As if the feminine enters into a deal with the masculine to transform and control a space. This perhaps also reflects both Mother and Natsukusa's statuses as migrant women who must traverse through a multitude of different border control systems in order to find their home. Particularly for Mother, men—especially romantic and sexual relationships with men—play a large role in her ability to ground herself in either America or Japan, and perhaps even validate her citizenship in the eyes of immigration systems. The stability men provide her with by being a constant within each country is the root of her ability to settle in either location. It is this base which she then builds upon once that initial deal has been struck.

This ability to control and further develop natural spaces and elements, though at a cost, is similar to the reclamation of ecological spaces explored in ecofeminist theory, where to do so means to take it from or enter into a deal with patriarchy. Mother bargains with nature in order to create something that she can call her own, but, perhaps in parallel to her 'bad passport' at the beginning of the text, has to do so at such a high cost because of her status as a woman, perhaps

⁶⁵ Itō, 'Michiyuki', pp.68-69.

even as a migrant woman.⁶⁶ Her ability to assert herself anywhere in the world comes with a level of difficulty, and for as unsympathetic and neglectful as Mother can be, Itō once again does indicate a sense of tragedy here. There is also an echo here of Spooner's barbaric feminism, that mode of thinking and being that recognises the 'freedom and oneness with nature' a young girl may have 'prior to assuming the burdens of adult femininity.'⁶⁷ In a patriarchal world, Mother returns to this earlier love for nature as a means through which to assert herself because of the ways in which she is viewed and treated as a migrant woman with a 'bad passport'.⁶⁸ Her transformation of urban spaces through the vines, as well as her desire to live at the riverbank, may also reflect a need for a familiar comfort as much as it might a need for domination. Mother's narcissism and neglect of her children make her far from the ideal of the harmonious 'guardia[n] of Mother Nature's garden' posited by some early ecofeminist theory, but through presenting the ways in various patriarchal and national societies treat her because of her migrant status, Itō asks us to consider the tragedy of Mother's situation.⁶⁹ Like many of the female yōkai in Japanese folklore, she's complicated, having both an element of sorrow about her as well as danger, and she seems to understand that without systemic change, she will always be on the fringe of society, always having to bargain for space, for a home. Like the yōkai, her liminality defines both her sense of self and the options available to her.⁷⁰ For a time, it seems as if Natsukusa could be forced to follow this same path, as signalled by the encounter with the assaulting vines.

⁶⁶ Itō, 'Mother leads us on board', p.27.

⁶⁷ Catherine Spooner, 'Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of the Gothic', p.8.

⁶⁸ Itō, 'Mother leads us on board', p.27.

⁶⁹ Thompson, 'Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms', p.507.

⁷⁰ Foster, 'Introducing Yōkai', p.5.

It is also notable that, when Natsukusa is being assaulted, she imagines that the same is happening to Alexa. If we take Alexa to be Natsukusa's personification of the riverbank who also experiences the same trauma as Natsukusa, we can perhaps sense an underlying development in which Natsukusa is increasingly starting to align herself with the natural world, though the assault demonstrates that she cannot yet wield any control over it. In addition, the English translation of Natsukusa's name is 'summer grass', further twinning her with Alexa, who represents 'wild grass', and creating a sense of sisterhood between Natsukusa and the natural world.

As the story progresses, the police come to the riverbank after hearing '*reports of child endangerment and abuse*',⁷¹ and as chaos ensues as the children initially fight back before retreating further into the riverbank, Natsukusa's mind finally clears enough for her to understand that she must 'take charge' and get Zushiō and little sister away from Mother and the riverbank: 'I had to get out of there / I had to leave.'⁷² At this point, Alexa disappears from the tale: Natsukusa, thanks to this moment of clarity, labelled by Angles as a 'bold, psychic resolve', no longer requires her imaginary friend.⁷³ Itō has also said that this revelation was inspired by the determination of Otohime (Princess Oto 乙姫) in the sekkyō-bushi *Shintoku-maru*, further linking Natsukusa to the characters of these folktales.⁷⁴

Now, it is Natsukusa's turn to lead the family's migration. She takes Zushiō and little sister back to America, to the wasteland. However, prior to their journey, she has a revelatory conversation with an older man who often frequents the riverbank. Presented throughout the text as a sinister presence in the form of a pervert who comes to the riverbank to pleasure himself, it's

⁷¹ Itō, 'September -th', p.76.

⁷² Itō, 'Kawara Alexa, or wild grass on the riverbank', pp.86-87.

⁷³ Angles, 'Translator's preface', p.14.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

perhaps surprising that, when confronted, he details such an important piece of knowledge to Natsukusa. In many ways, this echoes the ‘plot twists’ and ‘melodramatic moments of reconciliation’ that Angles notes were common embellishments of the sekkyō-bushi, and signals Natsukusa’s final push through the ‘grotesquerie [sic]’ and hardship of the sekkyō-bushi format into a resolution.⁷⁵

When speaking to the man, Natsukusa asks him if he can identify a ‘grass with white spikes of seed’ she doesn’t recognise, and he says that it is ‘*Paspalum urvillei*’⁷⁶ (Vasey grass).⁷⁷ When she asks him why it wasn’t listed in her plant book, he explains that it was first discovered in ‘1958 in northern Kyūshū, so it’s newly naturalized [sic] here.’⁷⁸ He then explains that the word ‘naturalize [sic]’ is written using the characters for ‘return’ and ‘change’, and that this is what people call plants that have ‘come from somewhere else and settled down’.⁷⁹ The parallel here between the concepts of naturalised plants and naturalised migrants is clear. Indeed, throughout the text, Itō only ever names plants that have been naturalised in both Japan and California, representing Natsukusa’s own experiences and identity. Once Natsukusa understands this idea of returning and changing, it becomes clear that she feels confident that she can naturalise herself, Zushiō, and little sister back in the wasteland.

The journey to California is still fraught with the same obstacles and issues as before, with Natsukusa bearing witness to other displaced migrant families and the unwelcoming, bigoted response they receive. She is told yet again that there is a ‘dirty spot’ on her passport, and must

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.10.

⁷⁶ Itō, ‘Kawara Alexa, or wild grass on the riverbank’, p.87.

⁷⁷ Itō, ‘A guide to the plants in this book’, p.99.

⁷⁸ Itō, ‘Kawara Alexa, or wild grass on the riverbank’, p.87.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

answer questions on how long she has been away from America.⁸⁰ She is told 'In order to solve this problem, / You have no choice but to transform / So that you look like those who grow here naturally...(Be carried from your native land to foreign soil, where you will grow wild and propagate)'.⁸¹ Once Natsukusa, Zushiō, and little sister are successfully through immigration, Natsukusa finds hope in seeing other, naturalised migrants:

Everything overgrown shone luxuriant green

They spilled out in large numbers

Alexa kawaransis

Erigeron canadensis

Sorghum halepense

Ones who were not born here naturally but that had transformed into ones
who had

The passersby [sic] and the ones going home

Came outside too

Beside me, *Conyza sumatrensis* started speaking to *Verbena brasiliensis*⁸²

That Itō shows Natsukusa thinking of the migrants as akin to plants further stresses how deep Natsukusa's connection to and understanding of her ecological environments has become. Like Mother, she uses horticultural knowledge as a template around which to form her life. However, where Mother appears to have been trapped in cycles of life and death, of her own narcissism and abuse, Natsukusa's outlook is one of continued life, one where she, like a plant, can continue to transform and naturalise as is required. It's a template that isn't without its difficulties, but it is

⁸⁰ Itō, 'We leave the riverbank and return to the wasteland', p.90.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp.90-91.

⁸² Ibid., p.91.

ultimately more bountiful. As Natsukusa looks on at the migrants beginning or continuing their life in America, she thinks: “The ground was covered, blooms spread across the earth...Amazing, a truly amazing sight.”⁸³

Natsukusa, Zushiō, and little sister finally reach their old house in the wasteland, where they converse with a neighbour who recognises them and asks them where they have been. He explains that while they were gone, some things burned up in the mountain fires, but that some came back to life: ‘It’s Spring / And this year, / The biggest rain in a hundred years fell, / Things that died, things that didn’t / All of them came back to life all at once, / You too.’⁸⁴ To their surprise, they find that the father they left behind is alive and well: ‘the law of the plants had extended to this man who had been our father, living had become more commonplace than dying for him, it had become possible for him to return [...] Father spoke in a voice as grand as a giant tree thousands of years old.’⁸⁵ He welcomes them home gladly.

Having finally ended her journey in a prosperous environment, Natsukusa further connects with her ecological powers, having become a confident and safe young woman. In the final scene of the text, she takes herself out to an area where the ‘air is moist’, the ‘grass spread out’, and where the moss that ‘[grows] at the base of the trees’ and ‘on the rocks and sloping earth’ have ‘microscopic stems’ that ‘fertiliz[e] [sic] in a tumultuous free for all’.⁸⁶

In the middle of the wasteland, I spread out my arms and legs wide and
crouched down
And that’s how I grew a stem

⁸³ Ibid., pp.92-93.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.93.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp.94-95.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.95.

A bud was born from the tip of the stem
It swelled
And swelled
And opened
And took in everything
The stem continued to grow
Giving birth to one bud after another
[...]
Wearing the open flowers and withered flowers upon my body
I continued to grow stems
I grew them with all my might⁸⁷

This eco-mythical, fantastical ending could be read simply as a metaphor, as Natsukusa determinedly naturalising herself in America in order to provide the home and safety Mother never did. However, if we read it as Natsukusa's mythical reality, it's possible that this final scene shows Natsukusa harnessing her own power over nature, and doing so on terms she finds acceptable. Though like Mother, Natsukusa uses existing natural organisms for fertilisation (here, the 'microscopic stems' of the 'moss'), her method of co-creation with nature is less sexual and less invasive than Mother's.⁸⁸ Perhaps because Natsukusa and Mother have differing personalities, the knowledge Natsukusa has acquired is different, more reflective of her outward-facing approach, a stark contrast to Mother's narcissism and her internal procreative methods. Natsukusa's lack of self-involvement is reflected in the way in which she grows her plants. Unlike Mother, who seemingly grew them from inside herself, Natsukusa appears to sprout them from the outside of

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp.95-96.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.95.

her body, as indicated by the way she ‘wear[s] the open...and withered flowers upon [her] body’.⁸⁹ Natsukusa’s environments are grown with the goal of providing, of creating a safe space for both herself and her family, rather than as a never-ending extension of herself. They are built outwardly, with other people in mind. The repetition in this section of the text further cements the abundance of Natsukusa’s growth, both her literal botanical growths, as indicated by the ‘stem’ that bore a bud ‘from the tip of that stem’, a bud that ‘swelled / And swelled’—but also her developing emotional growth which acts as the cathartic moment of the tale.⁹⁰ In another subversive twist on the sekkyō-bushi format, it is not the destruction of something (such as the murder of a tormentor) that determines Natsukusa’s safety and freedom, but the creation of her own environment, having escaped that which was destructive.

In using the contrasting examples of Mother and Natsukusa, Itō explores some of the ideas present in ecofeminism, such as the connection posed between women and nature, while transcending the essentialisms and imagery that activists like Davis condemned. In *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*, the connection between women and nature is not shown to be an innate, magical good, nor is it tied to the problematic Euro-centric ideas of the past. Instead, the need for and connection to natural spaces is a direct result of having a migrant identity in a world that isn’t friendly towards migrants. In this way, Itō also reflects themes present within Japanese folklore and in particular sekkyō-bushi by drawing upon these tales’ use of the natural world and their equation of it with socially outcast and marginalised groups.

Equally, Itō’s work—in particular her characterisation of Mother—rejects the idea that women are innate ‘guardians of Mother Nature’s garden’, instead providing a more nuanced approach to ecofeminism which discards the nurturing ideals and morals that can be projected

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.96.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.95.

onto women when they are equated with a nature gendered female.⁹¹ By lending Mother a fantastical, supernatural quality, Itō also evokes the female yōkai who reject their society's standards for women, and whose desires manifest in disturbing, complicated, and sometimes even tragic ways. In both *Mother* and *Natsukusa* we witness the 'burdens of adult femininity', the need to navigate a patriarchal world as both a woman and a migrant, and the complexity that comes with this.⁹² Both Mother and Natsukusa as an adult and a young adult respectively return to the 'savagery of girlhood'⁹³ and the 'freedom and oneness with nature' posed by barbaric feminism as a means through which to create their own, separate identities.⁹⁴ Neither of these connections to nature is innately good, but rather simply neutral, indicated by Itō to be more reflective of each individual woman's identity and her choices, free from the idealised feminine, nurturing icon. In other words, Itō's representation of a connection between women and nature is a more realistic reflection of various femininities, priorities, and characteristics, shaped by both personality and circumstance.

Itō uses the *sekkyō-bushi* format and a subversive feminist lead in *Natsukusa* in order to further draw out the relationship between nature and marginalised groups that Japanese folklore has always been acutely aware of, and in doing so rejects the 'white, middle class ethos and uptake' of early ecofeminism and addresses complex issues surrounding migration and shifting identities.⁹⁵ Itō still challenges patriarchal society and control by showing how her characters battle and bargain

⁹¹ Thompson, 'Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms', p.506.

⁹² Spooner, 'Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of the Gothic', p.8.

⁹³ Ibid., p.7.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.8.

⁹⁵ Thompson, 'Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms', p.507.

with it almost daily; however, there is no simple binary in which the urban completely equals the masculine, and the natural completely equals the feminine. Rather, Itō indicates a more nuanced bargaining process, in which the feminine must navigate the masculine in order to reclaim and develop both urban and natural spaces. In addition, Itō indicates that, ultimately, the relationship between women and the natural world is dictated by each individual woman's choices, for better and for worse. This ability and freedom to be changeable is ultimately more liberating than some of the prescriptive gender roles posed by early ecofeminism, and by drawing upon Japanese folklore and the liminality explored within it, Itō expands upon the ways in which it is possible for women to develop their relationships with both nature and their own identities, furthering the theory in a way that accounts for greater autonomy and individualism.

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Thesis Reflection

*Please note that all quotations from my poetry collection, *The Island Witch*, have been redacted.*

When I first designed and developed this thesis in 2018, the creative component—the poetry collection which would become *The Island Witch*—was a direct response to the Western publishing landscape of the time and the mythological retellings which were popular on the market, such as Stephen Fry’s *Heroes* and Neil Gaiman’s *Norse Mythology*. These retellings, particularly Fry’s *Heroes*, focus heavily on male figures—indeed, only one female figure, Atalanta, leads a story in *Heroes*, alongside seven male counterparts.¹ This lack of popular examination of female characters from mythology—whose stories and perspectives have often been overlooked, sidelined, and dismissed throughout history—was something I was (and still am) keen to address. In the years that have followed, the publishing landscape has changed, and now in 2023 features many mythological retellings that centre female characters. This is particularly true in fiction, where novels focussed on female figures from Greek mythology have become popular. These include Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Natalie Haynes’ *Stone Blind* and *A Thousand Ships*, Constanza Casati’s *Clytemnestra*, Claire North’s *Ithaca*, and Jennifer Saint’s *Atalanta*, *Ariadne*, and *Elektra*.

This trend has partly extended to poetry, indicated by the publication of collections such as Nikita Gill’s *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters*, which explores many Greek female figures, and Fiona Benson’s *Vertigo & Ghost*, the first section of which explores the Greek god Zeus as a serial rapist and examines female characters including Medusa, Semele, and Callisto.² Work from small presses, such as Lisabelle Tay’s pamphlet *Pilgrim*, also touch upon female

¹ Stephen Fry, ‘Contents’, *Heroes* (London: Michael Joseph, 2018), p.x.

² Fiona Benson, ‘Part One: Zeus’, *Vertigo & Ghost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), pp.3-41.

mythological figures such as Eurydice³ from Greek mythology, as well as Chang'e⁴ and the selkie from Chinese and Celtic folklore respectively.⁵

It's clear from these English language publications, however, that there remains a heavy focus on Greek mythology. Indeed, classical Greek and Roman mythologies have often been attributed a higher sense of value within Western publishing due to a history of their use in canonical literature (for example, in acclaimed work from the Early-Modern period onwards). Their continued prevalence was evident in poetry collections I had read years prior, such as Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, Rowan Ricardo Phillips' *The Ground*, and Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*. Recent fiction trends have only compounded this.

This prevalence and assigned value was something I wanted to challenge in my own work by drawing upon mythological figures from all over the world in addition to classical mythologies. As a result, *The Island Witch* features characters from Chinese, Japanese, South American, Greek, Scottish, and Indian myths, legends, and folktales, among others.

I was also keen to create a poetic reimagining of these cultural figures and stories. This was for several reasons. Firstly, the malleability of poetic forms—in particular the ability to use free verse to break formal conventions—seemed perfectly suited to myths and folktales. These stories are often strange and fantastical, charting the courses of gods and mortals, the transformations and lives of inhuman creatures, and the shaping of earthly and celestial worlds. The introduction of magic can tilt characters off their axis in an instant. Human and inhuman realms collide suddenly. Figures hide their true selves beneath sheens of social convention, or in elaborate and convincing disguises. Stories are constantly unravelling and shifting, and I felt being able to convey

³ Lisabelle Tay, 'Letter to Orpheus', *Pilgrim* (Birmingham: The Emma Press, 2021), pp.10-11.

⁴ Tay, 'Lunar Gossip', p.9.

⁵ Tay, 'Selkie', p.6.

this through a variety of poetic forms would be both artistically liberating and suitably reflective of the nature of myths, legends, and folktales.

Secondly, I wanted to write poems that explored the personal emotions and experiences of my chosen female subjects. Myths can be retold in a very “A to B” fashion: events are recounted in third person, and while the actions of characters are charted, we aren’t always given much insight into how they *feel* about these. In examining overlooked female figures, I delve into their emotional lives to bring to the fore an aspect of their characters that had been left out in previous accounts (as appears to be a goal of some recent fiction retellings). Furthermore, in using poetry I engage with the lyric poem—that which ‘expresses the speaker’s personal emotions and feelings’—while also giving myself room to explore a range of perspectives through different forms and modes of address (first, second, and third).⁶

Thirdly, because I wanted to consider multiple female figures from across various world mythologies, I felt that a poetry collection would be an appropriate format for this, as I could dedicate a poem or sequence to each individual and develop the form of the pieces in response to each story. The freedom to deploy various forms across the poems, I felt, would be a way of creating distinctive perspectives, while the ability to use first, second, and third person would enable me to create further variation. In addition, handling stories from various cultures required a great deal of sensitivity to avoid appropriation while still creating a collection with a diverse range of figures. It was important to me that the focus of the poems be on the characters’ internal lives, as well as the story beats that continue to make tales resonant, rather than speaking to any sense of national or cultural identity. This is because, as an English woman, I simply cannot speak to those feelings and experiences, nor would it be my place to try. Several other works have handled

⁶ Poets.org, ‘Lyric Poetry’, *Poets.org* (2023) <<https://poets.org/glossary/lyric-poetry>> [accessed 12 September 2023].

mythological material in this way. For example, Tay's *Pilgrim* includes within it the figures of Chang'e,⁷ Sir Gawain,⁸ Eurydice,⁹ and the selkie, from Chinese, English, Greek, and Celtic mythology respectively.¹⁰ Equally, Gaiman's novel *American Gods* features characters from Norse, Slavic, Germanic, West African, Egyptian, and Christian pantheons. Each does this without speaking to or for specific cultural experiences, but rather delights in both caring for and recontextualising their source materials for a modern audience (Tay in exploring the internal voices of her chosen characters, and Gaiman through creating a fantastical, modern American odyssey). The ability to highlight facets of the lyric poem gave me a way to further emphasise my focus on the emotional lives of my subjects, while the freedom to also switch to second and third person for some poems gave me an opportunity to create a sense of separation, so that I would not be seen as speaking for certain groups or cultures.

Finally, poetry has always been a part of imparting mythology, with many stories being passed down orally via epic poetry, performance, and song, as evidenced by Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* as well as the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. As such, I felt that poetry would be an interesting medium through which to reconnect with and recontextualise these tales.

The socio-political backdrop against which I was developing this collection also played a role in my writing and decision-making processes, particularly when it came to which contemporary concerns I wanted my work to reflect. As Jack Zipes notes, these stories maintain relevance through reinvention, defying any canonical or static form that reflects the 'hegemonic

⁷ Tay, 'Lunar Gossip', p.9.

⁸ Tay, 'Sir Gawain in the Forest', p.12.

⁹ Tay, 'Letter to Orpheus', pp.10-11.

¹⁰ Tay, 'Selkie', p.6.

interests of the [now obsolete] bourgeoisie.¹¹ Instead, they must be remoulded, shaped to mirror our own, present concerns; a practice I was keen to engage in. In 2017, the Me Too movement, which encourages women to share their experiences of sexual assault and violence, began to gain steam, and the years that have followed have rightfully brought about a societal reckoning, with previously silenced victims speaking up.¹² Though this doesn't permeate all of my poems, it was an experience I felt drawn to reflecting. This work, I feel, acts as a continuation of feminist myth and folktale retelling practices that stem back as far as the 1970s, spearheaded by writers like Angela Carter, whose fairy tale and folklore reinventions in *The Bloody Chamber* centre female characters and explore a range of then-contemporary concerns, including the societal dissection and hyper-sexualisation of the female body (as discussed in my essay 'Dissected Bodies').

It is my view that it is worth continuing to develop and build upon feminist retellings of myths, folktales, legends, etc, as a means through which to explore our own contemporary concerns; that this practice must continue as we both understand more about histories and stories which have been neglected, and as we continue to tackle feminist issues in our current time. It's also worth noting that current feminists are still facing some of the same issues our forerunners did. For example, I drew upon my research into the work of Angela Carter and Helen Oyeyemi

¹¹ Jack Zipes, 'Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1 (1987), 107-110 (PDF)

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254933625 Fairy Tale as MythMyth as Fairy Tale](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254933625_Fairy_Tale_as_MythMyth_as_Fairy_Tale)> [accessed 11 January 2023], p.2.

¹² Holly Corbett, '#MeToo Five Years Later: How The Movement Started And What Needs To Change', *Forbes* (October 2022)

<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2022/10/27/metoo-five-years-later-how-the-movement-started-and-what-needs-to-change/?sh=6810f9435afe>> [accessed 14 September 2023].

and their preoccupation with the dehumanising fragmentation and dissection of female bodies, an issue which continues to this day, especially in media like adverts and films. I was particularly interested in developing this in the poems ‘Peacock’ and ‘Hunger’.

‘Peacock’ is based on the story of Draupadi, a key female figure in the *Mahabharata*. When she is won in a dice game, Draupadi is subjected to lewd remarks and an attempted disrobing. I explore this story beat as a way of considering the dissection of female bodies through certain lenses, as well as the ways in which women might desire to regain control, particularly through transformation:

[REDACTED]

Here, I focus on how having one’s body segmented, exposed, and hyper-focused on by another can make one feel [REDACTED], as well as how one might try to ground oneself in one’s body in order to feel in control and autonomous [REDACTED]. The desire to transform into something animalistic, into a [REDACTED], and turn the exposed chest into a spectacle of one’s own making, a [REDACTED], further reflects the desire to regain control over how one’s body is presented and perceived, rather than being subject to someone else’s dissecting gaze.

‘Hunger’ draws upon the Japanese folktale figure of the futakuchi-onna, also known as the kuwazu nyobo: a creature which takes the form of a woman with a second mouth in the back of her head.¹³ She is the physical manifestation of repressed female hunger, using her hair to grab food and feed herself in secret. While this poem draws upon the figures of the female yōkai from Japanese mythology and the way in which they typically hide their true selves, as expounded on in

¹³ Aoko Matsuda, ‘Female Ghosts and Spirits from Japanese Folklore Ranked’, *Electric Lit* (October 2020) < <https://electricliterature.com/female-ghosts-and-spirits-from-japanese-folklore-ranked/> > [accessed 21 September 2023].

my essay “Wearing the open flowers and withered flowers upon my body”: Myth, barbaric feminism, and ecofeminism in Hiromi Itō’s *Wild Grass on the Riverbank*’, I also explore another instance of the female body being monitored, this time through food:

[REDACTED]

I draw upon the pressure that women can face to maintain certain beauty standards, in particular thinness, and how food—or rather a lack of food—plays a part in this; how eating so little and in a dainty, “ladylike” way can be viewed as a mark of beauty and integrity, even if it leaves women undernourished. I consider how women might, to some extent, play into certain facets of expected gender performance, particularly when it comes to the aestheticization of the female body. This was also partially inspired by Carter’s work, in particular the heroine of her short story ‘The Bloody Chamber’, who becomes aware of the ways in which her husband, the murderous Marquis, views her, and begins to somewhat complicitly play the sexually passive ingenue (as detailed in ‘Dissected Bodies’). In ‘Hunger’, I wanted the speaker to have a particular aesthetic awareness, something I feel that contemporary women are often expected to have in their performance of gender, especially alongside the rise of modern technology and social media, and the curation and promotion of “perfectly” posed bodies online:

[REDACTED]

This hyper-awareness of how to present oneself in order to satisfy certain expectations of gender performance is rife in our current society, particularly online. Women have often faced this kind of pressure, as noted in Carter’s and Oyeyemi’s work, but I believe that it continues to be a contemporary concern that has only been compounded by the modern online world. In 2017, a UK study found that 35% of girls aged 11-21 said that their biggest online worry was comparing themselves to others, leading Labour MP Jess Phillips to state that the pressure to be perfect online leads women to try to ‘reach some unattainable goal of how our faces, bodies, homes and lifestyles

should be' and that this 'seeps into real life', leaving women feeling 'inferior' in both their work and personal lives.¹⁴ This pressure to perform is explored in 'Hunger', as the story of the futakuchi-onna is permeated by the pressure and expectation to play a particular kind of idealised woman who exists on little-to-nothing, maintaining a very docile, thin, and subservient image, free of wants, needs, desires, or satisfaction.

In addition, the emergence of Me Too left me preoccupied with voice, particularly female voices that had been silenced and how and why this had happened. The news stories about now convicted sex offender and former Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein were rife throughout much of the time when I was writing this project, steeped in abusive power dynamics and silenced women as it became clear that he and others had worked for decades to hide his sexual crimes. These stories and the Me Too movement permeate my work, particularly the poems 'Prophecy', 'Medusa', and 'Repetition [Echo ii]'.

'Prophecy' draws upon the story of Cassandra from Greek mythology. Given the gift of accurate prophecy by Apollo, Cassandra had this privilege stripped from her by him when she refused his sexual advances. Her prophecies would remain truthful, but no one would believe her. This notion of an altered, silenced voice, as well as the attempt to tell a story and have it be believed—particularly when the silencing is a direct result of not submitting to a male figure's sexual advances—permeated the Me Too years, and I felt strongly that I wanted to make this the focus of my Cassandra retelling. I was particularly keen to reflect this alteration in voice formally, ultimately developing a form of redaction:

[REDACTED]

¹⁴ Sarah Marsh, 'Girls suffer under pressure of online 'perfection', poll finds', *The Guardian* (August 2017) < <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/23/girls-suffer-under-pressure-of-online-perfection-poll-finds> > [accessed 24 September 2023].

I convey that Cassandra's voice has been deliberately tampered with—as if Apollo is blocking out certain words in her speech—to explore the idea of bodily autonomy and voice being taken away. The reader is implicated so that they themselves can't see the words that Cassandra is trying to impart. Cassandra's story hinges on the idea that she cannot be believed because there is no one who can truly comprehend her messages, so I use blocking/redaction to place the reader outside of the message and Cassandra's voice. The reader's body fails them as much as Cassandra's fails her.

In addition, the language used around sexual assault is explored in 'Medusa'. In Greek mythology, Medusa, a devout priestess of Athena, was turned into a gorgon as punishment after she was raped by the god Poseidon in the Temple of Athena, as this was considered an act of desecration. I was struck by the way in which Medusa's rape is often referred to as desecration, and that it is this that is treated as the crime, not the rape itself. It reminded me of the way in which rape continues to be mischaracterised, evident in recent high-profile cases like that of Brock Turner, which the poet Fiona Benson appears to draw upon in *Vertigo & Ghost* (outlined in 'Dissected Bodies'). Turner's father was famously quoted as saying that his son shouldn't have been jailed for '20 minutes of action', cruelly misrepresenting the assault of Turner's victim, writer and artist Chanel Miller.¹⁵ This desire to not name rape accurately is strongly paralleled in Medusa's story, and I chose to reflect this in the lines [REDACTED].

Furthermore, I explore themes of coercion in the sequence centred around Echo, particularly in 'Repetition [Echo ii]'. In Greek mythology, Echo is cursed by Hera to only have an

¹⁵ BBC News, 'Brock Turner: Stanford sex attack swimmer freed from jail', *BBC News*

(September 2016) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-37259537>> [accessed on 18 September 2023].

echo for a voice, after Echo distracted Hera so she would not notice her husband Zeus' affairs. This means that Echo can only repeat what is said to her, often picking up the ends of sentences. I was struck by how easy it would be for people to abuse Echo's curse, particularly as a way to make her say specific words and consent to or deny certain actions. As a result, 'Repetition [Echo ii]' only consists of words Echo is forced to speak:

[REDACTED]

Here, someone takes advantage of Echo's curse, first by treating her as a plaything that repeats individual words and tongue twisters. Then, when they realise how successful this has been, they move into trying to sexually coerce her and get her to make sexual advances by repeating their phrases: [REDACTED]. This only stops when a third person intervenes: [REDACTED].

These poems are a direct reflection of the stories and concerns around sexual consent and abuse that permeated the period during which I was writing, and which we still continue to grapple with today.

I was also influenced by my research into the deployment of fragmentation as a feminist, critical strategy by writers, as detailed in 'Dissected Bodies'. In particular, Adrienne Rich's observation that fragmentation permeates female life—which is often divided up by social obligations such as childcare and domestic labour that society often assigns to women—influenced some of my creative and critical writing. Rich notes that as a mother, her writing practice had to be completed in snatches of time outside of her caring duties, making it difficult to achieve the 'freedom of mind' to commit to long periods of thinking without her 'attention [being] suddenly snatched away.'¹⁶ As a consequence, her writing and her authorial identity were formed from a

¹⁶ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34:1, Women, Writing and Teaching (Oct. 1972), 18-30, p.24.

series of fragments. It is this lived experience of fragmentation that forms the basis for deploying fragmentation as a critical, feminist strategy. Benson and Oyeyemi develop this in their work, as their protagonists are also forced to find their identities through a series of fragments. As I argue in ‘Dissected Bodies’, I also feel what Rich is discussing applies to the ways in which women often come to understand and critique certain social and feminist issues—working through (often deliberate) obfuscation by patriarchal systems to coalesce a series of information understood in snatches and form a cognitive whole. This method of thinking is replicated in my critical work through the deployment of a creative-critical structure, wherein my analysis is punctuated by prose sections that reflect real-world experiences and contemporary, feminist concerns. It is important to me that my analysis does not exist in a vacuum, but rather directly connects to current issues and encourages the reader to put pieces together, much like work such as Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* does. This is reflected in the sections focused on advertising, film, and other media in ‘Dissected Bodies’, and the gallery sequences and pieces of ekphrasis in “After a while, you’ll see her when you think of me’: The Crafted Woman and Female Agency’.

I also explore the idea of identity being formed and conveyed through fragments through formal choices in my poetry. This is deployed in the sequence centred around Demeter and Persephone, as well as the series of Echo poems.

In the five poems focused on Demeter and Persephone, I engage with the epistolary form. In Greek mythology, Demeter and her daughter Persephone are separated after Hades abducts Persephone so that she can be his wife in the underworld. Demeter tries to get her back, but because Persephone has eaten food from the underworld (six pomegranate seeds) it is decided that she cannot leave forever and must instead spend six months of the year in the underworld, and six months with her mother. This separation is the focus of my poems and caused me consider how these two figures might communicate when apart. Following my research into fragmentation,

letters seemed to be the perfect format, as they themselves are fragments of recorded time. By the time one receives a letter, what it details has often already happened, with senders passing small portions of their lives between each other. Much like Rich, I considered what time these characters might have to themselves amidst their various duties (Demeter as the goddess of the harvest, and Persephone as the queen of the underworld) and thought about the snatches of time in which they might be able to communicate with one another, and so the epistolary format was developed, becoming the place where their familial relationship can continue to take shape.

Equally, the sequence centred on Echo was also inspired by my research into fragmentation. I was particularly struck by how both Benson and Oyeyemi's protagonists begin to self-actualise across fragments of text and wanted to produce something similar for Echo. Across the four poems in this series, I wanted the reader to gradually get closer to Echo's voice and perspective. 'Curse [Echo i]' details the moment of Echo's curse, in particular her desperation to regain some control over her voice and understand how speech now functions for her: [REDACTED]. 'Repetition [Echo ii]' as noted earlier is written in Echo's voice but only reflects the words others force her to repeat. 'Lamentable Tragedy [Echo iii]' keeps the reader at a distance once again, using the format of a playscript (something I was keen to engage with given Greek myth's long history with theatrical performance), but there is a sense of Echo's thought processes and desires as demonstrated by her actions, particularly when she goes to clap by Narcissus' ear in an attempt to get his attention. Finally, 'Narcissus [Echo iv]' is written from the first-person perspective of Echo's internal monologue—the only place where her thoughts can truly be voiced now. The reader must work through these different formats before they are given access to Echo's internal voice, reflecting Echo's struggles to be heard and understood—charting her attempts to break through across the sequence.

Overall, my creative and critical work has been shaped by the publishing landscape against which it was developed, the socio-political backdrop of the time in which it was written, and my

research into the work of feminist myth, folklore, and fairy tale retellings, in particular my analysis of fragmentation as a formal strategy. By widening the scope of my collection to include stories from various world mythologies, rather than just classical Greek and Roman, and by using a range of poetic forms, I believe my creative work offers an original contribution to the current publishing sphere, balancing the intricacies of diverse representation while sensitively handling different cultural material. I also believe that my poetry continues a necessary tradition of feminist retellings, speaking to current social concerns and strategically reinventing myths to dissect such issues.

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