

# Diplomarbeit

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“Universal Truth(s)?  
Politics, Metafiction and the Theme of  
Storytelling in Rewritings of Classical Myths  
by Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson  
and Ali Smith”

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## 1 Introduction

In 2005, the Scottish publisher Canongate launched a new book series, with the aim to re-tell ancient myths from a wide array of cultural backgrounds. The ambitious publishing endeavour is still under way, but already a number of well established as well as lesser known writers from different countries have contributed to the project by choosing ancient mythological material and reworking it into short novels. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neither the myths nor the idea of re-telling itself are anything new. Nevertheless, the mere existence of Canongate's project shows, they continue to be popular – both to readers and publishers. Liedeke Plate has suggested that the success of re-tellings and their popularity in the publishing industry is to be understood in terms of marketability, and that re-tellings are attractive to publishers because, on the one hand "the canonical work or author functions as a brand name [so that] publishers of rewritings happily exploit the canonical name's wide recognition and its function as guarantee of a standard of quality and of certain aesthetic or narrative pleasures" (Plate 398) and on the other hand, re-tellings function as advertising for the originals, which raises readers' interest in the originals, and again promises to boost sales (Plate 399). Plate makes an interesting point, but ironically marketability is in itself not very marketable as a reason for publishing a series of re-tellings. The question that I want to raise is what "apology" for re-telling is self-reflexively portrayed in the works of the Canongate *Myths* series themselves, and how the novels themselves in a metafictional way express and demonstrate the particular meanings that re-tellings can carry. As not all novels that have appeared in the Canongate Myth Series are equally self-reflexive, the focus of my paper will therefore lie on three novels which self-consciously thematise their own practice and could be said to incorporate their own 'poetics of re-telling': Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005), and Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007).

In answer to the question, why the re-telling of old, well-known stories is (still) a good idea, the short introductory disclaimer by the publisher placed at the beginning of each novel in the series claims that myths are „timeless and universal stories that reflect and shape our lives“, suggesting that the myths of the past are of persisting influence,

and therefore worth revisiting. Of course, myths are frequently associated with ancient wisdom, and it is a common idea that they contain universal truths of enduring value about the world and humanity built on the idea of the possibility to discern a continuity in human behaviour as well as core values, morals and ideas across cultural boundaries, but how is Canongate's evocation of such "universal stories" to be interpreted in a postmodern world where the existence of universal truths as well as its representation in any kind of discourse – be it fictional or non-fictional – have been severely contested, and how is the re-telling of myths legitimised if – as can be assumed – these allegedly universal truths can just as well be read out of the originals? In other words, what justifies re-telling if it is all about universality? Do the re-tellings serve to demonstrate the fact that any new version of an ancient myth will only reiterate and prove its inherent universal meaning? Or do these re-tellings – despite the disclaimer – themselves contest claims of universality in re-telling the old myths with a difference and demonstrating the subversive potential of re-telling, as postmodern literature has frequently done? Or is there, perhaps, a third possibility and could these re-tellings indeed aim to represent – paradoxically – *new* universal truths?

Before a detailed analysis of the three novels mentioned above shall attempt to answer these questions, it shall be helpful to recapitulate how re-tellings and parodic forms of fiction have been evaluated and problematised both theoretically by critics and scholars, and metafictionally by writers themselves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although some dismiss re-tellings as derivative or even parasitic, there have been many who have observed the subversive potential of parody and re-tellings which makes it possible for them to influence 'the real world'. Even among the latter, however, opinions differ on what such forms of fiction can achieve and how they can and should do so. In particular, two differing positions, which nevertheless both stress the subversive potential of re-telling, shall be outlined here – politically engaged re-vision, on the one hand, and postmodern historiographical metafiction (cf. Hutcheon 105-23) on the other hand. Although both approaches share a large number of aspects, they nevertheless differ significantly in what they demand of re-telling and how they judge the scope of the subversion it facilitates.

In 1972, Adrienne Rich formulated the idea of feminist re-vision, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 2046) and called it "an act of survival" (Rich 2046) for women. While language and literature was considered quite definitely a masculine domain, the reclaiming of both was understood as an essential prerequisite for female self-knowledge and self-definition and tied to the hope that "revisionist mythmaking [...] offer us [women] one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (Ostriker 71). The practice of re-vision, of course, is not restricted to feminism, and has been taken up by different marginal and oppressed social groups aiming for self-definition. Most notably, it has been used in a postcolonial context. Re-vision hence aims to challenge the dominant 'truth' through the re-telling of the very narratives that were considered normative reflections of the social hegemony, aimed to inscribe and reinforce oppressive structures and hierarchies, and to silence difference, and to redress an imbalance countering the dominant perspective in literature with a specific, marginal one, granting the subject positions to those who have traditionally been allocated to the position of the Other. As Liedeke Plate argues, "[r]e-vision was motivated by a desire to counter a tradition of silence and alleged misrepresentation. [...] It was formulated as a challenge to the existing literary canon that was activated by profound disagreement with or disbelief in the texts of the past." (Plate 394). Hence, it can be defined by its clearly oppositional stance against the cultural hegemony, as well as its orientation towards a better future in which that hegemony is broken (Plate 390-1).

Such 're-telling with a difference', however, can take on different forms, and one of them falls into the category of what Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographical metafiction'. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon describes the latter as a form of fiction which expresses and problematises the paradoxical nature of the postmodern experience, while being self-reflexively aware of its own ambiguity. Although, as Hutcheon argues, 'historiographical metafiction' typically incorporates perspectives that can be identified as marginal and "ex-centric" – that is, situated outside the cultural hegemony of "the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture" (Hutcheon 130) – and has taken over some of its methods from fiction with a

clear political agenda, with which it shares its aim to challenge the idea of universality of said dominant culture and to expose its constructedness and relativity, it is differentiated from re-vision in that it will not take a clear ideological stance, but is critical of ideology in general, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is not actually possible to be entirely without an ideology (Hutcheon 178). By foregrounding the process of meaning-making, instead of the product that meaning is, historiographic metafiction reveals the constructedness of all meaning, and "questions the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment" (Hutcheon 57). In questioning all meaning, this approach, however, also problematises the existence of unified subject positions as well as "visions of community and collectivity" (Plate 408), which are an integral part of the aspirations behind re-vision. Postmodern re-tellings along the lines of historiographical metafiction, then, can be said to represent a more ambiguous, but also disillusioned and more self-critical perspective on the potential of re-telling than re-vision. As Hutcheon argues, "there is contradiction, but no dialectic in postmodernism. And it is essential that the doubleness be maintained, not resolved. [...] It is the doubleness that renders unlikely the possible extremes of both political quietism and radical revolution (Hutcheon 209).

Both re-vision and historiographical metafiction will provide points of reference in discussing the way re-telling works – and is self-reflexively represented – in the three novels that will be analysed here. It should be noted, that all three authors can be said to be situated in "ex-centric" positions outside the dominant cultural norm which facilitates a critical perspective, as all three are female, and two of them are known to be homosexual. It will therefore be interesting to observe if and to what degree this critical – and perhaps ideological – perspective can be recognised in the re-tellings, and how certain theoretical ideas about the power of re-telling – and storytelling in general – are taken up and contextualised by each of the three authors. It is furthermore interesting, that in each of the three novels, the myths re-told are part of the classical canon of Greek and Roman antiquity. Taking into account the fact that the classical canon is often portrayed as the very foundation of and hence a profound influence on Western culture, it should be considered how these re-tellings interpret their sources – are they portrayed as



institutions of an oppressive, dominant culture, or are they understood in a more complex and equivocal way?

The questions that shall guide the analysis of the three novels are hence concerned both with politics and with metafiction: Can the novels be said to be political at all? Do the novels aim to be subversive, or do they affirm dominant discourses? How are such dominant discourses framed within the re-tellings, and how are they portrayed? Which, if any, political or ideological position do the re-writings take up in relation to their sources? Are their politics focused on issues of gender, or are other issues addressed? Are they earnestly ideological, or are they characterised by postmodern, paradoxical ambiguity? How self-reflexive are the re-tellings? Where do they correspond to Hutcheon's idea of 'historiographical metafiction'? How do they represent the mythological material that provides the source for the novels? How do they represent their own, intertextual endeavour? Are mythological narratives – in particular, and as opposed to literary narratives – portrayed in a certain light? What role does the theme of story-telling play, how is story-telling, and particularly re-telling evaluated? Do the texts raise questions about the uses and abuses of stories?

In the each of the following three chapters, one of the novels will be analysed in due consideration of the questions outlined above, in a sequence ordered chronologically. In order to allow an easier evaluation of the intertextual relationship between the re-tellings and their mythological sources, at the beginning of each chapter there will be provided a short summary of the most important aspects of the myths in question, as well as an overview of its reception in both art and theory as far as this is relevant for the re-telling, which will finally lead up to the analysis itself. At the end, a synoptic comparison between the three novels will provide an overview of similarities as well as differences, and reveal if it is possible to discern a consistent underlying message that unites these re-tellings or if they are disparate in their ultimate meanings and evaluations.



## **2 Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad***

### **2.1 *The Odyssey and Its Reception***

In her 2005 novel, *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood takes up the task of re-telling one of the most famous and popular stories of the classical canon, Homer's *Odyssey*. The well-known *epos* tells the story of shrewd Odysseus, who, on his return journey from the Trojan war in which he participated, is frequently hindered and detained in his attempt to reach his home. He becomes involved with a large array of mythological, supernatural creatures – like cyclopes, nymphs, gods and goddesses, and sea monsters – as well as a number of fellow humans, who alternately threaten or assist in his quest for home. In these adventures, he generally relies on his cunning to manoeuvre himself out of predicaments. Meanwhile, on the island of Ithaca, the already tense situation precipitates with the increasing duration of his absence. When, after the ten years of absence due to the Trojan war, Odysseus fails to return to his home like his fellow Greek kings, the danger that his throne be usurped by one of the young Ithacan aristocrats or even his own son Telemachus increases with the duration of his absence. It is his wife Penelope, who resists this development as good as she can, both by defying her son's premature claims to power and by obstinately refusing to re-marry – despite the suitors' increasingly aggressive, and economically detrimental encroachment on her hospitality – and faithfully holding out for her husband. In her attempts to stall Odysseus's replacement, she uses her cunning, and devises the famous ruse of the shroud. Declaring herself ready to re-marry as soon as she has finished weaving her father-in-law Laertes's shroud, she begins an 'interminable' weaving project and secretly keeps undoing the work she has done in the day in the night-time. Unfortunately, one of her maids betrays the secret to the suitors and Penelope is eventually forced to finish her weaving. It is only Odysseus's last minute return to Ithaca and his circumspect plotting that accomplishes the happy ending, consisting in a bloody revenge both on the suitors and the treacherous maids, and a happy reunion of Odysseus and Penelope.

Choosing to re-tell the *Odyssey*, Margaret Atwood places herself in a rich intertextual field. Not only has the *Odyssey*, for the entire span of its almost 3000 year long history of reception, been the subject of innumerable reworkings, adaptations and parodies in various forms of fiction, the poem itself was originally based on and compiled from much older material, passed on by oral tradition. No doubt, it is not just the legendary quality of the poetry that makes the *Odyssey* such an attractive source for adaptation and appropriation, but also the fact that it is such a complex, in many ways ambiguous and often puzzling work, a fact that is of course exacerbated by the mystery that surrounds its production – until today, there is no definite agreement among scholars who Homer was, and if he was even one person. The *Odyssey*, like its 'prequel' the *Iliad*, is indeed a myth shrouded in myth, and on account of its very equivocalness it still continues to produce a multitude of interpretations and readings. In the present context, it is neither possible nor necessary to elaborate in any detail on these various interpretations. It should be noted, however, that it is not easy to find a 'textbook' reading of the *Odyssey*, that, so to speak, provides a standard interpretation of it. Even though the *Odyssey* is a canonical work, its meaning has never been fixed. This is an interesting fact in the face of the question how *The Penelopiad*, as a possibly revisionist text, positions itself in relation to its source, and what kind of interpretation of the *Odyssey* is reflected in *The Penelopiad*. In this context, it should also be documented, that, Penelope is anything but a marginal figure in the original text, and indeed plays a central role in the development of the plot, as many scholars – both with and without a feminist background – have shown. In general, Homer's *epos* holds Penelope up as a laudable heroine, whose famous faithfulness and endurance during her husband's absence are regarded as rare and exceptional virtues. Like her husband, she is known for her cunning (*metis*), which she uses to devise plans in order to stall her impending re-marriage. However, despite her importance the *Odyssey* does not provide insight into Penelope's motives. She is portrayed 'from the outside', and although the *epos* does focus on what she says and does, her thoughts, feelings and inner motives are not disclosed. Far from reducing the interest in Penelope, the very mysteriousness that surrounds her character makes her the object of even more critical scrutiny. For some scholars, the interpretation of the entire work hinges on the question of "what was

Penelope really up to" (*The Penelopiad* xxi), which, of course, is subject to much speculation and debate.

It is also remarkable that, because of the unusual centrality of a female character, as well as diverse other reasons, the *Odyssey* as a whole has often been perceived in peculiarly gendered terms. In contrast to the *Iliad*, in which – as Barbara Clayton documents – “we find a world of war with a tragic outcome, glorious heroes on the battlefield winning renown through strength, and a cast of characters almost exclusively male” (Clayton 1), which could be identified as a typically masculine setting, the *Odyssey*, “with its happy (comic) ending, deviousness and machinations within the household, and a cast of characters in which powerful females are prominently featured” (Clayton 1) has frequently been associated with femininity. While some scholars, like Richard Bentley, assumed that the *Odyssey* was a work whose intended audience was female, others, like Samuel Butler, argued that its author must have been a woman (Clayton 1-2). However, this association of the *Odyssey* with femininity is not necessarily to be equated with a feminist stance. In fact, many of the male scholars used the idea of femininity to account the alleged inferiority of the poem in relation to the ‘masculine’ *Iliad*. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, picked up the idea of the feminine *Odyssey*, to read it as a hidden manifesto of female power and a celebration of the equality and ‘likemindedness’ (*homophrosyne*) between Odysseus and his wife. In line with the ideas of second-wave feminism, Penelope has been read in an extremely positive way as a paradigm of female agency and a specifically feminine form of creativity that provides an alternative to traditional creativity, which is perceived as a masculine domain. In an attempt to formulate a *Penelopeian Poetics*, Barbara Clayton has focused her argument on the conceit of Penelope’s weaving, which, she argues is a form of ‘art’ that “privileges process over product” (Clayton ix). “Like a Penelopean poetics, the feminine, as I understand it, must be explained in terms of *how* rather than *what*. It is constituted by a resistance to any ideological position that can be construed as masculine. It is above all a principle of *difference*” (Clayton x). Many similar feminist interpretations of Penelope focus on the fact that the character is portrayed as extremely multi-faceted and does not at all conform to the clichée that women in antiquity had extremely little choice regarding their social roles and could only pick one

of a number of one-dimensional stereotypes, but would never, for example, be thought of as respectable and desirable at the same time, as Sarah Pomeroy outlined in her 1985 work *Goddesses, Wives, Whores or Slaves*. Nancy Felson-Rubin, in *Regarding Penelope* argues, that this is extraordinarily not the case of Penelope, who is not only an object of reverence and respect as well as an object of sexual desire, but also a subject in her own right – and is furthermore closely associated with the idea of creativity and storytelling, a theme which plays a great role in the *Odyssey*, whose “self-referentiality [...] has become to be seen as a hallmark of this text” (Clayton 6).

Despite these celebratory and empowering feminist readings, however, it should not be forgotten that the *Odyssey* portrays Penelope’s virtuous character as a remarkable exception to the rule, an ideal against a general view of women that would today be called misogynist. Far from being a ‘feminist’ work, the *epos* also reflects and advocates the strict system of social roles and hierarchical structures that characterised Greek society (cf. Finley 80-118), as well as a set of morals, values and ideas of propriety, the transgression of which was considered a great offense (cf. Finley 119-157).

In the following chapters, I will explore how Atwood’s work *The Penelopiad* integrates itself into this tradition, and in what relation to the original Homeric poem it places itself, and whether its portrayal of Penelope is a positive or a negative one. It would be interesting to examine whether and how it responds both to earlier re-workings of the material in the form of fiction and to critical readings of the Homeric texts, but a detailed account of such interrelations and influences would require the analysis of a number of works – both of primary and secondary literature – that would certainly exceed the scope of this paper. Such comparisons as will nevertheless be featured, will therefore necessarily be of a cursory and fragmentary nature and will not lay claim to any completeness.

## **2.2 Against and Beyond the Odyssey**

As the title already suggests, instead of the male hero Odysseus, *The Penelopiad* instead focuses on the poem’s female protagonist, and covering not only the events that form the plot of the *Odyssey*, but Penelope’s entire life story, which takes the form of a memoir. In addition to that, the chapters of Penelope’s tale are interspersed with

chapters told from the collective perspective of her maids, who were hanged for their betrayal at the end of the *Odyssey*. *The Penelopiad* hence provides two different female perspectives, from which the myth is re-told. Considering the general tenor of Margaret Atwood's fiction, it is not surprising that she places her re-writing of the *Odyssey* in a context which allows her to address feminist issues. However, Atwood herself has frequently stated that she does not regard her work as feminist as such (cf. Tolan 2), which is why *The Penelopiad* should not rashly be equated with feminist 're-visionist mythmaking'.

The choice to re-tell the *Odyssey* from a female perspective by "giv[ing] the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (*The Penelopiad* xxi) as the author states in the "Introduction", clearly echoes the practice of feminist-revision, but the textbook clarity with which these intentions are spelled out in the "Introduction" almost seems to mock the naivety of early second wave feminism and its attempts to gain superior self-knowledge and define female experience by re-writing the male canon. On the surface level, the novel may indeed pursue the proclaimed almost detective-story-like goal of finding the 'real' answers to the questions „What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to" (*The Penelopiad* xxi), but any deeper exploration into the world of *The Penelopiad* will soon problematise its premise, and show that these questions cannot be answered simply by a shift in perspective, but that raising them opens up a whole network of new problems and new questions. Nevertheless, *The Penelopiad* can be said to go both against and beyond the *Odyssey*, by deflating the heroism and pathos of the original Homeric myth, and focussing on a lesser explored character or plot-line. Due to the fact that Penelope actually plays a rather central role in the *Odyssey* anyway, the 'beyond' that *The Penelopiad* provides in the case of these characters are the insights into her psyche. The maids, who are indeed hardly more than plot devices in Homer's epic poem, on the other hand, provide a secondary focus, as their role and their relevance to Penelope's life are foregrounded.

### 2.2.1 A Story from the Other Side

Unlike in some re-tellings, in *The Penelopiad* plot and setting, as well as the basic constellation of characters, remain unchanged from that of the original narrative. Salient and unmissable differences, however, are to be found on the level of the narrative situation. The omniscient bard persona of the *Odyssey* is replaced by multiperspectival, homodiegetic, first-person narration. Ultimately, all formal and stylistic differences – as well as even those changes that reach as far as the content level or concern evaluation – can be traced back through the narrator-characters who become the new focal points of the story and through who everything is mediated. According to Linda Hutcheon, this sort of narrative situation is typical for historiographical metafiction and serves the “subversion of the stability of point of view”. (Hutcheon 160).

On the one hand, we find overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe. In both cases, the inscription of subjectivity is problematized, though in very different ways. (Hutcheon 160)

As has already been mentioned, the bulk of the narrative is told from the perspective of Odysseus’s wife Penelope, while a number of chapters, dispersed throughout and woven into the structure of the novel, are told from the perspectives of the “hanged maids”. While there may not be “myriad voices”, these two perspectives provide conflicting views of situations and characters, and the maids’ chapters are especially effective in undermining the construction of a unified and meaningful narrative, by contesting not only the Homeric original, but also Penelope’s attempt to construct her own story.

An interesting peculiarity about the narrative situation, which should not go unmentioned, is its temporality. While the events recounted are set centuries before Christ, the narration takes place in the present, and at least Penelope’s tale is explicitly directed at a modern narratee: “your ears – yes yours!” (*The Penelopiad* 2). The narrator personas are all dead and the story is told from ‘beyond the grave’. The notion is that the pagan underworld has simply lasted throughout the centuries, and while being eventually “upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road” (*The Penelopiad* 18) – that fancy place with the drastic special effects being of course



Christian hell – the dead of classical antiquity are still around, relatively isolated from, but not totally without knowledge of the modern world. The author might have taken the idea of the storytelling shades in the underworld from the passages in the *Odyssey* known as the first and the second *nekylia*, which are set in Hades, with the shades of deceased characters providing superior or alternative insights and information on characters and events.

The main narrator is Penelope's shade in the underworld who remembers and re-evaluates the story of her life in retrospective fashion, while interspersing that memoir with occasional simultaneous accounts of 'life' in the underworld. As Penelope's self-reflexivity reveals, she does not shirk self-criticism. Viewing her life with the benefit of hindsight, and through sobered and somewhat embittered eyes, Penelope comes to the conclusion that the part that she herself played was less than laudable, and that she ultimately amounted to "an edifying legend" and "a stick used to beat other women with" (*The Penelopiad* 2). Although this does not come to the surface very often, one major motivation for Penelope's somewhat reluctant decision to engage in the "low art" (*The Penelopiad* 3-4) of storytelling is guilt. She is filled with deep discomfort with the – in her eyes misguided and false – praise and glory heaped upon her by the bards. Faced with how her own character is portrayed by the story-tellers, Penelope is shocked to find that she has dwindled down to a mere stereotype – that of the faithful, patient and enduring wife, who lives for the memory of her absent husband, and upon his return, forgives him all his delinquencies. Even more unpleasant is the realisation that in part, this was indeed the role she played, even if this did not fully reflect her own thoughts and preferences. Her story, then, is meant to correct the misrepresentation of her character, by adding depth and providing explanations and justifications for her actions, poignantly illustrating the sheer difficulty that Penelope faces in finding her own place in society, and figuring out what line of action to pursue in the course of her life. The narrator also portrays her story as a cautionary tale for other women, with the older, wiser Penelope making an apotropaic example of her gullible and demure younger self.

The maids' tale, on the other hand, which, more often than not, takes on forms other than that of a conventional narrative – from lyrical forms to academic discourse to

a video tape transcript – does not so much produce a coherent, independent narrative of their own, but responds to and comments on Penelope's biographical tale, outlining the differences between their own lives to that of Penelope and her peers, and not rarely functions to put Penelope's tale into perspective, thereby preventing the reader from according her too much credibility.

## 2.2.2 Unravelling the *Odyssey*

*The Penelopiad* sets out on its deconstructive mission of debunking and challenging the canonic version by letting Penelope portray the same events and characters through an alternative view-point, placing different focuses, and passing different judgements. It is significant that the narrator is overtly aware of the intertextual context of her story, and the existence of an "official version", which she declaredly sets out to refute. Frequently, her accounts are therefore consciously set into contrast to the canonic version, and designed to deconstruct and debunk the world of the male myth with its glory and heroic trappings, as well as the idealisation and overblown praise of Homer's *epos*. When the characters and events that figure importantly in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are described by the narrator Penelope, their importance is downplayed and devalorised; their intentions and motifs are denigrated or at least banalised. This happens on various levels, both explicitly and implicitly.

On a microscopic level Penelope uses style and language to express her disrespect for – and disbelief in – the allegedly noble and heroic characters and events described in the *Odyssey*, demonstrating the powerful role that naming plays in defining identities. Replacing the poetic diction and verbose lyricism of the *Odyssey* with a style of present day colloquialisms, she succeeds in banalising, 'domesticating' or harshly ridiculing even the most glorified aspects of the mythological world. Thus the unattainable and idealised homeland of the *Odyssey*, which its hero tries to return to so desperately, becomes "Ithaca, a goat-strewn rock" (*The Penelopiad* 31), while the suitors urging Penelope to re-marry are "mannerless young whelps" (*The Penelopiad* 109).

Character descriptions are handled with similar ironic detachment and stark realism. Counteracting the idealising and eulogistic style of epic bards, she does not shy

away from pointing out the negative features of the characters. If in the process of myth-making ordinary lives and people are transformed into super-human adventures and heroes, as Mircea Eliade has argued in his mythographical work from 1953 (cf. Eliade), Penelope's tale reverses this process, revealing the stark reality beneath the mythical and heroic personae. One prime example is her characterisation of Odysseus. Although she hardly changes or modifies the facts, which can all be found in the *Odyssey* as well, her slant of perspective and interpretation of these facts create a completely different image of the sea-faring hero. The Odysseus of the *Odyssey* is known as a wily and shrewd trickster, who, instead of using pure physical force, outwits his adversaries, and is known to escape out of predicaments by the power of his mind and his gift for contriving cunning schemes. This *metis*, which likens him to the goddess Athena, and assures him her divine support, is his prime virtue. In general, Odysseus is characterised positively as a noble and intelligent hero. Penelope's description of Odysseus, on the other hand, undermines this idealisation, and starts by bringing the hero down to earth and reducing him to a material level. She picks up on the fact that he is the Greek hero who is least famous for his physical achievements, belittling his stature and appearance, and comically describing him as "top-heavy" (*The Penelopiad* 32) due to his conspicuously short legs.

In a similar movement towards the banal, Odysseus's legendary seafaring adventures, where he – according to myth – dealt with supernatural beings, monsters, nymphs and goddesses, are relativised by "rumours", which strip these tales of any semblance of the supernatural or even of the heroic and portray the *Odyssey* more as an excessive drinking spree got out of hand than as a mythic quest (*The Penelopiad* 83; 92-1). By denying the fantastic and heroic in these stories any justification and providing mundane explanations for the glorifying stories of myth, Penelope's tale contributes substantially to the undermining of the authority of the canonic version.

Even Odysseus's traditionally most lauded virtues, his slyness and wit, are construed negatively by Penelope, as she implies that he lies indiscriminately both to friends and foes and that his schemes are driven not by noble but self-serving motives. Odysseus is portrayed as a hypocrite, who uses language – more precisely his gift for story-telling – to manipulate and deceive anyone gullible enough to fall for him. His

young and inexperienced bride Penelope is no exception, as her older, wiser self in the underworld has recognised:

This was one of his greatest secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two of them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome it. He could draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little conspiracy of his own making. Nobody could do this better than he: for once, the stories don't lie. And he had a wonderful voice as well, deep and sonorous. So of course I did as he asked (*The Penelopiad* 45).

Fifteen years old and freshly married, Penelope wants to believe in this myth of solidarity between her and her husband, but the shade of Penelope in the underworld has made the hurtful experience that Odysseus would "play his tricks and try out his lies" (*The Penelopiad* 2) on her too, so that in hindsight any semblance of harmony and like-mindedness between husband and wife seems untrustworthy. This is noteworthy, as in the *Odyssey* the *homophrosyne* – that is likemindedness – between Penelope and Odysseus is an important theme that is frequently addressed. In *The Penelopiad*, on the other hand, the reader is confronted with the disillusioning idea that such like-mindedness between man and woman is a myth, and any ostensible harmony is likely to be based on deceit on the man's part and foolishness on the woman's part. Not only Odysseus but all other men – notably Telemachus and the suitors – in the story share basic character traits, being hypocritical, self-serving, manipulative and callous. When all heroic pretense is dropped, in Penelope's view the role of man is the role of villain. Hence, in her re-telling, Penelope seems to treat male characters in a way that has been the fate of female characters during centuries of male dominated literature – they are robbed of their individuality and fitted into a one-dimensional stereotype. It is this sort of generalisation and categorisation that both revision and postmodern historiographical metafiction contest in the dominant narratives. It is significant, that Penelope, in her attempt at re-vision, falls into the same pattern.

The subversion of the male myth does not stop at the characterisation of its heroes. From her detached and modernised perspective, the narrator Penelope deconstructs the entire *Weltanschauung* of classical antiquity as it is reflected in the *Odyssey* – its values, customs, and beliefs. In part these passages represent a parodic treatment of the myths that embody these values, customs, and beliefs, in part her tale satirises ancient society itself for accepting them. By analogy, they also make a general,

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statement about the contingency of similar values, customs and beliefs in today's society, the ultimate absurdity of which will be revealed in hindsight, despite the fact that they may now be considered 'natural' and 'universal'.

On the subject of the gods, for example, Penelope expresses extremely sceptical and by ancient standards highly blasphemous ideas. She herself seems to waver between the idea that the gods actually exist but are just as base and ignoble as humans are, and the idea that supernatural beings and events are just silly fabrications of storytellers. What remains certain is that Penelope refuses to take the supernatural at face value, and applies a sceptical gaze to any mythical story about gods and similar creatures. She certainly relativises and questions those passages in the *Odyssey*, in which gods are credited for interfering in human affairs, such as when Penelope ascribes her scheme of unravelling Laertes' shroud at night to an inspiration by Athena:

When telling the story later I used to say that it was Pallas Athene, goddess of weaving, who'd given me this idea, and perhaps this was true, for all I know; but crediting some god for one's inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not (*The Penelopiad* 112).

Such confessions let the gods appear as human inventions used to avert socially threatening situations by giving up responsibility to higher powers.

Despite her scepticism Penelope does not fully renounce the gods, instead taking the line of a wary agnostic: "It's true that I sometimes doubted their existence, these gods", she admits, "[b]ut during my lifetime I considered it prudent not to take any risks" (*The Penelopiad* 40). After her death, with nothing left to lose and without having to fear the consequences of possible blasphemy, Penelope does not relinquish the opportunity to finally speak her mind about the powers who for all her life she was educated and expected to revere and abandons the mask of feigned respect and awe. Again, she touches upon well-known stories, but re-tells them with a different tone that is both irreverent and mocking.

The gods wanted meat as much as we did, but all they ever got from us was the bones and fat, thanks to a bit of rudimentary slight of hand by Prometheus: only an idiot would have been deceived by a bag of bad cow parts disguised as good ones, and Zeus was deceived; which goes to show that the gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe (*The Penelopiad* 39-40).

Penelope does not only ridicule the gods' apparent shortcomings, she also berates their cruelty towards mortals. She indirectly questions the vindication for some of the punishments in Tartarus – alluding to the myths of Tantalus and Sisyphus – by ascribing it to the god's immature enjoyment of torturing the powerless: "What the gods really like is to conjure up banquets [...] and then snatch them away. Making people roll heavy stones up steep hills is another of their favourite jests" (*The Penelopiad* 16-7). This sadistic pleasure also manifests itself in the gods' tendency to seduce mortals:

The gods were never averse to making a mess. In fact they enjoyed it. To watch some mortal with his or her eyes frying in their sockets through an overdose of god-sex made them shake with laughter. (*The Penelopiad* 24)

In Penelope's interpretation, there is nothing remotely honorable and worthy of respect about the gods. For her, they are overly powerful children with a twisted, sadistic sense of humour: "There was something childish about the gods, in a nasty way" (*The Penelopiad* 24).

The peculiar anthropomorphism of the Greek gods is well-known and canonical, but despite the fact that they have complex personalities, including weaknesses and flaws, in the mythological canon, their superiority is never challenged. Whenever a mortal contests the rule of the gods, he is charged with *hubris* and punished severely. Essentially, the mythic narratives are therefore exemplary tales designed to reinforce traditional power structures, and deter individuals from breaking the rules. In stark contrast to this, Penelope's tale, far from reinforcing the gods' power, does not even accept them as full characters. Again, as in the case of men, she seeks to unravel any false claims to complexity and depth, and replaces them by a grim and unflattering generalisation.

Of course, the deficiencies of the rulers then act as an incitive to question the rules they make. Therefore, in similar fashion, Penelope deprecates the mores and values of ancient society. Veering between parody and satire, she provides a synoptic view of the ancient customs and conventions as they characteristically occur in the Homeric texts, like the ancients' immoderate love of "meat, meat, meat" and "wine, wine, wine" (*The Penelopiad* 36). Her descriptions of ancient marital rites, sexual politics, or the roles of ancestors and heirs are satires that work by stating the facts in plain terms, without the added pathetic value, which is construed as fake, constructed

and superfluous, and letting the reader make his or her own judgement. Yet they portray a cold, unfriendly world, where "marriages [are] for having children, and children were not toys and pets [but] vehicles for passing things along" (*The Penelopiad* 24). All human actions are motivated by politics, economics, and the pursuit of wealth and power, while there is no room for genuine human relationships or love. Supported by images of stereotypical masculinity, like the preoccupation with meat and wine or the privileging of political or economic power over relationships on a personal level, the ancient world is generally identified with patriarchal customs and values, whose injustices, double standards, hypocrisies and delusions are exposed. Penelope's ironic and detached position, which is literally removed from the world, allows her to recognise and reveal the contingency and constructedness of all these traditions and conventions. At the same time, however, the story is also sensitive to the fact that from within the boundaries of society, these constructed values and conventions appear as 'given' and natural, and that even from a marginal position within society, breaking the pattern is not an easy feat. Penelope's own life story is itself an excellent example for that.

### **2.3 A Female Perspective**

My analysis has so far concentrated on the way that the narrator Penelope deconstructs the canon, and strips it off its flourishes and beautifications in order to reveal the truth about its characters, society and value system. Her tale, however, is not made up entirely of the negation of the *Odyssey*. The shift in focus also addresses original themes, as the story concentrates less on politics, heroic quests or divine intervention, but on the subtleties and difficulties of relationships and everyday life in family or society, and gives insight into the psyche of its narrator-protagonist. As Penelope's viewpoint is a gendered one, her story is especially concerned with the social identities of women and illustrates the dilemma faced by the women of the ancient world when forced to assume one of a very limited number of social roles. While Odysseus's story recounts fights with sea monsters and encounters with goddesses, Penelope's story deals with household duties and her rebellious teenage son – or, on a deeper level with her loneliness in a hostile and unfeeling world full of actors and role-

players and constantly having to pretend and hide her true feelings, while being dreadfully insecure about her own identity and purpose.

Numerous self-reflexive passages portray Penelope as very doubtful about her own position in society. From childhood on she feels maladaptive and alien, unable or badly equipped to act the part she was born into. She eventually learns to get by, curbing her individuality, keeping her head low and learning to role-play herself. By foregrounding the idea of role-playing and of putting on of a socially acceptable mask in order to fit in, Atwood seems to allude to the critical concept of "masquerade" which plays a significant role in gender theory and "was crucial to the developing discourse about the performative nature of gender" (Tolan 86). Ultimately, the idea of the performativity of gender which was developed to great effect by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, goes back as far as Simone de Beauvoir, who famously stated that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 295).

### **2.3.1 Female Roles in Man-Made Myth**

Penelope's description of the other females in the story is significant in more than one way. On the one hand, it exemplifies the strained relationships that exist not only between men and women, but also among women. On the other hand each of the other female characters is also perceived as a potential role model for Penelope. Most of Penelope's peers are evaluated as negative examples, and seem to provide hints how *not* to act. It is problematic, however, that Penelope's own perception of her female contemporaries seems to be informed and impaired by the dominant discourse of patriarchy. There is a discrepancy between her perception of the complexity of her own personality, and her perception of the women around her, in whom she does not see the same complexity and individuality that she demands for herself. In her eyes, they merely fulfill social functions and stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal system. It is not exactly clear, whether the 'flatness' of the other female characters that Penelope portrays is grounded in their own actual conformity to prescribed roles or in the fact that Penelope's perception of other women – though not herself – is structured according to these prescribed categories. It is a fact that young Penelope, in looking to other females



in search of role models or foils, never sees beyond the surface performance, which is why she invariably fails to identify with any of them.

Her impression is that society necessitates self-effacement followed by pretense and falsehood, and thereby obliterates any real positive emotions in human relationships. Therefore, the narrator views most of her female contemporaries with similar distrust and disdain as the men. Partly, of course, this devalorisation of female characters exonerates Penelope from the responsibility of having acted wrongly by implying that there is no way for women to act in a thoroughly *good* way. On the other hand, however, it represents an increasingly gloomy and desperate take on the role of women in society.

Penelope's prime foil and rejected role model is Helen. Helen is gifted with extraordinary, possibly divine beauty, which she self-consciously exploits to exert power over men by appealing to their desires. She benefits from the fact that she enjoys what is expected of her: making a spectacle of herself, ever being the center of male attention and existing purely as the object of the male gaze. She thoroughly embraces the stereotypical role of the beautiful but superficial woman. Due to her physical qualities, she is so desirable to men that she can get away with almost anything: Despite committing a serious breach of the rules of society by eloping with a stranger, committing adultery, and sending her whole country into war she is not punished but rehabilitated at the Spartan court with her husband.

Helen's beauty, then, is a source of power – a power, however, which can never be available to Penelope. Due to the inherent inequality between the two women on the basis of their appearance, Helen's line of action is never a real option for Penelope. It is the injustice of this inequality that haunts and embitters Penelope, so that her narrative keeps returning to the topic of Helen with an almost obsessive tenacity. Penelope realises that the man-made ideal of the 'perfect' woman, which could never conform to, is based on superficiality and misguided values, and she is openly disgusted at Helen's behaviour and the male reactions it evokes – yet she cannot help coveting Helen's social success and begrudging her the male attention. In spite of the tenor of Penelope's asseverations, the impression arises that her dislike of Helen is as much informed by envy as by disappointed idealism. It is the passages on Helen that probably have earned

*The Penelopiad* a comparison to Bridget Jones (*The Penelopiad*, front cover), as they distinctly mimick (and mock) the style of popular 'chick lit' novels like Helen Fielding's, in which relationships between women are typically strained due to jealousy and rivalry in the fight for an ideal romantic relationship with a man. On a more serious note, however, the portrayal of Helen also problematises the question of female power in patriarchal society and seems to suggest that the control that an individual woman can gain over her own fate by playing by the rules of patriarchal society, more or less amounts to a betrayal of her own sex.

Penelope portrays the relative leniency with which Helen is treated in the canonic Homeric texts as mistaken, and does everything to reveal Helen's true flaws beneath her perfect appearance. Even in the *Odyssey*, Helen is not an entirely positive character, but she is never really held responsible for the damage she causes. Despite evidence that her role in the *Iliad* was not as passive as it is often construed, her male contemporaries treat her more like a precious object or prize that is stolen by strangers and must be retrieved, but not like a responsible person. In addition to that, her beauty seems to be enough of a redeeming feature to forgive everything. Penelope, on the contrary, criticising the superficiality of the male viewpoint, makes a special point of highlighting Helen's negative character traits that did not figure in the 'male' version of the story, because it was solely concerned with Helen's appearance. Like the gods, she is portrayed as cruel and childish, finding pleasure in the suffering of others. On top of this, she is shallow but also two-faced, hiding a rotten core beneath her superficial flawlessness.

Another interesting female character from Homer's poems is mentioned only fleetingly in Penelope's tale: Klytemnestra acts as a foil both to Penelope and Helen. With her husband away at war, her situation is initially very similar to that of Penelope. However, unlike Odysseus's wife, she is not patient and virtuous, and instead commits adultery, which brings her in line with Helen. Her crime, however, is graver than Helen's for two reasons: First, she does not stop short at adultery but turns murderous by plotting her husband's death together with her lover. While Helen may be indirectly responsible for the deaths of thousands of men, having caused a war, she can successfully feign innocence and passivity in order to evade the consequences of her

crime. Klytemnestra, on the other hand, breaks the rules openly and recklessly, assuming an active role in the plot, without the protection of lies and pretense. This, above all, must be the reason why she is perceived as so monstrous. She pays for it with her life, as she is soon killed by her own son, who is obliged to avenge his father. In her case, then, breaking the rules of society equals self-destruction.

If Helen and Klytemnestra represent two different ways of maneuvering the power structures and the network of rules that society is made up of, neither of them is a suitable option for Penelope. Certainly, there is a more or less subdued hint of envy of these two women's grasp for independence from the rules – a desire to be able to incarnate either patriarchy's ultimate desire or its ultimate fear – but Penelope, as it were, is stuck in the middle, so that both alternatives appear impossible to her.

While Helen and Klytemnestra are women the same age as Penelope, who exemplify different ways of breaking the rules, the female figures from the earlier generation represent more traditional values and power structures. Penelope encounters two 'surrogate' mother figures at the Ithacan court. Anticleia is the aged queen, mother of Odysseus, and Eurycleia is an old slave woman, former wetnurse to the infant prince, and the woman who really raised him. Both are mother figures to Odysseus so that their portrayal corresponds closely to the stereotype of the mother-in-law. With their names slight variations of each other, they act as different incarnations of the same type. They both represent the traditional order of society, patriarchy finding its strongest advocate in the person of aged females, who, through their role as mothers of powerful men, make it their cause to reinforce and propagate the old order. They perceive younger woman as unwanted rivals and threats that can best be averted by assimilating them into the same structures of wifedom, motherhood and subservience to men that they have been absorbed into.

This interpretation might not be absolutely clear for Anticleia, especially as her role in general is not very prominent. It is clear, however, from Penelope's tale that she is not a sympathetic character. Her interest in Penelope reaches as far as her wealth, ancestry and social standings make her a good match for "her adored son Odysseus" (*The Penelopiad* 62), but she treats her daughter-in-law with cold, stand-offish disdain verging on openly expressed dislike. As Penelope poignantly puts it:

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A princess of Sparta was not to be sneezed at – but I think she would have been better pleased if I'd died of seasickness on the way to Ithaca and Odysseus had arrived home with the bridal presents but not the bride (*The Penelopiad* 62).

Anticleia makes no attempts of introducing Penelope into the courtly household, instead making her feel like an unwelcome outsider.

Eurycleia, on the other hand, a stock example of the mother-in-law, is "at least friendly" (*The Penelopiad* 62) to Penelope. She remembers how "Eurycleia made a point of taking me under her wing, leading me about the palace to show me where everything was, and as she kept saying, 'how we do things here'" (*The Penelopiad* 62). Likened by Penelope to a mother hen, she is a busybody who is ever in motion to pamper the male members of the royal household, and likes to have everything under her control. She, too, is somewhat reluctant to let Penelope assume her place as Odysseus's wife, and would ideally like restrict her responsibility to the sole purpose of giving birth to an heir, while taking care of all other wifely and motherly duties herself:

She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus liked things done. (*The Penelopiad* 63)

While both of Penelope's 'surrogate' mothers represent traditional social structures, her actual biological mother is something of an exception. She is a naiad, a non-human, supernatural being, who is placed, to some extent, outside of society. Hence, she is largely unencumbered by social rules and mores, and prefers swimming in rivers and lakes to human company. Her interest in motherhood is therefore comparatively slight, so that she is not much of a support for her daughter. Penelope's main impression of her mother is one of absence and on the few occasions where their paths cross, the mother is perceived as an alien creature. For lack of more intimacy and familiarity, her portrayal seems somewhat abstract. Her name, for example, is never revealed, and she is characterised mainly through the symbolic properties of water: "beautiful, but chilly at heart", with a "short attention span and rapidly changing emotions", but most of all "elusive" (*The Penelopiad* 10-1). It becomes clear that though the naiad may occupy a place outside society, she is still somehow incorporated into its fabric, being the incarnation of certain characteristics which are stereotypically perceived as quintessentially feminine. The stereotype of femininity which is represented by Penelope's biological mother, however, seems to echo feminist ideas of a

positive and independent form of femininity. The positive evaluation of such feminist independence, however, is to some degree undermined by Penelope's portrayal, as it is clear that the naiad is not a particularly loving or nurturing mother, who does not support Penelope during her childhood, or later, and is incapable of committing to a real relationship with her daughter. She does, however, impart a piece of wisdom to her daughter on her wedding day, which is worth quoting in full, as it represents a manifesto of sorts – a specifically 'feminine' way of doing things and of solving problems, modelled on the flexibility and persistence of water:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hands into it, all you feel is a carress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that my child. Remember that you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does (*The Penelopiad* 43).

Flexible compliance and slow subversion, according to this 'feminist' naiad, are the means by which to circumnavigate the rigid rules of society with its prohibitive norms and ideals. Facing an obstacle, a woman will not succeed by addressing it directly and openly. She will have to go behind and around it, and slowly manipulate the situation, until an acceptable state is reached. If this requires masking one's true intentions, and hiding one's real face, it represents a more positive side to role-playing that does not serve the purpose of adapting to a normative standard, but that helps to pursue individual aims under the guise of secrecy. To Penelope the connection is clear: "I remembered my mother's advice to me. [...] For this reason I pretended ..." (*The Penelopiad* 108). The ambiguity of Penelope's life story, however, makes it unclear whether the naiad's advice – which implies the ideals of second wave feminism – is really to be considered a good one.

### **2.3.2 Penelope's Dilemma**

As mentioned before, the protagonist's discomfort with the prescribed codes of conduct for a woman in her position is obvious. In her early life, Penelope constantly finds herself at odds with the persona that she is expected to project to the outside and is ill at ease with the way her society confines her to inactivity and idleness. The sort of oppression she suffers is that of an aristocratic woman. All possible occupations are

precluded by respectability, the officiousness of servants or the crippling supervisory glance of intrusive, hostile relatives or strangers, so that Penelope sees no other way than to retreat into passivity and the repetitive, mind-numbing activity of weaving. It is significant that *The Penelopiad* does not pick up the idea of weaving as a paradigm of feminine creativity, as some feminist scholars of the *Odyssey* did. Far from romanticism the subversive potential of the craft, Penelope resorts to weaving because there is literally nothing else she can do, and because it gives her the possibility to seek some privacy and retreat from the obtrusive and possibly threatening world of social interaction.

Paradoxically, what brings about a change for the better is the disaster of the Trojan war, and the 20 years of Odysseus's absence. Superficially, of course, Penelope perceives this as a great tragedy, and sees her life in ruin, but indeed the king's departure creates an unprecedented situation, which, while it does constitute a crisis for his wife, also opens up a window of opportunity for her own agency, making independent decisions necessary. For the duration of her former life, Penelope found herself pitted against the overwhelming power of her own society, whose norms and ideals she had certainly internalised, as difficult as she found it to live by them, so that her dilemma was as much an internal as an external one. With the departure of Odysseus, she finds herself in an exceptional situation where the rigid prescriptions that govern everyday situations find less and less appliance. The power vacuum created by Odysseus's absence is a potential for change. From Odysseus's point of view, change is of course undesirable and threatening, which is why in the original narrative, both the suitor's siege on Odysseus's household as well as Telemachus's growing impatience are a source of alarm which endanger the happy ending. For Penelope change is not an option, as she neither desires to re-marry, nor wants her husband prematurely supplanted by Telemachus, and so her goal is to keep the power vacuum intact until her husband's return. Due to the pressure she is placed under by both the suitor's and Telemachus, her situation is precarious and anything but comfortable. Initially, she also finds the lack of guidance and the necessity of independent action – in combination with helplessness concerning the grand scale of things and outer forces trying to influence her – distressing. However, while she is battling boredom at the court and waiting for news of

her husband's fate, she learns that the power vacuum does not only have negative sides: she suddenly has more elbow room and for the first time her own actions and (moral) choices determine her life. It is crucial, however, that despite this limited freedom, Penelope never quite manages to liberate herself from the oppressive power of society. The scrutinising gaze of the public never quite leaves her, and in determining her actions, thoughts of respectability and reputation play an important role, which shows how thoroughly she has internalised these social policies as well. *The Penelopiad* remains wary of overestimating the actual potential of 'fluid', subversive, and perhaps specifically feminine power within the structures of patriarchal society. This is poignantly exemplified by the ends to which Penelope uses her newly gained independence.

The first thing that Penelope takes care of in the absence of any other authority, are the practical chores arising in the management of the court. "As the years passed I found myself making inventories [...] and planning the palace menus and wardrobes." (*The Penelopiad* 87) Despite the fact that throughout her former life she was kept away from such tasks, she turns out to be an adept household manager, under whose guidance the court prospers. Here, it is remarkable that even while gaining her first semblance of independence, she does so with her husband in mind:

My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he'd have even more wealth when he came back than when he'd left – more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves. I had such a clear picture in my head – Odysseus returning, and me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done all what was usually considered a man's business. On his behalf, of course. (*The Penelopiad* 88-9)

The same tendency can be observed in Penelope's treatment of the suitors. Their appearance on the scene and resolution to impose on her hospitality for as long as she makes up her mind to marry one of them marks the first great moral dilemma for Penelope. Her options are, either to side with the suitors, pick one of them, and thereby replace Odysseus; not to marry and hold out for her husband, but commit adultery in secret; or to remain faithful and withstand the suitors. Apart from the fact that she does not seem particularly interested in the suitors, with Odysseus death still unconfirmed and the eyes of the public – and her son – upon her, going behind her husband's back could have disastrous consequences, as the examples of Helen and Klytemnestra show.

In defying the suitors, as she decides to, Penelope finds herself in the morally favourable position of both following her own heart and observing the standards of social propriety, as the suitors with their morally unacceptable and intemperate behaviour appear as antagonists by all standards. Whether the coinciding of her own wishes with the 'rules' is indeed due to naivety and credulity, as the narrator's embittered tone sometimes implies, is another question. The crucial point is that in the absence of her husband, it is her task to keep the situation from escalating, and so to preserve the *status quo*, keeping Odysseus's emptied position from being filled by an impostor until he returns. If, by following her mother's advice, Penelope indeed pursues a uniquely feminine activity, she still does so on behalf of traditional power structures and patriarchy. Penelope knows that her line of action must strike a delicate balance. Neither must she turn them away or lock them out for if she did, "they'd turn really ugly and go on the rampage and snatch by force what they were attempting to win by persuasion" (*The Penelopiad* 107), nor can she surrender to their insistence. Aware that she cannot defeat the suitors in an open, physical confrontation, she keeps them at bay, sending ambiguous, never too obvious signals:

For this reason I pretended to view their wooing favourably, in theory. I even went so far as to encourage one, then another, and to send them secret messages. But, I told them, before choosing among them, I had to be satisfied in my mind that Odysseus would never return. (*The Penelopiad* 108)

Pressured from all sides, Penelope thinks up a ruse to buy herself more time, and – ideally – post-pones the decision indefinitely "without reproach to [her]self" (*The Penelopiad* 112). The story of Penelope's weaving has become proverbial. What *The Penelopiad* accentuates in comparison to the *Odyssey* is the role of the maids. In Atwood's work, Penelope picks twelve maids to assist her in her nightly endeavour to unravel all that she has woven during the daytime. Compared to her representation of other female characters her description of these maids is astonishingly positive: "They were pleasant girls, full of energy; [...] it cheered me up to hear them chattering away, and to listen to their singing. [...] They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace" (*The Penelopiad* 112-3).

The fact that Penelope portrays the maids in such a positive light is not only a result of her almost motherly relationship to them, it also seems to be directly connected



to their social position. They are lower class and in no position of power, which sets them apart from Penelope's social surroundings. They do not engage in the affected role-playing that the characters from the upper class need to assert their social status and identity, because in a world where only the aristocrats count, they hardly have an identity at all. Through anonymity and invisibility, they enjoy certain freedoms that Penelope envies: they do not have to worry about respectability and reputation, and are never subjected to public scrutiny. This independence from the rigid social structures of the upper class, in the protagonist's eyes, makes them trustworthy and reliable. The maids are quintessential deliverers of information, and their information is distinguished from the pompous and hypocritical man-made tales by its unaffectedness, reliability and authenticity – even though it largely takes the form of gossip. In comparison to the majority of the other characters who are generally portrayed as more powerful than Penelope, their lack of power also makes them appear harmless and unthreatening. Penelope's impression of the maids becomes increasingly suspect as the story continues, but is never revoked by the narrator herself. The trust in and sympathy with the maids felt by Penelope, the character, is uniquely shared by Penelope, the narrator. No other character is described by the narrator with such earnest affection and without a semblance of disdain.

To Penelope, it is the presence of the maids and a feeling of – in her life unprecedented – female complicity in facing a common opponent that turns the shroud weaving project into such a positive experience. In the respective passages, the narrator, for once, goes without irony and contempt and expresses, unmediatedly, the delight felt by her younger self:

These nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch – even – of hilarity. [...] We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. [...] We were almost like sisters. (*The Penelopiad* 114)

In this harmonic vision, at last, Margaret Atwood seems to pick up the thread from feminist scholars of Homer, as the idea of the interminable weaving project is connected with feminism and female solidarity, suggesting an analogy between the unravelling and re-weaving of the shroud and the creation of a self-defined female identity, which is emancipated from the prefabricated roles provided by the patriarchal world order (cf. Clayton). However, this beautiful, and certainly desirable idea is

immediately problematised, and not without irony: It is one of the maids who causes this brief spell of harmony in Penelope's life to end by betraying the secret to one of the suitors. Thus, in a world which is governed by male power, female solidarity is revealed to be an illusion.

Despite the failing of the plan and Penelope being forced to finish her weaving, an actual re-marriage is averted by Odysseus's timely return, which results in the slaughter of the suitors and the execution of the maids. The evaluation implied in the *Odyssey* portrays the maids as treacherous and opportunistic, and – worst of all – licentious, having not only disclosed information to the suitors but also slept with them. Only in the context of such a judgement can the final verdict and the merciless execution by Odysseus and Telemachus be justified. *The Penelopiad*, however, again problematises the traditional evaluation and portrays the ending of the story in a different light.

### 2.3.3 Guilt and Excuses

The chapter in which Odysseus and Telemachus "snuff the maids" (*The Penelopiad* 157) represents the structural climax and thematic centrepiece of Penelope's tale. Considering this, it is the more interesting in that she herself did not even witness the events in question: "I slept through the mayhem. How could I have done such a thing? I suspect Eurycleia put something in the comforting drink she gave me, to keep me out of the action and stop me from interfering." (*The Penelopiad* 157) This shows that as soon as Odysseus is back at the court, Penelope is again pushed into passivity and isolation, while important information is kept from her. For the most important part of her story, therefore, Penelope has to resort to repeating somebody else's report. It is Eurycleia who reports the events, so that again a maid is used as a bearer of information into Penelope's isolated domain:

Odysseus summoned her and ordered her to point out the girls who had been – as he called it – 'disloyal'. He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors into the courtyard – including the bodies of their erstwhile lovers – and to wash the brains and gore off the floor. [...] Then he told Telemachus to chop the maids into pieces with his sword. But my son, wanting to assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better [...] hanged them all in a row from a ship's hawser (*The Penelopiad* 159).

Although Penelope is – according to her own narration – horrified by this outcome, she does not protest at the time. Her feelings of guilt are obvious, but she tries to rationalise her actions. Not only does she describe herself as incapacitated during the terrible deed itself, she also evokes the threatening possibility that by siding with them, the same judgement would be passed over her.

What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years. Dead is dead, I told myself. I'll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I'll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me as well. (*The Penelopiad* 160)

Rather than rebelling against the unfair judgement passed by the male members of her family, Penelope settles into resigned acquiescence. It is clear, that this is ultimately the more comfortable option. She chooses to believe in Odysseus's stories, instead of pursuing the truth, and she attempts to make herself believe her own stories about her powerlessness and ultimate innocence regarding the death of the maids. It is a typically postmodern paradox along the lines of those described by Linda Hutcheon that there is nothing innocent about wanting to be innocent, and that regardless of the conscious choice to believe in it, the very awareness of there being a story makes it impossible to accept it as truth. Penelope admits: "The two of us [Odysseus and her] were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other" (*The Penelopiad* 173). Penelope's desire for a happy ending, it seems, was stronger than her desire for truth.

It is only centuries later, from beyond the grave, that Penelope 'speaks out' to correct the evaluation implied by the "official version" and vindicates the maids, explaining why their execution was not just an exaggerated measure, but also completely unjustified. She admits to telling the maids to spy on the suitors, and thereby bringing them into situations in which they could not resist the men, and were not only seduced or raped, but also forced to disclose the secret of the shroud. She herself takes the responsibility for the failing of the plan with the shroud and belatedly clears them of all charges of indulgent or treacherous collaboration with the enemies. In the context of Penelope's vindication, then, their deaths indeed seem unjustifiably cruel. Although unable to re-write the actual events, Penelope's re-telling problematises the traditional

evaluation of the ending of the *Odyssey* as a happy ending. The reader's sympathy and support is redistributed, and transferred from the victorious male heroes led by Odysseus, to their helpless victims. While in both versions the suitors remain antagonists to be defeated, in *The Penelopiad* the return of Odysseus does not seem to put an end to tyranny, oppression and all evil that befell Ithaca – as in the *Odyssey*. Penelope's tale, rather than re-writing the plot of the *Odyssey* on a grand scale, constitutes a re-evaluation of the well-known events by the employment of a different perspective.

Interestingly, it is Penelope's own role in the story, or more precisely the evaluation of her behaviour, which still remains disputable. Her tale, while being ostensibly motivated by a desire to reveal the truth and set the record straight, is not only a confession and self-accusation, it also functions as a justification of her own actions. In the beginning of the story, the narrator warns the reader not to follow her role, and repeatedly, she blames herself or expresses regret at her own past behaviour, perception or judgement. However, just as frequently, she seems to try and justify her actions, even as she acknowledges their wrongness, by referring to her own former naivety and the superiority of the opposing forces as well as the adversity of circumstances. She stylises herself as the victim of social conventions which she portrays as ultimately insurmountable. At the same time, however, her tale reveals that her ultimate desire – a happy and quiet life together with her husband – always lay entirely within these social conventions. For this happy ending, she sacrificed her principles and her clear consciousness and colluded in the murder of the maids. Penelope's confession is ambiguous, because while she is admitting her guilt, she simultaneously seems to try to shift responsibility, foreground her powerlessness and blame the system in which men are more powerful than women, and in which sexual double-standards are the norm. Moreover, this seems to be what her entire tale ultimately amounts to – an attempt to clear her conscience and rationalise her guilt by rewriting the story in a way which foregrounds the villainous nature of men and the patriarchal system, while placing herself in the role of the victim. Atwood here seems to adopt a critical, postmodern attitude to the idealistic idea of feminist re-vision as imagined by Adrienne Rich and other theorists and artists, challenging the binarism of

woman as victim and man as culprit. Try as she might, Penelope's tale never quite holds water, as if she were not able to completely convince herself of the truthfulness of her own story. It becomes obvious that she cannot simply distance herself from the system, as she attempts to. Her attempts to whitewash herself of allegations concerning her sexual conduct in Odysseus' absence are just one of the examples that reveal how much her own judgement and sense of propriety are influenced by the dominant social system. She very clearly distances herself from any accusations of promiscuity. She stresses that she dislikes the term "Penelope's web", because unlike a spider, she "had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, [she'd] merely been trying to avoid entanglement [her]self." (*The Penelopiad* 119) Then she dedicates a whole chapter on the refutation of various "slandrous gossip" (*The Penelopiad* 143) concerning her relations with the suitors. "These stories are completely untrue", she asserts (*The Penelopiad* 143).

In the face of these very desperate protestations of innocence, it is up to the reader to decide how much sympathy and belief to grant the narrator as for various reasons Penelope is not completely reliable as a narrator. Just as Penelope finds it difficult to come to terms with herself, the reader will find it difficult to come clean with the narrator and protagonist of *The Penelopiad*, unable to completely excuse her mistakes. The reader is left with a sort of unease and discomfort, maybe even a sort of guilt – the same feelings which haunt Penelope all the way into the afterlife and ultimately incite her to tell her tale in the first place.

## **2.4 Haunting the Story – The Chorus of Maids**

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's guilt and restlessness are given a manifest shape in the form of the maids. Themselves restless ghosts who cannot find peace, they haunt the characters who they think are to blame for their unjust deaths – notably Odysseus and Penelope. Theirs is the real unheard voice of the *Odyssey*, as they are doubly disadvantaged both by their sex and their class background, and are thus unjustly forced to be the doomed pawns in the game of the powerful – without rights, a life, or a story of their own. In the structure of the text their chapters are interspersed throughout Penelope's tale. According to the author's notes at the end, "The Chorus of Maids is a

tribute to the use of such choruses in Greek drama", while the idea of "burlesquing the main action" is taken from the "satyr plays performed before serious drama" (*The Penelopiad* 198). The Chorus of Maids reacts and sometimes also contradicts the "main action" of Penelope's tale. It therefore also mimics, on a smaller scale, the practice of re-telling itself. They appropriate and parody a variety of different genres and forms, in order to transport their message, and their style is itself of a haunting nature, being characterised by many repetitions and a sing-song-like quality. As Penelope's tale adds new perspectives to the *Odyssey* and relativises its authority, so the maids call Penelope's discourse into question and undermine its claim to truthfulness, showing that it is deeply invested in patriarchal power structures, which it manages to overcome only to some extent. Penelope is definitely not a revolutionary character – her strategy is keeping her head down, being pliant and patient, and it is only from the safety of the underworld that she makes an attempt to subvert the hegemonial power structures. However, as has been discussed, even that endeavour seems to be the pretext for a selfish attempt to white-wash herself as well as construct a (for her) acceptable version of the *Odyssey*. In those cases where Penelope's authority is uncertain and she has to resort to speculation, she is prone to resort to a more moderate account of events, while the maids will vouch for the more drastic, less respectable versions that Penelope dismisses as rumours.

The maids are not, like Penelope, concerned with reputation or respectability, and never attempt to whitewash their reputation. They describe in plain terms and openly, how dire their disprivileged lives were from childhood on, and how they learned to utilise what little power they have to make their lives better and to seize every chance at pleasure:

As we grew older, we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer. We swayed our hips, we lurked, we winked, we signalled with our eyebrows, even when we were children; we met boys behind pigpens, noble boys and ignoble boys alike. We rolled around in the straw, in the mud, in the dung, on the beds of soft fleece we were making up for our masters. We drank the wine left in the wine cups. We spat onto the serving platters. Between the bright hall and the dark scullery we crammed filched meat into our mouths. We laughed together in our attics, in our nights. We snatched what we could. (*The Penelopiad* 14)

Compared to Penelope, they are less self-conscious and insecure about their own roles. They are not riddled by guilt but have a clear conscience. Their own agenda is to point out the double-standards and hypocrisy of the upper classes and to illustrate in what various ways their execution was outrageously unfair and unjustified. In addition to ridiculing Penelope's complaints about her less than ideal life by contrasting it with their own much harder fates, they also directly address the characters who are responsible for their deaths.

"A Rope-Jumping Rhyme", their first chapter, is obviously directed at Odysseus, and the verses, "with every goddess, queen, and bitch / from there to here / you scratched your itch / we did much less / than what you did / you judged us bad" (*The Penelopiad* 5) addresses the incongruence of his punishment of their promiscuity with his own adulterous actions. In "The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll", they deal with how their lives were from birth on intertwined with that of their age-mate Telemachus, who ends up being their "cold-eyed teenaged killer" (*The Penelopiad* 68).

Unexpectedly, and more importantly, however, they also present a take on Penelope's role in the whole case, which further problematises her own account. It is significant that the romanticised image that Penelope has of the maids is not mutual. Perhaps the most important effect of the maids' chapters is to reveal the hypocrisy in Penelope's life as well as in her narrative, and contesting and ridiculing her attempt to find out the truth, make sense of the events of her life, and construct a meaningful narrative. In the maids' chapter "The Perils of Penelope, A Drama", a version of the story is presented in which Penelope is, firstly, not at all faithful, and secondly, the string puller behind the execution of the maids, orchestrating their deaths to eliminate the witnesses to her adultery. In this version, Penelope is guilty of the same hypocrisy she condemns in others, and makes her slaves the undeserving scapegoats of her crime. In this context, it makes sense that in the underworld, the maids avoid Penelope and "shun [her] as if [she] had done them a terrible injury." (*The Penelopiad* 115) Significantly though, the maids do not expressly claim that the version presented in this chapter is the truth, as the entire scene is framed by the introduction "word has it" (*The Penelopiad* 147). Ultimately, it is therefore up to the reader to decide which version is to be believed.

It is the readers' interpretations and evaluations, too, that the maids parody. In "The Trial of Odysseus as Videotaped by the Maids", they act out in a literal court room scene the process of judgement that the character of Odysseus has to undergo at the end of the *Odyssey*, not unlike the process of evaluation performed by any reader. How is the cruel slaughter of suitors and maids to be interpreted, how does it influence the reading of the character of Odysseus? The final decision of the judge mimics a readerly choice:

Your client's times were not our times. Standards of behaviour were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career. Also I do not wish to be guilty of an anachronism. Therefore I must dismiss the case. (*The Penelopiad* 182)

Another parody of readerly reaction is found in "An Anthropology Lecture", which imitates the academical style of literary scholars and presents a reading of the slaughter of the maids as a symbol for "the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians" (*The Penelopiad* 165). This chapter echoes a certain sort of anthropological readings of myth, like those that can be found in Robert Graves' *Myths* (which is cited as a reference by the author in the notes at the end). The point of criticism, however, is that such theories reduce the maids to a "pure symbol" (*The Penelopiad* 168) so that the "educated minds [...] don't have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice." (*The Penelopiad* 168)

In general, then, it can be said that the maids criticise the original canonic work and its characters as well as the readership – among who there are also scholars and potentially re-telling artists – for doing them wrong, deeming them unimportant, forgetting to take them into consideration in the evaluation of events. Like Penelope, they 'live on' into the present day. But unlike their erstwhile mistress, who only sets out to tell a story, of which she is not sure it will be heard or understood, they choose a different medium. Their chapters with their songs, rhymes and drama bear witness to this, being made up of 'performances', and instead of attempting to form a unified narrative, they indeed reflect "myriad voices" (Hutcheon 160), and a number of different conflicting versions of 'what really happened', and thus, in a postmodern way, contest the possibility of truth altogether. While their approach seems more 'honest'



than that of Penelope in its postmodern scepticism of any unified narrative, the actual merit of their haunting 'performances' is evaluated ambiguously. While Penelope is still grappling with the demons of the past and her own guilt in the underworld and considers it too risky to get reborn on Earth (*The Penelopiad* 188), the maids do as Odysseus and get reborn, which would suggest that they achieve some sort of liberation. However, it is made clear, that their rebirths are tied to those of Odysseus and only serve the haunting, and the endless revisiting of the past. The maids never forget, and never let him forget. They follow him, taking constant revenge, just by letting their presence work on his conscience:

We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right.  
We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. (*The Penelopiad* 193)

## **2.5 A Story Told against Storytelling? – Metafictional Meanings and the Theme of Storytelling**

Like many contemporary intertextual works and re-writings, *The Penelopiad* is a highly self-reflexive and metafictional work. Especially in Penelope's tale the theme of storytelling figures explicitly as an important subject both within the narrative, and in the self-reflexive, 'authorial' passages related by the narrator. In the maids' chapters, metafictional themes are alluded to implicitly through a consciously playful handling of language and literary genres and conventions.

The theme of storytelling suffuses Penelope's tale on all levels, and the power and omnipresence of stories is an important idea. Far from being a celebration of the practice of storytelling, however, her tale is highly critical of this activity. What can be observed is a deep distrust, if not a denigration of creativity and artistic production. This concerns, on the one hand, the traditional case of narrative power being held by the dominant social group, but also, on the other hand, the attempts of less powerful groups to seize narrative power for subversive ends.

On the one hand Penelope is a character who is constantly told stories. In her world, stories are of utmost importance, but they have a more problematic position than in our society. In ancient Greece, the term *mythos* originally meant simply speech, and the concept of myth was different from ours: It was used to designate history and fact,

and only later acquired its meaning of fictive fabrication. In other words, in Penelope's world, storytelling always lays claims to truthfulness – it is not simply autonomous fiction. On the other hand, however, there are very implausible or conflicting versions of stories in circulation, which refute the claim of veracity, and make room for speculation. In any case, in Penelope's world, stories are not only an essential form of entertainment, they also constitute an indispensable way of transmitting information and news. At the same time, however, there is never a guarantee, that what the story reflects is really the 'truth'. Interestingly, this ancient world of mythological storytelling portrayed in *The Penelopiad*, shares some defining features with the world of postmodernism, as it is, for example, described by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. In the former as in the latter, the boundaries between truth and fiction, story and history are blurred, and the fact that any story's claim to universal truth must be illusory, becomes increasingly clear.

Especially to a character like Penelope who – on account of her gender role, or simply her personality – is frequently not part of the plot-forming action, stories are absolutely necessary. It is only through stories that she can learn the events of the Trojan war, of Odysseus' journey, of her own childhood, or – incidentally – the events that took place while she was sleeping and locked away in her chamber. Under the premise that no story can accurately represent reality, this dependence on stories automatically makes her vulnerable to being fed lies, and she is ever suspicious of this being the case.

Odysseus is the one character who symbolises the quintessential storyteller. Penelope describes him as an "excellent raconteur", who finds pleasure in telling tales: "Once he'd finished making love, Odysseus always liked to talk to me. He told me many stories, stories about himself, true, [...] but other stories as well ..." (*The Penelopiad* 74) In the *Odyssey*, his talent for storytelling is counted among his virtues, but in Penelope's tale, this evaluation is problematised. To her it stands in direct connection to his being a skillful liar and manipulator, which Penelope cannot judge as positive character traits. When Odysseus tells stories about himself, it is very likely that he adjusts their content to suit his purposes. Penelope is – more or less consciously – aware of this and when she finally acquiesces to believing his stories, she practically knows she is lying to herself.

During Odysseus's absence, more than ever, Penelope is dependent on the information of storytellers. It is minstrels and bards who bring news from the Trojan war and rumours from Odysseus's adventures. Here again, the kernel of truth behind the stories is hard to come by, as the "yarn-spinners" (*The Penelopiad* 2), as Penelope calls them, not only apply artistic licence of their own, they also adjust the content to the listener, in order to achieve the most pleasing effects.

Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest versions *in my presence* – the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses. (*The Penelopiad* 84, my italics)

While most of the time Penelope is aware of that hidden flattery, she sometimes consciously chooses to believe it, as "even an obvious fabrication is some comfort if you have few others." (*The Penelopiad* 83) On other occasions – when the stories get cruder and less edifying and replace Odysseus' seamonsters and goddesses with barfights and prostitutes – she gets the impression that the tales she gets told are deliberately designed to upset her. Again, typically adopting her role as a helpless victim, she accuses the storytellers not only of "buttering her up" for personal gain, but also of a malicious cruelty for finding joy in "tormenting the vulnerable" (*The Penelopiad* 50). It seems therefore, that Penelope's distrust in storytelling is made up of both a fear of being lied to and a fear of being told the truth. In any case, what is harmless entertainment to those not involved, becomes a more serious affair to those personally affected by the stories. This association of male characters – above all Odysseus – with storytelling symbolises the male monopoly on language and discourse while Penelope's behaviour exemplifies women's collaborative reinforcement of that circumstance believing the male narratives unquestioningly or suspending their disbelief to avoid trouble.

However, what is even worse for Penelope than being told stories and not knowing what to believe, is becoming the subject of a story that she has no control over. This is exactly what happens "after the main events were over and things had become less legendary" (*The Penelopiad* 3) – the legendary lives on in the tales, and Penelope realises that she has become a part of it. "[T]hey were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself" (*The*

*Penelopiad* 3). The several stories are eventually cemented into one, as "the official version gain[s] ground" (*The Penelopiad* 2) and becomes "the main authority on the subject" (*The Penelopiad* 179). Since his version is written, interpreted and passed on by men, it represents a quintessentially male world-view, advocating male values, and idealising men as heroes, while Penelope – according to her own view fictionalised beyond recognition – has become another one of those female characters who relinquish their potential and become proponents and supporters of the patriarchal order: "An edifying legend. A stick to beat other women with" (*The Penelopiad* 2). Held up as an example of female virtues according to men, she is the image of faithfulness, endurance, respectability, passivity, while her few attempts at creativity and activity only serve the purpose of stabilising and reinforcing traditional, patriarchal order. This, of course, is a play on another effect of the male monopoly on language and discourse – the fact that women are necessarily pushed into the position of helpless objects of discourse, who have no control over their own (discursive) existence.

Penelope's perspective of the 'official version' significantly disregards the actual complexity and equivocalness of the Homeric epos itself, and instead portrays it as a collection of two-dimensional and oppressive stereotypes so that the canonical, male story (or myth) becomes a symbol for oppressive patriarchal culture as a whole.

In order to contest male discourse and the cemented truths of its canonical narratives, Penelope finally embarks on her own quest of story-telling, as she illustrates in her introductory first chapter:

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to do it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children – folks with time on their hands. Once people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel – there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts. (*The Penelopiad* 3)

It is interesting that Penelope here associates storytelling with a lack of power, while the novel as a whole demonstrates the power of stories – especially in the hands of the powerful and especially if they are believed to be true. Perhaps, what Penelope refers to as tale-telling, and associates with beggars and old wives, however, is the kind of story that does not claim universality, that is indeed a re-telling, in the way mythical stories usually are. Practiced by the 'ex-centric' members of society, then, it can be

regarded as an attempt of the powerless to partake in the discursive power of the dominant group. For Penelope, who is in an ambiguous position regarding power, because she is both an aristocrat and a woman, it is therefore not a matter of fact and even somehow embarrassing to resort to a practice that obviously puts her into the same category as those powerless, lower class people she mentions. However, because she is a woman, and not least because she is dead, this derivative, unauthoritative and insecure way of storytelling is her only possibility to be heard. Her dilemma mirrors a problematic fact often addressed by feminist literary theory: female writers have to resort to the traditionally masculine and male-dominated tool of language in order to express themselves, a problem which is intensified in the case of re-vision and re-telling, when women writers use and adapt whole texts of male discourse to create new meanings.

Hence, Penelope's attitude to re-telling remains ambiguous. Although fully aware that most storytellers are liars, she nevertheless adheres to a belief in the existence of one plausible truth – that is the truth she attempts to tell in her own story. However, in addition to the general difficulty of conveying experience through discourse, she faces an additional complication: Her experience, as well as her memory, are incomplete and do not add up to a coherent story. Like a historiographer, she has to build her own truth out of other people's stories. In the course of the narrative, the reader is guided towards the postmodern insight that Penelope's 'truth' can be no more truthful than the *Odyssey* itself, and just amounts to another fabrication – but that various fabrications of no particular hierarchy are the closest anyone can get in representing reality.

Unable to practice the 'male' kind of storytelling and to present her version as the one authority, and in what is perhaps a parody of typically 'feminine speech', she practices a very self-conscious and overt telling. She never denies the existence of other versions of the story and frequently cites the *Odyssey*, alluding to what "you've probably heard" (*The Penelopiad* 49) only to then provide a 'corrected' or alternative version. She is also not averse to admitting her own ignorance or uncertainty concerning some events she did not personally witness, does not remember or cannot explain. "Do I remember [...]? Not in the least", she says of the incident in her early youth when her

father tried to drown her, "But I've been told the story ..." (*The Penelopiad* 9). As to the real reason for the same incident, she openly admits her perplexity: "I've never been able to find the right answer" (*The Penelopiad* 27) If she engages in speculation, she never leaves this unacknowledged – such passages are framed by hedges and phrases like "Perhaps. I liked to think so" (*The Penelopiad* 47).

In general, Penelope is a narrator who never lets the reader forget that hers is just one of many versions of the same story. Through this self-consciousness, her tale does not only contest the dominant canonic version by undermining its claim to universality, it also, to some extent, impeaches her own plausibility. Again, in the face of such storytelling, the reader is prone to question whether there is in fact any 'right answer' to make sense of the contingent and perplexing events in people's lives, no matter how much not knowing it may haunt us, so that like Penelope, we finally fill up the gaps with fiction and fabrication. If we read Penelope's tale as feminist re-vision, this could be interpreted as a severe critique of re-writing with a political agenda, revealing the limitations of such practices as re-visionist myth-making. *The Penelopiad*, by portraying Penelope's attempt at re-vision as only marginally successful, reflects a typically postmodern stance. Here, the postmodern skepticism towards metanarratives is applied not only to the original source – the *Odyssey* – but simultaneously to Penelope's attempt to re-write it. Penelope's version of the tale has obviously no claim to objectivity or universality, which Penelope intuitively knows. Yet, she attempts to hold on to an epistemological innocence that lets her hope for the truth and the meaning of her story to reveal itself. Her 'will to deception' is portrayed as a more or less conscious decision to believe what she knows to be untrue – first Odysseus's stories, and then her own – which makes her appear somewhat dishonest. On the other hand, however, Penelope's problem is typical of the postmodern condition, and the conflict between a Nietzschean 'will to truth' and a 'will to deception' that withstands postmodern demystification simply constitutes an unresolvable part of its inherent paradoxicality. As other works by Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* documents a dilemma between the desire for "resolved plotlines [...] and a growing postmodernist mistrust of metanarratives" (Tolan 59), which results in a "perpetual vacillation [...] between the constructive and the deconstructive" (Tolan 69).

In contrast to Penelope's attempt at what could be identified as re-visionist mythmaking, which more than anything shows up the limitations and contradictions of the concept, the maids' chapters contain a slightly different take on the idea of re-telling, perhaps more in line with postmodern demystification than feminist re-vision. As has already been mentioned, in their chapters, no attempt at constructing a coherent narrative is made. Instead they present a collage of different 'tableaux', each parodying a specific form of popular discourse and an aspect of Penelope's narrative. However, as has been discussed, their way of storytelling, too, remains ambiguous.





### 3 Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*

Jeanette Winterson's contribution to the Canongate *Myths* series is the novel *Weight*, a re-telling that takes as its pivotal figure the Titan Atlas. According to the author's introduction, "the story of Atlas holding up the world" is a story "waiting to be written. Re-written" (*Weight* xviii). Reviving the story of this 'petrified' character, the novel explores Atlas's inner life and psychological development. Winterson interprets Atlas as the paradigm of the subject oppressed and marginalised by a hegemonial power, and contrasts him with the hero Heracles, who in many ways seems to be a representation of that hegemonial power. The central themes of boundaries and desire, however, are significant for both of the protagonists, although in different ways. On a symbolical level Winterson realigns the story with themes which figure prominently in many of her works, and which are strongly informed by the author's own experience and ideology. The author-narrator foregrounds the autobiographical content of the novel and her identification with the protagonist. Though issues of gender and sexuality are not obviously central concerns of the novel, the influence of feminist and especially lesbian feminist thought and queer theory can be traced in the novel. Especially in its portrayal of power relations, discursive power, the relationship between body and mind and the formation of identities, the novel also shows parallels to Michel Foucault's theories, and could have been influenced by Judith Butler's reading of Foucault in *Gender Trouble*. To some extent, Judith Butler's ideas also seem to be reflected in what could be called the novel's poetics – its metafictional reflections on storytelling and more importantly "telling the story again".

This chapter will first summarise the 'canonical' versions of the myth, and provide an overview over the traditional interpretation of story and characters, especially in order to highlight differences. The next part will explore the novel's re-writing of the creation myth, and the portrayal of the ancient world before the establishment of the Olympian reign, linking these to certain feminist interpretations of classical mythology, most notably the so-called 'Goddess Myth'. The analysis will then continue to explore the power strategies of the hegemonial Olympian regime, the meaning of physical and discursive power, and the identities of the subjects invested by

this hegemony. The question of agency and the possibility of self-definition is especially important in this context. The answer to this question is inseparable from the novel's metafictional reflexions. The last part of the chapter will focus on the theme of storytelling and its political and subversive potential – both on a literal and a metaphorical level, both of which are addressed especially in the autobiographical passages, but are also reflected in the novel's metafictional content, on a level of plot as well as on a stylistic level.

### **3.1 *The Myths of Atlas and Heracles – Canonic Version and Reception***

Though today still ubiquitous as the name giver of the Atlantic Ocean and as the namesake of the atlas as a collection of maps, Atlas is not one of the most prominent figures in the Greek mythological canon, which is generally a reflection of the cult of the Olympian pantheon, and therefore consists mainly of myths about the Olympian generation. One of the most important and earliest written sources for the stories that cover the creation of the world, the genealogy of the gods, and the wars and struggles that lead to establishing the Olympian pantheon, is Hesiod's *Theogony*. As the earliest known work that tells the story of the Titans, it can be considered the most canonical of versions and has had a great influence on other textualisations and reworkings of the myth. Hence, it also constitutes the basis (though not the only source) for Robert Graves's *Myths*, which, like Atwood, Winterson cites as a reference (ix, not paginated). It is important to note, however, that Hesiod's *Theogony* is biased in its portrayal of divine 'history', and clearly expresses the superiority and legitimacy of the authoritative, patriarchal rule of Zeus at the head of the Olympian pantheon, which he espouses. It is this fact, that must be kept in mind when exploring the intertextual relationship between that version of the ancient Greek myth and its 21<sup>st</sup> century retelling by Jeanette Winterson.

According to the canonical version, then, Atlas belongs to an older generation of deities known as Titans, who appear only in marginal positions in the Olympian myths, and then mostly as adversaries. Atlas is known for ruling the island kingdom Atlantis and participating in the Titans' revolt against their father Uranus. After

the destruction and flooding of Atlantis he leads the other Titans in the struggle against the younger generation of gods, which ends with Zeus, having defeated his father Cronus, superseding him as the ruler of the gods and taking his residence on Mount Olympus. (Graves 143-44; 37-41) After the Olympians' victory, when the Titans are banned and confined to Britain, Atlas is singled out and sentenced to stand at the westernmost point of the Earth and carry the cosmos on his shoulders for the rest of his immortal existence. Literally pushed to the margin of the world, the character plays no more active role in the story, and is never liberated apart from the short period of time when, for the fulfilment of his eleventh labour, Heracles offers to bear the firmament for Atlas while he picks the apples of the Hesperides for him. (Graves 507-11) Apart from this episode, Atlas's story is distinguished by passivity and immobility, and according to some traditions, he is eventually even literally turned to stone (Graves 144). The story of Atlas's "exemplary punishment" (Graves 41), against which he never earnestly protests despite his legendary strength, can be seen as a classic and uncomplicated example that helps to establish the power and superiority of the Olympian gods and warns against disobedience and *hubris*. From the perspective of Hesiod and the Olympian religion in general, the Titans occupy the role of villains or at least an inferior, outdated generation, who have to be overthrown and subdued so that the proper order and the rightful rule of Zeus can be established (cf. Lefkovitz 16). As far as the canonical, Olympian version of the myth goes, the story of Atlas more or less ends with the enforcement of his eternal life sentence, and apart from the times where he reappears as a minor character in the myth of Heracles, he is only evoked as an immutable, fossilised, and almost lifeless constant somewhere at the edge of the world. Perhaps on account of the scarceness of action and character development in his story Atlas has not been the subject of either extensive theoretical discussions or literary adaptations or re-workings, and he is certainly not celebrated as a subversive figure. In this respect, he usually yields precedence to his brother Prometheus, whose struggle against the hegemonial ruler Zeus on behalf of humanity has made him an attractive subject of literary re-interpretations.

The encounter between Atlas and Heracles represents an important plot point in *Weight*, and the contrasting of the two characters is such a central theme that

Heracles can be called a second protagonist of the novel. As half-god and the son of Zeus by a mortal woman, Heracles is perhaps the most important hero of the mythological canon. Although not a 'villain' like Atlas, on account of his humanity he is not infallible, and his relationship with the gods is anything but free of conflict. According to myth, Heracles's life is characterised by the antagonism of Hera, Zeus's jealous wife, who continuously punishes him for his father's infidelity. On one occasion she causes a fit of madness in him and makes him kill his own wife and children, thereby occasioning the famous twelve labours that Heracles has to perform to make amends. His toils, however, do not end with the completion of these labours, and his final downfall is fittingly brought about by a jealous wife who, trying to ensure his fidelity with magical means, inadvertently causes his death. After his death, however, Heracles's labours are finally rewarded and he is taken up into the pantheon of Olympian gods. Due to Heracles' huge popularity and wide reception that lasted throughout and beyond Greek antiquity, his character has been reinterpreted in many different and often contrary ways. It is difficult, therefore, to define who the 'real' Heracles of myth is. Galinsky (1972) argues that "his origins belong to the folktale, [...] where he initially seems to have been no more than the type of strong boy who recurs [in the folk literature of many countries]" (Galinsky 2), and later entered into mythology and cult. Initially in the latter context, too, his prodigious strength and physical prowess were central to his role (Galinsky 3). In Homer, the first written source in which Heracles is mentioned, he is judged harshly as a violent and unbridled ruffian who transgresses social rules and conventions, violates the sacred law of hospitality, and presumptuously defies the gods (Galinsky 9-12). Later, this rebelliousness would be interpreted more positively, and Galinsky argues that "Herakles was the hero with the inherent capacity to break out of an established pattern and to have a choice open to him" (Galinsky 6). A similar version of Heracles later also found its way into Athenian comedy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, where more serious versions of the myths are parodied, and the lighthearted portrayal of his physical exploits and his immense appetite take on almost carnivalesque forms. In a completely contrary and not at all subversive interpretation the character of Heracles also came to symbolise the human virtues of endurance and humble acceptance in the face of a tragic fate in the tragedies of the same

time, where his unquestioning obedience and trust in the essential, though for humans not always understandable, justice of the gods' counsel is held up as a positive example, and rewarded with his final apotheosis. Essential to Heracles's character is not only his two-fold nature as both a god and a hero, but his general ambiguity as a character who takes on many different guises throughout ages of reception, reflecting diverse and changing values and morals. However various the interpretations, Heracles ultimately remains a figure in support of the established order, which is precisely what makes him a hero. Even if his affinity with the gods is conflicted during his mortal life, his final apotheosis and reception into the pantheon symbolises the removal of such differences and completes the assimilation of Heracles to divine law. In Winterson's reinterpretation of Heracles, the character's affinity with the Olympian order is retained and even reaffirmed, but the associated evaluation is changed completely as the heroic pathos surrounding the character is deflated completely, and Heracles's role as the champion of Olympian values is recast in an intensely negative form. In his brash and vulgar physicality the character in Winterson's reading corresponds most closely to the carnivalesque Heracles of the comedies, but unlike him, he does not manage to win the reader's sympathy and may at best inspire pity when his true, inner weakness and his helplessness in relation to the system he represents are revealed. More dominant, however, is his function as Atlas's foil, whose story, including an unglamorous ending with no mention of apotheosis, shows up the error of his ways.

## **3.2 *Rewriting Origins***

### **3.2.1 The Goddess Myth**

Winterson's re-telling can be said to follow the classic deconstructive pattern of postmodern and re-visionist re-tellings in defying the dominant and prevailing version of the narrative, concentrating on the portrayal of a character in a position of powerlessness, who is traditionally counted among the 'losers' of the story, and in providing an alternative perspective on the well-known characters and events. As has been mentioned, the canonic version to be re-written was first recorded in the works of Hesiod, and is associated with the Olympian cult. In Winterson's interpretation, the

Olympian regime is identified with values typical of Western patriarchal hegemony and characterised by the dominance of and the establishing as the norm of the male and the heterosexual and a range of associated stereotypical characteristics, the marginalisation and oppression of all difference from this norm, and the maintenance of strict hierarchical structures and a rigid power system to keep the prevailing order intact. It is likely that Winterson drew some inspiration for this from Robert Graves' 1954 compilation of the Greek myths, which is cited as a source for *Weight* (ix, not paginated). Graves interprets the myths according to a modified version of a theory known as Euhemerism, which assumes that "events and persons in mythology refer to actual historical occurrences and figures" (Passman 193) and that the narratives of myth are built around existing religious cults and rituals in order to explain them. In *The Greek Myths* (1954), as well as the earlier work *The White Goddess* (1948), Graves subscribes to the theory that the patriarchal Olympian cult which corresponds to the well-known mythologies supplanted an earlier, matrilinear religion and culture. Graves in the 1940s was not the first to formulate this theory, which was developed by a German scholar, Johann Jakob Bachofen, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and notably shaped by a group of classicists known as the Cambridge Ritual School (Passman 183). Among them it was Janes Ellen Harrison who "first introduced a feminist – indeed, a radical feminist – perspective to classics" (Passman 182). Although the theory, which presents matriculture as prior to – and therefore by implication as more authentic and legitimate than – the prevailing patriarchal culture, is highly contested especially among classicists, it is celebrated by some feminists as an empowering female alternative to patriarchal originary myths. As Tina Passman wrote in 1993:

In this particular cultural moment when many of us cry for a revolution in human thought and action, some feminisms have anchored their visionary work firmly to the past, linking the notions "ancient" and "future." [...] The unearthing of evidence for early matriculture in the West – Europe, Asia Minor, and Africa – furnishes the seed for this feminist re-visioning and re-construction of a matristic past and carries with it a web of ethics, aesthetics, history and spirituality. (182)

Taken up especially by feminists outside the academic world, the so-called Goddess myth evokes a pre-patriarchal utopia that is characterised by balance and harmony, a devaluation of violence and aggression and a life in close communion with

nature. Graves and other proponents of the Goddess myth maintain that traces of the original cult as well as the upheaval and the supplanting of matrilinear through patrilinear culture are still preserved in coded form in the patriarchal myths that tell of the repeated generational struggles within the divine family, which finally result in the hegemony of Zeus.

### 3.2.2 Utopian Aspects of the Primordial World of *Weight*

In this context, it is especially interesting that Winterson chooses a myth that is set both before and after the establishment of the Olympian reign and takes the opportunity to chart the changes it brings about, as witnessed by the focalising character of Atlas. In the passages set before the war between the Titans and Olympians, *Weight* depicts a primordial world, which, in analogy to the interpretation of the Olympian regime as a symbol of patriarchal culture and in accordance with the Goddess myth, can be read to symbolise a prepatriarchal world order identified with values that are expressly antithetical to those of patriarchy and the dominant order in general. However, they should not too hastily be identified with a primordial 'femininity', as is the case in essentialist feminist theories like Harrison's. Essentialist reasoning has since been criticised and problematised by scholars who see femininity as a construct of the very dominant order that they are trying to subvert, whereby the strict binary categorisation into feminine and masculine is not seen as empowering but oppressive. As scholars have observed, a similar point of view is typical of Winterson's work, which is full of attempts to undermine and transcend binary thinking, as well as the essentialism underlying concepts like femininity and masculinity (Rubinson 114). One passage that illustrates this perfectly is found right at the beginning and tells of the creation of life.

Science calls it the world before life began – the Hadean period. But life had begun, because life is more than the ability to reproduce. In the molten lava spills and cratered rocks, life longed for life. *The proto, the almost, the maybe.* Not Venus. Not Mars. Earth. Planet Earth, that wanted life so badly, she got it. (*Weight* 4)

This rewriting of the creation counters the Judaeo-Christian creation myth in making do without a creator – in fact in this case 'emergence' would perhaps be a better term than creation. In this account, mythology is mixed up with scientific discourse – which, as the still highly poetic passages suggest – does not make it any less mystical or

miraculous. It is significant that in Winterson's version of the creation myth, life is located not in "the ability to reproduce", and especially not in sexual reproduction – it is the longing for life, its mere potentiality combined with a wish for it that makes it possible. This foregrounds the power of imagination, ideas and belief, suggesting that the most important prerequisite for the implementation and reification of an idea is the belief in its potentiality. Moreover, it is emphatically neither Mars nor Venus – the planets or deities that epitomise masculinity and femininity – but Earth that is the origin of life. Although Earth is traditionally also equated with femininity, in the context of Greek mythology it is the maternal aspect of femininity along with a notion of independent fertility that it symbolises<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, Venus, the Roman version of Aphrodite, is the goddess of love, beauty and sexual allure. In particular, she symbolises heterosexual love, and could be identified with Irigaray's notion of the feminine a narcissistic discursive construct of masculinity, never independent from it but defined as its Other and mirror image. In Irigaray's theory the 'real' feminine is excluded from this binarism as well as all signification, and can for all practical purposes not be reached in any way from within the signifying system of language that governs the world as we know it. As the introduction of a 'third option' in addition to Venus and Mars shows, the world of *Weight* does not adopt this perspective, but instead seems to share some characteristic features of Monique Wittig's portrayal of gendered identities. Earth is, like the lesbian in Wittig's theory, "excessive to a phallogentric economy that has traditionally relegated woman to the positions of object of exchange and specular mirror of man" (Zimmerman, qtd. in Palmer 189). In this excluded position, however, lies her power which gives her the agency and possibility to subvert traditional structures: she defies the habitual lesbian stereotype of sterility following from asexuality in being the independent originator of life. This 'celebration' of disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised positions for holding unique and productive possibilities, which would be inaccessible from advantaged, 'dominant' positions, which first becomes apparent in the creation passage, is an important theme of *Weight* that resurfaces in different contexts

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1 Even in the 'patriarchal' Olympian myth, the entirety of creation is predicated upon a parthenogenetic conception without the participation of a male deity: "At the beginning of all things Mother Earth emerged from the Chaos and bore her son Uranus as she slept." (Graves 31)



throughout the novel. As will become clear, however, this idea is not promoted uncritically but problematised.

The idea of lesbianism as a liberating – or liberated – form of femininity, or gender identity in general, also reappears in the second chapter, narrated by Atlas in the first person, when he tells of the love story between his mother Earth and Poseidon. Although at first sight Poseidon is male identified, there are a number of hints that associate him, too, with femininity. The first clue is the fact that Winterson makes Atlas the son of Mother Earth and Poseidon. Atlas's genealogy is a matter of some disagreement among mythographers. According to the canonic myth, as Graves documents, Cronus and the Titans are the offspring of Earth and Uranos, a primal deity and personification of the sky (Graves 37). Unlike in *Weight*, Atlas is originally not Cronus's brother but his nephew, being the son of a first generation Titan and a nymph (Graves 143). According to this version, Poseidon, as one of the sons of Cronus, and therefore a member of the Olympian generation, is probably younger than Atlas and could not be his father. Graves does mention briefly, however, that according to a different version of the myth circulated in Egypt<sup>2</sup>, Atlas is the son of Poseidon (Graves 143), and it seems that this is the version that Winterson follows, simultaneously also making Atlas one of the first generation of Titans, who are the direct offspring of Gaia, the personification of Earth. The meaning of Winterson's choice regarding Atlas's genealogy becomes clear upon inspecting which domains are allocated to the gods Uranos and Poseidon respectively, and what symbolic meanings they hold. While Uranos is, like Zeus after him, the god of the sky, Poseidon is the ruler over the oceans (Graves 32; 59). The reassigning of paternity to Poseidon in *Weight*, therefore, gives Atlas a father identified with water rather than air, which is significant considering that, like earth, water is an element traditionally associated with femininity, whereas air and fire symbolise masculinity. Atlas explicitly references this association when he says of his parents: "My mother and father teemed with life. They were life. Creation depended on them and had done so before there was air or fire" (*Weight* 11). Although the recourse to these traditional identifications of male and female with the four elements to

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<sup>2</sup> It is an interesting coincidence, though probably not more, that ancient Egypt is one of the countries that archaeologists and anthropologists have clearly associated with matriarchal culture (Passman 198).

some extent contradicts Winterson's anti-essentialist standpoint, it symbolically emphasises the independence of creation from male power, and sets against it the notion of a union at the origin of the world that is figuratively, if not literally, lesbian. Furthermore, the fact that Poseidon is 'officially' and by name, male, but can take on differently sexed physical shapes and with a combination of feminine and masculine features again contests any rigid essentialist assumptions about gender roles. In Atlas's description of the courting couple, gender identifications, as well as bodies, are utopian in their fluidity:

Sometimes he was a long way out and she missed him and the beached fishes gasped for breath. Then he was all over her again and they were mermaids together because there was always something feminine about my father, for all his power. Earth and water are the same kind, just as fire and air are their opposites. (*Weight* 12-13)

The dreamlike, paradisaical description of this primaeval love story, which is free of conflict and disharmony but characterised by concord and mutual respect, portrays this 'lesbian' love – or rather, a love beyond categorisation – as preferable to the later norm of heterosexuality under patriarchal rule, where the relationships between men and women tend to be marked by a steep power differential, a lack of respect, as well as distrust and betrayal<sup>3</sup>. It is also significant that the utopic, untouched, natural world in which the love story between Atlas's parents is set is still largely characterised by boundlessness. With no 'political' system and no leadership, the only two protagonists are equal and at peace. The "gentle restraint" (*Weight* 13) that their co-existence requires is in no way oppressive. This utopian freedom is also reflected in the 'liquidness' of both bodies and identities. The world Atlas describes in this first chapter has materialised, but is still not fully solidified, but changeful and "volatile" (*Weight* 12), as Atlas says of his parents. Their bodies are not clearly or rigidly defined, so that they can take different shapes, and "[be] mermaids together" (*Weight* 13), or, even more paradoxically, inhabit and travel locations they simultaneously *are*: "Places only they could go, places only they could be." (*Weight* 13)

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3 Incidentally this relationship that is somehow both hetero- and homosexual and is facilitated by this very fluid conception of identities, is also preferable to the 'compulsory lesbianism', that is presented by Monique Wittig as the only alternative to the present oppressive normative regime, but seems hardly more tolerant of difference and variety.

There is no doubt that on some level the original world order of *Weight* shares essential characteristics with the "Edenic condition of ecological balance, mutual respect and egalitarian relations, with the (positive) power of the feminine being revered" (Passman 197) that is represented by the matricentric society associated with the Goddess myth, and in contrast to which "[p]atriarchal development becomes equivalent to the Fall" (Passman 197). However, Winterson does not adopt the essentialist perspective implied by the Goddess myth by not directly identifying the prepatriarchal world with (heterosexual) femininity, and, in a manoeuvre reminiscent of Monique Wittig's introduction of the lesbian as a third gender able to subvert and break out of the restriction of gender within the binary pair of masculinity and femininity, introduces a third option, characterised by plurality and flexibility. *Weight's* description of the primaeval world tends to do away with restrictive categories like masculine or feminine, lesbian or homosexual, and denies the substantiality of (sexual/gender) identity itself. Instead, the scenario is reminiscent of Judith Butler's rephrasing of Foucault's description of the experiences of a hermaphrodite, found in *Gender Trouble*:

Smiles, happiness, pleasures, and desire are figured here as qualities without an abiding substance to which they are said to adhere. As free-floating attributes, they suggest the possibility of a gendered experience that cannot be grasped through the substantializing and hierarchizing grammar of nouns (*res extensa*) and adjectives (attributes, essential and accidental). (Butler 33)

There can be no doubt, then, that Winterson's primordial world is identified as antithesis to the Western, patriarchal order represented by the Olympian regime and functions as an utopian backdrop against which to contrast the present. Significantly, the idealisation of the pre-Olympian time reverses the evaluation of the canonic version of the myth as textualised by Hesiod, which, designed to support and glorify the cult of Zeus, portrays the primordial world as primitive and inferior (Galinsky 16). In contrast, the utopian portrayal of the original, primordial world in *Weight* undermines the justification of the later Olympian regime and disputes the idea of linear progress that underlies it. This ideal world does not simply represent a superior alternative to the patriarchal world, it is also portrayed as more legitimate through its claim to originality and higher authenticity.

### **3.3 Under Olympian Oppression**

The establishing of the Olympian domination in *Weight* can be read as a decline into a despotic reign characterised by boundaries and limitations, which work in various ways to establish and uphold the Olympian monopoly of power. In its portrayal of this dominant regime, Winterson's novel foregrounds the fact that its power is historical and constructed and built on discursive and performative strategies of reinforcement, thereby contesting its claim to universality and naturalness. At the same time, however, this discursive power is not to be underestimated, and *Weight* also documents of the pervasiveness of the regime, and the sheer difficulty of escaping it, even for those individuals, who have superior knowledge of the limits of the regime, because, like Atlas, they are situated in marginal locations, literally leaning on the boundaries of the world. In fact, it gives insight into the way in which even such marginalised individuals are themselves, to some extent, creations of the dominant discourse, and into the role they play in maintaining the status quo of the regime and their own oppression. This fact is symbolised by the character of Atlas, who plays a central role in the 'founding' of this regime, not only because he is the focalising character that suggests narrative continuity in the transition from one world order to another but also because the punishment for his resistance is the most obvious and most literal example for the boundaries imposed by the Olympian regime.

#### **3.3.1 The Beginning of Boundaries**

The establishment of the Olympian regime, as well as the events leading up to it are related in one chapter narrated by Atlas in the first person. Atlas, in more than one way, is a creature of margins. He is born of the quasi-lesbian union of Water and Earth and can to some extent be identified with the primordial world in existence before the establishment of patriarchal hegemony, along with its norms and regulations. However, while his parents' lives could be identified with an untouched, natural state of the world, during Atlas's lifetime culture is beginning to take possession of and influence nature and civilisation is on the rise. Finally, as will be shown, he becomes a symbol of the power of the Olympian regime, and is virtually defined by his captivity. Furthermore, due to his punishment, his actual, *physical* location is a margin; a "hinge" – the

boundary between Heaven and Earth, or, as it sometimes appears, the boundary between Kosmos and Chaos.

In the beginning, Atlas's own life is as utopian as that of his parents before him, as he leads a simple life close to nature. Although he is the ruler of the prosperous island of Atlantis, he identifies himself as a gardener or farmer, rather than a ruler; his speciality is nurturing rather than domination and it is private life rather than public affairs that interest him. „His daughters, his peace and quiet, his own thoughts, his freedom, his pride" are "everything that matter[s] to him" (*Weight* 55). His wealth derives not from exploitation but from a harmonious and respectful relationship with nature:

When I wanted gold and jewels I asked my mother where she kept them and she [...] showed me her secret mines and underground caves. When I wanted whales or harbours or nets lined with fish or pearls for my daughters, I went to my father, who respected me and treated me as an equal. [...] Land and sea were equal home to me. (*Weight* 15-16)

Though he takes pride in the fame of his garden, and his special and profitable connection with nature, he does not overvalue material possessions. He does not understand that men "love gold, long for gold and guard it with their lives, though life is more precious than any metal" (*Weight* 18). Neither does he understand the jealousy with which Hera guards the golden apples of her tree, and which leads her to ban Atlas from his own garden. The way the gods impose limitations upon the world around them and view nature in categories of ownership is alien to him.

Atlas's lack of enthusiasm for the war he would have "preferred to avoid" (*Weight* 19) indicates that he does not regard violence and aggression as an adequate way of solving problems. He understands that real strength relies on flexibility and permeability, instead of unyielding rigidity. The wall Atlas builds around his garden "relies on nothing" (*Weight* 17). "A solid wall is easily collapsed," he declares, while "[a] wall well built with invisible spaces will allow the winds that rage against it to pass through" (*Weight* 16-17). This philosophy is reminiscent of the advice given to Penelope by her naiad mother in *The Penelopiad*. Atlas's kind of power can then be said to be almost feminine; it represents an alternative to the traditional, masculine – and in the case of *Weight* Olympian – understanding of strength.

First stirrings of the impending change can be found in the development of notions of private property and material possessions, and in the creation of first boundaries. The first material, man-made boundary mentioned in *Weight*, which is ironically erected by Atlas himself, is meant to delineate property – the wall around his garden. Although it is in itself a harmless gesture, it marks the beginning of a change, and the arrival of greed, jealousy and hunger for power in the Edenic prepatriarchal world that Atlas was born into. At the same time, the compartmentalisation that becomes apparent in the partitioning of land reveals a deeper-lying trend of fragmentation and categorisation, that runs contrary to the old holistic world order, and also affects the ‘social’ domain, as the progeny of this old order see their freedom being increasingly restricted. However, the rivalry between Titans and Olympian gods surfaces only slowly and at first there is friendship between them so that Hera leaves her precious golden apple tree in Atlas’s care in the garden of the Hesperides. Hera’s anger at Atlas’s daughters taking some of the fruit and her consequent measures for their protection – the monster Ladon is to guard them – are among the first signs that point towards the advent of animosity. Atlas’s own wall, erected as a defense against possible intruders, is turned against him as he is forbidden to enter his own garden. It is a heavy blow: “When I was cast out of the garden, I thought nothing heavier could befall me” (*Weight* 19). It should be noted how the choice of words here saliently accentuates the parallels to Christian mythology and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, with the significant difference that Atlas is thrown out of a garden that he himself created. The incident represents the beginning of the inscription of Atlas as marginal and Other to the Olympian norms.

In his description of the outbreak of war, Atlas conflates two actually separate struggles – that in which Cronus superseded his father Uranus as leader, and the war of the Titans, led by Atlas, against the younger generation of Olympian gods. Atlas only gets involved after Zeus sends the Athenians to destroy Atlantis. According to Robert Graves, this is done as a measure to curb the mounting *hubris*, “greed” and “cruelty” of the population of Atlantis (Graves 143). In Atlas’s account this issue is not addressed, so that it rather appears that the main motivation is Zeus’s own greed, jealousy and hunger for power (*Weight* 18). In any case, material possessions are the trigger for unrest. After

the destruction of Atlantis through a deluge (Graves 143) – note again the parallels to Christian mythology – Atlas has nothing left to lose, and is therefore eager to join the “revolt against the heavens” (*Weight* 20). This wording is somewhat peculiar, as in the myth it is the Olympians who revolt against the supremacy of Cronus and the other Titans. Graves, for example, refers to a “rebellion against Cronus” (Graves 144). However, it seems here that either Atlas or the author prefer not to highlight the Titan’s previous role as part of the ruling class. Only later does Atlas admit that he used to be “one of the powerful” (*Weight* 68). When his side loses the war, however, he suddenly finds himself on the other end of the power spectrum, and in fact the establishing of the Olympian regime is directly dependent on the banning and punishment of the defeated enemies.

### 3.3.2 Atlas’s Punishment

After the triumph of the Olympians over the Titans, their subsequent banning or imprisonment is the first action taken by the new ruler. By silencing all dissenting voices and literally subjugating the leader of the opposition this facilitates the total domination of the Olympian regime. In this context, Atlas’s exceptional punishment gains symbolic meaning as the ‘foundation’ of Olympian power in more than one way. Not only is his spectacular punishment exemplary and designed to deter anybody from any further ‘rebellion’ against Olympian supremacy, there is also a symbolism evident in the specific form and function of the punitive task that Atlas has to fulfill. Unlike his brother Prometheus’s punishment, which is simply designed to torture him, but has no practical aim, Atlas’s sentence actually serves a purpose – namely to bear the ‘Kosmos’<sup>4</sup> on his shoulders, keeping it separate from the Earth. Thus, the punishment not only asserts Olympian power by constraining and isolating the chief representative of the old order, it is also an act of fragmentation, compartmentalisation and ‘ordering’ that on a smaller scale repeats the substitution of the unbounded pluralism of the previous world

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<sup>4</sup> It is not easy to tell what is meant by Kosmos in *Weight*, and what exactly Atlas’s task therefore requires. In Greek mythology, the term Kosmos actually refers to the entire existing universe, as opposed to the unordered nothing of Chaos. This would require Atlas to be located outside of existence in order to be able to carry it. In fact, in some passages Atlas’s place seems to be located outside of time and space. More frequently, however, he appears to be standing in space and holding up the Earth. In the ‘original’ version, he is condemned to the outer reaches of the Earth and has to bear the sky (the firmament) on his shoulders.

order with the strict binary thinking that characterises the Olympian order. Thus the form of his punishment itself is a manifestation of the Olympian order and its values, which Atlas is thereby literally forced to *uphold*.

The enforcement of Atlas's sentence is, then, the first implementation of the new and from then on universal law. With Foucault, it is possible to read this public punishment as having a specific "juridico-political function" (Foucault 48). According to *Discipline and Punish* "[public punishment] is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular." (Foucault 48) This holds true for Atlas's sentence with the only difference that Zeus's power has not been momentarily injured, but is just in the process of being established. It is also true that "[i]ts aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, at its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength." (Foucault 48-9). In a sense, then, Atlas's punishment through Zeus resembles the public punishments and tortures, which are, according to Foucault, a demonstration of the power of the sovereign. Although this element definitely constitutes an aspect of its meaning, Atlas's torture and confinement it is not purely a matter of "the physical strength of the sovereign beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it" (Foucault 49). In fact, though Atlas suffers pain under the weight of the Kosmos, and is rendered immobile, he is not forced, in any physical way, to keep the Kosmos on his shoulders, and unlike Heracles, who cannot put down the sphere out of his own power, Atlas could, theoretically, free himself of his burden. For the greater part of the novel, however, he does not, and this points to the fact that he is primarily bound by a different set of chains. Upon closer inspection Atlas's sentence shares more definite characteristics with the newer forms of punishment analysed by Foucault, which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, it is a discursive, rather than physical form of power which masters both body and 'soul' of the prisoner, tying them up and conflating them with a complex web of 'narratives'. Through the enforcement of his punishment, Atlas is given a new role and function, a physical task that engages his body but also taps into and responds individually to his personality, his specific dispositions. Through the performance of this task, the power of discourse reaches every aspect of his identity,



shaping it, *re-writing* it. It is significant, therefore, that Zeus's decree, the pronunciation of Atlas's sentence, is nothing but an act of naming: "*Atlas, Atlas, Atlas*" (*Weight 22*). Atlas concludes that his name is a portent of fate: "It's in my name, I should have known. My name is Atlas – it means 'the long suffering one'." (*Weight 22*) What is implied, however, is that Zeus's act of naming defined the meaning of Atlas's name as a punishment, and Atlas's acceptance accounts for the fact that he does not (fully) recognise fate as a construction – and at the same time a disguise – of Olympian power.

The strategies of mystification and naturalisation of power constructs become obvious in *Weight*. Despite the actually prominent role of Zeus in Atlas's subjugation, the palpable, material power of the sovereign fades into the background and is even consciously obscured. The established power relations and the newly constructed role and identity of the subject are naturalised, that is, made to appear as a natural and unchangeable, even unquestionable state of affairs, while their historicity and constructedness are concealed.

Atlas observes how cleverly his punishment is designed to fit the nature of his 'crime', as well as his own individual nature. It falls into the category of analogical punishment, which means that a correlation between the 'offense' and the punishment is intended. Fighting "for freedom" (*Weight 14*) is punished by a further reduction of his personal freedom. Hence "[b]y assuming the form of a natural sequence, punishment does not appear as the arbitrary effect of [...] power" (Foucault 105). But the scope of naturalisation goes further than this, taking into account not just the individual type of his transgression, but his entire person. The punishment is carefully adapted to his bodily nature, his "great strength" (*Weight 20*), which is an essential part of his self image and seems to predestine him for the task he has to perform, following a certain idea of 'biology as destiny'. In addition to his physical form, Atlas's personality and psychological disposition also appear to him ideally suited to deal with his burden. He is enduring and patient, and is known for his intimate knowledge of and love for the Kosmos, which is handed into his responsibility: "Because I loved the earth. Because the seas of the earth held no fear for me. Because I had learned the positions of planets and the track of the stars" (*Weight 20*). Atlas also feels that the punishment "engage[s] his vanity" (*Weight 70*), and to a degree he indeed takes pride in the 'virtue' and

martyrlike dedication which distinguishes him from the mentally weaker Heracles: "He [Atlas] [is] Lord of the Kosmos, wonder of the universe" (*Weight* 70). Atlas is convinced that he is the *only* person who is both physically and mentally strong enough to bear the Kosmos. Believing in the necessity of the task, he feels obliged to serve his sentence as his sense of duty is engaged. What he cannot know at this point and will not find out until the very end of the novel is that the world does not actually need to be held up, and nothing catastrophic would happen if he let it go. What he is holding up so dutifully is the status quo of his own imprisonment and powerlessness – the very world order whose desolation he desires more than anything.

Of course, the idea that a person has no agency and influence over the events and developments in their life and resigns to being governed utterly by a higher power is not as alien in the context of mythological narratives as it would seem to most 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. The concept of fate played an important role in the belief system reflected in the myths of ancient Greece: It is fate that determines the course a human life can take – be it that of a hero or an ordinary person. Though the vicissitudes of life seem harsh and often arbitrary, the belief in fate interprets them as inevitable elements in a sort of natural order or plan of the gods, which may be impossible for humans to understand, but which are still and for that very reason beyond dispute or questioning. Any attempt to influence one's allotted fate and to show agency and free will must necessarily amount to *hubris* and deserves to be punished. This notion of fate is taken up in *Weight*, and finds reflection in the two protagonists' beliefs. But, typically for Winterson, this question of faith is subjected to a critical inspection and re-evaluation. In her story, it becomes apparent that the omnipotent guiding force that her characters believe to be shaping their life is not a force that by default exists *in the world*; it gains its power only by the subjects' belief in its existence. It is a myth in the sense that its power originates on the level of discourse and from there influences 'reality'. The reader realises what the subjects are initially unable to understand, namely that this fate is not something that enforces a sort of natural order or just and legitimate plan of the gods, although the processes of naturalisation at work may create this illusion, but that fate serves the sole function of making them resign to a passive and uncritical fulfilment of their prescribed tasks. Winterson takes some artistic licence in making Atlas, along

with all Titans, "half man, half god" (*Weight* 13) and subjecting him to fate despite being a deity, as normally, "[a] god has no fate", as Hera claims (*Weight* 40). This alteration sets Atlas apart from the Olympians and humanises him, emphasising the gap between the powerful and the powerless, rather than the difference between the mortals and immortals. Atlas's sentence widens this gap, redefining him as a powerless subject without agency, reduced to a passive building block for Olympian power. Thus, when Atlas refers to "the will of the gods", it is from the point of view of a subject and believer, not an overpowered and maltreated relative and former friend.

When Atlas feels that he is carrying the world "in time, as well as in space" (*Weight* 25), the historicity of his punishment has successfully been concealed; its beginning and ending have become inconceivable: "I felt the world before it began, and the future marked me. I would always be here." (*Weight* 23) And, in a way, in his mind he has always been there, or at least always been destined for it, as his interpretation of his own name suggests. Atlas hardly mentions Zeus, the true agent behind the punishment, and rarely associates him with his punishment. He resigns to the ostensible fact that his punishment is inevitable and a natural effect of his behaviour and personality, as well as his fate, placing the responsibility for his suffering on himself: "In a way I was allowed to be my own punishment." (*Weight* 20) In fact, he can hardly keep himself and his punishment apart: "This is my monstrous burden. The boundary of what I am" (*Weight* 21). Such statements, of course, reveal how fully Atlas has internalised the narratives of power that he is subjected to and how completely he has accepted his new role and identity as legitimate and real, though no less of a torture. His resignation to an existence of suffering becomes especially obvious in his conversations with Heracles, as when the hero, disconcerted after his conversation with Hera, asks Atlas for the reason why they obediently follow the gods' will. Not only his own situation consolidates his deterministic conviction, but so do the human fates that he is in a privileged position to observe: "I hear all the business of men, and the more I hear them questioning their lot, the more I know how futile it is" (*Weight* 50). In the face of Heracles's first, naive realisation that he leads his unhappy, restless life for no plausible reason, he replies as someone who has accepted his situation and knows his desire for

freedom to be impossible to realise: "There is no such thing as freedom. Freedom is a country that doesn't exist" (*Weight* 51).

Although I have established that the punishment goes beyond a *merely* physical display of power, the role of the body therein must not be neglected. Foucault writes that "the body [is always] at issue" as it is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 25). The punishment works to assert Olympian power within Atlas himself and thereby uses the body as a representative for the entire being. As the site where boundaries become manifest, and construed as the true origin of the constraint, the body plays an important role in keeping Atlas restrained. The condition of physical 'imprisonment' literally represents and continuously mirrors and reaffirms Atlas's internal imprisonment. With himself as the physical, palpable proof and incarnation of his imprisonment, the idea of an escape becomes as impossible as "unbelieving" himself (*Weight* 26). Because his own body comes to mean boundaries for Atlas, an existence in freedom is as impossible and unimaginable as an existence without a body. In the fantastic, mythological world of *Weight* the conflation of his entire existence with his new role, and the horror at the interminable stasis of his situation, the thought of "[f]orever [being] the same person" and "[f]orever [performing] the same task" (*Weight* 69) can actually become physical reality. Atlas feels his body harden, become fossilised and finally indiscernible from the heavy body of the Earth: "As the dinosaurs crawl through my hair and volcanic eruptions pock my face, I find I am become a part of what I must bear. There is no longer Atlas and the world, there is only the World Atlas" (*Weight* 25). In this context, Atlas's desire for freedom takes the form of a problematically self-destructive longing to dissolve the material boundaries of his own self. "I should like to unbelieve myself", he admits at one point. "I sleep at night and wake in the morning hoping to be gone" (*Weight* 26). What *Weight* seems to echo here, besides a Foucauldian reading of the body, is a dilemma that has figured importantly in gender theory – namely the relation between body and identity, and the question of biology as fate. The problem could be summed up as the dilemma between the desire to transcend the body along with its seemingly rigid sexual differentiation and the associated oppressive gender roles and the

feeling that the body, despite all this, still matters, and plays a significant part in constituting individual identity and subjectivity. Experienced through the structures of dominant discourse, the body itself becomes an institution of that dominant power, and tightens its hold on the individual, by being a prison that can literally not be escaped alive.

The hold that imprisoning powers of discourse have over Atlas is demonstrated especially through the events in the garden of the Hesperides, when Atlas is physically freed from his burden by Heracles to pick the golden apples that Heracles is compelled to obtain for his eleventh labour. Although Atlas is relieved from his burden, there seems no doubt to him that his liberty must necessarily be temporary. He does not even consider an escape but dutifully returns to his old home in order to fulfill his promise. When Zeus arrives in the disguise of an old man in order to check on the escaped convict and assess the situation, he is worried that Atlas might "begin to consider the nature of Heracles's blind question" (*Weight 57*) and realise its implications. Zeus's anxiety shows that the mere idea that his subjects' 'fate' is not universal and that liberation could be feasible constitutes a very real threat to his power. He soon realises, however, that, although physically free, Atlas has not thrown off his mental shackles, and is still "in his usual place" (*Weight 58*).

The following scene, in which Atlas picks the apples, has symbolic significance. When Atlas is unable to pick up the third apple due to its apparently enormous weight, and forced to pause, he begins to consider Heracles's question, reflecting on the nature of his imprisonment and his desire for freedom. In this context, the importance of rational thought for Atlas is foregrounded. As he is neither physical and sensual like Heracles, nor a particularly emotional character, thinking is Atlas's favoured method of solving problems – or at least evading them. Rational thought is to him what the endless journeys and labours are to Heracles – a comfort and distraction.

He saved himself in his lonely hours by thinking. He invented mathematical puzzles and solved them. He plotted the course of the stars. He tried to understand the ways of gods and men, and was mentally constructing a giant history of the world. (*Weight 66*)

However, while his thoughts might give him strength and endurance in his current situation, it becomes obvious that they can never lead him out of his dilemma,

because they cannot transcend the power structures of discourse, the very thing that keeps Atlas bound. Indeed, his adherence to rational thought and – by implication – the evasion of feeling then can be said to facilitate and reinforce his imprisonment. Thinking rationally, he cannot envision a way out of his situation, and instead sees boundaries everywhere. Wondering what an alternative to his life could look like, he comes to the conclusion that freedom from his burden would not remove the odious boundaries, but that they are everywhere. Any life is necessarily full of restrictions and could never satisfy his excessive desire for freedom, for which his personal history is the best proof. Again seeking fault with himself, he begins to see his desire not as a consequence of his restricted condition, but as its cause, finally accepting the accusation of *hubris* as truth: "Why had he fought against the gods? He already had more than enough." (*Weight 70*).

Hera appears and addresses him, trying to challenge his deadlocked conceptions. She explains the symbolic meaning of the three apples as his past, present, and future, and calls his attention to the fact that when he was picking the apples, he was unable to see the tree in its true form, laden with fruits, but could see only the three apples he ended up choosing. The apples represent all his potential pasts and futures and show that "[he] could have chosen differently [but] did not." (*Weight 76*) While Atlas misinterprets the heaviest apple as his future, the unbearable weight of which he fears so much, Hera objects that it is indeed his present that is almost too heavy to lift, while his future "hardens every day, but is not fixed" (*Weight 76*). Atlas, however, is not very receptive to Hera's message and attempt to shake him into agency. His mind is preoccupied with his obligation towards Heracles and the possibility of staving off the return to his burden for a short while. Heracles, however, despite duplicitously agreeing to let Atlas complete the eleventh task for him and take the apples to his master, tricks the Titan into shouldering the Kosmos again, and disappears.

### **3.3.4 Heracles**

Heracles, the second protagonist and focalising character, is in many ways a foil and contrast to Atlas. However, underneath the obvious differences, there are also a number of parallels and analogies. If Atlas represents an outsider to the hegemonial

order who is 'colonised' by the dominant narrative, then Heracles, a demigod and the son of Zeus by a mortal woman, represents an original creation of Zeus's patriarchal, heterosexual order. Consequently, the originally positive character undergoes a drastic re-writing in *Weight*, and becomes a projection surface for a satirical diatribe against certain aspects of the dominant, male, heterosexual culture in general. Heracles's heroics are deflated and most of his sympathetic characteristics are removed, while most of his actions appear as morally questionable. Hence, Heracles initially appears like a grotesque stock character, with his demeanor crassly stereotypical, and his utterances characterised by flat generalisations and platitudes. In both cases the stereotypes he draws on are particularly located in the area of gender roles. Heracles's own description of his youth suggests an exaggerated form of masculinity, characterised by violence, sexual excesses and overindulgence: "[I] killed everything, shagged what was left and ate the rest" (*Weight* 31-32). His speech style itself contains ostensible markers of stereotypical masculinity, like the frequent use of profanities and slang and a tendency to address his interlocutors with informal, casual 'nick names' of his own contrivance – calling Atlas "you old globe" (*Weight* 29), Ladon "you bag of venom" (*Weight* 36) and Hera "drop dead gorgeous" (*Weight* 40). As has already been observed in the case of *The Penelopiad*, this technique of using informal or even slang language in association with typically heroic characters creates ironic tension between intertextually informed reader expectation and the 'reality' of the story world and demystifies the glorified – and by implication misrepresented – world of mythological heroes, bringing them, figuratively speaking, down to earth. Stripped of the pathos of words, the Heracles of *Weight* appears as a violent brutish and untrustworthy simpleton.

Heracles is obviously not capable of critical thought – a fact that is associated with his own position of power as a member of the dominant social group. This is, for example demonstrated by the way he interprets normative stereotypes as unconditional truths in two statements, which he proclaims soon after his first appearance: "[w]omen don't like a stranger at the tit" (*Weight* 30) and "[m]en are unfaithful by nature" (31). The latter statement also shows a familiar strategy of naturalisation and continues: "This is not a fault in men, for nature should not be accused of faulty workmanship. It is as useless to rail against man's infidelity as it is to complain that water is wet" (*Weight* 31).

Another striking aspect of Heracles's personality is his disrespectful objectification of women, who "like wood, [are] for splitting and for keeping him warm (*Weight* 60). What is striking and unusual about Heracles's masculinity is that it is expressed in markedly physical ways. His preoccupations with bodily pleasures has already been observed and, in contrast to Atlas, Heracles does not appear as a particularly cerebral character. He is described as "a bastard and a blagger" (*Weight* 34) with "no brains but plenty of cunning" (*Weight* 83) and may share some features with the trickster, but identifies himself largely through his body, rather than his mind.

In some of the early literary reinterpretations, Heracles's physical strength is accompanied and complemented by the virtue of mental and spiritual endurance, a reading that gave Heracles the epithet "much-enduring" and survived throughout the ages, making Heracles the epitome of the virtuous hero even in Christian times. In contrast, *Weight* presents a completely antithetical interpretation of Heracles, while transferring the more positively connotated characteristics of patience and endurance to Atlas. The character of Heracles is used to demonstrate how a position of power can corrupt and spoil the character, and how 'superficial', physical strength can cover up and thereby promote underlying weakness. The hero uses his physical ability to make his life easier and obliterate all opposition while avoiding true conflict:

Nobody argues with a man who is twice as tall, twice as heavy, twice as hot-tempered, and three times the big head. Argue with Heracles, and he'd crush you. So he was always right. (*Weight* 59)

Heracles's relationships with women follow similar paths: "No woman ever refused him. That was his charm", may be the official version of his personal story. The truth contains a qualification, namely that "no woman who ever refused him lived to tell the tale" (*Weight* 60), and reveals Heracles's radical way of dealing with persons and situations that fall outside the fixed categories and expectations of his narrow-minded world view – he will not acknowledge any fact that he does not like, or that contradicts his narrow-minded world view, and will even go so far as to kill a person who expresses such a fact, in order to silence him or her.

On closer inspection, then, Heracles's behavior, indeed his entire identity, has the air of a performance or pose functioning to conceal insecurity and weakness. It is not always clear how consciously this pose is assumed, but it is obviously influenced by the



dominant, normative discourse that Heracles has internalised from childhood on. Bound by his ancestry, he, too, has to play a specific role prescribed by the dominant narrative, which is constitutive of his identity. Unlike Atlas, this role defines him not as a transgressor and enemy of the dominant system, who needs to be punished and contained, but as a champion and ideal representative of it – but it is no less restrictive. Although *Weight* portrays Heracles as a stereotype, his stereotypical behaviour is not depicted as *natural*, but as adopted and internalised under the pressure of normative culture. Underneath that mask, Heracles is a more complex character, a fact that he desperately tries to hide. Heracles can impossibly conform fully and exactly to the prescribed norm that his role dictates, due to his ambiguous and “double” nature that is in its essence indefinable. As outlined above, ambiguity is one of the characteristics of Heracles which is continuously important theme throughout the history of the character’s reception, and which is explained with recourse to his parentage. *Weight* represents no exception: Heracles is described as “*man of double nature, the god in him folded back in human flesh*” (*Weight* 30, emphasis in the original). The ‘doubleness’ of Heracles gives him an essentially hybrid nature that defies binary classification, and actually likens him to Atlas. Both of them, so to speak, sit on fences. Thus, in its portrayal of both a typical outsider and a typical insider of society in similar terms, *Weight* makes a general statement on human nature, individuality, and oppressive social roles, and seems to imply that whatever the outer, superficial role or masquerade may be, all humans are essentially characterised by an underlying ambiguity and undefinability.

However, such ‘doubleness’ or ambiguity is anomalous and unacceptable within the structures of Olympian hegemony, so that Heracles’s exaggerated – even camp – performance of his heroic role can be explained as a case of overcompensation, in which the emphasis on a certain characteristic reveals its artificiality and points towards its very lack: Heracles is in reality *not* the strongest man in the world, *not* the clear-cut epitome of the Olympian hero, and *not* all that sure of himself. Heracles’s exaggerated pose has the unintentional effect of undermining the clearly defined categories and stereotypes of the dominant order and revealing their artificiality and constructedness. Nevertheless, it should be noted, that although the character of Heracles helps to expose

these facts, the character itself is far from using subversive techniques consciously to undermine the dominant system, or even realising any such potential. He has simply internalised the dominant narrative sufficiently to believe in its universality, and acts accordingly, repressing all that falls outside that normative narrative as unnatural and abnormal.

Ultimately, then, Heracles is a slave and prisoner like Atlas. Like the latter, Heracles is convinced of the omnipotence of "fate" to which he is subjected despite his great strength. Hence, even though Heracles is 'on the winning side' his existence is still inscribed by a power discourse over which he has no control. As "hero of the world" he may embody the values, morals and ideals of the divine Olympian order among humans, but does not have the divine power and freedom to direct his own fate, and he is as resigned to his own essential powerlessness as Atlas. Unlike the Titan, however, he does not passively brood over his helplessness. Instead, his life of physical action and indulgence keeps him from reflecting and distracts from his unpleasant fate. While Atlas is resigned to the pointlessness of questioning the Olympian order, after his failed 'rebellion', Heracles, who was born into the regime and knows no alternative, has never even thought of questioning it. Prior to his encounter with Atlas, therefore, Heracles seems to be almost reduced to this superficial and stereotypical performance. The question "*Is he a joke or a god?*" (Weight 35) reflects how his unawareness of the inauthenticity of his own identity makes it hard to take the character seriously, as it is incompatible with the notion of divine power and knowledge. The fact that Heracles can be "*both a joke and a god*" (Weight 35), in turn, both symbolises his inherent ambiguity and suggests that even godliness might be nothing more than a pose.

The events in the garden of the Hesperides and his conversations with Atlas, confront Heracles with ideas that challenge his simple world view and question the universality of fate and divine law. Sent to the garden of the Hesperides to kill Ladon and clear the way for Atlas, Heracles is confronted by Hera. She suggests that fate is not the universal force Heracles believes it to be, and that it is an invalid excuse for not taking responsibility for one's actions. "If I seem like fate to you, it is because you have no power of your own", she tells him, and then prophecies how he will be responsible for his own downfall: "Not what you meet on the way, but what you are, will destroy

you" (*Weight* 41). At a loss in the face of these news, Heracles flees from the disconcerting idea of freedom and agency into his habitual 'prison', the stereotype of his social role. Utterly perplexed by the presence of the most influential and powerful – and also threatening – female character in his life, he resorts to the simplest way of dealing with women known to him. By viewing Hera as an object of his sexual desire and arousal, he places her in a 'managable' context, and although he is too scared to attempt to rape her, he asserts his virility by masturbating in front of her eyes.

Such an escape from unpleasant ideas into oblivious corporeality cannot be permanent, and Heracles is haunted by the unwelcome thoughts, as by a parasite: "He didn't want to think. Thinking was like a hornet. It was outside his head, buzzing at him" (*Weight* 50). Heracles, confronted with an unwelcome truth, reacts with a similar 'will to deception' as Penelope does in *The Penelopiad*. Like in her case, however, the truth cannot be so easily 'unseen' and keeps haunting him, pestering him like an insect. His crisis finally consolidates in the face of his own weakness under the weight of the Kosmos. Alone with the world and lacking the habitual distraction, he can no longer evade the problematic implications of his reluctant self-confrontation: "*He could accept any challenge, except the challenge of no challenge. He knew himself through combat. He defined himself by opposition. [...] He couldn't bear this slowly turning solitude*" (*Weight* 71, emphasis in the original). The following dream in which he is "a note struck and sounded" (*Weight* 79), and then feels personified in each of his defeated adversaries, each of the labours he has already completed, symbolises his subconscious awareness of the transience of his own existence, the fact that he is defined by his actions, and the problematic realisation that his actions – and consequently his existence – are not defined by him. He wakes in distress from a dream that foreshadows the hero's self-destruction as prophesied by Hera, in which he faces himself as the final one in a long row of opponents, "tearing at his own flesh as though it were a shirt he could pull off" (*Weight* 79). Again, as in the case of Atlas, the intense notion of self-obliteration surfaces in an unbearable situation and is imagined in physical terms, but this desolation of boundaries is not, like in Atlas's case, the object of a problematic desire, but of the greatest fear.

Heracles's ignoble escape represents a defeat and a rejection of the insights his encounter with Atlas and Hera brought. The idea of transcending the power structures he had taken for universal presents a challenge that surpasses his strength as well as an existential risk he is not willing to take. It is ultimately not in Heracles's interest to destroy the power structures that created him, and which, by playing along, he also derives benefits from. To some extent, he resembles Penelope in that he has too much to lose. His utmost desire is not a yearning for the freedom of nothingness, infinite space and the absence of power structures. He equates the concept of freedom with boundaries of his own choosing – "home, if home is where you want to be" (*Weight* 51) – and the end of his restless life and the tests and traps set by the gods. When he asks Zeus to pardon Prometheus and Zeus shows recognition for his 'heroic deed', it seems that it is his obedience and acceptance of Zeus's dominance that is rewarded, but Heracles is naively happy: "He felt that Zeus had at last acknowledged him. He felt he was at last being rewarded, instead of punished, for the hero, the conqueror, the *good man* that he was" (*Weight* 93, emphasis in the original). The ending of Heracles's story according to the myth provides such acknowledgement on a grand scale and tells of his apotheosis and acceptance into the pantheon of Mount Olympus. Finally a god, Heracles is, as it were, freed from his ambiguity, and finds a permanent home. This relief, however, is kept from him in *Weight*. Indeed, it is an attempt to settle down that brings about his ruin, whereas the apotheosis, which follows and alleviates the tragedy of Heracles's death in the original myth, is omitted. This seems to point towards a rather negative evaluation of Heracles's 'will to deception', but again the verdict is ultimately ambiguous, portraying Heracles's understandable fear of the loss of his identity as much as showing up the fact that his playing by the rules of the dominant discourse and his ignoring of conflicting ideas did not bring about the peaceful domesticity that he wished for.

### **3.4 Shaking the Boundaries – Repetition, Imagination and Storytelling as Subversive Strategies**

Heracles's resort to denial and complacency, and Atlas's hopelessly deadlocked situation and resignation convincingly illustrate the pervasiveness of the power

structures that restrict them in different ways, and the frustration at the continuous, failed attempts to break them from within which create paradoxes and vicious circles. Two thirds into the novel, the characters have passed from an intermediary position of opportunity and potential back into their respective 'prisons'. Within the narrative, there seems to be no way for the characters to remove the boundaries, or even see past them. It is at this moment, when all hope seems lost, that the boundaries of the narrative itself are breached, and the 'author' breaks through from behind the autobiographical trope that the Atlas myth represents. In the eighth chapter, headed "Leaning on the boundaries of myself", the covert omniscient narrator, which has dominated the novel except for one chapter told from Atlas's perspective, is substituted with an overt first person narrator who is conflated with the author persona. Another chapter with the same narrative situation entitled "Desire" is inserted before the last chapter, which concludes Atlas's story. These chapters have the character of extended 'author's notes', in which the author-narrator comments on the story, relates her<sup>5</sup> own experiences, and points out the analogies to Atlas. There are autobiographical passages that tell of an unhappy childhood, and a learning process along the lines of a *Bildungsroman*, in which creativity plays a crucial role. Like Atlas, the author-narrator faces loneliness, isolation and marginalisation. "Having no one to carry me," the author-narrator explains, "I learned to carry myself. My girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex" (*Weight* 97). A comparison is drawn between the boundaries faced by Atlas and Heracles, and the oppression the author herself faced in her life – and again, oppression is understood in discursive terms. For example, the author concedes how compelling a myth the notion of fate constitutes considering the helplessness and powerlessness one experiences every day; how "so much of life reads like fate" (*Weight* 97), and how hard it is not to give up on free will altogether. She admits the reality of 'fate', although she obviously does not interpret it in a religious way. Instead of the will of the gods, the 'burden' that restricts our choices and decisions are our collective and individual pasts and futures:

I realise now that the past does not dissolve like a mirage. I realise that the future, though invisible, has weight. We are in the gravitational pull of past and future. It takes huge energy – speed-of-light power – to break that gravitational

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5 It should be noted, that the gender or sex of the author-narrator is never explicitly stated. I have adopted the female pronoun, assuming that the author-narrator is intended to be identified with Jeanette Winterson.

pull. [...] The pull of past and future is so strong that the present is crushed by it. We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour. The burden is intolerable. (*Weight* 99)

Here, the allusion to the power of reiterative performance is striking. It is not only individual traditions, but also general social traditions and norms that each individual re-enacts and reinforces. The narrative of tradition and norm is also symbolised by the influence of parents' "stories", that, according to the author-narrator, each individual must eventually disbelieve and reject, in order to be able to find his or her own story: "If you go on believing the fiction of your parents, it is difficult to construct any narrative of your own" (*Weight* 139). Certainly, the "gravitational pull" makes it difficult to act independently, but in the very definition of its power as one constituted by repetition lies the opportunity for difference. The same conclusion is to be found in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency", then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility [...] then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (Butler 198-199, emphasis in the original)

The insight that the structures of discourse cannot be broken or transcended and have to become the source of change is reflected in Atlas's story, too. Alone in space, he is watching the barren, waterless landscape of Mars, and it is this planet of masculinity of all celestial bodies that he turns into a fertile garden – with the help of his imagination. For the moment, "the limitless universe of his imagination" (*Weight* 104) is a fantastic utopia that provides only a contrast to reality, but not a way to influence it. Although in the 'real', material world the hold on Atlas is upheld, the freedom of thought that Atlas finds in his imagination is gaining prevalence over the restrictions of the material world: "His mind was always escaping. They had captured his body, but not his thoughts" (*Weight* 105).

However, *Weight* also problematises the notion of imagination as a way of transcending boundaries, and views critically its potential for real change. An existence

divorced from reality, locked up in the ivory tower of one's own imagination is not desirable as a permanent state, and Atlas knows "that something [is] missing from his argument" (*Weight* 106). He returns to the two words reverberating constantly throughout the novel, and decides that it is the symbols of his imprisonment and burden that he must work with:

*Boundaries. Desire.* He turned over the words like stones. The words were stones, as dry and inhospitable as the Martian regolith. Nothing grew out of those words. It was these he would have to break open and crumble into good soil. It was these he would have to water and watch and sleep beside for the first sign of life. (*Weight* 106, emphasis in the original)

The text seems to differentiate between imagination and creativity as a means of escapism that ultimately preserves an oppressed existence of dependence and passivity, but implies a denial of reality, and imagination and creativity as a key to self-assertive agency – and simultaneously concede that it is not always easy to differentiate between the two, as the boundaries are fluid. It is clear, however, that due to the fact that much of the power of the dominant regime is discursive and, in fact, narrative, storytelling is a good starting point for subversion and change.

*Weight* also demonstrates the specific effects that a marginalised position in society has on the ability to recognise the discursive nature of the status quo and to try to re-write the story. Read subjective identity as a substantialised story, whose origins have been concealed and disguised as nature, the author-narrator implies that "in a way [she] was lucky" (*Weight* 139), because, being adopted, she was not burdened with a fully substantialised family identity. Less susceptible to the compulsion to maintain the continuity of her family's tradition, the author-narrator attempts to construct her own view of the world: "Having brought no world with me, I made one" (*Weight* 141). However, this "world", constructed consciously in the absence of a defining role model or tradition, takes on a life of its own, beyond the control of its originator, until, in turn, it becomes the narrative that controls its make. The world, in other words, is a metaphor for a defined identity, which, even if it is self-made, "like everything you birth [...] gradually becomes too big to carry" (*Weight* 143), becomes a burden that hampers agency, becomes a rigid social role, somehow divorced from the individual subject itself: "It's not me, it's itself" (*Weight* 143).

*Weight* portrays the danger that any narrative – even a subversive one – holds: it can become rigid and oppressive. At the same time, however, there seems to be an implication that such rigidity and fixedness is not narrative's true form. Against it, she holds the familiar ideal of movement, fluidity and boundlessness: "What limits? There are none. The story moves at the speed of light, and like light, the story is curved. There are no straight lines. The lines that smooth across the page, deceive." (*Weight* 145). In other words – no story is ever really fixed, in form or meaning, and if it seems that way, the fixedness is of our own making, and it is grounded in our own desire for coherence meaning, and also identity: "Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true" (*Weight* 145). In portraying stories as the basis of truth, *Weight* subscribes to a typically postmodern idea which aims to desubstantialise all narratives, and not just the dominant one. What is crucial, however, is that this is not seen as a reason to stop telling stories. On the contrary, it debunks the myths of the universality, immutability and stability of single stories only to replace them with the idea of unpredictable, fluid and everchanging ones and raises the awareness of individuals' constant contributions to these stories that constitute reality. By repeating stories – with a difference – individuals can begin to influence reality. Desubstantialised like that, the stories of the past cease to be a burden, and realising her agency, and freedom to change things, the author-narrator can "crawl out from under the world [she has] made", and cease re-enacting the role of her identity in ever the same way.

It is clear, however, that this is not a liberation, or breaking out of boundaries in the classical sense. "The real problems", as the author-narrator concedes, "can't be solved" (*Weight* 137), but repetition is not target-oriented, it is an on-going process, and the fact that there is no end in sight – to the story, as well as to space, the recurring trope for boundlessness – is viewed as a positive thing. The author-narrator demonstrates the potential of "telling the story again" by giving Atlas's story a happy ending, which transcends the frames of reference of myth and conflates the story with 'real' events. Atlas has to wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century for his liberation, and in the time he has spent waiting, he has turned more than ever into an astrophysical phenomenon: "Time had become meaningless to Atlas. He was in a black hole. He was under the event horizon.



He was a singularity. He was alone" (*Weight* 123). However, his solitude is to end with the advent of space exploration. When Laika, the soviet space dog, enters orbit in her rocket, Atlas is roused out of his petrification and desensitisation, and frees and adopts the dog. Evidently, the love and maternal care he gives Laika, and the fact that he finally allows himself to feel and not just think, are crucial in this event, initialising the happy ending: "Atlas had long ago ceased to feel the weight of the world he carried, but he felt the skin and bone of this little dog. Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep, and that changed everything" (*Weight* 127). In Laika's company, Atlas watches the development of human space exploration, a symbol for the dream and the pursuit of freedom. Science seems to have overruled the ancient laws of limitation. "Now it seems there are no boundaries. The universe has no centre. Every limit can be crossed" (*Weight* 132). Perhaps inspired by this atmosphere of endeavour, perhaps apprehensive of a human invasion of space, Atlas finally lets go of the world, only to find that it does not need holding up: "There was no burden. There was only the diamond-blue earth gardened in a wilderness of space" (*Weight* 150). As Atlas and Laika "walk away" into the infinity of space, the story ends with an image of lightness, fluidity and potential, contrasting the frustrating stasis and heaviness that has dominated a large proportion of the novel. With Silvia Antosa, *Weight* can be said to finally fulfill the "Wintersonian itinerary" (197), which eventually achieves the dematerialisation of heavy bodies.

From the very first pages of *Weight*, which are placed before the table of contents in the manner of an epigraph and take the form of a short poetic passage that likens sedimentary rock formations to the pages of a book (*Weight* xiv), it is clear that story-telling and narratives as such are key themes in this re-telling, and are inextricably connected to other ideas that keep re-appearing in the text: boundaries and the desire to transcend them. In the story of Atlas, actual, material boundaries such as fences, walls, the body, or the material world in general are present, together with more symbolic types of boundaries which inhabit the realm of ideas and narratives. These boundaries and limitations can be externally imposed upon a person, or created by that person herself. Typically, however, oppressive boundaries are always a consequence of the rigid system of power relations in which the subjects find themselves bound up. Following a transgression of symbolic limitations, they can take an overt, material form

as corporeal punishment enforced by the holders of hegemonial power, or they can be present more subtly, in the form of social pressure to follow the dominant norms. *Weight* explores the two protagonists' different ways of dealing with these boundaries and limitations, as well as their desire for or fear of going beyond them. In addition to that, the text itself incorporates and mimics various discourses of limitation, and simultaneously transcends them. As the power of the story is demonstrated, its function is again read as double-edged – it can represent both the structures constituting the boundaries, and constitute a means of transcending the same.

## **4 Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy***

Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy* represents a departure from the other two novels I have discussed. Described as a "remix of Ovid's most joyful myth", that is, the story of Iphis and Ianthe, in the blurb, the novel approaches the endeavour of retelling in a slightly different way than Atwood's and Winterson's works. The myth is not re-told with the original ancient setting and the characters intact, but relocated into the present. The protagonists' search for identity in relation to social norms and expectations and less acceptable but more liberating alternatives constitutes the central theme of the novel. Although the plot and character constellations are based only loosely on the Ovidian myth – the most striking parallel on that level is a lesbian love story –, the themes that Smith accentuates can be found in both stories. The similarities between the 'original' myth and its modern counterpart are explicitly pointed out, as the myth of Iphis and Ianthe is embedded as a story within the story and functions as inspiration and guidance for the modern characters. The novel also contains metafictional reflections on narrative power, dominant and subversive discourses

### **4.1 Ovid's *Metamorphoses***

#### **4.1.1 Ovid as Re-telling and Canonical Source**

*Girl Meets Boy* uses Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the immediate source for the myth of Iphis and Ianthe. The Roman poet lived during the rule of emperor Augustus and wrote the *Metamorphoses* between 2 and 8 AD. During his lifetime, already, Ovid was an acclaimed and famous poet and for a long time his work received a stronger reception in Western culture than the 'original' Greek versions, for the simple reasons that throughout the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era, Latin was the lingua franca of the educated classes, and up until the end of the eighteenth century, Greek was known by only few people in the West (Miles 9-10). According to Geoffrey Miles, "[t]he *Metamorphoses* was for many centuries one of the most popular books in Europe, and [...] is by far the most important text in transmitting the myths to later writers" (9), as it functioned as the defining authority on classical mythology, and became the subject

of new interpretations, as well as the source of numerous intertextual references and re-workings. As Denis Feeney puts it in the introduction to the 2004 translation of the *Metamorphoses*, "the poem's fingerprints are everywhere in the European tradition" (xiii). Even in times after the nineteenth century, when Greek scholarship flourished and when translations of older, more 'authentic' mythological works became available, the *Metamorphoses* remained popular, for their literary merit and their accessibility. In some cases, they also remain the major authority and best source for certain myths, when they are based on earlier textualisations which are lost or not part of the well-known canon.

Despite his obvious canonicity, it becomes quite clear in the case of Ovid – much more so than in the cases of earlier greek textualisations – that the author himself was essentially a re-writer. While the same actually holds true for Homer or Hesiod, whose works are based on older oral traditions, due to the fact that they constitute the *earliest* written records of Greek mythology they are surrounded with an aura of originality and superior authenticity. Also significant is the fact that these earlier works originated in a culture for which the myths still represented 'historical' and religious truth. In contrast, the Romans and hence Ovid, too, had gained sufficient distance from this culture and religion, and their own quotidian world was even further removed from the world of gods and heroes than that of Homer and Hesiod, so that they could regard the stories about the gods as entertaining fictions and treat them with ironic detachment and humour. This circumstance is exemplified in the artistic licence that characterises Ovid's treatment of the myths. Denis Feeney praises the poet's "phenomenal ability to put his own distinctive mark of ownership on a longstanding inheritance" (Feeney xv). Feeney goes on to describe Ovid's intertextual work as showing up a "zestful relish for dissonance", with "characters and scenarios that the audience knows well from other contexts [being] transmuted into a different genre and metre, with discordant effects that transform the way we think about both the old and the next contexts" (xv-xvi). In contrast to Ovid's role as canonical authority, such a reading highlights the poet's light and playful approach to his venerable sources, and seems to associate him more with postmodern re-writers than with the earliest Greek textualisations of the myths. In the given context of a brand-new translation, such a conceit certainly serves rhetorical

purposes in emphasising the modernity and 'up-to-date-ness' of the *Metamorphoses*. However, Feeney's argument also demonstrates how readily Ovid's work lends itself to re-reading it as modern and subversive.

#### 4.1.2 The Ovidian Myth of Iphis and Ianthe

The Story of Iphis and Ianthe is featured in the ninth book of the *Metamorphoses*, and was probably based on an earlier version, now lost, by the Alexandrian poet Nicander (Anderson 464-465). Set in Crete, the story tells of a woman, Telethusa, who is expecting a child, and who is told by her husband that because of their poverty they cannot afford to bring up a girl child, so that unless the infant turns out to be a boy, she is to kill it. Shortly before the birth, the benevolent Egyptian goddess Isis appears to Telethusa in a dream, and instructs her to disobey her husband's command, and "rear whatever is born" (Ovid 374). The appearance of Isis is an innovation by Ovid, as Nicander attributes the miracle to the Greek goddess Leto. Anderson ascribes this amendment to the fact that as "a deity outside the Greco-Roman pantheon [Isis] was not tarnished by the usual subhuman associations [Ovid] gives gods" (Anderson 465). As a female infant is born, Telethusa conceals this fact from her husband, and raises the child, who is given the gender-neutral name 'Iphis', as a boy. On account of Iphis's androgynous but attractive appearance, the deception works well, until eventually a tragic complication arises: Iphis is betrothed to a girl, Ianthe. Having known each other throughout their childhood, they have also fallen in love with each other – "their innocent hearts were aglow with a simliar fire" (Ovid 375). But while Ianthe takes her lover for a man and believes her love to be quite normal, Iphis is keenly aware of the fact that a love between two girls is "a love that no one has heard of, a new kind of passion, a monstrous desire" (Ovid 375) and laments her seemingly inescapable predicament, and the fact that she has no "hope of ever enjoying her loved one". She draws on examples from nature and other myths to illustrate the sheer impossibility that a love between two females constitutes in her world. Her pain is further augmented by the irony of her situation: Her love is not hindered by any of the usual, conventional reasons that can condemn love to failure, as neither Ianthe's feelings, nor a previous engagement, nor the parents' disapproval stand in the way of a happy marriage: "It's

nature alone, more powerful than all, who opposes the match" (Ovid 377). In their despair at the imminent wedding, Telethusa and Iphis pray together at the altar of the goddess Isis asking for help. Indeed, upon leaving the temple Iphis is miraculously transformed into a male, and the wedding can proceed without further complications.

In the face of the details of Iphis's desperate monologue and the sex change as prerequisite of the happy ending, allegations of homophobia seem anything but absurd. Kirk Ormand, however, warns against applying the modern concept of homosexuality, and consequently homophobia, to Roman literature, because as he points out, "that is not a category the Romans thought with" (Ormand 87). He argues that, in categorising and judging a sexual relationship, the sexual orientation of the two partners matter less than the roles assumed in the relationship – in other words, what matters is a category of gender, understood in performative terms. Sexual relations are essentially and exclusively understood as an encounter between two unequal partners, in which one takes the dominant and active role, and the other the submissive and passive role. The active role is by default taken by the male, while the submissive role can be taken by either a woman or a man, without that preference reflecting in any way upon the dominant partner. It will, however, be considered unnatural if the submissive role is assumed voluntarily and with pleasure. As "the sexual objects of desire, regardless of physical sex, were understood to be of a fundamentally lower social status [...] than the men who penetrated them" (Ormand 81), it would be considered abnormal for a man to enjoy such a degradation. For a woman, on the other hand, the lower social status is the norm, but any *enjoyment* of sexual activity is regarded as unacceptable. Likewise unacceptable is the case of a woman assuming the traditionally male, "penetrative" role, again regardless whether her object of desire is male or female. These women, known by the term *tribades*, were perceived by men as threatening and monstrous (Ormand 84), and it is against them that the hostility and alleged "homophobia" found in Roman texts is directed.

Anderson groups Iphis with the *tribades*, when he points out that Iphis's insistence on the novelty of her situation has an ironic function and "reflects her innocence, but not the truth", as Ovid's audience must have been aware of the existence of female homosexuality (469). On the other hand, he also stresses her "pathetic despair,

utterly hopeless, passive, colorless" (464). In the light of Ormand's argument, however, passivity and being a *tribas* are not compatible. Ormand argues that the sort of love portrayed in the myth about Iphis and Ianthe is indeed unique and unheard of, as "their desire for each other is characterized by an unprecedented equality and mutuality" (92), before he goes on to explain that,

Iphis lives in a curiously literary world, a world in which love between women is not so much morally reprehensible as imaginatively impossible because there is no asymmetry of power between them. [...] What Iphis finds unthinkable is not the typical Roman category of tribadism (to say nothing of "lesbianism"), but a romance of equal partners. (92)

What Iphis laments, consequently, is not the wrongness of her sexual orientation, but the inadequacy of her gender, because her femininity and passivity prevents her from "enjoying" her loved one, and from giving the relationship the power asymmetry that it seems to require. Hence, as Ormand perceptively notes, Iphis's transformation is not so much a sex change than reorientation of her social gender. What Ovid describes are the "distinguishing marks that guarantee masculinity in the public streets of Rome: a longer stride, shorter hair, [and] sharper features" but not, markedly, male genitalia, which he elegantly passes over (Ormand 99).

More than in the other two source texts, Ovid's myth of Iphis and Ianthe centres upon questions of gender roles, sexuality, and sexual desire both within and beyond the boundaries of normality. This is typical of Ovid's writing, which generally "carried him on to explore the theme of love in a variety of genres and contexts" (Feeney xv), and though the intentions behind this were most likely rather a case of poetics than of politics, Feeney observes a sort of 'denaturalising' or 'desubstantialising' side-effect to Ovid's thorough exploration of the world's sexual diversity, arguing that his stories "open up a profoundly interesting theme, as they reveal how sex and love, the most apparently natural of all human processes, are experienced through societal conventions that are so deep we cannot recognize them as conventions" (Feeney xvi).

## **4.2 Critical Aspects of the Re-telling**

The Ovidian account of Iphis and Ianthe is the starting point of a re-telling that differs from the previous two cases in some essential points. Most strikingly *Girl Meets Boy* does not adopt the setting of its source text, and character and plot are only loosely

connected to the original. While the main narrative is set in modern Scotland and is essentially a new story, narrated in a multiperspectival fashion, with the five chapters being alternatively told from the perspectives of two sisters, Anthea and Imogen, the myth of Iphis and Ianthe is featured as a story within the story. Furthermore, on a more abstract level of motifs and themes, parallels can be identified. In this respect, it is important to note that unlike the other two re-writings, *Girl Meets Boy* does not interpret its hypotext as the instrument of an oppressive normative culture, but as an empowering tale that celebrates and legitimises difference and indefinability. The novel can therefore not be said to be a revisionist re-telling in the sense that it construes its source as a text in need of correction. Instead, the novel practices re-vision in the sense of looking back to forge a link of solidarity between past and present, underlining the timelessness of certain experiences and difficulties. At the same time, however, the story also documents the differences between then and now. Like in the myth of Iphis, the love between two girls is at odds with the norms and conventions of society that are fixed in the categories and concepts which structure the perception of reality. However, while in the Ovidian myth these norms and conventions are not seriously questioned, and perceived as unalterable, *Girl Meets Boy* scrutinises the origins of such norms, and challenges the legitimacy and truthfulness of the dominant narrative. Similar to the two re-tellings discussed in the previous chapters the novel explores the interplay between individuals and society as well as the discrepancy between the idiosyncracies of reality and the pre-fabricated social roles and normative ideals, and propagates the disengagement from oppressive norms by various means.

#### **4.2.1 Corporate Rule and Dominant Discourse**

Norms and ideals are portrayed as constructs of an oppressive power, which uses a discursive regime to manipulate and control its subjects. However, unlike in the earlier mythological re-tellings, in the modern setting this power is no longer associated with divinity or concepts such as fate. Instead, the sovereign power is associated with corporate rule, and the norms and ideals common to society are portrayed as consciously constructed myths and lies circulated by advertising and the media, in order to uphold that regime. By providing insights into the strategies used by companies to



create these modern myths, the novel counteracts their attempts at naturalising their constructs, and reveals their artificiality.

In *Girl Meets Boy* corporate rule is represented by a company called Pure, a large corporation modelled on multi-industry conglomerate companies like the Virgin Group – perhaps the name Pure is even a conscious allusion to the latter. Both narrators are employees of Pure, and both eventually give up their job on moral grounds after their work in the marketing department gives them insight into the morally questionable proceedings of the company. *Girl Meets Boy* centres around the company's latest project – the selling of bottled water. Considering the fact that the same water is available for free from the tap, its sale needs to be backed by a manipulative marketing strategy that persuades customers to buy the water nevertheless. The method is laid out by the "boss of bosses" Keith during the so-called "Creative lectures". With a comically over-drawn use of 'visionary' rhetorics, Keith's motivational speech in front of the marketing Creatives reveals how products are made desirable by being charged with abstract secondary meanings and positive values, so that the consumer is led to purchase the product in order to obtain symbolic meaning, deceiving consumers into believing they can purchase happiness and health with money. Through the association with abstract concepts like purity and nature created by advertising, the company projects a public image which is contrary to its real nature. What poses as truthful information, is indeed a calculating lie. The company's readiness to sell untruths as truths as well as its sinister objectives become even more obvious in a conversation where Keith tries to win Imogen for the job as head of the "DND" – the revealingly named "dominant narrative department" (*Girl Meets Boy* 121). He tells her of his ambition "to make Pure oblivion possible" (*Girl Meets Boy* 116), and "to make it not just possible but natural for someone, from the point of rising in the morning to the point of going to sleep again at night, to spend his whole day, obviously, in Pure hands" (*Girl Meets Boy* 116). The ultimate objective, then, is to dominate and direct all aspects of the customers' lives, and make them completely dependent, by controlling their needs and desires through the discursive regime of advertisement and media, and simultaneously concealing the regime behind the idea of free choice and the illusion of the naturalness of these constructed needs and desires.

Through corporate control, the media become the channel for a new form of myth-making that consists in the mystification of the coercive and manipulative power corporations hold over consumers. By filtering information and controlling what is commonly perceived to be true, corporate power discourse gains control over reality itself, shapes the identities of its 'subjects' and rewrites their social roles according to their consuming habits. By tapping into common stereotypes, and consciously reinforcing them, it categorises individuals into homogenised target groups, and aims to make them adapt more and more to these norms, in order to increase control over them. These stereotypes, of course, are just another myth constructed and propagated by the media, and do not truthfully reflect reality. However, by making a majority of people believe in them, and live according to them, they gain a reality effect. Like the other two novels, *Girl Meets Boy* thus portrays how discursive and narrative power has the potential to influence and shape individual lives. What companies like Pure do with their advertising is, in fact, a form of re-telling, as they use the collective narratives of society as a source, and change and adapt their meaning for their purposes – to sell products. One crucial fact that differentiates their meaning-making from the more positive forms of storytelling which are likewise portrayed in the novel is the fact that it does not admit to its fictionality. *Girl Meets Boys* does not condemn advertising on account of its fictionality, but on account of the fact that it disguises itself as truth. The dichotomy of lies and truth is of course problematised by postmodern theory and the novel's pretty clear distinction of truth and lies, and heroes and villains certainly sets it apart from both Atwood's and Winterson's texts.

#### **4.2.2 Pressured Identities – Two Narrators Under The Dominant Narrative**

The two narrators are initially distinguished from each other by their response to the dominant norm. Anthea, twenty-one years old and on the brink of adulthood, struggles with the task of choosing her place in society and defining her social identity. She is confronted on all sides – both in public and in private – with instructions on how to behave and the compulsion to decide and define, once and for all, who she is. Like Penelope, however, Anthea is not happy with the choices. Her sister's attempt to install

her at the company where she works is symbolic of the way society pressures her to re-define her identity by taking on a specific social function or role, determining not only "what [she is]" but also "who [she is]" (*Girl Meets Boy* 24). These occupations, to Anthea, seem to blank out individuality, just like the faceless representations of 'individuals' on an advertising poster for a dating agency, in which the differences between persons are reduced to their occupations: "They didn't have faces, they had cartoon blank circles instead, but they were wearing uniforms or outfits and holding things to make it clearer what they were." (*Girl Meets Boy* 31). The same poster, also reduces gender to minimalistic outer markers, as "the difference between male and female [is] breasts and hair" (*Girl Meets Boy* 31), and as the attribution of gender to occupations strictly follows common stereotypes, as if gender were an inherent part of the respective occupational roles and identities.

Anthea is unable to identify with any of these pre-fabricated roles. Nor is the conundrum of her identity solved by her name, which, she perceives, does not have a constitutive meaning: "I was named after some girl from the past I'd never seen, a girl on a Saturday evening tv show" (*Girl Meets Boy* 25). She is frustrated with the apparent necessity to define oneself and reduce oneself to a restrictive role and "tired of having to be anything at all" (*Girl Meets Boy* 23). Similarly to Atlas, the restrictions imposed on her identity kindle in Anthea the desire for freedom and for a dissolution of boundaries, and again, this dissolution is thought in images of water and fluidity, as a dissolution of bodily boundaries and the merging with the body of another, a beloved person:

... I wished that my bones were unbound, I wished that they were mingling, picked clean by fish, with the bones of another body, a body my bones and heart and soul had loved with unfathomable certainty for decades, and both of us deep now, lost to everything but the fact of bare bones on a dark seabed. (*Girl Meets Boy* 24-25)

Nature functions as a temporary refuge from the pressures of society, and on her way to work Anthea briefly escapes the structures of civilisation and climbs down to the river Ness that runs through her hometown. The bewildered reactions of passers-by however, recall the 'digressiveness' of this behaviour: "[People] looked down at me like I was mad. [...] Clearly nobody ever went down to the riverbank. Clearly nobody was supposed to" (*Girl Meets Boy* 26). To Anthea, however, the proximity of the river has a soothing effect, and its age helps to put the constructions and efforts of humanity into

perspective: "[The river] changed as I watched. As it changed, it stayed the same. The river was all about time, it was about how little time actually mattered" (*Girl Meets Boy* 28). Like in both other re-tellings, water is evoked as a symbol of liberation, fluidity and boundlessness – so that it is incidentally of great symbolic meaning that the Pure company abuses this image in order to sell it and subject that symbol of freedom to the law of capitalism. In Anthea's case, it seems as if the short-lived escape from structures and schedules foreshadows the more radical escape from regulative norms that Anthea is to perform later. However, for now it is not permanent, and the pressure to oblige her sister and "to be a good girl, whatever good means" (*Girl Meets Boy* 30) makes her return to her workplace.

While Anthea suffers because she feels that the rigid and inauthentic structures of society do not do her individuality justice, keeps breaking 'the rules' and soon breaks free for good because she cannot subject herself to them, her sister Imogen has attempted to solve the problem posed by the discrepancy between reality and ideal from a different side – by re-shaping herself according to normative structures. She is portrayed as very self-conscious and anxious about other people's opinions, concerned with categories like normality and appropriateness, which is also expressed, for example, through her anxiety to always know the 'correct' words and names for things and ideas and the correct versions of songs or stories. In part, this 'normative' aspect of her personality is traced back to the events in her childhood, when the girls' mother split up with their father and left the family, and Imogen, as the older sister, was prematurely forced to take responsibility and play a wifely and motherly role for her father and sister. "[Imogen] had to do all that mother stuff", Anthea explains, and speculates that "that's one of the reasons Midge is so resentful" (*Girl Meets Boy* 98). In a way, Imogen was forced at a very young age to replace her mother and adopt the stereotypical female role her mother had consciously rejected. A key event that Anthea remembers was an incident with their "father out in the garden in first days after [their mother] went, hanging out the washing" and Imogen "seven years old, running downstairs to take over, to do it instead of him, because the neighbours were laughing to see a man at the washing line" (*Girl Meets Boy* 99). It is the expectations of men like her father and

those of normative society, that Imogen has internalised and made the mould of her identity.

Hence, she consciously and violently suppresses all parts of her that do not comply with the ideals she is trying to embody, and does so at the cost of her own well-being and principles. Her fragmented state of mind is also reflected textually in the passages narrated from her perspective, where there are two different 'voices' present, one that is used for describing outer events and acceptable, 'official' thoughts, and one that expresses unruly or disconcerting thoughts. Setting this latter voice in parenthesis illustrates how Imogen suppresses and rejects these thoughts that she does not deem worthy to form a part of her ideal identity. In many cases, however, the paranthesised voice expresses her real observations and spontaneous thoughts and evaluations, while the 'official' voice expresses an ideal that Imogen is trying to make herself believe in. This becomes most obvious when Imogen tells herself, as if she were using autosuggestion, that "she is doing well", and that "she is clearly doing the right thing" (*Girl Meets Boy* 52). At other points, this 'official', auto-suggestive voice seems to repeat advertising texts and to mirror the dogmas of the efficiency-oriented, capitalist consumer society she lives in. In general, it tends to endorse virtues like efficiency and productivity, using the value system of the market to make judgements, while the parenthesised voice exposes the fact that excellence according to this value system does not create happiness. Thus, when Imogen tells herself: "I am so lucky to live here at this time in history, in the Capital of the Highlands, which is exceptionally buoyant right now, the fastest-developing city in the whole of the UK" (*Girl Meets Boy* 54), the 'mantra' is nevertheless not capable of abating her underlying unhappiness.

Unlike Anthea, Imogen initially identifies strongly with her job at Pure and works hard to perform well, trying to assert herself as the only woman in her team, but at the same time trying to please her superiors. Her pathetic attempts to fit in at any cost are exemplified by the way she also joins her unlikeable colleagues Norman and Dominic in their after work pub crawl, but it becomes clear, that the gender difference still constitutes a nearly insurmountable barrier. Her colleagues obviously do not respect her as an equal: they see her as a woman, not as a person, and they "talk about work as if [she is] not there" (*Girl Meets Boy* 66). Their immature, chauvinistic humour likewise

excludes her, making her the object of their laughter, instead of letting her in on the joke. Cornered, Imogen finally even resigns to her role as object:

I drink four glasses filled to the top [...]. It makes them roar with laughter when I bend right down to drink it. Eventually I do it so that that's what it will do, make them laugh (*Girl Meets Boy* 66).

Imogen not only tortures herself to make her behaviour comply with society's expectations and ideals, she also strives to mould her body into an ideal shape. Her remarks about exercising and purging and her attempt to re-assure herself in the face of her actual unhappiness with the fact of being "down to just seven stone" (*Girl Meets Boy* 52), as well as Anthea's observation that her sister has lost a lot of weight and is "far too thin" (*Girl Meets Boy* 39) suggest that Imogen has an eating disorder. She herself, however, maintains the illusion that losing weight and 'fitness' are a good sign and that it means that she is "doing well" (*Girl Meets Boy* 52).

The dominant narrative not only influences Imogen's self-perception, but also her attitude towards others. In the light of the efforts she takes to remain within the boundaries of normality, and prescribed ideals, attempts at liberation strike her as selfish. Her perception of feminism is characterised by this notion, but the sentiment that is obviously rooted in the experience of her "selfish" mother leaving her family. Holding up her own contrastive 'self-lessness' up as a positive example, she proclaims her conviction to rather give up "herself" and "everything [...] including any stupid political principle" than to leave her own future children (*Girl Meets Boy* 53). Imogen's general disdain for persons who do not, like her, make an effort to conform exactly to a prescribed ideal, but position themselves outside the boundaries of normality is problematised when she has to find out that her sister is one of those persons.

### **4.3 Lesbian Love as a Challenge to Normative Categories**

#### **4.3.1 Love as Liberation**

As in Ovid's myth of Iphis and Iante, *Girl Meets Boy* features a lesbian love story. In a playful way, certain details of the original myth are reflected in the modernised version. For example, like Iphis, Robin has a gender neutral name. Her last name Goodman might be an allusion to her androgynous appearance, which also likens

her to Iphis. Anthea's name, on the other hand, has a similar meaning as Ianthe's, being associated with flowers. In Ovid's story, the love between two girls is represented as an entirely new idea, and its realisation represents an unresolvable conundrum for Iphis, as it is irreconcilable not only with conventions but with the Roman concept of love itself. If it were not for the 'deus ex machina' transformation at the end that realigns the relationship according to gender norms, Iphis's story would have been a tragic one. The contrast to the the portrayal of the love between Anthea and Robin is significant. In the modern version, there is none of that distress or anxiety. Instead of causing an identity crisis, as it arguably does in Iphis, for Anthea falling in love with a girl proves liberating, and actually resolves her unhappiness with the choices provided by normative society by showing her an alternative. Falling in love with Robin opens up a whole new world of experience for Anthea, lets her realise that she can be "so much more than [her]self", and makes her feel virtually transformed: "Now I had taken a whole new shape. No, I had taken the shape I was always supposed to, the shape that let me hold my head high. Me, Anthea Gunn, head turned towards the sun" (*Girl Meets Boy* 81). The idea of the transformation is obviously taken from the myth of Iphis. The crucial difference, however, is that Anthea, unlike Iphis, is transformed into a shape that transcends definition, prescribed models of identity, and even the boundaries of the self. Through love, the mystery of Anthea's identity is resolved, independent of socially and medially prescribed role models. This re-definition which eschews definition is also symbolised by the re-interpretation of Anthea's name that Robin undertakes. She breaks the meaningless association with "someone off the tv", and gives Anthea's name a romantic new interpretation, based on its original Greek meaning: "It means flowers, or a coming-up of flowers, a blooming of flowers. [...] You're a walking peace protest. You're the flower in the Gunn" (*Girl Meets Boy* 82). It is interesting, that the typically male act of definition through naming, here performed by Robin, is interpreted in such a positive way. Falling in love, here, is associated with the utopian notion of gaining a superior perception of reality and self, recognising the concepts and categories of life before as limiting lies and finding the *true* meaning beneath them. There is no mention of the more negative aspects of love, like dependence and vulnerability. These, as well as all notions of hierarchies and restrictions, seem to be relegated to heterosexual

relationships. The most negative feeling associated with the girls' love for each other seems to be that it is confusing and overwhelming. A feeling of liberating fluidity, here, is – again – expressed by the water imagery that Anthea used to describe her desire for freedom: "our first underwater night together, deep in each others arms" (*Girl Meets Boy* 81).

Of course, it is crucial that this love does not comply with the dominant ideal of a heterosexual relationship built along a power differential, but represents an idealised, almost utopian alternative. The relationship between Anthea and Robin is characterised by an unusual balance and mutuality. There is no role differentiation, or mimicking of heterosexual relationships, but unlike in the source narrative, this is not interpreted as a lack but as an enrichment. Robin embodies an androgynous ideal that combines the best features of both genders. For example, at their first encounter, Anthea, misled by the traditionally male attire, mistakes Robin for a boy, only to realise that "he looked really like a girl" and to conclude: "She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life" (*Girl Meets Boy* 45). It is crucial to note that although traditionally masculine characteristics play a role in the description of Robin's beauty, masculinity does not dominate her appearance. Instead, what characterises her is a certain indefinability, which plays with people's expectations regarding gender characteristics, upturning and subverting them, until it can no longer be certainly said which characteristic is 'properly' assigned to which gender. In Anthea's loving eyes this indefinability is not perceived as a threat, but as a fascinating and titillating experience, and she welcomes the shattering of rigid binarisms like a range of new, unseen colours:

It had been exciting, first the not knowing what Robin was, then the finding out. The grey area, I'd discovered, had been misnamed: really the grey area was a whole other spectrum of colours new to the eye. She had the swagger of a girl. She blushed like a boy. She had a girl's toughness. She had a boy's gentleness. She was as meaty as a girl. She was as graceful as a boy. She was as brave and handsome and rough as a girl. She was as pretty and delicate and dainty as a boy. She turned boys' heads like a girl. She turned girls' heads like a boy. She made love like a boy. She made love like a girl. She was so boyish it was girlish, so girlish it was boyish. (*Girl Meets Boy* 84)

Physical sensuality plays an important role in the portrayal of the love between Anthea and Robin. Hence, the heterosexist myth that lesbian love is asexual and that there cannot be any sex without penetration, which is so central to the Ovidian narrative,



is consciously refuted. The sensuality and sexuality portrayed in *Girl Meets Boy* necessarily differs from the patriarchal and heterosexual conception of it, which is "genitally centered" and partitions off particular, discrete parts of the body for an exclusively sexual function. In contrast, the lesbian love portrayed by Ali Smith is 'eccentric', and consequently does away with the compartmentalisation of the body into areas 'central' and 'marginal' to sex. Instead, it utilises the body in a holistic way, as an organ of sensuality in its entirety. Furthermore, the body is not thought as separate or antithetical to the mind and the psyche, so that sensuality transcends the merely physical realm and affects body, mind and soul in equal ways. In fact, even the boundaries between the two lovers are destabilised in the act of love making: "We were tangled in each other's arms so that I wasn't sure whose hand that was by my head, was it hers or mine?" (*Girl Meets Boy* 101). But sex is not only thought of as an entanglement of bodies, which consequently leads to a blurring and possible transcendence of boundaries, but simultaneously as an entanglement and blurring of images and textual references. The transcendental sex scene is characterised particularly by mythological imagery, in fact, the very imagery of *The Metamorphoses*, where humans and supernatural beings are transformed into animals, plants, and elements. Anthea's and Robin's bodies and minds are imagined to fuse, and, together, create fluid new shapes and forms that keep shifting into each other. The entire passage is formulated in questions, as if it could never be quite certain what one or both of them embodies at any given point. Water imagery again plays a certain role:

Was I melting? Would I melt? Was I gold? Was I magnesium? Was I briny, were my whole insides a piece of sea, was I nothing but salty water with a mind of its own, was I some kind of fountain, was I the force of water through stone? (*Girl Meets Boy*, 102)

Occasionally, specific myths are alluded to, like that of Daphne, who is transformed into a laurel tree (Ovid 1.451-565), or Actaeon, who is transformed into a stag (Ovid 3.139-252):

... then I was a tree whose branches were all budded knots, and what were those felt buds, were they – antlers? were antlers really growing out of both of us? was my whole front furring over? and were we the same pelt?" (*Girl Meets Boy* 102-3)

Mimicking the climactic excitement of sex, the passage increases in speed and – it seems – volume, with exstatic and fantastic images chasing each other across the page at an ever growing pace. Then it ends, and the intense, poetic and associative style is replaced again with Anthea's normal voice that comments with playful self-irony on the frenzy of transformations just experienced, as well as the pathos with which this elation was described: "We were all that, in the space of about ten minutes. Phew" (*Girl Meets Boy* 104).

Anthea and Robin seem to realise a sort of utopian vision of female identity, once described by Adrienne Rich as "self-defined, self-loving, woman-identified, neither an imitation man nor its objectified opposite" (Rich 225). Generally speaking, *Girl Meets Boy* features a very utopian portrayal of love – and specifically lesbian love – which works as an enlightening and liberating force in the life of the two lovers. This can be seen as a conscious reaction to the negative and resigned view lesbian love that is featured in the myth of Iphis, and which lives on in homophobic 'myths' until the modern day.

#### **4.3.1 Encountering Difference – Imogen's Reaction to Her Sister's Homosexuality**

Iphis's internal struggle and inability to fit the idea of homosexuality into her mental concepts is not left out of *Girl Meets Boy* altogether. It is transferred to Anthea's sister Imogen, who inadvertently witnesses a tender moment between the two lovers and is shocked at the revelation of her sister's homosexuality. On the one hand, the thoughts that race through Imogen's head shortly after the discovery that her sister is "a gay" (*Girl Meets Boy* 49) show how deeply Imogen is influenced by the dominant narrative, and how thoroughly she has blocked out the existence of alternatives. Represented in a free-association, stream-of-consciousness-like form, however, her thoughts also reveal how her habitually fixed and narrow-minded world view is disrupted by the internal conflict which the realisation creates. Although Imogen tries to convince herself that she is "not upset" (*Girl Meets Boy* 49), she is obviously scandalised. However, the reason does not seem to lie so much in a moral objection or homophobia as such, but in the fact that the discovery brings Imogen into an epistemic

crisis. Never having known a homosexual in person, Imogen's idea of homosexuality is made up entirely of stereotypes circulating in society and distributed by the media; the idea is practically fiction to her. Faced with the task of incorporating this stereotype into her sister's identity, she is forced to realise their obvious incongruity, a realisation which threatens to disrupt either the internal image she has of her sister – and which is built of life-long experience –, or her concept of homosexuals – which is built on the same foundation as her entire worldview: the dominant narrative.

In her attempt to solve this conundrum, she tries to make sense of her sister's homosexuality in different ways. She views it as a condition external to Anthea's 'true identity' that she somehow fell victim to, as to an illness. She tries to lay the blame on Robin for "turn[ing her] into one of them" (*Girl Meets Boy* 55) or on her mother "for splitting up with [their] father" (*Girl Meets Boy* 49). Alternatively, she tries to find traces of the stereotypical homosexual in her sister's earlier behaviour and general characteristics, enlisting a number of possible 'prognostic symptoms'. Her idea that homosexuality is an instance of her sister's general oddness – "She always was weird. She always was different. She always was contrary. She always did what she knew she shouldn't" (*Girl Meets Boy* 51) – rings just as ridiculous as the attempts to identify her fondness for certain TV-shows or songs as symptoms of homosexuality. This conflation of sexual orientation with a certain, typical 'lifestyle' contradicts Imogen's asseveration that "[g]ay people are just the same as heterosexual people, except for the being gay, of course" (*Girl Meets Boy* 50). The latter statement, along with several other clichéd protestations of tolerance are nothing but dishonest attempts at 'political correctness' designed to cover up a profound homophobia and fall into the category of the 'beautiful lies' spun out by advertising. In reality, Imogen perceives the intrusion of homosexuality into her world of normality as a threat and a debacle. Her admission that she "wouldn't mind so much, if it was someone else's sister" (*Girl Meets Boy* 54) is revealing in that context.

Imogen's choice of words is also interesting in the context of her difficulty to reconcile the concept of lesbianism with the image of her sister. Portrayed as positively *unthinkable*, the word 'lesbian' is treated like a taboo and always paraphrased with terms like "female homosexuals" (*Girl Meets Boy* 51) or obviously blanked out by

phrases like "that word" (55) or "one of them" (55). Occasionally, these substitute phrases conspicuously stand out from the text by being framed by double spaces – textually expressing Imogen's attempt to keep the term at a distance while accentuating the censored taboo word 'behind' the euphemism. Imogen is obviously reluctant to identify her sister with a name that for Imogen carries only negative associations. When Imogen expresses her distress at not knowing the 'correct' or 'proper' word for what her sister and her lover are, this also suggests a beginning realisation that the common stereotype associated with the name 'lesbian' is incongruous with the reality of the individuals she knows in person. As Imogen makes the disconcerting and disillusioning experience of having one's mental concepts and categories challenged by reality, her immediate reaction is to look for new manageable categories to which she can allocate the undefinability she has encountered and to fix it in language by finding out the "proper word" (*Girl Meets Boy* 77). Robin, however, denies Imogen the gratification of a re-assuring name by insisting on her individuality and independence from categories: "The proper word for me [...] is me" (*Girl Meets Boy* 77).

To sum up, Imogen's internal monologue parallels Iphis's embittered speech in the Ovidian myth in that it reveals the discrepancy between the norms of the dominant narrative and homosexuality, and portrays the distress of a person facing this clash of conflicting 'truths'. Whereas in Iphis's story, however, the social norms and the related mental concepts are affirmed and universalised through the example of nature and thus stand fast and unaltered, requiring the individual to adapt to them, in the modernised version, the authority of the dominant narrative is successively undermined and revealed as fake, a process that can be tracked easily in Imogen's personal development. The epistemic crisis triggered by the discovery of Anthea's lesbianism is the first step towards a disengagement from the rigid structures of the dominant narrative.

In the second chapter narrated by Imogen she is confronted with experiences that further contribute to the widening of horizon. This happens quite literally as she leaves the narrowminded small town world of Inverness to visit London. On her train journey south, she excitedly charts the changes and the newness that she encounters. Her observations, of course, are still characterised by her naive belief in stereotypes, but there is also an element of reflectiveness, which, for example, makes her ponder the

meaning of statues and memorials in London. The purpose of her journey, of course, is a meeting with her boss Keith, who attempts to win her for a new job. However, the meeting contributes to Imogen's growing disillusionment with Pure. She is slightly disappointed to find out that the mythical "Base Camp", which had been surrounded with a glamorous aura and was speculated to be in America is nothing but an office block in Milton Keynes. Moreover, Keith's rhetoric is beginning to lose its charm as soon as she realises that it is always in the same vein: "I am feeling a bit disenchanted. Has Keith driven me all this way out of London in a specially-chauffeured car to this collection of prefab offices on the outskirts of a new Town just to give me a Creative lecture" (*Girl Meets Boy* 118). The image of Pure that Imogen so faithfully adhered to in her mind is beginning to crumble and reveal itself as a lie. The last straw, however, is the tasks that Imogen's new job as head of the "Dominant Narrative Department" encompasses. According to the formula "Deny Disparage Rephrase" that is behind the acronym "DDR" that Keith suggests to Imogen, she is to uphold the reputation of the company and ensure that "Pure [is] perceived by the market as pure" (*Girl Meets Boy* 119) by refuting any publicised information that reveals the truth about Pure's immoral methods and the deception used to cover them up. When asked to effectively become a professional liar, Imogen is finally spurred into self-assertion and works up the anger to object and contradict the dominant narrative. For the first time, Imogen realises that there can be such a thing as a "wrong law", that it should be changed, and that "there's a lot [she] can do about it" (*Girl Meets Boy* 125).

In a different way than her sister and Robin, Imogen has arrived at the same conclusion, and in the final chapter, called appropriately "all together now", the novel ends with an optimistic and dynamic outlook into the future. It is quite clear that this is a utopian and not overly realistic ideal – but it is consciously so. It is in the power of a story to transport a message which appeals directly to the reader, namely, that this is an ideal worth pursuing, and that each individual has the power and obligation to do so.

#### **4.4 Storytelling and Re-writing in *Girl Meets Boy***

In a self-reflexive fashion stories, myth and storytelling are an omnipresent theme throughout the novel, as is the dichotomy of truth and lies. Narratives appear in

different forms and functions, and can be put to different uses. In the hands of corporate rule, myths or stories are powerful tools of manipulation and thought control – but it is crucial that this is the kind of narrative that disguises itself as truth. In opposition to such ‘undesirable’ narrative discourse, *Girl Meets Boy* suggests alternatives that hold subversive potential – on the one hand, there is the demystification and debunking of mendacious power narratives in their own domain, as exemplified by the activism practiced by Anthea and Robin. On the other hand, there are stories. Stories, however, are again differentiated – some, as the stories told by Anthea and Imogen’s grand-father contain historical truth, even if the details may differ from the ‘official’ historical accounts, and some, like the stories Robin and Anthea tell each other, and, perhaps, *Girl Meets Boy* itself, are indeed fictions – they are too good to be true, utopian and romantic ideals. Both types of stories, as the novel metafictionally implies, “need the telling” (*Girl Meets Boy* 161).

#### **4.4.1 The Reclaiming of Narrative Power and Information as Activism**

In the hands of those who see behind the lies of the dominant narrative, narrative power becomes a political tool of dissent and resistance by means of demystification. Having established that the power that structures society and human life in general and robs individuals of agency and the possibility of self-definition is built to a large extent on discursive strategies of myth-making and misinformation, the novel propagates a reclaiming of these strategies for antithetical ends. Robin, Anthea, and finally Imogen realise that they must seize narrative and discursive power instead of ceding it passively to the manipulation of powerful corporations. From the beginning, Robin practices a specific kind of activism which epitomises this. By leaving messages in the public realm which directly refer to, respond to, and contradict the dominant discourse in its publicised form – most frequently advertisements, but also, for example, the sign outside the Pure company building –, she relativises and deconstructs the otherwise undisputed and frequently unquestioned ‘truths’ of advertising and the media. First Anthea and then Imogen join this re-writerly project under the slogan “*When You See A Wrong, Write It!*” (*Girl Meets Boy* 153) in which they contradict the dominant narrative

where it would otherwise go unquestioned. Against the mendacious myths of advertising, they hold bare facts: "DON'T BE STUPID. WATER IS A HUMAN RIGHT. SELLING IT IS MORALLY WRO[NG]" (*Girl Meets Boy* 43). Then, they extend their work beyond the myths of advertising. Under the premise that omission is also a sort of lie, they set out to reveal hushed-up social wrongs and injustices and to take action against general ignorance and misinformation, trying to raise awareness and actively battle society's 'will to deception' with messages like the following:

ACROSS THE WORLD, TWO MILLION GIRLS, KILLED BEFORE BIRTH OR AT BIRTH BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S ON RECORD. ADD TO THAT THE OFF-RECORD ESTIMATE OF FIFTY-EIGHT MILLION MORE GIRLS, KILLED BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S SIXTY MILLION GIRLS. (*Girl Meets Boy* 133)

Despite its acceptance of the postmodern destabilisation of such concepts as truth and lies, *Girl Meets Boy* seems to suggest that, although all discourses may be constructed, for all practical purposes some of them are still closer to the actual reality of things than others, and that some facts are worth knowing, despite the general unreliability on facts.

#### 4.4.2 Stories that "Need the Telling"

*Girl Meets Boy*, however, not only promotes the demystification of dominant myths and the publication of hushed-up or denied wrongs, but also celebrates storytelling. Stories, in a typically postmodern way, are interpreted in a rather broad sense, and various forms of stories, with various uses appear in *Girl Meets Boy*.

The opening passage of the novel relates one of Anthea's childhood memories, in which she recalls her grandparents and the stories that her grandfather used to tell her and her sister. These stories are peculiar. On the one hand, they seem fantastical and unrealistic – for example, the grandfather tells of the times "when [he] was a girl" (*Girl Meets Boy* 3) – on the other hand, they purport to be genuine accounts of the past, and do in fact frame historical events and personae. While, the younger sister Anthea, is eager to absorb the story regardless of its ontological status, Imogen, on the other hand is confused, and even annoyed by their grandfather's refusal to tell his stories according to the laws and conventions of reality. Perhaps this is because she is older, or perhaps because even as a child, she is anxious to know the right words for things and fit the

things she encounters and the experiences she makes into clear categories, but it is significant how the blurring of the boundaries between historical fact and fiction disturbs her. The grandfather, however, is convinced that his stories, regardless of whether all the details are correct, teach the children important things about the past that "they have to know" (*Girl Meets Boy* 11). He insists: "It's true. It happened" (*Girl Meets Boy* 11). By putting himself, for example, into the role of a suffragette, and narrating the story of their protests as if he had taken part, he not only relates important historical and political facts, like the real story of Lilian Lenton, in a way that makes it easier for the children to relate to them personally, but he also destabilises and undermines dominant notions about the world, like, for example, the idea that a person who is now a man, cannot have been a little girl.

The grandfather's stories, interestingly, share some of their characteristics with mythological narratives. Like in the case of myth, their ontological status is not clear. They lay claims to authenticity and truth, and are rooted in historical events, but at the same time, they feature fantastic and improbable events, and transgress notions of linear time and space. Through the symbol of the grandfather's stories, *Girl Meets Boy* asserts the value of mythological storytelling. When contrasted with the interpretation of myth featured both in *The Penelopiad* and in *Weight*, which tend to read their mythological sources as rigid and oppressive, this reveals a different interpretation of myth, which associates it with the anti-authoritative and subversive flexibility of re-telling. This ambiguity, in fact, is something that many theorists of myth and narrative discourses in general have observed (cf. Coupe 1-13; Kroeber).

Not only the grand-father, but also Anthea and Robin appear as storytellers in *Girl Meets Boy*. After falling in love, the two young women tell each other their 'life stories'. Anthea's tells the story of her life through the following short narrative:

If my life was a story, I said, it'd start like this: Before she left, my mother gave me a compass. But when I tried to use it, when I was really far out, lost at sea, the compass didn't work. So I tried the other compass, the one my father had given me before he left. But that compass was broken too. So you looked out across the deep waters, Robin said. And you decided, by yourself, and with the help of a clear night and some stars, which way was north and which was south and which way was east and why was west. Yes? Yes I said. (*Girl Meets Boy*, 85)



Anthea's story seems to repeat the typical structure of the *Bildungsroman*, while at the same time reflecting aspects of the quest myth, especially through the image of being lost at sea and needing a compass. It also contains the idea that, being confronted with two possible options, Anthea chooses a third, which is ultimately the only *right* way for her. Again, traditional binarisms are undermined. However, the story also shows that not categories can be abandoned – in order to orient herself, Anthea still needs categories like north, south, east and west, even though she must decide for herself *where* they lie.

Robin's story, on the other hand, takes a different conventional form of fiction as its model, that of the love story:

[The story] begins one day when I come down a ladder off an interventionist act of art protest, and turn round and see the most beautiful person I've ever seen. From that moment on, I'm home. It's as if I've been struggling upstream, going against the grain, until that moment. Then we get married, me and the person, and we live together happily ever after, which is impossible, both in story and in life, actually. But we get to. And that's the message. That's it. That's all. (*Girl Meets Boy* 85-6)

This story obviously parodies and makes fun of the conventional fairy-tale ending, creating an ironic effect of implausibility as she narrates her life according to these oversimplifying structures. Of course, for both Anthea and Robin, it is clear that it is a phantasm: "a very fishy sort [of story]" that "sounds a bit lightweight" (*Girl Meets Boy* 86). Nevertheless, Robin obstinately insists that they "get to" have their impossible happy ending. This fact is especially interesting when one considers that there is a tradition among lesbian literary critics and theorists, to view the conventional plot structures of (heterosexual) love stories as oppressive and therefore objectionable, as documented by Suzanne Juhasz in 1998. Robin, however, playfully references this plot form, documenting its implausibility in a lighthearted way, while at the same time suggesting that for stories, at least, such a beautiful illusion might be acceptable. The idea of such conventional plots, of course, is also referenced by the title, which overturns the classical template for love stories along the lines of "boy meets girl" in more than one way. Not only are subject and object interchanged, the verb itself also takes on a different meaning, suggesting a coming together of 'boy' and 'girl' in one person to form the androgynous and undefinable ideal of the novel. The fairy tale

ending, on the other hand, is mirrored not only by Robin's 'life story', but also, on a larger scale by the novel itself. Its plotline, to some extent, undermines the classical structures of comic love stories, which proceed along the scheme 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl' (or its lesbian variation). *Girl Meets Boy* defies this classical structure by simply leaving out the complication. The absence of any insurmountable problems is what constitutes the utopia of *Girl Meets Boy*. It should not be assumed, however, that the novel itself is therefore "a bit lightweight", because it does not do so unreflectedly.

The story that forms the centrepiece of the novel is of course the Ovidian story of Iphis and Ianthe. When Robin tells Anthea this tale it becomes clear that *Girl Meets Boy* does not interpret the myth of Iphis and Ianthe as the instrument of an oppressive normative culture, but as an empowering tale that celebrates and legitimises difference and indefinability and contains the promise of change. This fact, of course, also becomes clear in the similarities that – despite the huge differences in the details – can be found between *Girl Meets Boy* and Ovid's myth of Iphis and Ianthe. The very theme of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the transformation, which represents the "single linking thread that unites the hugely various stories" (Feeney xxii), by definition defies rigid categorisations and fixed norms. When it comes to style, Pfirter-Kern's observations point into a similar direction:

Although [the] overall structure suggests a chronological scheme, a continuity and unity, the very nature of the *Metamorphoses* challenges such a strictly observed balance and symmetry. Ovid deliberately disregards neat divisions. [...] [H]e [does] not strive for unity within the individual stories or in the overall structure. He rather intended to divert, amuse and surprise the reader through his vivid imagination, his verbal and intellectual wit and his distinctive sense of humour. (Pfirter-Kern 2-3)

Thus, when the re-telling seems to resemble its hypotext in terms of style and 'atmosphere', as observed in a review by Allan Massie, who calls the text "authentically Ovidian in its lightness, wit, grace and exuberance" (*Girl Meets Boy*, inside of front cover, unpaginated), this is most likely a conscious emulation of characteristics that are cherished as appropriate to the poetic ideal of the re-writing. Ali Smith also does not seem to share the view of some feminist critics who accuse Ovid's text of deeply rooted homophobia, evident in the fact that the homosexual love between the two girls Iphis

and Ianthe is represented not only as unusual but as virtually unimaginable, and that Iphis has to be transformed into a man in order for the story to end well.

When Robin re-tells the story of Iphis and Ianthe, she accepts that Ovid was of a different time and culture and simply not able to imagine some things. Instead she approves of his relative openmindedness regarding "all sorts of love" (*Girl Meets Boy* 97), which finds expression in the *Metamorphoses*. There is an awareness of the exceptional character that the myth of Iphis and Ianthe takes on between tales of rapes and unhappy loves, in which 'love' is only available in the form of sexual desire, and sexual desire is always a matter of a hierarchical, and often violent power relationship. Robin observes that this happy story is just what Ovid needs "to carry him through the several much more scurrilous stories about people who fall, unhappily and with terrible consequences, in love with their fathers, their brothers, various unsuitable animals, and the dead ghosts of their lovers" (*Girl Meets Boy* 100). In her appropriation of Ovid's myth, Robin is aware that she is partially "imposing far too modern a reading on it" (*Girl Meets Boy* 91), and that she reads meanings out of it that may not have been intended by the author. But this, *Girl Meets Boy* implies, is exactly the power of stories – that they can mean more than they originally did, and that they can improve by re-telling. The original is not viewed as an authoritative, and therefore oppressive sort of narrative, but as a source of new ideas and inspirations. In both the novel *Girl Meets Boy*, and its hypotext, an initial dilemma is resolved by a transformation. However, while in the myth of Iphis the transformation takes actually place to re-align the 'aberration' with the norm, and turn the impossible homosexual relationship into a 'proper' heterosexual one that complies with the norms and regulation of the dominant narrative, the re-telling promotes a different idea, and transformation and change are not a means of assimilation but of diversification.

It is in the last chapter that the text finally reveals its full self-awareness as a story and an 'unrealistically' utopian one at that. Its metafictional reflections, however, help to explain the novel's unusual and puzzling relationship with utopia. Taking up the reappearing idea of the fairy-tale ending, Anthea begins the chapter, entitled *All Together Now*, with a reference to one of the most famous and prototypical love stories in the history of literature: Jane Eyre. "Reader, I married him/her" is the first line of the

last chapter, almost identical to its counterpart in Charlotte Brontë's novel, with the small distinction of a problematised gender pronoun. This is followed by the account of a wedding – her own wedding with Robin. And Anthea expresses clearly that they will not settle for compromises: "I don't mean we had a civil ceremony. I don't mean we had a civil partnership. I mean we did what's still impossible after all these centuries. I mean we did the still-miraculous, in this day and age. I mean we got married" (*Girl Meets Boy* 149). Huge and pompous celebration draws a crowd – "there must have been hundreds" (*Girl Meets Boy* 151) – and not only magically reunites all the lost family members, but also "all the people from the rest of the tale" (*Girl Meets Boy* 152), meaning 'supporting' characters like receptionists and work colleagues, though Anthea is careful to exclude particular antagonists like Norman, Dominic or Keith. Anthea's account, blatantly mimicking conventions of literature and cinema, becomes increasingly unbelievable. It turns out that Anthea and Robin's interventionist protest art, instead of turning into a scandal, is now publicly celebrated:

Inverness [...] once famed for its faith in unexpected ancient creatures of the deep, had now become famous for something new: for fairness, for art, and for the art of fairness. Inverness, now world-renowned for its humane and galvanising public works of art, had quadrupled its tourist intake. (*Girl Meets Boy* 153)

It is quite problematic, perhaps, how their subversive art is here portrayed as being appropriated for boosting the tourist trade and making money, but Anthea does not dwell on it. She continues the fantastical tale, which the reader finds increasingly hard to believe, and at the moment where the first gods are mentioned, it is clear that her story has gone beyond the frame of reference of our reality, and has outed itself as a fantasy. Again, however, ironical awareness is not far away. At the end of her phantastic and utopian tale, Anthea returns to 'reality':

Uh-huh. Okay. I know. In my dreams. What I mean is, we stood on the bank of the river under the trees, the pair of us, and we promised the nothing that was there, the nothing that made us, the nothing that was listening, that we truly desired to go beyond ourselves. And that's the message. That's it. That's all. (*Girl Meets Boy* 159)

And the message, it seems, could not be clearer. *Girl Meets Boy*, like the other novels, documents the need and desire for beautiful stories that make the world seem a better place, in which values like harmony and community are realised. It expresses a

warning, by showing up that this desire is so strong that it makes people vulnerable to manipulation by storytellers who attempt to sell their stories as truths. In opposition to this, it promotes critical thinking and distrust against authoritative narratives. On the other hand, however, it makes a strong case for stories themselves, be they new or old, and as utopian and unrealistic as they may seem. Stories, especially utopian ones, have the unique value of portraying the world as it is *not*, not only inspiring the wish for change, but also giving this wish a definite shape. As Anthea sums up at the end of the last chapter, how stories can help individual persons, to persevere in their struggle with real life – especially the struggle to make life better:

It was always the stories that needed the telling that gave us the rope we could cross any river with. They balanced us high above any crevasse. They made us be natural acrobats. They made us brave. They met us well. They changed us. It was in their nature to. (*Girl Meets Boy* 160)

Instead of the benevolent goddess of the Ovidian myth, here, the potential for change is found in the capacity of imagination, and in stories "that need the telling".



## 5 Conclusion

It can be concluded that the question after a common ideology or message to be found in each of the three novels is not easily answered. The novels differ from each other not only in the choice of their source material, but also in stylistic and generic details and setting as well as what could be called 'general mood'. It is however clear that they all do take critical political stance and, due to their self-reflexivity, contain a sort of poetics.

The most striking common denominator that connects these three novels is the theme of storytelling which is used as a trope with a plethora of different facets. The central theme of story-telling can be said to be precipitated on a dichotomy between the dominant narrative and the subversive narrative. In relation to the 'real world' the dominant narrative is characterised by authority, rigidity, and a tendency towards fixed meanings. It is understood as the system of power structures which govern the society, and which is informed by the values of the dominant, hegemonial social group typically characterised, with varying emphasis, as Western, white, middle-class, capitalist, heterosexual and male. This dominant narrative authoritatively claims to reflect the one and only universal truth, and has the preservation of the status quo – in other words, the power of the powerful – as its goal. This goal is achieved by a Foucauldian process of naturalisation, by passing the dominant order off as a natural order, and concealing its historicity and constructedness, as well as the its dependence on the sustained reinforcement through its subjects, its performativity. The dominant narrative derives its power for shaping the world from the fact that it pretends to be a narrative objectively describing the universal way the world should be shaped. The dominant narrative is, to different degrees in the three texts, associated with the canonical texts that serve as the sources for the myths re-told.

In relation to the dominant narrative, the re-tellings occupy marginal and 'ex-centric' positions. The protagonists in each of the three re-writings are in one or more ways excluded from the dominant discourse – they are female, of a different, mythical 'race', homosexual. They feel misrepresented and oppressed by the dominant narrative which is associated with structures of normative rigidity, boundaries and oppression.

The novels demonstrate how those individuals who are marginalised by the system, and therefore situated at its boundaries, find it easier to perceive its constructedness. The protagonists' 'ex-centric' perspective, therefore allows a critical and deconstructive view of dominant narrative and its system, revealing, how through discursive power it shapes and creates the world, and directs the development of individuals into rigid social roles. The novels – to different degrees – picture the pervasiveness of the dominant narrative, and the helplessness of the individual in the face of it.

The question that the novels pose themselves is how to come to terms with the power of the dominant narrative, and how to break free, if it is indeed possible. Is there room for subversive, individual agency *within* the dominant narrative, or can the dominant narrative be broken out of? Given the discursive form of the oppressive system and the impossibility to fully *break out* of discourse, the idea of a subversive narrative plays an important role. In this context, all three novels reflect on the concept of re-vision, and the idea of telling stories for political purposes and to effect social change. At the same time, however, they take a critical stance in relation to the ambition of re-vision, and question its real potential. They are sensitive to the problems and dilemmas inherent in the concept, like the paradoxical dependence on the dominant narrative as a basis for subversion, or the problematic role of binary oppositions, which are revealed as constructions of the dominant discourse, meaning that any oppositional stance simultaneously works to reinforce what it challenges. Nevertheless, as the novels portray it, the best possibility for agency lies in subversion within the structures, and it is made feasible by the dependence of the dominant power narrative on reinforcement through sustained repetition. Through repetition with a difference, difference can be introduced into the discursive realm. But while they adopt the postmodern problematisation of the basis of meaning-making, and apply a critical gaze to all ideologies, not just the dominant one, the novels are also aware of the problems with obtaining and sustaining the demystified and critical perspective that postmodernism is associated with, like the fear of a loss of identity and ultimate self-destruction through the destabilisation of all meanings, and the lure of the security provided by the fixed structures of the dominant discourse. In all of the novels, there is a strong sense that, even upon realising their contingency, unified narratives and stable meanings are



needed, or at least desired – something that has been referred to with the Nietzschean term 'will to deception'. It is along these lines that the novels stage the endeavour of *re-telling*.

In Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, for example, the merit of re-telling is perceived as quite ambiguous, and their its to indeed change the past is viewed skeptically, as the protagonists are doomed to repeat the unhappy stories of their lives in the form of a ghostly haunting of the text. Here the main objective is to undermine the universality of the dominant story, and contrast it with a counternarrative. Despite the hope that such an example might induce other oppressed and silenced individuals to act differently, here the act of narration is ultimately backwards-looking and comes at too late a time to provide individual empowerment and or liberation for the protagonists. In *The Penelopiad*, subversive agency is limited, and is not credited with the power to liberate the teller of the story. Instead, it is oriented towards the reader, prompting her to act, and thus purports to be for the benefit a wider community of oppressed individuals.

In Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, on the other hand, the focus is more on the individual, especially as the character of Atlas is presented as an identificatory figure for the author herself. In this highly symbolic story, an individual's stubborn repetition of narratives of the past from a different perspective does not facilitate liberation. Nothing new can spring out of one brooding mind, as long as categories are fixed and boundaries upheld. The stories of the past are ultimately portrayed as burdens that the individual must let go, in order to form his or her own, original narrative. Instead of opposing the dominant narrative and style with a counternarrative that attempts to embody its binary opposite, in the vein of *écriture féminine*, the binarisms that reinforce the dominant order are transgressed in favour of hybridity, doubleness and forms that combine characteristics traditionally perceived as mutually exclusive, and embody an utopian ideal of fluidity and pluralism.

The same ideal is also found in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* where the issue of the dominant and the subversive narrative is carried into the present and its capitalistic consumer and information society, where power is equated with economic potency and command of the media. Its lesbian love story holds up an ideal of androgyny and more generally ambiguity and individuality that defies definition and categorisation and

contradicts the common stereotypes disseminated by the media. Besides embodying and living this subversive ideal, the novel also advocates public resistance to the dominant (and deceptive) narrative embodied by advertising by re-claiming the public spaces, and employing the same method as advertising to promulgate subversive messages in a form of informative 'vandalism'. It is important to note, however, that these messages contain facts and do have a claim to truth that aims to debilitate the misinformation of the dominant media. More so than the two previous novels, *Girl Meets Boy* operates with a clearer distinction between truth and lies, suggesting that in certain contexts, like political activism, they are useful and necessary. *Girl Meets Boy* also celebrates the power of storytelling, but instead of promoting its potential for direct political change, it again evokes the role of the reader (or listener). In portraying utopian scenarios, stories can at the same time inspire the wish for change and provide support and guidance for those who struggle in a less than ideal reality.

The idea of a subversive narrative challenging a dominant one hence takes very different forms in each of the novels. What is crucial, however, is that repetition with a difference and re-telling are portrayed as the means by which to introduce the values of pluralism and diversity within a discourse built on exactly the opposite. The only binarism that is not destabilised and undermined, it seems, is the one between the rigidity of dominant discourse with its unjustified claim to universal validity, and the fluidity of the subversive narrative, which does not seek to efface the dominant narrative, but exist beside it, leaving the ultimate responsibility of choice to the reader.

The novels also contain reflections on the nature of myth itself, and here it is interesting that the values of fluidity, variety and pluralism are also associated with the 'genre' of myth per se. The original and true form of the mythological narrative is oral tradition, and sustained repetition with constant variation. The situation that myths should function as rigidly fixed, canonical narratives of authority, claiming universal truth, is actually an oxymoronic one, and by re-telling these canonised myths, so the argument seems to be, the novels of Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith restore the mythical narrative to its original and proper form.

Besides holding up mythical re-telling as a way of critical examination of the status quo, and thus of political agency, all three novels hence also contain their own

*apologia*, making a better case for the cause of re-telling than the publisher who simply advertises myths as containing universal truth. In fact, the novels seem to contain one message, suitably paradoxical for their postmodern context, namely that the only truth that can be universally asserted, is that there is no universal truth.



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## Abstract

The paper is concerned with contemporary re-tellings of classical myths from Greek and Roman antiquity. It is mainly focussed on three novels by Anglo-American writers that were published as part of a series called *Myths* by the Scottish publisher Canongate. The novels are Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* and Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*.

Considering the fact that neither the myths nor the idea of re-tellings are anything new at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question arises after the use or purpose that the novels claim for themselves and for stories in general, and how they justify themselves in the face of their apparent unoriginality. It is the aim of the paper, to explore, if generalising answers to this question can be abstracted from the analyses of the three novels, and if yes, what they are.

Two different concepts of re-tellings serve as starting points for comparison and contrast. On the one hand, there is the concept of re-vision, which refers to a form of re-telling with a clear political affiliation – as for example feminism – and with the ambition to directly influence and change social reality through the artistic practice of writing. On the other hand, there is the concept of historiographical metafiction, which, according to Linda Hutcheon, is a typically postmodern form of fiction, which does not only have a strong self-reflexive (and self-critical) focus, but is also characterised by its paradoxical meanings, which can be found on many levels and which is credited with the potential for a critical, and hence subversive, portrayal of political and social issues, but which applies the same critical gaze to the very ideologies behind political movements like feminism.

The analyses will consider the intertextual relationship between the texts that provide the sources for the myths retold and the re-tellings, as well as the metafictional self-reflexivity of the texts and their ideas on the theme of storytelling, in order to link their critical, and possibly ideologically informed portrayal of political and social issues – predominantly, but not only, concerning gender – to metafictional reflexions on the power and potential of storytelling.

The analyses reveal that despite considerable differences between the texts, it is possible to find common tendencies. In all three of the texts, there can be found a dichotomy between authoritative, fixed and therefore oppressive meanings – which are more or less strongly associated with canonical myths – and plural, flexible and subversive meanings – which are always associated with a positive view of storytelling and especially re-telling. While all three texts seem to consider the ideology of re-vision and the possibility of telling stories for political purposes, and for effecting social change, they adopt a critical position toward this idea, and reflect diverse ideas regarding the meanings and possibilities of storytelling, and particularly re-telling. On the one hand, storytelling is regarded as a means for deconstructing the dominant narratives and their deadlocked meanings, on the other hand its potential for constructing individual narratives – and hence identities, visions of the future, and more – is recognised. Ultimately, there is one real common ground that the texts share despite their differences – the paradoxical, and never fully achievable ideal of plurality, flexibility and difference.

## Zusammenfassung (Abstract in German)

Die Arbeit befasst sich mit zeitgenössischen Neuinterpretationen von Mythen des klassischen Altertums. Der Hauptaugenmerk liegt dabei auf drei Romanen anglophoner Schriftstellerinnen, welche in einer 2005 gestarteten Serie des schottischen Verlags Canongate unter dem Serientitel *Myths* erschienen sind: Margaret Atwoods *The Penelopiad*, Jeanette Wintersons *Weight* und Ali Smiths *Girl Meets Boy*.

Ausgehend von der Feststellung, dass zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts weder die Mythen noch die Idee solcher Neuinterpretationen oder *re-tellings* etwas Neues sind, stellt sich die Frage, welchen Nutzen die Romane sich selbst, und Geschichten im Allgemeinen, zuschreiben, und wie sie sich angesichts ihrer fehlenden Originalität rechtfertigen. Es ist das Ziel der Arbeit, zu untersuchen ob in dieser Hinsicht überhaupt eine einheitliche Aussage getroffen werden kann, und wenn ja, welche dies ist.

Zwei unterschiedliche Konzeptionen von Neuinterpretationen dienen dabei als Ausgangspunkte für Vergleiche: einerseits das Konzept der *revision*, worunter Neuinterpretationen mit einer klaren politischen Zuordnung, zum Beispiel zum Feminismus, und der Ambition mithilfe der künstlerischen Tätigkeit gesellschaftliche Veränderungen herbeizuführen, zu verstehen sind; andererseits das Konzept der *historiographical metafiction*, worunter nach Linda Hutcheon jene typisch postmodernen Werke zu verstehen sind, welche nicht nur stark selbstreflexiv geprägt sind, sondern auch auf vielen Ebenen paradoxe und widersprüchliche Bedeutungen tragen, und denen zwar ein Potential zur kritischen Stellungnahme zu politischen und gesellschaftlichen Themen zugeschrieben wird, die jedoch den selben kritischen Blick auch auf die Ideologien anwenden, welche hinter politischen Bewegungen wie dem Feminismus stehen.

In der Analyse werden sowohl das intertextuelle Verhältnis zwischen dem Mythos, welcher den Quelltext darstellt, und der Neuinterpretation, als auch die metafiktionale Selbstreflexion der Werke und ihre Behandlung des Themas Geschichtenerzählen untersucht, um die kritische – und möglicherweise ideologisch geprägte – Auseinandersetzung der Werke mit politischen und gesellschaftlichen Themen – vor allem, aber nicht nur, im Bereich der Genderpolitik – mit metafiktionalen

Überlegungen zu den Möglichkeiten des Geschichtenerzählens in Verbindung zu bringen.

Wie die Analysen zeigen, ist es, trotz beträchtlicher Unterschiede zwischen den einzelnen Texten, möglich, eine gemeinsame Grundtendenz zu finden. In allen drei Texten spielt der Gegensatz zwischen autoritären, festgesetzten, und demnach oppressiven Bedeutungen – welche mehr oder weniger stark mit den kanonisierten Mythen in Verbindung gebracht werden – und einem pluralistischen, flexiblen und subversiven Begriff von Bedeutung – welcher in allen Fällen mit dem Erzählen, und vor allem Wiedererzählen von Geschichten in Verbindung gebracht wird. Während alle drei Werke die Ideologie der *re-vision* zu reflektieren scheinen, und die Möglichkeit des Geschichtenerzählens für politische Zwecke und zur Erwirkung gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen in Erwägung ziehen, nehmen sie dennoch eine Position der kritischen Distanz gegenüber jener Ideologie ein, und sprechen dem Geschichtenerzählen – und vor allem dem *re-telling* – unterschiedlichen Bedeutungen und Fähigkeiten zu. Zum einen wird es als eine Möglichkeit zur Dekonstruktion dominanter Narrative und festgefahrener Bedeutungen gesehen, zum anderen aber auch als ein Weg, individuelle Narrative – und damit Identitäten wie auch Zukunftsvisionen – zu *konstruieren*. Letztendlich bleibt allen drei Romanen eine Gemeinsamkeit, nämlich das paradoxe, und wohl auch bewussterweise nie ganz realisierbare Ideal der Pluralität, Flexibilität und Differenz.

## Curriculum Vitae

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