

On Sappho's Website: Women Poets and Myth in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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Voices from the Wilderness: Post/colonial Trauma, Spectral Witness, and Environmental Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

Note: *As usual, my paper's title and abstract promise a far more ambitious paper than I could present here in twenty minutes. I am in the process of developing this into a longer journal article and apologize for not being able to address all the aspects of Atwood's work that I proposed in my abstract, particularly her exploration of indigenous myths. Also, when I saw that in the panel before this one Dr. Párraga would be presenting a reading of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, I decided to focus more on "Circe/Mud Poems."*

In her 2012 introduction to *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Margaret Atwood notes that the post-millennial popularity of "end-of-the-world scenarios" are indicative of a particularly North American cultural obsession with "survival stories" (vi). Survival is, of course, a consistent theme in Atwood's own work, present from her early poetry and fiction of the late 1960s and early 70s, to her more recent speculative fictions, which directly engage with apocalyptic narrative. Atwood's critical and creative interest in survival, as a theme central to Canadian literature, is primarily focused on western imperialist preoccupations and encounters with "Nature as Monster" (xi). Atwood argues, however, that this view of nature is no longer expressed as a fear of "the monster that will kill us"; rather, we fear our own monstrous potential for killing or destroying nature, and subsequently, the theme of survival has now come to signify the projected aftermath of "irreparable and self-inflicted disaster" brought on by extreme climate change (xi). Although Atwood observes that this "reversed" positioning or "situation" (xi) is a trend within early twenty-first century texts and discourses, I would argue that Atwood has been writing from this perspective over the past forty years since she first published her critical survey of Canadian literature. It is a position that is both prophetic and aligned with her ongoing project of constructing a postcolonial identity and feminist voice dedicated to exposing the violent legacies of imperialist histories and patriarchal sexual politics, which continue to influence relationships between self and other, and by extension, humans in relationship to their environments.

Atwood's two poem sequences, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and "Circe/Mud Poems" (1974), are perhaps her most cohesive earlier works that challenge western paradigms of expansionism that seek to construct "a garrison against the wilderness" (Staines 16), which leads, as Atwood concludes in her Afterword to *Susanna Moodie*, to a division within the self and its sense of place, or, a kind of national "paranoid schizophrenia" (62). Both texts rewrite myth and history to illustrate the ways in which fears of dissolution and annihilation, due to the absence of clear borders between self and other, are rooted in western patriarchal and imperialist discourses that perceive nature (symbolically and textually coded via the bodies of women, "natives" or animals) as markers of an incommensurable, threatening difference. Atwood links myths and archetypes of the monstrous-feminine, such as the witch (Circe) or crone (Susanna), to representations of the wilderness as a feminized space of unmapped country that must be

conquered and controlled through masculine or colonial aggression (Davey 17, 21; Nicholson 14). Both texts describe journeys into hostile territories, where violence always hovers at the margins or borders that separate “human” from “animal.” The male and/or colonial invader resists integrating alternative perceptions of their “new worlds,” and consequently, the desire for domination and mastery over wilderness spaces leads to instability, hauntings, waking nightmares, and traumatic loss and displacement for those who survive their encounter with a landscape that is, as Gorjup Branko notes, “defined and deformed by the patriarchal mind that sees the world as a battleground for oppositional forces” (139). Moreover, in Karen Stein’s reading of Atwood’s poetry, she argues that “landscape exists not as an identifiable locale, but as a mythic force” (9), through which the texts disrupt “conventional stereotypes of the pioneer as conqueror of nature” and instead expose the alienation and ambivalence of “the settler’s conflicted doubleness” (25).

This doubleness is also often illustrative of women’s positioning within a patriarchal paradigm or narrative. For example, the narrative arc of Susanna’s journals highlights her identity as a white settler or invader who ultimately does not conquer the wilderness but is alienated and traumatized by it, remaining haunted for the rest of her life by the seven years in the bush and its brutal price of survival; eventually, Susanna finds a way to merge with the land but only in death. Likewise, in “Circe/Mud Poems,” Circe is acutely cognizant of her role (within the mythic version of her life) as both conqueror (of the men who invade her island) and conquered (by Odysseus); she struggles to retain control over her body and domain while longing for a genuine companion, and eventually realizes the only possibility of this is to escape the parameters of her own myth. Circe and Susanna are emblematic of Atwood’s typical female narrator, whom, Stein observes, is “an alienated speaker, a victim-storyteller, insistently reporting, imagining, and inscribing her tale” through detachment and “emotional flatness” (12). According to Madeleine Davies, Atwood’s storytellers play and resist the “role of silent spectator,” writing or narrating their lives “as silent witnesses” to events (63), while actively providing patterns and imagery “of erasure and void [that] also testify to the crises of identity suffered by Atwood’s protagonist, whose uncertain sense of subjectivity repeatedly produces split selves” (62). Often moving between past, present, and future, the personas of Circe and Susanna speak from specific yet shifting locales and are forced to negotiate the slippage of temporal and spatial boundaries that threaten their sense of a coherent identity. As victims and survivors who participate, both willingly and unwillingly, in the devastation of their own landscapes or homes, Circe and Susanna are situated in the poems as spectral absences and presences, speaking from a vanishing wilderness to provide prophetic witness to the cyclical violence of apocalyptic and environmental destruction perpetuated through patriarchal narratives and imperialist practices.

In this way, Frank Davey argues, Atwood links feminism and ecology to show how, “Woman’s body is also the world’s body” (29). In other words, according to Atwood, the fear of “Nature as Monster” is linked to the view of “Nature as woman,” and accordingly, from a patriarchal perspective both nature and the nature of women are viewed as synonymous. In *Survival*, Atwood argues that, in Canadian literature specifically, Nature is personified not only as “cold, forbidding and possibly vicious” (224) but also as “a nasty chilly old woman” (226).

Atwood reminds us that in western myths the archetype of the Crone is linked to the figure of Hecate, “goddess of the underworld, who presides over death and has oracular powers”; however, when patriarchy views Hecate, or the Crone, as the only embodiment of the “feminine,” and as a dangerous and feared aspect of the “feminine,” we end up with a literature or culture that sees both Nature and women as sinister, archaic forces needing to be conquered and controlled (223).

The figure of the Crone is also directly linked to the archetype of the Witch, whose own source of power is rooted in her ability to manipulate Nature; also, historically, those women who tended to be targeted as witches were isolated individuals who lived on the margins of society, and were respected yet condemned for their skills as “cunning women” or healers. Circe is a mythical version of the witch figure, playing a significant role in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which she is set up as a creator and destroyer, exiled in physical and psychological isolation on her island until Odysseus and his men arrive (Buchbinder 125-126). David Buchbinder notes that Atwood’s poetry and fiction often engage intertextually with Homer’s *Odyssey*, from which she borrows and develops three female roles or types: the Siren, Circe, and Penelope; as women who are both subordinate and powerful, they provide Atwood with vehicles for exploring contemporary sexual politics (123-124). According to Stein, by returning to “the Homeric version” of Circe’s tale, Atwood rejects later representations of her “as a witch, a femme fatale, a monster,” and instead offers up a real woman, a priestess and prophet, sympathetic and wise, retelling her story as one of “mutual love” within heterosexual parameters, though not without its own challenges and temptations of falling back into the old binaries of active masculinity and passive femininity (37).

In “Circe/Mud Poems,” Atwood uses the *Odyssey* to deconstruct the western myth or story of the male hero, which forces Circe, as Davey notes, “to live on a timeless island and participate in plots and landscapes” that are not her own, and despite her transformative powers she finds “mythological men,” or the heroic archetype, “tiresome and predictable” (45). Moreover, through Circe’s narrative perspective, Atwood attempts to find a way out of a traumatic history of invasion, colonization, and destruction. The opening poem describes a burnt-out forest, an apocalyptic landscape, with “blunted” and “charred” trees, and “seared rocks”; the force of nature is equated to “power / impinging,” signaling the invasive arrival of Odysseus and the theme of imperialism underlying the myth of the hero. Circe addresses his anticipated act of trespass through a kind of prophetic, passive waiting for him to “find what there is” (46); in other words, she seems to ask: You discover the reality of this place, but will you accept it or destroy it? Circe’s phrasing emphasizes colonial exploration while suggesting, according to Buchbinder, that her narrative “is caught up in a temporal loop that causes the known past to become the predictable future” (127); although she is also witness to a future that cannot unfold, an impossible utopia located on another island where the history of conquest has yet to be written (132), she knows that Odysseus’ story, and her role within it, will play out as it always does because he refuses this other possibility while leaving her “trapped in a narrative that condemns her to loneliness” (138).

The narrative arc of “Circe/Mud Poems” is ultimately concerned with Circe’s own apocalyptic desire for a transformative power that will disrupt and destroy all the old myths and bring about a genuine metamorphosis within the world, or, a new story that is freed from the old

narrative patterns. Odysseus' story is one of "misadventures, lies, losses and cunning departures" (Atwood 64), encapsulating the patriarchal order and its violent march of progress, of forever "killing" and "saying Onward" (51) while leaving behind a path of destruction, which brings us nowhere but our own extinction. For most of the sequence, Circe retells this story through her repeated encounters with men arriving again and again on the island and assuming her to be a "mud woman," someone who would "accept, accept, accept ... anything you throw into me" (63); she is locked in a traumatic history of invasion and abuse, and has closed herself off, "deaf as an eye, / deaf as a wound, which listens / to nothing but its own pain" (63). Circe admits, "It would be so simple" (61) to remain faithful to this gendered narrative, where she is cast as a passive and pliable receptacle that at the same time consumes and destroys the men who have come to conquer her body, which Atwood presents as an allegory for the colonialist invader "lured" by his dream of an unconquered "virgin" land (52). However, as Branko notes, "Circe finds the whole business of being Circe rather tiring, a monstrous invention of male fantasy" (140), and she must confront how she has contributed to the construction of that fantasy, and its potential destruction of her world, either through her inaction or silence.

Thus, Circe attempts to "lure" Odysseus into a different story of flux and fluidity, a narrative that does not care about reaching a destination or staking a claim of ownership over others and the land but embraces the cyclical, metamorphic process of "becoming" and dying with the rest of the natural world. Circe does not offer Odysseus an heroic myth but a reality where "shit, / transforms itself" into flowers and food, and they are simply a part of this cycle, but he isn't "content / with that" – he wants to know the future and she warns him it's not what he wants to hear or believe: "To know the future / there must be a death" and "the future is a mess, snarled guts all over the yard" (66). This future is the endless loop of the same mythic story of the hero's quest, an endless cycle of invasion and destruction, unchanging whether played faster, forward, or backwards, and always containing the same elements: "the animals, / the blackened trees, the arrivals, / the bodies, words, it goes and goes" (69). Circe informs him that the only escape from this future is another island, an alternate place or choice that has not yet existed, and thus making it impossible to know what happens, "this land is not finished, / this body is not reversible" (69), resisting the desire for narrative closure and patterns of death without rebirth. She then offers a vision of them walking "through a field [in] November" (69), the time of transformation and liminality, when "the grass is yellow" but "the apples / are still on the trees," while snow begins "falling on our skin and melting" (70). Within the landscape of this other story, they do not intrude or impinge upon but merge with the animals and the land, which is not yet touched or marred by the history of invasion; they walk silently along "a stream, not frozen yet, in the mud / beside it the track of a deer" (70), indicating traces of other life, other species that share this world with them. Circe, as a prophet or seer who lives "timelessly," fades into this other ending that is only a dream vision because in the "real" story, Odysseus always leaves "and the story is ruthless" (68).

Branko argues that Atwood's appropriation and revision of myth, which itself illustrates the desire for different narratives, is ultimately concerned with our need for metamorphosis, "that we must learn to reject domination: the devastation of our natural world, the oppression of women,

and political tyranny” (143). Colin Nicholson argues that Atwood’s deconstruction of gender binaries within classical mythologies is part of her broader engagement in a decolonizing project that “both embodies and resists inherited definitions and determinations” (16), and by developing “a cartography of the imagination [that is] at once deconstructive and reconstructive” (21), Atwood attempts to situate spaces within “a history which precedes European incomers” (23). Nicholson and Branko provide insightful readings of this aspect of Atwood’s work, where she combines indigenous and Greco-Roman mythologies to explore hybrid narratives and identities, which unfortunately I did not have enough time to discuss here but plan to in the longer paper.

In closing, I would like to note some of the ways in which *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, like “Circe/Mud Poems,” attempts to provide a different story that is opposed to the western imperialist desire to impose straight lines and clear borders between civilization and the wilderness. Although Susanna’s colonialist narrative primarily positions her within the first two journals as the white settler who is both alien to and alienated from her new home, it is in her spectral existence of the third journal when her sense of home is achieved through acceptance of “disorder and contradictions” (Stein 27). This acceptance of place, however, is gained through Susanna’s own traumatic losses and sense of dislocation that she must work through, if not in her own life then in her death, and only when the land itself is on the brink of environmental apocalypse due to urban sprawl and extreme climate change. Overall, Branko argues for reading Susanna’s “double vision” as “the symbol of a metamorphosed self” (137). From its prefatory poem, Susanna is introduced as a disembodied voice describing a violent act of self-representation through a “picture” where she has “cut out the face” so that “where my eyes were, / every- / thing appears”; this image encapsulates not only Susanna’s dislocation but also the overwhelming sense of the space surrounding her while living in the bush, and her subsequent struggle to merge with that space; the focus on the eyes and the emptying of the self emphasizes the theme of vision and prophecy that her journey leads to when, as Atwood claims in the Afterword, she “finally accepts the reality of the country she is in, and . . . the inescapable doubleness of her own vision” (63).

After over a century of being buried underground, in the last two poems of the sequence, Susanna claims she can “see now”; as part of the earth, which “is a blizzard in [her] eyes” (58), she finally understands it and is resurrected by it into new life and insight. She reappears as a spectral presence looking out through the eyes of an old woman riding in a bus, and “has become the spirit of the land she once hated” (64), claiming it as her “kingdom” (60). Susanna has transformed into the personification of Canada as Crone, icy and cold, having the last laugh at the living humans who continue to believe that nature is the alien other separate from themselves, as a force that must be conquered. With the “secret” knowledge of her prophetic vision, she claims the outside is always within, and the wilderness always there if we are willing to see it: “Turn, look down: / there is no city; / this is the centre of a forest / your place is empty” (61).

In other words, like the final poem in Circe’s narrative, we have moved backwards in time to the primeval forest before invasion and destruction; yet we must also recall, as Atwood insists in *Strange Things*, that for the “indigenous peoples the wilderness was not empty but full” (79). Thus, Susanna’s closing words indicate that our claim on this place is empty or devoid of lasting

power; and, in the temporal loop of her prophetic vision, we are warned that destroying the environment through expansionist depletion of resources ultimately leads to our own destruction and extinction – the place will once again be empty of us. In other words, the place that we have claimed is not ours, we do not own or possess the land, we are part of the land and not separate from or above it, and only by shifting our view of our place within the world will we survive. When read together, “Circe/Mud Poems” and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* provide an example of how Atwood rewrites myth and history as a significant strategy of what Donna Haraway calls, “bringing the dead into active presence” (8), forcing us to confront and engage with radical otherness, including our own annihilation. Like Haraway, Atwood emphasizes that our survival is dependent on writing new myths and narratives that challenge us to cultivate responsive relations to others, to accept “that our space is shared space” (Vogt 179), and that we are interconnected and interdependent with the natural world around us (Hengen 74).

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