

THE TRANSCULTURATION OF MYTHIC ARCHETYPES: MARGARET ATWOOD'S CIRCE

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ABSTRACT

In this article I will focus on the transformation of mythic archetypes in Margaret Atwood's collection of poetry *You Are Happy*. More specifically, I will analyze Atwood's use of the character Circe (and, indirectly, Odysseus) in the section titled "Circe / Mud Poems." My hypothesis is that Atwood's revision of mythic archetypes can find an appropriate interpretation when it is read as a reflection on the colonial condition. For this reason, the treatment of the mythical archetypes will be explained referring to three key concepts in postcolonial studies: *ambivalence*, *mimicry*, and *transculturation*.

KEYWORDS

Atwood, Circe, Odyssey, Odysseus, ambivalence, mimicry, transculturation.

LA TRANSCULTURACIÓN DE LOS ARQUETIPOS MÍTICOS:

LA CIRCE DE MARGARET ATWOOD

RESUMEN

En este artículo me centraré en la transformación de los arquetipos míticos en la colección de poesía de Margaret Atwood *You Are Happy*. Más concretamente, voy a analizar el uso de Atwood del personaje Circe (e, indirectamente, Odiseo) en la sección titulada "Circe / Mud Poems". Mi hipótesis es que la revisión de Atwood de los arquetipos míticos puede encontrar una interpretación adecuada cuando se lee como una reflexión sobre la condición colonial. Por esta razón, se explicará el tratamiento de los arquetipos míticos refiriéndose a tres conceptos clave en los estudios poscoloniales: la ambivalencia, el mimetismo y la transculturación.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Atwood, Circe, Odisea, Odiseo, ambivalencia, mimetismo, transculturación.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the section “Circe / Mud Poems,” from the collection of poetry *You Are Happy*, Margaret Atwood reworks an episode of the *Odyssey*, the period of time during which Odysseus arrives and resides on the island of Aeaea, home of the sorceress Circe (*Od.10.135-12.143*). My hypothesis is that Atwood’s poetic rewriting of this story can find an appropriate interpretation when it is read as a discourse about the Other, as a reflection on the colonial condition and as a poetic representation of the existential condition of the postcolonial writer. For this reason, the treatment of mythical archetypes in her rewriting will be explained referring to three key concepts in postcolonial studies: *ambivalence*, *mimicry*, and *transculturation*. I will then briefly focus on the overall structure of the collection and on its conclusion in order to show Atwood’s final handling of the discourse on alterity.

Some of the “Circe / Mud Poems” are characterized by deep tragic irony, “where the individual is so isolated as to feel his existence a living death” (Frye 297); other poems are closer to the invective or the complaint, “the poem of exile, neglect or protest at cruelty” (Frye 297). Circe as a *dramatis persona* is an isolated being, forced to live—and re-live forever—her fate of *femme fatale*. The section includes, for the first time in Atwood’s repertoire, several prose poems that, according to Jerome H. Rosenberg, seem to allow Atwood to comment, with more precision, on the conflicting truths offered by reality and myth (73). At the end of the section we are presented with a vision of two islands (Atwood 69-70) which has been understood as a metaphorical representation of a way out of the mythical world. The first island, in fact, has been interpreted alternatively as “the locale of the received myth” (Rosenberg 80) or as Circe’s revised myth (Lauter 72); while the second island is simply “unknown” (Rosenberg 80), a place where neither story counts (Lauter 72) or where one experiences the intense reality of a felt present, and that life is open-ended and fresh experience is possible (Grace 74). According to George Woodcock, the second island can be understood as “modern life that has not yet made its own myths,” or as Canada (134).

In the *Odyssey* the Circe episode is narrated by Odysseus at the court of Alcinous. In this circumstance the Homeric hero is a homodiegetic narrator: he acquires a strong degree of narratorial authority since he is the protagonist and sole survivor of the events that he is narrating. The truthfulness of the narrative act is fully bestowed on his trustability and it is not possible for anyone to disavow his story (Stanford 64). In the poetic narration of Atwood's Circe, the starting point is as crucial as, all things considered, quite recurring: as Gérard Genette affirms about another Homeric hypertext, Jean Giono's *Naissance de l'Odysée*, the hypotext is considered misleading and for this reason there is an attempt to reach the truth through a second narration of the events by a secondary character. The suspect that the original narration may be unreliable is due in large part to an element that is already present in the hypotext: Homer describes Odysseus as a genius of cunning and deceit, a hero who does not hesitate to resort to lies, both with his friends and enemies. If he often lies, then even the plot of his adventures, that he narrates in the first person, can be unreliable; the possibility and the necessity of a new narration, then, derives to some extent from an aspect inherent in the original story (Genette 364; see also Stanford 19 and 64).

2. ATWOOD'S MYTHMAKING

In the poetic section "Circe / Mud Poems" we apparently meet a new characterization of the *dread goddess of human speech*, which can be seen as an example of what Alicia Ostriker calls *revisionist mythmaking*: the poet deconstructs a prior myth and constructs a new one, which includes, instead of excluding, herself, initially satisfying the thirst of the single poet but ultimately making cultural change possible (72). The new characterization, however, is at best fluctuating. The poetic text is not firm in denying the traditional story nor in affirming the innovative version of the mythic character. In certain instances this happens because the innovation is simply denied, while in others the innovative elements originate intensifying secondary features that are already present in the *Odyssey*. I will consider two poems as exemplifications of these two techniques thanks to which the hypertextual status of the section remains essentially indeterminate.

It was not my fault, these animals
who once were lovers

it was not my fault, the snouts
and hooves, the tongues
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over

with teeth and fur

I did not add the shaggy
rugs, the tusked masks,
they happened

I did not say anything, I sat
and watched, they happened
because I did not say anything.

It was not my fault, these animals
who could no longer touch me
through the rinds of their hardening skins,
these animals dying
of thirst because they could not speak

these drying skeletons
that have crashed and bitter the ground
under the cliffs, these
wrecked words. (Atwood 48)

This poem contains Circe's attempt to defend herself from the accusation of being responsible for what occurred to the travelers that reached her island: their metamorphosis into pigs.¹ If Circe simply revealed not to be responsible for these transformations, the hypotext would be proved false. In the first two stanzas we notice the repetition of the syntagma "it was not my fault": Circe affirms her innocence because the transformations occurred without her intromission. The third stanza ends with the final assertion of her innocence and non-involvement in those acts, because "they happened." Following this, however, the poetic 'I' reveals more; the same expression is used again, adding new details: "they happened / because I did not say anything." With the use of the epanodos, Circe's story is completed: the woman observed the transformations (which she had probably triggered) without intervening, almost with cynical gratification. In this poem we see the first occurrence of the dialectic between traditional mythic account and revised mythic account: initially the sorceress seems to claim a new identity for herself, refusing her traditional role; however, she immediately takes a step back and the new story that she was about to tell is negated by her feeble re-admission of guilt.

¹ In the *Odyssey*, on the island of Circe there are also wolves and lions. According to some scholars, these animals are bewitched human beings as well; however, there is no indication of this in the text (Jong 258).

The fourth poem, a prose poem, is emblematic of the second mythopoetic technique:

People come from all over to consult me, bringing their limbs which have unaccountably fallen off, they don't know why, my front porch is waist deep in hands, bringing their blood hoarded in pickle jars, bringing their fears about their hearts, which they either can or can't hear at night. They offer me their pain, hoping in return for a word, a word, any word from those they have assaulted daily, with shovels, axes, electric saws, the silent ones, the ones they accused of being silent because they would not speak in the received language.

I spend my days with my head pressed to the earth, to stones, to shrubs, collecting the few muted syllables left over; in the evenings I dispense them, a letter at a time, trying to be fair, to the clamouring suppliants, who have built elaborate staircases across the level ground so they can approach me on their knees. Around me everything is worn down, the grass, the roots, the soil, nothing is left but the bared rock.

Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island. I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind. (Atwood 49)

The process of alteration of Circe begins again denying tradition: the enchantress loses her traits of luring woman dedicated to the transmutation of her lovers into pigs, and is presented instead as a cannibal female-shaman and prophetess. Her new role is to collect the syllables of nature and to convert them into prophetic, healing words. Because of her mantic qualities, however, Circe's characterization is not completely new. Atwood's Circe is a prophetess but this aspect is a secondary element that can already be found in the original version: Odysseus visits the Underworld in order to hear Tiresias' prophecy (*Od.11.100-37*). However, the prophecy concerning Odysseus' further adventures is complemented by Circe. According to Irene de Jong's analysis, Tiresias deals with the hero's fate on a large scale, while Circe gives him precise nautical and geographical information and important advice about the nostos that Odysseus and his men will have to undertake in order to go back home (*Od.12.37-141*). Circe's detailed instructions, then, fill in the gap left by Tiresias (Jong 266, 277 and 297). The original Circe already displays the precognitive abilities that Atwood exploits in her rewriting.

The alternation between traditional mythic account and revisionist mythic account is reflected in a dramatic shift in Circe's characterization: in some cases she may be identified with the archetype that Joseph Campbell defines the "Woman as the Temptress," while in other cases Circe aspires to identify

herself with the opposite archetype, the “Goddess” (91ff and 101ff). The first archetype corresponds to a material and carnal gratification, associated with lower passions, temptation and the distraction from the real goal of the hero; the second archetype corresponds to a higher level of satisfaction, which allows the hero to grow spiritually and to be completed as an individual (Jobling 36 and 38). These opposing representations correspond to irreconcilable feelings for *the man of many turns*.

At times Circe is described as a diabolic sorceress and temptress: for instance, in the poem “The fist, withered and strung” (Atwood 57)—where, after various love promises, following the Homeric source, she unsuccessfully tries to bewitch Odysseus into a pig—or in the poem “Now it is winter” (Atwood 67). In other poems Circe tries to be the “Goddess” of the Homeric hero, but the consequence of this act is that she becomes a victim of his violence. In the poem “I made no choice” (Atwood 50), a prostrated Circe offers Odysseus the things that he needs (“Nevertheless I gave you / the food you demanded for the journey / you said you planned,” ll. 12-14) but is repaid with lies (“but you planned no journey,” l. 14). In the poem “There are so many things I want” (Atwood 54), Circe abandons the conflict and crosses the imaginary boundary that separates her from Odysseus, in order to share with him the life on the island and the Adamic act of naming the world:

There are so many things I want
you to have. This is mine, this
tree, I give you its name,

here is food, white like roots, red,
growing in the marsh, on the shore,
I pronounce these names for you also.

This is mine, this island, you can have
the rocks, the plants
that spread themselves flat over
the thin soil, I renounce them.

You can have this water,
this flesh, I abdicate,

I watch you, you claim
without noticing it,
you know how to take.

Initially there is an attempt to cross the barriers and overcome conflict for the benefit of an existence lived together. However, this becomes an act of submission: Circe resigns her claim to the land and becomes a subaltern. It can be inferred from the choice of the verbs: to renounce and to abdicate. This attitude will lead her to be a victim of her interlocutor, as can be seen in the last triplet, where the verbs associated with the Homeric hero are connected with violence—to claim—and knowledge—to know. The beginning of the seventh line is also particularly relevant. Circe's words ("This is mine, this island") echo the words pronounced by Caliban in *The Tempest* ("this island's mine," Act I, sc. 2):² the parallelism between the two figures, both invaded on their islands, makes even more explicit the colonial metaphor. The encounter with the Other is resolved with a territorial appropriation and then, as we have seen, with an act of submission. The metaphor of territorial invasion is present throughout the section: "you land on the dry shore" (Atwood 46), "One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat" (Atwood 50). In the poem "Holding my arms down" (Atwood 55) the encounter between Circe and Odysseus is even more degraded, since the relationship becomes sexual violence perpetrated by the man against the woman:

Holding my arms down
holding my head down by the hair

mouth gouging my face
and neck, fingers groping into my flesh (ll. 1-4)

The archetype of the Goddess undergoes a final and brutal treatment in the sixteenth poem (Atwood 61), a prose poem, where the narrator introduces in an intradiegetic narrative the figure of the mud woman, Circe's alter ego. The mud woman does not have a life of her own and her only task is to fulfill the sexual desires of the two men who have constructed her. Her body begins at the neck and ends at the knees and elbows; each time the two men make love to her, they repair her, making her breasts bigger and hips wider. Out of metaphor, when the woman decides to relinquish her traditional power, her only other choice is to become a receptacle, a sexual object, modeled in the image and likeness of men's desires (Grace 72). If Circe cannot be the Temptress of tradition, she has to become a passive object of desire and a victim. In both cases, "the Other is fixed as unchangeable, known, and predictable" (Childs and Williams 125).

² I would like to thank Professor Biancamaria Rizzardi for suggesting this intertextual reference.

3. AMBIVALENCE AND MIMICRY

In Atwood's retelling, the relationship between Circe and Odysseus constantly fluctuates between attraction, love and devotion—"We walk in the cedar groves / intending love" (Atwood 62; ll. 1-2)—and repulsion, dread and disdain—"To be feared, to be despised, / these are your choices" (Atwood 53; ll. 18-19). My idea is that Atwood is poetically representing in the interrelation between the two mythical characters the process known as *ambivalence*, a term first used in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite or to describe a simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from an object, a person or an action (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 12). As it has been observed, applied to colonial discourse theory, ambivalence describes the "complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer": for this reason, "complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 12-13).

According to Stephen Slemon, the concept of ambivalence is important for all postcolonial writers, but it is particularly relevant for writers belonging to settler colonies because for them the illusion of a stable self/other binary division has never been available, and as a result the sites of figural contestation between colonizer and colonized have been taken inward and internalized in their textual practices (38). Even though in Australia, New Zealand, or Canada there has been no anti-colonial struggle nor a fight for independence, Second-World writers share with their counterparts in the decolonizing nations a desire to shake off the relationship of colonial dependency (Boehmer 213). According to Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, in settler communities authors articulate the dominant concerns of postcolonial theory: namely, "an ambivalent position between oppressor and oppressed" and "a complicity with colonialism's territorial appropriations". They also state that "Such problematics have been internalized within settler colony writings, making them in many ways exemplary texts for postcolonial critics who [...] often emphasize the forms of resistance within colonial authority (Childs and Williams 84). For all these reasons, according to Stephen Slemon, the ambivalence of literary resistance is the always-already condition of Second-World settler and postcolonial literary writing, because in the white literatures of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or South Africa, anti-colonialist resistance has never been directed at an object which can be seen as purely external to the self (38).

Reading Atwood's Circe's characterization in light of the concept of ambivalence, the attraction towards and repulsion from Odysseus and the possibility of living together on the island of Aeaea become a complex mix of complicity and resistance towards a patriarchal and colonizing subject, who represents the practices of phallogocentrism. Metaphorically this is indicated by the attraction towards and repulsion from an *other* story that Circe is trying to tell and that then will eventually replace the traditional one. Circe, being part of tradition, fears life outside myth: in the second island she will cease to exist as an archetype and will necessarily need to become a real human being. At the same time, she dreams of a new life with her lover, far from the symbols of Circe and Odysseus. As affirmed by Stephen Slemon, "literary resistance is necessarily in a place of ambivalence: between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them" (37).

When Circe attempts to embody the archetype of the Temptress and tries to transform Odysseus into a pig, she is adopting his aggressive attitudes. She is therefore accepting and imitating the *language* of Odysseus, representative of the colonial and traditional discourses. With this action, she is enacting another important and recurrent process in postcolonial studies, which is once again related to the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized: *mimicry*, or "the colonized adopting and adapting to the colonizer's culture" and "an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas" (Huddart 39).

The concept of mimicry, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 126), has a particularly significant role in settler colonies: as Alan Lawson notes, settler subjects enunciate the authority that is in colonial discourse on behalf of the imperial enterprise that they represent. They represent, but also mimic, the real imperial culture from which they are separated. Mimicry becomes then a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settlers (Lawson 156). In this sense, Circe is fighting the traditional mythical discourse from the inside, since she is essentially part of it. In adopting the role of the Temptress she is enunciating the authority of tradition, mimicking its powers. Also in this case, following Lawson's reasoning, the condition of settler colonies is particularly relevant since the Second-World postcolonial subject does not simply resist a discursive power that has been imposed from outside. In writing back against the representations of experience of this place, the subject opposes that which is internal to itself in a dual sense: "its own history of apprehensions and its own history of representations" (Lawson 154).

A different example of mimicry can be found in the description of Circe as a cannibal female-shaman and prophetess (Atwood 49). The natural elements

surrounding this particular Circe—body parts, the soil, the grass, the roots—are for aboriginal, pretechnological people, primary letters of the shamanic alphabet and everyday parts of life (VanSpanckeren 186). Circe exercises her authority over the land, translating her desire for the land into a desire for Native authenticity: her poetic narrative of indigenization manifests her desire to inherit the Natives' spiritual rites to the land (Lawson 156 and 157), thus appropriating their traditions. Circe's nativism, her desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 159), may be considered an extreme form of mimicry.

As it has been observed, when colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to mimic the colonizer, the result is never simple reproduction. Rather, it is a "blurred copy" of the colonizer that can be threatening because mimicry can lead to mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics, locating a "crack in the certainty of colonial dominance" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 139). As affirmed by Homi K. Bhabha, "The menace of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (129). If the menace of mockery, as an "ironic compromise" (Bhabha 126), remains fundamentally implicit in most of the section, it becomes explicit at least in one occasion, the final close of the poem "There must be more for you to do":

Don't you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward? (Atwood 51; ll. 13-18)

4. TRANSCULTURATION

Atwood uses the Homeric mythic complex to discuss the problems generated in her poetry by the dynamic of gender politics: such mythic complex transfers to her poetry relevant properties, especially particular traditional stances of the woman in gender politics (Buchbinder 123). Modern readers are likely to perceive in the structures of the *Odyssey* an underwriting of the ideologies of male supremacy and patriarchal values, and the nature of culturally defined sexual roles (Buchbinder 124 and 140). When dealing with the story of Odysseus and Circe, then, Atwood deals with a myth *of the society*, a western and patriarchal paradigm which sees man as a violent

conqueror and woman alternatively as a menacing seductress or a passive object of desire. Portraying Circe using innovative features (an innocent victim, a cannibal female-shaman, or a woman in love), the poet is fighting the mythical discourse from the inside: the fluctuation between irreconcilable options (is she the traditional Circe or not?) leads to the weakening of the archetype, which loses its reliability. If we consider Circe (and, indirectly, Odysseus)³ as a sign of tradition, it undergoes a process through which the link between its signifier and its signified, namely the form and meaning of the sign, is attenuated, making it an open signifier, ready to change.

Atwood develops a further phase of her mythopoetic process, producing a new version of the myth that we can read against Roland Barthes' *artificial myth*. Looking at the process of modern myth creation, Barthes states that myth, considered as a type of speech, is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: for this reason it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second (Barthes 114). According to Barthes, we can resist myth using it as the departure point for a third semiological chain: we use its signification as the first term of a second myth. In this sense, we mythify myth, producing an *artificial myth* (Barthes 135).

Barthes indicates very clearly the function of this second-order myth: "The power of the second myth is that it gives the first its basis as a naivety which is looked at" (136) or, in other words, it exposes the rhetoric of the original myth as such. The artificial myth undermines the original myth, revealing that it is only a form devoid of history and contingency. In Atwood's reworking of Circe, the creation of the artificial myth is possible because the poems create a series of new associations which can be considered more or less innovative and which are connected to the sign Circe, now transformed in an open signifier. These associations, as we have seen, are not the ones usually employed by tradition: Circe as an enamored woman, as a celebrant of a primaeval cult, connected both to the cult of Mother Earth and to cannibalistic rituals. Circe is presented as a seduced and abandoned woman, physically violated by her lover; a woman who does not want to submit to the rules imposed by tradition but who otherwise does not want to resign herself to the idea of being abandoned. Apparently, Circe is the other woman, the mistress.

However, Atwood inserts in the section various passages which might refer to a previous visit of the Homeric hero on the island of Aea. In the poem "I made no choice" (Atwood 50), where Circe describes Odysseus

³ In the section, Odysseus stands always for a nameless male addressee of the poems and is the male Other who helps define the female roles (Buchbinder 124).

reaching her island, the event point precedes the speech point—"you simply appeared" (l. 3), "I gave you / the food you demanded" (ll. 12-13)—while in the other poems Circe addresses the Homeric hero using the present tense. The only time Circe uses the past simple is when she is narrating Odysseus' arrival on the island, distancing it in time, as if it were another arrival, a previous one. Likewise, in the poem "When you look at nothing" (Atwood 65) Circe, indirectly mentioning Penelope, says that she had already experienced abandonment:

You returned to her after the other war
and look what happened.
Now you are wondering
whether to do it again. (ll. 8-11)

We also have to consider the instances in which the poems refer to the *Odyssey* as a diegetic act which comes before Circe's poetic narration, a prior event which relentlessly tends to repeat itself: "you abandon yourself to your memoranda, you traverse again those menacing oceans [...]. But it's not finished, that saga" (Atwood 64).

It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story, or not the same story. I know you've fulfilled everything you promised [...]. But I worry about the future. In the story the boat disappears, and it doesn't say what happens then [...]. Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless. (Atwood 68)

Because of all these passages, the chronology of the events is not always certain and we are no longer certain whether Circe came before or after Penelope.

Atwood is creating an "anti-myth"⁴ imbuing the open signifier Circe with an array of new characteristics. In order to fully understand this new model we need to analyze the primary imagery in the poems. In the first part of the section the imagery is predominantly "demonic": the world of nightmare, pain and confusion (Frye 147). The description of the island of Circe fits perfectly among the images of the world that "desire totally rejects" (Frye 147), Hell. A sinister forest, a sinister enchanted garden, rocks, cannibalism, an erotic relation that is a destructive and violent passion, working against loyalty and frustrating the one who possesses it (Frye 148-150). In order to sustain this demonic imagery, we can add "*the boat*" in the first poem (Atwood 46; l. 5),

⁴ This is how Marc Colavincenzo, following Barthes' reasoning, defines the new semiological chain, the second-order myth (52).

which recalls the boat that carries souls of the newly deceased into the world of the dead, the men who “swoop and thunder / around this island” (Atwood 47; ll. 13-14), who re-enact Lucifer’s fall, and a poem that can be read as an evocation of the chthonic goddess Hecate, “queen of the two dimensions” (Atwood 63; l. 3).

In the section we also find occasional representations of the opposite world, “the categories of reality in the forms of human desire,” the Heaven of religion, which Frye defines apocalyptic imagery (141). These images work as counterpoint to the previous imagery, enhancing the contrast or interplay of the different elements in the section. In “There are so many things I want” (Atwood 54) we find a primaeval couple who live on an paradisiac island sharing the Adamic act of naming every living creature. In the sixteenth poem (Atwood 61) we are at the dawn of time attending the creation of the first woman from the dust of the earth. These sporadic paradisiac visions culminate in “We walk in the cedar groves” (Atwood 62) where, albeit briefly, the first woman and the first man live together in a new garden of Eden.

Observing all these distinctive images, the artificial myth that we begin to distinguish has the aspect and the name of the Homeric temptress, but the features of a primaeval, rebel and abandoned woman, associated with demonic rituals. Because of the strong biblical connotations of some of the recurring images, one figure that can be associated to all these features is Lilith. According to the Talmudic tradition, she was Adam’s first wife. She considered herself his equal since both of them had been created from dust. When Lilith saw that Adam was determined to overpower her by lying on top of her, she rose into the air and flew away. Later she engaged in unbridled promiscuity with demons and bore a brood of more than one hundred a day (Patai 223-4). The figure of Lilith has always been popular in western literature: for instance, she takes part in the witches’ sabbath of Walpurgis Night in Goethe’s *Faust* and is one of the protagonists of Robert Browning’s poem “Adam, Lilith, and Eve.”

In Atwood’s section, Circe and Odysseus are thus metamorphosized into a primordial couple who live, albeit precariously, in a garden of Eden which looks extraordinarily like a Canadian landscape. According to Robert Kroetsch, one meta-narrative that has asserted itself persistently in the New World context is precisely the myth of the new world, the garden story, the “dream of Eden” (31-32). It is important to notice that Atwood, in creating a hybrid form for the characterization of her personal Circe, does not appropriate, say, First Nations traditions or aboriginal stories: as noted by Linda Hutcheon, “while culturally a hybrid, [...] Canada has experienced no actual ‘creolization’ which might have created something new out of an

adaptation process.” For this reason, “Canada’s colonial culture lacked some of the sense of a ‘civilizing’ mission, but still defined itself in terms of values which can, today, be seen as British, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and *male*” (77-78; emphasis added). On the contrary, Atwood uses a mythological figure that belongs to western tradition and Jewish folklore; the very creation of this hybrid character, however, leads to the disruption of the Homeric discourse and of the ideologies underlying it: an underwriting of the ideologies of male supremacy and of patriarchal values (Buchbinder 124).

My idea is that the radical transformation of Circe in an archetype of a lethal but also wounded woman, who has been abandoned and for this reason is resentful, is more than a simple elaboration of a traditional myth but corresponds to what Robert Fraser defines as a “positive transmutation of one literary archetype into a material for another tradition, and a different and instructive interpretation of history” (165), which he indicates as the highest purpose of the use of myth in literature. It is an instance of the “new hybrid mythical visions of this world” (Albertazzi 19) which characterize a *transcultural* use of myth, which is typical of postcolonial literature.

Fernando Ortiz chooses the word *transculturation* to describe the highly varied phenomena that have occurred in Cuba as a result of the complex transmutations of culture that have taken place on the island, without the knowledge of which it would be impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban people (98). According to Ortiz, the word *transculturation* recapitulates the problems of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation (98). The term better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another: it does not consist merely in acquiring another culture (acculturation), but it also necessarily involves the loss of a previous culture (deculturation). In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called *neoculturation* (102-103).

In postcolonial studies, *transculturation*, as an infinite process of mutual influence, designates a new, hybrid culture that can no longer be traced back to separable origins (Hawley 437). Françoise Lionnet defines the term as a process of cultural intercourse and exchange, a circulation of practices which creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms (11). It becomes then a term that identifies a “process wherein texts, traditions, and symbolic systems interact and, through exchange, affect each other” (Hawley 88). It also refers to the reciprocal influences of modes and representation and cultural practices (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 233). As it has been observed, *transculturation* deviates from concepts that rest in an understanding of cultural influence as being monodirectional and instead emphasizes the

multilaterality, but also the violence, of cultural interaction (Mackenthun and Jobs 9). The transformation of mythical archetypes in Atwood's poetic section becomes a process from which a new reality emerges transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, not even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent (Malinowski lix).

5. ATWOOD'S DISCOURSE ON ALTERITY

In the collection *You Are Happy*, Atwood's treatment of the conflict between the Self and the Other proceeds in a very interesting direction. In the first section, titled "You Are Happy," it is resolved in a series of poems characterized by the general idea of hostility (Grace 64): the section presents the political struggles, public and private, that degrade our lives (Rosenberg 73), contending with the fictions we employ to order our lives and the failures we encounter in that pursuit (Rosenberg 74). The second section, "Songs of the Transformed," is dedicated to others whose identities have been altered, either by Circe or by some other force (Rosenberg 75). This section also contains at least three elements that would become essential in Atwood's poetry: the denunciation of the vices of humanity and of the exploitation of the natural world; the need to introduce different points of view to observe reality; and the inevitability of change which, as metamorphosis, represents one the most important theme in Atwood's later production (Woodcock 141).

The way out from the mythical world, which is foreseen in the third section with the vision of the second island, is finally sanctioned in the fourth and final section, "There is Only One of Everything." The representation of reality through the Circe and Odysseus symbols becomes inadequate and is replaced with a different kind of representation. Together with the overcoming of mythical thought, the poems of the final section represent a way to bring to the forefront the necessity to live in the present moment: as affirmed by Sherrill Grace, these poems are celebrations of the uniqueness of life, they are denials, if only for a moment, of splits, aggressive opposites and power politics. They are positive affirmation of a final wholeness (74), without stereotypes or mythic archetypes.

In the title poem of this last section (Atwood 92) there is, according to Kathleen Vogt, a celebration of the ordinary particular to a degree rare in Atwood. The sense of "something approaching unity between the self and the other" is not common in her poetry (165). It is precisely this idea of *something approaching unity*, an urgency to overcome differences in order to reach unification, which permits a coherent reading of the last section. And it is

again this idea that permits us to identify that “originality of metaphors” which, according to Elsa Linguanti, is so relevant for postcolonial writers (9).

In some of the poems that form the final section—“Eating Fire” (Atwood 79-83), “Four Auguries” (Atwood 84-86) and “Head Against White” (Atwood 87-91)—we notice that metaphors of generation draw the reader’s attention to the human flesh (Irvine 102); but especially the last three poems—“There is Only One of Everything” (Atwood 92), “Late August” (Atwood 93) and “Book of Ancestors” (Atwood 94-96)—finally move from questions to answers, “uncertain as always, but emotionally compelling nevertheless” (Rosenberg 81).

“Book of Ancestors” is significant as a positive resolution to the dilemma of the conflict between the Self and the Other, or, between woman and man. The final movement of the poem contains the description of a man who decides to escape permanently from the world of myth and become part of the real world (lines 53-56):

You are intact, you turn
towards me, your eyes opening, the eyes
intricate and easily bruised, you open

yourself to me gently

The metaphor of opening (“you open // yourself to me”), intuitively associated with female sexuality, is used instead to describe the man, so as to create a deep connection and a gradual fusion between the two subjects. David Buchbinder defines this transformation of the two partners a “pax humana” (137). The concluding lines are an epitome of this process of rapprochement; this is what the two lovers are able to accomplish (lines 60-62):

[...] to take
that risk, to offer life and remain

alive, open yourself like this and become whole

With a new metaphor of opening (“open yourself like this”), there is the poetic creation of a unity between the two lovers (“and become whole”), the generation of the image of an alchemical Rebis, “starting-point of a movement of redemption” (Frye 157). The final synthesis between woman and man has precisely the function to recover the idea of *something approaching unity* that is paramount for the comprehension of the whole final section. The metaphors of opening and of the creation of a totality between woman and man not only satisfy the necessity to produce “expressions of originality” in

the dominant metaphors, but they also conform perfectly to those metaphors indicated by Linguanti as recurrent in postcolonial writers: links, bridges, gateways, overlapping, sharing, gathering, “something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side”: all this to create “the seamless whole.” (13-14 and 17).

Using a terminology employed by Northrop Frye, the collection of poetry *You Are Happy* opens with a sparagmos (148), the tearing apart of the couple and of the individual, metaphorically represented by various images of death and violence. The section “Circe / Mud poems” rewrites myth to represent the conflict between the two lovers, an agon (187) which concludes with the vision of the second island, the *anagnorisis* (163) or acknowledgment, of the existence of something new and superior. The last section concludes with a manifestation of the divine, a theophany represented by the vision of the perfect being, generated by the union of the two lovers. In this final image, we recognize the “postcolonial contrapasso”: “The Other is encountered only after removing the barriers [...], only after crossing the boundaries of prejudice” (Concilio 47; translation mine).

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