

Shifting the Mythic Discourse: Ambiguity and Destabilization in Joanne Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web*

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Abstract. The Homeric Penelope, long hailed as a feminist icon just as much as an example of submissive wife, has been the focus of numerous revisions and interpretations ranging from the reactionary to the most subversive. This article analyzes Joanne Kyger's revision of the mythic discourse in *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965) by studying two of the main strategies used by the poet: subtle shifts of focus and the use of alternative sources. Building from Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, which gave the poet the aesthetic freedom to move within Homer's text, the article examines Kyger's use of the mythic discourse to undermine the prevalence of patriarchal narratives and question their position as established categories. Operating inside and outside the Homeric construct, Kyger's collection perpetuates and subverts the classical myth in a move that anticipates contemporary – feminist – revisions and adaptations.

Keywords: monomyth; revisionism; Joanne Kyger; Beat Generation; Penelope.

[es] Modificando el Discurso Mítico: Ambigüedad y Desestabilización en *The Tapestry and the Web* de Joanne Kyger

Resumen. La Penélope Homérica, icono feminista y esposa sumisa a la vez, ha sido objeto de numerosas interpretaciones y revisiones que van de las más conservadoras a las más subversivas. Este artículo analiza la revisión del discurso mítico llevada a cabo por Joanne Kyger en *The Tapestry and the Web* a través del estudio de dos de las principales estrategias que usa la poeta: el reenfoque sutil y el uso de fuentes alternativas. Partiendo del concepto de monomito de Joseph Campbell, que la poeta usa como elemento liberador para adentrarse en el texto de Homero, este artículo examina el uso que hace Kyger del discurso mítico para minimizar la prevalencia de un discurso mitológico patriarcal a través del que cuestiona su posición como categoría fija. Funcionando dentro y fuera de la obra Homérica, la colección de Kyger preserva y subvierte el mito clásico anticipando, de este modo, revisiones y adaptaciones (feministas) contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: monomito; revisionismo; Joanne Kyger; Generación Beat; Penélope.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The Myth of the Beat Generation. 3. Shifts and deviations: *The Tapestry and the Web*. Poised Sanity: Shifting Penelope. Textual Sources: Alternative Paths. 4. Conclusion. Works Cited.

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1. Introduction

The revision of classical myths has been, and continues to be, a recurrent strategy and a source of inspiration in the poetry and fiction by both male and female authors. While classical myth fulfilled the ambitious role of offering “an explanation of something in nature; how, for instance, any and everything in the universe came into existence” (Hamilton 12), contemporary cultures often turn to myth with the no less ambitious task of providing “a unique perspective on the present, as well as the future” (Perlich 2). Nevertheless, as many scholars have noted (Pomeroy, 1975; Lefkowitz, 1986; Rabinowitz, 1993) an analysis of the way female characters are portrayed in classical myths might conclude that the myths as we know them leave little room for female subjectivity and empowerment. As Ken Dowden writes in *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (1992), “Greek mythology is by and large a man's mythology, describing a world from a man's point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men, [...] and they

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seldom have scope for action on their own initiative” (162). In spite – or perhaps because – of assertions like this one, writers and poets such as Hilda Doolittle, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, or Edith Wharton have all reinterpreted mythological characters or themes through their works. Similarly, critics and scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Estella Lauter or Diane Purkiss, have also been concerned with the relationship between feminism and myth from very different perspectives².

Reading myths as “not lies, but rather men’s attempt to impose symbolic order upon their universe” (Pomeroy 1), feminist evaluations and revisions of mythical texts acknowledge the relevance of the mythological discourse to study and contest the socio-cultural and political position of women in past and present societies. In addition, poets and artists investing in myth have stressed the evolving nature of the mythological discourse as a potentially liberating tool for female and individual empowerment. As Babbage (2011) has quoted, “myths, [...], only really achieve significance in the telling: in this sense they are open structures differently filled by each generation” (4). This notion of open structure, which Joanne Kyger uses in the twenty-seven short poems included in *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965) resonates with Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a text that had a profound influence on the poet’s approach to myth in this collection (see Grace and Johnson, 2004). Campbell’s reduction of mythical discourse to the notion of a core, fundamental structure capable of encompassing different cultures and human experience, was for Kyger an invitation to enter and retell old narratives. Through the monomyth, she “understood that it was possible to have this narrative, this old narrative that could go through your life that was common to all humans. And you saw your life in terms of that” (144). Building from this archetypal essence of mythical discourse, Kyger enters the *Odyssey* and manages to inscribe alternative routes without fundamentally changing the structure or themes in the Homeric poem.

One of these alternative routes takes Joanne Kyger to a new-found Penelope through which she exposes a specific kind of symbolic ordering of women in society that she uses to create connections with her own position in the world – mainly as a young poet dwelling in a rather masculine literary world, and a newly-wed adjusting to life in Japan with poet Gary Snyder. Kyger’s Penelope, though, is not oblivious to the tradition she stems from. As an archaic ideal wife, as Fantham et al. note, Penelope “was meant not only to produce and raise heirs but also to preside over her household by weaving and watching over the domestic slaves and goods” (33). While Penelope can be said to fit the mold of the submissive, patient, and forever-loyal paradigm of the perfect spouse, many have read inconsistencies and acts of defiance in between lines of the *Odyssey* that point towards a much more active and cunning character. Nevertheless, while scholars like Felson-Rubin have seen her as a “source of suspense” (67) with much more narrative control than has traditionally been endowed to her, others have underlined Penelope’s ultimate subjugation to the patriarchal narrative the *Odyssey* represents (Doherty 1995).

This article analyzes Kyger’s revision of the mythic discourse in *The Tapestry and the Web* by studying two of the main strategies used by the poet: subtle shifts of focus and the use of alternative sources. To do so, the article focuses on “The Maze” and “12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)”, two poems that – interestingly enough – do not necessarily follow the *Odyssey*, but complicate the Homeric epic by opening up alternative points of entrance to reevaluate the mythical Penelope. To contextualize the poet and the collection, the first part of the article offers an overview of the uses of myth in the Beat Generation with a special focus on female poets.

2. The Myth of the Beat Generation

Attracted to the afore-mentioned open-nature quality of myths, female writers and poets associated with the Beat Generation, like many artists and poets before them, have accepted the challenge and invitation to retell these stories through their poetry. Notorious examples can be found in Diane di Prima’s *Loba* (1998) and Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy* (2011), two poetry collections which invoke, revisit, and reinterpret not just world-wide mythologies, but also the epic genre itself as a great conduit of the mythical discourse and the masculine genre per excellence. This revisionist impulse, now a widely used and researched artistic resource, has been interpreted by some scholars as being particularly relevant to female writers. In the seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar refer to the process of literary revision as “a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition [through which female authors] managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards” (73). This tension between conformism and subversion, present in most mythical revisions, delineates Kyger’s overall approach to the Homeric myth.

In any case, whether attracted to the potentially liberating stories of mythical female characters as it happens in di Prima’s *Loba*, whether responding to the urge to substitute male images with female role models – as it might be the case in Janine Pommy Vega’s *Tracking the Serpent* (1997) – or in hope of reverting the cultural archive to empower female subjectivity and “shoulder/abdicate patriarchy” (xi) as Waldman writes in *Iovis*, Beat women have frequently turned to myth and mythical discourse in their work, oftentimes to reevaluate their own position in the literary spheres in which they move. Indeed, stemming out from the notoriously masculine Beat Generation, which

² For instance, by studying the position of women in ancient Greece, or in classical mythology, to name just two aspects. See Sue Blundell’s *Women in Ancient Greece* (1995), or Ellen Reeder’s edited book, *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece* (1996), Eva Cantarella’s *Pandora’s Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (1987), or Jane Cahill’s *Her Kind: Stories of Women from Greek Mythology* (1995).

status as an all-boys club was not seriously questioned until the mid 1990s with the publication of the first anthologies and scholarly works on women writers associated with the movement (Knight 1996, Peabody 1997, McNeil 1996, Friedman 1996, 1998), many of the so-called Beat women expand the revision of mythology through classical texts to incorporate also their own participation in the Beat Generation as a sort of mythical construction. Using canonical texts written by their male counterparts as any other mythical discourse, female Beat poets update the Beat ethos and the position of women in the movement. For instance, an example derived from Allen Ginsberg's landmark "Howl for Carl Solomon" include di Prima's "The Loba recovers the memory of a mare" (in *Loba*) or Waldman's "HOLY 21st century" (in *Outrider*).

Through the rewriting of classical myths, as well as contemporary self-mythologizing texts, Beat women carry out specific acts of re-vision, using Adrienne Rich's (1972) well-known thesis on feminist literary revision of patriarchal texts. The act of revision, through which women are given the means to revert the negative stereotyping recurrent in patriarchal mythologies, becomes a way "to deconstruct supposedly archetypal images of the feminine to reveal how these – far from being 'timeless' entities outside the processes of human development – are reflections of the symbolic order through which cultures are produced" (Babbage 22). Kyger's re-visitation of the *Odyssey* in *The Tapestry and the Web* exhibits many of these feminist traits, even if most scholars have been cautious not to perform an anachronic, feminist, reading of a text written in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Early studies of Kyger's use of myth in poetry include Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (1989), where he devotes a chapter to study the role of women – including figures such as di Prima, Kyger, Helen Adams, among others – within the literary and artistic activity that took place in the West Coast. Focusing on the "appropriative stance" (179), he places *The Tapestry and the Web* as an example of Kyger's "synthesis of myth and personal voice" (189), and notes how, while "written outside a specific feminist discourse" (190), the collection stands as a subversion of the masculine literary world Kyger was part of. Similarly acknowledging its destabilizing power, Linda Russo has analyzed Kyger's collection as an act "of imaginative intervention into epic invention, animating female presence, remaking the gender ideologies and histories transmitted from generation to generation in epic form" ("To Deal with" 179). Highlighting the fragmentary aspect of the poems, the author stresses Kyger's poetics as a strategy to escape masculine categorization. Like Davidson, Russo stresses the mixture of "layers of both personal and mythic history" (182), and Robert Duncan's influence on Kyger's approach to myth. In fact, although Kyger's approach may anticipate contemporary feminist revisions, Manwell (2015) has recently reminded us that the poet's main influences at this point "were – other – male poets, grappling with mythic archetypes as a way of getting inside the text and using mythemes and mythic figures as a means to personalize the universal" (61). Myth, in this context, allowed poets such as Kyger the possibility of using universal structures to navigate personal experience without falling on the traps of confessionalism (Russo, 2002:187; Manwell, 2015:56).

In addition, just as Davidson and Manwell, Russo is cautious not to read *The Tapestry and the Web* as a feminist text but does acknowledge that it "anticipates the revisionary project that characterizes a feminist poetics shaped by the second-wave women's movement" (188). Amy L. Friedman has similarly highlighted Kyger's revision of the epic poem and transformation of Penelope into different versions that allow her to explore "burgeoning female creativity" ("Joanne Kyger" 80), noting how "instead of utilizing reference to myth to shore up a sense of cultural survival and endurance, Kyger stamps Penelope's story with a personal narrative of female artistic power and perspective" (81). Building upon these and other works, this article examines the techniques through which Kyger uses the mythical discourse to contest rigid constructions of female characters and to expose the malleability of such discourses and the power hierarchies that they operate through.

3. Shifts and deviations: *The Tapestry and the Web*

Joanne Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* draws primarily from Homer's *Odyssey* while centering on Penelope to construct an alternative version of female endurance and fidelity. In the Homeric version of the myth, while Odysseus embarks in a twenty-year-long journey – first fighting the Trojan War and then returning home – Penelope is shown struggling to remain faithful while inventing schemes that would help her postpone taking another husband from her long list of suitors. While the *Odyssey* also narrates Penelope's actions, in so far as they are read as preserving Odysseus's status and power, she is left in a secondary, rather passive, position. To many a representative of female respectability and marital faithfulness, traditional iconography of Penelope represents her sitting down to symbolize her waiting, and crossed-legged to suggest her sexual inactivity in the absence of her husband³. Competing with these interpretations, critics like Bernard Knox or Marilyn Katz have favored more ambivalent readings which champion a newfound power in Penelope's inconsistencies and enigmatic actions in the epic poem, seeing her as "far more ambiguous than tradition allows" (Katz 6). Cavarero similarly reinterpreted Penelope's seemingly impractical weaving and unweaving as a conscious effort to create

³ For a summary of the history of the representation of Penelope – and other female characters – in art see Diana Buitron-Oliver's and Beth Cohen's chapter "Between Skylla and Penelope: Female Characters of the Odyssey in Archaic and Classical Greek Art", in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (1995).

an independent space within a patriarchal grand narrative. For Cavarero, Penelope's evasion through her craft helps the stoic wife avoid actions that would "end the time of a belonging-to-herself that she creates through an endless process of weaving" (13). Oscillating between these apparently contradictory readings, Kyger enters different preconceptions of the mythical character of Penelope to destabilize both archaic and contemporary preconceptions of femininity and gender. Not necessarily rewriting or revising any particular mythical text, Kyger introduces and anticipates feminist revisionist literary practices while carefully maintaining Penelope's subjugation to the patriarchal system of the mythical discourse.

This move might be motivated by two rather interrelated aspects. On the one hand, written from 1958 to 1962, Kyger's reworking of Penelope predates much of the second-wave feminism, where revisionist and appropriative strategies would become frequent literary techniques. Unlike more radical revisions like Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), where the author distances more clearly from Homer's depiction of Penelope, Kyger chooses not to lose track of the textual references through which she accesses Penelope's story. On the other hand, this strategy is also significant in light of Kyger's participation or assimilation in the predominantly masculine literary spheres of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation. As such, Kyger's partial fidelity to the texts she revisits can be read as the poet's own survival strategy as a female poet aware of the larger structures she dwells in. Highlighting Kyger's weaving of myth and personal voice, Davidson has noted how Kyger wrote "from within those [patriarchal] stories as a woman who finds herself inscribed into a myth she wishes to interrogate in her own terms" (192). In what follows, this article reviews Kyger's revisionist stance through two main strategies and delineates the connection to her overall poetics.

3.1. Poised Sanity: Shifting Penelope

Kyger's poetics in *The Tapestry and the Web* is outlined in "The Maze", the poem that opens the collection and which establishes the poet's overall approach to the mythical text. Introducing the reader to Penelope's traditional waiting stance, this poem destabilizes the self-imposed and embraced expectancy associated with Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* by describing her wait as a site of female imprisonment, as both a physical and psychological oppressive state. The first person singular "I" who voices this situation helps create a powerful and dynamic imagery – despite her physical confinement – of her psychological collapse, by drawing the image of a woman on the verge of losing her mind as a consequence of her lack of freedom. The first two stanzas delineate her despair, establishing her longing for freedom:

I saw the
dead bird on the sidewalk
his neck uncovered
and prehistoric
At seven in the morning
my hair was bound
against the fish in the air
who begged for the ocean
I longed for their place (11)

These stanzas can be seen as representative of Kyger's style throughout the collection and, to some extent, throughout her body of work. Using direct, colloquial speech, her lines move between semantic clarity and obscurity, a style Robert Lee describes as "cryptic, often given to half phrase, and disjunctive" (53) and Alice Notley dubs as "spiritual, natural, and transparent, full of that light" (17). Through the use of a very visual language, Kyger's poetics provide the reader with metaphoric snapshots whose meaning often surges from the juxtaposition of images. In "The Maze", the image of the dead and prehistoric bird of the first stanza acquires a deeper meaning when the "fish in the air," (11) struggling to live outside of the ocean, are introduced. These images of dead or stranded animals are tied up with the speaker's "bound" hair, and her desperate state of oppression runs parallel in the text to these images to symbolize her wish to exchange places with the fish: "who begged for the ocean / I longed for their place" (11).

Although not specified as Penelope, there are certain references in the poem that direct the reader to Odysseus' myth. For instance, in the third stanza Kyger introduces a masculine figure which could be seen as a symbol for Odysseus's influence both in his presence and absence – "Behind the / tall thin muslin of the curtain / we could see his shadow" (11). Odysseus's voyage is similarly evoked rather than directly addressed as the speaker expresses concern over the state of the sea – she "checked the harbor / to see if it was safe" (11). However, Kyger uses this poem to introduce a key change in Penelope's attitude and motivation as a character from the Homeric tradition of the paragon of wifely loyalty, as the speaker is shown not necessarily praying for Odysseus's wellbeing, but "rather hoping / one had gone astray / and flung itself upon the shore / for all to watch" (11). Kyger continues to add new nuances to the mythological representation of Penelope, disrupting the supposed calm state – both physical and psychological – of her twenty-year waiting:

If I should weep
 they would never know
 and so I walked
 silently
 shrugging off hands
 in treacherous places
 wanting to fall (11).

These lines depict the speaker's anxiety at the same time that they point towards her secondary position within the narrative. This position, however, is not used to portray a victimized Penelope, but to insinuate other possibilities at her disposal, simply, because no one was looking. Kyger, this way, questions the stability of the mythical discourse, insinuating that changing the focus towards what was left outside the main narrative can acutely affect a character's description and actions. Introducing a theme she will deal with in other poems in the collection, "The Maze" illustrates Penelope's search for different paths outside the traditional reading of the *Odyssey*, as well as her wish to find herself "in treacherous places" (11), an allusion to the possibilities that are entertained when she is read not through the position of the faithful wife but through that of the strategic mind critics would come to see her as a few decades later (see Foley, 1978; Marquardt, 1985; Winkler, 1990; Clayton, 2004). Expanding on the description of a Penelope on the verge of losing her mind, the psychological angst of the speaker goes offboard in the last section of the poem, where her long captivity and seemingly inability to exert any change in her situation finally drive her to insanity. Using pieces of the curtains she tears down "like some / insane insect" (13), the speaker:

creates a
 demented web
 from the thin folds
 her possessed fingers
 clawing she
 thrusts them away with
 sharp jabs of long pins
 to the walls. (13)

Far from the Homeric interpretation of Penelope's majestically enduring of the twenty years Odysseus is away, "The Maze" serves to introduce in the collection links to contemporary issues related to gender and creativity. As Russo notes, the "demented web maker recalls the female creative genius domesticated and entrapped as in the unmade female protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" ("To Deal with" 184). Indeed, the shredding of the curtains, in the poem a symbol of her forced domesticity, forges new links with Penelope's ability as a cunning weaver. Nonetheless, in contrast to Homer's telling of the myth, in Kyger's reworking of the story, Penelope's artistry does not reaffirm her loyalty to her husband, but becomes the medium through which she exemplifies, even if through a violent outburst, the oppression she is suffering. Metamorphosing into an animal at the end of the poem, Penelope violently transforms – weaves – her anger into an example of female anxiety and defiant nonconformity. In addition to Russo's apt connection between this poem and Gilman's short story, two texts ultimately representing the dangers of enforced domesticity for women, Kyger was influenced by the image of yet another female character gone insane after failing to occupy the role of the married woman: Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). In a letter written in 1958 to the author Michael Rumaker (see Ammiel and Kyger, 2012), Kyger describes a dream/nightmare that influenced much of the imagery in "The Maze":

I was looking at the white muslin curtain in my bedroom and I fell asleep. When I awoke Sheila was mad – like Pip's friend in GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Mrs. Havershams [sic] – and had done awful things to the curtains. They were shredded in the most terrifying way – most of them missing – like some loose spider web, and fastened with the points of open safety pins to the ceiling and walls around the window. Complete horror possessed me. After a moment I was walking with some friends and I was overwhelmed by a great thirst. I drank one glass of water after another urgently. Then I would start to resume my walking I would find I had to still quench my thirst and would be forced to drink again and again. (*Communication is Essential*, 12)

Awaking in her dream to a moment of uncanny familiarity, the terror of the domestic scene gives way to a thirst that cannot be quenched in the young poet, and that prevents her from moving on. To the already upsetting plot, this "disturbing fragment" (Kyger in Alcalay, 2012) also includes the transformation of her friend into a Dickensian character who, like Penelope in the *Odyssey* and Kyger's speaker in "The Maze", waits for her – in this case almost – husband, to complete her story. Miss Havisham's fruitless wait to resume the clock on the wall stuck at twenty to nine parallels Penelope's endless weaving while waiting for the reoccupation of her household.

In the context of what this dream will become, the opening poem in a collection primarily concerned with offering an alternative take on Penelope as a symbol of female endurance and creativity, the reference to Miss Havisham might be telling. Complicating the simplistic angel-monster duality of Victorian norms of femininity, the grotesque madness of Miss Havisham in her faded wedding dress points to the dangers of societal expectations for women, at the same time that it highlights the ultimate malleability of discourse. Miss Havisham, like Penelope and any other character trapped in a patriarchal text, cannot escape her representational universe, but the poet who sets out to revise her story can unveil, even if not free, plots and subplots to give her new readings.

Within this unveiling of new directions of the mythological text it unravels, “The Maze” also anticipates a strategy adopted throughout the collection: the blending of personal detail and mythical text in “a new narrative complex, one that collages references to contemporary contexts and details” (Russo, “To Deal with”, 180). Intertwined with the references to the classical Penelope, this poem situates the maze in contemporary times through a memory of the speaker visiting Governor’s Palace maze in Williamsburg, Virginia. With these “layers of personal, reflective imagery and references” (Friedman, “Joanne Kyger”, 79), Kyger reevaluates the relevance of the mythical discourse in a society which has substituted the collective notion of myth for an idea of personal myth. As Sophia Heller points out in *The Absence of Myth* (2006), “[t]ransformed to a metaphorical and conceptual level, myth has lost its former status as an objective reality; it no longer originates in the inviolable domain of Supernatural Beings and instead has become a method to be adopted or discarded at will.” (3) Willfully adopting or discarding various mythical discourses – as argued in the next section – Kyger uses her poetry to create a sort of mythical or textual self through which she can negotiate her position in different spheres, whether personal, social or literary. In addition, “The Maze” came to symbolize, as critics like Davidson and Russo (“Particularizing”) have observed, a sort of off-ramp into acceptance by Kyger’s male counterparts (see Duncan in Jarnot 183). Notoriously influenced by Charles Olson’s projective verse⁴, the poet lets the content shape the poem, so that the reader is confronted with the maze itself, as the words in the poem leave a physical imprint of their path through the poet’s mind on the page – a trail of Kyger’s imagination and craft. See for example the way in which the words are arranged when the speaker gets into the maze:

delighted

I went to it

and stood

poised

inside the

precise

entrance

like a long hallway

the tightly trimmed

bushes

held themselves

pointing each

leaf

and twig

in an unquestioning manner. (11-12)

Narrowing the text to accommodate the maze, Kyger symbolizes the oppression by physically representing the narrow passages of the maze, and by interrupting the natural rhythm or breath in lines like “inside the / precise / entrance” or “bushes / held themselves / pointing each / leaf”⁵. Nonetheless, the speaker seems not to participate in the feeling of anxiety being lost in a maze ought to provoke. For her, “white gravel / caressed [her] feet” (12), and she “knew each corner / without pausing” (12). In light of the links established in the collection between the mythical texts Kyger revisits and her personal circumstances, the speaker’s apparent comfort in the maze might point to the idea that if the maze is read as the patriarchal myth the speaker is trapped into – or the masculine literary spheres in which the poet moves – this is a space she knows only too well.

Kyger’s reevaluation of Penelope’s wait in “The Maze” creates a new space to tell a different tale of desperation and insanity while still keeping her trapped in the labyrinth of her eternal waiting. This subtle

⁴ Much like Kyger does in *Strange Big Moon*, where she documents the influence of the projective verse, Anne Waldman’s “Eyes In All The Heads To Be Looked Out Of” (included in *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants & Essays*) also honors the influence of Olson in her poetry, as well as her symbolic birth as a poet.

⁵ In “Energy on the Page: Joanne Kyger in Conversation with Dale Smith” (2000), Kyger links her focus on articulation in *Tapestry* and poetics in general with Olson’s “projective verse”: “You know how thoughts and words can drift through you but once you write them down, they’ve arrived. And when something beautiful arrives, you want to have enough coordination to transcribe it. You know, the HEAD to the EAR to the SYLLABLE. And the HEART to the BREATH to the LINE. Voice and Word.”

rewriting move might not just be a consequence of the poet's anticipation of feminist revisionism, but a conscious decision to play the same cards, so to speak, and still get a winning hand. Indeed, such a stance is also present in contemporary revisions of Penelope such as Lourdes Ortiz's "Penélope" (2007) and Tino Villanueva's *So Spoke Penelope* (2013), two reinterpretations of the mythical character that stress Penelope's painful waiting and psychological distress, showing also her boredom and sexual frustration. Seen in the context of Kyger's oeuvre, this strategy is also used in other works, such as the narrative poem "Descartes and the Splendor Of: A Real Drama of Everyday Life", included in her second poetry collection, *Places to Go* (1970). Quoting extensively from the philosopher's text (Falk 2012), Kyger revisits René Descartes' *A Discourse on Method* (1637) and uses the structure of Descartes' reasoning to situate her revision in much the same way as she uses Homer's *Odyssey* in *The Tapestry and the Web*. Using revision to similarly redirect attention onto female experience, Kyger allows subtle recontextualizations of the discourse to relocate the argument to fit the poet's personal experience and domestic spaces attributed to her gender.

3.2. Textual Sources: Alternative Paths

Closely linked to the first strategy – by which the poet finds new ways of shifting the focus of attention in the mythological discourse – is the incorporation of alternative textual sources that destabilize or undermine the foundation of mythical knowledge. As the previous section showed, crucial to Kyger's collection is the foregrounding of Penelope as a character that has previously been treated as secondary and/or complementary to the main action performed by Odysseus. Part of her "Re-Visioning" – in Adrienne Rich's sense of seeing afresh – of Penelope, is concerned with breaking the feminine stereotype of the sexually passive woman. Directly questioning the tradition that has Penelope winning "individual fame for her chastity" (Fantham et al. 39) in the *Odyssey*, halfway through her collection, Kyger includes an untitled short poem, as if in the form of an improvised research note, which reads as follows:

Somewhere you can find reference to the fact that PAN was
the son of PENELOPE
Either as a result of a god
or as a result of ALL the suitors
who hung around while Odysseus was abroad. (29)

Chiefly introducing a revision based on Penelope's sexuality, the poet places her sexual activity, notoriously absent in the *Odyssey*, at the center of her myth. With this move, as Friedman observes, Kyger's Penelope is very "much fueled by Eros than the nobly stoic spouse of Homer's epic" (79), which creates a subtle turn through which the poet "re-evaluates the passivity of Penelope's patience for Odysseus" (80). In addition to the narrative shift this strategy symbolizes, this short poem, together with "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," – where Kyger more visibly entertains the idea of Penelope's infidelity – illustrates not only the poet's intention of offering a re-interpretation of the position of women in classical texts, but also of exposing the delicate thread on which mythological knowledge functions. Directing the attention to the intentionally vague "Somewhere", Kyger allows the "readers to catch glimpses of other potential stories bubbling up from beneath the authoritative narrative" (Carden 128). Benefiting from the open and ever-changing nature of the mythical discourse, these counter-stories resonating throughout *The Tapestry and the Web* function as destabilizers of the rigid conventions for the feminine sex perpetuated through classical renditions of myths. Elevating what in the classic reference guide John Bell's *New Pantheon* (1790) is documented as "slander" (166) presuming to attack Penelope's virtue, Kyger uses her poems to *contaminate* her rendition of Odysseus' wife through side-stories such as these:

Some say the reason why her gallants had not the last favour, was, because they preferred living well at Ulysses' cost. Other authors pretend, that they really enjoyed her, and that the god Pan was the fruit of their amours; though some affirm that she conceived Pan, when Mercury, in the shape of a goat, cropt her virgin flower... (166)

The *New Pantheon*, with its now humorous, gossipy speech, might be one of the sources from which Kyger bases her arguments against a fixed interpretation of mythological truth. Although other references to this version of the story include Servius's commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, Kyger may have used Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* as her main source for this apocryphal reference (Russo, "To Deal With", 188) – a reference also used in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Although other critics and commentators have stated that all these narratives may have mistaken Penelope for the nymph Penelopeia of Arcadia – who is more often depicted as the mother of Pan by Hermes – Kyger takes advantage of the mixed origin and etymological misconceptions to expose the shaky foundations of myth and re-evaluate, at the same time, the validity of alternative versions. Hence, with vague, or even mistaken, references such as these in mind, Kyger invites the reader to question the prevalence of the Homeric text, a technique through which she is able to bend Penelope's story at her will. In the first stanzas of "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," Kyger entertains the possibility of Penelope's deceit:

Refresh my thoughts on Penelope again.
 Just HOW
 solitary was her wait?
 I noticed Someone got to her that
 barrel chested he-goat prancing
 around w/ his reed pipes
 is no fantasy of small talk.
 More the result of BIG talk
 and the absence of her husband. (31)

While in most poems of the collection the voice of the poet and the speaker tend to fuse, alluding to a kind of symbiosis between the contemporary and the mythological woman, in this poem Kyger uses a detached and humorous voice which physically and chronologically separates her from Penelope. As someone who is confronted with two different versions of the same story, one told by Homer and the other just by “Someone” (31), the poet imagines the Pan-as-Penelope’s-son as a more plausible scenario for her heroine. Despite the terrible pains she must have suffered giving birth to a half-goat – “And what a cockeyed lecherous offspring. What a birth / THAT must have been. Did she turn away & sigh?” (31) – and despite the obstacles it presents – “And where did she hide her impudent monster?” (31) – Kyger chooses to believe or at least entertain this version of Penelope. For the 20th century independent woman who accesses Penelope through the *Odyssey*, the complex and substantially more active character this slander presents might be a more plausible, believable, figure than the one described as “a flat dimension character of beauty / keeping one task in mind and letting nothing *Human* touch her / – which is pretend.” (31) What Kyger is doing in this poem, and in *The Tapestry and the Web* in general, is using her poetry to go beyond this flat dimension; for her, Penelope “knew what she was doing,” (31) which places her in an active position and in control of her own life.

In addition, the poem foregrounds Kyger’s voice as a poet re-writing Penelope’s story, something which is achieved by the repetition of the first personal pronoun and the use of verbs like “notice,” “believe,” “recall,” “choose,” and “suppose,” all of which are used to describe the critical and artistic position of the author towards the Homeric epic. In this manner, she voices her reservations concerning Penelope’s actions in the epic:

Some thing keeps escaping me. Something
 about the landing of the husband’s boat upon the shore.
 She did not run up and embrace him as I recall.
 He came upon her at the house & killed the suitors. (31)

It might be because of these inconsistencies that, despite all the problems that arise from the versions where Pan is Penelope’s son, Kyger still chooses to pursue that path, as it represents a more realistic female experience for her. Portraying a self-determined Penelope, one that is represented as creating her own story– “Falling into her weaving, / creating herself as a fold in her tapestry” (31) – this poem grants the poet with the power to re-write Homer’s myth in whichever way she feels like. As the following stanza exemplifies, this is Kyger’s own revision of Penelope:

I choose to think of her waiting for him
 concocting his adventures bringing
 the misfortunes to him
 – she must have had her hands full. (31)

As the italicization of the “I” indicates, *The Tapestry and the Web* represents the poet’s own vision and re-writing of the *Odyssey*. This position is also justified in the poem “Iliad: Achilles does not die,” where Kyger highlights the role of Homer in the construction and validation of the myth by alluding to his personal choices when telling the story of the Trojan War. For example, while other accounts narrate the death of Achilles, Homer ends his tale with Hector’s funeral, leaving Achilles and Troy’s fate open. In Kyger’s words, Homer concludes by, “[l]eaving him alive abruptly that way / & the burial & the keening / for the other at the end of the dry plain” (42). Similarly, Kyger also stresses the open-ended position of Helen at the end of the epic – “& no more of Helen / who takes her back? soft as / a throw of silk” (42). Just as in “Pan as the Son of Penelope” where she exposes the malleability of myth by entertaining conflicting stories, here she does so by bringing to the fore Homer’s own narrative choices in shaping his story. For instance, stressing “how Homer dislikes Paris” (42), the poet alludes to Homer’s apparent personal dislike of Paris as the main reason for his portrayal as an unskilled coward in the *Iliad*.

By alluding to the tension created by other narratives that have contested the representation of Homer’s Penelope, as well as Homer’s treatment of Paris and Achilles in the *Iliad*, Kyger contextualizes her own use and appropriation of mythological sources within a tradition of revision that sustains the mythic discourse. Seemingly aware that, as Hite writes in *The Other Side of the Story*, “the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of ‘other sides,’ alternative versions that might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphases and values” (4), Kyger uses her collection to delve in the sea of textual

reference and personal opinion in which myths often function. Much like Atwood in *The Penelopiad*, whose Penelope avoids setting the Pan story straight (Suzuki 273), Kyger's refocused Penelope is not presented to the reader as the ultimate and improved Penelope. Rather, Kyger anticipates the approach adopted by contemporary revisions of Penelope by writers such as Silvana La Spina, Annie Leclerc and Margaret Atwood which, as Dell'Abate-Çelebi notes, share the urge to rewrite the story "by suggesting that Penelope is an amalgam of her past identity as well as those she constructs for herself" (22). Much like Diane di Prima does in *Loba* when describing Lilith through numerous and at times contradicting discourses (see Encarnación-Pinedo, 2018), the ultimate transformative power of Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* lies in the poet's strategic exposition of the inconsistency and malleability of the mythical discourse, which ultimately highlights the poet's own power to offer counter stories to destabilize dominant narratives.

4. Conclusion

Through subtle techniques such as the shifting focus towards secondary characters such as Penelope, the inscription of personal and asynchronous elements in the mythical text and the incorporation of alternative discourses, Kyger manages to destabilize the traditional inscription of femininity in the epic, at the same time that she validates unconventional courses of action that run parallel to the patriarchal narrative the *Odyssey* represents. Stripped to the core, bared down to its *monomythical* structure, Kyger's approach in *The Tapestry and the Web* not only functions within the aesthetic doings of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation, but also anticipates subsequent revisions of the mythical discourse by writers such as Margaret Atwood, Silvana La Spina or Annie Leclerc. In this respect, in *The Tapestry and the Web*, Joanne Kyger revises the *Odyssey* in much the same way that Margaret Atwood revised the Orpheus myth in "Orpheus" and "Eurydice" in *Interlunar* (1984). Both Kyger and Atwood provide the traditionally secondary characters in their myths, Penelope and Eurydice respectively, with a revitalized energy that places them at the center of the narrative and allows them to shift and deviate from their dominant sources while still being somewhat constrained to the – patriarchal – structure they evolved from.

Nevertheless, as argued in this article, Kyger does not intend to undermine the *Odyssey* by tearing its structure and themes; nor does she rewrite Penelope as a character completely isolated from the narrative she was taken from. By following Homer's epic to include subtle deviations and changes of focus, Kyger manages to destabilize the role of women in the epic, at the same time that she validates courses of action outside the patriarchal domain the *Odyssey* represents. The subversion that lies at the heart of Kyger's approach to the revision of the mythical discourse has been taken up by contemporary revisions of the Homeric myth. Notorious examples include La Spina's *Penelope* (1998) and Leclerc's *Toi, Pénélope* (2001), two novels that subvert the basic structure of the *Odyssey* to give voice to a Penelope that embodies an amalgam of classical and modern discourses to expose, for instance, the institutionalization of gender violence and its historical perpetuation through the mythical discourse. More than thirty years their senior, Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* anticipated many of the techniques employed in not just contemporary feminist revisions but also in general literary and media adaptations of mythical texts.

The poet's at times playful, at times elusive, and at times disruptive poetics undermines the sovereignty of the mythical discourse she revisits. Much like Penelope, whose weaving functions both within and outside patriarchy – being interpreted as functioning simultaneously for and against the fulfillment of the role of the faithful wife – Joanne Kyger uses her poetry to undermine the domain of the patriarchal tale by questioning its position as an established category and imagining alternative constructions, a technique that can be extrapolated to her oeuvre and her participation in larger structures such as the Beat Generation or the San Francisco Renaissance.

Expanding the notion of mythical revision first developed in *The Tapestry and the Web*, in *The Dharma Committee* (1986) Kyger uses irony and mockery to document the formation of a literary group that sought to "bridge the gap between our [Jack] Spicer group and the world of the Beat writer" (1)⁶. Using this text to expose her stylistic discrepancies with the Beats, for instance, the confessionism verbatim – "Talk talk talk yak yak is that all you ever do?" (5) – she challenges her own participation in ready-established literary groups, a resistance developed throughout her body of work which stresses the self-sustenance and independence of her poetics.

In *On Time* (2015), the last collection she published before her death, she continued to use her poetry to revisit established narratives and challenge fixed categorizations unabashedly contesting labels through poems such as "I'm Very Busy Now So I Can't Answer All Those Questions About Beat Women Poets" (62). Associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School and the Beat Generation alike, as Waldman writes in the foreword to *Strange Big Moon*, and much like the weaving Penelope, Kyger "remains a category of her own design and making" (ix).

⁶ In its ironic and satiric style, as well as in the different sections it is divided into, Kyger's *The Dharma Committee* is closely related to Bob Kaufman's *Abomunist Manifesto* (1959), where he similarly mocks the literary and social phenomenon through a false manifesto.

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