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Matriarchal voice, mythic choice in Hébert, Yourcenar, and Desvignes

Platt, Carole Brooks, Ph.D.

Rice University, 1989

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RICE UNIVERSITY

Matriarchal Voice, Mythic Choice
In Hébert, Yourcenar, and Desvignes

by

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Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

MATRIARCHAL VOICE, MYTHIC CHOICE
in Hébert, Yourcenar and Desvignes

by Carole Brooks Platt

This dissertation discusses the historical and social aspects of myth to point out the earlier maternal subtexts beneath patriarchal myths. Matriarchal myth permits us to redefine an empowered "feminine" for application to literary texts. The early and persistent worship of female deities in France has led to the periodic resurgence of matriarchal consciousness in French literature; namely, in courtly love, romanticism, and surrealism. In twentieth-century women's work in French, this matriarchal choice may still exist, although in conflict with a discordant patriarchal choice.

Because of the historical situation of women in Québec, her French heritage, and strong female models in her youth, Anne Hébert produces a "mothered," matriarchal text in Kamouraska. Her overly gynocentric narrative universe leads to an unbalanced view of the feminine and gender polarization. Hébert empowers women at the expense of men. The resultant prototype of feminine dominance ultimately resembles male mythic images of witches and vampires.

Marguerite Yourcenar's exclusive upbringing by her father and her family myth of the mortal danger of childbearing influence her "fathered" text: L'Oeuvre au noir. Over-identification with the father engenders a disdain for the feminine seen in reductive female portrayal. However, while rejecting the feminine and hardening his rational self, her male protagonist experiences a compensatory resurgence in matriarchal-style consciousness.

Desvignes's "parented" text, Les Noeuds d'argile, derives from her balanced childhood in the harmonious landscape of her native Bourgogne, where vestiges of a "religion de la terre" still remain. The horror of the German occupation in her teens also fueled her desire for reconstruction and balance. Desvignes creates a matriarchal man with a clear, unrepressed feminine side and a need for merger with the physical female. However, he eventually succumbs to the pressures of patriarchal society and pursues an obsessive masculine ideal which eventually kills him.

Each of these novels sounds a distinctive matriarchal voice arising from the woman author's personal and national origins. Whether strident and exclusivistic, camouflaged and muted, or in harmonious balance, this matriarchal voice is a mythic choice and a gauge of her vision of gender.
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INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, a friend introduced me to Adrienne Rich's seminal study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. I had just completed a Master's degree in French literature and linguistics and was imbued with structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism as critical tools. I was also pregnant with my first child. I read the book with interest, but my new condition predisposed me to focus on Rich's comments on her own pregnancy and motherhood. Her striking contrast of the feminine principle exalted in the ancient matriarchal religions and the devalued feminine in modern patriarchy failed to take hold in my consciousness. I buried my newly acquired knowledge of the ancient goddess cults just as they had for centuries lain dormant before their scholarly revival in the modern era.

More recently, during my doctoral studies at Rice, my thesis director introduced me to Merlin Stone's book, *When God Was a Woman*. Stone describes the powerful female deity who was worshipped before conquering cultures with their patriarchal god(s) suppressed her. I immediately connected the prototypical mythical female Stone describes with Anne Hébert's protagonist Elisabeth in *Kamouraska*. In order to devise a new "specifically feminine" critical tool, I decided to research goddess myth extensively. I felt that by understanding and restoring the female-centered myths of
prehistory one might better interpret works by and about women created consciously or unconsciously under the earlier myths' aegis.

My sister, another dévotée of myth and folktale, suggested I read Robert Graves's thorough account of goddess theory in *The White Goddess*. Graves's impressively compiled historical, linguistic, archeological and literary evidence for an archetypal triple goddess proved invaluable to my study. In his two volume work, *The Greek Myths*, Graves disentangled the well-known Greek myths from what he speculates were matriarchal origins. He identifies the shifting emphases in the myths from supreme goddess worship to conscious propagandizing for a patriarchal cause. Specifically, his unconventional version of the Oedipus myth leads us away from the Freudian interpretation toward an earlier sacred rite which required the Old King's (Father's) death and the New King's (Son's) union with the Queen (Mother) for the cyclical rejuvenation of nature to occur. Another variant on this same mythic theme depicts the Son annually dying and resurrecting through the agency of his Goddess lover/mother. The Oedipus myth and, with even greater clarity, the Orestes myth express the tension between a matriarchal and a patriarchal familial and religious perspective in Greek society.

Realizing that Graves alone may not be considered authoritative enough as a methodological base, I include
throughout the dissertation references to other mythologists whose views parallel or complement Graves's. Joseph Campbell's series of books on mythology and Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother* were particularly useful references.

When I probed beyond the writings of the male mythologists, I found that many women writers of the 1970's and 1980's had also discovered matriarchal myth and were applying it with a vengeance to their women-centered writings. Although these writers differed in their orientation towards goddess study—whether through the lens of popular psychology, post-Freudian feminist theory, neo-Jungian theory, the history of religions, anthropology, poetry, the novel or literary criticism—they shared the common goal of re-evoking and re-sacralizing a truly feminine archetype, untainted by patriarchal prejudice. By activating a positive, autonomous model for womanhood inherent in the notion of a once reigning feminine principle, these writers sought to inspire modern women individually and collectively toward strength and independence. Almost across the board, however, these goddess theorists tended to ignore the dual aspect of the Goddess who, along with her creative aspect, possessed a destructive side. In their efforts to revivify the potent female forces behind the ancient goddess religions, most matriarchal revivalists were ignoring the highly significant fact of the Goddess's insatiable need for male sacrifice.
My goal in this dissertation is to clarify matriarchal myth, to identify its importance in French literary consciousness, and to use it as a tool for understanding three works by women authors in French. I begin by establishing a theoretical basis for matriarchal myth and situating it within the French literary context. I show how literary characterizations that adopt a mythic viewpoint must inevitably choose between contrasting mythic gender visions, the matriarchal and the patriarchal. Portrayals which kill off the sexually active or powerful woman assuage male psychic fear caused by both the engulfing biological mother and the man-killing archetypal female deity. I briefly trace literary expressions of this psychic and societally-perpetuated fear in French male-authored literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

In Chapter Two I attempt to redefine the "feminine" by gleaning its aspects from ancient myths and archetypes and by pointing out the positive characteristics of matriarchal consciousness: the interconnectedness of all living things, the unity of opposites, the cyclical nature of time, and the holiness of sex. The resultant redefinition provides a more powerful, nuanced viewpoint lacking the prejudice of patriarchally-defined femininity (darkness, passivity, weakness, etc.). I analyze Simone de Beauvoir's anti-matriarchalist vision in the Deuxième sexe to show how France's foremost theoretician on the feminine
disregarded the positive, nonspecifically-tellurian aspects of Great Goddess worship. I see Beauvoir's stance as conditioned by contemporaneous societal attitudes toward femininity and her own negative feelings about the institution of motherhood.

In contrast with Beauvoir's repudiation of matriarchal myth, I pursue the ideas of its major theorists, Bachofen and Briffault, and those of its Socialist supporters, before demonstrating its function in the writings of Freud and Jung. Each of these writers embraced the idea of matriarchy and used it for his own theoretical ends. Many other writers in the modern era have denied the existence of true matriarchies, based on anthropological and archeological evidence. I suggest that whether or not women actually ruled in early societies is irrelevant. The term "matriarchal" myth as I employ it does not refer to actual social power of women even though their increased social power sometimes has led to a resurgence of society's perceived value of the feminine. I use the term "matriarchal" to describe a mythical belief system in which a female deity reigns supreme and possesses the ultimate creative and transformative powers of the universe. That the feminine principle once reigned in female-centered religions seems to me incontrovertible.

Elucidating the perpetuation of matriarchal myth on French terrain is the aim of Chapter Three. A trail of
precedents of matriarchal consciousness in France is pursued from courtly love to nineteenth-century Romantic poetry to surrealism.

The question of writing and sexual difference has intrigued me for a number of years. For this reason, Part II of my dissertation is dedicated to a study of the mythic substructure of several contemporary women's texts written in French. I wanted to determine how these authors use mythic patterns in their character and plot development as well as in their figurative language. I sought to recognize in their texts matriarchal mythic patterns which would contrast with the prevailing patriarchal patterns of Western culture. Myths invariably contain strong opinions about both appropriate and inappropriate gender behavior. Knowing this, I hoped to gain insight into the woman writer's attitudes about gender by analyzing her mythic choices. Using biographical data obtained both from published sources and direct correspondence with the two living authors, I show how the varying family and historico-cultural origins of the authors predispose their mythic orientation which, in turn, reflects the visions of gender arising in their works. Each author learned indelible lessons from her family life, social environment, and personal experiences which formed a private folklore inevitably shading her view of the world.

I chose to study Kamouraska by Anne Hébert, L'Oeuvre au noir by Marguerite Yourcenar, and Les Noeuds d'argile by
Lucette Desvignes, based on the excellent literary quality of their texts as well as on the epic scope of their narratives. The density of their texts, the rich psychological complexity of their characters, and the vastness of the narrative landscape lent themselves particularly well to mythic interpretation. These three writers are also interesting for comparative purposes since their national origins differ (French/Canadian, Belgian/French, Burgundian/French respectively), despite their common language. Hébert adheres the closest to the matriarchal mythic paradigm in her female-centered story due both to her French heritage and to her specifically French-Canadian origins. Yourcenar and Desvignes are strongly affiliated with mainstream (patriarchal) French culture and literary tradition. Their main protagonists are men. Nonetheless, owing to their national origins, filtered through their male protagonists we witness evidence of matriarchal consciousness.

My approach to women's fiction is neither to psychoanalyze the author through her works nor to view her text as an ex nihilo production or the vital child of a dead author. Instead, I situate the author's writings in her personal context as well as in her geographic specificity. Her protagonist inevitably finds him/herself at the crossroads of self and society, presented with choices and constraints. As Elizabeth Long states, "Novels are an
especially fruitful mode of access to the subjective dimension of collective life in part because they explore the meeting-places of self and society, of inner desires and external constraints. . . ."¹

In my analysis, I explain the protagonist's turmoil in terms of conflicting mythic choices which dictate his or her behavior. Working at counter-purposes to the major mythic nominator I identify a secondary mythic choice, a sort of mythic denominator. I view the protagonist's contradictory impulses as deriving from the conflictive position of the individual in society which provides the dramatic tension of the text.

Anne Hébert, an author highly sensitive to the female condition, situates *Kamouraska*, as well as most of the corpus of her work, in a gynocentric universe where the female body and the problematics of the female condition predominate. As stated above, Hébert's French-Canadian origins, with its entrenched cultural myth of the strong woman ("la femme forte"), influences her primary mythic choice. Nonetheless, her protagonist, Elisabeth, is anchored in patriarchal society. In the "meeting-place of self and society," Elisabeth finds herself ambivalently torn between her inner self molded in a matriarchal family and

the constraining roles of femininity available in the patriarchal societal script.

Marguerite Yourcenar's exclusive upbringing by her father and her family myth of the mortal danger of childbearing influence her male-identified writing and her primary patriarchal mythic choice. Her over-identification with the father engenders a certain disdain for the feminine. Her portrayal of women is more often than not reductive and she is unable to create leading female protagonists. *L'Œuvre au noir*, despite a full complement of female characters, presents few flattering images of women.

Paradoxically, through Yourcenar's male protagonist, a healthy respect for matriarchal consciousness shows through, representing both her protagonist's deviance from patriarchal societal norms and his increasing compliance with the demands of his feminine unconscious mind. His conscious withdrawal from women and his development of an excessively cold, rational self is compensated by an unconscious resurgence of the "feminine" (matriarchally defined). To satisfy the conflicting demands of his unconscious, he will adopt self-affirming activities based on matriarchal-style consciousness. Of the three protagonists of the novels under consideration, only Zénon will positively resolve his inner conflict. But the resolution occurs in death where he is transfixed in a
solitary dimension beyond the world of duality.

Finally, Lucette Desvignes's *Noeuds d'argile* presents an androgynous primary choice modeled on a paradisiacal vision of the myth of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Eve's nurturance and the close interrelatedness of the couple ensure that Eden is indeed a paradise. Desvignes's vision derives from her balanced childhood in the harmonious landscape of her native Bourgogne, where vestiges of a matriarchally-based "religion de la terre" still exist in folk practices and beliefs. Threatened in her teens by the discordance and horror of the German occupation, an authentic aspiration toward reconstruction and a profound belief in the need for tenderness between individuals inform her work. Desvignes creates a male protagonist, Marrain, who both exemplifies the androgynous ideal and depends on symbiotic merger to attain individual happiness. However, Marrain will succumb to the pressures of society and pursue in Herculean fashion an obsessive masculine ideal which will eventually kill him.

Analyzing both the theory of matriarchal myth and its practice in the writing of three women authors of the late twentieth century helps to clarify our vision of the feminine and its usefulness in our daily lives. With the advent of women writers writing from a position of strength, myth becomes reality. The empowered feminine ceases to be an exclusive inspiration to the male poet, as in the
Gravesian formula; it henceforth serves the female author
toward different ends. By uncovering the differing mythic
foundations in these authors, we see how mythic choices
allow each to speak in a variety of voices, both masculine
and feminine or, otherwise stated, patriarchal and
matriarchal. Our goal is to identify these choices and to
contribute a new perspective to the idea of feminine voice--
a voice necessarily at odds with the dominant male societal
ethos.

2 "Woman is not a poet; she is either a Muse or she is
nothing. This is not to say that a woman should refrain
from writing poems; only, that she should write as a woman,
not as if she were an honorary man." Robert Graves, The
White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth (1948;
PART I

Matriarchal Myth

Theory and French Context
The Mythical Text: Historical and Social Aspects

Are there objects which are inevitably a source of suggestiveness, as Baudelaire suggested about Woman? Certainly not: one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things.¹

--- Roland Barthes

In sharp contrast to Jung and Freud, for whom myth bears universal significance, Barthes declares myth void of essential truth. The language of myth transforms history into nature to serve a social purpose: "myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal."² For Barthes, myth does not explain, it only "empties" reality by reducing "the


² Barthes 130-1.
complexity of human acts" to "the simplicity of essences."³

Barthes was not a mythologist, yet his perceptive
description of the historical, social, and linguistic bases
of the mythmaking process aligns his thinking with that of
many whose specialty is mythology. Joseph Campbell, well-
known for finding one hero's face beneath a thousand
mythical images, nonetheless agreed that myths and rites
arise from a specific historical context, albeit filtered
through the "general psychology of the species":

[A]though the rites certainly have a psychological
function and must be interpreted in terms of the
general psychology of the human species, each local
system itself has a long history behind it of a
particular sort of social experience and cannot be
explained in general psychological terms. It has been
closely adjusted to specific, geographically determined
conditions of existence, and comprehends, furthermore,
certain archaic notions of cosmology that have been
derived from millenniums of meditation on the
recognized natural order of the living world . . .

No functioning mythological system can be explained in
terms of the universal images of which it is
constituted. These images are developed largely from
. . . infantile imprints . . . and constitute merely
the raw material of myth. They carry the energies of
the psyche into the mythological context and weld them
to the historical task of the society, where the
symbols function, not in the way of a regressive recall
of the spirit to the joys and sorrows, desires and
terrors of little Oedipus, or of the earlier bambino,
but rather as releasers and directors of the energies
into the field of adult experience and performance.
Mythology, that is to say, is progressive, not
regressive.⁴

³ Barthes 131-2.

⁴ Joseph Campbell, The Masks of the God: Primitive
Mircea Eliade confirms the historicity of myth, without denying that some myths attain "world-wide significance": "Every hierophany we look at is also an historical fact. Every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation. Even the most personal and transcendent mystical experiences are affected by the age in which they occur."  

For his part, René Girard ties mythmaking to real events, specifically, real collective violence in the form of ritual killing which was the primitive response to natural disasters. Girard uses the Milomaki and more familiar Oedipus legend to exemplify his theory. Oedipus is exiled, not for his incestuous crimes, but for visiting the plague upon Thebes. His other crimes are ancillary, proof of his general malfeasance. Girard concludes that we can never historically reconstitute the myth, but we are assured of one thing: the violence actually occurred. In his view, cults and cultures are founded on the social unity affected by this collective violence.\(^5\)


The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who bases his theory on empirical evidence from field research as opposed to "armchair" hypothetical reconstruction, provides perhaps the most useful definition of myth for our purposes: "a myth or sacred story has to be defined by its function. It is a story which is told in order to establish a belief, to serve as a precedent in ceremony or ritual, or to rank as a pattern of moral or religious conduct. Mythology, therefore, or the sacred tradition of a society, is a body of narratives woven into their culture, dictating their belief, defining their ritual, acting as a chart of their social order and the pattern of their moral behaviour."7 Without denying the "historical kernel" of the meaning of myth, Malinowski emphasizes the sociological function of myth: "The historical assessment of myth, useful as it may be in many cases, has to be supplemented by the sociological theory of myth . . . . historical narratives . . . can only be understood by reference to ritual, ethical, and social influences of the story on present day conduct."8 Like Malinowski, both Cassirer and Durkheim adopt a functionalist view of myth.

Joan Bamberger and Gerda Lerner, an anthropologist and a historian respectively, concur in placing myth in its

8 Malinowski 251.
historical context. They also add insights into the practical, sociological uses of myth. Bamberger bases her ideas on Malinowski's "myth as social charter" theory. She believes that myths of origins are invented to explain present realities or societal practices needing justification. Using the anthropological evidence of a male-dominated primitive society still existing in South America, she shows how the men through their myths hypothesize an era when women ruled with an abusive power in order to justify their excluding women from the society's secret (male) rituals. The myth of the evil powerful woman works to keep power out of the hands of women and to keep them submissive. Myth, in other words, is a script handed out to society members to ensure compliance with contemporary standards of acceptable behavior.

Gerda Lerner confirms and extends this hypothesis. She demonstrates how myths and rites exist not merely to explain present society as it is, but to impel its members to behave in a manner basically contrary to their nature. She provides the example of male initiatory rites which sever the boy child from his exclusive attachment to his


mother in order to align him with the older male warriors.¹¹ Societally-prescribed rites, such as Bamberger's example of the new initiate's stepping on his mother's belly, enforce anti-feminine feelings and detachment from the mother. Just as laws are created to rectify proscribed conduct, mythic stories and rites are devised to rectify penchants in the psyche considered dysfunctional in a given society.

The fundamental idea that rite prefigures myth brings together the ideas of the theoreticians we have examined thus far: the rite is the social practice and the myth is its justification. As Stanley Hyman clearly states, "the myth tells a story sanctioning a rite."¹² Furthermore, and of greater importance for the purposes of this dissertation, revised mythical language reflects changing societal views and practices. The transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal mythic orientation is a prime example of changing mythical language, as we shall see in the following section.

¹¹ In a modern scenario, girl children may be said to be acculturated to passivity and dependence on the male through the "Prince Charming" type fairy tales.

The Maternal Subtext: Oedipus and Jocasta

When the classical Greek myths are voided of universal content and reduced to moralizing discourses, we are better able to view them as literary products emanating from a particular period of history. The principles that Patrick Brady has applied to first-person narration in fictional texts are equally valid when analyzing a mythical text. As he so eloquently states, "Ultimately, the essential character of first-person narration resides in the fact that it presents us not with a reality, not even a veiled reality, but merely with layer upon layer of veils; and the task of criticism must be to focus on these veils and to analyze them with a delicate scepticism which leaves them intact - if we tear them asunder to find the Truth, we shall find nothing, for the Veil is the Truth: there is no Truth or Reality beyond the Veil."13 The mythical story is like a veil through which we must interpret reality. Beneath the veil of the Greek myths that are so familiar to us, another veil lies hidden providing an alternate interpretation to reality tied to a more ancient social organization.

A number of mythologists, including J. J. Bachofen, Robert Briffault, Joseph Campbell, Robert Graves and Erich Neumann, have exposed the matriarchal origins of myth in

13 Patrick Brady, Structuralist Perspectives in Criticism of Fiction (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1978) 74.
their works.¹⁴ Many contemporary American feminist writers have attempted to strengthen modern women by appealing to a powerful mythical past. Strong female mythic models effectively counter the deprecating vision of women in patriarchal myth (Eisler, Hall, Harding, Millett, Pratt, Rich, Stone, Walker).

Robert Graves has delineated the parameters of matriarchal myth in his densely detailed works The White Goddess and The Greek Myths. Some theoreticians consider Graves's assertions about matriarchal myth speculative and excessive. Thoroughly convinced of his theory, Graves indeed found evidence to support it in many wide and varied mythical and literary sources. Whether or not he overstated his case, a pattern of reverence for a central life-perpetuating goddess figure undeniably existed in many early religious beliefs. When a god appears in later mythologies, he is typically the son/lover or brother/lover of the goddess. He must pass annually through a cycle of birth, love of the goddess, self-inflicted or rival-dealt death, and resurrection (as in the myths of Isis and Osiris, Cybele

¹⁴ Malinowski, it must be noted, was staunchly opposed to the idea of a universal stage of matriarchy that preceded patriarchy. He concluded through field observation that mother-right and father-right existed simultaneously. "[T]here is no such thing as pure mother-right or father-right, only a legal over-emphasis on one side of kinship, accompanied very often by a strong emotional, at times even customary, reaction against this over-emphasis." Malinowski, Sex, Culture, and Myth 155.
and Attis, Ishtar and Tammuz, Astarte and Adonis).  

According to Graves, the Oedipus myth can be viewed in line with other Mother-goddess/Son-lover myths, with the difference that it underscores a transitional clash between a matrilineal and a patrilineal social and religious organization in Greece. Traditionally, critics have interpreted the myth as it appears in Sophocles' Oedipus the King as man's insurmountably tragic destiny. Freud's long-accepted "family romance" relies on this mythic storyline. In Graves's matriarchally-inspired version, Oedipus

15 Sir James Frazer likewise perceived this pattern. He concludes his analysis of oriental religions in the west deploring the early Europeans' millennia-long worship of the oriental Great Mother of the Gods and her son/lover. The close of the Middle Ages, for him, "marked the return of Europe to native ideals of life and conduct, to saner, manlier [emphasis added], views of the world." The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, abridged ed. (1922; New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963) 415.

Otto Rank views primal mother worship and its resurgences just as negatively: "The father-God has been put in the place of the primal mother charged with anxiety and desire, in order, in the Freudian meaning of 'Totemism,' to create and to guarantee social organization. Every relapse to the veneration of the mother, which can only be accomplished sexually, is therefore anti-social and is persecuted with all the horror of so-called religious fanaticism." The Trauma of Birth (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929) 126. Rank fails where Graves succeeds in recognizing resurgent, albeit desexualized, mother worship in the Virgin Mary.

16 R. W. Connell who adamantly opposes the idea of masculinity and femininity as essences comments on Freud and the Oedipal drama: "The crucial point is that no one pattern of development can be taken as universal even within the specificical social context Freud studied. Researches like Anne Parson's work on southern Italy have documented alternative 'nuclear complexes', and this point has to be applied within cultures as well as between them. The
invades Thebes, overthrows the old king (Laius), and marries his queen Jocasta. As the new king, he tries to substitute the Corinthian custom of patrilineal laws of succession for the existing matrilineal laws. Jocasta commits suicide to protest against this "patriarchal revolutionary"\(^{17}\) and the loyal Thebans finally banish him from their city. Graves is obviously convinced that his version of the myth is prior, reflecting an earlier social organization. The cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory for him derives from a "perverted anecdote,"\(^{18}\) the classical Greek version of the Oedipus myth, not his more "historically" accurate variant.

In *The White Goddess*, Graves divulges what he considers the "history" of Goddess religion in Europe and its tenets:

In Europe there were at first no male gods contemporary with the Goddess to challenge her prestige or power, but she had a lover who was alternatively the beneficent Serpent of Wisdom, and the beneficent Star of Life, her son. The Son was incarnate in the male demons of the various totem societies ruled by her, who assisted in the erotic dances held in her honour. The Serpent, incarnate in the sacred serpents which were the ghosts of the dead, sent the winds. The Son, who was also called Lucifer or Phosphorus ('bringer of light') because as evening-star he led in the light of the Moon, was reborn every year, grew up as the year advanced, destroyed the Serpent, and won the Goddess's

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Oedipal drama is constructed in quite specific situations. Not only are there multiple pathways through childhood, the *routes can and do change as gender relations change in history*" (emphasis added). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 206.

\(^{17}\) Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 15.

love. Her love destroyed him, but from his ashes was born another Serpent which, at Easter, laid the glad or red egg which she ate; so that the Son was reborn to her as a child once more.\(^{19}\)

The Serpent rival is not considered the father of the Star-son (primitive peoples, Graves felt, were ignorant of the role of the father in procreation); nonetheless, we perceive the pattern of the son killing the father for the love of his mother who in turn destroys him only to give birth to him again.

The earliest Greek creation myths confirm this pattern where the son in league with the mother kills the father. Gaia and Cronos castrate Uranus and overthrow him. Rhea hides Zeus from Cronos, whom he later fights and defeats. As our earlier argument regarding the historicity of myth and the primacy of rite over myth would suggest, mythic language of this type would seem to justify a king's annual ritual sacrifice by his royal replacement.\(^{20}\) The myth of the emasculation of Uranus, for example, "records the annual supplanting of the old oak-king by his successor" per


The Oedipus myth in like manner records the ritual death of Laius, a solar king. In Sophocles' version of the Oedipus myth, the son still murders his father and marries his mother, but the principle characters' non-recognition of each other disguises the ancient theme.

The Oedipal legend then as it appears in the Sophoclean tragedy covers up an earlier matriarchal orientation. The ritual sacrifice of the old king and the Sacred Marriage of the Goddess to her son-lover is now portrayed as an incestuous union and parricide. The Sophoclean play begins with the Thebans beseeching Oedipus the king to save them from a plague that has broken out in their city (ostensibly caused by his unconscious crimes). In Graves's telling of the more ancient version of the myth, the plague is visited upon Thebes after Jocasta's suicide. The death of the Goddess figure, central to the survival of all life forms, and the threat to the matriarchal order occasion a pervasive plague on the people, cattle and crops of the city.

If we are to believe Graves, at the origins of the Oedipal myth stands a once-powerful Jocasta, queenly incarnation of the White Goddess or Triple Goddess. In Goddess religion, the queen or high priestess, as incarnations of the Goddess, had ritualized sexual relations with cyclically changing partners to ensure fertility for

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all living things. Graves explains that the Triple Goddess "was a personification of primitive woman--woman the creatress and destructress. As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag." The patriarchal telling of the Oedipal myth neutralizes the powerful mother to undermine the significance of her sexuality and to decentralize her role in her son's demise. She lacks cognizance of her relation to the Star-son and takes her own life in horror when she becomes aware of her sin, rather than dying in protest of patriarchal rule.

Just as the patriarchal Oedipal text overlays its matriarchal corollary, Sarah Kofman has analyzed Freud's own writings and found the lack he attributes to Woman really camouflages her dangerous self-sufficiency. Kofman's astute reviewer, Elisabeth Berg, finds "the image of the superwoman looming behind Freud's text." In line with his patriarchal predecessors, Freud's Oedipal myth debases women, thus guaranteeing the authority of the male. The family constellation of the resolved Oedipus complex resembles the male-centered Olympian pantheon that ultimately displaces the mother-centered religion. In the

22 Graves, The White Goddess 386.

Olympian pantheon headed by the Father-God Zeus, the all-powerful and centrally important mother is demoted to a more subservient wife.

The Killing of Clytemnestra

In the nineteenth century, J. J. Bachofen first made the connection between the Orestes myth, as told by Aeschylus, and the historical transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greece. Once again the story fits the Gravesian mold of the sacred king (Agamemnon) who is betrayed by his goddess-wife (Clytemnestra) and killed by his younger rival (Aegisthos). The ensuing matricide, however, marks the incontrovertible passage over to patriarchy. Graves believes it improbable that a real Orestes would have actually killed Clytemnestra, given the strong position of the mother in his matrilineal society. Thus, the sequence of Orestes' revenge found in Aeschylus' Oresteia could only be categorized as religious propagandizing by the author in the service of patriarchal society. The new version of the ancient myth is designed

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25 Bachofen felt that Clytemnestra's apparent power was a mythical over-compensation for the actual downgraded status of women in Greek society. Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon because "the sense of degradation and fury of despair spur her on to armed resistance, exalting her to that warlike grandeur which, though it seems to exceed the
to invalidate mother-right and firmly establish the
superiority of fatherhood as the following lines from the
play attest:

The Woman you call the mother of the child
is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,
the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.
The man is the source of life - the one who mounts.
She, like a stranger for a stranger, keeps
the shoot alive unless god hurts the roots.
I give you proof of that all I say is true.
The father can father forth without a mother.
Here she stands, our living witness. Look -
(Exhibiting Athena)

Child sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus,
ever bred in the darkness of the womb
but such a stock no goddess could conceive!

_The Eumenides_, v. 666-677

Psychoanalytic readings of the Orestes myth rarely
focus on Clytemnestra herself, but rather on Orestes and his
relationship to his mother and father in the traditional
Oedipal triangle.\(^{26}\) For our purposes, the mythic
characterization of Clytemnestra herself is essential to
understanding an author's vision of gender. As Marguerite

\(^{26}\) See André Green, "Oreste et Oedipe, Essai sur la
structure comparée des mythes tragiques d’Oreste et d’Oedipe
et sur la fonction de la tragédie" in André Berg, Anne
Clancier, Paul Ricoeur and Lothar-Henry Rubenstein, _L'Art et
la Psychanalyse_ (Paris: Mouton, 1968) as well as Ernest
Jones's _Hamlet and Oedipus._
Yourcenar points out in the preface to her play, *Electre ou la Chute des Masques*, the space of a half-generation—from Aeschylus to Sophocles—sufficed to reduce Clytemnestra from an enormous feminine figure of the matriarchal age to a bitter and lucid personification of evil.²⁷ Yourcenar the hellenist did not appear to lament the burial of barbary symbolized by Clytemnestra's fall.²⁸ Similarly, Robert Fagles and W. B. Stanford read the Aeschylean version of the myth as "the rite of passage from savagery to civilization."²⁹ Masculine will (Orestes with the backing of Apollo and Zeus) triumphs over Mother Earth (Clytemnestra). Just Athenian law (male) dominates the (female) retaliatory law of the Furies.

In Fagles' reading, as seen through the Aeschylean veil, Clytemnestra bears no resemblance to the queen who chooses her lovers at will, substituting the old for the


²⁸ "La tragédie proprement dite éclate dans cette oeuvre [L'Orestie] encore régie par les lois de l'épopée au moment où le Vengeur se voit écartelé entre la vieille coutume matriarchale et le droit familial des époques suivantes, entre la Mère et le Père, et où les dieux eux-mêmes ont à choisir entre ce qu'on doit aux morts et ce qu'on doit aux vivants. Elle ne finit qu'à l'heure où tout un monde immémorial et barbare descend définitivement sous terre avec Clytemnestre." Yourcenar, *Théâtre II* 11.

young in the name of the Goddess she worships. She now becomes a demonic figure: a foul witch, a beguiling nightmare who leads man to his doom. Goddesses, it seems, are regularly transformed into witches. As mythologies lose their focus on a female deity, they tend to evolve towards a deprecating patriarchal vision of the female necessary to justify the transfer of power. Stubborn remnants of female power inevitably become associated with evil, unbridled sexuality, provoking male psychic fear of the hypersexual, man-eating female.

Actually, the leap from goddess to witch is not so great since even the early mythologies associated the feminine both with the most creative and most destructive

30 It is interesting to note that Northrop Frye in The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976) recognizes that Greek myths often restate an earlier matriarchal myth. Although he does not make the connection with Clytemnestra, he is more astute in recognizing the Penelope subtext. He writes: "one wonders whether Homer is not giving us a rationalized version of a matriarchal story which was Penelope-centered and not Ulysses-centered, in which Penelope's right to choose her suitor was unconditioned by any previous commitment. This would bring the Odyssey into line with Robert Graves' 'white goddess' type of story" (70).

31 In yet another example of patriarchal rewrite, Barbara Walker in The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother, and Crone (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) points out that Medea was "... the eponymous Mother Goddess of the Medes, an all-healer from whose name came the word 'medicine,' embodying the feminine Wisdom principle anciently known as 'med.' Another incarnation of the same principle was Medusa (Greek Metis), converted into a poisonous she-demon by patriarchal reinterpretation and slain by the ancestral hero of Athenian patriarchy" (9).
powers in the universe. Over time, the positive aspects of female mythic worship became increasingly lost, the destructive elements being reinforced and promulgated as the "true" nature of the empowered feminine.

Otto Rank, citing Bachofen's historical repression of the "rule of woman" and commenting on modern society's general devaluation of the feminine, attributes both to the trauma of birth. 32 Several modern women psychologists have situated the origins of male psychic fear of women, not in the birth process, but in the infantile experience of the all-powerful mother. Dorothy Dinnerstein combines mythic imagery and mothering, referring to the male fear of engulfment by the "magically powerful goddess mother of infancy," 33 and to male need for sanctuary and independence from her. Mother, like Nature, is alternately nourishing and threatening. Karen Horney attributed masculine terror

32 Rank, The Trauma of Birth 37. We cannot help but ask ourselves why men were not traumatized by birth in the "matriarchal age" or why girl children were or are not equally traumatized by birth through the agency of the female.

before the feminine to both the infantile impression of maternal omnipotence and to male fear of menstruation, awe of motherhood, and dread of loss or inadequacy in intercourse. She felt that men created folk legends and beliefs as an externalized amulet to ward off their fear. "It is not . . . that I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime, a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires . . . the very personification of what is sinister." 

Joseph Campbell associates Melanie Klein's theory of the child's simultaneous feelings of bliss and fantasies of destruction regarding the mother (the good and the bad breast) with the very foundations of myth. He feels that this infantile "imprint of experience" contributes to the "mythological imagery of the mother associated almost equally with beatitude and danger, birth and death, the inexhaustible nourishing breast and the tearing claws of the ogress." In his view, the myths which are contrived over the course of the millennia find "a point of support for the reception of such images in the déjá vu of the partially


35 Horney 135. Chodorow criticizes Horney for neglecting the import of the powerful mother on female development and for claiming that male dread and concomitant disparagement of women is universal, when, in fact, she maintains, it varies in different societies.

36 Campbell, Primitive Mythology 71.
self-shaped and self-shaping mind." Unlike animals which inherit stereoptypes in the form of intuitive reactions to certain stimuli in their natural environment, humans fashion their own artificial world [and their myths] "out of [their] own self-produced images of rage and fear." 37

Could the adult modern man remain profoundly marked both by the infantile impression of the powerful mother and racial memories of the Great Goddess of prehistory who provided all bounty on the condition of male sacrifice? Richard Roberts surmises this very connection: "Perhaps the reason for male fear may be found in the ancient archetype of the love-death goddess, eternally present in the dark waters of the collective unconscious of modern men, and from these depths, the archetype still spins its black magic of contemporary fear." 38

While this theory may sound far-fetched, it is merely the matriarchal version of Freud's own theory of archaic memory traces which he used to explain the universal existence of identical unconscious psychic structures where individual experience may differ. Rosalind Coward clearly identifies Freud's "philogenetic account of the structures of the individual unconscious," in both Totem and Taboo and

37 Campbell, Primitive Mythology, 76.
Moses and Monotheism. 39 Freud's inherited racial memory is, however, father-centered, not mother-centered. In his patrifocal view, the primitive sons' guilt for killing the archetypal father, who had held exclusive sexual rights to the mother and the sisters, occasions a return of the father's prohibition by the sons themselves. "The repression of the wish for the father's death and for sexual relations with the mother correspond to the repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex." 40 According to Freud, sons inherit philogenetically fear of the Father rather than dread of the Mother.

Freud's memory trace is hypothesized backwards from the psychic structures he observed in his own European cultural environment. Yet, preserved evidence of repeated ritual male sacrifice under Goddess-inspired religion would seem to have more of an effect on the modern male psyche than a one-time hypothetical archetypal killing. Whether male fear originates from a racial legacy of ritual sacrifice or through its perpetuation in socially-received stereotypes (corroborated by infantile impressions), the effect is the same.


40 Coward 193.
Sir James Frazer recounts in horrifying detail the rituals in honor of Cybele which included bloody sacrifice and emasculation of her priests. Holiday spectators might even be so entranced by the festival spirit as to emulate the priests' sacrifice. Even the worship of Demeter, so idealized by modern feminists, included a ritual "reaping" (i.e. castration) with her "moon-shaped sickle." Further, "in the old days the priest who bore the name and played the part of Attis [Cybele's son/lover] at the spring festival of Cybele was regularly hanged or otherwise slain upon the sacred tree..." In other legends, kings were eucharistically eaten after being castrated or they were dismembered and their body parts buried in different parts of the country to ensure fertility. European harvest-customs of fairly recent vintage show vestiges of the principle of slaying a sacrificial victim for the sake of the crops, as Frazer has shown.

In light of the mythic and historical reality of the dark side of Goddess worship, it is easier to understand why the literature of patriarchal Greece emphasized the need to

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neutralize the powerful mother and to subordinate her in the Olympian pantheon. The neutralization process was simple: she must harness her sexuality or die (often by her own hands). Seventeenth-century French tragedy was solidly founded on the patriarchal Greek literary tradition and societal legacy. For the most part, this French theatre portrays either submissive daughters and wives or rapaciously sexual or abusively powerful queens who must die (Phèdre, Hermione in Andromaque, Cléopâtre in Rodogune). Molière's comedies not only revere the obedient daughter but also deplore a woman's pretension to learn. An intelligent woman, like an Eve in possession of knowledge, is considered a dangerous thing (L'Ecole des femmes, Les Précieuses ridicules, and Les Femmes savantes). The acquisition of knowledge could lead to a dangerous ascension to power.

In the eighteenth-century feminocentric French novel, a "feminine" principle designed and in the service of men may reign, but woman's disruptive sexuality is always punished by death. A vulnerable, sexually inactive female like Marivaux's Marianne survives gloriously; but the

44 As Elisabeth Badinter notes in L'Amour en plus (Paris: Flammarion, 1970): "La femme n'est plus assimilée au serpent de la Génèse, ou à une créature rusée et diabolique qu'il faut mettre au pas. Elle devient une personne douce et sensée dont on attend qu'elle soit raisonnable et indulgente. Eve fait tout doucement place à Marie. La curieuse, l'ambitieuse se métamorphose en une créature modeste et raisonnable, dont les ambitions ne dépassent plus les limites du foyer" (225).
powerful, sexually voracious, Mme de Mertueil suffers a hideous end. Male preference for weak and even dying women is evident in many eighteenth-century French novels.

Rousseau's Julie becomes the ideal of the century and the model for the nineteenth century woman—the consummate daughter, wife and mother who sacrifices her sexuality for the patriarchal ideal. Rousseau, for all his libertarian thinking on man in society, viewed woman as a threat who must be curbed through a repressive conception of the institution of motherhood. He even cites the Greek example: "When the Greek women married, they disappeared from public life; within the four walls of their home they devoted themselves to the care of their household and family. This is the mode of life prescribed for women alike by nature and reason." Finally, the death of Flaubert's Emma Bovary and


Zola's Nana continues a long line of women neutralized in a particularly loathsome way because of their unharnessed sexuality.

Twentieth-century Women Writers and Matriarchal Myth

When women authors write about myth they have several alternatives: they may reveal the matriarchal subtext, as we have done; they may decide to adhere to the traditional patriarchal model; or they may construct a revisionary myth which rehabilitates the feminine and/or establishes a balance between the sexes. In the case of Clytemnestra, two twentieth-century women theorists have viewed her role in the Oresteia as the assertive female defying tradition. Kate Millett describes a wife rebelling "against the masculine authority of husband and king."49 Her murder and the taming of the Furies denote "matriarchy's last stand in the ancient world."50 Froma I. Zeitlin also portrays Clytemnestra as a woman asserting herself in patriarchal society by murdering her husband and choosing her own sexual partner. Neither critic recognizes the queen's act as her right and duty in the matriarchal context. Zeitlin,


50 Millett 113.
nonetheless, detects in the play all the elements of the matriarchal myth without identifying it as such. Anxiety towards the "normally dormant power [of the female] which may always erupt into open violence"\textsuperscript{51} underlies the suppression of the mother. Clytemnestra's offense is a paradigmatic example of the "Rule of Women where female aims to annihilate male."\textsuperscript{52} She further sees the connection between "the assertion of sexual independence [through privileging the mother-child bond over the marriage bond] . . . and . . . a desire to rule."\textsuperscript{53}

Actually, few women writers have valorized Clytemnestra's story, even though she had little reason to be vilified, even within the framework of the patriarchal version. Agamemnon had killed her former husband and her baby; he had abducted and forcibly married her. Agamemnon had also sacrificed their own daughter Iphigeneia and brought home Cassandra after ten year's absence as a trophy of war. In spite of these extenuating circumstances, Jane Miller talks about the "damaging" image of Clytemnestra and Jocasta that women writers must resort to when writing about the mother's consciousness from her own perspective. She feels that women writers have no story of their own and must


\textsuperscript{52} Zeitlin 155.

\textsuperscript{53} Zeitlin 158.
"echo the accounts that sons have given of mothers."  
Carolyn Heilbrun goes so far as to say that the killing of Clytemnestra is a necessary antidote to the overvaluation of the maternal in women. She wants women to "see the transformation of the Erinyes into the Eumenides as the acquiescence of the female spirits in the destruction of motherhood and as the affirmation of self-creation, of the passage of initiation rites by our female Orestes, by Orestes, that is, speaking for woman now."  
Both of these writers view Clytemnestra principally as a mother, rather than as a woman and ruler in her own right; both therefore have reduced the import of her story. 

On the French side, Marie Cardinal in her novel Le Passé empiété takes the same stance vis-à-vis the mother. She personifies her troubled protagonist as divided between her true self and her Clytemnestrian self. It is only upon the death of Clytemnestra that she can partake of her full human potential. Cardinal's choice of this version of the myth was no doubt predisposed by her own tormented relations with her mother as seen in her autobiographical account Les Mots pour le dire.

Alice Jardine, another American theorist, uses an untampered patriarchal reading of the Orestes myth to categorize all of American literature. She sees the Orestes myth (the son is central) as the operative myth in American literature. She theorizes that since the father is dead in American fiction, the mother must be punished by the son in order to maintain his identity. "In the Orestes or Neronic myth, it is the killing of the mother, or flight from her deathly sexuality [emphasis added] that confers the imaginary stamp on filial identity. And when this myth becomes central to an entire culture, we know that Oedipus has truly departed for Colonus." 56

We have seen how an analysis of mythic language thought to be universal in content reveals instead a language of Fathers silencing a threatening maternal discourse. Subsequent generations of readers, writers, and their critics use their mythic choices, whether matriarchal, patriarchal, or equalitarian, to express their own feelings about gender. It does not appear to be sex alone that determines the writer's use of the myth. Personal history in conjunction with the larger historical and cultural context, plus the usefulness of the paradigm in expressing the protagonist's story, govern his or her choice.

In Chapters Two and Three we shall pursue our analysis of matriarchal myth by studying the inadequacies of Simone de Beauvoir's approach to the eternal feminine. We shall then seek to dispel the controversy over the existence of actual matriarchies by underlining the importance and undisputed existence of matriarchal consciousness. We shall study previous incursions of matriarchal mythic consciousness in male-authored French literature and criticism before beginning our textual analyses of three contemporary women authors writing in French.
Redefining the Feminine through Matriarchal Consciousness

In Chapter One, I attempted to point out how the Classical Greek myths camouflage earlier matriarchal stories which possess a different story line privileging the feminine. If we accept the role of myth as social charter, the character evolution in the mythical stories reflects changing social realities and efforts to impose different attitudes about gender.¹ To further corroborate his notion, one has only to read Merlin Stone's historic account of the Hebrew invaders' suppression of women and Goddess worship. Through their telling of the Adam and Eve creation myth, we better understand the extent to which patriarchal myth consciously devalued the feminine:

The myth of Adam and Eve, in which male domination was explained and justified, informed women and men alike that male ownership and control of submissively obedient women was to be regarded as the divine and natural state of the human species. . . . [The] image of Eve as the sexually tempting but God-defying seductress was surely intended as a warning to all Hebrew men to stay away from the sacred women of the temples, for if they succumbed to the temptations of

¹ Gerda Lerner in The Creation of Patriarchy affirms that "[t]he shift from the Mother-Goddess to the thunder-god may be more prescriptive than descriptive. It may tell us more about what the upper class of royal servants, bureaucrats, and warriors wanted the population to believe than what the population actually did believe" (152).
these women, they simultaneously accepted the female deity—Her fruit, Her sexuality, and, perhaps most important, the resulting matrilineal identity for any children who might be conceived in this manner. It must also, perhaps even more pointedly, have been directed at Hebrew women, cautioning them not to take part in the ancient religion and its sexual customs, as they appear to have continued to do, despite the warnings and punishments meted out by the Levite priests.  

This image of Eve the temptress, who brings sin, death, work, and painful childbearing into the world, has been the most pervasively damaging myth for women in Western society.

Any attempt to define the feminine which is based on these stories of patriarchal inspiration is doomed to reflect inaccurately any "essential" or "eternal" characteristic of the feminine. Simone de Beauvoir describes Woman couched in the terms of patriarchal myth: 

"[Elle] est à la fois Eve et la Vierge Marie. Elle est une idole, une servante, la source de la vie, une puissance des ténèbres; elle est le silence élémentaire de la vérité, elle est artifice, bavardage et mensonge; elle est la guérisseuse et la sorcière; elle est la proie de l'homme, elle est sa perte, elle est tout ce qu'il n'est pas et qu'il veut avoir, sa négation et sa raison d'être."  

The two volumes of Le

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Deuxième sexe are geared to demystifying this image of Woman and to explaining the true source of her "essence."

The basic tenets of Beauvoir's theory are well known: "otherness" essentially distinguishes the female from the governing male principle; patriarchal society defines "the feminine" by limiting woman's lives to the reproductive and the non-productive. Society perpetuates itself along with its artificially-conceived notions of femininity, which serve basically to aggrandize the male and keep the female diminished and bound to the home.

Although aware of matriarchal myth, Beauvoir neglects to find a truly empowered feminine in this source. For her, primitive woman was bound to the earth - her power may have been strong, but it was obscure and alien, like that of Nature: she did not create, but magically conjured up her bounty. She explains that woman's powerful qualities as "Terre, Mère, Déesse"4 were conferred on her by the male, in a male governed society. Female divinization reflected male fear and weakness before a capricious, misunderstood, Nature, rather than true reverence for a feminine principle.

Beauvoir was inaccurate in identifying the Goddess with the earth only; the Goddess was not an exclusively telluric figure. Merlin Stone has discovered accounts of Sun Goddesses in Canaan, Anatolia, Arabia, and Australia and she

4 Beauvoir, vol. 1, 91.
further notes that the Egyptian Goddess Nut's brother Geb symbolized the earth while she represented the heavens. According to Joseph Campbell, the cow-goddess Hathor was "an eternally present, world-supporting principle" at once the frame of the world and a maternal force operating within it . . . ." Even if the Goddess was frequently associated with the earth, this is no reason to deprecate her power or minimize it. Riane Eisler makes a clever connection between the main imagery of Goddess religion and that of Christianity: "scholars in the past have routinely referred to the worship of the Goddess, not as a religion, but as a 'fertility cult' and to the Goddess as an 'earth mother.' But though the fecundity of women and of the earth was, and still is, a requisite for species survival, this characterization is far too simplistic. It would be comparable, for example to characterizing Christianity as just a death cult because the central image in its art is the Crucifixion."6

5 The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology (1962; New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 54. Susan Sontag would probably say that the secular Mother Earth metaphor has persisted for so long because of the imagery's familiar correspondence to the human body (based on comments made at a conference given at Rice University, "Illness as Metaphor," October 25, 1988). Note that the invisible, non-corporeal relation of "Sun" and "Father" has not persisted into the modern era. The Father God is located in the sky, he does not equal sky as Mother equals Earth: "Our Father who art in Heaven . . . ."

Beauvoir in no way regrets the demise of matriarchal myth. She feels that female-based religion had to be abolished for civilization to progress beyond a primitive stage. The concept of cyclical time and nature had to be arrested so that linear progress could be made. Beauvoir's reasoning was completely unjustified for, as Merlin Stone states, "it has been archeologically confirmed that the earliest law, government, medicine, agriculture, architecture, metallurgy, wheeled vehicles, ceramics, textiles, and written language were intially developed in societies that worshipped the Goddess." 7 Eisler confirms: "almost universally those places where the first great breakthroughs in material and social technology were made had one feature in common: the worship of the Goddess." 8 Graves notes that Goddess-worshipping Minoan Crete was "sophisticated enough to have written archives, four-storey buildings with hygienic plumbing, doors with modern-looking locks, registered trademarks, chess, a central system of weights and measures, and a calendar based on patient astronomic observation." 9

7 Stone xxiv.

8 Eisler, The Chalice and the Blade. 9 Eisler also maintains that these societies were equalitarian in their treatment of the genders. The "dominator" societies of patriarchy come later.

On the other hand, as Joseph Campbell reveals, after the patriarchal raiding parties had passed through matriarchal ancient India, "there were no more cities in the Indus for a thousand years"\textsuperscript{10} since the uncivilized invaders had laid waste to them. It was the Christian Church that violently suppressed the advocates of advanced reasoning in the name of their patriarchal religion during the Renaissance. Furthermore, the existence of quite primitive patriarchal societies in the world today proves that patriarchy is not necessarily an adjunct of progress. But, just as Athena rules in favor of Orestes and patriarchy in \textit{The Eumenides}, Beauvoir sees the dethroning of the Goddess as a necessary precondition for the universe to evolve towards the light.

Beauvoir's analysis describes the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal mythology without attempting to identify or to salvage any of the positive aspects of the feminine that existed in ancient Goddess worship. She describes the foundation of the male creative principle under the aegis of Aeschylus, Aristotle, and Hippocrates. Man installed himself as the true source of creation, assuring his supremacy in mythological pantheons. He becomes the supreme germinator; her role is demoted to mere passive fecundity. "Elle est la terre et l'homme la

\textsuperscript{10} Campbell, \textit{Oriental Mythology} 174.
semblance, elle est l'Eau et il est le Feu."\textsuperscript{11} The sovereign male principle reflects an active creative force, a higher light, intelligence used to take charge of the world. Woman is reduced to the moistened soil that passively nurtures the life implanted in it by the male generatrix.

Beauvoir's own position on human reproduction essentially mirrors the patriarchal view by reducing the mother's role to passive flesh engendering more flesh. "Elle engendre dans la généralité de son corps, non dans la singularité de son existence."\textsuperscript{12} The new life within her is merely "un polype né de sa chair,"\textsuperscript{13} causing fear and vomiting. There is no mention of the bond between the mother and the growing child, of the delight in the sensation of their contiguous flesh, of the tremendous task of raising the child to maturity. Beauvoir thoroughly disparages motherhood and femininity in complicity with the men who have devalued both as part and parcel of their ascension to power in patriarchal mythology.

Recognizing that the female develops in patriarchal society according to the patriarchal ideal of femininity was Beauvoir's indispensable contribution to women's liberation. She is correct to deplore the objectivization of woman and

\textsuperscript{11} Beauvoir, vol. 1, 193.

\textsuperscript{12} Beauvoir, vol. 2, 158.

\textsuperscript{13} Beauvoir, vol. 2, 159.
her collaboration in her demise by over-investing in the power of her body. She also correctly inculpates women who desire to remain powerless, passive, and docile. Fear of diminished femininity and fewer chances to seduce men outweighs their desire for self-affirmation. The thesis of women's fear of success linked to a fear of loss of femininity and of power to attract a man has been more recently and more thoroughly developed by Colette Dowling in *The Cinderella Complex*. However, neither Dowling nor Beauvoir connects the historic suppression of female power to male fear of the powerful mythic feminine. It is this fear, and not just the current parameters of the institution of motherhood in Western society, which must be overturned for woman to feel free to assert herself.

Beauvoir makes no attempt to redefine the feminine by culling positive characteristics from the empowered feminine of the past before her fall under patriarchy. She expresses very negative attitudes toward modern women's attempts (prior to 1949) to transcend her condition through creativity. She sees women writers' strivings as too mediocre, too geared towards merely filling the void of their existence to show genius. Her solution is for women and men to progress beyond their natural differences and

"affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité."\textsuperscript{14} Man is human, woman is his opposite. Woman must, in effect, become like man to become human, not merely feminine. Sadly, she presumes that nothing is to be gained by a reevaluation of the feminine and a positive assertion of matriarchal consciousness.

Early "Matriarchalists"

Beauvoir insists that un "age d'or de la Femme n'est qu'un mythe."\textsuperscript{15} Yet the idea of an early matriarchate has had important theoretical supporters. J. J. Bachofen, in \textit{Das Mütterrecht} (1861), first postulated the existence of a matriarchal stage of society, using mythology as his principal evidence. He held that women originally developed culture. He also praised the mothers' religious devotion and respect for the dead. Nonetheless, he felt much like Beauvoir that the conversion to patriarchy represented the ascendancy of superior religious and intellectual organization: "Matriarchy is bound up with matter and a religious stage of development that acknowledges only corporeal life . . . The triumph of patriarchy brings with it the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature, a sublimation of human existence over the laws of

\textsuperscript{14} Beauvoir, vol. 2, 504.

\textsuperscript{15} Beauvoir, vol. 1, 91.
material life."\(^\text{17}\)

Robert Briffault's three-volume work, *The Mothers* (1927), established the matriarchal monopoly of archaic religions and the primacy of matrilinearity. Yet, after laboriously documenting female dominance in religion and myth, Briffault concludes: "Those achievements which constitute what, in the best sense, we term civilisation, have taken place in societies organised on patriarchal principles; they are for the most part the work of men. Women have had very little direct share in them. Women are constitutionally deficient in the qualities that mark the masculine intellect."\(^\text{18}\) Women's achievements lie in "the material conditions of culture."\(^\text{19}\) Differing from Beauvoir, Briffault attributes to women the bond between mother and child, calling it the original basis of social organization: "The maternal instinct alone is primitively 'altruistic'; every sentiment that has made social aggregation possible by checking self-regard owes its existence to that primal love."\(^\text{20}\)

As Adrienne Rich has noted in *Of Woman Born*, both Briffault and Bachofen envisioned a return to maternal

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19 Briffault 515.
20 Briffault 510.
altruism, not to matriarchy, as the means to save civilization. To Rich, patriarchal idealization of this maternal altruism camouflages male fear and loathing of women—a fear which we ascribed to psychic and societal remnants derived from sacrificial Goddess ritual in Chapter One. Bachofen and Briffault find the Altruistic Mother sacred only because she assuages the mythic fears of their sex.

The Socialist's Regard for the Mother

According to Erich Fromm, the Socialist camp in the nineteenth century—Marx, Engels, Bebel and others—discovered Bachofen and lauded his theory because it seemed to privilege the mother's unconditional love for the child regardless of his or her merit. In the matriarchal paradigm defined by Bachofen, the Socialists saw an affiliation with their own Marxist thought. Socialism, like Mother Right, matricentrically provides for all its children. Bachofen himself was an aristocrat, not a Socialist; the acceptance of his theory by the Socialist camp is yet another instance myth used to express one's predilections, not basic truths. A contradiction existed between Bachofen's approval of gynocratic democracy and his opposition to the political emancipation of women. Fromm attributes this discrepancy to
personal and economic factors in Bachofen's life.  

Marx felt that the exalted position of goddesses indicated a "earlier period when woman was freer and more respected." Speaking about social systems, Engels connected the "overthrow of mother right" with the "world historical defeat of the female sex." He continues: "The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman, especially conspicuous among the Greeks of the heroic and still more of the classical age, has gradually been palliated and glossed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished."  

Fromm demonstrates that the "patricentric" complex is necessary to promote obedience in a class society. He also

21 "His predilection for matriarchy apparently stemmed from his intense fixation on his own mother: he did not marry until he was forty, after the death of his mother. Moreover, his inheritance of ten million dollars permitted him to remain aloof from certain bourgeois ideals, and such aloofness was a necessity for any admirer of matriarchy. On the other hand, this patrician of Basel was so thoroughly rooted in his entrenched patriarchal tradition that he could not help but remain loyal to the traditional Protestant-bourgeois ideals." Erich Fromm, The Crisis of Psychoanalysis (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970) 93-94.


23 Engels 120-1.
propounds the interesting theory that sexual repression aids and abets repressive society: full sexual fulfillment would lead to a need for fulfillment in all other areas.

Freud and Jung

Freud also accepted the notion of a matriarchy. According to Naomi Goldenberg,\textsuperscript{24} who has studied religion in Freud's works, he believed that female deities were worshipped to compensate women for losing their earlier political power. After the slaying of the father (see \textit{Totem and Taboo}), women ruled until a new male became chief of the household. Freud's preoedipal scenario actually replicates Graves's, with the son slaying the father and a powerful mother interposed between the two. However, he sees a one-time linear progression rather than the cyclical progression that is attested to over and over again in matriarchal myth and ritual.

Freud, needless to say, felt that conversion to patriarchy was a necessary step in civilization: "This turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality--that is, an advance of civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis,

based on an inference and a premiss. Taking sides in this way with a thought-process in preference to a sense perception has proved to be a momentous step."²⁵

Jung too believed in the existence of matriarchy. In his Aspects of the Feminine, Jung refers to a certain type of mother ("purely instinctive," "all-devouring") as a "throw-back to a primitive state of matriarchy where the man leads an insipid existence as a mere procreator and serf of the soil."²⁶ In The Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy, he refers to "the primordial matriarchal world . . . which was overthrown by the masculine world of the father."²⁷ Jung's images of the "feminine" in his anima/animus model obviously reflect his attitude toward matriarchy: "infantile," "primitive," "instinctive," "archaic," "dark," "auxiliary," "irrational."²⁸


Matriarchy versus Matriarchal Consciousness

Bachofen and Briffault "uncovered" matriarchy only to confine women to an "altruistic," non-threatening, ideal. Marxists coopted the idea of the altruistic mother to further their socialist aims. Freud and Jung used matriarchy to express metaphorically their ideas about a superior, rational, father principle. Most modern historians and anthropologists, however, have discredited Bachofen's and Briffault's research. Engel's formulation of the downfall of matriarchy has also been disproven.\(^\text{29}\)

Nonetheless, as Joan Bamberger has stated, "To have cast doubt . . . on the historical evidence for the Rule of Women is not the same thing as challenging the significance of the mythologies of matriarchy. The main issue would seem not to be whether women did or did not hold positions of political importance at some point in prehistory, or even whether they took up weapons and fought in battle as the Amazons allegedly did, but that there are myths claiming

\(^{29}\) Rosalind Coward draws on Malinowski to refute the Marxists stating that "the necessity that patrilineal descent should be established as soon as property begins to be accumulated is proved to be totally fallacious: "A number of historically known cases show there is no automatic necessity. For example, the Navaho of Northern Arizona profited by the introduction of sheep into the South-West some time in the seventeenth century so as to develop into a prosperous pastoral people, yet in spite of their thriving flocks tended by the men, they have remained obstinately matrilineal. (Malinowski, "Must Kinship be Dehumanized by Mock-Algebra?" Man, February 1930) qtd. in Coward, Patriarchal Precedents 86.
women did these things, which they now no longer do."\textsuperscript{30}

The question then is not whether matriarchy existed, but what alternate vision of the feminine matriarchal consciousness embodied. Whether or not women actually ruled, or whether the kinship patterns of matrilinearity and matrilocality were the only concrete evidence of a female-centered society\textsuperscript{31}, women in matriarchal myth undeniably connote a far more active, powerful image than the successor goddesses of patriarchy. As Adrienne Rich states, the Goddess "exists, not to cajole or reassure man, but to assert herself."\textsuperscript{32} It cannot be proven conclusively that matriarchal myth points to an earlier age when women were powerful.\textsuperscript{33} But matriarchal myth does express an ideology that emphasizes interconnectedness, unity, cycle, and guilt-free sexuality, unlike its patriarchal counterpart. We shall study the positively valorized notions of the feminine that we can extrapolate from matriarchal myth and show how

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy," 266-7.
\item \textsuperscript{31} See Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 29.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Rich, Of Woman Born 94.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Mircea Eliade postulates that the "social and cultural phenomenon known as matriarchy" [read not political] is connected to the discovery of agriculture by women." She owns the soil because she first cultivated it and her prestige further derives from her identification with the cosmic model of Mother Earth. See Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader, v. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975) 204-5.
\end{itemize}
the symbols that have come to represent the feminine in patriarchy were not nearly so gender specific in matriarchal consciousness. In the following chapter, we shall show the subversive tradition of matriarchal consciousness that has existed in French literature, running countercurrent to the more persistent patriarchal tradition, and its culmination in contemporary French critical thought.

The Essential Feminine of Matriarchal Myth

Graves's view of matriarchal myth, embodied in the White or Great Goddess, tells us much about woman's ancient ritual lovemaking and fecundity and its connection to the renewal of all nature. Woman's beauty, sexuality, fecundity, and rapport with nature are all revered. Even when the male appears in the divine script, the female role remains central. Yet the dynamics of the divine scenario contain negative elements as well: they point to the necessity of male aggressivity and war-like tendencies as integral to the process. Renewal is as dependent on the Goddess's fecundity as it is on the male's prowess in battle. Further, the Goddess destroys the son only to bear him again to instigate the process anew. Graves defines a paradigm of power in which the union of sex and violence ensures the continuity of life. A ceaseless cycle of creation (love) and destruction (death) governs the natural universe.
It is interesting to view the theory of the American anthropologist Marvin Harris in light of the Gravesian scenario. Harris categorically denies the existence of "a golden age of matriarchy when women reigned supreme over men."\textsuperscript{34} He believes that warfare and female infanticide were attempts to control reproductive and ecological pressures and that the "allotment of women [was] . . . a reward for male aggressiveness."\textsuperscript{35} Even within this very anti-matriarchal framework, it can be seen that Graves's theory metaphorically encapsulates Harris's: the battle ensures the fertility of the land and the Goddess is the combatant's reward. The fact that the Goddess only bears sons in the cyclical drama further reproduces Harris's belief, based on anthropological evidence, that female infanticide was one of the accepted means of controlling the tribal population. In this way the matriarchal myth can be said to reflect the dynamics of society without mirroring the actual power structure.

Graves's model is particularly useful in understanding the origins of dominance and submission in male-female relations. The characteristics of the male and the female are embodied by the Goddess and her consorts in the annual fertility drama: the seductiveness and cruelty of the

\textsuperscript{34} Marvin Harris, \textit{Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures} (New York: Random House, 1977) 57.

\textsuperscript{35} Harris 60.
female, the lust and aggression of the male, and the by-products of sexual potency and fecundity.

But Graves's analysis of the White Goddess myth is an incomplete picture of matriarchal myth. His scenario designates the supremacy of the female, her demanding and consuming love expressed as the duality of creation and destruction, and the tension that existed between generations of combative males. It does not, however, identify all the positive and negative aspects of the Great Mother archetype. For a fuller understanding of the Mother Archetype, we turn to the works of several other matriarchal mythologists, principally Erich Neumann, Merlin Stone, Richard Roberts.

The Great Mother Archetype

Erich Neumann has written the most comprehensive analysis of the Great Mother Archetype, although, as Adrienne Rich notes, "he is primarily concerned with integrating the feminine into the masculine psyche . . . and his bias is clearly masculine."36 Nonetheless, he provides a great deal of information useful in defining matriarchal consciousness. First, he designates the vessel as the central symbol of the feminine; the basic feminine functions are "the giving of life, nourishment, warmth, and

36 Rich 95.
protection."  

Joseph Campbell also refers to the "Universal Mother" as the "first, nourishing and protecting presence." He also deemphasizes the gloomy side of Goddess worship in the Minoan context. The mother-goddess was not only feared in Minoan Crete, "ritual scenes suggest an idyll, rather, of harmony and peace, wisdom and a power of prophecy . . . ."  

In the "matriarchal stage," which Neumann defines as a psychological and not an archaeological or historical entity, "the Feminine is preponderant over the Masculine."  


38 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949) 113. Campbell's references to the Goddess are minimal in this book. He mentions the simultaneity of her guises as mother of life and mother of death. He also mentions her triple aspect as virgin, harlot, and hag, but only in the context of the Sumero-Babylonian astral mythology. However, in *Occidental Mythology*, he exposes the "deeper song," the matriarchal substratum, of the Hebrew, Greek, and Celtic myths much as Graves did in his works.  

39 Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (1949; New York: Penguin Books, 1964) 20. Campbell paints the Minoan culture as gentler than its patriarchal successors: "there were no walled cities in Crete before the coming of the Greeks. There is little evidence of weapons. Battle scenes of kingly conquest play no role in the the setting of the style. The tone is of general luxury and delight, a broad participation by all classes in a genial atmosphere of well-being, and the vast development of a profitable commerce by sea, to every port of the archaic world and even--boldly--to regions far beyond" (62). He does not, however, deny the tradition of "ritual regicide" (64).  

40 Neumann 43.
The Feminine contains "the opposites of earth and heaven, night and day, death and life;"\textsuperscript{41} it is not restricted to the realm of earth, matter, and night, as in later patriarchal cosmogonies. Merlin Stone also points out that "the title of the Goddess in most historical documents of the Near East was the Queen of the Heaven (not "Earth Mother").\textsuperscript{42}

The counterfactual male creation principle of patriarchal theology is inoperative in matriarchal myth. Even as vessel, the woman is not merely a receptacle for male seed; she is the true creator of life: "this vessel with its mysterious creative character . . . brings forth the male in itself and from out of itself."\textsuperscript{43} Neumann explains that the Feminine creates the male engendering principle, as can be seen in the relation between the Great Mother and her son/lover. But, as the Gravesian scenario depicts, the Great Mother also represents death because of her perpetual need for human sacrifice to fecundate and revive the earth.

Neumann further explains that in matriarchal consciousness darkness is not negatively valorized, as in patriarchal consciousness, for it is "this primordial

\textsuperscript{41} Neumann 45.

\textsuperscript{42} Stone, xxii.

\textsuperscript{43} Stone 61.
darkness which bears the light as moon, stars, and sun, and almost every where these luminaries are looked upon as the offspring of the Nocturnal Mother."44 In lunar mythology, night is the time of birth with the stars and the moon as the visible offspring; "and morning, when the luminous world of the stars vanishes, is a time of death, in which the daytime sky devours the children of the night."45 With the advent of patriarchy, the sun takes on the positive valorization that it has had ever since. Neumann concludes forcibly, and in obvious contradiction with Gaston Bachelard46, that "the Great Mother . . . in truth encompasses almost everything—heaven, water, and earth, while even fire is her son . . . the Feminine cannot be identified with the telluric chthonic, the lower, earthly principle, as the later patriarchal world and its religions and philosophies would have it. The totality of the Archetypal Feminine goes far beyond the projection in which she unites the elements of earth, water, air and fire."47

44 Stone 212.
45 Joseph Campbell confirms this: "In the early mythologies of the moon-bull the sun was always conceived as a warlike, blazing, destructive deity; . . . whereas the moon, dispenser of the night dews by which the world of vegetation is refreshed, represents the principle of life: the principle of birth and death that is life." Oriental Mythology 91.
46 Bachelard's discussion of the "maleness" of archetypal fire will be discussed in Chapter Five.
47 Campbell, Oriental Mythology 225.
Neumann also addresses the matriarchal concept of time, with its emphasis on cycle, pointing out its divergence from the patriarchal concept, which is geared toward timelessness and eternity. Likewise, Roberts sees patriarchy attempting to "discard time, the end of time being the desired goal."\(^{48}\) In matriarchal consciousness, rebirth follows death. For Roberts, patriarchy exemplifies "fear of nature, sex, and death"\(^{49}\) and even of life, as exemplified in the celibacy and monasticism of early Christianity. In a recent television interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell also identified the Judeo-Christian tradition's refusal to affirm life. By denying the snake (which represents immortality) in the Garden of Eden, man denies the continuity of life. Woman is blamed for man's woes because she represents life and brings him into the world of painful dualities. On the other hand, as Neumann, Roberts, and Stone reveal, the Mother Goddess religions celebrated life in dance, song, and orgiastic fertility rites. Stone asserts that sex in the Goddess religions was considered sacred and holy.\(^{50}\)

Neumann provides further information on the sacredness of the Feminine through her transformative acts. Her body

\(^{48}\) Roberts, *From Eden to Eros* 2.

\(^{49}\) Roberts.

\(^{50}\) The patriarchally oriented mythologist Eliade believes that female orgiastic rites only represented a "periodic abolition of the norms that govern profane life." See Beane 416.
transforms the blood of menstruation into a child and blood into milk to nourish the child after its birth. Beyond the body, she also transforms thread into fabric and clay into pottery. The Goddess's demand for sacrifice is even transformative, for suffering brings growth in the chain of being.

Neumann sees the tending of the fire as central to the female transformation mysteries: "[F]emale domination [in the house] is symbolized in its center, the fireplace, the seat of warmth and food preparation, the 'hearth,' which is also the original altar."\(^{51}\) Fire is also used to transform clay into ceramics and to improve food.\(^{52}\) The gathering and preparation of food also leads woman to discover healing potions, intoxicants, and poisons.

Let us summarize the characteristics of matriarchal consciousness and of the Feminine found in the works of the matriarchal mythologists which we will be using in our coming analysis:

1. Matriarchal myth represents a reverence for life and respect for the dead.

\(^{51}\) Neumann 284.

\(^{52}\) A detailed discussion of the symbolism of fire will be included in Chapter Five, where it plays a major role in the analysis of *L'Oeuvre au noir*. 
2. The religious worship in matriarchal religions is communal and emphasizes the unity and solidarity of all life.

3. Time is cyclical.


5. Sex is a sacred act.

6. The Feminine is represented by the vessel symbol—the source of all life. Yet Woman is not a receptacle—she transforms her blood into the child.

7. The Woman also transforms matter into sacred objects, e.g. tapestries and pottery.

8. The Feminine contains all opposites, all dualities, such as heaven and earth, night and day, life and death.

9. Darkness bears the light.

10. Woman is a healer.

As we have seen, when we examine the essential feminine from the matriarchal perspective, its characteristics differ markedly from those delineated by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième sexe*. The patriarchal viewpoint distinguishes itself by separating the natural dualities inherent in life into distinct categories and attributing the negative values
to the female. A mythology extolling the eternal cycle of death and rebirth is overthrown in favor of the forward-pushing rational will of man-the-conqueror. Yet, as we shall see, mother-worship will survive and matriarchal consciousness will persist, even in twentieth-century France, despite ancient and modern efforts to eradicate them. Campbell compellingly portrays the Goddess's survival for us: "[T]he power of this goddess-mother of the world, whom we have here seen defamed, abused, insulted, and overthrown by her sons, is to remain as an ever-present threat to their castle of reason, which is founded upon a soil that they consider to be dead but is actually alive, breathing and threatening to shift."33

33 Campbell, *Occidental Mythology* 86.
3

Precedents of Matriarchal Consciousness in France

Introduction

Popular world opinion associates France with femininity and recognizes the French woman as femininity's ideal. According to Michèle Sarde, "La Française se trouve . . . parée du prestige douteux d'apparaître comme une espèce de superfemme en qui la féminité est exacerbée au point de devenir caricaturale." After brilliantly and copiously analyzing the literary and historical image of women in France, Sarde concludes that French women are proud of their femininity and seek sovereignty within its boundaries.

The French woman's satisfaction with her femininity may derive in part from French cultural myth and stereotype that has venerated the feminine from prehistoric times to the modern era. Goddess worship pervaded the earliest cultures established in France, persisted in Celtic Gaul as well as in Romanized Gaul. Despite its overthrow by a fundamentally patriarchal conception of divinity which entered France with Christianity, Goddess worship remained active, albeit camouflaged, in a number of ways.

Goddess worship in France did not derive from a single source. Various strains of her worship meet on the crossroads where the beliefs of indigenous peoples were incorporated and refined by invading peoples with their own sovereign feminine principles.

Tracing the path of the Goddess in France, we find that her earliest known depiction (c. 20,000 B.C.) was found in the town of Laussel. The central power of the feminine over life and death is apparent in the cave art, figurines and idols of paleolithic France. In the neolithic period a new wave of Goddess worship reached France by way of Greek mariners. Cles-Reden sees goddess carvings of Mediterranean influence executed at St. Sernin and affirms that "[f]emale statue menhirs in the south of France greatly outnumber the male." She further detects the presence of a warrior god limited to the south of France but sees that of

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2 Roberts 27.

3 Eisler, The Chalice and the Blade.


5 Cles-Reden 227.
"the goddess of death spread farther and farther." Burial places show that her cult is also adopted in the north of France, with Brittany appearing to have become a unique center of Goddess worship due to its connections with Iberia and Ireland. Cles-Reden goes so far as to state that "France was the spiritual centre from which the monolith cult spread to central as well as to northern Europe and the British Isles." When the Celts arrived in Gaul, they were easily able to meld their own religion with that of the indigenous Goddess-worshipping peoples since they bore much in common. Jean Markale, a specialist on druidic religion and the Celts, postulates that the supreme deity of the druids was female, even though the majority of the priests were men and there were male gods in their pantheon. Emile Thevenot, who has studied the sanctuaries of Gaul, confirms the

6 Cles-Reden 227.
7 Cles-Reden 252.
8 See Emile Thevenot, Divinités et sanctuaires de la Gaule. (Paris: Fayard, Résurrection du passé, 1968) 166. Joseph Campbell identifies the Celts as a patriarchal, iron-bearing people, but states that goddess worship continued under their patriarchal system much as it continued from the early Creto-Aegean period to the classic Olympian period in Greece. He describes late Celtic legends which continue to portray "brazen dames" and concludes that the Celts "overcame but did not extinguish an earlier, Bronze Age civilization of Mother Right." Campbell, Occidental Mythology 40.
particularly strong veneration of goddesses in the later Gallo-Roman era. In his view, the indigenous Gauls merely assimilated the Roman gods and goddesses to their own and concretized them using Roman architectural and artistic conceptions.

According to the *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, in the Celtic religion "[s]overeignty was regarded in Ireland [and, we will presume, in Celtic France as well] as a goddess whom the king must wed in order to ensure the welfare of his people. The notion may have been a development from the primitive idea of marriage of a tribal god to a goddess of the earth, or of water, as a source of fertility."¹⁰ The identity between this description of Celtic religion and Graves's goddess theory is undeniable.

Elements of Markale's and Thevenot's descriptions of the goddesses in France also match aspects of Graves's theory. For instance, the Gallo-Roman goddesses were often depicted in triads (like the Triple Goddess) or they formed couples with Roman gods assimilated into their pantheons. Thevenot concludes, much along the same lines as Graves, that the Goddess was the immutable element of the divine couple; the god was variable. Whereas the Gauls often changed the names of their gods, adopting the Roman forms, their goddesses retained their Gallic cult names: Rosmerta,

Damona, Sirona, Nantosuelta, and Épona. Thevenot postulates that the Gauls were too attached to their goddesses to change their names and that the attributes of Greco-Roman goddesses did not resemble closely enough the Gallic conceptions of their goddesses.

The Celtic Minerva, named after the Roman goddess, is an exception. However, Markale describes the aspects of this Minerva (whom he equates with the Irish Celtic Triple Goddess Brigit as well as the Great Goddess of prehistory) much as Graves would: "...maîtresse de poésie, de magie et de prophétie, savante en techniques diverses, mère de tous les dieux, quelque peu nymphomane et animée de la fureur guerrière, triple déesse mais toujours femme unique, probablement hérétique de la Grande Déesse des temps préhistoriques, telle se présente la Minerva celtique."\(^{11}\)

Goddess worship is again reinforced in France under the Roman Empire with the importation of Cybele worship and Egyptian Isis worship. Bonnie Anderson reports that "[i]n the centuries immediately before the rise of Christianity, the worship of Isis was the most widespread religion in the Roman Empire."\(^{12}\) With the advent of Christianity, Goddess worship is officially ousted, yet beliefs in the unique

\(^{11}\) Markale 141-2.

powers of a feminine deity persisted in ritualistic folk practices and beliefs. Christianity itself was forced to incorporate the people's unpressed need for Goddess worship in the medieval cult of the Virgin Mary. As Joseph Campbell has said, "You don't have a tradition with the Goddess celebrated any more beautifully and marvelously than in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century French cathedrals, every one of which is called Notre Dame."  

The nineteenth century, a time of great social and political upheaval, saw another Marian revival in the country that had been since the seventeenth century officially dedicated by its king to Notre Dame. The numerous Virgin sightings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of which occurred in France and Belgium (Paris 1830, LaSalette 1846, Lourdes 1858, Pontmain 1871, Beauraing 1932, and Banneaux 1933), expressed a  

13 Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, The Power of Myth (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 170. Campbell further states: "What you have in the Catholic tradition is a coming together of the patriarchal, monotheistic Hebrew idea of the Messiah as one who is to unite the spiritual and temporal powers, and the Hellenistic, classical idea of the Savior as the dead and resurrected son of the Great Goddess by a virgin birth (180)." I feel that French Catholicism in particular reverted to strong Madonna worship because of a long-entrenched familiarity with Mother Goddesses.  

continuation of the spirit of ancient Goddess worship into the present. The most famous apparition at Lourdes, a site of healing waters, clearly had roots in the Celtic, pre-Christian era. The medicinal quality of water sources had been associated with beneficent Mother Goddesses, who incarnated the spirit of rivers and lakes, from the time of ancient Gaul (Thevenot).

Of course, a one-to-one identity does not exist between the Goddess and the Virgin Mary, who is denuded of her sexuality, disconnected from fertility, and divinized as pure and virginal. As Barbara Pope stresses, "the Virgin of the apparitions . . . was always [officially] cast as an intermediary, who had been given her privileges by a loving Son and prescient Father. Her active cooperation was not stressed." Nonetheless, while the attributes of the Goddess may have changed to a protective image devoid of threatening female sexuality, she remains a sovereign principle and firmly connected to French soil.

When writers use mythic stories or patterns to structure their texts, whether consciously or unconsciously, they must choose between contrasting mythic paradigms, the matriarchal and the patriarchal, with their inherently different gender visions. When we analyze French literature

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15 Pope 195.
and popular folklore, patterns and practices emerge pointing to both patriarchal and matriarchal mythic choices. In Chapter One we saw how a patriarchal tradition has dominated in France. Yet a countercurrent has also existed, specifically in courtly love, romantic poetry, and surrealism, extolling the empowered feminine. Each of these instances of the resurgent feminine principle in male-authored literature came in times of national crisis (the Crusades, the Revolution and its after-shocks, and World War I) which allowed for a shuffling of the gender status quo, permitted a breakdown of stifling constraints and conventions, both social and literary, and allowed for change.¹⁶

A number of authors have detected a connection between national crisis and feminine resurgence. Riane Eisler, for instance, notes what she calls strong "glyanic" (feminine) resurgence in times of "chaos" defined as "states of increasing systems disequilibrium, times when unprecedented

¹⁶ Michèle Sarde also identifies these three movements as evidence for a "feminine mystique" that has been inscribed in the French collective conscious since the Middle Ages. She does not, however, identify this mystique as a remnant of matriarchal consciousness or see each movement as a reaction against hyper-patriarchal constraints. For her, the basic paradigm is expressed in terms of female adultery: "Mari/Femme/Amant," not the more archetypal generation conflict of the mother and son conspiring against the father to replace him in the name of rejuvenation. See Regard sur les Françaises 115-138.
and unpredictable systems changes can come about."¹⁷ (In the United States an obvious instance of national crisis and feminine resurgence occurs with the birth of the feminist movement in the revolutionary climate of the 1960's anti-war protest era.) Otto Rank states categorically that "every revolution which strives for the overthrow of masculine dominance shows the tendency to return to the mother."¹⁸

We might say that when societal devotion to the Law of the Father becomes too great (characterized by excessive reason, logic, abstraction, spirituality, repressed sexuality, or, more concretely, aggressivity and war), younger generations of men will appeal to the Goddess to satisfy their desire for renewal. The French artist's choice of matriarchal myth stems then from both the universal resurgence of the feminine in times of crisis and from the particular survival of archetypes and folk practices associated with his people's ancient worship of a powerful female deity. France, with its strong emotional undercurrent of Goddess worship, smoldering under an equally strong surface devotion to Father worship (the patriarchal family, male domination in political and intellectual matters—all legacies of Greco-Roman influence), is a lieu de prédilection for the periodic flaming up of matriarchal

¹⁷ Eisler 129.

Consciousness.

Courtly Love

Theories of the origins of courtly love are too numerous to outline within the scope of this dissertation. We would refer the reader to Boase's *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*\(^{19}\) for the most exhaustive detailing of the many theories and their proponents. Among these theories he cites the "Chivalric-Matriarchal": "Courtly love was the product of the interaction of Christianity and a primitive Germanic/Celtic, Pictish matriarchy, which ensured the survival of pre-Christian mores and a veneration for women amongst the European aristocracy."\(^{20}\) He also cites the "Spring Folk ritual": "Courtly love evolved out of the folk traditions and ritual dance songs of Europe, particularly those associated with the rites of spring, or it was an actual survival of the pagan cult of Cybele or Maia, the Great Mother of the Gods."\(^{21}\) Boase admits that "the joyful

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\(^{20}\) Boase 75.

\(^{21}\) Boase 86. Gaston Paris, who first defined the concept of Courtly Love, believed the troubadour poetry originated in the "chants sung at the great pagan Celtic festivals of May Day." See Robert S. Briffault, *The Troubadours* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965) 21. Briffault rejects this thesis out of hand: "That the spread of the new Provençal style ousted what uncouth psalmodies may have previously been intoned at May celebrations is only natural. But those facts, if facts they be, contain no tittle of indication that can help to
festivities of 1 May, and the Virgin Mary, as she was depicted in the popular imagination, derive many of their attributes from the Great Mother of the Gods, whose syncretistic cultus was once widespread in western Asia, the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean. It was customary, among the aristocracy, to celebrate May Day with jousting and the recitation of poetry. The Floral Games at Toulouse, which were intended to promote a revival of troubadour poetry in the fourteenth century, were almost certainly linked indirectly with the pagan feast of Cybele and Attis."

However, he draws the line here in connecting Goddess worship to courtly love: "sexual licence which marked the regeneration of nature is incompatible with Courtly Love. The courtly lover did not rebel against the institution of marriage; social constraints were merely ignored. Furthermore the courtly ethic, with its stress on fidelity and purity, was far from being a 'natural morality'. In short, the essential features of Courtly Love cannot be explained by studying the folk traditions and the ritual dance songs of Europe." He feels further that the absence trace the Provençal Muse up to her spring. They elucidate in no way the origin and development of the distinctive characteristics of that new poetry" (21).

22 Boase 127.

23 Boase 127.
of proof that pagan Europe was ever matriarchal "in the true sense" (social predominance of women) militates against the matriarchal thesis.

Briffault sees the flowering of the courtly aesthetic as an apologetic for traditional aristocratic moral laxity in the face of repression by the Christian Church: "By bringing aristocratic usage into association with claims to cultivated taste and a refined emotional sensibility; by representing amorous relations as subject to fine distinctions passing, by their subtlety, the comprehension of the vulgar throng; by adopting heroic and knightly principles appropriate to the manifestation of lofty ideals and emotions, courtly and chivalric theories came to constitute a manner of apologetics seving to shield the time-honored way of life to which the privileged ruling class was accustomed. Love proclaimed itself noble that it might not be declared scandalous."

Briffault revives the Goddess as a thirteenth-century troubadour camouflage for a continued veneration of women and erotic love after the Albigensian Crusade. In this "crusade," the Church Fathers ruthlessly massacred heretical elements (Cathars, courtly poets) in Provence. Faced with the possibility of death, the remaining poets submitted to ecclesiastical dictates and "reformed" their poetry, lauding

chastity and venerating the Virgin Mary. The Christian Church, equally opposed to Mary worship which they correctly connected with pagan Goddess worship, "adopted what she could not suppress" and incorporated the cult of the Virgin. In Briffault's estimation, the troubadours were not really worshipping the Virgin (or the Goddess), but merely "substituting the name of Our Lady for that of the object of their profane passion."  

Boase and Briffault revive the Goddess without giving serious consideration to her role in the courtly ethic. To Robert Graves, the connection is much more direct. Believing that the basic theme of all true poetry is the invocation of the White Goddess of matriarchal myth, Graves postulates that courtly love found its original impetus in the Goddess-inspired poetry of Welsh bards. According to his theory of origins, a guild of Welsh minstrels had preserved "an astonishingly ancient literary tradition, mainly in the form of popular tales which preserved fragments not only of pre-Cymric, but of pre-Goidelic myth,


26 Marguerite Yourcenar makes the inescapable, in my opinion, connection between the Madonna and the Goddess when her character Giulio refers to the Virgin Mary as "La Bonne Mère" and comments: "Il se tut, sur ce mot qui à son insu assimilait Marie aux antiques Bonnes Déeses que l'homme n'a jamais cessé de prier." Denier du rêve (Paris: Plon, 1959) 37.

some of which goes back as far as the Stone Age." The Norman-French invaders of England brought the Welsh minstrels into their court, where Breton knights "who could understand Welsh recognized some of the tales as better versions of those which they had heard at home. The trovères, or finders, translated them into contemporary French and adapted them to the Provençal code of chivalry, and in their new dress they conquered Europe." Graves, whose devotion to the Goddess is unremitting, calls this change from pure Goddess poetry to the chivalric code "irresponsible."

From the vantage of this dissertation, the significant factor is not that the French poets "copied" the Welsh poetry, but that the French poetic consciousness was so receptive to this style of poetry and that it was so readily accepted and disseminated in French society. The popularity of the style attests to its responding to a preparedness and a need in the collective consciousness of the French people. As Boase brings out, there is no proof of matriarchy having existed in Europe. Nonetheless, as we have seen, from the cave dwellers to the megalith builders, to the Celtic druids of Gaul, to the surviving pagan rites of spring

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28 Graves, The White Goddess 20. The Cymry, according to Graves, were a tribal aristocracy of Brythonic origin who had conquered Wales. The Goidels belonged to the serf class under the Cymric conquerors.

29 Graves, White Goddess 20.
celebrations, there is considerable evidence of Goddess worship in France. Furthermore, the high social status of women during the Middle Ages, due to the absence of their men in the Crusades, and the governance by women leaders (Eléonore d'Aquitaine, Marie de Champagne, Aélis de Blois, and Mathilde, wife of Henri le Lion) created a receptive matriarchal social ambiance in France.30

One has only to compare the structure of the fêtes de mai to the central topos of courtly love poetry to see the underlying paradigm of matriarchal myth in both. Michèle Sarde reveals that in the May Day celebrations a married woman opened the ball with a "Roi de la jeunesse qui devenait ainsi son amant symbolique. Dans les heures ou les jours de licence qui suivaient, elle avait tout loisir de faire enrager son vieux mari si elle en avait le désir."31 This is obviously an updated, less violent version of the new king's overthrow of the old king for the love of the Goddess. Similarly, courtly love poetry celebrates the young poet's long-suffering adoration of a high-placed lady


31 Sarde, Regard sur les Françaises 251.
of society whose jealous old husband impedes the consummation of this love. The sense of the myth may have changed owing to the demands of Christian society, however, the paradigm of the venerated female from whom radiates the battling principles of the young and the old male remains the same. The fact that the Lady had to be a married woman, which emphasizes replacement rather than a simple joining, further confirms the similarity to Graves's ancient theme.

The Lady herself retains the dual characteristics of the Goddess who inspires both adoration and fear and loathing. On the surface of the courtly love convention, the Lady is placed on a pedestal and valorized above all else in the universe. All the values of the real world are reversed: riches are unimportant, reason is scorned, woman has all the power, and God favors young lovers. Woman is no longer the possession of man; she possesses his entire being through his longing. On the other hand, the Lady is also a cruel, haughty, faithless and capricious temptress. The poet's perpetual linking of his love with suffering and death expresses the Goddess's destructive character. As Graves states in another poetic context: She [the Goddess] was Death, but she granted poetic immortality to the victims whom she had seduced by her love-charms."\(^{32}\) The obstacle to the poet's love allows him to dwell on his desire all the

\(^{32}\) Graves, The White Goddess 432.
more; and it is from this wellspring that the poetry arises.\textsuperscript{33}

Denis de Rougemont wrote about the link between passion and death in the myth of Tristan and Isolde. Although unfamiliar with the specifics of the Goddess paradigm, he is able to capture the dynamics of the poet's love and destruction which brings about his rebirth: "Why does western man wish to suffer this passion, which lacerates him and which all his common sense rejects? Why does he yearn after this particular kind of love notwithstanding that its effulgence must coincide with his self-destruction? The answer is that he reaches self-awareness and tests himself only by risking his life—in suffering on the verge of death."\textsuperscript{34}

Whereas Rougemont did not recognize the Goddess, he did recognize that the spirit of the French people, which was "still pagan,"\textsuperscript{35} rejected the Christian doctrine of marriage. And herein lies the "need" for the courtly love doctrine. The sacrament of marriage was not instituted in France until the 11th century, coinciding with the flowering

\textsuperscript{33} The Jungian Richard Roberts sees courtly love as a collective male longing for the anima, the idealized woman within, and the poem is the grail to contain it. The poet serves the White Goddess from within. \textit{From Eden to Eros} 70.

\textsuperscript{34} Denis de Rougemont, \textit{Love in the Western World} (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940) 51.

\textsuperscript{35} Rougement 74.
of courtly love poetry. In the social realm, large numbers of young men were excluded from marriage because of the system of patrimony that left all inheritance to the oldest son. For this reason the husbands were always "old" and the lovers always young and longing for a woman. Sarde hypothesizes that the indissolubility of marriage created a class of "mal-mariées" whose frustration matched that of the disinherited youths. Their fantasies of adultery created the courtly love discourse.

The complexity of courtly love defies a comprehensive and totally elucidating explanation. However, if we regard all of the factors mentioned above, we can more readily understand why the French court and society were predisposed to accept and to promulgate a matriarchally based poetic consciousness. We can also perceive the danger inherent in this renewed apotheosis of Woman. The strengthening of her powers exacerbated male fear of emasculation at the hands of the empowered feminine. Sarde has categorized the power paradigm of courtly love as a gender reversal in which man is feminized (because of his powerlessness) and woman is masculinized (because of her power). In fact, as we have shown, it represented a return to a concept of the feminine principle dominating the weaker, subservient male.36

36 Jean Markale corroborates my position that courtly love represents a resurgence of the matriarchal principle: "Il faut dire que la fine amor, ou 'amour courtois', s'il est une exaltation de la féminité, est aussi et surtout la reconnaissance de la notion de la sourveraineté incarnée par
Richard Roberts, once again from the vantage of his Jungian psychology, theorizes that the emergence of courtly love poetry and the anarchistic flouting of the marriage convention created a male psychic backlash leading to the witchcraze of the Renaissance.37 Just as France was the site of the first depiction of Goddess imagery, it was also the site of the first secular trial on charges of witchcraft (Paris 1390).38 In Roberts's very plausible view, "as the flames of eros were fanned by courtly love, the sexual energy of the Great Mother became more than men could handle, resulting in the flight from the goddess in the escape to the intellectual homosexuality of the monasteries. . . . The male hysteria focussed relentlessly upon the sexual nature of witchcraft, and beneath this hysteria we see clearly masculine inadequacy before the power of

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37 "This erotic flowering, in the poetry of courtly love and in the radical concept of marriage, awakened sleeping monsters in the psyches of monks and nuns, and was followed by a collective repression of the anima and the erotic impulses thereof. This repression bred new monsters in the psyches of monks and inquisitors, whereupon witches rode the nightskies of the Renaissance, projected on to the face of the moon, the Mother Goddess herself, and projected also onto the innocent persons of the women of Europe, England and America." From Eden to Eros 30.

38 Roberts 66.
feminine sexuality . . ."\(^{39}\)

A Return to the Mother: French Romanticism

The Romantic movement in France represented a break with the patriarchal, Greco-Roman literary models in search of a new source of inspiration. By foregoing the imitation of the antique Fathers, the Romantic poets freed themselves to explore more personal, emotional, sensitive means of creation. All that is associated with femininity is considered good. In the wake of the political upheaval of the Revolution of 1789, a young generation of poets sought to rid itself of the old, and to create new forms through the mediation of the feminine principle. Woman becomes the Muse who inspires the poet to return to Nature and, ultimately, to aspire beyond the constraints of his mortal condition toward the Infinite. Man is weak, vulnerable, uncertain; nature is strong and enduring—in effect, immutable. The poet yearns to return to the womb/tomb of the eternal Mother.\(^{40}\) In reward for his sacrifice

\(^{39}\) Roberts 70-72.

\(^{40}\) Durand also sees in the Romantic cult of nature "une projection d'un complexe du retour à la mère." *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Bordas, "Etudes supérieures," 1969) 263. Erich Fromm notes that "formerly 'woman' signified her quality as lover, and union with her the experience of authentic 'humanness,' it became more and more to mean 'mother,' and the bond with her a return to 'nature' and harmonious life in nature's womb." *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* 90.
immortality is to be conferred on him. 41

As Marguerite Yourcenar has stated, the Romantics moved forward by going back to the Middle Ages for their inspiration: "jusqu'à un certain point l'étude du Moyen Âge a été une 'fuite en avant' pour la génération des romantiques; elle les a ramenés aux sources de la poésie populaire, au phénomène européen originel après les lucidités, mais aussi les sécheresses du XVIIIe siècle." 42

A number of other critics place the Romantic inspiration even further back in the age of the Goddess. Graves recognized in the Romantic poet "a fatalistic regard for the Goddess as the mistress who commanded his destiny," 43 but felt that the poet's excesses and decadence eliminated him from the field of "true" poets whose adoration and fear of the Goddess is more sacred and authentic.

Gilbert and Gubar cite Northrop Frye's identification in the Romantic period of a "revolutionary 'mother-goddess

41 Vigny's Chatterton exemplifies the Romantic poet. He pronounces Poetry an "ennemie fatale," a "fée malfaisante," born with the poet and cause of his doom. Chatterton drains poetry from the chalice, ancient symbol of the Goddess, and, typical of the Romantic poet who confuses himself with his work, burns his poems thus immolating himself like a sacred king. Alfred de Vigny, Chatterton (1835; Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1937).


myth' which allows power and dignity to women—a myth which would liberate the energy of all living creatures." 

For Erich Neumann the Romantics of the nineteenth century were "wholly dominated by this constellation in which the mother archetype of the collective unconscious overpowers the anima and by its fascination leads to the uroboric incest of the death urge or to madness." Neumann further generalizes that all inspiration is "imputed to the anima or transformative character of the Feminine in its immaterial, spiritual aspect."

Finally, Sarde identifies the Feminine in its Romantic garb as the dichotomous object of the poet's adoration and disgust. Her analysis best describes the poets' ambivalent relationship to the Muse/Goddess: Vigny's woman is "à la fois sorcière, fée, ange, and démon"; in Musset's feminine imagery "l'angélisme et le satanisme se disputent"; Stendhal's strong independent women dominate their lovers; Baudelaire's "dialectique du spleen et de l'idéal l'exaltait [la femme] tout en l'avilissant."

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45 Neumann, *The Great Mother*, note 18, 34.

46 Neumann 70.

47 Sarde 117.

48 Sarde 119.
In Sarde's informed view, Michelet et Hugo were the most "féminolâtres" of the Romantics, worshipping woman without vilifying her. Michelet reasserts the principle of matrilinearity and the femininity of "God": "Je me sens profondément le fils de la femme. ... Dieu est une mère."\textsuperscript{49} Hugo practices a "culte de la femme-nature."\textsuperscript{50}

Woman as Incarnation of Surreality

In the early twentieth century, the masculine principle had reached a zenith of aggressivity as the barbarous World War I raged. The Surrealist movement reacted to this violence, seeking to change life and transform the world through a "new" anarchistic poetic spirit. The "transformation" was to occur through a kind of mystical identification with all the unconscious forces of nature and through a systematic breakdown of the constraining barriers of logic and reason. Although they did not always identify it as such, the dynamics of their approach to change was through the violent overthrow of bourgeois patriarchal values (the Law of the Father: logic, reason) and a cultivation of matriarchal style consciousness.

Tristan Tzara lists the predilections of the Surrealist group for primitive and occult phenomena: "amour des


\textsuperscript{50} Sarde 123.
fantômes, des sorcelleries, de l'occultisme, de la magie, du vice, du rêve, des folies, des passions, du folklore véritable ou inventé, de la mythologie (voire des mystifications), des utopies sociales ou autres, des voyages réels or imaginaires, du bric-à-brac, des merveilles, des aventures et moeurs des peuples sauvages, et généralement de tout ce qui sortait des cadres rigides où l'on avait placé la beauté pour qu'elle s'identifiât avec l'esprit . . ."  

The elected precursors of the group reflect the Surrealists further predilection for the literaty Father-bashers of the past: the fantasies of the Middle Ages; French, English and German romanticism; Nerval, Baudelaire, Cros, Huysman, Germain Nouveau, Jarry, and Rimbaud.

In the true spirit of matriarchal mythic consciousness, the Surrealists sought to celebrate life in its purest, most natural form by intensifying and sacralizing the connection between the individual and the external world, indeed of the entire cosmos. The "true self" that Breton and his followers so ardently quested after was considered co-terminous with the universe. Just as in Goddess ritual, with its linking of a divinely inspired procreative act to the fertility of the land and its inhabitants, the Surrealists hoped to tear down the boundaries between the

self and the world to permit a perpetual osmosis between man and his environment. The movement also sought to nullify individual effort in favor of a collective spirit of creativity. Like the cyclical process of renewal found in the Goddess cults, the Surrealists believed that their revolution had to be perpetual, not a linear, one-time overthrow. "La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas."\(^{52}\)

Of course, the most intimate connection between Surrealism and matriarchal consciousness is the elevation of Woman to the central position of mediator of surreality. Louis Aragon intones his devotion to Elsa as reverently and as humbly as any ancient Goddess worshipper in Le Fou d'Elsa: "Je t'ai placée en plein jour sur la pierre votive/ Et désormais c'est de toi qu'est toute dévotion/ Tout murmure de pèlerin, tout agenouillement de la croyance/ Tout cri de l'agonisant [. . .]/ Alors je m'aperçois que je t'ai donné la place réservée à Dieu/ Car de tout temps ici régnaient la prière et sa gloire."\(^{53}\) Breton's Nadja is a prophetess and a madwoman, a mediator of the marvels of the universe. The poet Eluard, like the Star-son, is born from his own embrace with the Feminine and he sings in celebration of his love: "O toi qui supprime l'oubli,

\(^{52}\) André Breton, Nadja (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 187.

\(^{53}\) Louis Aragon, "D'Elsa qui est une mosquée à ma folie," Le Fou d'Elsa, qtd. in Sarde, Regard sur les Française 127.
l'espoir et l'ignorance,/ Qui supprime l'absence et qui me mets au monde,/ Je chante pour chanter, je t'aime pour chanter/ Le mystère où l'amour me crée et se délivre."\textsuperscript{54}

However, like the double postulate of the Goddess's attraction, her love can also be destructive for man. As an advocate of "amour fou," Nadja attempts to force Breton to destroy the two of them in a wild, head-on crash into death. Aragon personifies France as a "belle dame sans merci" who requires the sacrifice of his blood: "Ma Dame veut savoir que rien ne m'humilie/ Par elle demandé tout s'en métamorphose/ Elle exige de moi de si terribles choses/ Qu'il faut que mon coeur saigne et que mon genou plie/ On me verra trembler mais non pas lui faillir/ Toujours placer amour plus haut qu'honneur Certain/ Que la nuit n'est pas longue à cause du matin/ Et je saurai baisser le front pour obéir."\textsuperscript{55}

Despite the sometimes destructive demands of the Feminine, overall, love is considered the only recourse that can reconcile man with life. Each Surrealist poet seems to define life's ultimate goal as merger with the Feminine. Courtly love celebrated submission to, and desire for, the Mother; romanticism yearned for return to the Mother; and

\textsuperscript{54} Paul Eluard, "Celle de toujours, toute," \textit{Capitale de la douleur} (Paris: Gallimard, 1926) 141.

surrealism desired merger with the Mother in an effort to achieve the resolution of all contradictions.

This positive valorization of the Feminine is especially interesting in light of certain American post-psychoanalytic theories in which male fear of fusion with the mother (becoming like the mother, i.e. a woman) has been identified as the main ingredient in male gender formation. According to these theories, it is precisely his over-differentiation from the mother that defines male individuality. On the contrary, as we have shown, in the French male psyche the attraction of the Mother (albeit tinged with an ambivalent approach/avoidance compulsion), and not her repulsion, has governed a recurrent type of French poetic consciousness steeped, as it were, in ancient matriarchal origins. Interconnectedness with the Mother gives birth to the text and, although the poet may suffer in the process, immortality is the reward for his sacrifice.

Contemporary French Critical Theory

Alice Jardine's work, Gynesis, is an important source of information on the place of Woman in French critical

theory and the attitude of French women theorists toward theories of the feminine. As she explains, "all the major theoreticians in France are concerned with 'woman' 'the feminine' or variations thereof . . . but the 'feminine' has little to do with women." 57 Or, as Jonathan Culler has stated, "in recent French writing 'woman' has come to stand for any radical force that subverts the concepts, assumptions, and structures of traditional male discourse." 58

Based on Culler's pronouncement and others similar to it, modern French critical theory unquestionably proceeds in a direct line with the anti-patriarchal tradition which seeks rebirth through access to the feminine. As in the theories of Bachofen, Briffault, the Socialist camp, Jung, as well as through the poetic consciousness of the troubadours, the Romantics and the Surrealists, the feminine is seen as a means to transforming the world.

French women literary critics, such as Hélène Cixous, Irène Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, infrequently write about other women writers and their work has not proved very useful for my study of matriarchal myth in contemporary women writers in French. Each of these critics believes that since the Feminine has been consistently repressed in

57 Jardine 34-5.
58 Culler 61.
patriarchal society and discourse, since "woman" is a social not a natural construct, it is fruitless to study women authors.59 Yet each of these critics proposes a revalorization of the Feminine which Domna Stanton has correctly identified as a "maternal metaphor" seeking to reunite modern woman with the primal, pre-oedipal, archaic Mother who engendered without the Father.60 We see this pre-conscious, pre-oedipal Mother as the Great Mother of matriarchal myth reasserting her power on the modern female psyche.

That modern women critics on both sides of the Atlantic should construct their theories in Mother-dominated terrains is hardly surprising. Their persistent referral to female-centered myths, such as that of Demeter and Persephone, attests to their need for new mythical paradigms with which they can identify their own female experience in a positive way. Replacing the Father-centered Oedipal complex with a Mother-or daughter-centered myth provides the female


validation they seek without the interposition of the Father. Union with the Mother in modern critical theory by women is a female self-begetting that spurns the role of the Father, much as happens in the most ancient myths of origins before paternity was recognized. This Father-spurning, as with the courtly love poets, the Romantics, and the Surrealists, is an act of dissidence, a revolutionary force designed to sweep away old patriarchal structures to bring about change. However, the woman writer hopes the feminine will directly benefit women and not merely serve as a mediating force for exclusive male use.

There is no doubt that the legitimizing myth of male supremacy needs to be deconstructed. Modern women need to explore matriarchal consciousness to validate their growing sense of female self-worth and to motivate continued independence and assertiveness. However, they cannot inscribe themselves permanently in a primitive scenario that denies the reality of the Father's role in the creation process. An exclusively "mothered" text is just as narcissistic and biased as an exclusively "fathered" text. An "ungendered" text scarcely kindles the fires of the imagination. A reading of sexual difference more in line with the designs of nature removes the fabricated myths of hierarchy to celebrate shared jouissance and creation through the merger of the sexes—a merger which leaves the constituent parts intact.
What is needed is a society and a discourse whose newly developed mythic ideal favors a highly valued Feminine and Masculine principle reigning side by side, no longer pitted against each other in hierachical stances of domination and submission. Eternal essences would no longer be confined to one sex or the other or used to diminish the life possibilities of either one. The positive feminine virtues of nurturance, interrelatedness, and unity would be as available for male use as the positive male virtues of independence, competition, and the external quest in the world at large would be for female use. In a similar vein, the "parented" text would propose an integrative gender vision conducive to healthy psychic equilibrium.

It is because of the paucity of feminist criticism in France that I am undertaking to study three contemporary women authors writing in French in light of my studies of matriarchal myth. As will be shown, their highly diverse writing styles and divergent uses of matriarchal myth do not contribute to a universal notion of feminine specificity in writing. Rather, they point to each woman writer's unique personal and cultural history which influences her choice of myth and produces her particular vision of gender relations.
PART II

THE MOTHERED, FATHERED, AND PARENTED TEXT:

CHOOSING A MYTHICAL PARADIGM
The Mother's Legacy: Matriarchal Myth in Anne Hébert's Kamouraska

Reine et maîtresse certaine crucifiée aux portes de la ville la plus lointaine [. . .]

Nous t'invoquons, ventre premier, fin visage d'aube passant entre les côtes de l'homme la dure barrière du jour

Vois tes fils et tes époux pourrissent pèle-mêle entre tes cuisses, sous une seule malédiction

Mère du Christ souviens-toi des filles dernière-nées, celles qui sont sans nom ni histoire, tout de suite fracassées entre deux très grandes pierres

Source des larmes et du cri, de quelles parures vives nous léguas-tu la charge et l'honneur. L'angoisse et l'amour, le deuil et la joie se célèbrent à fêtes égales, en pleine face gravées, comme des paysages profonds

--Anne Hébert, "Eve"

Introduction

In this chapter we shall first discuss Kamouraska as theater, showing how the main protagonist, Elisabeth, plays simultaneous and contradictory roles in her life drama. We shall then discuss Anne Hébert's critics who have detected mythical subtexts, noting the similarities to and differences from our approach. Next, we shall explore Anne Hébert's choice of matriarchal myth and locate the mythic references within Kamouraska. In this section, Elisabeth's
ambivalence, her inner voyage from the perspective of the cave, and her ultimate failure to resuscitate the Goddess will be traced. In the last section, we shall attempt an intertextual analysis of Hébert's works for a deeper understanding of her vision of gender in Kamouraska.

The Novel as Existential Theater

Kamouraska\(^1\) is the story of Elisabeth d'Aulnières-Tassy who as a young woman murdered her abusive husband Antoine through the proxy of her lover George. Twenty years later she re-imagines during a drug-induced sleep the original events surrounding the murder scheme, for which she was subsequently acquitted. In her narrative, Hébert deftly interweaves a complex array of voices which emanate from Elisabeth's psyche.\(^2\) Scenes from Elisabeth's youth, young married life, and maturity are pieced together as the triple stages of her life merge into one woman's archetypal story.

In the theatre of her mind, Elisabeth transforms a


\(^2\) Janet Paterson concurs that Elisabeth's voice is multiple: "Voilà pourquoi, certes, au niveau des dimensions spatiales, Elisabeth est toujours là et ailleurs; voilà pourquoi ses voix sont plurielles et diffuses. Figure multiple d'un sujet clivé dont la réintégration est irréalisable soit dans la réalité soit dans le rêve (dont le ça demeure, en quelque sorte, irrécupérable), le personnage d'Elisabeth incarne une confrontation tragique entre le réel et le rêve." Anne Hébert: Architexture romanesque (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1985) 144.
murderous act into a ritual slaying paralleling the Gravesian theme of matriarchal myth. In so doing, she is the lone celebrant of an ancient sacred rite. Unlike the critics who interpret Elisabeth's story as an attempt to come to terms with her guilt, we see her narrative as an effort to free herself from guilt through psychic identification with the powerful mythic female figure described in our previous chapters. She revives her sacred Goddess self in torturous contrast to the profane Mme Rolland of the quotidian—a figure who chooses submission over self-assertion.

As Mme Rolland, the mature voice of the present, Elisabeth unfolds her drama. She peacefully awaits her husband's death—a death which will open the floodgates of her conscious repression and launch her on the high sea of love and adventure: "Essuyer mes yeux secs, flâner dans une ville inconnue, immense, sans fin, pleine d'hommes. Toutes voiles battantes. Sur la haute mer. La grande ville est comme la mer hautaine et folle. Partir, à la recherche de l'unique douceur de mon coeur. Amour perdu" (10-11).

However, it is Elisabeth who will assume the principal role

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3 Anne Hébert's own statement regarding her text helps confirm our theory. She stated in a radio interview in 1974 that one of the themes of Kamouraska was "la déculpabilisation de la femme." Qtd. in Murray Sachs, "Love on the Rocks: Anne Hébert's Kamouraska," ed. & intro. Paula Gilbert Lewis, Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Woman Writers of Quebec (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985) 115.
in the drama, which she will play with emotion and bravado, before resuming the role of her inauthentic corrollary, Mme Rolland: "Et moi, je suis une femme de théâtre. Emotions, fièvres, cris, grincements de dents. Je ne crains rien. Sauf l'ennui. J'irai jusqu'au bout de ma folie. C'est une obligation que j'ai. Je suis lancée. Puis je me rangerai. Je redeviendrai Mme Rolland" (78).

Anne Hébert aptly chooses the theatrical metaphor to underscore Elisabeth's conflicting mythic choices. Elisabeth is torn between the inner role of Goddess of matriarchal myth and her external role modeled on the patriarchal stereotype of the devoted wife and mother. She also on occasion assumes the role of witch: patriarchy's characterization of the strong mythic female or the real woman who audaciously assumes male functions or challenges male authority. In her confusion, Elisabeth sometimes cannot resist the label patriarchy reserves for the woman

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4 Both Janet Paterson (Anne Hébert) and Françoise Maccabée-Iqbal ("Kamouraska, 'la fausse représentation démasquée,'" Voix et images, 4, 1979: 460-478) note the theatrical metaphor in Kamouraska. Neither recognizes, however, the underlying contradiction between the matriarchal self and the patriarchally-defined self. Paterson contrasts dream versus reality, while Iqbal exposes Elisabeth's striving toward masculinity.

who murders her husband.  

The effort to disapprove Elisabeth by plumbing her unconscious mind in search of self-enlightenment and rebirth, is ultimately unsuccessful. Elisabeth never integrates the empowered feminine encountered in her unconscious with her conscious self. Awakening, she learns that her second husband, whom she had thought near death, is quite imperiously alive. She condemns herself to the perpetual role of submissive wife of patriarchy as her Goddess self dies.

Mythical Subtexts - The Critics

A number of critics have written about Kamouraska, claiming to have found a mythical subtext. Yet none has identified the Gravesian ancient theme as the cornerstone of the text as I intend to demonstrate. Each, in his or her

6 French-Canadian myth is strongly impregnated with the image of the husband-killing witch. The story of Marie Josephe Corriveau who killed her abusive husband in 1763 became a legendary witch whose tale has been recounted for two hundred years. This phenomenon is explained in L'Histoire des femmes au Québec: "Les femmes qui tuent leurs maris ou leurs enfants remettent en question l'autorité masculine. Deux des seules explications acceptées par les hommes pour justifier cette révolte subversive menaçant les fondements de leur autorité sont celles de la sorcière, de la mauvaise femme qui connaît les secrets du diable et de la folie. La rébellion féminine est ainsi niée et nommée de telle manière que les hommes ne se sentent plus menacés." Micheline Dumont, Michèle Jean, Marie Lavigne, et Jennifer Stoddart, L'Histoire des femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles (Montréal: Les Quinze, 1982) 113.
unique way, lends confirmation to my position.

Most of the critics who have written about Hébert are Canadians themselves, thus able to recognize the specifically French-Canadian aspect of her work. Denis Bouchard praises Kamouraska as a masterpiece of "la Québécoise avant qu'elle ne devienne parisienne." He states with pride that it is possible to live in France without renouncing one's culture, even an "informe" culture such as that of Quebec. He claims that despite its marginalization, its cultural and geographic isolation, its lack of identity and artistic tradition, "C'est le Québec qui figure au centre de l'oeuvre [entier], c'est lui qui est le personnage central." Further, it is an "absence d'amour, une violence systématique, une orgie du rêve de destruction" that defines Québec for him.

Bouchard's categorization of gender relations in Hébert's works makes his description of Québec intriguing. He portrays all of Hébert's male characters as tragically weak, mystically neurotic, in their desire for sainthood. Hébert's women, he notes, are sexually frustrated and

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7 Denis Bouchard, Une Lecture d'Anne Hébert: La recherche d'une mythologie (Montreal: Collection Littérature/Cahiers du Québec/Hurtubise HMH, 1977) 178. He notes that Hébert has lived in Paris since 1956.

8 Bouchard 179.

9 Bouchard 190.

10 Bouchard 190.
diabolic. Both, he asserts, are allegories of the French-Canadian man and woman that become mythologized in Hébert's work. The female's permanent lack of satisfaction will lead her inevitably to execute the weak male.

If we broaden our optic view to encompass Québec and its cultural relations to France, Bouchard might be said to lament the weaker "femme" devoured by the domineering "mother" who is never satisfied by his literary output. Anne Hébert for him mythically captures the painfully perceived inferior essence of Québec, a province rendered impotent by its uneasy devotion to the powerful Mother.

Bouchard's two-tier myth of intra-territorial gender relations and inter-national cultural relations is especially interesting because in the very language he uses to formulate his myth he describes the insatiable Goddess of love and death. He speaks of Woman as "la femme insaisissable" who kills instead of giving herself, who offers up another "sacrifice humain."\(^{11}\) Further, he identifies the violence in all of Hébert's work as circumscribed within a closed circle and stemming from "une révolte sourde de haine au centre de laquelle l'Eve apocalyptique ne voyait plus que des foetus d'hommes à détruire insidieusement. . . ."\(^{12}\) His horror before the

\(^{11}\) Bouchard 148.

\(^{12}\) Bouchard 177.
figure of the Hebertian woman, contrasted with his unfailing sympathy for the "tragic" male, expresses his male psychic fear of the powerful Goddess.

Bouchard assumes the reader concurs with his categorization of the French-Canadian man and woman, since he never provides any supporting evidence for his theory. Marie Couillard takes a different view of gender relations in Québec and furnishes a cogent justification for her position. In her excellent article "Écrire et vivre au Québec des femmes: Impression et expression d'une culture," she describes the history of woman's role in the French-Canadian culture. She first insists on the important contribution of strong independent women leaders in the formation of the colony. She emphasizes the mythologizing of the French-Canadian woman's fecundity, which was so essential in establishing the colony. Man is depicted as an authoritative, yet absent, father figure. The figure of the mother binds the fabric of family and society together. She is essentially an archetypal mother who ensures fertility and the solidarity of life.

Ironically, this strong woman's strength derives from her devotion to, and her upholding of, the patriarchal society. Submission to the father is expected and women are

refused autonomy. Couillard describes French-Canadian literature of the early twentieth century in the same terms as the French literary tradition of neutralizing the autonomous woman discussed in Chapter One: "[T]oute résistance, toute manifestation d'autonomie de la part du personnage féminin se solde dans les romans de cette époque par une élimination punitive du récalcitant comme par exemple la mort, la clôture dans un couvent, la disparition etc."

"La femme forte" of French-Canadian folklore is not really a strong, independent woman, then, but rather a strong mother serving the patriarchal cause. Couillard cites Jean Lemoyne’s portrait of this mother: "C'est une apothéose: la mère canadienne française se dresse en calicot sur son 'prélart' devant un poêle et une marmite, un petit sur la hanche gauche, une grande cuiller à la main droite, une gruppe de petits aux jambes et un petit dans le ber de la revanche, là à côté de la boîte à bois." The myth surrounding this strong mother changes in the novels after World War II to a menacing figure who hinders her children's full development. Anne Hébert had already created the prototype of this obliterative mother in her short story "Le Torrent," written in 1945.

14 Couillard 88.

15 Jean Lemoyne, Convergences (Montréal: HMH, 1961) 103 qtd. in Couillard 92.
According to Couillard, the French-Canadian novel of the 1960's reflects the societal demystification process of the "Révolution tranquille" expressed through violence and revolt. A merely menacing mother now becomes "un monstre dévorant" (because of her excessive internalization of patriarchal values). Couillard states that the Révolution tranquille only substituted "un mythe à un autre sans pour autant restituer à la femme sa qualité d'être." From Great Mother to witch, it is hard to disentangle the Woman from her myth.

After tracing the increasingly negative mythification of Woman in French-Canadian literature, Couillard concludes that novels like Hébert's Kamouraska, Les Enfants du sabbat, and Héloïse break the progression by demystifying man from his clearly valorized role as the "héros-protecteur." Hébert accomplishes this by exaggerating male mythic fears of women through caricatures intended to smash the stereotypes of both the "déesse bénéfique" and the manly defender of women. Kamouraska, more than anything else for Couillard, defies the strong male stereotype in creating the images of the "Seigneur assassiné, ... le Saint damné"; it

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16 Couillard 94.
17 Couillard 95.
18 Couillard 97.
depicts the "Époux et Père gisant à l'agonie."  

Both Bouchard and Couillard have arrived at the same point in Hébert's work while approaching it from different angles. Bouchard sees her powerful female figure as a telling symbol of the real Québécoise who diminishes the male. Couillard sees the empowered female as a manifestation of male mythic fear designed to undercut the myth of his power. She feels that Hébert's feminine consciousness drives her to reduce the oppressor in inverse proportion to the size of his fears. In either case, the mythically large female looms over the miniature male in a terrain that is specifically French-Canadian, yet unmistakably redolent of the European Goddess of yore. 

Henry Cohen, like Couillard, identifies the male characters of the novel as antitheses of the québécois hero. Elisabeth for him is also counter-stereotypic of the ideal québécoise. Cohen, however, penetrates deeper, finding more ancient mythic subtexts. First, he states that the novel resembles the fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast" in a "version allotropique où une femme fatale attire sur un être sauvage la vengeance d'une société ignorante."  

He sees Antoine as a coarse but vulnerable lord who must die as a scapegoat for the collective guilt of the community whose

19 Couillard 96.

sins he mirrors. The likeness of this interpretation to the ritual killing of the king for the well-being of the community is inescapable.

Drawing on Greek mythology, Cohen recalls the myth of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur. George becomes a Theseus who kills the dragon Antoine to purge himself of an inner monstrosity. "Le héros descend dans le labyrinthe de l'hiver québécois, relié à son Elisabeth-Ariane par le fil mince de la route qui relie Sorel à Kamouraska."21 Here we meet again the Goddess, for, as Graves states, "Ariadne . . . was an orgiastic goddess, and . . . male human sacrifice was an integral part of her worship . . . ."22 Cohen correctly assesses that "l'amour-passion désunit souvent plus qu'il n'unit, puisqu'il provoque des crimes que ne pardonneront jamais les dieux,"23 but here the "crime" is a sacred ritual performed in service to the Goddess. He perceives the "univers réglé par des dieux,"24 but not the universe governed by the Goddess.

Henri Servin identifies a Christian mythic dimension in Kamouraska contained particularly in the "thème obsessionnel

21 Cohen 108.
23 Cohen 109.
24 Cohen 109.
de la crucifixion"²⁵. Even relying on Christian imagery we again encounter the Goddess, for, as both Graves and Campbell point out, Jesus was but one in a long series of dying and reborn gods. He was "Son of the Sun-God . . . offered himself as eucharistic sacrifice for his people . . . and has been worshipped . . . as if he were another Tammuz, Dionysus, Zagreus, Orpheus, Hercules or Osiris."²⁶ Hébert's recurrent image of the "pietà sauvage," takes on new meaning in its matriarchal context as the Goddess cradling the dying god.

The Goddess Lost

Two other critics recognize the empowered female in Kamouraska, but attribute her strength to varying non-divine sources. Ruth Major, writing about Kamouraska and les Enfants du sabbat, comments that it is women who "détiennent le pouvoir de vie et de mort."²⁷ Their grandeur lies in their power over death: "elles sont grandes par la mort, le meurtre et le chaos puisque c'est le seul pouvoir qui leur soit octroyé. Les pouvoirs juridiques et/ou sociaux sont le lieu des hommes: elles doivent les contourner pour se


²⁶ Graves, White Goddess 423.

réaliser." It is not their matriarchal divinity that enables them to demand sacrifice--rather murder, witchcraft, and vampirism are their only possible access to power in a patriarchal society.

In Françoise Maccabée-Iqbal's scheme, Elisabeth's power comes from an assimilation of masculine traits compensating for her feelings of inferiority associated with the female condition. Iqbal's thesis is totally understandable in light of her use of the male-centered theories of Alfred Adler and Gilbert Durand. By associating Elisabeth's power with a compulsion towards masculinity rather than with a powerful assertion of matriarchal femininity, her interpretation irreparably clashes with my own. She sees theatrical ceremonial rituals instead of the sacred marriage for the benefit of the community: "Les notables de Sorel, réveillés la nuit, s'ennuient le jour. Nous leur offrirons la vie et la mort dans un tourbillon qui les effraye et les fascine. Bénis sommes-nous par qui le scandale arrive" (Kamouraska, 131). She detects "un piège de coquette" in place of Elisabeth the huntress. For her, George is a savior making his stations of the cross, not the God of the Waxing Year doing battle with his rival. In performing the murder, she feels that George is sacrificing his unconscious

28 Major 467.

femininity. Blind to the ritual rivalry between two men for the love of the Goddess, she establishes a fundamental rivalry between the masculine and the feminine. Her final citation from Durand perfectly describes the impetus for the Goddess ritual in "la dialectique matérielle de la vie et de la mort, la mort qui sort de la vie et la vie qui sort de la mort." Yet she finds only a conjunction of the masculine and the feminine in a sexually polyvalent uroboros.

The Goddess Found

The final mythically-oriented critic is Barbara Godard. She talks about "new myths of origins . . . which focus on women's relationships to women" in Kamouraska, where the "new myth" is the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone. Godard proposes that Hébert "take[s] the quest motif from men's writing (a quest for the Holy Grail) and drape[s] it in the garments of the Great Mother." Elisabeth must recognize "the lost tradition of the goddess, triple in nature . . . virgin, mother, and hag, variously autonomous, nurturing, and destructive, bringer of life and of death."

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30 Durand, Structures anthropologiques, qtd. in Iqbal 478.
32 Godard 34.
37 Godard 24-5.
In Godard's schema, Elisabeth's interior journey is designed to enable her to recognize her "source of inner power" and to find "a mythic prehistory when women were revered."38 Discovering the Great Mother within her, Elisabeth has the potential (which she does not realize) to give birth to herself symbolically and to find freedom.

Godard's introduction of goddess theory into her criticism is typical of many women critics of the 1970's and 1980's. These writers have focused exclusively on an idealized reading of the Demeter myth which comes to represent female selfhood, female bonding, and women's superior connection to creation and to nature.39 Susan

38 Godard 34.

39 See, for example, Carol Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980): "The reemergence of the Goddess in contemporary culture gathers together many of the themes of women's spiritual quest. It is a new naming of women's power, women's bodies, women's feelings of connection to nature, and women's bonds with each other" (128).

See also Annis Pratt, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981): "[Women novelists] have dug the goddess out of the ruins and cleansed the debris from her face, casting aside the gynophbic masks that have obscured her beauty, her power, and her beneficence. In so doing, they have made of the woman's novel a pathway to the authentic self, to the roots of our selves beneath consciousness of self, and to our innermost being" (178).

An excellent summary of women writers' use of the myth of Demeter and Persephone "to re-define, to re-affirm and to celebrate female consciousness itself" (303) can be found in Susan Guber, "Mother, maiden and the marriage of death: Women writers and an ancient myth," Women's Studies, vol. 6 (1975): 301-315.
Gubar shows the exclusive connection in many women authors between the Goddess and a nurturing ability to create. These idealized readings are the female correlative of the patriarchal myths in that they privilege their own sex as the principle purveyor of good. As Pratt states, "[T]he archetype of the goddess can vary from gynophobic to celebratory according to the critic's views on femininity."^40 Where Northrop Frye identifies a feminine figure as "Venus, whose alternative form is Diana of the triple will, the white goddess who always kills, and whose rebirth is for herself," women writers, according to Pratt, see the "erotically independent, self-regenerative, and organically powerful [female] archetype."^41

Unfortunately, a totally beneficent reading of the Goddess denies the historical reality of male sacrifice in her worship. It is the violence in the ritual which, as shown above, explains the frightful power of the Goddess in the male psyche and her excessive repression in the history of civilization and religion. Godard, like Pratt, looks to myths of origins that firmly link mothers and daughters. While mentioning the destructive aspect of the Goddess, she never connects it to Elisabeth's story. Godard's Elisabeth seeks her lost mother in order to give birth to herself.

^40 Pratt 138.

^41 Pratt.
This portrayal denies Elisabeth's deathly relation to the male figures in her life, and thus obscures the paradigm of the Gravesian ancient theme so central to the story.

The "Mothered" Text: Hébert's Use of Matriarchal Myth

One cannot deny the French-Canadian specificity of Kamouraska and its personal relevance to Anne Hébert. For one thing, as Delbert Russell demonstrates, the story itself is based on an actual historical incident and "the victim of the murder was, in fact, distantly related to Anne Hébert's mother."42 Further, "Kamouraska abounds in allusions to place names, and respects the objective existence of the major characters and events in the historical incident."43

Since Québec has mythologized the strong, fertile, nurturing mother who holds together the fabric of society, it is not surprising to find that matriarchal myth predominates in one of her writers. But, probing her work, it becomes clear that Hébert wishes to empower women at the expense of men. In order to do so, she must transcend the specifically French-Canadian maternal myth and delve deeper into her inherited French psychic structures. There she resuscitates the ancient mythic female whose sexuality overrides her maternity. The paradigm of the archetypal

42 Delbert Russell, Anne Hébert (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 74.

43 Russell 76.
goddess whose new consort must kill the old king on the model of the original Clytemnestra myth structures Kamouraska.

Undoubtedly, personal factors also played a role in her choice of matriarchal myth. We know from René Lacôte's book, Anne Hébert, that she had a happy childhood in a balanced home with an equal number of girl and boy siblings. She was mostly educated by her father, whom she admired; her principal companion in childhood and young adulthood was her cousin, De Saint-Denys Garneau, who was like a god for her. Both her father and her cousin were poets in their own right.

Hébert's original impetus to create may well have derived from identification with these two important male figures in her life, representing both the old and the new literary generations. But, she "both . . . claim[s] the male model and den[ies] its maleness"44 by becoming a writer for whom the female condition is central to her work. Perhaps in order to assert her particularity and to differentiate herself from impossibly male personal and literary influences, she needed to discover the empowered feminine and establish a maternal relation to her text.

The similarity between the Gravesian theme and her novel might suggest an intentional mythic choice. However,

44 Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood 140.
in her letter to me Anne Hébert writes: Au moment où j'ai écrit Kamouraska je ne connaissais pas la théorie de Graves sur l'ère pré-patriarcale. J'ai écrit mon roman en toute innocence. Peut-être parce que j'ai toujours cru, très profondément, en l'extraordinaire vitalité de la femme et peut-être aussi parce que dans mon enfance j'ai connu, autour de moi, des femmes fortes et sûres d'elles-mêmes."

She avows that personal belief and powerful female role models influenced her choice.

Of course, we cannot expect the author to provide all the clues to her work; especially since, as the psychoanalyst Alice Miller states, "the writer, without knowing it, tells about his childhood when he writes" (emphasis added).

In the landscape surrounding the Hébert's mother's family home in Sainte-Catherine de Fossambault, where Hébert was born and spent her summers, we find perhaps another personal clue. Lacôte emphasizes the hostility and harshness of the terrain and its importance in initiating Hébert to "la vie secrète des eaux, des arbres et des plantes . . . ." Lacôte describes the terrain like the Goddess in her destructive aspect: "[L]a nature encore indomptée menace toujours de reprendre aux hommes son

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bien." 47 This "unconquerable nature," which impregnates Hébert's personality (in Lacôte's words), may also have dictated, in part, her choice of matriarchal myth.

In Kamouraska Hébert sets up a strong matriarchy as the foundation of her heroine's young life. As Herbert Russell points out, certain of Hébert's changes in the details of the family of the actual murderess lead to an emphasis on the "feminine 'solidarity'" of Elisabeth d'Aulnières' household, and the absence of men." 48 For Russell, these changes translate into an "unbalanced and excessively feminine" 49 upbringing for Elisabeth. Hébert has indeed established a matriarchal family that encourages an outbreak of active feminine desire. Her exclusively "mothered" heroine plays out her life in a "mothered" text where female desire dominates until it oversteps its bounds and is repressed by the paternal forces.

In Hébert's telling of the incident, Elisabeth's father dies during her mother's pregnancy. The grieving mother withdraws from the maternal role, thus allowing Elisabeth freedom of choice on the construction of her femininity. She is essentially left without a role model or a parental enforcing agent. Unhampered by society's dictates,

47 Lacôte 18.
48 Russell 80.
49 Russell 81.
Elisabeth chooses a marginalized femininity that resembles the modern masculine sex role but, in fact, recalls the strong woman of matriarchal myth. She prefers to play with boys (who are freer) and her hair is clipped short. As an adolescent, she is a young Diana, "la chasseresse," (66). She knows how to aim and, as Antoine remarks, "[c]'est rare pour une femme" (67). As an adult woman looking for the courage to enter into an adulterous relationship, she tries to remember back to her untrammelled childhood as a source of power: "Retrouver l'enfance libre et forte en moi. La petite fille aux cheveux tondus s'échappant de la maison par une fenêtre" (123).

Elisabeth's mother believes totally in the female solidarity of family, stating that "après avoir donné naissance à une petite fille, [les femmes mariées] n'ont plus qu'à devenir veuves le plus rapidement possible" (98). The three unmarried aunts, to whom she eventually confers her daughter's upbringing, echo in unison their sorrow that "la dynastie des femmes seules ne se perpétue pas éternellement" (98). Matrilinearity is an established fact in Elisabeth's family. In a family myth where the father must die, the Oedipal complex is inoperative. Clytemnestra rules until suppressed in the name of the dead father.

Elisabeth's private myth of ultimate freedom is incompatible with patriarchy's designs for women seen through its own myths. The old aunts themselves demonstrate
conflicting mythic bases as they instill in Elisabeth the patriarchal vision of feminine happiness. At first accepting their idealized image of the romantic adventure and its culmination in marriage in patriarchal society, Elisabeth soon recognizes all this as "Les fables de Dieu et celles des hommes. Les Noces de Cana, La Fiancée de Lammermoor, À la claire fontaine, jamais je ne t'oublierai. L'amour, la belle amour des chansons et des romans" (69).

Within the confines of their home, the aunts' mythic base is much more matriarchal. As seen above, they recognize matrilineal descent only. When Elisabeth's marriage fails, they do everything in their power to remove the insidious male from her life and return her to the matriarchal fold. They even protect her after the murder plot, for their love and their female solidarity are limitless. "Me réfugier auprès de mes tantes. Leur amour infini. Leur tendre pitié" (203). They worship Elisabeth like a goddess, exempting her from society's laws: "Elle

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50 R. W. Connell in *Gender and Power* defines true love as the only acceptable escape route society maps out for the woman living the constricted feminine life designed to subordinate her: the "dichotomized world of sexual ideology . . . claims a way for each woman as a loved individual to escape the narrow and impoverished world the dichotomy constructs for women as a group" (248-9).

51 The exile of Antoine reminds us of the exogamous matrilinear family where, according to Erich Neumann, the males are expelled and must "live on the margin of the female group with which they are sexually associated." Neumann, *The Great Mother* 270.
passerait au coeur du feu, sans se brûler; au plus profond
du vice sans que s'altère son visage. La tragique, dure
vertu de la beauté suffisante, invente ses propres lois.
Vous ne pouvez comprendre. Elle est au-dessus des lois
ordinaires de la terre" (47). Yet patriarchy's values
undermine their matriarchal confidence: "C'est notre faute
aussi. Nous t'avons mal élevée, Elisabeth, pourrie. Petite
idole, statuette d'or dans notre désert. Trois si pauvres
vieilles filles de Sorel. Ah! mes soeurs nous nous damnons
avec la Petite! Ah!" (48).

Elisabeth's demystification of motherhood underscores
her deviance from patriarchal mythologies glorifying the
Madonna and child. Her first two pregnancies please her, as
they award her recognition: "J'aime être enceinte. Cela me
donne une importance extraordinaire dans la maison. Antoine
se fait tout petit, étonné, sournois" (87). But, to the
mature Elisabeth, motherhood is a reduction: "Je n'ai été
qu'un ventre fidèle, une matrice à faire des enfants" (10).
Motherhood, in her mind, produces an irreparable loss of the
self in both abstract and concrete terms: "Toute cette
marmaille à porter et à mettre au monde, à élever au sein, à
sevrer. Occupation de mes jours et de mes nuits. Cela me
tue et me fait vivre tout à la fois. Je suis occupée à
plein temps. Onze maternités en vingt-deux ans. Terre
aveugle, tant de sang et de lait, de placenta en galettes
brisées" (11). She does not really acknowledge the children
of Antoine and Jérôme as her own. Mirroring the Aeschylean formula, she rejoices when "un enfant d'Antoine" does not choose "un sexe et un visage dans la nuit" (118). Negating the maternal relation to the child, she also underlines her distaste for the father. Only her "love-child" holds a place in her heart.

The demystification process is marvelously framed in the scene where Mme Rolland plays the role of the queen of the family restoring order in the nursery. Her daughter dispels the illusion, noticing her mother's disheveled appearance: "Mais maman est en robe de chambre! Ses cheveux sont en désordre. Et puis son visage a l'air tout rouge" (34). This same décalage between the order of the patriarchal myth and the disorder of reality is evident in the contrast between the young bride Elisabeth's lace and finery on the morning of her wedding and the "vêtements jetés dans la chambre, en grand désordre" (73) later that evening.

Elisabeth's discomfort with the role of the domesticated woman is consistent with her Goddess self. Domesticity is totally antithetical to the notion of the Goddess. In fact, at marriages in ancient Greece, the White Goddess had to be propitiated because marriage was considered hateful to her.52 In Mme Rolland's marriage

scenario, the cyclical filling of the sugar bowl replaces the cyclical rituals of life and death: "Le sucre devrait être là pourtant, intarissable, renouvelé dans l'ombre par des mains vouées au sucre. Depuis le temps que cela fonctionne ainsi. Depuis le premier jour du mariage d'Elisabeth d'Aulnières avec Jérôme Rolland. Ainsi pour le sel, la farine, l'huile, les œufs. Des provisions sûres, l'une suivant l'autre, selon les saisons, comme les phases de la lune. L'ordre impeccable" (19).

The Ambivalent Narrator

As noted earlier, the voice of Mme Rolland, the ultimately domesticated, submissive wife of patriarchy, opens Kamouraska. Her subjection reflects a choice, dictated by the painful circumstances of her life. Although officially expiated for the murder of her first husband, Mme Rolland must be publicly expiated through correct behavior. Her relation to Jérôme protects her reputation from harmful accusations: "Absolution de tout mal, brève éternité, réconciliation avec le monde entier" (30). She is not a murderess, she is a saint: she marches in society's gaze, innocence plastered to her chest: "C'est cela ma vraie vie. Sentir le monde se diviser en deux haies pour me voir

53 Judi Roller notes that "food and the preparation of meals are used to exemplify the servitude and drudgery of marriage" in feminist novels. The Politics of the Feminist Novel 23.
passer. La mer Rouge qui se fend en deux pour que l'armée sainte traverse. C'est ça la terre, la vie de la terre, ma vie à moi" (8). The measure of her submission to patriarchy equals the measure of her innocence: "Accéder à l'ombre du moindre désir de cet homme. Etre là. Lui donner à boire, lui dire bonjour, lui dire adieu. Lui dire que c'est l'été. L'assurer de la miséricorde de Dieu. Montrer un visage de paix, l'évidence même de la paix sur notre visage réconcilié. L'innocence étalée comme la peau sur les os" (35).

For Mme Rolland, the dying Jérôme replaces the dead Antoine, in an unbroken chain symbolized by the uroboros of matriarchal myth: "Mon mari meurt à nouveau. Doucement dans son lit. La première fois c'était dans la violence, le sang et la neige. Non pas deux maris se remplaçant l'un l'autre, sur les registres de mariage, mais un seul homme renaissant sans cesse de ses cendres. Un long serpent unique se reformant sans fin, dans ses anneaux" (31). Her imagery reflects matriarchal myth, yet deforms it self-deprecatingly when she refers to [l']homme éternel qui me prend et m'abandonne à mesure" (31). As we have seen, it is the Goddess who alternately seduces and ritually kills her consorts while she remains the only permanent figure in the constellation.

On the other hand, Mme Rolland is aware of her inauthenticity. She recognizes herself as little more than
a donkey or a turkey following the carrot of her virtue which baits her stupidly forward. Mme Rolland slips into her discourse intimations of her sacred Goddess self which will be further developed when Elisabeth takes the stage. She calls the period of her love for George Nelson her true "règne de femme" (10) and announces that the heroic quest will resume when she is freed by her second husband's death: "Partir, à la recherche de l'unique douceur de mon coeur" (10-11). Most importantly, she terms the death of her first husband a ritual sacrifice: "Le sacrifice célébré sur la neige" (11).

Just as Mme Rolland expresses herself ambivalently in these opening pages of the narrative, Elisabeth's conception of herself fluctuates throughout her fragmented narrative. Although much more frequently referring to herself as a queen or a martyr (as we will discuss shortly), she also demotes herself occasionally to the devalued status of women in male myth. At one point, she describes herself as the evil Eve of Hebrew myth: "Le crime qui passe la porte du coeur consentant. La mort d'Antoine Tassy, convoitée comme un fruit" (42). She portrays herself weaving a "fleur de sang" in a patriarchally-designed tapestry, where woman controls the fate of man and brings him to his doom. She also associates George with "la faute originelle" (128), since he will be her accomplice in the fall of man.

In a patriarchal context, the fierce, blinding sun that
relentlessly tortures Elisabeth throughout the text could be construed as the symbol of her guilt. The sun, as a superior Father principle, forces Elisabeth to face her boldly-illuminated guilt as in Racine's Phèdre.\footnote{Henri Servin, in fact, has identified the sun as a male symbol that constantly whips Elisabeth to expiate her sin: "L'intensité brutale de l'élément mâle, symbolisé par le soleil, constamment la foutette et la blesse comme si elle devait expier quelque faute." Servin, "Une Lecture du corps," 189.} She is unequivocally crushed in its presence: "ces rayons pointus qui déchirent mes yeux" (41); "la lumière ... trop fort, presque brutal" (50); "un soleil fixe au-dessus de la maison" (51); "une lumière ... intolérable" (103); "des taches de soleil menaçantes" (247). The sun is like a lion that brutally seeks out its prey.\footnote{Lucille Roy (Entre la lumière et l'ombre: L'Univers poétique d'Anne Hébert (Sherbrooke (Quebec): Editions Naaman, 1984)), who has done an exhaustive study of light and shadow in Hébert's entire opus, categorizes the light in Kamouraska as "une puissance captivante, écrasante et néfaste" (19). Ultimately, however, she sees a double ambivalence in the meaning of light and shadow in Hébert's work. Her identification of the "double tendance vers l'absolu de la vie et de la mort" (179) in the Hébertian corpus expresses the fundamental signification of the Goddess of matriarchal myth for us.}

But in the matriarchal context, the sun could be a malevolent deity seeking to destroy the lunar Elisabeth. Her marriages to Antoine and to Jérôme Rolland are like the moon's "marriage of death with the sun, the negative male..."
principle that rapes and kills the Feminine." Elisabeth herself classifies sex with both husbands as rape: "[elle est] couchée dans le lit d'Antoine, caressée par Antoine, ouverte et refermée par Antoine, violée par Antoine, ravie par Antoine" (129); the sick Jérôme no longer has "la santé de la violer" (26). Both husbands also try to kill her—Antoine physically on numerous occasions, Rolland mentally through the slow deadening of her soul. Elisabeth's power source is the ultimate ambivalence in the text. Is she a witch or a goddess of matriarchal myth? The one occasion on which she uses the appellation "witch" (in the modern sense) is in a nightmare sequence which equates power with witchcraft: "Je suis une sorcière. Je crie pour faire sortir le mal où qu'il se trouve, chez

56 See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* 316. As Neumann describes it, the sun was originally a death symbol, while the moon signified life. It is in the patriarchate that the sun becomes "a dominant and positive symbol."

57 In the context of the history of religions, the sun's ever-increasing brutality would suggest the waning power of the vulnerable Goddess and the ascension of the Sun-king in the religious pantheon. See Graves, *The White Goddess* 389.

Gilbert Durand identifies the sun as a diurnal symbol of paternity. This interpretation would confirm the association of the sun with the ascension of the patriarchal god.

58 The word "witch" is ambivalent in itself if we compare its modern usage with its possible origins in Old English witan, "to know" or in Old High German wih, meaning "holy." Etymology of "witch" cited in Thelma J. Shinn, *Worlds Within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) 11.
les bêtes et les hommes" (131). Elisabeth's self-image here corresponds to man's mythical association of the powerful female with a witch figure. Rather than allow this solitary reference to confirm Elisabeth's self-image as witch, we must emphasize the necessary ambivalence of a woman driven by matriarchal forces living in a patriarchal society. Her own inner vision jars against society's opposing view which she has also internalized.

In most instances in the novel, accusations of witchcraft and of diabolism express more the projected fears and loathings of the name-caller than the actual status of the person maligned. M. Rolland, for example, feels small and vulnerable before the triumphant, and lethal, image his wife reflects into the mirror. "Sa femme lui apparaît telle qu'en lui-même se dresse la mort, transfigurée, tout au long des nuits de cauchemars" (14).

Elisabeth calls the servant Florida "diable" (33) merely because her expert care interferes with Elisabeth's adopted sense of duty towards the dying husband. In an hallucinated state, Elisabeth hears the diabolic Florida accuse her before all the world of having killed M. Rolland. Florida assimilates his impending death to the actual death of the first husband in a blistering, imaginary attack: "Monsieur se meurt. C'est Madame qui l'assassine. Venez. Venez tous. Nous passerons Madame en jugement. Nous passerons Madame à la casserole comme un lapin qu'on fend au
couteau dans toute sa longueur. Cric son sale ventre plein de sales tripes" (32).

The servant Aurélie bears the major brunt of the accusations of witchcraft throughout the text. First, Mme Rolland calls Aurélie a witch because her servant testified against her at the murder trial. As in Florida's case, Elisabeth projects her loathing for the unfaithful servant into an accusation of diabolism or witchcraft. But Aurélie was considered a witch even before the murder incident. Interestingly, the only real basis for this is her pipe-smoking, her refusal of conventional femininity, and her ability to predict whether babies will live or die (by licking them immediately after birth to detect their salinity). It is the mid-wife and unmarried savant who is accused of witchcraft. Not surprisingly, George Nelson, a doctor, is her most virulent attacker: "Empêcher votre servante Aurélie de jouer les sorcières auprès des nouveau-nés ... (121);" "Quelle pauvre sorcière tu fais, Aurélie" (175).

Aurélie, for her part, never identifies herself as a witch. In fact, on several occasions, she accuses George Nelson of diabolism, in retaliation, no doubt, for his accusations against her: "Aurélie s'empresse de colporter dans tout Sorel que le docteur Nelson est un diable américain qui maudit les mamelles des femmes. Comme on empoisonne des sources" (114). For his role in the murder plot, Aurélie
calls him "le roi des démons" (194). Clearly, the demonic appellation, like its correlate "witch," are merely convenient invectives labelling a projected fear and loathing.

The Dark within the Cave

As the narrative unfurls, Elisabeth progressively releases herself from the stricture of her "fausse représentation" (34), and the voice of the resurgent Goddess dominates for a time. The resolution of the ambivalence of the text in favor of the Goddess becomes pronounced when Elisabeth retires from her societal functions and plunges into her psychic depths in a solitary search for answers.

Gilbert and Guber have applied the parable of the cave to women's fiction with telling results for our purposes. For them, the cave is at once a tomb and a womb: it encloses Woman in her specificity, but it also allows her to derive power from that specificity. Within the "cavern of her own mind" she can "reconcile the cave's negative metaphor potential with its positive mythic possibilities." The female artist, for them, "makes her journey into what Adrienne Rich has called 'the cratered night of female memory' to revitalize the darkness, to

59 Gilbert and Guber, The Madwoman in the Attic 98.
60 Gilbert and Gubar 95.
retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, conceive, and give birth."\textsuperscript{61}

In the cave-like enclosure of Léontine's small bedroom (her children's tutor), Elisabeth finds access to her true self buried beneath the false monument to patriarchy that she had erected in its place.\textsuperscript{62} At first, her anxiety peaks in the smallness of the room: "Les quatre murs de la chambre me serrent et m'oppressent, comme un poing fermé sur ma gorge" (93). But, in time, she grows accustomed to the reduced space and is able to reenter psychologically her past self. "Le temps. Ce temps-là. Un certain temps de ma vie, réintégré, comme une coquille vide. S'est refermé à nouveau sur moi. Un petit claquement sec d'huitre. Je m'entraîne à vivre dans cet espace réduit. Je m'enracine dans la maison de la rue Augusta. Je respire un air raréfié, déjà respiré. Je mets mes pas dans mes pas. Mme Rolland n'existe plus. Je suis Elisabeth d'Aulnières, épouse d'Antoine Tassy. Je me meurs de langueur. J'attends que l'on vienne me délivrer. J'ai dix-neuf ans" (100).

Out of the cave also steps the child Elisabeth from whose hand "doucement meurt l'esquisse vaine d'un signe de croix" (58). She joyously removes her white communicant's

\textsuperscript{61} Gilbert and Gubar 98-9.

\textsuperscript{62} Lucille Roy discusses the importance of dark, enclosed places in Kamouraska where Elisabeth roots herself cyclically to discover her most profound and nocturnal forces. Entre la lumière et l'ombre 92.
dress "qui tombe à la terre, l'entoure d'un anneau neigeux, qu'elle franchit allègrement à cloche-pied" (59). Freed of the vestiges of Christianity, she will be able to tell her story from a matriarchal vantage point.

As Mme Rolland, Elisabeth had hinted at the sacredness of her mission ("le sacrifice célébré sur le neige"); now the physically sleeping, but psychologically awakened, Elisabeth will narrate the events surrounding Antoine's death from the Goddess's perspective. Antoine's death may have been violent, but it was just. Like the Goddess, Elisabeth required renewed love and the death of the old. "Renaître à la vie, intouchée, intouchable, sauf pour l'unique homme de ce monde, en marche vers moi. Violente, pure, innocente! Je suis innocente! J'attends que mon amour me prenne et me garde. Cet homme est le bonheur. Il est la justice" (117). She speaks of the absoluteness of love and of death linking them in a sacred equation derived from her matriarchal foremothers: "L'absolu de l'amour et de la mort. La justice rétablie. La sainte barbarie instituée. Nous serons sauvés par elle. Nous sommes possédés" (158). Seen through the cave perspective, George Nelson's undressing her in front of the window for everyone to see was not an act of cruelty, but ritual intercourse for the society's benefit. Love and death are metonymically equated when Elisabeth remarks that George's "sexe [est] dur comme un arme" (159). She further proclaims that justice
will be established "par le feu et le sang" (163) as in Goddess myth and ritual.

Elisabeth speaks clearly and forcefully, obviously assimilating her role to that of the love/death Goddess: "Mais je suis là, je veux que tu vives et qu'il meure! Je t'ai choisi, George Nelson. Je suis la vie et la mort inextricablement liées. Vois comme je suis douce-amère" (164). "Célébrer ce sacrifice. Il le faut. Vivre!" (167). Again, she asserts, "Je suis l'amour et la vie, mon exigence n'a de comparable que l'absolu de la mort" (171). Her linking of love and of death recalls the ritual of the queen bee or the black widow spider: "Mon pauvre amour, je ne saurai sans doute jamais comment t'expliquer qu'au-delà de toute sainteté règne l'innocence astucieuse et cruelle des bêtes et des fous" (173).

On other occasions she speaks of the cyclical turnover of the men in her life redolent of the seasonal change of kings in the Goddess religions. There had to be two men in her life for the proper worship to take place: "En quel songe les ai-je appelés tous les deux? Non seulement mon amour, mais l'autre, mon mari? Comme si l'on ne pouvait appeler l'un sans l'autre" (131). She compares their rivalry to "une sorte de manège confus" (131), suggesting an unstoppable cycle: "Tuer deux fois, trois fois, ce mort sans cesse renaissant" (141). The men themselves are inextricably linked, as in the Goddess religions, where the
rivals were often twins: "Dans un pays lointain, plein de neige et de sang. Entre deux hommes liés entre eux par leur redoutable mystère étranger. S'ils allaient tous deux, à l'instant même, prendre deux visages semblables et fraternels? Deux visages d'homme envahis par quelque chose d'étrange et d'atroce qui les ravage et les transfigure à la fois: le goût de la mort."

George Nelson has clearly been called into the Goddess's service: "Dès à présent tu entres à mon service, à moi, George Nelson. Et je te préviens que c'est comme si tu enrais en religion" (178). His role in the process is connected to the fertility of the land. The earth will be ravaged, like his soul, until he kills the old king at the Goddess's behest: "La terre et le coeur se ravinrent, d'un seul et même ravage. On ne saura jamais au juste où cela a commencé. Du côté de la terre sans doute. La campagne est rongée par l'intérieur. Un infime glissement de terrain, à l'origine, quelque part dans un paysage noyé de pluie,

63 See Graves, White Goddess 388.

64 For Durand the "goût de la mort" represents a positive valorisation of night and the return to the mother as the lower belly of the earth (Durand, Structures anthropologiques 269). In this context we should remember the ritual Elisabeth and George enact in the woods when it is still too light for them to make love without detection. They play dead. Stretched out together in the pine needles, they simulate the rigidity and absoluteness of death. It is as though they are twins returned to the womb/tomb of the mother and thus protected from everything that is not their love (151).
entraînant éblouis, inondations, torrents qui se déchaînent. Un pan de monde connu cède et s'écroule. (Vous ne vous connaissiez pas cette lâcheté, docteur Nelson?) Vous voici directement concerné, lié au sort de cette terre. A l'effondrement de cette terre" (172-73).

George's voice, which is inextricably meshed with that of Elisabeth, shows that he voluntarily accepts his role in the queen's sacred ritual: "L'abattre comme une perdix. Antoine Tassy est né perdant. Je lui prendrai sa tour. Je lui prendrai sa reine. Je lui prendrai sa femme, il le faut. Je rétablirai la justice initiale du vainqueur et du vaincu. Avouer enfin son mal profond. La recherche éperdue de la possession du monde. Posséder cette femme. Posséder la terre" (129).

Elisabeth relives through George the harsh journey to Kamouraska to kill the sacred king. "Est-ce possible que je rêve la passion d'un autre, avec cette acuité insoutenable? Je sens dans mon dos la force irrésistible qui pousse George Nelson sur la route de Kamouraska" (199). It is not a witch's spell that pushes George onward, but rather his inescapable devotion to the Goddess. The assimilation of the queen and her lover is so total that it is their combined force that kills the old king: "Je voudrais posséder mon amour, comme ma propre main. Le suivre dans toutes les démarches de sa vitalité extraordinaire. Que pas une de ses pensées ne m'échappe. Que pas une de ses
souffrances ne me soit épargnée. Etre deux avec lui. Lever le bras avec lui, lorsqu'il le faudra. Tuer mon mari avec lui" (200).

The ritual murder takes place in the snowy domain of Kamouraska, since sacred kings return to the north to die. The ritual is accomplished by a conquering demi-god imbued with the ecstasy of power and lust: "Un homme s'acharne, à coups de crosse de pistolet, sur un mort couché, la face dans la neige. Il frappe jusqu'à l'usure de la force surhumaine en lui déchaînée. Maître de la vie et de la mort. Un instant le vainqueur essuie son visage sur ma manche. Cherche dans son coeur la femme pour laquelle . . . Désire s'accoupler immédiatement avec elle. Triomphalement. Avant que ne déclinent sa puissance et sa folie. Avant que ne s'apaise son ivresse" (234). Because of the blood sacrifice spread over the earth to propitiate the Goddess, the storms of passion no longer ravage either George or "la terre ferme" (235). He may return to Sorel to claim his queen.

As Graves informs us: "the sacred king . . . is a Sun-king and returns at death to the Universal Mother, the White Moon Goddess, who imprisons him in the extreme north. Why the north? Because that is the quarter from which the Sun never shines, from which the wind brings snow; only dead suns are to be found in the cold polar north." The White Goddess 111.
The Goddess Dethroned

The notion of recognition figures centrally in mythic stories. Why else was Zeus constantly disguising himself? Didn't Clytemnestra fall because she failed to recognize Orestes at her door? Elisabeth understands that the key to the resolution of her story is the all-important scene of the recognition of her lover. She must "découvrir son visage . . . reconnaître et être reconnue par lui" (240). Yet, at the crucial moment, she cannot face George, fearing that she will discover in his features the image of her dead husband instead of her long-awaited lover. In fact, George's act has transfigured him. Elisabeth does not recognize him: "Votre visage au retour posé sur moi, inconnaisssable à jamais. Terrifiant. Non je ne connais pas cet homme! Découvert, docteur Nelson. Vous êtes découvert. Etranger. Assassin" (249). The bond between them irreparably broken, George flees cursing her name and Elisabeth must stand trial alone for the murder of Antoine.

Elisabeth has made her interior journey of rediscovery within the cave's protective confines, and she is reluctant to leave the darkness for the light, to leave her memories for the reality of her second marriage to Rolland. "Je construis des barrages d'obstination et de mauvaise volonté. Je persiste du côté des ténèbres. Je fouille les ténèbres. Je tâte comme une aveugle. Mes deux bras tendus dans l'ombre . . . Je refuse bel et bien la rue du Parloir et
Jérôme Rolland, mon mari" (242-3). Still reliving a dreamy past, she visualizes her marriage ceremony to Jérôme Rolland and portrays herself as a mother holding in her arms her youngest baby. The baby opens her blouse and a milk-laden breast appears. This image marks the ultimate conversion from matriarchy to patriarchy. The Goddess is now assimilated to the image of the Virgin Mother and Child --the Goddess's sexuality has been neutralized, and she is reduced in perpetuity to the supporting role of Mother of the Supreme Father God's Son.

Finally, drawn back to reality less by her servants' smelling salts than by her failed internal quest, Elisabeth returns to her husband Jérôme's side. Resuscitated, sanctified by the church, and enthroned on a pile of pillows, Jérôme is served by Florida with "des airs de sacristine" (249). Lowering her eyes in a submissive pose, Elisabeth wipes a tear from her eye.

The play ends. Like a Lorenzaccio à l'envers, Mme Rolland steps on stage again wearing the false mask of innocence, not the douce-amère visage of the Goddess, permanently affixed to her skin: "J'ai n'ai plus qu'à devenir si sage qu'on me prenne au mot. Fixer le masque de l'innocence sur les os de ma face. Accepter l'innocence en guise de revanche ou de punition. Jouer le jeu cruel, la comédie épuisante, jour après jour. Jusqu'à ce que la ressemblance parfaite me colle à la peau. L'orgueil est ma
seule joie, de place en place, tout le long d'un chemin amer" (249). The patriarchal gods rule in the end, and the Goddess must go underground.

Despite her reluctant return to the light of day and the world of the Fathers, Elisabeth is thrown into a violent waking nightmare. While maintaining an exterior calm and an unquestioning devotion to her husband, she visualizes her internal self in a crushingly pessimistic scene. This final vision is that of "une femme noire, vivante, datant d'une époque reculée et sauvage (250)" unleashed on a little town. This ancient, blackened, savage woman is the Goddess, condemned to die because she goes unrecognized in the barren city terrain: "Elle ne trouve que des portes fermées et le désert de terre battue dont sont faites les rues. Il ne lui reste sans doute plus qu'à mourir de faim et de solitude" (250). In the supreme décalage between appearance and reality, Mme Rolland's tears for her abandoned self are interpreted by assembled witnesses as tears of joy for the revival of her husband. The devaluation of the Goddess is complete. Condemned to play the part of the submissive wife, she must sacrifice the role she had painstakingly revived. Her character is permanently cast as Mme Rolland, wife and mother, servant of patriarchy. She is a matriarchal Goddess no more.

Mme Rolland holds onto the the hand of M. Rolland "comme à un fil fragile qui la rattache encore à la vie et
risque de casser d'"une minute à l'autre" (249). She had hoped, upon her husband's death, to set sail on the high sea of the big city in search of her lost love. Now, she holds onto Rolland as though to a life preserver. Just as she lacked the courage to flee with George after Antoine's death, she now fears to embark, sails unfurled, in search of freedom. Her recovery of the potent female that had lain dormant within her for eighteen years is counterbalanced and finally buried under stones, not only by the forces of patriarchy, but also by her conscious dis-ease with the empowered feminine. Her mythic conflict remains permanently irresoluble; the resurgent Goddess is suppressed for the sake of security in a patriarchal world.

Kamouraska ultimately fits into the standard adulterous love plot as seen through its conclusion. Similar to her many fictional predecessors, Elisabeth's neutered sexuality and spiritual death are the price she pays for daring to

66 As Rachel Blau DuPlessis states: "Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relations to the 'social script' or plot designed to constrain her legally, economically, and sexually. Death is the result when energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality, at once their most enticing and most damaging expression, are expended outside the 'couvert' of marriage or valid romance: through adultery . . . , loss of virginity or even suspected 'impurity' . . . , or generalized female passion . . . ." Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 16.
rewrite her social script. By choosing sexual freedom based on the matriarchal paradigm, she became even more firmly and inescapably enclosed within the bounds of a suffocating marriage. As we shall see, Anne Hébert's subsequent works attempt to overcome this impasse with curious results for the empowered feminine.

Intertextual Analysis and Gender Ideology

Barbara Godard views Kamouraska as an example of female Gothic in its depiction of a woman's difficulty in giving birth to her psychic self. Godard's discussion of Kamouraska as a Gothic novel hinges on a psychological argument. She feels that Elisabeth's mother saw her child as monstrous and rejected her; the adult Elisabeth, in turn, became monstrous, fragmented, and unable to face her own new self birthed during her interior journey. In Godard's interpretation, Elisabeth "recoils from the monstrous hag of her self let loose on the world."67 Gothic for Godard equals the creation of a monster, specifically, the birthing of a child. Even the author, in Godard's view, recoils from her textual creation, which she considers monstrous.

Claire Kahane has also written about the Gothic novel in terms of problematical mothering. She, however, reverses the paradigm and sees the mother as monstrous, not the

67 Godard, "My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert," 36.
child. For her, the Gothic fear is "fear of femaleness itself, perceived as threatening to one's wholeness, obliterating the very boundaries of self." The "spectral mother, the original Other [is] the antagonist in our common struggle to locate a self."

We also have categorized Kamouraska as a "mothered" text because of Elisabeth's solidly-female upbringing, the thematic demystification of the "ideal" (patriarchally-defined) mother, the fragmented narration that emanates radially from the female protagonist, and, especially, because of the author's underlying use of matriarchal myth. Mothering is central in the text and fathering is peripheral. Unlike Godard and Kahane, we do not feel that either the text's relation to the mother/author or the character's relation to her fictional mother is monstrous. Rather, it is motherhood itself that drains Elisabeth ("tant de sang et de lait"), and dilutes her self. Her internal journey is not an effort to recover and release her lost mother, as Godard asserts, or to separate herself from the engulfing mother, as Kahane would imply. Elisabeth's hope is quite simply to construct a strong female self that does

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69 Kahane 351.
not mother or who can escape the rigors of mothering as soon as the children are born. It is in this sense that matriarchal myth becomes so important to the text: the Great Goddess is not a great mother, she is a lover who bears a son only to make him her perpetual lover. She reproduces lovers who are divine because of their relation to her, not dependents who will sap her energies and her sense of self.

For this reason, the Great Goddess is threatening to the male, but not to the female. Male fear of female engulfment is everywhere evident in Hébert's works. For example, after the murder, George deplores Elisabeth's body, associating it metaphorically and mythically with an archetypal female sea-monster: "Elisabeth! Ton corps s'ouvre et se referme sur moi pour m'engloutir à jamais. Ce goût de varech et d'iode" (223). A woman's hair alone can symbolize male entrapment, as it does for the overwhelmed François in "Le Torrent." 70

70 Durand calls "la chevelure . . . l'image de la féminité fatale et thériomorphe." Structures anthropologiques 116.

The reader is referred to the works of Edvard Munch for an extraordinary pictorial representation of the male mythic fear of the engulfing female. Munch was obsessed with the concept of the femme fatale, whom he reincarnated in his art as "a modern Eve, a blood-sucking vampire, a flamelike bacchante, an archetypal murderess (usually identified as Charlotte Corday), a demonic temptress disguised as a consoling Madonna." (Robert Rosenblum, introd., Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art Catalogue, 1978) 3-4.) His painting "Vampire" portrays a woman sucking a man's neck with her
In an example taken from Héloïse, Bernard laments his childhood relation to his domineering mother. "N'était-il pas jusqu'à son grand corps dégingandé qui retrouvait souplesse et liberté, empêché si longtemps par mille petits fils invisibles, cousus par sa mère, à même sa peau, quand il était enfant et dormait dans son petit lit, contre le grand lit maternel."\footnote{Anne Hébert, Héloïse (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980) 13-14. This description recalls Durand's identification of the spider as an archetypal rendering of "la mère qui a réussi à emprisonner l'enfant dans les mailles de son réseau." Structures anthropologiques 116.} His regressive relationship with the vampire Héloïse has him desiring the very engulfment he was escaping from his mother: "Il enfouit sa tête dans les jupes de la jeune femme. Retrouve l'odeur prenante des grèves; varech, goémon, vase profonde qui fume et déchaîne."\footnote{Hébert, Héloïse 100.} Once again the female sea-monster is evoked.\footnote{Durand states that the "hydre/pieuvre [est un] symbole direct de la fatalité de l'océan que la toute-puissance néfaste et féminoidé se manifeste." Structures anthropologique 116.}

Male loathing for the female is evident in Les Enfants du sabbat where the doctor Painchaud wants to remove Julie's hair cascading around him. "Man's Head in Woman's Hair" evokes the archetype even more convincingly. His "Madonna" is clearly the Goddess of life and death--she is pictured as a lusty, long-haired, death-like temptress, overshadowing an anxious male foetus cramped into a corner of the picture.
"matrice obscène" as the source of her danger. The male protagonist of Les Chambres de bois declares his wife a "diable": "C'est toi qui est mauvaise, Catherine, une sale fille, voilà ce que tu es, comme Lia [sa soeur], comme toutes les autres." Stevens Brown in Les Fous de Bassan is the most misogynous of all the Hébertian men; his hate will lead him to rape and to murder.

Hébert's gender characterizations play on the son's mythic fear and his loathing for the engulfing mother. The daughter, however, does not risk engulfment unless she has the misfortune of being born to an actual witch, as is the case with Julie in Les Enfants du sabbat. It is the daughter's fate to mother, and it is this process that is considered monstrous to the female herself. Hébert's fictional low regard for both mothering and men leads her to denounce mothering rather than to expand the role of the father in the parenting process. In her exclusively "mothered" text, Hébert creates the narcissistic female monster who devours men and rebels against mothering, not


76 See Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering, and Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur, for exposés of the negative effects of exclusive mothering on girls and boys. Both authors call for equal parenting to resolve psychological imbalances caused by the powerful mother of infancy and childhood.
her mother, in the name of sexual pleasure and freedom.

Hébert's works show a marked progression with regard to the representation of women and their relation to one another. Patricia Smart has demonstrated in Hébert's early poetry "une conscience lucide du destin de réceptivité, de sacrifice et d'enfance perpétuelle réservé à la femme" existing simultaneously with "un érotisme naissant associé à la libération d'une puissance captive." As Smart notes, alongside the sacrificially passive woman evident in Hébert's poetry, a powerful feminine figure emerges. She appears as an active huntress (whom we meet again in Kamouraska as well as in Les Fous de Bassan). In Hébert's poem "Eve," a portion of which is cited at the beginning of this chapter, a collective female persona invokes the name of a powerful mythic Eve "reine et maîtresse certaine," creatress and destructress, to inspire her faceless, powerless, female descendants. Hébert's imagery jointly evokes the malediction of Eve the transgressor and the lustful power of the archetypal Goddess, the Mother's mixed legacy to her daughters.

This is in fact that same ambivalently perceived Goddess that we encounter in Kamouraska, a pivotal work where male and female forces fight for dominance and the

male ultimately prevails, as in the historic conversion from matriarchy to patriarchy.

In her subsequent novels, Hébert creates scenarios where the female has two options. She must either unite in female solidarity to avoid the male, who incarnates evil and will destroy her; or she must adopt the role of the femme fatale and defeat him through his own fearful psychic structures. The female who allows the male to divide her from her sisters will be suppressed by him. The imperious female will devour the male in true queen-bee fashion.

In Les Enfants du sabbat and in Héloïse, the female protagonists are certifiable witches and vampires and their suppression of the male is complete. Julie de la Trinité and Héloïse triumph by becoming the powerful evil female figures derived from the male mind's mythic transformation of the Goddess. 78 It is as though Hébert, in continuing to

78 Maurice Emond, in La Femme à la fenêtre: L'univers symbolique d'Anne Hébert dans les Chambres de bois, Kamouraska et les Enfants du sabbat (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1984), traces "la Grande Déesse" behind the witch cult in Les Enfants du sabbat with impressive detail. As he states, "Philomène et Julie, déesses et sorcières, incarnent la revanche de la femme sur l'hégémonie mâle" (135). "Dans Les Enfants du sabbat Anne Hébert réunit les symboles de la Grande Déesse, de l'Arbre de Vie et du serpent héraldique, reproduisant ainsi les archétypes fondamentaux de la sacralité, de la fécondité et de l'immortalité" (147). However, because he bases most of his analysis on Durand's concept of "euphémisation," he becomes confused. While Hébert's use of the goddess/witch figure may be a "revenge against male hegemony," as he states, the witch herself is a direct descendant of the original powerful Goddess. The witch cults do not reverse the symbolic values of the "régime diurne," they preserve the "régime nocturne" of ancient Goddess worship. Durand's
push beyond the matriarchal mythological script portrayed in Kamouraska, cannot imagine a triumphant powerful female without resorting to the revived patriarchal image of the foul witch who devours men. Perhaps the real constriction of the female in patriarchal society necessitated this deeper plunge into the Gothic/Satanic mode as her only means of escape. Alternatively, she portrays woman as virginal and good and, consequently, destroyed by the male, as in Les Fous de Bassan.

In sum, Hébert's "gynocentric essentialism"\(^7^9\) is but

"Mère terrible," who Emond finds everywhere evident in Hébert's works, is the Great Goddess—"in her destructive aspect only. Emond sees sacrificial women victims bringing on renewal where, as we have seen, the male is clearly the victim in the Mother religion (as depicted also in Kamouraska). The daughters of patriarchy are Hébert's sacrificial female victims—her "Mère du Christ" is "crucifiée." Emond recognizes the Goddess under the witch's hat, but he does not clearly see her as woman's legacy from the bi-valent mythic Mother.

Neither does he recognize Elisabeth as a Goddess figure. However, in describing the snow imagery in Kamouraska, he evocatively portrays the ambivalence of the Goddess without knowing it:

Il est impossible d'évoquer la pureté et la blancheur de la neige dans Kamouraska sans songer en même temps au sang coulé qui la souille. Elle est à la fois le noir et le blanc, l'eau et le feu; elle est souillure et pureté, contrainte et libération, mort et rénaissance. Elle est le lieu de rencontre des contraires, la matière privilégiée qui rassemble toutes les contradictions sans cependant offrir de réconciliation. Elle résume les tensions sans les résoudre. La neige est le paysage même d'une symbolique du noir et du blanc et d'une dialectique de l'eau et du feu (261).

\(^7^9\) Term created by Natalie Rosinsky, Feminist Futures: Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984) 1.
the mirror image of the androcentric essentialism that has been devastating to women for so long. Her exclusively "mothered" text emphasizes highly polarized gender roles and the limited manifestations of power possible in female experience. The empowered female, whether a matriarchal Goddess from our ancient past or her Satanic mythic heir of patriarchal invention, poses a major threat to the male psyche. Hébert insists on the separation of the male and the female, instead of fomenting a healthy integration of the two. She does not promote equality or an androgynous vision of a female capable of performing "male" as well as "female" functions in society. Hébert's intention may be to demystify the role of the Canadian "héros-protecteur," as Marie Couillard suggested, but the net effect is a perpetuation of the image of woman as either an angelic victim or as a monstrous victimizer.80

Hébert's early poetry begins the process of evoking the strong woman of female myth. Kamouraska firmly establishes her, and her lethal consequences, only to witness her demise. In the later writings, the empowered female is reinstalled in the denatured guise of male mythic consciousness. Ultimately, Hébert divorces the sexes to the

80 Flannery O'Connor, who writes American Southern Gothic, attempts to show the gross disparity between man's reality and the Grace God offers. However, the grotesque exaggeration of evil, nihilism and violence in her work overshadows the message. There is a possible parallel here to Hébert's work.
highest possible degree. Men are confined to weak or
diabolic roles. Women are either sacredly/monstrously
powerful or powerless sacrificial victims. Neither image
flatters women (or men), nor provides a viable constructive
model for them to follow. Gilbert and Gubar correctly
assessed the problem when they stated that until the woman
author kills the male aesthetic ideal of the "angel" and the
"monster," she will be unable to "journey through the
looking glass toward literary autonomy."

81 Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 17.
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Tiamat's Son - The Internalized Mother
in Marguerite Yourcenar's L'Oeuvre au noir

Introduction

Despite her dual Belgian and French ancestry (as well as many foreign sojourns and long-time residence in the United States), Marguerite Yourcenar considered herself "French by culture": "I am as much French as I am Flemish, and not simply because half of my father's family . . . was native to the region of Béthune and never spoke Flemish, and my mother's family, which was Belgian and Walloon, spoke only French. What is more important and more objective than these criteria of blood and language is that I am French by culture."¹

Although her French/Belgian national origins will bear on her mythic choices, of greater pertinence is her personal history. Yourcenar lost her mother ten days after birth -- a loss that profoundly affected her psyche and her literary output. A motherless childhood, as well as a fear of childbirth derived from a more pervasive family myth of the mortal danger of childbirth, account, in part, for an

overall patriarchal orientation of her work.

As an ally of the male camp she tends to devalue real as well as mythic women in her fiction. Her most clearly mythically-based works -- *Feux*, *Les Nouvelles orientales*, and *Théâtre II* -- confirm her generally reductive attitude women. They typically suffer tragic fates as scorned lovers or death-bound nurturers. Maleficent female mythical beings (who lure men only to destroy them) abound. Yourcenar clearly prefers simple, passive, nurturing creatures to embody the feminine in women. This trend, as shall be seen, repeats itself in *L'Oeuvre au noir*.

If we were to listen exclusively to Yourcenar's female characters, we would believe her entire opus to have emerged as Athena from the Father's head, bearing the marks of her identification with him. However, if we examine the mythical affiliations of a male character like Zénon, we come to recognize a feminine quality that lies embedded in her text, reviving an earlier, more matriarchally-inspired mythic choice. Uncovering the mythical feminine, albeit transformed into an abstract, solitary, internal ideal, allows us to identify Yourcenar's matriarchal voice in *L'Oeuvre au noir* and render articulate that which lies encoded beneath the surface.

As we have shown in our early chapters, matriarchal myth often underlies the more well-known and more recent patriarchal mythical traditions. What is less immediately
apparent, but is just as true, is the fact that oriental
religions, Jewish kabbalistic tradition, Jungian psychology
and alchemy evince similar matriarchal origins.²

Yourcenar herself acknowledged³ the resemblances in
these systems (without discerning the matriarchal
underwiring), and admitted the profound influence oriental
mysticism had on her.⁴ Reading Walter Kaiser's discussion
of the "seamless fusion of oriental mysticism and Greek
rationalism" in Yourcenar's work, the matriarchal mythic
connection is conspicuously evident. He writes of
Yourcenar's "infinite compassion for all created beings man
or beast, vegetable or mineral, and her radiant sense of the
holiness of life itself, however brief and doomed . . . . "
(133). The "eternal landscapes" of the "ceaseless
geological drama" (134), he adds, tend to dwarf the relative
importance of "man" in her thought. Yourcenar's belief in

² Geneviève Spencer-Noël points out the similarities
between these thought systems in Zénon ou le thème de
l'alchimie dans L'Oeuvre au noir de Marguerite Yourcenar
detect matriarchal myth as a common basis.

³ "[L']alchimie . . . a gardé vivantes certaines formes
de la pensée présocratique, et semble avoir communiqué, nous
ignorons comment, avec certaines formes de la pensée
orientale, peut-être à travers l'alexandrinisme et la
Kabbale juive." Patrick De Rosbo, Entretiens radiophoniques
avec Marguerite Yourcenar (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972)
125.

⁴ "Vous savez, ce qui a eu une grande influence sur
moi: c'est le Tao, le Bouddhisme, toute la pensée
orientale." Marguerite Yourcenar, Radioscopie avec Chancel, J.
cited in Spencer-Noël 117.
the solidarity of all aspects of life, its sacredness, and the primacy of the natural environment recall the tenets of Goddess religion and are evidence of her matriarchal voice.

Yourcenar denied Zénon any mythic affiliation apart from the moment in "Promenade sur la dune" where he takes a nude, solitary, morning swim and thinks of himself as the pure Adam Kadmon of the kabbalistic tradition.\(^5\) As we have shown in previous chapters, the Hebrew religion excised the feminine from a place in the Godhead; but, she appears to have reemerged in the mystical Judaism of the Kaballah.\(^6\) Adam Kadmon was thought to be an androgynous being.\(^7\) The


\(^6\) Christine Dowling states: "There was a long period in Jewish history during which the goddess seemed to disappear, yet her subliminal presence remained in mystical Judaism and in the wisdom traditions, and as the Shekinah she reemerged in the Kaballah." Dowling compares the resurgence of the Goddess in mystical Judaism to as similar resurgence in Christianity "evidenced in the devotion directed to female saints and the Virgin Mother. . . ." *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 16. It should also be noted that in the Gnostic doctrine the feminine principle, Sophia, is at once the mother and bride of Christ. Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy": 388.

\(^7\) Halevi Z'ev ben Shimon, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree* (London: Rider and Company) 34.
kabbalists, like Jung, believed individual men and women contain the active and passive poles of the two sexes within them by analogy to the androgynous primordial man. Further, according to Jung, some alchemists referred to the *prima materia* of the alchemical transformation process as Adam "who carried his invisible Eve hidden in his body." The alchemical tradition then supported the belief in an androgynous first being.

Likewise, the metaphors of alchemy revolve around the conjunction of the male and the female. Jung speaks of the alchemical tradition of mother-son and brother-sister incest, representing the endogamous mating necessary for the ceaseless perpetuation of life. The transmutation process itself, wherein the philosopher/king is swallowed up by his feminine unconscious and renewed and reborn, obviously perpetuated the same ancient matriarchal theme.

The alchemical superstructure of *L'Oeuvre au noir* leads Zénon through a similar process of death and rebirth through the feminine before the final ecstatic leap into the universal. Furthermore, the omnipresent metaphor of fire in the text, with its ambivalent connotation of both archetypal masculinity and femininity, concretizes Zénon's psychic conflict between the animus and the rising anima. Initially engaged in a lonely, external quest to be "plus qu'un homme"

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(18), which entails a rejection of the feminine, Zénon eventually comes to realize that his quest must be internal requiring loss of the self. Zénon's experience in the abyss, symbol of primeval femininity and central to "l'oeuvre au noir," constitutes the dissolution of his too rigidly defined patriarchal self through a return to his own feminine depths. He arises from this experience purified, selfless and saintly, a reflection of the internal, eternal Mother who has reformed him. This psycho-alchemical death and rebirth through the feminine is an obvious continuation of the matriarchal basic theme and further evidence of Yourcenar's submerged matriarchal voice.

The Masculine Mode

Many critics have categorized Marguerite Yourcenar's work as self-effacing because of its historical, geographic, and gender distancing from the author. Unlike many women writers who create "marginal" (or so the Canon-definers would say) literature by focusing on their sex, Yourcenar seems to avoid marginality of this kind. As Colette Gaudin has stated, "Yourcenar does not write as a woman" in the 

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9 Definition of l'oeuvre au noir per Marguerite Yourcenar: "la période de dissolution et de calcination de tous les concepts, tous les préjugés, toutes les notions sur lesquels nous avons accoutumé à vivre." Patrick De Rosbo, Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguerite Yourcenar (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972) 120.
sense that she does not "renounce the historical marginality of women and reposition that marginality at the center of her fiction."\(^{10}\)

Many critics are prompt to comment that Yourcenar writes as a man. Jean d'Ormesson went so far as to dismiss sweepingly the specificity of women writers with Yourcenar's admission to the Académie Française. He wrote shortly before her induction: "The principal virtue of Marguerite Yourcenar is to have destroyed the myth of feminine literature. . . . It is not even a question of saying that Marguerite Yourcenar writes as a man does. With her, we enter into unisexual literature. After her, no one will ever attempt to distinguish feminine from masculine literature."\(^{11}\)

We concur that Yourcenar studiously avoids marginalization. For the most part, she inscribes her text in mainstream masculine discourse. Never having suffered from being a woman, as she herself admits, she rejects a discourse that is inspired by "the woundedness of the feminine,"\(^{12}\) or whose conscious goal is to (re)empower the


\(^{11}\) Qtd. in Gaudin 52.

\(^{12}\) Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, *Listening to Our Bodies: The Rebirth of Feminine Wisdom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 74, refers to Syliva Plath and Anne Sexton as having "rejected living out and through the woundedness of the feminine." This terminology appeared particularly apt in
feminine. Moreover, she strongly criticized those women who devote their writings exclusively to the female condition. "If men were the same way," she stated, "we would not have Virgil's Dido or Mme Bovary or Mme de Langeais or Anna Karenina."\(^{13}\) While her own sexual preference might have produced some type of marginal discourse in another writer, homosexuality becomes a non-deviant, dignified norm in Yourcenar's works.

Yourcenar felt a greater link with humanity in general than with women in particular. She objected to the aggressivity of modern feminism and its apparent conformity to male profit- and success-oriented ideals.\(^{14}\) Unlike Beauvoir, she rejected a leveling of the social and psychological differences between the sexes. Identifying certain "specifically 'feminine' virtues . . . gentleness, kindness, subtlety, delicacy . . . ," as well as certain masculine virtues "courage, endurance, physical strength, self-control . . . ," she insisted that both sexes need to share a measure of these virtues to qualify as good human beings.\(^{15}\)

\[^{13}\] Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 227.

\[^{14}\] Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 221-22.

\[^{15}\] Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 223.
Yourcenar's strict adherence to historical accuracy further reflects an almost compulsive need to conform to authoritative (masculine) modes of expression. If we compare both Hébert's and Yourcenar's appended notes regarding the historicity of their texts, we note the striking difference in their approaches. Hébert describes simply how she transforms historical personages into fictional characters of her imagination: "Quoique ce roman soit basé sur un fait réel qui s'est produit au Canada, il y a très longtemps, il n'en demeure pas moins une oeuvre d'imagination. Les personnages véridables de ce drame n'ont fait que prêter à mon histoire leurs gestes les plus extérieurs, les plus officiels, en quelque sorte. Pour le reste, ils sont devenus mes créatures imaginaires, au cours d'un lent cheminement intérieur."16 Disregarding all but the formal input of the authoritative historical father, Hébert avows, in essence, that she has "mothered" her text during a slow gestation in the fertile womb of her female imagination.

Yourcenar, on the contrary, in a twenty-page note explains how her fictional characters rigorously adhere to historical models, how Zénon's philosophy embodies many of the philosophical countercurrents of his time, how she depends on archives, genealogical records, and authentic

16 Author's note, Hébert, Kamouraska 6.
documents and court records to provide what she perceives as an essential quality of historical veracity. Yourcenar affirms, in what Gaudin has termed "the language of paternalistic authority," the legitimate (paternal) relation of historical accuracy to her creation.

The "Fathered" Text

We have already explored the gynocentric universe in Hébert's Kamouraska which contributes to her "mothered" text. Most critics have identified Yourcenar's androcentric literary universe. Whereas Yourcenar asserted the equal value of good men and women and intelligent men and women, she considered women's historical lives as too secondary, too dependent on men, to permit her to create a leading female protagonist. A woman could never be sufficiently representative of an entire historical period. For this reason, in both Mémoires d'Hadrien and L'Oeuvre au noir, male characters embody her literary visions. In her mind, male characters possessed the independence and life

17 Gaudin 33.

18 Jonathan Culler's idea about the importance of legitimate meanings in the literary criticism of a patriarchal culture suggested to me Yourcenar's corollary paternal relation to her text. See On Deconstruction 60. Linda Stillman, "Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phalacy of Indifference," Studies in Twentieth Century French Literature, vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1985), also refers to the "controlling male who speaks with the unalterable authority of history . . . (262)" especially in Mémoires d'Hadrien.
possibilities necessary to transcend the contingent and attain the universal that female characters lack. With regard to L'Oeuvre au noir, she revealed that "it would have been impossible to convey the whole broad panorama of the sixteenth century through the Lady of Froso in her Swedish manor, just as it would have been impossible to convey the ancient world through Plotina [in Mémoires d'Hadrien]."  
Furthermore, through her male protagonists, Yourcenar is able to wield commandingly the male, paternal power traditionally associated with both the intellectual life of the mind and the quest for mastery over others. Yourcenar does not create men to view them from a female perspective; neither does she create them to view women through their eyes. Yourcenar appears to project herself onto the fictional male thus, on a surface level, allying herself with the paternal literary forces.

The male-identified woman writer often views women as secondary. Carolyn Heilbrun describes such women authors who enter the male mainstream while sacrificing both their

19 Yourcenar, With Open Eyes 226.

20 Jane Miller suggested that women writers often write about men from these perspectives in Women Writing about Men.

21 In speaking of nineteenth-century women writers, Gilbert and Guber explain how women writers disguised as men "could move vigorously away from the 'lesser subjects' and 'lesser lives' which had constrained [their] foremothers." The Madwoman in the Attic 65.
womanhood and bonding with other women. She laments their tendency to create fictional female characters lacking the autonomy that they themselves display through their writing. Why, she asks, must a male character necessarily be the only one to "stand for the full range of human experience, moving through action and quest to achievement or failure?" Jane Flax expresses the problem of the father-identified daughter in psychological terms translatable into the problem of the male-identified woman writer:

The father represents autonomy, reinforced by patriarchal authority and control outside the family. The daughter sees him as the gatekeeper to both autonomy and the outside, nonfamilial world. Yet the price of identifying with the father is high... The daughter must give up her own preoedipal tie to the mother, and often take on the father's devaluation of and contemptuous attitude for the mother and, by extension, for women as a group. Sometimes, the daughter, especially if there are no sons or she is the oldest sibling, enters not only into a quasi-sexual 'little girl' relation to the father, but a protomasculine one as well. This leaves women with what feels like an irresolvable dilemma: to be loved and nurtured, and remain tied to the mother, or to be autonomous and externally successful, to be like a man. The external success is often undercut and limited, not only by

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22 Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979.) 88. Heilbrun cites the case of Simone de Beauvoir whose novel The Mandarins was to contain 'all of [her]self,' but who could not "create a positive heroine" (72). Heilbrun quotes Beauvoir's Force of Circumstance, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), as evidence: "Anna, hasn't the autonomy that has been bestowed upon me by a profession which means so much to me. [Anna] lives the relative life of a secondary being; Henri resembles me more than Anna does" (268). The parallel to Yourcenar's relation to her male protagonist is clear.
patriarchal control outside the home and the alienating quality of work, but by the inner psychic pain caused by this ongoing conflict."²³

The Dead Mother

Yourcenar fits both the psychological model of the father-identified daughter and the literary model of the male-identified woman author. As we stated, Yourcenar's mother died ten days after giving birth to her. As an only child raised by her father and a series of governesses and mistresses, it would seem natural for her to identify with the single male parent. Employing Nancy Chodorow's theory on the socialization of gender through the family, we might also presume that the absence of the mother role model could have short-circuited the usual transmission of "learned" feminine traits such as relatedness, inner-directness, passivity, and the propensity to "mother" (either children or texts).

When interviewed on the absence of her mother in her childhood, Yourcenar contemptuously replied that she did not suffer in the least from this absence. She stated further that her "father was surrounded by bevies of women. So there were plenty of people to make [her] collars in

broderie anglaise and to give [her] candy."24 This reply both de-individualizes women and reduces mothering to the stereotypical seamstress and nurturer.

Linda Stillman refuses to recognize the psychological insignificance Yourcenar imputes to her mother's death. Stillman has examined Yourcenar's masculine discourse and uncovered a repressed feminine discourse that belies the author's avowed allegiance to masculine (feminine-indifferent) modes of expression. By analyzing Yourcenar's language and narrative strategies, Stillman identifies the resurgence of anguished imagery and mechanisms of defense pointing to the author's tormented imaginings surrounding the dead mother. For Stillman, the return of the repressed spectral mother haunts the daughter's discourse. The daughter's tropical "turning away from the woman"25 expresses her traumatic loss, her anger, and her guilt: "The desire to avoid or eradicate motherhood in order to undo her mother's death leads Yourcenar to the (literary) denial of her own existence and thereby her responsibility for that death. The turning away from the woman expresses her anger against her mother for dying, against herself (and her subsequent guilt) for causing the awful death, and against the heterosexual experience that intitated the

24 Yourcenar, With Open Eves 1.

25 Stillman 265.
Stillman hypothesizes that masculine homosexuality "masks . . . an amorous discourse between a mother and her daughter and the fantasm of matricide furnishes the deep structure of [Yourcenar's] . . . texts." Yourcenar alternately glories in an idealized image of the mother as all-giving nurturer and fantasizes her murder for failing to gratify her.

Stillman's psychoanalytic interpretation of Yourcenar's fiction reveals disturbing insights into the author's psyche. The critic breaks the polished façade of Yourcenar's fiction and discovers bloody, scarred underpinnings. In our opinion, such an all-encompassing intertextual "revelation" of the author's unconscious intentions dangerously overreaches the critic's mission. Although we come to similar conclusions regarding the surface structure of Yourcenar's works (male-identified discourse, disdain for women, the father's assimilation to the figure of the older brother), our own particular analysis of L'Oeuvre au noir avoids this psychocritical sighting of maternal phantasms. Instead, we shall explore the textual portrayal of women, the male protagonist's abandonment by the mother, his rejection of women, his haunting by the feminine in the form of a raging,

26 Stillman 265.

27 Stillman 264.
uncontrollable fire, and his death and rebirth through the 
agency of the archetypal feminine.

This "haunting by the feminine" which lures, destroys, 
and brings about rebirth constitutes the repressed feminine 
discourse—a matriarchal discourse—in Yourcenar's work. In 
the conclusion of her article on Yourcenar's prefaces, 
Colette Gaudin suggests that while Yourcenar's fiction 
"imposes men's voices," "the man's voice can be heard only 
through the mediation of her own, [therefore] isn't there in 
it something of the woman's voice . . . ." Her image of 
men differs markedly from the "male heroes of the humanist 
tradition," and "[h]er work might be a preface to a chapter 
of feminism which is possibly being written elsewhere."

Indeed, we believe that within the "fathered" text, a mother 
speaks through Yourcenar's male protagonist. By analyzing

\[28\] Gaudin 52.

\[29\] Hadrian's bisexuality and his participation in the 
Eleusinian mysteries are evidence of his feminine nature. 
Orestes in *Electra ou la chute des masques* is depicted as a 
man/woman ("cette faible bouche, ce corps fragile" (40), his 
face less virile than his sister's. Nathanaël of *Un homme 
obscure* evinces matriarchal ideology in his closeness to 
nature, animals, wooded areas and in his belief in the unity 
of all nature. He even states himself the lack of 
differentiation between himself and women: "Il ne se 
sentait pas non plus particulièrement mâle en présence du 
doux peuple des femelles; il avait ardemment possédé 
certaines femmes, mais, hors du lit, ses soucis, ses 
besoins, ses servitudes à l'égard de la paie, de la maladie, 
des tâches quotidiennes qu'on accomplit pour vivre ne lui 
avait pas paru si différents des leurs." Marguerite 
198.
Zénon's attraction to the mythical feminine, we will attempt to yield a less psychocritical feminine discourse based on his matriarchal consciousness.

Female Portrayal/Female Betrayal

Yourcenar resented being accused of minimally representing women in her works. She summarized the female presence in her entire opus like a literary accountant tallying her credits: in *Feux*, women speak most of the time; in *Denier du rêve* male and female characters balance each other; female characters are in the forefront of several of the "oriental tales;" Sophie in *Coup de Grâce* and the Lady of Froso in *Le Oeuvre au noir*, she contended, were positive, active female figures.\(^{30}\)

While it is true that women figures preponderate in *Feux*, each suffers the pain of lost love in a well of loneliness and desperation. Yourcenar's brand of mythological revisionism strips female mythic figures of their power and reduces them to scorned lovers. Her treatment of Clytemnestra provides a good example. Clytemnestra is a woman wholly consumed by her husband: "J'ai consenti à me fondre dans son destin comme un fruit dans une bouche."\(^{31}\) Clytemnestra does not cry over

\(^{30}\) See Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 226.

Iphigeneia's sacrificial murder, considering her husband's ambitions more important than the future of her children. Aegisthos means nothing more to her than the filling of a void left by her philandering, absent husband. (Phedre also talks about being sucked into the deathly void left by Hippolyte.) Clytemnestra murders, not out of strength, but as a woman scorned: "je ne le tuais que pour ça, pour le forcer à se rendre compte que je n'étais pas une chose sans importance qu'on peut laisser tomber, ou céder au premier venu."

In her theatre, women do not fare much better. In Electra ou la chute des masques, Yourcenar portrays Clytemnestra as a corpulent matron who killed the king in her youth for the benefit of her lover and their son Orestes. The monstrous daughter, Electra, an iron maiden wielding insane, brute hatred, savagely strangles her aged, now harmless, mother. Before sacrificing herself for her husband, Alceste suffers in vitriolic exclamation; afterwards, she lies an inert body, the "Alceste morte" of the next eleven scenes who is reluctantly revived by Hercules. Although cognizant of Ariane's more powerful origins as "la déesse épouse et mère de temps plus primitifs," Yourcenar chooses the more recent legendary

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32 Yourcenar, Feux 186-7.

33 Marguerite Yourcenar, "Qui n'a pas son Minotaure," Théâtre II 166.
Ariane, abandoned, albeit by choice this time, by her lover Theseus. It is clear that Yourcenar's mythical borrowings express what is important to her more than fidelity to the legends.\textsuperscript{34}

The familiar pattern of male abandonment or lack of commitment to the devoted female, and her inability to cope with the loss, is firmly established in \textit{Feux} (1936). Yet it had previous occurred in \textit{Alexis} (1929) and recurs again in \textit{Le Coup de Grâce} (1939) and in \textit{L'Oeuvre au noir} (1968). Monique, through no fault of her own, loses Alexis who prefers men. Yourcenar cites the positive strength of Sophie and the Lady of Froso, yet both lose their men despite tender commitment.

Yourcenar's \textit{Nouvelles orientales} (1938) present another assortment of female characters, young and old, who fail because of their dependence on men. The author's choice of a wide array of myths and legends with this common theme would seem to bolster her own deep-seated beliefs about the genders and their relations. In "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" the young apprentice Ling prefers the master's portraits of

\textsuperscript{34} In her \textit{Entretiens radiophoniques} with de Rosbo, Yourcenar squarely equates myth with poetry, not history: "Aucun drame emprunté à la légende grecque traditionnelle n'est à proprement parler un drame historique, tous ces grands sujets se situant dans ce monde de la proto-histoire, de l'âge du bronze, qu'il nous est impossible d'imager même à demi réaliste, et pour lesquels le mot même d'histoire est prématuré. Ils appartiennent en fait au monde de la poésie pure" (38).
his wife to the living woman. He is too busy to cry when she kills herself in desperation. In "Le Dernier amour du Prince Genghi," a resourceful woman finds her way back into the blind prince's favor through a series of disguises only to taste the humiliation of defeat when the dying prince fails to name her amongst his most cherished former lovers. In "Le Sourire de Marko," a widow shelters and tenderly cares for a young giant Serb who is engaged in conspiratorial activities. When he visciously insults her because of some over-cooked goat meat (which he assimilates to her aging skin), she tips off the Turkish authorities to his presence and seeks his death with a vengeance, overseeing a series of tortures designed to verify if he is actually dead. The young hero triumphs, murders the old woman with her own instruments of torture, and runs off with a nubile young dancer who was touched by his smile. Another widow, Aphrodissia, flees from her village with the decapitated head of her young lover and plunges to her death down a hillside. She was escaping not only the hypocrisy of hiding her love, but also the "long châtiment d'être une vieille femme qui n'est plus aimée."³³

In her oriental tales involving the mythical feminine, Yourcenar does portray a dubious brand of female triumph over men. However, the victory of innocents and fairies

requires death or transformation. A young woman is immolated in the walls of a building constructed by her husband's brothers in "Le Lait de la mort." Although she dies, her exposed breasts miraculously continue to nourish her baby who is brought to her until he is weaned. The nymphs of "Notre-Dame-des-hirondelles" are goddess figures who must desert their sacred trees and grottos because of a priest's campaign against them and the waning faith of the young people of the village. Like the young peasant woman in "Le Lait de la mort," these nymphs are immured alive behind a chapel built to ensure their demise. They too survive miraculously. The Virgin Mary alters their form: as swallows they are free "car ce qui est interdit aux Nymphes est permis aux hirondelles." 36

The nymphs in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" remain triumphant; however, their powers are portrayed as maleficent and destructive to men. They blind and ruin the men caught in their feminine web of illusions. The all-powerful Kâli is decapitated by jealous gods who remorsefully revive her, erroneously attaching her head to the body of a prostitute. The sullied goddess becomes the ultimate evil temptress and destructress: "Elle tua comme l'insecte femelle qui dévore ses mâles; elle écrasa les êtres qu'elle enfantait comme une laie qui se retourne sur

sa portée.\textsuperscript{37} Her power is great, but her domain is loathsome. She longs to be liberated into the "pur néant" where "Tout se résorbe en Rien."\textsuperscript{38}

In the following passage, Linda Stillman neatly summarizes the feminine presence in Yourcenar's works reaching a similar conclusion to my own:

Triangulation structures the erotics of Yourcenar's fiction, but rather than a typical ménage à trois, men sacrifice loving women to the greater and more natural glory of a pederastic relationship. Children, when mentioned at all, are either abandoned along with their mothers, born crippled and wished dead, or potentially feared by a rape victim. Always, we witness a victim, the suffering female, her love associated with torture, abandonment, and death; and a victor, the male, his homosexual love valorized. These narratives devalue female sexuality, depicted as dependent on ruse, fancy, and artifice, and always infelicitous. Yourcenar and her heroes have a lot to say about women. It is usually in the form of maxims and is rarely nice.\textsuperscript{39}

While denigrating the role of women in the society-at-large and systematizing the plight of the lover scorned and the abandoned older woman, Yourcenar clearly extols the virtues of the nurturant mother. In her \textit{Entretiens radiophoniques} with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar describes Sophie (\textit{Le Coup de Grâce}) as though she were the archetypal

\textsuperscript{37} Yourcenar, "Kâli décapitée," \textit{Nouvelles orientales} 168.

\textsuperscript{38} Marguerite Yourcenar, "Kâli décapitée," \textit{Nouvelles orientales} 169.

\textsuperscript{39} Stillman, "Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phallacy of Indifference," 262.
Great Mother in her beneficent aspect: "elle représente la terre elle-même, elle incarne cet élément féminin qui compte tant pour moi, mais que j'avoue retrouver assez rarement, par malheur, chez les femmes que nous voyons autour de nous: cette abondance d'émotion et de sentiment presque inépuisable, cette foncière bonté, cette patiente capacité d'accepter . . . . Sophie a une richesse de source . . . elle garde cette espèce de générosité et de grandeur qui est celle d'un être presque élémentaire."  

Yourcenar further describes the women in Denier du rêve as "terrestres," Earth-Goddess-like; specifically Marcella "représentait la Terre, au sens où la mère de Dieu byzantine est appelée 'la terre des vivants.'"  

Similarly, Yourcenar's description of Valentine, "le premier état de la femme parfaite . . . à la fois aimante et détachée, passive par sagesse et non par faiblesse," recalls the many fertile yet indifferent goddess figurines of Ancient Europe. Yourcenar's veneration of the nurturant mother may, as Stillman has asserted, represent the abandoned daughter's fantasy of her dead mother. That Sophie, Valentine, the miraculously nurturant woman in "Le Lait de la mort" all die young may indicate Yourcenar's

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40 De Rosbo, Entretiens radiophoniques: 89.

41 De Rosbo 90.

"fantasm of matricide" (Stillman) for the mother who failed to gratify her. Or it may, in my own scheme, just bring us full circle to the fatality of motherhood. The creation of the feminine man or the man drawn to the mythical feminine may be the author's only means of salvaging womanhood in the patriarchal world that she has constructed for her own protection.

L'Oeuvre au noir

Analyzing L'Oeuvre au noir in particular, we witness a wide assortment of female characters, only two of whom are developed to any degree: Hilzonde, the mother of Zénon, and Martha, Zénon's half-sister. Hilzonde typifies the abandoned, suffering victim who rejects maternity. She represents also the chameleonesque female whose colors change depending on the male whose life she shares. Initially, an Italian priest arouses her only to abandon her shortly thereafter to illegitimate motherhood. Depressed and weary of both her own flesh and the fruit it engenders (shades of Beauvoir), her child is condemned to maternal indifference: "lasse de sa chair et du fruit de celle-ci,

43 "Yourcenar's fiction figuratively repeats the matricide that her physical existence literally wrought." Stillman 275.

44 Marguerite Yourcenar, L'Oeuvre au noir (Paris: Gallimard (Collection Folio), 1968). All pagination will refer to this edition.
elle semblait étendre à son enfant la réprobation ennuyée qu'elle avait pour elle-même" (27).

Simon Adriansen revitalizes Hilzonde through his heretical Anabaptist faith. Inspired by a religious outlook that sanctifies all relations governed by love, he treats his new wife like an angel, and sex becomes a sacred act: "Hilzonde revivait au contact de cet homme comme une barque échouée qu'entraîne la marée montante. Elle goûtaît le mystère sans honte de ces plaisirs permis, et la façon dont le vieil homme, penché sur son épaule, lui caressât les seins, comme si faire l'amour était une manière de bénir" (33). Hilzonde finds new respect for herself under Adriansen's tutelage. Although awakened by Adriansen's religious philosophy and his touch, Hilzonde is little more than a faithful automaton under her husband's control.

During Adriansen's absence from the Anabaptist enclave at Münster, Hilzonde falls sway to the religious fervor of the new Christ-King of her sect, Hans Bockhold. She then ecstatically submits to the lustful charlatan's passionate embraces. Inspired by pentecostal-style religion and an orgiastic preacher, the subdued wife now burns like a flaming torch.

As we have seen in her interview with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar characterized her "admirable" women characters over and over again as "la terre" because of their simplicity, humility, and closeness to the realities of
nature. Hilzonde resembles more closely soft clay, modeled and remodeled as she is by the men in her life. Only in death does she attain a measure of firmness: she resolutely marches with her daughter to rejoin their God, calmly extending her throat for the executioner's axe.

This daughter, Martha, is spared a martyr's death, and later becomes highlighted in Yourcenar's narrative. Yourcenar considered Martha and Electre odious characters. Although initially devoted to her cousin Bénédicte and to the Evangelical faith, Martha loses the sympathy of her creator for lacking the courage to nurse her terminally ill cousin through to death (note that failure to nurture is odious to Yourcenar). Having lost her cousin, she also eventually loses the faith. Both of the fiery passions in her life dwindle until "il n'en restait qu'une immense cendre" (403). Yourcenar ultimately damns Martha for rejecting her moral values in favor of riches and social position.\(^5\) In the text we are told that a "vide somptueux" (403) governs Martha's life. She is a very intelligent, highly lucid, female character; but she suffers from moral flaws that condemn her to a sort of sumptuous inconsequence. She is not hopelessly dependent on men to shape her destiny, as was her mother Hilzonde. However, the mask of inauthenticity she wears to maintain the privileges of class

\(^5\) See de Rosbo, \textit{Entretiens radiophoniques} 75.
is more despicable to Yourcenar than mindless female malleability. In Electra, Yourcenar forces all of her characters to face their acts unprotected by the masks of justice, but none is more villified than Electra for her mauvaise foi.

Two powerful women, whose historical existence justifies their presence in the text, appear in L'Oeuvre au noir: Queen Catherine of Paris and the Regent Marguerite of the Netherlands. Catherine de Medici's vignette mainly presents her as a mother concerned for the health of her child. She is also a queen lacking the strength to support Zénon in his philosophical dispute with the Sorbonne, despite her admiration for him. Marguerite is depicted as a good housewife as well as Head of State. She is tenderly devoted to her female companion, but the love for her defunct husband overwhelms all other concerns, including matters of State. Both women then, although politically empowered through widowhood, are reduced essentially to wives and mothers in the Yourcenarian text.

The only truly positive female character in the book fits the mold of a strong, independent woman in the matriarchal tradition. The Lady of Froso is tall and beautiful, comfortable in nature, a healer, and serenely sexual. The "bains magiques accompagnés de chants" of the Scandinavian "witch" cult in which she is instructed prefigure and mirror the female-centered magical baths and
sexual ceremonies of Brother Cyprien's sect "les Anges" (285). The Lady of Froso wants a child from Zénon without matrimony. Although clearly depicting the Lady of Froso as a matriarchal figure, Yourcenar sees her principally as the "only women (sic) who might have been [Zénon's] companion and shared his medical work." It is her escape from patriarchally-determined femininity that empowers the Lady in Yourcenar's eyes and elevates her to the status of honorary man. Yourcenar depicts, but does not acknowledge, the female tradition from which the Lady derives her strength.

Yourcenar's truly positive female characters are indeed rare and her minor feminine characters hopelessly conform to the most negatively valorized patriarchal tradition. Apart from Jacqueline, the corpulent, joyous paragon of maternity, and Wivine, the pure but insipid admirer of Zénon, the only other female characters are witches, sirens, prostitutes, sibyls, lemures, and sexually deviant heretics. The abundance of these hypersexual threatening females is certainly, in part, a function of the sixteenth-century setting of the novel. In Renaissance Europe, as we saw in Chapter Three, female assertion in sexual or other domains was fearfully translated into horrific images emanating from the male psyche. Therefore,

46 Yourcenar, With Open Eyes 226.
in a "fathered" text, stemming from an androcentric tradition and circulating around a male protagonist, one would expect to encounter such negative images of the feminine as seen in the society at large.47

Finally, we might add that Yourcenar's treatment of witches in her text is another indication of her male-identified writing. According to Mary Daly, women were singled out for persecution as witches "who had rejected marriage (Spinster) and women who had survived it (widows). The witch-hunters sought to purify their society (The Mystical Body) of these 'indigestible' elements--women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral, and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere."48 The "witches" were also midwives and healers that the new male medical profession sought to suppress.49 Robert Briffault states that the witches were also "the successors and representives of the

47 Joseph Pleck, in his book The Myth of Masculinity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), cites the cultural explanation as one reason for men's negative attitudes toward women. While his remarks apply to the twentieth-century, they could equally apply to a sixteenth-century setting: "men (and women) hold these attitudes simply because they are widespread in the culture; given that the culture holds these attitudes, one does not need complex psychological theories to explain why individuals adopt them (see Pleck, 1978a)" (112).


49 Daly cites a study by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English as her source in Gyn/Ecology 221.
sacred and revered priestesses"\textsuperscript{50} of the ancient matriarchal religions performing rites that were once considered sacred. Eva Figes corroborates that "witchcraft is overwhelmingly associated with women."\textsuperscript{51} R. W. Connell categorizes the witch craze as "state violence . . . directed mainly against women."\textsuperscript{52}

Male fear of the empowered feminine was, no doubt, one of the driving forces behind the persecution of women in the witchcraze.\textsuperscript{53} The historians Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser find Joan of Arc's "masculine" life-style and subsequent burning emblematic of "men's fears of women who confidently claimed authority and who acted independently."\textsuperscript{54} Generally, lack of conformance to the devalued patriarchal mode of femininity engendered a

\textsuperscript{50} Briffault, \textit{The Mothers.} vol. 2, 562.

\textsuperscript{51} Figes, \textit{Patriarchal Attitudes} 61.

\textsuperscript{52} Connell, \textit{Gender and Power} 128.

\textsuperscript{53} Briffault explains that male dread of women derived from the magical powers originally attributed to her by primitive societies. "She was dreaded not because she was necessarily maleficent, but because she was possessed of magical power; and all magical power is dreaded and regarded as dangerous, not because it is habitually employed do harm, but because it is susceptible of being so used, even if commonly exercised for objects beneficial to all.

Such a power, when wielded by one sex alone, must inevitably be regarded with dread and terror by the other sex." Male appropriation of female power to Briffault is a self-protective measure. \textit{The Mothers.} vol. 2., 570.

\textsuperscript{54} Anderson and Zinsser, \textit{A History of Their Own.}
masculine reign of terror directed against women.

Nonetheless, in L'Oeuvre au noir we get no sense that historically women were especially singled out for prosecution. There is only one "unofficial" female witch burning. Otherwise, men are the principal victims of the fiery scourge. The story of Don Blas de Vela's routing from a monastery for being a "sorcier cabbaliste" (232) is mentioned. The earlier burning at the stake of two historical figures--Michel Servet and Etienne Dolet--serves as a painfully constant reminder of the danger Zénon faces for his heretical activities. Zénon is eventually accused of being both a sodomist and a sorcerer. He admits to both charges, but without the negative connotation reserved for these "crimes" by the masses. ("Il avait été à ses heures l'un et l'autre, mais les mots ne correspondaient pas aux choses; ils traduisent seulement l'opinion que le troupeau se fait des choses" (225). Once again, the father-identified daughter denies her foremothers and throws the weight of her sympathetic attention to a hierarchically more "important" male suffering.

Zénon's Psychic Formation: Maternal Abandonment

Zénon's psychic experience of the mother in her rejecting and depriving aspect stems from maternal indifference and abandonment. As Erich Neumann explains, "all interruptions and disturbances in the positive stream
flowing from the mother to living things"55 are experienced as the "Terrible Mother." The Terrible Mother also seeks to draw "the life of the individual back into herself," in her "devouring-ensnaring function."56 Zénon's cousin, Henri-Maximilien, by contrast, was deeply loved and highly nurtured by his mother. He becomes a consummate soldier, a poet, and a great lover of women. Henri-Maximilien's life is marked by balance and a joie de vivre that Zénon lacks because of his opposite experience of maternal abandonment.

Deprived of a positive experience of the nurturing, good mother, Zénon will spend his life associating the feminine with its devouring aspect and will be unable to establish healthy relations with women. In Jungian terminology, the animus traits of "intellectuality, cold rationality and reliance on the mind"57 will dominate him. Pursuing an intellectual path, Zénon will adopt the rigid persona necessary to protect his vulnerable ego damaged by maternal abandonment. However, his repressed feminine nature will continue to demand expression. Zénon's unconscious projections of the feminine will forcefully demonstrate his unresolved fixation on the feminine. Since, according to Jung, the language of the unconscious expresses


56 Neumann 72.

itself primarily in images, evidence of Zénon's unconscious projections will primarily take personified, symbolic, or metaphorical form.  

*Indifference to women*

Zénon's indifference to women is apparent early on in his life. He forsakes the devoted Wiwine to pursue an isolated existence in search of himself. In effect, this solitary path toward self-knowledge will alienate him from the integrated self and block full individuation until the moment of his death. As Jolande Jacobi states: "Exclusive self-reliance makes for spiritual pride, sterile brooding and isolation within one's own ego. Man needs an opposite to concretize his experience. Without the presence of someone other and different, question and answer merge into a formless mass."  

Meanwhile, bland metaphorical analogies rather than vigorous contempt mark Zénon's indifference to the allure of female sexuality. Brothel girls "lui plurent autant qu'à un délicat un plat de viandes gâtées" (38). He abandons his first lover after a week, feeling nothing more for her than "la joie mêlée de crainte du nageur qui plonge dans une eau rafraîchissante mais peu sûre" (41). Catherine, the servant


*59 Jacobi 108.*
who enters his bed uninvited at Jean Myers' house, is compared to "la bière et le pain dont on prend sa part avec indifférence, sans dégoût et sans délices" (195). When Zénon inadvertently leaves his bedroom door unlocked a week later, his ensuant encounter with Catherine is categorized as "grotesque." The flesh's power to attract, despite his distaste for the woman, consternates Zénon. But his repulsion the following morning is merely likened to having slept in a "douteux lit d'auberge" (196-7).

The Metaphor of Fire

As Yourcenar states in *With Open Eyes*, "Life has many things in comon with a brazier: heat (that heat that distinguishes [sic] the living from the dead), instability, the mixture of dazzling light and dark smoke, and the fact that like fire it feeds on destruction: life is devastating." As her fundamental metaphor for life, in both its beneficent and its destructive aspects, it is not surprising that fire symbolism abounds in *L'Oeuvre au noir*. Yourcenar sees Zénon himself as being composed of "fire and flame." His wandering tempers him like a slow-burning fire until we find him at mid-life, "consumed, burned up

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60 Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 173.

61 Yourcenar, *With Open Eyes* 135.
. . . and reduced to ashes."\(^{62}\) During his student phase, Yourcenar describes Zénon as "cet esprit pour qui chaque objet au monde était un phénomène ou un signe" (39). Fires are the "signes du moi,"\(^{63}\) dominating the hieroglyphics of Zénon's soul.

In its beneficent aspect, fire represents Zénon's internal passion. There is fire in his eyes ("le feu de ses prunelles sombres fascinait et déplaisait tout ensemble" (38). It also represents the warmth of companionship: in nocturnal escapades with his cousin, the young Zénon is drawn to campfires and tavern fires—obvious signs of life in the night. He remembers fondly the fires of St. John's Eve where he would lie with farmworkers to celebrate the opening of summer. But the fire also offers the solace of solitary meditation: he is, on more than one occasion, termed the "compagnon du feu" (63, 139). While contemplating fire, Zénon associates his own elemental essence with the object of his meditation. Fire is both the "démon domestiqué" of the hearth and the "dieu enflammé" in the sky (180). Through sex and wine one can also access the "royaume igné" (241), but the embers are quick to die, despite the magnitude of "la grande flamme sensuelle"

\(^{62}\) Yourcenar, With Open Eyes 136.

\(^{63}\) Term taken from André Breton's pursuit of his essence by way of the signposts that the "hasard quotidien" placed in his path in Nadja.
It is interesting to move beyond Yourcenar's conscious use of the metaphor of fire to see how the element of fire can be construed as masculine, following Bachelard's archetypology, or feminine, using both Bachelard's analysis and the historical use of bonfires in matriarchal myth and ritual. In his *Psychanalyse du feu*, Bachelard identifies fire as an exclusively sexual symbol and it is essentially a male element. He rejects the idea that "le feu, c'est la vie; la vie est un feu." When Zénon attaches himself to a small society of alchemists at the School of Theology, he seeks the company of inquiring minds like his own. The purely masculine affiliation of the society is no doubt also a surface attraction for a man in perpetual flight from woman. For, as Bachelard informs us, alchemy is uniquely a science of celibate men in an all-male society. The alchemists, in Bachelard's view, were drawn to the powerful

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64 Bachelard accepts the patriarchal Greek mythic depiction of Prometheus's theft of fire from the Gods for presentation to mankind. However, he does acknowledge the existence of mythic origins of fire attributable to animals and to women. He cites the example of the original feminine cooking fire. Eva Figes identifies this myth in her account of Malinowski's description of the Trobriand Islanders' beliefs. Woman created the sun "but kept back a little of the fire in order to cook, hiding the fire in her vagina when she was not using it. But man discovered her hiding place and stole it." *Patriarchal Attitudes* 35-6.

"feu intime et mâle, objet de méditation" which compensated for their unfulfilled sexual desires. The furnace-enclosed masculine fire gave the alchemist a feeling of mastery and control. Zénon himself expresses pride in belonging to "cette race des hommes qui domestique le feu, transforme la substance des choses, et scrute les chemins des astres" (52).

The masculine nature of the contemplative, transformative fire is in direct contrast to the destructive fire, which consumes and destroys whatever it touches. Consuming fires dominate the entire summer preceding Zénon's departure from his home in search of himself. First, he witnesses harvesters burning a "witch," who they believe used sympathetic magic (urination) to call forth additional downpours on their already rain-soaked fields. Later, in the forest, he contemplates the essence of trees and his thoughts are drawn to the virtual fire within them which may ultimately consume them. He is irresistibly drawn to the flames generated by a group of carbon-makers, blackened by their work. He also witnesses the arson of a farm by anabaptists and, returning to his home, perceives his house illuminated by so many torches that he thinks he is seeing another fire.

Bachelard 90.
Bachelard would consider these consuming fires as feminine: "Le principe féminin des choses est un principe de surface et d'enveloppe, un giron, un refuge, une tiédeur. Le principe masculin est un principe de centre, un centre de puissance, actif et soudain comme l'étincelle et la volonté. La chaleur féminine attaque les choses du dehors. Le feu masculin les attaque du dedans, au coeur de l'essence."\(^{67}\) Bachelard further states that "le feu est en nous et hors de nous, invisible et éclatant, esprit et fumée."\(^{68}\) Presumably, the internal fire is masculine and the external one feminine.

Bachelard's analysis of fire contrasts the destructive female fire—which we see as the Terrible Mother or Great Goddess in her devouring, chaotic, untamed aspect—with the superior male fire—true creator, as well as bearer of light and higher consciousness. Feminine fire blazes uncontrollably (like the threatening hypersexual Goddess) or appears as a diaphanous, inconstant "fumée blanche" (the unattainable, yearned for object of desire). Bachelard's description of the Empedocles complex reads like a description of the old king's death by sacrifice and rebirth to eternity in matriarchal Goddess ritual: "L'amour, la mort et le feu sont unis dans un même instant. Par son

\(^{67}\) Bachelard 89.

\(^{68}\) Bachelard 93.
sacrifice dans le coeur de la flamme, l'éphémère nous donne une leçon d'éternité. La mort totale et sans trace est la garantie que nous partons tout entiers dans l'au-delà. Tout perdre pour tout gagner. La leçon du feu est claire: 'Après avoir tout obtenu par adresse par amour ou par violence, il faut que tu cèdes tout, que tu t'anéantisses.' (D'Annunzio, Contemplation de la Mort)." 69 Taking the uncontrollable fire as a feminine symbol, "l'appel du bûcher", 70 which haunts Zénon his entire life, can then be said to objectify the projection of his repressed anima.

More interesting still is the mythological association of bonfires and Goddess-worship and their presence in the religious rituals of both Belgium and France. Bachelard cites Frazer's work, but calls attention to his allusions to the friction that produced the bonfires (with its sexual associations) rather than their matriarchal origins. We find the historical analogy a convincing argument for classifying raging fires with the feminine principle.

According to Frazer, bonfires have been kindled "from time immemorial" 71 by peasants all over Europe on certain days of the year. Frazer cites the lenten fires, the Easter fires, the Beltane fires (May Day), the fires of the summer

69 Bachelard 36-7.

70 Bachelard 40.

71 Frazer, The Golden Bough 705.
solstice or Midsummer Day (St John's Eve), the Hallowe'en fires, and Midwinter fires. These fires date from antiquity and our first knowledge of them comes from attempts by Christian synods to eradicate them as "heathenish rites." 72 Effigies were burnt in the fires, or the burning of living persons was simulated, but, originally, evidence points to actual human sacrifice. As Frazer notes, "the fire is believed to promote the growth of the crops and the welfare of man and beast, either positively by stimulating them, or negatively by averting the dangers and calamities which threaten them from such causes as thunder and lightning, conflagration, blight, mildew, vermin, sterility, disease, and not least of all witchcraft." 73 The festivals were joyous occasions, accompanied by singing, dancing, and the coupling of the young people.

Although Frazer makes no allusion to the fact, these festivals were obviously rites originally connected to Goddess worship. The Great Goddess as a tree-spirit or spirit of vegetation later became personified as the "May Lady" or "Queen of the May." "Burning the witch" or "burning the Old Woman"—a figure attached to a pole in the center of the fire—was often an integral part of the ceremony. While the witch came to be the nefarious symbol

72 Frazer 706.
73 Frazer 744.
of evil in the cultures nearer to our time, originally it most probably represented the corn goddess or the moon herself, whose sacred union (symbolized by the phallic pole) fertilized the new harvest.\textsuperscript{74} Leaf-men were also often burned or pretended to be burned. These, in all probability, represented embodiments of the vegetation spirit—the old king who must die for renewal to take place. The nominal king, who reigns for a year in the modern-day peasant festivals of the South of France, may be a vestige of the revolving sacred kingship of ancient Goddess ritual.

Frazer, while initially recognizing the fertilizing aspect of the fires, eventually reduces his interpretation of the festivals to a single patriarchal notion: the fires were kindled to destroy the witches, who were held responsible for all the calamities befalling the villagers. Human and animal sacrifices were thought to contain the evil spirits and their death rid the community of their influence—thus bringing on fertility. This interpretation neglects the presence of singing, dancing, and love-making around the fires in obvious celebration of the fertility principle. The bonfires were also used to kindle the hearth fires in the village homes, and burnt remnants of the rituals were recovered to protect against evil in the coming

year.

Going back to ancient times, we learn from Esther Harding that Vestal Virgins tended sacred fires and ceremonies were performed in May to call forth rain in sacrificial rituals. "Torches, candles, and fires [were] burned in honor of the moon and [were] used as fertilizing magic, being carried, for example, round the newly-seeded fields to aid the germination of the grain, just as Hecate's torches were carried around the freshly sown fields, long ago in Greece, to promote their fertility".75

We believe that the fires clearly represented the notion of fertility originally associated with Goddess worship. Under the cloak of Christianity, evil implications became attached to the fires. Then, during the Renaissance, the Christian fathers further inverted the meaning of the sacrificial fires and created the analogous "purifying paternal fires,"76 destined to eliminate heretical elements. We witness a perversion of the fire principle from sacrificial nature worship attached to the feminine principle to a punitive paternal destruction of human life.

In the case of Zénon, the raging fires convey both levels of meaning. On one level, they no doubt signal the

75 Harding 128.

76 Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology 198. Bachelard does not treat the theological problem of purification by fire, but assumes that the underlying principle was that fire purifies everything.
Christian, patriarchal purifying fires; but, on a deeper level, they also signal the matriarchal demand for unrestricted sexuality, spontaneity and fertility. As Bachelard states, "Toute lutte contre les impulsions sexuelles doit donc être symbolisée par une lutte contre le feu."\(^7\) Zénon's cold, harsh exterior is but a psychic barrier to the reproductive demands of his unconscious. The persona of the invisible pilgrim barricades against the raging flames of the anima as well as against the intolerant and menacing society that surrounds him. He travels north in an effort to escape an epoch "où la raison humaine se trouve prise dans un cercle de flammes" (178).

Zénon's asceticism, his disdain for women, his preference for homosexuality, his cold rationality, his calculated disguises all fuel a raging feminine fire: the soul's conflagration in honor of spontaneity, emotion, sensuality and, most of all, fertility. Jacobi explains this compensatory relation between the persona (the societal mask) and the soul-image (the anima) thus: "Persona and soul-image stand in compensatory relation to one another; the more rigidly the mask, the persona, cuts off the individual from his natural, instinctual life, the more archaic, undifferentiated, and powerful become the soul-

\(^7\) Bachelard 167.
image." The mask hardens to the point of being indistinguishable from his real face, resulting in the reduction to ashes of his true self. ("Mais le philosophe sentait parfois lui coller au visage le masque insignifiant du docteur Théus. Cette vie imaginaire aurait aussi bien pu être la sienne. Quelqu'un un jour lui demanda s'il n'avait pas rencontré un certain Zénon au cours de ses voyages. Ce fut presque sans mentir qu'il répondit non" (200).

In Linda Stillman's psychoanalytic approach to Yourcenar's fiction, the omnipresent destructive fires, whether concrete or metaphorical, hark back to the death of Yourcenar's mother from puerperal fever. The recurrent fires denote the author's inability to escape the spectral mother in her narratives. In our correlative Jungian interpretation, these fires also denote the resurgence of repressed material. However, we see the fires as the anima's rising to compensate for over-differentiation of the rigid, intellectual, female-rejecting persona.

The Feminine Within: Zénon's Matriarchal Consciousness

1 The Serpent

The first evidence of Zénon's matriarchal consciousness is found in his professed sympathy for the maligned serpent. As Merlin Stone and others have shown, the Goddess religions

78 Jacobi, The Psychology of C. G. Jung 120.
revered the serpent, which represented both wisdom and immortality; he was not the sinister purveyor of evil and death as portrayed in the Adam and Eve myth. Zénon's reasoning, totally at variance with accepted Christian mythology, acknowledges the serpent's wisdom: "Une sympathie l'attirait vers les reptiles calomniés par la peur ou la superstition humaine, froids, prudents, à demi souterrains enfermant dans chacun de leurs rampants anneaux une sorte de minérale sagesse" (49). Obviously, Zénon identifies his own heretical stance vis-à-vis the world with that of the cold, prudent, subterranean and, especially, wise animal.  

2 The Lore of Trees

In a forest, Zénon testifies to his knowledge of ancient tree worship, which, as Graves, Frazer, Neumann and Eliade have demonstrated, was originally associated with Goddess worship:

"Ces bois étaient le reste des grandes futaies du temps païen: d'étranges conseils tombaient de

79 The serpent does not always have this positive valorization in Yourcenar's writings. In "Anna, Soror . . . ," for example, the serpent is associated with witchcraft and presages Miguel's incestuous relationship with his sister. Zénon's particular interpretation confirms in part the matriarchal configuration of his psyche.

80 "The Great Earth Mother who brings forth all life from herself is eminently the mother of all vegetation. The fertility rituals and myths of the whole world are based upon this archetypal context. The center of this vegetative symbolism is the tree." Neumann, The Great Mother 49.
leurs feuilles" (50). Rather than deny the trees' magic, Zénon recognizes the hermetic powers contained within them: "il retrouvait dans chacune de ces pyramides végétales l'hiéroglyphe hermétique des forces ascendantes, le signe de l'air, qui baigne et nourrit ces belles entités sylvestres, du feu, dont elles portent en soi la virtualité, et qui peut-être les détruira un jour" (50).

3 The Healer

Even in these early days, before he departs on his quest for self-knowledge, Zénon begins to practice the healing arts, first associated with women. As an itinerant healer, who shuns and scorns the bourgeois scramble for wealth and position, Zénon further expresses his matriarchal proclivities.81 Although he initially serves the great kingdoms of Europe and Asia, he ultimately serves the humblest citizens of his native Bruges. Along the route of his life travels, he provides medical assistance to all those who seek it, even the most politically or morally unacceptable patients (e.g. the religious activist with the broken leg and the adulterous woman with an unwanted pregnancy).

81 Remember Fromm's characterization of Mother Right as a social system favoring equal distribution of nature's wealth to all of the Mother's children, hence its appeal to socialist ideologues.
4 The Alchemist

Although Zénon initiates his quest in an outward reach toward adventure and conquest, he eventually concedes the superiority of inner transformation. In Neumann's words, he understands that "[s]acrifice and suffering are the prerequisites of the transformation conferred by [the Goddess], and this law of dying and becoming is an essential part of the wisdom of the Great Goddess of living things, the goddess of all growth, psychic as well as physical."³³

We have already explained in Bachelardian terms Zénon's attraction to the alchemical science: alchemy was a male science devoted to the masculine fire principle. We may indeed classify alchemy as a masculine pursuit when envisioning an exclusively male-inhabited enclave centered around a masculine-enclosed fire. On deeper inspection, and with the aid of archetypal theory, we realize how the male alchemist actually internalized and employed feminine powers. The alchemist really incarnated a latter-day shaman. Yourcenar herself said that Zénon experienced "une immémoriale expérience chamaniste."³⁴ As Neumann explains,


³³ Neumann, The Great Mother 252.

³⁴ Rosbo, Entretiens radiophoniques avec M. Yourcenar, 119 (note).
"the male shaman or seer is in high degree 'feminine,' since he is dependent on his anima aspect." In the earliest times, it was women, not men, who discovered the potency of natural substances and transformed them into healing potions, medicines, and poisons. In an analogous situation, Neumann illuminates the male initiate's experience of the Eleusinian mysteries. In these predominantly feminine rites, dating from a matriarchal religious era, the male initiate emotionally and unconsciously identified himself with Demeter, who represented his own feminine aspect.

Furthermore, the alchemical process of transmutation, whether applied to matter or to the spirit, expressed the matriarchal blend of suffering and death needed to achieve renewal and immortality. To Spencer-Noël, this alchemical

85 Neumann, The Great Mother 296. Robert Briffault demonstrates that "the adoption of female dress by male shamans . . . [was] a phenomenon of world-wide prevalence. This is because the men felt they appropriated the magical powers of women by wearing their dress. Even the priestly robes of Roman Catholic clergy, as he states are "essentially feminine in character." The shaman must become feminine to be powerful. The Mothers, vol. 2, 531-2.

86 According to Eliade, the alchemist's innovation was that of projecting on to matter "the initiatory function of suffering. Thanks to the alchemical operations, corresponding to the tortures, death and resurrection of the initiate, the substance is transmuted, that is, attains a transcendential mode of being: it becomes gold. Gold, we repeat, is the symbol of immortality. In Egypt the flesh of the Gods was believed to be of gold. By becoming God, the flesh of Pharaoh also became gold. Alchemical transmutation is therefore equivalent to the perfecting of matter or, in Christian terminology, to its redemption." Beane and Doty, Myths, Rites, Symbols 429.
theme of purifying death leading to regeneration invites a comparison to Jesus's death and resurrection.\textsuperscript{87} She also notes the comparison between Hinduism and alchemy, especially the concept of the union of opposites.\textsuperscript{88} While correctly identifying the black goddess Kāli as simultaneously illustrating the principles of creation and destruction, Spencer-Noël evinces no knowledge of the Great Goddess, of whom Kāli is but one incarnation. She further remarks the alchemists' belief in "perpétuel recommencement . . . ; évolution sans fin, faite de destructions et de renaissances récurrentes,"\textsuperscript{89} but nowhere recognizes alchemy's most ancient source and the unifying principle behind Jesus, Kāli, and perpetual rebirth: the cyclical destruction and regeneration inherent in Goddess ritual and matriarchal consciousness.\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{88} Walter Kaiser, in "The achievement of Marguerite Yourcenar," feels that the oeuvre au noir described by Yourcenar is "indebted, at least in part, to oriental mysticism" (115). He also is unaware of this mysticism's matriarchal base.

\textsuperscript{89} Spencer-Noël 51.

\textsuperscript{90} In his article on Yourcenar, Ermese Soos speaks of alchemy as "symbolized by the struggle, marriage, and death of the king and queen, from whose travail the son of the philosophers is born." This description closely resembles the queen's ritual of matriarchal religion with the difference that Soos's queen erroneously dies in the process. "The Only Motion is Returning: The Metaphor of Alchemy in Mallet-Joris and Yourcenar," 3.
In Jung's important study of the religious and psychological problems of alchemy he definitely connects the alchemist to matriarchal consciousness. The idea of the serpens mercurii, "the dragon that creates and destroys itself and also represents the prima materia, . . . goes back to the Tehom (primal waters), the Tiamat [Mother of All Living] with her dragon attribute, and thus to the primordial matriarchal world which, in the theomachy of the Marduk myth [Marduk was the patron god of the city of Babylon], was overthrown by the masculine world of the father. The historical shift in the world's consciousness towards the masculine is compensated by the chthonic femininity of the unconscious."\(^9^1\) Jung further explains:

. . . the higher, the spiritual, the masculine, inclines to the lower, the earthly, the feminine; and accordingly, the mother, who was anterior to the world of the father, accommodates herself to the male principle and, with the aid of the human spirit (alchemy or "the philosophy"), produces a son--not the antithesis of Christ but rather his chthonic counterpart, not a divine man but a fabulous being conforming to the nature of the primordial mother. And just as the redemption of man the microcosm is the task of the "upper" son, so the "lower" son has the function of a salvator macrocosmi.\(^9^2\)

Jung insists again that this "filius philosophorum," or "son of Tiamat," "reflects the features of the primordial

\(^9^1\) De Laszlo, ed., The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung, 454.

\(^9^2\) De Laszlo 455.
maternal figure" and is "decidedly hermaphroditic."\textsuperscript{93}
Yourcenar's creation, Zénon, with his highly developed feminine inner self, could then be called another son of Tiamat.

5 The Maternal Abyss

After a fortuitous encounter with old Greete, a servant in his family, Zénon discovers his pleasure in being recognized for himself. Little by little, the façade of his hardened rationalism cracks, allowing his unconscious feminine self to express itself. In the chapter entitled "l'Abîme," the dark, feminine side of his nature emerges from his psyche as a boundless continuum of time and space. This very boundlessness is a metaphor for the reproductive process, in which the self continually reaches beyond its limits to produce anew. In the maternal abyss, Zénon's feminine unconscious satisfies the demands of the Goddess, in a fertile contemplation of the universe.

Through the use of maternal metaphors Zénon ponders the birth of ideas and eventually dismisses completely the rational realm to contemplate the material substratum of existence. He first considers water in its particularity, and then enters into the element itself to experience its totality. In his mental experiments with water, he is able

\textsuperscript{93} De Laszlo 456.
to encounter maternity within himself, for, as Bachelard states, water is almost always feminine and it is maternal.\textsuperscript{94}

Zénon's descent into the abyss is in effect a descent into the "dark world of the unconscious . . . the perilous adventure of the night sea journey, whose end and aim is the restoration of life, resurrection, and the triumph over death."\textsuperscript{95} Having refused the actual sea journey that would have saved his body, he takes an internal journey that will save his soul. Like a primitive hero, Zénon is devoured by the dragon, his own feminine unconscious, in order to be reborn.

Although inundated by the black waters of his unconscious, his own element, the masculine fire, is never entirely extinguished or else he would indeed die. His thoughts progress quickly to the horror of the paternal fires of the Inquisitors and he is only able to abandon his anxious meditation of burnings at the stake by contemplating "avec une sorte de froid amour, le feu inaccessible des astres" (218). The return to fire imagery indicates his continued struggle against the feminine and his inability, as yet, to face its demands completely.


\textsuperscript{95} Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy," 317.
Yet his matriarchal reverie persists as he focuses on objects and reduces them to their living origins: a shirt is a field of flax, a shoe once moved to the rhythmic breathing of the cow who provided the leather. Segregating thus the material world from its civilizing effects, he secludes himself from the paternalist camp. Refusing to disassociate the flax from the shirt, the cow from the shoe, he expresses the fundamentally matriarchal belief in the solidarity of all life, its unity in a great whole.

In general, his philosophy constantly moves away from the abstract and the spiritual toward a functionalist, materialist vision of the world and the human animal, a vision which aligns him with ancient matriarchal thought processes. The only adequate symbols for him are concrete and directly evident. The only real god is the visible one --the sun whose continued presence is the fundamental condition of life on the planet. As in ancient Goddess ritual, he believes that the violence of nature is pure and innocent: "la violence du flot était sans colère" (337). Further, he perceives the Earth turning on its endless circular path, unconscious of man's calendar divisions. This cyclical vision, as well as his own circular return to his native Bruges, affirms his adherence to the matriarchal camp. However, his cold absence of desire and his brooding sterility block acquiescence to the Goddess's demands for fertility, and hinder full integration of the self.
6 Attraction to the Goddess Sect

In the patriarchal development of the Judeo-Christian West, with its masculine, monotheistic trend toward abstraction, the goddess, as a feminine figure of wisdom, was disenthroned and repressed. She survived only secretly, for the most part on heretical and revolutionary bypaths.\(^96\)

Brother Cyprien's group of Angels, depicted in the chapter entitled "Les désordres de la chair," is one such heretical sect. Although Brother Florian, the group's founder, denies under torture any adherence to a deviant theology in organizing his sect, its structure clearly demonstrates an affinity to ancient goddess worship.\(^97\) "La Belle" is the goddess figure whom the supplicants worship through sexual acts considered sacred. Cyprien describes the group's guilt-free sexuality much as Stone described the attitudes toward sexuality in the ancient goddess sects: "Il n'y a chez les Anges ni honte, ni jalousie, ni défense concernant le doux usage du corps. La Belle donne à tous ceux qui l'en requièrent la consolation de ses baisers, . . ." (189). The worshippers call her "Eve" -- returning to the name its original beneficent connotation.

Zénon denounces this vestige of goddess religion not

\(^{96}\) Neumann, The Great Mother 331.

\(^{97}\) Campbell describes rites of Tantric cults of India which engaged in simila: ritual intercourse and sacred chanting. Oriental Mythology 359–60. Eliade describes tantric ceremonial as giving "tremendous importance to woman and to female divinities . . . ." Patterns in Comparative Religions 177.
only as superstitious but also as dangerous: the heresy of the flesh being less threatening to the Church fathers than the theological heresy that connected candles, rites, prayers and angelic appellations to the group's activities. Nonetheless, Zénon is attracted to the goddess sect. A hazel tree rod, thrown into his window by a beckoning Cyprien below, kindles Zénon's passion. The "grande flamme sensuelle" (304), ignited as it were by the Beltane-like feminine fires, draws Zénon into its orb. Although he never accedes to her demands, Zénon is momentarily impelled to risk the retribution of the paternal fires to satisfy the Goddess's call to worship. In the rationalizing light of morning, he surmises that this transitory arousal was but a dream.

7 The Birth of the Spirit Child

Zénon is eventually prosecuted for his alleged connections to the heretical Angels and for his impious philosophical treatises. Alone in his prison he is visited by the apparition of a child who resembles him. This spirit child represents in a sense the apogee of Zénon's incorporation of the feminine. His progressive appropriation of female power culminates in the supreme appropriation: her procreative power. Zénon, through a conjunctive process in his psyche, mentally conjures up a young boy. Having fully developed the feminine within him,
he is able to dispense with women all together and create a child without her. Although his conscious mind recalls his past associations with living, breathing women, notably the Lady of Froso, the child's appearance is clearly a production of his own psychic need. Finally assenting to life's insistent demand for reproduction, he has created an extension of himself and assured the immortality of his essence. It is as though the dying king has achieved immortality without the involvement of the Mother/Goddess in the process. He has created himself the divine spirit son. His creation through a self-fertilizing psychic operation provides ultimate freedom from the female. Our author traumatized by female reproduction allows her male protagonist to bear young mentally--without risking a senseless death in childbirth.

The Dying Sun

La nuit était tombée, sans qu'il pût savoir si c'était en lui ou dans la chambre: tout était nuit. La nuit aussi bougeait: les ténèbres s'écartaient pour faire place à d'autres, abîme sur abîme, épaisseur sombre sur épaisseur sombre. Mais ce noir différent de celui qu'on voit par les yeux frémissait de couleurs issues pour ainsi dire de ce qui était leur absence: le noir tournait au vert livide, puis au blanc pur; le blanc pâle se transmutait en or rouge sans que cessât pourtant l'originelle noirceur, tout comme les feux des astres et l'aurore boréale tressaillent dans ce qui est quand même la nuit noire. Un instant qui lui sembla éternel, un globe écarlate palpita en lui ou en dehors de lui, saigna sur la mer. Comme le soleil d'été dans les régions polaires, la sphère éclatante parut hésiter, prête à descendre d'un degré vers le nadir, puis, d'un sursaut imperceptible, remonta vers le zénith, se résorba enfin dans un jour aveuglant qui
était en même temps la nuit.

Zénon chooses suicide rather than submit to the falsely "patriarchal purifying fires." He must remain loyal to himself and to the feminine within by achieving in death the balance he could not effect in life. Zénon's death is described in metaphoric terms consciously designed, it would appear, to emulate the alchemical process of transmutation. The colors perceived by his inner-directed eye proceed in strict conformity to the alchemical process from black to green to white to red and finally to the transmuted gold. The gold denotes the self's transcendence, its freeing from the base material of existence (the body) into pure sublimated form (the soul). The release is condensed into an ecstatic moment where the soul's coronation marks the victorious crossover into an unfettered eternity.

Yourcenar has categorized the sun bleeding into the sea as a "return to the universal."98 The sun, representing the contained fire of the life force, spills its vital fluid into deep waters, Bachelardian symbol of the invitation to death. "L'eau est ainsi une invitation à mourir; elle est une invitation à une mort spéciale qui nous permet de rejoindre un des refuges matériels élémentaires."99 The

98 Yourcenar, With Open Eyes 148.
99 Bachelard, L'Eau et les Rêves 77.
blood of the self combines with the blood of the Earth\textsuperscript{100}, becoming one with the \textit{aqua permanens}.

But the self's reabsorption into the watery depths is not merely a return to the universal. More specifically, it should be viewed as a return to the Mother, or, philogenetically, a return to our most primitive (maternal) origins. As Bachelard states, death in water is "la plus maternelle des morts."\textsuperscript{101} Water permits the total dissolution of the self ("L'eau dissout plus complètement. Elle nous aide à mourir totalement")\textsuperscript{102}, that is, a complete merging with the Mother. The absence of fear and desire that adherents of oriental religions, including Yourcenar, so ardently seek is thus best expressed by the metaphor of return to the protective, fully nurturing space of the Mother that precedes the birth of desire. "L'Eau nous berce. L'eau nous endort. L'eau nous rend notre mère"\textsuperscript{103}. Zénon finally drowns the consuming fires of his anima through the metaphorical return to the Mother at the moment of death.

But Yourcenar's death imagery does not end with the the sun bleeding into the sea. From there the sun is catapulted up in a radiant rebirth "dans un jour aveuglant qui était en

\textsuperscript{100} For Bachelard, water is the "sang de la Terre. Elle est la vie de la Terre" (\textit{L'Eau et les rêves} 87).

\textsuperscript{101} Bachelard, \textit{L'Eau et les rêves} 100.

\textsuperscript{102} Bachelard, \textit{L'Eau et les rêves} 125.

\textsuperscript{103} Bachelard, \textit{L'Eau et les rêves} 178.
mêmes temps la nuit" (443). Like the uroboros, or the correlative self-contained symbol of the royal endogamous marriage of the Great Goddess and her son/consort, he is devoured and beget anew into a purified "incombustible" state of immortality.104

The simultaneity of day and night expresses the resolution of contradictions sought in oriental mysticism. In archetypal terms, we might rather describe it as sexual differentiation perpetually transcended in a zone of pure celestial luminescence.105 It is beyond pleasure and pain, beyond male and female, finally beyond life and death that Zénon's creator grants him a luminous repose. Zénon, like his author, escapes all particularism, including the sexual tension underlying gender difference.106 Behind a veil of

104 Jung explains that the uroboros and royal endogamous mating were symbolic variants of each other designed to explain the self-contained notion of the cycle of life in "Psychology and Alchemy," page 396. He stresses the pagan, mainly gnostic, origins of alchemical theory which, in our mind, bears an unmistakable similarity to Goddess religion.

105 See Bachelard quoting Novalis: "La lumière n'est pas seulement un symbole mais un agent de la pureté. 'Là où la lumière ne trouve rien à faire, rien à séparer, rien à unir, elle passe. Ce qui ne peut être séparé ni uni est simple, pur.' Dans les espaces infinis, la lumière ne fait donc rien. Elle attend l'œil. Elle attend l'âme. Elle est donc la base de l'illumination spirituelle. Jamais peut-être on n'a tiré autant de pensée d'un phénomène physique que Novalis quand il décrit le passage du feu intime à la lumière céleste" La Psychanalyse du feu (174).

106 According to Jung, the ultimate phase of alchemy is indeed "the union of opposites in the archetypal form of the hieros gamos or 'chymical marriage.' Here the supreme opposites, male and female (as in the Chinese Yang and Yin),
universal symbols, he is transported from the mortal human field to the cold realm of celestial light. Timeless, neither created nor creating, he ascends the chain of being and attains the supreme status of a solitary, inaccessible fixture in the universal.\textsuperscript{107}

Conclusion

Thus, a mythic paradigm configured differently from the one we saw in Hébert's Kamouraska underlies Yourcenar's L'Oeuvre au noir. Hébert's pre-oedipal, matriarchal scenario empowers Clytemnestra and suppresses Agamemnon in favor of Aegisthos. Deathly female sexuality provokes Clytemnestra's fall as the power center converts to patriarchy. In subsequent works, Clytemnestra rises again by incorporating malevolent powers from the masculine psyche to compensate for her beleaguered feminine self.

By contrast, in Yourcenar's post-oedipal, patriarchal scenario, Clytemnestra is dead. In this woman author's personal myth, the Goddess's sexuality is less threatening to the male than to the Goddess herself, who dies by the

hand of her child. Yourcenar's own family myth that motherhood kills the mother dictates the foremost choice of patriarchal myth. In matriarchal myth, the woman represents the unquenchable desire for the permanent cycle of life; the male is the revolving, interchangeable element that keeps the life force in motion. In patriarchal myth, femininity becomes the passive, insignificant factor given over to the more important abstract, invisible male forces. Rationality supercedes reproduction.

It is not loss, anger, and guilt over the death of the mother that furnishes the deep structure of Yourcenar's texts. Rather, the belief that motherhood itself is life-threatening underlies Yourcenar's narrative and, perhaps,

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108 As we have shown, Yourcenar's mother died pursuant to childbirth. This death, however, was only one in a series of maternal deaths in Yourcenar's family: both her grandmother and her great-grandmother also died not long after childbirth. In Souvenirs Pieux she describes these deaths as exemplary of the "folklore" of the women of the family surrounding childbirth. In dialogue with her husband, the virago Electra likens their plan to murder Clytemnestra with "their child," saying she will perhaps die from it "couverte de sang comme une accouchée" (Yourcenar, Electre 31).

109 In Souvenirs pieux, Yourcenar talks about the life force as having taken possession of her grandmother Mathilde (like a passive recipient) and not having left until it "emptied" her: "La force qui crée les mondes a pris possession de cette dame à volants et à ombrelle pour ne la quitter qu'après l'avoir vidée (130)." In a latter passage she compliments the more moderate fecundity of Mathilde's four daughters (including Yourcenar's mother), comparing Mathilde's inmoderate fertility to "la floraison surabondante d'arbres fruitiers attaqués par la rouille ou par des parasites invisibles, ou qu'un sol appauvri n'alimente plus (158)."
life strategy. It is notable that in Feux, with its mostly female-centered stories, there are many metaphors of pregnancy and they are all painful and horrible.

Yourcenar's male characters seem to prefer their solitude, like Zénon, Alexis, Eric, Orestes; while women are constantly impinging on this solitude and suffering rejection. At the bottom of the Yourcenarian male's refusal of women lies a refusal to procreate camouflaging the woman author's own fear of childbirth. Homosexuality becomes a preferable sexual alternative because the admixture of like with like avoids procreation. In Alexis the protagonist openly admits his fear that his wife may die in childbirth and attributes his return to his homosexual instincts to

\[110\] In Entretiens radiophoniques Yourcenar says that Eric, who is admittedly an exaggeration of male refusal, is "barricadé en quelque sorte contre la vie (75)." Her metaphor is quite apt.

\[111\] In a note added to her Entretiens radiophoniques Yourcenar states that negative attitudes toward homosexuality must be "rethought" in view of the contemporary threat of overpopulation, thus confirming the connection between homosexuality and sterility in her thought: "C'est qu'aux époques anciennes la condamnation de l'homosexualité (quand cette condamnation prévalut) fut intimement liée à des conditions ethniques et sociales dans lesquelles l'accroissement numérique du groupe semblait la seule garantie de survie, et bientôt de domination sur le groupe voisin. C'est au contraire la lutte contre tout accroissement numérique de l'espèce, devenu désastreux pour l'espèce elle-même, qui nous préoccupe ou devrait nous préoccuper aujourd'hui. À l'époque des contraceptifs chimiques, du stérilet, de la stérilisation volontaire (et demain peut-être compulsive) et, dans certains pays, de l'abortion légalisée, la situation de l'homosexualité est évidemment à repenser, et c'est la fonction du romancier d'inciter à repenser (86, note 1)."
this fear: "le souvenir de ces heures, où je vous crus perdue, contribua peut-être à me ramener du côté où penchaient toujours mes instincts." ¹¹² Given her early experience and the folklore of her family, it is not surprising that in Yourcenar's narrative strategies man alone triumphs, while women always seem to lose.

In L'Oeuvre au noir the father-identified author valiantly struggles through the proxy of her textual brother Zénon to suppress the feminine in a narrative act of self-preservation. Yet, just as the matriarchal Furies perpetually hound Orestes for his crime, a resurgent feminine attracts Zénon. Despite his flight from women, the archetypal feminine will remain an "effective counterplayer" ¹¹³ in his unconscious. He flees women while becoming increasingly attracted to the feminine mythical sphere. In this respect, he is not unlike Hadrian, who admits having worshipped the Earth Goddess, and who had been initiated into the feminine Eleusinian Mysteries. Zénon takes the process further by the dissolution and regeneration of his ego-consciousness through the agency of the feminine. In so doing, he performs the ancient rite of


¹¹³ Joseph Campbell refers to the Goddess as an effective counterplayer in the unconscious of civilization antecedent to patriarchal takeover in Occidental Mythology 70.
matriarchal myth and ritual. In her mythic choices, Yourcenar allies herself with the Father, but he is a Father who internalizes the Mother's law.

Through incorporation of the feminine Zénon balances his psyche and becomes a more laudible human being. However, his ultimate fate lies in transcending life and death to a fixed, celestial dimension beyond gender difference, thus beyond the problematics of reproduction so fearful to his creator.
Introduction

Lucette Desvignes's equalitarian vision of gender sets her apart from both Anne Hébert and Marguerite Yourcenar. As we have seen, Anne Hébert's matriarchal orientation produced a uniquely "mothered" text, where the female is dangerously empowered and eventually crushed. The chafing of Elisabeth's matriarchally-inspired life course against the dictates of a patriarchal society causes her ambivalence and suffering. To survive she must comply with patriarchal standards of femininity; the authentic Elisabeth is condemned to die of hunger and solitude as her story ends.

Yourcenar's "fathered" text engendered a male protagonist so firmly turned against women in his conscious mind that his feminine inner self demanded a compensatory expression. While overtly disdaining the "feminine," he evinces, both psychically and through his acts, positive aspects of matriarchally-defined femininity. Once again, fidelity to the matriarchal mode in a patriarchal society categorizes the protagonist as a dangerous heretic and eventually seals his doom. Only resurrected to solitary selfhood in a genderless eternity does he attain
unthreatened authenticity.

Both the Hébertian and the Yourcenarian optics fail to establish harmonious relations between the sexes. In fact, their message about gender posits heterosexuality's serious menace to selfhood and, potentially, to life itself. This message echoes the Book of Genesis and, in its sexually-inverted form, radical feminism. Lucette Desvignes' *Noeuds d'argile*\(^1\) represents a striking contrast to this type of gender ideology. Her text is born of union, hence "parented." Her most admirable characters are androgynous—exhibiting the positive qualities of both masculinity and femininity. The enchantress of patriarchal mythologies who leads the male to doom does not figure in Desvignes's work. In her vision, the knot represents the healthy commingling of souls benefiting the individuals involved, rather than "a dire instrument of the enchantress," or "the Feminine's terrible power to bind and fetter."\(^2\)

Life, for Desvignes, attains its apogee during those moments when the self is transcended and essences, whether plant, animal, or human, merge. For Desvignes, genders do not need to be in conflict; they can and should be mutually supportive. The following long passage fully expresses

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\(^2\) Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* 228.
Desvignes's philosophy of the joy of merger. Marrain speaks of the quality of his relationship with Jeanne, his young wife, comparing it to the paradisiacal shared life of Adam and Eve:

Jusqu'à sa mort toute une vie de bonheur. La vieillesse même ne leur ferait pas peur. Ils y arriveraient tous les deux l'un contre l'autre, ils auraient travaillé joyeusement, courageusement, ils auraient été ensemble sans arrêt, pas une nuit l'un sans l'autre. C'était dommage qu'il ne croyait à rien, il avait tout d'un coup regret de ne pas pouvoir imaginer qu'ils auraient à se présenter devant quelqu'un au bout du temps, lui la tenant par la main comme Adam pouvait avoir tenu Eve, non pas vieux comme ils pourraient l'être alors, mais pareils à ce qu'ils étaient la première nuit, et pour dire: Nous avons été comme cela depuis le début que nous avons vraiment respiré la vie, tous les deux soudés, incapables de respirer l'un sans l'autre. C'est comme ça que nous voulons passer notre éternité. Ça serait beau de pouvoir croire à ça; peut-être que ceux qui croyaient à cela se trouvaient plus forts de la certitude. Oui, c'était une chance. Mais au fond cela ne changeait rien pour eux deux. La vie qui comptait, celle de leur rencontre jusqu'à leur mort, elle serait pleine et suffisamment riche de tout ce qu'il se donneraient pour pouvoir se terminer au bout de la vieillesse, quand ils auraient tout fait tout dit et qu'entre eux tout se serait tellement resserré par la force de l'habitude qu'ils ne se sentiraient plus qu'un coeur, qu'un cerveau, qu'une volonté. Et cela pas du tout parce que l'un aurait cédé, se serait fait le reflet de l'autre--ni elle réduite à l'obéissance des femmes, ni lui pliant devant ses caprices. Simplement vivant des mêmes envies, des mêmes battements de coeur, de la même honnêteté. (273)

Marrain's equal-marriage ideal, compared to the situation of Adam and Eve in paradise, overthrows the patriarchally-prejudicial account in Genesis. Neither a creator God nor a creating Goddess breathes life into man
and woman: they give each other life when their pair is matched. Eve neither dominates nor perverts paradise: she and Adam harmoniously hold hands. Work is not a punishment for the couple's transgressing God's injunctions. Work and love are integrated, both are joyous expressions of the couple's efforts. Symbiotic merger, which somehow manages to retain and reinforce the integrity of the self, exemplifies Marrain's (and Desvignes's) vision.

Marrain drives himself from Eden. When he becomes a father, he unconsciously reinscribes himself into the exclusive Law of the Father and dies in an obsessive outward quest beyond the nurturing ground of Eden. Jeanne shoulders the burden for Marrain's death only tangentially: her family would not relinquish the secret formula for the blue glaze coveted by Marrain's family; she prods Marrain to instigate the search for the glaze himself, confident of his eventual success. Little could she have anticipated he would drive himself to a senseless premature death.

Foregoing creation and renewal as well as the interrelatedness of the feminine mode, Marrain relentlessly seeks to perpetuate the old in an achievement-oriented externalized goal. The true locus of happiness in youthful spontaneity, creativity, and abundant and uninhibited sexuality eludes him; he dies victim to an obsessive
superannuated ideal.³ Failing to overthrow the all-masculine father and rejuvenate his artistic terrain through feminine identification, he dies.

The Roots of Balance

In a private communication to me, Lucette Desvignes confirmed my interpretation of her balanced vision of gender in Les Noeuds d'argile.⁴ Agreeing also that an author's vision is a product of his or her childhood, education, and personal experience, she gracefully delineated her own feelings about the roots of her philosophy.

Desvignes was raised in a balanced family setting. Both of her parents were teachers. The entire family was devoted to the unremitting task of learning; little time was allotted to play or pleasure. It is easy to surmise that the daughter of two parents working in the same profession would have little reason to formulate an unbalanced view of the relative dominance of the mother or the father figure. She does, nonetheless, admit that in the course of her

³ Karen Horney, like Lucette Desvignes, sees the "union of the sexes" as offering "the greatest possibilities for happiness"; but also recognizes the powerful "destructive forces that continually work to destroy our chances for happiness." Feminine Psychology 117. In her conference at Rice University Desvignes spoke of her book as "une démarche inéluctable vers la catastrophe par des personnages qui avait tout pour être heureux."

⁴ All quotations in this section will be taken from Lucette Desvignes's letter to me dated July 5, 1988.
fiction-writing career (begun in her 50's), deeper feelings of admiration seemed to have surfaced unconsciously with regard to her father as compared to feelings of sarcasm with regard to her mother.

Desvignes clearly admires the qualities of tenderness, nurturance, and communicativeness above all else in her characters as well as in life. However, in her work, these traditionally feminine virtues lose their feminine specificity. The most nurturant parent in her novel is Jeanne's father, le patron Berthoin. Francis is warmer to his children than his wife is. Marrain must convince Jeanne to accept her pregnancy and look forward to raising their child together. The mothers—Justine, Mme Berthoin, and even Jeanne—lack in varying degrees the tenderness their husbands' manifest toward their children. This affective disequilibrium between mothers and fathers may reflect Desvignes's own feelings about her parents.

Leaving aside her family origins, Desvignes feels that World War II and the German occupation of her native town, Chalon-sur-Sâone, marked her much more profoundly than her studious and uneventful childhood:

Chalon était sur la "Ligne de Démarcation" entre la zone libre et la zone occupée et fut le théâtre de sanglantes atrocités —, marché noir, suppression des voitures, pénurie de vêtements, de chaussures, de pneus de vélo, fuite désespoirée des gens traqués, tortures et camps de concentration pour les Gitans, les communistes, les Juifs, les Résistants, les opposants de toute catégorie . . . Bref, tout ce quotidien obsédant et tragique . . . J'avais treize ans à la
déclaration de la guerre, 18 à la Libération (mais la guerre a encore duré un an). Epreuves incessantes, tension, chagrins, angoisses, haine et souffrances de toute sorte ont remplacé pour moi le sens de l'épanouissement de l'adolescence avec ses soucis naïfs et facilement égoïstes. Le sens de l'ego en opposition avec l'autorité parentale ou éventuellement s'épanouissant dans l'atmosphère de la famille a peut-être disparu dans le souci de la Libération puis de la victoire, souci beaucoup plus épique et collectif.

The horror of war forged a belief in the survival of the collectivity over the survival of the self; normal adolescent rebellion against parental authority subsided before the greater need of society's liberation.

In the period after the war, Desvignes, and many like her, felt the need to construct a better, more harmonious world. The life that her characters, Marrain and Jeanne, share reflects her "vision personnelle en face d'un destin à façonner . . . [et] cette volonté de construction réussie, d'équilibre, a existé dès la sortie de l'adolescence. Elle a notamment dû prendre en compte le poids, la présence, la vérité de l'autre, donc les respecter, peut-être s'en accommoder, en tout cas . . . accepter comme une évidence rassurante et même bénéfique (et certainement pas hostile ou néfaste) la diversité et les contrastes des éléments (humains ou autres) auxquels on doit se frotter pour se façonner et se construire."

Desvignes feels that her equanimity with regard to both men and women, her tendency to harmonize the sexes in her writing, derives from her own inner nature and reflects "une
aspiration authentique." Describing the balance of nature found in her regional terrain, Desvignes poetically expresses her concluding thought on the origins of her harmonious vision of gender:

"J'ignore moi-même si la clé se trouve dans mon enfance, dans mon enracinement dans une région merveilleusement tempérée, merveilleusement variée dans ses aspects et ressources (vignes et près, rivières et lacs, falaises et plaines, collines douces - rien d'excessif, et tout s'y trouve . . .), merveilleux symbole historique de fusion entre les peuples de la Saône, les Gaulois, les Romains, les Flamands, c'est-à-dire le nord et le midi, le soleil et les brumes, la joie de vivre et la pensée profonde, la volubilité poétique et gestuelle et le sens de l'art. Il est possible que cet équilibre permanent et à tout niveau m'ait donné ma Weltanschauung, ma vision du monde. . ."

Le Romancier

Lucette Desvignes is not a feminist. She does not even wish to be considered a "woman writer." In French, she prefers to be called a romantier, not a romantière. During a conference at Rice University in 1987, she stated her pleasure in hearing a French critic's comments that she writes like a man. I do not believe, however, that Desvignes should be classified as a male-identified author as in the case of Yourcenar. It is true that Desvignes's novel is recounted from the perspective of two major male protagonists. Yet, as Desvignes writes, "Je n'ai eu aucun mal à avoir . . . la vision masculine tout au long du roman: Celle de Francis [the father] d'abord, puis celle de Marrain
[the son], car j'étais à travers eux fascinée par leur vision de Jeanne, pivot et centre de toute l'histoire."
Hence, although male narration dominates, it revolves around a central woman figure.

Desvignes's pleasure in creating male characters derives less from shedding her own femininity than from having the versatility to plunge successfully into the mind of the other sex. In the beginning of her letter to me she explained that adopting a characters' persona fulfilled her previous need to diversify herself by using foreign languages. Since her characters were her ancestors, yet not directly known to her (except Jeanne in her late years), she was obliged to literally become each of them. In transforming herself into the fictional being she necessarily drew on her own sensibilities, emotions, and experience to portray them. By her account, the assignation of character traits was made non-deliberately and without concern for gender labeling: "Ce qui m'entraînait d'une part, à donner aux uns ou aux autres tel trait de caractère, telle sensibilité, telle émotion qui me plaisait, me paraissait juste, ou sympathique, ainsi qu'il ou elle me venait à l'esprit (ou remontait de mon expérience ou de mon souvenir) sans jamais me soucier d'un étiquetage selon le genre. Ainsi sont distribuées des caractéristiques inattendues . . . énergie et volonté d'affirmation de soi chez la femme (comme Jeanne par exemple); tendresse,
compassion, respect de l'individualité de l'autre chez l'homme (Marrain étant l'exemple privilégié) - répartition non délibérée qui vient avec l'inspiration et l'écriture, mais qui me satisfait pleinement une fois écrite . . ."

Desvignes may exploit the male perspective in her work, both in space allotted and in analytic depth; but, like Yourcenar's Zénon, her male protagonist is infused with matriarchal consciousness. We attribute Marrain's femininity both to the female awareness lent him by his woman author as well as to the matriarchal origins and vestiges in the author's native Chalon that have marked her consciousness.

In a recent interview with me (November 20, 1988), Desvignes confirmed my intuition regarding her heritage. She described Chalon's yearly Carnaval, dating back to the Middle Ages, in which the community revelled in a liberating festivity with roots descending even further back to the time of the Gaulois. Actually older than the Middle Ages, this is a Celtic rite of spring, like many others documented by Frazer in the Golden Bough, and testifies to the especially strong matriarchal undercurrent in Desvignes's region of France. In exact symbolic replication of ancient Goddess ritual, the people of Chalon yearly witnessed the straw man, "le Carnaval," judged, burned, and floated down the Sâone and replaced by a new "Carnaval" who would suffer the same fate at the end of the year. They also preserved
the ritualistic bonfires of Midsummer day.

Interestingly, if we go back to Markale's and Thevenot's books on the religion of Gaul, we find that Lyon, which is not far from Chalon-sur-Saône, was a sacred city to the Gauls named after Lug, a Celtic cult figure. Lug reputedly instituted the Celtic festival Lugnasad (August 1) in honor of his adoptive mother Tailu, an Earth deity (Markale 88). The river Saône was once dedicated to the goddess Sauonna, from which the river's name is derived (Thevenot 208). Even more interestingly, Thevenot reports that in Desvignes's native Bourgogne the statuary uncovered shows the existence of a paired god and goddess (sixty examples have been found in the region) seated together on the same bench (237). These paired deities seem emblematic of Devignes's equalitarian vision of gender.

Desvignes further explained the peculiarity of the people of her region which she defined as a "civilisation tournée vers le passé qui ne veut pas rompre avec le passé." This past included one hundred years as the capital of the kingdom of the Francs whose last monarch was a queen, not a king. She identified the staunchly anti-clerical stance of the present-day peoples, their preference for the collective over the individual life, and their strong "religion de la terre." A commonly-held peasant belief in an all-pervasive life force arising from the earth and suffusing plant, animal, and human life with its vitalizing properties is a
spiritual remnant of their Celtic origins which were infused with matriarchal consciousness. Francis's union with the great oak, a tree once sacred to the druids and to the Goddess, described further (see 230), was until recently practiced by the peasants of her region, according to Desvignes.

Eve is Eden

Desvignes creates two types of women in Les Noeuds d'argile: those who are soft, receptive and giving in love versus those who are rigid, hard, non-communicative and unloving. If Desvignes's men have discovered one thing in common, it is that connecting with the former type creates a plush paradise of Eden, whereas the latter type produces an icy hell. One is reminded of Mark Twain's portrayal of the first man and woman in "The Diary of Adam and Eve." It is Eve's delicacy, beauty, sensitivity, nurturance, natural wisdom, communicativeness, and loving devotion that Twain evokes. At her graveside, Adam declares: "Wheresoever she was, there was Eden."5

At the opening of the novel, Francis's thoughts focus on his pleasurable, youthful alliances with carefree, sensual women. He does not in the least criticize their

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promiscuity, categorizing their sensuality as merely a pleasant additive to the other roles they played in life. Although very much a patriarch in terms of family power structure and economics, Francis received an anti-clerical education from his uncle Germinal. He was thus spared Christianity's unflattering view of female sexuality. His uncle also convinced him that paradise is now, not in some glorious afterlife for the self-sacrificing, and it is what we make of it.

However, Francis's life is far from paradisiacal. A bitter, undemonstrative, wife blights his existence. He contrasts the corporeal softness of his youthful lovers with his wife who is "raide comme la justice," "toute pincée, silencieuse, et froide," "plate de partout et dure comme un paquet d'os" (8). Later in the narrative, Francis laments foregoing true love with the sensual, loving, Antoinette for a dismal, cold, economically-arranged marriage with Justine, the boss's daughter.

A thoroughly opaque woman, his wife Justine refuses the interpenetration that love can bring. She speaks rarely and only in bitter tones, denying joie and douceur to her husband and children. Although born of the bourgeoisie and accustomed to having her way with her parents, she marries a worker in her father's factory and thereafter submits to a self-imposed life of frugality and hard work. Acting like the servant of the family, she refuses even to sit at the
dinner table, much to Francis's consternation: "On arriverait peut-être bien à la faire asseoir à table de temps en temps, nom de bois, à lui faire quitter son attitude de servante qu'il n'avait jamais pu lui faire perdre (est-ce que c'était pour rester plus nettement sur son quant-à-soi? est-ce que, sans y penser vraiment peut-être, c'était pour prendre une allure d'esclave, de femme qui se sacrifie, comme dans les campagnes où, patronnes ou pas, on les considère ni plus ni moins que comme des bêtes en ne leur laissant le droit de parler que si elles ont bien une gueule d'empeigne et le prennent elles-mêmes?)" (152). Francis feels Justine has unconsciously chosen her myth of martyrdom; Mark Twain would say that Justine's failure to radiate the positive characteristics of femininity condemns the whole family to a joyless existence. Because of a non-nurturing mother, the Pacôme household cannot be Eden. Not surprisingly, Mariette, following her mother's lead, walls her life in bitter loneliness.

Francis finds Eden with the rediscovery of Antoinette, now an innkeeper on the route to Cluny where he is headed on business. Antoinette contrasts in every way with Justine. Rather than hostilely submit to his authority while imposing an excessively austere regime, Antoinette gently orders Francis to indulge in pleasure. Seated across from him, she feeds him abundantly, while visually devouring him in equal pleasure. The meal done, Francis feels completely full,
physically and spiritually nourished by her presence: est-ce qu'il était donc si vide pour que tout soit aspiré si fort et trouve tant de place pour se loger . . . ." (74). Antoinette's generosity in the kitchen is equalled by her liberality in the bedroom; Francis is as famished for her abundant breasts as he was for her bountiful dinner. The breast he clutches is like "une argile vivante" he can mold at will.6

The intimate encounter with Antoinette transforms Francis. Resuming his journey toward Cluny, he spontaneously breaks into song signifying his happiness. But, suddenly, bleak thoughts overwhelm him. His error in choosing his wife becomes painfully clear. He descends from his carriage and presses his back against an old oak tree. The tree replenishes him like a lover, infusing him with warmth and tenderness until her energy is spent:

Il se tourna contre le chêne, le dos appliqué au tronc,

6 She becomes a mythic mother nature for him, abundant mother of all living, and her flesh is the sign of her generosity. Michèle Sarde's account of Victor Hugo's cult of "la femme-nature" reminds us of Francis's arousal by Antoinette: "La femme mythique d'Hugo comme celle de Michelet, Mère universelle, se confond avec la nature primitive: 'Ainsi nature! Abri de toute créature/ O mère universelle! Indulgent Nature.' Mais l'angélisme domine cette Nature vouée à la protection et au bien de l'homme: 'Quand ton oeil noir et doux me parle et me contemple/ Quant ta robe m'effleure avec un léger bruit/ Je crois avoir touché quelques voiles du temple/ Je dis comme Tobie, un ange est dans ma nuit.' Mais le culte de la femme-nature est inséparable de l'amour de la chair féminine: 'La mamelle du monde au mystérieux lait [...] chair de la femme! argile idéale! ô merveille!'" Sarde, Regard sur les Françaises 123.
tou du long de bas en haut, depuis les talons jusqu'aux épaules et au cuchot de la tête. Bien plaqué tout contre, à se toucher de partout tous les deux. Les bras un peu écartés du corps, les mains ouvertes à plat sur l'écorce, la caressant ou tout comme. Au bout de quelques minutes c'est comme si tout le coeur de l'arbre battait contre vous. La sève qui coule dans les veines de l'arbre se met à cogner joyeusement contre les rugosités, par-delà l'aubier, comme pour suinter au-dehors, changer de corps, passer dans l'homme au travers des peaux, devenir sang et force à l'intérieur de lui. Toute une chaleur qui passe les frontières, qui déménage, qui s'installe un peu plus loin chez le voisin. C'est lui le voisin. La chaleur a pénétré à l'intérieur de lui, elle circule partout, elle tue la fatigue, elle soulage les reins. . . . C'est comme après l'amour, quand c'est fini c'est fini, on se détache, on se sépare, on n'a plus rien à faire collés ensemble. Avec ce chêne-là c'était pareil, il se détournait de vous après vous avoir donné ce qu'il pouvait, sa chaleur, sa tendresse. (93)

While practicing an age-old peasant custom, Francis's encounter with Antoinette clearly prepared him to receive the oak's nurturance. In Jungian terms, his erotic and loving experience with the Eve-like Antoinette initiated him into awareness and development of the woman within him, his anima, opening him to relatedness with plantlife.7 Justine's angry deferral to his authority and resultant loss of desire and inter-relatedness mark his marriage; Antoinette, on the other hand, soothes his soul and provides needed emotional support by inundating him with intimacy.

7 "Woman takes man into her body, thereby opening him to his own woman within. Each initiation that man receives from woman is dual in nature, not only erotic sexually, but also Erotic. Thereafter each experience of woman should produce a new relation with his anima." Richard Roberts, From Eden to Eros 146.
In terms of matriarchal myth, Antoinette is the Goddess who establishes and requires a symbiotic relationship between human, plant and animal. On subsequent visits to Antoinette, Francis describes her using the triptych "chaud et tendre et doux" (134, 137). She is the "flamme" that rekindles his "bûche"; she is the "lampe" that illuminates his darkness (135). Yet, for all her warmth and gentleness, she is a "femme forte et solide" (150).

Antoinette's untimely death drives Francis from Eden and his life becomes a living death: "Il s'était réinstallé dans sa vie de tous les jours comme on s'enlise, en attendant que la boue vous recouvre, sans pouvoir ni vouloir bouger ni pied ni patte. . . . Il était là sans y être; il ne regardait plus personne, comme si tout ce qui l'entourait le lassait, lui pesait" (344). Without Antoinette, Francis withers like a plant deprived of light and water. Sapped of his life force, he can no longer bear the happiness of others, with tragic results for Jeanne and Marrain.

The Matriarchal Man

Francis, a consummate patriarchal man until his "retrouvailles" of Antoinette, reverts to an even more soulless life when she dies. His son, Marrain, however,

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We firmly believe that Francis's experience could only have been described by a woman author or a male author deeply in touch with his inner woman.
evinces signs of the feminine within from his first appearance in the text. In contrast to his father, Marrain is finely attuned to his mother's feelings, despite her harsh comportment. In his interior monologues he always sympathizes with women's needs and feelings; he frequently refers to men using the disapproving word "brutal," while women evoke the appealing word "douceur."

Francis frequently recounted to Marrain how his own father had once slapped him hard enough to fling him headlong into "le laurier-rose." This family myth of the brutal grandfather deeply affected Marrain. He may have adopted his docile demeanor to protect himself against a similar brutality or to react against a kind of masculinity that he found abhorrent. At any rate, his docility, respectfulness, and tenderness toward both his mother and his father resemble more a daughter's than a son's. Marrain clearly distinguishes himself from his three brothers, who all left the paternal home after violent exchanges with the father, and he happily maintains a tender relationship with his sister.

Marrain remains at home partly because he can conceive of no more pleasurable work than potting. Although potting was an exclusive male domain in Desvignes's family tradition, in ancient times potting was restricted to women. The modern male potter, while denying female access to the wheel, exploits his own creative feminine self. Adrienne
Rich reminds us that pottery-making was one of the original transformation mysteries of the feminine:

"... Briffault and Neumann ... cite numerous examples to show that the deeply revered art of pottery-making was invented by women, was taboo to men, was regarded as a sacred process and that 'the making of the pot is just as much a part of the creative activity of the Feminine as is the making of the child. ... In pottery making the woman experiences ... primordial creative force ... we know how great a role the sacred vessel played in the primordial era, particularly as a vehicle of magical action. In this magical implication the essential features of the feminine transformation character are bound up with the vessel as a symbol of transformation.'"9

Nonetheless, the archetypalist Bachelard sees the potter as a father, not a mother, who creates a feminine receptacle in a sexual, not a sacred, act:

D'Annunzio nous montre Stelio qui contemple, à la verrerie, dans le four à recuire 'prolongement du four à fondre, les vases brillants, encore esclaves du feu, encore sous son empire... Ensuite les belles créatures frêles abandonnaient leur père, se détachaient de lui pour toujours; elles se refroidissaient, devenaient de froides gemmes, vivaient de leur vie nouvelle dans le monde, entraient au service des hommes voluptueux, rencontraient des périls, suivaient les variations de la lumière, recevaient la fleur coupée ou la boisson envirante.' Ainsi 'l'éminente dignité des arts du feu' provient de ce que leurs ouvrages portent la marque la plus profondément humaine, la marque de l'amour primitif. Ils sont les œuvres d'un père. Les formes créées par le feu sont modelées, plus que toute autre, comme le dit si bien Paul Valéry 'à fin de caresses.'"10


10 Bachelard, La Psychanalyse du feu 94-5.
Marrain does approach his work like a tender act of love "doucement, sans brutalité" (19). He caresses his vase into shape, and releases it finally "comme une étreinte qui se relâche après l'amour . . ." (19). His approach to his art would appear to be uniquely patriarchally inspired, like Bachelard's, modeled on the counterfactual Hebrew story of Adam, from whose body woman is created. However, he also abundantly describes the creative process in terms of pregnant maternal imagery (not the effortless and unconscious loss of a rib in deep sleep), thus rectifying the error of Genesis and assimilating his own experience with that of a woman:

Il faudrait bien qu'un jour ou l'autre tout cela sorte de lui; il le faudrait, sans ça il aurait l'impression d'étouffer, peut-être de mourir. (18) C'était comme s'il écoutait au fond de lui, la tête penchée, des choses qui bougeaient, qui le remplissaient. De ces choses qui montaient qui voulaient sortir. (19)

. . . Marrain avait eu l'impression que c'était sorti de lui et non pas vraiment de ce bloc infère qu'il avait libéré de sa toile cirée quelques minutes plus tôt. Maintenant c'était bel et bien sorti" (20).

C'est comme ça qu'une femme devait se sentir, douleurs mises à part bien entendu, après qu'elle ait expulsé d'elle un enfant auquel elle était bien obligée, même malgré elle, de penser depuis si longtemps. Tant qu'il n'est pas expulsé c'est encore elle, c'est sa vie à elle; c'est elle qui respire pour lui, même s'il bouge et qu'il se retourne sans qu'elle le souhaite. Mais

une fois sorti, elle n'aura plus que quelques minutes encore à sentir qu'il fait toujours partie d'elle, à croire qu'elle se prolonge, qu'ils ont tous deux des liens qui vont durer. Quelques minutes seulement, et ses gigotements à lui sont les siens à lui, et il criera et elle entendra une voix étrangère; pendant quelques minutes elle ne sentira plus exactement où sa chair à elle finit, où sa chair à lui commence, il y a encore comme des palpitations communes, comme un contact qui reste. Et puis c'est fini, les limites sont tracées . . . (20)

Also telling are Marrain's perceptions of the birthing process seen above. His intuition that the new mother cries because of the lost contiguousness with her child expresses perhaps his own nostalgia for the merged and blissful prenatal state which he projects onto the mother. Marrain recaptures such a symbiotic relationship with his cat (like Francis with his tree):

"Beau chat, gros pépère, tu es doux, tu es bon, tu es mon gros pépère à moi", ronronnait Marrain. Dans ses bras le chat se faisait lourd; c'est comme s'il n'avait plus eu du tout de squelette. À ces moments-là on se rendait compte de toute sa masse de muscles. Plus de griffes, plus de nerfs, plus de volonté. Plus rien que de l'amour. Marrain pensait qu'il n'avait pas d'autre mot; entre ce chat et lui, il existait quelque chose, quelque chose qui passait de l'un à l'autre, comme un courant, une magie, c'était difficile à dire. Mais ça existait, il aurait fallu être en bois pour ne pas le sentir. (22)

Equal Love

Francis's relationship with Antoinette permitted his merger with the great oak tree. Marrain's nostalgia for merger with the mother and his relationship with his cat foreshadow his own intensely symbiotic relationship with
Jeanne. In these two lovers we see the split fragments of
the psyche reunited, the archetypal splitting of the
original androgynous being overcome. The frightening
specter of the "Other," who threatens life and limb, gives
way to a restorative, osmotic ethic. Desvignes describes
the nature of Marrain and Jeanne's relationship, a model of
equilibrium in love, in the following excerpt from her
letter to me:

A tous les niveaux, et à l'image de leur relation
individuelle avec le monde, il y a entre eux osmose,
correspondance, prolongements, partage, communion
(c'est-à-dire acceptation compréhensive, et non rejet,
du "non-moi", et même naturalisation du "non-moi" pour
arriver à l'élargissement du moi, à l'intégration des
éléments extérieurs). Au niveau de l'amour... il
doit donc y avoir, non point combat, conflit,
établissement difficile d'un modus vivendi instable,
mais bien nivelllement de différences, 'curiosité
sympathique' de l'autre (dans son organisation de
sensibilité, dans son physique, dans ses habitudes et
comportements). D'où cette symétrie dans la découverte
des corps, cet effort permanent et joyeux de chacun
pour se mettre toujours à la place de l'autre
... .

From the very start of their relationship, Marrain and
Jeanne seem to melt into each other irresistibly,
obliterating the boundaries of the self: "ils avaient fondu
l'un contre l'autre, c'était presque insoutenable" (211).
They declare that "avant nous n'existions pas vraiment"
(225). They are cemented together, soldered: the word
"soudés" recurs no less than thirteen times in the text.
Jeanne hungered for Marrain; she had "l'angoisse du manque"
(210) before him. Marrain fills to overflowing with Jeanne. She is his "lumière . . . [s]on air et [s]on eau" (331). They are united body and soul and their love is a magic they give birth to together ("On le fabrique, on le fait naître. C'est magique" (307)).

Desvignes's depiction of ideal love in the marital relation differs greatly from the more common perception of discordant marital relations in modern literature. According to Annis Pratt, "an ideal lover almost always includes a rejection of social expectations concerning engagement and marriage."12 Marriage is more typically depicted as an "archetypal enclosure" where women are "willlessly driven into postures of masochism and submission."13 Finally and emphatically, "[w]omen authors tenaciously portray matrimony as a negative institution."14 Pratt does concede that, "Although few in number, there do exist novels in which men and women seek, and sometimes achieve authenticity and equity within marriage."15 In order to achieve this authenticity and equity, Pratt notes that gender norms must be broken down in the narrative process to build a kind of new age couple. She concludes: "it is no

12 Pratt, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction 23.
13 Pratt 48.
14 Pratt 53.
15 Pratt 54.
coincidence that the authors of the few equal-marrige novels and novels of erotic fulfillment talk about phoenixes, of androgyny, or of, in Hehmann's phrase, a 'new gender,' a state of consciousness in which individual men and women shed the destructive attributes of gender and reach toward those moments of truly human exchange."\textsuperscript{16}

Marrain's character represents this newly evolved total being who develops rather than suppresses his feminine self. In this sense, he clearly stands apart from the throng of common men as described in post-psychoanalytic feminist theory. According to Nancy Chodorow, for instance, because of the infant male's primary identification with the mother an "underlying sense of femaleness . . . continually . . . undermines the sense of maleness."\textsuperscript{17} As he grows up, he must learn to be "not-feminine" in order to be masculine. Rejection of his feminine self then is an integral part of becoming a man. Marrain, on the other hand, barely differentiates himself from the female.

Chodorow's theory of the reproduction of mothering states that girl children suffer from "permeable ego boundaries"\textsuperscript{18} with their mothers and constantly seek

\textsuperscript{16} Pratt 94.

\textsuperscript{17} Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," in Eisenstein, The Future of Difference 12.

\textsuperscript{18} Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering 93.
relationships in order to establish a self that cannot stand alone. The boy child comes to see himself as separate and distinct. The adult woman's desire to mother is in fact a recreation of the mother-daughter bond lost in marriage to the non-relational male. Women, she feels, continue to suffer from permeable ego boundaries and fail to orient themselves toward success in the external world outside the domestic sphere. Yet Marrain, a male, thrives on his merged relationship with Jeanne. As we have seen, merger with Jeanne fills him up rather than overwheels him. Marrain is the rare male who requires intimacy for survival and who sees little need in establishing himself out of the family ego mass in order to define himself.

Patrick Brady predicts Marrain's ultimate fall from a combination of factors, one of which is his inability to differentiate himself from the nuclear family ego mass. Using Eric Berne's and Claude Steiner's theories of transactional analysis, Brady believes that Marrain possesses a life "script" which has told him that "man-woman relationships are not normally good," based on the relations with and between his parents. Brady sees Marrain's relationship with Jeanne as an example of a "counterscript" that allows him a brief period of happiness before his reversion to the "deep" script and "virtual suicide" from obsessive overwork caused by "rivalry with Woman through
creation" (womb-envy).  

This is an attractive and plausible theory if one considers Marrain an average male. However, as we have seen, Marrain's feminine nature is so strong that we cannot judge him by prevailing standards of masculinity. Rather than an aberrant development in a tragic life script, we believe Marrain's special relationship to Jeanne issues from his unusually androgynous temperament. His emotional expressiveness and his empathic feelings for women clearly differentiate him from average males. Desvignes modeled her characters on the extraordinary relationship ("cet amour étonnant") that she felt existed between her grandmother and grandfather. Recreating this love was one of the pleasures of the text's creator: "J'ai donc dû recréer mes personnages en même temps que je tâchais d'exprimer leur vérité d'êtres et de couple. Processus complexe et exaltant: je pénétrais dans leur vie mais ils reflétaient la vision que j'avais de leur vie réussie" (Desvignes letter). Desvignes, then, took her family myth of the perfectly happy couple and translated it into the fictional


20 See Joseph H. Pleck, The Myth of Masculinity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981): "Men are . . . les empathic, that is, their feelings are less affected by the feelings of others (Hoffman, 1977). Men are also less emotionally expressive (Allen and Hamsher, 1974; Allen and Haccoun, 1976; Bem, Martyna, and Watson, 1976; Balswick and Avertt, 1977)."
relationship between Marrain and Jeanne.

Mythic Conversion

A reference in Les Noeuds d'argile to the Clytemnestra myth allows us to continue our analysis of an author's vision of gender from her particular interpretation of this mythic story. Thinking about his sentimentality toward the furnishings in his home, Marrain's thoughts lead him to the great classics of Greek theatre he has been reading and to his perception of the décor in these plays:

C'est vrai qu'ils avaient besoin de ces meubles autour d'eux pour se sentir bien. Ils devaient être sentimentaux, probable--quand il lisait ces œuvres terribles . . . il était sûr que ça se passait dans des palais en pierre, sans meubles, sans rien au mur. Pas le moindre reflet de bois ciré pour vous adoucir au moment d'une décision farouche; pas de forme tendre, un pied chantourné, une moulure, un arrondi pour vous retenir l'œil, pour empêcher un geste de menace ou de haine. Des palais nus, glacés à cause de l'épaisseur des murs; et dehors dès que vous sortiez, une chaleur torride, des souffles d'airs brûlants, un vent à vous dessécher jusqu'aux entrailles. (376)

The barrenness and harshness of the décor brings to mind the participants in the dramas, inscribed in stone like the décor:

C'est comme ça qu'il les voyait, tous tant qu'ils étaient. Clytemnestre, Agamemnon--leurs noms mêmes sentaient la pierre. Il avait lu et relu ce qu'ils disaient; il s'était étonné d'abord qu'on puisse parler comme ça, si fort, si dur. Il avait fallu qu'il s'habitue, aussi, à les entendre parler; on annonçait leurs noms, l'un après l'autre pour dire qu'ils prenaient la parole, on ne disait jamais ce qu'ils ressemblaient, comment ils étaient habillés, à quoi
ressemblait le paysage. Est-ce qu'il y avait des jardins où ils se promenaient des fois, pour réfléchir à tous ces meurtres dont ils avaient tous l'envie? Ils ne bougeaient pas beaucoup non plus, probable qu'ils devaient se piquer debout pour dire ce qu'ils avaient à dire, justement, à en perdre la respiration. Même ceux qui étaient des criminels, des coupables. Quand ils parlaient c'était comme un coup de tonnerre. Et ceux qui n'avaient rien fait n'échappaient pas non plus; il avait eu du mal, lui Marrain, à lire l'histoire d'Hippolyte jusqu'au bout tant il avait le coeur serré par l'injustice qui criaient là-dedans. Plusieurs fois aussi il avait retrouvé les mêmes héros—Oreste, Electre, Oedipe avec leurs noms barbares—mais ce qu'ils disaient, ce qu'ils faisaient même, n'était jamais pareil. Ça ne faisait rien, ils pouvaient bien mourir dans une histoire et seulement s'en aller dans une autre; ils étaient comme des grands fantômes; on n'attendait pas d'eux qu'ils ouvrent une porte pour pouvoir se retrouver de l'autre côté. Et mourir, pour eux, c'était toujours au contact de la pierre. Déchiré sur les chemins, écrasé sous les colonnes d'un palais, poignardé contre le marbre d'une piscine. (376)

Marrain voids the myths of gender difference.

Clytemnestre and Agamemnon, Orestes, Electre, and Oedipus are lumped together by their harsh, barbarian sounding names. Their gender is not even an issue. Marrain deplores these lives reduced to immobilized cries jabbing out like sudden thunderbolts in a bleak, frozen atmosphere.

Everything in the myth contrasts to his own beatific vision of life with Jeanne:

Pendant tous ces soirs où il les écoutait parler entre les lignes si serrées de ses livres minuscules, il se sentait dans la dureté de la pierre, et quand il levait les yeux et revenait dans la chambre, c'était tout le contraire; c'était le tendre et le chaud, c'était le bois et c'étaient les fleurs, c'étaient les flammes, c'était la douceur du poil de chèvre sous les pieds. C'était, aussi, à la fin de sa lecture, la peau de Jeanne, la chaleur de Jeanne, le corps de Jeanne avec sa vie et ses palpitations.
Jamais elle n'avait besoin de lui faire fermer son livre. Il sentait quand elle était prête à venir—quelque chose dans son pas, dans le souffle qu'elle retenait peut-être comme pour se faire plus légère. Phèdre ou Jocaste se retrouvait sur le guéridon au moment même où Jeanne arrivait sur le canapé, et il la prenait comme une proie, cela faisait partie des règles du nouveau jeu. (376-77)

The harshness of myth is left behind for the softness of his reality. Jeanne is the willing victim of Marrain's playful hunt instead of a marked Phèdre, prey of an implacably jealous goddess. Rules governing the game of love replace the strict, unbending rules of classical performance.

However, Marrain leaves aside his readings about women, "[s]es bonnes femmes d'avant les Gaulois" (378) as Jeanne calls them, and reads about a man. Encountering the story of Heracles, Marrain is struck by this superior man's ("il était plus qu'un homme' (378) tragic fate of perpetual subservience to mediocre masters despite his heroic accomplishments. Heracles's massacre of his own family, under the influence of a madness induced by the gods, exemplifies his tragic undoing, his loss of control over his own life, and his ultimate demise. This story converts the unfailingly optimistic Marrain into a pessimistic believer

21 It is interesting that Marrain does not attribute Heracles's tragic fate to the jealous Hera, who was pertually undermining him for an accident of birth: he was an illegitimate child of Zeus. It is the more generic "dieux" to whom he attributes "la folie, le massacre, la ruine, le gâchis . . ." (387).
in the slight relation between people's worth and their degree of accomplishment in life.

Il [Héraklès] a pris son destin en main, il le façonne il lui donne sa forme avec tout ce qu'il a en lui de bon, d'honnête, de vaillant. Il triomphe de tout, il s'impose toutes les privations nécessaires, la séparation, la solitude, la fatigue; il navigue entre les obstacles, il combat ouvertement quand il faut attaquer de face, il est le maître de sa vie—eh bien non, il n'en est pas le maître, il va être écrasé comme aucune fripouille ne l'a jamais été, ne l'est ni le sera. Il est atteint dans ce qu'il a de plus cher, sa famille est massacrée et c'est lui qui écrase et fend les têtes et perce de ses flèches. Il ne dirige plus sa vie, il n'est plus le maître de rien. Il a cru qu'il suffisait de vouloir aller tout droit, tout net, tout franc, en pensant qu'il y avait au bout les retrouvailles pour toujours avec ceux qu'il aimait. Probable que c'était une ambition inacceptable, puisqu'il faut terminer son sillon dans le sang et les ruines, puisqu'il faut faire du vainqueur une épave. C'était plus inacceptable que tout, ça; plus que le roi poignardé dans sa piscine au retour de la guerre, plus encore que le prince accusé a tort et traîné à mort par ses chevaux plus même que tout ce qui était arrivé à Oedipe et dont ils avaient longuement parlé ensemble. Il avait l'esprit tout plein de cette tristesse, non pas tellement pour Héraklès lui-même, il y avait bien d'autres choses tristes dans les journaux si on voulait s'attendrir, mais plutôt pour ce que ça représentait, pour la manière dont ça vous faisait réfléchir sur la vie, sur le peu de rapport qu'il y avait entre ce que les gens valaient, finalement, et leur réussite dans la vie. (379)

Marrain finds Heracles's fate more tragic than Agamemnon's, Hippolyte's, or Oedipus's—all of whom, as we have seen, originally played roles in the more antique matriarchal storyline described by Graves. Heracles (meaning 'Glory of Hera') was also originally a participant in the matriarchal drama. He was a sacred king, subservient
to the Goddess, and sacrificially killed and eaten after six months' reign by his deputy. This new Heracles was felled and eaten after his reign by the "reincarnated" Heracles. "This alternate eucharistic sacrifice made royalty continuous, each king being in turn the Sun-god beloved of the reigning Moon-goddess."\(^{22}\) In a later development of the system, Heracles prolonged his reign by offering "a child-victim in his stead; which explains the Greek legends of Hercules killing children by accident or in a fit of madness . . . ."\(^{23}\) His defeat of wild beasts in his labors for Eurystheus were originally the newly-installed "sacred king's ritual combat [with opponents in beast disguise] . . . part of the coronation ritual in Greece, Asia Minor, Babylonia and Syria; each beast representing one season of the year.\(^{24}\) His final immolation resulted from a sacrificial burning leading to immortalization.\(^{25}\)

The more well-known classical Greek versions of the story represent that society's conversion to patriarchy. Identifying with the latter version, Marrain expresses his desire to transform to a more traditional, patriarchally-

\(^{22}\) Graves, *The White Goddess* 127.

\(^{23}\) Graves, *The White Goddess* 127.

\(^{24}\) Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 106.

defined male. Marrain constructs his masculinity differently at this point in his life to conform to hegemonic standards of masculinity--namely, aggressive, achievement-oriented, non-relational behavior. He seems to sense what Connell has termed "the contradiction between the project of erotic love [equal love in our system] and the requirements of patriarchal institutions - marriage, property and kinship relations . . . ." The conflicting demands of Marrain's androgynous self situated in an equal marriage and his role as son in a patriarchal society will be discussed fully in the next section.

In all likelihood, an unconscious identification with the parental model of his childhood, provoked by his own ascension to fatherhood, influences Marrain's existential choice. His perceived failure to provide adequately for his family, economic support being a mainstay of the masculine sex role identity, fuels his transformation further. Identifying with his father, he conforms to societal expectations of masculine behavior and restructures himself

26 R. W. Connell in Gender and Power talks about the power dynamics which arise from a "hegemonic definition of sexual character, femininity and masculinity" (163). Hegemonic masculinity for him is an undiluted concept of mainstream masculinity and necessarily implies a power setup that subordinates women.

27 The definition of traditional or hegemonic masculinity is confirmed by many authors including Connell and Pleck.

28 Connell 217.
like clay in a patriarchal mold. Unfortunately, by zealously conforming to accepted standards of the male sex role he overcompensates and his exaggerated masculinity leads to adverse consequences.\(^{29}\)

Erich Fromm's distinction between the matricentric and the patricentric individual typifies Marrain's conversion. For Fromm, the matricentric complex is "characterized by a feeling of optimistic trust in mother's unconditional love, far fewer guilt feelings, a far weaker superego, and a greater capacity for pleasure and happiness."\(^{30}\) By contrast, "the patricentric individual . . . is characterized by . . . a strict superego, guilt feelings, docile love for paternal authority, desire and pleasure at dominating weaker people, acceptance of suffering as a

\(^{29}\) Joseph Pleck in *The Myth of Masculinity* has developed a modern, alternative paradigm of masculinity which explains sex role strain (SRS) in terms of individual versus societal expectations, rather than in terms of inherent differences between the sexes. He finds the sexes to be more similar than different and believes that androgyny is a useful transitional concept for creating a more practical paradigm of sex role identity. [Connell also believes that eighty years of research finds "massive psychological similarity between women and men" *Gender and Power* 170.] However, under the masculine-feminine bi-polar system, if an individual sees himself as not living up to society's expectations of his sex role behavior, he will suffer, even though these very expectations are often dysfunctional for him (e.g., "aggression and emotional constriction" (135) in men). As Pleck states, "Actual or imagined violation of sex roles leads individuals to overconform to them" (145).

\(^{30}\) Fromm, "The Theory of Mother Right and Social Psychology," 104.
punishment for one's guilt, and a damaged capacity for happiness."31 Marrain is "guilty" of not fulfilling the expectations of his masculine role and failing to comply with the dictates of the family ego mass. Wishing to find the formula on his own, he tries to dominate the weaker brother-in-law artistically and intellectually. His "acceptance of suffering" is so great that he drives himself to death.

Marrain begins his quest with the total confidence of Bouvillon, his boss, who views their combined effort as youth's conquest of new terrain: "Il voulait qu'à eux deux ils lancent sur le marché des choses nouvelles, pour une clientèle nouvelle, exigeante, riche. C'est à eux seuls qu'ils allaient réaliser les projets lancés par le Père Pacôme et suivis par le Père Berthoin. Il n'y avait pas besoin de la génération ancienne, elle ne ferait jamais rien de bon dans ce nouveau domaine. On ne leur ferait pas de tort pour autant. Ils resteraient à Cluny comme à Bourg avec leurs marchés habituels, assez occupés de leur production traditionnelle pour continuer à gagner leur vie comme avant, ni plus ni moins, et sans difficultés nouvelles. Eux, les jeunes ils iraient de l'avant" (387).

However, Marrain identifies with the patriarchal Herculean model, where tasks are performed in submission to

31 Fromm.
inferior powers as a means of proving oneself through feats of masculinity. Instead of exploring his feminine creativity in a sacred act of devotion, he strikes out on the masculine quest, feeling "fort et sûr de lui, comme Héraklès" (392). Instead of overthrowing the sacred king (the old generation of potters) to establish his new reign on the matriarchal model, he obsessively combats the adversaries of fatigue, cold, uncertainty, and sleeplessness searching for the blue glaze before exploring new avenues. Marrain is not consumed by love of the Goddess; he is consumed because he is unable to overthrow the reigning father principle.

Like an antique hero, Marrain descends into a hellish Underworld in furtherance of the quest. Jeanne, resembling Isis in search of Osiris, must rescue him from the Underworld and attempt to restore him to health. Similar to the mythic-based stories of Marie de France where the wounded male is brought back from the outward quest and immobilized with the woman (see "Guigemar"), Jeanne confines Marrain to his bed.\footnote{Rachel Blau DuPlessis cites Elaine Showalter, who feels that "[t]his wounding of male heroes is a symbolic way of making them experience the passivity, dependency, and powerlessness associated with women's experiences of gender," Writing Beyond the Ending 86. We do not feel that Desvignes's narrative strategy conforms with this description. Her fondness for her "matriarchal man" was obviously too great to wound him so that he would suffer the female condition. Rather, Marrain's wounding is a consequence of his foregoing the feminine and inscribing himself in the patriarchal mode; here he meets with the
the Great Mother's powers of resuscitation to calm and console him:

Elle venait à lui, elle lui avait offert tout ce qu'elle possédait de tendre et de maternel. Il n'avait eu qu'à se lever son bras sur son coude, il avait reçu cette offrande au creux de sa main, comme dans une coupe. Douce et fondante et tiède. Ce n'était plus l'échange de leurs jeux, c'était la charité et le coeur débordant, c'était le don de la tendresse, l'apaisement, le remède. En même temps elle lui caressait la poitrine, et là aussi malgré les poils où ses doigts s'accrochaient à l'occasion c'était la caresse de la pitié, celle qui voulait panser le torse brisé et lui redonner confiance. C'est comme si elle avait dit Guéris et trouve la paix, et encore Prends, je te donne le calme et l'oubli et encore Je ne demande rien, prends seulement, je suis là pour donner et non pour prendre. Elle ne disait rien, mais lui Marrain entendant Prends Prends Prends C'est pour toi Receois Receois Acceppe. Il avait dû s'enfoncer dans le sommeil au-delà de ce calme, car à part la sensation de ses lèvres sur les paupières fatiguées qu'il n'arrivait même plus à soulever il ne se rappelait rien. (401)

The next day, the fever of illness and passion confused, Marrain wants to make love to Jeanne. Even in his weakened, feverous state, Marrain fantasizes the scene as a violent masculine appropriation of the female body, in other words, as rape⁴⁴: "Une seule chose avait compté. La

⁴³ Throughout Desvignes's text the female breast is glorified from the male perspective for its power to stimulate him erotically. Here, where Marrain is no longer capable of performing the sexual act, the breast regains a nurturant function.

⁴⁴ Diana Russell sees rape as an instance of "overconformity to male role norms" as cited in Pleck's Limits of Masculinity 146:
prendre, encore et encore, désespérément. Lui si faible alors, si tendre toujours, il avait même rêvé de violence pour la prendre. L'écarteler au lieu de l'écarter. Et mourir en elle après l'avoir prise" (402). His mental desire foiled by his powerless body, Marrain feels as though he is already dead. At this lonely juncture, an image of deathly dissolution in deep water reminds us of Zénon's final imaginings: "Il avait compris alors ce que peut faire un marin dans un naufrage, quand il a fini de lutter, qu'il lâche la planche incapable de soutenir son poids, qu'il détend tous ses muscles, les bras en croix, qu'il se laisse couler, qu'il s'ouvre à la mer pour que le noir et le froid puissent l'envahir plus vite. Il avait sombré lui Marrain dans le désespoir, les nerfs détendus aussi, anéanti" (402).

Marrain chooses his actual death in line with the family's myth as transmitted by the disenchanted uncle Germinal. Germinal, in deciding to die with dignity, but not without disgust, turned his face permanently toward the

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Rape is not so much a deviant act as an over-conforming act. Rape may be understood as an extreme acting-out of qualities that are regarded as super masculine in this and many other societies: aggression, force, power, strength, toughness, dominance, competitiveness. To win, to be superior, to be successful, to conquer—all demonstrate masculinity to those who subscribe to common cultural notions of masculinity i.e., the masculine mystique.

We are reminded of Antoine in Kamouraska and Stevens Brown in Les Fous de Bassan whose violence toward women and abuse of alcohol can be explained in terms of this overconformity to male role norms.
wall: "C'est pratiquement d'avoir su ça [the indiscriminate shootings of the Communards by the Versaillais pursuing to the Commune of 1871] que l'oncle Germinal était mort, selon ce qu'en avait toujours dit le Père. A partir de cette connaissance-là il n'avait plus voulu s'entêter à lutter. C'est temps de partir, après ça, il avait dit. C'est là-dessus qu'il s'était tourné vers le mur; on ne l'avait plus entendu, on n'avait plus revu son visage. Il s'était retiré un peu avant, par dignité. Par dégoût aussi, dégoût que tout aille si mal et soit si mal fait" (405).

Marrain never relinquishes his self-image of the tragic Heracles who looses everything despite superhuman efforts. But neither in the end can he relinquish his great love for Jeanne and his need to merge with her. Immobilized in his death bed, he rejoins with Jeanne, letting his almost skeletal remains melt into her. He recognizes Jeanne as the life force itself, an all-nurturing Earth Goddess, and refuses her entreaty to be able to die with him: "Ma douce, vous êtes la vie même. Le jour où je vous ai vue, ça n'a pas été seulement le début de l'Année Jeanne, ça a été tout simplement le début de ma vie; j'avais enfin vu quelqu'un qui vivait. Tu m'as appris à vivre sans que je m'en rende compte, rien qu'à me trouver près de toi, à te regarder vivre. La vie même. Le sang, le coeur, le mouvement. La flamme et la douceur. L'amour des autres, l'élan de la tendresse. L'amitié avec le monde, aussi, avec la terre,"
avec les arbres" (417). She is likened to a deity whom he thanks for having granted him life ("je vous remercie de m'avoir permis de vivre"). Marrain verbalizes his sensation of returning, as it were, to the Mother's womb in death: "Je meurs plein de vous, gorgé de vous. Je meurs en vous" (420).

Although turned toward the wall, separated physically from his wife and family, Marrain never loses sight of his beloved Jeanne. In Marrain's final moments, he sees himself holding Jeanne's hand as they both gingerly enter a frigid river. Its icy fingers ascend their bodies, taking their breathe away, suffocating them, yet making them laugh encased in frozen pleasure that never ends:

Quand on entrait dans la rivière, c'était un froid coupant, les pieds les jambes vous en perdiez le contrôle, au fur et à mesure que vous avanciez, avec précaution pour ne pas vous tordre les chevilles sur les cailloux glissant, le froid montaient, les cuisses, le ventre, le souffle manquait, on suffoquait, on riait quand même, c'était glacé et bon, c'était doux, au fond, on tenait Jeanne par la main, elle aussi entrait dans l'eau froide avec courage, elle riait, ses joues riaient, ses yeux riaient Jeanne Jeanne, quand on criait les noms sur la rivière il y avait encore plus d'écho que par-dessus les hautes herbes de la prairie Jeanne Jeanne

The triple calling of Jeanne replaces forever the Triple Goddess in her progressive yet simultaneous stages of life from virgin, to mother, to hag. For Marrain, Jeanne did not exist before their love, she is primarily a lover not a mother, and she never ages or seeks to destroy him.
She is his present constant, his reason for living, and his helpmate in death. While his death was senseless, caused in large part by forsaking his androgynous symbiotic ideal for the solitary masculine quest, in its final moments it is a return to the aesthetics of merger that made his brief life so worthwhile.35

Generational Conflict

In Desvignes's narrative schema, true happiness is possible only when gender difference is deemphasized and the male is freed from sex-typing that cripples his emotional, creative, and relational self. Whereas genders do not conflict in the book, generations do. In a patriarchal society, as reflected in the Oedipal paradigm, difference between generations of the same sex tends to be minimized. Sons are expected to identify with the father, reject the

35 Carol Gilligan considers the accepted masculine ideal of adulthood unbalanced, thus extolling the deviant feminine mode: "the qualities deemed necessary for adulthood--the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making, and responsible action--are those associated with masculinity and considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self. . . . Yet looked at from a different perspective, these stereotypes reflect a conception of adulthood that is itself out of balance, favoring the separateness of the individual self over connection to others, and leaning more toward an autonomous life of work than toward interdependence of love and care." However, her reading of the Demeter/Persephone myth privileges the feminine bond, denies the aggression of matriarchal myth, and does not admit the type of male matriarchal consciousness that we witness in Desvignes' work. In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 17.
mother, and essentially mirror the father's behavior. Cross-sexual identification (i.e., sons with mothers) is considered unhealthy as it will undermine prevailing masculine sex role identity. Patriarchy desires sons to reproduce sameness and expects these sons to be economically useful to the father. Generational conflict then arises with difference, i.e., when daughters are born or when sons refuse to comply with their roles and to serve the father. Ironically, as Desvignes demonstrates, patriarchy's demand for generational sameness subverts the cohesiveness of the family. Daughters are inevitably born and youth more often than not opts for individual success and happiness over blind submission to parental authority.

Erich Fromm explains the importance of the son in patriarchal culture and the father's conditional, economically determined, love:

Depending on economic circumstances, the son is either the heir to his father's estate or the future provider for his father in sickness and old age. He represents a sort of capital investment. From an economic viewpoint, the sums invested in his education and professional training are quite akin to those contributed toward accident insurance and old-age pensions.

Moreover, the son plays an important role insofar as the father's social prestige is concerned. His contributions to society and the concomitant social recognition can increase his father's prestige; his social failure can diminish or even destroy his father's prestige. (An economically or socially successful marriage by the son plays an equivalent role.)

Because of the son's social and economic function, the
goal of his education is ordinarily not his personal happiness—i.e., the maximum development of his own personality; it is rather his maximum usefulness in contributing to the father's economic or social needs. Frequently, therefore, we find an objective conflict between the son's happiness and his usefulness; but this conflict is usually not consciously noticed by the father, since the ideology of his society leads him to see both goals as identical. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the father frequently identifies himself with his son: he expects his son not only to be socially useful, but also to fulfill his own unsatisfied wishes and fantasies.

These social functions of the son play a decisive role in the quality of the father's love: he loves his son on the condition that the son fulfill the expectations that are centered around him. If this is not the case, the father's love can end, or even turn to disdain or hate. Note 1: This also accounts for the fact that the "favorite son"—the one who best fulfills his father's expectations—is a characteristic phenomenon in patricentric culture.36

Fromm's description of the patriarchal father unmistakably resembles Francis.37 Francis rejects out of hand his sons who refuse to stay at home working for the family business. His concept of the extended family, with its collective pool of resources, does not allow for


37 His resemblance to God the Father is also undeniable. Consider Alice Miller's definition of the Hebrew deity: "God the Father is easily offended, jealous, and basically insecure; He therefore demands obedience and conformity in the expression of ideas, tolerates no graven images and--since 'graven images' included works of art for the Hebrew God—no creativity either. He dictates beliefs and imposes punishment on apostates, persecutes the guilty with a vengeance, permits His sons to live only according to His principles and to find happiness only on His terms." Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child 221.
individual and separatist ambition. Marrain is his favorite son precisely because he remains at home playing the part of the ever-respectful, obedient, grateful child. Francis believes himself to be a great liberal who accords liberty of expression to all; but he is unable to confer on his sons freedom beyond the family frontier. Even when Marrain marries and moves his wife into the family home, Francis refuses to pay a wage for his son's contribution to the family business.

As Patrick Brady astutely remarks, this "refusal . . . amounts to economic castration of his son." It becomes apparent that in modern times financial struggles replace the sexual rivalries between fathers and sons of the ancient mythic stories as the true locus of power shifts from the wielder of the phallus to the controller of the money supply. Marrain is economically castrated both by his father and by uncle Thurauld, the patriarch of his wife's family, who holds back the secret formula that would have assured his success in life. As we have shown, in Marrain's slavish devotion to finding the secret formula coveted by the fathers (and the mothers who internalize the fathers' desires), he relinquishes life and renewal in the name of a static patriarchal ideal. By linking his fate with Heracles, Marrain not only falsely exaggerates his

38 Brady, "Womb-envy, Counterscript, and Subversion," 68.
masculinity in conflict with his more predominately feminine self, but he also expresses his unjust oppression by the "divinities" of the parental generation. Unlike Heracles, who in the end of his story (which Marrain apparently never completes) ascends to Olympus, marries Hera's daughter, and reigns equal and autonomous among the gods, Marrain dies exhausted by his efforts to raise himself to the level of the fathers on his own merit.

Of course, all fathers in patriarchal society do not fit the patriarchal mold. The highly nurturant patron Berthoin, for instance, obviously prefers Jeanne to his dull-witted son. Neither are mothers exempt from the patriarchal desire for economically useful sons. Jeanne expresses humiliation in not giving birth to a son, despite Marrain's declared wish for a daughter (this matriarchal man prefers a daughter who will replicate the beloved wife). Jeanne, a "femme forte" but still a daughter of patriarchy, reminds Marrain that her brother, Ours Martin, received the secret formula for the blue glaze simply by virtue of siring a son ("la descendance mâle est assurée" (380)). Jeanne knows that Marrain would not have appreciated receiving the formula for so tangential a reason as her brother "qui fait gagner au ventre de sa femme ce qu'il ne pourrait gagner avec ses doigts" (380). But, an accomplice in the patriarchal system, she wants to give Marrain a son who will inherit Marrain's own potting factory.
After Marrain dies, Francis becomes obsessed with the idea of the "fils de Marrain" that Jeanne must assuredly carry in her second pregnancy. His most ardent desire is to raise the child in his home as a replacement for his lost son. The child brings Francis and Justine together as they talk of nothing else: "L'enfant, c'était le rêve, c'était du tout neuf, comme un autre départ qu'ils reprendraient ensemble tant bien que mal. Eux c'était le connu, c'était triste, et puis c'était pour chacun tant de regrets, de remords, d'absinthe. Avec ce petit on pouvait recommencer des choses" (448).

Much to Francis's dismay, Jeanne has another daughter. The birth of the daughter is like another death of Marrain: "Mais il n'acceptait pas que le fils de Marrain ne soit pas né. C'est comme si Marrain était mort une troisième fois, pour lui." (449). Despite the fact that Francis has three other sons, all of whom have sons of their own, he considers himself "sans fils" like Marrain. All he has from Marrain is a "pissouse" (449). Jeanne gives up her two daughters to the grandparents to raise, feeling she cannot provide the time or the tenderness they will require: "il ne faut pas demander à une branche morte de donner des feuilles et des fleurs" (451).

Only Justine seems pleased with a grandchild. She sees no difference between having a son or a daughter of Marrain: "la fille de Marrain au lieu du fils de Marrain,
quant à elle, elle n'y voyait point de différence. C'était sa descendance, elle voulait Angéline" (451). Angéline is "her" baby. She proudly receives the little one's "jolis sourires" (452), while Francis only provokes tears. In her zeal to "mother," Justine excludes Francis from the parenting process and thus fails to redeem herself in Desvignes's equality-based system. Nonetheless, with the advent of the grandchild in her life she is finally able to release her heretofore repressed tenderness.

Whereas Justine flowers personally after years of having been "en bois," Francis views the triangular configuration of father, son and daughter-in-law as dead or dying trees: "Marrain déjà mort comme une bûche. Et Jeanne toute morte dedans, comme une branche desséchée. Et lui Francis, Francis le vieux c'était comme ça maintenant son vrai nom, il était pratiquement mort aussi, la pourriture de vieillerie était au coeur de l'arbre, l'écorce faisait encore illusion mais c'était tout, à l'intérieur il y avait tant de fibres qui avaient craqué et qui craquaient encore à chaque instant l'une après l'autre" (452).

In an interesting parallel to Zénon's death, Francis conjures up a grandson from his intense desire, much as Zénon had hallucinated a spirit son. The grandson, called "le petit Germinal" after the admired uncle, accompanies Francis everywhere: "Il le promenait, dans la cour ou dans le jardin, il l'emmenait à l'atelier, il lui montrait
comment les tours fonctionnaient, celui du grand-père était à roue, celui à pédale, c'avait été celui de son père, est-ce qu'il saurait aussi bien s'en servir quand il serait grand?" (452). Zénon creates the son from his unconscious, while consciously preferring to leave the world without a trace. Francis clearly sees the grandson as his continuation into the future, recalling the Hébertian formula "Tu es mon fils[fille] et tu me continues" ["Le Torrent," Les Enfants du sabbat]. Although, not surprisingly, in Hébert's case it is the mother who makes this pronouncement.

Francis's comforting vision, a compensatory dream of fulfillment, becomes an anxious nightmare as Francis loses control of "le petit Germinal." More like his uncles than his father, the child refuses to become a potter, abandons his sorely disappointed grandfather. Recognizing that all is lost, Francis tears up the secret formula that Marrain had finally received, too late, on his deathbed and had passed on for his son. Without this son of patriarchy, the formula's mystery will not be transformed into pottery.

Francis finally succumbs to the slow decaying of his body brought on by repeated losses--Antoinette and Marrain, his other sons and now "le petit Germinal"--and caused, for the most part, by patriarchy's unreasonable demands for sameness. Heartbroken, "les mains vides" (453), he tragically enacts the same final rite of departure practiced
by generations of the men of his family: he turns his face toward the wall in disgust. Had Marrain remained faithful to his matriarchal self, had the patriarchal fathers allowed for his difference, a senseless sacrifice might have been averted.
CONCLUSION

Mircea Eliade has stated that "hierophany implies a choice, a clear-cut separation of this thing which manifests the sacred from everything else around it."¹ As we have seen, however, mythic choices are rarely "clear-cut": embedded in the well-known myths vestiges of prior mythic choices lie trapped or transfigured by the newly worded mythical text. Essentialist ideas about gender are incarnated in mythical personages whose successes and defeats dictate to individuals the "appropriate" choices for their behavior in a given society. These choices change with changing times. Sometimes the more recently established mythic choice of a civilization never succeeds in fully extinguishing a previous, contradictory choice entrenched in its people's national and/or poetic consciousness.

None of the three novels we have analyzed can be considered "feminist," yet each speaks to a degree in an authentic feminine voice. This is not the écriture féminine of the French women theorists, who look for "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and

¹ Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religions 13.
text."\textsuperscript{2} It is a mode of consciousness derived from the matriarchal conception of life as seen through pre-patriarchal myth and archetype. None of these writers speaks in a purely feminine voice. I would quite agree with Elaine Showalter's estimation that women write "inside two traditions simultaneously"\textsuperscript{3} as evidenced in my mythic conflict critical approach.

R. W. Connell's notion of the coexistence of masculinity and femininity, which can be evaluated on separate, not opposite, scales in the same person, help us assess a woman author's voice and obtain less gender-biased results.\textsuperscript{4}

Hébert's female-centered vision gives her a very high score on the feminine scale and low marks for her masculine voice. The net effect is unbalanced, creating excessive gender polarization which limits rather than expands male or female identity. Furthermore, her empowered feminine ultimately resembles more closely the devouring mother or witch figure of male mythic consciousness than a matriarchal goddess figure. The empowering process for Anne Hébert leads to an actualization of the worst patriarchal attitudes


\textsuperscript{3} Showalter 32.

\textsuperscript{4} Connell, \textit{Gender and Power} 173-4.
toward the feminine.

Yourcenar, while receiving a high score for her masculine voice, succeeds in scoring on the feminine scale as well through the incorporation of positive matriarchal qualities into her masculine protagonist. Balancing the scale for her male protagonist, she nonetheless denies her female characters equal opportunity with their reductive portrayal. The male fulfills himself by developing his feminine self but a masculine woman, on the model of Electre, is a vile, shrill, monster.

Desvignes is the most successful in speaking in both a masculine and a feminine voice despite the narrative perspective emanating from the male protagonist. Her equalitarian vision, where the masculine and feminine are equally empowered, generates much less gender constriction. Marrain's character especially exemplifies a sexually integrated personality, but Jeanne is also an exemplary strong female character. Desvignes ranks among the twentieth-century women writers who, in Sandra Gilbert's words, "struggle . . . to define a gender-free reality behind or beneath myth, an ontological essence so pure, so free that 'it' can 'inhabit' any self, any costume." The prototypic dominance and submission of mythic paradigms are obliterared (temporarily at least) by the balanced inner

being engaged in equal love.

Based on the evidence of our mythic and literary research, we must conclude that the best human alternative is to rid ourselves of myths of difference in an effort to create balance and reduce the conflict between self and society. By fully engaging in a harmonious future that underscores the interconnectedness of all living things, ends artificial dualities, values nurturance, creativity, the sacredness of sex, and accepts the cyclical nature of life, we will be less likely to fall into the destructive trap of the singularly striving ego in the obsessive forward quest. If once "feminine" qualities, now fallen into disrepute, were to become available to men and women alike, the world might be a better place for all. In the final analysis, the resuscitated mythic feminine is not designed to glorify women's mythical past (especially in light of the destructive aspect of male sacrifice), but instead to impress upon us its positive virtues. Virtues which we no longer need to define as specifically feminine at all.
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