INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700  800/521-0600
RICE UNIVERSITY

‘YOU SHALL HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE SING ON AS IF IN PAIN’:
THE PHILOMELA MYTH AS METAPHOR OF TRANSFORMATION AND
RESISTANCE IN THE WORKS OF SUSAN GLASPELL AND ALICE WALKER

by

CONSTANTINA MICHALOS

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Wesley A. Morris, Professor, Director
English

Jahe Chance, Professor
English

James Castañeda, Professor
Hispanic and Classical Studies
Houston, Texas

May 1996
ABSTRACT

‘You Shall Hear The Nightingale Sing On As If In Pain’: The Philomela Myth as Metaphor of Transformation and Resistance in the Works of Susan Glaspell and Alice Walker

by

Constantina Michalos

The story of Philomela and Procne has long been a figure of violence in literature. However, male mythologizers write Philomela out of existence, whereas women writers use the myth as a metaphor for female oppression and silencing. This paper examines the mutually exclusive strategies of Philomela’s male and female mythographers.

Chapters one through three explore how classical and medieval poets rewrote the myth to sublimate their fear which the story’s themes represent. Rendered speechless, hence powerless within a masculine construct, Philomela creates a new idiom and reconstitutes her identity in weaving. Recognizing the immanent consequence of this feminine poetic, male mythologizers, epitomized by Coleridge in the nineteenth century, seek to silence Philomela once and for all.

Nevertheless, the Philomela/Procne myth resonates throughout the texts of women. Chapter four analyzes Trifles and “A Jury of Her Peers”, by Susan Glaspell, revealing the life of a frontier woman domineered by an unyielding husband she finally kills. The male investigators overlook evidence they deem “trifles” because it lies in woman’s work. The neighbor women, on the other hand, deduce the truth of
Minnie’s existence, and unite to subvert the law and establish a new form of justice based on the caring and connectedness of women, not the abstract principles of men.

Chapter five illustrates Alice Walker’s utilization of the myth to expose the worldwide oppression of women. In *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Celie and Tashi find meaning for their existence in a confederacy of women who bond to repudiate the tyranny of culture and redefine themselves as worthy and whole.

Philomela raped, mutilated and silenced is a familiar image for women. The strength in an otherwise horrific tale lies in Philomela’s ability to subvert the patriarchy that would subjugate her by usurping the power of language into a call to sisterhood and an affirmation of such power in that bond.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of writing a dissertation is a long and arduous one. Quite often over the past few years, I wondered if I would ever finish. But my devotion to Philomela’s song and my determination to sing my own kept my goal clear and ever-present in my heart and mind. Nevertheless, I could not have done it alone. I am not certain I can ever adequately thank those individuals for their support, understanding, encouragement and patience: my committee - Dr. Wesley Morris, Dr. Jane Chance and Dr. James Castañeda - whose impartial, insightful assessment of my work challenged me to refine my text to be the best that it could be; Molly Slack, who saved my academic life when technology failed me, braving unseasonably frigid temperatures and inhumanly long hours to see this project reach fruition; my friends, who listened for hours as I formulated my thesis and said yes, it was a story worth telling; my daughters, Nicole and Megan, who have grown into beautiful women with generous spirits, kind hearts and honorable visions of their own.

To all of you, I am forever grateful.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction 1

II. Chapter One: The Classical Tradition:
     Ovid Rerapes Philomela 19

III. Chapter Two: The Middle Ages and The Renaissance:
        Philomela’s Conversion 50

IV. Chapter Three: The Romantic Period:
       Coleridge Delivers the Literary Coup de Grâce
       Upon Philomela 66

V. Chapter Four: Susan Glaspell:
       Marginalized Women Marginalizing Men 91

VI. Chapter Five: Alice Walker:
       Transcultural Oppression of Women in The
       Color Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy 171

VII. Conclusion 255

VIII. Works Cited 260
‘You Shall Hear the Nightingale Sing On As If In Pain’:
The Philomela Myth as Metaphor of Transformation and Resistance in the Works of
Susan Glaspell and Alice Walker

Introduction

During a discussion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, my Romantic poetry professor
described the poet in terms that revealed a patently troubled psyche. I had heretofore
considered Coleridge’s drug habit the primary inspiration for his major poems, but this
new insight into Coleridge’s psychology provided a more complex critical perspective.
Apparently sexual fantasies and their attendant guilt underscored his poetry as much as
his laudanum consumption. Consequently, when Coleridge transforms Milton’s “most
musical, most melancholy bird” into an “idle thought” for “[I]n Nature there is nothing
melancholy” and thus ushers in the Romantic period, free of the crippling anxieties of
tradition, I read those anxieties not as the metrical rules and models of antiquity but
rather as the archetypal figures of sexual violation and depravity depicted in mythical
tradition, particularly in the story of Philomela and Procris. And I could not accept
the new Romantic sensibility as merely a liberating aesthetic. Rather, the dark side of
Coleridge’s personality betrays itself in his obsessive re-vision of the nightingale myth
in his poem “The Nightingale”.

In order to understand Coleridge’s motivation and my own unease with it, I
returned to the original myth and found, as I had anticipated, something more than an
explanation for the existence of nightingales and swallows in nature. A more critical
exegesis of the myth and its various manifestations reveals a more complex text
illuminative of its mythologizers’ idiosyncratic motives.
The myth depicts Philomela's rape by her brother-in-law Tereus and his subsequent mutilation of her so she cannot reveal his crime. By cutting out her tongue, he renders her powerless within a phallogocentric patriarchy. She has threatened to articulate his condemnation, a power reserved for men, and for her presumption she is punished accordingly. What Tereus does not anticipate in his personal and cultural gendercentricity is that Philomela can create an alternate medium by which to "speak" her outrage. She turns to her weaving, a skill as graphic as storytelling but disdained by Tereus as female and, therefore, fatally ignored by him as a viable means to communicate. Her completed tapestry clearly tells the story of her violation and Procne understands immediately what has transpired. The sisters reunite and plot to avenge their outrageous betrayal by killing Procne's son and feeding him to Tereus. When he realizes what he has eaten, Tereus pursues the sisters, and all three are transformed, Philomela into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow and Tereus into a hoopoe.

As hideous as the tale is, the Greek versions do not dwell on the grisly details. However, when Ovid recounts the myth, he develops just those details the Greeks omit. His narrative then becomes not only an expanded account of a very brief story; his elaborations reveal, as well, a misogynistic theme through which he silences and oppresses Philomela linguistically, just as Tereus did physically. I have shown in my analysis of Ovid's treatment of the myth that he consistently focuses more attention on Philomela and Procne, insidiously suggesting that they instigate their tragedy simply by requesting their reunion, and that their revenge is more heinous than Tereus's
crime. Through a close reading of Ovid’s poetry, I have demonstrated that his sinister implications, his repeated and increasingly graphic descriptions of Philomela’s rape and mutilation, and his gruesome portrayal of Itys’s death deflect attention from Tereus’s gratuitous rape and mutilation of Philomela and, instead, condemn the sisters for their presumptuous usurpation of male power, that is, language, manifested in Philomela’s inventive use of her loom. The victims become the victimizers.

Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue to literally and figuratively deprive her of the power of language and Ovid inaugurates a literary, social and historical tradition in which women are troped as silent, submissive and subjugated. Philomela subverts his efforts, however, by creating a new poetic, a female lexicon outside the patriarchy. Through her reappropriation of language, she effects a reconciliation with Procne and they successfully avenge themselves against Tereus. This defiance of the patriarchy through the arrogation of language, precisely the locus of authority the patriarchy has claimed for itself, must be punished. Since Tereus fails, Ovid picks up the gauntlet and condemns the sisters for their audacity. However, even as author, he cannot forestall their transformations. So he does the next best thing. He denies their identity. Throughout the story they have persistently defied male authority and reoriginated themselves within a female context of power in sisterhood. Now Ovid refuses to name which sister becomes which bird and consigns them to literary and literal anonymity.

However, they resist his punitive efforts. The figures of Philomela and Procne resonate throughout literary history, and though other male poets attempt to varying
degrees and for various reasons to mute their voices or completely silence them, the sisters prevail, asserting that “mysterious power of the character who refuses to remain in her textually ordained place” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 28). Of all the writers discussed herein, Samuel Taylor Coleridge ranks with Ovid in his obsessive re-imaging of the nightingale myth. The conflict between his private sexual fantasies and his public moral persona creates the aesthetic crisis he attempts to resolve in “The Nightingale” when he declares “[I]n Nature there is nothing melancholy” and thus transforms Philomela’s song into the Romantic manifesto. Aware of the myth as an archetype of violence and violation, Coleridge submerges his neuroses beneath a new poetic sensibility free of the constraints of tradition and, ostensibly, of its allusions. Romantic poets manifest this new poetic sensibility in “a quest for self-creation, for self-comprehension, for self-positioning” (Ross, “Romantic Quest and Conquest” 26) and that is realized in nothing less than a voice that re-creates the world. This assertion of creative power epitomizes the metaphor of “writer as God” articulated in Coleridge’s definition of the imagination as “. . . a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” By assuming this position of author “with which writer, deity and pater familias are identified” (Said, qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 4). Coleridge not only bequeaths a new tradition to his literary heirs, he assumes a position from which he can “willfully reoriginat[e] thought . . . [and] take[s] upon himself the beginning of things . . . a point in time he declares to be free of prior causality” (Brisman, Romantic Origins 22). The time Coleridge seeks is free of Philomela, and by asserting a creative power analogous to God’s, Coleridge can create
a world in which she does not exist. If Philomela does not exist, her rape and
mutilation did not occur, and his conscience and consciousness are free of her awful
story.

My exegesis of “The Nightingale” reveals, however, that although Coleridge
attempts to excise Philomela from tradition by drastically rewriting her story and
purging her mythological legacy, she remains to haunt him in images that reinforce his
sense of guilty preoccupation with her story. Aware that his “source of creative
inspiration and imaginative power within him was becoming, in its sexually lurid
suggestiveness, a threat to his conscious self-image” (Rzepka, The Self As Mind 160),
Coleridge was convinced that he was doomed to fail as a poet because he had lost his
innocence, nevertheless abdicating responsibility for that loss and blaming external
forces (i.e. Philomela). In order to reintegrate his consciousness into his poem,
Coleridge must appoint a surrogate, the “most gentle Maid” and his “dear babe”
Hartley, whose innocence allows them to experience the joy which comes from the
union of nature and God as he manifests himself in nature, and from which Coleridge
is inevitably alienated by his contaminated imagination.

His later poem, “The Pains of Sleep”, continues to illustrate Coleridge’s guilt-
ridden psyche, tormented by unnameable impulses of which the Philomela myth
reminds him. Unable to accept responsibility for his reveries here as well, Coleridge
reverses his own definition of morality in order to rationalize his behavior. Whereas
he maintains that “evil [which] has its ground or origin in the agent, and not the
compulsion of circumstances”, in his poem, evil derives from a “compulsion of
circumstances” beyond the dreamer’s control. Indeed, by the end of the poem, he disclaims the dream completely and judges that “Such griefs with such men well agree.” Nevertheless, as the ultimate symbol of his repressed fantasies, the poem itself implicates Coleridge in his own nightmare, personified by such as Philomela, despite this last desperate strategy.

In my close readings of the Philomela myth as used by male mythologizers from antiquity to Coleridge, I have demonstrated that they attempt to write her out of existence either to punish her for her presumptuous reappropriation of language and, therefore, power from the patriarchy, or to excise her from their guilty imaginations because of the violent sexuality inherent in her story. Because this story has such potent implications, narratively and thematically, their efforts must disempower Philomela so that she is not a symbol of resistance but reverts instead to the symbol of submission she was meant to be.

In “The Voice of the Shuttle”, Geoffrey Hartman joins that tradition by appropriating Philomela’s quintessentially female experiences to universal (i.e. male) artistic endeavors. However, feminist critics caution that if we read the myth thus and do not privilege the power of sisterhood instead, “we will be domesticated and subjugated into the loss of our own history” (Marcus, “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny” 91). Patricia Joplin maintains that women reject the male linear structure of myth which leads to an inevitable bloodthirsty end stressing the violence the sisters wreak rather than that which was wrought upon them. Instead, the female reader focuses on the middle, “the moment of the loom”, that “literary passage . . . where change is
occurring” (Furman, “Textual Criticism” 49). Philomela’s text not only reveals the horror of her rape and mutilation to Procne and her other female readers. Her weaving mends and unites feminine consciousness, asserting what Joplin calls a “will to survive despite everything that threatens to silence us, including the male literary tradition and its critics . . .” (“The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours” 52)

Tillie Olsen calls the silences imposed by the male literary tradition “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot” (Silences 6), cultural prohibitions and biases which preclude women’s articulation of their lives and experiences. In order to neutralize this codification of their silence, women must reappropriate language with which to articulate and valorize gender differences in the text and to constitute and validate a female paradigm for human experience. Since, however, language formation has been, for the most part controlled by men, women are forced to conceptualize themselves, their values and experiences within an alien construct which does not speak for them and often, indeed, excludes them. Women’s understanding of the world and their self-articulation within it are, consequently, inadequate and often erroneous. Denied access to the full resources of language, women are “forced into silence, euphemism or circumlocution” (Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” 255). Speaking and writing from such gender-marked, ideologically constrained and linguistically handicapped positions, women are challenged with “nothing less than to ‘reinvent’ language . . . to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phalacy of masculine meaning” (Felman, qtd. in Showalter 254). Otherwise woman’s experience and its articulation
remain unrecognized because they are unrepresentable in a male idiom. The frustrating paradox of what Shirley and Edwin Ardener describe as the inevitable mutedness of women is that women have valid experiences and a viable vocabulary with which to articulate them, but they “cannot be ‘realized’ in the language of the dominant structure” because their code is “unsuitable”, that is, it does not conform to masculine constructs (Perceiving Women 22, ix).

In order to survive and prevail as readers, writers and individuals, women must, as Judith Fetterley charges, recover their power and discover themselves by resisting and rejecting the mythologies and ideas about men and women embedded in our culture and inscribed in its literature, and thus in our psyches. From this new feminist critical perspective, women will find a “unique and powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices . . . which spoke about us to us and at us but never for us” (The Resisting Reader xxiv). Female readers and writers, therefore, reject the universalizing principle that underscores Geoffrey Hartman’s analysis of the Philomela/Procne myth and privilege, instead, Philomela’s resourcefulness at her loom as a liberating, regenerative act and the reunion of the sisters as a bond strong enough to counter codified masculine oppression. The image of silence as a kind of rape and of rape as a symbol of subjugation, submission and silence are common in literature by women. The Philomela myth is a compelling metaphor for creative survival against the patriarchy, especially as utilized by Susan Glaspell and Alice Walker.

Minnie Wright has been dominated into silence and isolation by a tyrannical husband she finally murders. The county attorney, sheriff and farmer who investigate
the murder are convinced of her guilt but can neither provide a motive nor explain the method. They are conducting their investigation from a masculine perspective and consequently cannot see the clues their wives read clearly. What the men disdain as "trifles" and criticize as poor housekeeping, the women uneasily read as signs of Minnie's oppressed existence and motivation. Just as Procne reads Philomela's tapestry "all as plain to her as if in print", Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters recognize that kitchen chores left half-done and a quilt whose stitching has gone awry signify more than slovenliness. They piece together Minnie's life as they piece together her quilt, and the completed image of her desolation and defeat forces them to contemplate their own lives. When they find her strangled bird, a symbol of the life John Wright strangled out of Minnie, they understand why she killed him and why she used a rope. The men, on the other hand, scorn the clues the women recognize and wonder, instead, why Minnie didn't use a gun. Frustrated by his inability to find a motive, the county attorney says to Mr. Peters, "If there were some definite thing - something to show. Something to make a story about." As long as they pursue their investigation from a masculine perspective that privileges male signs and male texts, they will never read the story of Minnie's life, deduce her motive and solve the crime.

Glaspell knows, as Philomela did, the subversive power of female language and creates for her women not only signs for them to read outside the patriarchal ken, but an idiom as well by which to articulate their understanding of Minnie's experience and how it relates to their own. The women read Minnie's unfinished chores as signs of "sudden anger"; they look "through a thing to something else" and see more than a
stove that is inadequate. And they speak their “dawning comprehension” of Minnie’s life and their own in unfinished sentences punctuated with dots and dashes. The men, on the other hand, speak within “the narrow parameters of discourse” (Ben-Zvi, “Susan Glaspell’s Contribution . . .” 153), a linear narrative which is inadequate to the undulations of the women’s lives. They want no digressions, “just the facts.” Yet the “facts” of Minnie’s life are irrelevant to the men and certainly incomprensible to them as a motive for murder. The men and women may speak the same words, but they have a different meaning within a female context, a meaning which escapes the men in their disdain because they cannot conceive an alternative to their context. This heightens the irony of the puns the women deliver throughout Glaspell’s texts in reference to Minnie’s quilt. Because quilting and knotting are sewing terms, the men humor the women by asking if they had decided whether Minnie was going to quilt or knot her needlework. Consequently, they miss the implications of Mrs. Hale’s pun when she says, “We call it - knot it.”

Glaspell gives her women a method by which to communicate their understanding of Minnie’s life and their own to one another. As subversive as their new language is, they must subvert another patriarchal icon - the law - in order to successfully revalidate their existence and experiences and confer meaning on Minnie’s. They recognize, as the narrative unfolds, that more than John Wright’s murder has occurred in this house. The crime against Minnie is the greater injustice, but the patriarchal “proclivity for the letter of the law” mitigates against any justice for Minnie. Having identified with Minnie’s plight and in “partial expiation” for Mrs.
Hale’s inaction, the women unite to suppress the evidence. In so doing, they focus on the crime against Minnie (and by extension themselves), reading her clues as proof of her victimization, not as evidence of her guilt, just as women read Philomela’s tapestry as a new poetic, not her revenge as unnatural and loathsome. By refocusing our attention on Minnie, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters create a new tapestry of her life and conceal the clues that would convict her. This subversion of the patriarchy, effected through the caring and connection that distinguishes women’s relationships, liberates the women into self-definition. Mrs. Peters rejects the notion that she is “married to the law” and Mrs. Hale rejects the convention of John Wright’s murder as a crime, re-conceiving it within Minnie’s context and her unwitting participation in it. Mrs. Hale reinforces her defiant act, ironically with a word the men continue to disregard but which emphatically underscores the power of female language. “We call it - knot it” describes not only needlework. It unmistakably articulates female rejection of the patriarchy. “NOT IT!”

Alice Walker’s women suffer analogous violations - physical and emotional, racial, sexual and sexist - and they too survive and prevail through uncommonly strong bonds among uncommonly strong women. Celie has been repeatedly raped by the man she believes is her father and by the man who claims her as his wife. Threatened into silence by the life and death authority they wield over her, Celie writes to God in an effort to locate meaning in her life. At first she is so ashamed that she does not even sign her name. But God never “writes back”, he never “speaks” an answer. Rather, he withholds meaning, purpose, identity. When she learns the truth of her past
from Nettie, she rejects him, concluding that God is like all the other men she has ever known - “trifling, forgetful and low down.” Now she signs her name, reflecting her various identities as sister and owner of Folkpants Unlimited. And she signs “Amen”- blessing and praising her self herself.

Though Celie is writing her self-discovery, she actually usurps the spoken word because her letters read more like dialogue than narration and she records conversations which reflect her personal and professional growth. As her self-confidence grows, the letters mature from a child-like simplicity to a more textured record of the world and people around her. The women who surround and support Celie are critical to this transformation: Shug with her unconventional views on men, love and God; Sofia, with her unconventional views on marital and social roles; and Mary Agnes, with her unconventional strength of character to save Sofia. Each represents an aspect of “woman” Celie eventually becomes, but the most significant relationship is with Shug.

Not only does Shug teach Celie how to love herself, she frees her from the oppressive control of Mister by providing her all the letters from Nettie he has concealed for so many years. He has punished both sisters for Nettie’s rejection of him by keeping their letters secret, wielding another kind of life and death power over them since the sisters equated their letters, their words, with survival, just as Tereus silences Philomela and renders her powerless and figuratively dead. Nettie’s letters also reveal the truth of Celie’s family history to her, another critical source of knowledge of identity that Mister withholding as punishment. Here, too, Tereus
antedates Mister when he separates Philomela and Procne and lies to each about the other’s death. Shug frees her also from the tyranny of a white, anthropomorphic god and the constricting doctrines of organized religion and teaches Celie to value herself as a member of creation, co-extensive with it and inferior to nothing and no one. The final lesson that liberates Celie is her sewing. With Shug’s encouragement, Celie develops Folkpants Unlimited, a cottage industry that affords her economic freedom from the men around her. Like her letters and Nettie’s, Celie’s pants are her “moment of the loom”, that place which, for Philomela and Minnie and now Celie, signifies the liberating quality of their text, their tapestry, their quilt - the locus of their resistance - their pants unlimited.

The frightened girl who writes to God in order to reconstitute her fragmented identity becomes an independent woman, socially, economically, sexually and intellectually, because of the strong women around her and their concerted, creative efforts to prevail against an oppressive patriarchy. The women stitch a quilt and repair the lost thread of connectedness; they speak “double - and quadruple speak” to free Sofia from a subverted patriarchy; they sing the blues, “just one refrain - freedom”; and “everyday we going to read Nettie’s letters and sew.”

Though Nettie’s letters finally provide Celie with the truth of their family history, they also reveal a very troubling truth about the Africa she had expected to be ideal and idyllic. Nettie describes her experiences as a missionary and, in the process, exposes practices that are as crippling and destructive as anything Celie has experienced but invidiously masquerade as culture. The most hideous examples of
Olinkan ritual are scarification and clitoridectomy, both rites of initiation, both intended to keep the woman subservient. As she relates these horrible practices, Nettie refers to an Olinkan girl named Tashi who has undergone both procedures and is clearly suffering. Though The Color Purple ends with a happy family reunion back in America that includes Tashi, Walker returns to the girl and her descent into madness in Possessing the Secret of Joy.

Unlike her oppressed literary sisters, Tashi willingly submits to mutilation. Philomela and Celie are raped, and Minnie is systematically violated by an authoritarian husband. But by consciously yielding, Tashi is no less a victim. Indeed because she submits to the systematic, codified mutilation of women, seduced by her charismatic leader into believing that nothing less than the survival of Olinkan culture depends on her compliance, she may be more of a victim. She is conditioned to reject her intact body - an uncircumcised vulva is a “monstrosity” - and to believe that no man will marry an uncircumcised woman. What she does not recognize is that this appeal to her loyalty is really a controlling tactic. If she remains uncircumcised, she remains unmarried. She is conditioned to believe that without marriage, she will not survive. Thus, she is an economic hostage of a patriarchal practice whose roots are more malignant than she conceives when she does her patriotic duty, sincerely believing that her act is protecting Olinkan society from cultural imperialism.

The clitoridectomy that Tashi undergoes mutilates not only her body, but her psyche as well. Every aspect of her identity disintegrates into madness and we read, through non-consecutive accounts by various narrators which mirrors this
fragmentation, how she finally confronts the truth of this practice and avenges herself against the patriarchy that sought not only to control her but to destroy her. Tashi learns from M'Lissa, the tsunga who circumcised her, about the power of women during a time before society, i.e. patriarchy, imposed these rituals in the name of cultural identity, and from the concerned and outraged people around her that the mutilation ritual was initiated to control the sexuality of women. Since the clitoris is a source of pleasure for women exclusive of men, it had to be excised in order to invest men with sexual power and divest women of theirs. Just as insidious is the conspiracy of silence the women themselves perpetuate out of shame, fear and guilt, once again willingly submitting to the manipulative patriarchy. But before she can fully comprehend the magnitude of this revelation, she must confront the reality of her sister's death under the tsunga's knife. Although she is initially fearful of her repressed memories, she turns to female forms that allow her to explore her life. The truth that her paintings and allegories reveal frees her to name Dura's death "murder" and to share this knowledge with other victimized women. But she cannot do it alone. Though she is supported by Adam, educated by Pierre, and attended by Mzee, the suffering women directly involved with Tashi and responsive to her words truly sustain her.

Deceived by the patriarchy into willingly adopting a submissive posture before all men, Tashi must resort to subversive methods to expose its duplicity, methods only other women will understand. She reappropriates male forms and composes placards on poster board the color of her country's flag that proclaim, "If you lie to yourself
about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it,” enjoining women to confront the truth of their condition on this new banner of liberation. She sews a red dress for her execution, glorifying the menstrual blood of women, which once signified their freedom, in her color choice. Like Philomela’s tapestry, Minnie’s quilt and Celie’s pants, Tashi’s red dress is her “moment of the loom”, her symbolic transition from a place of submission to a place of defiance. Having been silenced, subordinated and subjugated because they are women, these oppressed literary sisters redefine themselves in female terms and through female signs and prevail figuratively, literally and literarily. Her supporters revise the national anthem and sing in Tashi’s support. Beaten by soldiers for their subversive efforts, the women continue to sing/speak their emancipation. Like Shug and Mary Agnes, who sing the blues in another, equally oppressive world, their antiphonal confirmation of Tashi’s message enunciates “the facts and privileges (current and imminent) of female speech in the liberating distinction between words and music” (Berlant, “Race, Gender and Nation in The Color Purple” 221). Tashi has inspired these women who perceived themselves as powerless and doomed; but now she must learn something from them - the secret of joy - that something with which “they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them.” At the moment of her execution, after unwrapping their swaddled baby girls exposing whole, unscarred bodies, the women enact the answer for her in unfurled banners - that RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!

Tashi has exposed patriarchal euphemisms by rewriting male lies in an idiom of female truth. She has consecrated woman’s blood as life-giving, life-affirming,
sacramental in the symbol of her dress. She has taught women to celebrate the future in which they will possess themselves. She has elevated woman’s experience to the level of an anthem. Now she can die. “Satisfied.”

The texts discussed and analyzed in the body of this paper confirm my observation that the myth of Philomela and Procne is a compelling story to which male and female writers return for gender-marked reasons. The most significant act in the myth is Philomela’s creative use of her loom to represent her rape and mutilation, a text so clear that Procne reads it “as plain to her as if in print.” Male mythologizers, however, read this act as a defiant usurpation of the prerogative of language and the power inherent therein and punish Philomela variously for her presumption. Furthermore, the reunion with Procne that her tapestry effects engenders inhuman and inhumane behaviors that these poets also condemn. Others are obsessed with the aggressive sexuality of the myth, and though Tereus was the aggressor, they focus on Philomela with a voyeuristic intensity resolved only by her conversion to a Christian symbol or, more radically, her extirpation from tradition. And, furthermore, from their consciences.

Female writers, on the other hand, long silenced by the patriarchy, see in Philomela’s “moment of the loom” that transitional place of defiance from which they can empower themselves and effect change. The reunion with Procne is a regenerative source of strength. Moreover, articulating a new poetic that subverts established forms, Philomela shatters the quintessentially female “aesthetic of silence” and liberates women into new imaginative possibilities that resonate “as a repetition in the
finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”
Chapter 1

The Classical Tradition: Ovid Rerapae Philomela

Classical myths were conceived to explain man's existence, his relationship with the world and the natural and supernatural phenomena which impinged upon him. Therefore, at its most basic level, the story of Philomela and Procne explains the presence of nightingales and swallows in nature. But it also raises questions of power and domination, sexuality and identity, artistic creation and the suppression of such impulses. Yet the story's male mythologizers do not attempt to answer these questions. Secure in a patriarchy which need not consider these issues, these writers do not even perceive them. Or they consciously ignore these questions out of indifference or from an inability to confront their troubling implications.

One of the more obvious reasons why the mythologizers are unable to confront these issues is linguistic. Since these stories are retold in a masculine idiom, the language does not betray them to themselves. However, in examples from the Philomela/Procne myth to which I will refer shortly, it is apparent that their language does betray the women it strives to depict. Finally, however, a generation of American women poets have engaged in revisionist mythmaking of their own in order to recuperate women from culturally engendered stereotypes. "The old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasies." In her essay, "The Thieves of Language", Alicia Ostriker
states that the language we speak and write “has been an encoding of male privilege”, a language which renders us silent and speechless because it is “inadequate to describe or express women’s experience.” She charges, however, that “we must also have it in our power to ‘seize speech’ and make it say what we mean” (318, 315).

Philomela, the first female poet, expresses woman’s experience of rape and mutilation through a female language of weaving. Edith Hamilton relates in her version, taken from Ovid, that Tereus assumed he was safe; Philomela could neither speak nor write his crime for public knowledge. “However, although people then could not write, they could tell a story without speaking because they were marvelous craftsmen.” The smith could hammer out stories of the hunt or harvest. “The women were equally remarkable in their kind of work. They could weave . . . forms so lifelike anyone could see what tale they illustrated” (Hamilton 270). Philomela creates a new form to generate a new meaning, a form which Tereus, in his disdain for anything female, would never have considered a threat, but which Philomela recognized immediately as a means of communication and which we read as a source of power. “Women have had the power of naming stolen from us” (Daly qtd. in Ostriker 318). For Philomela, this theft is physical as well as symbolic. But like the women writers who succeed her, Philomela creates a new aesthetic, a code peculiarly female, and she speaks “in a semantic context that arises from quantitatively new experience” (318).

Her “quantitatively new experience” comes to us originally from ancient Greece. According to Apollodorus, Tereus, the son of Ares, marries Procne after successfully
assisting her father Pandion in a war against Labdacus. Together they have a son, Itys. However, Tereus falls in love with Philomela, seduces her, saying that Procne is dead, though he has concealed her in the country. He marries Philomela, beds with her, and then cuts out her tongue. Philomela weaves her story in a robe and thus reveals it to Procne. Procne seeks out her sister, kills Itys, boils him and serves him for supper to the unsuspecting Tereus. They flee, and when Tereus realizes what has happened, he follows with an ax. Finally overtaken, the sisters pray to the gods to be turned into birds. Procne becomes a nightingale. Philomela a swallow, and Tereus a hoopoe.

Apollodorus tells his tale succinctly, with no extraneous details. He records the events in a linear progression, with neither opinions, interpretations nor conclusions. There are, nevertheless, significant narrative gaps: when does Tereus first see Philomela; why, how and when does he hide Procne away; why does he mutilate Philomela, since she does not threaten him as she does in later versions; how does Philomela learn that Procne is alive and how does she get the robe to her? Sir James Frazer provides substantial notes to a Apollodorus’s text. It is curious, therefore, that he does not comment on Tereus’s gratuitous violence, all the more horrible because it is unexpected and motiveless. The very mention of this deed in such an abbreviated text warrants commentary, but Frazer is conspicuously silent. Nor does he address the lie of Procne’s death and the “marriage” to Philomela which Tereus orchestrates in order to “bed” her. Apollodorus makes a distinction between “seduce” and “bed” which establishes a legitimacy of intercourse within the marital context which is patently false here and
whose implications resonate throughout the literary tradition of this myth. The question of rape within marriage, pretended or otherwise, will certainly be addressed later, after several other mythologizers implicate themselves in Philomela’s violation through their silence. Frazer, however, makes a subtle revision in the myth with a condemnatory adjective in his note. Tereus the hoopoe cried “Poo? Poo?” as he pursued his cruel wife (99). Our attention shifts abruptly from Tereus’s deceit and violence to Procne’s infanticide, a shift which Frazer inscribes into our consciousnesses. Thus Frazer perpetuates a pattern which I will demonstrate earlier mythologizers adopt and which, like their silence on the “rape in marriage” issue, serves to victimize the victims and exonerate the perpetrator.

Edith Hamilton takes her translation from Ovid, but reads from a Greek perspective when she omits his more gruesome depiction of Philomela’s mutilation. In her preface to the tale, she explains, “The Greek poets were not given to such details, but the Latin had no manner of objection to them” (268). Perhaps by omitting this graphic detail, Hamilton is also maintaining a sense of decorum with which she is more comfortable. Nevertheless, the rest of her translation remains faithful to Ovid in that she does not privilege the sisters’ reunion over Tereus’s revulsion. Rather she maintains Ovid’s image of the victims becoming the victimizers. Neither does Hamilton provide commentary or footnotes to influence reader response or to deflect attention from Ovid’s text. Thus, although her version is a modern one, she does not intrude upon the tale with
ambivalent analyses that betray a bias, as do Frazer and William S. Anderson (whom I will discuss shortly).

Apollodorus traces Tereus’s genealogy to Ares and Hamilton judges immediately that he also “proved to have inherited all his father’s detestable qualities” (270). Procne has been separated from her family for over five years and begs Tereus to allow her to invite Philomela for a visit. He agrees to escort Philomela back to Thrace from Athens. But when he sees her, he falls in love with her. Tereus persuades Pandion to let Philomela return with him. Their voyage is uneventful; nevertheless, when they arrive in Thrace, Tereus lies that Procne is dead and forces Philomela into a “pretended marriage”. Within a short while, she learns the truth and threatens to expose him. “She would surely find means to let the world know what he had done . . . and he would be an outcast among men” (270). Such boldness, however, both frightens and infuriates him and so he cuts out her tongue. Leaving Philomela in a strongly guarded place, Tereus returns to Procne, this time lying that Philomela had died on the journey.

Philomela is left mute, isolated and “in those days there was no writing.” But there are other ways to communicate. Hamilton’s version observes, “She had no greater motive to make clear the story she wove than any artist ever had” (270). Betrayed by a perverted patriarchy, deprived of language, Philomela weaves her story on a tapestry and “communicates through symbolic forms. She thus becomes a type of poet articulating a version of truth in defiance of the betrayal of language” (Walker, The Nightingale’s
And Procne understands everything, “all as plain to her as if in print” (Hamilton 270).

Procne cannot speak now either. But her silence is self-imposed. Neither tears nor words will distract her from freeing Philomela and punishing Tereus. “We will weep hereafter,” she counsels Philomela after they reunite (271). The sisters transcend patriarchal language and communicate through their shared outrage, thus enforcing “the aesthetic of silence [which] is quintessentially a female aesthetic” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 43). Prepared for anything, Procne understands her vengeance only after she sees her son. “How like your father you are” (Hamilton 271). She recognizes Itys is a repetition and reminder of Tereus and his crime, and the child’s own potential for it as Tereus’s son. If Tereus has inherited Ares’ “detestable qualities”, one can assume that such a legacy has been bequeathed to Itys as well. By destroying Itys, Procne mutilates Tereus physically and symbolically, thus punishing him in kind for his crimes against Philomela and herself.

After she tells him what he has eaten, she and Philomela flee. The power of her words temporarily paralyzes him with horror. But eventually he catches up to them. The gods intervene here unasked and transform Procne into a nightingale, Philomela into a swallow, and “the wretched Tereus” into a hawk. Procne perpetually mourns her son in her song and Philomela can only twitter because her tongue has been cut out. Though Ovid does not identify which sister becomes which bird, the Roman writers confuse the sisters and make the tongueless Philomela the nightingale. Her song then becomes
“Tereu, Tereu”, in which she everlastingly names her attacker and makes good her threat to expose him among men. Again she tells her story without the language of men, and again it is understood “as plain . . . as if in print” (271).

This version, however, also undermines the sisters’ vengeance against Tereus. “In his first sickening horror he could not move” (271). Tereus’s revulsion stems not only from his apparent cannibalism but from the knowledge that he has eaten his son. The active vital man who moved so smoothly through seduction and violation is now paralyzed by grief as well as nausea. The horror of his motiveless crime is eclipsed by the awfulness of the sisters’ “fit punishment” for it. So the aggressor becomes pitiable and the victims detestable. Although he is transformed into a hawk, “an ugly bird with a huge beak” which recaptures his human warlike, predatory countenance, he is nonetheless described as “wretched”, further inscribing his misery (271). His initial crime is overlooked and Tereus remains the pathetic father who “in his first sickening horror could not move.”

Procne, on the other hand, sings the saddest song because “she never forgets the son she killed” (271). Nor is the reader allowed to forget. The mythologizers of Philomela and Procne consistently emphasize the infanticide. In so doing, they divert our attention from Tereus’s grisly deed and transform him into the victim. Procne becomes, then, the villainess, committing and recommitting, through the nightingale’s song, a horrendous act. No one denies that infanticide is horrible and that it may even be indefensible. The question which the reader should address is why Procne is driven to
such a deed. There are textual reasons for her revenge and interpretive reasons for her method. Tereus, however, can claim only lust and fear as a justification for his rape and mutilation of Philomela. Yet in the end, “the wretched Tereus” is a pitiful father, not a violent, merciless rapist and liar, and the mournful Procne “never forgets the son she killed.” This is a painfully ambiguous position to be left in. Does she “never forget” because she is such a good mother eternally memorializing her hapless son; or is she condemned to “never forget” her awful act by continuously singing about it. If we accept the latter alternative, attention shifts from Tereus to Procne; his crime blurs in the process and her response is magnified beyond human comprehension. With this new focus, the victim becomes the victimizer and the original crime is all but forgotten. Except by the critical reader who will not forget what Tereus has done; for that reader the original crime is committed anew and this time Procne’s integrity is violated as well as her mythologizers’.

The inversion of the nightingale/swallow transformation appears in the New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, which implies that this is a Roman source but does not indicate the writer. This rendering of the myth is as simple as in Apollodorus, but here, although Tereus falls in love with Philomela, he does not marry her, and he mutilates her for fear she will reveal his crime even though she does not threaten him. We know their familial relationship from tradition, yet only in this version Philomela is named “sister-in-law” and his act is named “violation”. Further, Tereus is called “tyrant” as he chases the sisters with a drawn sword. Whereas in Frazer and Hamilton subtle uses
of language betray the sisters, this writer inscribes a new sympathy with linguistic
choices that suggest the writer is female. Tereus’s incest is unpardonable and Procne’s
revenge is appropriate, conclusions one can draw from the author’s own language. She
continues her story with their transformation by a benevolent deity who intervenes
unasked. But then she moves radically beyond other mythologizers and her narrative
innovation supports a dramatic rereading of the myth’s end. Here Itys is resuscitated and
changed into a goldfinch. Procne does not have to sing for her lost son because he has
been restored, and as a swallow, she can hover around human habitation, re-enacting in
nature her maternal, nurturing, domestic side. In addition, Philomela can sing the name
of her rapist for all eternity. Though some commentators call this nightingale/swallow
inversion absurd, it makes perfect sense in this context (Apollodorus 100). The sisters are
rescued from Tereus by a benevolent deity, and from mythologizers who would
perpetuate his crime by violating their narrative integrity with their revisions. If the role
of poet is analogous to God’s, this poet is the benevolent deity who saved the sisters
poetically, symbolically and literally from further assault (Larousse 182)

Ovid’s re-imaging of the myth of Philomela and Procne is the most dramatic,
most elaborate, most psychologically insightful and most problematic of the classical
mythologizers. Tereus was a successful ally to Pandion in his war, and he was made “a
son as well” (Metamorphoses 1.428), through marriage to Procne. But this dynastic
arrangement between Athens and Thrace is doomed immediately.

The omens, though, were baleful: neither Juno,
Nor Hymen, nor the Graces, blessed the marriage;
The Furies swung, or, maybe brandished torches
Snatched from a funeral; the Furies lighted
The bridal bed; and above the bridal chamber
Brooded the evil hoot-owl. With such omens
Tereus and Procne were married, with such omens
The bride and bridegroom were soon father and mother. (l. 430-7)

The Thracians rejoiced at the marriage and subsequent birth of Itys nonetheless, and Ovid observes in his first of many narrative intrusions that “People never know, it seems” (l. 442).

After five years of marriage and separation from her family, Procne humbly asks to see Philomela again as a reward for the “source of satisfaction to my husband” she has been (l. 446). Ovid suggests, however, that by asking for this reunion, Procne inadvertently asks for her fate. He emphasizes her responsibility by having Tereus agree to her request “promptly”. In his later pleas to Pandion, Tereus contrives within himself that “If he went too far, he would lay the blame on Procne,/Saying she wished it so” (l. 473-4). Tereus is the son of Ares and, though Hamilton’s version states that he inherited his father’s “detestable qualities”, Ovid gives us no cause to question Tereus’s integrity until he actually sees Philomela. Ironically, “the sight of her dear sister”, which would have been, should have been Tereus’s “finest present” to Procne, signals the beginning of their destruction (l. 443). But according to Ovid, Procne’s request was the impetus for their doom.

Other mythologizers preface their account of the rape and mutilation by stating that Tereus fell in love with Philomela. This does not justify his behavior, though the male mythologizers suggest that through this “love” and his “pretended marriage” to
Philomela, Tereus had a right to her. To us, his act becomes, instead, even more reprehensible. In his description of Tereus’s response to seeing Philomela, Ovid conlates love and lust. Tereus’s passion is all-consuming, “as ripe grain burns, or dry leaves burn” (l. 457). This rustic simile does not distance us from Tereus’s physiological reaction to Philomela, as Ovid’s commentator William S. Anderson maintains. “Ovid has been careful to avoid giving him negative associations yet” (Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” 212). Nor do the subsequent examples of Tereus’s willingness to bribe and corrupt anyone associated with Philomela in order to win her deny that “In that unbridled passion/There was nothing he would not dare” (Ovid l. 467-8). The images of fire consistently describe his passion, emphasizing his lust as all-consuming, destructive and distorting. Nevertheless, Ovid insists that love made Tereus eloquent - not lust, not passion, but love. Both Ovid and Tereus pervert the word, each in his own way.

He next describes Tereus as a “secret crime-contriver” with “blind darkness” in his heart, yet he implicates Philomela in that contrivance. Just as Procne began this inexorable movement with her request, Philomela expedites it with her appeal to Pandion. Ovid’s language is far too suggestive to be innocent. She “wheedles her father, and fondles him, and coaxes” (l. 480). She “wants the same thing” as Tereus has dissembled, which we know for her is “to please Procne”. But for a chilling moment, that “same thing” becomes satisfying Tereus’s lust, which now is her lust as well. Her request becomes a seduction and, indeed, Tereus imagines “she is in his arms” and it is “Not her father she is kissing” (l. 484, 486). Ovid thus makes Procne and Philomela complicit in
their own doom. They are victims whose victimization is compelled through Ovid’s language. Both requests are made within a patriarchal hierarchy: wife submissive to husband, daughter submissive to father. Both requests are made in gendered language of female sexuality which confirms masculine authority. We know of Procne as daughter, sister, wife and mother. “Any ways of mine [which] have been a source of satisfaction to my husband” are conjugal (l. 439-440). She has given Tereus a son, a symbol of his potency and re-creation of his maleness. But Philomela’s visit is a favor only Tereus can grant, not a demand Procne can insist upon. Nor is Philomela’s request unreasonable, but she is reduced to wheedling, fondling and coaxing, never simply asking. The sexual language marks the submissive role Philomela is thrust into. Even as a well-loyed daughter, she must appeal to Pandion’s authority as father and male. But in Ovid’s process, she compromises herself further for “Everything [she does]/Is fuel to [Tereus’s] fire” (l. 482).

Both sisters get what they want. Ovid allows them to succeed because they have conformed to patriarchal expectations of female behavior. In his narrative, however, Ovid makes Philomela and Procne responsible for their fates by making their ill-fated requests in the first place. If we, on the other hand, have read their success not as conformity but as a conscious manipulation of the men who wield power within their own socio/linguistic construct, Ovid has snatched from them their misperceived triumphs by making them fatally ironic. Recognizing such potential power in women through their feigned conformity, he punishes them for their presumption long before Tereus does.
“... both his daughters, She thinks, have won; they are losers, both his daughters, But how was she to know?” (l.485-7).

It is essential that Ovid clearly define roles and relationships in this encounter so that Tereus can blur these distinctions for narrative and thematic purposes. As he watches Philomela cajole Pandion, “... He would like to be/Her father, at that moment; and if he were/He would be as wicked a father as he is husband” (l. 481-3). Pandion appeals to Tereus as son, kin, and father as he commends Philomela to his care. Thus he confers familial responsibility upon Tereus and also familial identity, identity which Tereus abuses in his crime against Philomela. Tereus’s behavior is incestuous and vile and we must focus on him. Pandion charges Tereus “by your honor and kinship,/Protect her with a father’s love” (l. 499-500). Yet he weeps at their departure “and underneath his sorrow/Foreboding lay” (l. 509-510).

Before we proceed to the rape in Ovid, we must return to our three other sources for a closer reading of that act. In both Apollodorus and Hamilton, Tereus lies that Procone is dead and misleads Philomela into marriage. In Hyginus, he even lies to Pandion so that the father unwittingly sacrifices his second daughter (Anderson 210). Within the context of pretended marriage, Tereus legitimates his lust by satisfying it according to the patriarchal system which has codified female submission and subjugation. Nor do Apollodorus’s and Hamilton’s sources refer to Tereus’s behavior as either rape or violation, and an entire legal and cultural tradition informs their description of his behavior. Under the rule of Romulus in 753 B.C.E., domestic relation laws were
established to consolidate authority in the husband as head of the household. “Wives were viewed as necessary and inseparable possessions of their respective husbands; a wife did not exist as a legal individual in her own right” (Okun, Woman Abuse. Facts Replacing Myths 2). These laws antedate Ovid by 700 years and they formalized domestic customs in effect long before Romulus and far beyond Rome. Regardless, Christianity reaffirmed the Hebraic and Roman traditional patriarchal hegemony, particularly in the writings of Paul and Peter.

Under this system of law and tradition, the wife’s status as her husband’s property was interpreted to mean that she had no conjugal rights or freedoms of choice. “Since the traditional marriage contract held that husbands had sexual access to their wives at will, marital rape was viewed as legally impossible and, therefore, not subject to prosecution.” Moreover, the victims themselves did not recognize the possibility that forced sex with their husbands was rape. They viewed it as wifely duty (52). As Monique Plaza states in “Our Costs and Their Benefits”, “Rape is, in many ways, a mere extension of what are culturally defined as “normal” heterosexual relations” (qtd. in Woodhull 170).

Many American feminists insist on the importance of desexualizing rape by defining it as a crime of power, not of sex. However, in her essay “Sexuality, Power and the Question of Rape”, Winifred Woodhull argues that it is impossible to separate the two. “Women have not limited the challenge to male domination to questions traditionally recognized as falling within the realm of sexuality, but have instead shown how sexuality is bound up with economic and political structures, language and
philosophy, the world of work and the world of play” (169). And “Foucault’s analysis of power as a process that produces particular forms of sexuality . . . confirms . . . the feminist contention that sexuality and sexual relations are social constructs” (168). Power and sexuality are inextricably linked and society reinforces that bond.

We can clearly see from this historical and critical digression how the pretended marriage in Apollodorus’s and Hamilton’s sources is related to the failure by either mythologizer to name Tereus’s act rape. In the Larousse, where our source is unknown, Tereus also falls in love with Philomela, although he does not marry her. But for the first time his act is called “violation”. There is no “sex (i.e. rape) in marriage” code to protect him, and this mythologizer boldly names his vile deed. Ovid follows suit and calls it rape. However, because Tereus does not arrogantly declare his crime to Philomela before committing it, as in Ovid, the anonymous mythologizer indicts him with her language, whereas Ovid becomes complicit with Tereus in his version.

We know that, although “love made him eloquent”, Tereus is driven by an all-consuming lust. The fire imagery of his passion gives way to metaphors of predatory animals and their victims. He is “savage”, “gloating”, impatient for his captive. She is the poor hopeless prey of an eagle, “hooked by the cruel talons” (Ovid l. 517); after the rape, she is “a frightened lamb which a grey wolf has mangled” (l. 531), “a dove/With her own blood all over her feathers” (l. 535). These figures of birds presage the later transformations. However, here Philomela is covered with her own blood, sacrificial and virginal, whereas at the end, both sister-birds are stained by the blood of Itys, also
sacrificial and virginal. Ovid subverts the latter image by making it a perpetual emblem of the sisters’ vengeance rather than a symbolic reminder of Tereus’s original crime.

Tereus dominates Philomela and Procne linguistically by successfully misrepresenting his motives within the accepted idiom. Now he no longer must be eloquent. He makes no effort to dissemble this time. There are no false deaths and pretended marriages here. Instead, he tells her what he is going to do, “and straightway did it./Raped her” (l. 527-8). His authority through language is greatest at this moment. He names his deed and then enacts it. The word literally becomes flesh. Tereus is the signifier and his act of naming eerily echoes the power of the first naming act spoken within the logocentric masculine tradition: “Let there be light. And there was light.”

Ovid rapes Philomela as well, for not only does he describe the events and sensations leading to the act in voyeuristic detail, he names and renames it three times: Tereus told Philomela what he was going to do, he did it, he raped her. Through his repeated inscription of the rape, Ovid becomes complicit in the crime. His words, symbols of the patriarchy and its power, are analogous to Tereus’s act in their tyrannical authority to subdue and subjugate Philomela. Inscribed within the patriarchy and circumscribed by it, Philomela is helpless beneath Ovid’s pen/penis. Gilbert and Gubar further underscore Ovid’s narrative collusion in their discussion of male “authority”.

The roots of “authority” tell us, after all, that if a woman is man’s property then he must have authorized her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation “penned” by man, moreover, woman has been “Penned up” or “penned in.” As a sort of “sentence” man has spoken, she has herself been “sentenced”: fated, jailed, for he has both “indited” her and “indicted” her. As a thought he has “framed”, she has been both “framed” (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs,
graphics, and “framed up” (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies. (Gilbert and Gubar 13)

Ovid continues the violation of Philomela’s integrity and her identity in his description of the rape. “... a virgin, all alone, and calling/For her father, her sister, but most often/For the great gods. In vain” (l. 528-30). His phrase “all alone” is accusatory, implying that Philomela deserves to be raped for being alone with a man who is not her husband. Philomela has no rights in and of herself and is defined only in terms of her husband or father. Therefore, any behavior that violates this convention is dangerously presumptuous and warrants the severest punishment. Here Ovid articulates patriarchal strictures against women that presage contemporary attitudes toward rape which blame the victim for her own assault. *Because she was out alone, she was asking for it.* The supreme irony of the story, however, is that Philomela is not alone. Although he is not her husband, Tereus is assigned every other social role which should assure her safety in his company. Yet she is most vulnerable in his presence because he ignores these roles. In the process, he knowingly transgresses the boundaries and responsibilities which they automatically impose and which have come to define civilized behavior. The call to her father, sister and the gods is in vain because she is unrecognizable by them now as daughter, sister, virgin. When she “tears her loosened hair,/ [She] beats her breast, wild as a woman in mourning”, she is, in fact, mourning her dead self, and though her circumstances are confused, her understanding of them is quite lucid (l. 536-7).

...Were my father’s orders
Nothing to you, his tears, my sister’s love,
My own virginity, the bonds of marriage?
Now it is all confused, mixed up; I am
My sister's rival, a second class wife, and you
For better and worse, the husband of two women. (l. 539-44)

The narrative consequences and thematic implications for Tereus's perverted role
reversals and sins against family merge in Philomela's speech. In light of the pretended
marriages in three other versions, her references to "the bonds of marriage" and to Tercus
as "the husband of two women" "for better and worse" are particularly ironic. They are,
moreover, poignant, for she is neither bride nor virgin. In this passage, she speaks her
outrage directly. Ovid narrates her initial plea to the gods as "in vain". As she boldly
declares her threat to Tereus, she emphatically doubts their existence. "If those on
high/Behold these things, if there are any gods/If anything is left . . . The air of Heaven
will hear, and any god,/If there is any god in Heaven, will hear me" (l. 542-4; 549-50).
The gods are conspicuously absent from this world bereft of moral responsibility, but
Tereus created the void and so much misery without their jealous interference. In this
tale, Ovid shifts his attention from the earlier god/man cycle of myths, where mortals
were always unfairly matched against immortals and always doomed to defeat and
punishment. His new theme is "the impious interrelations of mortals . . . the impiety
against fellow man, against those who should be dearest to one, members of the same
family." Nor is there divine intervention in the final transformation into birds. "They
went flying from him/As if they were on wings. They were on wings!" (l. 659-60). Ovid
is more interested in the tragic themes and complicated psychologies of his characters
than in the marvelous ending (Anderson 236). Any interference from the gods now
would defeat Ovid's new thematic purpose, to dramatize "the impious interrelations of
morts” and the punishments they impose upon each other. I will demonstrate a little later that Ovid is not as indifferent to the “marvelous ending” as his commentator would have us believe, and that it, in fact, reflects his more subversive theme.

In Hamilton’s source, Philomela threatens to expose Tereus to the world after she learns their marriage was just a ruse. “He would be an outcast among men” (270). But in Ovid, because Tereus’s crime violates all sensibilities and confounds the natural order of things, Philomela will even “move the very woods and rocks to pity./The air of Heaven will hear, and any god,/If there is any god in Heaven, will hear me” (l. 548-50). Nothing will constrain her; she even disclaims the humiliation and concomitant silence which rape forces upon women. “Now that I have no shame, I will proclaim it” (l. 545). Philomela would boldly usurp a male idiom to name a male act to a male audience and they would hear and understand. Such blatant disregard for his authority, indeed a displacement of it by her self-assertion, angers and frightens Tereus. His response is predictable. Though to kill Philomela is more merciful, to mutilate her is more appropriate. She threatened to speak his name and his crime, and thus to author his doom. To silence her is, therefore, to disempower her. Again.

. . . he seized her tongue
With pincers, though it cried against the outrage,
Babbled and made a sound something like Father,
Till the sword cut it off. The mangled root
Quivered, the severed tongue along the ground
Lay quivering, making a little murmur,
Jerking and twitching, the way a serpent does
Run over by a wheel, and with its dying movement
Came to its mistress’s feet. (l. 559-67)
Ovid’s description is grotesque in its detail. Even his commentator concedes that he exceeds the rules of decorum. Anderson goes on, however, to interpret the passage and attempt to mitigate Ovid’s perverted fascination with a horrible event.

It can hardly be imagined that Ovid expected us to believe his details about the tongue, even if reinforced with the simile of the snake . . . nor should we in our superiority think that he turned away from the shrieking, bleeding, wild Philomela to this tiny tongue to enhance his tragedy. Quite the reverse. He reached a moment of horror, and now he desires to mute it. The grotesque rhetorically relieves us, helps to place more distance at last between us and the actors. Or to put it another way, the tongue cannot sustain the task of symbolizing the outrage to the girl, and we can follow its incredible activities for their own intrinsic “value”. (Anderson 224)

Quite the contrary. In a tale where women are symbolically and physically silenced and outraged, nothing can mute the horror. We hear the tongue cry and babble, and watch it twitch and jerk, until it finally dies. It is the perfect synecdoche for Philomela, the emblem of her mangled identity and powerlessness. Rather than distance us from her outrage, the severed tongue compels us to confront again the rapist and barbarian Tereus is. It continues to speak for Philomela - even as it quivers at her feet.

Anderson often resorts to this “distancing” ploy when he addresses anything particularly unpleasant in the myth, as if to protect the reader. I believe, instead, that he is really protecting himself and Ovid. The story is implicitly perverted and therefore painful to read. By offering such absurd speculations, Anderson attempts to sanitize the perversion and diffuse the images Ovid created. In the process, he violates Philomela
again by diminishing her experience with his inane interpretations. Ovid, nevertheless, frustrates Anderson’s efforts to redeem him by actually entering his story. Through his intrusive commentaries and foreshadowings, we sense his presence as more than a narrator. He is an observer, a voyeur, and the horrors he witnesses do not discourage his curiosity. Instead, he watches with such morbid fascination that he can describe every twitch and jerk of her severed tongue without turning away in disgust. Ovid’s unrelenting fidelity to detail violates Philomela’s body as much as Tereus did. There is something of a paradox in Ovid’s zealous attention to detail. If he is too explicit in his account, he is linguistically complicit in Philomela’s rape. If he sanitizes the details, he is guilty of concealing the crime. However, if we read back to the Greek sources, we recognize the horror of Philomela’s experience and the significance of her reunion with Procris and their subsequent transformation in even those brief accounts. Ovid elaborates on his predecessors and thus presents a far more textured version. Nevertheless, his graphic descriptions provide more than elaboration. In many instances, Ovid’s narrative intrusions place him in the text beside Tereus and his fidelity to detail becomes obsessive, satisfying his voyeuristic curiosity rather than furthering the narrative. As demonstrated above, Ovid appears intent on implicating Philomela in her own doom and his glosses on her behavior impute sordid motives to her words and actions. As we have also seen, even his commentator’s attempt to relieve Ovid’s grisly description of Philomela’s severed tongue of its gruesomeness and render it, instead, as simile alone, fails. Apparently Ovid’s purpose is not merely to tell a story. His narrative design
incriminates Philomela and assaults her integrity just as Tereus assaulted her body. And
the horror does not end when the tongue finally comes to rest at Philomela’s feet.

It seems too much to believe - even then, Tereus
Took her, and took her again, the injured body
Still giving satisfaction to his lust. (Ovid l. 557-560)

Power and sexuality are inseparable here. After Tereus renders Philomela powerless by
depriving her of speech, he reasserts his sexual authority over her by raping her twice
more. In his actions, Tereus anachronistically confirms a contemporary study which
shows that rape following abuse is “a further demonstration of authority” within the
whole context of violence. Some men, in fact, “experience sexual arousal from violence”
(Davidson qtd. in Barry 170).

Such ruthless lust and violence “seems too much to believe.” Nevertheless, to
eliminate any doubt, to intensify the horror in case we have averted our eyes, Ovid
reports the two subsequent rapes. Not so for Anderson, his commentator. He does not
even mention the two latter rapes. He so successfully distances himself from Philomela’s
mutilation that, in a sense, he moves outside the text to spare himself any further
unpleasantness. Because he does not comment on these rapes, they did not happen.
Philomela, Ovid and his readers know only too well that the rapes occurred, but Anderson
puts “Tereus took her, and took her again” under erasure. By writing the rapes out of
existence, or rather, by not writing the rapes into existence, Anderson denies Philomela
even the mutilated vestige of a self she has left with the power of his word.
Tereus also leaves Philomela behind and returns to Procne, lying to her that Philomela is dead. For a year, the deluded sister "mourn[ed] a fate that should have been resented/Rather than mourned for" (Ovid l. 571-2). Meanwhile, Philomela's grief and isolation teach her "Sharpness of wit, and cunning comes in trouble" (l. 577). Having neither a voice nor a penis to use as her pen, Philomela turns to her loom. She weave/writes her story in purple, the colors of royalty and mourning. As "the type of poetess", Philomela must "use her ingenuity to overcome exile and mutilation", a strategy which informs much poetry by her successors in the nineteenth century (Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden* 22). Geoffrey Hartman writes in "The Voice of the Shuttle", "There is always something that violates us, deprives our voice, and compels art toward an aesthetic of silence" (*Beyond Formalism* 353). For Hartman's critical purposes, however, that voice is genderless. But as Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "The aesthetic of silence is quintessentially a female aesthetic" (43). Ironically, Philomela is not handicapped by an "anxiety of authorship", though her mythologizers jealously guard their literary paternity with their subtle revisions and reinterpretations of the myth. She is, instead, the mother-poet, engendering a narrative genealogy, a new text with its own history. Transmitting it via a messenger to Procne and thus making public the very private, Philomela's tapestry-text assumes an ontic status, obliging its iteration and reiteration. And Procne understands the hieroglyph of Philomela's experience, as do all other women who read it.
In her essay on sexuality and power, Woodhull states that “Foucault has argued [that] power, far from silencing sexuality, has tirelessly coaxed and forced its articulation, making of it the truth of our being that knowledge must try to discover” (168). Philomela articulates her sexuality and gender through her woven story, seizing power and knowledge from Tereus in the process. If we substitute themes from the myth in Woodhull’s formulation, the articulation of sexuality assumes new force. “The truth of our being” is a power of female sexuality which “knowledge”, that is male knowledge of the Other “must try to discover” but can never apprehend within a patriarchal system of language. Tereus wrenches the power of speech from Philomela and abuses it when he misrepresents her fate to Procne. He speaks his story in a language she never doubted until she reads a new version of it in a language she recognizes as Truth. “Procne said nothing” (Ovid 1.583). Ovid here suggests that Tereus has rendered her powerless as well. But her silence is self-imposed. She is grieved and outraged, but she is in control. “There was no room/For tears, but for confusion only, and vengeance” (l. 585-6). Nor is the “confusion” a disordered mind. It echoes, instead, the “confusion” of familial relationships which Philomela identifies after Tereus rapes her. The metamorphoses of identities which Tereus initiated continue when Procne, unrecognizable in costume, her anger concealed by the frenzied rites of Bacchic worshippers who follow her to the “hidden cottage”, frees Philomela, disguises her and “brought her/Home” (l. 600). Ovid suggests that the unrestrained and irrational festivities which mark the celebration mirror the quality of Procne’s mind now and hereafter. Tereus’s acts are beyond human
comprehension, but no mythologizer, especially not Ovid, implies that he is mad. Why, then, should we read Procne’s outrage as madness? Rather than concede such power to both Tereus and Ovid to reduce her so, we read the Bacchic festival as a metaphor for transformations, and confer a different power on Procne which neither Tereus nor Ovid can recognize. “It was the time when all the Thracian mothers/Held festival for Bacchus, and the night/Shared their secrets” (1.585-7).

When they are finally alone, Philomela cannot face Procne, “whom she knew she had wronged” (1.608). Having made both sisters responsible for their destruction from the very beginning, Ovid now further inculpates Philomela in Tereus’s crime. She feels as if she had seduced her brother-in-law and they had been lovers rather than victim and victimizer. Our own recent legal past reflects a tradition in which the woman is put on the defensive and, through the rhetorical tricks of many defense attorneys, led to believe that she provoked her own rape. The patriarchy revictimizes the victim through language which ostensibly serves her cause for justice. But Ovid even deprives Philomela of witnesses. “. . . longing with all her heart/To have the power to call the gods to witness/It was not her fault, but something forced upon her” (1.609-11). For thematic purposes, Ovid precludes divine presence; he and Tereus are the only witnesses to Philomela’s rape and neither speaks to disabuse her of the notion of her own guilt. That “something forced upon her” is not only Tereus. It is Ovid as well.

Procne, on the other hand, speaks in her own voice and articulates an outrage and resolve which echoes Philomela’s earlier tirade against Tereus in its power. She reads
Philomela’s story and understands immediately that Tereus is “the author of our evils” (l. 619), in the sense of the logocentric patriarchy. She is prepared for any revenge, and though she enunciates several viable possibilities, including castration, none of them is the appropriate “act of boldness” for her. Philomela and Procne exercise unusual, if not macabre, resourcefulness and courage, traits usually attributed to men, but their circumstances are extraordinary and necessitate extraordinary responses. Such single-mindedness of purpose is out of character for women. Yet in this way they demonstrate that they are, in fact, women of character. They have been passive victims throughout, and their active response defeats masculine expectations. But just as Philomela was punished for her presumption, so too are she and Procne held accountable for this success by their male mythologizers.

When Procne sees her son Itys with “pithless eyes”, she knows immediately what she must do. “How like his father he is” (l. 622). She must destroy this repetition and reminder of Tereus, and through the son, kill the father. The unsuspecting boy hugs and kisses his mother and “she was moved to tenderness” (l. 627). She had earlier chided that “This was no time for tears” (l. 614), but now her eyes are full “against her will”. Her considered revenge cannot completely repress her maternal instinct. For Ovid, this magnifies the loathsomeness of her fatal decision. For Procne, all familial relationships have been challenged and undermined by Tereus, and she must examine them in order to regain her perspective.

... And why should one make pretty speeches,
The other be dumb, and ravished tongue unable
To tell of ravish? Since he calls me mother,
Why does she not say Sister? Whose wife are you, 
Daughter of Pandion? Will you disgrace him, 
Your husband, Tereus? But devotion to him 
Is a worse crime. (l. 631-7)

Procne speaks her dilemma, unlike Philomela, who cannot. But when she makes her decision, she acts "without more words", identifying even more completely with her violated sister (l. 637).

Procne is a wife, mother, daughter, sister, woman. Tereus has destroyed all of her identities in his crime against the family and with them any claims he might have to her loyalty. She and Philomela, on the other hand, must "reconstitute their lost family" and their lost identities. Procne is the only mother in this story and Philomela is now her spiritual daughter. "Mothers, daughters, sisters must be recovered as parts 'of the original woman we are'"(Ostriker 319). In The Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow theorizes that the pre-oedipal oneness between mother and daughter is not lost in the transition to Freud's oedipal stage. Because of conventional child-rearing practices, the daughter maintains a continuity with her mother even as she differentiates from her. Boys, on the other hand, emphasize difference and, therefore, separate completely from the mother and identify with the father. In this difficult process, the boy "rejects and devalues women and whatever he considers to be feminine in the social world." Since the mother is traditionally associated with emotion and sympathy, "girls emerge from this period with a basis for "empathy" built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as their own (92, 167, 169, 181). Consequently, Philomela and Procne share an
understanding which is peculiarly female and from which the male has ironically and
fatally excluded himself. The patriarchy which privileges differentiation and separateness
over identification and connectedness could never anticipate Procne's decision nor
understand her choice.

Nothing can mitigate the awfulness of infanticide. Nor does Ovid attempt to
spare Procne or the reader from his unrelenting description of Itys's death. He is no
benevolent deity, transforming Procne in order to save her. His metamorphosis of her
into a tigress underscores her ruthlessness. Just as Philomela was a "frightened lamb" to
Tereus's "wolf", so Itys is a "defenseless fawn" to her "tigress". Ovid effaces her motive
by juxtaposing her pitilessness to Tereus's instead of her outrage to Philomela's. Indeed,
the description of Itys's death is far more gruesome than Philomela's rape and mutilation.
Philomela is "like a dove/With her own blood all over her feathers" (Ovid l. 533-4),
probably the blood from her ruptured hymen and some attendant bruises she received
when Tereus dragged her with him . . . to some ramshackle building" (l. 522-3). When he
severs her tongue, it is with one clean stroke. Merciless and barbaric, no doubt. But
there is no blood. Although in Hamilton, when Procne kills Itys, it is with one stroke of a
dagger (271), in Ovid, however, "the room/Dripped blood."

[She] drove the knife home through breast, through side, one wound,
Enough to kill him, but she made another,
Cutting the throat, and they cut up the body
Still living, still keeping something of the spirit,
And part of the flesh leaped in the boiling kettles,
Part hissed on turning skewers, and the room
Dripped blood. (l. 638-45)
She is not dissuaded when he screams her name or feebly attempts to embrace her for protection. His cry, in fact, is a ghostly echo of Philomela’s tongue calling “Father” before it is cut out. Both calls are futile. For Philomela, Pandion is physically absent. For Itys, his primal source of security becomes “his doom approaching.” Before his eyes, familial relationships dissolve and identities are fatally transformed.

For the first time in his narrative, Ovid calls Procne “queen” as she serves Tereus his son. This new identity confirms the power which Procne usurps from Tereus and exercises over him. However, given his consistent subordination of the sisters, Ovid cannot leave Procne in this position of authority. He quickly brings her low, to palace “herald” this time, who is “eager” to report “her bloody murder.” Writing within the patriarchal classical tradition, Ovid well knew that a messenger who brings bad news is put to death for his efforts. By inscribing Procne into that convention in his revised terms, he symbolically kills her. Ovid’s authorial gesture here is analogous to Tereus’s mutilation of Philomela. Both women assert a new authority which threatens the patriarchy and both are punished in kind for such presumption.

Procne appeals to Tereus’s ego and explains the feast is “a ritual meal for husbands only” (l. 648), implying also that in his inviolable role as husband, he was able to wreak such havoc on the family with impunity. Ignorant of what he is eating, sitting proud “high in his chair”, Tereus devours his son, his second self, his own identity, even as he devoured others. Nor does he understand Procne’s answer when he calls for Itys. “He has come in.” Only when Philomela, covered this time in Itys’s blood, hurls the
boy’s head at his father, does Tereus recognize what he has eaten. More than when she wished she could invoke the gods to be her witnesses, Philomela now wants “The power to speak to express her full rejoicing” (l. 661). And Procne before her “could not conceal her cruel joy and was eager/To be the herald of her bloody murder” (l. 653-4). Tereus only wishes to “eject the terrible feast: all he can do/Is weep, call himself the pitiful resting-place of his dear son” (l.666-8). Procne’s eyes had filled with tears just once, but she had never changed her expression when she resolved to kill her son. Ovid’s juxtaposition of the three reactions to Itys’s murder, making Tereus “pitiful” and the sisters joyful, further demonstrates the attitude which has informed his re-vision of the myth throughout. He repeatedly diminishes the horror and outrage which Tereus perpetrates against Philomela and Procne, and through his use of language and detail, betrays the sisters in turn.

Even the final transformation is merely an alteration, not an escape. Anderson, Ovid’s commentator, states that Ovid was more interested in complex themes and psychologies than in the marvelous. In light of my analysis of Ovid’s treatment of Philomela and Procne, the ending is more a calculated vindication of Tereus and a conclusive judgment on the sisters. Other mythologizers are precise as to which sister becomes which bird. In Ovid, however, “One flew to the woods, the other to the roof-top,/And even so the red marks of the murder/Stayed on their breasts; the feathers were blood covered” (l. 671-3). He does not name the birds; even now he withholds identity from Philomela and Procne as individuals. But he marks them as murderers. The blood-stained feathers are constant reminders of their gruesome crime and perpetual
testimony to their perverted natures. They are free from Tereus, but not from Ovid.

Tereus is transformed into a hoopoe, “the bird who looks like war” (l. 672). Even in his altered state, he is still recognizable as the son of Ares. In the fourteenth century Ovide Moralise of Bersuire, the hoopoe is allegorized as a bird which “builds [its] nest in dung heaps because [it] performs a foul and ignominious deed” (263). The identification is complete and ironically appropriate. Finally.
Chapter 2

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Philomela's Conversion

Ovid bequeathed his re-vision of the myth to medieval Europe. However, many medieval poets utilize the nightingale, but rarely refer to the Philomela myth in the manner of Ovid. In her book, The Change of Philomel, Wendy Pfeffer traces the evolution of the nightingale's various metaphorical meanings from violence, to harbinger of spring, to a symbol of the poet himself and of poetic inspiration, to Christ's Passion and the Virgin Mary. "...the absence of thematic innovation in medieval literature was a consciously achieved art, quite deserving of respect in its own right. In this context, the nightingale is a part of a treasury of images to be used and re-used" (5). Although Ovid's version of the myth is its principal source for medieval Europe, the story "seems not to have struck a responsive chord in other Roman poets" (14). Their references to the myth are more or less incidental, often only to establish the season. Ovid's story also provides "Philomela" as a synonym for "luscinia", the classical Latin word for nightingale. But when his contemporaries and successors use "luscinia", they immediately dissociate the nightingale from the myth and, indeed, connect the bird with the light of dawn. Medieval bestiaries which describe the nocturnal activities of the nightingale illustrate its care of its young and not the hidden, secret dark side of rape (20). In the Pervirgilium Veneris (The Vigil of Venus), an anonymous work dated sometime between the first and fifth centuries C.E., the metaphoric value of the Philomela/Procne story and the nightingale is developed
beyond its archetype of violence. The bird is now identified with springtime, its song with the poet’s composition (18).

In later vernacular literature of the troubadours and trouverses, the nightingale is a singer of spring and represents the poet or the object of his love, and/or an inspiration for the troubadour himself. Pfeffer concludes that this conception of the nightingale must originate in folklore since many of its characteristics found in medieval poetry also exist in the contemporary folklore (214). Marie de France (Laustic), Boccaccio and the author of Guillaume au Faucon, however, do not ignore the nightingale as a sexual symbol, though certainly not in its gruesome Ovidian context (51). The Carmina Burana, a medieval anthology of poetry, contains twenty-one poems with references to the nightingale. Five specifically evoke the classical myth; in others, the nightingale heralds spring as a season and as a time for love, with all its sexual connotations for both the poet and his imaged lovers (71). The poem distinguishes, however, between the violence in Ovid and the acceptable eroticism between consenting lovers. At times, the nightingale is called “philomela” instead of “luscinia”, but the poet does not expand the word’s symbolic potential to include its archetype.

For Christian authors of the High Middle Ages, nevertheless, the nightingale image resounded with mythical allusions and so they avoided it (25). As a harbinger of spring, on the other hand, the nightingale sings God’s praises, as all birds do, even in early Christian poems. Conversely, the poets thank God for spring and her birds, including the nightingale. Her song, whether sung in God’s praise, to protect her young,
or to herald spring, is a song of joy analogous to the poet’s. Consequently, Philomela’s
mournful song begins to fade (32). In the Christian context, spring is also a season of
spiritual renewal; therefore, the nightingale becomes associated with Easter and naturally
with Christ. Just as her song is food for the poet, Christ is Food for man. This symbolic
link with Christ converts Philomela from a secular image to a spiritual one. In devotional
material, the nightingale was “associated with God, with the love of God and the light
that He brings” (49). For the thirteenth century Latin authors, the nightingale becomes “a
metaphor for the devout poet or meditative soul, a parallel to the poet himself” (39). In
his poem Philomena praevia temporis amoeni, John Pecham uses the nightingale to
represent the Christian soul meditating on the history of man from creation to redemption
through Christ’s passion. The bird’s song ends and it dies at the moment of Christ’s
death (40). In an earlier anonymous poem, the nightingale recounts Christ’s Passion and
could almost die for grief singing of His wounds and suffering (36).

It would be easy to read the nightingale’s death as the perfect symbolic sacrifice
to complement Christ’s. Pfeffer, however, provides interesting commentary on the fact
that the bird only dies in religious works.

Although the nightingale of religious poetry remained distinct from its
confrere in secular works, the connotations attached to the secular bird
were not so easily ignored. The bird was a physical embodiment of
sexuality - its very appearance in a poem could serve as a reminder of
secular things... To dissociate the bird from its sexual connotations, it was
necessary to remove the physical reminders of that sexuality. Hence, the
bird must die. But its song remains in memory, especially in the memory
of the poets inspired by it. By having the songbird die, the poets call
attention to its power as a sexual image and confirm for the modern reader
their awareness of the erotic nature of the image. Moreover, the dilemma
posed by the sexuality of the bird has no resolution. One perceives,
ultimately, a fascination with sexuality which must be ritually destroyed . . . The nightingale’s death does not eliminate the sexual connotations of the bird, but merely provides for their sublimation and permits the reader’s concentration to move from temporal to spiritual matters. In this fashion, poets of religious verse could incorporate the nightingale into their poetry without incorporating at the same time those features which most clearly bound the bird to the temporal world. (49-50)

For the modern reader, however, this latter strategy is futile. The nightingale’s association with the pagan myth is inevitable, and the themes of sexual violation and domination which it enacts cannot be killed off in a “symbolic sacrifice”. Moreover, the “conversion” of Philomela into an emblem of Christ’s Passion and later the Virgin further reinforces her archetypal image as submissive, passive victim. Her metaphorical identification with the divine is not as redemptive nor as digressive as her pious mythologizers prayed it would be.

Devotional works in old French faced a similar dilemma. It was difficult to incorporate the nightingale into poems dedicated to the Virgin because of the bird’s association with “profane matters” (41). Used most often to set the scene in a pious poem and as a reminder of this world, the nightingale’s song undergoes a change. “The bird’s song is now devoted to Jesus, and the bird tells its secular audience, lovers, to turn to God” (46).

Pfeffer notes that “no other bird is referred to as frequently in medieval literature, and no other bird has its range of signification” (5). But the nightingale’s initial appearance in literature is so frighteningly awful, one would expect that the bird would be expurgated from poetic imagery rather than perpetuated through it. The process is a
curious one. Unlike prior re-imaginings of the myth, these poets remove Philomela from her violent sexual context and rehabilitate her through poetry to become, finally, a metaphor for God and the Virgin. What more Christian gesture can these mythologizers make? They save her from repeated rapes and confer divine identity upon her. Their efforts, however, imply also that she needs to be saved, that somehow she is responsible for her own rape, that, in effect, she deserves it. Ironically, the figures with whom she is identified are also passive victims who submit to the word of the Father. For Mary, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38); and for Christ, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). In Christian theology, one strives to be like Mary and Christ, examples of triumph through obedience submission, humility and suffering. In light of feminist criticism, the story of Philomela vitiates against that. Medieval religious mythologizers, on the other hand, insist upon it.

In the *Ovidius Moralizatus*, Peter Bersuire completes the transformation, or better, the conversion of Philomela from secular symbol to divine metaphor. This fourteenth century prose work is a medieval moralizing commentary on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The Middle Ages received Ovid and his contemporaries as authorities, “seeing them as masters of wisdom who could do and write no wrong” (Reynolds, *The Ovidius Moralizatus* 4). However, many of Ovid’s stories contain disturbing elements. Through the use of allegory, Bersuire could find a moral and Christian dimension to those stories. “Sacred Scripture...communicates some other truth.” With this technique of scriptural
exegesis applied to non-scriptural texts, Bersuire could “confirm the mysteries of morals and of faith through man-made fictions”(17).

He succinctly relates Ovid’s tale, excluding many details and images which allow for thematic and psychological explorations in the source. What he does tell is essential for his allegorical method to succeed. For example, Bersuire states that “Under the cover of being related he took her to Thrace to see her sister but raped her. Because she resisted this incest, he cut out her tongue . . .” Later, Tereus eats Itys because he “delights in his own flesh” (262-3). Bersuire calls the tapestry Philomela weaves a “web”, an apt image for the trap in which the unsuspecting Philomela is caught and the network of relationships which Tereus destroys with the incest. He diverges from his predecessors significantly in his conclusion that Philomela is pregnant. The pregnancy “betrays” the crime much as the web “reveals” it. Moreover, the pregnancy perpetuates the crime, for just as Itys is a fatal repetition and reminder of Tereus for Procne, so is this pregnancy for Philomela. Furthermore, the pregnancy is a public sign of a private crime. Ironically, in his effort to Christianize the tale, Bersuire subjects Philomela to less than Christian charity.

Whereas in the earlier mythologizers, the transformations provide an escape for the sisters, here they underscore the irresponsible behavior of all three. Bersuire explains that they are transformed because birds “are known to flee because of confusion.” Confusion here connotes the anarchy which they have wrought with their unnatural behaviors. Unlike Ovid, he names which sister becomes which bird, maintaining the
Roman inversion, and judges them “to become swallows and nightingales because such evil women are more accustomed than others to be busy with playing and singing.”

Though he rebukes them as “evil women”, their behavior is described generally as more frivolous than cruel. Tereus’s transformation, on the other hand, is patently appropriate. “Evil men become hoopoes which build their nests in dung heaps because they perform a foul and ignominious deed.” (263). Just as Chaucer suited the story to his own moral purposes, so too Bersuire derives moral significance from such an awful tale. However, whereas Chaucer protests that the foulness of Tereus’s deed inhibits him, yet he proceeds to write his idiosyncratic version of the myth, Bersuire names it “incest” directly and punishes it in kind so that his Christian readers can make no mistake. A quote from Hosea 4:2 confirms his allegorical interpretation of the myth. “Cursing and lying and killing and theft and adultery have overflowed and blood has touched blood.”

Like Ovid, Chaucer is a very present narrator in “The Legend of Good Women”, written in 1385, immediately challenging a God who would either actively or passively allow evil to happen. He is directly affected by Tereus’s deed, underscoring the man and his act as “foul” three times in four lines. Nor is the tale’s power lost through time, for whether Chaucer hears or reads it, “Still lasts the venom of so long ago,/ Infecting whosoever will behold” it (l. 2242-3). Chaucer makes the story his own, as did Ovid, wrestling it from Philomela and Procne through his style and narrative technique, revealing in the process a perspective and consciousness which controls him as much as what we read.
He begins with the marriage of Procne and Tereus, juxtaposing the celebration to the bad omens which attend it. And then he stops. "To end this story in the shortest way - / I tire of him whose tale I have begun" (l. 2283-4, italics mine). After only thirteen lines, he has grown tired? "Of him whose tale I have begun"? This is the story of Philomela and Procne, retold in The Legend of Good Women, a legendary of women betrayed in love, yet Chaucer confers narrative ownership upon Tereus. Or must he end the tale before his "eyes grow foul and sore also" from looking at his word picture once again. In order to tell the story, therefore, but to protect himself as storyteller, his choice of language and detail must transcend the baseness of the tale even as he communicates it. So he resumes the myth with Procne’s humble request to see Philomela after five years, except his language is Christian, not Ovidian. She prays to Tereus as a God-loving man for days and “at last” he agrees to fetch Philomela back from Athens. Tereus appeals to Pandion and promises to protect Philomela “Just as my own heart’s life, her life I’ll keep” (l. 2278). Although Philomela cries and embraces her father for his permission and Tereus pleads for her “using every wile”, Chaucer does not dramatize his desire nor use language which is suggestive or inflammatory. The characters enunciate their respective familial relationships and responsibilities but, unlike the foreboding which lay beneath Pandion’s tears in Ovid, in Chaucer “of no ill will thought he” (l. 2307).

Once they return to Thrace, those roles disintegrate and Chaucer’s imagery reinforces Philomela’s terror.

... her heart quaked, and she asked him thus -
"Where is my sister, brother Tereus?"
And with these words she wept, a woeful sight,
And pale and pitiful, trembled with fright.
Just as the lamb does which the wolf has bitten,
Or as the dove does, by the eagle smitten. (l. 2314-19)

But Tereus does not "rape" Philomela; he does not even "violate" her. He "use[s] such force on her that he/At last has taken her virginity" (l. 2324-5). There is something so unexpectedly decorous in this description as to thoroughly diffuse Philomela's fear and helplessness. She disappears completely in Chaucer's direct response to her rape. "Behold a man's deed in the cause of right!" (l. 2327). He charges the reader to watch the rape again, but in terms of Tereus, not Philomela, as if she is merely a means to his moral's end.

Philomela does not threaten Tereus, but "Fearing lest she make known to all his shame,/And give him among men a villain's name", he cuts out her tongue (l. 2332-3). Only in this version does Tereus's crime become his "shame", connoting a very different moral dimension for Chaucer than for the other mythologizers. Ironically, Chaucer undercuts his own effort to temper Tereus's lust with a Christian conscience by concluding that Tereus imprisons Philomela so that "she will have to serve his lustful use" continually (l. 2337). Perhaps that is why Chaucer prays for her. And immediately thereafter, "Now it is time for me to end this tale" (l. 2341). This intrusion forces us to stop and distances us from the horror which preceded it, allowing Chaucer to pause and regain his perspective, protecting himself from the "infection" which telling this tale threatens. His narrative strategy here antedates an analogous technique cited earlier,
utilized by Ovid’s commentator, William S. Anderson, and used as he ineffectually attempts to mitigate Ovid’s grisly description of Philomela’s mutilation.

Chaucer returns briefly to Procne, where Tereus lies to her about Philomela’s fate and almost breaks her heart with grief. Philomela, in the meantime, has woven her entire story on fabric. With “a skill well known to women” she “wrote the text” of her suffering and Procne understood. Silenced by grief and anger, the very next day Procne “feigns” a pilgrimage to Bacchus in order to free her “dumb sister”. Unlike Ovid, who intimates that the Bacchic frenzy inflames Procne’s anger, Chaucer uses the festival as Procne’s ruse to leave the palace unsuspected. When the two sisters reconcile, they weep and moan in each other’s arms. “And thus I let them in their sorrow dwell” (l. 2382).

Chaucer ends the tale with their reunion. He leaves them to suffer in perpetual sorrow rather than give them recourse to revenge and release through their subsequent transformations. Within a Christian context, it would be impossible for Chaucer to redeem the sisters’ infanticide. However, he incriminates himself in a totally selfish, less than Christian motive for his revised ending. “The remnant is not burdensome to tell” (l. 2383). Of course it isn’t. He rewrites it to suit his needs, eliminating that which is burdensome to him. The story bothers him from the beginning. It is “foul” and “infectious” and he wants to end it even before he begins. So he asserts his power as transcendental signifier to write and tell and show a tale to signify his sign. This complex story of rape, mutilation and betrayal is a vehicle for Chaucer’s moral for women to beware men for they are never true for very long. Ironically, the moral indicts Chaucer
even as it indites an ending to his tale. He, too, has not been true for very long. Chaucer strips the myth of its "complicated psychologies and emotions" and undermines their grand and tragic implications for his banal purpose. This is a betrayal in itself. By leaving the sisters "in their sorrow to dwell", he consigns them to a purgatory of his creation. By subordinating her story to his moral purpose, Chaucer glosses Philomela out of existence.

In his Roman tragedy, "Titus Andronicus", William Shakespeare reverts to the Ovidian myth with specific references to Philomela and thematic adaptation of her story. Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and now empress of Rome, plots revenge against Titus Andronicus for his execution of her son. Her Moorish lover Aaron urges her two surviving sons to rape Lavinia, Titus's daughter. "Philomela must lose her tongue today./Thy sons make pillage of her chastity" (II, iii, 43-4). When Lavinia appears ravished and mutilated before her uncle Marcus, he immediately understands what has happened. But her aggressors are "a craftier Tereus", for they have cut off her hands as well. "Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,/And in a tedious sampler sew'd her mind;/But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee" (II, iv, 38-40). Her mangled body is her text, written by her rapists Demetrius and Chiron, and her uncle reads it easily. Titus calls her "thou map of woe" (III, ii, 12), and he will study her "martyr'd signs" and gestures and "of these, will wrest an alphabet./And by still practice learn to know thy meaning" (III, ii, 44-5). His effort to decipher her "martyr'd signs" is not, however, an intrusion into the realm of female communication. She does not create a new aesthetic as
did Philomela, and the only other woman in the play co-authored Lavinia’s suffering. Therefore, her empathic link is solely with her family, ironically the patriarchy whose arrogance and pride instigated this disaster in the first place.

Lavinia’s rape is a crime of political power and sexuality, but the genders are neatly polarized here as they are in the original myth. Tamora exercises political and sexual authority over her husband, and Titus identifies with Procne in the depth and degree of his outrage and revenge. Lavinia loses her identity as a woman-virgin, and her rape is a potent symbol of the fall from political favor her family suffers. Her father’s identity as a heroic figure of power and authority disintegrates with this further insult. In an effort to reconstitute familial identity, Titus and Marcus read Lavinia’s gestures sympathetically and understand. She reads the *Metamorphoses* and Titus comprehends that “rape, I fear, was the root of thy annoy” (IV, i, 48), and Marcus intuits that she had more than one attacker when she “lifts her arms in sequence thus” (IV, i, 37). Though she cannot weave their identities as her prototype did, Lavinia reveals them in an ingenious way. Marcus shows her how to write in the sand with his staff. Guided by her stumps, Lavinia names the crime and its perpetrators. Aware that the wind will blow the sands blank again, Titus inscribes the rapists’ names in brass. Like Philomela’s tapestry, this “leaf of brass” will tell and retell Lavinia’s story. Ironically, Demetrius and Chiron do not apprehend in the cryptic message Titus sends them that he has divined their guilt. They studied Horace in school and recognize his verse, but they fail to read beneath his proverb to a deeper moral Titus has written especially for them. Titus writes for Lavinia,
but he does not usurp her power in the process. She is physically incapable of writing or speaking the text of her revenge. Therefore, Marcus recites an oath for them all and Titus writes, “See here in bloody lines I have set down:/And what is written shall be executed” (V, ii, 14-15).

Their revenge is gruesomely reminiscent of Ovid. “I will grind your bones to dust,/And with your blood and it I’ll make . . . two pastries of your shameful heads,/And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,/Like to the earth swallow her own increase” (V, ii, 186-7, 189-91). Titus calls himself Procne to Lavinia’s Philomel, but his daughter has been worse used and his revenge is “worse” than his predecessor’s. At the banquet, he charges Chiron and Demetrius with their crime against Lavinia. Shakespeare morbidly echoes Ovid when the emperor orders, “Go fetch them hither to us presently” and Titus replies, “Why, they are, both baked in this pie:/Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,/Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (V, iii, 59-62), and he kills her. He also kills Lavinia, however. “Die, die . . . and thy shame with thee,/And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die” (V, iii, 46-7). Within the context of Roman honor, Lavinia must die so as not to further dishonor herself and her father as a living symbol of their shame.

However, in the play this is not a gender-marked code, for in Act I, scene i, Titus kills his son Mutius for barring his way. “Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine. My sons would never so dishonor me” (294-5). There are no “marvelous transformations” at the end. The only marvel is that order is restored through Lucius’s ascent to the throne.

Shakespeare embeds the earlier myth in his grisly play as a familiar figure of violence
and revenge and as a metaphor for the issues of sexuality and power which the play
addresses. Titus does undergo a “transformation” from haughty conqueror to humble
father. He is like Procne, not just in his outrage and revenge, but in his empathy for
Lavinia. He becomes her tongue and hands and communicates their common grief in a
genderless language. For Titus, as well, identity and relationships blur beyond
recognition, and he apprehends that, in a sense, Lavinia’s experience and his own mirror
each other.

Sir Philip Sidney, on the other hand, completely subsumes Philomela’s experience
beneath his own sense of worthlessness. Written between 1577 and 1581, “The
Nightingale” is part of a collection called the Certain Sonnets, and illustrates a more
private poetry, “outside the strict confines of the pastoral-heroic romance” of the Arcadia
(Rudenstine, Sidney’s Poetic Development (115). The cycle describes the growth and
end of a courtly love affair and all of the bitterness and resentment inherent in such an
experience. In his synopsis, Neil Rudenstine states that “The Nightingale” is in a group
of five sonnets which “develop the themes of the lover’s desire and the lady’s coldness”,
and that this sonnet “regrets that the lady is ‘chaste and cruel’” (116). Rudenstine
describes a poet “frank in his open avowal of desire”, “a more experienced and self-
assured lover than the young courtiers of Arcadia”, whose “theme is sexual desire.” And
in connection with “The Nightingale”, Rudenstine writes that the frustrated poet/lover is
“perfectly capable of appreciating the humor of his predicament” (117).
There is no humor in Philomela’s “predicament”, nor is Sidney capable of “appreciating” what has occurred. He is so completely self-involved in his own failure and loss that he dismisses her experience as insignificant in comparison. Sidney writes, “She hath no other cause of anguish/But Tereus’s love, on her by strong hand wroken.” Sidney makes Tereus sound like a persistent lover, not a rapist. Nor do her “ languishing spirits” conjure up the mangled, abandoned Philomela, patiently and resolutely weaving her story into a tapestry. More than “her will was broken”, although Sidney’s language suggests that Philomela submitted to Tereus’s love rather than that she was forced to submit to his lust. When she complains “full womanlike”, Tereus severs her tongue to stop her threats, a detail Sidney omits. Ironically, it is after her mutilation that Philomela resorts to a means even more “full womanlike” to ingeniously articulate her complaint, yet Sidney ignores this as well. His image is of a woman too well-loved against her will, not a ravished, mutilated victim of her brother-in-law’s incest.

Juxtaposed to Philomela’s “too much having” is Sidney’s “daily craving” for a love he cannot have, which, to him, is “more cause to lament” than her “suffering”. That he subordinates the horror of her rape to his selfish, unrequited love is incomprehensible. That he suggests his pain is greater than hers is unfathomable. That he counsels her to “take some gladness,/That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness” is unforgivable. He totally reappropriates her quintessential experience of pain, loss and humiliation and reduces her to a whining, shallow woman who could never understand, let alone endure, the quality of his pain. He writes, “Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.” The
thorn which is his pen/penis rapes Philomela again, and his poem gives the reader “more cause to lament” for her than he could ever know.
Chapter 3

The Romantic Period: Coleridge Delivers the Literary Coup de Grâce Upon Philomela

Romantic poetry moves radically from any prior conception to a theory and practice of poetry as a process of self-discovery. Consequently, the imagination becomes the principle source of knowledge which explores central issues of reality and being, and reveals, through a visionary poetry, a new kind of truth. The possibilities of creative power are, therefore, enormous, and through them, the manifestation and expression of self as it apprehends and transforms the world. "Romantic poets are driven to a quest for self-creation, for self-comprehension, for self-positioning that is unprecedented in literature" (Ross, "Romantic Quest and Conquest" 26). Their poetry is characterized by an anxious persistence "to find in his own voice an aboriginal self that re-creates the world and that emblematizes the capacity for seizing meaning in the world", "a poem about the coming to being of the poetic self" (26). The "poetic self" is undeniably male. Writing within the patriarchal tradition, Romantic poets "resort to masculine metaphors of power, not only because they are socialized and indoctrinated into a masculinist tradition, but also because these metaphors allow them to reassert the power of [their] vocation" (29).

The powerful self derives not only from "the use of efficacious language". The "writer as God" metaphor "is built into the very word, author, with which writer, deity and pater familias are identified." Edward Said summarizes the meanings of author and authority as
grounded in the following notions: (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish - in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course. (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 4)

Said expands the implications of this definition with his later observation that “underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, or hierarchy” in any literary text (5). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine in depth the crucial claims of literary paternity and their ramifications for feminist criticism in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, who claims that “the artist’s ‘most essential quality is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women’” (3). Such a masculinist premise fosters the analogy between literary power and male sexuality. “The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis”, able to generate texts to which he lays claim, as a biological father engenders a progeny which he claims as his own (4). Linked with God as patriarch-creators, male writers automatically exclude women from the creative enterprise. Not only do women writers lack a metaphorical penis with which to write, the only model for them to emulate is a grand “cosmic Author” whose only begotten sons are writers.

All poets perceive themselves as creator-seers, offering mimetic or alternative visions of reality, and most probably acknowledge a link between their sexual potency and their literary power. But the most extravagant claim to literary paternity and authority is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s definition of the imagination as “... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” (*The Biographia*
The phallogocentric power of the poet is analogous to a divine power no less than God’s. “In effect, the sublime Romantic ego defined itself as god the father, the creator of that language ‘which rules with Daedal harmony a throng/Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were’” (Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound” IV, l. 416-17). The Romantic poet-god is not only creator here, but savior as well. Anne K. Mellor writes in “On Romanticism and Feminism” that the big six Romantic poets “have been heralded because they endorsed a concept of the self as a power that gains control over and gives significance to nature, a nature troped in their writings as feminine. They thus legitimized the continued repression of women” (8). We will see later how Coleridge, as creator-poet, silences Philomela’s song in his poem “The Nightingale” and thus silences her story of rape and mutilation and, in effect, her existence.

The self which Romantic introspection reveals to Coleridge is critically divided between a public moral persona and an agonizingly repressed private man. He believed that “poetry should label what was morally good and that he, as poet-seer, was necessarily a righteous man. His imagination betrayed him, however, demanding a world more complex than ‘affirmative poetry’ could offer, reveling, instead, in the sensual and dark” (Bostetter, The Romantic Ventriloquists 99). Edward Bostetter writes in The Romantic Ventriloquists, “He was abnormally susceptible to ‘vice’: indolence, daydreaming, drinking, gambling, laudanum; and if he did not indulge in sexual promiscuity, he possessed strong sexual impulses that unrelentingly haunted his dreams . . . he suffered abnormally also from a sense of guilt and remorse; and the interaction of
susceptibility and remorse owed much to his religious upbringing.” His reaction to such spiritual and physical torment was denial. These characteristics were not intrinsically a part of him; he maintained, instead, that he was “a virtuous man who was acted upon and driven to vice by some power beyond his control” (92).

Although the Romantic self is conceived as very self-aware of its response to experience, and the imagination is the shaping power which synthesizes those experiences and perceptions into a work of art, Coleridge nevertheless posits that the unconscious is the source of the imagination. “There is in genius itself as unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius” (qtd. in Read, The True Voice of Feeling 173). His dream poems reflect the psychological significance of the unconscious in his writing, as we shall see shortly in “The Pains of Sleep”. However, before examining that more obvious example of the dark side of his nature he strove to imaginatively suppress, I believe that the new poetic which he articulates in “The Nightingale”, a ‘father’s tale’ in more ways than one, is inextricably linked to his sense of victimization by external forces and must be analyzed in light of his philosophy, psychology and aesthetic.

Coleridge was the most Christian of the Romantic poets. Unlike his contemporaries, he was hostile to the integration of mythic symbols into his poetry which the others saw as natural. Douglas Bush explains in Mythology and the Romantic Tradition that “instead, Coleridge contrasted Greek finiteness in which form was the end, with Christian symbols of moral truth and infinity” (52). His philosophic desire for unity,
the "One Life" in so many of his poems, clashed with what he perceived to be Greek
ccontentment with multiplicity. He could never reconcile the heathenism and dubious
morality of mortals and immortals in Greek myth with the virtue of Christian asceticism,
and Christian myth transcended any moral a Greek fable might offer. As underscored
earlier in my analysis of medieval mythologizers’ Christianized revision of the Philomela
myth, the archetype is so base and horrific in its sexuality and depravity that those writers
had to remove her from her violent context and could only allude to her as a symbol of
the harbinger of spring, Christ’s Passion and Christ himself. Coleridge ultimately revises
Philomela out of existence for similar, ostensibly altruistic, motives.

In "The Thieves of Language", Alicia Ostriker offers a more compelling potential
for the mythic tradition which Coleridge rejects. "Mythology . . . has a double power. It
exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere . . . At the same time, myth is
quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable
motivation - everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed or
abominable" (317). Given Coleridge’s susceptibility to vice, it is clear that Greek
mythology poses more of a threat to his imagination and his psyche than to Christian
truth. Menaced by his sense of women as sinister and tempting, Coleridge identifies evil
with their sexual aggression and underscores his fear that sexual desire is always
perverted by an aggressive woman in his imagery (Bostetter 121).

Though Coleridge’s Christian background suggests that he would specifically
renounce the god/man cycle of myths as perversely irreverent literary antecedents, instead
he rejects the Philomela/Procne myth, an ultimate example of man's impiety to woman. The lust, aggression and perversion are Tereus's, but there is a deeper association with Philomela which Coleridge must exorcise from his spirit with the words of his poem. If Philomela does not sing a lamentation, she was not raped and mutilated and driven to infanticide with her sister. By writing her out of existence, Coleridge dissolves the spectre of Philomela from his imagination and his dreams. The power and authority of the male poet to create and uncreate are unmistakably spoken here.

Milton's "most musical, most melancholy" bird is an "idle thought/In Nature there is nothing melancholy" (14-15). Coleridge re-thinks for Milton even as he re-writes Philomela for himself. Like Sir Philip Sidney before him, Coleridge reappropriates Philomela's experience and makes it male. The only "melancholy sound in Nature" comes from

\[\ldots\text{some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced}\\\text{With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,}\\\text{Or slow distemper, or neglected love,}\\\text{(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,}\\\text{And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale}\\\text{Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,}\\\text{First named these notes a melancholy strain.}" (16-22)

Rape, mutilation, lies, betrayal and infanticide become "a grievous wrong or slow distemper, or neglected love." Not only does Coleridge rob Philomela and Procne of their awful experience, he diminishes it in kind. The sisters disappear and so does their tapestry, for whatever happened to this new male poet becomes, not a mournful song, but "gentle sounds" by which he "tell[s] back the tale/Of his own sorrow." Coleridge is,
nonetheless, aware that “youths and maidens most poetical . . . still/Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs/O’er Philomela’s pity-pleading strains” (35, 37-9).

Coleridge here betrays his own obsession with the aggressive sexuality of the myth. Though he has carefully rewritten the story so that it bears no resemblance to its archetype, Philomela remains to haunt him, and, perhaps, to taunt him. He will not listen to her “pity-pleading strains” which conjure in his mind her struggle with the lustful Tereus, an image of himself he must struggle to repress. The danger and evil which she represents for Coleridge are not implicit in herself, but he must tame her by force, again, as did his literary predecessors, as if she prompts her repeated violations by her persistent and presumptuous existence. “To justify [her] exploitation and destruction, woman . . . must be seen both as morally evil and as metaphysically non-existent” (Ostriker 326). It is a short step from there to rape and expurgation from tradition. The tension between his imagination and his rational mind, between his dark side and his affirming moral nature is untenable unless he can “assert and if possible demonstrate that the will was subduing and controlling the passions” (Bostetter 122). By constructing a philosophical system which dissipates those passions he cannot own, Coleridge sublimates his fascination with the archetype of perverted sexual desire to a new aesthetic which expunges that archetype. In a sense, he is re-enacting Freud’s repetition compulsion. “The Nightingale”, with its subliminal echoes of Philomela’s rape, is a “symbolic representation of a central situation in his life” which Bostetter explains as his inability to control those “strong sexual impulses which haunted his dreams.” By “reconstructing the
bad situation" in his poem, Coleridge finds a solution that he can apply to his life (127). Struggling to write poetry which reflected a virtuous nature, Coleridge encodes a new poetic free of the sexual violence inscribed in tradition.

This new aesthetic is significant in that it frees Romantic poets from the anxieties and fears with which tradition is laden and which cripple poetic expression and directs their attention to Nature, wherein they can perceive "the one life within us and abroad.” But its true power lies in the forceful demonstration of authority which Coleridge claims for the poet. Romanticism urges self-realization through the exercise of creative powers analogous to God’s. Therefore, Coleridge’s definition of the Imagination asserts a kind of divinity for the poet which is particularly crucial in light of the new aesthetic he enunciates in “The Nightingale”.

The Imagination, then, I consider as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and Prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (The Biographia Literaria 516)

Through his imaginative powers, the poet’s word becomes the LOGOS by which he recreates a world. In “the Nightingale”, Coleridge uncreates Philomela by declaring with his word a new world without her in it. In Romantic Origins, Leslie Brisman states that by “exercising secondary imagination, a poet may be said to make a beginning not by
insisting on a point of absolute origin but by willfully re-originating thought and
approaching his primary aesthetic act like a moral act for which he assumes the
responsibility . . . Since he takes upon himself the beginnings of things, the poet stakes
out a point in time he declares to be free of prior causality” (22). The aesthetic origin
Coleridge seeks is a time beyond Philomela, outside of her awful story, and for him it is a
moral imperative to excise her from tradition and thus from his consciousness.

In this poem, Coleridge announces a new imaginative world which Philomela no
longer inhabits and an entire generation of poets follow suit. However, though his new
aesthetic may be free of the disabling anxieties of tradition, his poem is riddled with his
personal neuroses. The subtitle for “The Nightingale” is “a conversation poem”, in which
the poet directly articulates his identity to his listeners, what Patricia M. Ball calls a
“reflex consciousness”, that is “a mind turning upon itself to behold its own being” (The
Central Self 100). Although there are two obvious listeners, “the orientation is
unreservedly egocentric, there is no sinking of the self and no vicarious extension of
being, just the marshaling of all resources to augment the illumination of the one
significant consciousness. Coleridge sets himself before his own imagination even as he
peoples his stage with other actors” (89). But we know that Coleridge’s imagination has
a “sensual and dark” side to it and, though he enunciates his nature philosophy as an
alternative poetic to classical tradition, he nonetheless reveals his anxieties as well.

In a compelling discussion of the poet as mesmerist, Charles J. Rzepka describes
how, “by means of something very close to mesmeric “suggestion”, [the poet] attempts to
influence, even upend, the conventional ways in which his listeners perceive the world around them, supplanting their fancies with his own” (The Self As Mind 115). The poet declares a new world with his LOGOS, for Coleridge a psychological as well as aesthetic realm from which he must exclude Philomela and all her resonant associations. The egocentric consciousness of the poet which Ball describes must integrate the consciousnesses of his participant/listeners into his re-created world without compromising his power to shape and control their responses. What, to this reader of his poem, is a confession of sexual and creative anxieties, is for Coleridge and the Romantic movement a demonstration of the inordinate powers of self-discovery and self-expression which Coleridge defines as an echo of the “infinite I AM”.

Boccaccio described the mesmeric power of the poet to manipulate the illusion of a new world of nature and of man he creates so as “to capture and control the minds of his hearers” (Reynolds 22). Coleridge’s power, therefore, lies not only in his poetic skill, but in his ability to dominate other consciousnesses with his own. Though the image of the mesmerist is more obvious in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Christabel”, in the opening lines of “The Nightingale”, Coleridge relaxes his audience and actually directs their attention to what he would have them see, hear, feel and think.

Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!  
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,  
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently,  
O’er its soft bed of verdure. All is still,  
A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,  
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers  
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find  
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars. (4-11)
When the nightingale begins to sing, he easily dismisses the mythical allusions he assumes his listeners will make as an “idle thought!” and redefines the song as

Nature’s sweet voice[s], always full of love
And joyance! ‘Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music! (42-48, italics mine)

Not only does the song become “sweet”, but its singer is a he. Philomela is dismissed from tradition and ousted from the forest. The poem, however, goes on to subvert Coleridge’s intentions and reveals that perhaps he has hypnotized himself as well and does not realize what part of his unconscious he has exposed with his own words. The nightingale sings in a grove “wild with tangling underwood./And the trim walks are broken up” (52-3). Moreover, the castle which is “hard by” is empty, the great lord does not live there. One recalls the prison in which Tereus abandons Philomela after he rapes and mutilates her and, though she weaves her story instead of singing it, the “jug jug” of the nightingale’s song reminds the reader of the only sound she can make after her mutilation and transformation. For Coleridge, on the other hand, the song is “one low piping sound more sweet than all” (61).

“Hard by” this empty castle which is “hard by” this wild grove lives “a most gentle Maid . . . in her hospitable home.” The narrative transition is abrupt, but its aesthetic rationale is apparent from Coleridge’s biography. Coleridge wanted desperately to believe in his chaste self-image and to write the kind of poetry it should inspire. But
the deep introspection which his creative act necessitated revealed a serious contradiction in his nature. "Coleridge realized that the chthonic source of creative inspiration and imaginative power within him was becoming, in its sexually lurid suggestiveness, a threat to his conscious self-image, if not indeed to his sanity" (Rzepka 160). Furthermore, joy and delight, the Romantic conditions for creation which Michael J. Cooke defines as "positive knowledge and experience of integrity and goodness as the ground of things" are given only to the pure and "in their purest hour" (13). Coleridge was convinced that he was doomed to fail as a poet because he had lost his innocence, while simultaneously he maintained that external forces were responsible for the loss. Ironically, it is this sense of his lost innocence and joy, compounded by his guilty preoccupation with evil which produced the more powerful poems.

But "The Nightingale" is neither "Kubla Khan", "The Ancient Mariner", nor "Christabel". Therefore, in order to reintegrate his consciousness into his poem, Coleridge must appoint a surrogate whose innocence allows her to experience the joy which comes from the union of nature and God as he manifests himself in nature, an experience from which Coleridge is inevitably alienated by his contaminated imagination. The "most gentle Maid . . . knows all their notes", what Lucy Newlyn describes as "one of those sounds in God's 'eternal language' that are only 'intelligible' to the gifted" (Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion 144). She watches the moon, another recurring figure which serves as a catalyst to the natural experience of joy, "awaken[ed] earth and sky/With one sensation" and hears the nightingales "burst forth in
choral minstrelsy.” The image of vitality and ecstasy which intensifies as the birds “perch giddily/On blossoming twig still swinging from the breeze” certainly belies Milton’s description of the nightingale as a “melancholy bird”. Rzepka remarks that Coleridge’s abrupt farewell to the nightingale and his auditors brings his readers and listeners out of the poet’s trance (115). Coleridge, however, is still mesmerized by the nightingale’s song. “That strain again!/Full fain it would delay me” (90-1). After such glorious music, the nightingale’s “wanton song” still reminds him of something forbidden and fascinating. Again he must designate a surrogate to experience its joy. This time his “dear babe” Hartley “bid[s] us listen.” He, like the Maid, is “intuitively in touch with the symbol language of God” (Newlyn 144). “And I deem it wise/To make him Nature’s play-mate” (96-7). Coleridge bequeaths to his son a legacy of joy in communion with nature, something the poet can only achieve vicariously. “… if that Heaven/Should give me life, his childhood shall grow up/Familiar with these songs, that with the night, He may associate joy” (106-9).

There is an irony in this bequest, however. The moon can soothe the crying baby who is disturbed by what Coleridge concludes is a bad dream. But Coleridge is driven to insomnia by his lurid imagination and concomitant guilt, as we shall read shortly in “The Pains of Sleep”, so he must “associate joy” with the night if he is to rest. He projects his desire onto his child by making the moon a nursemaid and filling the grove with the nightingale’s joyful, perpetual harmony “that should you close your eyes, you might almost/Forget it was not day” (63-4, italics mine). Almost, but not quite. Coleridge
cannot forestall the inevitable night and its dark dreams, not with innocent surrogates who understand God’s eternal language, not with bright moonlight which “awaken[s] earth and sky”, not with the song of nightingales transformed. He calls his poem “a father’s tale” wherein he blesses his son with hopes for a better life. And he blesses his literary sons as well, with a new poetic he believes is free of the crippling anxieties of tradition. The poem, however, subverts his intentions and efforts as literary patriarch. Though he strove to speak and write Philomela out of existence, her perpetual lament is inscribed in Coleridge’s unconscious and her song is much louder than the “choral minstrelsy” of his re-imaged nightingales.

“The Pains of Sleep” dramatically demonstrates Coleridge’s tormented psyche overwhelmed by guilt for harboring unnamable impulses of which the Philomela myth reminds him. At the same time, the poem reveals Coleridge’s inability to accept responsibility for his reveries. Nightmares, then, are the perfect symbolic representations of his repressed fantasies.

Desire with loathing strangely mixed
on wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be his which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others’ still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame. (23-32)

There is no reassuring moon to light up the night, no “choral minstrelsy” of nightingales to make him “forget it was not day.” For Coleridge,
. . . the night's dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day.
Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper's worst calamity. (33-36)

He is anguished and agonized, suffering and tortured by "the fiendish dreams". Yet with a scream and a tear, he subdues his "anguish to a milder mood" and contemplates the unjustness of his nightmare. The poem begins "With reverential resignation . . . [to] a sense o'er all my soul imprest/That I am weak" (7, 10). Nevertheless, after the "pains of sleep", Coleridge disavows his fallibility.

Such punishments, I said, were due
To natures deesiest stained with sin, -
For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within,
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!
Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me? (43-49)

Coleridge is well aware that since the Fall, the potential for sin is intrinsic to human existence and he defines it as "an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent, and not in the compulsion of circumstances" (qtd. in Brisman 39). Furthermore, the will is a moralizing faculty, "the inward motives and impulses which constitute the essence of morality." Habitual immorality, therefore, "involves subversion of the will and is 'more hopeless and therefore of deeper Evil than any single Crime, however great'" (Cooper, Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry 122). These definitions are Coleridge's own, but he deconstructs them in "The Pains of Sleep". Evil in this poem derives from a "compulsion of circumstances" beyond the dreamer's control and not from the dreamer
himself. Cooper echoes Bostetter in his observation that the irrational sense of guilt and shame which Coleridge endures for his inadvertent sinful thoughts "suggest[s] that the thoughts are unconsciously perceived as deserved punishment for some previously unknown sin for which one does in fact bear responsibility" (115). "Deeds to be hid which were not hid/Which all confused I could not know/Whether I suffered, or I did" ("Sleep" 27-29).

Repression and denial are common defense mechanisms, but Coleridge also adopts an "isolation of affect" in the poem's final stanza (Cambor, Personal interview 3/14/89). Whereas "yester-night I prayed aloud/In anguish and in agony,/Up-starting from the fiendish crowd/Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me" for two nights (14-17), now he distances himself from the dream as if he is observing and recording someone else's torment. "Such punishments, I said, were due/To natures deepliest stained with sin" (43-44, italics mine). There is neither humility, resignation nor supplication here for his own "weak" soul. Now he views "the horror of their deeds" and judges that "Such griefs with such men well agree" (48, italics mine). Nevertheless, as the ultimate symbolic representation of his repressed fantasies, the poem itself irrevocably implicates Coleridge in his own nightmare, despite his last desperate strategy. Anca Vlasopolos defines Coleridge's symbolic method as "the aesthetic he forged out of his awareness of infinite desire and its dangers" (The Symbolic Method of Coleridge, Baudelaire and Yeats 28). The very act of will which defines the Romantic poet undeniably transforms
the conscious or the unconscious "compulsion of circumstances" which underlies Coleridge's poetic imagination into a work of art which cannot be repressed.

Almost fifty years after Coleridge's death, his great-great niece Mary Elizabeth also writes poetry about a tormented psyche. But as a female poet writing within a phallocentrism tradition, she is very conscious of the roots of her anxiety and dramatically depicts them in "The Other Side of the Mirror". Extending their metaphor of literary paternity, Gilbert and Gubar explain how woman becomes man's aesthetic property, just as socio-economic and legal traditions have always already made her his own.

The roots of "authority" tell us, after all, that if a woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property.

... for women who felt themselves to be more than, in every sense, the property of literary texts, the problem posed by such authority was neither metaphysical nor philological, but... psychological. Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt the pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which... deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen. (13)

The "autonomy" to which Gilbert and Gubar refer is the power to speak themselves which male authors deprive women of. Since women read themselves as angels or monsters inscribed in male authored texts, their self-images are male-constructs of the feminine. In order to speak their true identities, therefore, women writers must read through a male text to reach a female self-conception. The literary text becomes a mirror the male writer holds up to the woman "hesitant to attempt the pen". At first she only
sees her perfect, silent image killed into immortal art by the poet. But after looking long and hard, she sees, as the speaker in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s poem, a woman “Made mad because [her] hope was gone” (21), a woman she finally recognizes as herself.

Held in the hands of the male author, the mirror is a crucial figure of patriarchal distortion and reflection for the woman seeking a viable self. The King in fairy tales is the creator-poet of literary texts. Both are “the voice of the looking-glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules . . . every woman’s self-evaluation . . . the woman internalize[s] the King’s rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind.” (38) She, as yet, does not speak her own voice. But the mirror is the only alternative to an external reality which bears little resemblance to female reality. The woman writer looks past the self the male invented for her, listens past his voice for her own, and with its resonating power “explode[s] out of the Queen’s looking glass,” out of an “aesthetic of silence” into one of self-articulation and confirmation.

Before her dramatic breakthrough, however, the female writer contemplates one of two images in the king’s looking glass. Perhaps she is the angel, evolving from the divinity of the Virgin Mary to her handmaid Beatrice to the domestic angel of the Victorian household, what Virginia Woolf called “the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women” (20). Commenting on Goethe’s “Eternal Feminine,” Hans Eichner explains that “‘the ideal of contemplative purity’ is always feminine, while the ideal of significant action is masculine.” Women are defined, therefore, as passive, denied the “generative power” ascribed to men as creator-
poet-progenitors, and their purity signifies “self-lessness”, with all its moral and psychological ramifications (21). Identified in terms of the man to whom she “owes her Being”, woman’s behavior must accrue to his greatness; she is to remain passive and submissive, that is, angelic, and derive satisfaction from her husband’s pleasure, not from herself nor for her own sake. (23)

The antithesis of the angel is the monster, the woman who asserts her autonomy with “significant action,” and consequently, is monstrous because she is unfeminine. This literary sorority includes not only Philomela and Procris, but Eve, Error, Lady Macbeth, Regan and Goneril, and even little Becky Sharp. Though such presumption is considered freakish, these monster women possess a power and energy which the male writer fears. In order to re-possess his text and repress his anxieties, the writer must condemn the monster woman as evil and unnatural. Despite his remark that “a great mind is androgynous,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge nevertheless appropriates the androgynous male as “the source of divine creativity” and relegates the androgynous female to “an image of horror, figured in the Uba Thaluba of Coleridge’s nightmares, in the Life-in-Death of “The Ancient Mariner” and in the lamia-like Geraldine of “Christabel” (Mellor 7). And throughout the nightingale myth, Ovid betrays an ambiguous power over his text. Philomela and Procris persistently defy this “authority” with their various strategies. He reasserts this control over them and his narrative with his condemnatory details describing their behavior, and with his incessant repetitions of Tereus’s assaults upon them. Philomela and Procris, however, encode a new text in
which they reveal “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her
textually ordained “place” and thus generates a story that “gets away” from its author.
(Gilbert and Gubar 28) Ironically, Ovid becomes a character in their story, participating
as he does with Tereus in a kind of “gang rape” with his pen.

Though the dichotomous angel/monster woman is a more pronounced figure in
Victorian fiction, Philomela and Procne also reflect this duality. They are dutiful
daughters, and Procne’s request for Philomela’s visit is a reward for proper behavior of an
obedient angel-wife. However, “for every glowing portrait of submissive women
enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies
the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the ‘Female Will.’” (28) Any
assertiveness of the female will is “sacrilegious fiendishness” because it is monstrously
aberrant behavior toward male, i.e., god-like authority. And when such potential power
lurks behind or beneath or within the angel, the male writer is even more threatened and
more textually vindictive. Both Philomela and Procne argue against domination by
Tereus. Philomela reshapes her female docility into a new aesthetic; Procne articulates a
revenge against him grounded in a feminine empathy which defies and transcends
patriarchal bonds. Both women are boldly creative in their responses. Ovid, however,
scornful of female creativity and fearful of their autonomy, subdues them with
descriptions of monstrous aggression - unmotherly, unfeminine, ultimately unhuman -
behavior which, ironically, is valorized as peculiarly masculine. Though the apocryphal
story of Lilith was outside of Ovid's ken, it nonetheless resonates throughout literature by
and about women.

What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and
female "presumption" - that is, angry revolt against male domination - are
inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic. Excluded from the human
community . . . the figure[s] of Lilith [and Philomela and Procne]
represent[s] the price women have been told they must pay for attempting
to define themselves. (35)

The price men exact is women's silence.

The canon of literature established by women bears testimony to the fact that they
did "attempt the pen" despite patriarchal efforts to silence them. However, before the
woman writer can transcend the metaphor inscribed for her in the looking-glass text of
the male writer, she must confront it and expose all of its allusions and evocations as
male constructs. Defined as a monster by the patriarchy because she is creative, the
woman writer must now define herself, instead, as articulate and self-generative. But to
speak after centuries of silence is no easy task, and to strip away the masks designed and
imposed by men is painful and frightening. The woman Mary Elizabeth Coleridge sees
in "The Other Side of the Mirror" "had no voice to speak her dread" (18). The image
which the poem's speaker conjures up is not the angel she had pretended to be on this
side of the mirror. Rather, what appears is "a woman, wild/With more than womanly
despair" (5-6). Gilbert and Gubar write that "the madwoman in literature by women is
. . . usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage"
written as mad "so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female
feelings of fragmentation . . . between what they are and what they are supposed to be."
(78) The woman in the mirror is neither “glad” nor “gay” nor lovely. Her hair stands back, like a crown of thorns, only hers is “hard unsanctified distress,” not glorified redemptive suffering. She will no longer conceal, as the self-less humble angel should, the anger and outrage and truth of her being which “once no man on earth could guess” (“Mirror” 10).

Suddenly, however, what is more disturbing than the woman’s inability to speak is the poet’s description of her silent mouth. “... - not a sound/Came through the parted lines of red. Whate’er it was, the hideous wound/In silence and in secret bled” (13-16). The reader and all women are transported backward in time to the archetypal myth of violation and mutilation which Coleridge’s great-great uncle would suppress, and we see Philomela’s wounded, bleeding mouth after Tereus severs her tongue and renders her speechless and, consequently, powerless. Philomela, compelled toward an “aesthetic of silence” by her circumstances, weaves her story and a new, female poetic in her tapestry. Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, also compelled toward “an art of silence” because of patriarchal subjugation, invokes the type for the silent female poet and identifies with her as well as with the woman in the mirror when she whispers, “I am she!” (30) Her poem “speak[s] her dread” for the three of them, just as Philomela’s tapestry “spoke her woe” to Procrine and all other women.

Their “life’s desire” which the woman in the mirror and Coleridge seek to articulate is their identity, conceived and spoken by themselves. That alone is the “one low piping sound more sweet than all” which can “set the crystal surface free!” In the final stanza, the
woman before the mirror speaks directly to her image, just as Mary Elizabeth Coleridge speaks to herself through her poem, and gently but confidently bids the ‘madwoman’ to “pass” through the image inscribed in the looking-glass text of men to a saner, “fairer vision” of female truth.

While she was writing *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Susan Griffin noted in her diary that “all the time I wrote the book, the patriarchal voice was in me, whispering to me . . . that I had no proof for any of my writing, that I was wildly in error” (Ostriker 327). Nevertheless, she completed the book. Each time feminist critics and readers refer to it, they reinforce its legitimacy and value and dispel the ghosts of the patriarchy in the process. Any text a woman writer undertakes continues to be fraught with uncertainty and insecurity projected into her very soul and intellect by the patriarchy. Even though male writers may suffer analogously from “the anxiety of influence”, they have never systematically been silenced by the literary tradition they sought to emulate. However, the hegemonic presence of the male subsumed the female as potentially creative for centuries, silenced her when her physical presence could no longer be ignored, and then undermined and distorted her voice when she finally attempted to speak. Especially in literature by men about women, the male consciousness superseded any female articulation of truth. But as Gilbert and Gubar have aptly demonstrated, regardless of their respective strategies, literature by women ultimately subverts the power of the male metaphor to silence and imprison by its very existence.
Moreover, female characters undermine the authority of their literary fathers even within the texts designed to contain and control them. Whether she is angel or monster, indeed whether she is present or absent from the text, the primal dread and anxiety which woman as Other provokes in men promotes and perpetuates their metaphors and strategies of domination more than any sense of inherent superiority which has been codified in the phallogocentric tradition. And male writers betray this anxiety and fascination each time they attempt to write a woman; only within a male construct can she be understood, or at least circumscribed. When a male writer returns consistently to a specific image of woman, and through his repeated re-imagings attempts to subdue her, then that image cannot be ignored as a mere convention.

The radical revisions of the archetypal myth of domination and repression of female voice and identity by male mythologizers dramatizes an obsession with the figures of Philomela and Procne which resonates throughout literature. Depending on the reader’s gendered perspective, all that occurs in the myth - marriage, birth, betrayal, rape, mutilation, lies, infanticide - represents male authority over the female, or female subjugation by the male. Yet it is male mythologizers who re-tell the story in order to assert and confirm their power in its reiteration. Such un-authorized re-authorings of Philomela and Procne ruthlesslly repeat the indignities originally inflicted upon them by Tereus. Nevertheless, the compulsive return to this myth and its allusions implies an uneasy confidence by male writers over these sisters and all they represent. By exposing subliminal or unconscious narrative tactics, a close re-reading of their various efforts to sublimate their fears reveals
instead that the texts betray their authors: from Ovid, who enjoys a voyeuristic complicity with Tereus, to medieval mythologizers who rewrite Philomela into a Christian symbol of God and Christ in order to save her from her literary damnation, to Sidney, who jealously appropriates her experience as his own and qualitatively diminishes it in the process, to Coleridge, who expiates his guilt and fear in the guise of articulating a new aesthetic to his generation that is free of the crippling anxieties of tradition which we now read as the anxieties that cripple his imagination. Moreover, even after all they have endured, Philomela and Procne assert that "mysterious power of the character who refuses to remain in her textually ordained place." They will not be silenced. Philomela will force her male mythologizers to listen to her song.
Chapter 4

Susan Glaspell: Marginalized Women Marginalizing Men

In the preceding chapters, I have established an interpretive basis for my contention that male mythologizers repeatedly though unsuccessfully attempt to divest Philomela and Procne of the new linguistic power they have formulated for themselves and succeeding generations of women by focusing their narrative efforts on the sisters’ revenge and ignoring the strength they exhibit in their unwonted potent bond. The source of that strength, the singularly female poetic Philomela engenders on her loom, poses an aesthetic, linguistic, and socio/cultural threat to the patriarchy which it must expunge in order to maintain its authority in its various aspects, as earlier defined by Edward Said, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Nevertheless, for all its efforts to silence and circumscribe women within its masculinist constructs, the patriarchy failed. Though women’s voices may have been literally muted intermittently throughout history, the record shows that they have spoken subversively through and within female literary forms they have conceived outside of and unremarked by patriarchal constraints. Not surprisingly, a recurrent metaphor in literature by women is the Philomela/Procne myth. As archetypes of consummate victimization by the patriarchy, the sisters represent for women, figures of creative survival and aesthetic tenacity. Philomela’s tapestry, Procne’s horrified but facile comprehension of its message, their reunion and steadfast bond with one another, and their liberating transformations have served, in one form or other, as symbols for all women - writers, readers, speakers, weavers - to emulate. In this chapter
on Susan Gaspell’s play Trifles and short story “A Jury of Her Peers”, and the next chapter on Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy. I will provide a theoretical analysis of how masculinist structures codify the oppression of women from every perspective of their experience and demonstrate how women continue to confound the efforts of the patriarchy to subjugate and silence them.

“In “The Voice of the Shuttle”, Geoffrey Hartman joins the Greek fathers in analyzing the myth of Procris and Philomela as a story in which “the truth will out.” He universalizes the story as saying that the artist will not be silenced and suggests that in these universal terms the myth is an archetype” (Marcus, “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny” 88). But Marcus goes on to caution that “if we allow male critics to universalize our stories - as . . . Geoffrey Hartman claims that reading the myth as the story of the artist and the truth rather than as a sister’s revenge for the rape of her sister is “higher” or “deeper” than the story of the power of sisterhood - we will be domesticated and subjugated into the loss of our own history” (91). Patricia Joplin echoes this admonition when she reminds women that history has repeatedly taught us that it is “naive” to trust that “the truth will out” without a struggle, “including with those who claim to be telling us the truth” (“The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours” 30).

The struggle is against the universalizing principle that underscores Hartman’s analysis. At the end of his essay, “the specific nature of women’s double violation disappears behind apparently genderless (but actually male) language of “us”, “I”, “you”
who agree to attest to that which violates, deprives, silences only as a mysterious, unnamed “something”. For the feminist unwilling to “let Philomela become universal before she has been met as a female, this is the primary evasion” (30). That “unnamed ‘something’” is the narrative tradition in which male mythologizers constantly demonize the sisters, focusing on their revenge rather than the hideous crime which prompted this response. Hartman joins that tradition by appropriating Philomela’s quintessentially female experience to universal (i.e. male) artistic endeavors. The crucial elision occurs at the locus in the text where Philomela manifests a power her male mythologizers ignore, thereby ostensibly disarming her. Hartman “celebrates Language and not violated woman’s emergence from silencing; he celebrates literature and the male poet’s trope, not woman’s elevation of a safe, feminine, domestic craft - weaving - into art as a new means of resistance” (26).

Joplin maintains that women reject the male linear structure of myth which leads to an inevitable end of bloodthirsty revenge stressing the violence the sisters wreak rather than that which was wrought upon them. Instead, the female reader focuses on the middle, “the moment of the loom”, what Nellie Furman defines as “a literary passage, a place of transition, an area which either leads to something different or a space where change is occurring (“Textual Criticism” 49). However, as a cultural document, the myth depicts and encodes patriarchal power and hegemony, and cannot accommodate a resistant woman, socially or narratively. Therefore, the myth must suppress Philomela’s power at her loom. Her tapestry becomes merely a narrative device that brings the sisters
together in ultimate violence. Thus the myth would have us believe that the sisters’
desire for reunion is superseded by a desire for revenge, that the text Philomela so
patiently weaves shouts *infanticide*, when, in fact, it mourns a sister and a life. However,
as Jacqueline de Weever states, “The textile is the text. In the Greek stories, textile
and text are identical” (*Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women’s Fiction* 50).
Nevertheless, the myth would deny any purpose to Philomela’s weaving other than
revenge, and consequently persuade us that (female) violence is inevitable and (female)
art is weak (Joplin 52). But, as stated earlier, the text betrays itself. If Philomela’s art is
weak, why is her text so persistently and, as in Ovid and Coleridge, so violently
repressed?

It is the “moment of the loom” that threatens Philomela’s male mythologizers.

“The underlying threat posed by the text . . . is that without textual violation, the mark or
body which remains may be a locus from which language may seem to emanate; the text
may seem to be a speaker, and, further, a speaker which speaks about itself, expresses its
own desires” (Greenberg, “Reading Reading: Echo’s Abduction of Language” 307).

Philomela’s textile/text not only reveals the horror of her rape and mutilation to Procne
and her other female readers. Her weaving mends and unites feminine consciousness,
asserting her physical survival and reunion with Procne and the rest of us. In recovering
her voice through this new poetic, Philomela reconnects a bond temporarily severed by
men, but stronger this time in its potential for “community and communication” beyond
her text. In the process, she also asserts what Joplin calls a “will to survive despite
everything that threatens to silence us, including the male literary tradition and its critics who have preserved Philomela’s “voice” without knowing what it says” (52).

The silences imposed by the male literary tradition are what Tillie Olsen calls “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot” (Silences 6). Joanna Russ describes these inhibitors as more than illiteracy, poverty and lack of leisure. Cultural prohibitions and biases also preclude women’s articulation of their lives and experience. Charlotte Bronte was advised by Robert Southey “to give up thoughts of becoming a poet: Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and ought not to be.” Ellen Glasgow was told to “stop writing and go back to the South and have some babies.” And Leonard Woolf, supportive of his wife Virginia’s work, commented to Florence Howe, past president of the Modern Language Association and past thirty, “Why does a pretty girl like you want to waste her life in a library?” (qtd. in How to Suppress Women’s Writing 11-12). Russ further enumerates the methods by which the “white male club” suppresses women’s writing as:

1. Denial of Agency: “She didn’t write it; he did” (21).
2. Pollution of Agency: “She wrote it, all right - but she shouldn’t have” (25).
3. The Double Standard of Content: “She did, but look what she wrote about” (40).
4. False Categorizing: “She is not really she [an artist] and it is not really it [serious, of the right genre, aesthetically sound, important, etc.]” (61).
5. Isolation: “She only wrote one of it” or “She wrote it, but it’s only interesting/included in the canon for one, limited reason” (62, 76).

6. Anomalousness: “She wrote it, but there are very few of her” (76).

7. Lack of Role Models: “If women can, why haven’t they?” (93).

To disassemble, or rather, neutralize this codification of women’s silence requires of feminist criticism “much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one’s right to say it. And the will . . . to find the form for one’s own life comprehensions” (Olsen 27). It requires nothing less than a reappropriation of language with which to articulate and valorize gender differences in the text and to constitute and validate a female paradigm for human experience. This project, however, is daunting since language formation, its norms and use have been, for the most part, controlled by men. Consequently, women are forced to conceptualize themselves, their values and experiences within an alien construct, one which not only does not speak for them, but often speaks against, above and beyond them. To cull an understanding of such a world and one’s relationship to it is virtually impossible and engenders inadequate, erroneous self-perceptions.

In a sexist world, symbol systems and conceptual apparatuses have been male creations. These do not reflect the experiences of women, but rather function to falsify our own self-images and experiences . . . It is necessary to grasp the fundamental fact that women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to name ourselves, the world or god. (Daly, Beyond God the Father 7-8)

Women, therefore, have been relegated to inadequate positions of articulation, not because “language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have
been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism or circumlocution” (Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” 255). However, we cannot ignore the fact that “women’s consciousness” has been too long a masculine formulation, “what men have thought women should be”, nor underestimate the susceptibility of women writers “to the aesthetic standards and values of the male tradition, and to male approval and validation” (Showalter, “Toward a Feminist Poetics” 130, 132). Hence the definition of “feminine sensibility” as rendered by men to mean sentiment, intuition, feeling, to the exclusion of sense, intellect, reason (Sukenick, “On Women and Fiction” 32). As absurd or “careless” a perspective as this dichotomy reflects, it is a socio/historical and literary given with which women authors have had to contend. Female experience is replete with examples of male dismissal of women’s intellectual capacities. So women have subverted their intellect in “inferior” forms: diaries, journals, the sentimental novel, so “you are not too much seen as a usurper”; writing about “safe” subjects: house, children, love; refusing the so-called female values, which are not female but a social scheme, and to identify with male values, which are not male but an appropriation by men - or an attribution of men - of all human values, mixed up with the anti-values of domination - violence-oppression and the like. In this mixture, where is your real identity? (Rochefort, “Are Women Writers Still Monsters?” 185)

Or, like Virginia Woolf laments, to suppress truth for the almighty dollar. “I think you will find it extremely difficult to say what you think and make money.” “This is where I think, as a writer, your excruciating difficulty lies: To stand up for your own point of view.” “A certain attitude is required . . . I think that the angle is almost as
important as the thing . . . Now I find my angle incessantly obscured, quite unconsciously no doubt, by the desire of the editor and of the public that a woman should see things from the chary feminine angle (italics mine). My article, written from that oblique point of view, always went down.” And though she praises, and perhaps envies, Joyce and Proust for “their openness, their honesty, their determination to say everything,” she notes that “men are shocked if a woman said what she felt. Yet literature which is always pulling down the blinds is not literature. All that we have ought to be expressed - mind and body - a process of incredible difficulty and danger” (“Speech, Manuscript and Notes” 164-5).

Because we speak and write from a gender-marked, ideologically constrained and linguistically handicapped position, our challenge is “nothing less than to ‘reinvent’ language, . . . to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning” (Felman, qtd. in Showalter, “Wilderness” 254), a language that, for Annie LeClerc and all women, is not oppressive but “loosens the tongue.” Only in this way can women avert what Xaviee Gauthier fears will be a re-entry into the historical process subdued and alienated, speaking and writing as men do; “it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt” (“Is There Such a Thing as Women’s Writing?” 163).

These anthems notwithstanding, we must acknowledge that, as an ideological construct, language inscribes and entraps women in a male-dominated cultural and
historical context. Woman’s experience and its articulation are, consequently, inauthentic and unheard since they are unrecognizable and unrepresentable in a male idiom.

Anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener describe the inevitable mutedness of women dominated by male systems of perception and communication.

The dominant mode may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure their world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones. [They might be] relatively more “inarticulate” when expressing themselves through the idiom of the dominant group, and silent on matters of special concern to them for which no accommodation has been made in it. (Perceiving Women viii)

The frustrating paradox of mutedness as Edwin Ardener defines it is that “[T]he muted structures are ‘there’ but cannot be ‘realized’ in the language of the dominant structure” (22). That is, women have valid experiences and a viable vocabulary by and through which to articulate them; however, because their code is “unsuitable”, they “might sometimes lack the facility to raise to conscious level their unconscious thoughts” (ix). Therefore, men fail to, that is only if they have attempted to, apprehend women’s speech and writing unless they conform to male codes embodied in masculine constructs of “women’s writing”. The irony here is that women continue to write and often prefer that men do not understand them rather than subscribe to the masculine order. As we shall see in an analysis of Trifles by Susan Glaspell, women redefine justice through a code of their own constituted by “trifles” disdained by men as “women’s things”. They
have, as Ardener would suggest, found a way to express themselves “in a form other than direct expository speech” (ix).

In Ardener’s diagram of intersecting circles to illustrate the relationship between the dominant and muted groups, it is clear that some features of women do not fit man’s definition of society. The grey crescent of “Y” outside the dominant circle “X” represents what Ardener calls the “wild”, “a metaphor of the non-social which in confusing ways is vouched for by the senses”, those faculties men have ascribed to women in opposition to their clear, rational judgment (23). For women, this shaded area of “Y” represents “a zone in circle “X” which is ambiguously male and “wild”, a zone which men do not perceive” (24). Showalter further defines the “wild” as always imaginary; “from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the unconscious. In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not know what is in the wild” (“Wilderness” 262).

This is the place from which women’s writing and feminist criticism will emerge.

This is the place where difference will be redefined, not as opposition - male/female.
penis/penis envy - or oppression, but as "multiplicity, ambiguity and heterogeneity which is part of textuality itself"; this is the place where women will forge new tools, linguistic and literary, which will inscribe the "specificity of their experience" into the center of consciousness and culture; this is the place where women will revalidate traditionally feminine forms "(formlessness?) and preoccupations; rediscovering subjectivity, the language of feeling, ourselves" (Jacobus, Reading Woman 30, 32). This is the place where women will dismantle the canon which has designated as "great" those texts which claim to embody "universal human truths", "truths" which reflect the dominant male ideology which has reinforced the oppression, subordination and inferiority of women and barred their entry into the literary tradition unless they are meek, obedient and humble, that is, untrue to themselves. This is the place where feminist re-vision will occur - "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 35).

Although Ardener's circles posit women's imagination outside the dominant masculine model, thereby mitigating their mutedness, he does not provide a schema by which the male reader will now apprehend and comprehend their language. But why would the male reader even deign to attend their efforts? After all, the world is created in man's image, his word is Law, his vision is universal truth. What could a woman writer possibly hope to add to this socio/literary utopia? Nothing - if she is writing and reading
for men. But if she is writing and reading for women, for herself, she is engaging in what Adrienne Rich calls “an act of survival” (35). In her preface to The Resisting Reader, Judith Fetterley writes that her book

is based on the premise that we read and that what we read affects us - drenches us . . . in its assumptions, and that to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read. . . At its best, feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. (viii)

Fetterley continues that, as a subordinated member of the patriarchy, woman is Other, bereft, disinherit, isolated. She is defined as less than human because she is not male, yet she is forced to identify with maleness, even in her experience of literature. The problem is further compounded in our national literature, in which “[T]he experience of being American [universal] is equated with the experience of being male” (xii). The experience of literature, therefore, excludes and isolates women further and renders them powerless to identify themselves in terms of the universal experiences it purports to depict. Her powerlessness is exacerbated by the narrative itself, often a tale of men’s power over women. A diabolical result of this identification with maleness is described by Patrocinio P. Schweickart in relation to The Rainbow.

My affective response to the novel Lawrence did write is bifurcated. On the one hand, because I am a woman, I am implicated in the representation of Ursula and in the destiny Lawrence has prepared for her: man is the son of god, but woman is the daughter of man. Her vocation is to witness his transcendence in rapt silence. On the other hand, Fetterley is correct that I am also induced to identify with Birkin, and in so doing, I am drawn into complicity with the reduction of Ursula, and therefore of myself, to the role of the other. (“Reading Ourselves” 272)
Women are not only subordinated to men, but they are also ineluctably enlisted in their own subordination through this inevitable identification with the male.

Fetterley maintains, however, that women can recover their power and discover themselves by resisting and rejecting the mythologies and ideas about men and women embedded in our culture and inscribed in its literature, and thus in our psyches. Feminist criticism provides the perspective from which women can expose and question assumptions heretofore presented as originating and universal. It is a "unique and powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices . . . which spoke about us and to us and at us but never for us" (xxiv).

If Judith Fetterley seeks to re-educate women readers to reject "the voices of heredity and training" and listen to their own, then Annette Kolodny addresses an inverse dilemma in "Dancing Through the Minesfield". Because the literary tradition is masculine, its themes and concerns male, and the language which encodes it formulated by men, male readers are ill-equipped to "interpret and appreciate women's texts, -duc, in large part, to a lack of prior acquaintance" (282). Women write about the world they inhabit and their daily experience of it within a tradition of prior, influential works by other women. The reader who approaches this fiction without a knowledge of its historical, cultural or narrative context will be sorely challenged to understand it. Though women see neither themselves nor their experiences authentically reflected in male narratives, they comprehend the text because they are immersed in its idiom. Male readers, on the other hand, do not read themselves in women's texts because they cannot
read past the words on the page - nor do they have to. They have, instead, a predominantly male canonical mirror in which to see their image reflected. That is why, as Virginia Woolf observed, the male reader is disposed to dismiss what he cannot understand, impugning women’s writing as offering, “not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental because it differs from his own” (“Women and Fiction” 81).

That “difference in view” includes a difference in values, woman-centered this time, which men fail to or refuse to recognize as significant. Ignorance of an alternate view of the world and its concomitant values, customs and codes because of a lack of exposure is one thing; deliberate blindness to its existence and its rich symbolic processes, and negation of its potential is consummate hubris. With such a reader, the woman writer must “make clear that what appears to be a dispute about aesthetic merit is, in reality a dispute about the contexts of judgment; and what is at issue, then, is the adequacy of the prior assumptions and reading habits brought to bear on the text” (Kolodny 284). Kolodny and Woolf are saying that male readers’ disdain for women’s writing is grounded in the assumption that valiant battles, honorable deaths and births of nations are the stuff of life and, therefore, of literature, and that women’s texts, grounded in the stuff of women’s lives – having babies, raising families, making homes – need not be countenanced. The matter of women’s writing is irrelevant, trivial, and its style reflects its content. Male readers criticize women’s fiction and thus, obliquely, their experiences, from an illiterate perspective because they lack the codes necessary to
translate what appear to be Trifles into the stuff of this world. Kolodny describes the male reader as, “however inadvertently, . . . a different kind of reader and that, where women are concerned, he is often an inadequate reader” (“A Map” 57). Though Tereus silences Philomela specifically to prevent her from revealing his crime of rape and incest, the male literary tradition, written and read, has generally silenced women without even knowing what they might have said.

Kolodny’s observations concerning the recalcitrant male reader derive from her examination of Susan Glaspell’s short story, “A Jury of her Peers”, based on her play of the preceding year Trifles. Elaine Hedges observes that the title changes reflect changes in Glaspell’s thematic concerns. Whereas Trifles emphasizes the supposed insignificance of the female things the two farm women interpret and use to exonerate Minnie Foster, “A Jury of her Peers” stresses the historical/legal place of women in American society. Since women did not yet have the right to vote in 1917 (the year of the story’s composition), they did not have a viable place within the male legal system. In order for Minnie to be treated fairly, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, her peers, must become her advocates because the men are constitutionally and culturally their superiors (“Small Things Reconsidered” 106). In “Generic Translation and Thematic Shift”, Leonard Mustazza states that though “A Jury of Her Peers” is a faithful adaptation of Trifles, Glaspell made some additions. For example, stage directions are now more detailed descriptions of setting, character and dialogue. But more significant is the emotional distance Glaspell creates between the two women so that we read their final identification
as an evolution, not a "meandering toward concurrence" (490, 494). By carefully selecting her details so that they reflect the critical realities of life for frontier women, Glaspell’s themes - woman’s place in society, her isolation, the psychic violence against her, her powerlessness against the patriarchy - “achieve imaginative force and conviction by being firmly rooted in and organically emerging from carefully observed details of a localized way of life” (Hedges 91). W.B. Worthen suggests, in Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater, that our apprehension of the texts differs significantly by virtue of the demands each genre makes on us as reader/ spectator/ interpreter. The observations of these critics will be incorporated into my analysis of Glaspell’s texts as a paradigm of men’s disdain for women’s experiences and their inability or unwillingness to decipher the signs which constitute women’s world. Ironically, because they reflexively privilege the male perspective, the locus of knowledge and truth, they unconsciously forfeit their voice of “law”. The women, on the other hand, readily though uneasily read the signs in Minnie Foster’s kitchen and uncover the “truth”. As a result, unbeknownst to the men, they reconstitute “law” as “justice”, a conception more sensitive to the reality of Minnie’s experience and, in the process, bond in unity of purpose and identification.

The narratives resonate with images of the myth of Philomela and Procne and I will integrate the archetype into Glaspell’s texts to underscore the themes of silence, violation and sorority. Culturally and physiologically silenced, Philomela creates a new poetic by which to communicate her experiences to Procne. By using a quintessentially
female form, she raises her tapestry to a level of art and articulation inconceivable to the patriarchy. Thus Philomela empowers herself and, by extension, Procne, re-defining them within a feminine context of unity and strength capable of unwonted self assertion that resonates throughout the patriarchy. Centuries later, Minnie Foster, silenced by an oppressive husband, communicates her onerous conditions to her neighbors through the unaccustomed confusion in her frontier kitchen. Dismissed by the men as “trifles”, her clues include unbaked bread, an unwiped table, uneven stitching on a quilt and a dead bird. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters not only read but hesitantly interpret Minnie’s signs as emblems of her life. They see, too, their own stifled existence in Minnie’s record. Empathizing with the absent Minnie and recognizing themselves as equally powerless and circumscribed, the women conceal evidence that they recognize as incriminating but which the men ignore as “trifles.” By subverting the law thus, they create a new context in which justice - more human, more humane, more female - re-defines Minnie’s experience and their own as real, valid and significant.

Briefly, the story chronicles the investigation of a murder committed in an isolated Iowa farmhouse. Minnie Wright allegedly choked her husband John as he slept in their bed. Mr. Henderson, the county attorney, Mr. Peters, the sheriff, and Mr. Hale, the farmer who found the body are looking for clues with which to condemn Minnie, while the wives of the two local men are at the house to gather necessities for the jailed woman. Actually, Mrs. Hale is there to keep Mrs. Peters company because she is uncomfortable in Minnie’s house. As the men roam the house and barn looking for clues
to a motive, the women remain in the kitchen. Glaspell thus immediately establishes the opposition between active male space and static female space. But, as Linda Ben-Zvi notes, “locating her play in female space is a radical departure, especially without men to control things even in a female province” (“Susan Glaspell’s Contribution” 153). Other than to criticize or mock the women, including the absent Minnie, the men see nothing relevant to their investigation in the kitchen. And therein lies the irony. The men occupy “male territory” - the murder scene, the outdoors, looking for “something to show anger or - sudden feeling” (Trifles 752) - and ignore “female territory” - the kitchen - assuming that it reveals nothing except poor housekeeping. The women, on the other hand, slowly piece together, like a quilt, a life of quiet desperation from the signs Minnie has left behind, signs they recognize as pieces of their own lives.

The loneliness and isolation which undermine Minnie Wright’s integrity, if not her sanity, are immediately apparent. “[The farmhouse] looked very cold this March morning. It had always been a lonesome looking place. It was down in a hollow, and the poplar trees around it were lonesome looking trees.” As they approach, the men are studiously discussing the crime that has occurred here, but the sight is enough to silence Mrs. Hale and prompt Mrs. Peters to nervously say, “I’m glad you came with me” (“Jury” 280). The isolation is further underscored by Mr. Hale’s reason for coming to the Wright farm the day before. He wanted to persuade John Wright to go in with him on a party telephone; otherwise “they won’t come out this branch road except for a price I can’t pay” and “in this lonesome stretch of road it would be a good thing” (283). Though “the
farmers' wives have their hands full”, Mrs. Hale admits she did not visit Minnie because 
“it never seemed a very cheerful place” (288). Her omission haunts Mrs. Hale throughout
the narrative and I will address its implications later. For now, it underscores Minnie's
isolation.

The weather also heightens the landscape’s desolation. The north wind “cuts” and
“bites” as the entourage rides to the farm. Mrs. Hale worries if her son is dressed warmly
enough for his errand to town. And though a deputy sheriff preceded them to the house
that morning to start a fire by which they could warm themselves, it was so cold
overnight that all of Minnie’s preserves, save one, shattered and were lost. “She’ll feel
awful bad, after all her hard work in the hot weather” (291). The men laugh and dismiss
the women as typically worrying over trifles, whereas their work - a murder investigation
- is far more significant. But Hedges writes that the frontier farm wife’s day extended
from 4:30 A.M. to 11:30 P.M. (“Small Things” 95), and a character in Glaspell’s
“Inheritors” declares, “A country don’t make itself. When the sun was up we were up.
When the sun went down we didn’t.” So when Mrs. Hale defends Minnie to the county
attorney with, “There’s a great deal of work to be done on a farm” (288), she is not just
explaining away dirty towels and pans. She is speaking the existence of all farm women
and, like Glaspell, not sentimentalizing frontier life.

The men are looking for a motive in this crime, “something to show anger, or -
sudden feeling” (293), but Jeannie McKnight, in her essay “American Dream, Nightmare
Underside” pursues an essential truth about farm life in general: “something in the
frontier conditions themselves provoked insanity, particularly in women” (26). Though many women were resilient to the hardships that inevitably arose, and our experience of the frontier may be limited to Caddie Woodlawn and Little House on the Prairie. McKnight explores the ugly, dreary, empty, “rigidly circumscribed lives” of many other farm women, exacerbated by a barren landscape, crippling weather, endless work and unrelieved loneliness. She expands the definition of insanity as “a severe and enduring psychosis which would have resulted in commitment in a more civilized and settled region” to include the “intermittent flareups of bizarre behavior, and /or the kind of feeling disturbances such as melancholia and depression so common to women’s writing” (27). If Mrs. Hale can remember when Minnie Wright was young and lively and wore pretty clothes and sang in the choir - when she was Minnie Foster - surely for Minnie, nostalgia for those times may have hit her with a vengeance “when she snatched a moment here and there to feel” (27). Mrs. Hale tells us that John Wright “was a hard man . . . just to pass the time of day with him - . . . Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (“Jury” 299), that no place “would be any cheerfuler for John Wright’s bein’ in it” (289). And Mr. Hale has tried once before this fateful day to convince Wright to get a phone, “but he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet - guess you know about how much he talked to himself”; Mr. Hale knows that making his appeal to Wright in front of Minnie, that “all the womenfolks liked the telephones, and that in this lonesome stretch of road it would be a good thing”, would be to no avail because “I didn’t know as what his wife wanted made much difference to
John” (283). Childless and living with a man like John Wright, for Minnie, “indulgence in the thought of her loneliness and the monotony of her Herculean struggle” could precipitate serious depression (Krueger, qtd. in McKnight 27).

With her marriage, Minnie has lost her vitality and vivacity, all color and music gone from her life; but for McKnight, the loss of the society of other women is Minnie’s real tragedy. Centuries earlier, Proca, having been separated from Philomela for five years, misses her sister and seeks her companionship. Tereus pretends to bring Philomela to Proca out of kindness, though his true motives are base. John Wright isolates Minnie simply by marrying her. Though the men’s motives differ, the [re]unions of the women in these texts signifies a triumph by the female spirit over the will of men. Because her clothes were shabby and “bore the marks of much making over”, Minnie kept to herself, thus missing the companionship and diversion of quilting bees and Ladies Aid projects, activities which mitigated somewhat “the sense of powerlessness isolation could produce” (Hedges 102). Mrs. Peters has only just met Minnie, but it has been more than a year since Mrs. Hale has visited, though they’ve known each other for over thirty years. Her work and children have kept Mrs. Hale busy, but John Wright’s temperament, evident throughout his homestead, have kept her away from Minnie. “I could’ve come. I stayed away because it weren’t cheerful - and that’s why I ought to have come. I - I’ve never liked this place . . . it’s a lonesome place, and always was. I wish I had come by to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now -” (“Jury” 298). McKnight posits the origin of Minnie’s depression in her loss of a “female world” where “friendship and support
provided certain important emotional functions: ‘Within this secure and empathetic world women could share sorrows, anxieties, and joys, confident that other women had experienced similar emotions’” (Smith-Rosenberg, qtd. in McKnight 33). In a moment of true empathy with Minnie after the discovery of the dead bird, Mrs. Peters remembers, “When I was a girl, my kitten - there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes - before I could get there - If they hadn’t held me back I would have - hurt him” (“Jury” 301-2). And after Mrs. Hale, convinced that Wright had killed the bird because it sang, the way he’d killed Minnie’s song, muses on the utter and profound stillness of the house, Mrs. Peters speaks again. “I know what stillness is,” she said in a queer, monotonous voice. “When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died - after he was two years old - and me with no other then - I know what stillness is” (302-3). Mrs. Hale recognizes that “identification, not complementarity, is the psychological mechanism that draws women together” (Abel, “Merging Identities” 415). “We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things - it’s all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren’t - why do you and I understand? Why do we know - what we know this minute?” (“Jury” 303).

Though their experiences may be analogous, the women have only now recognized their interrelatedness and, in the case of Mrs. Peters, articulated what appear to be repressed memories and emotions. Whether or not these women tempered or denied their feelings because their husbands are uncommunicative or because self-restraint is the condition of the frontier wife, it is clear that Minnie could no longer
maintain a posture of stoicism. She does not keep a diary or write letters, (as McKnight's historical sources did), but the women read the effects of her solitude in the "queer stitches" of Minnie's quilt blocks. I will examine the quilt as a symbol of women's writing in more depth shortly, but it is important to examine its significance in a frontier context first. Mothers taught their daughters to sew in "small, exact stitches as a badge of needlework skill, a source of self-esteem, and status, through the recognition and admiration of other women." The precise stitching also instilled "habits of patience, neatness and diligence" and were a means by which "to quiet oneself, to relieve distress or alleviate loneliness" (Hedges 103). So when Minnie's heretofore even stitching goes awry, the women recognize the lapse "as if she didn't know what she was about" ("Jury" 295) and Mrs. Peters wonders what "she was so - nervous about?" (296). Even quilting cannot soothe Minnie. According to Hedges, the log cabin pattern of Minnie's quilt symbolizes the hardships and heroics of pioneer life. The central red square represents the hearth, the center of the home over which the woman presides, ministering to the emotional and physical needs of the family. Woman's role as culture bearer and civilizer of the frontier in the pioneering process is celebrated here. In her narrative context, however, Minnie's quilt - utilitarian, therapeutic, a historical document, woman's art - is bitterly and poignantly ironic (105).

In Sister's Choice, Elaine Showalter writes that Minnie's quilt is sewn with the "common threads of American women's culture and writing. Both theme and form in women's writing, piecing and patchwork, have also become metaphors for a Female
aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politic of feminist survival” (146). To suggest, however, that the form emerges “naturally from womanly impulses of nurturance and thrift”, that women have a natural propensity for “quilting as an expressive mode” marginalizes women’s work as domestic and denies it the status of great transformative art. Showalter cautions that “[B]ecause of the devaluation, even stigma of the domestic, the feminine and craft within the value systems of cultural history, the incorporation of quilt methods and metaphors in American women’s writing has always been risky. Quilts, like those who write about them, are thought to be trifling “ (147, italics mine). However, it is precisely because quilts and their makers occupy a “sphere outside of high culture” that only Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are able to read Minnie’s stitching as the anguish of a troubled spirit unable to create an orderly art. “Women not only made beautiful and functional objects, but expressed their own convictions on a wide variety of subjects in a language for the most part comprehensible only to other women” (Mainardi, qtd. in Showalter 192). Ironically, this creative outlet, valued by the patriarchy solely for its utilitarianism, allowed women to communicate thoughts and feelings which would have otherwise gone unexpressed.

Thousands of years before Minnie Wright’s oppression and depression were deciphered by her neighbors, Procne read a similar text in her sister’s tapestry. Tereus mutilated Philomela, believing, in his arrogance, that without a tongue, she could never communicate his identity. “However, although people then could not write, they could tell a story without speaking because they were marvelous craftsmen . . . Philomela
accordingly turned to her loom. She had a greater motive to make clear the story she wove than any artist ever had.” And Procne, still in mourning, unrolled the tapestry and saw Philomela and Tereus “unmistakable. With horror she read what had happened, all as plain to her as if in print” (Hamilton 270-1). Regardless of whether or not their aesthetic form is gender-marked, the fact remains that even with centuries separating them, both women transcended patriarchal contempt for their art and through it subverted the very systems that would have condemned them.

The quilt is not only a hieroglyph of Minnie’s life; it is a metaphor for the manner in which the women read the disparate signs in her kitchen and construct or piece together the narrative of her oppressed, circumscribed existence and Glaspell’s themes. The fabric patches in Minnie’s sewing basket are discarded fragments of her life - a threadbare dress, tattered bedding, a worn curtain - which, when sorted and matched, coordinated and contrasted, and finally sewn together, reveal a general pattern which emerges with the finished quilt. In the same way, the unbaked bread, the half-wiped table and the dirty pans indicate to the women “an important discovery that forced Minnie Foster out of the pattern of her chores” (Alkalay-Gut, “The Importance of Trifles” 3).

Even Mrs. Hale, who “hated to see things half done” is reluctant to leave her own kitchen, though she knows “[t]t was no ordinary thing that called her away” (“Jury” 279). And once in Minnie’s kitchen, she sees “[t]hings begun - and not finished” and wonders what could have interrupted Minnie. “‘I don’t see any signs of anger around here. I don’t - She stopped. It was as if her mind tripped on something” (293).
The county attorney, on the other hand, reads the dirty towels and pans as indifferent housekeeping, which makes Minnie "suspect as a woman, and this anti-feminine behavior would indicate potential homicidal tendencies inconceivable in a good wife" (Alkalay-Gut 3). Mrs. Hale defends Minnie as the hardworking farm wife they all are, though she later realizes that the towels were probably soiled by the deputy who had preceded them to the house to start a fire that morning, and that Minnie's preserves shattered because the house had been left unheated the night before. Nevertheless, defined within the domestic context men have prescribed for women, Minnie's unkept kitchen reflects the aberrant, "anti-feminine" behavior she later manifests by strangling her husband. Mrs. Hale also worries that Minnie has left the bedroom untidy as well, not only because the men will criticize her "homemaking instinct" again, but because she fears they are "trying to get her own house to turn against her." Paradoxically, if Minnie's guilt is inscribed in this male construct of the "good wife" which she violates with her "indifferent housekeeping", then her innocence is equally inscribed therein.

From jail, she only asks about her preserves and for her shawl and apron "to make her feel more natural. If you're used to wearing an apron-" Hedges states that, within Glaspell's thematic context, the kitchen is not nurturing and the cult of domesticity is a trap. Minnie has merely exchanged one jail for another and, by asking for her apron, donned her "prison garb" (106). But if the men are doing the reading, incorrect though they may be, by asking for her apron, Minnie could not possibly have killed John Wright.
Regardless, since the house is Minnie’s purview, the men will neither acknowledge nor comprehend any clues they might find couched in a feminine idiom. They are comfortable leaving the women in the kitchen - where they belong - because there’s “nothing important here . . . nothing here but kitchen things”, nothing relevant to the male enterprise of a murder investigation. Here is where Glaspell inverts the macho-based detective story - by placing all the clues within the marginal female sphere created by men and their interpretation within the marginal female idiom ignored by men. The men are looking for clear, empirical evidence, “something to show anger - or sudden feeling”, whereas the women intuit the slow, unrelenting accumulation of violations and defeats which drove Minnie to kill John Wright, modes of thinking ascribed to each gender by the male. Even as Lewis Hale tells the story of his grisly discovery and implies that Wright was a difficult man, indifferent to Minnie’s needs, the county attorney discounts the suggestion. “Let’s talk about that a little later . . . I’m anxious now to get along to just what happened” (“Jury” 283, italics mine). And when Mrs. Hale describes the farm as dreary, just as much because of John Wright’s presence as its isolated location, Henderson ignores the feelings implicit in her observation. “I’d like to talk to you about that a little later. I’m anxious to get the lay of things upstairs” (289, italics mine). Minnie told Mr. Hale she did not hear Wright being strangled and wake up because she was on the inside and “I sleep sound.” The county attorney will use this remark against her. If she were a dutiful wife, she would have heard her husband being murdered. Though at the time of their discussion concerning the method by which
Wright was killed the women do not yet recognize the implications of his being strangled, the men think it was "a funny way to kill a man". They cannot understand why the killer did not use the gun in the house. In the play, Mrs. Peters concludes, "It must have been done awful crafty" (752, italics mine). For Minnie and Glaspell, the rope is narratively and thematically a perfect murder weapon. Minnie strangles Wright, just as he strangled her bird and, by extension, the life out of her. If she had used the gun, a symbol of male power, Minnie would have unimaginatively substituted one form of male oppression for another. Instead, by using the rope, doing it "awful crafty", Minnie has fashioned a more creative, feminine response, one the men cannot "unravel". As noted earlier, Annette Kolodny described the male reader as "inadequate" where women are concerned. Judith Fetterley elaborates this view of inadequacy with her conclusion that men are not just unable to read Minnie's text; they are unable to recognize it as a text because they cannot imagine that women have stories. Textuality is equated with a masculine subject and a masculine point of view. Consequently, their investigation is based on their understanding of a text and how to read it. They are looking for signs of forced entry and trying to understand why the gun was not used rather than how the killer could lie beside her victim or why the rope was used instead. Ironically it is the men who would not recognize a clue if they came upon it, not the women, because Minnie's kitchen is not a text to them and, therefore, void of any significance for their investigation ("Reading About Reading" 147-8).
It is clear that Minnie has murdered her husband. We do not doubt the validity of the clues and their interpretation by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. Nevertheless, the women revise and suppress the evidence that might be used against Minnie, assuming the men could read it as such. And we, law-abiding citizens all, applaud when Mrs. Hale shoves the box containing the dead bird into her pocket. Helene Keyssar writes that Glaspell builds our complicity with the two women. “By making us acknowledge a woman’s world, the play exposes a space usually ignored on-stage, and once we see this inner life, the murder appears justified” (Feminist Theater 26). The knowledge that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to about themselves, each other and Minnie does not derive from some ephemeral connection women instinctively share, nor from some masculine construct of a deus ex machina necessary to resolve a narrative dilemma that cannot resolve itself. Obviously, “A Jury of Her Peers”, double the length of Trifles, is more dense and textured than its dramatic antecedent. In adapting her play to short story form, Glaspell amplified concise stage directions and succinct dialogue into more elaborate revelations of setting and character and their interrelatedness, thus creating a more humanly complex conclusion.

W.B. Worthen theorizes that readers of “Jury” are more engaged with the text because of a transformation effected by Mrs. Hale upon them that spectators of Trifles cannot undergo. In “Jury”, the narrative point of view is clearly Mrs. Hale’s as she interprets Minnie’s environment in relation to her own. As a victim of patriarchal ideology herself, Mrs. Hale reads the clues in Minnie’s kitchen “within codes of narration
already inscribed as feminine, as illegitimate or trivial alongside the masculine strategies of detection practiced by the authorities” (Modern Drama 50-1). She wonders what might have interrupted Minnie and worries that her untidy kitchen will turn against her, that it is a sign of unfeminine (i.e. murderous) behavior. Worthen states that reading “Jury” “requires the reconstruction of the “immasculated” reader, defined by Judith Fetterley as conditioned “to think like men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values” (The Resisting Reader xx), within the female narrative voice; that is, to create what Patrocinio Schweickart calls a reading strategy of “connection” rather than mastery (qtd. in Worthen 51). The reader must abandon the prejudices of the men in the story and learn to read within Mrs. Hale’s perspective in order to criticize the relationship between gender and interpretive authority, what Worthen calls “the signal narrative strategy” of “Jury” (50).

Mrs. Hale’s reading of Minnie’s kitchen as the text of Minnie’s life reveals the absent woman to us. To reject her narrative perspective is to align ourselves with the men instead, who look at Minnie’s life but do not see it. In Trifles, however, Mrs. Hale’s narrative voice is absent, the voice that reverses “immasculation” and makes reading a gendered activity in “Jury”. Consequently, lacking an informed perspective, we cannot see the play’s events through the women’s eyes, and though the play urges us to believe they are correct, we are only accessories to their conclusions.

The figuration of reading as a gendered activity in “Jury” works through our identification with Mrs. Hale’s perspective, a kind of reading that is explicitly interested, biased, engaged. Readers of “Jury”, male and female, cross the boundary into a feminist reading practice. The audience of Trifles can observe this activity and sympathize with it, but only from a
distance, the explicitly “masculine” distance with which the realistic theater “others” its objects. (52)

Worthen defines “othering” as the tendency of the realistic theater to stage the social “other” while simultaneously protecting the audience from the consequences of such contact, thereby belying its designation as “realistic” (33).

The role of spectator, literally and figuratively, is a “damning” one. Mrs. Hale has “seen” Minnie’s life deteriorate over twenty years and has done nothing, an omission she calls “a crime”. However, as readers transformed within Mrs. Hale’s informed perspective, we “see” Minnie by rejecting the codified blindness of the men even as they “look” past Minnie’s life. Trifles, on the other hand, “exposes but maintains the subject/object, male/female dichotomies that the story brilliantly elides in the process of reading” (52). Whereas “Jury” successfully transforms reading into a political practice and thus allows us to forsake the blindness of the spectator, Trifles, limited by a form that cannot enunciate a narrative voice that recuperates the spectator, does not offer an alternative way of seeing.

Whereas Worthen maintains that the form of Trifles precludes a true and complete empathetic response to Minnie and the two farm women available to the transformed reader of “Jury”, Leonard Mustazza concurs in that the extended form of “Jury” allows Glaspell to create an emotional distance between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters so that their self and reciprocal understanding evolve naturally from the text, a narrative device less accessible to her in the more restricted form of the drama. Both texts powerfully depict Minnie’s plight, but it will be helpful, nevertheless, to note differences
between the two which contribute to a deeper understanding of the farm women and their motivations. The play begins in Minnie’s kitchen, described as gloomy and disorderly. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters stand together, away from the men, nervous and disturbed as Lewis Hale recounts what he found here the day before. Though the men and women are physically polarized, the county attorney still exercises authority over all of them: inviting (ordering?) the women to warm themselves by the fire; chastising Sheriff Peters for not leaving someone overnight to make sure nothing was touched; directing Hale’s story so that he does not digress or interpret events. The women move physically and emotionally closer as the narrative progresses, but it is clear that even though the men are allied in their investigation, the hierarchy Henderson maintains reinforces their separatedness. When Minnie’s shattered preserves are discovered and again when the three men patronize them for worrying over “trifles,” Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters move together. However, when the county attorney enlists Mrs. Peters to “keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us”, he distances her from Mrs. Hale by aligning Mrs. Peters with the patriarchal system of law, a position she occupies as the sheriff’s wife and which she reiterates in her defense of the men’s “snoopin’ and criticisin’” as “no more than their duty.” Throughout the play, she vacillates between an identification with her husband and an identification with Minnie. Until she makes her commitment, there is an emotional and attitudinal distance between her and Mrs. Hale.

In its longer exposition, the story, on the other hand, sets up narrative and thematic tensions before we even get to the farm. The cold, barren landscape is repeated
in Minnie’s home and life. In *Trifles*, when Henderson asks Mrs. Hale why she did not visit Minnie, she answers that it never seemed a cheerful place. In “Jury”, Mrs. Hale cannot cross the threshold when they arrive at the house (before Henderson asks her anything), not because a murder has been committed there, but “because she hadn’t crossed it before. Time and time again it had been in her mind” to visit Minnie Foster, but she never did and “Minnie Foster would go from her mind” (“Jury” 280-1). She articulates her guilt more poignantly later, when she recognizes how lonely and desperate Minnie had been, but the suggestion of it is evident this early in the story. Mrs. Hale reluctantly leaves her work half done to accompany the men and Mrs. Peters. After the county attorney insults Minnie’s housekeeping, she says, “I’d hate to have men comin’ into my kitchen - snoopin’ around and criticisin’.” She can identify with Minnie here, not only because “farmers’ wives have their hands full”, but because the men would deduce that she lacked “the homemaking instinct” also if they went to her house now, while she was gone, having “left in such a hurry” - as Minnie had. She looks around the kitchen and notes that it is not only untidy but that chores have been left half done. She remembers her own kitchen and wonders what had interrupted Minnie. After all, a murder investigation had interrupted her. What could have caused Minnie to leave her work undone? This identification with Minnie becomes more telling later when Mrs. Hale answers her own question.

When the play opens, the two women appear allied, physically and temperamentally. In the story, however, we get a very different sense of Mrs. Hale’s
opinion of Mrs. Peters. Small and thin and with a weak voice, Mrs. Peters does not resemble a sheriff’s wife. Her predecessor, on the other hand, “had a voice that somehow seemed to be backing up the law with every word” (280). Instead, Mrs. Peters speaks “nervously”, “timidly”, “apologetically”; yet Henderson names her “one of us”, looking at Mrs. Hale all the while but excluding her from this alliance. Here, too, as in the play, he enlists Mrs. Peters’ help, assuming that because she is “married to the law”, she will read the clues as he would. Mr. Hale ironically undermines her usefulness to the investigation by intimating that the women would not recognize a clue if they saw one. Throughout Trifles, the men’s words and attitudes condescend to the women and their world. In “Jury”, Glaspell describes this condescension as “laughter”, “superiority”, a “pleasantry”, a “throwing up of hands”. Nevertheless, Mrs. Peters acquiesces to them in her role of sheriff’s wife for a disturbingly long time.

In the play, Mrs. Peters’ identification with the law is underscored by her ambivalence. Although she is still ambivalent in the story, her identification is complicated by an apparent early distrust by Mrs. Hale. After the men leave the two in the kitchen, confident that they would never tamper with any evidence they might find if they recognized it as such, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters look around and silently notice Minnie’s interrupted work. In the play, immediately after defending the men as “doing their duty”, Mrs. Peters refers to a set loaf of bread while Mrs. Hale picks up the baked one outside the breadbox and abruptly drops it, turning instead to the shattered bottles of preserves. In the story, however, as she picks up the bread, Mrs. Hale wonders to herself
why Minnie never got to put it in the breadbox and looks around at the work left half done. "... then she glanced around and saw that Mrs. Peters was watching her - and she didn’t want Mrs. Peters to get that feeling she had got of work begun and then - for some reason - not finished" (290). At this point, Mrs. Hale cannot possibly know what had interrupted Minnie, but she knows, as all farm wives do, that only something extraordinary would have kept Minnie from baking her bread. She does not want Mrs. Peters wondering the same thing and coming to the wrong (though right) conclusion about Minnie.

She examines the clothes they’ve gathered for Mrs. Peters to take to the jail, reminisces about the lively, pretty Minnie Foster of twenty years ago, and "with a carefullness in which there was something tender, she folded the shabby clothes ... She looked at Mrs. Peters and there was something in the other woman’s look that irritated her. ‘She don’t care,’ she said to herself. ‘Much difference it makes to her whether Minnie Foster had pretty clothes when she was a girl’” (292). She is very protective of Minnie, out of friendship and guilt, and doubts Mrs. Peters could understand Minnie’s situation, being new to town and a sheriff’s wife as well. But when she looks at Mrs. Peters again, she is not so sure about her indifference, "... in fact, she hadn’t at any time been perfectly sure about Mrs. Peters. She had that shrinking manner, and yet her eyes looked as if they could see a long way into things” (292, italics mine). Mrs. Peters may speak in a thin, nervous voice and timidly acquiesce to the men, but Mrs. Hale’s
dawning recognition of her ability to “see a long way into things” is the beginning of her change in attitude. Mrs. Peters is more complex than Mrs. Hale had thought; though she continues to speak like a sheriff’s wife for a while longer, she is not merely an echo of her husband’s legal pieties. In the play, Mrs. Peters simply takes Minnie’s shawl from behind the door; in the story, she stands looking at it for a minute. Though Glaspell does not tell us what Mrs. Peters is thinking, as she does when Mrs. Hale looks at her shabby clothes and remembers a young, vibrant Minnie, the fact that Mrs. Peters hesitates over the shawl suggests that she too is seeing the ghost of Minnie Foster. She thinks Minnie’s request for her apron odd, for what will get her dirty in jail. But then she realizes that it will probably make her feel “more natural. If you’re used to wearing an apron.” (292), as if doubting the equation between naturalness and aprons. At this point, Mrs. Hale asks if she thinks Minnie killed Wright. Earlier she had not wanted Mrs. Peters to even suspect that she was considering this possibility so that she would not start thinking it too. Now she trusts her enough to broach the subject. But when she asks, “a frightened look blurred the other things [the shawl and apron and their implications] in Mrs. Peter’s eyes” (292). As the story progresses and Mrs. Hale repeatedly sees that look in Mrs. Peters’ eyes, it becomes clear that when Mrs. Peters sees “through a thing to something else”, she is not only reading the significance of Minnie’s signs left behind in her kitchen, but connecting those signs and significances to her own life.

Looking at the half wiped table and half empty bucket of sugar and reading them as the “signs of anger” the men are looking for, Mrs. Hale “releases herself” from her
reverie and complains again about the men snooping around. "But Mrs. Hale," said the sheriff’s wife, "the law is the law." In *Trifles*, the characters are delineated by name in the left hand margin as in a script, but in "Jury", each time Mrs. Peters speaks the law, she is "the sheriff’s wife". In the play, Mrs. Hale concedes "I s’pose tis", and suggests they loosen their coats. She answers the same way in the story, but adds "aggressively", "The law is the law - and a bad stove is a bad stove." The men have to do their duty and Minnie had to do hers - with inferior equipment, in an inferior environment, enduring an inferior existence. Having left her own bread unbaked, Mrs. Hale can identify with Minnie. "The thought of Minnie Foster trying to bake in that oven - and the thought of her never going over to see Minnie Foster -" (294). Again her identification with Minnie is compounded by her guilt. Mrs. Peters responds to the broken stove in her own way. "A person gets discouraged - and loses heart." But she also "looked from the stove to the sink - to the pail of water which had been carried in from the outside", viewing in her mind’s eye the hardships of the frontier wife. At this point, Mrs. Hale "gently" suggests they loosen their coats. Her demeanor and attitude toward Mrs. Peters have softened as the two women move emotionally closer together and to Minnie.

Mrs. Peters finds Minnie’s sewing basket and they examine the quilt pieces, laying out the log cabin pattern. When they wonder aloud whether Minnie was going to "quilt it or knot it", the men, having descended from the bedroom, laugh at their concern, and go out to the barn and "get that cleared up". They are, after all, involved in a murder investigation and the women look like they are putting together a fabric puzzle. Never
mind that without those quilts, the men would freeze on a day just like this one; they simply assume that the quilts will be on their beds, never considering the work involved in getting them there. The words "quilt" and "knot" are technical terms derived from women's work. Quilting the blocks means stitching through the fabric layers at close intervals with a needle and thread; knotting the blocks means joining the quilt layers via short lengths of yarn drawn through from the back and tied or knotted at wide intervals across the top (Hedges 107). Since the men do not value the work, they do not value the words that describe it. Because of their disdain, they will not recognize the ironic pun Mrs. Hale utters at the end of the narrative. Though in the play the women look abashed when the men laugh at their question, in both texts Mrs. Hale remarks resentfully that taking up their time with little things while they are waiting for the men to complete their investigation is nothing to laugh at, nothing "strange". She is defensive here, having unconsciously spoken the polarization between men's and women's spheres she has internalized from the patriarchal value system. And "the sheriff's wife" reverts apologetically. "Of course they've got awful important things on their minds." But this time Mrs. Hale does not turn on her; instead, they continue examining Minnie's quilt. The juxtaposition of the men's investigation to the women's examination of Minnie's quilt is ironic in that the quilt, dismissed as "little things", manifests more significances than the men's search will elicit.

In "Jury", Mrs. Peters finds Minnie's erratic stitching. Mrs. Hale has been "looking at the fine, even sewing, and preoccupied with thoughts of the woman who had
done that sewing” when Mrs. Peters says, “in a troubled way” that “it looks as if she didn’t know what she was about!” Mrs. Peters must hand the block to Mrs. Hale for her to see the confused stitching. “Their eyes met - something flashed to life, passed between them; then, as if with an effort, they seemed to pull away from each other” (295).

“Seemed to pull away” - but did not. The understanding between the two women is heightened by the fact that they both touch the fabric square Minnie had touched, the physical contact cementing their connection. Earlier, Mrs. Hale had hesitated to wipe off the table for fear of arousing Mrs. Peters’ suspicions; now she nonchalantly repairs Minnie’s sewing and Mrs. Peters offers only perfunctory protest. While the woman is sewing, Mrs. Peters timidly asks Mrs. Hale what she thinks Minnie was so nervous about.

In *Trifles*, Mrs. Hale asks the question and Mrs. Peters defends Minnie, saying her own sewing is often “queer” when she is tired. However, Glaspell has not established enough textual support in the play as yet for Mrs. Peters’ defense and superficial identification. In “Jury”, on the other hand, Mrs. Hale’s identification with Minnie is clear and so her defense is logical. Moreover, the internal questioning and searching we read Mrs. Peters undergo makes the question from her reasonable. It also provides her another narrative moment to “peer into something” as she tries to discern the reason for Minnie’s nervousness and, perhaps, her own. Clearly, Mrs. Hale’s response is more than matter-of-fact. While Mrs. Peters looks for paper and string with which to wrap up Minnie’s things, Mrs. Hale looks again at one piece of “crazy sewing”. Comparing it to the dainty, accurate stitching of the other blocks, she notes “the difference was startling. Holding
this block made her feel queer, as if the distracted thoughts of the woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself were communicating themselves to her” (297).

Mrs. Hale’s contemplation of Minnie’s blocks and the presentiment that her “distracted thoughts” were communicating themselves to her through the “crazy sewing” are reminiscent of Procne’s response to Philomela’s tapestry. The tapestry image is precise and Philomela is confident Procne will read and interpret it correctly. Minnie, on the other hand, has not deliberately drawn pictures of her life, nor does she expect that anyone will read her kitchen as a metaphor for her existence. Nonetheless, both women have used an idiom that subverts the power of the patriarchy to oppress and silence them. Rejecting the language of men, either by necessity or inadvertence, Philomela and Minnie create, instead, a semiotics which empowers them rather than marginalizes their experiences. Resorting to an art quintessentially female, Philomela weaves her story so skillfully, it cannot be misread by her sister. And the absent Minnie Foster becomes the unwitting “transmitter” or “sender” in this schema in which “only the women are competent ‘receivers’ or ‘readers’ of her message, since they alone share not only her context (the supposed insignificance of kitchen things), but, as a result, the conceptual patterns that make up her world” (Kolodny, “A Map” 42).

The strangled bird the women find next is not only a symbol of the life-strangled out of Minnie. It continues the connection backward through the centuries to another silenced woman. Philomela’s transformation into a nightingale saves her life in the
original myth and enables her to speak her violator’s name in her song forever. Although we have seen how various mythologizers attempt to silence her narratively, linguistically, stylistically, historically and culturally, Philomela has obviously survived their efforts eloquently. For Minnie, the bird represents the song and color that had been in her life before she married John Wright. She tries to recapture that former song in her bird but, as Mrs. Hale observes, “Wright wouldn’t like the bird - a thing that sang” (302). The women recognize the symbolic connection between the bird’s death and Wright’s, though Mrs. Peters nervously tries to discount it by minimizing its significance within her inherited context of masculine disdain for woman’s intuition. “‘It’s a good thing the men couldn’t hear us! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a - dead canary.’ She hurried over that. ‘As if that could have anything to do with -with - My, wouldn’t they laugh?’” To which Mrs. Hale mutters, “Maybe they would - maybe they wouldn’t” (304). Both women apprehend that though the men dismissed all the other clues out of ignorant contempt for women’s things, they may recognize the dead bird as the motive they have been looking for.

The first time the men come in after the bird is discovered, the county attorney indifferently asks if they have decided whether Minnie was going to quilt or knot her blocks. “‘We think,’ began the sheriff’s wife in a flurried voice, ‘that she was going to - knot it.’ He was too preoccupied to notice the change that came in her voice on that last” (301, italics mine). Mrs. Peters has spoken ironically, but it escapes Henderson, as all her comments do. Glaspell underscores the irony by referring to Mrs. Peters as “the sheriff’s
wife” as she begins to separate herself from that identity, heightening her verbal, psychological and behavioral rebellion. When Henderson ignores her remark this time, she does not defend him as preoccupied with his duty. When he notices the cage and asks about the bird, the women are united in their explanation that the cat got it. But Mrs. Peters maintains the charade, in open defiance of the law to which she is “married”, when she lies that the cat is gone “now” because “they’re superstitious, you know; they leave.” Leonard Mustazza observes that by uttering such a banality, Mrs. Peters “plays at being the shallow woman who believes in superstition, thus consciously playing one of the roles the men expect her to assume” (495). Predictably, “the county attorney did not heed her” as she reappropriates and transforms a male myth of female behavior and, thereby, subverts the authority of the patriarchy while ostensibly acting within it - all while he is trying to figure out why there are no signs of forced entry and why the killer used a rope.

When the men come in again, Henderson does not inspect the items Mrs. Peters has selected for Minnie. “Oh, I guess they’re not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out . . . No; Mrs. Peters doesn’t need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff’s wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs. Peters?” (“Jury” 305). This time, Mrs. Hale cannot see her face, her eyes, but she hears Mrs. Peters reply, “Not - just that way.” Again a pun that goes undetected. Earlier she had been enlisted as “one of them” to assist in the investigation, or at least not thwart it. Now its outcome rests with her. Mrs. Hale’s eyes force Mrs. Peters to turn toward her, “having turned away at that
suggestion of being married to the law.” What is she looking at, what does she see, as she peers into that private place that is her life, her eyes averted from the men. She turns back after the men leave and the women look unflinchingly at each other; then Mrs. Hale guides their gaze to the hidden box containing the dead bird “that would make certain the conviction of the other woman - that woman who was not there and yet who had been there with them all through the hour” (306). “What was, evokes hauntingly the image of what might have been. And more, what should have been” (Bell and Ohmann, “Virginia Woolf’s Criticism” 59). Mrs. Peters rushes forward and takes the box, trying to force it into her pocket. It does not fit and Mrs. Hale must conceal it, but Mrs. Peters’ attempt affirms their understanding of each other and their loyalty to Minnie. At the end, when Henderson facetiously asks again what they had deduced Minnie was going to do with her quilt, Mrs. Hale answers this time, “We call it - knot it, Mr. Henderson”, precisely directing her pun at the patriarchal symbol they have rejected and against which they are protecting Minnie. Though she cannot be transformed, as was Philomela, Minnie tries to recapture the music of her youth with her bird, but Wright silences it as he has silenced her spirit. The women, however, speak for her as well as themselves when they say No! to the patriarchy and Yes! to sisterhood. The physical image of the bird is inverted here from Philomela’s myth, but its symbolic power is the same. It will continue to sing opposition to the oppressor as a perpetual warning to all women.

The discovery of the dead bird, a poignant symbol of Minnie’s life, senselessly killed by a vindictive John Wright, emboldens Mrs. Peters to reject the patriarchal
language and assumptions that have circumscribed her life and to align herself with Mrs. Hale and the absent Minnie. But the bird, in and of itself, does not prompt her actions. Rather it initiates the process by which Mrs. Peters recovers the memories of her own anger, desolation and loss which mirror Minnie’s exactly. When she first finds the cage, Mrs. Peters thinks it odd, given Minnie’s circumstances, to imagine a bird in this house. Mrs. Hale, full of recriminations for not having visited Minnie more often, does not know if she had a bird, though “I should think she would’ve wanted a bird”, bitterly considering Minnie’s alternative of being alone with John Wright. Here lies the paradox of Minnie’s existence: because of John Wright, she needs companionship, and because of John Wright, Mrs. Hale cannot provide it. “I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now ‘She did not put it into words” (“Jury” 298). The broken birdcage door fascinates the women recognizing that “someone must have been - rough with it”, their eyes meet - “startled, questioning, apprehensive. For a moment, neither spoke nor stirred.” When they speculate as to what might have happened to the bird, neither woman really believes that it got sick and died, and the broken door commands their gaze once more.

When they find the bird, killed as it was, they understand. “The eyes of the two women met - this time clung together in a look of dawning comprehension, of growing horror” (300). Heretofore in Trifles, the women look at the things in the kitchen, not each other, with “dawning comprehension”. Only after the discovery of the bird and the successive intrusions by the men do they begin to look at each other with understanding,
significance and solidarity. In “Jury”, the women are always looking at each other and into each other, “seeing through a thing to something else” in silent and reluctant assent. This is what W.B. Worthen described as the difference between reading from an informed perspective and merely “spectating” the events. Now when the women speak, it is “as if they were afraid of what they were saying, but as if they could not help saying it” (301). Both women understand Minnie’s motivation, but from different perspectives. Mrs Hale slowly pieces together Minnie’s life: no children, an oppressive environment, a taciturn, authoritarian husband. “No. Wright wouldn’t like the bird - a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that too.” But Mrs. Peters identifies directly with Minnie’s experience and feelings. “When I was a girl,” said Mrs. Peters, under her breath, “my kitten - there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes - before I could get there - If they hadn’t held me back I would have - hurt him” (302). She knows how it feels to have a precious, beloved pet killed out of sheer malice. And she knows how it feels to want to avenge its death. Yet, uneasy with this revelation, and unable, as yet, to accept the truth and its implications for all three women, she insists “wildly”, “We don’t know who killed him. We don’t know.” “I knew John Wright” is Mrs. Hale’s answer and she does not move.

Then Mrs. Hale muses on the resounding silence before and after the bird. “If there had been years and years of - nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful - still - after the bird was still.” And again, Mrs. Peters identifies with Minnie, this time with the sound of silence. “I know what stillness is,” she said in a queer, monotonous voice. “When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died - after he was two years
old - and me with no other then - I know what stillness is,” repeated Mrs. Peters in just
that same way” (302-3). When Mrs. Peters speaks, “[i]t was as if something within her
not herself had spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something she did not know as
herself” (302). This revelation is critical not only for an identification with Minnie, but
for Mrs. Peters to finally and honestly recognize herself. “The self she doesn’t recognize
as “herself” is the self who knows what she knows because of the life she has lived. She
reads this life in Minnie’s story and contacts that self from which she has been
systematically alienated by virtue of being married to the law and subsequently required
to read like a man” (Fetterley 149). Though she falters temporarily when she laughingly
dismisses the significance of the dead bird, when Henderson officiously remarks that she
is “married to the law” and, therefore, trustworthy, Mrs. Peters turns away - to look at and
listen to and affirm the self that spoke to her just moments earlier - and to reject the
formulations and assumptions that have oppressed her for so long. Throughout “Jury”,
we read the women developing a private understanding of themselves and Minnie and
their relationship to her, Mrs. Hale by imaginatively identifying with Minnie’s plight,
Mrs. Peters by having suffered analogous losses. This understanding manifests itself not
only in their words but in their tacit agreement to suppress the evidence. In Trifles,
although we arrive at the same conclusion, because the women lack the depth of character
developed and revealed in the story, the ending is satisfying but not as powerful. As
disturbing as Mrs. Peters’ experiences have been, they serve as a narrative link to
Minnie’s suffering and forge the identification necessary for the ending to be believable.
However, the deliberate accretion of her introspective moments in the story transforms her experiences into revelations and, coupled with Mrs. Hale’s guilty reminiscences of Minnie and herself, makes the ending inevitable.

As noted earlier, the opposition between male and female language is crucial to an understanding of Glaspell’s themes. The men speak the precise, empirical language of the law. “The facts, m’am. Just the facts.” They are looking for concrete masculine clues - the weapon, mode of entry - to solve a masculine crime - murder - committed, this time, by a woman. Yet the men do not adapt or modify their investigation to this peculiar circumstance of having a female suspect. Within their idiom and perspective, which they privilege over the women’s, they cannot possibly recognize the clues which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters uneasily piece together into the narrative of Minnie’s life because they cannot imagine that Minnie has a story to tell. Their disdain for and amusement at “women’s things” disallows them to read Minnie’s motive and her choice of weapon in her kitchen. The women intuit Minnie’s desperation in her unfinished work. The evidence the men seek would leave her story untold. As Annette Kolodny suggests, the survival of Minnie Foster is the survival of woman as text and “the competence of her reading audience alone determines the outcome. “‘A Jury of Her Peers’ functions as a highly specialized language act (called “literature”) which examines the difficulty inherent in deciphering other highly specialized realms of meaning - in this case women’s conceptual and symbolic worlds . . . The intended emphasis . . . is the inaccessibility of female meaning to male interpretation”. Because the men lack
“familiarity with the women’s imaginative universe, that universe within which their acts are signs”, the text which is Minnie remains invisible to the men (as do Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters for the most part) and so they fail to read her crime in her kitchen (58).

Though the women imply that they might recognize the significance of the dead bird in the murder, the men must first deign to recognize its significance in Minnie’s life before they can accept revenge as a motive. It seems unlikely, in this masculine construct, that the men can equate the bird’s life with a man’s, though the women readily equate it with Minnie’s.

We have read how Susan Glaspell “overturns the very hierarchical values of the society she depicts” by emphasizing throughout both her texts how women’s “‘trifles’ can reveal truths, that the concerns of women may have as much significance as the ‘facts’ of men” (Ben-Zvi 154). As radical as her themes are (for an audience in 1917), her innovative form accommodates their articulation. “The desire of women characters to break the rules of their societies cannot be depicted in plays which follow conventional rules” (152). Locating her story of a murder investigation in the kitchen does more than “merely upend the conventional detective format.” Although we would expect the men, representatives of the law, to be the focus of our attention, Glaspell instead places the reader/spectator in the world of women, forcing us to see the world through women’s eyes. We are not privy to the men’s activities or conversation offstage; when they periodically enter, somewhat like a mobile Greek chorus, they speak the “conscience of the community”, reiterating their major themes of Minnie’s guilt and the triviality of the
women's preoccupations (Mustazza 490), thus magnifying Glaspell's theme of the power and validity of female experience and perception.

The women are consigned to the kitchen by the men, yet they are free here to retrace Minnie's life without interference. The quilt which reveals Minnie's state of mind is the central image of the narrative for, in their unconscious investigation and subsequent resolution of the case, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quilt a pattern of awareness out of disconnected pieces without any expectations or preconceived notions limiting their actions. Nor do the women construct a linear narrative of Minnie's life from these pieces. The signs in her kitchen, the defective stove, her shabby clothes, the dead bird move them back and forth through Minnie's life and their own, surfacing their memories, near and distant, as separate narratives that ultimately create a coherent whole. The men, on the other hand, are limited by the rules which mark their investigation. They begin in the kitchen where Mr. Hale found Minnie, move to the bedroom where John Wright's body lay, and out to the barn where, perhaps, a clue to explain the murder weapon might be found. The county attorney wants only the facts, and each time Mr. Hale digresses in his story, Henderson "returns him to the narrow parameters of the discourse . . . In his insistence on the limitations of discourse, the attorney makes clear that he is able to proceed only in prescribed ways. The notion of linearity in Glaspell's plays is always connected with suppression and with social institutions which have become rigid and confining" (Ben-Zvi 153). Ironically, this rigid adherence to official process by the county attorney causes him to miss or dismiss the subtle familial circumstances Hale
alludes to which contributed to the murder. Because he is not part of the legal system, Hale’s language is “more in spirit with the freer, unstructured methods of the women” (153). In “Jury”, Mrs. Hale worries that he “often wandered along and got things mixed up in a story. She hoped that he would tell this straight and plain” fearing any elaboration would “just make things harder for Minnie Foster” (“Jury” 282, italics mine). When Hale resumes his story after Henderson chides him, he does so “very deliberately and carefully”, as the official discourse demands, though the sight of Henderson’s pencil and paper disturbs him and he speaks “guardedly” (i.e. femininely) so as not to make Minnie appear any more “queer” than the circumstances already make her out to be. Nevertheless, as a man, he accompanies the officials in their investigation and once aligned with them, he ridicules the women from an authoritative stance. When Minnie’s ruined preserves are discovered, Mr. Hale says, “with good-natured superiority, ‘women are used to worrying over ‘trifles”’” (287); and when Henderson asks Mrs. Peters to “keep and eye out”, Mr. Hale “rubbed his face after the fashion of a showman getting ready for a pleasantry” and wonders aloud if the women would recognize a clue if they saw it (289, italics mine). By contrasting the enjoined methodology of the men with the apparent unsystematic discoveries of the women, Glaspell presents the dichotomy between “male fixity - the fixity of a society gone rigid - and female exploration at the outskirts of that society [Ardener’s shaded Y area - the “wild”] in the world of women, among “trifles”. She underlines this dichotomy by offering a form which has the same randomness and
openness as the quilting process itself, in apposition to the constrained, formalized actions of her male characters” (Ben-Zvi 153-4).

In the Philomela/Procne myth, Philomela’s radical redefinition of articulation through her loom prompts her male mythologizers to attempt to suppress her unexpectedly powerful new voice. However, as illustrated earlier, the myth’s compelling images and the sound of Philomela’s voice eternally indicting Tereus prevail against their efforts to re-vise and re-image her story. The feminine poetic she communicates in her tapestry serves, moreover, as a metaphoric as well as thematic source for Glaspell. Hence, Glaspell’s most significant innovation is her use of language. Obviously, the men and women speak the same words, but it is clear the words have different meanings for their different users. For example, putting up preserves on a hot afternoon is not “work” to the men. To include what women do under the rubric “work” as defined by men would require a thorough re-assessment of the value system which defines experiences as worthwhile, i.e. male, and present a radical challenge to conceptions of male identity. By the same token, since John Wright did not drink, kept his word and paid his debts, the community, i.e. men, call him “good”. To expand the definition of “good” to include Wright’s treatment of Minnie would explode the masculine boundaries that enclose and protect men. To acknowledge Wright’s treatment of her as oppressive would make the other men complicit in it and force them to confront their treatment of their own wives. Socially and culturally, the men cannot afford such self-scrutiny. Having broken with tradition by placing her women center stage, Glaspell must now create an idiom,
independent of the masculine model, which articulates this new feminine vantage point. Her women are struggling to find themselves and their voices against a hostile environment dominated by equally hostile men. Coming from a tradition of self-restraint in which, McKnight states, women were “reluctant to plumb the depths of their feelings and so much appears to have been left unsaid” (36), Glaspell’s frontier women may be unused to speech, or their silent resentment at the men for minimizing their concerns may not indicate deference to the men’s position but rather an awareness of the inadequacy of language to express their feelings and their circumstances. “. . . women had to discover and reappropriate themselves as subjects . . . to invent both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women’s reclaiming what had always been theirs but had been usurped from them; control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it” (Suleiman, “(Re)Writing the Body” 65). With her radical changes in form and language, Susan Glaspell antedates Suleiman’s conclusion by seventy years.

However, the move from inarticulateness to expressiveness is painstakingly slow. For the first six pages of “Jury” and the first four of Trifles, the women do not speak. Their connection is spatial, standing near each other and moving closer together as the men, especially Henderson, demean Minnie and, by extension, them as well. Mrs. Peters speaks to Mrs. Henderson, “looking . . . for sympathetic understanding” when she laments the loss of Minnie’s preserves. To which her husband condescends, “Held for murder and worrying about her preserves.” Mrs. Hale defends Minnie when Henderson impugns her housekeeping, to which he replies patronizingly, “Ah, loyal to your sex, I
see.” Whatever the women say is dismissed or scorned. Once alone in the kitchen, their conversation is predictable: distress over the preserves, disagreement over the men doing their duty, examination of Minnie’s shabby clothes, discussion of Minnie’s alleged guilt. As they speak, they look around at all the half-done work. In *Trifles*, Mrs. Peters lifts the towel covering bread that has been set for baking and “stands still”. Mrs. Hale picks up the finished loaf left just outside the breadbox, “then abruptly drops it”. The women move from silence before the men because they *cannot* speak aloud to silence within themselves because they *do not want* to speak aloud the truth of Minnie’s desperate situation. The women touch things in the kitchen, but their gestures stop short, as if to abort any connection between Minnie’s signs left behind and their dawning comprehension of their significance. The stage directions in *Trifles* read: “in a manner of returning to *familiar* things”, safe things like Minnie’s shattered fruit jars or her shawl and apron. In “Jury”, Mrs. Hale wonders to herself why Minnie’s chores have been left undone and reads the half-wiped table and half-poured sugar as “signs of anger”. In *Trifles*, she makes a move to wipe the table and then “drops the towel”, coming back to *familiar* things like the investigation in the bedroom overhead.

With the discovery of the quilt and the dead bird, communication between the two women is more verbal, though still hesitant, and Glaspell captures their tentativeness with the dash, punctuation which shows “the character is unsure of the direction in which she is going, as yet unprepared to articulate consciously a new awareness or unwilling to put into words feelings and wishes which may collapse under the weight of words . . .
Gaspell has the courage to allow her women to trail off their words in pauses, devices against the tyranny of language” (Ben-Zvi 156). “The sewing,’ said Mrs. Peters in a troubled way. ‘all the rest of them have been so nice and even - but - this one. Why it looks as if she didn’t know what she was about!’ Their eyes met - something flashed to life, passed between them; then, as if with an effort, they seemed to pull away from each other” (“Jury” 295). And with a return to the familiar, Mrs. Hale repairs Minnie’s uneven sewing. When they find the broken bird cage, “Looks as if someone must have been rough with it.’ Again their eyes met -startled, questioning, apprehensive. For a moment neither spoke nor stirred” (298). And with a return to the familiar, Mrs. Peters thanks Mrs. Hale for keeping her company. When they find the dead bird, “‘Oh, Mrs. Peters!’ she cried. ‘It’s - Look at it! Its neck - look at its neck! It’s all - other side to. Somebody wrung its neck.’ And then again the eyes of the two women met - this time clung together in a look of dawning comprehension, of growing horror.” But this time the return to the familiar is disturbing, not distracting. “When I was a girl,” said Mrs. Peters, under her breath, “my kitten - there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes - before I could get there -” She covered her face an instant. “If they hadn’t held me back I would have” - she caught herself, looked upstairs where footsteps were heard, and finished weakly - hurt him” (301-2). Ben-Zvi observes, “Unwilling or unable to say more, Mrs. Peters talks in half sentences, covering her growing awareness in pauses more telling than the words she actually employs. The sentence becomes the verbal
concomitant to the patchwork investigation the two women have conducted in the kitchen" (158).

The connection between Mrs. Peters and Minnie is forged in the dashes and pauses of her memory. Mrs. Hale enacts a similar connection in the dashes and pauses of her recriminations. "... I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here. I wish - I had ... I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful - and that's why I ought to have come. I' - she looked around - 'I've never liked this place ... it's a lonesome place, and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now -' She did not put it into words ... 'Not having children makes less work, but it makes a quiet house - and Wright out to work all day - and no company when he did come in''' ("Jury" 298). And later, after all has been discovered, "I might 'a' known she needed help! I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things - it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't - why do you and I understand? Why do we know - what we know this minute?" (303). Mrs. Hale recognizes here that the life they have been piecing together from disparate signs is not just Minnie's. This moment of anagnoresis energizes the women and strengthens their resolve to protect Minnie from further patriarchal oppression by suppressing the evidence and empower themselves by subverting the system epitomized by the men.

Glaspell's innovations with language reflect her concerns with the inadequacy of male-dominated constructs to express female experience and the inevitable subjugation of
female existence imposed by such language. Long before *écriture féminine* formally addressed these concerns, Glaspell wrote “otherwise”, so that we “read between the lines for desires or states of mind that cannot be articulated in the social arena and the languages of phallocentrism.” Glaspell’s radical style, therefore, “permits a reader to see through [her characters’] socially enforced reticence” (Jones, “Inscribing Femininity” 99-100). So we read the signs in Minnie’s kitchen and understand that chores left undone signify “sudden anger”; we look with the women “through a thing to something else” and appreciate “what that kitchen had meant through all the years”; we stop and start with dashes and unfinished sentences, hesitant to acknowledge what we know is true; we watch the women look at each other with “dawning comprehension” and we see ourselves reflected in their eyes.

Glaspell also prefigures psychoanalytic critics such as Luce Irigaray by presenting Minnie as the absent woman - woman as void - “against whom male characters react, upon whom they impose a shape . . . making of the absent woman a kind of palimpsest upon which to inscribe their own identities, desires, and language” (Ben-Zvi 157). Mr. Hale speaks Minnie to the authorities, and they theorize about and concur with his words and, hence, his creation of Minnie. Their conception of Minnie is based not only on Mr. Hale’s depiction of the events surrounding her, but also on their conceptions of women in general. Consequently, based on their male-centered interpretations, she is a poor housekeeper, indifferent wife and unnatural woman. The women, on the other hand remain silent. Only when they are alone do Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters speak, slowly
developing a language of their own which haltingly articulates what Minnie is saying to them and what they recognize in themselves as “shared subjugation”. Through this awkward medium of expression, the women reconstruct their identities and rescue Minnie from the men, linguistically as well as legally. Throughout the narrative, the men ignore the women, responding to them with derision, verbally erasing them from the kitchen just as Minnie is physically absent. But the women fill in the void with their language that reflects their growing self-awareness. A fine example of this is the question of how Minnie was going to finish her needlework. The first time the men overhear them and laugh is when Mrs. Hale asks, “I wonder if she was going to quilt it or knot it?” Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Peters states, “We think she was going to - knot it.” The men do not detect her change in tone on the last. At the end, after the women have silently agreed to conceal the evidence and thus rebel against their husbands and what they stand for, Mrs. Hale underlines this self-assertion with, “We call it - knot it.” Again the men do not recognize this significant pun. “From interrogative to qualified statement to assertion - the sentences mark the changes in the women, changes the men overlook because they do not hear the import of the words the women use. To the men, the words refer to “trifles”, the language is foreign, the shape of the sentences irrelevant” (Ben-Zvi 158). As I indicated earlier, Glaspell’s use of the dash represents the women’s hesitation to speak. In her last sentence of both texts, however, the dash assumes a different significance. Rather than reflect an uncertain pause, this final dash serves as a flourish, a drum roll to herald a profound change in the women that Glaspell’s reader/spectators apprehend.
The men ignore the women's words because they reflect experiences and concerns the men do not consider noteworthy. If they listened, they would have to allow the women a certain significance which would, in turn, diminish their own. To read Minnie's clues would imply that there was a story behind her life worth telling. And, as Judith Fetterley indicates in "Reading About Reading", this story is inimical to the men. Minnie has written "nothing less than the story of men's systematic, institutionalized and culturally approved violence toward women, and of women's potential for retaliation" (153). All the clues she leaves behind point unmistakably to this, yet the men fail to read them correctly. That Mrs. Hale reworks Minnie's uneven sewing and that the women lie about the cat and hide the dead bird substantiate the fact that they know the men could read Minnie's clues accurately if they chose to. Fetterley suggests that the men fail, not because they are "inadequate" readers, but because they are unwilling readers. To read Minnie's story would force them to read their wives in her life and themselves in John Wright. This is a story that "sexist culture must repress", and in so doing, "allows the violence to continue" (154).

Fetterley maintains that within "A Jury of Her Peers", the story of male violence against women and their retaliatory violence is again suppressed. In order to save Minnie's life, the women must undo her story; by concealing the evidence that points to her guilt, they are ensuring that her story (i.e. her motive) will never be told. If her story is silenced, her identity is again denied; but in order to protect Minnie, the women must defer to the men's refusal to recognize her story. "... the women are willing to let the
principle stand in order to protect the particular woman” (154). By looking for their clues instead of reading hers, the men protect themselves in their control of textuality (i.e. the masculine subject, the masculine point of view). Especially because Minnie’s story is anything but “trifles”, the men must perpetuate the assumption that only they have stories. But in the act of writing “A Jury of Her Peers” and Trifles, Glaspell denies this assumption. The existence of her texts does not suppress but rather tells Minnie’s story.

Glaspell’s fiction is didactic in the sense that it is designed to educate male readers in the recognition and interpretation of women’s texts, while at the same time it gratifies the woman reader with the discovery, recovery and validation of her own experiences. [Her texts are] neither unintelligible to male readers nor susceptible to masculinist interpretation. If you can get men to read it, they’ll recognize its point because Glaspell chooses to make an issue of precisely the principle her characters are willing to forego. (154)

Judith Fetterley argues that, regardless of how her male characters behave, the very existence of Glaspell’s texts forces her male readers to question and re-evaluate their assumed textual supremacy. Linda Ben-Zvi analyzes Glaspell’s innovations in language and form which allowed her to explore her radical themes in radical ways on the American stage. Both critics agree, though from different analytical perspectives, that Glaspell succeeds in presenting woman’s experience to a recalcitrant male reader and compelling him to take notice. Judith Stephens would disagree, arguing instead that, by adhering to conventions of Progressive era drama, Trifles “also colludes with dominant gender ideology, and, in this respect, refutes its own argument” (“Gender Ideology” 291). Basing her position in a materialist feminist analysis, and the work of Michelle Barrett, Stephens explains that “compensation” and “recuperation” are two of several processes
by which literary texts produce gender ideology. "Compensation' refers to the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the "moral value" of femininity, and 'recuperation' refers to the process of negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods, Progressive era dramas" (283).

Stephens offers a brief history of the moral leadership of women in social reform and points out the irony of domestic imagery in the exhortations of female reformers to expand the sphere of women's influence. Using the language of the patriarchy which had subordinated women to home and hearth to change women's position in society defeated their purpose. In the same way, Progressive era drama championed social issues, including women's rights, but subtly maintained the status quo by presenting these issues within traditional dramatic conventions. Not only did drama present a moral view of life, it was generally accepted that moral crises must be resolved by the "right" (i.e. moral) decision made by a woman. "Even the most "liberal-minded" critics of the period subscribed to a belief in the morally superior female" (Bank qtd. in Stephens 286).

According to Stephens, Glaspell's Trifles perpetuates this "compensation" by preserving the moralistic nature and conventional structure of Progressive era drama. Though Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters subvert the law by concealing the evidence against Minnie, "they maintain the image of moral leaders by adhering to an alternate or "higher" moral code" (291). Though Stephens acknowledges other critical assessments of Trifles as a feminist document because it privileges women and their perspective, she insists that
"recuperation" undermines Glaspell's efforts by maintaining the separate spheres of male and female existence. Women's "justice" temporarily triumphs over men's "laws", but the system continues intact. Stephens sees as "romantic" the notion that "each woman can secretly and individually subvert the larger system, if she so desires", that she has the "real power" and merely "permits" men to "remain and function in socially acknowledged positions of power" (291). In this way, women's exercise of their moral power does not extend beyond the play to society, where it really counts. The obstacle to any transformation of dramatic themes into social reform is inherent in the dramatic form utilized to express the need for change, a form inherently resistant to change. Stephens pursues the feminist materialist project "to reveal the complicity of the representational apparatus in maintaining sexual difference" (293) and thus ignores the radical changes Glaspell wrought in form and language precisely so that her themes would not be submerged by a masculine ideology. Glaspell is not naive. Her texts will neither inspire judicial reform nor win the right to vote for women. But neither is that her purpose. By centering a woman's story within a woman's sphere, creating a language that enables her characters to speak a woman's truth unutterable within the dominant idiom, providing a moral alternative that is truly humane, Glaspell effects interpretive and aesthetic changes that make women's writing powerful and a force to be reckoned with.

Glaspell's innovations open out linguistic and thematic possibilities for herself and her three women, and feminist writers who follow her, so much so that she suffers the "peculiar eclipsing" Tillie Olsen describes as the fate of many women writers (40).
Glaspell was not silenced by an insidious dramatic form but by the social structure which had existed for centuries and would have precluded Judith Shakespeare a place; that “network of money and power that brought drama to the public remained not only primarily controlled by men but intimidatingly impenetrable for most women” (Keyssar 18). By writing a play and a story that threaten male authority, Glaspell is excluded from the literary canon because of her gender and her presumption. Barbara Ozieblo writes that “we should not be surprised, then, that Glaspell’s reviewers dismissed her plays as nonsense and that the management of the [Provincetown] Players (co-founded by Glaspell, her husband George Cram Cook, and Eugene O’Neill in 1913) deleted them from their repertoire after she had left” (“Rebellion and Rejection” 66). Given the tradition of American literature as a masculine search for identity against a society figured as female and the inevitable elision to all experience as male, Glaspell’s rebellious female protagonists “appropriate and transform the myths of the male literary canon” by rejecting the patriarchal myth they had been taught to respect but learned was false and by defining themselves against the obstacle they name “male” and, therefore, inadequate and inferior.

Glaspell’s women are rebellious as they revalidate their existence and experiences against an oppressive patriarchal system called the cult of domesticity. However, in order to succeed, they must reorder the structure that underpins and perpetuates such systems - the law. They do not go to Minnie’s house that morning intending to subvert the law. Indeed, they are behaving within prescribed patterns and, therefore, according to
their husbands’ expectations: as the sheriff’s wife, Mrs. Peters can be trusted to gather Minnie’s things; since this is a murder scene, Mrs. Peters will be uneasy and so Mrs. Hale is enlisted to keep her company. However, as we have seen, the process by which they discover the truth about Minnie’s life and John Wright’s murder forces a concomitant self-discovery within the women which challenges all that they have been taught to hold true and valid in their lives. Mrs. Peters especially undergoes a dramatic psychic alteration as she assimilates the evidence and liberates herself from the constricting identity conferred upon her by the patriarchy. As the story opens, the apparent crime is murder. But as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that more has been lost than a man’s life.

Untouched by what has happened at the farm, the men pursue their investigation in a linear direction - beginning, middle, end - with no digressions. Henderson deflects details about Wright’s oppressive temperament because they are intuitions not facts, and is insensitive to innuendoes which might complicate what appears to be a straightforward case by introducing a “human” element. He is the law, and “the law, Glaspell indicates, is a fixed thing incapable of dealing with either nuances of a case or variations of human behavior” (Ben-Zvi 151). Since the women are consigned to a place outside this rigid order, they are free to interpret “nuances” and emphasize those “variations”.

This is precisely what they do as they peruse Minnie’s kitchen. And as a result of their “peculiarly feminine sensibilities”, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters redefine “the awful thing” done in that house. Wright’s murder notwithstanding, the women focus on the
slow, relentless death of Minnie’s spirit. She had been pretty, lively, sang in the church choir, wore white dresses and blue ribbons. Now her clothes are too shabby for her to wear to the Ladies’ Aid, assuming Wright would let her attend, and the bird she had bought to recapture the music in her life is maliciously killed by him as well. Both women can identify with the desolate and difficult existence of the farm wife. As the women uncover clues to Minnie’s life, Mrs. Peters recovers memories of her loneliness at the death of her child and her potential for violence at the senseless killing of her cat. She identifies with Minnie’s experiences, but she does not know her. She only meets her the day before when the authorities bring Minnie to her house before taking her to jail. Mrs. Hale, on the other hand, has known Minnie for over thirty years and indicts herself throughout the narrative for her neglect of her girlhood friend. “I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here. I wish - I had ... I could’ve come. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now ...” “... she was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and - fluttery. How - she - did - change” (“Jury” 298-9). “I wonder how it would seem - never to have had any children around?” (302). “I wish you’d seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons, and stood up there in the choir and sang” (303). Mrs. Hale consistently calls her Minnie Foster in her reminiscences, as if by rejecting the married name she can reject the marriage and recover, instead, the vivacious girl Minnie was before John Wright killed her spirit. But she cannot resurrect the Minnie of their youth nor can she atone for her protracted absence. In a final outburst of recognition and recrimination, she implicates
herself in the greater injustice against Minnie. "Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while!" she cried. "That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (303).

Not the men - who do not recognize Minnie's isolation as a crime; who do not recognize the hardships of women's circumscribed lives as a crime; who do not recognize an oppressive marriage as a crime. Their "proclivity for the letter of the law" bars them from viewing the events in the farmhouse from anything other than a legal perspective. The women, on the other hand, "with a finer grasp of ideal justice", unite to protect Minnie from "what is clearly the injustice of man's law when applied to women" (France, "Apropos of Women" 151). Having identified with Minnie's plight, and in "partial expiation" for Mrs. Hale's inaction, the women unite to suppress the evidence. Phyllis Mael suggests that had either woman been alone, it is unlikely "she would have had sufficient understanding or courage to make the vital decision, but as the trifles reveal the arduousness of Minnie's life (and by implication of their own), a web of sisterhood is woven which connects the lives of all three, enabling Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to counter patriarchal law" ("Trifles": The Path to Sisterhood" 281).

In making this decision, the women focus on the crime against Minnie (and by extension against them), relegating John Wright's murder to a different level of significance irrelevant to them at the moment. The men, however, pursue this more obvious crime because it clearly fits within the parameters of the patriarchal system. This bifurcated view of the same event reminds us of the difference in view between
Philomela’s male mythologizers and her feminist readers. As noted elsewhere, the male mythologizers focus on the infanticide perpetrated by Philomela and Procne as their revenge against Tereus. The emphasis on its unnaturalness and bloodthirstiness makes the sisters hideous monsters, thus diverting attention from the hideously monstrous crimes of rape and mutilation perpetrated by Tereus which initiated this entire chain of events. Tereus becomes pitiable, having cannibalized his son. Procne is loathsome, having killed her son. Feminist readers, on the other hand, focus on the rape image in Philomela’s tapestry as a new poetic, a new source of power with which women can communicate women’s experience and be heard and understood by other women. In the same way, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters read Minnie’s clues, not as evidence of her guilt but as proof of her victimization. The “awful thing” done in that house was not so much John Wright’s murder as the events leading up to it. But the legal system, personified by the men conducting the investigation, cannot see the crime that way. John Wright is “pitiable”, having been murdered. Minnie is “loathsome”, having murdered him. To protect Minnie from the same mythographic fate suffered by Philomela and Procne, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters must create a new tapestry, absent the clues of Minnie’s life, and so they conceal the evidence that would convict her.

This decision comes neither quickly nor easily for the women. But it does evolve organically from the details of oppression that Glaspell depicts and, more crucially, from the private and reciprocal identification the women undergo with Minnie and each other. Recognizing that Minnie will not be treated fairly by a masculinist system that ignores
individual circumstances and judges rather by absolutes, the women reject the law and adopt, instead, a morality of caring. In this thematic and narrative decision, Glaspell prefigures the work of Carol Gilligan by over sixty years. Gilligan’s 1982 landmark study of moral development in women responds to the work of Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg, who, using the male model as universal, see women’s sense of justice as “compromised”, an “aside”, or “immature” respectively (In a Different Voice 18).

In his struggle to resolve the contradictions posed for his Oedipal theory by the differences in female anatomy and the different configuration of the young girl’s early family relationships, through his acknowledgment of the strength and persistence of women’s pre-Oedipal attachments to their mothers, Freud saw a developmental difference he believed responsible for women’s developmental failures. Since the development of a superego or conscience is directly related to castration anxiety, Freud saw no inherent need in women for a clear-cut Oedipal resolution. Consequently, women’s superego was compromised, never becoming “so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men.” Thus, Freud concluded that women “show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility” (Freud qtd. in Gilligan 7).

In this way a problem in theory is refigured as a problem in women’s development located in their experience of relationships. The work of Nancy Chodorow challenges this patriarchal view which perceives women’s development as “less” and
male development as the norm. Noting that every generation reproduces “certain general and nearly universal differences that characterize masculine and feminine personality and roles”, Chodorow attributes these differences to the fact that, for the most part and in most places, women are responsible for early child care. Given that gender identity formation is unrelated to anatomy and that “with rare exception [is] firmly and irreversibly established for both sexes by the time a child is around three”, the interpersonal dynamics of its formation with a typically female caregiver will differ for boys and girls. Female identity formation takes place in a context of ongoing relationship since “mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with themselves” and girls, in identifying as female see themselves as like their mothers, “thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation.” In contrast, “mothers experience their sons as a male opposite” and boys, in identifying as male, separate from their mothers, thus diminishing “their primary love and sense of empathic tie.” Consequently, male development necessitates a “more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries.” Chodorow argues that sex differences in early gender identity formation (i.e. connectedness vs. individuation) “does not mean that women have ‘weaker’ ego boundaries than men or are more prone to psychosis.” It means instead that “girls emerge from this period with a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not.”

Chodorow’s account of female psychology is far more positive than Freud’s prevailing masculine description. “Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s
needs or feelings as one’s own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another’s needs and feelings) . . . From very early, then, because they are parented by a person of the same gender . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well.” As a result, “in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does” (The Reproduction of Mothering 150, 166-7, 44).

Chodorow’s conclusions indicate the crucial differences in the experience of relationships between men and women. For boys and men, separation and individuation from the mother are essential for the development of masculinity, and intimacy, consequently, becomes a threat to their gender identity. For girls and women, on the other hand, femininity is not dependent on separation or individuation, and separation becomes a threat to feminine identity.

However, “when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing separation, [w]omen’s failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop” (Gilligan 9). This masculinist premise is reiterated in the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose six stages of moral judgment from childhood to adulthood derive from a twenty year study of eighty-four boys. Nevertheless, he claims universality for his stage sequence, even though women, excluded from his original sample, appear to be deficient in that they never proceed beyond stage three. “At this stage morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and
goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others” (18). Kohlberg’s six stages encompass three views of morality: “preconventional, conventional and postconventional, to reflect the expansion in moral understanding from an individual to a societal to a universal point of view.” Preconventional moral judgment is “egocentric and derives moral constructs from individual needs”, denoting an inability to construct a shared or societal viewpoint; “conventional judgment is based on the shared norms and values that sustain relationships, groups, communities and societies”, always the point of departure in Kohlberg’s scheme; and “postconventional judgment adopts a reflective perspective on societal values and constructs moral principles that are universal in application”, thus transcending the moral vision of the prior judgments (73).

Kohlberg maintains that the female moral conception of goodness and caring is functional in the home, but this perspective is inadequate in the masculine domain outside the home, in government and the workplace, “where relationships are subordinated to rules (stage four) and rules to universal principles of justice (stage five)” (18). Marilyn Friedman suggests that Kohlberg’s distinction between the public/political realm and the private/personal realm, and the moral reasoning which characterizes each, “coincides with a long-standing presumption of western thought that the world of personal relationships, of the family and of family ties and loyalties - the traditional world of women - is a world of lesser moral importance than the public world of government and the marketplace - the male-dominated world outside the home” (“Care and Context in Moral Reasoning” 194). The moral world Kohlberg privileges protects abstract persons
involved in impersonal, undifferentiated social contracts with rules and rights mutually respected. Gilligan’s moral domain, on the other hand, constituted by a different moral development, not a “deficient” or “inferior” one, privileges relationships as women’s central moral concern and “makes care and responsibility to persons the major categories of thinking for women rather than rights and rules” (191). Gilligan states that the problem for psychologists in deciphering or even discerning women’s experience, and thus their moral development, lies in a “shift in the imagery of relationships”. Women’s image of a “web” of relationships rather than a “hierarchy” conveys a different way of structuring relationships which reflects a different moral view of those relationships. “... A non-hierarchical vision of human connection, transposed into the image of web, changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnectedness” (Gilligan 62).

However problematic the web metaphor may be within a male dominated construct of hierarchical moral judgments, a further complication lies within the language women use to formulate their moral domain. Gilligan argues that the language women use in this formulation is different from the language of men but nonetheless valid in any definition of moral development. That women speak about the same concerns “in a different voice” indicates that there is more than one way of looking at moral issues, “but that the sexes either have differential access to them, or strong constraints on the use of one style of thought” (Haste, The Sexual Metaphor 212). It is clear that Kohlberg’s hierarchical sequence is far more constraining in structure and purpose than the web-like connections Gilligan describes. Moreover, we can extend Gilligan’s use of “voice” to
include listening as a key aspect of connectedness, an interaction highly improbable, if not impossible in Kohlberg’s construction. “Listening” means receptive participation in a dialogue, not just to “hear” but to “connect” with and to that “different voice”, to accept the speaker’s perspective rather than analyze or interpret what is said (212-13).

This metaphorical elaboration of “voice” to include dialogue with a receptive listener becomes more apparent in what Gilligan calls the “contextual relativism” of moral reasoning. For her, the hypothetical Heinz dilemma of Kohlberg’s studies is too abstract and “separates the moral problem from the social contingencies of its possible occurrence.” Gilligan argues that only within a particular context can the cause and effect of a moral dilemma become apparent and “engage[s] the compassion and tolerance repeatedly noted to distinguish the moral judgments of women.” Furthermore, a specific, substantive context will illuminate the social injustices that a moral problem may reflect and allow us to imagine the suffering such injustices may engender (Gilligan 100). The contextualization of the individual within “social contingencies” generates the empathy and compassion in the female speaker/listener-reader that differentiates Gilligan’s alternative moral framework. The “different voice” that articulates the dilemma will, moreover, speak a valid language that graphically describes the “contingencies” and redefines “injustice” and “suffering”. Seeing women’s moral judgment as more immersed in the details of relationships and narratives, Seyla Benhabib further develops Gilligan’s “contextual relativism” in her contrast between the generalized and the concrete other. The “generalized other”, which dominates universalist moral psychology
and moral theory, enacts the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In public and institutionalized interactions, we are all entitled to the same rights and bound by the same duties, reinforced by moral feelings of respect, duty, worthiness, and dignity. The "concrete other" on the other hand, asks that we view each individual as having a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution. In recognizing and confirming the uniqueness of the other in more private, non-institutional interactions, our behavior is governed by the norms of friendship, love and care. Treating the other thus, we confirm her humanity and human individuality through love, care sympathy, and solidarity. ("The Generalized and The Concrete Other" 163–4).

Benhabib’s "generalized other" illustrates Kohlberg’s conception of moral understanding as traditionally masculine and associated with the public world of social power; her "concrete other" represents Gilligan’s more feminine construction of the moral domain grounded in friendship, caring and the "privacy of domestic interchange".

Having established this theoretical foundation, with the findings of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow in the vanguard, let us return to Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers" and a more informed analysis of Susan Glaspell’s depiction of two modes of judging: the postconventional, exemplified by the three men throughout and Mrs. Peters initially, and the conventional, consistently revealed through Mrs. Hale’s words and actions and Mrs. Peters’ changed attitude by the end of both texts. From the very beginning, the men manifest postconventional moral thought in their approach to the crime. A murder has been committed; the prime suspect is the victim’s wife; the weapon they have is unusual
by male standards. They only need a motive. As noted earlier, the men consistently ignore the clues that fore-ground the narrative that is Minnie’s life and demand an empathic interpretation. Otherwise, Minnie would be for them the “concrete other” with a contextualized existence they must confront. They are incapable of sustaining such a moral perspective and performing their public duties. Frustrated by his inability to find a motive, the county attorney says to Mr. Peters, “If there were some definite thing—something to show. Something to make a story about. A thing that would connect up with this clumsy way of doing it” (“Jury” 304; italics mine). Ironically, the story he so desperately needs is the “contextual particularity” that Gilligan describes as the circumstances which generate the empathic connection noted in women, the story Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters had no trouble reading in Minnie’s signs. However, in the stage Kohlberg maintains is the most mature level of moral development, where the universal principles of justice prevail, there is no place for such a narrative.

The hierarchical structure that designates Kohlberg’s moral domain is also evident in the conduct of the investigation. The men assume a superior stance in their continuous criticism and demeaning of the women’s domestic sphere. But it is clear that even among the men, distinctions are drawn. The county attorney interrogates Mr. and Mrs. Hale, controlling the flow of information and stemming the tide of “contextual particularity”, that is rejecting details about John Wright’s nature that might illuminate the investigation because they are not facts, just observations, and Henderson’s duty is to the facts. Though Mr. Hale accompanies the other two men on the tour of the house, by the end,
because he is not officially “the law”, he is needed only to prepare the horses for their departure. Mr. Peters, however, is an official representative of “the law”; nevertheless, he is subordinate enough to be publicly reprimanded for not leaving a deputy in the house overnight, and he defers to Henderson when he asks the county attorney to inspect the items his wife has collected for Minnie. When Mr. Peters suggests to Henderson that they “ought” to take a look at the windows in the other room, the county attorney acquiesces scoffingly, “Oh - windows”, as if allowing Mr. Peters the illusion that he has contributed constructively to the investigation. The separation which Chodorow describes as essential to masculine gender identity, and Kohlberg opposes to Gilligan’s female connectedness, is also exhibited by Henderson at the end of the narrative, when he chooses to stay behind. “I’m going to stay here awhile,” the county attorney suddenly announced. “I want to go over everything. I’m not satisfied we can’t do better” (304). Thus Henderson intimates that the investigation, a collective endeavor conducted by men out of duty to the rights of another man, promises to be more fruitful when undertaken by the highest ranking authority figure - alone.

When the men criticize Minnie and trivialize the women’s preoccupations, they are speaking from abstract constructions of “woman” and “housekeeper”. In her defense, however, Mrs. Hale speaks from a contextualized perspective which she shares with the other women. “There’s a great deal of work to be done on a farm . . . Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be” (288), and “It’s a shame about her fruit . . . She’ll feel awful bad, after all her hard work in the hot
weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer” (290-1). The women move physically closer as the men belittle them, yet Mrs. Peters continues to speak the patriarchal judgmental mode. In this way she demonstrates what Gilligan calls women’s “... uncertainty about their right to make moral comments ... When women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known” (Gilligan 66-7). Mrs. Peters’ identity is entirely constructed by the patriarchy: she is “Mrs. Peters” or the “sheriff’s wife”, named “one of us” by Henderson and pronounced “married to the law” by him as well. Only at the end, when she has redefined herself on her own terms and rejected the oppressive system personified by her husband, though Glaspell continues to refer to her as “the sheriff’s wife”, here the appellation is ironic, underscoring the subversive power of her rebellion. Even Mrs. Hale is referred to as Martha Hale at the end, asserting her personal identity as she asserts her rejection of the patriarchal order and enforces, instead, a re-imaged conception of justice. However, until Mrs. Peters comes to her new self-awareness, initiated by the slow identification with Minnie, she enunciates a postconventional view of the law, defending the men as doing their duty and having important things on their minds. But when Mrs. Hale objects to the men looking around, fearful that the house will turn on Minnie, and Mrs. Peters protests that “the law is the law”, Mrs. Hale counters with “and a bad stove is a bad stove”, thus forcing a reinterpretation of abstract concepts like “law” and “duty” within a particular context.
Minnie had to cook on that stove and Mrs. Hale contemplates “what it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with.” More significant is Mrs. Peters’ look of “seeing through a thing to something else”, contextualizing Minnie’s struggle in that kitchen in her mind’s eye and concluding, “A person gets discouraged - and loses heart” (“Jury” 294). It is here that the women begin to move emotionally and morally closer together and to Minnie.

As I have demonstrated throughout, Mrs. Hale identifies with Minnie from the start, defending her to the authorities as a hard-working farm wife - just as she is; recognizing the significance of the lost fruit - having put up preserves herself the previous summer; resenting the men snooping around lest the house betray Minnie - the way her own kitchen would if the men arrived there now that she is gone. The recognition and understanding deepen as she moves from sign to sign in Minnie’s kitchen, wondering why chores have been left unfinished. Remembering Minnie as the vivacious girl she had been before she married John Wright and juxtaposing those memories to the reality of Minnie’s present, Mrs. Hale apprehends the tragedy that has transpired over the past twenty years and culminated in the murder of John Wright. Punctuating her thoughts of Minnie are recriminations about her own neglectful behavior. She did not visit as often as she should have, not just because she was busy herself. The farm, desolate, cheerless and cold as John Wright, kept her away. Though she knew of Minnie’s disintegration, she did nothing to assuage it, and with the accumulation and interpretation of clues, she can see now that Minnie’s needs should have superseded her discomfort. “I might’ve
known she needed help! I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things - it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't - why do you and I understand? Why do we know - what we know this minute?" (303). Mrs. Hale forges the connection between the women with the consciousness of their shared experience, suffered separately and alone, but nevertheless the same. This consciousness compels her to inculpate herself for Minnie's circumstances, perceived now as the real crime. When Mrs. Peters, still uncomfortable with her own revelations, reminds Mrs. Hale "in her tight little way" that "The law has got to punish crime", Mrs. Hale rejects the convention of John Wright's murder as a crime and redefines the concept within Minnie's context and her unwitting participation in it. "I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (303). As the men come in and out at the conclusion of their investigation, Mrs. Hale does not speak again until the final pun she delivers to the unheeding county attorney. But in those silent moments, she has decided her course of action and communicates to Mrs. Peters with her eyes the need for unity and compassion to save Minnie.

Mrs. Peters has only just met Minnie but it is as if she has known the absent woman all her life. The killing of Minnie's bird evokes feelings of her own murderous anger when her kitten was brutally slain and the silent desolation she suffered when her first baby died. Mrs. Hale's reflections on Minnie's past serve also to irrevocably connect Mrs. Peters to Minnie's present. As she looks around the kitchen and listens to
Mrs. Hale intone Minnie’s life, she sees “through a thing to something else”, recognizing the discouragement Minnie must have felt through her own silent introspection. Three times she looks deep within herself until the self she does not recognize, “the self from which she has been systematically alienated by virtue of being married to the law” asserts itself. The women have been looking at Minnie’s things, looking at each other, looking inside themselves, but when Henderson defines Mrs. Peters as “married to the law”, she looks away. In those few moments during which neither we nor Mrs. Hale can see her eyes, we believe that all Mrs. Peters has seen today - Minnie’s life, Mrs. Hale’s, her own - have converged into a vision of connectedness. Gilligan writes that “the essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice” (67). Mrs. Hale has left the final decision up to Mrs. Peters - she has had to make the most radical break with the patriarchal value system which has heretofore prescribed all her choices. No longer seeing herself as an adjunct to the law, Mrs. Peters takes charge of her re-newed identity and acts accordingly. Minnie has been accused of murdering her husband, but Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale see her as the victim of an insidiously murderous process instead. Motivated by compassion, understanding and care for all Minnie has endured, and a desire to protect her from further oppression by a system incapable of and unwilling to read her story, the women silently agree to conceal the evidence. They have never spoken their suspicions nor their intentions, yet there is no doubt what their course of action must be. In the spaces between the dashes of their sentences, in the eyes which looked within, tried to look away, and finally held each other
“in a steady, burning look in which there was no evasion or flinching”, the women forge their connection with Minnie and each other, linked not only by experience but by a sense of an empowered self.

Judith Stephens criticized Glaspell’s texts for perpetuating the “romantic notion that each woman can secretly and individually subvert the larger system” even though the system of men’s law remains intact (291). The women may not have revised the law in their subversion of it, nor have they revised the men’s conception of them. But, given Glaspell’s innovations in form and language - locating women and their issues center stage and providing them an idiom with which to articulate the unexpressed and heed the inexpressible and her use of the Philomela/Procne myth - they have dramatically revised their conception of themselves, developing a belated respect for the value of their lives as women and acting out of a new awareness and conviction that their world is different from, but certainly equal to, the world of men.
Chapter 5

Alice Walker: Transcultural Oppression of Women in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois observed that African-Americans have developed a double consciousness - being American and being Black - and that the latter identity is inexorably undermined by the former (Hernton, “The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers” 205). By extension, therefore, Black women develop a triple consciousness - American, Black and female - and each identity is successively eroded by both cultures. Whereas Philomela and Minnie are subjected to a tyrannical brother-in-law and husband, respectively, Black women are subjugated simultaneously by the dominant white society and the Black patriarchy. Consequently, their oppression is racial as well as sexist, complicating their struggle even more so than white women’s.

Rendered subordinate to their white contemporaries by history and culture, Black men redirect their struggle “into safer and more certain channels, and the consequence is the familiar demonstration of male power over women” (Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* xvi). Though the position of Black men does not change appreciably vis à vis white men with this exercise of power, it nevertheless creates a climate of authority in which Black masculine prerogatives dominate Black women’s lives. These themes of oppression manifest themselves in fiction through masculine images of rape and its concomitant silence and silencing. However, many African-American women writers prevail against
such unilateral misery perpetrated by the patriarchy, white and Black, with their own female conceptions of power grounded in images of sisterhood and community.

The literary history of African-American women writers, from the poems of Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley to contemporary fiction, demonstrates that they have never been artistically nor critically silent. “In their own voices, black women have always confirmed and authenticated the complexity of the black female experience, and in so doing have debunked the negative stereotypes that others created of them while denying them audience for their words” (McKay, “Reflections on Black Women Writers” 251). Even in slave narratives, the dominant mode of early African-American literature, women recoup their experience from images of complete helplessness and victimization epitomized by Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. Though they do not deny their sexual exploitation, the women see themselves as more than victims of rape and seduction. “They depicted themselves as complex human beings with a desire to engage in discourse that took the breadth of their experiences into consideration” (253). Even while recounting the hideousness of slavery, they demonstrated the strength, courage, spirit and dignity with which they lived and often escaped. In the process of self-creation as heroines in their own narratives, African-American writers identified “the existence of and effectiveness of a woman’s community”, paying tribute “to the roles that women play as models and inspiration in their struggle to rise above oppression” (252). Through this real and literary sisterhood, black women write to explode the stereotypes imposed upon them by history and other writers, creating characters who are strong but not infallible,
weak but not pathetic, “exploring all aspects of black women’s experiences . . . to
transcend race and gender oppression” (259). The literary tradition of African-American
women illuminates their stories “as a way of self-confirmation and a means of correcting
the erroneous white and male record of their inner reality” (259).

Alice Walker, in particular, emphasizes “the culture of women as a means to self-
understanding and growth” (Christian, “Trajectories of Self-Definition” 327), deriving
their experiences as well as the language with which to describe them from African-
American culture. By exposing the “estrangement and violence” that mark the
relationships between her men and women, Walker radically challenges “long-standing
black middle class proscriptions against dramatizing and thereby exposing anything that
might reinforce damaging racial stereotypes” (Watkins, The Color Purple 17). In an
effort to constitute a black identity and unity in that blackness, African-American writers
of the 1950s and 1960s, especially, tended to “idealize the relationship between black
men and women, to blame sexism in the black community solely on racism or to justify a
position that black men were superior to women” (Christian, 321). Walker, however,
boldly explores issues of intraracial oppression in The Color Purple and Possessing the
Secret of Joy and, by utilizing symbols from the Philomela/Procris myth, the literary
archetype of sexist ideology, reconstitutes her women into figures of consequence. A
close reading of these novels will reveal Walker’s purpose and method, and relate Celie
and Tashi to their literary foremother narratively, thematically and figuratively.
Alice Walker's return in the twentieth century to the epistolary novel, a form popularized in the eighteenth, is appropriate for the development of Celie, a character hesitant to speak, unsure of what to speak, virtually illiterate within a threatening patriarchal system. As Josephine Donovan points out in "The Silence is Broken", the novel, which valorizes individual experience and individual truth, emerged naturally from a world which privileged the aesthetic premises of the ancients and slavishly adhered to its rules into a post-Cartesian world in which "details of everyday life have become legitimate sources of verification" (208). Based on stereotypes of what is feminine, women have been traditionally associated with the sentimental novel. However, Donovan indicates that lack of education rather than any inherent affinity with sentiment led women to dwell on feeling in their novels (209).

Since the novel in the eighteenth century was a new genre, there were no rules or models from antiquity to follow, which freed uneducated women to practice their form. In addition, since the matter of novels was everyday life written in the "plain style", a vernacular close to the style women spoke, the novel was not considered appropriate for serious literary attention. This prejudice of the educated elite therefore allowed women as "cultural outsiders", to develop a new genre unimpeded by disdainful critical intrusions or expectations of publication. Free to experiment, women borrowed from their lives, intersecting content and form in the epistolary novel and autobiography or memoir. The epistolary convention developed in part from "amateur" letter writing, a popular feminine pastime in the later seventeenth century. Though Cicero's Epistulae ad
Familiares, the prototype for the classical genre, was still taught to schoolboys, by this time the form had been severely bowdlerized by a series of letter writing manuals written in the 1600s as models for correspondence in stock situations. Consequently, formal rhetorical training was unnecessary in order to write informal, acceptable prose. Even Samuel Richardson had been commissioned to compose a letter-writing manual, an exercise which probably led to his use of the epistolary convention in Pamela. Not formally educated, his status as “cultural outsider” may explain his use of a non-traditional style and genre which was later emulated by Fanny Burney in Eveline and Jane Austen in Eleanor and Marianne. Many of the English women prose writers of the seventeenth century are known for their correspondence, therefore, and also for their autobiographies and memoirs (210-11). Fundamentally private or family-oriented, these non-traditional genres allowed women to write unrestricted by classical doctrine because, as Mme. de Stael observed, “the ancients would never have thought of giving their fiction such a form [because it] always presupposes more sentiment than action” (qtd. in Donovan 210). No longer could lack of an education consign women to literary exile “for they, as well as any male, had access to the experiential details of daily life and therefore access to resources of legitimate literary experience” (212).

The “plain style” of women’s writing was directly influenced by a growing tendency among seventeenth century scientific writers toward a simpler style. Opposing the traditional “Ciceronian rounded period” which is marked by a closed syllogistic logic
congenial to a world view structured by a rigid class system and an educated elite of males, women’s writing reflects a “loose period” which attempts instead to express . . . the order in which an idea presents itself when it is first experienced. It begins, therefore, without premeditation, stating its idea in the first form that occurs; the second member is determined by the situation in which the mind finds itself after the first has been spoken; and so on throughout the period. Each member being an emergency of the situation. (Croll qtd. in Donovan 213)

Contrary to the deductive reasoning of the Ciceronian period, the “loose period” suggests inductive empiricism typical of the seventeenth century in which it first appeared. More significant is its “spontaneous, unpracticed quality which, when valued, obviates the necessity for formal rhetorical training” (213, italics mine). This stylistic shift from formal rhetorical modes to a style in which everything is subordinated to expression benefited women writers whose epistolary style was marked by a “breathless, disorganized ‘artless’ informality” (Moers qtd. in Donovan 213).

This epistolary form is, therefore, perfectly suited for Celie’s need to identify herself and locate meaning for her oppression within a patriarchal system that silences her with no less than a threat of death, comparable to Tereus’s literal mutilation of Philomela so she cannot speak her violation either. Enjoined by her abusive stepfather not to reveal his repeated rapes, Celie begins the process of self-discovery and self-preservation with a letter to God asking for a sign “letting me know what’s happening to me” (Purple 1). The tentativeness of her project is underscored immediately when she puts herself under erasure. “I am I have always been a good girl” (1). She attempts to reconcile this fragile self-concept with the reality of her oppressive existence, but her letters reflect more than a
litany of abuses. As Kimberly Rae Connor states, “Celie’s letters show text as the production of self, rather than a reflection of self, and identity as textually constructed, not a pregiven entity” (Conversions and Visions 266). Though Celie writes to God for the majority of the novel, the sign of meaning she asks for in her first letter never comes from Him. Rather, among the sordid details of her life, Celie culls her own meaning, her own worth, the value of family and friends, and the power of love in a language that, however illiterate, validates her existence because it is a “medium of self-description, not the medium for a text of another world” (Heilbrun and Stimpson, “Theories: A Dialogue” 71). Walker writes of Celie, “She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic” (Living By The Word 64). Celie authors herself and authorizes her existence in her own idiom, exclusive of the alienating discourse shaped by the patriarchy, white and black. Even when she is resettled in Memphis with Shug, overseeing her successful Folkpants, Unlimited and one of her workers tries to teach her how to speak correctly because using “us” instead of “we” makes people think she is dumb and “a dead country give-away”, Celie persists in her idiom. “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (Purple 223).

Celie’s story covers more than thirty years between two wars, related through ninety-four letters, including twenty-three from Nettie, fourteen to Nettie (which come
back unopened) and one from Shug to Celie. Though set in a potentially rich external historic context, The Color Purple does not focus on racism in America nor imperialism in Africa. Walker has stated that her intention in The Color Purple was to displace the typically patriarchal concerns of the historical novel - “the taking of lands, or the births, battles and deaths of Great Men” - with the scene of “one woman asking another for her underwear” (“Writing The Color Purple” 356). “As long as ‘the transmission and experience of power’ are its primary focus, as long as ‘war and politics are seen as more significant to the history of humankind than child-rearing’, women remain marginalized or invisible” (Lerner qtd. in Greene and Kahn 13). Thus by locating her text in the private, family-oriented concerns of the epistolary novel, Walker’s emphasis is, instead, on another “history”: the story of the universal oppression of Black women. Through her fluid, unrestrained dialect, Celie “defamiliarizes practices and conditions endemic to the oppression of women” (Butler-Evans, Race, Gender, and Desire 171), especially in her graphic narrations of her rape by Alphonse:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (Purple 1-2)

And her rape in marriage by Mister:

He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. (81)

And:
He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say. (117)

Hence the reader has no choice but to listen to her voice and confront the ugliness of her condition. Nettie’s letters effect the same reaction through her demystification of ritual oppression of women in an ersatz utopian Africa. In their letters, therefore, Celie and Nettie supplant the broad issues of African-American history with a personal female history that posits women’s oppression as a valid history in itself. And as Celie’s letters evolve from private interior monologues to a more inclusive narration of community interactions, Walker’s womanist ideology becomes more apparent. Though Celie’s experiences are especially hideous and dehumanizing, the women around her suffer no less. This realization unites them not only in an image of shared suffering but in a vision of shared strength.

Defined by a system that values a cow over a woman, that permits beatings because “she my wife”, Celie articulates this subservience to Harpo because, as yet, she does not know otherwise. Sofia will not listen to Harpo and Celie counsels that he should beat her to make her “mind him”. “I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me” (38). That is, she is not docile, obedient, self-effacing. She says and does exactly as she pleases, which is an outright challenge to Black men and white society. Though Harpo is silently pleased at Sofia’s independence and easily reverses roles with her, he must at least appear to adhere to the male system of control and subjugation for the time being. But subconsciously, Celie knows she has done something wrong. For over a month, she cannot sleep, suffering pangs of conscience for “sinning against Sofia’s spirit.” When
Sofia confronts Celie, she admits, “I say it cause I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t. What that? she say. Fight, I say. She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out her jaws. She mad before, sad now” (42). Sofia feels sorry for Celie because she reminds her of her mother - compliant, abused, oppressed. When Celie describes how she went from feeling mad to feeling sick to feeling nothing at all and resigns herself to the ways of her husband since “this life soon be over. Heaven last all ways,” Sofia counsels that Celie bash in Mister’s head and “think about heaven later.” The women laugh till they fall down and then they begin to work on a quilt. They piece together the pattern, called Sister’s Choice, to which Shug contributes a yellow dress, and in this act of communal activity, they engage in an act of creative healing repairing the lost thread of connectedness. Although she weaves alone, Philomela engages in an analogously communal activity, for Procris clearly reads her tapestry/text and effects their reconciliation, “repairing the lost thread of connectedness” unraveled by Tereus. So too, Minnie Wright’s neighbors literally repair her jagged stitching on her quilt and thus reconnect to one another in their subversion of the law.

Celie’s quilt, like her letters then, is a symbol of repressed female creativity and identity. Celie will give the quilt to Shug out of love if it turns out “perfect”; otherwise she will keep it for herself because of the pieces of Shug’s dress sewn into it. In this way she has created an expression of her feelings, heretofore repressed in every way, within the guise of a useful object valued by the patriarchy for its utility and oblivious to its other meanings. The quilt is also a metaphor for how we read Celie’s life in her letters.
and Nettie’s, piecing together details, rejecting lies, incorporating truths, until the finished pattern, Sister’s Choice, presents a life and a text of connection, separation and re-connection framed by Celie’s opening and closing images: “I am fourteen years old” and “I think this the youngest us ever felt.” Like Philomela’s tapestry and Minnie’s quilt, we read Celie’s letters as a text of oppression and violation over which she prevails in a quintessentially female form of unity and community. Her letters themselves also reflect more than a search for self. As Michael Awkward states, they “prevent an erasure of the creative spirit” (Inspiriting Influences 143). Threatened into silence by her stepfather, Celie refuses, like Philomela and Minnie, to retreat into voicelessness and the “numb and bleeding madness” other silenced artists whom Walker eulogizes in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” have suffered. Instead, her letters serve as a psychological release for the burdens of a life of which she is so ashamed, she cannot talk to God for solace and understanding so instead writes to Him. Nettie assumes this metaphor of writing as release and deliverance when she understands why Celie continues writing to God even if He does not “read” her letters. “When I don’t write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don’t pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart” (Purple 136, italics mine). Like Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen before her, Walker writes of “[Black] grandmothers and mothers of ours . . . Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” 233). So the anonymous Black woman from Alabama whose quilt hangs in the Smithsonian Institution is “an artist who left her mark in the only materials
she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use”
(239). And Philomela, whose “case looked hopeless”, turned to her loom. “With infinite
pains and surpassing skill she produced a wonderful tapestry on which the whole account
of her wrongs unfolded because “[S]he had a greater motive to make clear the story she
wove than any artist ever had” (Hamilton 270). And from her own mother’s garden, “the
Art that is her gift”, Walker receives a legacy of respect “for all that illuminates and
cherishes life . . . a respect for the possibilities - and the will to grasp them” (“Gardens”
242).

Celie’s letters provide her artistic control over an oppressive environment until
she actually develops financial and emotional control over her situation. However, before
Shug gives Celie Nettie’s hidden letters, Mister continues to wield a figurative life and
death power over the two sisters. Over the years, Celie believes Nettie is dead. Upon
their separation, Celie implores Nettie to write and Nettie replies, “Nothing but death can
keep me from it” (Purple 19), but she never writes - or at least Celie never sees her letters.
Nettie’s letters, her words, are equated with life. Their absence, suppression, means
death. Because Nettie had fought Mister’s advances, he vowed neither sister would ever
hear from the other. His archetype Tereus wields similar power over Philomela and
Procne. Because Philomela threatens to expose his crime, he silences her in the only way
he perceives possible and keeps the sisters apart by imprisoning one and lying to the
other. However, just as Shug circumvents Mister with her knowledge of the truth of
Nettie’s letters, so too Procne circumvents Tereus with her knowledge of the truth of
Philomela’s tapestry. Ironically, after Shug discerns what Mister has been doing for thirty years, she not only strips him of his control, but asserts her own kind of life-bestowing power by getting Nettie’s letters to Celie and facilitating her transformation. Furthermore she distracts Celie’s desire to kill Mister for his deception by suggesting they sew some pants. Celie demurs at first, subscribing to convention. “I ain’t no man” and “Mister not going to let his wife wear pants” (152). Shattering the convention by reminding Celie that she does all the work around the place anyway, and revealing that she and Albert often cross-dressed when they were courting, Shug insists that “everyday we going to read Nettie’s letters and sew” (153).

Though traditionally associated with men, masculinity, maleness and all its attendant power, the pants are reappropriated by the women, blurring gender identities, and endowing the women with the economic power and concomitant independence they symbolize. Like her letters and Nettie’s, the pants are Celie’s “moment of the loom”, that place which, for Philomela and Minnie and now Celie, signifies the liberatory quality of their text, their tapestry, the locus of their resistance, their pants unlimited. Self-stigmatized by what she believes is incest, haunted by the memory of those whom she believes are her lost children, Celie has been violated as woman and as person throughout her life. The males around her are thus able to even more effectively oppress her since she is convinced she has no alternative. However, surrounded by and bonded to strong women like Shug and Sofia, informed of the truth by Nettie, Celie is able to slowly and defiantly regain the self and the life she has been systematically denied. Just as
Philomela’s tapestry reveals the truth of her rape and mutilation to Procne, and Minnie’s quilt and kitchen “trifles” expose the truth of her desolation and silent suffering to Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters - and these women unite in their respective texts to free themselves from further violation - Celie reads her emotional freedom in Nettie’s letters, writes her spiritual freedom in response, and sees her economic and social freedom in the pants she sews with Shug.

Every day Celie empowers herself further, financially and emotionally, and moves closer to the emancipation of self she articulates when she finally confronts Mister. She asserts this new self within an idiom of curses, and defines and confirms herself within Shug’s conception of the divine, none of which Mister can comprehend because it lies outside his patriarchal ken.

Any more letters come? I ast . . .
If they did, he say, I wouldn’t give ’em to you . . .
I curse you, I say.
What that mean? he say.
I say, until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble.
He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all. Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me.
And it seem to come to me from the trees . . . Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I’m telling you ain’t coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape the words . . . The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say . . . A dust devil flew up on the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything you do to me, already done to you . . . I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here. (213-214, italics mine)
Every time she curses him, Mister laughs and demeans her, attempting to defuse the supernatural power of her words and regain his own power with renewed threats. But Celie is speaking resistance, defiance, and self-affirmation with a voice dissociated from the subjugated self she has been thus far and from a new perspective informed by the truth of her life revealed in a letter from Nettie, reinforced by a new conception of god taught to her by Shug in which she is co-extensive with creation, not subordinate to it, and supported by the material success she has found in her cottage industry.

By withholding Nettie’s letters from Celie, Mister assumes the posture of his archetype Tereus. He has violated one sister and, in the face of resistance by the other, exercised the power of the male to control language, that is, to deprive them of speech. But, like Philomela and Procris and Minnie before them, Celie and Nettie prevail over Mister. Celie’s letters, though obviously written, read more like dialogue than narration. The cadences of her sentences and her spelling reflect the sounds and rhythms of speech, not writing. And the letters themselves relate conversations, written as such, between Celie and God, Celie and herself, and Celie and the other women in her community.

Lauren Berlant writes in “Race, Gender, and Nation” that to counter the “delegitimizing pressure” of female marginality, the women in The Color Purple find “expression and refuge in wordplay, in the masterful and courageous deployment of language in irony, in rage, in fun, in lies, in song, and in deadly silences” (221). This is most apparent when the women scheme to get Sofia released from jail. The men suggest dynamiting the prison or smuggling in a file, typically male demonstrations of power. But Mister
determines that Squeak must go because, through the convoluted sexual relationships between southern Blacks and whites, the warden is euphemistically identified as her uncle. The women provide Squeak with a ruse of "double- and quadruple-talk" that tricks the warden into giving her what she wants though he believes it is just the opposite. She says that Sofia is not suffering enough in jail and a more appropriate punishment would be for her to serve the balance of her sentence as the mayor's maid. Her violent refusal was Sofia's crime in the first place and this would be the "worse thing could happen to her." When the prizefighter observes that "[t]his sound mighty like some ole uncle Tommin' to me", Shug puns, "Well, Uncle Tom wasn't called Uncle for nothing" (Purple 99). Squeak succeeds in her mission, but only after she is raped by the warden. "He say if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me. That be a sin. But this just little fornication. Everybody guilty of that" (101). He has done a little verbal equivocating of his own, expected of men, unique and subversively powerful in the mouths of women.

However, the description of Squeak's rape, "so different in representational mode" than Celie's, "serves as the diacritical mark that organizes Squeak's insertion into the womanist order" (Berlant 220). Celie retreats into silence and marginality after her incestuous rapes, but Squeak silences Harpo as he angrily threatens guns and fire in retaliation for her rape. "Shut up, Harpo, say Squeak. I'm telling it" (Purple 100). Her words wield more power than Harpo's empty macho gestures, and they all listen closely while she tells her story. She hesitates just once before she relates the actual rape, until Shug prompts her with an ironic echo, "... if you can't tell us, who you gon' tell, God?"
(101). Long before we learn Shug's theology, she posits redemptive power within the community, not with a white, anthropomorphic god. Squeak has exposed herself to "sexual, racial, and political abuse in the name of communal solidarity" (Berlant 220) and, recognizing the strength therein which she draws into herself, will not be relegated to the inferior, anonymous position the younger Celie was forced to assume. Instead she asserts her right to use her given name as author of this story. "My name is Mary Agnes, she say" and six months later she begins to sing. She no longer squeaks in a "subvocalized voice" as Harpo's dutiful replacement for a defiant Sofia. Rather, she has learned to lie and subvert the patriarchal order even while speaking its idiom and, with Shug, sings "the fact and the privileges (current and imminent) of female speech in the liberatory distinction between words and music" (221).

By figuring the rape as a springboard to her self-identity rather than an obliteration of it, Mary Agnes further subverts the patriarchy by defusing its weapon of literal and figurative oppression. Just as Walker violates reader expectation by locating her novel in the life of a single, young Black woman rather than in a race of people, here too she surprises her audience with an untraditional rendering of a patriarchal socio-literary trope. Thus, Walker joins her characters as they subvert a system which has ignored them as female, black, creative, with her formal and narrative innovations.

Encouraged by Shug to put her creative energies to constructive use, the two women sing the blues - not lyrics of victimization and pain, but anthems of resistance with "but just one refrain - freedom", in the tradition of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday.
Here, too, Philomela’s story resonates within Walker’s text. Though her tapestry reveals “victimization and pain”, Procne’s reading of it results in reunion, transformation and resistance to the “patriarchal order” for the sisters.

We all know something about blues. Being about us, life is the only training we need to measure their truth. They talk to us, in our own language. They are the expression of a particular social process by which poor Black women have commented on all the major theoretical, practical, and political questions facing us and have created a mass audience who listens to what we say, in that form. [Female blues singers] recall the worst aspects of our collective situation and teach how to wring from that the best transformation consciousness can achieve at precise moments in history. They are the bearers of the self-determination tradition in Black women’s blues. Unsentimental. Historical. Materialist . . . each, in her own way and for her own day, travels the road from rape to revolution. (Russell, “Slave Codes” 130-131)

Shug’s music has afforded her the independence from men and their money that underscores her strength of character and personal resolve. Her physical presence is the embodiment of the socio/sexual power of the blues singer to reclaim “female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire”, that is, a shift from sexual object to sexual subject (Carby, “It Jus Be’s That Way Sometime” 756). Mary Agnes’s voice is “little”, but eventually they get used to it and Celie observes that like an unused gramophone, her voice was “silent as a grave. Then you put a record on it and it come to life” (Purple 103). She sings about her color, claiming equivalent significance for yellow as for black, and Harpo loves her for herself, not her color. Thus Walker rewrites the figure of the tragic mulatto, endowing Mary Agnes with a strength and grace revealed through her personal sacrifice and confirmed in her act of self-naming.
In their music, as in their conversations recorded in Celie’s letters, “women are speaking to and of women . . . out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration” (Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” 49). Thus Celie performs a double act of resistance in her letters. They are the place in which her voice has been “held in trust” until she could find a way to counter the voice of the patriarchy. She has been warned not to “tell nobody but God” of her rapes, and out of shame she writes to God rather than speak to Him, protecting her anonymity by not signing her name and maintaining a submissive position by utilizing an “inferior” female form. But as she grows in self-awareness and confidence, and learns the truth of her past from Nettie not God, she rejects Him, realizing, “You must be sleep.” “If he ever listened to poor colored women, the world would be a different place” (Purple 183, 199-200). Now her writing assumes a privileged status and she within it. She signs “Amen”, ascribing her own hieratical assent to her words, and elaborates her name to include her various identities as “sister” and owner of Folkpants Unlimited. She has been a talking book, writing speech to tell her story that we listen to even as we read it.

Celie undergoes a transformation in her relationship with Shug that is reflected in her letters. Curious about the more cosmopolitan Shug, Celie fantasizes about her after seeing her picture. When an ill Shug arrives at the house and Celie is ordered to nurse her, she is still self-consciously in awe though Shug dismisses her with, “You sure is ugly”, confirming Mister’s assessment of his wife. Initially, Shug is “hateful”, at once indifferent and hostile to Celie, but the women develop a strong friendship that eventually
becomes a romantic relationship. When Celie and Sofia resolved their earlier misunderstanding, they settled down into the communal creative activity of sewing a quilt together. Shug tries to sew a square, but her efforts are not any good so she contributes an old dress. For her, the resolution of any antagonism toward Celie comes in a song - another creative act in which Celie participates, though this time unwittingly. While Celie is washing her hair, Shug begins to hum “something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head” (Purple 55). And when she sings it publicly at Harpo’s juke joint, she calls it “Miss Celie’s song”, the “low down dirty blues” that is Celie’s life. Again, Walker’s women bond in a creative act of healing and restoration. Celie’s creativity extends to her letters. As she and Shug grow closer, her letters become more textured, more detailed, and though Celie continues to address her letters to God, Shug has become her confidante. Michael Awkward suggests that the change in Celie’s letters does not evolve from her sensitivity to her Reader’s need for more information in order to understand her history better. “Rather, it suggests that a temporal distance from the event and her participation in a reciprocal and caring relationship with the blues singer enables the protagonist/narrator to discuss her painful personal history, the particulars of which she had not, before talking about them with Shug, been able to record in her letters” (154). This change in Celie is most dramatically apparent in her different descriptions of Alphonse’s rape, first to God:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (1-2)
Then to Shug:

The girls had a little separate room, I say, off to itself, connected to the house by a little plank walk. Nobody ever come in there but Mama. But one time when mama not at home, he come. Told me he want me to trim his hair. He bring the scissors and comb and brush and a stool. While I trim his hair he look at me funny. He a little nervous too, but I don’t know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs ... It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow ... After he through, I say, he make me finish trimming his hair. (116-117)

The first version reveals a frightened young girl, confused and unable to adequately articulate the events that have just transpired and irrevocably changed her life. Told to “shut up” and “never tell nobody”, she submits to the physical and verbal violation by producing two children she believes are dead and writing scant accounts of her life. She records her observations, rarely allowing herself the luxury of an analysis or interpretation of the events. As she develops under Shug’s subtle tutelage, however, she amplifies her descriptions, contextualizes her circumstances - that is, she discovers meaning, assigns significance to the events that constitute her being. She narrates the story of her life because she deserves to be told. The loving, caring, supportive relationship with Shug endows Celie with a sexual autonomy outside the predatory masculine sexuality that heretofore marked her experience and “leads to a major shift in her understanding of mastery and power in the world” (Berlant 226). Recognizing that she is loving, lovable and worthy of respect in the most intimate circumstances endows Celie with a powerful voice with which to articulate the new self she has discovered.
The other critical transformation in Celie that Shug helps to effect is in her attitude toward and conception of God. When Nettie informs Celie that “Pa is not our pa!” (Purple 182), she intends to free her sister from the guilt of incest she has endured. But at first the information further disorients Celie. Her rapes not only violated her body and personal integrity; they also transgressed the boundaries of familial relationships. Like Philomela, Celie’s roles are confused. She is daughter/wife to Alphonse, daughter/rival to her mother, mother/sister to her children, “good girl”/unvirgin to God. Now she is uncertain who or what she is. “My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa” (183). God, from whom she asked a sign of meaning in this senseless chaos that is her life and suffering over one hundred and eighty pages earlier, “must be sleep”, and she no longer writes to him. Philomela too had asked for help. “… if there are any gods/If anything is left/… if there is any god in Heaven, will hear me” (Ovid 1.542-4; 549-50). But like Celie centuries later, Philomela helps herself, rediscovering her inner strength and the power of her self-inscribed feminine poetic, re-uniting with Procné in literal and figurative sisterhood to avenge themselves against the oppressive patriarchy. With the stigma of incest removed, Celie is finally able to speak for herself, and in her first letter to Nettie relates her meeting with Alphonse during which she confronts him with the truth of his familial role. Though he maintains that to have told them the story of their father’s lynching would have been cruel, “Any man would have done what I done” (Purple 187), it is clear that pity did not motivate him to withhold the truth. Once
again, by not speaking their family history, a quintessentially male capacity and prerogative, Alphonse is able to control Celie and Nettie by constructing an altered and alternate version of history, also a male function, whose parameters prescribe their lives. Analogously, Tereus creates a new family history for Procne when he lies that Philomela is dead (and, in some versions, for Philomela, when he lies to her that Procne is dead and charms her into a “pretended marriage”). Nettie finally escapes to save herself, but Celie continues to be victimized by him and later by Mister.

So she reflexively turns to God. “[L]ong as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along” (18). But when she recognizes that not only did her request go unanswered by him, it probably went unheeded as well, she angrily equates God with all the other men she has known - “[t]rifling, forgetful and low-down” and is positive he is white, not only because he is “the one in the white folks’ bible”, but because she knows “white folks never listen to colored, period” (199). Shug explains her raceless, genderless god to provide Celie with an alternative to the binding orthodoxy of Christian and African-American tradition, a white and male theology. Rather than continue to be inscribed in this perfidious system, Shug’s animism “allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self” (Henderson, “TCP: Revisions and Redefinitions” 16).

Here’s the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find God. . . God ain’t a he or a she, but a It . . . Don’t look like nothing . . . It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be . . . My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which
I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. *(Purple* 202-203)

Rejecting the received image of God as male and white enables Celie to reject the image of man as god-like. Thus she supplants a hierarchy of tradition with unity and continuity - a more female, congenial conception of deity and divinity. Shug counsels, “You have to get man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall. Man corrupt everything . . . He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t . . . tell him to get lost. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.” But for Celie, “. . . this is hard work . . . He been there so long, he don’t want to budge . . . Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it” (204).

Celie has been subjected to the oppressive patriarchal system of demands and expectations for so long, it is difficult for her to imagine herself otherwise. But now she steps out of “the white hermeneutical circle” of tradition and into Walker’s “bold new model for a self-defined, or internally defined, notion of tradition, one black and female”, armed with a new-found voice with which she declares her independence (Gates, “Color Me Zora” 258). She has been threatened into silence by Alphonse, believing that if she told her mother the truth, it would kill her; the rape itself has undermined her identity, putting her self-image under erasure. “I am I have always been a good girl” *(Purple* 1); Mister beats her, just because she is his wife; and Sofia survives in jail by acting like Celie. “Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like you. I jump right up and do just what they say”. . . “I can’t fix my mouth to say how I feel” (93). Inspired by Shug’s theology of personal divinity, Celie rejects the powerlessness she has
internalized and speaks herself into her own re-created image. Responding to Mister’s protest at her departure for Memphis with Shug, Celie pronounces, “. . . It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation” from which she has been excluded but which she now claims to be part of and which is part of her (207). When he hints at scandal - “What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after” - and Grady echoes this prescriptive idea of woman - “A woman can’t git a man if peoples talk” - Celie, Shug, Sofia and Mary Agnes “laugh and laugh” conspiratorially, having refused the male construct of woman as domestic servant, wholly dependent upon and defined by her man (207-208). Guided by the self-inventiveness of Shug and Sofia’s unflagging defiance, Celie and Mary Agnes bond with them into a sisterhood of “outrageous, audacious, courageous . . . willful” womanists who define themselves, each in her own way and according to her own needs, outside patriarchal constraints of sexuality and gender, wielding their own power of the word.

Celie’s letters dramatically narrate the transformation of an oppressed woman, silenced and marginalized by patriarchal strictures, into an independent yet connected individual able to eloquently articulate her place in the center of her family and community. Nettie’s letters help to lead her through the painful process of self-discovery and self-validation by exposing hidden family truths that liberate Celie into a healthy, integrated conception of self. Placing the letters in their own narrative space save two, which are presented within Celie’s letters to God, renders them a “significant part of Nettie’s record of Celie’s life” (Awkward 157). It also reaffirms Walker’s choice of the
epistolary novel as “an apt device in that it reflects the traditional familial role of women as keepers of family history in their talk and letters” and reinforces the metaphor of the quilt as the integration of women’s disparate, fragmenting experiences into a coherent, cohesive, aesthetic whole. “The fabric of the novel is made by the interweaving of letters which reveal the respective network of inter-familial relationships supported by a sister. Despite the differences in the sisters’ language, as well as the experiences described, these letters are quilted into a rich and many-coloured pattern to produce a harmonious whole” (Birch, Black American Women’s Writing 223). Just as the quilt the women sew is an act of creative healing repairing the lost thread of connectedness, so too Nettie’s and Celie’s letters repair the thread of sisterhood unraveled by Alphonse. Nettie’s voice, silenced for thirty years by Mister, re-emerges to offer Celie the liberating information she so desperately needs and initiates the consequences of male attempts to control the female voice. Nettie’s early letters, in which she reveals the truth of their paternity and frees Celie from the guilt of incest and informs her of how she came to be in Africa and that Celie’s children are alive and well, are written in the same rural idiom which marks Celie’s. However, reading the letters chronologically also denotes the educative influences of Corinne and Samuel. Nettie replaces the colloquialisms of the South with a grammatically correct form which designates her letters as written discourse and suggests a transformation in Nettie’s character into the patient missionary/educator. However, then her letters become “mere monologues on African history. Appearing as they do, after Celie’s intensely subjective voice has been established, they seem lackluster and
intrusive” (Watkins, New York Times Book Review 18). Donna Haisty Winchell describes Nettie’s letters, in their formal English, as “stiffly didactic after the poetic beauty of Celie’s nearly illiterate attempts to verbalize her plight” (Alice Walker 94), and Michael Awkward agrees that Nettie’s letters, with their “frequently banal discussions of African history and a rather stilted prose style . . . fail to command the reader’s attention to a degree equal to Celie’s compelling letters” (155). But none of these critics agree with Trudier Harris’s assessment of Nettie’s letters as “extraneous to the central concerns of the novel” (qtd. in Awkward 155). Nettie’s letters illuminate Walker’s aesthetic choice of the epistolary novel to represent issues of Black women’s oppression as transcultural rather than the traditional patriarchal historical novel, in which such personal issues would be submerged. By exploring examples of intraracial gender oppression instead of focusing on white imperialism, Nettie describes women’s conditions in Africa as analogous to what Celie suffers in America and exposes a continent neither utopian and pure nor its people as particularly noble. The two sisters’ letters, different in language and specific content, nevertheless intersect ideologically, producing a discourse on the plight of Black women. This then, and not a diatribe against public, historical, exploitative movements, is Walker’s purpose.

Nettie’s first reaction to Africa is clearly emotional. “Something struck in me, in my soul . . . we kneeled down . . . and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried - and lived and died - to see again” (Purple 149). And upon seeing Africans, “. . . I felt like I was seeing black for the first time. And
Celie, there is something magical about it. Because the black is so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight” (147). Her responses, however, are not completely romanticized. She does ask poignantly, “Why did they sell us? How could they have done it?” (145) and is angry that “[T]hey acknowledge no responsibility whatsoever” (171). Even Samuel later weeps, “The Africans don’t even see us. They don’t even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold” (243). Indifferent to any conception of pan-Africanism the missionaries hope to encourage, the Olinkans are as self-centered as white people in America. Nettie observes, “They think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them” (174). But the most invidious resemblance is to Pa himself.

There is a way that the men speak to the women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face” as they say. To “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (168)

And the behavior of slaves before the slavemaster. However, to acknowledge historical complicity in the plight of their American slave brothers and sisters would require the Olinkans to examine their treatment of their own women.

In describing her adjustment to Africa and her role as missionary, Nettie enumerates various Olinkan rituals, practices and beliefs which clearly serve only to keep the women subservient. Although it is incumbent upon Samuel to preach the Christian
virtue of monogamy, the bonding of the polygamous wives is more open and productive than the ambiguous relationship between Corinne and Nettie. Nevertheless, the Olinkan husband has life and death power over his wife. “If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed.” Or if “the child of a favorite wife should fall ill . . . each woman fears the accusation of sorcery from . . . the husband” (172-173).

When Nettie points out that the world is changing, that women are no longer the pawns of patriarchal authority, Tashi’s father counters that Nettie’s ostensible liberation is pitiable because she has no man to look after her, as Olinkan women do. Protected by father, uncle, brother or nephew, “[t]here is always someone to look after the Olinkan woman”, not from some anachronistic chivalric code, but from the authoritative position of ownership and control. And, as Tashi’s mother has explained to Nettie earlier, Olinkan girls do not need an education.

A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something.
What can she become? I asked.
Why, she said, the mother of his children.
But I am not the mother of anybody’s children, I said, and I am something.
You are not much, she said. The missionary’s drudge. (162)

Later, Tashi deduces male opposition to female education. “Who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows” (176). Knowledge as power is equated with men, and so women are kept in ignorance, defined only as childbearers to their husbands.

The most hideous examples of control in the name of “respect” for women are the rituals of scarification and clitoridectomy, called the rite of female initiation. Tashi, the native child in whom Nettie sees something special, spends much of her time playing
with and learning from Olivia and Adam, Celie’s children. Her mother worries that what she teaches Tashi “does not really enter her soul”, but Nettie recognizes this as Tashi’s understanding that “she is learning a way of life she will never live” (166-167).

Suspicious of the missionary ways and especially of Nettie, “a pitiful, cast-out woman”, Tashi’s father forbids her to play in Nettie’s hut; instead, he invites Olivia to theirs, where she can “learn what women are for” (168). After he dies, Catherine, Tashi’s mother, wants her to continue to learn, and she and other mothers send their daughters to the missionary school. Yet, even though Tashi has converted to Christianity and is educated in a Western tradition, and Nettie believes she understands the obsolescence of many Olinkan practices, Tashi nevertheless undergoes facial scarification - “carving their identification as a people into their children’s faces” (248) - and clitoridectomy, ordinarily performed by age eleven. Olivia explains that Tashi submits “to make her people feel better”; believing that the white man has taken everything except Olinkan rituals and that their tribal integrity depends on her participation in tradition, Tashi yields to the delusion that she is protecting and preserving her people with her deed. No Olinkan woman would ever be endowed with such social, cultural, historical power, and the true motives for these rituals will emerge shortly. In any event, Tashi is happy that the initiation ceremony is not performed in Europe or America. “That makes it more valuable to her” (245).

Because Olinkan custom prohibits discussion of a girl’s genitalia, Nettie knows only that there is danger of infection during the initiation ceremony and that it is not
comparable to male circumcision, which is "just the removal of a bit of skin" (245).

Indeed, when they see Tashi shortly after the ceremonies, "she'd lost a considerable amount of weight, and seemed listless, dull-eyed and tired. Her face was still swollen from half a dozen small, neat incisions high on each cheek . . . Tashi is, unfortunately, ashamed of these scars on her face, and now hardly ever raises her head. They must be painful too because they look irritated and red" (248). Adam is angry that Tashi, whom he loves, has submitted to the rituals and avoids her, and Nettie believes that she is beginning "to appreciate the magnitude of her mistake" (248). Tashi and Catherine run away to the mbeles' camp (resistance fighters), and after two and a half months, Adam brings Tashi back. He wants to marry her and take her to America, but she refuses. She protests that no one in America will like her and that she will be shunned because of the scarification marks on her cheeks. She fears too that Adam will be distracted by American women, neither as black nor scarred as she is, and desert her. To reassure her of his love and loyalty, he apologizes for his initial reactions to the ceremonies and undergoes scarification of his own cheeks. Samuel marries them and they return to America, reunited with Celie and her extended family on the 4th of July, a day Harpo describes as one on which "black folks don't have to work Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (294).

Although Tashi's concern about the American response to her scars is legitimate, given American xenophobia and racism, the emotional scars she carries are her greater burden. What Nettie observes and describes as ritualized oppression of women among
the Olinka in *The Color Purple* translates into Tashi’s descent into madness and murder in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Unlike her oppressed literary sisters, Tashi willingly submits to mutilation. Philomela and Celie are raped, and Minnie is systematically violated by an authoritarian husband. But by consciously yielding, Tashi is no less a victim. She has been beguiled by the words, the *speech*, of a charismatic leader with the power to define her as a woman. Having internalized his lies, she submits her body upon which the patriarchal definition of woman will literally be inscribed and suffers the dire consequences of her compliance. Believing that her people are in danger of cultural imperialism as well as economic exploitation, although she has been Christianized, she resumes her tribal identity in a process that ironically strips her of her own. When she leaves Olivia, her childhood friend, “the sister of my heart”, to join the mbeles and undergo scarification and the initiation ceremony, she contemptuously rejects all that Olivia and her family have taught her and represented.

> You are a foreigner . . . Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change . . . You want to change us so that we are like you. And who are you like? Do you even know? . . . You barely have your own black skin, and it is fading . . . You don’t even know what you’ve lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you! . . . We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself. (Joy 22-24)

Tashi’s outrage at the cultural imperialism suffered by her people is legitimate. However, she does not recognize that by submitting to these rituals, she is subjecting herself to
gender imperialism viciously enacted by the very people she so eloquently defends and bravely emulates.

Though ostensibly an external sign of tribal chauvinism, scarification is, in fact, a kind of branding, a mark of ownership by which the patriarchy lays claim to the individual. More insidious is the sign and symbol of female circumcision. Even though Adam loves Tashi and wants to marry her, he is a foreigner; she undergoes the procedure so that she “would not have the shame of being unmarried” amid her people (64). Among many African tribes, including the Olinka, men do not marry women who have not been excised and are not virgins. This operation

is regarded as the conditio sine qua non for the whole teaching of tribal law, religion and morality . . . The abolition of irua (genital mutilation) will destroy the tribal symbol which identifies the age-groups, and prevent the Gikuyu from perpetuating that spirit of collectivism and national solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial. (Kenyatta qtd. in Daly, Gyn/Ecology 167, 445)

Therefore, nothing less than the survival of African culture and society depends on the

“sado-ritual of excision and infibulation”. However, as Greene and Kahn point out,

“Ideology masks contradictions, offers partial truths in the interest of a false coherence, thereby obscuring the actual conditions of our existence . . . that gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the interests of male supremacy . . . that the construction of gender is grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality” (“Feminist Scholarship” 3).

It is Kenyatta’s phrase “time immemorial” that lends a mythic quality to the cultural lie that engendered and perpetuated female mutilation. Tashi relates to Raye, her
psychiatrist, a superficial version of the ritual’s origins, though it resonates with psycho sexual/cultural implications.

From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way. (Joy 121, italics mine)

To Tashi’s circumcised friends, she is a “monstrosity”. In order to stop their jeering and be accepted “as a real woman by the Olinka people”, Tashi submits to the procedure.

Mary Daly states that “only a mutilated woman is considered 100% feminine. By removal of her specifically female-identified organ, which is not necessary for the male’s pleasure or for reproductive servitude, she ‘becomes a woman’”, a phallicocratic construct of the feminine (Gyn/Ecology 167-8). Woman is defined by negation and loss. Only with the excision of her clitoris - that which makes her a woman - does she become a woman. Philomela is analogously defined by Tereus. Because she threatens to speak Tereus’s crime, a male function and prerogative, he mutilates her, renders her speechless and powerless, therefore female. Tashi admits to an incredulous Raye that she willingly sacrificed the pleasures of masturbation and cunnilingus, both based in the clitoris, both taboo to the Olinka, to please, instead, an absent, sanctified lover - “Our Leader, our Jesus Christ” - and become completely woman, completely African, completely Olinkan.

However, the operation renders her unrecognizable to Adam, especially her eyes - no longer sparkling with anticipation but now “flat as eyes that have been painted in, and with dull paint” (Joy 43-4). And it has reduced her once proud walk, the walk of the
*invincible Olinkan woman* she imagined she would become, to a shuffle - the gait of the *proper Olinkan maiden*.

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M’Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi’s vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body, and has nowhere to go. There was the odor, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off. (65)

Olivia observes that Tashi is passive; no longer impish or cheerful, everything about her is slow and studied. “That her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes” (66).

Daly elaborates the long-term effects of female mutilation in gruesome detail.

... the infibulated girl can look forward to a life of repeated encounters with “the little knife” - the instrument of her perpetual torture. For women who are infibulated have to be cut open - either by the husband or by another woman - to permit intercourse. They have to be cut open further for delivery of a child. Often they are sewn up again after delivery, depending upon the decision of the husband. The cutting (defibulation) and re-sewing goes on throughout a woman’s living death of reproductive “life”. Immediate medical results of excision and infibulation include hemorrhage, infections, shock, retention of urine, damage to adjacent tissues, dermoid cysts, abscesses, keloid scarring, coital difficulties, and infertility caused by chronic pelvic infections. In addition, we should consider the psychological maiming caused by this torture. (157)

The emphasis on purity by both the Olinkan leader in his pronouncements from prison and Kenyatta in his allusive nationalistic manifesto underscores male hatred of the clitoris because it renders him expendable for female sexual pleasure and, therefore, must
be excised. Tashi exposes this male paranoia when she complains to M'Lissa, the woman who circumcised her, that she never experienced any sexual pleasure. "That is your own fault, she says. The pleasure a woman receives comes from her own brain. The brain sends it to any spo... never can touch. Then why is it that it is a woman's vulva that is destroyed? I ask. "Bathed", as they say, "cleaned off," I ask. And not her shoulders or her neck. Not her breasts? (Joy 246). The penis is specific to sexuality and sexual pleasure, but also to reproduction and elimination. The clitoris, on the other hand, is the only human organ specific to sexuality and sexual pleasure; the vagina is an organ of reproduction as well as sexuality. Therefore, the woman has more physiological sources of sexual pleasure, which insure her sexual autonomy.

Though separated by continents and centuries, Olinkan myth and psychoanalytic theory intersect in their misogyny. Freudian understanding of female personality is based on penis envy. Beginning with this theory, then, the definition of the female is negative - what she is is the result of the fact that she is not male and "lacks" a penis. In the Olinkan hermaphroditic myth, the clitoris is a penis and must be excised to make the woman feminine. Here, too, she is defined by men by what she lacks. But this time it is a unique organ of feminleness which looks and acts perilously like its male analogue. Philomela has an organ which appears androgynous. But when she usurps male power, that is when she threatens to speak of the crime committed against her, using her tongue in an authoritative, male manner, it must be excised. In order to be female, i.e. silent and submissive, she must lose her tongue. The ritual which makes her feminine magnifies the
difference between men and women by making woman “different” to herself. But Freud ignores the conditions within patriarchy that shape woman’s experience and her perception of herself as inferior and focuses instead on biological differences. He refuses “to acknowledge that woman is born female in a masculine-dominated culture which is bent on extending its values even to anatomy and is therefore capable of investing biological phenomena with symbolic force” (Millet, Sexual Politics 180). The creation myth that Pierre relates to Tashi is a patriarchal redefinition of anatomy and sexuality, laced with lies and euphemisms to diffuse the power of a female “preculture” and keep women subordinate. The discovery that she does not have a penis generates an inferior self-image characterized by absence and lack. Until this moment we are asked to believe that she thought her clitoris was a penis because she masturbated with it, but now she inexplicably concludes that a penis must be better for such purposes. Freud calls the period of clitoral autoeroticism in girls “phallic”, subsuming all sexual activity under a linguistically male rubric. Freud’s usage is predicated on the belief that masturbation is the active pursuit of pleasure, and that activity is masculine whereas passivity, i.e. vaginal sexual pleasure, is feminine (181-2). Therefore “the elimination of the clitoral sexuality is a necessary pre-condition for the development of femininity” which, as Mary Daly states, “is a construct of phallocracy”. The feminized girl “acknowledges the fact of her castration, the consequent superiority of the male and her own inferiority . . . and seeks fulfillment in a life devoted to reproduction”, that is, the hunt for a male organ (Freud qtd. in Millet 186). Millet complains that even in reproduction, the only function Freudian
theory recommends for her, the woman is bested by "the male prerogative even to give
birth, as babies are but surrogate penises" (185).

To subdue female sexual and reproductive autonomy and its inherent
socio/economic power evidenced in M'Lissa's herstory of female society, men focus on
women's genitalia as a site of dangerous power and must expunge the threat. It is male
envy that necessitates female castration in its literal and figurative forms. In formulating
the theory of penis envy, however, Freud neglects the social explanation of female envy
of male social status - his power, freedom and authority - focusing instead on a literal
jealousy of the organ whereby the male is distinguished. Freud maintains that once a girl
discovers her castration is a universal female experience, "she develops, like a scar, a
sense of inferiority. When she has passed beyond her first attempt at explaining her lack
of a penis as being a punishment personal to herself and has realized that that sexual
character is a universal one, she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which
is the lesser in so important a respect." First she blames her mother, "who sent her into
the world so insufficiently equipped" and who is "almost always held responsible for her
lack of a penis" (Freud qtd. in Millet 183). To the excised woman, the penis is an organ
to dread, not to envy, and her lack of a clitoris is punishment for her presumptuous power
enforced by men, not biology. Nor does she blame her mother. Rather she blames the
authoritative system that conscripts her own mother in its brutal practices. And her
mother resignedly, silently, blames herself. According to Freud, however, the girl now
rejects her mother, her own sex, and must direct herself positively to a masculine model if she is to mature to what he calls her Oedipal stage. The girl has assumed that her mother has mutilated her as a judgment on her general unworthiness, or possibly for the crime of masturbation, and now turns her anxious attention toward her father whom she expects will award her with a penis (183-4). The female idols subversively preserved and recreated by African women celebrate the power of female sexuality and immortalize female self-possession in their “look of confidence. Of pride. Of peace.” Amy, the American, is circumcised for masturbating. In Africa, the masturbating woman is a goddess.

Disappointed in her hope for a penis, but never completely relinquishing it, the girl now more properly relates it with a baby, especially a boy baby who comes equipped with the longed-for penis. Childbirth, often fatal, is always harrowingly painful for the circumcised woman. But the birth of a son is particularly torturous for the mother since she knows he will grow up to “break into someone else’s daughter. Just as another woman’s son breaks into hers” (Joy 245). To women, the penis is an instrument of perpetual torment and their sons wield it. However, women who reject Freud’s prescription for normal, healthy development - the cessation of masturbation, which is a masculine activity, and the commencement of reproduction, which is feminine - fall into the “masculinity complex”. These are deviant women who, not necessarily homosexual, pursue “masculine aims”. Tereus’s punishment by mutilation of Philomela’s presumptuous speech is appropriate in a male, logogentric context. When she and Procne
later seek revenge, their behavior is again described as unfeminine, deviant (read “masculine”) and they are narratively and thematically excoriated by their mythologizer. “They do not seek the penis openly and honestly in maternity, but instead desire to enter universities, pursue an autonomous or independent course in life, take up with feminism, or grow restless and require treatment as “neurotics”. Freud’s method was to castigate such “immature” women as “regressive” or “incomplete persons”, clinical cases of “arrested development” (Millet, 186, italics mine). When professional women, insubordinate women who have invaded male “territory” and seek to “compete”, thereby threatening men, sue for clemency in behalf of Tashi, they are threatened with the loss of their jobs. These women do not retreat in awe of the president’s penis and their inferiority for lack of one. They respond to male exercise of economic power, not any inherent anatomical superiority. Nevertheless, “[T]hey looked ashamed, and their eyes did not meet the camera. One easily imagined their sliding feet” (198).

Though the “masculinity complex” is aberrant behavior demonstrated by unregenerated women, all women display aspects of modesty and jealousy directly related to penis envy. Freud maintains that women are ashamed of their “genital deficiency” and are therefore instinctively modest in order to conceal their defect. He even goes so far as to explain pubic hair as nature’s sympathetic response to conceal their “female fault” (188). According to Olinkan tradition, the uncircumcised vagina, the intact clitoris, the female penis is a monstrosity. Because the erect clitoris resembles the penis and threatens its potency, it must be cut out. Patriarchy, not biology, effects
“genital deficiency” in Olinkan women and modesty is enforced due to the ritual’s taboo. Both women and men are ashamed, women by their mutilation, men as their mutilators. Ironically, Olinkan women appear barebreasted, totally unfazed by the arrival of the missionaries. Adam is too young at the time to be embarrassed by their partial nudity. Clearly neither the women nor the fully-clothed tribal elders are embarrassed either. Their breasts do not hold a mystical power the men fear. They are not “female faults” nature herself wants to cover. They are not taboo. Tashi asks M’Lissa why other female body parts are not “bathed” or “cleaned off” like the vulva is, but her question goes unanswered. Because “the blameless vulva” is the locus of female sexual and reproductive power, it must be subdued and controlled. Breasts sustain life. They do not grant it. Though Freud maintains that because of their constitution, their lack of a penis, women have not and cannot contribute to civilization, he allows that they might have invented weaving and plaiting - “discoveries that spring from an identical impulse - the need to hide their deformity” (Millet 189). If civilization is defined within a masculinist construct of death, destruction and subjugation, women have been its victims, not its heroes. But while men have been about the business of conquest and power, “women transmitted culture to the young - built the social network and infra-structures that provide continuity in the community” (Lerner qtd. in Greene and Kahn 17). Women’s art, weaving in its various manifestations - a tapestry, a quilt, pants, a red dress - communicates female experience, female culture and civilization in a singularly female
form. Women do not hide their deformities behind their art. Rather they proclaim the
injustices that inflict their wounds in the first place.

Freud relegates women to a position of unalterable disentitlement by virtue of
their anatomy and then faults them, again by virtue of their anatomy which accounts for
their deficient moral sense, for demanding equality on every level. “The whole weight of
responsibility, and even of guilt, is now placed upon any woman unwilling to “stay in her
place”. The theory of penis envy shifts the blame of her suffering to the female for daring
to aspire to a biologically impossible state. Any woman who resists “femininity” and the
circumscribed existence it portends deviates unnaturally and unrealistically from her fate,
as “‘anatomy is destiny’. In so evading the only destiny nature has granted her, she
courts nothingness” (Millett 189). Ovid implicates Philomela and Procne in their own
doom for requesting their reunion in the first place. In a sense, they have deviated from
their “circumscribed existence” as daughter and wife respectively and have repositioned
themselves within a feminine construct of sisterhood. It is from this perspective that they
take significant action and for their efforts, their male mythologizer inscribe a new
destiny for them: narrative and thematic nothingness. No man will marry an
uncircumcised woman. Defiant, “deviant” women who refuse circumcision are too
powerful to be left free: they are enslaved or put to death. Men, for whom penis/power is
destiny must, because of their own biological necessity, “overcome the resistance of the
sexual object” through an act of sexual aggression, that is rape in its literal and figurative
forms (Donovan, Feminist Theory 101). Female circumcision, itself a version of
anatomy is destiny, is enslavement and death of another sort. Victimized by patriarchal
tradition, defined and contained by mutilating ritual, circumcised women are raped of
their physical, emotional, social and psychological identity. If they refuse circumcision,
they “court nothingness”. If they submit to circumcision, they become “nothingness”.

Both Freud and Olinkan myth and ritual shift attention to the vagina in order to
make the woman once again sexually dependent upon the man. This dependency is also
equated with purity in that it extends to sexual fidelity as well. Genitally reconstructed to
satisfy male purposes, women exist in the thrall of perpetual pain, “an important
condition for their perpetual purity, for pain preoccupies minds, emotions, imaginations,
sensations, prohibiting presence of the Self” (Daly 159). Physiologically deprived of her
sexuality, the circumcised woman is denied every aspect of her identity because the entire
focus of her being is directed toward her pain - its cause, its reason, its consequence.
Fitted to accommodate only her husband, and this in excruciating pain, no mutilated
woman could endure penetration by another man - hence her enforced sexual fidelity,
what Verzin calls “perpetual virginity”(444). That the woman is sewn tight to simulate
the sexual stimulation of anal intercourse and never allowed to get “loose” and decrease
the man’s pleasure is true in a metaphorical sense as well. M’Lissa tells Tashi that

the uncircumcised woman is *loose*, like a shoe that *all*, no matter what
their size, might wear. This is *unseemly*. *Unclean. A proper woman* must
be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an
opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge. Men love and enjoy
the struggle. But she never said anything about the woman. About the
pleasure she might have. Or the suffering. (*Joy* 224, italics mine).
A “loose” woman is deviant, by male standards, because she experiences her sexuality and its attendant pleasure on her own terms. “Now we can begin to understand something about the insistence, among people in mutilating cultures, that a woman’s vagina be tight. By force if necessary. If you think of being wanton, being loose, as being able to achieve orgasm easily.” Pierre makes this socio-linguistic connection for his father Adam after describing the only girl he ever loved as being able to achieve orgasm “doing almost anything” - riding a horse, rubbing against a tree or boulder, against the earth itself. Adam is shocked that a woman can find pleasure so easily, carelessly. “The word you are looking for is wantonly. Loosely. a woman who is sexually “unrestrained”, according to the dictionary, is by definition “lascivious, wanton and loose.” But why is that? A man who is sexually unrestrained is simply a man” (179-80). The sexism against women encoded in language inscribes their control and oppression in cultural practice. The mutilation ritual is called “bathing”, “cleansing”, “purification”; the hideous wound it creates is called “healing”, an ironic word choice since it never does, physically or psychically. Pierre further exposes the cruel irony implicit in sexist language by naming female mutilation pornography and rape, performed to requite man’s jealousy of woman’s pleasure, which she can achieve without him. There is nothing pure nor purifying in the motive or the act or its consequences.

Pierre, who “wants to be the first anthropologist to empower and not further endanger his subjects” (230), has been unable to put Tashi’s suffering out of his mind. When he explains the Olinkan origin myth that engenders the rituals of female mutilation,
he unlocks the mystery of Tashi’s recurrent nightmare of the dark tower, and on the day of her execution, rededicates himself to destroying the terrors of the dark tower - the patriarchal myth of mutilation and oppression - for other women. According to the creation myth, the earth is a feminine body, its sexual organ an anthill, its clitoris a termite hill.

The God Amma, creator of the world, was lonely and desirous of intercourse with this creature. That was the occasion of the first breach of the order of the universe . . . At God’s approach, the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as God’s organ and prevented intercourse. But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. But the original incident was destined to affect the course of things forever . . . God had further intercourse with his earth-wife, and this time without any mishap, the excision of the offending member having removed the cause of the former disorder. The spirit drew two outlines on the ground, one male one female. And man and woman lay on top of these shadows and took them both for their own. So from the first, each human being was endowed with two souls of different sex. In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris. But man’s life was incapable of supporting both beings, and so each person would have to merge himself in the sex for which he was best suited. Therefore, man is circumcised to rid him of his femininity; the woman is excised to rid her of her masculinity. (173-7)

Pierre elaborates further the termite myth and its connection to female circumcision.

Because of the heat and humidity, human beings in Africa imitated the termite when building houses that were cool and comfortable, long-lasting and easily constructed. With their long, vaulted passageways and great domed storage rooms, termite houses have natural air-conditioning, and they are built of clay, the earth itself, the cheapest, most plentiful material around. Over time, the people developed a strong identification with the termite, especially since, unlike most other insects, the termite has kept a place for
males in its society. There is a queen, but also a king. Out of gratitude for having been taught so much, the people’s religious symbology became completely reflective of termite behavior. The termites would have taught them to make pots, which would have led inevitably to the notion that the first human beings were themselves fashioned out of clay. And that someone or something fashioned them. And in her nightmare, Tashi is the termite queen who loses her wings and lies in the dark inert, with millions of worker termites buzzing about, taking care of her. She is stuffed with food at one end while her millions of eggs are constantly removed at the other. She endures all this, only to die at the end and be devoured by those to whom she has given birth.

As troubled as Tashi is by Pierre’s termite story, she recognizes it. “But how did I know this? No one told me?” And Raye explains that the cultural message that all women are to be systematically desexed is transmitted in “some coded, mythological reason for it, used secretly among the village elders.” How else would they know what they were talking about, how to keep it going, how to talk about it? “Circumcision is a taboo that is never discussed” (231-3). All Tashi is told by her culture is that circumcision is an expression of pride in her people and that no man will marry her otherwise. What the elders conceal as “guardians of the knowledge of the beginning of man” is that Creation itself began with mutilation and rape.

And this is how people who mutilate little girls see the beginning of life,” groans Olivia. “Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women and to the earth,” says Raye bitterly. Mbati is angry and horrified. “Nobody knows this story, nobody even knows why they do this thing. I certainly never had any idea why it was done to me. If my sex organs were unclean, why was I born with them?” (235)
But her mother can only answer that everyone knew a woman’s vulva was dirty. She never told Mbati any stories about termites and genitals and clitoris that rose like penises.

Tashi half listens to their anger at such systematic dissimulation and betrayal as she remembers a time when, as a child, she served refreshments to the village elders and remained to listen to them, unnoticed because she was such a small girl child. She does not understand what she hears. “Man is God’s cock.” “The tsunga’s stitch helps the cock to know his crop.” “Woman is Queen. Since God has given her to us, we must treat her well.” “If left to herself, the Queen would fly. But God is merciful He clips her wings.” “When she rose up, as a man would, she did not see God’s axe. God struck the blow that made her Queen.” “God liked it fighting! God liked it tight! That’s why He created the tsunga” (236-8). This is the code that Raye describes which a girl child could not have recognized. That is why Tashi had been allowed to stay, because the elders were secure that she could not decipher the kind of life for her they had determined.

Couched in the mystery of religious ritual and obscured by codes, the conspiracy of silence surrounding genital mutilation protects the patriarchy in its perpetuation of such atrocities and keeps the women in ignorant compliance. Tashi cannot ask about her sister Dura’s premature death, its memory haunting her maddened soul and yet she does not know why, nor can Mbati explain in Tashi’s defense why she reminds her of her own mother, who died while Mbati was an infant. “How did your mother die? It is a taboo question in Olinka. One never asked for fear of the answer. Mbati subsides into silence”
(161, italics mine). When Adam describes Tashi as a tortured woman whose life was destroyed by a ritual she did not understand enacted upon her body, the courtroom spectators become furious at the word “ritual”. “Male voices, and female voices, calling for Adam’s silence. Shut up, shut up, you disgraceful American! The voices cry. This is our business you would put in the street! We cannot publicly discuss this taboo” (162-3, italics mine). Nettie never understood why the discussion of menstruation was taboo. It is a sign of the suffering and “they do not want to hear what their children suffer.” But it is not the pain and incapacitation, in and of themselves, that they do not want to confront. Rather it is what they symbolize - “signs of the weakness and uncertainty of men” (165).

If women must be subjugated through systematic mutilation and violation of their bodies and minds, how powerful does that truly render the men? Even Adam, who has also suffered because of Tashi’s suffering, wonders if men ever considered what it would feel like to have their penises removed. Would they then be able to understand what the women endure? Male circumcision, though presented as symbolically analogous to the female ceremony, is nothing more than the removal of the foreskin, which leaves his organ of sexual pleasure intact, does not hinder his reproductive capacity, and reduces the risk of infection. But to have their bodies “whittled” and “refashioned” into unnatural configurations of flesh . . . “How wearying to think nobody . . . has ever listened to them” (166).

Nevertheless, Adam has not always been so enlightened. He admits to Raye that it had not occurred to him that Tashi’s pain was anything more than physical, that it
existed on a continuum of suffering. “I had thought of what was done to her as something singular, absolute” (169). Even when their son Benny is born and the doctor is stunned by what he has seen, Adam is too embarrassed to speak and coughs out of nervousness. Tashi reaches for his hand, and though he moves closer, he does not touch her. There between Tashi, Adam, the baby and the doctor was only “a ringing silence. Which seemed oddly, after a moment, like the screaming of monkeys” (59). Adam further abdicates his responsibility as husband and Christian when he refuses to preach on the subject in his own church in San Francisco. Agitated by the constant focus on Jesus’s suffering, Tashi feels that such homiletic myopia “excludes the suffering of others from one’s view . . . I knew I wanted my own suffering, the suffering of women and little girls, still cringing before the overpowering might and weapons of the torturers, to be the subject of a sermon.” But Adam declines to deliver even just one sermon on the subject of Tashi’s suffering, Tashi’s crucifixion, because “the congregation would be embarrassed to discuss something so private and that, in any case, he would be ashamed to do so” (275-6). Does the congregation’s embarrassment stem from some Puritanical discomfort with public discussions of private matters, or from a recognition within themselves of some tacit complicity, through their continued silence and self-imposed ignorance, in systematic torture masquerading as culture and religion? Is Adam ashamed to discuss his wife’s genitalia from the pulpit, or to admit his impotence in the face of such hideous gender imperialism? Or are they all silenced by the realization that to confront the barbarity of the Other is to acknowledge it in themselves?
Mary Daly explains the conspiracy of silence from several perspectives. Western critics of female ritual mutilation are intimidated by charges of racism and neo-colonialism "to the point of mis-naming, non-naming, and not seeing these rituals." Yet, despite local protest, international organizations have distributed vaccines and vitamins. Obviously a call for the cessation of genital mutilation is political and not humanitarian. Taboos against saying/writing the truth about such atrocities, about naming them, protect not only the phallocracy in which they are practiced but also those "advanced societies" in which anonymous malignity is perpetrated against women. To allow ourselves to see the connections is to accept that such atrocities are "normal, ritualized, repeated."

International organizations, the Catholic church, whose membership includes these victimized women, anthropologists, Third World leaders educated in the West all willingly participate in this conspiracy of silence because their socio/political purposes "have nothing to do with women's specific well-being unless this happens to fit into the "wider" aims" (158).

The most profound silence is among the victimized women themselves. Daly writes that one basic function of the sado-ritual is to silence "the mind’s imaginative and critical powers . . . which teaches women never to forget to murder their own divinity."

Preoccupied with unbearable pain on a daily basis, the creative energy of these women is anesthetized. And though united in their suffering, both physical and mental, the women suffer in isolation, silenced by a taboo which precludes psychic release through empathic connection. Undergoing the ritual mutilation in the guise of protecting and perpetuating
tribal integrity, not recognizing that it is, instead, extreme proof of their subservience to patriarchal authority over their sexual and reproductive capacities, these women cannot articulate their anguish against a practice that exists ostensibly for their benefit. They are held hostage by a lie - that no man will marry an uncircumcised woman because she is impure - and so their cultural and material survival depends on their submission. And they cannot speak the evil inequity of this practice, even if they recognize it. Sadly, women who have not been physically mutilated “cannot really wish to imagine the conditions of their sisters, for the burden of knowing is heavy. It is heavy not merely because of the differences in conditions, but especially because of the similarities” (154-8). Systematized cultural oppression of women exists in many forms, perhaps more subtle but no less destructive in the “civilized” West - whether it be the disenfranchisement of women, criminalization of abortion, sexual harassment in the workplace, or unequal pay for equal work. Their effects may be less barbaric in kind, but not in degree.

Walker shocks her readers out of any smug cultural superiority in the character of Amy Maxwell, another of Raye’s patients. As a child, Amy had masturbated, a practice that appalled her mother to the point that she bound Amy’s hands before putting her to bed, poured hot sauce on her fingers and, when Amy was six, had her clitoris excised. In New Orleans. In America. In the twentieth century. “A rich white child could not touch herself sexually, if others could see her, and be safe” (Joy 187). Disbelieving that her pristine America could be soiled by the blood of mutilated women, Tashi is reminded that
she is not the first African woman to come to America. Many African women were sold into bondage because they refused to be circumcised. But those who had been mutilated fascinated American doctors who examined the naked defenseless women on the auction block. Even Tashi had become something of a side-show freak when she gave birth to Benny. “... as if I were some creature from beyond their imaginings. In the end, though, I was that creature... a crowd of nurses, curious hospital staff and medical students gathered around my bed. For days afterward doctors and nurses from around the city and for all I know around the state came by to peer over the shoulder of my doctor as he examined me” (60).

The American doctors who had examined the slaves centuries earlier learned to perform the procedure on other enslaved women in the name of Science. They found a use for it on white women as a cure for hysteria. In an article in Ms. magazine, Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem report that in nineteenth century England, clitoridectomies were performed as a cure for insomnia, sterility, unhappy marriages and masturbation in children, and that as recently as the 1940s, the operation was performed in the United States to “save the ‘gentler sex’ from sickness and suffering” (“Genital Mutilation” 67). Amy describes the generations of Black female servants in her household as variously infertile, docile, “slavish in spirit” though legally not a slave, lacking spunk, “no self”. This description echoes Olivia’s observation after Tashi’s operation that her eyes revealed only “the mortal blow that had been dealt her soul”, that she was “virtually buried”. Amy’s servants display a “gentleness of spirit” her mother values as exemplary; Amy
sublimates her depression into a disturbing cheerfulness that drives her husband away and her son to suicide; Tashi’s pain, confusion and sense of betrayal force her into madness. Such is the salvation of the “gentler sex from sickness and suffering”.

Just as the taboo against masturbation and its attendant remedy - clitoridectomy - exist in the West, so too does the silence surrounding the procedure. Amy’s mother tells her,ironically, that she has had her tonsils removed and that the pain is in her throat. But, though the pain is elsewhere, Amy cannot touch it, fearful of contradicting or offending her mother. Her anger at her mother for controlling her life with an “invisible hand” surfaces only after her son dies and she has to start feeling her own feelings for herself. “I had tried to live through Josh’s body because it was whole” (Lox 190). The image of the “invisible hand” appears in the creation myth Pierre reads to Tashi and represents the god-like power enjoyed by those [males] who ceremoniously mutilate women. “In the moment of birth the pain of parturition was concentrated in the woman’s clitoris, which was excised by an invisible hand . . . Even so long ago God deserted woman, I thought, staying by her just long enough to illustrate to man the cutting to be done” (177). The laying on of hands, the sanctification of an apostle - God to man - extends across centuries and across cultures. Yet, at this moment in Raye’s office Tashi rejects any possibility of self-recognition in Amy’s story, choosing instead to defend Amy’s mother. Perhaps she “had had trouble communicating with her doctor, who was perhaps like me a stranger from another tribe; perhaps her troubles stemmed from a complication
encountered in the language. *Perhaps* Amy’s mother had meant her daughter’s tonsils after all” (190, italics mine).

By denying the role of Amy’s mother in this barbarity, she does not implicate her own. One of Tashi’s early psychiatrists observes that “Negro women can never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers. Blame them for what? I asked. Blame them for anything, said he” (19). The most complex paradox which exacerbates the ritual’s atrocities even further is the complicity of mothers in their own daughters’ mutilations and their subsequent silence. Olivia’s memory of Tashi upon their first meeting is her unremitting weeping. When her father asks about Tashi, the village elders “looked genially at him and at us and at each other and replied, looking about now over the heads of those assembled. What little girl, Pastor? There is no little crying girl here” (8). Rather than explain to the newcomers, the outsiders, and allow themselves to speak and hear the truth - that Dura, Tashi’s sister had bled to death - Tashi is denied and erased by the elders. And in a sense, so is Dura because the circumstances of her death are never explained to Tashi. To further confuse her, the events and activities before Dura’s death do not presage such an outcome. “Suddenly she had become the center of everyone’s attention; every day there were gifts. Decorative items mainly: beads, bracelets, a bundle of dried henna for reddening hair and palms, but the odd pencil and tablet as well. Bright remnants of cloth for a headscarf and dress. The promise of shoes!” (9). In the midst of a ritual perpetuating a primitive practice is the subversive intimation of an enlightened future Dura will never see in the
oxymoronic gift of pencil and tablet. This portion of the ritual serves to distract the participants/perpetrators from the victimized child’s pain and life-long deformity, and perhaps premature death. Thus Tashi does not understand why the sight of her own blood terrifies her, why she modifies her behavior so as to forestall injury. Indeed she forgets, as Amy forgets her tonsillectomy in New Orleans. This repressed memory is part of Tashi’s madness.

And the village women contribute to this repression. Admonishing her not to cry because it will bring them bad luck and the missionaries will believe that they beat her, the women threaten Tashi with banishment from the village if she does not stop. Guilt and responsibility for any bad luck the villagers might suffer is, thus, foisted on a six year old child. Tashi’s confusion is compounded by her inability to reconcile such indifference to Dura’s death with women who have known both sisters all their lives. “It was a nightmare. Suddenly it was not acceptable to speak of my sister. Or to cry for her” (15). Since Tashi could acknowledge neither Dura nor her death, it was as if she had never existed. By silencing Tashi’s mourning, eradicating any cause for grief, that aspect of Tashi’s identity - sister - is erased. Tereus and Mister attempt to keep the sisters in their respective narratives apart, claiming deaths that have never occurred but nevertheless redefining each sister in her role as survivor. When Procne and Philomela and Celie and Nettie reunite, they reconstitute their families and their identities in the process. Though Tashi can never resurrect the dead Dura, when she finally acknowledges
the truth of her sister’s death, confers meaning upon it, she is able to reconstitute her own identity and forge a sisterhood with other suffering women.

But Tashi’s mother does not say anything comforting in the way of explanation either. She works hard, with a “resigned dignity”, to fill the emptiness, and Tashi can feel “the weight of Dura’s death settling upon her spirit . . . But my mother never wept, though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens with its praising pain” (16-17). No words of doubt or anger or recrimination - just a cry, ambiguous in its praise but not in its pain. Yet later, when Tashi finally confronts M’Lissa about Dura’s death and her own death-in-life, the tsunga directly implicates her mother. “The death of your sister was your stupid mother Nafa’s (Catherine) fault . . . If Dura is not bathed, she said, no one will marry her . . . She was the kind of woman who jumps even before the man says boo. Your mother helped me hold your sister down” (256-7, italics mine). Though Tashi doubts the veracity of M’Lissa’s account, and after she is baptized Catherine repudiates the ritual, she nevertheless responds to patriarchal strictures in the matter of Dura, believing the procedure is being done for Dura, not to her. Conditioned to believe that no man will marry an uncircumcised woman, Catherine accedes to tradition out of concern for her child. The only way to ensure Dura’s economic survival is through marriage, and the only way to ensure her marital viability is through clitoridectomy. Thus patriarchal control of women’s bodies - their sexuality and reproductive capacity - is enforced by socio-economic rewards and punishments.
M'Lissa further inculpates mothers in their conspiracy of silence. In order to assuage their guilt and their daughters’ fears of pain upon penetration, “even after they themselves almost died the first time a man broke into their bodies, they want to be told it was a minor hurt, the same that all women feel, that their daughters will barely notice, and cease, over time, to remember” (245, italics mine). This is the reassurance the tsunga must provide so the mothers can deceive their daughters into a life of unremitting pain and mitigate their guilt somewhat. Only later, when Tashi understands herself and her culture and what it does to women, can she see that her mother was unable to comfort her. “. . . there was not enough of herself left to her, to think about me. Or about my sister Dura. . . . She had just sunk into her role of “She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter” (275).

That women have been seduced for centuries to succumb to male definitions of their desirability, and that men have for centuries controlled the economic destiny of women through marriage explains why mothers would be so anxious, though piteously misguided, to have their daughters excised. However, to have other women, themselves mutilated, perform the ritual is an even more invidious aspect of the tradition. Yet if “tsunga” is the sole position of power, honor or even economic independence for a woman, then the tsunga will perpetuate the ritual to survive (Morgan and Steinem 98). When Tashi asks why the women in M'Lissa’s family have been tsungas “from the time of memory”, she answers, “Because it is such an honor. . . . And also because it is the way we fill our bellies” (Joy 219). “No one ever married me, and I lived anyway” (257). This
collusion between oppressor and oppressed is symbiotic. The tsunga is economically independent and the tribal leader is absolved of any direct responsibility for ritual mutilation. Male abdication of responsibility, moreover, is completely ensconced in myth. Since all persons are hermaphroditic at birth, this condition is cured by male circumcision and female excision and, since the clitoris may kill a man or at least render him impotent and the clitoris kills children at birth, clearly the clitoris is an instrument of death and must be eliminated (Daly 159-160). Though the procedure is completely dictated by men, from its raison d'être to its completion, men are conspicuously absent from its execution. “. . . the tsunga was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power” (Joy 277). The women’s apparently active participation in their own destruction protects their true castrators. Daly relates “castrate” to the Sanskrit “sāsati”, meaning “he cuts to pieces”. Under patriarchy, this is done to women’s bodies, minds and spirits - they are divided and fragmented into disconnected pieces. Thus, by blocking the power of the Self as an integrated whole, the use of women in the ritual blunts the power of sisterhood. Though women are directly involved in the mutilation, its conduct and perpetuation are not their cultural responsibility. “The idea that such procedures, or any part of them, could be woman-originated is only thinkable in the mind-set of the phallocracy . . . only to those who do not wish to see” (164-5). Women did not conceive this brutality against other women and, as Daly writes, when they intone prayers and howl with joy, “the screaming token torturers are silencing not only the victim, but their own victimized Selves. Their
screams are the “sounds of silence” imposed upon women in sado-ritual” (164). Even Tashi notes that women who have not been gelded have a different sound. Their voices come from another age. The sound - a crescendo of pain - confirms for M’Lissa “that there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women” (Joy 223), just as the gods abandoned Philomela when she cried out for help and Celie concludes god “must be sleep” since he never answered her letters.

The silence imposed by complicit cultural repression is broken with the help of a truly empathic psychiatrist in the mode of Carl Jung when Tashi is able to confront the truth of Dura’s death and her own predicament. Watching a black and white film Mzee, the old psychiatrist, made earlier on a trip to Africa, Tashi recognizes a scene she has repressed for years. He and his entourage had inadvertently entered the ritual space where serial circumcisions were about to be performed. Everything and everyone stopped, except for a large fighting cock, strutting majestically and crowing mightily among them. Tashi faints and later dismisses her spell. “There was nothing I could tell them; I could not say, The picture of a fighting cock completely terrorized me” (73). Unable to speak the repressed memory that was beginning to emerge, Tashi paints a series of ever larger, more fearsome fighting cocks. And one day she draws a foot holding something small between its toes. At first she does not recognize whose foot it is or what it is holding, but the painting clearly agitates her and she feels “every connecting circuit in my brain was making an effort to shut down” (74). Her mind is trying to protect her by submerging the reawakened memory, but she recognizes the foot she has
painted as belonging to M’Lissa, the tsunga who circumcised her and Dura. She knows because she finally remembers, “as if a lid lifted off my brain”, the day Dura was mutilated. “I had crept . . . to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror . . . and I knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut. Dura who made those inhuman shrieks that rent the air and chilled my heart” (75).

Silence - and the tsunga M’Lissa shuffles from the hut carrying something “so insignificant and unclean that she carried it not in her fingers but between her toes.” Whatever it is, she flings it toward a waiting chicken that quickly gobbles it down. Once Tashi exorcises this memory from her mind and spirit, the monstrous cock she has painted no longer frightens her. “The cock was undeniably overweening, egotistical, puffed up and it was his diet of submission that had made him so” (80). The cock is an ancient African symbol for God, and its “diet of submission” is the excised clitoris of Dura and the other little girls lying helpless in the dirt. Tashi confronts the event of Dura’s death in her painting.

I remembered by sister Dura’s . . . my sister Dura’s . . . I could get no further. There was a boulder lodged in my throat . . . I knew what the boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions. Emotions that had frightened me insane. I had been going to say, before the boulder barred my throat: my sister’s death. Because that was how I had always thought of Dura’s demise. She’d simply died. She’d bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame. Instead, I took a deep breath and exhaled it against the boulder blocking my throat: I remembered my sister Dura’s murder, I said, exploding the boulder. . . She has been screaming in my ears since it happened, I said . . . Only I could not hear her, I signed. You didn’t dare, said the Old Man. (82-4)
And later, when Tashi begins to see Raye after the Old Man has died, the boulder which had barred the word “murder” from her throat rolls off her tongue again, this time “completely crushing the old familiar faraway voice I’d always used to tell this tale [of her circumcision], a voice that had hardly seemed connected to me” (121). The voice that parroted the Leader’s dogma, that echoed his instructions, that euphemized his lies to make them bearable is no longer connected to Tashi’s soul and does not speak for her. Now she speaks for herself.

Empowered by the truth and emboldened in her “madness”, Tashi returns to Africa to confront M’Lissa and the origins of her misery. Surprised that M’Lissa is still alive, she finds a national monument and heroine, honored “for her unfailing adherence to ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state.” As Tashi notes, however, “no mention was made of how she fulfilled this obligation” in the Newsweek article that celebrated her life and accomplishments (149-50). International silence conspires once again against the women M’Lissa victimized “in service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are.” Cynically M’Lissa names herself and the people she served. “Who are we but torturers of children?” (226). Though she reveals anger and even guilt in her ruminations, Tashi does not trust M’Lissa. There is something sinister about her subverting the healthy maternal image she projects to the tourists, the pilgrims. “Her whole body is smiling her welcome; except for her eyes. They are wary and alert . . . Hers is an X-ray gaze. But then, so is mine, now” (155).
But neither does M’Lissa trust Tashi. Both women see madness reflected in the other’s eyes and M’Lissa knows she can only distract Tashi from her revenge with a story. Therefore, she “blandly” informs her that if a tsunga is murdered by a woman she has circumcised, that proves her value (the tsunga’s) to her tribe and elevates her to sainthood. Refusing to effect M’Lissa’s sanctification, Tashi postpones her plans for several days. So, like a doomed Scheherazade, M’Lissa tells Tashi “another version of reality of which I had not heard”, indefinitely delaying the inevitable. Both women are storytellers, conflating mythology with reality in an attempt to impose meaning on history. M’Lissa speaks a pre-history to Tashi, a female history that Mbati characterizes as bizarre because there is no objective masculine correlative to confirm it. Standing outside the male myth that delegitimizes them, M’Lissa’s stories seem patently absurd. But prefacing the patriarchal myths of oppression with another story, a herstory, invests women’s suffering with meaning.

M’Lissa is honored as a link with the past, especially for women, because she represents a female-centered tradition. Despite its destructiveness, the ritual she performed is a sign of stability sorely missing and desperately needed in this time of transition from colonialism to independence. What her listeners do not apprehend is that the past she speaks of is a woman’s time, more precious and powerful than anything man could devise and, therefore, subject to annihilation by him. She claims “there was a time when women didn’t have periods. Oh, there may have been a single drop of blood, but only one! she says this was before woman’s capture” (154). Before women were
harnessed for men's reproductive needs. It is difficult for Tashi and Mbati to understand M'Lissa's meaning because it is impossible for them to imagine a time when women were free, particularly if they do not perceive themselves as enslaved. There are stories about the sacredness of woman's blood. "... when men and women became priests blood was smeared on their faces until they looked as they had at birth. And that symbolized rebirth: the birth of the spirit. But that was in the old days before the people of Olinka were born as a people" (207). That is before the patriarchy organized the Olinka into a society with practices and customs which excluded women except as their victim. And that is when the role of tsunga originated. "Since the people of Olinka became a people there has always been a tsunga" (219).

The need to subjugate women became a cultural imperative in order to validate and ensure male authority. The time before the people became a tribe - patriarchy - was considered evil because women had economic, social and reproductive power. "... although everyone knew they had a mother, because she had given birth to them, a father was not to be had in the same way. You could not be sure. And so, your mother's brother was your father. The house always belonged, in those days, to the woman, and there were never children without parents or a home. But somehow this was seen as evil" (219, italics mine). Azizah Al-Hibri theorizes that

pre-historic man came to envy women's reproductive powers and the magical phenomenon of menstruation ("that females can bleed suddenly and heavily without dying"). Men saw these physical processes as a means to immortality that they did not have. "Not only did she constantly recover from her bouts with bleeding, but more significantly, she constantly reproduced herself - she had the key to immortality and he did not." The male thus saw the woman originally as Other, but superior, for
he was ‘excluded and cut off from the cycle of ever-regenerating life.’ . . . In order to establish his own sense of superiority and to lay out his own avenue to immortality or transcendence, the male channeled his energy into . . . the domination of an Other, the female and a feminized nature. (qtd. in Donovan, *Feminist Theory* 179)

Mary O’Brien argues that “because the male experience of reproduction is discontinuous, men had to establish “artificial modes of continuity”. This required a denigration of the female reproductive process and a valorization of idealist, intellectual (male) reproduction, i.e. culture (qtd. in Donovan 241).

The evil imputed to female economic, social and reproductive power is, therefore, in the eye of the beholder and to men, this woman power had to be stopped. Since the birth process initiates the cycle of power, for mothers can always be identified but fathers cannot, women’s sexual and reproductive capacities had to be controlled. How better than to destroy all sexual pleasure for women and guarantee sexual fidelity by making intercourse excruciating and child-birth often fatal. The added threat that no man would marry an uncircumcised woman and that if she refused the procedure, the entire tribe would be in danger of cultural extinction, forced women to become hostages to their bodies and the patriarchy. Once “the people of Olinka were born as a people”, Olinkan women ceased to exist as women.

Long before this ritualized subjugation of women, long before the tsunga was enlisted to aid the patriarchy in its gendered massacre, “in some age quite beyond the scope of the present imagination” (*Joy* 201), children were given “idols” to play with as teaching tools, “figures revered as the Creator, Goddess, the Life Force Itself”, all
touching themselves, smiling, free. M'Lissa's mother, herself a tsunga, had such a figure. M'Lissa remembers her mother as sad, never smiling, but often praying and "walking slowly in the direction of her prayers" (220). She follows her one day into a barren forest blighted by a man and woman who fornicated there long ago and watches as her mother removes something from a hole in a rotting tree, unfolds it, looks upon it, kisses it and replaces it. After her mother leaves, M'Lissa removes the object and examines it. "It was a small smiling figure with one hand on her genitals, every part of which appeared intact" (220). M'Lissa had not yet been circumcised and so she compares herself to the statuette, touching herself just as the figure did. Her response is as blissful as the figure's look but its sudden intensity shocks and frightens her. Though she plays with the figure often, she never touches herself again. "It seemed too powerful for me to ever again compare myself... If I had, then at least I would have known the experience that the work of the tsunga was trying to prevent" (221). When Tashi, as a little girl, finds the figurine in M'Lissa's hut and plays with it, M'Lissa "boxed her ears, claiming the thing I held - a small figure playing with her genitals - was indecent. I was too young to ask why, therefore, she had it in her hut" (111). Recognizing an inherent power in the doll but not perceiving its significance, the tsunga is as ignorant as her victims of the truth behind the ritual of mutilation. "Why did they make us do it? I never really knew" (223).

M'Lissa's mother, on the other hand, knows the truth but cannot reveal it to her daughter because of the conspiracy of silence in which she is an unwilling participant. Nevertheless, when she has to circumcise M'Lissa, she prays to the idol constantly and
tries to protect her daughter. But "four strong eagle-eyed women" hold M'Lissa down and watch her mother, so when she tries to "leave me a nub, down there where the charge I had felt with the little statuette had seemed to be heading", a vestige of femaleness and female pleasure, "the other women saw". The witch doctor must finish what she has started and shows no mercy. He leaves M'Lissa far more lame and incapacitated than is necessary, even by the barbaric standards of the patriarchy. But he must punish her and her mother for their rebelliousness. "He had learned all the healing and cures that he knew from women, which was why he was called a witchdoctor, and wore the witch's grass skirt, but the witches who taught him had been put to death, because they refused circumcision and were too powerful among the women to be left free, uncircumcised" (221). Like the uncircumcised women who had to be sold into slavery into the New World, like the defiant wife who committed suicide rather than submit to the torture of intercourse, like early African women, "the mother of womankind", who owned their bodies, including their vulvas, and touched them as much as they liked. Who were notoriously free until they were captured and "enslaved among people - indigenous Africans and invading Arabs - who never touched their genitals if they could help it, having been taught such touching was a sin" (278). Powerful women - immanent in the sexuality and reproductive capacity of all women - must be subdued. Left physiologically castrated, socially determined and emotionally crippled, circumcised women suffer a figurative death, silenced, erased, unrecognizable to themselves, not only by the mutilation of their bodies but by the decimation of their souls.
Three months after her initiation, M'Lissa drags herself home. But she is no longer the child who had been taken to the hut. The fragmentation of her identity which occurred when her body was rent apart is manifested in her isolation of affect, a defense mechanism she must employ in order to survive. “I was never to see that child again” (222) When she finally sees the child again, in her mind’s eye, M’Lissa speaks of herself in the third person, as if she is a stranger who had been left behind bleeding, crying, betrayed. “I couldn’t think about her anymore. I would have died” (225). When Tashi taunts M’Lissa that she has seen that child countless times in the faces of all her victims, M’Lissa “could not feel her pain enough to cry. She was like someone beaten into insensibility. Bitter, but otherwise emotionally inert” (223). M’Lissa’s clitoris has been excised and so has her capacity for empathic connection to other women. In order for her to survive as a tsunga, it must be thus.

When Tashi first looks into M’Lissa’s eyes upon their reunion, she notes a shadow. “Is it apprehension? Is it fear?” (155). This close to death, M’Lissa must make sense of her life. As she interweaves Olinkan myth and tradition with herstory, she speaks self-recognition, contrition and anger - at the patriarchy and at women for submitting to it. If “the God of woman is autonomy”, why then do women, “even today, after giving birth, ... come back to the tsunga to be resown, tighter than before. Because if it is loose he won’t receive enough pleasure” (224, italics mine). Tashi, who believes she submitted to the initiation ceremony for all the noble reasons enunciated by the Leader, is dumbstruck to learn that she was manipulated even further. She had been sent
“to give the tsunga something to do. To give the new community a symbol of its purpose
. . . But you encouraged it, I say, puzzled and hurt. Do fools need encouragement? They
encourage themselves”. As Tashi attempts to defend herself, quoting the Leader,
M’Lissa interrupts. “Did our Leader not keep his penis? Is there evidence that even one
testicle was removed? The man had eleven children by three different wives. I think this
means the fellow’s private parts were intact”. Tashi is scandalized at such disrespect, but
M’Lissa is angry that women succumb to male lies and suffer for their gullibility while
men continue to perpetuate the lies and suffering with equanimity and impunity.

“Women, she sneers, are too cowardly to look behind a smiling face. A man smiles and
tells them they will look beautiful weeping, and they send for the knife” (244).

Tashi echoes this image of woman as coward when she ambiguously accepts the
guilt for not killing M’Lissa, a fact she does not want publicly disclosed “because women
are cowards and do not need to be reminded we are” (255). M’Lissa even implies that
Tashi’s mother is a coward for succumbing too quickly and willingly to the dictates of
patriarchal tradition. The chief had temporarily suspended circumcision to prove to the
white missionaries that he was modern, not a savage, and that as chief, he could stop
them. “So of course he stopped it, to prove to them he was chief. His decision had
nothing to do with us” (256). The motivation for the cessation of circumcision, like its
implementation centuries earlier, was purely political and a demonstration of power. But
here the struggle for power is against white missionaries and the imperialism they
represent. Recognizing his inferior position juxtaposed to theirs, the struggle
is deflected into safer and more certain channels, and the consequence is the familiar demonstration of male power over women. This demonstration, however, is not simply the result of greater safety in directing anger at women than at men. It derives as well from the fact that . . . the male gains something from a system in which all women are at some level his subjects. (Fetterley, The Resisting Reader xvi)

But Nafa (Catherine), still susceptible to patriarchal prescriptions and believing that since the new missionaries are black the village will return to all its former ways, fears that if Dura remains uncircumcised, she will remain unmarried. “She was the kind of woman who jumps even before the man says boo. Your mother helped me hold your sister down” (257).

When Tashi naively implies that even men are kept ignorant of what is done to women’s bodies, that they too are pawns of the patriarchy in that “they only know they’re supposed to be man enough to break into the woman’s body” and often hurt themselves trying, M’Lissa remains coldly unsympathetic. Tashi does not apprehend that if a woman can become a “woman” only through circumcision, then a man can become a “man” only if a woman suffers interminably and is “made into something other than herself” (246). Tashi can no longer make love that is not painful or humiliating; she drives Adam to Lizette, his French lover and mother of Pierre; she aborts a second pregnancy rather than risk another retarded child, or a daughter who will be victimized by culture, or a cesarean section which will force her to be restrained and cut upon yet again. All of her instincts, all that makes her who she is, has been eradicated by patriarchal dictates. Yet Tashi still does not recognize that she has been conditioned enough to submit to victimization by
men and then re-victimize herself by accepting responsibility for their “bruises and lacerations”.

M'Lissa's stories reveal to Tashi and herself “the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world” (139). By naming the atrocity she was manipulated into performing, she frees herself and is able to die. But Tashi must tell stories of her own, often within the context of others’, before she appreciates the tenacity of that connection or the depth of its root. She allegorizes her life to gloss the truth she fears and is dismissed as insane, even by her attorneys. The truth is taboo, and any alternative articulation of it, that is female experience spoken by a female, is unacceptable, marginal, mad. “Can you bear to know what I have lost?” Tashi screams in the courtroom, but no one responds. They dare not read the true story that is inscribed on her body and seared onto her psyche - the story of barbarity and brutality the patriarchy would call culture, but its victims name duplicity, domination, dehumanization. So she lapses into a fairy tale - “Once upon a time there was a man with a very long and tough beard” - and the entire courtroom, including her family, bursts into laughter. The attorney reminds her to answer the question and “not attempt to indulge and distract the court with your fantasy life.” But her fantasy life is her survival.

“Without it I’m afraid to exist” (35-6). As a child, she escapes the memory that scratches at her consciousness into fantasy and fable. “Come see how Tashi has left our world. You can tell because her eyes have glazed over”, the other children would taunt (20). As an adult, she concludes to Raye,
Without this habit, it would be impossible for me to guess anything out of
the ordinary had happened to me... if I find myself way off into an
improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I can guess something
horrible has happened to me and that I can't bear to think about it... do
you think this is how storytelling came into being? That the story is only
the mask for the truth? (132)

Walker's narrative form, a non-chronological account of Tashi's suffering related
in a nonconsecutive order by her and those whose lives her pain has touched, reflects the
fragmented personality Tashi is attempting to reconstitute into a whole woman. Her
chapter headings are profoundly emblematic of the disintegrated sense of self her
memories and experiences have created. Sometimes she is Tashi in Africa; sometimes
she is Evelyn in America; sometimes she is Tashi-Evelyn or Evelyn-Tashi, dichotomized
by circumstance and geography but struggling to recuperate a unified whole with the
truth. Twice, near the end, she is Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson. The first is when she
confesses to murdering M'Lissa because she is tired of the trial. Her guilt is ambiguous
because she denies killing M'Lissa to Olivia in order not to disappoint her, but she
confesses her guilt in a final letter, also headed Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson, to the dead
Lizette. "I am being what is left of myself. And that sliver of myself is all that I have
left" (254). It takes Tashi a long, painful time to recreate herself, incorporating all of her
identities, including her newest, strongest one as symbol of resistance, into a seamless
whole that does not require hyphens when she writes her new name just before she dies.
"Tashi Evelyn Johnson. Reborn" (279).

Both M'Lissa and Tashi tell stories as a distraction against madness, M'Lissa to
postpone Tashi's murderous revenge, Tashi to postpone the revelation of truth she fears.
M'Lissa creates a new story, a herstory outside the patriarchy as an act of rebellion, contrition and liberation by which to confront what has been done to her and what she has done to others. By providing “another version of reality” of which Tashi has not heard, M'Lissa promotes Tashi’s psychic release. Nevertheless, Tashi must create her own personal medium through which she can understand her life and free herself from its oppression. Hence she allegorizes her subconscious into an art so huge it covers an entire room, and paints the memory she has so long repressed. She recognizes the rooster, M'Lissa’s foot and the “insignificant and unclean” object she carries between her toes as figures in her sister’s death and can rename it murder. After Pierre explains the circumcision myth that underlies her mutilation, Tashi is able to envision a drama in which she is an invisible character, rendered thus by her “main” characters, the village elders, and re-image their dialogue, through which she deciphers the patriarchal code which has enslaved her and other women. No longer fearing the truth, rather empowered by it, Tashi avenges herself upon M’Lissa and, by extension, the patriarchy. But killing M'Lissa, or accepting the guilt for her death, is not the only way Tashi retaliates against the cultural system that victimized her. Finally apprehending, “the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world”, Tashi determines to teach this truth to other women and liberate them as well.

Recognizing that she is a griot whose story cannot be told, Tashi decides “that write something I could and would” (109). So like her oppressed literary sisters before her - Philomela’s tapestry, Minnie’s quilt, Celie’s letters - she creates a new poetic.
Reappropriating a quintessentially male form of mind control - the billboard - Tashi subverts it to her own uses by creating signs on which she inscribes words of rebellion and resistance for women. Rejecting white poster board - “white is not the culprit this time” - she chooses paper the color of her country’s flag. At her age, Tashi recognizes that “all I am good for is alerting you to disaster”, and so she rewrites the traditional patriarchal myth of power represented in the flag’s red, yellow and blue into a challenge and prediction for all women. “If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it” (108). If women persist in their silent collusion with tyrants, they will continue to be tyrannized. History - male, authoritative - will blame them for their condition.

M’Lissa knew at the moment of her mutilation that “the God of woman is autonomy”. Tashi knows it now, as she inscribes a new manifesto. This is the “moment of the loom” for Tashi, the locus of resistance for her and generations of women after her as she writes the truth of women’s past and the promise of their future. As the young woman who sold Tashi the paper relates their encounter in court, the attorney misquotes her. “If you lie about your pain you will be killed,” he repeats incorrectly, eliminating the critical phrases that identify the victim and her victimizer. The attorney accepts the woman’s correction - “if you lie to yourself” - impatiently. Recognizing the significance of Tashi’s color choices and obviously moved by the implications of her declaration, the woman insists that it be spoken accurately. The attorney, on the other hand, aware of Tashi’s allusions, misrepresents crucial words, silencing her articulation of female truth.
and its implicit demand for belated female justice even as he fulfills his role as guardian of male truth in the pursuit of male justice. Throughout her testimony, the woman maintains that she did not understand the import of Tashi’s message, assuming the position of ignorant acquiescence to the status quo expected of her. However, she betrays herself in her correction of the attorney and in her warning to Tashi to be careful.

Why did you do that, asked the attorney sharply. The young woman gave him a frightened look. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she replied. I don’t know, she said. But of course she knew. Half the people in prison in Olinka were there for expressing their discontent with the present government. An audible groan escaped me. The judges glared. (109)

Tashi’s groan speaks as eloquently as any word of opposition she has written or might utter. Even the judges, official representatives of the patriarchy, comprehend her meaning. But there is a power in her sound, a female sign outside the male construct of language, which they cannot control nor silence.

Tashi recognizes that this young woman represents the hope for the future for the words the older woman has said and written have clearly moved her. The attorney attempts to diminish this effect by dismissing any possibility the woman might have understood Tashi’s intentions, as if Tashi’s words are incomprehensible to any sane individual. By relegating her placards to the rantings of a madwoman, the attorney hopes to subdue Tashi into silence, just as Ovid, centuries earlier, suggests that the frenzied rites of Bacchic worshippers reflect the maddened state of Proce’s mind as she seeks the imprisoned Philomela, and the country attorney reads Minnie’s unkept kitchen as aberrant, anti-feminine behavior. Each attempts to diminish the women by naming them
Nevertheless, we read past their misogynistic implications to the Bacchic festival as a metaphor for transformation underscoring Procne’s resolve, and we recognize Minnie Wright as a hardworking farm wife victimized by circumstance as well as an oppressive husband. The bonds Tashi has begun to forge are already too strong for the attorney to sever. When Mbati testifies that Tashi appeared “motherly”, the attorney renames her “demon” and “fiend”. The filial bond they establish almost immediately is, however, impervious to his verbal assault. Tashi thinks of Mbati as “the daughter I should have had. Perhaps could have had, had I not aborted her out of fear”. “I am this child’s mother. Otherwise she would not have appeared so vividly, a radiant flower of infinite freshness, in my life” (159, 271). And Tashi is the mother Mbati lost when only an infant. As she attempts to describe this bond “in a definite voice”, the attorney cuts her off. “Childhood memories are quite irrelevant to this court” (161). Ironically, it is childhood memories that have brought Tashi back to Africa and ultimately to this courtroom. But the attorney will not allow Mbati to continue. He must prevent her from broaching the subject of her mother’s death, for it is taboo; and he cannot allow her to paint a sympathetic, human portrait of Tashi. The only way to protect patriarchal tradition and sever the bond between the two women before the court is to silence Mbati – to stop her story even before she speaks it and thus erase Mbati’s mother, Tashi as her new mother, and Mbati as daughter to them both. Nevertheless, “Mbati looks me in the face and holds my gaze” (161). Like Tashi’s groan before the court, the women’s gaze is
a female sign outside the ken of male verbal proscriptions. No words the attorney speaks
are strong enough to rupture the bond between the two women.

Later, before her execution, Tashi gives Mbati her clay figurine that for centuries
women have been forced to keep hidden while other women continued to fashion,
refusing to abandon the female truth the idols represented even as men, fearing their
power, stripped them of their female identity. “This is for my granddaughter, I say . . .
Neither of us can have it - that look of confidence. Of pride. Of peace carved into the
doll’s face - because self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim. But
perhaps your daughter . . . I never intended to have a child, she says. The world is
entirely too treacherous . . . Are you saying we should just let ourselves die out? And the
hope of wholeness with us?” (273). Mbati had called M’Lissa “mother” in deference to
her position as mother of the nation, an honor earned and conferred for her prodigious
efforts to preserve and perpetuate Olinkan tradition as keeper and teacher of an
oppressive past. Tashi, on the other hand, is the “mother” of a new awareness for women
- a knowledge of self, of wholeness never again to be systematically rent by the
patriarchy.

Though M’Lissa may have achieved sainthood upon her death, the president of
the country is not pleased that Tashi hastened her sanctification. Ostensibly, Tashi has
murdered a national monument - an icon - and that is crime enough. But she must be
punished for the temerity of her assault against male systems of authority and oppression,
of which M’Lissa was a revered symbol, and serve as an example for other rebellious
women. The president is “rabid” in his insistence on the death penalty for Tashi. Professional women who petition him to spare Tashi’s life are refused and “warned they will lose their jobs if they pressed their interest in the case further”. For centuries, women were economic hostages to a brutal practice - no man would marry an uncircumcised woman. An now, in an era of specious progress, the economic integrity of the descendants of those women continues to be extorted from them. “There was a photograph of the women as they were dismissed. They looked ashamed, and their eyes did not meet the camera. One easily imagined their sliding feet” (198).

But there are other women who are not so intimidated because they have nothing of material value that can be wrested from them as punishment for their defiance. They have traveled from all over the country in support of Tashi and place offerings of “wildflowers, herbs, seeds, beads, ears of corn, anything they can claim as their own” beneath her window (193). She has become the new cultural icon. Each time the women sing the national anthem, they are beaten by Muslim fanatics and cultural fundamentalists who recognize that the song which originally mobilized a nation behind its male leaders now lauds a woman whose efforts have enlightened women to rebel against the patriarchy. Just as Tashi reappropriates the patriarchal symbolism of the flag’s colors to create a new banner of emancipation, so too these women sing a new anthem of freedom from between the lines of an old song of enslavement. The beatings do not stop their singing - another display of the strength of sisterhood. The day Tashi is sentenced to death, the women sit silently dejected and the men ignore them. But the next day they
resume singing, and the beatings resume as well. One would assume that since Tashi has been sentenced to death, the patriarchy has prevailed; however, the fundamentalists, who resist change to preserve their power not their culture, recognize the subversiveness of the new anthem, the potential power for women it heralds, and they can do nothing to silence them beyond a typical male exercise of violence. Undaunted, the women continue to sing/speak their emancipation. Like Shug and Mary Agnes, who sing the blues in another, equally oppressive world, their antiphonal confirmation of Tashi’s message enunciates “the facts and privileges (current and imminent) of female speech in the liberating distinction between words and music” (Berlant 221).

Through her placards, Tashi has taught these women to resist the oppression of ritual that mutilates their bodies and souls in the name of tradition and culture. But there is one more lesson she herself must learn before she dies and it is taught to her by the women she has inspired and empowered with her words. One evening, Mbati reads to Tashi from a book by Mirella Ricciardi entitled African Saga and published in 1982 (Hospital, New York Times Book Review 29). Identified by Walker only as “a white colonialist author who has lived all her life among Africans and failed to see them as human beings who can be destroyed by suffering”, Ricciardi writes with condescending unselﬁscnsnes, “Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them” (Joy 271, italics mine). Reminiscent of Daly’s international conspiracy of silence, Ricciardi deflects attention from the “suffering and humiliation” inflicted upon African [women]
by whites and African men by praising, instead, their preternatural capacity to survive through some mystical "secret of joy". Thus, by generating a fascination with the Other rather than an outrage at their condition, Ricciardi and her peers exculpate themselves from the horrors of imperialism and raise suffering to the level of wonder and awe. Outraged by the presumption of this "settler cannibal" who has stolen the integrity, identity and wealth of her people to "also write about how much joy we possess", Tashi exacts a promise that Mbati will not let her die "before she has discovered and presented to my eyes the definitive secret of joy" (272).

The morning of her execution Tashi sees the "secret" enacted before her and reads its meaning in the words and actions of women united by their common suffering. Recognizing that singing is a new articulation of a transformed feminine consciousness, the authorities, armed with machine guns, silence the voices of the waiting women once again with the threat of violence. "But women will be women." As Tashi passes by, each woman drops the diapers off her swaddled daughter and lifts the laughing, smiling, screeching baby to her shoulders. "It is a protest and a celebration the men threatening them do not even recognize" (280). This is the future, the generation of women who will possess themselves - body and soul. The "hope of wholeness" Tashi wished for Mbati's daughter, for all daughters, is their reality. Just before Tashi is shot, Mbati unfurls a banner which they hold up to her. It reads "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" The soldiers cannot stop Tashi from reading this last declaration of independence. Ironically, they are illiterate and do not know what it says.
Tashi achieves her own final act of resistance at her execution, another female sign whose significance the men fail to apprehend. She wants to wear a red dress to face her firing squad. “I am sick to death of black and white. Neither of those is first. Red, the color of woman’s blood, comes before them both” (203). Remembering M’Lissa’s herstory lesson, Tashi symbolically sanctifies woman’s blood in her choice. “Before the people of Olinka were born as a people, it is said that the blood of a woman was sacred . . . that [it] symbolized rebirth: the birth of the spirit” (207). Tashi has been reborn in the truth. Now she can die. But first, she not only consecrates woman’s culture in her actions; she exposes patriarchal lies couched in euphemism by investing pejorative male terms with their original female meanings. Women had to be “bathed”, “cleansed”, “purified” because their blood was “dirty”, “evil”, “fatal”. Tashi’s dress, however, is another banner that proclaims that woman’s blood is life-giving, life-affirming, sacramental. So she and Olivia sew a red dress which, like Philomela’s tapestry, Minnie’s quilt, and Celie’s pants, communicates resistance to patriarchy in singularly female form. Having been silenced, subordinated and subjugated because they are women, these oppressed literary sisters redefine themselves in female terms and through female signs and prevail figuratively, literally and literarily.

Besides the obvious racial/political implications of “being sick to death of black and white”, black is emblematic of Tashi’s madness. Each time Adam left to visit Lizette and Pierre in Paris, “. . . I was like a crow, flapping my wings increasingly in my own head, cawing mutely across an empty sky. And I wore black, and black and black” (224).
When Pierre first comes to live with them after Lizette has died, Tashi is so out of her mind with anger and envy that she cannot eat and “was emaciated as a scarecrow . . . I wore nothing that wasn’t black”. She greets his arrival with a barrage of stones she had begun to collect the day Pierre was born and “. . . dove forward, flapping my arms and shrieking hoarsely like a crow” (145). The image of the black bird as madness and death changes subtly, mirroring Tashi’s subtle healing. Upon her return to the openness of the African countryside, she feels “. . . that I had flown direct, as if I were a bird . . . a magical journey” (152). In court, Tashi imagines a flight with Mbati, uniting them in a filial bond. “Come, I say to her, smiling, I am your mother. If you take my hand . . . you will discover that the two of us can fly . . . out the door and into the sky . . . Mother and daughter heading for the sun” (159). Reborn in the truth, energized by re-connection with other women, Tashi liberates herself into a new symbol of flight as freedom and sees herself, at the moment of her death, flying inside a world which forever excluded her but is now cracked open by a gunshot. “And satisfied” (281). Years before, her life had been stolen from her by a tyrannical patriarchy. Now she dies under her own power, duping the system that had deceived her into believing it had once again prevailed. Philomela’s transformation into a nightingale saves her life and gives her a muted voice by which to name her oppressor eternally. Minnie Wright’s strangled bird transforms her and her neighbors into women who rewrite law into justice. And Tashi’s transformation from a vengeful crow into a bird that flies into the re-creative energy of the sun emancipates her from the death of madness into the life of truth.
Alice Walker has focused her thematic attention on the transcultural oppression of Black women in her novels, The Color Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy, though it is abundantly clear that the victimization she describes extends to all women, transcending chronological, geographic and cultural boundaries. Through her innovative narrative forms, the epistolary novel and a non-chronological account of events by a non-consecutive series of narrators, Walker’s protagonists guide their readers through their lives of victimization, revelation and self-validation. Celie, repeatedly raped by her putative father and husband, is silenced by their authority to wield life and death power over her. Her letters, however, first to God - who never "writes" back - and then to Nettie - whose letters have been hidden from Celie for thirty years by a vengeful Mister - provide her a voice literally spoken in writing by which to confront the apparent meaninglessness of her life and her self and slowly evolve from a passive victim into a woman in full control of her body, mind and socio/economic destiny. To achieve such independence, Celie rejects the traditional power of the patriarchy armed with the support, encouragement and example of non-traditional powerful women: Sofia, who defies not only her husband but even the more daunting authority of the white community; Shug, who flies in the face of convention in every aspect of her life; and Mary Agnes, who sacrifices herself to the sexual depredations of white male authority in order to save Sofia, and asserts her own authority to name herself and tell her story. Inspired by such self-possession, Celie learns to own herself, to take back her life from men and God, and fashion a new one, socially, sexually, spiritually and economically
defined in terms of a creative woman power centered in care and connection, not arbitrary displays of cruel arrogance.

Tashi, raped continually by culture, descends into madness chronicled by her fragmented narration before she emerges into wholeness. She has been mutilated and silenced by ritual, but her violation is even more malignant because it is codified into a system practiced for centuries by a smug patriarchy before a horrified world intimidated into mutedness by renewed charges of cultural imperialism. Isolated and defenseless in the face of such power, Tashi must reach within and tap her resources of female resistance and resilience in order to heal and prevail. Just as Celie, Tashi does not do it alone. Though supported by Adam, educated by Pierre, and attended by the Old Man, the suffering women directly involved with Tashi and responsive to her words truly sustain her. Like Celie and her letters, Tashi reads the truth of her life in an unexpected context - the art she has created. In order to integrate her fragmented existence and derive meaning for her suffering, Tashi turns to female forms which allow her to explore her life. Though initially fearful of her repressed memories, the truth they eventually reveal through her paintings and allegories empower her to share her knowledge with other victimized women. Cognizant of the validity of her message, the patriarchy cannot, however, counter the subversiveness of her methods to communicate it because they are beyond conventional language men have formulated and control. Tashi’s placards inspire women to sing and tell stories with their eyes, to unwrap swaddled girl babies and unfurl banners. All the men can do is beat the women, aim machine guns, hurl epithets - masculine
actions impotent against women armed with knowledge men cannot read. "Resistance is the secret of joy" - secret because it is a woman's word, inscribed on a baby's unscarred bottom, invisible to a man's eye.

Walker's protagonists endure because they are women defined and constrained by men. They prevail because they redefine themselves as women outside the limits of masculine constraints, beyond the scope of masculine language. On their own terms. In their own image.
Conclusion

The story of Procne’s betrayal and Philomela’s rape and mutilation, their complicit revenge and subsequent transformation have long been figures of violence in literary tradition. Narrative variations of the basic myth have occurred as it progresses through Greek poetry and drama to Ovid, who retells it to his contemporaries and bequeaths it to medieval Europe. The Latin version is far more complex than its Greek predecessors. Ovid’s fire and animal imagery magnifies Tereus’s lust and viciousness, his narrator offers dark commentary on man’s nature, and the dialogue raises serious questions about identity within the patriarchy. In illuminating footnotes to Ovid, two of his translators further revise the myth through his commentary and interpretation.

In the Middle Ages, however, Philomela and Procne as the nightingale and swallow gradually lose their association with the primal myth and become, instead, harbingers of spring. The nightingale is now a symbol of love, not rape, and in the poetry of the troubadours and trouveres, comes to represent the poet, objects of his love and/or his inspiration. Within a Christian context, the nightingale is the meditative soul singing God’s praises. Eventually, it is associated with the Passion and, in the fourteenth century Ovide Moralise, the nightingale becomes a metaphor for God and the Virgin. The symbolic conversion of Philomela is complete. Chaucer, on the other hand, returns to the original myth in “The Legend of Good Women”. As in Ovid, the narrator is very present here, immediately challenging God’s active or passive role in the presence of evil in the world. However, the story itself becomes secondary to the narrator’s preoccupation with
its foulness and the process of telling such an awful tale for a moral purpose. Whereas Chaucer avoids the more graphic elements of the tale, Sir Philip Sidney uses the rape as his inspiration and writes a poem far more grotesque and frightening in its implications than the original.

To varying degrees and for a variety of motives, mythologizers write Philomela out of existence. The literary coup de grace occurs in the Romantic Period when the poets abandon the myth completely. Though “Ode to a Nightingale” is more famous, I have examined “The Nightingale” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a latter example of this radical mythography. Coleridge was unique among his peers in that he was the most Christian of his contemporaries. However, the facile gloss over this violent archetypal myth that his union of nature and religion provides has proven unsatisfactory. Moreover, his effort to submerge his neurosis beneath an ostensible new poetic which breaks with mythic tradition fails when compared with his more psychological poems, particularly “The Pains of Sleep”. The spectre of Philomela returns, however, ironically in a poem by Coleridge’s great-great niece Mary Elizabeth. The “one low piping sound more sweet than all” of which he writes now cannot come “through the parted line of red./Whate’er it was, the hideous wound...” on the face of the woman about whom she writes almost fifty years later.

The Philomela/Procne myth continues to be used by women writers in the twentieth century as a metaphor for female oppression and its concomitant silence and silencing. However, just as Philomela transcends the silence by creating a new poetic
with her tapestry, so too these writers create analogous tapestries, new forms quintessentially female, by which their protagonists communicate their experiences to other women and thus forge a bond reminiscent of the literal sisterhood shared by Philomela and Procne. In her one act play Trifles and her subsequent short story “A Jury of Her Peers”, based on the play, Susan Glaspell examines the life of a frontier woman so domineered for years by her unyielding husband that she finally kills him. The murder investigation is conducted by men convinced of her guilt but unable to find proof of it because they are looking for traditional evidence (i.e. masculine) in a conventional crime (i.e. masculine). The women who accompany them to the farmhouse, on the other hand, inadvertently find clues in the woman’s work the men overlook as “trifles”: an untidy kitchen, half-baked bread, uneven stitching on a quilt, and a dead bird. Slowly, uneasily, they read the signs of Minnie Wright’s life and deduce the truth of her existence, uniting in the end to subvert the law and establish a new form of justice based on the caring and connectedness of women, not the abstract principles of men.

Alice Walker utilizes the myth in The Color Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy to illustrate a widespread oppression of women exceeding geographic boundaries. In The Color Purple, Celie attempts to find meaning for her miserable existence through correspondence with an unresponsive God. Gradually, however, he is supplanted by a confederacy of women who have taken control of their lives and who teach Celie to reject her position as material and spiritual pawn of the patriarchy, and to find her value within herself as a woman. In Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker exposes a more grisly form
of oppression - the ritual genital mutilation of women in Africa. Tashi’s story is the culmination and epitome in its most hideous manifestation of female mutilation and subjugation begun in the Philomela/Procne myth. Whereas the archetype illustrates how culture inscribes itself in myth, demonstrating a phallogocentric power of men over women, Tashi’s experience is a direct articulation of the power of God inscribed upon women. Yet, here, too, women bond to repudiate the tyranny of culture (i.e. patriarchy) and to redefine themselves as worthy and whole.

This paper has examined the mutually exclusive strategies of Philomela’s male and female mythologizers in an effort to make us all listen to her melancholy song. The classical and medieval poets subtly rewrote the Philomela/Procne myth in order to sublimate their fear which the story and its themes represent. By focusing on the revenge the sisters undertake rather than the crime which forces it, these mythologizers cast Philomela and Procne as tyrannical victimizers and Tereus as a pitiable victim, thereby deflecting attention from the power Philomela seizes for herself. Rendered speechless, hence powerless within a masculine construct, Philomela creates a new idiom and reconstitutes her fractured identity in weaving. Recognizing the immanent consequence of this feminine poetic, male poets seek to silence Philomela once and for all, by writing her out of existence. But figures from the Philomela/Procne myth resonate throughout the texts of women, particularly Glaspell and Walker. The image of Philomela raped, mutilated and silenced is all too familiar for women. The strength in an otherwise horrific, debilitating tale lies in Philomela’s ability to subvert the patriarchy that would
subjugate her by usurping the power of language into a new form recognized and
valorized by women as a call to sisterhood and an affirmation of such power in that bond.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


---. "The Pains of Sleep". 182-183.

---. "The Nightingale". 144-181.


--- “Writing The Color Purple”. 355-360.


Secondary Sources


Rutgers University Press, 1991. 154-167


Haraway, Donna. “Ecce Homo, Ain't I (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate(d) Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape”. *Feminists Theorize the*


- - - . “Writing Autobiography”. Feminisms. An Anthology of Literary Theory and


Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. All The Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave. Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982.


- - - . “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”. 243-270.


Mael, Phyllis. “Trifles: The Path to Sisterhood”. Literature of Film Quarterly. 17.4


Russell, Michelle. "Slave Codes and Liner Notes". All The Women Are White, All


1982.


