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## Rethinking the Patriarchal Discourse: Feminist Rewritings of the Canonical Texts

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Reviewing, re-questioning and rewriting is the common agenda of the poststructuralist or postmodern, postcolonial and feminist writers and critics. Since the 1960s, beginning with *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, women writers have undertaken this re-reading, re-interpretation and re-writing of canonical texts, whether in Great-Britain or in the United States, where minority authors play with the double literary tradition – male and western – to counter it with their own double discourse – female and ethnic – for aesthetic and political purposes. Adrienne Rich in her famous article, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’, wrote:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival (18).

In this same article, she envisaged the rewriting of the Literary Canon as a necessary rupture from the past: “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” (19). Rich was referencing a long tradition of masculine texts she had herself worked to “re-view” in her poems by using the famous works of Yeats, Wordsworth or William Blake for example, as critical meta-textual commentaries. For her, “re-viewing” did not simply consist in a “transposition” or a “textual permutation”, to use the formulations of Julia Kristeva’s attempt to define intertextuality in *La Révolution Du Langage Poétique* or in *Séméiotikè*. It was not a purely recreational, postmodern endeavour. Rich saw rewriting first and foremost as a political act of defying the patriarchal narrative upheld by the canonical texts.

Feminist writers and critics have identified a number of textual strategies to reinscribe and restore women to their rightful place in literature. As we have seen, women writers have never been acknowledged to have a literary history or past, dominated by the patriarchal ideology that artistic creativity is itself a male quality. The female tradition had been ignored, derided, even taken over and replaced, by this “phallogocentric myth of creativity” (Moi 57). Most of what women wrote has fallen outside the sacred canon and dismissed as trivial and non-serious.

Feminist tradition has thus to discover for itself self-enhancing role models who are ‘self-actualising and whose “identities are not dependent on men” (Moi 47). They have to either appropriate such role models from the past writing by rewriting the major works of the established canon or to formulate an alternative canon of women’s writings. Feminist critics

through the use of intertextuality deconstructed the representations of women in cultures, the images, stereotypes and archetypes. They have found women as the beautiful Other, an aesthetic object whose will and power if checked will succour like a mother, or as a schemer whose will and power if unchecked will devour (Stimpson 117). Feminist criticism has generally been deconstructive: this dual activity of pulling down and putting up, negation and recreation, leads women to “demystifying a new world landscape that men were grandly mythologizing” (Stimpson 118) by representing women either as angels or monsters.

One of the most potentially liberating effects of post-structuralism for feminism is that it enables the feminist reader to uncover the discursive production of all meanings, to pinpoint whose interests they support and to locate the contradictions which render them fundamentally unstable and open to change. Feminists have reformulated aspects of poststructuralist theory in order to appropriate it for feminism. This process of reworking and reformulating theories is potentially infinite. In her book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985), Alice Jardine argues that an extensive process of questioning and rethinking the foundations of Western critical thought is taking place in France. This process has arisen out of the collapse of the West’s master narratives. These accounts of the world, which claim to explain it, centre on “Man, the Subject, Truth, History, Meaning” (Jardine 25). Gynesis, according to Jardine, is this process of questioning and deconstructing.

As their first field of activity feminist writers have resorted to rewriting and resisting patriarchal canonical works. Popular patriarchal texts are taken up to be ripped up, recycled, imitated, parodied, rewritten and manipulated in as many ways as possible. Rewriting of the patriarchal canon creates the very space for recharting existing male dominated narratives or discourse, demolishing and exploding texts of male-established genres, reconstructing images and myths, recasting an entire range of male-conceived women characters that are recreated and reframed from a woman’s point of view and perspective.

As with the postcolonial rewritings of the canon, Shakespeare has emerged as an obvious and most prominent choice in seeking to interrogate or revise the canon as the dominant, enduring, trans-historical and cross-cultural signifier, since his corpus of works stands so clearly positioned in the hierarchy of value within it. Authors who allude to, quote or rewrite Shakespearean themes have the greatest chance of their readers both registering the allusion and being able to see the writer’s critical movement behind the act of rewriting or revision. Marianne Novy in two of the critical anthologies edited by her – *Women’s Revisions of Shakespeare* and *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, has given an exhaustive account of women’s revision of Shakespeare’s themes and characters through dramatic and poetic representations down the ages beginning with Aphra Behn’s *Oroonokoo* which is inspired by Othello’s depiction of the relations between two races and Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* whose protagonist Robert Moore is supposedly inspired by Coriolanus to the more recent revisions of Shakespeare by Margaret Laurence and others.

Marianne Novy suggests that for centuries women have been reading Shakespeare with a point of view peculiar to their own perspective as women and hence their criticism has taken a different direction from the Shakespearean scholarship of their own time and culture. In poems, novels and plays from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, women have contributed to constructing an image of Shakespeare they could find congenial and have reconstructed previous images by analysing and rewriting the gender relations in his plays. Women writers have expressed a kind of critical distance from Shakespeare as well as continuity with him in their explicit rewritings of his plays. Brontë makes *Shirley* a re-placement of Coriolanus in

the Yorkshire moors by including the Coriolanus chapter as well as by other echoes. Margaret Arnold claims that in fashioning her hero Robert Moore, she creates a middle class avatar of many of the Roman hero's qualities, setting a lonely industrial warrior in the context of a society of well-fed tradesmen and pitting a group of starving mill hands against him.

George Eliot introduces many allusions to *As You Like It* in *Daniel Deronda* to raise the issue of why Gwendolen fails to appropriate the power Rosalind possesses. The two main characters in *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen and Daniel, are, in different ways, rewritings of Rosalind and Hamlet. The blending of Hamlet characteristics with the 'female' Shakespearean characteristic of "sensibility and reflectiveness developing into a many-sided sympathy" (Novy, *Women's Revisions* 97), is one of the ways *Daniel Deronda* shows George Eliot reading and revising Shakespeare from a woman's point of view.

The American playwright Charlotte Barnes uses *The Tempest* as a model in her dramatization of Pocahontas's story in her verse drama *The Forest Princess* (1844). She is emphatic about giving Pocahontas more historical vision and public concern than Miranda has in Shakespeare. *The Forest Princess* goes some way towards turning woman – Miranda/Pocahontas – into a genuinely political female subject, one possessed of wide historical vision and moved by more than purely private motives.

Some contemporary feminist rewritings of Shakespeare make their points partly by placing women in central roles Shakespeare devised for men. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* imagines a female Prospero, a female writer concerned about her daughter and the meaning of life. Other feminists more explicitly rewrite the plots of Shakespeare's female characters. The Australian feminist Alison Lyssa, in an afterword to her play *Pinball*, calls it "a play where King Lear's daughter Cordelia (I called her Theenie) refused to let her father's madness continue until it led her to her death" and she further contrasts the mutual support of her female characters with the behaviour of the sisters in *King Lear*. Lyssa's emphasis on the changes she has made in her play from *King Lear*'s plot resembles Rich's emphasis on the contrast between Shakespeare's world view and contemporary feminist criticism. These rewritings and rereading mark out a continuum of attitude towards Shakespeare, showing differences in the ideological and social possibilities for women, at different historical points. Feminist critics have suggested that Shakespeare's comedies validate women's strengths while the tragedies emphasise male struggles that ultimately victimise women. Loyal, funny and beautiful Beatrice, bold and courtly Rosalind, brilliant and brave Portia celebrate female energy. But Desdemona's death, Cordelia's exile and Ophelia's suicide shatter the dreams of a self-determined, joyous and healthy life, while women like Lady Macbeth and Gertrude who go against the established norms are not held up in good light.

Some particular plays recur with greater frequency than others in the adaptations or rewritings of Shakespearean themes by the feminist writers. The special pertinence to women writers of plays such as *The Tempest* or *King Lear*, with their obvious themes of fathers and daughters and patriarchy cannot be denied. *The Tempest* is one of the plays most often rewritten by feminist writers for the very reason that it appealed to the postcolonial imagination, namely, that it allows for the reading of colonialism as essentially a male struggle. At a time when the nationalist and internationalist politics of anti-colonialism were fiercely patriarchal—when armed struggle was equated with masculinity—*The Tempest*'s opposition of Prospero and Caliban made the play an ideal site for the rewriting of what must be seen not as colonisation but as the colonisation of men. The play appealed to writers of the period and anti-colonialist versions have lost some of their political edge in part because they are complicit with Shakespeare's play in suppressing the agency of women within and against

colonialism. Despite their radical intentions and involvement in political struggle, anti-colonialist writers turned to *The Tempest* in part because it effaced colonised women as sources of resistance, because it presented colonised women only as obedient daughters, because it denied solidarity between colonised men and women, between women across race. As participants in the ideologies of patriarchy and heterosexism, the rewriters of *The Tempest* are blind to the presence of these ideologies in the play and therefore trapped into reinscribing them by the model they choose to subvert. George Lamming, for instance, writes the history of anti-colonial struggle in the Caribbean almost completely in terms of male agency and discusses black women only in terms of their sexual involvements with white men; Fernandez Retamar, though he takes issue with Lamming's reading of Prospero, does not escape Lamming's nearly all-male concept of colonialism—his list of thirty-seven Caribbean 'Calibans', resisters of colonialism, includes only one woman; and Lemuel Johnson's satirical and ambiguous "High life for Caliban" caused pain to the black women by its inability to repudiate the racist misogyny of colonialism. Rob Nixon speculates in his 1987 article on *The Tempest* that "the play's declining pertinence to contemporary Africa and the Caribbean" may be due in part to the difficulty of "wresting from it any role for female defiance or leadership at a time when feminism is becoming an increasingly important source of resistance in the Third World" (577).

Interestingly, Rob Nixon's prediction about the declining relevance of *The Tempest* in an age influenced by feminism seems not to have come true. What has happened instead is that African, Caribbean and African American rewriters have given up trying to wrest a heroic role from *The Tempest* and have turned rather to inventing a discourse where *The Tempest* is silent. Interrelated concerns about voicing the silenced or oppressed female characters of the play—the onstage Miranda, but also the offstage absent presences of Claribel, Sycorax and Miranda's unnamed mother—clearly link such writers' textual stances.

In African and Caribbean countries Caliban has become the inexhaustible symbol of the colonised insurgent but in Canada the Prospero-Miranda or Miranda-Ferdinand relationships are more relevant as metaphors of parental or romantic relations. Miranda, at the beginning of the play is truly "all-heeding" child of Prospero, the Anglo-European daughter subjected to the Law of the Father and as such the symbol of a victim of patriarchal rule. Miranda, absent and silent during most of the action of *The Tempest* yet essential to its happy conclusion, seems a fitting representative of Canada's aspirations as a dutiful daughter of the empire. English/Canadian writers have redefined Miranda as radically as black writers have redefined Caliban. It has been pointed out by various critics how black writers focus on the implications of Caliban's rebellion whereas English/Canadian writers re-write Miranda's. They ignore Caliban to replace both Caliban and Prospero with Miranda. Instead of identifying with Caliban, as the French Canadian, black American and West Indian writers do, the majority of English/Canadian writers—Margaret Laurence, Charles G.D. Roberts and Audrey Thomas—focus on Miranda.

Although there is a long tradition of Canadian rewritings that privilege Miranda's perspective, these re-visions are not unique to Canada. Elaine Showalter in her article "Miranda's Story" has recounted Miranda's "long and significant history in American women's writing" (40). Showalter concentrates on the implications of the Miranda figure for contemporary feminism, concluding that white feminists must ultimately abandon identification with the only woman on the island to acknowledge that many different women inhabit the world.

The Canadian Mirandas do not talk back to the patriarch or uphold the tenets of contemporary aggressive feminism. From the time of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts's fable *The*

*Heart of the Ancient Wood* (1900), Canadian rewritings have recognised that Miranda cannot seize her voice as Caliban does in Aime Cesaire's play *A Tempest*. Alternative patterns of ambivalence, complicity and resistance emerge in Canadian women's re-visioning of *The Tempest*. Charles G.D. Robert's *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* first focuses on Miranda as a powerful central figure, wielding her own magic over the creatures of the wood. Her father is absent; nature and Caliban are her teachers. The novel re-defines the Miranda/Caliban/Ferdinand triangle in a way that is unique to the North American situation. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) extends Roberts' linking of sexual politics and colonial history through an elaboration of Miranda's role. Again Miranda embodies Canada's future, but Laurence takes her beyond her initial rejection of Caliban through an infatuation with imported values to return her to a more fruitful interaction with Caliban's indigenous values. The intuitive magic practised by Roberts' Miranda becomes conscious art in Laurence's. Where *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* ends with expulsion from the original Eden in quest of a new Eden "fairer far than Eden's self," *The Diviners* begins with Morag's expulsion from the Eden of childhood innocence (effected by her parents' deaths).

Shakespearean fathers are another reason of the plays demanding resistance and creating tensions in some of the women's rewritings of Shakespeare. If *The Tempest* is a recurring presence in the canon of women writers' appropriation of Shakespeare—due not least to its depiction of a lone patriarch—*King Lear* is another popular reference point, for a similar reason. A number of works directly invoke Lear in the form of a sustained understanding of plot and structure. Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1992) displaces Shakespeare's play in the American Mid-West. Her defiant decision to rewrite *King Lear*, providing the vilified older sisters Goneril and Regan with both sympathy and motive, has a lot to do with her leaning towards essentially realist and psychologically believable forms of narrative. Smiley endeavours to find motive where Shakespeare keeps things open and to fill the gaps in the events where the play allows issues to remain enigmatic.

Another female character in Shakespeare that has long been misunderstood and traditionally vilified is Gertrude in *Hamlet*. Gertrude is one of Shakespeare's most elusive female characters, and one over which criticism (feminist and otherwise) has long debated. She is most often represented, as a lustful, adulterous and morally weak woman as Hamlet and the Ghost see her. Accused of wantonness and lack of feminine delicacy by her own son, the target of his harangue in the famous closet scene (III.iv), Gertrude has long been held up as the woman behind the famous line in Hamlet "frailty thy name is woman" (I. ii.146). To Bradley, "the queen was not a bad-hearted woman.....But she had a soft animal nature, and was very dull and very shallow.....She loved to be happy. The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that the people may be happy in it in a good-humoured sensual fashion" (167). Marrying in haste after the death of her first husband, she is even suspected of complicity in the murder of her own husband. Yet Gertrude herself is silent about these accusations against her as if she has nothing to offer in her defence.

Feminist critics of Shakespeare have tried to present Gertrude differently. An early attempt was made in 1957 in the article *The Character of Hamlet's Mother*, where Carolyn Heilbrun questioned the influential views of Bradley and Dover Wilson among others, and argued that Gertrude was "intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech;" she nevertheless had to admit to Gertrude's being also "passion's slave" (207). Rebecca Smith, after thoroughly examining the textual evidence, concluded that the traditional depiction of Gertrude is a false one, because what her words and actions actually create is a soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman who is caught miserably

between “two mighty opposites,” her “heart cleft in twain” (III.iv.156) by divided loyalties to husband and son. She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their conflict leaves her bewildered and unhappy. (194)

More recently, but in a similar vein, Janet Adelman has claimed in her article “Man and Wife is One Flesh”, again after a close textual reading, that what is seen is “a woman more muddled than actively wicked; even her famous sensuality is less apparent than her conflicted solicitude both for her husband and for her son” (15). Adelman would even suggest that Gertrude’s death could be read as a suicide in order to protect her son, on the grounds that “she shows unusual determination in disobeying Claudius’s command not to drink [the poisoned cup]” (16). For Baldwin Maxwell also, Gertrude’s first gesture of independence comes when she defies Claudius’s order not to drink the poisoned cup.

Certain critics, placing Gertrude in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean representation of women, have pointed out that deviant behaviour in women has always been portrayed as moral waywardness. Thus, Lisa Jardine’s point in her book *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (1983) that “it is the male characters who perceive free choice on the part of the female character as an inevitable sign of irrational lust, and as the inevitable prelude to disorder and disaster” (72), proves rather helpful to understand Shakespeare’s handling of the character.

Apart from the emphasis on Shakespearean heroines that has been described here, there are a few other canonical works and characters that are supposed to have received an unfair treatment at the hands of their authors and critics such as Tess, Estella, Catherine and Miss Mary Bennet. All these characters have found voices in the rewritings by contemporary writers. *The Independence of Miss Mary Bennet* by Colleen McClough is a spinoff of the book *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Mary Bennet is a minor character in *Pride and Prejudice*. She is Elizabeth Bennet’s sister who is the main character of *Pride and Prejudice*. *The Independence of Miss Mary Bennet* is the latest in a long line of *Pride and Prejudice* prequels, sequels and updatings. Austen’s novel was often adapted and dramatized from its early days, but the first full-fledged *Pride and Prejudice* sequel is thought to be *Pemberley Shades* by D.A. Bonavia-Hunt, published in 1949 and recently brought back into print. Countless other *Pemberley* and *Darcy* novels have followed.

Feminist rewritings of the Canon often take the form of providing a voice to the silent female figures that are misrepresented by the writers and critics alike. *Estella* by Alanna Knight is such an attempt to voice the thoughts and emotions of a character that mostly remains reticent and unapproachable in Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*. Estella who appears very cold and contemptuous throughout *Great Expectations* is represented here as a very sensitive girl from the beginning who falls in love with Pip very early in the novel and her heartless demeanour is because of the instructions by Miss Havisham to be cruel to the boys, in an attempt to take revenge from the male sex in general for her disappointment and betrayal in love.

The novel is an attempt to bring to life a character in Dickens that has been mostly misunderstood as a cold hearted siren who draws Pip to his ruin but Alanna Knight shows that Estella must have suffered too, in being made a tool of vengeance against her will or inclinations which are never consulted in the original novel—“I was no party to the compact,” said Estella, “for if I could walk and speak, when it was made, it was as much as I could do” (*Great Expectations* 323). By giving the narrative voice to Estella, Knight has tried to present the other side of her story which is only hinted at in *Great Expectations*.

Similarly, in *Catherine, Her Book*, John Wheatcroft has tried to reproduce the journal kept by Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* and of which only a fragment is left which Lockwood stumbles upon during the course of his forced stay at Wuthering Heights. *Catherine, Her Book*, seeks to reinterpret the story of Catherine Earnshaw from a feminine, if not feminist, point of view. Here again we are reintroduced to Catherine's journal that Lockwood could read only a few pages from and which tells the story of *Wuthering Heights* from Catherine's perspective, explaining her actions and providing a motive for her apparently whimsical decisions. Wheatcroft imaginatively rewrites the sequence of events in *Wuthering Heights* purely and exclusively from the perspective of Catherine Earnshaw whereas in the original novel it keeps changing from Lockwood to Heathcliff to Cathy to Nelly.

All these rewritings featuring Miranda, Sycorax, Gertrude, Tess, Mary Bennet, Estella and Catherine are attempts to give voice to the muted, to bring the marginalised to the centre and to reinterpret the patriarchal representations from the point of the female who is underprivileged even amongst the privileged races and classes.

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