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Modern Mortals and Emergent Goddesses:  
Rewriting Myth in Contemporary Canadian Literature

by

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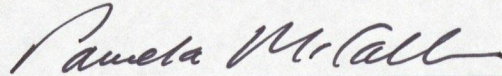
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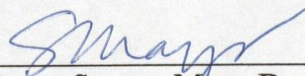
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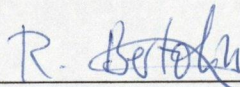
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Modern Mortals and Emergent Goddesses: Rewriting Myth in Contemporary Canadian Literature" submitted by Teresa Kathleen Green in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an examination of the ways in which contemporary Canadian literature addresses issues of social convention. It explores how literary transformations of Greek mythology challenge traditional cultural notions of the female body in its various forms. It examines the following texts: Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address*, Suzette Mayr's *The Widows* and Nicole Markotić's *Yellow Pages*. The first chapter addresses Northrop Frye's literary and mythological criticism, establishing the convention and discussing the significance of his contradictory stance on literature's autonomous universe and its social effect. The subsequent chapters provide an analysis of how contemporary writers participate in a dialogue with this criticism, creating new feminist versions of well-known stories. They elaborate on literary challenges to social expectations originating in Greek mythology and illustrate the problems with, and possibilities for, conventional stories in connection to the problem (female, aging, Deaf) body.

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For my Grandmother,  
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who still had stories to tell.



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## Chapter One

### Tradition and Progress: Establishing Convention in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*

The finest stories are always retold, appreciated time and again. When they are not retold verbatim, they are told in variation, with metaphors and symbols, a means of signifying and paying homage to the stories that came before. As Northrop Frye writes, “we find [ . . . ] primitive formulas reappearing in the greatest classics – in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to them” (*Anatomy* 17). Great literature calls upon other great literature. We find in every story origins that derive from outside the text. The primitive forms that Frye refers to in *Anatomy of Criticism* are the beginnings of stories and legends. They are mythologies that remain eminent throughout time. Though published in 1957, *Anatomy*'s cornucopia of observations on literature (including the examination of these mythological conventions) is still a leading resource for understanding literary tradition. The approach that Frye takes to the recurring themes and legends found in both poetry and prose is the ultimate foundation to discovering the meaning of the mythical story in even the most contemporary of narratives. Though the transformations of the myths found in the literature that I will be discussing are far beyond what Frye might have anticipated, he does provide an essential basis to the discussion of these texts, establishing the foundation of literature's mythological tradition.

Reproductions of myth, though found in varying degrees, are habitually present in literature. The tendency to retell classical stories originates not only from the appreciation of a good tale but from the need to acknowledge how recognizable and influential these stories are within society. They have distinguished characters, cherished plotlines. They

are legends that we are unable to forget. As Frye recognizes, there is an undeniable recurrence of certain formulae throughout literature. Consequently, an author's use of such formulae should not go without examination. For this reason, Frye's framework for literary criticism is crucial to our understanding of the ways in which mythology works in the bounds of literature. He provides both a structured analysis of techniques and stylization that are used in such texts, and a discussion on the relevance of returning to such ancient tales.

Although it is critical to understand Frye's theories with regards to this topic, it is also imperative to appreciate his contradictions. His stance on literature takes on a polarity that is difficult to resolve. He firmly argues for art's aesthetic nature as its most fundamental aspect, stating that it has an ethical freedom that allows it to be, first and foremost, art. He suggests that literature is "an autonomous verbal structure" (74) where "questions of fact or truth are subordinated to the primary literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake" (74). Art is thus explicitly independent from society. However, at the other end of Frye's spectrum of criticism, is the notion that literature has the ability to evoke the promises of a society's future. It provides a perspective on humanity that presents the critic "with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture" (348). Literature is then both aesthetic and ethical. It "stands on its own feet" (115) while at the same time being "useful and functional [ . . . ] to culture" (115).

The latter part of this contradiction is both flexible and variable. Frye does not refer to literature's connection to society as being fixed. As A. C. Hamilton notes, his criticism commonly refers to literature's societal "roots," allowing for the possibility that it can grow beyond what society has given to it thus far. He goes on to say that "a literary work does



not passively reflect its immediate historical context but actively shapes an extended cultural context with which it is intrinsically, inextricably linked” (108). In essence, Frye argues for both the autonomous nature of literature and its ethical possibilities, a precarious and incongruous stance. This contradiction is continually replayed throughout his attempt at a universal literary theory. Though the combination of these two points seems paradoxical, Frye left significant room for discussion on his theories. The disparity between Frye’s views of art’s aesthetic and social possibilities provides a provocative space in which an author can explore a realm of potential avenues for the use of myth in narrative. In order to investigate these possibilities, one must first familiarize oneself with *Anatomy*. Frye’s assertions on myth and symbol here are fundamental to this study.

*Anatomy* begins with an admonition of the immensity, if not the near futility, of the undertaking. If this vast work is to be considered as valuable, even essential to our understanding of the criticism of English literature, it is equally vital to remember that it is, in the author’s own words, “a trial or incomplete attempt, on the possibility of the scope, theory, principles, and technique of literary criticism.” (3). *Anatomy*’s task is daunting. Structured in a way that provides a gradual progression of approaches to literature, it delineates the significance of everything from the single word to the whole of literature and its criticisms. It exposes the efficacy of a text’s communication by examining the many modes of exchange that literature provides (genre, symbol, archetype and myth to name only a few). Frye attempts to elucidate criticism’s function in the literary world, examining various texts in the progress of his argument. He works on the basis of literature’s autonomy and yet also provides discussion on its social and cultural aspects. He examines the traditions that continue throughout the ages and yet leaves room for the possibility that

those traditions will not always be stable. *Anatomy*, though interminably elaborate in its discussion of the various themes and overall system of literature should thus be considered to be more of a beginning than a conclusion on the topic of literary criticism. Frye himself warns: "The gaps in the subject as treated here are too enormous for the book ever to be regarded as presenting my system or even my theory. It is to be regarded rather as an interconnected group of suggestions" (3). This being said, it does provide the foundation for critics and artists alike who desire to participate in a dialogue with his theories and/or the literature that his work begins to examine. Just as Frye felt that the Aristotelian analysis of literature needed to be revisited, presently his own theories need to be "re-examined in light of fresh evidence" (14).

Frye's essays on the use of Classical and Biblical myths in literature set the precedent for any discussion of literature's long-lasting archetypes. They also provide an illustrative account of how myth functions within both literature and the world. The chapters "Theory of Symbols" and "Theory of Myths" describe the mythical roots of literature's stylization. In these essays, Frye discusses the ways in which literature perpetuates mythology-based archetypes and symbolism. However, he also acknowledges the problematic relationship between the supernatural, often idealized world of myth and the realism-prone, fictional world of literature. He carefully delineates the various modes of representing the mythical in art: the common tendencies, the scope of imagery, and the significance of myth as an active literary field. His discussion of the structural basis of the recreation of myth throughout poetry and fiction is crucial to our understanding of how myth-influenced literature functions today.

In "Theory of Symbols," Frye establishes the foundation for understanding

literature's symbolic and mythological tendencies. In *Anatomy*, the category of symbols is delegated into phases. Symbols can be literal ("any unit whatever, down to the letters" 79) or descriptive ("likely to be treated critically as signs" 79). Each phase of symbols is liable to tend toward a certain type of literature. Literature containing descriptive symbols, the symbolism that signifies other things and other meanings, is that which also provides accessibility to types of archetypes and to the world outside the text. Frye writes that "[l]iterature deeply influenced by the descriptive aspect of symbolism is likely to tend toward the realistic in its narrative and the didactic or descriptive in its meaning" (79). Certain words are singled out, more important to the text than the literal symbols that surround them. These words, these descriptive symbols, aim to produce an accurate representation of the external world (or, as Frye would have it, an accurate representation of the world as is possible by way of a hypothetic structure). Such literature, Frye argues, must establish a balance between didacticism and "its integrity as a structure of words" (80). Literature can never entirely opt for assertion over aesthetics for that would displace its primary objective of providing pleasure in favour of achieving the unattainable objective of realistic representation.

This leads us to an aspect of Frye's argument that is central to his paradoxical position. He asserts that "[l]iterary meaning may best be described [ . . . ] as hypothetical" (74). This hypothetical element relies on the fact that, first and foremost, literature must function as art or, rather, "a structure of words for its own sake" (74). Mythological recurrences are, consequently, due to aesthetic choices, rather than any cultural reasoning. One might retell the myth of Athena for the simple reason that it is an exceptional story and Athena a compelling character. On a subsequent level, any connection such aesthetic

inclinations have to the world outside of the text are strictly hypothetical (what could be, what should be, what might be, what is similar to). The recreation of a myth has no further literary significance. Hence, any apparent connection that literature has to the world is scrutinized as being somewhat unrealistic.

To acknowledge literature's artifice is, however, not to undermine its ability to instruct. It is only to prioritize its meaning. As Frye argues, in literature what entertains precedes what instructs, or, "the reality-principle is subordinate to the pleasure-principle" (75). Consequently, what was first argued as art's purely artistic function and purpose is soon altered by Frye to accommodate the notion that literature has the ability to inform and educate its readers. He likens such instruction to an awakening, a provision of insight on reality to readers (75). Now, despite its definitive aesthetic aim, literature is acknowledged as having the ability to affect and instruct. It both inspires and provides realization to its reader. Furthermore, just as it affects a single reader, literature affects society. Its artifice informs society's ideology. Though Frye argues for its autonomous nature, the hypothetical relationship that he claims literature has with the external world is the means by which literary archetypes become consumed and assumed by society.

In his later work, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*, Frye makes the essential point that not only is literature an active human creation but myth itself was originally created by human society. It is this enduring tradition of mythical creation that is the basis for the prevalence and continuation of specific symbolic meanings. Society informs mythology. Mythology, in turn, informs society. These meanings, though borne out of a tradition of narrative, ultimately originate from a society. The earliest narrative that lends symbolic significance to the works that follow it is not,

foremost, a work of art, but rather an original inscription of cultural values. From this point forward, literature perpetuates these values, turning each story over and over again until mythical legends become associated with quasi-truths. On this most simple level, certain symbols that a text refers to (water, trees, fire) become indefinitely associated with certain meanings (death, knowledge, destruction). At another level, archetypal images of the body (woman as saint, the aged as socially outcast, the deaf as invalid) progress throughout time.

This initial stage of symbolic meaning provides infinite possibilities to approaching a text's aesthetic qualities. Symbolic units "show an analogy of proportion between the [literature] and the nature which it imitates" (84). Those symbols that have the ability to profoundly affect a culture throughout the course of time have a specialized form, the mythical form that Frye defines as "symbol as archetype" (95). Archetypes are a convention that literature continually revisits, perpetuating their meaning over and over again. If we are to assume that Frye is correct, that literature has the ability to awaken the reader to various aspects of reality, acknowledging this convention has many implications. Whether such conventions are adequate representations of reality fails to be relevant. Regardless of realism, they are accepted and repeated continuously, providing the reader with the pleasure of rereading aesthetically pleasing tales but also continually re-establishing certain conventions as having a given value and meaning: "Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions, or what you will for its *content*; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels" (97).

Regardless of the argument that literature is borne solely out of other literature, the fact that it does contain "life, reality, experience, nature" alongside its literary conventions

allows for a significant intertwining of art and reality. Conventions produced out of replications of mythological figures such as Arachne, Penelope, Athena, and the Furies, all have their literary and aesthetic significance and yet, as they are applied to the life and reality of a text, act as a comment on that reality. Perpetuated literary conventions of women as saints, domestic goddesses, and whores coincide with social conventions and expectations about the female body. Hence, literature that attempts to eradicate these imposing myths seeks to also eradicate notions of the body in society. That which deals with the conventions faced by the contemporary female body does provide valuable illumination and discussion. However, texts that take on the original myths that provide these conventions seek the source of the problem body in literature and pull it out by its roots. The texts of contemporary authors such as Aritha van Herk, Suzette Mayr and Nicole Markotić speak directly to these original myths (Arachne, the Eumenedes and Odysseus) and defy the conventions that *Anatomy* puts forward as archetypal. Each author transforms the original story so that it doubles back on itself, inverting its meaning. They achieve a flexibility in myth that could not have been anticipated, altering the conventionalized problem body that has been perpetuated over time and providing the readers with an awakening to reality beyond even Frye's expectations.

In order to fully appreciate the literature of these contemporary writers, we must distinguish the new, transformed narratives from the original and conventionalized myths. In the attempt to distinguish one text's achievement over that of its source, Frye argues that readers tend to focus on the peripheral rather than the central critical facts. In essence, they concentrate on the theme of the source that is passed on by the text in question rather than the ornamentation added to the original by its successor. However, what Frye does not

mention is that ornamental changes to the original can unequivocally affect the themes of the contemporary text. Small changes can unequivocally alter the implications of a myth. For example, we will see in a later chapter the change of the mythical Arachne's signature occupation from weaving tapestry to weaving (driving) through the back roads of southern Alberta. From this example we learn how the theme of a myth can be drastically altered by the aesthetic adjustments made to original myths.

Original stories and, consequently, "the structural principles of literature [...] are [...] closely related to mythology and comparative religion" (134). A study of archetypes begins with an examination of the world of pure myth, a "literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience" (136). He theorizes that such a world operates on human desire, a notion that calls upon a suggestion already discussed in "Symbols," the concept that literature's relation to the world is strictly hypothetical. Though what is revealed in myth and literature may be attainable in the world, the revelation is strictly founded upon human aspirations rather than facts. While much of literature operates on repeating these desires with only slight variation, contemporary narrative is founded on the need for altering conventionalized notions of the body. By transforming various aspects of the body that originated in these tomes, they achieve a complete reformation of what is found in the world of myth. Therefore, mythical symbolism is intrinsically linked to literary tradition. The meaning of a text is deeply rooted in the history of writing. Nevertheless, despite the presumably traditional process of literature, it is not fixed. Myth is a "field of activity" (136); it can be changed. Contemporary writers celebrate this flexibility.

The changes made to myth and its incorporation into literature open an area of



fiction labeled romance. This region explores the human possibilities of an apocalyptic world, the only place that “nature can be humanized and man liberated” (Denham 55). It provides a space that is both realistic and idealistic. While the characters of a romance are human (not supernatural or god-like in any way) the world in which they live is free of embarrassments and awkwardness. Hence, as myth is incorporated into literature, the fictional world, regardless of its realistic elements, is allowed a supernatural state: a state that frees the characters from a self-consciousness and self-awareness that would normally confine them. Such freedom is ultimately idealistic and therefore, to Frye, romance signifies the displacement of “myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to ‘realism,’ [it] conventionalize[s] content in an idealized direction” (137). While contemporary literature works myth into a realistic world that is fraught with the tensions of self-awareness, romance has nothing of this actuality. However, in terms of its technical mythological applications, a look into romance reveals the essence of myth-based literature. After all, displacing myth in a realistic setting requires some form of simile in order to actually work. Whether this form takes the shape of “analogy, significant association, [or] incidental accompanying imagery” (137), myth-based literature relies heavily on such techniques.

While Frye states that “in more realistic modes [of literature] the association [with myth] becomes less significant and more a matter of incidental, even coincidental or accidental imagery” (137). Contemporary literature defies such a concept. Frye’s argument arises from his intention of establishing a more universal approach to literary criticism. His organization of myth and archetypal symbols in literature does not seem to include a space for literature that combines realism and myth to comment and act upon the

world outside of the text. Consequently, the contemporary narratives already mentioned must inhabit a space somewhere amidst Frye's categorization that has yet to be defined. While romance offers a human direction, Frye suggests that it is far too idealized to approach anything near to realism. The writers of contemporary literature, however, are far from accidentally happening upon mythology in their texts. Frye also does not include literature that is both intentionally associating itself with myth while actively using it for reflections founded upon realism. He does not suppose that while art has the ability to perpetuate convention it also has the ability to defy it, altering perceptions of archetypal imagery in the process. The writings of contemporary women push at the boundaries of Frye's theorizing about the universal conventions of literary tradition.

This is not to say that Frye's theory is inadequate when it comes to approaching the texts that have emerged some forty to forty-five years after he first published *Anatomy of Criticism*. While "Theory of Symbols" and "Theory of Myths" illuminate some of the crucial aspects of what contemporary authors are attempting, a more extensive examination of his theories is needed in order to reveal the dialogue in contemporary literature that is engendered by his work. Despite *Anatomy of Criticism*'s importance in the mapping out of mythical contributions in literature, it is Frye's other works that enable us to participate more productively in this dialogue.

The arguments presented in *Anatomy* are at once inspiring and suffocating. While Frye's contention clearly states that myth and literature have a propensity to change and alter in great magnitude (the very foundation of the literature today that reveals myth's overwhelming flexibility and potential), he also suggests that any such changes and alterations are separate from the world that surrounds the literature. From Frye's

perspective, if changes in the mythical archetypes of literature occur, they are entirely unrelated to the world from which that literature emerges. He argues that “[a]rchetypal literature is thus related to the concrete universal” (54). In other words, because literature and myth are highly stylized creations, changes within them have nothing to do with the ideology of the society from which they are borne. The archetypes produced in them are constant, known universally and, although able to be altered aesthetically, they are unchanging in their overall perceptions. Their adaptations and transformations throughout time are merely representative of stylistic and artistic changes in convention. Fortunately, Frye was not so relentlessly limiting in his later critical texts. He further complicated his contradictory position in texts such as *The Critical Path* and *Words With Power* in which he allows for greater possibilities in terms of the influence that literature has on society.

In *Anatomy* Frye suggests that romance is “the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience” (139). This admission allows for the notion that mythical patterns can be applied to a somewhat more realism-prone (not supernatural) text. Though supernatural elements may be reduced or even lost in such texts, the overall separation from society still exists. However human in direction a romance aims to be, it is, in Frye’s theory, heavily idealized and far from representative of reality. Furthermore, it does not allow for these patterns to affect the world outside of that text. It is Frye’s other works, *Words with Power* and *The Critical Path* that more specifically link mythological undertones in literature to the external world. While *Anatomy* hesitates to draw on literature’s significant connection to society, his later texts embrace it. *Anatomy* suggests that the archetypes produced from myths are continuously recreated and rewritten in literature. *Words with Power* and *The Critical Path*

suggest that these literary conventions speak to and hope to alter the societal traditions that are reflected by them as well. Some traditions need to be broken.

*Anatomy* presents the beginning of a discussion on myth and literature that is fraught with tension. In “Theory of Myths” Frye states conclusively that “as long as poetry follows religion towards the moral, religious and poetic archetypes will be very close together” (156). He does not suggest that the link between literature and myth is also connected closely to the natural world. Adamson aptly draws attention to the fact that “Frye insisted upon separating the concerns of literary criticism from ideological ones, though the concept of ideology often went by other names” (77-78). Yet, in the works following *Anatomy*, Frye establishes a more direct link between myth and the real world. The highly aesthetic and non-ideological theory presented in *Anatomy* is contradicted in order to present an approach to the idea that literature, like myth, has the opportunity to influence minds.

Out of the creative mind emerges a literature that exposes “the civilization [one] is trying to build or maintain out of [one’s] environment, a world rooted in the conception of art, as the environment is rooted in the conception of nature” (*The Critical Path* 57). In both *The Critical Path* and *Words with Power*, Frye describes the prominent myth in any society as being the myth of concern, “a structure of practical human concern” (*Words with Power* 32). Furthermore, in *The Critical Path*, Frye writes that “the ultimate source of a poem is not so much the individual poet as the social situation from which he springs, and of which he is the spokesman and the medium” (18). While this statement does not refer to literature’s mythical foundation, it does expound upon the idea that the poet and the poet’s creation come from and act upon societal situations, a notion that Frye specifically spoke

against in *Anatomy*. In *The Critical Path*, the tradition of myth in literature informs the culture that participates in it. He argues that this myth provides a tradition based on a "limited orbit of language, reference, allusion, belief" (35). Hence, working with mythology does have certain limits. However he also suggests that, through social and cultural changes, mythology develops and progresses. He argues that there is a tendency for it to "become encyclopaedic, expanding into a total myth covering society's view of the past, present and future, its relations to its gods and its neighbours, its traditions, its social and religious duties, and its ultimate destiny" (36).

While Frye is accurate in his assessment of myth's function within society, he is limited in his understanding of its possibilities. Though he discusses myth as being an integral part of any society, he also argues that "[m]yths that are no longer believed, no longer connected with cult or ritual, become purely literary" (WP 33). Yet, despite a lack of cult or ritual, Classical myth (a myth slated by Frye to the purely literary world) still has ideological reference. Classical mythological figures emerge to a great extent in the discussion of our myth of concern. We associate characters and events from Classical mythology with the happenings of everyday life and the production of various stereotypes and social schema. So prevalent is the link between Classical myth and our conceptions of our personal and cultural realities that contemporary literature takes it, and all of its long-living archetypes, to task. Despite its lack of followers, such myths are not reduced to being solely fictional, as Frye would have us believe. They still function within the world today as any myth does, "express[ing] human beliefs and fears and anxieties and passions and aggressions" (*Words with Power* 31).

If we are to read Frye's work on the assumption that his theory stays the same

despite its contradictory nature, literature and myth are limited, universal traditions that are able to change. They are specific and are unrelated to the real world and yet they are informed by and formed out of social circumstance. It is a tension that provides significant space in which to create new possibilities. It is an argument from which can emerge an interesting dialogue between the literature of today and earlier works of theory. Ultimately, and reductively, myth for Frye is universal and indicative of the social structure of authority. This prevailing relationship between mythology and society is that which many contemporary writers speak to today. To the contemporary writer, myth is an ever-changing medium for social protest, a form that can be used to speak against the exact concept of universal and traditional literature that Frye perpetuated.

The societal influences of literature and mythology both discussed and overlooked by Frye provide a realm of possibilities for the contemporary writer. One aspect of Classical mythology that Frye neglected to account for was its internal propensity for change. Not only do myths experience transformations over time (as they are rewritten by different writers), but they also contain various aspects of change within themselves. Countless mythological legends involve transformations of the body. Though Frye noted literature's ability to alter, he did not go so far as to examine the significance of these internal changes. Thus new literature explores a region of mythology little examined by Frye as they recount mythological transformations and provide new ones of their own. The ability for the mythical and archetypal body to change allows for the notion that the body in society (as influenced by literature and myth) can also reform. More specifically, as we accept the possibility for bodily transformation, our own perceptions find a new proclivity to change.

Myth, to Frye, and to the authors mentioned here, is equated with a form of identity. Specifically to Frye, it “is an art of implicit metaphorical identity”(Anatomy 136). In his theories, Frye’s discussion of the problematic is limited to that of the realm of literature. He asserts that the implicit metaphorical identities present in realistic fiction create “certain technical problems for making it plausible” (136). His discussion of such technical problems erroneously excludes the notion that metaphorical identities can be assumed by or a reflection of society. In *Anatomy*, myth and realism do not connect through literature. In *The Critical Path* and *Words with Power*, however, myth, literature, and reality, are heavily intertwined. Despite this contradictory stance, an interesting discussion develops as one attempts to explore the societal implications portrayed by myth and the aesthetic nature of any artistic work.

Regardless of such difficult beginnings, it is essential to incorporate Frye’s theories into the concerns of contemporary literature. An opportunity has risen for a new plateau for Frye’s criticism in the contemporary world. Just as myth seems unnatural (or supernatural) in realistic fiction, the body that does not conform to a universalized norm has been traditionally regarded as unnatural in a realistic world. While in Frye’s analysis, myth and realism are largely separable and the presence of myth in realism is shown as performing a function much like that of simile, contemporary literature takes this theory one step further. Contemporary characters are no longer connected to a classical background merely for stylistic purposes. They are exposed as the direct descendants of myth, a product of a mythology-informed archetype. They are also revealed as products of a society, forcing the limitations that socio-political situations have placed upon them. As such, they connect the implications of mythology and to the world outside of the text. By living through and



reliving myth, these characters provide a setting where myth *is* real and one has to relive it in order to escape it and all the expectations of body and life that come with it.

By incorporating myth into a discussion of bodies marked by disability, female gender and age, each movement away from the norm seems at once a fantastical and yet oddly realistic revelation. While myths are very much a cultural basis for our ideas on the body and what we deem to be its problems, their fantastic elements allow the reader to place her/himself in the position of an objective observer. Perhaps these authors are not attempting to make myth seem natural but to make the unnatural, the extraordinary, become just another element of humanity. Instead of a linear and mostly bipolar spectrum of myth to realism and natural to unnatural, all elements combine in contemporary narrative, erasing the old boundaries and eliminating the walls that restrict us from knowledge, understanding, acceptance and a new realm of art.

Although literature, in Frye's theory, is somewhat separate from society, it does act upon it. "It is the task of the public critic to exemplify how a man of taste uses and evaluates literature, and thus show how literature is absorbed into society" (*Anatomy* 8). Critics such as Frye's own student, Margaret Atwood, explore the possibilities of Frye's theories within the context of Canadian Literature. Atwood, however, does not argue for the existence of an autonomous literary universe. She stresses Frye's later notions of literature's social effect. She describes the implications of Canadian literature on the people's psyche, exploring the ways in which its readers absorb it. Like her predecessor, Atwood sees literary criticism as a "practical, text-centered, and value-oriented craft" (*Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* 11). As such, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* addresses the specific effects and thematic traditions of Canadian

literature, a text exemplifying Frye's notion that the critic must address how literature functions in society. As the first influential text on the topic of Canadian Literature, Atwood had an overwhelming undertaking. She argues that

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who we are and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge, we will not survive. (19)

Atwood, unlike Frye, brings another element to literary criticism: the gender dynamics of narrative. Though *Survival* still leaves room for more innovative discussions of gender in literature, Atwood's criticism and literature expound upon "power relations between men and women, and women's marginalization in culture and society" (Sturges 87). Her literature can be seen as a forerunner to the narratives of today, exploring problems of female identity that still exacerbate the characters of Mayr, Markotić and van Herk. Her criticism concerns the Canadian literary tradition that has until now perpetuated restrictive notions of the female self.

As criticism brings a quality of directness to the ideas produced in literature, it too becomes reflective in the changes still to come in the tradition, a map to guide us into the future. The gendered language produced in *Anatomy* is clearly indicative of a time when the future prominence of female writers, characters and thought was underestimated. Now, Frye's gendered language with reference to the artist is recognized for its exclusionary quality, the female artist apparently lost among the flux of male writers. Frye's references

to male theorists and critics only continue his gender-specific omissions. Furthermore, Frye's *Anatomy*, however scientific and objective it purports to be, provides an ironic access to the essence of society's views on the body. The male body is dominant over the female body just as the masculine pronoun dominates over the feminine. More subtle and yet becoming more recognizable are Frye's association between literature and the problem body, the body which does not conform to society's normative standards. His likeness of literature to a "deaf" and "mute" individual is indicative of what literature, and therefore also criticism, has yet to accomplish. Hence, even within Frye we are able to find the necessity of contemporary female writers. The problem body is still in need of being liberated.

In all this study of literature and criticism, Frye reminds us that criticism is essentially scientific and, consequently, suggests a sense of progress. He writes that "[r]esearch begins in what is known as 'background,' and one would expect it, as it goes on, to start organizing the foreground as well" (*Anatomy* 8). With Frye's theories in mind, one is able to enter into a discussion of literature and its criticism. In order to criticize, however, one must avoid the "religio-political color-filter" (*Anatomy* 7). Instead of entering into the criticism of literature with pre-supposed political motivations, one must enter criticism by way of first examining the literature itself. "If criticism exists," Frye argues, "it must be an examination of literature in terms of the conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field" (*Anatomy* 7). Recent texts in Canadian literature provide the critic with new ideas in response to the tradition of symbolism and mythology in literature. As noted earlier, writers such as van Herk, Mayr, and Markotić create a dialogue with previous works in Canadian narrative (written by Ross,

Watson, and Laurence, to name a few), responding to notions of body and self presented in these earlier texts and, more specifically, to the literature that informed them, the beginning of the tradition, mythology. From this foundation, modern mortals and transformed goddesses emerge, escaping the conventions that bind us. With the conceptual framework described by Frye, the critic is able to examine these texts and, ultimately, shed light onto current debates on the mythology of the problem body.

## Chapter Two

### **From Language to Landscape: Re-mapping Mortal Bodies in Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey***

The female figure in Canadian literature is in a constant state of movement. Whether she is progressing toward a greater perception of self, or wandering across the page, literally nomadic, she is in perpetual motion. As her predecessors were typically confined to conventional representations of women in the domestic domain, writing her experience, for many authors today, begins with the rewriting of those conventions. Thus, the fundamental elements of traditional depictions, language and space, become the site of much examination. Christl Verduyn observes “[t]hat the world that language creates seems to favour men more than women, and that the vehicle of delivery – language itself – reflects that favour” (75), limiting the female space in literature. Our understanding of the woman’s body is confounded by both societal implications and ideological expectations. As Thompson notes, “the body [is] a cultural text that is interpreted, inscribed with meaning” (22). Just as this meaning is often borne out of the desires of authority, so it will be inscribed with conventional cultural values. Consequently, for a female, corporeal meaning is entombed by the ideology of the cultural inscriber: the male. Such inscriptions can be, in part, discovered in the archetypal symbols that have thus far been relatively consistent throughout literature.

As Frye proposed, stories are repeated throughout time. Even though variations occur, certain imagery remains relatively the same, certain messages continue to be expressed: “The mythological line of descent from previous poets back to Homer (the usual symbolic starting point) [ . . . ] carries on into our own time” (*Words With Power* 47).

Mythology, and thus literature, provides us with an array of archetypes and conventions that we find in society. We may choose to believe that these archetypes reflect the society around them (as Frye argued in *Critical Path*), or that the society around them reflects these archetypes. More convincingly, literature and society can be viewed as being in a continuous dialogue, turning in on each other, replicating and forming out of the other's language. Regardless of one's perspective, we are aware of the sexual and gender dynamics found in these legends. In the words of King, "[m]yth may thus provide a language in which to speak of sexual variations, [though . . . ] the characters of myth [up until this point] are far from being role models for mortals" (22). Thus far, mythological reproductions have only confirmed a limited perspective on the possibilities for women. Nevertheless, texts that perpetuate new notions of the female self have begun surfacing in Canadian Literature.

However restricted the female body, its oppression is not a result of literary tradition alone. As we come to understand how Frye's theory of archetypes can help us to illuminate the origins of the problem body, we also come to realize a spectrum of other cultural facets (history, science, geography) as fellow contributors in the overall literary composition that relentlessly repeats the story of the controlled female identity. For centuries, the female body in Western civilization has been understood in contrast to the male body. Aristotelian descriptions of the female as a deformed and/or mutilated male (Thomson 20) are some of the earliest sources of a concept of the female physiognomy that has been predicated throughout the ages. Classical Greek society, for example, held that "there was something highly symbolic about the act of penetration itself; it represented a genuinely unequal ethical and power valuation between the penetrator and the penetrated"

(Nye 18). Furthermore, language itself has delegated the woman's body into confined spaces, limiting its movement and function to the opposition or subservience to the male form. Feminists and theorists, including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Elaine Showalter, inspire a dialogue on the origins of and means of escape from these antiquated and oppressive perspectives. While these individuals, their works and the works of others like them have helped to expand and reorient conceptualizations of the female sex, new definitions and arguments still arise from feminist discourse. Likewise, contemporary literature evolves as a process of liberation for the female body (be it political, social, literal, historical). The essence of current Canadian narrative puts forth the suggestion that the female protagonist must establish herself on new and diverse landscapes if she is to participate in the evolution of female identity.

Like language, the act of mapping in our society suggests an element of control. Charting a landscape defines a place just as language defines an object. The literature of Aritha van Herk explores this parallel, defying both the perceived immutability of language and our understanding of landscape in order to realize new possibilities for the female body. Verduyn suggests that "for van Herk, language precedes reality. Language brings the world into existence by naming" ("Tongue in Cheek" 74). In her critical work, *A Frozen Tongue*, van Herk likens this overwhelming power of language to cartography: "Mapping, like language, is creation more than representation" (58). The identity of an area is defined and created by maps. The identity of an individual is defined by language. However, just as maps change with time, notions of female identity have progressed greatly from their early Aristotelian definitions.

Mapping the undefined female space is a difficult undertaking. Female identities,



despite social expectations (or rather, limitations), herald numerous perspectives and potentials. The restricted variation in roles (from which women still find themselves trying to escape) has had devastating effects on a female sense of self. It is obvious that there is a need to explore both the aspects of female identity as they have been hitherto demarcated as well as innovative and uncharted spaces. Such a vast topic at once requires the benefits of mapping and the ability to recognize when one can map no further. In *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*, van Herk explores these precise possibilities. A reinvented story of the Arachne myth, *No Fixed Address* puts the new Canadian literary heroine on the map. In this text, the author explicitly challenges the persistent archetypes and myths found in Frye's *Anatomy* while linking the exploration of the female self with the topography of the Canadian landscape. She confronts both problematic associations with the female body and masculine-dominated concepts of Canadian geography, revealing the dilemmas for females in literature and society alike.

*No Fixed Address* not only speaks to the mythical origins of the conventional female body, but also addresses the perpetuation of these myths by earlier Canadian literature. Concepts of the domestic female space that are derived from legends like that of Penelope (the homebound wife of a continuously traveling Odysseus) are reiterated by Canadian texts that maintain the conventional domesticity of female characters. Consequently, the space outside the home, the imposing Canadian landscape, becomes a place unexplored by and unknown to them. From the perspective of a woman who has "met adventures at crossroads, propositions in motels, terror at gas stations" (*Frozen* 286), this confinement of the Canadian literary heroine is a grave error. The connection between women and landscape cannot be denied. Hence, the mistake of earlier works of Canadian

fiction must be eradicated by van Herk's pen. The Canadian female protagonist must meet her landscape.

Complications between women and land arise in several key Canadian narratives. Mrs. Bentley of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* struggles internally with her identity while never realizing the oppressive nature of her husband's paintings. Caught in assumptions about land expressed in Mr. Bentley's artwork, she understands the world around her through the misted lens of her husband's vision: "[E]verything is distorted, intensified, alive with thin, cold, bitter life" (23). The paintings are celebratory of an abysmal nature. Lonely, sparsely-peopled streets with false-fronted stores foreground a prairie beyond that is regrettably left somewhat untouched. Yet, while such portrayals of small town country life can be seen as reflective of Mrs. Bentley's own inner emotional state, the paintings are always definitively those of her husband. It is the house – the female domain – that most adequately represents Mrs. Bentley's deterioration and oppression. Its leaking ceiling and gray walls are expressive of her own internal decay. In a parallel way, Mrs. Bentley accepts Mr. Bentley's perception of her as the definitive guide to understanding herself. As she understands her external world through her husband's paintings, she understands her own identity through her husband's reactions to her noting that "[t]here are times when [she] think[s] he has never quite forgiven [her] for being *just a woman*" (31, emphasis mine).

Likewise, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* explores the problematic relationship between women and land through the ghostly manifestations of Mother Potter. The unrecognized Everywoman of the text, Mother Potter reveals an association between women and land that is dangerously close to what van Herk will later expose. The country

is “[n]othing but old women fishing” (20), “[n]othing but old women waiting” (45).

Women are inextricably linked to the landscape. However, Mother Potter’s association with the natural world around her puts her in a precarious situation. The narrative dispels and invokes her. While the country is peopled by those who are seeking (fishing) and waiting, the people who knew Mother Potter are unable to establish her whereabouts (or, as van Herk might argue, unable to define her). They are continuously mistaken in their sightings of her. She is seen fishing at various spots along the river despite the fact that she is actually dead, hidden in the upstairs bedroom of her home. However mistaken they are, all of the characters claim to be confident in their description of her whereabouts. They all purport to know what they have seen, to know “a shadow from an old woman” (20).

Nevertheless all are wrong in their assumptions of her whereabouts just as we (as readers) are wrong in our assumptions of the definitive female character. The old woman is universal in the sense that she, like all others, trolls the line of an identity that is not defined by her. However, unlike *Double Hook*’s other female characters, Mother Potter knows the source of the problem. She seeks to know and trace the land, to discover something she herself cannot yet comprehend. Likewise, the female character today must achieve her own understanding of the landscape around her in order to acquire a greater conception of her own identity.

In these examples, only two of a large tradition, the discussion (or absence of discussion) of land presents new opportunities to the writer who wishes to challenge the literary tradition of male-dominated interpretations of the female self. As Showalter suggests of contemporary female novels, a novel embedded in the *female* tradition will focus on “*self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of

opposition, a search for identity” (274). She further suggests that such a novel’s author may “devote [herself] to the forging of female mythologies” (285). To do so, however, she must work from within pre-existing texts and move outwards, away from the defined, currently male-dominated space of the page. Hence, traditional concepts of land, ancient mythologies and conventional genres must be appropriated and restructured in order to establish a new tradition. The centuries-old depictions of women that originate in ancient Greek myth must be paralleled with centuries-old depictions of land as a conquered feminine entity in order to fully explore and rewrite the problematic female body. Thus, the traditional roles of females within the text must be met with new, previously non-existent roles for the female character. In *No Fixed Address*, van Herk achieves these numerous and formidable requirements. She rewrites the established Greek myth of Arachne by placing a very non-traditional female character into a very non-traditionally female text: the picaresque novel.

The picaresque novel enables van Herk to do three important things. First, she is able to establish a new space for the female protagonist by displacing the traditionally male picaro with an untraditional, female picara. By assuming the picaresque genre, van Herk argues against the notion of fixed male and female roles, opening a plateau of possibilities for her character. Second, she places her heroine, comfortably, in the outdoors. This disruption of the female, domestic domain is emphasized by the juxtaposition of Arachne’s comfort and mobility in the outdoors with her awkwardness in a domestic setting. Third, the culmination of these two components with van Herk’s discussion of land and travel enables the reader to come to know both the necessity and the impossibility of mapping the female self.

As a picara, Arachne Manteia is empowered with the ability to traverse uncharted territories. The vastness of the land to which she has access parallels the vastness of possibilities yet to be explored by female characters in Canadian literature. Van Herk describes Canada as a country of which “the sheer immensity [ . . . ] underscores the importance of measuring and charting” (*A Frozen Tongue* 54). She describes in detail the lay of this land and our inherent need to understand it. She lists the number of islands and miles of which Canada is comprised (52,210 and 3,851,890, respectively), imparting the curiosity and fear that many feel toward the great unknown of the country’s landscape. The need to know defines the masculine-oriented activity of cartography. As van Herk writes, “[m]an maps to make familiar an undefined space” (55). However, unlike the continual progression of knowledge with regards to Canadian topography, the development of the knowledge of the female body that landscape is so commonly compared to is somewhat stunted. Despite the changing depictions of female characters and the increasing diversity in narratives afforded to them, the female narrative in Canadian literature remains a largely unmapped territory.

The problem with such a narrative is quite similar to the problem of Canadian identity proposed by Atwood. In her words,

Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it [ . . . . ] Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It’s that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost. What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. (*Survival* 18)

While Atwood did much to examine the abundances and absences of certain types of

female characters in Canadian literature, this paragraph alone suggests a perspective still present in literature today. Contemporary Canadian narrative, however, acknowledges that it is not only *he* that requires a map, not only *he* should know how to relate himself to his surroundings. Just as the male identity requires such an understanding of place and one's position in it, so too does the female identity. It is this understanding that van Herk's revised *Arachne* makes accessible to her reader. She demonstrates the necessity of the struggle to overcome female stereotypes as she herself conquers the conventional limitations of female characterization. Furthermore, she reveals the necessity of knowing one's surroundings in order to achieve this task. While a Canadian must strive to know her land before she knows herself, a female must come to terms with and disassemble the problematic definitions of land before she can undertake similar definitions of her own body.

The multifaceted relationship between women and land that is developed in *No Fixed Address* is first developed as a relationship of absence. The traditional female role is the domestic role, within the home, separated from the naturalness of the outdoors. This relationship marks the disparity between women's restrictive domestic space and the presumably male domain, the vastness of the outdoors. As van Herk establishes in "Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape," the land of the west is perpetually defined as feminine, the unmapped territory being virginal, the mapped territory being dominated or conquered. Female identity in the west has experienced much the same definition. Women are reduced to the single signifier "Woman." The masculine cultural authority determines feminine identity by way of categorization. Women are "fixed as mothers/saints/whores, muses all" (18). Marlene Goldman's study of van Herk's work

assesses the author's refusal of "the desire to 'fix' the prairie by imposing [a] type of grid, fashioned from a male perspective" (22), noting that "she likewise rejects the representations of women as Woman proffered by male western writers" (22).

Women and landscape are comparable in both their male-determined definition and their resultant need for deterritorialization. Goldman aptly refers to the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in her discussion of van Herk's work. These theorists "align attempts to subvert traditional representations of identity with revolutionary political struggles" (Goldman 23), a paralleling that enhances the study of van Herk's associations between land and the female self. By exploring the relationship between a subject's internal and external environments, Deleuze and Guattari are able to provide a fluid description of identity rather than a fixed and conventional one. Though not all of Goldman's associations between the theorists and van Herk's work are firmly established (there is a rather stretching notion of the female writer as a "nomadic war machine" that, even from Goldman's perspective, requires extensive justification) (23), both the former's theory and the latter's text make innovative suggestions concerning concepts of space and revolution, particularly focusing on the concept of mapping.

Women, van Herk asserts, need to escape the predetermined confines of male-defined space and identity. The most effective way of doing this is to "[reach] for outside, [to attempt] to establish themselves in a different way" ("Interview" 2, 1987). Van Herk's subversion of the domestic space is found in the movement of all of her female protagonists (Arachne, the traveling underwear salesman, J.L. the wilderness cook, Judith, the rural pig farmer and Dorcas, the personal courier) from inside the conventional spatial confinements of the home and domesticity to the unlimited possibilities of the world beyond the domicile.



Van Herk has been described as “the guardian of a special form of the feminine in that she will figure out how to have it both ways: not group solidarity, but rather, group solitariness” (Kroetsch 67).

Group solitariness marks the dramatic shift in the allotment of feminine space in *No Fixed Address*. Arachne, who, as her name suggests, has significant affinities with the woman weaver of Greek mythology, assumes the traditionally male role of rogue in this parody of the picaresque novel. The conventional “‘on-the-road’ novel” (*Frozen* 284) that van Herk subverts for her female protagonist still contains several key elements of the traditional picaresque. Though the picaro of *No Fixed Address* is, notably, a picara, much of the roguish elements of the genre remain. Arachne, like her male predecessors (Tom Sawyer, Robinson Crusoe, and Gulliver, to name a few) “lives by [her] wits and shows little if any alteration of character through the long succession of [her] adventures” (Abrams 130). Though picaresque novels to date have been decidedly male, Arachne does not fall short of the genre’s requirements. She is free of restraints, traveling with no apparent boundaries. Her occupation leads her to various strange encounters as she travels along the roads of Alberta. Her adventures are at times so fantastic (sleeping with bears, listening to a double-faced woman) that they go beyond fulfilling van Herk’s assessment of the picaresque as “den[ying] contact with real life altogether” (*Frozen* 285).

The movement of the woman in Canadian literature away from the confined spaces of home and city, and into the wilds of the west, is not a transition van Herk marks with a sense of absence or loss. Nor is it marked by the suggestion that she struggles with feelings of inadequacy as she encounters a vast and unknown landscape. It is a passage marked by the concept of innovation, moving outside the traditional boundaries proffered to women,

the boundaries of the home and the limitations associated with those boundaries. Most simply, it is a movement marked by the notion of *movement*, mobility. The categorization of women as domestic goddesses, as “keeper[s] of clean tea towels and hot casseroles” (*No Fixed Address* 60) is obliterated as Arachne weaves her way through the Alberta back-roads. Her movement away from the home is in itself exceptional. Her movement away from the city is thus even more astounding. By becoming the traditional wandering rogue, Arachne enables a concept of women that is far from that of “blue-eyed young secretaries who wear confident skirts and whose teeth have been straightened to tongue-tempting lines” (*No Fixed Address* 59). By forsaking the centres of male-dominated progress (cities, homes) for the open road and untouched land, Arachne ultimately sheds the multitudinous layers of containment that her many predecessors were unable to shake.

Mapped and unmapped territory, city and country roads, all become intricately entwined in the text’s expression of the relationship between female and male identity. The title *No Fixed Address* appropriately refers to Arachne’s lack of definition by conventional ideas. As Goldman notes, “the term ‘address’ refers [ . . . ] to both physical location and the linguistic notion of address” (27). Arachne is neither fixed to a permanent physical space, nor is she fixed within an ideological expectation of what a woman is or should be. Van Herk writes that

[she] is perfectly capable of domesticity. She deprecates it – “who’d waste their life cooking and cleaning?” – but there are days when she can be caught and held by the probability of sink and stove, of market and vacuum cleaner. Thomas usually takes care of that angle of life, but when he’s not around, Arachne can experiment, refresh her sense of the horror of what she calls house

arrest. (27)

The mobility experienced here by Arachne is a significant change from the limited space that her namesake is afforded in mythology. While the mythological Arachne's travels are limited to her web, Arachne Manteia's web is redefined, stretching over the entire west.

While Deleuze and Guattari's theory of deterritorialization ultimately requires the road-less and horizon-less desert, van Herk chooses to keep her heroine in the west, the region she describes as "the kingdom of the male virgin" ("A Gentle Circumcision" 257). This choice only accentuates van Herk's daring. By taking on the west, van Herk does not displace her characters or her readers. The problem she addresses is one that is quite relevant to its geography and therefore needs to be explicated within the west's confines. The choice of locale also emphasizes the fact that van Herk intends to make her revolution a Canadian one. The Canadian heroine emerges from her stagnancy as van Herk pushes the page onto unmapped territory – the region of women.

As Atwood proposed, in order to come to know the female body beyond its traditional meaning, we must first come to understand her external environment. Arachne moves fluidly within the text between the city and the country, mapped and unmapped lands. Her occupation as a city bus driver signifies her need to leave the city limits. Her quest for self is not satiated by her distinctive career, despite its unconventional element of mobility. As a bus driver, Arachne is still visible ("What's a girl doing driving a bus?" 50) and thus unable to slip through society's impositions and establish a self unmitigated by the male-dominated world around her. Her career as a traveling underwear salesperson, however, and the uncharted territory to which it leads her, exposes the necessity for females to reach beyond not only the home but also the male-organized space of city and even

already mapped territory. She revels in the freedom of the open road and all the possibilities it has to offer her: “She can crawl through a barbed-wire fence into blue alfalfa” (7). As a traveler without origin or actual destination, Arachne defies convention, becoming an invisible voyager along Alberta’s roads and highways. By taking the job with the ironically named Lady’s Comfort, “Arachne has managed to get rid of what form and structure there was to her work, if not her life” (8). This is only the beginning.

The freedom of the character is in no way hindered by the product that she sells. Though Arachne works for Ladies’ Comfort, she knows that the ultimate comfort for women is found in freedom. One of her own small freedoms is her refusal to wear the product that she so faithfully sells. Like her mythological namesake, in order to achieve the most from her movements, she must do it without the restraint of fabric. Arachne, in mythology, worked “with her garments tucked up beneath [her] breasts, out of the way” (Ovid 135). Likewise, the contemporary Arachne is uninhibited by garments as she goes travels the countryside making sales. While she drives, the underwear remains in her trunk, a small souvenir of the restrictions and societal expectations that women face even today. Her product is consistent with the traditional opinion “that woman’s body should be prisoner, taped and measured and controlled” (2). Even her own brief experience with underwear is chronicled as a moment of torture. In her adolescence, the humility of the purchase (or more accurately, the theft) of her second bra is a turning point for young Arachne. The garment makes her body feel “straightjacketed” (99). Finally feeling that it is “not possible to escape the disdainful world [, that s]he ha[s] no tools and she [doesn’t] know how to get them” (100), she throws her “new bra in her drawer and [wears] nothing” (100). Arachne’s career as an underwear salesperson is desirable because of the freedom it

gives her to weave in and out of Alberta's little-known towns. Her refusal to wear her own product is a personal denial of the common control of conventional institutions.

As a continual traveler, Arachne not only defies cultural convention but narrative tradition as well. While female protagonists have customarily inspired character valuations by means of their psychological struggles (Pamela, Emma in *Madame Bovary*, Morag in *The Diviners*), Arachne's perpetual motion leaves the reader constantly wondering at her next move, rather than attempting an understanding of her internal complexities. Like the river nymphs response to the original Arachne's tapestries, the enjoyment is in "seeing the cloths, not only when they [are] completed, but even while they [are] still being woven" (Ovid 134). The sectional titles of "Notebook on a Missing Person" further convey the sense of urgency the reader feels as they try to catch up to Arachne, to trace her weaving trail through the west. As a participant in such an active pursuit, the reader is not involved in the traditional assessment of the female character. Arachne escapes the conventional limitations of the novel of character. She is not engaged in a process of self-evaluation, nor does she look on her past with a reassessing glance. Her love affair with Thomas, what might be a traditional focus for a female narrative, is only a subplot. She feels no emotional turmoil over her relationship with her mother, her friends or her lovers. Her story does not end with a wedding a birth or a death – in fact, it does not really end at all. Her adventures are limitless.

Just as she is not confined to a fixed address, the story "refuses to reduce Arachne's desire to travel to the confines of a realistic plot" (Goldman 29). Meeting a snoose-selling doppelganger and her trusty companion, a grizzly bear, hardly denotes a sense of the real. A woman with two different faces is not a person any of van Herk's readers are likely to

meet. Nor are they likely to meet the ghost of a long-dead pilot. Yet, despite the fantastic elements of the text, the social obstacles that Arachne is facing are never devalued. With each movement away from “reality,” the reader becomes increasingly aware of the limitations we place on text, character and, dare we say it, *culture*, by way of our own mentality.

The ultimate affront to convention in *No Fixed Address* is Arachne’s definitive magic trick: invisibility. She moves further and further from the reader’s perception until she is finally out of sight. While her mythological namesake is forced into a near-invisible state by being transformed into the small body of a spider, Arachne Manteia *wills* herself into invisibility. By constantly moving, Arachne is always one step ahead of both reader and society. She actively removes herself from situations where she becomes visibly Woman, categorically and expectantly female. Van Herk states:

[Women are] supposed to be visible, we’re supposed to be beautiful. But we’re not supposed to be audible! Seen but not heard [ . . . ] When Arachne [ . . . ] disappears off the edge of the mappable world, what she’s doing is saying: the map cannot contain me; the narrative isn’t going to confine me. (“The Grace of Living and Writing” 22)

Life on the open road permits her to actively become self, to live in her own body, her own skin, and to follow her own will.

Again paralleling the female body with the Western landscape, invisibility of self is matched by the invisibility of territory. As Arachne goes deeper and deeper into her travels, she comes upon a town that is literally invisible to her before and after her brief visit to it. Redland becomes the geographical twin to her self: “It isn’t on the map, it isn’t

on any map” (25). Not only is undefined by cartography, but it does not accept her. When she begins what is usually her intoxicating sales pitch at the general store, she is interrupted with the firm response that ““Joe Parker from Tri-line stocks us”” (26). Redland will not have her. She is only allowed a brief glimpse. She leaves somewhat defeated. The “[n]ext time she passes that way she tries to find the town and can’t” (26). It is its own space, one that she is not permitted to invade. By the end of the novel, we are to realize that Arachne is much like this place. The readers do not own her story. She is unwilling to be owned or conquered. She refuses to be mapped.

Despite Arachne’s invisible wanderings and her rejection of conventional routes, she continually expresses a love of maps and mapping. Though one might initially conceptualize this as a signification that this woman, however uninhibited, ultimately reverts to a man’s guided notion of the world in order to move about in it, Arachne’s relationship to the lines on cartographic paper is not a submissive one. Admittedly, her fondness for maps, especially those belonging to or composed by Thomas, does inspire her travels. She looks at them as a source of undiscovered possibilities: “Roads, she thinks. There are roads out there” (70). However, despite the fact that Thomas’s “map has made Arachne bold” (71), her passion has a different purpose. Instead of using such charts to trace a route or find a destination (to discover the already discovered places of the world), Arachne defies the conventional purpose for such items. She “uses Thomas’s maps to locate the boundaries of civilized society and to escape its borders” (Goldman 28). Consequently, while the Arachne of mythology is confined to the weave of her web, Arachne Manteia evades such margins. She provides her readers with a map of living, motivates them to produce their own map of becoming.

While Atwood suggests a somewhat universal map as an achievement of literature (“[l]iterature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind” 16), van Herk makes mapping more personal. Though the narrative provides a map of its protagonist’s own excursions, Arachne is prudent, giving those who seek her only a flickering glimpse of her whereabouts. She is eventually written off the page, entering unknown, unmapped territory and embarking on a journey so mysterious, her pursuers are left straining to envision her forthcoming adventures. By leaving only traces (the discarded underwear samples), she enables those who watch her to take their own journey. If she were to map her complete journey (erroneously presuming that it would ever end) and thereby allow her readers to follow her exact trail, the problems of convention would simply be repeated. Readers would risk validating a new convention instead of continually being nudged to seek new ground.

Repetition and tradition are intrinsically linked to notions of the female self. Through the transformation of the mythical Arachne to Arachne Manteia, we become aware of the tradition of social limitations imposed upon women. The Arachne of Greek mythology was a woman punished for pride, for independence and for skill. Her weaving, though an activity within the socially established domestic sphere, was something she arrogantly used to challenge the gods (authority). Her work, then, became her own personal revolution just as Arachne Manteia’s work, becomes an act of rebellion as well. As Isabel Carrera Suarez comments, “[t]he authoritative structure of the patriarchal family [ . . . ] creates a desire for escape: [ . . . ] women escape family restrictions, freeing themselves through an occupation ‘outside’ the house” (91).

It is not only her love of driving and her chosen profession that differentiate



Arachne from other female protagonists. Both Arachne's physicality and her sexuality separate her from the traditional heroine. Like her mythological counterpart, who was transformed into being merely a body, Arachne's experiences are demarcated by their physicality. However, their bodily experiences are differentiated by their cultural origins. Ovid writes of a woman punished for the pride she takes in her craft. The Arachne of Greek mythology is condemned to live the life of a spider, weaving only webs instead of her venerated tapestries. Though the contemporary Arachne is her original's equal in her refusal to ask for forgiveness for who she is (the original Arachne refusing to retreat for the gods, the contemporary Arachne refusing to change for her society), her bodily representation is wholly different. In *No Fixed Address*, the body is not the site of punishment but the site of pleasure and freedom. While the original Arachne's body is restricted in mass and location, representative only of a narrow escape from a suicidal fate, van Herk's protagonist continually revels in physical freedom.

Arachne is "faithful to only her body, her reliable, well-tuned body" (180). She refuses to assume the desexualized role of "fembot who would spend hours making casseroles and buying laundry soap" (90). She is a woman "who responds [during sexual activity]. When [Thomas] thrusts inside of her, she moans; when she comes, she sometimes screams" (90). However, despite her passionate relationship with Thomas, Arachne further refuses the sexual limitations of females imposed by social convention. Her sexuality is not hindered by monogamy. On the road, she has several sexual conquests. Because of the invisibility provided by her traveling, Arachne lives without judgment or inhibition. Her sexual endeavours in and outside of her relationship with Thomas are passionate and unabashed. Her "sexual fantasies are incorrigible" (10) and her sexual

activities are distinct ways of coming to know herself. She is a sexually voracious female protagonist who lives without the chastisement of society (with the exception of her friend Thena, the upholder of societal convention and authority in ways similar to those of her own mythological counter part, Athena).

Each of Arachne's encounters exposes her desire to discover and to move beyond what she perceives as her own boundaries. Such encounters are not unlike those recreated in the mythological Arachne's tapestry. While the tapestry exposes the amorous endeavours between the gods and mortals, Arachne Manteia's encounters displace mythological gods with the contemporary "gods" of society: males. Her violent sexual encounter with the pianist, leaves her faced with the awareness that "she has stepped perilously close to another knowledge. And that it is dangerous" (57). She again pushes the boundaries of authority by facing off against the ultimate symbol of social control: the police. The threat of a speeding ticket persuades her to seduce its issuer. When the half-hearted encounter is still followed by a ticket left on her window the morning after, we are made aware of Arachne's conscious attempt to overcome authority. On the back of the ticket she writes: "Congratulations. You are incorruptible" (87).

Yet it is another sexual encounter that Arachne has on the road that is of most significance. The introduction of Josef explores, and defies, another cultural standard. Arachne reverses traditional notions of sexual power relations (the older man seducing the younger woman) by herself seducing Josef. Moreover, Josef's advanced years provide additional significance to this attack. The intermingling of the elderly body with the female body provides a doubly taboo sexuality. It is the only sexual encounter had by Arachne on the road that does not remain a one-night stand but rather a continual affair. Josef, unlike

her other men, “doesn’t belong in her gallery of pick-ups” (21). In this relationship, Arachne takes to task not only cultural limitations regarding women but also traditional expectations of the elderly. In the words of Goldman, “she flaunts social convention that relegates the elderly to an asexual limbo” (Goldman 29) by having an affair with a man who is almost ninety years of age. She seduces him, desires him. However, although the two “identify their souls corporeally (MacLaren xxxi), their relationship is not strictly sexual. They are continually marked by their similarities. They are both outcasts of society, Arachne an untraditional woman who explores the outskirts of nowhere, Josef an ignored elderly man who creates ornamental copper plates in the “detached garage behind the house” (151). She is the product of an unconventional and independent childhood, he is a former displaced Serb from Bosnia.

Furthermore, descriptions of Josef suggest spiderly characteristics and an association with weaving. Arachne observes that “his hair [is] a spun floss of white [ . . . ] She has never seen such a skein of hair” (10). The shape of his hand on her knee suggests a web, “five points balanced around her kneecap” (21). He wears a “webbed smile” (121). The light in his garage is “cobweb-hung” (123). His creation of the copper plates is somewhat like the detailed work of a tapestry. His depictions are as life-like as those of the mythical Arachne. His plates tell stories. The copper plate he leaves at her doorstep depicts “the endless [ . . . ] dance of death that is life” (MacLaren xxxi).

Arachne’s relationship with this man is as much dependent on her need for death (be it psychological or physical) as it is based on her desire for sex. In mythology, Athena’s ruin of Arachne’s tapestry led her to attempt suicide. In this novel, death becomes an act of survival as Arachne seeks various ends in order to escape her past. Van

Herk reveals that “[w]hen death is chosen or orchestrated or met on one’s own terms, it may be seen as an act of empowerment or agency” (“The Grace of Living and Writing” 23). With this in mind, a look into Arachne’s deathly endeavours reveals an unexpected source of empowerment. The whole of her relationship with Josef is intrinsically linked to death. Their first meeting is over the skull found next to Crowfoot’s grave (16). Together they hide it, bury death so that no one else can find it. They are later described as “refus[ing] time” (185), a suggestion of immortality or, at the very least, the continuity of life beyond the corporeal. The second time she sees him, a shadow outside her hotel window, she mistakes him for a “ghost of some man she once laid and has forgotten” (20). Josef, at one point suggest that he “should be dead” (159) though Arachne insists on his vitality. The culmination of these death-like images reveals itself in her ingestion of the potentially poisonous fugu sushi (suggestively figured in the shape of a spider). Both Arachne and her readers come to appreciate this experience as a fatal one (at least on some level). Her sexual encounter with the ghost of an Air Force pilot (a literally dead man) suggests that either Arachne is herself dead or that the two worlds are fantastically intertwined. In either respect, the connections between death and vital renewal awaken the reader to a new realm of possibilities for the self.

The connections between sexuality, spirituality and death are most powerfully portrayed in Josef’s last visit with Arachne at the Wild Woman site. Traditional notions of feminized landscape and the female body are uprooted as Arachne and the Wild Woman unite. In an extensive passage, van Herk describes a new relationship between land and women:

It is a long way east she has circled and circled, finally come to this nipple of land

on the breast of the world, immensely high and windswept. She spins, then stops and looks at Josef crouched over his cane [ . . . ] She takes his hand and pulls him with her, down to one of the hill's folds [ . . . ]

And there they find the Wild Woman, her stone outline spread to infinite sky, to a prairie grassland's suggestion of paradise, a woman open-armed on the highest hill of that world. They trace her outline: arms, amulet, hair, teeth, skirt, breasts, feet. Arachne stands between her legs.

Her face speaks, the welcome gesture of arms, the amulet's adornment, the breasts soft curves, immensely eloquent. Arachne's small shadow falls within the woman's shape, the stone-shaped woman. She stretches out inside the woman, lies within the stones on her back beneath the wheeling sky, arms outflung like the woman's, her head cushioned on a circle of breast. Josef stands between her legs, watching, then he stumps away.

The ridge is sheltered from the gusting wind; it is almost warm here. Arachne will never get tired of looking at the sky from within the woman's arms, but she finally rises and stares beyond the outline of rock to the horizon that wheels four dimensions around her. What secret burial she makes before she walks down the steep ridge to the car and the waiting old man is buried there. (189-190)

Hence, this last visit with Arachne results in an actual burial, a death of something unknown to the reader. It is perhaps the death of traditional depictions of land as being feminine, the death of her acceptance of such depictions or yet another death experience for Arachne.

While Arachne's relationship with Josef is entwined in notions of desire and death,

her relationship with Thomas is deeply connected to concepts of desire and life. He is “her one solid connection with what she calls ‘the real world,’ certainly the respectable world, in which she is an impostor” (81). Thomas is Arachne’s connection to the city (Calgary) and her connection to more conventional expectations for women. He provides her with a home, a fixed address in the male-constructed world of the city. He provides her with companionship, a lengthy relationship that one might expect, if predicting upon the conventions of society, to be a goal of any woman’s life. He is also responsible for the more traditional, if only temporary, manifestations in Arachne’s wardrobe. However, Arachne is “unwilling to indulge in the polite rituals that are expected when a woman is connected to a man” (47) and so the conventional aspects of their relationship end here.

Instead of attributing Arachne with the traditional role of saviour in the relationship, that role is divided between them. Arachne “save[s] him from life with a blue-eyed and bouncy-assed fembot” (90). Thomas saves her from her past (80). Neither of the two dominates the relationship. However, depictions of Thomas are feminine in nature: “What makes him so attractive? The fairness of his skin? The manicured hand that curls around the metal seat frame?” (69). Within the home, Thomas takes on the role more traditionally assigned to the female. When they make their first trip together, the trip to Calgary, he very femininely “lies with his head on her lap; she steers” (79). He is her Apocryphal lover (89, 94, 140), suggesting a lack of authenticity that separates their relationship from our understanding of conventional relationships, leaving it seem invented or mythical.

Depictions of Arachne’s childhood and current conversations with her mother expose another unconventional route taken in this narrative. *No Fixed Address* not only provides a non-traditional view of women as individuals, it also provides an unconventional

approach to female relationships with one another. The most noticeable of these, is the relationship between Arachne and Lanie. The original mother of Arachne, the mother in mythology, is dead, leaving no obligation on the part of van Herk to reproduce or transform this individual into her contemporary storyline. Despite this absent mother figure, van Herk decides to include a mother for her Arachne. Rather than replicating the consuming and oppressive mother-daughter relationship so often portrayed in Canadian literature, *No Fixed Address* exposes a different side to this commonly examined connection. Arachne's relationship with her mother is one of indifference. She goes so far as to say that "[s]he isn't convinced that she has a mother; Lanie's connection to her feels tenuous and unproven [ . . . ] She is without a scrap of motherly feeling herself" (28). Not only does this disparage the aforesaid precedent for mother-daughter relationships in Canadian literature but it also puts to question the very notion of a biological predisposition within females to be motherly and nurturing. For Arachne, the idea of "[m]otherhood arouses no idealized sentiment in her. That is something socialized, something incubated in a girl child with dolls and sibling babies" (28). Instead, it inspires the notion that females can hand down several different forms of knowledge and female identity. One of Lanie's most significant contributions to Arachne's development is one based on their indifference: "She refuses and refuses all the impositions of childhood and mothers" (29). Her independence from her mother, and her refusal to illuminate those aspects of her life that reflect her mother's teachings, echo that of her namesake. The original Arachne, though said to be an obvious student of Pallas, Arachne vehemently denied this truth. She was "[o]ffended at the suggestion that she had had any teacher" (Ovid 134).

Another profoundly significant relationship between females in the text is that of

Arachne and Thena. Echoing the story of their mythical namesakes, Arachne and Thena portray one significant difference in their relationship. Instead of being foes, they are friends. “Equally disillusioned with the world, they suit each other” (114). While the original story only consumes a brief segment of *Metamorphoses*, van Herk’s version spans the course of the novel, allowing for the development of an intricate and complex friendship. The tapestries woven by the mythological Athena and Arachne are transposed by the metaphorical tapestries Thena and Arachne weave through the course of their various dialogues in the text.

The original Athena’s tapestry was much like her contemporary’s words of warning to her rival. Alongside the praising portrait of the gods were pictures of punishment that hinted to Arachne’s imminent future. “One corner held Haemon and Thracian Rhodope, now icy mountains but once human beings, who dared to give themselves the names of the greatest of the gods”(136). She also included pictures of other mortals who had dared to compete against the gods and had lost, paying the price by being metamorphosed into an inanimate object or animal. The entire tapestry is bordered by a symbolic array of olives, a traditional symbol of peace. Likewise, van Herk’s Thena extends her hand in friendship while embroidering her dialogues with warnings of what might happen to Arachne should she continue to disregard her own position as a woman in society. Like her predecessor, Thena ultimately laces her words with the proposition of peace and forgiveness should Arachne choose to change her ways.

Arachne’s tapestry is much like her contemporary counterpart’s argument in response to the dialogue of her friend. It depicts the entrapment of various females in the grasp of a controlling entity. Europa is under Jupiter’s control, Leda is trapped by the



swan, Asterie is held by the eagle (Ovid 137). She then depicted various gods including Jupiter and Neptune, in states of metamorphosis, committing various crimes. Such defiance in Arachne's argument enraged the mythical Athena whereas in this contemporary transformation, Arachne's boldness may spark heated conversation but it does not embitter her friend. In most cases it rallies Thena to join Arachne in her opposition to conventional thinking.

Though Thena is, like her namesake, jealous of Arachne's successes, she does not punish her friend, she secretly revels in her power. Arachne is "explorer for Thena's determined enclosetment, a messenger from the world" (118). Thena is not the teacher to Arachne that she is in mythology but rather a confidante. One of the most significant aspects of the mythological transformations is found in Thena's voice. Thena actually speaks, repeats Arachne's story, unlike her mythological counterpart who sees the rebellious nature of Arachne's tapestry and "[tears] to pieces the tapestry which display[s] the crimes committed by the gods" (Ovid 137). Thena in *No Fixed Address* celebrates Arachne's defiance of convention, her refusal to adhere to the rules of the authoritative society around her. Arachne notes that "[I]t is impossible to fictionalize a life without someone to oversee the journey" (124). For our protagonist, Athena is that overseer. In turn, when Arachne is not around to tell her own story, Thena weaves it for her, in all its glory, for the world to see.

Depending on one's ability to see beyond the limitations of traditional female narratives, Arachne's ending is one of futility or of freedom. To those who do not understand the character's plight, her final disappearance, the disappearance from the page, renders the entire tale pointless. It is a story left hanging, a metaphorical translation of the

mythical Arachne's ending (had she succeeded in hanging herself). However, to those of us who are able to envision possibilities beyond the limitations of traditional genre and character, Arachne's disappearance from the page does not connote a dead end. Instead the road goes on, out of sight. Just as the town of Redland only exposes itself briefly to Arachne, so too does Arachne only briefly expose herself to us, her readers and her seekers. Like her namesake, her one life, the life in Calgary, the life as underwear sales rep, the life of female fictional character, is not ended but transformed. As Ovid's Arachne went from woman to spider, van Herk's Arachne goes from Woman to Being.

It is Arachne's final refusal of the traditional picaresque role that expresses the ultimate declaration against society's expectations of women. In Ian MacLaren's words, "[t]he picaresque form demands that closure not be invoked unless the picaro/picara repents and seeks readmission into society'/community on society's terms" (xxviii). Arachne defies such closure, choosing to disappear into uncharted wilderness rather than to return to a society whose terms do not suit her. She does not ask for, nor does she need forgiveness. It is her movement off of the page that calls her readers to action. Though MacLaren argues that Arachne is "unconcerned [with] whether or not she leaves the tracks of her routes for others to follow" (xxviii), this is not the case. Arachne carefully controls where she is and isn't seen. She only allows the readers, her pursuers, a brief glimpse into her life before she leaves them with nothing – no trace. She only allows them enough of her story to learn from her, not follow her. From there, they must plot their own course. To leave a map of her entire journey would be to reproduce another form of the map already in the hands of her readers (the unilateral map of traditional stereotypes, conventional schemas). There is more than one way to get to any destination.

### Chapter Three

#### Invoking the Furies: Elderly Divinities in Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*

In 1972, when Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* was first published, it was celebrated (and jeered) as "one of the first attempts to grasp Canadian literature" (Rosenthal 52). A student of Northrop Frye, Atwood shifts the analytical eye from the traditional literature that is consumed by Frye's body of work toward the unique and unmapped territory of Canadian narrative. While Frye, in *Bush Garden*, remarks on the conundrum of Canadian identity, Atwood responds by suggesting that the source of that conundrum is directly related to one's understanding of Canada as a country, a geographical place. As a special circumstance for Canadians, there is a lack of definition that exists both in their country's people and in the place itself. Hence, just as finding one's identity becomes entrenched in the notion of survival, survival becomes deeply rooted in the geographical location of Canada. Furthermore in Atwood's analysis, one's concept of Canada as a place becomes superimposed by the notion of "Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head" (*Survival* 18). Despite the undefined foundation for this country's literature, the means to understanding both the external and internal country is uncomplicated. Atwood suggests that the reading and writing of literature is paramount to our understanding of our country and of ourselves. She states:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been [ . . . ] For the members of country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without

that knowledge we will not survive. *Survival* 19

Hence, in avoiding the analysis of Canadian literature, in failing to acknowledge our fictional counterparts, we have been overlooking the source (both judicious and imprudent) of our identity as a nation. Atwood writes: “the extent to which Canadian literature has been neglected in its home territory suggests [ . . . ] a fear on the part of Canadians of knowing who they are” (*Survival* 16). While others, up to this point, have avoided entering into a discussion on Canadian literature, Atwood takes the subject to task, an act that finally signifies the undeniable existence of Canadian narrative.

The critic accomplishes many things with *Survival*. The principle function of the work is one that far exceeds Atwood’s initial objective of providing a thematic guide for students. As Reingard M. Nischik conveys, *Survival* is the text “which put Canadian literature on the map for the public and significantly contributed to a decade of thematic, self-centered criticism of Canadian literature in the Canadian academic world” (10). It has also been described as an “ironic manifesto against cultural victimization” (Becker 31), an attempt to fight back against the seemingly overwhelming power of the ideologies and attitudes of Canada’s southern neighbours. This description takes on fresh significance in this chapter, an examination of cultural victimization within Canada’s own borders.

In *Survival*, Atwood initiates a discourse on not only the predominant theme of survival in Canadian literature but on Canadian identity on the whole. Taking her cue from Frye, Atwood centralizes the study of literature on Canadian narrative. While Frye noted literary conventions and reproductions of mythological figures strictly on the basis of aesthetic significance, Atwood notes the connection of such aspects of literature to the world around it. She recounts the recurrence of certain types of characters and how such

fictional depictions relegate the Canadian heroine into a very distinct, and inflexible, identity. In the chapter “Ice Women vs Earth Mothers: The Stone Angel and the Absent Venus,” she draws attention to the particular commonality of the representations of females in Canadian fiction. Atwood observes that

most of the strong and vividly-portrayed women in Canadian Literature are old women . . . . [T]hat most of the women in the country with any real presence at all are over fifty, and a tough, sterile, suppressed and granite-jawed lot they are. (199)

Following Robert Graves’ lead in dividing the mythological goddess into three counterparts (Maiden, Love/Sex goddess and Crone), Atwood effectively argues for the notion that Canadian literature’s Venus and Diana figures are in absentia while there is an undeniable “bumper crop of sinister Hecate Crones” (199). Despite the fact that all of the matronly figures of Canadian Literature may not be sinister and “life-denying”, (199), Atwood notes that, even in the face of such amiable elderly women as Ethel Wilson’s Mrs. Severance (*Swamp Angel*), the typical characteristics associated with the elderly female are those also associated with the Crone of mythological derivation.

The Hecate myth that Atwood associates with fictional Canadian heroines revolves around a three-bodied, sinister and elderly goddess. The only Titan who retained her power after Zeus defeated Cronus (her father), she is a particularly powerful figure. The crone-like identity associated with Hecate is not far removed from that of the contemporary heroines of Canadian fiction – despite the significant lapse of time between their respective compositions. Strong and distinctive, both Hecate and her Canadian equivalents are noted for their stoicism and darker qualities. Characters such Margaret Laurence’s Hagar Shipley

(*The Stone Angel*) and the nameless mother in *A Jest of God*, along with Sheila Watson's Mother and Greta (*The Double Hook*), and Mrs. Bentley of *As For Me and My House* are indicative of the legacy of crones materializing in Canadian narratives. Mrs. Bentley, who is considerably younger than the others, only further establishes the notions of the Canadian woman as desexualized and lackluster hag. She woefully enacts her own separation from the life-affirming aspects of the female identity (sexuality, independence, etc.) by describing herself, at thirty-four years old, as "getting on" (22). Her description of the false-fronted prairie stores in the wind is reminiscent of society's perspective of the aging woman who (stubbornly or otherwise) falls victim to the torrent her advancing years.

The false fronts that other times stand up so flat and vacant are buckled down in desperation for their lives. They lean a little forward, better to hold their ground against the onslaughts of the wind. Some of them cower before the flail of dust and sand. Some of them wince as if the strain were torture. And yet you feel no sympathy, somehow can't be on their side. Instead you wait in impatience for the wind to work its will. (57)

The persistence of the elderly stereotype in Canadian Literature is undeniable. She is all-consuming and controlling. She is old-fashioned and judgmental. The "world of matrons and respectability" (Ross 64) is wrapped up in memory and unable to escape, nothing to look forward to in its future, the only future being death.

Strength for such characters, though evidently impenetrable, is limited in its outlets. They express their vigor only in their severity toward their families and in their disengagement from the changing world around them. Thus reduced, they leave the already restricted female body doubly confounded in terms of generating a means of

empowerment and escape. Canadian literature's older women, to date, have been paralyzed by their age. Hagar Shipley is ensnared in an unending sequence of memories and regrets. Watson's elderly matriarch is actually dead, only existing in the narrative as an oppressive and unrelenting presence from which none of the other characters can liberate themselves. Greta's existence in the same text functions exclusively as the unilateral opposition to her youthful counterparts. While Laurence's women serve to exude a cold and haunting air over her family, Watson's Mother becomes a living ghost come to suck the life from her survivors. All of these women inhabit the stereotypical elderly female body, assuming its icy glare and unforgiving stance. They are the living dead (or in the case of *The Double Hook*, the dead living) whose presence functions as a burden to those around them. However, despite their positions as unforgettable Canadian protagonists, they are formulaic and unchanging.

This convention in literature reflects the ideology of the world outside of it. As Dale Spender suggests in *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*, while "the worth of a man may increase with age in a society ordered by men (so that life merely begins at forty) that of a woman decreases with age (so that life ends at thirty . . . )" (14). The characters listed above are further rooted within the accepted notion that "old people endure; old people cling to outworn beliefs and lifestyles; old people embody the loss of power and options, entropy rather than energy. If they move at all it is usually toward greater physical and mental decline, or regressively toward recapture of a past" (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz 131). Though both Laurence and Watson depict their characters as being strong in their stubbornness, Hagar and Ma can more accurately be described as (and exploited for) their weaknesses. Greta and Mrs. Bentley's early and all too willing

assumption of their elderly personae only support the concept that female bodies all come to the same end. All of these characters communicate a tolerance for and adoption of the only role provided for the aged female, a very limited space from which the liberation and empowerment these bodies must emerge. Consequently, these characters accept their defeat. Ultimately, despite *The Stone Angel's* epigraph, these women *do* "go gentl[y] into that good night" (1).

Supporting Atwood's observations, Barbara Frey Waxman also notes the significant increase in literature concerning the aging woman, particularly noting the number of elderly women represented in fiction as widows. Waxman aptly quotes feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, on the state of the elderly woman in society.

"The meaning or the lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test, since it is this that reveals the meaning or the lack of meaning of the entirety of the life leading to that old age" (18). Waxman contends that cultural "antipathy toward the aging woman's body and persona, as well as [the] assignment of the older woman to the lower echelons of the second sex, must be changed" (2). Those who seek to actively participate in this change, Waxman argues, include those who are involved in the new propensity to write "the Reifungsroman, or the novel of ripening -, [a work that] oppos[es] its central tenet to the usual notion of deterioration in old age" (2).

Regrettably, despite her theoretically innovative introductory pages and her avant-garde proposition, Waxman fails to advance her study to works that look outside the typical stereotypes of the elderly. She describes the Reifungsromane as "frequently confessional in tone and structure. They are also usually characterized by great mobility, recursiveness or rambling in narrative structure" (16). While the notion of confession and mobility may be



associated with the positive perspective that one is finally telling one's story, Waxman's description echoes more negative subtexts of discussions on old age. The idea of confession represented here suggests one's last moments, one's last chance to tell their story; the description of a rambling narrative suggests a senility that can no longer maintain a coherent story line. Though she mentions that the protagonists are shown to "embrace [ . . . ] new commitments and interests" (16) she then goes on to discuss the rather common and dour themes of "physical and psychic pain; loneliness; alienation from family and youthful society; self-doubt; feelings of uselessness; and grief over the loss of friends" (16). However prominent these themes are, they fall short of being the unique and progressive depiction that Waxman suggests is a contemporary occurrence.

The positive elements of the *Reifungsromane*, though undeniably progressive, are still depicted by Waxman as being journeys and interests taken up by the protagonist alone. The movement through old age is considered a solitary one. Most depictions of the Canadian elderly heroine do not include the company of other elderly heroines let alone a youthful confidante. Furthermore, Waxman discusses the experience of the elderly woman as being a seemingly intellectual and physical exodus from the rest of the world, an internal, private journey of reflection rather than that of external wonder. She contends that the strength in aged characters is found in flashbacks and reminiscences, in their ability to look back on their life and achieve some peace (17). While there is mention of exploring one's physical and mental baggage (17), there is no discussion of ridding oneself of such fruitless complexities. Though she upholds Laurence's Hagar Shipley as a progressive elderly female protagonist, her description of her leaves much to be desired. The prominent Canadian character is described as an angry woman who is resentful of those whose help

she requires in her old age and who, waxing philosophical, re-evaluates her life in order to determine her identity (21). Finding one's identity in a mournful overview of one's past can hardly be seen as an innovative perspective on aging. Her exploration of Hagar's vulnerability and isolation illuminates an elderly experience deemed both common and expected. Waxman fails to note that, although it is important for elderly characters to inhabit a space in the literary tradition, that space should not be shaped by the restrictive notions of the aging body that are prevalent in contemporary society. Such conventions only repeat the same characteristics and plotlines afforded to elderly figures from the beginning of literature's span. As Frye argued, literature should be used to explore the possibilities for society's future, not inhibit it by continuing the ideologies of the past.

Waxman describes the frequent depiction of the character's inevitable death in the Reifungsroman in fatalistic, defeatist terms. Very traditional in her approach to the topic of death, Waxman suggests that a life is made valuable from one's ability to learn from one's memories: "[I]f the protagonist of the Reifungsroman dies at the end of the story, it is commonly after she has grown in a significant way" (17) via her time spent in reminiscence of the past. The elderly female body is habitually depicted as being stalwart and powerful only while also being unproductive and undesirable. It is a technique that has, itself, grown old. Though Waxman provides ample and illustrative conjecture on the changing literature of the aging body, she fails to incorporate texts as innovative as her assertion. Though *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* was published in 1990, Waxman's primary literary sources are typically originate in the 1970's and early 1980's. Departing from ubiquitous portrayals of aging bodies, the "ageless utopia" (2) that Waxman theorizes on and yet ultimately fails to expose is now

brought to life in a contemporary Canadian narrative.

In *The Widows*, Suzette Mayr both exposes and responds to the necessity of rewriting the elderly female body. Though there is an undeniable resilience found in the “bumper crop” of crones to which Atwood referred, establishing different possibilities for their stories is essential to the continuation of their presence in literature. Mayr at least momentarily frees the Canadian fictional heroine from her commonly hopeless fate and transforms the body of the aging individual from the hitherto ostracized crone to a vital member of society. The elderly female body found in *The Widows* is sexual, life-embracing and independent. While other elderly Canadian heroines are trapped by the tragedy of memories and bedsores, Mayr’s Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber are “grabbing life by the balls and pulling until they [snap]” (148).

One of the most conspicuous challenges to conventional depictions of the elderly body is Mayr’s illumination of the aesthetically influenced betrayals of the history of the aged. The presence of a somewhat forgotten Canadian historical figure, Annie Edson Taylor, serves not only as a guide to the three women in the Niagara Ball but also as an educator for the readers. By using Edson in her narrative, Mayr creates a place between history and fiction that explicates the crux of her narrative. Through excerpts of Berton’s historical rendition of the sixty-three-year-old woman’s Niagara plunge and the segments of *Niagara! The Musical* that are described in the narrative, Mayr reveals the necessity of addressing a misrepresented history. The story of Annie Edson emphasizes the impact that traditional depictions of the problem body have on society. From the perspective of the contemporary world, the story of such adventure and daring should not belong to an elderly woman. Berton’s account of her tale depicts a misplaced woman, an elderly and shapeless

female who, desperate to make ends meet, attempts to conquer the Niagara and find fame and fortune. His story is not of courage and intrigue but of the strange and ridiculous spectacle of an aged woman who is caught somewhere between modest femininity and a desexualized and undesirable masculine identity. Its musical adaptation only reiterates the fact that, in order to be exciting, a story about a woman surviving the Falls, must be a story about a young, attractive woman surviving the Falls. Though Sharon Lee Silvers is decades younger than her real-life counterpart, her physiology compels the audience to embrace her. The replacement of Sharon Lee Silvers in the play by her elderly understudy addresses the western cultural denial of the aged body. It is only when the musical meets with its true, elderly face that “Annie Edson Taylor [becomes] too real” (123) for her audience. However it is an entirely different psychological affront to *The Widows*’ protagonists. The aged substitution, they realize, “could [be] any of them” (123). The new body on the stage suggests something hitherto unacknowledged by any of them. There is “a better story” (147) for the aging woman; a story that needs to be told.

The “better story” proffered to the women suggests that the elderly woman need not be relegated to the stagnant conventions of society. The suppression of the true story of the sixty-three year-old Taylor is a result of culturally informed expectations of the older female body’s limitations. From the socially constructed perspectives of an anticipating audience, the elderly body cannot be glamourized and, ultimately, should not be found in the context of the theatre. The story of an elderly woman plunging over the Niagara and surviving is not a tale worth hearing because the aging body of its hero holds no value. The viewpoints expounded upon in *The Widows* expose the lack of progress in terms of perspectives on the aging body. They are a continuation of the ideas held by the original

audience of the real Annie Edson Taylor, the audience that rejected the story of a hitherto unaccomplished feat that would normally be celebrated by the media for years to come because of the aging (and therefore undesirable and unmarketable) body that achieved it. Taylor becomes just another anecdote, misrepresented and misunderstood in the few texts that refer to her. The elderly face of the story, despite Taylor's conscious understatement of her age to the press, is derelict.

However, Mayr insists that the aging body in Canadian fiction will not, like Taylor, die in obscurity. The widows' who follow in Taylor's footsteps have a different experience. Both their reasons for taking on the Falls, and their reception after surviving it, provide new possibilities for Canadian literature's elderly women. Though not brandished by fame and fortune for the remainder of their lives, these women walk away from surviving the Falls with a more welcoming response from the press and, more importantly, with a future that includes the formation of an entirely new community. By buying the delicatessen, the women of Mayr's narrative "do what Annie Taylor in 1901 refused to do" (241): they move on. They take their experience at the Falls and translate into an approach to life in its entirety. An inspiring environment for the life-affirming aged, the establishing of the delicatessen reveals the promise for continuing movement and infinite possibilities for the future despite the age of its elderly proprietors. The women here embrace their experience in the Falls as a doorway to even greater things, rather than the be all and end all of their existence (as Taylor apparently saw it). It is a defiance of the literary convention that has been thus far incomprehensible. The stagnant and defeated elderly body upheld by Laurence, Watson and others, is ultimately challenged and replaced with another story.

Mayr's rewriting of the narrative of the elderly body does not limit itself to

historical representations. She seeks out and rectifies the origins of the problems of the aging female: mythology. The recurrence of the Hecate myth that, as noted by Atwood, perpetuates the prevalent conventions of the elderly body in Canadian literature, is disrupted by the figures of Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber. These women struggle with the roles that are so easily assumed by their predecessors. In order to erase the persistence of the stereotypical elderly body, a new myth must take its place.

Consequently, the legend of the Furies (Eumenides) replaces that of Hecate and is reformed in order to make room for a new caste of elderly goddesses. Though the Furies' most prominent contemporary association is with anger ("the demons of primitive vendetta-law") (Fagles and Stanford 15), their legend is also significantly related to justice and civic involvement. Hence, the positive aspects of the goddesses from which the widows are modeled provide an intriguing possibility for the aging female body that refuses to be isolated from the rest of the world.

The Furies embody several characteristics crucial to the widows' cause. Foremost, these goddesses antedate the Olympian gods. Hence, their position as "first" gives them a distinct elevation in the hierarchies of the gods just as Mayr's widows' positions as elderly matriarchs (or first women) are influential positions in a hierarchy of family and female relationships (most notably that of the grandmother-granddaughter). Furthermore, their function in mythology is to avenge violations of the natural order and of humanity, a cause not unlike that taken up by these women as they avenge their society's stereotypes of the elderly woman. The punishment performed by the Furies, the pitiless arousal of remorse and the awakening to the knowledge of having wronged others, is placed within a contemporary context as Mayr's protagonists take on the society of the last decade of the

twentieth century. The once defeated widows become vengeful women, claiming what rightfully belongs to them (a more promising future and a gratifying concept of self). The ancient defenders of natural rights still inhabit their elderly postures but are rejuvenated by the modern desires of their Canadian counterparts.

The most significant aspect of the Furies that is revitalized in *The Widows* is their ability to change. The way in which this function comes about in mythology is artfully transformed in its contemporary Canadian counterpart. The Furies of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* illustrate a transformation of the elderly female body not too far removed from that which takes place in Mayr's text. The Furies, eager to avenge matricide, jealously await Athena's judgment of their hostage, Orestes. When Athena's justice rejects their desire for Orestes' death, they are assuaged only by Athena's promise to them their "seat / in the depths of the earth" (ll. 816-17). "No house can thrive without you" (903) she tells the angry women. "I will never tire / of telling you your gifts. So that you, / the older gods, can never say that I, / a young god and the mortals of my city / drove you outcast, outlawed from the land" (888-92). This promise inspires the Furies to accept Athena's promise of civic responsibility in return for the respect and honour of her and her citizens. Their name is promptly changed from the Furies to a more positively toned Eumenides (the Kindly Ones). Likewise, the angry widows of Mayr's text, when paired with Cleopatra-Maria (Mayr's Athena), are livened and changed. They are able to take on the world with new perspectives and, instead of renouncing their fates to the restrictive and conventional ends of traditional elderly Canadian characters, these women refuse the common role they earlier accepted. The jealousy, vengeance and unrest that were once characteristically embodied by the ancient Furies are reproduced in Mayr's lusty and defiant widows. The

previously suppressed elderly bodies of Canadian fiction emerge as sexual and dynamic beings. Hence, Mayr's text presents a new form on an old and ancient message. Just as Aeschylus "presents our lives not only as a painful series of recognitions but as an initiation into stronger states of consciousness" (Fagles and Stanford 20), Mayr implores us into a consciousness of the elderly body thus far unrecognized.

The first step in disrupting the monotonous pattern of Hecates is the confrontation of the stereotypes of the elderly embodied by them. They are toxic, sterile, cold, cute, stupid, and child-like. The elderly female is continuously and effortlessly portrayed as "toxic" simply because she is aging. The maturing body that refuses to be pinned-down and deemed infantile by her caregivers is seen as participating in "excessive acting out that induces a negative reaction and energy drain in anyone [around her]" (Davenport 10). In other words, the elderly are intolerable because they refuse, when faced directly with it, to be contained by the stereotype of being pet-like (cute, cuddly and in need of constant care). In enacting this refusal, they become the toxic elderly so often characterized in literature. "The older [they] g[e]t, the less of the world [they are] entitled to" (Mayr 92) and any elderly individual who tries to oppose their shrinking rights, is received as more of an unmanageable and undesirable hassle than a refreshingly vital individual.

Mayr represents this conventional take on aging with her character Hannelore who enacts the expected toxicity when she internally fumes at Cleopatra Maria's reaction to her new shoes. This is "how people, especially young people, [talk] to women they believ[e are] old, like the old women [are] freshly scrubbed puppies with bows on their heads" (65). While Cleopatra Maria unwittingly belittles her grandmother's purchase as an attempt at fashion, Hannelore is not ashamed but rather infuriated by the youthful and ignorant



deduction. The elder woman's thoughts supplant the younger one's silly stereotype with an apt attack on the foolish misconceptions of the young. However, Mayr's protagonist is not without her faults. Despite her own plight against this elderly stereotype, Hannelore is apparently unable to escape using it, at least in some degree, when it comes to her relationships with others. When she looks at her own elder, Ida, she sees "their pet, the one they [have] to look out for" (75). At this point, in the company of an older female body, Hannelore further exposes the extent to which elderly stereotypes exist in society by way of her own inability to see herself as the formulaic elderly female. Hence, she is able to escape the traditional depictions of the elderly woman only when in the presence of a still older female, denying both herself and Ida the freedom of a more liberating identity.

Mayr further attacks the stereotypes of the aged with her depictions of the elderly body as foreign. As Waxman asserts, depicting this body as having an element of foreignness is a conventional technique (8). Mayr emphasizes this familiar misrepresentation by portraying her characters as being literally foreign. Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber are German. Hence, the women are doubly othered; they are foreigners in society by way of both their age and their ethnicity. However, they are continuously separated from the rest of Canadians not only by the social environment but also by their own design. From their perspectives, the food, the attitudes, and not even the wave pools of Canada are as good as they are in Germany while, to the world around them, the widows are both "Nutty old ladies [and] nutty German tourists" (52). Their bodies twice rejected by an unreceptive external world, these women further separate themselves by way of their own opinions. They spell Canada with a "K," creating a separation between themselves and their country. Their identities, as Atwood argues of Canadian

identity in *Survival*, are determined as much by their understanding of themselves as their understanding of their country. Their lack of acceptance and knowledge of Canada, their reminiscences of how this country is “not like Germany” (35), only further problematize their knowledge of themselves. Likewise, knowledge of place and self converge at the end of the novel when the women come to empower themselves and their country. Now, “[e]verything in Kanada [is] simply wonderful” (210).

Commonly our elderly Canadian female protagonists are shown as “mak[ing] an internal journey to their pasts through dreams and frequent flashbacks” (Waxman 17). The memory so constantly referred to in *The Stone Angel* is cast aside and reduced by a single phrase in *The Widows*: “the fuckings of memory” (16). These women are aware of the duality of memory. Not only are they faced with the inability to remember and the “mis-memories” that alter their perceptions of themselves but they also recognize the longing with which such erotic traces of life leave them. Frau Schnadelhuber recollects the beauty of her youthful body: “When she was young, [her breasts] were so splendid she could have made love to herself every day” (102). While the memory of the “moisture between the between” (144) calls to them, the failure to recall the specifics of their lives teaches them not to rely on the past as a concrete source of identity. When Clotilde recounts a vivid tale of the two sisters in 1916, Hannelore counters her sibling by reminding her that she “wasn’t born until 1920” (29). These women realize that memory does not have the ability to shape their self-knowledge. While Hagar experiences the pains and tortures of the past, a veritable “Job in reverse” (Laurence 40), the women here refuse to live with this paralytic torment. Though Waxman argues the necessity for elderly characters of bringing “order [to] their lives by reassessing their pasts” (21), these three women relish in the reverie of

forgetting and “mis-remembering.” They refuse to spend their days recounting past mistakes and wallowing in the burden of regret. The novel focuses on the future, a giant egg slipping over the face of Niagara Falls.

It is not only the notion of elderly mental decline that is uprooted in *The Widows*. The physical deterioration so inextricable in the Reifungsroman is replaced in this work by a physiognomy of death that is changeable, even removable. The mask (of death) is worn periodically by each of Mayr’s three protagonists. At these times, they temporarily epitomize the same persona they will ultimately shake off, that of the three-bodied mythological figure so often reconstructed in Canadian literature, Hecate. As this “dread Goddess of the Night” (Hamilton 330), the widows assume Hecate’s most memorable characteristic. They are sinister, a warning to the young of what comes with age. As Hecate, each woman becomes a physical sign of the presumed consequences of aging. However, the devastation and degradation that they exude comes not from themselves but from the reality given to them by others. Their deterioration and sterility originates not from their age but from the identity forced upon them by society, an identity that they would not have chosen for themselves. “Frau Schnadelhuber [does not] feel ugly and useless until people [show] her she [is] ugly and useless” (169). Clotilde uses her cane in the airport in order to present herself as being death-like or being on the verge of dying. She does need the contrivance but uses it to exploit her role as elderly and, consequently, helpless. With a cane and her wrinkled visage, people will “rush at her with airport wheelchairs, offering to wheel her around” (148). Hannelore’s physiognomy is so deeply rooted within the Hecate myth, she is contained as if she were already dead. She is “buried by the past” (39) and trapped by the shame of enduring desires.

The death-like persona inhabited at these times reiterates the presumed uselessness of the elderly to the outside world. When Frau loses her job, she immediately “play[s] dead [by] throwing herself into the role of the burden” (178). Surrendering to the notion that there is no other option but to concede to the presumably inevitable limitations of her old age, she becomes “the star of her very own freak show” (178) and “settle[s] into the death mask, deader than dead” (186). However, the forgotten tale of Annie Edson Taylor combined with their Fury-like propensity to fight for natural rights, propels these three women to come to realize the necessity of living the life that they choose and not that which others have forced upon them. The only option left to them is not the presumed death mask but the actual embracing of life in their old age. Consequently, a transition is made and the mask is torn off of the elderly face. The three women abandon their Hecate, crone-like bodies in favour of the judicious and avenging Furies.

As the mythological “hideous old women” (Evans 88), the widows embrace the original role of the Furies as defenders of nature and avengers of such violations as gross inhumanity. They essentially reclaim the rights of the elderly body while challenging society’s convictions. However, they depart from their mythological counterparts by refusing the ugliness that was previously assumed by their elderly forms. While the body of the aged in *The Widows* is depicted as something “no amount of make-up [ . . . can] hide” (122), it is not ugly. The elderly body is rejuvenated and sexualized in *The Widows* whereas, in mythology, the Furies are contained within their hideous physiologies. The snaky locks characteristic of the mythical beings are ripped from the scalps of Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber. “The long white hair [of] the Furies” (113) is something the widows actively resist. When Hannelore tidies her hair, the ugliness of age is removed

from her and left “wedged between the teeth” (105) of the comb.

The transformation and empowerment of the elderly mythological body is paralleled with that of the youthful body in myth. A transformed Athena accompanies the rewritten Furies in their journey. Cleopatra Maria’s sexless lifestyle can be seen as reminiscent of her cranial birth or as a result of her “aged” personality in Mayr’s revision of her. However, it is further complicated by the suggestion of sexual conflict that is produced by her namesakes. Caught between the image of the ultimate seductress and that of the superlative virgin, Cleopatra Maria epitomizes the fusion of the problematic binaries so often used to characterize women in literature (the saint or whore dichotomy). An uncanny moment in the text, the young graduate student is placed face to face with a poster of her classical counterpart, Athena. Mayr’s Cleopatra is quite similar to the mythological goddess she believes to be “the smartest, meanest professional virgin ever” (217). A woman of war and intelligence, Athena/Cleopatra-Maria is the perfect juxtaposition for the sexually invigorated Fury images embodied by these women. Furthermore, their classical associations (the peaceful pact made between Athena and the Furies in *The Oresteia*) only enhance the necessity of Cleopatra Maria’s role in the widows’ search for justice.

In an ironic twist, the static and hopeless characteristics typically found in the elderly characters of the *Reifungsroman*, are illustrated by the youthful body (that of Cleopatra-Maria) in Mayr’s work. Cleopatra Maria’s desire for age materializes in stereotypically elderly trips to the kitchen for prune juice and an immeasurable disgust for sexual activity. However, her external body is still youthful. Her academic pursuits and mental abilities bring her to the fabled heights of her predecessor. Furthermore, because she is acting as Athena, Cleopatra Maria’s alliance with the elderly trio immediately

indicates to the reader that the journey will be successful and the widows will emerge as victors on their personal war against ageism. “Athena [is] always on the side of the victor - or, rather, her side always [wins] because wisdom [does] not encourage rash engagements against hopeless odds” (Evans 35). The fact that the Eumenides, paired with Athena, in *The Oresteia* enabled a new civilization to prosper suggests that the steps made toward a liberated elderly body by their contemporary counterparts will affect society advantageously as well.

However, despite these mythological indicators, it is not easily assumed that these women will survive their feat. If society were still captivated by conventional notions of the elderly body, even if the trio lived, they would receive a meager amount of satisfaction for doing so. However, Mayr has carefully chosen the historical event she wants to rewrite for numerous reasons. Not only is the disregard for Annie Edson Taylor’s valour an absence in history that needs to be filled but also the natural elements involved in the narrative can be utilized to repeat the essence of the problematic aging body. The widows, avenging the rights of the elderly female body, echo the roles of the Furies, classical avengers of all natural rights. The discussion of water in the text emphasizes their fight for natural rule. The waters of Niagara Falls are intricately entwined in the creation of the new elderly heroine.

The problem with the elderly body is the same problem experienced by human interaction with the Falls. As encapsulated by Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber, despite the attempts made to pin it down by stereotypes, the elderly body is uncontainable. Like the toxicity of the aged earlier discussed, it is the refusal to assume the stereotypical requirements of the aging body that aggravates the world around the widows.

The uncontained elderly body in Mayr's work is equated with the equally uncontrollable water of the Falls. Furthermore, just as Frye equated water as a universal symbol of death, Mayr works the imposing and fatalistic qualities of the Falls into her narrative, making them a necessary passageway into a new perspective on a thus far conventionalized human form.

Water is a body symbol. It is, like the protagonists, uncontained and sexual, powerful and empowering. The trio's understanding of their likeness to the Falls is expressed through their depictions of its flow. As they describe it, "[t]here is no way to understand water [. . .] Water [. . .] is controlled and separate [ . . . ] Water is to be dominated and used. Water shouldn't have impulses of its own" (225). Such descriptions of water can also be used to describe the problematic relationship between the elderly community and society at large. It is socially expected that the elderly have no desires or motivations of their own. They are seemingly entities without thoughts or emotions. The discrepancy between the unnaturalness of controlled water and the naturalness of uncontrolled water functions to express the necessity of freeing the elderly from the confines of stereotypes. Water, to these women, is the only place for freedom, the only place where their uncontrollable desires are welcomed and nourished. Once they have passed over the restrictive rails of the Falls, Hannelore knows she "is *home*" (225).

The desire for a connection with the water acknowledges a need for rebirth and rejuvenation as well as a need for an end. From their weekly trips to the pool to their great planning for the adventure at Niagara Falls, the widows constantly crave the life-affirming essence of the water's touch. When their trips to the pool become unsatisfactory (despite how much Hannelore swims, her "grief [will] not wash away") (41), the women pursue

more natural outlets for their needs. It is understood that the controlled atmosphere of the swimming pool will not free them. They must connect to the dangerous and quintessentially natural Falls in order to experience the rebirth, liberating themselves from the unnatural confinement society has placed upon them. Depictions of the Falls' murderous qualities (5, 9) only emphasize the process the women are about to undertake. The desire to plunge into the depths of the Falls is inextricably linked to the desire to destroy their socially constructed identities. The killer-like qualities of the cascade are like a teasing lullaby to their ears, "purr[ing] like water swirling down the drain" (5). In fact, the women not only tempt death, they yearn for it. The widows' deaths are announced as Clotilde joyously remarks that "'the only way to describe it is that one minute I was dead, the next minute I was alive'" (236).

Thus, with the death of their old lives, comes the creation of new ones. The widows are not seeking an end so much as they are working towards a new beginning. Water is thus not only the site of death but also the site of birth and rebirth. Though their feat is dangerous, the three women do not want to kill themselves so much as they want to eliminate the restrictive role placed upon them by society. They ultimately want to recover what is rightfully theirs: the free, sexual, desiring, intelligent, and powerful elderly body. Water and birth imagery are continually referred to in order to establish this essential quality of the Falls. Cleopatra Maria's birth is described like a plunge from the Niagara as she "rush[es] out the vaginal canal, her body lurching over the precipice" (9). Even the vessel used to accomplish this daring feat adheres to the birthing theme. The widows plunge into the Falls inside a key emblem of birth and the female body: the egg. The descriptions of the act of going over the cliff resemble images of both birth and death, "a



point of no return”(89).

The naturalness of water is rooted in sexual elements. The Falls and water in general are continuously connected to the female body and the body of desire. For Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber, the renewal in the Falls is paralleled with the renewal of desire in their love affair. Clotilde thinks of their new love as a “pool of lava” (145), expressing not only the sensations of the sensuous ripples of a pool of water but also the heat and intensity of a volcanic eruption. Meanwhile, Hannelore sees the Falls as having a “sensuous female curve” (62). To her, the water is charged with sexuality and her body physically responds to it. Likewise, “that special melt between the between [ . . . ] remind[s] her of the rush of Niagara Falls, the cool, chlorine smell of Sunday mornings at the swimming pool, the overwhelming warmth of natural hot springs in the mountains” (143).

Hannelore’s own desire is awakened by the enticing physicality of water. She feels “the desire to *be* the water, the movement, to be inside her own living, pumping heart” (145). This desire is reminiscent of Atwood’s theory on self and place. Water and sexuality are deeply rooted within the self. Hannelore experiences a greater understanding of herself as a sexual being as she comes to understand the physical nature of the water. Unlike the past, when sex was thought to have more to do with a man’s fulfillment than with a woman’s desires, sex now becomes entirely about the female body, one’s own body. For Hannelore, desire has “nothing to do with the monster under his kilt. Everything to do with the moisture between the between” (144).

The reclaiming of such natural liberties is exactly what Berton suggests another woman was trying to achieve when she “[shook] her fist at [a] Victorian morality which decreed that there was no place but the almshouse for a woman without means who had

reached a certain age” (3). The only legacy so far afforded to Annie Edson Taylor is a sadly degrading musical that destroys her story by depicting her as a third of her actual age. Her small victory may have been overshadowed by society’s capacity to suppress her, but the Niagara trio who were inspired by her re-establish her achievement with a success of epic proportions. Mayr’s widows successfully crack the austere elderly stereotype just as daringly as they successfully complete their journey over the Falls. The avenging Furies exhume Taylor and her story, and Mayr’s heroines, at least momentarily, challenge the consistency of both history and society, liberating the elderly body.

Though Hannelore, Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber’s physicalities are somewhat similar to the elderly Canadian heroines of the past, their plight is not comparable in the least to those who came before them. They do, like Hagar and numerous others, inhabit the mythological body in their assumption of the elderly role. However, unlike their predecessors, they refuse to inhabit the stereotypes that come with their bodies. By invoking the Furies, Hannelore, Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber eliminate the once comfortable space for Atwood’s Hecate-Crones and claim vengeance for the elderly in a new mythological form. Instead of wasting away in the woes of deterioration, they begin a progression towards a new elderly woman in Canadian fiction. Ultimately, they persevere in becoming much more than just “spinsters and wasted wombs” (Mayr 10).

## Chapter Four

### Emergent Mythologies: Silenced Women and Contemporary Goddesses in Nicole

#### Markotić's *Yellow Pages*

Greek mythology, not unlike Canadian history, is abundant with heroes. The choice to incorporate either a mythological legend or an historical one into a contemporary Canadian narrative is not uncommon. Using the former, as Frye suggested, intimates recognition of the long-established tradition of literature. Using the latter signals an acknowledgement of our society's past. Incorporating both into the same text creates a unique foundation of traditions that is demonstrative of our accepted cultural truths. However, such a combination may also be used to suggest that not only can perceptions of mythology lead to a fallible notion of society but so too can those of history. Just as mythologies are interpretations of a culture, the act of writing history enacts the same type of interpretation. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "history is now, once again, a cultural issue – and a problematic one, this time. It seems to be inevitably tied up with an entire set of challenged cultural and social assumptions" (Hutcheon 365). While mythology is currently associated with art and aesthetics, history claims to work on the basis of facts. We have inherited from both our concepts of self and society. Hence, the author that attempts to incorporate both mythology and history into her narrative faces a tremendous undertaking. The problem with such intertextuality in literature is the navigation of male-dominated mythologies and histories in order to circumvent a new, female-oriented understanding of such established stories. In other words, both mythology and history confront the feminist author with the problem of representing the hitherto silenced voice of the female.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, new interpretations of mythological

characters and legends provide intriguing perspectives on the problem body in literature. However, in order to achieve such perspectives, one must first overcome the conventional notion of “hero.” In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood summarizes the established requirements of the literary hero. A hero, she writes, “must struggle against obstacles, as heroes traditionally do; the struggle must be meaningful, it must have significance for people other than the hero himself, he must be fighting on behalf of his own group or nation” (165). She then lists various literary and mythological heroes (Beowulf, Odysseus, Oedipus). Included in her definition is the presupposition that the hero is male. The possibility of a female hero is consequently silenced by Atwood’s gendered language. While her “hero chapter” is an examination of “the problems that arise in connection with the literary Hero, [and] more specifically with the attempts to create Heroes based on historical figures” (165), she herself enacts one of these problems. In 1972, the feminist writer ironically fails to mention one thing. A hero does not necessarily have to be male. Nicole Markotić’s *Yellow Pages: A Catalogue of Intentions* addresses such an oversight. In this narrative, traditional notions of the mythological and historical hero are disrupted so that silent female voice is heard.

Concepts of the traditional, and traditionally male, hero are inarguably connected to ancient myths. As Atwood’s list implies, Greek mythology’s male heroes are often accompanied by silent, or subdued, female counterparts. In order to elaborate on the tradition of the male hero, and its history that dates well beyond the beginnings of Canadian history, Markotić incorporates the roots of heroic narrative (mythology) into the text. The transformations of two ancient myths work to elaborate on the doubly problematic (female and deaf) body of the unlikely protagonist, Mabel Bell.

The first myth is that of Odysseus. The familiar tale of the traveling hero (recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*) is rewritten in *Yellow Pages* to comment on the conventional, domestic representations of females. The stories of the legendary hero's travels are vast and exhilarating. In contrast, the sub-plot of his wife, Penelope, is tempered and restrained. While Odysseus' story is elaborate, Penelope's is the simple narrative of a dutiful wife. The hero sees the world and experiences its many pleasures. His wife remains at home, faithfully refusing the many prospective suitors who make her their conquest. She will not betray her husband. Penelope's loyalty despite her husband's absence is considered commendable. However, her position never sways from the conventional female domain. Her strength is rooted in domesticity. Even her ability to ward off sexual advances is deeply rooted in the wholesome, household female chore of weaving. She is the archetypal image of what society deems a desirable woman. Likewise, Odysseus exhibits the qualities crucial to male heroism. He is strong, adventurous, independent and sexual. On his voyages, he repeatedly fails in his loyalty to his wife. Countless women seduce him during his years abroad (Calypso, the Sirens, Circe). Odysseus and Penelope together produce a conventional relationship between hero and wife that has transcended time.

The second mythology that is revealed in *Yellow Pages* is that of Persephone, the myth of a beautiful goddess who wanders too far from her companions and is carried off by Hades to the underworld. Persephone's tale reads as a warning to young women who venture to far from home, a reflection of society's conventional expectations about women. The relationship between Hades and Persephone is one of captor and victim, signifying traditional perspectives on the female's role in a marriage as being that of a possession.

Persephone is seen “shrinking away” (Hamilton 61) in her desire to be with her family and yet unable to break free from the man that controls her.

This coupling, transformed in the contemporary *Yellow Pages*, reveals another aspect of the female-male power dynamics of heroism: control. Persephone’s situation is finally settled in a compromise of the gods. She spends part of the year underground with her husband and part of the year with her family, her placement in life determined by everyone around her with her own desire being of little importance. However, “[a]fter the lord of the dark world below carrie[s] her away she [is] never again the gay young creature [ . . . ] without a thought of care or trouble [ . . . . ] She [is] often said to be ‘the maiden whose name may not be spoken’” (Hamilton 64).

As in the Persephone myth, in *Yellow Pages*, various relationships between individuals are revealed as erroneously based upon power hierarchies. Most significantly, the cultural separation between the Deaf and the speaking world is exposed as perilously disabled by an ignorant, hearing society. The act of masculine control depicted in the story of Persephone is compounded in *Yellow Pages* by the control of the hearing society over that of the Deaf. The original Hades is transformed by a portrayal of Alexander Graham Bell that reveals how his hearing-focused theories ultimately pulled Deaf individuals away from their community and into a disturbing “underworld” of oppression and voicelessness. Ultimately, the two myths combine in this contemporary setting to illuminate society’s misguided concepts of both the female and the Deaf body.

The mingling of ancient mythologies and modern representations of history in *Yellow Pages* establishes the similar effects that both forms of writing have upon society. While mythology establishes cultural norms and bodily perfections by way of gods and

mortals, historical representations create god-like heroes in a setting more familiar to its readers (be it country, time, occupation or otherwise). Atwood suggests that, by using actual historical material, the author places herself<sup>1</sup> in the middle of a larger issue.

Problems for such a narrative in Canada

are connected with the patterns of Canadian history, and the related and perhaps even resultant patterns of Canadian psyche. That is, [the author's] subject will depend on what kinds of figures are made available to [her] by [her] country's history, and [her] approach to the subject will depend on the habits of thought and feeling made available to [her] by [her] culture. What, then, have our writers made of our historical "great men?" (*Survival* 166)

Atwood's observations include the suggestion that the "great men" of Canadian history have been commonly associated with intrusions upon nature. Not unlike previous intruders, Alexander Graham Bell emerges from *Yellow Pages* as a trespasser upon the rights of the natural body, an invader of Deaf society and its culture.

Harlan Lane argues that "the troubled-persons industry creates the disabled deaf person" (159), that special education, cochlear implants and hearing aids are not used to help the Deaf but are instead used to help establish the notion of the Deaf person as being disabled. If the Deaf person is disabled, we all profit. The disabled need devices, technology and education that will help them to appear "normal." The construction of the Deaf person as disabled is one supported and promoted by various groups and individuals.

One of the most famous people to aid in (and profit from) the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> Although Atwood uses masculine-gendered language in *Survival*, I will be using the feminine.

deafness as disability was Alexander Graham Bell. While Bell's name carries with it much patriotic sentiment and technological esteem with regards to the "creation" of the telephone (not the least of which is a telecommunications company bearing his name), Bell's impact as a teacher for the Deaf might still slip by unnoticed. Revealing this lesser known aspect of Bell's life, Markotić wrestles with a notion again described by Atwood, the notion that "the 'great man'- and also possibly the "anti-hero" [ . . . ] - may well be foreign models, and outmoded ones at that, which don't grow authentically when transplanted" (172). She further suggests that the best depiction of the "great man" will expose the fact that "the foreign model doesn't work very well here" (172). Such a depiction is found in *Yellow Pages*. Markotić fells the historical great man.

The narrative immediately confronts our preconceptions of the life of Alexander Bell and, in doing so, challenges our expectations about the hero's story. The novel opens with three short quotations, the first of which, on body and language, does not initially mean much to the person expecting to read of our national hero. The second quotation, on contemporary history, hints to us that our history is about to be re-performed. The last quotation, Bell's own words on wanting to be remembered as a teacher of the deaf, warms our hearts: our national hero was not only an ingenious inventor; he was a humanitarian as well. Markotić's tale, however, has only just begun.

As Hutcheon notes, "both history and fiction are discourses, [ . . . ] both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (367). *Yellow Pages* is an unraveling of these discourses. The story begins, as all "great man" stories should begin, with the earnest beginnings of the future hero. Aleck "decides he will hear his own magnificence" (9). In truth, Bell's magnificence resounds across the pages of history so



that all Canadians can “hear” it; his story does “reverberate into the future” (9). Countless biographies chronicle his life. Within their pages we find glorifying depictions of the scientist and the individual. He is described as a “truly great man” (Costain 213) and is further described as being everything from law-abiding to compassionate to self-effacing. One of his biographers writes, “[h]e seems to have been the most modest of men as well as the possessor of blithe spirits” (Costain 215). He met every challenge and persevered and “even if some things had not come about so fortunately, Alexander Graham Bell would have found other ways around the hidden corners” (Costain 217).

These glowing depictions continue with testaments to this national hero’s work as a teacher of the Deaf. Costain comments that “[a]ll his life he seems to have yearned for the work he understood best, the teaching of the deaf and the dumb” (208). Another biographer, Stevenson, writes that “[n]o better teacher could have been found in all the world than young Mr. Graham Bell” (98). Markotić’s text, however, will reveal a different perspective on Bell’s relationship with the Deaf community.

The desire or need to construct Bell as the epitome of the traditional hero is enacted in his biographies. They are texts that deny the existence of a different, less admirable side of their subject. *The Talking Wire: The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (a children’s book) describes the Six Nations Reserve as being a kindly gift bestowed upon the Six Nations by the British to compensate for having lost all of their lands in the war of Independence. While the adult reader will most likely pick up on the glossed over and optimistic version of history provided in the latter statement, the notion that Bell was the best teacher to the Deaf remains uncontested. The choice to scrutinize only certain aspects of the tale is associated with our desire to keep the flawless image of the hero intact. Many

biographers choose to focus on the suggestion of honour that can be ascribed to Bell's teaching of the Deaf. However, in order to do this, they must disregard the foundation of his teachings. By choosing to focus on Bell's intention and, furthermore, labeling those intentions as having some sort of extrinsic quality (good, honourable, humanitarian), the biographer enables him or herself to mould those characteristics to indicate that they are representative of intrinsic qualities in Bell that support traditional notions of heroism. However, as Atwood argued, the great Canadian hero is, ultimately, fallible. Hutcheon also points out, with reference to the postmodern historiographic metafiction, the objective of texts such as *Yellow Pages* is "to fragment, to render unstable, the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character" (Hutcheon 368). Hence, Markotić destabilizes conventional thinking with regards to Bell's heroism. His role as both inventor and teacher to the Deaf is revealed in new light.

Bell's notion of deafness was founded on certain presuppositions of the body. He assumed that "[t]he reason [ . . . ] why these unfortunate people suffer from speech defects is that they have not learned the correct position of the lips, the tongue, and the other organs of speech'" (Stevenson 43). While some choose to disregard the deeper connotations of these presuppositions, Markotić uses her narrative to expose the devastating results of Bell's concepts of deafness and speech impediments. At the narrative's outset, she foregrounds the notion of the essentially perfect body. In the earlier sections of her narrative, her descriptions of Bell's youth examine those qualities of the body deemed socially essential. Aleck and his grandfather "share the same curved earlobes. They share perfect enunciation" (10) (notably, these two qualities are connected in Markotić's prose just as they are connected in life: it is necessary to hear to have perfect enunciation). It is

not long into the story that we come to understand that Bell has his own imperfections; imperfections, fortunately, that are invisible to the human eye. He experiences a deafness that he is able to hide from the rest of the world. In some cases it is the deafness of a “body that refuses to let him hear” (14) that Aleck defies by “faking speech” (14). In other cases, much more devastating, it is the refusal to hear the reverberations of what he has brought upon the Deaf.

Bell’s work, as depicted in *Yellow Pages*, continually denies the Deaf body its humanity. The Deaf become like the automatons Aleck views as a child: “If one such machine can be constructed, why not another? Why not another?” (17). He is willing to sacrifice another’s life (initially only the life of his cat) in order to further his experiments. In later experiments he will be willing to sacrifice the very human lives of the Deaf community that his theories invade. These theories lead him to oppress the Deaf community, attempting to force them to speak in a language not their own (oral language). As Markotić comments in an article on the Deaf community, “Bell never understood that restricting the use of sign language would not make a deaf person hear, any more than taking away a blind person’s cane will make her see” (131).

For Aleck, there is a hierarchy of speech: “Words don’t look on the page the way they should” (24). The spoken language is more powerful. All people should speak orally/vocally. Aleck believes in the notion that verbal speech is above all other forms of communication, that in order to be considered an equal or greater individual in society, one must master such communication. He does not see the irony of perfecting physical language by means of written communication (Visible Speech). To him, the Visible Speech invented by his forebears is apart from the visible communications of sign

language, gesturing, writing. Furthermore, he is unable to acknowledge the exclusionary aspects of his most famous invention. He does not realize that “the telephone, tho a singular idea, presupposes the existence of another” (67), the idea that, in order to communicate, there must be sound. He only sees the future of the telephone as the continuance of verbal speech over all other forms of communication. “[I]ts spoken word will alter how we hear another’s voice, will insist on the listener’s reply. Will change even how we understand the written word” (67).

Markotić notes that, while other inventors (naming Reis) looked to the day when one could also communicate visually via wires and technology, Bell failed to realize that with the telephone, one is “at the mercy of the ear. The ear and the mouth” (73). She reveals the underlying preconceptions of Bell’s legendary invention. When Dom Pedro II is able to repeat his transmission (“To be or not to be”), the narrator reveals that “Bell had learned well, from teaching deaf students, to choose as examples sentences or phrases with which his listeners were already acquainted” (72). The brilliance of the invention of the telephone is suddenly reduced to the equivalent of a bad magic trick. The heroics of Bell are consequently compromised.

“Don’t think Bell wasn’t a hero. He was a hero, all right, just not in his own country” (75). This statement raises two questions that are crucial to this narrative. How was Bell a hero? How was Bell *not* a hero? By following the representations of Bell’s relationships with women in *Yellow Pages*, one is able to ascertain Bell’s heroic and anti-heroic nature and, more specifically, that the nature of Bell is neither of these two things. Aleck’s notion of the hierarchy of language leads him to deafness, blindness. The first among the women in Aleck’s life to expose us to this deafness is his mother. Markotić’s

depictions of the communications (both failed and successful) between mother and son foreshadow the great hero's non-heroic future. Though they understand each other perfectly, there is disappointment for both parties. While Aleck is frustrated by his mother's "inadequate" ears, "[he] will never translate the words her skin hears" (27).

Aleck's intelligence is undeniable. He can reproduce Visible Speech, he can make a machine speak, he can *sign*. Though all of these things express certain intelligence with regard to communication, he does not acknowledge the latter's significance in this category (28). His own relationship with his mother is inhibited by this refusal. Frustrated by her inability to hear his verbal speech, he stops signing. "Her son's lips exclude her. Aleck expects her eyes to do the work of her now useless ears" (29). He is unable to accept the idea that her body is not useless, that the hearing aid placed in her ear is the only thing that brings use to her body "Of course she can hear him, just not his words" (29). However, Eliza Bell remains powerless from Aleck's perspective. He associates her body with weakness. When he plays a game against Melly, he thinks, "I could overpower those hands [ . . . ] They're Mother's hands" (31). As a woman, Eliza is vulnerable. As a deaf woman, she is useless.

Aleck's associations of deafness with uselessness are continually conjured by the narrative. At one point, when his brother Melly sends him instructions on how to communicate with him in the afterlife, Aleck even confuses the word dead for deaf. The confusion is no slight mistake for Aleck's perception of the deaf body as useless is only compounded when he confuses the word deaf with a word signifying the ultimate useless human form, the *dead* body.

The second woman in Bell's life that exposes his problematic notion of speech is

Marie. Marie, as her brother tells the boys at Elgin school, “never gets silent” (41). While she is at once perfect (because she is so closely associated with the verbal), Marie’s body is the epitome of the inappropriate female form. Though she has the ability to speak and hear, (abilities that we have so far learned that Aleck does not have the patience to do without), she has numerous other undesirable physical traits. “Marie is too tall and too confident [ . . . ] Marie’s limbs don’t fit her body” (42). It does not take long for Marie’s greatest flaw to become evident. “Marie’s umbrella is just a cover for a defective leg” (43). Most disturbing of all to our supposed hero, Marie does not let this limp impede her. As they trek across the countryside, it is Aleck who lags behind. It is Aleck who fears her falling while Marie herself only laughs at such an incident. He is frustrated with her because “her expression refuses to acknowledge shame” (53). The disabled body *must* feel shame.

Not only is Marie’s body defective, her language is different. She “throw[s] fabulous words at her younger brother’s waiting ears” (45), she describes chocolate as sexy (44), she “[t]hrows words away” (50). Aleck “doesn’t know how to reply” (44) but he does want to engage her in vocalization. He must figure out “how to crack Marie’s code of speaking, translate it into a language he can recognize” (51). Aleck wants to recite lists of exotic fruits into Marie’s ear [ . . . . ] He wants her to listen while he says her name, wants her to hear his voice whispering” (44). Despite his intrigue at Marie’s vocal nature, when he draws her picture, he perfects the ears and yet leaves the mouth incomplete, blurred. Despite her stories, the strange and inappropriate words that entice him, Aleck does not complete this most crucial part of her body. Despite his conviction that “Marie is his solution” (54), the truth is that the only vocalization he wants to hear is his own. Much to his dismay, Marie never listens to him: “Daisies have no conversation, yet Marie pays more

attention to them than to her brother's tutor" (46). Like Aleck, she wants to hear her own voice and pay attention to her own story (an unmentionable desire for a female character amidst a hero narrative). Aleck decides that she is an "unpleasantly talkative girl" (53). However, despite his unhappiness with her flaws, he is insistent upon their relationship, pressing her to marry him. She is "deaf and mute" to his proposal. The romance ends, Aleck frustrated because he could not get her to hear.

Though "Marie pays no attention to Aleck's heroic narrative" (46), it is their relationship that unravels the communications that Aleck so witlessly denies. Marie's body, though hopelessly (from Aleck's perspective) defective, reveals the essence of bodily communication. Though she is most capable of verbal exchanges, she refuses to listen and, when speaking, refers heavily to senses other than hearing (vision, taste, touch). While her lack of attention in her choices of words frustrates him, her unwavering attention to the body tears him apart. She is an adversary to his theories on the hierarchy of speech. She fails to hear his words and yet sees the body speaking. She notices letters in the shapes of his toes despite Aleck's refusal to acknowledge her insight: "don't stare at what doesn't matter" (47). She is vision. From the ever-changing colours of her gloves to her continual "haphazard staring" (47), Marie's "eyes know how much he doesn't know" (51). Marie knows that "[t]here are [ . . . ] many languages Aleck can't yet speak" (53).

It is amidst his relationship with Marie that Aleck is confronted with yet another powerful intervention on the side of visual and physical communication. Throughout his visit to the Six Nation Reserve, he fails to understand the meaning of this people's language. The most profound of these misunderstandings is found in his confrontation with a female dancer. She dances in an attempt to engage him in a bodily form of

communication: “She is waiting for Aleck to tune in to the flow of her blood, for him to want to listen to what her body wants to say” (78) but, like the breath song the chief composes, Aleck will not be able to understand. He can only understand one language that which he believes to be the only language.

The character that is paramount to our understanding of Alexander Graham Bell as hero is Mabel Bell. The most crucial of the women that Aleck comes into contact with, she is initially introduced as an irony. “Gardiner Greene Hubbard – a rich Bostonian businessman [ . . . ] had managed, in spite of his prominent social status, to beget a deaf child” (79). In the space of two paragraphs, the narrator moves our perception of Mabel Bell from a young and inquisitive girl to a disabled body, a project for society and, more specifically, an enterprise for her father. “How can we deny Mutes the right to *appear* normal”(80, emphasis mine)? May, though consistently described as happy, thoughtful, intelligent, beautiful, satisfied, is defined solely by her deafness and by paternal expectations signifying society’s perspective. “To hear her speak, one might guess she’d been born deaf. Gardiner Greene Hubbard rejects this handicap” (81). As Markotić notes in “Oral Methods: Pathologizing the Deaf ‘Speaker,’” countless handicapped<sup>2</sup> people experience a social imposition on their identities. For Mabel, deafness becomes “the *essence* of who [she is]” (133).

The confinement May faces because of society’s definition of her body reveals the mythological convention provided in the Persephone myth. Like Persephone, Mabel’s fate is determined by those around her rather than by her own design. Through May and her

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<sup>2</sup> I use “handicapped” here as Markotić does in “Oral Methods,” to signify “a social disadvantage rather than a



connections to the ancient legend, we are able to recognize the problems with society's attitudes towards the Deaf community. The most significant of these problems is the notion that the Deaf do not have a community. As society ignores the Deaf community within it, Mabel becomes a rewritten Persephone, trapped in the underworld of a speaking society. She is consumed by others, hidden and silenced by the distance forced between herself and her community. As May grows up in a predominantly hearing-world, she experiences a resounding sense of isolation: "Funny how the Hearing will sometimes turn a deaf ear" (81). Her life as a student in a class that refuses her language in the interest of "normalcy," exposes the worst consequences of Bell's methods for teaching the Deaf. Legislation and education based on the principles of people who have never known a Deaf person lead to classrooms led by "Untrained Females [who . . . ] teach articulation"(84) and further the isolation of the Deaf community from the rest of the world.

With the introduction of Mabel (and most profoundly with the introduction of her own voice in the narrative), the notions of Bell as hero, anti-hero and/or undefined hero are permanently displaced while notions of the disabled body are exposed and reevaluated. While the only biography on Mabel Bell stills functions heavily as a testament to Alexander Graham Bell's own magnificence, Markotić will not let her narrative undertow its true hero. Though Lilius M. Toward expounds upon Mabel's good fortune, Markotić's hero's tale will not be circumscribed for another's purpose. Toward suggests that, "like her mother, Mabel was fortunate in her marriage. Alexander Graham Bell was not only a distinguished inventor, but had gained a reputation for his work with the deaf. He

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physical or mental lack" (139).

understood, as few people do, the problems facing deaf people” (xvii). Markotić implies that Mabel’s marriage may not have been relationship that she valued as good fortune.

Up until this point in history and narrative, Mabel Bell has been a traditional female counterpart to the male hero (Toward’s title, *Mabel Bell: Alexander’s Silent Partner* is most indicative of this). She has also been depicted as the traditional disabled character. As Markotić notes in “Oral Methods,” “[t]he disabled character [ . . . ] can be read only through an identifying process wherein readers [ . . . ] re-establish their own bodies as the norm, at the same time as they judge and evaluate disability as, metaphorically, a collective flaw or shortcoming” (133). However, in *Yellow Pages*, the author is determined to revisit Mabel’s hitherto unchallenged construction. She also chooses to confront its most successful backer: its mythological beginnings. The mentions of Persephone and Odysseus are crucial to our understanding of Markotić’s representations of Mabel and Aleck.

As earlier stated, the legend of Odysseus has succeeded in transcending time. The story of his wife, Penelope, however, has only succeeded in being a timeless sub-plot. It is an addition to his story that functions solely to emphasize Odysseus’ own magnificence. Penelope’s tale, that of a woman virtually abandoned by her husband but unwavering in her fidelity, flickers throughout such works as Homer’s *Odyssey*. Though she can be seen as intelligent (indicated by her thoughtful ruse to ward off suitors), Penelope’s intelligence is centralized, used only as an enhancement of her commitment to her relationship with her husband and limited to that of domesticity. Mabel’s own narrative reflects a revision of this earlier archetypal woman. Like Penelope in mythology, Mabel has hitherto been understood as a subordinate figure in history. As Alexander’s “silent partner,” her value has been seen only as a function of Bell’s own magnificence. She has been relegated (even

occasionally in her own biography) to the insignificance of a footnote to her husband's story. The dutiful Deaf wife, she is a symbolic emphasis of Bell's greatness as both a teacher of the Deaf and, more generally, as a national hero. However, Markotić reveals another side to both Mabel's narrative and the mythological tale of Penelope that fosters it.

Penelope's most significant trait is her faithfulness to Odysseus. In her husband's nineteen years away from her, Penelope never fails to believe that he is alive. Likewise, in history, Mabel has been recognized solely as Bell's steady companion, accompanying him to functions, supporting his every endeavour. However, Mabel's story, according to Markotić, is not the testament of fidelity that her predecessor's is. Penelope's faithfulness to her husband is considered a traditional female strength. It is tested by the numerous attractive suitors that implore her to marry them and yet it never waivers. Mabel's loyalty, however, is presumed a function of her deafness. Up until *Yellow Pages*, Mabel's faithfulness has been supposed upon the notion that her deafness may have inhibited her from marrying at all. Thomas writes that

with her handicap [Mabel] might never have an opportunity to marry. In spite of her intelligence and charm, few young men would wish to be saddled with a deaf wife. [Her grandfather] thought Mabel extremely fortunate to have become engaged to a man who had such an understanding of the problems of the deaf. Bell considered her deafness not so much a handicap but an added challenge to their love. (30)

With the suggestion that Mabel's marriage is the result of luck, one should expect that her gratitude would inspire her to unfailing loyalty. However, Markotić allows for the suggestion that Mabel's deafness did not render her unattractive to men, nor did it

desexualize her relationships with them. A new suitor, Thomas Watson, is borne out of Bell's partnership in telecommunication work, offering new opportunities to both Mabel's character and the reader's understanding of her. Though Frye argues that "[o]ne could hardly find a more elementary critical principle than the fact that the events of a literary fiction are not real but hypothetical events" (*Anatomy* 84), it is impossible to deny the fact that the epigrams suggested by such hypothetical events awaken the reader to a new perspective on the Deaf body's reality. The sexualized Deaf and female body emerges from *Yellow Pages* with a silent defiance that awakens the reader.

Suitors surround both Mabel, and her mythological counterpart, Penelope. Most importantly, they are left alone with them. For Penelope, this is a perilous situation. She must defend her honour and her husband by warding off these suitors single-handedly. Her son Telemachus does not present a threat to them and so she must use her wits to save her character. The circumstances are daunting, the female body endangered. As Hamilton states, there are "only two and one of them a woman against a great company" (293). Mabel finds herself in much the same situation. Left alone in Aleck's apartment with two men who both desire her, she discovers herself empowered rather than threatened. The female body, twice diminished because of her sex and her Deafness, is unexpectedly in control of the situation. The power dynamics of the conventional husband-wife relationship have thus far remained intact because of Mabel's literal inability to voice her reality. With the introduction of her own narrative, an inversion of that hierarchy is revealed.

From Mabel's viewpoint, we are able to see her powers of observation, her astute conceptions, and her doubly romanced body as both men enter into a relationship with her.

The chapter entitled "Platypus Love" finds Mabel seducing and being seduced by both men and yet dissatisfied with the notion that, inevitably, the triangle must be diminished in favour of a solitary couple. Reminiscent of the mythology surrounding the platypus<sup>3</sup>, Mabel's decision is a difficult one. Her relationship with Thomas, not Aleck, is based on understanding. Her relationship with Aleck is based on one man's desire to conquer his project (teaching Deaf individuals): "One of you privileges the mind. The other privileges the body. Why name you? I am the eager lover of both" (124).

While representations of the Deaf body have commonly limited its role to that of a desexualized anomaly, *Yellow Pages* refuses this stereotype. It is Mabel's relationship with Thomas that reveals the sexualized Deaf body.

My lips belong to Alex who stares at them more than my breasts or ankles or wrists. Thomas can have the rest. He demands nothing short of excess. Thomas rubs the tiny triangle of skin just above my earlobe till my kneecaps quiver. He grazes my neck with the tip of his tongue. He strokes my skin so lightly I feel a ripple all the way up the scalp. (121)

For Thomas, her ear is a part of a sexually feeling body, not a site of malfunction. Thomas's language is much like Mabel's, rooted in the body: they "rub [their] arms together in conversations that endure for hours" (125).

Aleck's failing, in Mabel's perception, is his focus on the mind, rather than the body: as she comments,

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<sup>3</sup> The story of the platypus tells of a beautiful woman who elopes with the man she loves rather than marrying the man she is promised to. As punishment, she is turned into a duck, and he is changed into a water-rat. Their children have aspects of both bodies as a result of their union.

People use sound as a barrier against connection. They say a person's name and then don't have to touch or be touched, though they long for both. That's why you want me to speak. Sound, when it escapes the body, leaves the idea of body behind. And I have left too much of myself to settle for a disembodied caress. (124)

Her dissatisfaction with Aleck is linked to his mythological predecessor.

Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens plays itself out in *Yellow Pages*, revealing Aleck's seduction with Mabel's speech as foolish temptation. As Mabel comes to embody two sides of a mythological tale (the dutiful wife and the seductress), a coupling that defies conventional, unilateral depictions of women as either one or the other, she recounts Odysseus's tale. It is the legend of "a boy on a quest to hear his own name sung and not die in the process" (120), a quest that is not unlike Aleck's. Odysseus desires to hear the Sirens sing as Aleck desires to hear Mabel speak, each associating beautiful music with their female counterparts' voices, the voices that chant their own names. Furthermore, the song of the Sirens "would make a man forget all else, and [ . . . ] would steal his life away" (Hamilton 309). Likewise, hearing Mabel's voice and speech suggests to Aleck the ultimate culmination of knowledge about deafness and vocalization. The desire to hear Mabel's voice (and thus hear his own knowledge reverberating back to him), consumes him. Like the Sirens become to Odysseus, Mabel becomes "all voice and no body" (120) to Aleck. It is through this association between Bell and Odysseus that one sees his ultimate failure: the inability to hear the Deaf. "Alex will steal the voice of an entire community: a language spoken with arms outstretched [ . . . ] He will steal their language. Only a great thief could perform such a prank. Only a hero" (125). Through Mabel, the revelation about Bell is complete. Our national hero has other qualities, qualities that we

must know.

Hence, Markotić's *Yellow Pages* illustrates another side to Alexander Graham Bell, a side that dispels the legend of the Canadian great man. In her reconsideration of his hero's narrative, she turns to other mythologies to counter his previous construction in Canadian storytelling. Her incorporation of previously unheard voices in Bell's tale reveals the necessity of turning away from conventional historical and mythological accounts to reveal new facets of character and of being. Penelope's honour is revealed as restriction; Persephone's entrapment is exposed in a realistic world. With the invocation of their stories, Mabel Bell's voice is finally heard and we encounter the possibilities of new narratives. The previously silenced voice of the female is heard and with it, a new narrative for the Deaf community emerges. Instead of continuing the reverberations of the story of Canada's great man, the voice of Mabel Bell awakens a new mythology.

## Conclusion

### Emerging from Convention: Myth Revised in Contemporary Canadian Literature

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye claims to map literature. He argues for a scientific approach to poetry and prose that delineates style, technique and tradition in categorical and definitive classifications. He plots the course of literary criticism and clearly denotes the tendency in literature to refer back to previous stories, particularly mythologies. However, though his theory appears at its outset to be structured and decisive, Frye leaves an ambiguous space between what he determines to be literature's autonomous universe and its social effect. While he argues for the purely aesthetic purpose of art, he also suggests that literature can portray society's infinite possibilities. While in *Anatomy* he ties such social possibilities to a concept of art's hypothetical relationship to reality, in his later works (*Words With Power*, *The Critical Path*) he proposes a far stronger connection between the two. He asserts that literature is not only borne out of society (as myth is originally created from a social context) but that it arguably affects the world around it. This stance significantly modifies his earlier claim that there is an autonomous literary universe.

The discussion of the social relevance and effect in literature is not so ambiguous in the later work of Frye's student, Margaret Atwood. In *Survival*, she successfully maps Canadian literature, proposing that, in order to understand oneself as a Canadian, one must understand our country's literature. Her discussion of that literature takes up the practices of Frye and applies them to this specific region of narrative. She carefully delineates common themes and recurring characters, suggesting that Canadian literature's prevalent concern is that of surviving and knowing the land as a means of knowing oneself. She also



uses this text as a means of pointing out issues that Canadian writers have not yet adequately addressed. She notes the lack of variety in female characters and the problems with the Canadian literary hero, opening a space for discussion and transition in the literature to come.

The myths and archetypes described by Frye and the styles and trends depicted by Atwood form the basis of our understanding of the literary tradition in the world and in Canada respectively. However, they are products of their time. Just as these critics were speaking to innovation in their specific moments in literary creation and criticism, so too does contemporary Canadian literature today speak to its time's need for change. Just as Frye expounded upon the recurrent themes and traditions of mythology in literature, Canadian writers continue to call upon mythology in their narratives. Stories that once established notions of the body in society are now being exposed for what they are, a means of perpetuating conventional limitations on perspectives on the human body, a means of problematizing bodies that do not adhere to the norm, a means of creating that norm. New stories are created that question the older mythologies. However, the use of mythology in contemporary literature stretches beyond challenges to convention. While it provides a writer with the potential of a connection to earlier stories, it also offers the possibility of a narrative about change. Writers willfully use mythology's tendency for transition to emphasize both society's own ever-changing reality and its future possibilities.

The first text that I discussed, *No Fixed Address*, eradicated problematic notions of the female body perpetuated in the Arachne myth. The concept that the domestic space was decidedly female was questioned as Aritha van Herk's protagonist ventured away from home and city and explored the little known regions of the Canadian landscape. While

gendered notions of space were confronted, so too were conventional expectations of the female body. Arachne Manteia's sexualized and unrestricted body, her non-traditional concepts of self fused with her natural understanding of the land, suggest new perspectives on the female self.

In *The Widows*, we saw the problems of the female body compounded with the addition of age. The notions of the sexless and angry aging female so perpetuated in representations of the Furies are altered by Suzette Mayr to present a contemporary perspective on both the female body and its elderly form. The characters within the text take on the characteristics expected of them by a society whose concepts are borne out of the archetypal imagery that myths such as that of the Furies present. As the three protagonists assume their conventional role in the world, they are awakened, along with the reader, to the necessity of life (not death) in old age.

In *Yellow Pages*, the female body is again problematized by the addition of deafness. Calling upon mythical figures such as Penelope, Persephone and the Sirens, Nicole Markotić enables the reader to envision a different experience for the wife of a national hero. Liberating Mabel Bell from the stagnant role of Alexander Graham Bell's "silent partner," *Yellow Pages* explores the possibilities for a conventional Canadian hero narrative from a different and crucial perspective. The faithful wife myth found in the story of Penelope and Odysseus is altered to expose the sexual and romantic possibilities for a woman considered disabled and, therefore, undesirable. The myth of Persephone is replayed to illustrate the sense of two worlds, two cultures, as Mabel Bell aspires to live in a world where her own language and experience as a Deaf person is valid. The underworld here is transformed to the speaking/ hearing world as Mabel's husband (Alexander Graham

Bell likened to Hades in this mythological transformation) keeps trying to pull her toward a world that is not her own.

All of these texts suggest the necessity of approaching the conventions perpetuated in previous literature with a critical eye. Exploring the possibilities of both early narratives of transformation and current changing perspectives on the problem body, writers such as Suzette Mayr, Aritha van Herk and Nicole Markotić enable new female bodies to emerge in contemporary Canadian literature. The myths that once bound the body to conventionalized gender expectations now reveal new ways of reading old stories and new possibilities for social change. The females in Canadian literature are released from traditional stories to become women whose potentials are yet to be discovered. Once unquestioned conventions of mortals and female deities are challenged and new goddesses emerge: ordinary women, brimming with the power to inspire, mapping a new female world.

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