THE POLITICS OF GYNOTOPIA: IMPERIAL RAPE AND FEMALE RETREAT

by

RHONDA L. KELLEY

(Under the Direction of James H. S. McGregor)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the phenomena of all-female communities from ancient Roman to twentieth century English and French Literatures. I am especially interested in the seemingly inevitable disentigration of the community as a result of male interference. I combine an eco-feminist theoretical approach, yielding an understanding of the all-female community as an archetypal representation of the mother-daughter relationship, and a Marxist feminist approach, focusing on male intrusion as a metaphor for imperialism.

INDEX WORDS: Rape, Imperialism, Utopia, Gynotopia, Radical Lesbian Feminism, Monique Wittig, Ovid, Margaret Cavendish, Christine de Pizan
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RHONDA L. KELLEY

B.A., The University of Georgia, 1991
M.A., The University of Georgia, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2005
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by

RHONDA L. KELLEY

Major Professor: James McGregor

Committee: Katharina Wilson
            Ronald Bogue
            Sarah Spence
            Richard Lafleur

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2005
DEDICATION

For my mother, Sandra, who taught me how to be a mom.

and

For my daughter, Tori, whom I love with all my heart and soul.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful acknowledgement to Dr. McGregor for his guidance, encouragement, and patience, and for being an exemplary scholar and teacher; to Drs. Wilson and LaFleur for being role models both as scholars and as teachers; to Dr. Spence for her support throughout my graduate studies; and to Dr. Bogue for his thoughtful assistance. I would also like to thank Nell Burger for her friendship, as well as her willingness to help every student in the department. Finally, thank you, Kris and Steve for listening to my ranting and raving and taking me to the movies when it all got to be too much.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About the Texts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gynotopia: Origins, Theories, and Problems</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gynotopia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Radical Lesbian Feminism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Dissolution of Community</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Les guérillères: The Cult of the O</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Radical Feminist Epic</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Problematic Gynotopia</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Failure of Theory</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How Women Achieve Selfhood in Ovid’s <em>Metamorphoses</em></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tale of Callisto (2.401-530)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tale of Proserpina (5.391-571)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tale of Iphis (9.666-797)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tale of Actaeon (3.155-255)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tale of Medea (7.1-424)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Christine de Pizan and the Castrating Pen</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

This book describes fictional utopian communities of women, their raison d’être (worship, politics, pleasure, protection), and the men who enter these female spaces. Its focus is upon fictional communities from ancient, medieval, and modern literature, as well as the similarities that transcend time and language and genre to reveal an archetypal community of women, a gynotopia. Founded by women as alternatives to and refuges from patriarchal institutions and exclusively occupied by women, the community serves as a mother figure for the individual women in the community. In the wake of male intrusion, the female community may lose a member or dissolve altogether.

The work at hand is by no means intended to be a thorough treatment of modern fictional gynotopias; for a more general survey, I refer the reader to Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers, an excellent and comprehensive collection of essays on feminist utopias compiled and edited by Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch. Rather, I intend to focus on the mytheme of separation, that moment when the individual woman leaves her group, her archetypal mother, and forms her own identity. I have chosen to examine the works of three women, the medieval Franco-Italian Christine de Pizan, the Restoration dramatist Margaret Cavendish, and the post-modern radical lesbian feminist Monique Wittig; I will also analyze the treatment of gynotopia, in the works of the Roman poet Ovid, the epitome of a writer who used myth to resist oppression.

In Chapter 1, I will offer a condensed version of the theories of gynotopia which are central to my critiques of the four texts addressed in this book. Chapter 2 examines
Les guérillères, Wittig’s radical lesbian epic, and the new problems that lesbian separatism creates. In Chapter 3, I return to the gynotopia’s mythic roots by studying the evolution of the archetype in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Chapter 4 examines the *City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan, a 14th century Franco-Italian writer who succeeds Ovid in this study, because she regards him as an arch-misogynist. I think that the desire of writers like Wittig and Christine to forget and rewrite myth is based on the erroneous assumption that myths of separation are essentially misogynist. There is value in the myths of patriarchy, lessons to be learned, and when feminists choose to ignore them because they are painful they lose something more important than the temporary relief that avoidance brings. Finally, in Chapter 5, Cavendish’s comedy *The Convent of Pleasure* will be examined as both a separatist feminist manifesto and a text that recognizes the need for an ultimate reversion to a pre-separatist state as she allows her heroine to individuate and the community to dissolve.

*About the Texts*

I use Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as the foundational text for studying gynotopian myths for several reasons. Though for many centuries the *Metamorphoses* had been considered to be merely a loosely framed collection of myths, it is now deservedly gaining recognition as an epic poem unified by the theme of transformation. The *Metamorphoses* is especially relevant to this study because of its subversive use of myth to critique Caesar Augustus’ growing imperial ambitions and because Ovid demonstrates (both in the *Metamorphoses* and the *Heroides*) a feminist disposition unusual for his time. His great epic depicts the transformation of the feminine from a universal concept (in the form of Nature) to a fragmentary, violated personality (in the forms of nymphs, women,
and goddesses), which, through stories of survival and transformation, he ultimately reconstructs into a transcendent goddess. It should be noted, however, that this reconstruction does not take place on the level of the narrative. Rather, it is through the act of reading the poem in its entirety that Ovid’s audience can observe the emergence of a composite feminine self.\(^1\) It could well be argued that Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is ultimately about the triumph of individual liberty over oppressive forces, and for that reason Ovid is the perfect source for a study about women resisting and retreating from patriarchal tyranny. The *Metamorphoses* is also useful for establishing the all-female community as a mother figure and for the study of mother-child archetypal relationships.

Christine, Cavendish, and Wittig are ideal sources for this comparative study of gynotopian myth because they reveal an interest in gynotopia that transcends time and culture, because they are representative of the feminist writers of their times, and because they are unique women who lived, to the best of their abilities, not only as feminists but as separatists. Pizan owned her own printing shop which she populated exclusively with women; Cavendish, regarded by her cotemporaries as “mad” due to her insistence on dressing in men’s clothing, was well known for her utopian theories and reformist politics; and Wittig is widely acclaimed for her contributions to separatist feminist theory. *Les guérillères* and *City of Ladies* are superlative examples of gynotopia, both in form and substance. The former challenges our concepts of genre and language, and the latter stands as a challenge to misogynists and as a defense of all women, everywhere, past, present, and future. Cavendish’s *Convent* is an exceptional gynotopian text because it not only follows the Ovidian template, but also reframes the dissolution of the

\(^{1}\) I examine this process at length in “The Politics of Rape: Sexual And Violent Imagery In The *Metamorphoses* Of Ovid” (Rhonda Kelley, thesis, University of Georgia, 1997).
community as an emotionally gratifying event. In contrast to the raped women in
*Metamorphoses*, *Convent’s* Lady Happy leaves the gynotopia, which she established,
because she discovers love and joy outside its walls.

Rape, as a theme, is present in all four texts. Though Cavendish’s women never
suffer rape, they do face the threat of violence, both physical and sexual, from the
townsmen who resent their retreat to communal life. In the *Metamorphoses*, the act of
rape (or, in some cases, attempted rape) either precedes or precipitates the
transformations of many female characters, including, among others, Callisto (whose tale
is explored at length in Chapter 3), Daphne, Caenis, Arethusa, Io, Europa, and Philomela.
Wittig’s *guérillères* cite rape as one of the reasons for their retreat from patriarchy and
use past sexual violence against women as an excuse for raping the men whom they have
taken prisoner during the war. For Christine rape is not merely an act of violence; rather
it becomes a means of revealing the strength of character of many women, deepening
their commitment to virginity.
Chapter 1

Gynotopia: Origins, Theories, and Problems

Gynotopia

A Feminist utopian novel is one which a. contrasts the present with an envisioned idealized society ..., b. offers a comprehensive critique of present values/conditions, c. sees men or male institutions as a major cause of present social ills, and d. presents women not only as at least equals of men but also as the sole arbiters of their reproductive functions.2

Ovid’s version of the Callisto myth is the foundational myth in our search for the metamythical female community or gynotopia.3 Here is a community founded and ruled over by a virginal, female deity; it is a community only temporarily contaminated by rape. The rapist is Jupiter, the archetypal sky-god and patriarch. The importance of the Callisto myth and its impact upon literary history have been recognized by Kathleen Wall in her book The Myth of Callisto from Ovid to Atwood, which chronicles the repetition of

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2 Sally Miller Gearhart, “Future Visions: Today’s Politics: Feminist Utopias in Review,” Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers, ed. Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch (New York: Schocken Books, 1984) 296; Gearhart lists eleven novels which she thinks fit the definition: Monique Wittig’s Les Guérillères, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s The Ruins of Isis and The Shattered Chain, Dorothy Bryant’s The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You, Suzy McKee Charnas’ Motherlines, Gearhart’s own The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel, Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time, Joanna Russ’ The Female Man, Rochelle Singer’s The Demeter Flower, and Donna Young’s Retreat: As It Was. I have chosen to write about Wittig’s Les Guérillères as the quintessential feminist utopian novel both for the novel’s status as “literature” and for its author’s status as “theorist.”

3 I will use the term “metamyth” to mean what might typically be called an “archetypal myth.” I will use “archetype” to mean the actor in a single myth or in the metamyth; the rapist, mother, community, and individual are all archetypes.
the myth up to the 20th century. However, Wall’s work focuses exclusively on the rape and does not acknowledge the community from which the victim is torn as a major mytheme of the Callisto myth. Rape is common enough in the *Metamorphoses*; the rapes of Daphne and Io precede that of Callisto in the poem, and either nymph could certainly serve in Callisto’s stead as Wall’s archetypal rape victim. What is unique about Callisto is her membership in Diana’s hunting party, an exclusively female group of virgins who have chosen to live outside the world of their fathers and brothers and to reject marriage and motherhood as their social destiny. Yet, Wall essentially ignores this early gynotopia, an unique and important element to the Callisto myth.

Ovid’s version of the gynotopia reveals four mythemes (the “gross constituent units” of a myth): “the need for women to gather in groups away from men”; “the locus of the gathering”; “the intrusion of a male figure”; and “the separation of the individual female from the group.” Loosely following Lévi-Strauss, I will use the term “mytheme” to refer to the structural or synchronic elements which are common to all complete versions of the myth and the term “theme” to refer to the diachronic elements of the myth, which may vary in narrative detail either within each myth or among many myths. For instance, in Ovid’s “Callisto,” the locus mytheme is expressed in the narrative in the themes of the forest wilderness and the solitary pool; there are at least two instances of the mytheme of intrusion: the rape and the birth of a child; and there are three instances of separation: Callisto leaving the group of her own accord, Callisto’s banishment, and Callisto’s transformation (a symbolic departure from the tribe of humanity). Lévi-Strauss

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said that the meaning of the myth is revealed in the relationship between the mythemes. There is a cause and effect relationship between the mythemes; the need for protection from men affects the women’s choice of a location, and the intrusion of the male is the cause for the woman’s separation from her community.

As in so many myths and tales about women separating from the world, Diana and her women reject not only marriage but also patriarchy (the male-dominated machinery of state and society, borderless and culturally non-specific), choosing to live in the uncultivated wilderness, Nature in her intact (or virginal) form, but the community of women cannot long exist without attracting the attention of a man (or, in this case, a god). Though Jupiter does not directly express a desire to disrupt the community, his rape of Callisto certainly does result in disruption. By contrast, as we will see in Chapter 5, Cavendish’s group of roguish men, angered by the retreating women’s unnatural rejection of marriage, deliberately scheme to destroy the Convent of Pleasure.

The most common theme within the mytheme of need among all of the works explored in this study is protection: protection from rape, protection from forced marriage, and protection from the oppression of patriarchal institutions. Of course, what each of these threats has in common is men. Women who seek gynotopia seek to separate themselves from all involvement with men, in order to protect themselves (and each other) from an oppressive patriarchy.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Diana, the Virgin Huntress, recognizes quite early the threat that men pose to her. Seldom is Diana alone; usually she is in the company of several young women who also wish to be out from under the *manus* (literally, “hand”) of

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6 See, for instance, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.330 (Diana in hiding with other gods), 3.155ff (Diana bathing in the company of her nymphs), and 4.304 (Diana’s train of huntress’ mentioned).
fathers, brothers, and husbands. It could be argued that Diana “reads” Ovid and learns from the tales of Io and Daphne that women are vulnerable to rape, especially near water. The goddess’ expulsion of Callisto and her summary execution of Actaeon could be read as attempts to protect herself from any such assault. Twice in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Diana has to confront the masculine threat to her community. Each time she acts swiftly and decisively. With the rape of Callisto, Diana suffers the sexual violation of her troop and quickly purges the community of the contaminated member. Actaeon’s crime, voyeurism, is treated as a sort of “visual rape,” or as a prelude to rape, and Diana assumes that the interloper cannot be trusted. In these two episodes, Ovid establishes, and Diana realizes, the need for the exclusivity of the community: women who would be whole must remain ever vigilant in the struggle to maintain the community against masculine intrusions. The gynotopian finds refuge from heterosexual servitude in sisterhood. Diana’s expulsion of Callisto and execution of Actaeon are necessary not only for her own protection but for the preservation of the community, for the safety of the sisterhood.

The all-female community in Ovid thus provides for its members a form of protection that they could not find in patriarchy because the matriarchal gynotopia protects women from the institution of marriage and all that it entails – sexual servitude, maternal slavery, and rape. Similarly, in the 14th century Christine de Pizan notes that it is necessary for women to protect themselves from the assaults of men because they can no longer rely upon men to protect them.

Whether by accident or design a man inevitably violates the female space, and usually finds one of the women alone and therefore vulnerable. The virgin who rejects
men and is separated from her community is simultaneously an object of both fear and desire for the patriarch. According to Simone de Beauvoir,

Now feared by the male, now desired or even demanded, the virgin would seem to represent the most consummate form of the feminine mystery; she is therefore the most disturbing and at the same time the most fascinating aspect.7

In other words, it is man’s combined fear of and fascination for the virgin that lead to her rape. From the perspective of the patriarch, the virgin’s withdrawal from the patriarchal psycho-sexual economy is the very act that invites sexual violation.

**Radical Lesbian Feminism**

The gynotopia of the 20th century is grounded mainly in radical feminist theory and politics. Beginning with the notion that the patriarchy is essentially oppressive, especially to women, and that women can have no place of power or even equity under patriarchy, radical feminism proposes that the entire system must be overthrown. Radical lesbian feminism argues that since the patriarchs stand to benefit more from women’s oppression than from their liberation, no man can be trusted to help in the overthrow of the patriarchy.

There are two paths which a radical feminist social order can take. The first is a complete separation of women from men, a sort of modern-day Amazonia. Lesbian-feminist Separatism assumes that the oppression of women will not end as long as women work, socialize, copulate, and live with men. The second path involves an attitude of self-adjustment that will allow for a community of women that floats about in patriarchal society but which is nevertheless separate.

Working from the assumption that women are a socially constructed class upon whose productive and reproductive labor the patriarchy is dependent for its power, lesbian feminists like Charlotte Bunch assert that the liberation of women can only be achieved by the dissolution of the patriarchal capitalist system. In “Lesbians in Revolt” she defines lesbianism in terms of political and social revolution:

To be a Lesbian is to love oneself, woman, in a culture that denigrates and despises women. The Lesbian rejects male sexual/political domination; she defies his world, his social organization, his ideology, and his definition of her as an inferior. Lesbianism puts women first while the society declares the male supreme. Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system.\(^8\)

Bunch’s revolution is not only sexual/political but also social/communal. Like so many of her radical lesbian sisters, Bunch calls for a Marxist solution to the problem of female oppression. Further, Bunch’s rhetoric reflects that of the gynotopian as outlined by Gearhart.

Marilyn Frye proposes something like a return to the pre-patriarchal definition of virgin which she calls “positive Virginity.”\(^9\) According to Frye, Virgins are women who “don’t avail themselves of male protection” and who “help to create and to defend (and they enjoy) women-only spaces.”\(^10\) Frye’s “Virgin” may have sex with men or women but is never bound legally or otherwise to any person. Thus in her view, though men in

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\(^10\) Frye 495.
general should not be excluded from female society, patriarchal marriage should be avoided.

Marxist and radical lesbian feminisms define woman as a social class. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserted,

One is not born, but becomes a woman. NO biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

Following de Beauvoir’s lead, Monique Wittig calls the very idea of “woman” a myth.11 Wittig’s definition of lesbian in her essay “One Is Not Born a Woman” is considered almost doctrinal. She writes that “a lesbian society” rejects the idea of “woman” both as a natural fact and as a social fact.12 A lesbian, she asserts, “is not a woman either economically or politically or ideologically.”13 Radical lesbian feminists cite de Beauvoir’s statement regarding heterosexual sex in support of their argument that heterosexual relationships are essentially oppressive:

Penetration … always constitutes a kind of violation. Formerly it was by a real or simulated rape that a woman was torn from her childhood universe and hurled into wifehood; it remains an act of violence that changes a girl into a woman.14

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12 Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman” 178.
13 Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman” 181.
However, de Beauvoir is a dubious patron for lesbian feminists since she regarded the youthful lesbian affair as “an apprenticeship” or a phase that would eventually end and motherhood as the ultimate “emancipation” for women.15

Mary Daly, the nun-cum-feminist of the 1970’s, was among the first to discuss the female community as a threat to patriarchy. First she posits female-society or sisterhood as wholly distinct from male societies. Sisterhood, she writes, is characterized by freedom and is “Self-affirming,” by which she means that each sister is regarded as an individual. On the other hand, brotherhoods serve “to perpetuate the State of War” and rob individuals of their sense of self.16 In her discussion of the medieval European witch-craze, which she regards as a gynocidal event,17 Daly asserts that the women who were singled out for persecution were mainly widows and spinsters or “women living outside the control of the patriarchal family, women who presented an option – an option of ‘eccentricity and of ‘indigestibility.’”18 Daly sees the medieval coven as an alternative communal space for women and views its demise to be the result of fear on the part of the patriarchy, fear that there were women outside of its control, women who existed beyond the system. Toward the end of her reconstruction of the history of women-centered spaces, Daly proposes the creation or emergence of a new space, “a woman identified environment,” what she calls “Gyn/Ecology.”19 As a student of history and literature, Daly has recognized the need for gynotopia, as well as the threat to any gynotopia’s existence (man’s fear of woman). However, Daly does not offer a fully-developed

15 De Beauvoir 382, 465.
17 Daly of course is not alone in this assertion, but the labeling of the witch-hunts as gynocide ignores the countless numbers of men (and cats) who were also tortured and burned at the stake.
18 Daly 186.
19 Daly 315
gynotopia; she only acknowledges the need for it. The task of building the gynotopia was
taken on by other radical feminists.

Gynotopias differ from utopias, in the expectations that their denizens hold for
them. Baruch notes what distinguishes gynotopia from utopia:

For men, utopia has often involved imposing control over
the individual who is seen as a threat to the group. For
women, on the contrary, utopia is a way of arriving at
freedom. Perhaps because they have been allowed so little
individuation, women do not see the individual as a threat
to society. … For men, utopia is the ideal state; for most
women, utopia is statelessness and the overcoming of
hierarchy and the traditional splits between human beings
and nature, subject and other, man and woman, parent and
child.20

One can conclude from Baruch’s comments that the gynotopia promotes individuation
and that utopias do not. As we will see in the chapters which follow, the impenetrable
gynotopias of Christine de Pizan and Monique Wittig actually inhibit growth, whereas
the porous gynotopias of Ovid and Cavendish encourage individuation.

As Baruch suggests, for men, utopia is an idealized State/Government. The male-
centered utopian fantasy focuses on the transformation of the state/system into a new
form/order that will afford luxury equally to all of its members. Baruch contrasts utopia
with gynotopia (not her term) by pointing to gynotopia’s “statelessness.” Gynotopia is
meant for “the overcoming of hierarchy and the traditional splits between human beings
and nature, subject and other, man and woman, parent and child.”21 One is tempted to
regard such definitions reductively, that is what has become the typical differentiation

20 Elaine Hoffman Baruch, “The Quest and the Questions,” Women in Search of Utopia:
Mavericks and Mythmakers, ed. Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch (Schocken Books: New York,
1984) xii.
21 Baruch, “The Quest and the Questions,” xii.
between men as power-centered and women as family/relationship-centered. Women seeking utopia want to be separate from the city, society, and men. They tend to gather in natural spaces, spaces which are boundless, which have no center. While that is true, it does not necessarily follow that women reject hierarchy because of a natural disinclination to it. Perhaps they reject hierarchy because the nature of what they flee is hierarchical. Similarly, they may gather in natural, unbounded spaces, not because they are naturally drawn to such spaces but because that is where they can escape from men. An examination of several modern and pre-modern fictional gynotopias will address these and other issues in the following chapters.

Gynotopian theory must next address the psychology of separation, of the female-centered space. With very little debate, the paradigm of community as mother and member as daughter is established.\(^{22}\) For this connection theorists look back to myth, specifically the myths of Diana and Ceres. Tucker Farley, for instance, affirms that the “connection of woman and earth as daughter-mother lovers is a powerful lesbian mythos” and asserts that rape serves as “the context for female solidarity.”\(^{23}\) In other words, the nature of the relationship between woman and her community is that of mother-daughter, a relationship which Farley sees as essentially sexual. Wittig would probably agree, as her guérillères are fully engaged with one another both as mothers-daughters and as lovers.

\(^{22}\) David Bleich regards all utopias as a reenactment of the mother-child relationship and as a “fantasy of infantile symbiosis”; in Bleich’s theory of utopia, the state being left is representative of the father and the utopia is the mother to whom the injured/hurt/sad child runs (\textit{Utopia: Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy}, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984) 15, 17).

The failure of all utopians (the inevitable fall of the utopia\textsuperscript{24} and its failure to be truly separate) is unavoidably repeated by gynotopians. Gearhart acknowledges the belief in the failure to achieve separation without admitting to its reality:

The main criticisms of separatist societies are that they are never really separate, that there’s always some connection to the male system and that women trying to be separatist are simply fooling themselves. Complete separatism is impossible at present, particularly if women want to continue to reproduce themselves. The utopian authors, however, have answers to the vital question of how reproduction can take place.\textsuperscript{25}

The problem with separatists’ defense of gynotopia lies not in their response to the obvious problem of reproduction but in their ignorance of the other ways in which gynotopians fail to separate. Gynotopians usually fail due to their own desires to be with men, as well as their living a reactive existence, reactive in that their reason for being is patriarchy. Baruch’s statement that “all-women utopias are a new phenomenon in fiction”\textsuperscript{26} points to one of the greatest weaknesses of feminist theory in general, namely a willing ignorance of the past. Baruch cannot be wholly unaware of gynotopian myths (e.g. Amazons, Diana’s hunting party, etc.), though she may have been understandably ignorant of the rather obscure Cavendish and perhaps even Pizan.

A third problem that all utopias face is that of respecting individuality. Individuation is difficult if not impossible to achieve for the utopian who sees himself (or more to the point herself) as a child in need of her mother’s protection. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, gynotopias often prevent their denizens from

\textsuperscript{24} In the words of Bleich, “the whole utopian complex of ideas paradoxically implies its own dissolution” (25).
\textsuperscript{25} Gearhart 301.
\textsuperscript{26} Baruch, “The Quest and the Questions,” xxv.
achieving full selfhood. This failure to individuate is particularly problematic for feminists, who by and large regard the “discovery” of the female self or the woman as subject and not object as one of the primary goals of feminism. Bleich associates the desire to abandon selfhood, to revert to symbiosis with the mother, as an “impulse … to restore the sense of uninterrupted bliss that comes of their original unity in the ‘State of Nature.’”

This leads to another common trait of utopias (and especially gynotopias), namely the desire to return to Nature, to a natural state; thus utopias are frequently located outside the limits of the city, in a more natural and frequently uncultivated environment. The definition of “nature” and “natural” has been a bugaboo to feminists for many centuries. Both Christine de Pizan and Monique Wittig challenge the definition of natural woman. Christine does so by simply defining natural woman as good and virtuous, thus defying patriarchy’s misogynistic definition of natural woman as libidinous and untrustworthy. Wittig, on the other hand, like other radical feminists, entirely rejects the notion of a natural woman. In fact, the “women” in *Les guérillères* are not, technically speaking, women, since Wittig asserts that lesbians are not women.

*The Dissolution of Community:*

For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized. (Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*)

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27 Bleich 19.
28 The Christian concept of the natural state of all humans will be discussed in the Christine chapter.
Just as it is necessary for the individual to separate from her mother, when the community replaces the mother in the psychic life of the individual, it then becomes necessary for the individual to separate from the community. While the community is formed to heal the psyche of the female collective, departure from the community at the appropriate time is healthy and natural, the next step in the evolution of the self. Callisto’s expulsion, a punishment on the narrative level, is a necessary step on the psychological level in the process of individuation, the formation of a unique identity.

Though the details may change in each variation of the myth, all of the mythemes upon which the myth is structured are essential for completion. Ovid and Cavendish include all four mythemes in their versions of gynotopia, Wittig and Pizan do not. I will argue that the exclusion of Intrusion and Separation leaves the myth psychologically and mythically incomplete.

Audre Lorde responds to the accusation that female community is psychologically stagnant:

For women the need and desire to nurture is not pathological but redemptive, and it is on that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by the patriarchal world.30

Rather than threatening individuation, Lorde asserts that “interdependency between women” actually leads to subjectivity.31 Lorde’s argument seems to be based on the notion that the psychological model for individuation, as espoused by Kristeva and others, is gender specific to men and does not apply to women. However, the claim that

31 Lorde 26.
interdependency is psychologically healthy is easily refuted by looking at a modern mother-daughter drama, the semi-autobiographical novel of Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior: A Girlhood among Ghosts*.

Kingston’s novel is the tale of a young, second generation Chinese American girl growing up in California. Her primary antagonist is her own mother who paradoxically silences her and imparts to her the gift of storytelling. In Chapter 1, Kingston tells the story of No Name Aunt. In China, after the men had left for Gold Mountain (the American continent) in search of a better life, the women in Maxine’s family lived together in one household. No Name Aunt (Maxine’s paternal aunt) became pregnant under suspicious circumstances. Much like Callisto, there is some speculation that she may have been raped, but she is offered no special consideration for such a possibility. Following the birth of the child, a girl, the aunt is deemed a disgrace to her family and her community, whereupon the villagers raid the family homestead, killing the livestock, ruining the stored food, and destroying various household items. The next day No Name Aunt drowns herself and her newborn daughter in the family well. Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, tells her daughter the story of No Name Aunt as a morality tale, as a warning to her daughter about sexual impurity and the impermanence of her position in her family. Kingston opens her novel with this story ostensibly to demonstrate her own mother’s manipulative child-rearing methods. There appears to be no intention on Kingston’s part to create a gynotopia. Yet, she has written a tale which fits the gynotopian Callisto model. The story, at the beginning of a novel about a woman who desperately needs to separate from her suffocating mother, serves as a warning to young Maxine and as a plea to the reader. No Name Aunt escaped the oppression of her family
and culture through death, taking her infant daughter with her; how can Maxine the adult separate from her own mother and establish her own identity as a person, as a woman, and as a second-generation Chinese American? Kingston answers this question in the final chapter of *Woman Warrior*, wherein Maxine discovers she has the gift of talk-story (which she ironically inherited from her mother). It is through story-telling, through writing that Maxine/Kingston achieves individuation, and the requisite condition for that individuation was a psychological separation from her mother and from her Chinese American

Chapter 2

Les guérillères: The Cult of the O

Monique Wittig’s obituary in a web-based lesbian-feminist journal declares, “she provided the theoretical egg from which lesbian-feminist separatism hatched in the early 1970s.”33 Though Wittig might have objected to the “separatist” label (not to mention the essentialism of the egg metaphor), she was nevertheless fully engaged in the development of radical lesbian feminist theory both in the abstract and in practice. Educated in literature at the Sorbonne and in Marxist socialism during the student-worker rebellion in Paris (1968), Wittig would become in the 1970’s and 1980’s “a major prophet”34 of radical lesbian feminism. Marthe Rosenfeld credits her subversive epic Les guérillères35 with “giv[ing] us the strength, the insight, and the language to fight against our own socialization, to liberate ourselves and our sisters, to believe in the power of words and ideas as forces for social change.”36 In fact it was during the student-worker revolution that Wittig penned Les guérillères, which according to Hélène Vivienne Wenzel “is probably the most widely read and frequently cited non-American feminist work of our times.”37

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35 Monique Wittig, Les Guérillères, trans. David Le Vay Boston: Beacon Press, 1971; unless otherwise noted, I will use Le Vay’s translation throughout this chapter.
36 Rosenfeld 9.
The logical, fictional culmination of radical feminist theory, *Les guérillères* is the quintessential gynotopia. The *guérillères* of Wittig’s novel live the radical feminist dream by organizing a worldwide rebellion against the patriarchy. Actually, “organized” is not quite right, as organization is one of the things against which they rebel. As befits a feminist rebellion, the *guérillères* seem to know instinctively when it is time for an uprising, and all over the world, they revolt at the same time.

**A Radical Feminist Epic**

The novel is a beautifully rendered radical feminist vision. It is a novel of resistance that both tells the story of resistance and also serves as an instrument of resistance. It subverts patriarchal literature by ignoring or subverting conventions of narrative. Wittig’s narrative is non-linear and without a typical plot. It is in many ways a Radical Lesbian Manifesto in that it both explains the tenets of radical lesbian feminism and expresses the anger of its adherents. It is a stream of conscious epic which defies its own convention, an epic that is neither chronological nor poetic. It subverts patriarchal language by creating new terminology and patriarchal law by refusing to apologize for, excuse, or even explain immoral behavior. The women of the new order concede nothing to the laws and morality of patriarchy. The novel and the women within it resist the myths of patriarchy, appropriating and rewriting or simply eliminating them altogether when necessary.

38 “*Guérillères*” is a combination of “*guerrière*” (feminine, “warrior”) and “*guérilla*” (“guerilla warfare”) – see Rosenfeld 7.
39 Wenzel says that “by style alone” *Les guérillères* “issues a profound challenge to canonized literary tradition” (264).
40 In “Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” Alicia Ostiker makes reference to “the need to identify femininity with morality” by way of explaining the trend among feminist revisionists, like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, to exalt the demonic female in their poetry (*Signs* 8.1 [1982]: 77).
The novel is not without its contradictions: even as she decries symbolism as a patriarchal tool, Wittig’s feminist epic is highly symbolic; she creates a new religion and then declares that religious ideology of any kind is undesirable. These and other contradictions can be explained away, but at a high cost to Wittig’s radical feminist dream. What follows is an analysis of the novel, an attempt to explain the contradictions, and a frank discussion of that which cannot be reconciled.

Wittig’s premise is simple: patriarchy, the male-dominated machinery of state that has been in place for millennia, is a dangerous, oppressive regime. The guérillères, Wittig’s Amazonian army, regard all men as a constant threat. They have only to look at patriarchy’s own record of its crimes against women and humanity, a record handed down through man’s own myth and history to remember women raped, bought, and sold (112-114); tortured and murdered (102); expelled from the earthly paradise (110). In order to be free, in order to thrive, they must eliminate the male-dominated machinery of state and establish a new order. They must “start from zero” (30, et al), and must therefore initiate a violent worldwide revolution. Toward this end, the guérillères organize into armies and take up arms.

In addition to the violent overthrow of patriarchal structures and institutions, the guérillères revolutionize language in their effort to achieve permanent change. Since little good is achieved in a revolution that merely replaces one tyrant with another, the guérillères must launch simultaneous attacks against both the master and his tools. The cultural revolution, an attack on theory, addresses both language and memory, as the patriarchy’s primary tools for creating “woman.” The novel itself serves as an exemplary resistance against language and memory. For instance, Wittig all but refuses to use the
word “woman”\textsuperscript{41} (femme), preferring instead “they” (elles)\textsuperscript{42} as her collective subject, and replaces patriarchal memory, HIStory which presents women as objects, with a revised mythology in which women become subjects. The cultural revolution addresses three social elements: the revision of memory, the reformation of language, and the construction of self which depends upon the reformation of the other two, as the self is formed in part through memory and is dependant upon language for its articulation.

Wittig grounds her reclamation of the female self in terms of physical pleasure, thus grounding female identity in the body. The pleasure of self-discovery is achieved through autoeroticism, lesbian sex,\textsuperscript{43} and female community. She seems to want to redefine identity as something not based on history, myth, or memory, but on tactile experience. This sensory approach to the formation of identity is necessary since Wittig will soon demonstrate the need to erase and rewrite memory via the revision of myth and history. Memory in patriarchal times is not to be trusted, because it has been created by men. Guérillères should trust experience over male-authored history.\textsuperscript{44}

For radical lesbian feminism, the goal of auto and same sex eroticism is to de-objectify the female body. Wittig considers political freedom and autoeroticism to be concomitant. The female body for her becomes the site of liberation, and uncultivated nature is the place wherein that liberation is achieved. Lesbianism and community are

\textsuperscript{41}Wittig rejected the notion that lesbians are women on the grounds that “the French word femme means both ‘woman’ and ‘wife’” (Namascar Shaktini, “Displacing the Phallic Subject: Wittig’s Lesbian Writing,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 8.1 [1982]: 30) and, therefore, always indicates an object of exchange.

\textsuperscript{42}“elles” is a plural feminine pronoun, meaning “they” or “shes” (as suggested by Rosenfeld [7]); Wenzel says that “elles” is meant “to designate the collective female protagonist; thus emphasizing women as an historical and social class” (276).

\textsuperscript{43}I will assume that autoeroticism and homosexuality are separate acts and will leave any speculation about the sameness of the two to a different forum.

\textsuperscript{44}Much as Chaucer’s Wife of Bath privileged experience over “auctoritee.”
closely linked in *Les Guérillères*. In the opening paragraph, a woman squats to urinate, while some of the women in the community “form a circle around her to watch the labia expel urine” (9). The act of urination is not only eroticized but also turned into a public spectacle. This incident marks the first of many circular formations, and it is no accident that this first circle exists in order to afford a better view of one woman’s genitals. The *guérillères* are dedicated to reclaiming their bodies and redefining how they are viewed, but that is not to say that they object to erotic pleasure derived from gazing upon and touching the body. When the women awake in the mornings, “they anoint their bodies with oil of sandalwood curcuma gardenia. … Their hands rub each leg in turn, the skin glistening” (15). The sensuality of fragrance mixed with the hand’s caress serves to ritualize this communal regimen. Wittig writes of numerous instances of pleasure and self-discovery: exposing their genitals to the sun (19), being proud of the vulva as a fecund symbol (31) and yet perceiving “their bodies in their entirety” (57). Through reclaiming their bodies, the women revoke their status as object.

Wittig’s intent is to imagine a world in which women have no shame, but shame cannot completely disappear and the female body cannot be truly subject, until their collective memory is revised. Declaring “there is no past” (30), they cling to the present and slowly forget the past; the past is a patriarchal construct, used to control and oppress. History is the warehouse of patriarchal memory, and the *guérillères* must create new memories as part of their fight for complete freedom. They reframe history and myth in order to empower the movement. Ultimately, invention takes place as the novel and the revolution progress: “remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent” (89). When remembering cannot take place (either because the knowledge has been lost
or the memory is too painful) creation of a new myth/history becomes necessary.

Examples of events too painful to remember and impossible to reframe as feminist myth include the stories of women “betrayed beaten seized seduced carried off violated and exchanged as vile and precious merchandise” (134). The women must not only disregard such myths, but forget them, remove them from memory. The importance of myth to the shaping of reality is emphasized: “They say there is no reality before it has been given shape by words rules regulations” (134). If the guérillères can forget the stories of the abused and victimized then they can live as truly independent and free beings.

Although Wittig accuses the patriarchy of inventing the history of women (111), she does not attempt to rewrite history, preferring instead to tackle myth, because myth determines identity through archetypes and metaphor. Through myth, the emphasis on difference can be disguised as deference. As the storehouse of memory and symbols, myth is the prime target of Wittig’s cultural revolution. Through myth women are taught to expect maltreatment. Wittig’s aim is to emasculate these myths by removing the phallus as the symbol of power and dominance and inserting the vulva/clitoris in its place. Everywhere we once saw phalli, we now see clitorises, the intention being to feminize the world of symbols.

The Golden Fleece and the Holy Grail are considered by the guérillères to be symbols for the vulva (44ff). Thus, man’s desire to find and own these objects takes on a new meaning:

They say that, at the period when the texts were compiled, the quests for the grail were singularly unique attempts to describe the zero the circle the ring the spherical cup containing the blood. (45)
The golden fleece was of course eventually acquired by Jason, with Medea’s help, but the grail has to this day eluded mankind. Wittig suggests this is because man has failed to recognize the symbolism of the grail and because men are not capable of grasping the grail’s meaning. The sirens of Greek myth who lured men to their doom with their seductive song are presented as no danger to the guérillères, for whom the sirens’ song sounds like “a continuous O. …[evoking] for them … the O, the zero or the circle, the vulval ring” (14). The implication is that the song and symbolism of the O are not only incomprehensible, but also dangerous to men.

Some mythical and semi-historical women survive in the form of reincarnated guérillères. For instance, the legendary Norsewoman Freydis Ericsdottir is paid homage in the form of an army of women baring their breasts savagely and frightening an army of men away (100), and while, taking a rest from battle, a group of young girls listen to a poem, recited by Sappho incarnate:

Is the finest thing on the dark earth really a group of horsemen whose horses go at a trot or a troop of infantry stamping the ground? Is the finest thing really a squadron of ship side by side? Anactoria Kypris Savé have a bearing a grace a radiant brightness of countenance that are pleasanter to see than all the chariots of the Lydians and their warriors charging in their armor. (104)

This poetic moment takes place on a beach, populated by naked, bathing women. It is an idyllic moment and as such is almost out of place in Wittig, who usually inverts the locus amoenus of classical myth. Earlier, the pool of water, where in Ovid one might find
nymphs frolicking or virgins bathing,45 is in Wittig polluted by the carcass of an ass and the vomit of the bathing women (10-11).

As the ultimate repressive tool, religion is an appropriate target for Wittig’s guérillères. The Judaeo-Christian Bible, a common target for feminists of all persuasions, is a fundamental text for Wittig; she rewrites some of the most powerful passages, resting power with the woman or at least reframing her loss of power in feminist terms. Eve is of particular interest to Wittig. Combining Romans 16:2046 and Genesis 3:15,47 Wittig predicts her guérillères will soon “crush the serpent under [their] heel” (111). The serpent to which Wittig refers is the patriarchal machine in general and Orpheus in particular. Combining Eve and snake-haired Medusa, Wittig has Eve talking to her favorite strand of hair, a snake by the name of Orpheus. In Wittig’s rendition of the myth, it is Orpheus who advises Eve to eat the forbidden fruit which he promises will give her knowledge (52). Because of her acquisition of knowledge, Eve is hailed as the ancestress of all witches (82). Finally, Wittig claims that Eve was expelled from Eden by a trick:

He has stolen your wisdom from you, he has closed your memory to what you were, … he has made of you a vile and fallen creature, he has gagged abused betrayed you. … He has woven around you a long list of defects he declares essential to your wellbeing [sic], to your nature. He has invented your history. But the time approaches when you can cry, erect, filled with ardour and courage, Paradise exists in the shadow of the sword. (110-11)

45 The rapes of Io, Daphne, and Callisto all begin or take place beside a pool of water.
46 “And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.”
47 “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”
Thus Wittig makes Eve the first victim of patriarchy, the witness to the creation of an oppressive language, and the vessel of female memory, once lost, now about to be recovered.

The *guérillères* also honor Draupadi, the Mahabharata heroine who married the five Pandavas:

Another mentions Draupadi who took five husbands. Of the first it is stated that Draupadi compared him to the apple of her eye, of the second it is stated that Draupadi compared him to the light of her life, of the third it is stated that Draupadi compared him to the treasures of her house, of the fourth it is stated that Draupadi compared him to a young acacia, of the fifth it is stated that Draupadi compared him to the rampart of her strength. (112)

Draupadi is an appropriate choice for the *guérillères* in that she was born from fire lit by her father seeking revenge against his enemies, making her vengeance’s daughter.

However, the selection of Draupadi is complicated by the fact that she was abandoned by all five of her husbands, and emerges from the *Mahabharata* not as a powerful and vindictive figure, but as a victimized and pathetic figure, who dies alone and abandoned. Wittig addresses the problem of Daraupadi’s victimization by focusing on her admiration (and objectification) of her five husbands. The emphasis is upon Draupadi as a sexual being, taking pleasure in her husbands. In comparing her husbands to each other and relegating them to the world of symbols (they are metaphoric “treasures” and not people with names), Draupadi manages to objectify not just these five men, but all men.

As the masculine method for recording history and myth, books are of great interest to Wittig’s *guérillères*. Their new domination of language and symbols leads the *guérillères* to first question and then destroy the books of the patriarchy. The women are depicted as avid readers of the old books, sometimes learning from them, at other times
entertained by them, and finally angered by them. Such a process may be intended to mimic the process of feminist academics who are seduced by great literature, amused by its old fashioned sexism, and finally outraged enough to write volumes against and in response to it. In the novel, texts that in the past were used to define women are called feminaries, and they hold a significant place in the evolution of the revolution. For instance, one of the first actions in the novel is that of reading aloud from a book beside a pool:

> By the lakeside there is an echo. As they stand there with an open book the chosen passages are re-uttered from the other side by a voice that becomes distant and repeats itself. Lucie Maure cries to the double echo the phrase of Phenarete, I say that that which is is. I say that that which is not also is. When she repeats the phrase several times the double, then triple, voice endlessly superimposes that which is and that which is not. The shadows brooding over the lake shift and begin to shiver because of the vibrations of the voice. (14)

The words of the book create an echo over which the women on the other side of the lake speak. In adding their voices to the voice of the reader, the words of the book are transformed, and a new text is created. Nature shifts in adjustment to the new reality, a reality that accepts both that which is and that which is not, a feminine reality. One cannot help but recall Ovid’s tale of Echo, who died in her attempt to repeat the words of Narcissus verbatim. Wittig’s women do not die, perhaps because they do not fall into the trap of repeating what he says, but rather add to it, multiple female voices drowning out and transforming the words of men. Finally, the women decide that the feminaries have “fulfilled their function,” and being “indoctrinated as they are with ancient texts,” (49) the women decide to burn the books of patriarchy.
The guérillères’ resistance against the language of men is part of their reconstruction of the female self or, as radical feminist theory calls for, the emergence of a non-gendered self. This particular aspect of radical feminist theory deems language itself as a tool of oppression that leads to the death of the female self. To even speak the language of the dominant class “poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated” (114). Since the control of symbolic language rests with the dominant class, a new language is called for which is based upon the symbols of women, a feminine language which “imprisons” and “overthrows” men; the guérillères will speak the language of “the zero, the O, the perfect circle” (114), the language of the vulva. Wittig claims that women “have [been] expelled … from the world of symbols” (112), oppressed by metaphors (66), but rather than doing away with the metaphor altogether, she first reclaims the symbols used against women for so long.

The “O which is the sign of the goddess, the symbol of the vulva ring” (27) is the one symbol which Amazonia embraces. Wittig addresses the objectification of the female body by means of symbolism, and calls for an end to the metaphorization of female genitalia, declaring “myths and symbols” no longer necessary (30). However, Wittig’s guérillères later decide that “they can invent terms that describe themselves without conventional references to herbals or bestiaries” (53), once again embracing a female-centered symbolism. Still again, the same women mock the use of metaphors:

They say that they did not garner and develop symbols that were necessary to them at an earlier period to demonstrate their strength. For example they do not compare the vulvas
to the sun moon stars. They do not say the vulvas are like black suns in shining night (57-58).

**A Problematic Gynotopia**

Ultimately, *Les guérillères* is an incomplete gynotopia. Wittig and her *guérillères* are unable to create a new regime that varies radically from the old regime. Embracing patriarchal methods of oppression, wielding power like a weapon, and falling victim to factionalism within the movement all contribute to a utopia never completely realized. Further, Wittig’s assertion that symbols “that were necessary …at an earlier period” are now and henceforth abandoned is not supported by the text. Wittig herself demonstrates the impossibility of abandoning symbols. They never abandon the O; they cannot abandon O, as it is the weapon that they “invent to imprison and to overthrow [men]” (114). In fact, the novel is divided into three sections or chapters by the presence of a giant O on an otherwise blank page. The implication is that the O stands alone as the one and only symbol of Amazonia. Despite her claim to be “inventing a new dynamic” in which women’s severed bodies are no longer on display, Wittig mimics the patriarchal fragmentation of the female body. She says that the old dynamic of putting the female body in museums and on pedestals has prevented them from moving freely (126). And yet she invents a space which is always circular and movement which is always cyclical. In reaction to patriarchal rhetoric/symbolism the *guérillères* employ typically patriarchal methods of destruction. They essentially adopt the rhetoric and the methods of their patriarchal counterparts, their predecessors in tyranny.

In the midst of a bloody and violent war, with dead bodies on nearly every page, Witting attempts to redefine pleasure and self. This becomes problematic. Ideally, the reinvention of language and myth will lead to an inversion of subjectivity and objectivity.
The female form will cease to be an object and women can claim to be subjects in their own right. However, Wittig’s definitions and understandings do not differ in any significant way from the féminaire.

**Wittig’s essentialism**

Perhaps the most glaring and least acceptable failure is Wittig’s own essentialism.

Wittig makes it very clear that essentialism is a tool of the patriarchy and is one of the evils against which the *guérillères* fight.

The women say, the men have kept you at a distance, they have supported you, they have put you on a pedestal, constructed with an essential difference. They say, men in their way have adored you like a goddess or else burned you at their stakes or else relegated you to their service in their backyards. They say so doing they have always in their speech dragged you in the dirt … They say oddly enough what they have exalted in their words as an essential difference is a biological variation. (100-02)

She makes it clear that essentialism of any kind is dangerous, be it positive (goddesses) or negative (witches), and yet she essentializes her *guérillères*, fulfilling all the expectations of patriarchy. From their egg-shaped homes to their dwelling in the wilderness, the *guérillères* are symbolically feminine. They retire to the countryside, the forests, and the uncivilized, uncultured, unpopulated places of the world, just as the Amazons and huntresses of patriarchal imagination have always done. Wittig calls them “possessors of vulvas,” thus reducing them to identification by that which separates them *biologically* from men (31). Furthermore, these possessors of vulvas “take proper pride in that which has long been regarded as the emblem of fecundity and the reproductive force of nature,” the uterus (31). One must ask by whom it has long been regarded an emblem of fecundity? Surely, by men. To embrace this one metaphor (even though it is perceived as
a positive association) makes no sense in light of Wittig’s rejection of all reductive symbols.

Wittig also appears to embrace the patriarchal notion that, as sensual beings, women are close to nature. For instance, in the orgiastic depiction of the guérillères of Perségame, Wittig places emphasis on the women not as warriors, but rather as sexual beings: they “go in groups, sowing disorder and confusion, unleashing around them the desire for orgasm like cat-headed Obel” (119). Even as the guérillères menace and kill, they inspire lust. One colony sleeps in fur coats hung from the tree branches in the shapes of bags (50). Given Wittig’s emphasis on the vulva, it is not hard to imagine that she intends these fur bags in which the women sleep to be vulval-like cocoons. Nightly the women enter the womb and are daily reborn. After the war with men begins, the women warriors sleep in “white cells” hewn from the mountainside. The cell “resembles an egg, a sarcophagus, an O in view of its aperture” (86). The cells in which they dwell resemble both womb and tomb and serve as a reminder of thousands of years of patriarchal literature linking the two emblems of life and death with the female anatomy. They fulfill the patriarchal expectations – the way they live confirms myth rather than resists it. The implication is that the only genuine or permanent female trait is the genitalia. Women are their genitals. One could argue that Wittig’s goal in exalting the vulva is to transcend shame, but her method is reductive and essentialist, the very characteristics which she resists.

Although Wittig acknowledges the problem of trading in one religion for another (“It is to fall between Scylla and Charybdis, to avoid one religious ideology only to adopt another” [80]), she can no more abandon religion than she can abandon the great O or
phallic imagery. She not only metaphorizes the vulva, she deifies it, repeating the patriarchal use of worship as a method for objectification. The O is everything and everywhere in *Les Guérillères*; it influences the shape of beds, homes, and community. When they are moving and when they are still, the O decides how they will walk and how they will gather. The women eventually realize that they should not exalt the vulva and deny that “they compare the vulva to the sun moon stars”(58); their denial is as ineffectual as their decision to no longer exalt the vulva. Wittig has already made clear the connection between the vulva and O and Amaterasu, the sun goddess (26ff). The association of O with a goddess colors every repetition or invocation of O after that.

**Failure to subvert patriarchal myth**

While rejecting western mythology, the women simultaneously choose to embrace it as well, honoring Minerva, goddess of war, and Bacchus, god of wine and debauchery. Wittig writes, “they shake their hair like the bacchantes who love to agitate their thyrsi” (93 and 98). Interestingly the *guérillères* choose the most masculine of the goddesses48 (she had no mother) and the one group of women who followed a male deity.49 There is no attempt to rework or redefine these myths. Their association with Bacchus complicates this lack of awareness of their own obsession with the most powerful and enduring of patriarchal symbols, the phallus. The rage that spurs them on in their war against men appears to be inspired by Bacchus. Marthe Rosenfeld argues that Wittig’s *guérillères* follow Minerva rather than Bacchus. I would argue that they follow both. To remove Bacchus from his own rites is next to impossible. It is his phallic thyrsi,

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48 Shaktini refers to Minerva as “the male-identified feminine subject” and “a triple denial of feminine subjectivity” (36-37).
49 Rosenfeld claims without offering proof that Wittig intends her bacchantes to be followers of Minerva (8).
which they shake. As goddess of reason (and the motherless daughter of Zeus), Minerva stands in direct opposition to Bacchus, who in many ways is the more feminine of the two deities. This same ritual is mimicked in battle:

Their violence is unleashed they are in a paroxysm of rage, in their devastating enthusiasm they appear wild-eyed hair bristling clenching their fists roaring rushing shrieking slaughtering in fury one might say of them that they are females who look like women when that are dead. (118)

Here, as above, the women are presented as maenads, devotees of a male deity who controlled the thoughts and actions of his followers, forcing them to kill men they loved and would grieve.50 Their actions are presented not as voluntary, but as forced. “They say that they sing with such utter fury that the movement that carries them forward is irresistible. They say that oppression engenders hate. They are heard on all sides crying hate hate” (116). Again, Bacchus figures into their activities, controlling their behavior, fueling their hate. The guérillères arguably surrender one form of oppression and embrace another. As slaves of hate, they are still victims of patriarchy – by reacting to it, they allow it to define them.

The presence of the phallus in Les Guérillères further serves to undermine Wittig’s purpose.51 Wittig metaphorizes the penis which she says is “what differentiates them from you the sign of domination and possession” (106). The “shining black snake with carmine rings” (74) is a phallic symbol which Wittig attempts to deconstruct. She recalls a time when the snake was worshipped and has her own priestess kiss the now lifeless form. Her attempt is clearly to make flaccid the phallus, to relegate its worship to

50 While in a Bacchic frenzy, Agave kills her son Pentheus, believing him to be a boar.
51 Note that Shaktini refers to “the token ‘presence’” of the phallus in Wittig’s Le corps lesbien and sees the phallus in “Wittig’s lesbian book” as dependent upon the goddess for its existence (32-33).
a distant past. Her deconstruction of the phallus in the form of a lifeless snake is compromised by her final words on the matter: The priestess “puts her lips to the black scales” (74). Perhaps the woman is mocking the old rites, but the final image left for the reader is that of an old woman kissing the phallus.

Wittig may be unaware of her own metaphorization of the penis. The following passage, for instance, is replete with phallic imagery: “They advance into the forest, between stiff woody stems, faces caught by the sun, covered by the pollen that escapes continually from invisible stamens” (70-71). Here Wittig transforms penises into stiff woody stems and stamens and semen into pollen which covers the faces of the guérillères. Beyond the description of the activity, she makes no comment. It is possible that Wittig is unaware of her own penis envy, expressed not only in this interaction with stems and stamens but also in her “phallicization” of the clitoris: recall for instance Sleeping Beauty’s spindle, usually interpreted as phallic by virtue of the fact that it exists separately from Sleeping Beauty’s body, it causes Sleeping Beauty’s imprisonment in sleep, and it pierces or penetrates Sleeping Beauty’s skin. To declare the spindle clitoral, without explanation, is at best a superficial approach to the feminization of myth.

**Failure to subvert patriarchal rhetoric**

They call it a “new world.” They declare the patriarchal armies to be institutions (94) and then form institutions of their own, organizing like men as they march to battle: “The women advance side by side in a geometric order of progress” (107). They use the weaponry and tactics of the patriarchy to bring about a new order. In her worship of the sun goddess Amaterasu, one of the women declares “Our kingdom come. May this order

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52 In Wittig the sun is female, but in patriarchal mythologies it is typically male.
be destroyed. May the good and the evil be cast down” (27). She is of course calling for an end to moral absolutism as one of the weapons of patriarchy, but she is not calling for the total annihilation of order. She wants to replace the current order with a new “kingdom,” which is an interesting choice of words for a feminist seeking to escape patriarchal language and institutions, dismantling one oppressive paradigm in favor of another equally oppressive paradigm.

Interestingly, the rally cry of the *guérillères* (Paradise exists in the shadow of the sword) is reminiscent of both the Biblical account of the Fall of Man which has Eden guarded by a flaming sword (Genesis 3:24) and the Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1942 call for jihad:

> Islam says: Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword. The sword is the key to paradise, which can be opened only for Holy Warriors. 53

This peculiar and seemingly random similarity calls attention to the methodology of the *guérillères*, which indicates a patriarchal and occasionally terrorist mentality.

For many women the war will never be over. They proclaim

> [H]ell, let the earth become a vast hell destroying killing and setting fire to the buildings of men, to theatres national assemblies to museums libraries prisons psychiatric hospitals factories old and new from which they free the slaves. … Together they sow disorder in the great cities, taking prisoners, putting to the sword all those who do not acknowledge their might. (130)

Their behavior and rhetoric are reflective of every great (patriarchal) empire. The guérillères decide on terrorism and guerilla warfare as the best tactic against the male armies. Their set-up is typically terrorist in that they claim superiority on the grounds that their armies are voluntarily joined (94) and in that their goal is not to gain ground but to “sow disarray” and “to harass [men] without pause” (94-95). Of course it is possible that terrorism as a method does not bother the guérillères. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the guérillères concede nothing to patriarchal moral codes, even disregarding the taboo against cannibalism (having declared war on men, the women then decide to eat them [97-98], on the grounds that men are a different species). However, this excuse only works if the guérillères are amoral and anarchist, but they are not. They must acknowledge some form of morality if they can accuse the patriarchy of criminal behavior against women, and any claim to anarchy is belied by the rigid system which they create and the order to which they subscribe. Further, if violence toward men (or anyone) is acceptable to them, then their claim that a feminist dominated world will be free of war has no basis. “In order for there to be peace there must first be a war” may work for George W. Bush, but it cannot work for radical feminists who must seek to distance themselves from the rhetoric of their oppressors if they are to proclaim “a new order.”

As the war nears its end, some of the women join hands with the surviving men and declare all traces of violence must disappear from this earth, then the sun will be honey-colored and music good to hear. … Let there be erased from human memory the longest most murderous war it has ever known, the last possible war in history. (127-28)

Wittig reminds us that utopia has yet to be achieved and that memory has yet to be erased. However, she also reminds us, perhaps unwittingly, that patriarchal rhetoric is
still very much a part of the new consciousness. Her phrase “the last possible war” recalls a war which many men considered “the war to end all wars” – that is, until the Second World War made it clear that there could be no ultimate war. One cannot help but wonder if the guérillères are committing a similar error and if that error might be symptomatic of their willingness to forget so much of “his-story.” Of course Wittig goes beyond the appellation “ultimate war,” declaring her revolution to be the last possible war meaning in a matriarchal society war is not possible. Once again, Wittig falls into the essentialist trap: women are naturally peaceful; if women ran the world there would be no war. She also contradicts herself, as she has previously declared women to be naturally violent.

**Failure to subvert patriarchal methods of oppression**

It has been said that all utopias seek to eliminate the individual, to merge the individual with the community, and Wittig’s Amazonia is no exception. The women of Amazonia are discouraged from leaving. These women recognize that not only is male intrusion a danger to their very existence, but also the temptation of the members to leave could very well mean the end of the community. A “lasting alliance” is sought between men and women and their new goal is “to transform the world” (128). The women disclaim violence against men who are no longer the enemy (131). Some men are absorbed by the system. The “young women” bring the “young men” into the community. The absorption of men into the new order marks the only time that Wittig uses the appellations “young women” and “young men.” Apparently she intends to distinguish this new, peaceful generation from the one which preceded it. On the surface, the new order does appear to be accepting of sexual difference. However, the young men permitted to enter Wittig’s Eden are distinctly feminine in both dress and biology: these
men dress like the group of women they are with, they have rounded and smooth faces, and full hips. The problem with this transformation of men into women is not so much the transformation itself, but the assumption that such a transformation is possible, even necessary or desirable. If Wittig’s goal was to achieve gender neutrality then she has failed, and it is not language that has prevented her from achieving her goal, but her own ideology.

“The system is closed. No radius starting from the center allows of any expansion or of breaking through. At he same time it is without limit, the juxtaposition of the increasingly widening circles configures every possible revolution” (69). Wittig attempts to defend rigidity by claiming that there is great freedom of movement within a rigid system. This is unacceptable. The inability of Amazonia to allow for an open system is patriarchal in nature and prevents growth, ending in undeveloped or improperly developed identities. “Beware of dispersal. Remain united like the characters in a book. Do not abandon the collectivity” (58). There is a lack of freedom in the attainment of a new order, as the female collective does not allow separation which is necessary to individuation.

The women and the young men who have joined them wear “the costume of peace” even as they bury the enemy dead, and the bodies of dead men are buried in communal graves with a black circle painted on their foreheads (124), thus in death transformed by their conquerors, adopted into the new order, or at least claimed in death as the property of the victor. I am reminded of a scene from Apocalypse Now in which

54 Margaret Cavendish’s Lady Happy will claim the same thing in Convent of Pleasure (Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays, ed. Anne Shaver [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999] 220).
Col. Kilgore marks his victims with “death cards.” Why? “Let’s Charlie know who did this.”

To free themselves from indoctrination, the women burn the books of patriarchy, but how is this act different from similar acts by a patriarchy intent on suppressing knowledge? The need to destroy anything implies that the object has power – in burning old knowledge the women continue to be victims of it.

Their objectification of men is perhaps excusable on the grounds that the men deserved it. However, the viciousness with which they pursue the sexual victimization of men is disturbing.

When they have a prisoner they strip him and make him run through the streets crying, it is your rod/cane/staff/wand/peg screw/staff of lead. Sometimes the subject has a fine body broadened at the hips with honeyed skin and muscles not showing. They take him by the hand and caress him and make him forget all their bad treatment. (106)

Their use of patriarchal methods for harassment undermines their mission to create a new dynamic. Particularly disturbing is their treatment of the effeminate male prisoner. The caress suggests that the women rape the weaker man, and just as men used myth and history to make women forget their own maltreatment, the women “make him forget.”

**Wittig’s pornographic gaze**

Wittig’s concentration on the vulva, on the female body in general, is superficial and counterproductive to the revolution. Wittig has turned her gaze upon the vulva, upon

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55 The “pornographic gaze” is the intentional direction of the audience’s attention to usually nude female body parts for the purpose of sexual titillation; the method itself is quite subtle, but the effect, the violent objectification of the female form, is not; though usually male-authored, Wittig’s *Les guérillères* is an excellent example of a female-authored pornographic gaze.
the thing, objectifying the female body, separating the vulva from the rest of the body, engaging the pornographic gaze. Wenzel, even while criticizing the work of Hélène Cixous, which she sees as failing to do what it pretends to do, namely “purporting to subvert the masculine order and language” on the basis of its emphasis on “woman’s basic differences – her breasts, womb, or vagina,” refuse to read Wittig in the same light.

The woman writer [of the écriture féminine movement] thus creates a superwoman to replace the superman, substitutes female genitalia for the phallus/penis, and reproduction for creativity. It must then be asked: How subversive is such a discourse?

Wenzel concludes that “Wittig’s radical feminist books … [constitute] the only truly subversive French feminist discourse.” In all fairness to both Wenzel and Wittig, Wenzel sees LG as the second part of a series including three other novels which depict the slow emergence of a singular, lesbian identity. Wenzel reads Wittig’s body of work as a vision of the evolution of a male-free existence for all women. However, I stand by my critique of the novel as applicable to the series, namely that the lesbian community would not exist but for its reaction to patriarchy and that the failure to separate from mother community represents a failure to individuate.

Wittig even turns her gaze upon dead women and women who have the appearance of dead women, describing a mass of female bodies lying on the snow. How the women died is unclear, but their bodies attract a pack of wolves:

56 268.
57 269.
58 275.
Ears erect, paws aquiver, they are above the faces, they
sniff at the cheeks, the mouths, they come and go, they
make a rush. The faces are torn to ribbons. The white face
of the beautiful Marie Viarme hangs detached from the
trunk, torn across the throat. One sees the sudden streaming
of blood on her cheeks. Clothes are torn, half-eaten bodies
swim in a vile red-black lake, the snow is tinged by it. The
wolves pant, they come and go, abandoning a body, seizing
it anew, running to another, paws aquiver, tongues lolling.

The wolves, clearly meant to be men, are in a sexual frenzy as they tear apart the bodies
of the women. It could be that this is meant to remind the guérillères of the crimes of
patriarchy, raping, rending, destroying women. However, Wittig’s lingering gaze upon
the beautiful face of Marie is not necessary to telling the story. The white face, streaming
blood and half-eaten, is, according to Wittig, undeniably beautiful.

Wittig’s fascination with the dead female body as a beautiful object is also
evident in the story of the gypsy women who reportedly carry with them “a mummified
corpse” which they regularly put on display:

The dead woman is clothed in a long tunic of green velvet,
covered with white embroidery and gilded ornaments. They
have hung little bells on her neck, on her sleeves. They
have put medallions in her hair. When they take hold of the
box to bring it out the dead woman tinkles everywhere (16)

The adornment with bells may recall the Victorian practice of dangling a bell outside the
coffin, a bell which is attached to the deceased’s toe via a string to avoid accidental live
burial mistaking the living for the dead. That the women have so carefully preserved the
corpse and have adorned it, suggests more than just an affection for the deceased. They
are intent on making her dead body beautiful. The tinkling bells add an air of the
ridiculous to, but in no way detract from the morbidity of, the scene. The goal is to
preserve not just the body, but also a semblance of life.
The difference between being alive and being dead is difficult for the *guérillères* to recognize, as demonstrated in the story of Iris Our:

Is she or is she not dead? Her nerves relax. She moves more feebly. The severed carotid releases gushes of blood. There is some on her white garments. It has flowed over her breast, it has spread, there is some on her hands. Though bright, it seems thickened and coagulated. Clots have formed crusts on her clothes. Iris Our’s arms dangle on either side. Her legs are outstretched. A fly comes and settles. Later it can be heard still buzzing. The window is open, on its other side there stir the branches of a pale green acacia. The sky is not to be seen. Iris Our’s eyes are closed. There is a sort of smile on her lips, her teeth are bared. Later the smile broadens, it is the beginning of a laugh. However the severed carotid allows no sound to form at her lips, save for a gurgling attributable to the swallowing of blood. (41)

The inability of the *guérillères* to discern life from death suggests a less than ideal existence, a dystopia. Further, it appears that the lack of freedom may contribute to the fascination with death within the community, as the dead body and the witnesses are clearly in a confined area: the window is open, but they cannot see the sky. The only movement is from the fly (which is later heard but not seen, emphasizing the stasis of the witnesses). There is a disturbing sensuality about the description of the dying woman as the blood “gushes” from her neck, flows over her breasts, and shines brightly. Wittig’s gaze is clearly pornographic here: her gaze lingers on body parts, not the body as a whole, and she seems to derive pleasure from the telling of the tale. The gaze of the spectators is as evident as their inaction. They are watching her die and not attempting in any way to interfere with the process, to relieve her obvious pain. Iris’ death-smile and her gurgling, interpreted as laughter by the witnesses, complete the gruesome picture. One could argue that the “laughter” and “smile” are merely projections of the amusement
of the audience, that is that the subjects are projecting their feelings on the object. Beyond the satisfaction of watching the woman die, no other emotion is portrayed not even pity for the dying woman, and, as with all objects, the feelings of the woman herself are unimportant.

**The Failure of Theory**

A brief look at other modern gynotopias reveals that essentialism and patriarchal norms are inescapable, or at least have yet to be escaped. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, an early twentieth century vision of male-free subsistence, is jeopardized by the presence of men. The narrator is, in fact, a man and is one of three explorers who, despite the intentions of hosts and guests alike, put an end to Herland’s naïve belief in the invulnerability of their way of life. Although the men are ultimately expelled, they leave behind a community of women fascinated by the patriarchal world. In fact, Gilman wrote a sequel in which the women send explorers to investigate that world. Tucker Farley makes especial note of the seeming asexuality of Herlanders. Farley suggests that either Gilman was unconcerned with the question of sexuality or more likely that she simply chose not to engage the paradox of lesbianism in a phallocentric culture.

In Sheri Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*, women live in walled cities where men exist only as servants. Each walled city has its own garrison, populated by the “violent” men. Every year the men of the garrison and the civilized women mate at a festival. Of the births resulting from these unions, the girls are automatically citizens of women’s country, and the boys are raised by their mothers until their fifth year, when they go to live with the men registered as their fathers. The boys return to women’s country once a year until their fifteenth birthday. At fifteen the boys must choose
between garrison life and women’s country. The twist to this tale is that the city
councilwomen are genetically engineering the newborns to be “peaceful,” to be
predisposed to choose women’s country. This manipulation of both the women and the
men is accomplished through a series of medical procedures performed upon the women
both before and after the festival. In reality the women are implanted with a birth-control
device before the festival, rendering them infertile for the period of their “assignation.”
After the festival the women whom the council has chosen to give birth are implanted
with the sperm of the servant-class, the non-violent men who chose to return to women’s
country. The hypothesis is that the male offspring of the non-violent men will be less
likely to choose the garrison over women’s country and that eventually the violent men
will become extinct, and in the story world that hypothesis seems to be playing out as
expected. There are several assumptions made by Tepper which disturb me, not the least
of which is that women are naturally less violent than men; actually Tepper takes it a step
further because her women are entirely non-violent. Further, Tepper assumes that the
propensity to violence among men is genetic and that it can be programmed out of the
human species through genetic engineering.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s fable “On Discovery”\textsuperscript{59} may be read as a response to
Les guérillères. It presents a nightmarish gynotopia that wreaks revenge on a hapless
male traveler. In Kingston’s Land of Women, the women punish one man, a
representative of his entire sex, for the pain that patriarchy has inflicted upon Asian
women. Kingston finds a unique solution to the problem of male intrusion: the women
bind Tang Ao’s feet, pierce his ears, and ultimately turn him into a woman. The

cleverness of this satire lies not only in the method of transformation, but in the fact that being treated like a woman makes one a woman. In this sense, Kingston is right on track with feminist theorists like Wittig who propose that women are not born, but made. However, even in affirming that woman is a construct, Kingston acknowledges that woman does exist. Note that the women of the Land of Women are still women and that Tang Ao is transformed not into some asexual creature, but rather into a gendered and sexed being. By the end of the fairy tale, Tang Ao possesses a womb and presumably experiences menses. He is forced to perform the gendered roles of a woman among sexually identified women who act like men. Kingston’s fable acts as a critique of *Les Guérillères* especially in its closing line: “In Women’s Land there are no taxes and no wars.” Here is Wittig’s Amazonia, where war is not possible. The snide assurance that there are no taxes confirms the satirical nature of the fable.

That the *guérillères* are willing to invent history/myth when they cannot or will not remember it is a problem. Willfully forgetting the past makes them vulnerable to repeating the crimes of patriarchy, as indeed they do.

The primary function of the gynotopia is protection; the need for protection keeps the women in a constant state of defensive vigilance that results in an identity of victimization. If the community is always afraid of penetration, it cannot be truly separate. In expending their energies to fight and prepare to fight men, they are still living in the shadow of the patriarchy. It is a reactionary and symbiotic existence; although they refuse to integrate, the *guérillères* still clearly regard men as part of their lives.
Despite the call for new words and symbols, the guérillères offer nothing new, no challenge to patriarchy. The O, the circle, and the vulval ring are not foreign to patriarchal language and are essentializing symbols. Wittig’s radical utopia fails to perform to expectations. The women warriors convene in order to free themselves from the slavery of patriarchy and the language that rendered them as symbolic objects. However, Wittig’s gynotopia does not escape the bonds of language and fails to free the female body from objectification. That it is now women objectifying women is no solution to the problem of verbal rape and subjugation. In Wittig’s world not only are women defined by their possession of a vulva but they are also cut off by violence from any opportunity to willingly leave their community and they are deprived of the ability to nurture (an instinct which they have not surrendered) as they have been nurtured and mothered by the community. In the end, Wittig’s gynotopia becomes an overbearing, tyrannical mother figure. The failure of the community to dissolve becomes a psychological impediment to the development of the self. The goal of the guérillères is to establish a new order. However, the new order as it is envisioned, and in the process of establishing it, differs little from the old order except in the gender of its deities and communal leaders.

As we have seen, current feminist criticism and fiction tends to focus on the community of women as an organic and inviolate whole, but historically the feminine community is rarely inviolate. Except for the feminist utopias discussed in this chapter, most all-female communities are ultimately violated, conquered, or dissolved by men. The modern gynotopia, while firmly grounded in radical feminist theory, ignores its own literary pre-history. The dissolution of the community and individual separation from it
are imperative both psychologically and mythically. Separation represents the psychological process of individuation and this development is present in all of the separation mythemes, both those violently induced and those voluntarily initiated.
Chapter 3

How Women Achieve Selfhood in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

In the search for an archetype, it is wise to begin with a myth, and when exploring myth it is not only wise, but also gratifying to begin with Ovid, who, I like to imagine, saw archetypes everywhere. His epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*, and, to a lesser extent, the epistolary *Heroides* have long been a standard source for Greco-Roman myth, and, during Ovid’s lifetime, they were also a source of great consternation for Caesar Augustus. By the latter half of the 1st century B.C., well before Wittig set pen to paper, the great Roman poet had already linked the colonization of the female body by the patriarchy to imperialistic expansion. Ovid was specifically concerned with Augustus’ moral legislation and his imperialistic ambitions. Ovid saw the two as related and criticized the regime by implicitly comparing Augustus with mythical figures that raped, pillaged, tortured, murdered, and enslaved women. The epic poet took aim at Augustus with a proto-Marxist-feminist approach, which simultaneously condemned imperialization and called attention to the victimization of women.

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61 The notion that Ovid was anti-Augustan is much disputed. Frederick Ahl, Leo Curran, and Frederick Williams have taken the position that Ovid was anti-Augustan (*Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982]; “Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” *Arethusa* 5 [1972]: 71-91; “Augustus and Daphne: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 1.560-63 and Phylarcus FGrH 81 F 32(b)” *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar* 3 [1981]: 249-57); Karl Galinsky and Douglas Little are of the opinion that Ovid was apolitical (“Augustus' Legislation on Morals and Marriage” *Philologus* 125 [1981]: 126-44; “The Non-Augustanism of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*” *Mnemosyne* 4.25 [1972]: 389-401).
Let me first address the assignment of genre. Despite Ovid’s use of epic meter, a superficial examination of the text may lead one to the conclusion that the *Metamorphoses* is not an epic poem. Due to its lack of an apparent hero and a basic theme or sustained action the poem may appear at first approach to be simply a collection of unrelated myths. On the other hand, one might read *Metamorphoses* as a cosmological epic since it begins with the creation of the world and extends into the future, an eternal metamorphosis in an immortal poem. However, besides the opening and closing lines, there are no overarching cosmic themes. On the contrary, Ovid chooses for his theme the physical transformation of mundane creatures. The search for a cosmological hero is equally difficult because with sexual violence as a recurring motif, the gods and the so-called heroes of Greek and Roman mythology are anything but heroic in Ovid’s text, for they seldom engage in any majestic or godly activity, choosing instead to perpetuate acts of rape against women, nymphs, and Goddesses. One figure, however, does emerge from the *Metamorphoses*, majestic and heroic, who does unify the text. She is the archetypal Great Goddess, a fusion of the individual goddesses in the text. The heroic action of this text is the Goddess’ journey from victim to victor. From the rape of the Earth by early man to Apollo’s slaughter of the Python, the guardian of the Great Goddess’ temple at Delphi, a patriarchal world subjugates the feminine. As the world becomes more and more patriarchal through imperialistic conquest, the once whole goddess is systematically broken down into component parts. So that she and through her all women may be more easily controlled, the patriarchy compartmentalizes her various traits, transforming aspects of her personality into complete, if less powerful, goddesses. By patriarchal times the matriarchal goddess’ power over heaven, earth, and the underworld, was divided
amongst Hera, Ceres, and Proserpine. She was robbed of her freedom and the control of her own sexuality, when she was forced to assume the role of mother, whore, or virgin. Not only was the Great Goddess divided into many less powerful avatars, but also these avatars were placed in moral and political opposition to one another. For instance, a jealous and bitter Hera lashes out at Callisto, the maternal aspect of the “virgin” Diana, following the latter’s rape by Jupiter. However, by the end of Ovid’s epic, the Goddess, in the forms of Medea and Isis, reemerges as a powerful deity possessing many of the attributes which she held in her pre-historic life, attributes which patriarchal cultures had methodically stripped from her by means of rape and redefinition.\(^{62}\) Many of Ovid’s women and goddesses seek refuge from patriarchal imperialism in wilderness retreats, and it is these retreats which both nurture and preserve the feminine until it is ready to reenter the world.

**The Tale of Callisto (2.401-530)**

In many ways, the Callisto myth is the founding myth in our search for the archetypal female community. Here is a community founded and ruled over by a virginal, female deity, a community only temporarily contaminated by rape. The rapist is Jupiter, the archetypal sky-god and patriarch; his victim is Callisto, a nymph in the service of the virgin goddess Diana.

While inspecting Arcadia following Phaëthon’s fatal chariot ride, Jupiter spies Callisto, who is said to have been Diana’s favorite girl (and arguably the goddess’ alter ego)\(^{63}\). The nymph has separated herself from Diana’s hunting party in order to refresh

\(^{62}\) For an in depth treatment of this evolution please see Kelley, “The Politics of Rape.”

\(^{63}\) Ovid links Callisto and Diana verbally when he has Jupiter in the guise of Diana call Callisto “a part of me” (*pars una mearum* [2.426]). For an extended treatment see Wall 10-25.
herself on a patch of green grass by a pool of water. She is vulnerable to assault as a result of being separated from her group. Ovid notes well Callisto’s lack of defense (she is unarmed and exhausted from the hunt), and Jupiter notes well Callisto’s lack of companions or indeed any witnesses. Jupiter assumes the disguise of Diana and approaches the defenseless and unwary nymph. Jupiter/Diana embraces Callisto and begins kissing her. Eventually, it becomes obvious to the virgin that “Diana” is really Jupiter, but, by then, she is well under the god’s power. Following her rape and impregnation, Callisto develops a hatred for her former vocation. She returns to her community, seeking comfort and security. When Diana discovers that Callisto is pregnant, she exiles the young woman from her company. Raped and impregnated by Jupiter, she has been marked by a man, claimed as his and can no longer rightfully dwell among virgins, women who are not under the manus of any man. Callisto gives birth to a son, Arcas, and Juno, still smarting from her husband’s infidelity, punishes Callisto by transforming her into a bear. Years later, when Arcas is hunting he happens upon his mother in bear form, and just as he is about to slaughter her, Jupiter turns both mother and son into constellations. Juno, in a final fit of pique, demands that the new constellations never be allowed to set in the pure waters of the ocean. Thus, Callisto is condemned by the abandonment of Diana and the cruelty of Juno to a life of impurity and exile.

The scene of the banishment is very similar to that of the rape and may reveal the true nature of Diana’s abandonment of Callisto. Diana, like Callisto, enters the grove at midday (2.417-18). Exhausted from the hunt and the heat of the sun, Diana needs refreshment and shelter (2.454-56). Also like Callisto, Diana lays down her weapons,
thus increasing her physical vulnerability. To further augment this vulnerability she disrobes and enters the pool, her body completely exposed (2.45 9). It is in this moment of exposure that Diana realizes what has happened to Callisto. The “two selves” (Diana vs. Callisto - intact vs. attacked) stand face to face, disrobed, as though looking in a mirror at her naked body, and suddenly it is impossible for Diana to deny the reality of her own vulnerability to rape. Her only defense is to separate completely from Callisto and banish the injured half of herself. To allow Callisto to enter the pool, which represents Diana’s still inviolate sexuality, would expose Diana to sexual violation and thus destroy her completely. Even Diana, who spurns all contact with men, surrenders some of her power to Jupiter when she recognizes her own vulnerability to rape and expels the raped Callisto from her company as a threat to her own sexual integrity.

The importance of the Callisto myth and its impact upon literary history have been noted before. It is a tale of rape and self-loathing, with the usual feminist approach centering on the fact that Jupiter is not blamed for Callisto’s rape and pregnancy by the two goddesses in the tale. Diana, goddess of childbirth, fails to protect Callisto; Juno, goddess of marriage and childbirth, maliciously turns the rape victim into a bear; and Jupiter, the archetypal king, simply takes what he wants with impunity. In this reading the rape is interpreted as a metaphor for imperialistic conquest, leading to the conclusion that Ovid’s myth-telling is a thinly veiled criticism of Caesar Augustus, whom he repeatedly refers to as “king”\(^\text{64}\) and compares to Jupiter. Finally, many critics have seen

\(^{64}\) The appellation “rex” was considered anathema during the Republic, and since Augustan propaganda billed the heir of Julius Caesar as “the Republic’s savior,” calling him “rex” was not only dangerously offensive, it also called attention to his imperial ambitions.
evidence of shame and self-loathing in Callisto and even Diana. While these approaches are certainly valid, they do not completely explain the actions of Juno and Diana, which appear to deviate from the expectations of them as archetypes. Why would the ideal mother reject her daughter? Why would the goddess of marriage punish a pregnant girl? Why would the goddess of childbirth separate the pregnant girl from the community, from her symbolic mother? I have argued in The Politics of Rape that Ovid’s political purpose was to critique Caesar Augustus, but I will also argue that on a metamythical level (a level of which Ovid himself may not have been fully aware) the tale acknowledges the necessity for the child to leave its mother for the sake of its own individuation; thus, Callisto’s departure becomes psychologically imperative and mythically inevitable.

In order to explain Diana’s odd behavior we must first locate the goddess in her mythic past. Artemis Bear (the Greek predecessor of Diana) is “not only the Birth Goddess but . . . also the incarnation of the primordial fertility of nature.” Wall argues that Callisto was in a sense an extension of Diana and that the need for a mortal half of the virginal goddess came about as a result of the patriarchy's decision to “purify Artemis, partly because what it would have perceived as the promiscuity of one of the primary female deities did not conform to its need for chastity in wives to ensure the purity of family lines.”

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65 Wall 19-20.
68 Wall 15.
The ancient, matriarchal goddess, who was by no means physically virgin, takes no notice of Callisto's state because it is like her own . . . And herein lies the explanation for Diana's eventual vituperative exile of Callisto. The tone of her dismissal is a patriarchal addition, yet the action is not a condemnation, but a blessing that sends her forth from the temple. Once the initiate has completed the ritual, she must go back to the secular world and take her wisdom with her. Diana's expulsion of Callisto is no more than this. That the girl leaves with the qualities of the goddess now part of her being is indicated by Callisto's transformation into a bear, the totem animal of Artemis which symbolizes the goddess' sexuality.

In other words, Callisto the Bear is the pregnant goddess Diana; she is the next phase of the maiden goddess, the natural progression of virgin to mother. According to Wall, the patriarchal additions include Diana's angry tone and her physical virginity; I would add to that list the means by which Callisto is impregnated, namely her rape. Further, I think that the tale that Ovid gives us should be interpreted in light of these additions, not in spite of them. Given the frequency of rape in the epic, Callisto’s expulsion could have been prompted by Diana’s realization of her own vulnerability to rape, resulting in her need to banish all threats and reminders of that vulnerability. The similarities between the scenes of banishment and rape, serve to increase Diana’s fear. Diana's words of banishment reveal her awareness of her sexual vulnerability: “do not defile the sacred pool” (2.464). Because the pool is an extension of Diana’s body, defilement of the pool suggests further sexual violence, thus rendering Callisto herself as a threat to Diana’s physical integrity.

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69 Wall 17.
70 Throughout pre-Bronze Age Europe women in labor are called bears, and "to this day in Lithuania, a woman in childbirth is called a bear" (Gimbutas 226).
When Callisto is raped, she is symbolically wed to Jupiter. Granted, the union is a violent one, but it leads to the transformation of the woman from virgin to mother, which is the traditional purpose of Roman marriage. Callisto has followed an inevitable path, a rite of passage necessary for the wholeness of self. Separation from Diana’s hunting party is a “natural” step toward selfhood. The expectant mother must leave her own mother in order to accept her new role. Therefore, the actions of Diana and Juno can be regarded as helpful rather than punitive. However, the individuation theory does not explain the anger and fear expressed by Diana and Juno. It may at this point be necessary to separate the myth from the confines of the text. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is about the imperialist rapist; the actions and attitudes of the goddesses are therefore expressions of their need to protect themselves from further violation: Juno, as the goddess of marriage, must reject the threat the unmarried mother poses to patriarchal order, and Diana, as the eternally virginal state goddess, must disassociate herself from the violated once-virgin. Their actions are rooted in the purpose of the poet to depict rape as an imperialistic tactic, necessitating the violent reactions of the goddesses. Thus, if we disregard the political context, the only elements or mythemes intrinsic to the myth are the coupling of a god with a woman, the subsequent pregnancy of the woman, and the woman’s separation from her own mother as a necessary correlative to becoming a mother herself. There are of course inherent risks, namely the loss of meaning and the possible violation of authorial intent, in taking any story out of its socio-political context. However, if other forms of narrative can survive reframing (if not complete deconstruction), then surely myth can.
**The Tale of Proserpina (5.391-571)**

Since I have argued that Diana acts as an archetypal mother, it may be helpful to examine more literal mother-daughter relationships in Ovid’s epic. Perhaps by looking at other mothers we can understand better the attitudes and behaviors of Juno and Diana in the Callisto myth. The stories of Iphis and Proserpina depict mothers who attempt to help their daughters evade death, and both the actions of these two mothers as well as the solutions they find for their daughters may shed light on the ideal mother-daughter relationship as envisioned by Ovid and which I argue is at the heart of myths of separation.

Proserpina is forcibly separated from her mother when she is brutally raped and kidnapped by her uncle, Dis. In response, Ceres abandons her role of nurturing earth mother and her grief is viewed by all the gods as excessive. Regarding the “marriage” as a personal loss and behaving “unnaturally” in protest, Ceres refuses to allow the seasons to progress, thus withholding nurturance from her human “children.” Though the reader may sympathize with Ceres’ pain, the myth refuses to condone her unnatural actions. The compromise that the gods and goddesses reach, that Dis and Ceres will share custody of Proserpina, may restore order but it hardly solves Proserpina’s problem of belonging to someone else. She is still, even in the most optimistically feminist interpretation, the property of someone else, two someone elses, in fact. Her inability to fully separate from her mother may account for her inability to have children, to fulfill her new role as wife. Like Callisto at the moment of her rape, Proserpina has been “initiated” into womanhood, but unlike Callisto she is not able to progress to motherhood.

71 Note that Proserpina is not consulted in the matter.
This analysis would seem to suggest that motherhood is a natural state for women. However, it should be emphasized that on a mythical level, the archetypal goddess does progress from virgin to mother to crone, but this is an ideal nature to which I refer and not a mandate for all real women. Keep in mind that the mother-daughter relationship is ultimately about the individuation of the self (all selves, male and female) represented by separation and growth; in the patriarchal worldview that means marriage and motherhood. The myth would be threatening and ultimately meaningless in its social context if the virgin left her mother to form her own new community, if she parthenogenetically reproduced to populate her community. The problem is that for the myth to be meaningful to the human psyche, the daughter must cross the threshold of daughter-mother. She has to become a human female, physically, emotionally, socially, and symbolically. She has to exist in the real world, which, for both Ovid and us, is patriarchal.

The Tale of Iphis (9.666–797)

Iphis is a girl who is faced with certain death because she is a girl. Her mother pretends her daughter is a boy and thus saves the child’s life. In the liminal space of adolescence, Iphis falls in love with another girl. In her world, the patriarchy, Iphis does not really exist. As a lesbian, she is invisible because she does not abide by the rules of a hetero-normative society. Death is the only possible solution for this social impossibility. In order to save her daughter, Iphis’ mother prays for help to Isis, who earlier in Ovid’s text was herself a rape victim saved by a double transformation and rewarded with motherhood and godhood. Like her Roman counterparts, Diana and Ceres,

72 For more on the status of “lesbian” in the ancient, medieval, and modern world, see Chapter 5.
Isis was present at the transition from virgin to mother. The prayer of Iphis’ mother is not that she be allowed to keep her daughter but that the child be allowed to live and thrive. In the case of Iphis, living means surrendering both maidenhood and sex. Iphis leaves the community of women when “she” becomes a “he.” Unlike Ceres, Iphis’ mother accepts and appreciates the loss of her virginal daughter as inevitable and even desirable, and unlike the Roman goddesses, Isis joyfully liberates Iphis from her community. Furthermore, Iphis’ tale ends happily and satisfactorily for all concerned. Does the mytheme of separation fall apart because Iphis does not become a mother? No, because individuation is still achieved – the daughter, now a man, has still crossed a threshold. She no longer lives in the liminal space of both sex and gender as she did before.\textsuperscript{73}

\textit{The Tale of Actaeon (3.155-255)}

Through his numerous tales of rape, Ovid establishes the need for female community and separation. The tale of Actaeon helps to illustrate this need. Actaeon was a hunter who happened upon Diana as she was bathing. The goddess was so outraged by the intrusion that she punished the young man by transforming him into a hart. He was then eaten by his own hounds.

Diana punishes Actaeon for his intrusion and Callisto for her loss of intactness. In both cases, the circumstance surrounding the breach of integrity is unimportant because it is the breach itself that must be rectified for the sake of preserving the integrity of the female community. Twice Diana has to confront the masculine threat to her community. Each time she acts swiftly and decisively. With the rape of Callisto, Diana suffers the

\textsuperscript{73} There is another Ovidian female who finds happiness and safety in the abandonment of her sex. After being raped by Neptune, Caenis asks to be transformed into a man (Caeneus) to prevent any future victimization (12.189-209).
sexual violation of her troop and quickly purges the community of the contaminated member. Actaeon’s crime, voyeurism, is treated either as rape, a sort of “visual rape,” or as a prelude to rape, and Diana assumes that the interloper cannot be trusted. In these two episodes, Ovid (or Diana) underscores the need for the exclusivity of the community: women who would be whole must remain ever vigilant in the struggle to maintain the community against masculine intrusions. The tales of Callisto-the-exiled and Actaeon-the-eaten-alive reveal Diana’s distaste for all things masculine and her ruthless determination to keep her circle closed. The frequency of rape in the *Metamorphoses* and Diana’s role as patroness of child-birth render the expulsion of Callisto as less an effect of Diana’s revulsion toward sexuality than her realization of her own vulnerability to rape and the need to banish all threats and reminders of that vulnerability.

*The Tale of Medea (7.1-424)*

There are a few women in the *Metamorphoses* who avoid victimization altogether or at least reclaim some power over their own destinies. Iphis avoids death twice. Caenis, raped by Neptune, chooses to be a man, so she will never suffer rape again.\(^\text{74}\) The daughter of Erysichthon, sold into slavery by her father, was granted the ability to change her form at will, thereby allowing her to escape the “mastery” of men. Medusa, following her rape, becomes a vengeful snake-haired monster with the power to turn men to stone, eliminating the possibility of any future rape. It may be argued that Medusa’s petrifying of mortals is both a punishment for and a defense against the male intruder. Philomela avenges herself against Tereus by killing and feeding his son to him. Following rape, pregnancy, imprisonment, and exile, Io becomes the goddess Isis, the one deity in the

\(^{74}\) Neptune also made her impervious to pointed weapons of other men.
Metamorphoses who offers aid and protection to her devotees. Finally, Medea, to whom Ovid devotes more than 400 lines, progresses from maiden to mother to goddess and refuses subjugation to any man.

Though Medea does not belong to any obvious community, she deserves a closer look. She is one of many women in the Metamorphoses who is used and objectified and becomes a raving, murderous lunatic. Ovid depicts the process of Medea’s transformation from maiden to witch to goddess, by focusing all 424 lines upon her evolving character, taking her beyond the categories of conquered and conqueror. Unlike her feminine counterparts, Medea does not mourn and wail when she is misused, and unlike Ovid’s rapists, Medea never acts out of fear for herself and makes no attempt to hide her crimes. Ovid introduces Medea as a young woman torn between love and loyalty to country and kin who struggles with the issue of pietas (a patriarchal virtue) and its proper expression. Medea banishes pietas in favor of love. Despite this rejection, she later uses pietas to manipulate the daughters of Pelias to slaughter their father. Medea perverts pietas by acting out of a skewed sort of pietas to Jason (Pelias had robbed him of his birthright); she evokes pietas to convince Pelias’ daughters to do what is ultimately an impious act.

Ovid paints Medea from the outset as mistress of her own destiny. She quickly abandons the role of the innocent maiden as she leaps whole-heartedly into the role of Jason’s wife. She knows from the beginning what she might expect from Jason: “once he is safe because of me, he may sail away without me and be another woman’s husband” (7.39-41). Yet, for the love of Jason, she accepts his promise to marry her in return for

75Unless otherwise noted, I use Rolfe Humphries’ translation (Ovid: Metamorphoses, Bloomington: Indiana Press University, 1983).
her aid; remaining skeptical, she makes him swear by the tri-formed goddess. Thus, she knowingly and freely surrenders her identity as daughter by aiding Jason against her father’s interest and eloping with her lover, choosing to abandon her home and family. Yet she takes with her the epithets Colchis (7.296, 331, 348) and Phasias (7.298), never quite abandoning her ancestry nor completely sublimating her social station to her husband’s. She also chooses to abandon her identity as sister, by killing her own brother and scattering his limbs to slow her father’s pursuit of the Argo. Wholly throwing herself into the identity of wife, she uses her arts to restore her father-in-law to a youthful body and to destroy her husband’s uncle. Then, she abandons the role of wife and mother just as suddenly and violently as she abandoned the role of sister and daughter. Medea returns to Corinth after murdering Pelias, and immediately launches a murderous rampage against all that Jason loves. Ovid does not even give her time to catch her breath:

At last, on snaky wings, she landed at Corinth: here, according to early tradition, ancient men’s bodies were said to have sprung from rain-bred mushrooms. After Jason’s new bride was torched by the Colchian poison and after two seas saw the king’s palace go up in flames, then was her impious sword stained with the blood of her sons, and, having avenged herself the woman, not at all a mother, fled the sword of Jason. (7.391-97)

The reader is given no warning of the impending doom of the royal line and her own sons; Medea literally hops off her dragons and begins killing. Ovid passes no judgment and provides no insight into the mind of the woman about to kill her own children.

Unlike most accounts of Medea, which culminate in the murder of her sons, Ovid’s version glosses over that element, devoting only half a line to it. Instead, Ovid ends his Medea with her attempt to kill Theseus. I think that beyond providing a clever transition from one story to another, the emphasis on Medea’s attempted murder of
Theseus is meant to provide more insight into Medea’s character and function as a burgeoning goddess. What is her motivation for trying to kill Theseus? What prompts her to kill her other victims? In the case of her baby brother, Medea killed to protect Jason; in the case of Pelias, she was avenging a wrong against Jason; and in the case of Jason’s new bride and her sons, Medea was exacting revenge for having been unfairly discarded by Jason. So is it protection or revenge that motivates Medea against Theseus? I think both apply. Medea’s tale begins with her as the daughter of a king who passionately loves the hero Jason and ends with Medea as the wife of a king trying to kill a hero. Perhaps Medea saw something in Theseus that reminded her of Jason, and she sought to stop him before he could seduce, elope with, and abandon any royal maidens. She fails, of course, because Theseus lives long enough to take Minos’ daughter, Ariadne, away from her home and leave her abandoned (along with his promise to marry her) on a deserted island. Just as Medea loved and aided Jason, so too Ariadne loves and aids Theseus; both girls act against the interests of their fathers in favor of the hero. Medea need not have known in advance what would happen if Theseus lived. His reputation was enough to recommend her against him. Other women in the *Metamorphoses* have taken similar precautions against men of a “certain type.” As mentioned above, Diana drove Actaeon away from her bathing pool, apparently having learned what men do when they happen upon women in or near water. Procne killed her son because he was too much like his father Tereus. Neither Diana nor Procne trusted “that type of man” because Ovid had taught them not to, and I think it is this mistrust of “that type” which compels Medea to seek Theseus’ death.
Medea can claim victory over Colchis, Corinth, and Athens, all of which suffered tremendous violence at her hands, but perhaps her most important victory is over death itself. Three times she escapes death, each time fleeing in her dragon-drawn chariot. Following Pelias’ murder, Ovid says she would have been punished had she not escaped on dragon’s wings (7.350-51). After killing Creusa and her own sons, Medea escapes Jason’s sword (7.397), and she flees similarly from her second husband after the attempted murder of Theseus (7.424). In addition to escaping the jaws of death and certain justice, Medea can rescue, even resurrect, men from death: she saves Jason from death, and she saves Aeson from old age and a looming death. Of Jason, Medea says “it is up to the gods whether he lives or dies” (7.23-24), but realizing what will happen if she does not intervene, she decides to wrest the power over life and death away from the gods and use her magic to secure both Jason’s life and his victory over her father. Jason’s father, Aeson, was, with Medea’s help, able to avoid “fate,” a boon not granted even to the gods. Indeed, Jupiter frequently complains of his own impotence in regard to fate. Medea’s power over death exceeds the abilities of all of the Olympian gods. Only the Earth-dwelling deity, Aesculapius, and the Egyptian Isis possess similar powers. Even the god Bacchus must concede Medea’s superiority when he comes to her for help in restoring health to his aunts. Though of course the gods themselves do not die, they do frequently bemoan their inability to stop the death of or restore life to a loved one. This must be especially galling to Apollo, god of the healing arts, who is upstaged by Medea and even by his own son, Aesculapius. Apollo, powerless to resurrect Hyacinthus (10.202-04), Coronis (2.617-18), and Leucothoe (4.247-49), must defer to Medea who slaughters and restores to life both animals and men at will.
Like the gods of the *Metamorphoses*, Medea commits all of her crimes with impunity, in part because she is ruled by her own law, and in part because she manages to escape the crime scene while her victims are in shock and unable to react. Like Apollo, Medea uses herbs to heal (7.98), she uses herbs to kill the serpent guardian (7.149-55), and she allows her reason to be conquered (7.10-11, 20). However, in the case of Apollo’s pining for Daphne, reason was conquered by love, whereas Medea’s reason gives way to her wrath (7.10-11). In contrast to Apollo, Medea understands that her passion is destructive, that, in her, love and violence are linked, and she knows that in order to save Jason’s life others will likely have to die. Her contemplative approach contrasts her sharply with Apollo, who when smitten by love for Daphne was deceived by his own oracle (1.491). Compare Apollo’s ignorance with Medea’s claim that “it is not ignorance of the truth that deceives me, but love” (7.92). Medea is insistent that despite her wrath, despite love, she is nevertheless in full possession of her intellectual faculties. She is not ignorant of the truth even when she is in the full blush of lust. Apollo confesses that while he is in love with Daphne he has no power over herbs (1.523), but Medea, even while passionately in love with Jason, has no problem selecting and concocting herbs to save Jason or to rejuvenate Aeson. In her incantation (7.199-219) she claims the powers of and power over various gods, including Apollo, saying that she can make him pale with fright (7.209). Medea also lays claim to the special talents of Apollo’s son Aesculapius, and she can claim the power of Orpheus (Apollo’s mortal son), who could move the rocks and trees with his song (11.1-2). In her incantation she says, “living rocks and oak trees are rooted up from their soil [by me]” (7.204). But Medea can do more than that: she can also move forests and shake the mountains and the Earth (7.205-06).
Even Jupiter must bow to Medea, for she performs the sky-god’s traditional task of overseeing and enforcing oaths. She agrees to help Jason, but in return she orders him to keep his promise: “you who have been helped by me, keep your promise!” (7.94) Leaving Jason bereft of his second wife, his children, and his fortune is his punishment, executed by Medea, for forswearing himself. Medea treats Jason like an unruly mortal who does not pay proper honors to her, as though she were a goddess. Medea punishes Pelias for robbing Jason of his birthright. She attempts to kill Theseus for his future misbehavior, ingratitude and the abandonment of Ariadne. Thus, Ovid presents a half-mortal woman who defies fate, the gods, and the laws of men and nature.

Medea does perhaps foresee her transformation into a goddess, for surely that is what has happened. Before any of her foul deeds, she claims for herself an inner divinity (“The greatest god is within me!” 7.55), as she, like Wittig’s guérillères, rejects social norms and laws. Later in the same speech she declares that she will be dear to the gods and that her head will touch the stars (7.61). From that point forward she ceases to question herself. Like Apollo and Jupiter she is initially spurred on by passion for Jason (one cannot call it love, as cupido is one of the “virtues” she abandons at 7.73). Medea is unique among Metamorphoses women, because at the moment of her transformation (when she finally decides to act on her feelings for Jason), she recognizes what is happening and is unafraid (7.92). It is as though she accepts her change as inevitable and without regret proceeds on her quest for knowledge and power. Medea separates herself from patriarchal society (and all of its values) when she finally chooses cupido over rectum, pietas, and pudor (7.73). In the absence of virtue, she understands that self-
gratification is the only legitimate motive, rendering her the perfect candidate for
deification in the Ovidian universe.

Medea is at best a problematic character to defend or even to define. She is
certainly strong, but her strength is best displayed violently: like a warrior, tyrant, or
rapist-god/king, her “love” is brutally expressed. She possesses the skills and powers of
the gods, but her resemblance to Olympians goes beyond magical prowess: in the
expression of her passion for Jason, mortals suffer. Medea transcends the role of victim,
and does so in a manner that is difficult to admire.

In contrast to Wittig’s assertion that the memory of evil deeds is unhealthy and
that one must rewrite or ignore such tales, Ovid demonstrates that remembering the past,
especially past victimizations, is essential to one’s safety. Prior to telling about numerous
rapes, “Memory’s daughters,” the Muses, recall the reason for their separation from men,
Pyreneus’ attempted rape (5.288). Urania tells Minerva that she and the other Muses
would enjoy their home on Helicon “if only we were safe, but everything frightens us
virgins and we have not yet recovered from our fear of Pyreneus” (5.273-75). Like Diana,
the Muses have learned from experience and rumor that the patriarchal world is a
dangerous place for a maiden. It is necessary to remember that evil exists and that the
world is dangerous because public complacency in a Republic can be fatal to liberty.
However, a long memory can be psychologically unhealthy if it limits personal freedom
and prevents individuation. “Everything frightens us,” says Urania, “and we have not yet
recovered.” The Muses live in a constant state of fear and victimization, removed not
only from men, but also from the world.
According to the Marxist feminist model, the rapes in the *Metamorphoses* are linked with imperialist conquest. However, while Ovid uses rape narratives to criticize Augustus’ moral legislation and imperialistic drive, we cannot forget that on a purely psychological level (i.e. separated from their political and social context) the myths depict the process of individuation, the establishment of a self wholly separate from one’s mother. While we might expect that the emergent identity should arrive triumphantly, it must be remembered that, at least in Ovid’s world, the individual is born into a political climate that is essentially oppressive. Ovid’s vision of individuation is that of a child who leaves one oppressive parent for another. The self, once smothered by an overly protective mother, is now the subject of a tyrannical father.

The next Chapter will explore the medieval masterpiece of an early French feminist, Christine de Pizan, who took Ovid to task for being the worst kind of misogynist. Christine responds to centuries of female oppression with her own *City of Ladies*, an impenetrable fortress built and exclusively occupied by women.
Chapter 4
Christine de Pizan and the Castrating Pen

Christine de Pizan, who is usually categorized as a feminist without much debate, is the first professional female writer to challenge the rhetoric of patriarchal misogyny with her own, quite feminine, brand of rhetoric, and she is for the most part successful. Christine never hesitates to call a rose a rose and a misogynist a misogynist, and her *City of Ladies* is an ambitious defense of women as a sex against centuries of misogynist literature. The *City* is impregnable and exclusively female, resembling modern feminist utopias like *Les guérillères*, and like feminist revisionist historians Christine changes myths to suit her purposes, ignoring, for instance, violations of communities and individuals that she appropriates for her own inviolate community.

*For the Defense of All Women*

The purpose of the walled city is protection. Reason asserts that women need to be protected from the slanders and mistreatment of men. Because no male “champion [will] afford them an adequate defense,” Christine with the help and guidance of The Female Trinity will build a great city which will then serve as “a refuge and defense

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77 Much has been written about her famous exchanges with *Romance of the Rose* apologists.

78 The name by which, for simplicity’s sake, I will hereafter refer to Reason, Rectitude, and Justice as a group.
against the various assailants” (1.3.3).\(^79\) Not only will the city protect “those ladies who have been abandoned,” who are in danger of assault, but it will also offer refuge to all women who have been victimized by the actions and words of men. Christine “rescues” legendary and mythical women from slander by retelling their stories in such a way as to erase either the sinful behavior of her ladies or the acts of violence which rendered them victims and made them legendary in the first place.\(^80\) Thus, she protects her city and herself from the slanders of men, which is after all the primary reason for the city’s existence. Through denial and redefinition, Christine routinely defends herself and her citizens. For instance, she corrects the misogynistic definition of a “natural woman” by simply redefining her as one who is virtuous. This is a simple and effective binary solution to the criticisms raised by misogynists: Good behavior is natural and more common and bad behavior is unnatural and uncommon. Interestingly, Christine does not regard the behavior of men in the same way; misbehaving men are the norm. It is also worth noting that Christine’s view of natural behavior as good is not in accordance with Christian doctrine, which holds that human beings in nature are sinful and capable of good works only through the grace of God.\(^81\) Christine subverts not only the Christian doctrine of original sin, but also the delivery of grace. As noted earlier, it is through the

\(^79\) Unless otherwise noted, I use the translation of Earl Jeffrey Richards (The Book of the City of Ladies, New York: Persea Books, 1982).

\(^80\) The city must also protect its women from “Women who lack virtue” who are as much a threat as the men (1.3.3). This exclusion of “a certain type of woman” is rather reminiscent of Diana’s treatment of Callisto who, I have argued, is excluded from the retinue of huntresses because of her lost virtue and because she reminded Diana of the goddess’s own vulnerability. Can we conclude then that Christine feels similarly vulnerable or exposed? Certainly the compulsion to exclude women who were genuinely “bad,” to include women who were virginal or chaste, and to excuse women who were genuinely bad but were necessarily included for their renown and strength of character suggests Christine’s desire to distance herself from women of lost virtue.

\(^81\) See for instance, Augustine On Merit and Forgiveness and On Nature and Grace, against Pelagius. See also Aquinas, Summa, 2.2.10.1.
grace of Reason not God that Christine is able to see all women, pagan and Christian, in a new light; through the grace delivered by a divine woman, Christine is able to love and admire the entirety of her own sex.

_Castrating Misogyny_

She begins _City_ with a diatribe against “all philosophers and poets” who have claimed that “the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice” (1.1.1), thus damaging the reputations of all women. Since the _Romance of the Rose_ has been treated extensively elsewhere, I will focus on Christine’s criticism of Ovid, which takes on a particularly personal quality in that she attacks not only his ideas, but also the man himself.

Of course, Christine is concerned about all misogynistic poets and philosophers, whose thoughts and theories were considered by many to be imbued with authority. This _auctoritas_ which was treated with great respect by Christine’s peers was perhaps her greatest rhetorical obstacle. The medieval faith in _auctoritas_ relied in part on man’s facility with reason and therefore was of a secular nature. However, _auctoritas_ was frequently employed as a rhetorical method by Christian theologians who used the pagan poets and philosophers as examples of both reasoned thinking and common sense, by which I mean what was universally acknowledged by men of all nations and beliefs to be true. Thus, for Christine, pagan misogynists (like Ovid and Cato) are as much a threat as Christian misogynists (like Jean de Meung and Matheolus). In attacking misogyny, she must also take on _auctoritas_.

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82 Willard argues that the debate over the _Roman de la Rose_ during which she incurred both the wrath and insults of “several young Parisian humanists,” is an illustration of “the [misogynistic] attitudes about which Christine was complaining” (336-37).
In order to refute the claims of male authority embodied by the medieval ideal of *auctoritas* without attacking every single misogynist idea or accusation against women, Christine must establish her own authority, and to do so she assumes a unique rhetorical stance. She notes that her own experience and observations of herself and other women stand in direct contrast with the assumptions and conclusions drawn by *auctoritas*. However, masculine rationale would seem to dictate that so many illustrious men cannot all be wrong, and therefore what she “feels” and “knows” or intuits must be false. Without saying so directly, Christine here makes the very argument which *auctoritas* relies upon for its power over popular philosophy and common sense. However, even in aligning against her own sex, Christine recognizes her alliance with patriarchal *auctoritas* as “folly” (1.1.2) and as a rejection of her intuitive knowledge. From the very beginning of her prologue male-centered *auctoritas* leads Christine to “[detest] myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature” (1.1.1). It is only after the arrival of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, the holy trinity of women, that Christine is able to discard the lies of the patriarchy. Significantly, Reason is the first to speak, allowing Christine to construct a new feminist mode of thought and historical analysis. It is only through the grace of Reason that Christine is able to see the truth behind the misogynistically generated tissue of lies known as HIStory. Christine simultaneously demonstrates her newfound love for her own sex and populates her city by giving examples of women who have triumphed over adversity and who have done great things, as well as by recounting the atrocities of men and by unfavorably comparing men to women. Interestingly, Christine does not target historians. Perhaps, like Wittig, she

83 Note that Wittig’s emphasis on the senses and the body as the most honest and reliable source of knowledge echoes Christine’s valuing of intuitive knowledge over *auctoritas*. 
recognizes the power of myth over that of historical fact. In addition, poets are largely dependent on accepted history as it suits their presumed purpose of perpetuating the patriarchy.

Christine invites those women who have challenged the patriarchy, by means of both literal and figurative castration and through the rejection of men as sexual partners, to be citizens in her city. Thus, women who dedicated themselves to virginity and chastity are lauded, as are the women who overpowered men whether physically or intellectually.

In addition to extolling the virtues and accomplishments of women, Christine devalues the auctoritas and accomplishments of men, citing fear of castration as the latent fear of all men and the primary motive for misogyny. Like Ovid’s rapists, fear is a common element among Christine’s misogynists.

Those men who are moved by the defect of their own bodies have impotent and deformed limbs but sharp and malicious minds. They have found no other way to avenge the pain of their impotence except by attacking women who bring joy to many. Thus they have thought to divert others away from the pleasure which they cannot personally enjoy. (I.8.7)

Christine uses her theory of male impotence and castration to explain what she reads as misogyny in Ovid, whose biography she conveniently reconstructs to include his castration. In an unique alteration of the historical account of Ovid’s exile and death, Christine has the poet returning to Rome only to be castrated by Augustus:

He was called back from exile and failed to refrain from the misdeeds [excessive promiscuity] for which his guilt had already punished him, he was castrated and disfigured because of faults (1.9.2).
Christine says that Ovid’s misogyny became even more vicious after his castration. I think she needs to castrate Ovid because of his great influence on her. Clearly, the influence is not consciously acknowledged by Christine. She could not possibly acknowledge the influence of a man she regards as a misogynist of the worst order, an author of the very sort of invective that she tries to resist.

Christine apparently had a propensity for linguistically castrating her male rivals. Note her tongue in cheek warning to Gontier Col during the famous Romance of the Rose debate: “if you seek in every way to minimize my firm beliefs by your anti-feminist attacks, please recall that a small dagger or knife point can pierce a great, bulging sack.”

Seeing herself as the “little knife” Christine threatens all she deems misogynists with literal castration.

**The Women Who Tried**

Besides castration, a woman may challenge a man’s power over her by rejecting him as a sexual partner. As Ovid demonstrates, women who seek to live separately from men are automatically targets for rape, and Christine’s Amazons fulfill perfectly the expectations of the Ovidian paradigm. Noted for their dedication to virginity are the Amazons who established a great nation in order to avoid the servitude of marriage. These women not only enjoy freedom from uxorious demands but also from the demands of the patriarchal state. They lived “without being subject to men” (1.16.1). Indeed, these women attempted to live without reference to men at all, banishing all men from their

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presence and excluding any future admittance of a man to their society. As with Wittig’s *guérillères*, Christine’s Amazons maintain a hierarchical social system: “the nobles among them . . . burned off their left breast . . . so that it would not hinder them from carrying a shield, and they removed the right breast of commoners to make it easier for them to shoot a bow” (1.16.1). The Amazons, like many if not most patriarchal systems practice imperialism: “They so delighted in the vocation of arms that through force they greatly increased their country and their dominion, and their high fame spread everywhere” (1.16.1).

Christine asserts that the Amazons formed a great nation to be free of “servitude” (1.4.3). However, the Amazons are anything but free of men and male influence, in that they live a reactive existence. After losing all their men in war the women armed themselves and “exacted a most fine revenge for the deaths of the men whom they loved” (1.16.1). The widows and orphaned girls “decided finally that thenceforth they would maintain their dominion by themselves without being subject to men” (I.16.1). They shut men out in reaction to previous pain inflicted upon them through grief and subjugation. Their desire to conquer the (Greek) world is not fueled by the will to dominate, but rather by “revenge for the deaths of the men they loved” (1.16.1).

In fact, the Amazons seem to be incapable of not loving men, incapable of living wholly separate from men, as demonstrated by Christine in the tale of Hippolyta and Menalippe, who at first are enemies to Hercules and Theseus and are finally their lovers. Christine details the valiant fight between the Amazons and the Greek heroes, after which Hippolyta and Menalippe become the prisoners of the heroes. Oddly, Christine seems concerned about the reputations of the Greek men, noting that Hercules and Theseus
“greatly honored the ladies” (1.18.5) as though they were guests at a foreign court and not prisoners of war. In this instance it is convenient, even desirable for the woman to be subject to the superior strength of the man. Hercules and Theseus are further honored by Christine for their courtliness (1.18.6). After the manner of Ovidian rapists and conquerors, the heroes ask only for their armor as ransom “in perpetual memory of this victory which they had won over the maidens” (1.18.6). Furthermore, because Theseus “greatly loved” Hippolyta and without deference to Hippolyta’s wishes in the matter, Orithyia “granted that Theseus could take [Hippolyta] into his own country” (1.18.6). The language is very telling, Hippolyta is acted upon by Theseus, she has no agency. Christine transfers agency from the men to the women (1.18.6), apparently attempting to empower the women by means of their own victimization. Thus, Christine deftly transforms the act of rape into an act of love. Theseus captures Hippolyta; Theseus loves Hippolyta; Theseus marries Hippolyta. To further diminish the accomplishments of the Amazons, the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta is counted by the Greeks a victory over all the Amazons. Hippolyta’s loss of independence frees the Greeks from fear of the Amazons (1.18.6). Why? They are now an example for future separatists. The walls must eventually come down. The Amazons represent a failed community and can only herald the same for other separatists.

Another “love-struck” Amazon, Penthesilea meets her doom at the hand of the Greeks as a result of her great “love” for Hector. True to her Amazon nature, she fights against the Greeks at Troy to avenge her man’s death. Penthesilea leaves the relative

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85 Laennec discusses in depth what she calls Christine’s “glorification of victimization,” calling such a move a “tactical [and rhetorical] choice.”
86 Who is by the way promoted by Christine from Hell (Limbo actually) to her own holy city (see Dante, *Inferno*, IV.124-128).
safety of her Amazon nation for the love of Hector – she violates the Amazonian raison d’être by attaching herself to a man, leading to the inevitable experience of grief, and finally her own death. The lesson here is that when the maiden leaves the safety of the sisterhood she is immediately vulnerable both physically and emotionally. First we learn that Penthesilea is a fierce warrior; then we are told that “she never condescended to couple with a man, remaining a virgin her whole life” (1.19.1). But Penthesilea’s decision to be a virgin is undermined by her “great love” and desire for Hector, sight unseen. Christine excuses Penthesilea’s feelings on the grounds that it is “normal … to love [one’s] peer freely.” So as long as the man is on an equal footing it is no disgrace to love him. However, this view contradicts the assumption that for Penthesilea “coupling with a man” was degrading; the desire to be near a man certainly proves to be fatal. Is it degrading for Penthesilea to kneel in front of Hector’s dead body as he seems to sit in state “as though he were alive”? As her foremothers fought to avenge the deaths of their husbands, so Penthesilea fights to avenge the death of Hector. Like the Ovidian rape victim, Penthesilea dies after she is separated from the other women “so that they could not help her” (1.19.2).

Zenobia too disdains the yoke of marriage and chooses at first to pursue her love of hunting. Zenobia prefers the wilderness to the city: “No one could keep her from leaving the residence of the walled cities, palaces, and royal chambers in order to live in the woods and forests, where, armed with sword and spear she eagerly hunted wild game” (1.20.1). She also rejects love of a man and marriage: “This maiden despised all physical love and refused to marry for a long time, for she was a woman who wished to keep her virginity for life” (1.20.1). Even in stating Zenobia’s preference for an
independent life, Christine reminds us that virginity is not a choice that every woman has: “In the end, under pressure from her parents, she took as husband the king of the Palmyrenes” (1.20.1). And despite her husband’s beauty of face and body she continues to abhor physical love, sleeping with her husband “only to have children” (1.20.1). Thus, Zenobia is subject to the rule of her parents and to the laws of God, following her parents’ directive to marry and the Church’s directive of chastity in marriage.

Camilla\(^{87}\) is an example of a woman who successfully pursued independence and the hunt. Like Zenobia and the Amazons, she considered marriage beneath her: “She was so high-minded that she did not deign to take a husband or to couple with a man” (1.24.1). Presumably Camilla is allowed to remain a virgin by her father’s consent. Though there is no mention of his feelings on the matter, it is unimaginable that she could or would have gone against her father’s wishes for her, both because of her own feelings for her father and because of the mores of the time, as the example of Zenobia makes so clear.

In Zenobia, Camilla, and the Amazons, Christine has laid a foundation for her city composed of women who intended to be independent but failed. On the one hand, Amazons are ideal for the foundation of the City of Ladies because they remind us that when we love we are vulnerable and that when we are not exclusive we are vulnerable. It could be argued that the Amazons serve as an example of what happens when one allows men to enter into one’s paradise. Like Ovid’s Diana and the Muses, Christine hopes that she will learn from the tale how to avoid such vulnerability. All of the accomplishments of the Amazons are compromised by their failures, and all of their failures are a result of

\(^{87}\) In Hell with Penthesilea (\textit{Inferno}, IV.124-128)
their vulnerability to men. The Amazon saga is proof of the need for gynotopia. The lesson Christine teaches us (whether she meant to or not) is that any attempt to reject the sexual attentions of men is doomed to failure. In this regard she follows Ovid who explicitly states that Daphne’s wish to remain a virgin would go unfulfilled because of her beauty. Daphne, like Zenobia and Camilla, is given her father’s consent to remain unwed.

**Ovid’s Rapists**

In Christine, man’s innate fear of women is demonstrated by the Greeks’ fear “that the power of these women might at the same time extend to their own land” (1.18.1). In anticipation of invasion, the Greeks preempted a first strike and sent Hercules and Theseus to take Amazonia by surprise and “invade them first” (1.18.2). Like Christine’s misogynist, Ovid’s rapist acts out of anger, fear, and a loss of self-control. For instance, Boreas responds to rejection with “terrible rage … which was his usual manner” (6.685). He claims that he is naturally violent: “my weapons [are] ferocity and might and anger and a threatening attitude… violence suits me” (6.687-90). Tereus responds to Philomela’s accusations with rage (6.549), and Dis responds to Cyane’s protests with great wrath (5.420). In a brutal attack he forces his way to the underworld through Cyane. Penetrating her completely, he then ruptures the earth (5.421-24). Even the rape of Daphne is motivated by anger (1.452-53).

Apollo is an example of the gods’ lack of control over their own emotions. Ovid repeatedly references Apollo’s vulnerability to uncontrollable passion: he burns, he has no power to cure his burning; he sees himself as victim of his own desires. Apollo is the only one of the gods who identifies himself as helpless and unable to resist his sexual
impulses; the other gods never examine their state of mind, they just act. Apollo is out of control with rage when he kills Coronis (2.600-11), but later regrets his action (2.6 12-16) and his inability to raise her dead body to life (2.618). Instead he settles for the cheap thrill of caressing her lifeless form (2.617). Similarly, he caresses Daphne’s altered form (1.553-56). The rape victims are forced to absorb the rapists’ anger and passion. In fact the victim of a god’s violent passion is treated as a vessel for receiving and containing what the god himself finds uncontrollable. Apollo, even while burning with love which the poet calls sterilem (1.496), is impotent and powerless.

The fear of discovery of the rape (and thus, the discovery of their inadequacy) leads Jupiter and Tereus to acts of violation beyond the initial rape. Jupiter’s love for Io was easily overcome by his fear of Juno’s anger (1.618-21). Tereus, motivated by the fear of Philomela’s threats to expose him, mutilates and further rapes her (6.549, 562). Although Juno cannot directly harm Jupiter’s person, she repeatedly upstages him by revealing his hiding places and depriving him of his sexual outlets. Repeatedly outperformed and outmaneuvered by his wife, Jupiter is pathetic and inept next to her. No wonder he so feared discovery and Juno’s jealous rages.

Neptune’s compensation to his victims following their rapes may be an attempt on his part to feel powerful and thus end the self-perpetuating cycle of impotence. In other words, the rapist feels out of control, powerless over his own emotions; this sense of powerlessness leads him to rape; but even the act of rape is a demonstration of his lack of self-control; so he compensates the victim in a way that only he can and, thus, re-establishes himself as powerful and in control of the situation, himself, and others. Twice Neptune talks to his victims but only after the fact and then only to grant their requests
for protection from further violation, though I doubt that the granting of such protection
has anything to do with a guilty conscience on Neptune’s part. More likely he complies
out of some primitive need to think of himself as the ultimate lover (in the case of
Erysichthon’s daughter) or perhaps to know that he was the one and only ravager of this
particular girl (in the case of Caenis).

Anger, violent passions, self-gratification, and even fear are the motivating factors
at work in the lives of the kings and gods who rape women. The Olympians of the
*Metamorphoses* are clumsy, powerless, and cowardly. They often make outrageous
claims that are insupportable, promises that are impossible to fulfill, and threats that they
are incapable of carrying out. They behave as autocratic, shameless tyrants.

The powers that the gods lack, the goddesses possess. The powers to resurrect and
create, for instance, are reserved for the Goddess Mothers of the *Metamorphoses* who
create or give birth to new life with little or no credit going to any god. Themis, the
original deity of the Oracle at Delphi before Apollo killed her Python, was the catalyst of
the creation of the new race of men (1.379). The Earth herself is the mother of many
races of beings, including man (1.395) and other monstrosities (1.416). Cybele is the
mother of all gods (10.104, 686) and Ceres (perhaps a later version of Cybele) is the giver
of all things (5.343), and as the goddess of agriculture she is the nurturer of all men
(5.341). Isis, who is credited in the *Metamorphoses* primarily as the savior of Iphis, was
in Egypt the Great Mother Goddess, a Creatrix, and an agriculture deity. Her powers in
the Graeco-Roman world included all of the powers that belonged individually to the
Olympian deities, both gods and goddesses. Goddesses like Ceres (first to give laws) and
Astraea (maiden of justice) make the rules for civilization, and it is women who control
and protect the transfer of the powers of state. For instance, Ariadne, Scylla, and Medea as maiden princesses become symbols of the state’s powers as they give themselves to their lovers. They are not only sexual objects but also political objects.

**Christine’s Sinners**

In order to honor the heathen queen, Semiramis, as the first stone of the Foundation, Christine must first excuse Semiramis’ incestuous relationship with her son. She declares that at the time incest was not taboo and that Semiramis was forced to marry her son in order to keep her position in the kingdom. Christine works out a new definition of “natural”: whatever actions we take are natural and not sinful (1.15.2). She allows Semiramis to violate the incest taboo on the grounds that natural law permitted that behavior at the time. Semiramis is literally absolved by Christine of the sin of incest on the grounds that she was subject only to the laws of nature, not the laws of God. Christine writes that had Semiramis “lived under our law” it would be right to reproach her for marrying her son. However, Semiramis’ motivation was political, not sexual, and so she can be forgiven (15.2).

There are many problems with Reason’s (and Christine’s) defense of Semiramis. This is presumably Reason’s version of the “virtuous pagan,” the pre-Christian individual who at least abided by natural law and led a virtuous existence. However, incest, like cannibalism, is a universal taboo; human disgust toward this act transcends religious and social law and its prohibition is universal; it is in fact against nature. Semiramis partakes of the advantages of power and hierarchy by marrying her son to prevent having to share her power with another woman. The incest taboo is a result of the need to extend power

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88 Dante, *Inferno* V.55-66 (Circle of the lustful)
89 Dante, *Inferno*, IV.
and increase material wealth. When families inter-marry they preclude the benefit of adding another family’s wealth to their own. Semiramis’ choice to wed her own son prevents an influx of new wealth and flies in the face of her own inclination to amass as much land, power, and material wealth as possible. There need not be a written law for Semiramis to violate, because she violates her own mandate. Reason defends the empress on the grounds that she considered herself the only woman worthy of marriage to her son – surely this is evidence of extreme narcissism and once again contrary to natural law and threatening to social order. Finally, the fact that Semiramis chose to marry in itself contradicts Christine’s ideal of the chaste widow. Semiramis marries not for the purpose of acquiring more lands and greater wealth, but for purely narcissistic reasons and is therefore hardly a shining example of the rational female ruler. “The taboo that separates the son from the mother, the injunction against incest, is generally taken as the foundational law of culture. It is the law of laws, the understanding upon which all moral behavior is based” (Semple, 181). According to Semple, Christine’s women do not obey the law because they are forced to do so by patriarchy, but rather because they choose to do so. Yet, Christine’s account of Semiramis belies this, for as Christine insists, “there can be no doubt that if she thought this was evil or that she would incur the slightest reproach, she would never have done this.” In other words, she would have followed the law, had there been a law prohibiting incest, and her obedience to the law would have been unwilling.

By turning witches, hated and feared by both the Christian and pagan patriarchies, into women of science, a male dominated field and a type of knowledge equally venerated by pagan and Christian patriarchies, Christine rescues these denizens of her
city from their bad reputations without ever having to directly contradict her predecessors, and yet her audience could not have been unaware of the storm of controversy surrounding the issue of witchcraft as men and women were regularly sentenced to burn at the stake for both the practice of witchcraft and the heresy of denying its existence. Though Christine does not attack the misogynist rhetoric of the Inquisition directly nor challenge the categorization of certain activities as witchcraft, she does demonstrate her awareness of the controversy in her question to Reason.

In light of the prohibition against the pursuit of arcane knowledge, Christine treads thin ice when she hopefully enquires about women who may have discovered an “unknown thing” (1.33.1). Reason replies with the story of Nicostrata who she says was “endowed by God with special gifts of knowledge” (1.33.2). In Christine such women become scientists, women who discover unknown things, not because they are unknowable (which would be a sin) but because they were not yet known. Christine neatly avoids the heresy by simply referring to the practices of Manto and Medea as “science” or “art” (1.32.1). Medea is praised for her knowledge of the properties of herbs, command of the weather, manipulation of geographic features, and the creation of fire. But Christine claims that Medea “was ignorant of no art which can be known” (1.32.1). In claiming knowledge of only those arts which can be known, Christine does enter the witchcraft debate obliquely. She defines knowledge of herbs as permitted knowledge, but offers no argument (theological or philosophical) to support her claim. She makes it seem that there is no need for such an argument. Circe is lauded for her ability to transform men.

90 Dante, Inferno eighth circle (XX.55)
Manto and Medea are lauded for their brilliant minds and their magical skills. Christine does not hesitate to enumerate the accomplishments of Manto: “she was well versed in the art of pyromancy, that is, divination by fire”; there was no man “who could so brilliantly read the veins of animals, the throats of bulls, and the entrails of beasts”; and she had the ability to “[force] spirits to speak in answer to her inquiries” (1.31.1). Christine questions neither the possibility of doing such things nor their legality, though the Church had by the 14th century declared such acts “witchcraft.”

Christine’s strength is her ability to reframe Christian doctrine in a feminist light without apparently offending anyone, but her daringness ends there. Christine embraces the traditional virtues of the Church, virginity, chaste widowhood, nurturance (the very “virtues” Ovid reveals as patriarchally constructed), and in doing so her revised heroines conform to a patriarchal paradigm which the original versions had managed to evade or to subvert. Like Wittig, Christine recognizes a problem, misogynistic literature, but her solution creates new problems, weakened and male-dependent heroines.

*A Problematic Gynotopia*

*City of Ladies* is a failed gynotopia for many reasons. Its author’s misreading of Ovid is particularly unfortunate, as she seems to have read some very powerful female characters in the wrong light. Christine’s Medea, for instance, lacks the strength of will, of body, or of character that Ovid’s Medea has. Christine’s Medea leaves no lasting impression on the audience and is in no way memorable. Christine changes myth and legend presumably to empower heroines. However, she fails to see the power these

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91 See the *Malleus Maleficarum*, I.10. Note that though the City predates the Malleus, the latter is a convenient reference for church and folk views of witchcraft in the 14th and 15th centuries. Witch burning (of mostly men) had already begun in France by the time Christine picked up a quill.
women already possess, and in the process of retelling the tale, transforms a myth into a simple story, robbing the myth and its heroine of their power. As demonstrated in the Wittig chapter, the failure to read mythical women as psychological archetypes leads to the disenchantment and disempowerment of both the archetype and the character.

In her insistence on the permanence and impregnability of her city, Christine ignores the lesson that Augustine and Ovid teach: namely, that all kingdoms, all cities eventually fall. Reason assures Christine

This City … will never be destroyed, nor will it ever fall, but will remain prosperous forever, regardless of all its jealous enemies. Although it will be stormed by numerous assaults, it will never be taken or conquered (1.4.2).

However, the reader knows that only the *City of God* is impervious to destruction and decay, and Christine should know this too. Yet she insists on the permanence of her city, and not because she was unaware of Augustine’s theology. On the contrary Christine modeled (philosophically and politically) *City of Ladies* on *City of God*.92

Christine’s city is founded upon a misreading and misappropriation of her sources. Her city is vulnerable to attack not so much because it is inhabited by women, but because it is inhabited by women who are insipid imitations of their namesakes. While acknowledging that Christine is aware of her historical tradition, we cannot ignore that in her abandonment of tradition Christine surrenders both the power of the original and the emotional/psychological success of separation. The city is as stagnate as Wittig’s Amazonia and the women within are less free to roam and connect with nature than their

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92 See for instance Earl Jeffrey Richards who asserts *City of Ladies* is not meant to “rival” *City of God*. Rather, she alludes to it so “that her political vision be understood as participating in a Christian tradition of political philosophy.” (xxxiii)
pagan counterparts. Christine’s city is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem of the vulnerable female.

Christine and Wittig have much in common. Each writer revises myth to fit her own ideological model without questioning either the model itself or the result; both Wittig and Christine advocate forgetfulness as a means of defense; and each woman creates a prison (both ideologically and literally) for all women. Christine, like Ovid, credits women with the establishment of the building blocks of society: law-making, agriculture, various sciences, the arts (including the art of war), and the written word. Christine’s attempt to reject the *auctoritas* of men, just as her heroines’ attempts to reject sex, fails. She cannot reject even Ovid (whom she managed to castrate, though apparently not very effectively). She suffers the same fate as her Amazons and virgin huntresses and even Wittig and her lesbian *guérillères*: they cannot, any of them, live without reference to and therefore dependence upon men.

Christine’s retelling of myth and legend transforms the mythical into the historical and the historical into fiction. This revision is essential to the moral impregnability of her fortress. For instance, in order to include Semiramis in the foundation of her city, she must first remove the taint of sexual impurity by condoning her incest with moral relativism: in some cultures it is permissible to commit incest with one’s son; therefore we will not judge Semiramis. The law of Nature prevails: “where all people were allowed to do whatever came into their hearts without sinning” (I.15.2). Christine performs similar ethical surgery on Medea, Circe, and Manto, who are no longer wicked pagan witches, but now scientists and feminist role models. One could argue that Christine anticipates a libertarian feminist perspective.
A man does not violate *The City of Ladies*; it is in fact invulnerable to the assaults of men or evil reputation. But are the women who compose the city safe from the pen of Christine? Are their reputations saved or harmed by Christine's moralizing? Christine saves Medea from condemnation as a witch, but would Medea have wanted such a thing? Does she need to be rescued at all? Regardless, Christine’s misuse of myth and complete disregard of the truth undermine her goal to build a perfect and impregnable city. Because her city is built on falsehoods, buttressed by women who suffered terribly at the hands of men and by women who caused suffering as well, the strength of these women is dissipated when their stories of loss and survival are glossed over. By ignoring their defects and their vulnerabilities, Christine jeopardizes the stability of her foundation. As students of literary history we know that some man at some time will wonder what those women are up to and will hatch a plan to sneak in and see for himself. Or, more likely, he will assume that a fortress begs to be invaded and overtaken and will make a violent assault (not alone of course) upon the fortified maidens. As in Wittig, the need for defense reinforces the potential for victimization. Separation is reactionary; it gives power to the oppressor.
Chapter 5

The Failed Lesbian Plot in The Convent of Pleasure

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, was until recently a relatively obscure, minor writer of the seventeenth-century. For nearly two centuries, she received very little notice from literary critics, who might casually mention her only to dismiss her as an insignificant, untalented eccentric. Recently, feminist critics have discovered Cavendish and have embraced her wholeheartedly as a proto-feminist. While such critics fault her only for her occasional disdain for her own sex, which they see expressed in her letters and poetry, they praise her Convent of Pleasure, which they see as free of any misogynistic tendencies. In Convent, Cavendish writes of women grouped together in order to avoid the aggravations of courtship and to enjoy the company of one another.

93 With the possible exception of admirer Charles Lamb, Cavendish was an unappreciated talent until the mid twentieth century. See Eli Lindtner Næss’ “Mad Madge and Other ‘Lost’ Women,” Edda 4 [1979]: 197-209 who mentions both her critics as well as the “real” reasons for their criticisms; see also Jean Gagen, “Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle,” Studies in Philology (1959): 520 and note; and Rachel Trubowitz, “Reenchantment of Utopia and the Female Monarchical Self: Margaret Cavendish’s Blazing World,” Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature (1992): 229.

94 Jacqueline Pearson, like many others before and since her, reads an honest “self-contempt” in Cavendish’s self-deprecation. For instance, she quotes the Preface to the Reader in World’s Olio:

But to speak truth, Men have great Reason not to let us in to their Governments, for there is great difference betwixt the Masculine Brain and the Feminine, the Masculine Strength and the Feminine …; and as great a difference is there between them, as there is between the longest and strongest Willow, compared to the strongest and largest Oak.

Pearson sees in this Cavendish’s “own ambivalence” in regard to a woman’s intellectual worth. She chooses to read Cavendish’s assertion of difference as disparagement. Note that in the above quote Cavendish does not deride woman as weak Oaks, but rather praises them as strong Willows. The reasons men have for keeping women out of public office according to Cavendish are good reasons for the men. Cavendish repeatedly alludes to the patriarchy’s fear of female rule, but her acknowledgement of that fear does not have to stand as a toleration of it (“‘Women may discourse … as well as men’: Speaking and Silent Women in the Plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle” Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature [1985]).

Theodora Janowski and Delores Paloma herald the convent as a “queer community, an alternative to patriarchal society,”96 and an inversion of the “traditional social order” which is always restored in Shakespeare’s comedies97. However, both critics ignore the arguably anti-feminist ending of the play, written by Cavendish’s husband, William, First Duke of Newcastle.

Convent is about a young woman’s evolution from virgin to wife, a process that occurs despite her resistance to it. When Lady Happy’s father, Lord Fortunate, dies, he makes her a wealthy, young, single woman in a city full of opportunistic bachelors. The play opens with three gentlemen talking amongst themselves about Happy’s prospects. The three unnamed men decide that all the bachelors of the city will “set out our Wooing hopes” for a chance to marry the “extream handsome, young, rich, and virtuous” Happy (217). However, Happy has no intention of marrying and immediately declares her abhorrence of wedded life, noting that “men are … troublers of women,” and that, for women, marriage is “slavery”98 full of “crosses and sorrows” and devoid of “pleasure, freedom, and happiness.” Further, she deems men foolish, vain, and deceitful (218, 220). Having determined that men have no redeeming qualities and in order to secure her own pleasure, freedom, and happiness, Happy decides to retire from the company of men altogether and invites several noble women to join her and her female servants in a “convent” on her grand estate. She distinguishes her convent from religious cloisters by

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96 Theodora A. Janowski, “Pure Resistance Queer(y)ing Virginity in William Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure and Margaret Cavendish’s The Convent of Pleasure” Shakespeare Studies 26 (1998): 229; see also Donoghue who finds it a “satisfying” lesbian romance and makes no attempt to explain the end of the play (from Passions between Women quoted in Miller, All the Rage, 136).
97 Dolores Paloma, “Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self” Women’s Studies 7 (1980): 64.
98 Compare Happy’s view of marriage with Wittig’s: “The woman under the roof if her husband is like a chained dog. The slave rarely tastes the delights of love, the woman never” (Les Guérillères 108).
indicating that she and her ladies will enjoy all the pleasures the world has to offer, but without men to spoil the fun (218-21). Happy sends Madame Mediator, the only widow who is given admittance to the convent, to announce Happy’s decision to lead a secluded life as a “Votress [not] to the gods but to Nature” (223) to the bachelors of the town, who, led by the aptly named Monsieur Take-Pleasure, immediately set about plotting an attack against Happy and her convent: they consider invasion, rape, torture, priests, and cross-dressing, but can agree on no plan of action (222-23, 226-28). Still, despite Happy’s best efforts to remain safe and secluded, and despite the bachelors’ bad planning, the convent is penetrated by a prince who, disguised as a woman, gains entrance, and immediately attaches himself to Happy.

Noticing that some of the women in the convent dress in “Masculine-Habits” and “act Lovers-parts,” the Prince suggests that he too could dress as a man and be Happy’s lover; he then becomes a man disguised as a woman disguised as a man (229). Happy happily accepts and declares her love for him thus: “More innocent Lovers never can there be, / Then my most Princely Lover, that’s a She” (229). The romance between Happy and the Prince unfolds as they watch a play (229-33), frolic with some shepherds (234-40), and sunbathe dressed as Neptune and an anonymous sea goddess (240-43). Following the ultimate revelation of the Prince’s identity, the protagonist and her lover are married (245) and the other virgins are presumably betrothed to the Prince’s invading army (244). The play ends with the transformation of the virgin paradise from the Convent of Pleasure to the Convent of Charity, a home for “old decrepit and bed-rid Matrons” (246).

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99 He is called Princess for most of the play, but to avoid confusion with the Princess of France from *Love’s Labour’s Lost* I will hereafter refer to him as “the Prince.”
Cavendish has yet to be fully appreciated or understood. *Convent* is a complex, erudite play, but it has not been treated as such. This chapter will critique the three common critical approaches to Cavendish and her play and will suggest alternatives that link it to the other texts I have described. The first and oldest assessment is the assumption that Cavendish was not a student of literature, the second is the assumption that seventeenth-century audiences were unused to gender-bending plays and incapable of thinking ahead of the plot, and the third is the assumption that *Convent* is a reaction to patriarchy and a challenge to heterosexuality as the dominant (or only) sexual paradigm. The first two approaches (the ignorant author and her equally ignorant audience) will be addressed together. The critique of the third approach also addresses the much ignored ending of the play, as the play’s outcome must surely influence any determinations about its radical feminist message (or lack thereof).

**Ignorant Author, Ignorant Audience**

The source of the first erroneous criticism of Cavendish comes from the lady herself, and early critics who swallowed whole her claim of ignorance, taking her to heart when she says,

> But, Noble Readers, do not think my Playes Are such as have been writ in former daies; As Johnson, Shakespear, Beaumont, Fletcher writ Mine want their Learning, Reading, Language, Wit: The Latin phrases, I could never tell But Johnson could, which made him write so well Greek, Latin Poets I could never read Nor their Historians, but our English Speed; I could not steal their Wit, nor Plots out take All my Playes Plots, my own brain did make. From Plutarch’s story I ne’er took a Plot,

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Nor from Romances, nor from Don Quixot,
As others have, for to assist their Wit,
But I upon my own Foundation writ.\textsuperscript{101}

Of course the trope of modesty is traditional, but that is no excuse for modern critics to ignore the erudition of her denial nor that her claim of ignorance is replete with references to poets and historians with whom she is clearly familiar. These critics also ignore the contradiction to her claim of ignorance contained in her poem, “Of Poets, and their Theft” where she demonstrates not only an awareness of the classics but also her contempt for those who do not portray them honestly:

\begin{verbatim}
Some take a Line or two of Horace Wit,
And here, and there they will a Fancy pick.
And so of Homer, Virgill, Ovid sweet:
Makes all those Poets in their Book to meet:
Yet makes them not appeare in their right shapes,
But like to Ghosts do wander in dark Shades.
But those that do so, are but Poet-Juglers,
And like to Conjurers are Spirit-troublers.
By Sorcery the Ignorant delude,
Shewing false Glasses to the Multitude.
And with a small, and undiscerning Haire,
They pull Truth out the place wherein she were.
But by the Poets Lawes they should be hang'd,
And in the Hell of Condemnation damn'd.
\end{verbatim}

To judge the inaccuracy and ignorance of the mimics of the Great Ones assumes a thorough knowledge and deep understanding of them. Surely, Cavendish’s denial of influence is a ploy; she is being coy with a predominantly male audience, which could not have failed to recognize her awareness of her literary predecessors, in particular, the \textit{Metamorphoses} (to which she alludes) and \textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost} (L\textsuperscript{3}) (which she gently

\textsuperscript{101} “A General Prologue to all My Playes” (265-66); in \textit{Agamemnon}, Aeschylus has Clytemnestra say something quite similar (I.845); both women demonstrate their proficiency with rhetoric, even as they deny it.
subverts). The learned reader can detect in Happy something of Diana (leading her band
of ladies in the worship of Nature), something of Callisto (retiring to the country-side to
avoid men), something of Atalanta (literally losing herself in marriage), and the plot is
clearly reminiscent of Shakespeare’s comedy – in fact, it could be argued that Cavendish
“corrects” the plot of $L^3$, which does not end as a proper comedy should.

Actually, one only has to read $L^3$ in order to find an appropriate refutation to her
“Preface.” Berowne, painting study as a pleasure-robber, declares reading to be
destructive to eyesight which could be better employed gazing upon a “fairer eye,” to
which the King of Navarre responds, “how well he’s read, to reason against reading!”
(I.i.80-94). The King recognizes that it takes considerable learning to debate such an
issue, and that Berowne’s complaint against reading is meant to conceal his real protest
against a three year abstinence from women. Not only is Cavendish’s ploy as
unsuccessful as Berowne’s, but neither figure (author nor character) seriously intended to
be believed. Cavendish employs the age old poetic device of declaring herself unworthy
to write such lofty verse. It is false modesty of the worst (or best) kind. Her claim to
ignorance of Shakespeare, in particular, is ironic given the obvious similarities between
Convent and $L^3$.

Like Happy, the King of Navarre decides to remove himself from the company of
the opposite sex, but unlike Happy, he wants to exclude pleasure and transform his court
into “a little academe / Still and contemplative in the living arts” (I.i.13-14). Thus, the all
male community of $L^3$ is predicated on the notion that men are essentially rational
creatures and that women are creatures of pleasure whose very nearness poses a danger to
any man seriously pursuing his studies. Women are excluded on the grounds that they are
naturally oriented to the pursuit of pleasure. *Convent* readily supports this notion in that Happy seeks separation from men for the pursuit of physical pleasure. Indeed, Cavendish is consistent in this point of view, for in the preface to her *Sociable Letters*, she states “Man’s Head’s a world, where Thoughts are Born and Bred / And Reason’s Emperour in every Head” (10), indicating that, in her opinion, men are more intellectual and rational than women, who are essentially creatures of emotion. However, it should not be assumed that Cavendish values one of these modes of thinking over the other; merely she insists that there is a difference, and this difference is made manifest both in *Convent* and *L3* through the failure of the characters to communicate across gendered lines.

One of the pleasurable activities in which the women of *Convent* engage is theatre, and it is after a play, in which men are depicted as despicable creatures and women as their helpless victims, that Happy first notices her difference from the Prince. The play within a play is a bit of melodramatic over-kill. The women act out a scene in which lower class women complain about their good-for-nothing husbands who womanize, drink too much, beat them “all black and blew,” and neglect the children (229). Upper-class ladies complain about the agony and dangers of childbirth, the loss of children, and husbands who gamble and womanize. The closing scene is that of a young lady who is advised that if she does not consent to marriage or run away to a convent the man in question will “have [her] against [her] will” (233). However, the Prince misses the point of the play, saying that he cannot “approve of it,” adding “for though some few be unhappy in marriage, yet there are many more that are so happy as they would not change their condition” (233). The Prince fails to understand that the scenes he just witnessed contain the sum of the complaint the women have against marriage. He cannot approve
the play because he looks forward to marriage with Happy. When she expresses her fear that he “will become an apostate,” he replies, “Not to you sweet Mistress” (233). Happy is concerned that the “princess” who had vowed, like the rest of them, to avoid marriage, would break “her” vow and leave the convent; she cautions against betraying Nature (Diana). However, the Prince assures her that he will never break his vows to her, again looking toward a marriage. The greatest danger to Happy is her assumption that the Prince knows what she means and responds in kind. Further, we know that there is no danger to the Prince as a result of misunderstanding, because it is the Prince’s world, indeed the Prince’s language, that will finally prevail.

Eventually, the Prince learns the lingo and is able to manipulate Happy through his skillful use of rhetoric. In masculine garb, he convinces Happy to embrace and kiss him by invoking and inverting the Christian concept of sin:

HAPPY
But innocent Lovers do not use to kiss.
PRINCE
Not an act more frequent amongst us Women-kind; nay, it were a sin in friendship, should we not kiss; then let us not prove ourselves Reprobates (234).

The Prince avoids reference to Christianity, which holds same-sex love as unnatural, and invokes rather the law of female communion, the only law that Happy has sworn to recognize. He uses the concept of reprobate (or apostate) appropriately this time, thus adjusting his speech to sway the lady and to accomplish his wooing. He uses her language against her to control and to direct both her actions and her heart.
Happy falls into the Prince’s trap despite her awareness of how men use language to control and to dominate, and the Princess of France from L3 displays a similar consciousness of this tactic:

HAPPY
Or, should I take delight in Admirers? they might gaze on my Beauty, and praise my Wit, and I receive nothing from their eyes or lips; for Words vanish as soon as spoken and Sights are not substantial. (218)

PRINCESS
Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean, Needs not the painted flourish of your praise: Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye, Not utter'd by base sale of chapmen's tongues: I am less proud to hear you tell my worth Than you much willing to be counted wise In spending your wit in the praise of mine. (II.i.13-19)

Happy seems to be aware of her status as object when she is gazed upon and even praised for her beauty, and she is distinctly uncomfortable with it. In fact, it is one of the reasons she wants to avoid courtship altogether. She senses that the woman as an object of admiration “receives nothing from [the] eyes or lips” of men. The Princess, also uncomfortable with such praise, adds that men (as viewing subjects) experience more pleasure than women (as beautiful objects). The two women define the problem similarly (men benefit from courtship rituals more than women), yet take different paths toward a solution (while Happy retreats, the Princess chooses to engage the enemy).

The sexes in L3 show a considerable lack of understanding of one another’s spoken intent. In fact, this lack of understanding adds to the humor of a play about the battle of the sexes. In the final act, the Princess reveals that she and her ladies understood the love letters as “pleasant jest,” confusing the men who believed that their letters showed much
more than jest (V.ii.767-76). As in Convent, the lack of understanding is present not only in conversation, but in art, the epistle and the play. However, the inability to understand in L3 does not have the same potentially dire consequences as in Convent, where the Prince’s inability to understand the meaning of the play makes it impossible for him to understand Happy’s protests against marriage; likewise, the inability of the bachelors to understand her desire for freedom leads them to plot the violent demise of the convent and the rape of its women.

In her portrayal of the bachelors, Cavendish gives us a look into the thought processes of men who wish to penetrate a closed female circle. Even after Madame Mediator tells the cads exactly what the women are up to behind their closed walls, the men are not satisfied that they have been told everything. Unable to imagine women getting along without men, they want to see for themselves what Happy’s maidens are really up to. The bachelors express fears of irreligiosity, holding Happy’s opinions to be heretical doctrine and suggesting that she “be examined by a Masculine Synod, and punish’d with a severe Husband, or tortured with a [debauched] Husband” (223). So in response to Happy’s complaint that men hurt women, Adviser suggests that they try, punish, and torture her, for attempting to escape from a painful life. Adviser has either misunderstood Happy’s reason to withdraw or more likely he simply rejects her definition of happiness. Further, Monsieur Facile, unconcerned about Happy’s rejection of Church authority, suggests that perhaps the clergy can convince her to come out. The bachelors even express apprehension “for the good of the Commonwealth” (222), clearly deeming Happy’s withdrawal of herself from the “market” as politically subversive.

102 Compare to the Princess’ declaration that abstinence from the society of women is a “deadly sin” (L3 II.i.105).
The bachelors further demonstrate their conceptual break from Happy’s reality through the definitions of “Nature” and “natural.” Madame Mediator reports that Happy “would enjoy the variety of Pleasures, which are in Nature” (223). Take-Pleasure contends that if Happy were honoring Nature “she must be a Mistress to Men” (223), implying that Nature requires as much. For Take-Pleasure, “Nature” is the unseen force, guided by a masculine deity which draws men and women together, and the only “natural” intimacy is congress between man and woman. Happy, as a devotee of Nature, has redefined “natural” to mean not what has been traditionally expected of women in relation to men, but simply that which exists in Nature, as both the dwelling place and the incarnation of her deity – the female Nature which she honors. Upon realizing that they cannot control Happy by invoking two authorities that she has roundly rejected (the church and the state), the bachelors consider taking the convent forcibly. The men mistake the meaning of nature (it is implied that only the women who serve Nature can understand its meaning) in their debate about burning the convent and raping the women within. Take-Pleasure and Adviser see rape as “Love” and a “good-service” to Nature, though it is frowned upon by the law. Notes Adviser “Why, so we do Nature good service, when we get a Wench with Child, but yet the Civil Laws do punish us for it” (226). The battle of the sexes could not be more clearly delineated nor the sexes more thoroughly incapable of understanding one another. Men and women do speak a different language,¹⁰³ and it will always be the male definition which dominates, for as Pearson says, “neither unscrupulous control of corrupt language in the form of lies, nor extraordinary linguistic ability … can allow women to live happily in man’s world” (41).

¹⁰³ Pearson recognizes the distinction between men’s and women’s language in Cavendish (33).
The men of $L^3$ also plan to infiltrate the play’s informal community of women, but as is appropriate to the light-hearted tone of the play, the Prince and his retainers plan a more playful assault. Boyet informs the Princess that she is to be housed in the field, “Like one who comes to besiege the court” (II.i.86), indicating the contentious nature of the male-female relationship when walls are built between them. Upon hearing the King’s plan to woo the ladies, Boyet warns his mistress and her entourage “Arm, wenches, arm! encounters mounted are / Against your Peace. Love doth approach disguised” (V.ii.82-83). Thus the tables are turned on the men, who become the army against the “besieged” women. As the King states: “Saint Cupid, then! and, soldiers, to the field!” (IV.iii.363). Though Shakespeare’s lovers lack the naked hostility of Cavendish’s suitors, the import is the same nevertheless: that the men will assault both the “fortresses” and the women within them. The Princess assures the King and his entourage that she and hers will remain in the field, separate from the men. Though the field has no enclosing walls, the Princess creates the illusion of enclosure when she states “This field shall hold me” (V.ii.345). Upon the news of her father’s death, the Princess declares her intention to shut herself up in a “mourning house” and remove herself from the society of these men. Note that when the men enclose themselves, they do so for the living arts, but when the women encloister themselves they do so to mourn the dead.

$L^3$ ends with the death of the King of France and the encloistering of the women, whereas Convent ends with a celebration. $L^3$ concludes with the Princess and her ladies leaving Navarre for seclusion and insisting that their suitors do likewise for the period of one year and a day. While appropriate for a Romance, such a timeframe is highly inappropriate for the Renaissance stage, for it would require breaking the unity of time.
L3 closes with “You, that way; we, this way” (V.ii.921). Such an ending does not meet the requirements for comedy, which traditionally ends in marriage/union and merriment or at least the declaration of the intent to marry. Even Berowne comments on the inappropriate ending of the story: “Our wooing doth not end like an old play; / Jack hath not Jill: these ladies courtesy / Might well have made our sport a comedy” (V.ii.874-76). And to the King’s protest that the matter lacks “but a twelvemonth an’ a day, / And ’twill end,” Berowne replies, “That’s too long for a play” (V.ii.877-78). Not only does Berowne complain that the ending is not a traditionally happy one, but he blames the women for the lack of denouement. Cavendish corrects this departure from tradition by ending her play with a wedding and a feast.

Through Lady Happy, as the embodiment of both Diana and Callisto, Cavendish invites us to compare Convent with Ovid’s masterpiece. As noted earlier, Happy’s stated purpose for separating herself from men is to avoid restraint, to embrace her freedom, and to indulge her pleasures. Not only will she and her ladies be free from the restraints of men, but they also will enjoy freedom within the community, which further distinguishes Happy’s convent of pleasure from a religious convent: “My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them” (220). Like Diana and her bevy of beautiful women, Happy seeks a life both separate and free, but where Diana and her virgins could freely roam the world outside the city, Happy and her virgins are confined to an enclosed space. Cavendish, apparently aware of the contradiction of freedom in an enclosure, goes to great lengths to describe the grandeur of the estate and the luxury of the community’s existence within it. After all, the walls are
not a consideration when one can “search the Land, and Fish the Sea” as Happy contends she and her maidens will do (221).

It is predicted that Happy, like Atalanta, will lose herself as well as her name. $L^3$ ends with the promise that the Princess will one day wed and is content to do so, but Lady Happy we can be assured will no longer be Happy after she is wed, for she must surely quit that name, as a conversation between Take-Pleasure and Dick indicates:

TAKE-PLEASURE
Dost thou think I shall get the Lady Happy?

DICK
Not if it be her fortune to continue in that name.

TAKE-PLEASURE
Why?

DICK
Because if she Marry your Worship she must change her Name; for the Wife takes the Name of her Husband, and quits her own. … You would be more happy with your Ladie’s Wealth, than the Lady would be with your Worship.

TAKE-PLEASURE
Why should you think so?

DICK
Because Women never think themselves happy in Marriage. (221)

The connection with Atalanta is obvious, in that Lady Happy will no longer be herself when she weds; she will lose both her name and her disposition. Gaining Happy’s love, revealing himself to be a man, and threatening to invade the entire realm should his desires not be met, the Prince causes the utter destruction of the convent and transforms Happy from virgin to wife. Like Jupiter, he carries on his wooing of the hapless Happy
near a pool and robs her of both her “Happy-ness” and her freedom. As in
*Metamorphoses*, *Convent* ends with the dissolution of the all-female community.

As already discussed, Happy sees men as “obstructers” of women taking natural pleasures or, one might argue, of “being Natural.” True to form, the bachelors and the Prince do seek to obstruct Happy’s devotion to Nature. Like the gods of the *Metamorphoses*, the men of Cavendish’s play respond to female independence with sexual violence: if she will not submit to their authority, she must be subdued, by robbing her of her sexual independence. In fact, Take-Pleasure invokes Jupiter as he plots rape (226). However, it is not overt violence which succeeds in subduing the lady, as in the *Metamorphoses*; rather it is a covert intrusion that wins the heart and mind of Happy. With a wink and a nod to Ovid, Cavendish reveals that the bachelors’ methods are no longer useful and gives us a man who is both thoughtfully cunning and casually violent, a man superior to her own bachelors and to Ovid’s rapist gods.

Along with the assumption that Cavendish was not aware of her tradition, critics tend to assume that her audience was equally oblivious. Misty Anderson approaches *Convent* as a challenge to the “hetero-normative love plot”\(^{104}\) and to that end must explain away the seeming return to the hetero-normative love plot at the play’s conclusion. The issue at hand is the love that blossoms between Happy and the Prince while he is disguised as a princess and the engagement which follows his unveiling. Anderson’s claim that “the audience is not privy to Cavendish’s little trick until” the

unveiling of the Prince at the dance\textsuperscript{105} assumes that a Reformation audience could not discern the “mistaken identity” plot right away and that the audience could not anticipate the socially sanctioned marriage with which such a play must end. Any claims about the audience’s ignorance until Act V (“the final revelation”) is belied by the Prince’s soliloquy in Act IV in which he reveals his identity and his purpose:

\begin{quote}
What have I on a Petticoat, Oh Mars! Thou God of War, pardon my sloth; but yet remember thou art a Lover, and so am I; but you will say my Kingdom wants me, not only to rule, and govern it, but to defend it: but what is a Kingdom in comparison to a Beautiful Mistress? (239)
\end{quote}

After the Prince admits that he follows Mars, rather than Diana, and that he has a kingdom awaiting governance, he dresses as Neptune and plays lover to Happy as a seagoddess. The Prince appears on stage twice in women’s clothing and thrice in men’s clothing: as a “Masculine Shepherd” (234ff), as Neptune (240ff), and “in a Man’s Apparel as going to Dance” (243ff). When the couple is crowned “King and Queen of the Shepherds” he wears the King’s crown (238); when they dress as sea deities, he takes the masculine form; and when they dance, he takes the male lead. The revelation of the Prince’s identity in Act V is a comedic convention and unnecessary for the education of the audience.

Despite Cavendish’s claims to ignorance of her literary predecessors and despite the critics who support that claim, the fact remains that her play is not unique, that it

\textsuperscript{105}Anderson 338; see also Hero Chalmers who asserts that the audience is as blissfully unaware of the gender switch as the characters are: “After all, the first-time reader of Cavendish’s play, like her female characters, remains under the impression that the women have permanently rejected male company right up to the final revelation” (“The Politics of Feminine Retreat in Margaret Cavendish’s The Female Academy and The Convent of Pleasure” Women’s Writing 6.1 [1999]: 81-94). That the Reformation audience (or any other for that matter) could be so gullible is hard for me to believe.
follows a convention as old as comedy itself, and that its conclusion is predictable by general audiences and critics alike.

**A Lesbian Relationship between a Man and a Woman**

As mentioned previously, it is the apparent lesbian nature of the relationship (at least from Happy’s point of view) as well as the convent’s exclusion of men that has attracted much recent attention, mainly from radical lesbian feminists, to Cavendish’s otherwise ignored play. Janowski writes, “The queer community of this play is created as a playful, though also perhaps deliberate, alternative to a patriarchal society that is marked by the objectification and subjugation of women.” However, the subjugation of women is not absent in Happy’s convent, because the noble women do subjugate the servant class, thus rendering the convent at best a pale version of patriarchy if we define patriarchy as a dominating system which oppresses women as a class. I am not so sure that Cavendish sought to usurp the patriarchy or even to provide an alternative space. The convent was intended to provide shelter for a limited number of women (20) of a specific class; it was meant to release Happy and her friends from the “slavery” of marriage, and it makes no attempt to change the world without, no attempt to redefine marriage or male/female relations in such a way as to subvert said slavery. The fact that the Prince could infiltrate the sanctum so easily demonstrates the futility of Happy’s attempts to avoid men. The fact that she prefers to be wooed by a masculine-identified person and considers her attraction to a woman unacceptable (as I will soon demonstrate)

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106 Janowski 283.
107 Trubowitz might agree, since she notes that Cavendish’s “paradigm of female dominion closely adheres to the prevailing ethos of male sovereignty” in Cavendish’s all-inclusive utopia *Blazing World* (237).
reinforces the inevitability of marriage and by extension the inevitability of “sexual servitude to men.”

Paloma considers Convent to be subversive of Shakespearean mores, for, “While in Shakespeare the comic error of sexual confusion is corrected and traditional order restored, the Cavendish plays never refer back to an order that has been momentarily disturbed: instead, they open up to a new future.” The “new future” to which Paloma refers is a “utopian [society] in which ‘he’ and ‘she’ would no longer be restrictive categories.” Paloma argues that for Cavendish, gender is an artificial construct and that gender switching in Convent “calls into question our accepted notions of gender as a definitive identity.” Paloma sees in Cavendish’s work an urge to declare that gender is not a fixed category and a desire to reshape her audience’s notion of gender through “dramatic trickery.” However, there is considerable textual evidence that gender-bending and social change were not what Cavendish had in mind. Far from looking toward “a new future,” Convent both restores patriarchal order and corrects “the error of sexual confusion.” The Prince and Happy wed. The disturbance of natural order is frequently commented upon in Convent: Happy’s retirement is considered an unnatural threat to both Church and State (222-23). Furthermore, the men’s assertion, that women’s living separately from men is unnatural, is affirmed in the concluding act, when social order and gendered hierarchy are restored: Happy becomes a dutiful wife and the convent is dispersed.

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108 Janowski 283.
109 Paloma 64.
110 Ibid 66.
111 Ibid 64.
112 Ibid.
Anderson argues that there is an erotic relationship between “two textually identified women.” However, this textual identification is hardly pat. The Prince, from his entrance, exhibits manly qualities, and only by the superficial means of costume (which is not always feminine) does he risk subverting gendered categories. His disguise is neither fixed nor completely successful. Indeed, the Prince is almost never referred to without some comment about his manliness: Mediator remarks, “She is a Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence” (226). The fact that Happy falls in love with the “manly” woman and not any of the “womanly” women further solidifies the heteronormative plot. Whether Happy knows it or not, the audience knows that she is in love with a man and guesses she will marry him by the end of the play. The cads, who following the discussion about rape, debate whether they should go into the convent disguised as women, are the first to alert the audience to the possibility of a cross-dressing interloper:

ADVISER
We shall discover our Selves.

TAKE-PLEASURE
We are not such fools as to betray our Selves.

ADVISER
We cannot avoid it, for our Garb and Behaviours; besides, our Voices will discover us: for we are as untoward to make Courtsies in Petticoats, as Women are to make Legs in Breeches; and it will be a great difficulty to raise our voices to a Treble-sound, as for Women to press down their Voices to a Base; besides, We shall never frame our Eyes and Mouths to such coy, dissembling looks, and pretty simpering Mopes and Smiles, as they do. (227)

113 Anderson 339.
The cads decide in the end that no man could successfully carry off such a disguise, and this leads one to wonder whether the Prince’s voice and behavior had not betrayed him right away, at least to the audience. Still, the Prince does succeed in convincing Happy that he is a woman, and this deceit causes Happy much confusion, as she clearly believes homosexual love to be unnatural.

While Anderson reluctantly concedes that “Cavendish’s official ending (technically) reasserts hetero-sexual order” (349), she refuses to acknowledge that everything up to that juncture also points toward the hetero-sexual order: Happy is destined to lose herself and become un-Happy; we know this because we read about Atalanta in Ovid. Happy must wed; we know this because we have seen L3. The Prince cannot really be who he claims to be; we know this because he is the mysterious stranger with whom we are so familiar from Shakespeare. Finally, Lady Happy cannot fall in love with a woman and live happily ever after in her convent of pleasure; we know this because she is most comfortable with the Prince when “she” is disguised as a man. The Prince frames their embrace in these terms: “These my Imbraces though of Femal kind, / May be as fervent as a Masculine mind” (234). Happy’s previous melancholic state is transformed as the scene becomes “Pastoral,” complete with sheep and an unmistakably phallic may-pole around which the lovers dance (235-238).

Janowski sees cross-dressing and the erotic nature of Happy and the Prince’s relationship as evidence of Cavendish’s challenge to patriarchal sexual norms, i.e. gendered dress and behavior, but a close reading of the text yields a very different perspective. The women dress in “Masculine-Habits” to simulate the active role (“Lover’s-parts”) in an erotic relationship (229). That they cannot, or will not, experience
one another as women hardly validates the notion that they were living an alternative lifestyle. These women needed to reproduce the “normative” environment of the world outside. Happy’s question, “Why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?” indicates both her affection for men and also her belief that same-sex love is “unlawful”; she continues, “Our Goddess Nature [Diana?]… I fear will punish me, for loving [the Prince] more than I ought to,” indicating that she considers same-sex love to be unnatural (234) and disgraceful (239). Madame Mediator repeats this judgment later when she declares “Women Kisses [to be] unnatural” (244). In fact, the only person in Convent who does insist that same-sex love is acceptable is the Prince, and the audience knows that the Prince says this only to convince Happy to kiss him.

In her argument for Convent as a reaction to heterosexual patriarchy, Anderson asserts that “by focusing on the pleasures of the body and making female bodies sites of pleasure accessible to women (rather than consumable objects available only to men), . . . Cavendish diminish[es] the demand for the hetero-normative love plot without foreclosing female pleasure.”114 Anderson’s flawed argument is endemic to radical lesbian feminist theory, which posits that when women enjoy women, when women gaze at women, or when women depict the female body as pieces of a whole, the female is somehow not objectified. As we have seen, Wittig unsuccessfully builds a gynotopia based on the notion that women cannot objectify other women. The flaw in this argument resides in the misunderstanding of what makes an object an object. When any body is enjoyed, gazed upon, or dismembered it becomes a “site of pleasure,” an object to be enjoyed by a subject. That the place or object in question is “accessible” only to women

114 Anderson 331.
subjects does not negate its position as object. Secondly, Cavendish is in no way successful (nor I am certain that she wished to be) in “diminishing the demand for the hetero-normative plot” as her play ends with the hetero-normative marriage of Happy and the Prince. While Anderson does not mention the complication that it was Lord Cavendish who ends the play, providing the normative result, she does posit that the fact the Prince is known only as “Princess” throughout Acts I through IV proves Cavendish’s desire to present a workable alternative to the norm. “It imagines that the sexual contract might be superseded by a sororal compact, which impedes the transfer of property between men through women. Here property … exists for the immediate pleasure of women”115 [emphasis mine]. One might think that Anderson has not actually read the play’s fifth act, wherein Lord Fortunate’s estate is transferred to the Prince. As confirmation of this transfer of property rights from father to husband, Mimick, kneeling before and addressing the Prince, asks that the convent be opened up to men (246). Further, Anderson seems unaware of the irony in her statement “property exists for the immediate pleasure of women,” for as mentioned above, the female servants are included among Happy’s properties and they do certainly attend to the pleasures of her noble friends.

Anderson further asserts that the mirrors in the convent “[direct] the women to a mildly autoerotic self relation as source of pleasure; the female body becomes an object of pleasure for their subject selves.”116 This argument is very similar to Wittig’s assertion that lesbian sexuality does not lead to the objectification of the female form, but the fact remains that the female body is as much “an object of pleasure” inside Happy’s convent

115 Ibid 333.
116 Anderson 334.
as it is outside the convent. The ladies do not surrender their status as objects simply because no men are present to gaze upon their bodies. Furthermore the presence of the Prince, as man and lover, argues against Happy’s body as an “object for her subject-self” alone. Moreover, Anderson’s own argument suggests that there can be no eroticism without objectification of a female body.

Sylvia Bowerbank, commenting on Cavendish’s “defiance of method,”\(^\text{117}\) notes that Cavendish regarded “revision of her work as a task beneath her dignity and also unnatural to her as a woman.”\(^\text{118}\) Cavendish defends her refusal to revise by saying that she imitates Nature. Bowerbank remarks that “Cavendish is best understood, then, as a defender not of her sex, but of self and self-expression.”\(^\text{119}\) However, when she hands her play over to her husband\(^\text{120}\) for completion she hardly affirms self-expression. She is in fact surrendering her self as object (in the form of her play) to her husband as subject.

In the Lord of Newcastle’s fifth act, The Prince is unmasked, so to speak, at a ball. He declares his undying love for Happy and says that if he cannot have her peacefully then he “will have her [and the other pretty women] by force of Arms” (244). Just as the Prince fails to understand the play within a play, so too Lord Newcastle fails to understand the play itself, and proceeds to write an ending which, though accurate in its essence (revelation and denouement must take place), fails to portray the female characters honestly. Happy is remarkably compliant and Madame Mediator, once a wise


\(^{118}\) Bowerbank 396.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) There is some confusion here about who wrote what in Acts IV and V: the phrase “written by my Lord Duke” precedes two songs in Act IV and is at the beginning of V.ii. Having not seen the original manuscript for myself, I am relying on Shaver’s judgment that “since no terminus is given, he seems to be the author of the final two scenes [Act V] and the epilogue” (238n).
old woman, becomes a foolish hag. Even the Prince is inconsistently portrayed: his subtlety, evidenced by his covert intrusion in Act II, gives way to overt hostility in Act V.

The claim that Cavendish seeks in her writings a life without men is weak and ignores the intent of utopia in Cavendish. Though Jacqueline Pearson makes special note of Cavendish’s claim (in *Blazing New World*) that “men make them *Slave*, whom Nature made to be their *Dearest Associates,*” she does not seem to recognize this as an affirmation of the ideal co-existence of men and women, of women with men. Cavendish is of course bemoaning the lack of equity and liberty for women in their relationships with men and the state, but she also believes that Nature intended women to be man’s “dearest associates.” In *Blazing New World*, Lady Victoria seeks to end the “Female Slavery” not by defeating and separating from men, but by earning their respect.\(^\text{122}\)

In illustration of Cavendish’s reluctant acceptance of patriarchal norms she wrote a short poem entitled “A Mock-Tale of his Grace the Duke of Newcastle” (her husband). Cavendish writes of an ugly, old woman who falls in love with a strapping young man, after having been struck by Cupid’s arrow. The young man (The Duke of Newcastle) marries this wealthy widow and on their wedding night:

Your Thoughts must go along with them to bed:
There being laid, he mounted now Love’s Throne;
She sighed with Love then fetched a deeper groan:
And so expired there in height of Pleasure,
And left him to enjoy her long-got Treasure.
Nay, so belov’d she was, that now lies low,
That all the Women wish’d for to dye so. (*Natures Pictures*)

\(^{121}\) Pearson 34.
\(^{122}\) Paloma 57-58.
Cavendish writes of a woman and a man fulfilling their roles in the patriarchal “sexual economy.” For the woman love is a dangerous thing (Cupid has violated her with his arrow) and marriage, indeed heterosexual sex, leads to certain death. On the other hand, marriage literally enriches the man; her property becomes his. Although the poem reiterates Cavendish’s view of sex and marriage in *Convent*, as in the play that message (sex is bad for us, marriage leads to slavery) is complicated by the “happy ending.” In this case every woman who heard the tale wished to die in a like manner and the woman herself is said to have died at the height of pleasure, sans fear or pain. Perhaps Cavendish is not at all ambivalent about the society in which she lives, but rather realistic about every woman’s fate to wed and die a slave to her husband. In fact, Cavendish suggests that women may ultimately enjoy that kind of slavery.

In conclusion, *Convent* is evidence of its author’s command of the classics: it follows the Ovidian model of female communities through the convent’s dissolution in Act V by the dominant, sexual partner of the convent’s virgin mistress, and it corrects Shakespeare’s problematic ending of *L3*. Cavendish has proven herself to be a complex writer, fooling for centuries both those male critics who could not recognize her erudition, as well as the feminist critics who failed to acknowledge her complexity as a woman and as an early feminist. She recognized the problem of female servitude and the “slavery of marriage,” and yet she freely accepted her role as wife to Newcastle, who “emphasize[d] her excellence as a wife” on her epitaph in Westminster Abbey.123

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123 Shaver 267.
Conclusion

Is any gynotopia viable? I think not, because, no utopia is viable. The moment we create it, it begins to die. What the myth of Eden teaches us, is that when given the choice between blissful ignorance and knowledge, we humans choose knowledge, every time, and when we become aware of the limitations of utopia on our freedom we destroy or leave it. Fortunately, Pandora’s myth assures us that although we have lost utopia, we can at least hope for its return, and we do. People will probably always aspire to return to Eden, but as we have seen, from Ovid’s Golden Age to Wittig’s Amazonia, utopia is always just out of our reach, somewhere or sometime far away.

The gynotopias of Wittig and Christine are unsatisfying because they remove the archetypes and symbolism of the myths that they claim to correct, leaving a simple, literal story. On the level of the story it is sad and outrageous that Jupiter rapes Callisto, but on a symbolic level theses violations are necessary for the eventual separation of the daughter from the community. In the attempt to preserve the virginity of the heroine and the wholeness of the community, Wittig and Christine may gratify the need to view women as strong and indestructible, but they rob the mythical figure of her right to individuation. The revisionists’ assertion of themselves as “reshapers” of myth and history is a hollow one in light of their ignorance or misinterpretation of the very myths they claim to rework. Wittig fails to deliver a fictional narrative that supports her own radical lesbian theory, and Christine unwittingly robs her heroines of their original power. In their attempts to rewrite myth they destroy the symbols and archetypes which make a myth a
myth, namely that separation is essential to individuation, just as separating from the father (patriarchy) and bonding with the mother (the women-only space) are essential to the early stages of self-identification.

Although Christine’s *City of Ladies* is a collection of narratives which do include intrusion and separation, as a meta-narrative it asserts that intrusion and separation are avoidable events. While many of Christine’s legendary mothers withhold their bodies to allow for “the growth of the individual, for separation and individuation,” her city, the archetypal mother, will eternally embrace its daughters. Wittig’s Amazonia similarly prevents its members from asserting themselves as individuals, but, in contrast to Pizan’s city, the community of guérillères do not entirely exclude the possibility of future (limited) interactions with men. The gynotopias of Ovid and Cavendish are perhaps more satisfying because, not only do they allow for the completion of the psychological process, but they also acknowledge the utopia’s inability to sustain itself indefinitely.

124 Semple 182.
Bibliography


