University of Lleida

Faculty of Arts

Final Degree Project:

The Importance of Myth in Contemporary Art: Myth, Poetry and Women

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Abstract

This project is intended to prove the prevalent importance of myth in contemporary art and, more specifically, to highlight how myth and poetry have shaped and reflected ideas of womanhood over time. A selection of significant literary periods, authors and works from the Renaissance to our days have been chosen in order to provide a wide scope of the evolution that the portrayal of women has undergone. Special attention has been paid to the way in which a group of selected poets have contributed to the construction and deconstruction of traditional Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman myths strongly attached to patterns of male dominance.

Keywords: myth, male dominance, womanhood, poetry, evolution, deconstruction.

Contents

Abstract

1.- Introduction

Within the wider frame indicated by the first part of the title of this Final Year Project – Treball Fi de Grau- the main focus of this piece of work is to highlight how myth and literature have shaped and reflected ideas of womanhood over the centuries, and to analyze how these ideas, albeit altered or deconstructed, still pervade contemporary art. A selection of significant literary periods from Renaissance to postmodern times will provide the chronological frames whereas specific references to works and authors from each period will help establish connections between the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete. For the sake of structure and internal coherence, and in order to avoid unnecessary dispersion, the texts selected will belong mainly to the domain of poetry, with the emphasis falling mainly on contemporary pieces.

Another important aim of this piece of research is to reflect the acquired intellectual competencies included in the curricula of the Degree in English Studies offered by the Department of English and Linguistics at the University of Lleida. The competencies that should especially come to the fore in this piece of research are the ability to produce clear, correct, and coherent prose adapted to purpose, occasion, and audience; the ability for judicious and critical evaluation; the ability to recognize and explain how literature is created in relation to major cultural socio-political and historical periods as well as the creative and imaginative aesthetic skills to appreciate and comment on literary works. Cross-cultural awareness and ethical judgment are also competencies that have guided the writing of this TFG.

As indicated by the structure of this work and by the title of the different chapters, a historical survey of gender relations as reflected in poetry leads to and throws light on

contemporary renderings of these relations. Since the interactions between the sexes are ultimately based on power, the main focus will be the analysis of patriarchy as an old but still efficient strategy to curb women's force. As clearly seen in the myths included in this TFG, the punishment inflicted on female creatures is destined to restrain and control female energy, curiosity, and independence, all of them attributes that pose a threat to male domination.

Special emphasis has also been laid on the need to argue against any simple notion of a uniform period or culture. Whether we speak of Elizabethan, Restoration, Victorian or Modern times, it is important to pay attention to the concept of 'culture' not as a unified phenomenon but as a multiplicity of spaces existing side by side and often competing for dominance and signification. The readings selected for this TFG reveal that scholars have argued against essentialism, stressing the need to pay attention to attitudes that are neither oppositional nor conformist, or perhaps both at the same time, because individuals inevitably collaborate and contend with the culture that they inhabit and produce.

2. Myth as life Narrative

Myths have been, since the beginning of time, object of numerous investigations due to their importance in many cultural areas. The concept of myth is not just a matter of the past, and the evidence is that myths have been evolving throughout history and have also reached contemporary times, some of them, such as myths contributing to stereotyped ideas about gender roles and behavior, are still deeply rooted in our subjectivity as human beings who have adopted and adapted the ideologies and cultural patterns of previous generations. This is the reason why we have formulated the paradox that will pervade most of this essay: although there are no definitive or fixed interpretations of myths because, like human beings, they are constantly evolving to fit new societies, new values and ways of thinking, the core and cultural influences of some myths seem to be indestructible, such as the alleged superiority of the male and the female's effort to redress this unbalance. So it could be interesting to look at the idea of myth as something permanent and, at the same time, moldable because it can be maintained, updated or deconstructed in different areas, art being one of the most relevant.

Etymologically, the concept of myth comes from the word *mythos,* which literally means: narration, story, tale or word. Due to the importance given to its study and analysis, it is not surprising to find different definitions of myth, which may vary greatly depending on their level of abstraction. According to Carlos García Gual (1997:9), "mito es el relato tradicional que refiere la actuación memorable y paradigmática de unas figuras extraordinarias- héroes y dioses- en un tiempo prestigioso y esencial". José Ferrater Mora (1992:2236) adds that "con frecuencia [los mitos] son considerados como el fundamento y el comienzo de la historia de una comunidad o del

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género humano en general". Gilbert Durand (1993: 35), gives a more abstract or even transcendental definition of the concept saying that myth "ordena la naturaleza, el caos se vuelve cosmos y al mismo tiempo elimina lo real, alejándose de la naturaleza de las cosas".

Finally, Dr. Manuel Cerezo (2002: 10-11) provides an enlightening commentary on the meaning and value of myth. These are his words:

> Pero sobre todo, el mito y la leyenda de la antigüedad nos ayudará a reflexionar sobre nosotros mismos y sobre la condición humana, tal vez porque lo más importante no es preguntarse qué es el mito, sino por qué se produce el fenómeno del mito.

What seems to be clear is the fact that myths arise as an attempt to explain the origin of the world and humanity. This is nowadays considered a theme in conflict with scientific studies that can support theories about the creation of the world with stronger and clearer evidence. However, it would be a big mistake to confront myth and science, and ignore the way in which they can harmonically complement each other. In fact, it is important to realize that, despite the scientific progress and the technological advances that allow access to the domain of science, even by the non-initiated, it seems that there is still a wide existential gap in our lives which needs to be filled, and myth seems to have this role because, consciously or unconsciously, it helps to understand the totality of the world and also to construct reality through the imagination. That is why we can say that myths have always been and still are a fundamental need for human beings, because they contribute to our own sense of security and confidence insofar as they provide real or imagined points of reference shared by a collectivity, and, to varying degrees of awareness, are also models for our thoughts and behavior.

2.1 Myth as core explanation of reality

Going back to the idea of myth as a builder of reality responsible for the construction of identity and human values, and beginning to focus more directly on the way in which ideas of womanhood have been built throughout history, I will now highlight the position of women in influential parts of Greek, Roman and Christian mythologies. Since the very beginning of times, most extant mythical stories in western culture reflect strong patriarchal values and, consequently, involve notorious woman discrimination. One of the clearest evidences is the supremacy of male Gods in monotheist religions, which are at the basis of patriarchal social systems rooted in notions of alleged female inferiority and justified subordination. Another evidence is the way in which first women are depicted in Greek and Roman mythology, later on incorporated to the Judeo- Christian tradition. In Greek mythology, for example, the first woman is thought to be Pandora, who was created out of clay by different gods who gave her unique gifts. Zeus sent her to Earth to marry Epimetheus, Prometheus' brother, and gave her a box as a present, with the only condition of not opening it. Pandora's curiosity was so powerful that she could not help to open the box ignoring the orders of Zeus. With her action, she released to the world all the evils of old age, poverty and sickness, though she also let freedom, hope and curiosity roam free. This myth was so integrated into the Greek society that, according to Rosemary Sadez Friedmann (2005:1), "[t]he relationship between men and women in ancient Greece was dictated by the myth of Pandora", whose "beauty was so great and her gaze so powerful that man was helpless in her sight. Hence, a woman's gaze was thought to be powerfully lethal". But the story does not finish here, because there are many other myths in Greek mythology which also contribute to seeing women as impulsive and sinful creatures,

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dangerous for men; Circe, for example, was the daughter of the god Helios and, after having murdered her husband, she was placed by her father on a solitary island, where she turned men into animals, mainly pigs. Another good example is Medusa, who was punished by Athena and condemned to be so ugly that every men who looked at her eyes, would turn into stone. Demeter and her daughter Persephone are perhaps not seen as dangerous or threatening as the other female figures mentioned before. However, both Demeter and Persephone were victims of male power and domination and had to retaliate in order to regain part of their former state of togetherness. The cyclical descent of Persephone into Hades with the resulting grieving inactivity of her mother, Demeter, and her spring resurgence account for this retaliation.

As Catherine Akca and Ali Gunes explain in their article "Male Myth-Making: The Origins of Feminism" (2009: 2), in the case of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of the origins of humanity is not so different from tales in Greek or Roman mythologies; God is also perceived as male and he created the first man, Adam, in His own image. However, Eve, the first woman, was apparently an afterthought created by God from one of Adam's ribs in order to provide him with "a helper like himself" (Genesis: 1-27, 2-20). Moreover, Eve is also thought to be the one who succumbed to the devil's temptation by eating the forbidden fruit, and by persuading her husband to do the same. For this reason they were expelled from Paradise, denying also the access to it to any human being who came after them and, consequently, condemning all humanity for this original sin.

As shown in the myths included in this piece of work, women are presented as vulnerable beings who cannot escape temptation and are therefore responsible for human suffering. They are also depicted as rebellious against the established male

authority and, for this reason they are punished and brought into subjection. In fact, according to Simone de Beauvoir (1949)[1], "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents the negative, defined by limiting criteria". Apart from that, the myth that Eve was physically created from Adam reinforces the idea postulated by Thomas Aquinas that "woman is an imperfect man and an incidental being." (Akca, Gunes, 2009: 3)

However, I think I cannot conclude this section without making explicit reference to two other well-known myths in the Judeo Christian tradition, which break with this idea of vulnerability and sin, and position women closer to power and purity. Such is the case of the myth of Judith, a beautiful and valiant widow inspired by God to defend Israel from an invading army. This myth endows the female figure with a sense of heroism which is closely related to the tenets of feminism. In fact, according to Gwen Raaberg in her article "Women and Power: the Politics of Myth Poetic Identity" (2001: 1), the myth of Judith is "a myth whose transformations over the centuries have recorded the imprint in society's varying attitudes toward women". On the other hand, the figure of the virgin mother Mary, that reflects the idea of female purity or angel, also contrasts sharply with the fallen mother Eve.

Finally, taking into account the relationship between myth and the creation of human values, and considering that both, Greco-Roman mythology and the Judeo-Christian

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[1] Original source: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 1949, translated by H M Parshley, Penguin 1972; written in French and first published as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in 1949; first Published in English by Jonathan Cape in 1953; transcribed by Andy Blunden for the *Value_of_Knowledge* website, 1998; Proofread: from the Penguin edition by Andy Blunden, February 2005. The document is available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm. For this essay the reference has been taken from Catherine Akca and Ali Gunes, "Male Myth-Making: The Origins of Feminism", *Nebula,* 1 (2009): 3

tradition, were perceived to be two of the most widespread versions of the creation of humanity in the western world, we can trace the origins of two extreme and opposed attitudes toward women. On the one hand, the idealization of the female figure as virgin, and on the other the position of inferiority of women towards men due to male fear of female creative power. In pre-scientific times, this power was strongly related to the devil and was, therefore, partly responsible for women's discrimination and even death. The fear of the unknown may explain, though not justify, the hostility that this fear engenders in the mind.

2.2. Myth as legitimation and instrument of power

If we think about myth as an instrument to create identities and social structures, we cannot help establish the relationship between myth and power. Closely related to language itself, myth has the power to classify societies creating ideology, values, ways of thinking and, consequently, human conducts. That is the reason why myth is considered to be one of the most powerful tools to construct reality.

Roland Barthes makes reference to the power of myth in his essay "Myth Today", though he tends to endow the notion of myth with some negative connotations by establishing a connection between myths and the manipulation of ideas and subjectivities. In fact, he points out that "myth disguises its true intentions" Barthes's work is closely focused on the use of myth as a persuasive device because "it uses language to construct its system or rhetoric". He also adds that "it points out and notifies us and also makes us understand something and imposes it on us". (Barthes, 1972: 110,117)

On the one hand, it can be said that the power of myth can be measured by the power it has to construct and maintain a way of seeing and explaining reality in our imagination, which is closely related to its power of persuasion. This can let us reach the conclusion that, to a great extent, societies have built their knowledge of themselves and the world from the basis of myths, which are deeply imprinted in our condition as human beings and which are, at the same time, constantly evolving parallel to the evolution of human subjectivity.

On the other hand, the relevance of myths can also be measured by the large number of references to them we can find in our daily life, especially in the field of art and entertainment. In fact, closely related to their power of creation, it is almost impossible to read a book, to watch a film, to listen to a song, or to look at a painting without establishing some connection with ancient myths. As a matter of fact, myths and their power of persuasion can be considered essential elements for the success of big organizations such as governments and mass media.

Going back to the responsibility of myths in constructing the world and its values, it is not difficult to connect present situations of male dominance with ancient mythology, to which humanity is still strongly attached to varying degrees of intensity or awareness. Peggy Reeves Sanday (1981:165) claims that "a hierarchical power relationship between the categories 'male and female' is maintained by the acting out of a 'myth' of male dominance". Also related to this topic, Gwen Raaberg in his article "Women and Power: The Politics of Myth Poetic Identity" said that:

> The myth and its multiple transformations are fascinating in what they reveal about attitudes toward women and about the repressed fears and desires of both females and males in patriarchal culture. (Raaberg, 2001:4)

3. Representation of Women in Medieval and Renaissance Times

Rather than attempting to outline the way in which womanhood was presented in Medieval and Renaissance times, since we might be tempted to fall into facile generalizations, we shall dwell on aspects of the transition or shift of emphasis from superstition to a more rational and scientific bent of mind. On the one hand, and at the risk of over-simplification, we could say that the Middle Ages were a period strongly attached to Christian ideology; God occupied a central position in human thoughts and beliefs and all arts were intended to glorify Him and The King as his lawful representative on Earth. In this respect, the Renaissance can be considered a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age; the increasing development and interest in science highly contributed to the social emancipation from religion due to the change in the way people perceived the relationship between man and God and, consequently, between man and the universe. This shift of emphasis from a transcendental conception of reality to a scientific explanation of the universe also brought about an increasing sense of human freedom and responsibility but also an increasing sense of inner conflict and instability. Men and women needed each other to survive the new challenges posed by science and especially by the migrations to the new world, where the hard living conditions of pioneers demanded that both men and women worked equally hard to increase their possibilities of success. Unfortunately, it has always been in times of need and conflict that gender equality has been achieved.

After wandering away from the Middle Ages, let's go back to this period to insist on the relevance of Theology postulating female inferiority and her necessary submission to male authority because, however distant in time, present attitudes of male domination can be traced back to those times. According to Gunes Akca in his article "Male myth-

making: the origins of feminism" (2009: 5), "the Middle Ages continued to propagate the traditional myth of woman as some kind of monster of depravity". However, if we take into account that two myths were directly responsible for the conception of womanhood in those times; the myth of Eve, and the myth of the Virgin Mary, we should remember that stereotypes of women were quite polarized, as has already been pointed out in this essay. Women were seen either as sinners responsible for the Fall of Humanity, or as saints capable of rejecting their sexuality, two pretty opposite and contradictory patterns of behaviour which placed women in two different types of prison, as Virginia Woolf would describe so powerfully in her essays and novels.[2] The Renaissance, as mentioned before, was a period of transition to the new world, a world in which science began to overcome religion, or better said, to explain facts that had so far been only explained by religion. The growing importance of science had also a great impact on the approach to notions of womanhood. The previous fear of women, as evil creatures or witches, began to disappear due to scientific explanations of facts previously considered to be otherworldly. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, despite this scientific and social evolution, the portrayal of women did not seem to be free of prejudices. As Akca Gunes also explains:

> Although the Renaissance may be differentiated from the Middle Ages as being a period of enlightenment, a period of expanding horizons and of new insights, the prevailing attitude towards women had become so much a constant of the culture as to be relatively unaffected by the momentum of change. Kelly asserts that 'there was no Renaissance for women, at least not in the Renaissance'. (2009: 7)

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[2] Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is considered to be an influential woman writer who defended the right of women to be mistresses of their time and life. In one of her most famous works, *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929, Woolf examines the difficult position of women who struggle to assert their independence and devote their time to literature and artistic creation.

There are many different ways to analyze the concept of womanhood within a period, and one of the most significant and telling ones is art. However, art is a really extensive field and, so as to follow coherently the line of my work, I am going to focus only on the myth of women as represented in poetry, more specifically in Shakespeare, the author par excellence whose work reflects these two periods, that is the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or the Christian and the Greco-Roman traditions. Shakespeare is indebted both to the strictures and constraints imposed by a God-centered ideology and to the greater freedom and responsibility of the individual introduced by Renaissance winds. Shakespeare navigated his way through rules while attempting to break them. According to Gunes Akca (2009: 7), "Shakespeare, who appears to be reasonably free of the prejudices of their age, remains open to some charges of misogyny". This controversy is exactly what I am going to analyze in the following subsections through a brief selection of Shakespeare sonnets.

3.1 Asserting male dominance

As mentioned in the previous section, Shakespeare is thought to be an example of the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Transition periods are complex times because they combine the old and the new, traces of what is no longer wanted or fully accepted with newly adopted forms or ways of life. Thus, many evidences of the maintenance of the status quo can be found in his sonnets, especially when making reference to the position of men versus women. Some of the most telling sonnet in terms of male power is "sonnet 144", which can actually be analyzed from many diverse points of views. In fact, according to John Hamill in his article "Shakespeare Sexuality: and how it affects the Authorship Issue" argued that some scholars, such as Joseph Sobran or J.T. Looney, agree on the fact that the sonnets t are

clearly an admission of Shakespeare's homosexuality. At this point, it is necessary to mention that Shakespeare's works have been read and interpreted differently at different times and by different critics. Significantly, romantic authors such as William Wordsworth believed that the sonnets were the key to Shakespeare's heart. However, these pieces can also make implicit reference to male dominance, which will occupy the main point of my analysis.

"Sonnet 144" is mainly focused on the traditional and prevalent idea that the nature of women was a corrupt one, and this idea is even reinforced by the direct comparison between his two loves, which are introduced at the very beginning of the poem: "Two loves I have of comfort and despair". At first sight one may think that he, the poet, is in love with two women, nevertheless, his two loves are a male and a female, which are contrasted through the poem in a way that male dominance is asserted firmly; the man is clearly portrayed as a pure and trustable creature and the author makes this idea explicit when saying "The better angel is a man right fair", affirmation that contrasts with the one given to his female love, "The worser spirit a woman coloured ill", to whom he also addresses as a "female evil".

The division male-female may be taken literally as referring to man and woman and therefore as reinforcing stereotypes of male superiority. However, Shakespeare's texts cannot be pinned down to any one single explanation or analysis. The notion of male-female in conflict in this poem and in many other texts by Shakespeare may also refer to the psychological conflict inside the individual. In any case, however, whether the terms 'male' and 'female' are theme or metaphor, it is clear that the female is 'the worser spirit'.

3.2 Tradition and innovation

Taking into account the theme of some of his poems, it seems obvious that Shakespeare did not finally manage to break definitely with the traditional sexual patterns attached to his period. Neither did he probably intend to do so. However, it is important to highlight that there is strong evidence of innovation in his work. In fact, we can say that he builds up a new stereotype of woman by deconstructing the one prevalent in the Middle Ages. This deconstruction is closely related to the triumph of science against theology, which liberated women from the conception of being either idealized or considered as frightening creatures from an evil world. Shakespeare, and the metaphysical poets after him[3], places the woman in a more real and immediate context, however unkind the outcome of this change may appear to be. A good example of this is "sonnet 130", which is considered to be a parody or a satire of the conventional love poetry of those times, basically of Petrarchan sonnets, which were idealized love sonnets directed to an idolized and perfect mistress called Laura. Contrary to that, Shakespeare highlights the ordinary beauty and the most human part of his lover, to a point that he even seems to be detracting her. He follows the line of comparing his lover with a number of natural beauties, though, in this case, his lover always occupies an inferior position towards them, because what Shakespeare wants to emphasize is the fact that she cannot stand up to the magnificence of the natural world. In fact, in the first two quatrains, the author compares his love to different aspects of nature, such as the snow, the sun, or coral.

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[3] John Donne (1572-1631) is known as a major representative of Metaphysical Poetry, a derogatory term created by Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth-century English essayist, poet, and philosopher. The Metaphysical Poets are known for their ability to surprise the reader by encouraging new points of view through the use of paradoxical images known as conceits, but also through subtle argument, inventive syntax, and imagery from art, philosophy, science and religion. Donne reached beyond the rational and hierarchical structures of the seventeenth century with his exacting and ingenious conceits, advancing the exploratory spirit of his time. However, like Shakespeare, his portrayal of women remains within the limits of patriarchy despite its realism.

However, at the very beginning we can already find strong evidence of the subversive line that the sonnet is going to follow; "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" shows clearly how Shakespeare deconstructs classical hyperboles. Other lines such as "Coral is far more red than her lips' red" or "And in some perfumes is there more delight", also help to break with the idea of female idealization. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that he finally concludes by claiming that perfection is not required for women to be beautiful or loved, as beauty is in the eye of the 'male' beholder; "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare. As any she belied with false compare". In this sonnet women may be liberated from the tyranny of courtly love, though the male gaze continues to exert its dominion on the female. From a radiant to a dark lady, the myth of female inferiority is only reformulated not destroyed.

4. Laxity and Backlash: From Restoration to Victorian times.

This is a long period subject to great social changes, so it is not difficult to imagine or understand the idea of evolution in different fields of knowledge. One of the most important ones, and directly related to the topic of this essay, is the increasing public presence of women poets in a tradition which, until then, was something unthinkable due to the cultural silencing of female voices. This fact can be considered one of the main causes for the prevailing image of women, who were always portrayed by male poets. In fact, as Dorothy Mermin said in her article "Women becoming poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch":

> Love poetry had been dominated since Sappho's time by male subjectivity,
> women appearing as either silent objects of male desire or, in the tradition
> of Ovid's Heroides dramatized figures used by male poets to distance and
> control feelings that no respectable Englishwoman could publically express
> in any way at all. (1990: 336)

However, this repression started to change slightly in the 17th century, when a new generation of female writers began to occupy a respectable position within the world of poetry. The fact of giving space to female voices was, obviously, crucial for the future redirection of the established patriarchal system. As a matter of fact, with their writings, they constructed a world "remote from politics or power, in which conventional hierarchy of gender is mitigated or evaded". (Mermin, 1990: 336)

4.1. The Restoration

Some of the most well-known and influential female writers that flourished within the Restoration period are Aphra Behn and Katherine Philips. However, it is important not

to forget the prevalence of male dominance, also in the field of poetry. That is why, before concentrating on female writers, I will first make reference to a famous poem written by a seminal male poet, whose work will help us to keep track of the comparison between the different ways in which men and women portrayed images of womanhood. John Milton, an English writer strongly in favor of anti-royalist positions but highly conservative with regard to women's inferior nature and position in society, published in 1664 *Paradise Lost,* an epic poem written in blank verse which was the first to appear in England after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. As the title suggests, the poem narrates the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and, despite the innovations introduced by the author, mainly related to the portrayal of the devil and his motives for rebellion, the author remains faithful to the male chauvinistic mode of placing women in an inferior position towards men; as sinners or dangerous beings bursting with pride who cannot escape temptation, or as creatures only intended to serve men in domestic duties, as can be read in this long poem: "Nothing lovelier can be found/ In women, than to study household goods, / And good works on her husband to promote" (*Paradise Lost* Book IX: 232-33).

Really different is the approach to womanhood built by Aphra Behn, who is considered to be the first English woman to make a living through writing. Most of her poetry explores themes related to love, sex and desire, mainly directed to free women from traditional conventions. As Giada Cacciavilni said in her article "Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and Sylvia Plath: 'a passionate journey' towards 'a revolution in female manners'", Aphra Behn was responsible for supplying literature with revolutionary concepts, allowing women to free themselves and, also, comparing repression of women with colonization. It is not, then, difficult to expect that her poems are used as a

tool to break the mold of gender roles. In fact, totally contrary to female stereotypes found till that moment, women in her poetry are empowered and men are usually depicted as passive or impotent. In her poem "To Alexis in Answer to His Poem against Fruition", she explicitly exposes a liberating philosophy by criticizing the way in which society controls women's sexuality and how women's reputation could be measured in terms of sexual freedom, as clearly depicted when she says that men are allowed to "fly if honour take our part" (line 21), whereas "they fly us if we yield" (line 24). Indirectly, she also constructs a more positive image of women by reinforcing the negative one of men, who are depicted as irresponsible beings, especially at the end of the poem when she claims: "For 'tis a fatal lesson he has learned / After fruition ne'er to be concerned" (lines 40,41).

Similar is the case of Katherine Philips, who also tried to transgress boundaries imposed by patriarchy and gender roles through her poems. Her poetic world centers mainly on female relationships, however she also dedicated some of her poems to strongly reject the idea of marriage, which she closely relates to repression. This fact makes her to be considered one of the first feminist poets. One good example of that is her poem "To One Persuading a Lady to Marriage". As the title suggests, the poem is directed to a man who wants to trap a woman into marriage. However, the woman does not conform to traditional stereotypes; she is a "public deity" (line 5), and she does not want herself to become "a petty household god" (line 8). Furthermore, the lady has a free will, to which she does not want to renounce, in fact her beams are "more bright and large than his" (line 16). Other poems such as "A Married State Affords But Little Ease" are also used by the author to claim the difficulty of being a wife and having to please a husband, which can be considered a parallelism between the fictional world she creates

with her poems, and her real life, in which she had to marry a man she did not have the chance to choose. At this point, it is important to mention that despite the fact that some of the poems quoted so far do not make direct or explicit reference to the myths mentioned at the beginning of this piece of work, the connections between the position of women as depicted in the lines quoted cannot be dissociated from the early stages of western civilization when society was organized in terms of male dominance and female submission. Greco-Roman myths and the Bible are at the basis of such organization and the roles ascribed to men and women. As we shall see in the last section of this TFG, contemporary writers make explicit reference to the myths they attempt to deconstruct, which accounts for the influence these myths have exerted on successive generations of men and women.

4.2. Victorian poetry

Despite the passage of time, and the several desperate attempts of female writers to break with the patriarchal social system, the Victorian period was still strongly attached to it. As cited by Greene and Kahn, "in terms of the alternative patriarchal exclusion tactic, the Victorian ideology of separate spheres fixed woman in the home as 'an aesthetic object, decorous, chaste, dependent.'" (1991:19). This idea is closely connected to the concept of "the angel in the house", criticized by Virginia Woolf in response to a poem "Angel in the House" published in 1854 by Coventry Patmore,[4] in

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[4] The following excerpt gives a sense of the ideal woman and the male-female relationship presented by Patmore's poem:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings

herself.http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/thackeray/angel.html

which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. In fact, according to Virginia Woolf, "killing the angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf, 1966:286). Another relevant concept also related to womanhood was the idea of the spinster, used to define unmarried women with no comfort or security, most of the times depicted in a pathetic and ridiculous way. However, it should be said that, although changing patterns of behaviour with respect to gender roles has always been a slow and hard task, the 19th century was considered a period of positive evolution of the idea of womanhood. As a matter of fact, Kathleen Hichkok in her article "The Spinster in Victoria's England: Changing attitudes in Popular Poetry by Women" said that:

> During this critical period in England's adaptation to modern times, one important social change that occurred was the gradual upgrading of the status of women within the social structure. Women increasingly came to be regarded as independent human beings whose value to society and to themselves did not alone depend upon successful fulfillment of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The social and literary representation of the unmarried woman of a 'certain age'- the spinster- provides a convenient focus for observing the overall progress of all women in English life. (1981: 119)

And this deconstruction of the idea of womanhood was a direct cause of the work of many writers, especially women, who have contributed to paving the way for future generations of women writers. One good example of this is Emily Dickinson, American poet whose legacy has been a fundamental contribution to the world of feminist poetry. Several of her poems have been analyzed from the point of view of feminism due to the fact that they focus mainly on deconstructing heavily arranged social status such as wifehood or spinsterhood. This is clearly depicted in one of her most aggressive and

hard poems in terms of gender; "Rearrange a Wife's Affection" (Poem 1737), which expresses repudiation of the state of wifehood in a very explicit way. The first stanza is used to establish a comparison between female vulnerability and male insensitivity, highlighted by violent actions such as "dislocate my Brain!" (line 2), or "Amputate my freckled Bosom! (line 3). In the second stanza is where the ideal marriage is deconstructed and the author seems to realize that marriage promises little of any value for a woman, in fact she says that: "Seven years of troth have taught thee/More than Wifehood ever may!" (lines 7,8). Other poems, such as "I'm Nobody, Who are You?*, (Poem 288) "A soft Sea Washed Around the House" (Poem 593) or "I Never Heard the Word Escape" (Poem 77) are also highly significant pieces where to look for themes and images in women's writing and writing about women.

It would not be fair to talk about Victorian poetry without mentioning Robert Barrett Browning and, his wife, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, who is believed to be one of the main sources of inspiration of Emily Dickinson. Both of them dedicated a big part of their work to talk about women, and it is highly interesting to compare the different ways in which they create a portrayal of them. On the one hand, Robert Barrett Browning 's "My Last Duchess" positions the woman as an inert and passive object of art. In fact, she is already dead and the Duke is the one who decides what can be known about her, and also the one who has total control over her. This idea is clearly depicted at the beginning of the poem throughout a delicate metaphor: "none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you" (lines 9-10). On the other hand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's portrayal of womanhood diverges much from the one built by her husband; in *Aurora Leigh,* a novel in verse published in 1856, Aurora, the protagonist of the story, is the one in charge of narrating herself into existence using the first person and this endows

her with the power of authority. This fact also positions the woman as the subject rather than the object, as in the case of the Duchess. Furthermore, this poem is considered a brilliant feminine piece of work because it narrates the story of an independent Victorian woman who tries to escape male dominance. However, this can also be seen as a point of controversy within the attempt of breaking the established patriarchal patterns, because Aurora is still subjected to men and, actually, the reader learns about her through her relationship to them, which, inevitably, reinforces the idea that Victorian women could not have their own identities separated from male figures. In fact, regardless of the author's gender, the last part of the first book is meant to give an explicit description of women according to men:

> The works of women are symbolical.
> We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
> Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
> To put on when you're weary — or a stool
> To stumble over and vex you . . . 'curse that stool!'
> Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
> And sleep, and dream of something we are not,
> But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
> This hurts most, thisŠthat, after all, we are paid
> The worth of our work, perhaps. (lines 457-465)

5. Rewriting Myth and the Canon: Contemporary Female Voices

Having already walked part of the extended path of mythology as reflected in poetry to create the necessary context where this last section might be meaningfully inserted, it is now time to centre our attention on the importance of myth in contemporary poetry, which, far from having fallen into oblivion, continues to exert an important influence on the construction and deconstruction of social patterns of thought and behaviour. Taking into account the evolution analyzed in the previous sections of this work, it is not a difficult task to predict the direction that this evolution will take within contemporary voices.

Before starting to analyze the work of different contemporary female poets, I think it is important to mention that, many contemporary male writers have also contributed to the deconstruction of the patriarchal system responsible for female discrimination. During the 20th century, female voices, often echoed by male ones, set out to deconstruct and rewrite texts which had traditionally reflected male domination. Aware of the importance and power of language to create the spaces we inhabit, these voices attempted to change attitudes and situations by changing the ways of naming and explaining them. In the domain of art, and more specifically in the field of poetry, references to myths and their pervasive influence in contemporary gender relations were increasingly heard. The last part of this TFG will concentrate on some of these voices in the English speaking world.

As has already been explained at the beginning of this essay, one of the most relevant gender myths within the Judeo-Christian tradition is the biblical image of Eve as a temptress. It is really interesting to analyze some of the modifications that the approach

to the figure of Eve has experimented within the work of some contemporary poets. Among others, Lucille Clifton[5] is considered to be the poet who managed to create one of the most fully developed re-interpretations of the myth in her series of poems about Eden, whose first publication was in 1972. Among a list of them, I have chosen two of her poems which I consider to be representative of the new original and radical direction the writer gives to the classical portrayal of Eve: "Adam Thinking" and "Eve Thinking". As the titles suggest, they are written from a very different perspective, that of the two protagonists of the old story. Both pieces manage to break with tradition and construct ideas of womanhood with highly positive connotations.

In "Adam Thinking", Clifton praises women and considers the state of female gender. Just the very beginning of the poem can be considered a powerful sign of its tone and content. The first line is built up with the single word "She", which creates a great impact on the reader and probably breaks her/his expectations. By choosing this word to open the poem, the writer invites different interpretations such as the power of women to stand alone without the need of men, or the idea of female dominance lording over the rest of the poem. However, the use of the third person may also remind us of centuries of female silence. Then, the author goes on to make faithful reference to the biblical story of the creation of women (Eve) told from Adam's perspective. In this version, Adam claims that Eve has been "stolen from my bone" (line 2), but he seems to

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[5]- Lucille Clifton(1936-2010). A prolific and widely respected poet, Lucille Clifton's work emphasizes endurance and strength through adversity, focusing particularly on African-American experience and family life. She served as the state of Maryland's poet laureate from 1974 until 1985, and won the prestigious National Book Award for Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000 (2000). In addition to her numerous poetry collections, she wrote many children's books. Clifton was a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Clifton's main focus is on women's history; however, according to Robert Mitchell in *American Book Review*, her poetry has a far broader range.

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lucille-clifton

claim that this was not fair, because he feels Eve as being a bigger deal than he thought and, he also thinks that "this creation is so fierce/ I would rather have been born" (lines 11, 12), thus reinforcing the idea of the power of women and the fear that this power produces on men. This situation makes him desire to go back to a state in which Eve was not created, or was still part of him, and this can be perceived when he says: "I hunger to tunnel back / inside desperate / to reconnect the rib and clay / and to be whole again" (lines 4,5,6,7). This fear of Eve that the author depicts in the poem can be directly connected to the prevalent stereotyping of women as incomprehensible beings almost impossible to understand by men. The unknown causes fear and the desire to overcome this feeling through domination. However, it is important to notice that in the second and last stanzas of the poem the emphasis does not fall so much on fear but on the female power of creation and the recognition and acceptance of this power by the male.

In the case of "Eve Thinking", Clifton endows the figure of Eve with many more qualities than the one of procreation; in this version of the myth, Eve is given the gift of language, whereas Adam is lost in a search for it as Eve says: "searching for language to/ call me/ but he is slow" (lines 8,9,10). Furthermore, he needs her not only as a mother figure, but also as a source of knowledge for him: "tonight as he sleeps/ I will whisper into his mouth/ our names" (lines 11,12,13). By giving Eve the power of knowledge, the author also manages to endow her with logic and rational thinking, two of the most intrinsic values of the human race traditionally ascribed to men only. Definitely, Lucille Clifton, with this deconstruction, tried to break with some ancient assumptions that constructed women as inferior creatures or men's servants, as in the case of Eve within the original Christian myth of creation.

Eavan Boland[6] is another important name in the field of contemporary poets aligned with feminism, whose main goal is also to express female perspective and reverse sexual roles inherited from myth and tradition. She introduces a female voice and point of view in Irish legends which constitute her cultural homeland, and, through this procedure, she challenges ancient female myths and constructs new ones. Her poetry is rooted in Irish history and mythology, throughout which she discusses different women's issues. It is important to know that Irish, like Celtic mythology, is mainly androcentric, which implies that the number of heroes and male characters is higher than the number of heroines. Boland's poetry tends to express longing for past times when women were stronger and had less prejudices to battle, and she shows especial interest in the Irish myth of Gráinne and Diarmuid[7]. For example, her poem "Story" narrates the tale of two lovers hiding in the woods, which can be considered a clear allusion to Gráinne and Diarmuid running away from the old King Fionn. However, in this case, the author does not centre on the enmity between Diarmuid and Fionn as

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[6] Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944. At the age of six, Boland's father was appointed Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom; the family followed him to London. At 14, she returned to Dublin to attend Holy Child School in Killiney. She published a pamphlet of poetry (23 Poems) in her first year at Trinity, in 1962. Boland earned a BA with First Class Honors in English Literature and Language from Trinity College, Dublin in 1966. She has taught at Trinity College, Dublin, University College, Dublin, and Bowdoin College, and was a member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Her books of poetry include *Domestic Violence* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), *Against Love Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), *The Lost Land* (1998), *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987* (1996), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (1990), *The Journey and Other Poems* (1986), *Night Feed* (1982), and *In Her Own Image* (1980).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eavan_Boland

[7] The story begins with the aging Fionn, leader of the warrior band the Fianna, grieving over the death of his wife Maigneis. His men find that Gráinne is the worthiest of all women and arrangements are made for their wedding. At their betrothal feast, however, Gráinne is distressed that Fionn is older than her father, and becomes enamored with Fionn's handsome warrior Diarmuid. She slips a sleeping potion to the rest of the guests and encourages Diarmuid to run away with her. They hide in a forest and Fionn immediately pursues them. They evade him several times with the help of Diarmuid's foster father, who conceals Gráinne in his cloak of invisibility while Diarmuid leaps over the pursuers' heads.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pursuit_of_Diarmuid_and_Gr%C3%A1inne

usual, but she highlights the female figure of Gráinne since the very beginning of the poem, when she already separates the two lovers and says: "I am writing/ a woman out of legend. I am thinking/ how new it is – this story. How hard it will be to tell". (lines 32,33,34). Other lines such as "And let the woman be slender" (line 5) or "That this woman is growing older" (line 14) are clear evidence of the way in which the author challenges conventions by putting emphasis on women, rather than men. "Embers" is also another good example of the deconstructed mythological world created by Eavan Boland; with this poem, she also celebrates womanhood, but with a tragic ending in this case. In "Embers", she makes reference to the myth of Diarmuid again, but this time she centres on the old woman of the Fianna, a woman who became young and beautiful again by the love of Diarmuid, but who is completely ignored by her husband. At the end of the poem, the author does not tell us directly the end of the myth, she implicitly discovers her fate with the last word: "ashes", suggesting that she finally turned into ashes because of her husband's rejection.

I cannot conclude this section without making explicit reference to another relevant figure within feminist poetry. As well as Eavan Boland, Louise Erdrich[8] also writes from an oppressed culture and uses mythology as an instrument for claiming gender equality. That is the reason why scholars have established so many parallelisms between these two writers. Louise Erdrich was born in Minnesota and she became involved with

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[8] Karen Louise Erdrich, known as Louise Erdrich, (Little Falls, Minnesota June 7, 1954) is an American author of novels, poetry, and children's books featuring Native American characters and settings. She is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, a band of the Anishinaabe (also known as Ojibwa and Chippewa). Erdrich is widely acclaimed as one of the most significant writers of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance. In 2009, her novel *The Plague of Doves* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In November 2012, she received the National Book Award for Fiction for her novel *The Round House.*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Erdrich

native American Studies, main topic of many of her poems. According to the poems by Erdrich, Native American mythology is attached to the tradition of androcentrism or male patriarchy; while men control every aspect of public life, women are resigned to the domestic sphere and they tend to occupy secondary positions in legends and myths. One of the most important characters in Native American mythologies is the figure of the trickster, who takes a central role played traditionally by a man. However, Erdrich manages to deconstruct tradition by creating a female trickster in her poems. For example in "Fooling God", a poem from her collection *Baptism of Desire,* she endows the trickster woman with the position of a story teller, and this is repeatedly highlighted by the use of "I" at the very beginning of most of the verses. The poem is about a woman who tries to deceive God and, in order to do so, the main character makes use of the two main widespread female stereotypes; on the one hand, that of sexual partner, built up by sentences like "I must be terrible and brush my hair / so that he finds me attractive" (lines 8,9). On the other hand, the one of mother, which can be considered to be dangerously connected with sexist beliefs in Native American tradition, always according to this poet. However, Erdrich combats wisely this idea by giving the female trickster an active participation, because she is not depicted as a passive object in the birthing process, in fact, she says that "[she] must pull them from between [her] legs" (line 21). Apart from that, she also takes active participation by guiding god to bed, which can be seen in line 19: "I must turn down the covers and guide him in".

As mentioned before, many connections have been established between Boland's and Erdrich's contemporary poetry. According to Collen Taylor in her article "Writing Women's Mythology: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Louise Erdrich":

Both clearly create a new female mythology and a unique female voice in their poetry. The striking similarities suggest a common consciousness, which, by the tone of their poetry, is one of anguish and dejection at the difficulties presented by long-standing sexism. (26)

To finish with this last section, and making reference to a well known myth in Greek mythology, I will briefly comment on the poem "Circe's Power" by Louise Glück[9], an American contemporary writer who has also contributed to giving new directions and interpretations to ancient myths and stories. In this case, the author does not deconstruct so directly the myth of Circe, who is still depicted as a powerful sorceress who turns men into animals. However, her actions are in some way justified, which releases her from the evil woman image she was given traditionally. This idea is built up just at the very beginning of the poem when she claims that "[she] had never turned anyone into a pig/ Some people are pigs; [she] made them/ look like pigs" (lines 1,2,3), which completely excludes her from liability, because she is just giving each one his/her real appearance and putting the world in order. In fact, this idea is even reinforced in the second stanza of the poem, where Circe seems to blame double standards of morality establishing a beautiful metaphor between them and the art of disguising: "I am sick of your world / that lets the outside disguise the inside" (lines 4, 5). As mentioned previously, the power of Circe is also prevalent in this version of the myth, and there is explicit reference to that in the poem. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the fact

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[9] Louise Elisabeth Glück (born April 22, 1943) is an American poet. Glück won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1993 for her collection *The Wild Iris*. Glück is the recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award (*Triumph of Achilles*), the Academy of American Poet's Prize (*Firstborn*), as well as numerous Guggenheim fellowships. She is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1999 was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 2003 she was named as judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets and served in that position through 2010. Glück was appointed the US Poet Laureate from 2003–2004, succeeding Billy Collins.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Gl%C3%BCck

that her power is used to emphasize her piety and her capacity for forgiveness, as can be seen in the following quotation: "then I reverse the spell/ showing you my goodness/ as well as my power" (lines 12,13,14). This can be seen just as another example of how slight changes in the way of telling a story can affect its final interpretation.

6. Conclusion

As indicated in the introduction, the aim of this piece of research has been to highlight the importance of mythology in western culture and its pervasive influence in the shaping of our thoughts and actions. Poetry has been our means of exploring how gender relations have been experienced and rendered over the centuries and how myths about the alleged inferiority of the female have entered the collective imagination. After analyzing the evolution of the idea of womanhood in parallelism with the evolution of myths in different periods, one could easily reach the conclusion that there is a deeply-rooted connection between myth and reality. What seems to be less clear is which of them controls the other, in other words: Is mythology constructed by reality? Or is reality constructed by mythology?

If we turn back to the most ancient myths about the creation of the world, one could think that mythology is based on reality, that is, writers invented stories to explain existing situations which reinforces the idea that reality creates myth. Besides, due to the development of science and the theory of evolution, every day fewer people literally believe the Biblical account of creation[10], or Greco-Roman mythologies which fall within the realm of fiction. However, if myths are stories invented to explain an already existing reality, their imaginative power is undeniable since they have always contributed to explaining, creating and maintaining a powerful tool for structures in what we call 'the real world'. Imagine that Adam was the one who ate from the

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[10] However, it should be said that the creation–evolution controversy (also termed the creation vs. evolution debate or the origins debate) is a recurring cultural, political, and theological dispute about the origins of the Earth, humanity, life, and the universe. This debate is most prevalent in the United States, but to a lesser extent is also present in Europe and elsewhere, and often portrayed as part of a culture war.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creation%E2%80%93evolution_controversy

forbidden fruit, or imagine that Zeus had sent Apollo with the box, rather than Pandora; would the fate of the world have been different? Would gender constructions have been constructed in another way?

I think that there is no clear answer for these questions. Although I am strongly convinced that myth and reality go hand in hand, in my opinion they both complement each other in a way that there is not a single direction to follow. That is why I would say that imagination affects our idea of reality in the same way as this idea of reality affects imagination, since both of them, are ways of acquiring knowledge which cannot be easily delimited or separated. As a matter of fact, we should be aware that words are not always interpreted equally because meaning is also constructed socially and therefore imaginatively. According to Tsung-chi Chang in her article "Can Women Speak?: Gender Construction/ Deconstruction in Twentieth Century Irish Literature": "it seems reasonable that literary texts never really mean what they say or say what they mean. Meaning, then, is elusive and constantly at stake in interpretation" (209).

One unquestionable think is that, across history, many nonconformist voices have found a way of changing reality through words, and myths have been their chosen tools for that change because myths have been essential and powerful instruments to create hierarchies, power and submission and, therefore, their analysis and deconstruction have been equally useful to revise and challenge deeply rooted patterns of thought and behavior in society. This can let us reach the conclusion that, to paraphrase the bard, so long as literature will be alive, so long as gender injustices will be committed and so long as new generations of poets will arise, myth will continue to be object of analysis as part of our most intrinsic, real or imagined nature. Where does reality end? Where does imagination begin?

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