

## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 1 (2008)

The Politics of Rereading



Δούκα-Καμπίτογλου Αικατερίνη, Μυθιστόρημα  
Γυναίκας: Ποιήτριες του 20ου αιώνα

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doi: [10.12681/syn.16608](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16608)

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**Αικατερίνη Δούκα-Καμπιτογλου. *Μυθιστόρημα Γυναίκας. Ποιήτριες του 20<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Παπαζήση, 2007. Σελ. 232.**

Once upon a time there was a monster that had been condemned to stay ugly and monstrous until the time that it would love a beautiful princess. The monster lived isolated in its castle where any mirrors that would remind it of its ugliness were forbidden, waiting for the beauty to come to save it. In this way centuries passed by. One day a girl walked through the door of the castle. She was not especially beautiful, nor very young, nor intelligent. The monster, however, in its despair, and not seeing any other choice confided in her its problem. "What is it really that you are telling me?" the girl answered. She grabbed the monster firmly by the shoulders and though it resisted guided it in front of the last remaining mirror. The monster looked, and in the glass it saw the reflection of a girl who tightly held the shoulders of a beautiful princess. "Do you see?" the girl told her. "There is no monster; they just told you that. The spells were fairy tales. Anyway," she added winking at her, "you know very well that there are no bad witches. You are the beauty and it is yourself that you have to give love to."

What does the mythmaker want to tell us? Just as in Plato where language functions both as medicine and poison so too for women their own myth can function as a fairy tale (παραμύθι) to deceive but also as a comfort (παραμυθία) to heal and to exorcize the wounds with which they have learned to live together. According to Roland Barthes, every culture nurtures thousands of mythologies, the truth of which is considered self-evident, and the messages that these mythologies hide are not simple or harmless especially for women who are the main victims *par excellence* of such prejudices of patriarchal culture. Thus a woman is needed to refuse the ready-made myth and to become a poet herself; an original creator who, according to the Platonic homeopathy, will summon her own tale to function contrary to the myth as a rival fear, as a subversive parody, and as a mythic story. A tale that will incorporate myth within a new historical frame that will show its causes, its foundations, its limitations.

In *A Woman's Novel* Douka-Kambitoglou explores the ways women in their poetry used the pores of a female experience in the polarized system of gender. Kambitoglou's book takes its place in the locale of the feminist morphology of Greece while on a parallel level it is placed among other important studies about women's feminist literature built on the foundations defined by Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's seminal works *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*; Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language*; Estella Lauter's *Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*; Liz Yorke's *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Women's Poetry*.

The book is composed of three chapters, three biohistories of the female creator, written at different times and published in Greek journals in 1997, 2000, and 2001. For the Greek public the writer chooses to focus on a distinctive, close and engaging critical reading of poetic myth-makings. Her reading is driven by a theoretical position that combines ideas and action; if the final goal of feminist literary criticism is to intervene in politics and to bring a change in women's position, it is necessary to have a more meaningful, unprejudiced intellectual training in women's experience. Thus, well-established feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous and Nina Baym believe that it is important to avoid the trap of imprisoning the living woman within abstract deconstructive theories and instead focus on specific analyses which are historically and experientially grounded on real women who are engaged in writing.

The aim of letting literature speak to us about experience appears in different and equally interesting ways. From the 1980s up to now in the Anglo-Saxon world, important feminist critics see that feminism has a psychological and perhaps spiritual value for Greek experience. They suggest an archetypal feminist theory that guides women toward searching for self-knowledge and fulfillment through a life-giving collective unconscious. Not entirely spiritual, the suggested feminization of the archetypal theory would offer more knowledge to women together with the awareness of body representations and images. By studying the ways women transform myth so as to focus on their personal experience, we understand the language, the vision, and the sensibility of contemporary women poets. From different archetypes such as animus, the shadow, and the Great Mother, we realize the personal and the collective unconscious as they translate it into art. Myth allows women creators to speak about another taboo of female experience, desire, which is approached as the sacred

act of the female human experience but also as an invincible power potent enough to break through the established cultural structures that immobilize female existence. The exploration of the relations between the structures of female poetry and desire must be undertaken not only on the body. As Liz Yorke and Margaret Atwood believe the biology of women must be considered in parallel with their history and their socialization.

The titles of the three chapters of Douka-Kambitoglou's book are characteristic of the above approach to female poetry writing as mythico-historical and as fairy tale. Chapter 1, "Beauty and the Beast: Redefining the Woman-poet," Chapter 2, "Biomythographies: Old and New Myths of Women," and Chapter 3, "Once upon a Time: Fairy Tale, Melodrama, Poetry" aim at tracing the female alternative vision in the work of poets, presenting the ways that the identity of their gender can be defined by the liberating of the female imaginary (14). From the American modernist poets, H.D. and Gertrude Stein, Kambitoglou's interest goes to Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Joy Harjo, Olga Broumas; then, to the British Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay; the Polish Wislawa Szymborska; and, to the Greek poets Aghelaki- Rouke, Pampouthi, Mastoraki, Laina, Galanaki and Karelli.

Their connecting thread is the ascertainment by the critic that "women's writing came from the odd antinomy in the life of the creator—the confrontation and the anxiety that comes from the experience of being simultaneously both a woman and a poet" (9)—in other words both the beauty and the beast according to Simone de Beauvoir, in front of the forbidden mirror of art. The bitter privilege of women creators to be nursed in a literary but also logocentric tradition that does not express them leads to the central question that the critic places in her introduction:

What is the new story that contemporary women poets try to tell us? Do we possibly need a new word, a new language? And is this language perhaps poetry?...Women at last dare write a poetry that is theirs, revealing that perhaps there is a basic differentiation between the male and the female way of understanding things which still leaves margins for an imaginary transformation of reality. (10-11)

By leaving men to their own logos, women turn in a dynamic way to the paralogy of the myth. By re-visioning the traditional myths, women poets weave meta-fictions that illustrate the other unstated side, where the silent heroine finally obtains her critical consciousness and autonomous voice so that she represents in her own story her own cinderellas, snow whites, and sleeping beauties. The re-visioned fictions become bases for communal, imaginary female experiences that envision situations of completion, symbiosis, omnipotence, fulfillment of desires, and freedom (15).

The six refractions of the first chapter, Silence, Monster, Muse, Myth, Mother, and Mouth refer to the contribution of the modernist poets to important experimental movements and to re-visionary mythmaking that is characterized by myths and archetypes aiming at the development and completion of the female archetype. The Muse of the poet is the dynamically developing self, an imaginary of the female double—not the externalized other as a patriarchal image but as a power of love for the female self. This self, however, exorcized by the prohibitions of a patriarchal curse of the logos takes the features, the language, and the intensity of a demon, of a mad woman locked in the attic. The woman poet expresses her anxiety in relation to the incarnation of the poetic power in a woman's body. Faced with her demonic self, transformed into a gorgon-medusa, she realizes that for her it is a symbol of dynamism and liberation instead of annihilation and death (33-34). According to Hélène Cixous, women are trapped between the medusa and the abyss. The medusa is beautiful, however, and finally laughs.

According to Kambitoglou, female creativity can be incarnated in grotesque creatures as in the poems of Katerina Aghelaki- Rouke, Pavlina Pampouthi, and Liz Lochhead. On the other hand, there is the aspect of the *anima* archetype that is the temptress motif. Even though we could traditionally say this enchantress is not the transformation of the beast that awaits, as in the case of the Homeric siren (who Margaret Atwood ridicules in her poem "The Siren's Song"), in women's poetry Homer's Circe is transformed into a sensitive subjectivity, a sentient human being, and in mythical figures of awe such as the Furies, the witches, the amazons. They all obtain an interesting human face as they are examined, and contrasted in terms of structure, imagery, archetype, tragic and comic vision. The critic explores how both sides of the twofold archetype appear in the female subjectivity, how the

schism/division between the woman and the creator is expressed in poetic words, how women's suppression in a patriarchal society comes to the surface with metaphors and symbols that female poets choose to represent their split self; they all involve a duality rooted in the mother-daughter dyad. The duality in women's poetry (the myth of Demeter and Persephone), the soul of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the importance of myth in ancient Greek society have become embodied in the search for the contemporary woman poet.

What is found behind all of the above is the desire for the union of opposites in the features of the Great Mother, the archetypal female prototype of the triple goddess—*Kore*, Mother, *Graea*—the dismemberment and the weakening of which desire was signaled by the turn towards phallogocentric thinking that divides the poet from the woman. The woman poet wants, like another Isis, to reunite the pieces of that goddess in order to resurrect her and, from the new image of that goddess-woman, to resurrect herself. This therapeutic return through myth takes another dimension in the second chapter, "Biomythographies: Old and New Myths of the Woman," where Kambitoglou examines the female poetic attempt to reverse myth's itinerary under the influence of patriarchy after having analyzed the parameters of this transformation. In the first part, "Biomythographies I: Beginning," the critic explains how we have to start politically by requesting the presence of women in positions of the speaking subjects but also theoretically with the acceptance of the importance of the somatic elements of subjectivity (69). This is a demand that is expressed sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly in Gertrude Stein's "Lifting Belly" (78), H.D.'s "The Master" (78), and Muriel Rukeyser's "The Poem as Mask" (79). Most of these poems appear for the first time in Greek, in very good translations made by the critic.

In the second part of the chapter, "Biomythographies II: Development," the central role of sexuality is examined as a lever of women's suppression; Kambitoglou analyzes mainly poems by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and explores their alternative myth of women's self-control and autonomy, and the *jouissance* that the power of the word offers. The organic itinerary of the chapter guides us to "Biomythographies III: Revival," where the woman poet creates a confrontation between positions of power and positions of weakness and in this way imposes new definitions of power, new chances for women, with deep effects on society. In the poetry of Adrienne Rich, we can see the process by which she includes and then rejects respected uses of power or romantic patriarchal imaginings of woman's victimization to achieve a vision finally of a beneficent female power—personal and political—a transforming energy that impregnates the development of a female aesthetics based on her own experience as a woman and a poet. The subjects that come up regarding Rich's aesthetics, as they appear in poems such as "Diving into the Wreck" (119-22), "North American Time" (125), "Transcendental Etude" (117), are the emphases on female silence, the transformation of which would signal a change in power relations, a poetic tradition that strengthens women's art and women creators, a recognition of the female principle as the place or the locus of the transformative power and finally the definition of the female body and its desires as a metaphor for the actual power of life. Rich teaches how we can be transformed from the state of suppressed aunties Jennifer or sisters-in-law—housewives in despair—into well-fed and fearless tigers ready to welcome and embrace the new woman.

The connection of the new with the old archetype is completed in the chapter that has the revealing title "Biomythographies IV: Completion." There the appearance mainly of Audre Lorde, a militant black poet, unfolds the relation between gender and race, as she reveals the fingerprint of the racial domination in the literary tradition. The use of a definite self-revealing confiding language "asks for an imaginary maternal archetype --biological, historical and metaphysical-- that searches to find its place in a female genealogy." The poet "uses eroticism as power, as an essential bridge that unites the spiritual and the political," according to the words of Catherine MacKinnon.

The last chapter of the book with the title "Once upon a Time: Fairy Tale, Melodrama, Poetry," a moral lesson that addresses a listener already suspicious of myth, overturns the romantic characteristics of the patriarchal fairy tale that requires the woman to be placed in a schizophrenic situation, that is, to be simultaneously morally superior but also sensitive, isolated and available, since passivity, isolation (from other women), sensitivity, gentleness and endurance are located at the heart of romantic experience (148). They secure the desired chastity of the woman as a commodity for the legitimized marital childbearing but also they justify the suppression of woman as the necessary measure against

her "natural inclination to go astray," according to Aristophanes and others. The fairy tale in other words is interpreted as a romance of civilizing the woman to be feminine (156)—in other words to be a monster that embodies its Lacanian image, this schizophrenic curse.

This schizophrenia in fairy tales is denounced by the Greek-American Olga Broumas, whose poems "The Grimm Sisters" and "Beginning with O" are, according to Kambitoglou, feminist metafiction or metatales in which the voices of the conscious speakers articulate the other side of the cultural representations of femininity. Broumas' heroines are not the only ones: certainly starting from the highest paradigm of Anne Sexton and her satirical "Transformations," American poets rewrite Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood, and certainly Beauty and the Beast, showing that women could weave texts and also interpret them without reproducing self-sacrifices. Reflecting and doubling their endeavor like a magical mirror, Ekaterini Kambitoglou's book functions in feminist criticism to stabilize a sense of community among women, as the friendly but steady hand on the shoulder but also to patrol that which Rachel Blau DuPlessis welcomes as the "Female that is the dream of somewhere else, the place beyond power." And if this power of the female imaginary depends on, as Douka-Kambitoglou shows, the principle of divide and conquer, then the way towards this somewhere else goes through the reconciliation between the beauty and her beast.

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