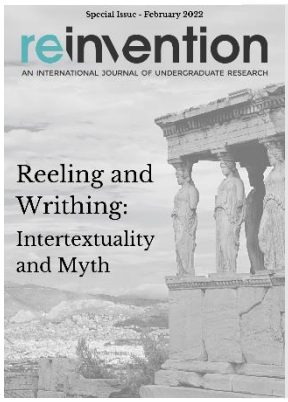


reinvention
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
https://reinventionjournal.org
Supported by MONASH WARWICK ALLIANCE
MONASH University
WARWICK

Editorial

Reeling and Writhing - An Exploration of Intertextuality

Shreya Sridharan, University of Warwick

I warmly welcome you to *Reinvention*'s latest special edition, one I am very proud to introduce as the first in my position as Editor. We bring to you an amalgamation of incisive research and imaginative poetry in our showcase of student work from a module in the University of Warwick's Writing Programme named *Reeling and Writhing*. Although perhaps not immediately obvious, this issue brings forth a new kind of interdisciplinarity as the students analyse literature and media by engaging with history, philosophy and sociology, all within the context of creative writing.

Reeling and Writhing, as a module, focused on teaching students that the creation and reception of texts cannot be separated from cultural contexts and societal responses to religion, history and myth. As outlined in our guest article, students were taught about myths and retellings of stories, as well as the strategies and means through which mythologies are created. Finally, they were tasked with creating poetry using intertextuality, which we now display in this issue. The cover, created by Elle Pearson, captures the relationship between the modern and the mythological as seen in our world - something that is explored in detail within this issue.

What can we as an audience learn from their work? How can we ourselves learn about intertextuality?

Intertextuality, in simple terms, refers to how one text can shape the meaning of another, and also refers to the connection between such related texts that can influence an audience's interpretation of the work. The papers in this issue focus on intertextuality and explore key themes or depictions or characters that tie different works together, across centuries and creators. We are not limited to literature, but rather focus on how different media – be it film or even games – are created and situated within their societal contexts, and how previous iterations affect this creation.

I believe that intertextuality can be considered a cornerstone of *Reinvention*, given our focus on interdisciplinarity. In our publications, we strive to showcase work that approaches a problem from different perspectives and, in doing so, we can highlight how different subjects influence each other. For example, in our recent issues, we have published work on climate change with one article from a meteorological view and one from a sustainable development view. As an audience, we are likely to embed contrasting and complementary ideas from these disciplines into our understanding of climate change, and I argue that this kind of receptive reading is one form of intertextuality.

When considering the content for this issue, what stood out to me (besides my personal interest in the works discussed) is how accessible it is. The pieces include not only literary classics such as *The Iliad* and Shakespeare's writing but also more recent work such as *Twilight*, *The Song of Achilles* and *Jennifer's Body.* These works are commonplace and, even if a typical reader has not considered their own perception of them, they are likely to have come across them. I think this is a special feature of this issue, which makes it an exciting read. A common theme tying the papers together is the evolution of ideas and intergenerational links – how have depictions of characters changed and why? What influences this? I think the analyses presented here give us much to learn, even as laypeople, about our own consumption of media – teaching us to reflect and rediscover what any art says and what brought it there.

Another special feature of this issue is the poetry that accompanies the research, as this is the first time *Reinvention* has published creative writing. The poems featured here cover a wide range of themes, from explorations of gender and sexuality to retellings of myths and to themes

of horror and violence. They capture some of the central ideas of the papers and do so by subverting expectations – in theme, style and form. I welcome our readers to listen to these voices carefully and experience the visceral as they read the poems.

This issue begins with a guest article, co-written by Giulia Champion and some of the student contributors – Alba Alonso Palombi, Estelle Wallis and Italo Ferrante. It outlines the idea and conception of this issue and what we hope our readers can take away from it. As Estelle aptly points out, poetry as a medium is personal, and our contributors have written beautiful, moving and personal poetry that reinterprets and recontextualises many of the texts discussed. I hope that this allows our readers to consider these texts in a new light and to reflect on how and in what ways different media can contribute to intertextuality.

In 'Crosses to Cullens: The Western Vampire from Gothic Predator to Romantic Icon', Alex Fewings examines how the depictions of sexuality in vampires have evolved from early Gothic fiction to modern portrayals of vampires. He places the figure of the vampire within the context of modern romance, rather than horror, and expertly weaves together this evolution of the character with questions of sexual acceptance and gender in the West.

Alba Alonso Palombi's 'The New Femme Fatale in *Jennifer's Body*' focuses on the character of Jennifer Check from the Diablo Cody film *Jennifer's Body*, examining how she relates to the trope of the *femme fatale.* In doing so, the paper offers a contextualised history of the *femme fatale*, from biblical figures to more recent characters, and posits that a new and empowered *femme fatale* has arrived – one who uses her power against those who have abused her.

In 'A Creature Without a Cave: Abstraction and (Mis)Appropriation of the Wendigo Myth in Contemporary North American Horror', Francesca Johnson analyses the representation of the Wendigo myth in North American horror across the media of television, film and games. She highlights how the use of the Wendigo by non-Indigenous creators can lead to problematic depictions of Indigenous culture and calls for a focus on Indigenous voices in the discourse on caveless creatures.

Estelle Wallis's 'The Once and Future Story: Arthurian Mythology as an Emblem for Western Ideals' explores three key texts in Arthurian literature to show how authors use the Arthurian myth to promulgate their society's values and priorities. Her paper provides a masterful analysis of how the myth is both influenced by and influences the Western psyche and is extremely relevant in an age where new forms of democratised media are used to shape societal values.

In 'The Relationship Between History and Mythology in Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins*', Kirsten Scheiby investigates how historical narratives are intertwined with mythology and offers an alternative view of the myth of assassins. She convincingly argues that the Sondheim/Weidman musical repositions assassins as three-dimensional people who are pursuing and participating in cultural ideals in contrast to previous representations of assassins as caricatured madmen. She offers an interesting insight into how historical figures are created by mythology and, in turn, how they can subsequently perpetuate mythologies.

Finally, J. S. Campion's 'Examining Patroclus' role in *The Iliad*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Song of Achilles*' investigates how the character of Patroclus affects the depictions of Achilles and is used to develop themes of war. The paper employs a queer reading of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles in the three aforementioned texts to emphasise its influence on the representation of war and its use in conveying the authors' attitudes towards war.

This issue, while focused on creative writing and literature, brings forth a new kind of interdisciplinarity, and I hope these papers and poetry resonate with our readers. It is a positive and key step for our readers to start thinking about creative practice as a research activity, and I welcome our readers to explore newer avenues of research. I would like to thank Giulia Champion for reaching out and proposing this special issue of *Reinvention* and for all her work. I also thank and congratulate all contributing authors. At *Reinvention*, we are always open to engaging with new projects, and we welcome any ideas for further special issues. Finally, I encourage our readers to look out for our April issue and to continue to engage with *Reinvention* in any way that they can.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Sridharan, S. (2022), 'Reeling and Writhing - An Exploration of Intertextuality', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/1100. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.1100, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Introduction for *Reinvention* Special Issue ‘Reeling and Writhing’

A dialogue between the students and tutor, and the reader

Alba Alonso Palombi, Giulia Champion, Italo Ferrante and Estelle Wallis, University of Warwick

Alba: Hello, how are you? I know this is probably not how you were expecting this introduction to start, but I thought it would be a good idea to let you know about this special issue. This won’t be a typical issue; in between the carefully researched, meticulously written, calculated articles, there will be poetry, which tends to break the rules. However, it is precisely this combination that will make this issue memorable, so there’s no need to proceed with caution; just let it wash over you and accept the voices that colour the papers. Some of these voices are very old, some are Greek, some are Saxon, some seem to be blasphemous. Please listen to them regardless; they have travelled a long way to get here, and gone through many forms and accents and they have been assembled carefully.

Giulia: This special issue was inspired by and compiled from the Warwick Writing Programme (WWP) module ‘CW310 Reeling & Writhing: Poetry & Intertextuality for Advanced Studies’ created by Professor Michael Hulse, who retired in December 2020. Professor Hulse, along with the whole WWP staff – Professor Ian Samson, Dr Chantal Wright, Dr Gonzalo C. Garcia, Dr Tim Leach, Professor David Morley, Professor Maureen Freely and Dr Lucy Brydon – offer to students an exciting and innovative list of modules that allow their creative and intellectual talents to flourish and develop. (Want to see this exceptional course list? Click here). In addition to being inspiring educators, they are also kind and supportive colleagues to whom I am extremely grateful for a year of collegiality and of learning about pedagogical practices. And let’s not forget the doctoral students whose tutor work in the department only strengthen it. I have only had the pleasure to meet and collaborate with three of them during the 2020–21 academic year, but I know the WWP would not be the same without all of them; thank you Arianna Autieri, Lúcia Collischonn de Abreu and Johnny Lynas.

Alba: This module is very much like what the above introduction promises, and was one of the most interesting classes I took as part of my undergraduate degree. It was a combination of theory and practice that made every class exciting and challenging – two words that apply to the entirety of the WWP. I loved to learn about myths and retellings, as well as being given the chance to explore characters through my own poetry and that of my peers. But more than anything, it was fascinating to see how a lot of the concepts we explored in class still echo today.

Giulia: As one of my most favourite modules that I have ever had the pleasure of teaching, 'Reeling and Writhing''s focus on adaptation engaged with my interest in post-colonial and decolonial rewriting of canonical literatures. However, what made this class and experience most memorable were the brilliant, beautiful, witty, moving and powerful pieces of work created by the students weekly, and I am extremely thrilled that *Reinvention* is giving us a chance to share some of their outstanding work – both their research and creative productions – through this special issue. This special issue, as was the module, is a space of polyphony and inclusion; similarly, we hope to provide an introduction to this issue that allows multiple voices to share their experience, but also to share where they are now, nearly a year after some of them brilliantly completed their BA. I might have been the tutor, but I am the one who was doing most of the learning that year. Thank you all for your intellectual and creative generosity throughout the six months we spent together.

Alba: I am currently studying a Publishing MA at the University of the Arts London, and continue to read and write poetry. I keep in mind what my years at Warwick taught me, striving to grow as an author without losing those ancient whispers, and hoping to see more of my work published.

Italo: [In reference to this module] the only quote that I can think of is this one by T. S. Eliot: 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.'

Estelle: One of the first pieces of advice we often get as aspiring writers is to make sure to read as much as possible – perhaps even to read more than we actually write. A huge part of the writing process, we are told, is taking inspiration from the world, our experiences and other works of writing. We

borrow techniques that we enjoy reading and incorporate them in our own styles. This is true, of course. Intertextuality has been practised for nearly as long as text itself has been around. Myths are often constructed on top of other stories, a web of interconnected stories using the same characters and worlds. No work is produced in a cultural vacuum; authors are constantly influenced by the writings they admire, and even the ones they despise. However, through my course, I have often found the reverse to be true as well. Not only does reading influence my writing, but the pieces that I write have often impacted my reading of particular texts. Through its focus on the relationship between poetic intertextuality and literary analysis, the 'Reeling and Writhing' module has been especially insightful in this area.

As I wrote my own take on the Virgin Mary, on Pygmalion, on the Creation myth, I reshaped my own perception of the original texts, which made me consider new and perhaps more interesting perspectives in my interpretation. The poetic medium is a particularly personal one, where it is often expected for an author to construct a close emotional connection not only with the reader but also with the topic addressed by the poem. Thus, the poem recontextualises a text on a level that 'classical' academic analysis does not always achieve. It builds emotional attachment and connection through sensory appeal – through carefully crafted connotations, through a practical experience of a text, rather than through theoretical debate. Poetry and creative writing complete literary analysis to enrich the reading of a work whose long history within a framework of creative processes often takes on a new depth in the writer's mind.

Giulia: We are so grateful that you have picked up this special issue of *Reinvention* and would like to acknowledge and thank from the bottom of our hearts the amazing and hardworking editorial team of *Reinvention*; this issue would not exist without them – especially Shreya Sridharan and Mara Caldarini. Thank you for your insightful comments, your kindness and your patience. Nor would this special issue exist without the precious help of the anonymous academics around the globe who generously helped us by peer-reviewing each research article and taking time out of their busy schedule to support all the authors in developing their work and strengthening it. Finally, all our thanks to Dr Ian Sansom, the director of the WWP, for your constant support and kindness towards staff and students alike.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Alonso Palombi, A., G. Champion, I. Ferrante and E. Wallis (2022), 'Introduction for Reinvention Special Issue ‘Reeling and Writhing’: A dialogue between the students and tutor, and the reader', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/955. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.955, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Crosses to Cullens: The Western Vampire from Gothic Predator to Romantic Icon

Alex James Fewings, University of Warwick

Abstract

Although the figure of the vampire in Western culture has undergone significant alterations from the nineteenth century to the modern day in terms of presentation, there has always existed a strain of latent sexual concern in their depictions. In earlier works, this sexuality was couched in a negative light, often incorporating themes of sexual assault, the violation of private spaces and dangerous, 'tempting' aspects of sexuality. This article will argue that, although there is continuity between early Gothic vampire fiction and modern vampiric paranormal romance in terms of their connection to sexuality, there has nevertheless been significant evolution in the manner in which that sexuality is approached, as it transforms from sexualised assault to a dangerous romance.

Keywords: Gothic literature, evolution of vampires in literature, development of literature into cinema, vampires and sexuality, horror and sexuality

The figure of the vampire has a singular place in the human imagination. From the Caribbean *soucouyant* to the Scottish *baobhan sith* to the Romanian *strigoi*, it seems that it is more common than not for cultures to produce such a concept. Even in the present day, when relatively few people believe in these creatures as literal monsters, vampires find a place in popular culture – but this place is significantly divorced from their original narrative role. The vampire has undergone a metamorphosis from a horrifying monster to a being with relatively little representation in actual horror media. In modern Western media, the vampire seems to have found a more constant home in the genre of romance fiction[1] than in horror. Although this difference has often been commented upon in other works, this article tracks the transition from the monsters of Gothic horror towards the vampires of the modern day, using comparative analysis of

different texts to trace the development of vampiric traits through this process. In particular, this article focuses on the development of the theme of sexuality, which has come to define the modern vampire, and in particular the way that this theme has developed over time to enter the realms of relative social acceptability, rather than being added at a later point. Thus, the development of the vampire into a romantic context can be seen as a reflection of the growing acceptance of sexuality in our modern society, taking these blood-sucking monsters from unhallowed chapels to standing them before the altar.

Before this evolution can be followed, however, we must first reach the roots of the family tree of undeath in Western popular culture. As aforementioned, the archetype of a vampiric, blood-sucking monster is common in folklore and mythology. Although 'most casual vampirophiles today still mistakenly believe vampire lore to be primarily a Romanian phenomenon' (McClelland, 2006: 16), it is more correct to say that the common Western idea of the vampire 'is of Slavic and Bulgarian – or, more generally, Balkan – provenance' (McClelland, 2006: 16).

> [T]he tradition of the vampire and, indeed, of the word vampire itself, which also had a prefolkloric meaning, goes back several centuries before [Western] Europeans […] had ever heard of such things. […] Toward the end of the seventeenth century […], scientists and journalists […] ventured more intrepidly into such places as Serbia, Croatia, and other areas around the borders of the Habsburg Empire. Their noble intention was first to record and then explain the exotic and perhaps supernatural goings-on at the boundaries of the civilized world.
> (McClelland, 2006: 3–4)

As a result of this, though, the concept of the vampire that the majority of later vampiric works, literary and otherwise, were principally based on a relative few outsiders' accounts of a small number of specific and notorious incidents. This focus on a few sources and the outsider's perspectives led to an ignorance of the folkloric context in which these vampire tales were based. Cut free from their home soil, the vampire was then reinterpreted through an Enlightenment worldview during the eighteenth century.

One of the earliest vampire narratives born from this reinterpretation was John William Polidori's 1819 novella *The Vampyre,* concerning the predation of the mysterious Lord Ruthven upon various victims. Christopher Frayling describes this horror novella as 'the first story to successfully fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre' (Frayling, 1992: 108). The novella incorporates many elements that find greater expression in later vampire fiction, but of particular interest are two themes relevant to the interrelation of vampire and romance fiction: corruption, and the association of vampiric predation and marriage. Regarding the former theme, Lord Ruthven is written as an embodiment or personification of moral corruption, as well as the destruction and 'bestiality' – in the sense of an animalistic state – which that leads to. He is consistently described as working to bring about the 'dissolution' of others, and as transgressing the bounds of 'polite' and 'corrupt' society:

> His peculiarities caused him to be invited to every house; all wished to see him, and those who had been accustomed to violent excitement, and now felt the weight of ennui, were pleased at having something in their presence capable of engaging their attention. [… H]e was as often among those females who adorn the sex by their domestic virtues, as among those who sully it by their vices.
> (Polidori, 1997: 39–40)

> Aubrey could not avoid remarking, that it was not upon the virtuous […] that he bestowed his alms; – these were sent from his door with hardly-suppressed sneers; but when the profligate came to ask something, not to relieve his wants, but to allow him to wallow in his lust, or to sink him still deeper in his iniquity, he was sent away with rich charity.
> (Polidori, 1997: 42)

In placing the figure of wickedness personified as an inhuman monster infiltrating society, Polidori depicts anxieties around creeping moral corruption that both echo classical Christian concerns relating to the concept of sin and demonic temptation and presage the stereotypically Victorian concern with moral degeneracy. However, he necessarily tied this figure of corruption to ideas of pleasure and excess, temptation and desire. This figure of the vampire as a terrible but desirable icon of

enticement to corruption, or as a forceful initiator of that corruption, is a trope that reoccurs throughout the genre going forwards and will play an important role in the metamorphosis from monster to love interest.

Regarding the second theme, it is most notable that – although Lord Ruthven fed upon the Greek girl, Ianthe – the climax of the story is not this, but rather the marriage of the protagonist Aubrey's sister to the 'Earl of Marsden' – actually the vampire in disguise, who promptly murders her.

> The guardians hastened to protect Miss Aubrey; but when they arrived, it was too late. Lord Ruthven had disappeared, and Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!
> (Polidori, 1997: 31)

Here again, we see the theme of corruption evident, in that the vampire subverts the sacred trust of marriage for the purpose of his predation. However, the association of marriage or relationships with vampiric predation in particular is notable. Perhaps the most classic site of this kind of fantastical attack is the bed, the clichéd image of the victim as the pale woman in the nightgown, sheets and gown both stained with crimson. The particular focus on the bed as a site of vampiric predation can be attributed to the fact that the bed and its room are seen as private locations, where one is vulnerable for long hours while asleep, but should, if the house is sound, be safe. Furthermore, they are powerfully representative of intimacy, especially in the context of the marital bed, which is particularly connected to blood due to the tradition of breaking the hymen during the first intercourse of newlyweds. Thus, the vampire's attack becomes a perverse parody of marital consummation.

The intimacy of the vampire's attack is not solely limited to the marriage bed, nor to the attack of the male vampire upon the female victim, however. In various cultures, childbirth – a profoundly dangerous period without modern medical aid – became associated with malevolent entities such as the Mesopotamian 'miscarriage-causing demoness Lamashtu' (Scurlock, 2014: 587), while McClelland writes that 'Inexplicable death, especially during sleep, is perhaps the most serious [phenomenon often explained by supernatural activity]' (McClelland, 2006: 64). Many such malevolent entities were construed as female, and female vampires have found their place in fiction as well as folklore. One early example of such is

Carmilla, of Thomas Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 novel of the same name. Later revealed to be the vampiric 'Mircalla, Countess Karnstein', Carmilla still preys upon a female victim, Laura, a young woman to whom the vampire attaches herself as a friend and confidant for an extended period.

LeFanu's work has gained some renown as the root of the sub-genre of lesbian vampire fiction, although this is not to suggest that it can be said to represent an effort to portray lesbianism in a positive light. The close relationship between Carmilla and Laura is founded upon a predatory desire to 'devour' the latter, forming another example of the alignment between vampirism and sexuality. This same alignment can be seen in Lord Ruthven's desire for marriage to Aubrey's sister and, later, in the Count Dracula's sexually charged attacks on Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker. In short, 'LeFanu's novella characterises Carmilla's monstrosity as a threat to her victims' sexual purity as well as to their lives' (Fong, 2016: 111). The novella goes so far as to directly comment upon the tendency of vampires to fixate upon specific victims in a manner where sexual/romantic desire and the desire to devour are intertwined, saying that 'The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons' (LeFanu, 2019). It then goes on to further describe this 'engrossing vehemence', saying that the vampire will 'exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem' and 'never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim' (LeFanu, 2019.). The use of the phrase '*resembling* the passion of love' (emphasis mine) implies that the vampire is incapable of truly feeling love, which may be a result of LeFanu being unwilling to characterise female–female attraction as 'true love'. Even with this reluctance, however, the writer still compares this pursuit to 'the gradual approaches of an artful courtship' (LeFanu, 2019) and thus works to add the concept of attraction from the vampire to the victim, where Lord Ruthven seemed more motivated by simple sadism and hunger. However, Carmilla still stands as an early example of a trope of female vampires that would become regrettably central to their characterisation going forwards: the archetype of the female vampire as seductress, beguiling victims (particularly men) for the sake of her predation.

This trope is clearly manifest in the nameless Brides of Dracula in Bram Stoker's famous novel, *Dracula*. These female vampires represent a red-

toothed hedonism, sexually corrupting and mortally destructive. Hobson states that ‘*Dracula* establishes the vision of the female vampire sucking men dry, and these women have insatiable hungers for blood and for sex’ (Hobson, 2016: 11). This same sexual danger is posed by Lucy Westenra when she is transformed in death into a vampire, as she ‘becomes more physically attractive and her body is hyperbolically eroticised, with her “sweetness […] turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty” and her “purity” transformed into “voluptuous wantonness”’ (Fong, 2016: 112). Unlike the case of the male vampire, the female vampire’s danger is attached to her physical attractiveness; beauty and voluptuousness are inherently tied to wantonness, just as in the myth of Pandora, a ‘sweet, lovely maiden-shape’ (Goold, 1982: 7) is paired with ‘a shameless mind and a deceitful nature’ (Goold, 1982: 7). This hypersexualisation of the vampiress blends destructiveness with beauty and womanly charms to the degree that the two are almost inseparable. This is not to suggest that Stoker’s vampires were directly inspired by Greek myths, but rather that both concepts of the monstrous feminine sprang from profoundly misogynistic cultures, simultaneously ascribing to women the capacity for boundless evil, and near-totally confining that evil to culturally feminine spaces and trappings.

One example of this in *Dracula* is the way in which Lucy Westenra’s introduction as a vampiress involves a perversion of the mother–child relationship, as she drains the blood from a small child and confronts the protagonists with that blood still on her lips. Another is the way in which the Brides of Dracula also predate upon small children, and their reliance upon seduction for hunting and as defence. Their introductory scene near the beginning of the novel involves the three Brides coming to the chamber of Jonathan Harker while he sleeps, evoking in him ‘a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips’ (Stoker, 2011: 44), and euphemistically referring to their intention to drain him of his blood as ‘kissing’: ‘“He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all”’ (Stoker, 2011: 45). Meanwhile, at the end of the book, Abraham van Helsing experiences a sudden attack of longing when looking upon one of the Brides ‘in her Vampire sleep, so full of life and voluptuous beauty that I shudder as though I have come to do murder’ (Stoker, 2011: 444). This attack of conscience does not last, and van Helsing destroys the Brides with stakes; an act which, by dehumanisation, has been construed by the novel’s male leads as more mercy than murder. In these representations of

the female vampire as demonic caricatures of female sexuality, we see a mirroring of the fears of a misogynistic society regarding that sexuality, and a ritual enactment of violent suppression.

The association of the vampire in the Gothic horror novel with mingled sexuality and violence is not unique to female vampires, however, and is often paired with the intrusion of an 'other' into Christian, upper-class life. This 'otherness' is often represented through foreignness, as we see in the origins of the Count Dracula in Romania, or Carmilla's status as an ancient Countess of Styria in Austria. McClelland notes that 'Even today, Eastern Europe is constructed as a disease needing to be quarantined' (McClelland, 2006: 225) and quotes Adam Burgess' *Divided Europe* in saying that:

> There is a discernible medical emphasis, more particularly a suggestion of disease, in several of the principal themes through which the region [of Eastern Europe] is understood … The conception of 'the East' as metaphorically diseased has disposed analysts to exaggerate all manner of real medical conditions, to the extent that they may even infect the West.
> (Burgess, *Divided Europe*, 55–56, quoted in McClelland, 2006: 225)

Thus, Dracula's intrusion into upper-class, English Christian life becomes a kind of unholy plague, at once killing and corrupting into sexual deviance. Examples of this latter theme of 'deviance' include *Carmilla*'s lesbian undertones, the Count Dracula's polygynous 'marriage' to his nameless Brides (which has a strange mirror in Lucy Westenra's proliferation of suitors and proposals), the Brides' own use of their sexuality and the bizarre perversion of breastfeeding which the Count performs to take control of Mina Harker:

> With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom.
> (Stoker, 2011: 340)

However, although these characteristics are put to the use of creating horror, they are also tropes that lend themselves well to the creation of intrigue and fascination – not to mention titillation. Dracula's plural

marriage to his wives evokes the Orientalist conception of the harem in Islamic culture. Although the Count places himself in opposition to the 'Turks', saying 'Is it a wonder that we were a conquering race; that we were proud; that when the Magyar, the Lombard, the Avar, the Bulgar, or the Turk poured his thousands on our frontiers, we drove them back?' (Stoker, 2011: 34), Stoker makes it clear in the first paragraph of the novel that by approaching Dracula's castle, Jonathan Harker is 'leaving the West and entering the East' to go 'among the traditions of Turkish rule' (Stoker, 2011: 1). The implication here seems to be that, despite his pride in 'dr[iving] … back' 'the Turk', Dracula belongs to the same exotic world, beyond the hallowed circle of 'the West'. This exoticism encompasses both fear (most clearly manifest in the vampire's predation and violent 'seductions') and intrigue, such as how both Dracula and his Brides have hypnotic power over the minds of their victims. This intrigue extends beyond the sexual and into the psychological. Abraham van Helsing spends significant time expounding on his theories about Dracula's thoughts and mentality; although speculations, these are deeply marked by Victorian prejudices, such as when van Helsing describes Dracula as having a 'child-brain' due to being a 'criminal' (Stoker, 2011: 411), they still betray a curiosity about the internal life of an immortal being. Perhaps the most essential question about the vampire's mentality is their reaction to their own state. Dracula seems to entirely accept – or even delight in – his unholy status; however, even before Stoker, there was the prototype for the 'reluctant vampire' – which has since become so common – in James Malcolm Rymer's 1845–47 *Varney the Vampire: Or, the Feast of Blood*. This work was published as one of many 'penny dreadfuls' of the time; short instalments of serialised stories sold for low prices and aimed to some degree towards the working classes. Rymer's work brought into prominence a trait that, over a century later, has achieved the status of cliché: the figure of the tragic vampire who rejects and hates their condition, but is nevertheless driven by it. In this original example, Sir Francis Varney, the titular vampire, throws himself into Mt. Vesuvius so as to assure his self-destruction. However, it was *Carmilla,* and later *Dracula*, that brought sufficient character to the vampire figure that it could be meaningfully developed to the point that it could be considered sympathetic, if not necessarily a traditional protagonist.

It is not correct to say that the figure of the vampire faded from popular culture following the end of the 1800s, or even that their romantic or

sexual elements fell by the wayside. Early films, such as the 1913 Robert G. Vignola *The Vampire*, featured heavily sexualised female 'vamps', a term synonymous with femme fatales at the time. *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (in English, *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror)* is generally thought to be the first near-faithful adaptation of *Dracula* to film, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in 1921. Ironically, though, the film was unlicensed as an adaptation. Despite adaptations made to the plot and characters, the production company was sued by the Stoker estate on grounds of copyright infringement. The suit was successful and the court ordered that the film be destroyed, although some copies survived. The attention the case gathered is thought to have contributed to the popularity of *Dracula* and the figure of the vampire more generally. Vampires often featured in pulp horror fiction, such as in the magazine *Weird Tales.* A perfect example is Akivasha in Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian novel, *Hour of the Dragon*, the 'woman who never died, who never grew old!' (Howard, 1935: 96). Claiming that 'it is in the shadows that mortals find immortality!' she attempts to – literally and quite explicitly, for the time – seduce Conan into joining her in immortality. However, all of this can still be considered more to extend rather than deviate from the work and archetypes of the 1800s, at least with regards to the humanisation of the vampire into a figure of romantic rather than horrific intentions. In this era, and going forwards, vampires still lingered in the shadows of mouldering castles, ancient mansions or forgotten tombs, waiting to drink the life of unfortunates who came too near, and with little in terms of human characterisation.

With the 1966–71 Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows*, the character of Barnabas Collins forms another link in the vampiric chain. Barnabas is a descendent of the reluctant vampire seen previously in Sir Francis Varney. Nina Auerbach describes the character as 'the first popular vampire to escape the Dracula plot into which Hammer movies were locked' (Auerbach, 1995: 138). Barnabas Collins was written so as to elicit sympathy for the figure of the vampire, painting him and his state as 'pitiful' (Auerbach, 1995: 138) rather than solely monstrous. This, and 'Anne Rice's beautiful young males' which Barnabas 'anticipat[ed]' (Auerbach, 1995: 138), served to add a vital element to the romantic cocktail of the vampire: sensitivity. The vampire is constructed as a being in mourning for the past in general and mortality specifically – in some ways recalling the Byronic hero of Romantic literature. Barnabas is

ʻparalyzed by [R]omantic nostalgia for his nineteenth-century life in the "old" Collins mansion, which he reconstructs in fond, obsessive detail' (Auerbach, 1995: 137–38). This nostalgia is another element that can serve as initial impetus for a relationship with a mortal, thanks to the clear ease with which ʻdesire for a living existence' can be diverted into ʻdesire for the living'. Emotional sensitivity creates an 'in' for a romantic hero or heroine – and for the audience – to form an attachment to the vampire, and acts to humanise them. It also forms a contrast with the inherent violence and inhumanity of the vampire's bloody thirst, creating intrigue and internal character conflict. Vampires thus become tragic rather than monstrous figures, potentially even tragic heroes – especially if they embrace some code or restriction regarding their feeding – and this formula found an acutely influential expression in Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*.

In Rice's work, vampires remain monstrous creatures who subsist on the blood of the living, often taking those lives as well. In fact, the first book of *The Vampire Chronicles*, the 1976 *Interview With the Vampire*, is focused deeply on the inherent tragedy and destructiveness of the vampires that its narrator, Louis de Pointe du Lac, has encountered during his two centuries of life, especially emphasising their self-destructiveness and the harm they deal to mortals and one another. It makes a point of the pointlessness of vampiric existence, with the self-proclaimed ʻoldest living vampire in the world' (Rice, 1976: 183), Armand, discoursing on the absence of a divine or demonic agent in their origins, or some greater purpose to their being. However, the tragedy of their existence is motivated as much or more by the human stresses of immortal and predatory existence as by the hungers or some other inherent villainous impulse of their condition, such as a drive to spread moral corruption. While the vampires in Rice's work do not seem to place much interest in the act of sex or romance in a human sense, they are ethereally beautiful and possess ʻquasi-angelic' (Auerbach, 1995: 96) keenness of senses that allow them a wholly new experience of life. Indeed, in the scene during which the narrator becomes a vampire, he perceives the vampire Lestat as being 'radiant', 'luminous' and his laughter as being like 'peals of bells' (Rice, 1976: 15). This association of these archetypal creatures of the night with aspects of the church or even divinity itself has another correspondence with Rice's vampires. Although they are frequently debaucherous, mingling sexuality and predation, the vampires of the *Chronicles* seem to experience what might be termed a form of

aesexuality; the sex act itself has little meaning to them, compared to the emotional intimacy they seek to create with whatever might bring happiness to their immortal existences. Despite this, though, the presence of the sexual element, paired with a desire for connection and emotional intimacy, creates a solid foundation for later works to move towards a more romantic angle.

Interview still remains solidly within the category of a horror story, relying less on brutality and more on a chronicle of immortal misery, longing and emptiness, and on the cold inhumanity of most of the vampires' sheer lack of regard for human life. Nevertheless, Rice's novel introduced both real attractiveness – as opposed to simply supernatural hypnotism and sexual victimisation – to the vampire, and the vampire's perspective to audiences. Sympathy, meanwhile, is built in Rice's later *The Vampire Chronicles* novels, where she presents a different view on vampiric existence through the eyes of Louis' vampiric sire, Lestat. The 1994 adaptation of *Interview* brought these qualities to cinemas with full visual force, starring Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt as Lestat and Louis respectively, and had a profound influence on vampire cinema. This second-hand influence can be seen clearly in a key difference between the 1992 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film and the 1997–2003 television series of the same name: the characters of Angel and Spike. The original movie was relatively standard horror fare, save for the subversion that the blonde 'popular girl' was the one with the destiny to hunt and destroy vampires, rather than simply being the victim. In the television serial, however, first Angel and then Spike are present. Each of these characters is a vampire (in this setting, people possessed by a form of demonic spirit) who acts as an ally, anti-hero, anti-villain and romantic interest at various points in the story. Angel proved successful enough in his own right to gain a spin-off series of the same name, which explored his character and 'redemption' further. Thus, we can see the figure of the 'bad boy vampire' being brought to the fore of the monster's characterisation in Western popular culture. Although even the original Lord Ruthven can be seen as a presaging of this, this transformation forms the very fundament of the final development of the vampire figure to be covered in this article: The vampire as love interest in paranormal romance.

The poster child of this particular sub-genre of vampire fiction is undoubtedly Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series; the first book was

published in 2005 and went on to spawn three sequels and a few spin-off stories, all marketed towards the then-emerging 'young adult fiction' demographic. The concept of Meyer's 'sparkly vampires' has become something of a household one, often compared mockingly to other vampire fiction. 'Increasingly, the idea of "sparkly vampires" has been detached from direct critiques of the series, becoming something of a catch-all term to characterise a perceived "watering-down" of teen or popular culture, usually offered in comparison to some "true" version that existed in the past' (Priest, 2018: 186) – ironic, given that, as with any originally folkloric figure, looking for a 'true' or 'canon' version of the vampire is an exercise in futility. However, that which separates the vampire in paranormal romance from other sub-species of vampire is less any characteristic of the vampire themselves and more to do with the focus of the narrative. The 2009–17 television show *The Vampire Diaries* unquestionably fits the definition of paranormal romance, and features vampires that burn rather than sparkle in the sun, wage conflicts over long-ago slights which have brutal consequences for nearby humans and otherwise fail to be 'softened' or 'cheapened'. In the case of *Twilight,* 'the heterosexual couple is established in the early chapters of the first book and their relationship remains the central focus of the series' (Priest, 2018: 183). In the case of *The Vampire Diaries*, a consistent thread throughout the series' many villains and plots is the love triangle between the heroine Elena Gilbert and the vampiric brothers Damon and Stefan Salvatore. The specifics of any given setting's vampiric metaphysics are, largely, irrelevant compared to the shape of the narrative imposed upon and, to a lesser extent, created by those metaphysics. For example, the same trait – burning under sunlight – can be used both as a representation of holy power destroying the unholy, as in *Nosferatu*, or as a plot device to add night-time ambiance to assignations still tinged with danger and an edge of the 'forbidden'. Likewise, the vampire's bite can serve to 'infect you in such wise, that […] in time, death […] shall make you like to him' (Stoker, 2011: 386), or as a metaphor for sex. This 'alternative penetration' angle may account to some degree for the relative lack of female vampiric lovers in paranormal romance. The anxiety over gender roles portrayed in *Dracula*'s Brides remains manifest to some degree in the genre, not least in the mirroring of the power relationship between a man and a woman in a patriarchal culture, and a vampire and a mortal. This becomes particularly apparent as the vampire's aristocratic nature in pop culture tends to bleed through to more modern settings in the form of wealth – an

example being the large house possessed by the Cullens. What mortals must accumulate via generational privilege, a vampire can justify as having acquired through superhuman power and the nature of their own immortality. Finally, the act of transformation into a vampire – 'siring', to use the terminology of Rice – is often used to constitute a metaphorical marriage. The 'taking' of virginity in traditional marital sex (involving the breaking of the hymen, as aforesaid) is mirrored both in the drinking of blood and in the 'taking' of mortality. As marriage (or the woman's first intercourse associated with the marital bed) might classically be said to constitute the transformation of a girl to a woman, the vampiric 'marriage' of siring constitutes the transformation of a mortal to a vampire.

Even from Polidori's *The Vampyre,* this type of monster has haunted bedrooms and been strangely concerned with the matter of marriage and romance in Western fiction. In this context, the figure of the vampire served as mask and manifestation of a variety of fears, including fear of the foreign and the other intruding into the circles of the writers' world, but sexual anxieties were frequently at the forefront of these fears. This we see in Lord Ruthven's corruptive influence, Carmilla's 'illustrat[ion of] the concerns of her era about unproductive and degenerate sexuality' (Hobson, 2016: 12) and Dracula's polygynous 'marriage' and sexualised assaults. Moving forwards, this trait remained in pulp fiction and some early adaptations of the vampire to the screen, while media such as *Dark Shadows* and *The Vampire Chronicles* served to begin the process of humanising the vampire – granting them sufficient sympathy that they could be seen as anti-heroes or even protagonists in their own right. A notable portion of this development occurred between *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*, which is considered by many a 'soft reboot' of the setting, allowing Rice to rehabilitate the character of Lestat and vampires in general by claiming an unreliable narrator for *Interview*. From this point, it was simply a matter of this more sympathetic characterisation of the vampire percolating into popular culture to the point that the idea of using one as a romantic interest reached the point of acceptability. In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that the 'profane lover' of the vampire would undergo this transformation, with increasing acceptance of what would previously have been considered 'sexual deviance', from homosexuality to extramarital sex to BDSM and other forms of sex-play. With increasing sexual liberation and the acceptance of the ways in which pain and pleasure are not entirely separate, it seems that

vampires will continue to haunt the bedrooms of our imagination – although perhaps in a more consensual manner than their ancestors.

Notes

[1] As a point of note, to distinguish 'romance' in the sense of romantic love and the genre of fiction surrounding it from the Romantic literary movement, in this essay things pertaining to the latter will be described in terms of 'Romanticism'.

References

Anatol, G. L. (2015), 'Preface', in *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Auerbach, N. (1995), *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Briggs, K. M. (1978), *An Encyclopedia of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies, and Other Supernatural Creatures*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Bunson, M. (1993), *The Vampire Encyclopedia*, New York, NY: Gramercy Books.

Childs, P. and R. Fowler. (2006), *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Fong, R. D. (2016), 'A Feminist Bloodletting: Reading Suicide in Florence Marryat and Angela Carter', in Hobson, A. and M. Anyiwo (eds.) *Gender in the Vampire Narrative*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 109–24.

Frayling, C. (1992), *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and Faber.

Goold, G. P. (ed.) (1982), *Hesiod. The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Norwich: Fletcher & Son Ltd.

Hobson, A. (2016), 'Dark Seductress: The Hypersexualization of the Female Vampire', in Hobson, A. and M. Anyiwo (ed.) *Gender in the Vampire Narrative*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 9–28.

Howard, R. E. (1935), 'The Hour of the Dragon', available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42243/42243-h/42243-h.htm, accessed 5th Apr. 2021. (originally published in serial format from 1935–36 in *Weird Tales* magazine)

LeFanu, J. T. S. (2019), 'Carmilla'. *Project Gutenberg*, 29th Apr. 2019. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10007/10007-h/10007-h.htm, accessed 5th Apr. 2021. (originally published in serial format from 1871–72 in *The Dark Blue* magazine)

McClelland, B. (2006), *Slayers and their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead*. Michigan, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Polidori, J. W. (1997), 'The Vampyre' in Morrison, R. and C. Baldick (ed.) *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 33–46 (originally published as *The Vampyre* in 1819 in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*).

Priest, H. (2018), 'Sparkly Vampires and Shimmering Aliens: The Paranormal Romance of Stephenie Meyer', in Murphy, B. (ed.), *Twenty First Century Popular Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rice, A. (1976), *Interview with the Vampire*, New York: Ballatine Books.

Rymer, J. M. (1845–47), *Varney the Vampire: Or, the Feast of Blood*, London: Independently Published.

Scurlock, J.. (2014), 'Chapter 12: Obstetrics and Gynecology' in Lewis, T. J *et al.* (ed.), *A Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine*, Atlanta, GA: SBL Press.

Stoker, B. (2011), *Dracula*, London: HarperCollins.

Glossary

Baobhan Sith (pronounced BAA-ban see): A vampiric being from Scottish folklore, usually taking the form of an attractive woman with deer's

hooves. Associated with faeries, shapeshifting and attacking hunters by night (Briggs, 1978: 16).

BDSM: An abbreviation for 'Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism', used somewhat generally to refer to acts of sex-play involving those elements.

Enlightenment, The: Also called the 'Age of Enlightenment' or the 'Age of Reason'; a period generally considered to stretch from the mid-1600s to the late-1700s, characterised by rising interest in knowledge gained through reason and evidence of the senses, constitutional government, separation of Church and state, and ideals such as human happiness, liberty, progress and toleration, but also by disparagement of ideas, emotions and peoples considered 'superstitious', 'primitive' or 'irrational'.

Genre: A category of literature defined by a prevalence of particular key traits, such as focus on particular themes, settings or character archetypes, although boundaries between genres are often indistinct.

Gothic: A style of story characterised by terror and suspense, usually set in or partly in a medieval setting, such as a castle or monastery, hence the name. Related to the Romantic movement in the recalling of medieval ideas and centralising emotion and the supernatural (Childs and Fowler, 2006: 100).

Orientalism: Western ideas or media imagining Middle Eastern and Asian societies as mysterious, never-changing or sexually charged (Childs and Fowler, 2006: 162).

Romanticism: A literary movement generally considered to be rooted in the late-1700s to mid-1800s, characterised by a focus on emotion, creativity and art over reason and science, on the connection of human. Despite the name, Romantic works are not necessarily involved with love, though many often are.

Soucouyant: A vampiric being from Caribbean folklore taking the form of a reclusive old woman by day, but who takes off her skin at night to travel as a fireball and suck the blood of victims (Anatol, 2015: 10).

Strigoi: A vampiric being from Romanian folklore; the spirit or corpse of a dead man, particularly of 'profane' individuals, which rises from the grave and takes on animal forms to drink the blood of victims (Bunson, 1993: 247).

To cite this paper please use the following details: Fewings, A.J. (2022), 'Crosses to Cullens: The Western Vampire from Gothic Predator to Romantic Icon', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/868. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.868, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

The New Femme Fatale in *Jennifer's Body*

Alba Alonso Palombi, University of Warwick

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of Jennifer Check from Diablo Cody's film *Jennifer's Body* (2009). It argues that the character of Jennifer advances the concept of the *femme fatale* by exploring the ways in which she both adheres to and challenges the trope, ranging from her outward appearance, her duplicity and her relationships with other female characters. This is contextualised through an overview of the longer history of the *femme fatale*, touching on biblical figures such as Eve (Adam's wife), Lilith (the first wife of Adam who turned into a demon-mother) and Salome (daughter of Herod II who asked for the head of John the Baptist), and later characters such as Catherine Tramell from *Basic Instinct* (1992) to analyse the evolution of the trope in relation to different cultural moments. Additionally, the discussion emphasises the importance of the female re-appropriation of the figure, and differentiates it from the *femme castrice*. Finally, the paper establishes the new *femme fatale*, led by Jennifer Check, as a by-product of objectification and abuse that turns her into both victim and monster with a vendetta against those that made her.

Keywords: Jennifer's Body, evolution of the femme fatale, women in horror, queer femme fatale, femme fatale as a feminist figure

Who is the *femme fatale* fatal to? If audiences and critics agree on one thing, it is that she is incredibly alluring, regardless of the actress playing her. As described by Janey Place, the *femme fatale* plays 'the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction' (cited in Bronfen, 2004: 113). However, with time, the role of this figure has evolved, as the femme fatale herself now reflects on the cultural moment when she is created, and attitudes towards female empowerment and sexuality have changed.

The focus of this paper will be on Jennifer from *Jennifer's Body*, a 2009 film directed by Karyn Kusama, starring Megan Fox as Jennifer and Amanda Seyfried as 'Needy'. By analysing the film, this paper will explore how Jennifer alternatively adheres to and challenges the concept, and reveal how the *femme fatale* is terrifying because of what she says about the society that turned her into a monster. Furthermore, it will argue that the character today offers an alternative to the femme fatales of previous eras, and breeds retribution, exploring notions of sorority and trauma in a subversion of the post-feminist spin of the figure, and advancing the trope to answer the demands of a generation of audiences raised on feminism.

The *femme fatale* has a long history. Overall, she could be described as lascivious, lovely, lying and lethal. However, equally crucial is her relationship with men, exemplified by the way definitions of the character focus exclusively on the effect she has on the men that cross her path. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.; 'femme fatale' entry) puts it concisely: 'a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations'. Thus, this complex character is often reduced to little more than a plot element – an obstacle the male protagonist will either overcome or succumb to.

The figure was popularised in the 1940s and 1950s with the rise of Hollywood's *film noir* era, a dark, pessimistic genre full of murders, lies and punishments that was a symptom of post-World War II America (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005; 'film noir' entry). These films featured a beautiful woman who got the male protagonist into all sorts of trouble – our *femme fatale* – who was then punished with death or incarceration for her transgressions (consequently, showcasing how the figure represented contemporary male anxieties about increasing female independence). However, the *femme fatale* is not limited to this era, and examples include biblical characters such as Lilith, Adam's first wife who supposedly turned into a demon-mother, and modern ones like Catherine Tramell from *Basic Instinct* (1992).

The tales of these fallen characters served as cautionary tales for women – rich in sub-text – and to discourage them from exercising independence; they did not want to end up ostracised or dead, did they? An example of this is the biblical tale of Eve, who doomed (wo)mankind by taking a bite

from the forbidden fruit, justifying the oppression of women for years to come. Moreover, Eve's initiative to bite the apple can be seen as an attempt to obtain knowledge that is not accessible, which is reminiscent of the struggle to become emancipated, a key point of the representation of female experience.

However, per Stevie Simkin, this act was viewed by the Church as proof that woman was 'the weaker one' (2014: 25), since Eve succumbed to temptation, showcasing how the punitive connotations ascribed to her were applied to the whole sex. These beliefs are still prevalent today in the Christian Church where women are not allowed to reach the same status as men, as per the Church's catechism, '*only a baptised man* validly receives sacred ordination' (First Nation Church, 2018; original emphasis). Consequently, one can observe how Eve was taken to represent the entirety of the female sex and her sin extrapolated accordingly and, in the exploitation of the *femme fatale*, that exposes how the figure can be employed with misogynistic intentions.

Additionally, readings of Genesis take the eating of the fruit as a metaphor signifying sexual intercourse between Adam and Eve (Veenker, 1999). Hence, Eve's role as a *femme fatale* is accentuated, since she brings about mankind's sexual awareness, for which she is punished with the pain of childbirth (and her children punished for the original sin). This is relevant since it poses woman as the instigator for sexual acts, justifying the man's sexual desires as a response to the woman's advances.

Likewise, the *femme fatale* also functions as 'a figure of the male fantasy', as put by Elisabeth Bronfen; she embodies 'both a fascination for the sexually aggressive woman, as well as anxieties about feminine domination' (2004: 106). This showcases the reason for the femme fatale's popularity, and how she has been objectified and utilised per the patriarchal agenda, without any agency of her own. Explorations of the sexual appeal of the *femme fatale* have been conducted extensively, often in the form of religious or mythical paintings, which relied on the excuse of the retelling to gorge in the female nude in compromised situations. This is the case for Henri Regnault's *Salome* (1870), which underwent different identity changes before it became a religious piece, although the subject remained the same (Sully, 2010: 48-49). The product was always going to be a sensual, loosely clothed woman, but the religious allusion

justified it. In other words, the *femme fatale* was a loophole for men to see a woman in the nude, and obtain their voyeuristic pleasure, without the danger of being accused of indecency; this simultaneously kept female sexuality in check since all these women were sinners, damned for their actions. Although it dates to the salons of the nineteenth century, *Salome*'s case remains relevant today as it is reminiscent of the attitudes towards 'leaked nudes'[1] or 'revenge porn',[2] where the reactions to both phenomena is all too familiar to the hypocrisy explored above. Therefore, one can observe how the *femme fatale* served (and serves) to justify the objectification of women, because of their perversity, linking their sexuality to sin and posing men as their prey.

On the other hand, and with the passing of time, *femme fatales* have been updated through a process of reimagining them as misunderstood feminist characters. A salient example is Lilith, the biblical first woman and wife of Adam. Lilith refused to submit to Adam, and fled Eden to become the mother of demons. As a result, she was punished by God, and she roams Earth killing new-born babies and mothers in revenge for her own murdered children (Gaines, 2020). A character that made people so uncomfortable that they doubly vilified her by sometimes attributing the fall of man to her, and claiming that she was the serpent, as is the case with Michelangelo's 'The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden' (1509–10) and the poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti with his poem 'Eden Bower' (1869; Gaines, 2020).

However, with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus shifted to Lilith's fight for independence and the relationship she could have had with Eve, thus counteracting the damage caused by the representation of Lilith as a baby eater and mother killer, and reinforcing the importance of sorority as a means of strength. An example of this reimagining is Judith Plaskow's short story, 'The Coming of Lilith' (1972), depicting this bond between the two first women, joining them against Adam, and conveniently omitting Lilith's murderous facet. This, although apparently biased, simultaneously questions the intention behind those tales, proposing Lilith as the victim of a society where women are powerless and silenced. This way, one can see how *femme fatales* are humanised in this reimagining process, encouraged by the socio-political context that focuses on their victim qualities over their imposed monstrous ones.

The changes in the figure's characterisation varied, and the 1980s and 1990s saw the birth of the spider woman, a personification of male anxieties surrounding female sexuality; a reflection of post-feminism, which Samantha Lindop describes as a man-made 'retaliation against feminism' (2018: 2). This version of the *femme fatale* is reactive, and tries to convince women that feminism is unnecessary. Subtler than the fallen women punished for their crimes, this reincarnation embodies the attributes of an empowered woman: she is socially and economically independent, successful and beautiful. Here is where the post-feminist *fatale* begins to work her tricks. As Lindop observes, these women present the notion that they are the ones who '*choose* to portray themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so' (2018: 50; original emphasis). This problematises the character, and leaves the more attentive audiences feeling uneasy with this superficially powerful women, as they are simultaneously everything feminism wants and everything it stands against.

There are many ways in which this plays out in film, and one example is Catherine Tramell from *Basic Instinct* (played by Sharon Stone), who enthrals a policeman for the benefit of her serial killing. She exemplifies the post-feminist goal of making women think that objectifying themselves is their idea, termed 'subjectification' by Rosalind Gill (cited in Lindop, 2018: 50). Lindop comments on Tramell's character:

> *Femmes fatales* such as Catherine knowingly use subjectification as a […] tactic, enabling them to get what they want. This complicated the idea that woman [sic] are unwitting victims of a discourse that reconfigures misogyny and anti-feminism as empowerment and freedom.
> (Lindop, 2018: 50)

This underlines the reason why this strand of *fatales* is so detrimental, because their 'tactics' seemingly yield results, and engraves this idea in girls' minds that if they attempt to fit into this male fantasy, they will obtain power. It is not that they are unaware of how anti-feminist this behaviour is, but rather that they take advantage of it regardless because they find these methods more effective, which puts into question the necessity of feminism.

This concept is supported in *Basic Instinct* by the portrayal of a victorious Catherine who single-handedly defeats the police department, and murders unscathed, securing her lust interest in the process. However, Catherine's character functions more like a plot element than a character. No explanation is given for her motivations, and most of the time that she is on-screen, she is naked or subjected to voyeuristic activities. She works as a male fantasy, an artificially crafted woman with an underlying, subconscious, post-feminist agenda. However, that fantasy of power ends after the camera turns off, as can be observed in the controversy surrounding Sharon Stone and the infamous interrogation scene, which is not too clear whether it was consensual or not (Sanguino, 2019).[3] Hence, one can observe how even the actresses playing *femme fatales* are not safe from the objectification/subjectification of the figure, regardless of the superficial power they exude.

Other manifestations of the trope can be found in the emergence of the *femme castrice*. A relative of the *femme fatale*, it is a character who enacts revenge on her rapists in a violent manner that deals with masochistic male paranoia on the implications of feminism (Lindop, 2018: 114). However, unlike the man-made *castrice*, recent years have also seen a female re-appropriation of the *femme fatale*, where she comes into her own character in films that touch the complex, intimate and painful facets of the female experience. This is the case for *Jennifer's Body*, a film written by, directed by and starring women.

Jennifer's Body is a great example of the evolution, and redemption, of the *femme fatal* which demonstrates the potential for the figure when it is in the right hands. The story takes place in a town near Minnesota, in the US, where Needy and Jennifer go to high school. The two are childhood friends, despite their differences, crystalised in their positions within the high-school hierarchy: Jennifer forms part of the upper echelon, as a cheerleader, while Needy is resigned to her role as a 'band nerd'. One day, Jennifer is sacrificed in a satanic ritual by a band called 'Low Shoulder' who believe they will get fame in exchange for the death of a virgin. However, Jennifer lied to them about her virginity, so she survives the ritual and turns into an all-powerful demon that needs to feed on human flesh to survive. After several of her schoolmates go missing, and she finds Jennifer covered in blood in her kitchen, Needy begins to suspect Jennifer of being behind the murders. Finally, Needy kills her, after Jennifer kills Chip

(Needy's boyfriend), and Needy is then sent to a mental asylum. There, she discovers she has inherited some of Jennifer's powers from her bite during the fight and escapes the institution to murder the band members who destroyed her life.

This paper will now examine how Jennifer's character is in constant conversation with the figure of the *femme fatale.* It will look at her physical and sexual attributes, as well as her manipulative tendencies, and how she challenges the typical portrayals via highlighting her victim quality and focusing on female relationships. It proposes the *femme fatale* as a figure of retribution, stemming from a history of abuse that is inherited from woman to woman.

From the start of the film, Jennifer meets the requirements for the *femme fatale* – she is lascivious, lovely, lying, and (soon to be) lethal. At the bar,the pair go to watch indie rock band 'Low Shoulder', and Jennifer, who is underage, manages to get drinks by playing 'hello-titty' with the bartender (*Jennifer's Body, 2009:* 13:09–13:14), manipulating him through a self-objectification, reminiscent of the post-feminist *femme fatale* previously examined. Additionally, in this scene, the use of the light-hearted pun, problematised by its childish connotations, exemplifies how normalised this behaviour is in a society where young girls learn to sexualise themselves (seemingly) to their favour. These qualities are heightened after Jennifer is sacrificed and comes back to life as a literal man-eater. Suddenly, her presentation as a sexual being is more overt; for example, she preys on unsuspecting high-school boys by luring them in with her sex appeal, personifying the *femme fatale* in her combination of the sex and death drives that prove equally lethal and alluring. This concept is explored in Simkin, who emphasises the contradiction of this figure that excites both 'feelings of desire in the heterosexual male' and 'fear' (Simkin, 2014: 7) – something that is exemplified by the fact that these boys ignore the obvious warning signs because of the promise of sex with Jennifer. This additionally highlights the characteristic *femme fatale* strategy that takes advantage of the fact that men do not see her as a threat because of her femininity, and uses that to her benefit.

Moreover, drawing on the sexually charged representation of Jennifer, she further adheres to the trope by the queerness of her character. She kisses Needy in a long, private scene; a scene shot close-up, focusing on their

lips, highlighting the reciprocity of their feelings (*Jennifer's Body*, 2009: 1:00:17-1:01:01). Furthermore, Jennifer also makes references to their childhood, talking about previous slumber parties, 'We can play boyfriend girlfriend like we used to' (1:10:00), adding a new layer of depth to their relationship. Additionally, Jennifer later even says, 'I go both ways' when Needy exclaims, 'I thought you only murdered boys!' (1:30:442–1:30:46), a play on words that (again) link her sexuality and the people she kills, highlighting her Eros and Thanatos duality (Simkin, 2014: 7). This representation of bisexuality is recurrent within the figure of the *femme fatale* – especially in the later ones, such as *Basic Instinct's* Catherine Tramell – but is something that also occurs in older texts such as Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (2019). Apart from the problematic fetishising of lesbian relationships, this queer-trope is controversial because it associates queer women with killers, psychopaths and manipulators, highlighting the imposed deviance on queer figures. Additionally, as per Lindop, 'the fatale's bisexuality serves to intensify her discursive danger' (Lindop, 2018: 46). Furthering the correlation between these seemingly sexually liberated women and the male anxieties about female sexuality. Especially a lesbian sexuality that would both render men irrelevant, and threaten their claim on women, further destabilising the 'conventional gendered order' (Lindop, 2018: 68).

Additionally, Jennifer's queerness enhances the threat of the *femme fatale's* death drive due to the association of homosexuality with sterility that informs the representation of serial killers as queer in popular media. This is explored by Lee Edelman, who presents the building blocks of society as reliant on a future never to be witnessed by those creating it, a future symbolised by the figure of the 'Child', a future that can only happen through heterosexual reproduction, 'since queerness, for contemporary culture at large […] is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end' (Edelman, 2004: 19). Thus, the very existence of people outside of heteronormativity poses a threat to society's survival, which is reflected in a queer, blood-thirsty Jennifer.

Lastly, this bisexuality, with heavy connotations of treachery, potentiates the *femme fatale's* duplicity. This hidden nature is another way in which Jennifer adheres to the traditional trope, as she conceals her powers and plays into the role set up for her. This is explored at various times in the film; the first instance of it being when Jennifer lies about her virginity to

the lead singer of 'Low Shoulder'. She thinks that is what he wants to hear and so morphs herself to match his expectations and desire. On this note, it is also interesting to think about how it was precisely the fact that Jennifer lied about being a virgin (thus concealing the true nature of her sexuality) that saved her from dying in the ritual. This implies that this adaptability, or acting, allows women to have some semblance of power in the patriarchy, as they decide what they are and what they are not. Conversely, there is a chance that Jennifer would have been spared if she had not lied, as her abusers would have looked for a more fitting victim for their sacrifice. In turn, this showcases how the threat of sexual predation goes beyond the victim's behaviour, as the predators retain their objective regardless of the girl, which poses this abuse as unavoidable.

To echo this, Jennifer attracts her victims by enticing them, laughing at their jokes and indiscriminately lying to them. She even does this with Needy's boyfriend Chip, whom she manipulates into thinking Needy cheated on him, and moulding her personality to his tastes *(Jennifer's Body, 2009:* 1:21:13–1:22:21). These are examples in which Jennifer, like the *femme fatales* before her, utilise their sexuality to lure in the unsuspecting male. Lindop dwells on this, equalling this tactic to a 'masquerade' where the *femme fatale* conceals her true nature to please the male gaze and 'subvert the law, along with the true nature of her disposition' (2018: 51). However, what could be taken for an efficient, empowering strategy, upon closer observation is revealed to be the only option left for women in a society that does not accept their sexuality as their own, and ensures that it is moulded to the male one. This reflection is impeded in post-feminist texts like *Basic Instinct* and the seemingly victorious *femme fatale*, happy with her existence, and implied and encouraged in *Jennifer's Body*, where Jennifer's victim status is highlighted.

This encouragement to question the necessity for these strategies is one of the ways in which *Jennifer's Body* challenges the trope of the *femme fatale,* but it is not the only strategy deployed to advance the figure. A key way in which this film differentiates itself is by its woman-centred plot – with two female leads, and a focus on the intricacies of female relationships and experience, touching on themes such as sexual abuse. There is no male hero to lead the action of the film, and although the *femme fatale* has villainous characteristics, the one to oppose her is

Needy. This is highly significant because it allows Jennifer to overcome the restrictions imposed on the figure as 'textually disruptive', or as 'the obstacle to the male quest' (Hanson, 2010: 216). She is a three-dimensional character and drives the action in the film rather than functioning as a plot device. Additionally, this text also challenges the traditional way the *femme fatale* trope is interacted with by grounding Jennifer's character and giving her motivations that make the audience see her as more than a 'stereotype of feminine evil' (Bronfen, 2004: 114). This can be seen in the film through the exploration of Jennifer's character that portrays her as more than a sexy monster.

At first, Jennifer is introduced as the stereotypical popular girl; she is mean and promiscuous, and does not incite sympathy. However, this is challenged when, after the audience has seen Jennifer disembowel several of her schoolmates, she reveals to Needy what 'Low Shoulder' did to her (1:02:03–1:09:10). This poignant scene, along with how Jennifer was lured into the van in a state of shock (18:17–18:50), and the fact that she asks, 'Are you guys rapists?' (1:02:19) has a strong impact on the audience, who realise the real-life implications of the scene, along with the fact that she was *forced* to become the monster she is. This scene, strongly reminiscent of sexual abuse, makes the audience sympathise with Jennifer, and even forget about the three people she has already eaten. This is achieved with the low angle, and point-of-view shot, showing the singer mid-stabbing, along with the close-ups on Jennifer's wailing face, chosen to provoke empathy in the audience by putting them in the victim's place. These techniques, characteristic of the horror genre, effectively allow the ritual to act as a stand-in for sexual abuse to discuss the effect this trauma can have on its victims.

However, it is worth noting that this film strays (or advances) the horror genre's tendency to gorge on the abused female body, using the cuts inflicted as an excuse to revel on the naked female form. Furthermore, the fact that this is only revealed after she is shown killing mercilessly showcases how the text intends to do more than impose the victim role on Jennifer, as so many horror films do (Chusna and Mahmudah, 2018: 11).

By proposing Jennifer as the product of male violence in a society where women's bodies are objectified, while simultaneously denying the viewer the chance to objectify and sexualise her brutalised body, and granting her

both power and a literal hunger for revenge, the text turns Jennifer into a complex character, with questionable goals that the audience finds itself empathising with, if they are not already rooting for her. In this way, *Jennifer's Body* challenges the apathetic, psycho *femme fatale* trope audiences are used to by presenting a young woman who has been hurt and is out for retribution, becoming, as Bronfen wanted to see, a *femme fatale* who 'has agency and is responsible for her decisions' (2004: 114), a character in her own right.

However, Jennifer's story does not end with redemption; she is killed by a weeping Needy, who stabs her in the chest, in a scene where the audience gets a glimpse at the thorough subjectification Jennifer has undergone, as she says, 'My tit', and Needy replies, 'No, your heart' (*Jennifer's Body, 2009:* 1:37:17–1:37:24). This humorous dialogue (representative of the film's prevalent tongue-in-cheek tone throughout) highlights how Jennifer was a victim of sub/objectification until the end, as the first thing she worried about was her breasts – exemplifying the awareness and internalisation of the male gaze. The scene is highly relevant because it showcases how Jennifer's character is a deliberate portrayal of the internalisation of the male desire, one that can only be overcome and defeated by women. This is exactly what happens in *Jennifer's Body*, as Needy embodies the final girl[4] and defeats her friend, realising that Jennifer must die because she has been fully corrupted. Needy sees past the post-feminist tactics and understands that Jennifer's power is a by-product of abuse that does more harm than good. This idea is initially introduced after Jennifer tells Needy what happened to her and explains in a light-hearted tone how, for some reason, she did not die, even though it should have killed her – to which Needy, crying, replies 'Maybe it did' (1:07:00), acknowledging how this experience has killed the girl she used to know. Needy's remark also highlights the detachment Jennifer shows when recounting her murder, which could hint at a coping mechanism – Jennifer becomes this monster to keep on living. It is in this way that this film advances the *femme fatale*, by presenting Jennifer as an example of the effects of a society that hypersexualises women, objectifying and exploiting them, and directly challenges the post-feminist examples by showing her as a victim, regardless of the power she acquired.

It is because of this that Lindop missed the point when she comments that 'in spite of the empowerment afforded to young women such as […]

Jennifer […] female sexuality is ultimately expressed only to show how monstrous it is' (2018: 109). *Jennifer's Body* is not about the horrors of female sexuality, but rather about how it has been horribly abused for the benefit of the male gaze, and how the women – who have been represented as monsters – are actually victims trying to survive the aftermath of their violation.

Jennifer's death, and Needy's revenge, is highly significant. That last haunting shot of Needy leaving the murder site and staring at the security camera, right at the audience, is both threatening and knowing. It works in two ways, acknowledging the audience as accomplices, and threatening those who might not agree with Needy's actions. It claims unapologetic authorship to the horrors inside the hotel room. This is emphasised in the film by the brief use of a point-of-view shot where one of the band members seems to be filming, and the video goes static, signalling the beginning of the attack. Here, the use of point of view puts the audience in the shoes of the soon-to-be-killed killers, augmenting the threat of this figure of retribution. This chilling image represents another way in which *Jennifer's Body* advances the trope of the *femme fatale*, as it deals with the inheritance of trauma and the importance of sorority, thus directly challenging the post-feminist rhetoric that attempts to persuade women that this unity is unnecessary (Lindop, 2018: 158). The film makes it clear to the audience that women are inextricably connected by seemingly exploring the post-feminist goal of making women think of one another as competition, when Jennifer and Needy fight over Chip, and later debunking it when Needy kills Jennifer and is heartbroken. Yes, the two had a complicated friendship, but what was important was that they both cared for each other and had a deep connection. This is evidenced in the film by the psychic link that unites the two, and by which Needy senses Jennifer murdering Colin (55:06–55:45), and Jennifer kissing someone and realising she is going to kill Chip (1:24:35). This bond is finally cemented in the text when Needy inherits Jennifer's demonic powers and decides to avenge her friend – even after Jennifer had killed her boyfriend and tries to kill her, demonstrating how she understands that Jennifer was a victim. To this extent, *Jennifer's Body* advances the figure of the *femme fatale* by showcasing the need for female solidarity, and the persistence of trauma that is inherited from woman to woman, and will keep passing down until the source of the harm is dismantled.

Lastly, it is through this inheritance that the *femme fatale* turns into a figure of retribution. Jennifer is reborn in Needy, which challenges the traditional effect of the *femme fatal* and her aftermath. Bronfen explores how, even though in the course of each cinematic narrative, the femme fatale loses her power both on the diegetic level (she dies) and on the visual level (she falls into shadows, diminishes in size, has no voice-over of her own), the disturbing power she embodies remains through the end (Bronfen, 2004: 113).

Hence, one can see how the passing of the torch to Needy in *Jennifer's Body* represents an advance of this trope by making this 'disturbing power' indestructible, even after Jennifer's demise. Needy becomes a reincarnation of Jennifer's anger, and it is in the process of dealing with this monster that she can overcome her mousy façade and come into her own strength. This growth is shown in the film by the way Needy carries herself, and even in her appearance when, at the end of the film, she loses the glasses and lets down her hair, obtaining a more mature look that connotes her mental development. This can be interpreted as the positive effect of the *femme fatale*; she is a personification of abuse, breathing and impossible to ignore. She forces people to face the products of a society they are enabling, and, in the case of women like Needy, realise that they cannot allow it to continue any longer. In this way, it could be argued that *Jennifer's Body* also represents the *femme fatale* as necessary, despite its more problematic features, for a wider reaction against the exploitation and objectification of women.

In conclusion, *Jennifer's Body* advances the trope of the *femme fatale* by presenting Jennifer as both victim and monster and humanising her through her experiences and motivations. She is still identifiable as a *femme fatale*; however, in this case, rather than being out for blood just because she can, the *femme fatale* terrifies because she is man-made and turns her power against those that hurt her. Jennifer offers a look into the nature of trauma, and its inheritance, achieved in the text with Needy. At the same time, this allows the text to comment on the importance of sorority and the complicated nature of female relationships, a point a lot of *femme fatales* miss. Consequently, one can observe how this film advances the trope and makes it more relevant to the events today, which explains its current popularity and the initial failure this film had when it was released. The production team, presumably male-dominated,

marketed it to college males because of Megan Fox's feature (ET Live, 2019). Both the production team and the male teens saw Fox as nothing other than a 'sex bomb', completely obviating the plot and the sub-text, performing the objectification the film denounces and justifying the need for *femme fatales* like Jennifer who make the issue impossible to ignore. *Jennifer's Body* presents an updated version of the *femme fatale* in a reclaiming of a figure that was employed as 'a symptom of male anxiety' (Bronfen, 2004: 114) and giving her voice and agency. The need for *femme fatales* will hopefully diminish with time, but right now, Jennifer represents one of the best examples of the figure: a character who is fed up with the abuse that has been inflicted upon her and becomes fatal to those who created her.

Notes

[1] Photographic material where a person (usually a woman) is shown in the nude. These are sent privately, and when they are shared, they become 'leaked'. There have been a lot of famous instances in which the victims were actresses and models, which sparked interest among audiences who scrambled to get a look at these pictures.

[2] Similar to the above, this tends to be more sexually explicit material that, like the above, is shared without the permission of the persons involved.

[3] Allegedly, Stone was not aware of what the audience would see in the final version of the film. She did agree to the scene because it made sense for the character, but she said that she would have appreciated it if Paul Verhoeven (the director) had showed her the scene as millions of people would later see it at the movie theatre. When she saw the final version, she slapped Verhoeven and asked him to get rid of the scene. He refused (Sanguino, 2019).

[4] A figure in the horror genre, particularly slasher films, the 'final girl' is the female character that escapes and defeats the killer after all her friends perish.

References

Basic Instinct, (1992), Directed by Paul Verhoeven [Film]. United States: Tristar Pictures.

Bronfen, E. (2004), 'Femme fatale: Negotiations of tragic desire', *New Literary History*, 35 (1), www.jstor.org/stable/20057823, accessed 4 February 2021

Chusna, A. and S. Mahmudah (2018), 'Female monsters: Figuring female transgression in *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *The Witch* (2013)', *Journal Humaniora,* 30 (1), 10–16

Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future: Queer theory and the death drive*, Durham: Duke University Press (Series Q).

Encyclopedia Britannica, (2005), 'film noir', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/film-noir. Accessed 11 December 2021.

Encyclopedia Britannica, (n.d.) 'Lilith', www.britannica.com/topic/Lilith-Jewish-folklore, accessed 4 February 2021

ET Live. (2019), '*Jennifer's Body* reunion: Megan Fox and Diablo Cody get candid about Hollywood (exclusive)', www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2JLRtWlq0o, accessed 4 February 2021

First Nation Church (2018), 'Can a nun become ordained?', https://firstnationchurch.com/can-a-nun-become-ordained, accessed 15 April 2021

Gaines, J. H. (2020), 'Lilith', *Bible History Daily*, www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/lilith/, accessed 4 February 2021.

Hanson, H. (2010), 'The big seduction: Feminist film criticism and the *femme fatale',* in O'Rawe, C. (eds), *The Femme Fatale: Images, histories, contexts*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 214–27

Jennifer's Body (2009) Directed by Karyn Kusama. Available at: Box of Broadcast, accessed 29 October 2020

Lindop, S. (2018), *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, Palgrave Macmillan UK

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (n.d.), 'Femme fatale', available at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/femme%20fatale, accessed 4 February 2021

Plaskow, J. (1972), *The Coming of Lilith*, https://jwa.org/media/coming-of-lilith-by-judith-plaskow, accessed 4 February 2021

Regnault, H. (1870), 'Salome', https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437384, accessed 15 April 2021

Rossetti, D. G. (2013), 'Eden Bower', in Cambridge University Press (ed.), *Poems,* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 31–40

Sanguino, J. (2019), '27 Años Después, Alguien Miente Sobre El Cruce De Piernas De 'Instinto Básico'', *EL PAÍS*, 14 April 2019, https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/03/15/icon/1489591086_437970.html#vch=m.facebook.com/HablemosdCine/videos/223812638899527 , accessed 17 April 2021

Simkin, S. (2014), *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox*, Palgrave Macmillan

Sully, J. (2010), 'Challenging the stereotype: The femme fatale in fin-de-siècle art and early cinema' in Hanson, H. and C. O'Rawe (eds), *The Femme Fatale: Images, histories, contexts*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 46–59

Michelangelo (n.d.), *The Fall of Man.* https://www.michelangelo.org/the-fall-of-man.jsp, accessed 11 January 2022

Veenker, R.A. (1999), 'Forbidden fruit: Ancient Near Eastern sexual metaphors', *Hebrew Union College Annual – Jewish Institute of Religion*, 70/71, 157–73

Glossary

Trope: a recurring theme or motif (in literature or art).

Femme castrice: a female figure who enacts violent revenge on her rapists.

Post-feminism: a reaction to the feminist movements of the 1970s that argued that feminism had become unnecessary.

Voyeuristic: relating to voyeurism, the practice of obtaining sexual gratification by looking at sexual acts (mainly secretively).

Eros: the ancient Greek god of physical love and sexual desire, it stands in for the libido.

Thanatos: an ancient Greek personification of death, also functions as the death instinct (expressed in violent aggression).

Final girl: trope in horror films, it refers to the girl who survives the killer in a slasher film.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Alonso Palombi, A. (2022), 'The New Femme Fatale in Jennifer's Body', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/881. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.881, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

A Creature Without a Cave: Abstraction and (Mis)Appropriation of the Wendigo Myth in Contemporary North American Horror

Francesca Amee Johnson, University of Warwick

Abstract

This article analyses prominent examples of the Wendigo myth in modern North American horror media and the implications of misappropriation by non-Indigenous creators for non-Indigenous audiences. This article's cross-media analysis covers television, film and game media; *Teen Wolf* (2011–17), *Supernatural* (2005–20), Bruce Wemple's *The Retreat* (2020) and SuperMassive Games' *Until Dawn* (2015). This analysis will trace the process of these media, made by non-Indigenous white creators, removing the Wendigo's indigeneity and placing it within fictional settings as an antagonist. I have named this observation of the Wendigo *the 'Caveless Creature' phenomenon*. The paper concludes that employing the Wendigo as a caveless creature is a common practice within horror as it easily creates a villain for white protagonists to defeat repeatedly. This construction is problematic in the horror genre as it presents an Indigenous antagonist that poses a threat to white culture for its otherness and indigeneity – while at the same time, misappropriating, discarding and demonising the Indigenous culture the myth comes from, at whim. Although this article is specifically observing the Wendigo, I argue that it is one of many caveless creatures, and the treatment of them by creators of non-Indigenous horror genre should be analysed in the future.

Keywords: Wendigo, North American horror fiction, Indigenous monsters, appropriation of horror mythology, horror antagonists, cannibalism, twenty-first century horror

Introduction

This article aims to be a cross-media analysis of the Wendigo myth (also known by numerous other variants) in popular culture and its schematic implementation within the horror genre. The first half of this paper will be dedicated to mapping out the Western conceptualisations of the myth in the horror genre. The second half will examine differing examples of the myth, and the pattern of problems I observe within the representation of the myth within contemporary North American horror media. I will analyse various media, including: *The Retreat* (dir. Bruce Wemple, 2020), *Until Dawn* (Bowen and Byles, 2015), and an array of recent supernatural-horror television series; *Supernatural* (2005–20) and *Teen Wolf* (2011–17).

I have theorised a term from my observations in this article specific to the horror genre: the 'Caveless Creature'. Although there are many more mythological figures that fit into this genre, I will explain how the caveless creature is constructed and used as an object within the horror genre, then exclusively focus on the Wendigo as an example of it in this paper.[1] The term 'caveless creature' is born out of my observations into the absence of the Indigenous people or an Indigenous mouthpiece – outside of the antagonistic figure – within North American horror media. This is a term for the process of taking a mythical Indigenous creature (here, the Wendigo) from its cultural context and its movement by non-Indigenous creators (a large majority being white) into a space of the horror genre that displays negative or antagonistic qualities. This term only applies to a specific type of horror antagonist due to one element: caveless creatures allegorically represent non-Indigenous perceptions of the creatures' origin culture and indigeneity itself.

It is important to analyse caveless creatures such as the Wendigo as investigation into them opens up discussion into a reoccurring problem with horror media. This article seeks to highlight that these misrepresentations – of the culture, its mythology and its purely antagonistic quality – that it is attached to feed back into the horror genre's contemporary consensus of the Wendigo. Since contemporary media tends to only repeat the same superficial aesthetic points about the Wendigo seen in older non-Indigenous media presentations of it, a more troubling issue arises: audiences' perceptions of both it and Indigenous peoples as a whole become negatively skewed based on misrepresentation. Due to this, the Wendigo and the caveless creature is a symptom of a larger

problem within horror. In investigating the Wendigo in particular, I have also distinguished three prominent issues with the horror genre's consensus of it; namely, it is: a) a figure of monster-hood, b) an antagonism and c) an allegory for Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples in horror fiction. The former two are ostensibly harmless; however, the third shifts the Wendigo from a seemingly decorative aspect with no impact on the story to a curated and volatile construction within horror narratives.

I propose that caveless creatures are depictions of the culture they are appropriated (or misappropriated) from and viewed as antagonists to the non-Indigenous landscape of the West, its culture and its people. Furthermore, these writers are often white and have no affiliation with Indigenous culture while writing to a mainly white demographic of their American audiences. The Wendigo thus serves a purpose in the horror genre as an instrumental object of contrivance with the purpose to scare (Western white audiences). As a tool and feature, application of the caveless creature in horror voids positive meaning and personhood to Indigenous peoples and demonises them within these narratives. There are already marginalising and reductive cultural perceptions of indigeneity in North America, such as 'the mystical native' that is only allowed to aid (Waldie, 2018: 74). This construction exists within horror media and is especially prominent when positioned alongside its opposite (the destructive caveless creature). For Indigenous people, Western pop culture misrepresents Indigenous culture so much that these extremes are sometimes the only available ways to exist within these stories at all. Like the mystical native, the caveless creature still limits and restricts the Indigenous person's ability to actively participate within the narrative – which takes place on their homeland and with their tradition supposedly at the centre of its conflict (in the creature) – as they only serve to either act as an aid or destroyer in relation to the white characters' goals or obstacles, dependent on the story's whim. Thusly, the Wendigo in these horror narratives becomes the supernatural foe that is only allowed to be what the narrative wants it to be in relation to its main focus of white people and non-Indigenous white culture.

My conclusion is that various media exemplify the horror genre's appropriation, or – as I argue – misappropriation, of the Wendigo as a caveless creature to scare their target demographic (non-Indigenous/white

people). There is a pattern of these misrepresentations as all the texts I observe all abstract the Wendigo and appropriate it with similar lack of care to its Indigenous roots. The impact this has on Indigenous society/culture is that they remain absent from the stories North American audiences are presented with. More worryingly, considering how there is a history of associating harmful stereotypes of Indigenous people to the destructive Wendigo, as Nazare pointed out in his examination of Algernon Blackwood's 2019 *Wendigo*, this can perpetuate these harmful stereotypes becoming widespread around Indigenous people within public discourse (Nazare, 2000: 30). This is a problem I have identified as inherent and possibly exclusive to North American white fiction stories. The harmful ideological associations of the Wendigo and Indigenous people are not present in Indigenous stories – as Joe Nazare's *The Horror! The Horror!* points out by comparing selected stories from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture (2000). While it is not this paper's aim to delve into that topic, I do propose that there should be a more critical analysis of the genre's tendency to implement caveless creatures to scare as the Wendigo is not the only example of this practice. Moreover, my analysis of the selected media texts and conclusion points to needing more examination into examples of Indigenous work around the Wendigo, both critically and as fiction media. I believe comparison of non-Indigenous fictions and how narratives written by Indigenous authors present what I believe is a more situated and embedded creature within its cultural context as opposed to a caveless one to highlight the problems I observe with North American horror media's portrayal of this caveless creature.

A brief address of limitations

This paper is aware of its limitations in terms of research knowledge on the Algonquian, Cree and other Indigenous cultures and myths available. Since Indigenous lore is not extensively documented outside of the insular Indigenous communities, the verification of it gives rise to many complications (Waldie, 2018: 70). I also understand the writing of this article is comprised of implicit biases, as I am not an Indigenous scholar and my array of critical sources used within this paper are primarily North American (i.e. Western in origin). More specifically, I understand that my ideologies and theorisations are also informed and formed by Western academia and scholarship. For this reason, this article's concern is not to try and generalise or simplify in efforts to piece together a narrative of the

Algonquian and Cree myth. However, what I do think this article can achieve is an informed investigation into the deliberate manipulation of the Wendigo myth in horror.

The Horror! The Horror! And guess what… more horror!

This article seeks to highlight and expand upon the work of Joe Nazare – specifically, horror's 'handling' of mythology juxtaposing contemporary Indigenous writers (Nazare, 2000: 24). Nazare investigates the question: 'what happens when one's cultural mythology is appropriated by another?' (2000: 24). He observes this trend within North American horror fiction written by white authors of the twentieth century and their usage of the Wendigo. The Wendigo is exclusively portrayed as an antagonist to white people, not as a 'protector' of Indigenous land (Waldie, 2018: 26). Nazare's work investigates whether the genre only serves to promote white cultural continuity and survival, and its main goal of entertainment for Western audiences, by continuing the practice of making the Wendigo a destroyer (2018: 26). He firmly believes the mythological figure is appropriated by the horror genre (2018: 28). Not only is the Wendigo disallowed extensive treatment as a figure of cultural significance, but it is also the main antagonist in these horror stories. The genre abstracts the creature from its cave within the larger implications of misappropriating its cultural context too. This treatment is so deeply entangled with white contemporary horror fiction, as 'white culture seeks to be titillated by [cultural indigeneity]' (2018: 31). These narratives, their creators and their consumers see native spiritual life as a 'curious artefact' to wield inside and outside of the narratives they enjoy (2018: 31). Therefore, the Wendigo as a caveless creature is a feature used to sideline Indigenous peoples in favour of whiteness.

The allegory of the cave starts with abstraction

The caveless creature is one of many features of Indigenous culture that are sacrificed in service of promoting the superiority of white people within these stories. The problem is that this is a recurring practice, and one that is done knowingly because these narratives prove commercially successful. In their quest to scare and be profitable commercially, these franchises routinely abstract indigeneity and eviscerate it from the creature or object used within the horror text. As a result of observing this,

it becomes apparent that the success of a horror fiction partly lies in how well they can exploit Indigenous culture. The Wendigo is a 'terrifying cannibal ice monster that has its genesis in stories of people forced into cannibalism by the long winter' (Smith and Fiore, 2010: 68). Smith and Fiore detail that, among the Cree and northernmost Ojibwa, it is a feared creature because it is understood as both a 'mythic character' and as a threat to humans (2010: 68). In *Landscape as Narrative, Narrative as Landscape*, North American horror fiction's conceptualisation of the Wendigo is:

> It will stalk you over the snow fields, and if you are attacked, rather than killing you, it might infect you with [Wendigo] sickness by biting you. Once ill, you might eventually 'go [Wendigo] yourself, fall into despair, become gluttonous, or develop a taste for human flesh…'
> (Smith and Fiore, 2010: 68)

However, irrespective of factors like medium, genre, artistic licence, viewer engagement and player participation, abstraction of the myth from this focal point of monster-hood is problematic. Horror media's use of the Wendigo occurs to set up the backdrop of iconography and uniqueness in setting and narrative of the horror story. The Wendigo is scary enough and proven profitable enough that it is worthy of continued misappropriation. It is also easy enough to focus on superficial elements only related to its monster-hood or loose cultural touchstones that previous horror media continually use to introduce audiences to it (such as the cannibal element in the popular choice of the human-turned-Wendigo scenario). Focus can also be put on the attacking of the human psyche, making it an antagonism, when connected to typical Western themes within horror, such as the formation of self, youth and survival before/during adulthood. I argue that these are both intentionally continued practices because they are necessary to the horror genre. For horror to continually have stories that are striking and profitable. they must evoke fascination with 'out-of-the-ordinary' Indigenous magic while also provoking fear in their audiences (Waldie, 2018: 69). Thus, the rich cultural background of the Wendigo is discarded, and it becomes a figure of monster-hood with one simple purpose: to antagonise. Due to its status as Indigenous, it is an unknowable threat to Western white-culture audiences. That is not to say that the magic of the mythical Wendigo or the Indigenous people is unreal,

but the type of superficial understanding of magic and mysticism that these horror texts gather and seek to market to audiences is.

Before the break, cannibalism!

Television horror has partaken in the abstraction and misappropriation of the Wendigo myth to bolster their stories with scare-ability. In the short episodic format, usually 20 to 30 minutes, these programmes quickly construct and deploy the Wendigo, then let it rampage through their stories – particularly, programmes such as *Teen Wolf* and *Supernatural* aimed at a young-adult demographic.

In *Teen Wolf*, the Wendigo myth is already misunderstood by the show, where it is portrayed as a species of man-eating shapeshifter. It is first introduced within the episode *Muted* (4.3). The indigeneity of the Wendigo is only mentioned sparsely as a proverbial stamp of approval to the haphazard computer research gathered by a teenager, Stiles Stilinski. This is to confirm suspicions of the cannibalesque mutilations by Sean Walcott (part of a family of Wendigos), who cannot last a full day without feeding on a human due to his insatiable hunger. It is important to note that the Walcott family are white and there is no presence of any Indigenous characters within the episodes. The Indigenous culture is relegated to an expository backdrop of these episodes, whereas the gory killing and feasting of the Walcott's takes centre stage. Not only is the myth's initial concept and Indigenous cultural context poorly handled and inconsistent within the show, but it is also conflated and then, in the fifth season, merged with the Chimera myth (another caveless creature misunderstood within the show).

One critic commentating on the series wrote of the fifth season: 'Hello Sean, and goodbye. We hardly knew you' (Pavlica, 2014). The comment 'our first Wendigo came and went' is profoundly recontextualised in how quickly it is introduced, given context and thrashed at the wayside of the story. Understanding the misappropriation of the narrative from its cultural context and the erasure of that culture from the show makes this offhand observation of the show more abstruse (Pavlica, 2014). We hardly know of Sean as a Wendigo himself, and little is done on the show's part to concretely explain a consistent lore around the Wendigo, the Walcott's as a family of them, and the Chimera. Instead, a butchered mash of the two

myths is fused into Sean's character, who is abandoned along with the Wendigo storyline. They are both unimportant after serving the purpose of antagonising the story's majority-white cast. However, this becomes more disquieting when considering that even more marginalised is the culture that provides his character's power and presence in the first place.

Supernatural also runs into this issue. Introduced in the second episode of the first season, *Wendigo* (1.2), the lore calls upon Cree origins. The Wendigo in *Supernatural* is understood as the product of human cannibalism. The usual strengths of a Wendigo are also befitting of North American media's typical portrayal of them: super strength, super speed and vulnerability to fire. They are humanoid in appearance, tall and have elongated limbs. Sam and Dean, the protagonists of the show, describe the Wendigo as follows:

> 'Wendigo' is a Cree Indian word. It means 'evil that devours.' They're hundreds of years old. Each was once a man, sometimes an Indian or other times a frontiersman or a miner or hunter. […] During some harsh Winter, a person finds themself starving, cut off from supplies or help – becomes a cannibal to survive, eating other members of his tribe or camp. […] If you eat enough [human flesh], over years, you become this less-than-human thing. You're always hungry. (*Supernatural*, 2005: 1.2)

An issue with the show's depiction of the myth lies in what accompanies the Wendigo and the lack of Indigenous voice throughout. The Wendigo is the first supernatural being hunted by the brothers within the series. However, despite abstracting facets of Cree myth to briefly explain the Wendigo, the viewer is introduced to it through Sam and Dean (both white). The two protagonists learn of the monster as they would any other, but there is no presence of Cree people or resources to contextualise the myth. Furthermore, the only depiction of a native person in connection to the Wendigo in the show is an 'unnamed Cree woman' with no lines; she is believed to be a Wendigo but dies shortly after.

In an episode of season five: *Two Minutes to Midnight (*5.21), Sam comments that they used to hunt 'simpler things' like the Wendigo. In analysis of this comment, as a piece of unwitting subtext, it provides insight into how the show – and, by extension, television – see the

Wendigo. Against the white protagonists, the Wendigo is an obstacle and object of horror to overcome and triumph over. It is depicted as a malevolent being, and while that is the case for the mythos in its Cree and other Indigenous contexts, these series see it as a simple mechanism in the larger schematic of horror – a creature to scare for a few minutes on-screen and nothing more. In the interworking of these episodes, little apart from superficial detail is given to keep the mythology consistent enough to provide intrigue and scare. *Supernatural's* Wendigo is problematic as it is introduced as the titular threat to white culture, but easily overcome and conquered in these neatly packaged television episodes by its white protagonists. This occurs in the complete absence of Indigenous characters and knowledge; when it is no longer impressively scary and unknowable, the lack of cultural significance makes the Wendigo easy to defeat and end the story without loose ends. This makes the Wendigo a terrifying object of horror with gravity and severity in its (alluded to) centuries-worth of context. Yet, it is also a disposable creature, from an equally disposable cultural background, that can be conveniently shunned back into its cave only to be abstracted once again on the whim of the show.

Unlike *Teen Wolf, Supernatural* includes other objects derived from Indigenous culture – specifically, the Anasazi people's protection symbols. *Supernatural* conflates this understanding with various Cree mythos and its own creative licence to create lore – a common practice of horror. The show uses almost entirely its own construction of lore to interlink these cultural artefacts to the Wendigo, in turn, inventing its own mythology using more items of Indigenous culture as decoration to do so.

Survival… but at what cost?

This section will analyse *The Retreat*, directed by Bruce Wemple, as it exemplifies the goal of horror to create narratives that scare and centre whiteness. Wemple's film understands the Wendigo as both a physical being and a spiritual force that controls lesser animal-like mini versions. The film hybridises these forms from varying mythos to attain both the jump-scare and abstract cosmic horror. The story takes place in the Adirondack High Peaks (upstate New York), which is a completely different area to the region to where most Indigenous Wendigo myths are centred.

Exposition of the myth takes place at the dinner table, where Marty (an elder white man) explains the myth of the Wendigo to the protagonists – two best friends (Gus and Adam) – after they arrive at the lodge. One of the first things we see on-screen is a framed picture with the quote: 'Give it your heart, your soul, and you'll never really leave the forest' (Wemple, 2020). This immediately links the following narrative to the idea of succumbing and becoming indentured to an unnatural force. Although the picture is light and picturesque, the quote invites the viewer to be wary. The film's scare element of the Wendigo comes from the sheer vulnerability humans must be in to find it. As the film progresses, Gus is alone, lost, disorientated and exhibiting signs of hypothermia. Gus becomes more unreliable as a narrator, and these signs of delusion become murky whenever the Wendigos is present, blurring the lines of reality. His physical ailments compound with other erratic and less verifiable signs of delusion (through thoughts and images of murder and cannibalism) each time the Wendigo is shown on-screen in interspersed cut scenes. It is understood to be a creature that preys on the weak and transforms them into depraved, wild and savage beings without personhood and compassion.

The threat here is the subjection of man by an Indigenous foe – specifically, the prospect of man-on-man violence due to the human capacity to sacrifice friends and loved ones to assure self-preservation and survival. However, I believe this comment from the film is unintentional and ironically allegorical to the film's evocation of a caveless creature. The film's use of Indigenous culture mirrors the protagonists' cannibalistic acts within it. I believe this also speaks to Western media's colonial approach to using caveless creatures. The figure itself is a spiritual creature that promotes selfish and destructive behaviours in humans and eats them to ensure its survival, thus turning them into the same thing. The caveless creature here is an example of the horror genre's continual use of Indigenous culture to promote the narratives of threats to whiteness at the expense of the Indigenous; or the cannibalisation of a culture to ensure box office promise and survival of the genre made largely for, and by, white people. This cannibalism is perpetuated by North American horror media and contributes to the larger problem of the Western representations of Indigenous culture as a product to use and abuse for their story's aim – which only highlights the colonial element to how North American horror media approaches Indigenous culture. This film – and Western media in

general – continually divulge in using caveless creatures to scare by sacrificing their origin cultures for white-focused stories and narratives of self-preservation as these stories are profitable for the predominantly white audience they are targeted to.

Furthermore, treatment of native Americans and their indigeneity is telling of the film's conceptualisation of the Wendigo's importance. It is deemed unimportant to make the Wendigo scarier and serves to make it a mere 'urban legend', a distant warning, as Marty states, among the Indigenous people of the forest (Wemple, 2020). The Wendigo is summarised perfectly by the deuteragonist Adam: 'oh, the cannibal thing?' (Wemple, 2020). Centuries-worth of cultural context is overlooked in place of the Wendigos most likened purpose to a horror monster, the aspect of cannibalism and flesh-eating as a threat to non-Indigenous tourists. All the characters laugh as the mythos is explained. They arrogantly reduce the entirety of the monster to its most disturbing and antagonistic qualities that relate to humans. More emphasis is put on describing the monster as an object of superstitious fear. It is a threat for our travelling white tourists as it 'possesses a human and makes them a monster', rather than as a protector of Indigenous communities, indigeneity, and a mythological rectifier for undesired traits that would harm a tribe (Wemple, 2020). Even the condition of Wendigo psychosis is mocked, relegated to something that 'makes people go crazy' or think they are possessed (Wemple, 2020). Marty as the white narrator of this segment serves as the authorial voice in the scene – and establishes the Wendigo as an Indigenous figure of monster-hood and an antagonism for white people – for both the characters and the viewer. He states, 'the native Americans say it protects the forest, but for the most part, it's a monster' (Wemple, 2020). Marty here exerts this white authority as the sole source of wisdom. He dismisses the Indigenous context due to his own disbelief in its verity as a white man disconnected from Indigenous culture. This entire conversation and exposition are a few short minutes, but it informs all subsequent appearances of the Wendigo for Gus and the viewer. This exemplifies my third categorisation outlined in my introduction: that the Wendigo is an allegory for Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples in horror fiction. It is particularly problematic as the lack of regard for Indigenous people preserves and propagates the harmful stereotype that they are simply superstitious to its predominately non-Indigenous white North American audience.

As well as the use of the Wendigo, *The Retreat* also evokes multiple cultural practices and artefacts of Indigenous communities as plot devices. Akin to *Supernatural's* Anasazi symbols, *The Retreat* features psychedelics made from a mixture of Peyote mushroom tea. The 'Peyote-shrooms-Ayahuasca mix' Gus mentions – which is a notable muddling of two different Indigenous cultures together here – is in order to 'trip' (Wemple, 2020). There is no real background given on the tea, and the scene in which Gus and Adam both drink it serves to highlight Gus's impulsivity and ignorance to cultures beyond him in service of his own satisfaction. This scene, using the tea mixture to push the narrative forwards, serves the function of foreshadowing when Gus is seemingly overtaken by the Wendigo spirit. After this point, the physical and mental manifestations of the Wendigo wreak havoc on Gus and his fragile mental state – especially after he believes he has killed Adam and eaten his remains. These scenes of mental turmoil are interspersed between shots of what is indicated to be the Wendigo spirit, enacting its malevolent will on Gus from far away. Gus's slow dissent into madness shows his disturbed and distorted versions of the same event, in which he kills/does not kill and eats/does not eat Adam. The Wendigo, however, fades into the background of the story. After its initial purpose is fulfilled, scaring the audience through jump-scares, it lacks necessity to the narrative and is subsequently dropped. The only times physical Wendigo appear in the film after the halfway point is in a cut-scene where Ryan (a hedonistic side character disliked by the protagonists) is cornered by three mini-Wendigos. The scene shows that the creatures may have been physically real and give a final scare to the audience in the closing act.

The colonialist trolly problem

I will continue this analysis of the caveless creature in the video game *Until Dawn*. Discounting the game's description of the Wendigo as a creature of terror and antagonism, the Wendigo's lore in *Until Dawn* is vague. The context is heavily dependent on the Wendigo's ability to frighten, and very little detail is given to its traits, drives and characteristics. This deliberately sparse framing of narrative allows the creature to be cosmic and disturbing as it is both alien and inexplicable to the white characters. Although the enigmatic allure works to place the Wendigo in the game, there are large implications when the creature's context is observed alongside other aspects of Indigenous culture. The

most noticeable example are totems. More than any other media I have previously analysed in this article, *Until Dawn* demonstrates the paradoxical issue of presenting Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples within media as one of the two extremes I mentioned earlier, where Indigenous people can only fit into the 'dangerous opponent or the helpful guide' archetype (Waldie, 2018: 74). The game's status as one of the 'game-like films' or cinematic games allows it to blur the line between various types of media (Allison, 2020: 275). However, it also represents the problematic elements of both genres by making the creature both take the place of Indigenous people within these stories, and be the only mouthpiece for Indigenous people. The Wendigo being the sole presence of indigeneity means it fulfils the aforementioned categorisations I outlined in my introduction (monster-hood and antagonism), and there is not even the opportunity for a helpful guide mystical native character to contrast it. Therefore, these seemingly harmless features that horror media routinely choose to utilise when constructing a horror antagonist – such as for caveless creatures – present the problem of viewers negatively associating Indigenous people themselves with it outside of engaging with the film or game.

Until Dawn follows a group of eight teenagers venturing a secluded cabin on the fictional Blackwood Mountain: an allusion to one of the first examples of the Wendigo within North American horror fiction Algernon Blackwood's *The Wendigo*). The introductory highlights familiarise us with the characters and state that this trip is on the anniversary of the group's two friends disappearing in the same spot the previous year. The game features eight playable characters who are based on the performances of recognisable film and TV actors, and, again, a majority-white cast. The characters take after stereotypical teenagers in slasher movies; 'the dumb jock, arrogant rich girl, flirt, nerdy class clown and alpha male' (Allison, 2020: 287). The game can be classified as an interactive drama game, offering 'branching narrative trees and multiple possible endings' (Lavigne, 2018: 15). Although 'agency is always a mirage', I do think it is interesting that, within this agency, you can choose how much of the Wendigo myth you end up figuring out using collectable totem items (2018: 16). One example is the documents players can find within the Sanatorium and within the caves of the mines, which explains how the white workers and mentally ill patients forced into cannibalism turned into Wendigos. As a player, you do not need to understand the Wendigo, or

Indigenous culture, to progress through the game. Instead, the horror conventions function better when players proceed in ignorance.

Something particularly interesting is the irony entangled with *Until Dawn's* Wendigo. Land dispute or an absence of Indigenous peoples are the backdrop of these stories, and the Wendigo arises as a physical manifestation of white culture's view of Indigenous people in this fight for land and survival. Nazare's (2000) notation of Carol J. Clover's *Clover's Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) and feminist/psychoanalytical approach to contemporary horror is important here (2000: 34). He comments on Clover's identification of modern horror with the 'settler-verses-Indian' stories of the 1930's and 40's Westerns (Clover, 1987: 33). *Until Dawn* overlaps three problems: the Wendigo as an antagonistic figure, Indigenous people being removed from their native land, and the white tourists using Indigenous cultural knowledge to preserve their own safety. The game's Wendigo takes centre stage amid the ongoing conflict between the Washington family, who purchased the mountain, and the Indigenous people who have left it since their homeland was bought to create a skiing resort attraction for tourists – with the only defender being the Wendigo itself. The 'demonisation' of the Wendigo that Nazare concluded when observing horror fiction, is a culmination of the aforementioned issues that are present within the game (Nazare, 2000: 34). *Until Dawn* specifically highlights the genre's usage of the Wendigo as allegory for Indigenous people. We are offered no alternate or opposing voice from Indigenous people, only the Wendigo, contrasted against the myriad of white characters that we play as – all with qualities of heroism. Seemingly, all of the original inhabitants of the mountain were driven off, leaving no Indigenous people to communicate the myth or display any traits other than the violence of the Wendigo. The Wendigo displays the difference between the inferior Indigenous monster/guide and the superior white protector/saviour. Here 'there is no room for the other to be the hero', the other being anyone not white, as the only representation of the other is as the monster – an uncontrollable unplayable NPC (Non-Playable Character) (Waldie, 2018: 70).

Until Dawn exemplifies a struggle by which present, living owners (the white characters) must battle dead, former owners (the Indigenous Wendigo) (Clover, 1987: 163). This struggle 'haunts our national consciousness' in the West and modern North American horror media

often illustrates this tension (1987: 163). Nazare notes that horror fiction is perhaps a chance for contemporary horror viewership to wrestle with and exorcise (themselves) of the ‘demons of guilt’ (Nazare, 2000: 34). The lore of the game does show some signs of superficial research, as ’it is set within Alberta, Canada, where Cree is the most populous Indigenous culture (Waldie, 2018: 67). However, *Until Dawn’s* main source of knowledge regarding this conflict is ‘is a grizzled, white stranger’ who is referred to only as ‘the Stranger’ in-game (Allison, 2020: 68). The mythos avoids ‘reflexive aspirations’ by utilising a largely white cast in the hero role, marginalising opportunities for Indigenous voice in the game (outside the villain role) and refuses to acknowledge reflection on capitalist consumption or promotion of colonial occupation that it is also complicit in (Waldie, 2018: 67).

Moreover, the deliberate centring of the white cast as the protagonists becomes more problematic with their ability to wield Indigenous artefacts. They can use totems and other artefacts with no aid or former knowledge of them, which is impossible (Waldie, 2018: 75). The totems act to show the white tourists using Indigenous cultural knowledge to preserve their own safety, but the knowledge and craft of totems are usually guarded within individual Indigenous communities. However, the game places heavy emphasis on the non-Indigenous protagonists and gameplayers easily finding and discovering clues embedded in the environment through totems despite having no Indigenous context. This only highlights the colonial enterprise to steal Indigenous power by making the white characters ‘wielders of power’ in direct contrast to the antagonist other, the Wendigo – a powerless NPC (Waldie, 2018: 75). *Until Dawn*, and contemporary horror, are in a perpetual cycle of repeated seizing and consuming of Indigenous culture to advance their own interests, be it gameplay, narrative or cultural perception (2018: 76).

Finally, I will directly expand on my third point about the Wendigo; it is an allegory for Indigenous culture. I will highlight Waldie’s notation that horror video games utilise conventional stereotypes to replicate the hegemonic power structures surrounding the authors who create them – and that is true for *Until Dawn* (Waldie, 2018: iii). Although the central storyline centres on Indigenous cultures, players are positioned to play as one of the almost exclusively white characters. The game sets the creature and Josh, who was previously a playable character (up until he is turned

into a Wendigo himself), as the unplayable NPC antagonists. The Wendigo is deliberately rendered inarticulate as an NPC, but through Josh's transition into one, this construction of *Until Dawn's* antagonists, as an unplayable beast that cannot and are not allowed to articulate, bears similarity to an observation made by Nazare on the literary tradition surrounding the Wendigo.

> In retrospect, the disavowal of Native American language and literary tradition, the positing of the Native American as brooding bogeyman and howling, inarticulate fiend of the wilderness clearly served as a pretext and justification for cultural domination (Nazare, 2000: 25)

Contrastingly, characters like Emily – who is played as being stabbed in the eye by a Wendigo – naturally make us side with the white characters since we (playing as them) want to protect them, needing them to stay alive to continue playing and against the Indigenous by simple virtue of playing the game. Furthermore, engagement in the misappropriation of Indigenous culture serves as an antagonism; however, it is problematically entangled as it is a 'core mechanic' for the game, since there are no stakes without the Wendigo (in all of its misappropriated glory) serving as the creature to escape from (Waldie, 2018: 63). The player, playing as white non-Indigenous characters, must reclaim the mountain from the monster, which re-engages colonial ideologies (2018: 26). Within the chapter *Race as Monstrosity*, Waldie states that *Until Dawn* situates its primary conflict as a 'battle of the protagonists versus a monstrous, mystical other': the Wendigo (2018: 67). The Wendigo is a foe of convenience in place of any other horror antagonist, when it could be of colonial occupation within these narratives that would provide interesting commentary to the Western relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Instead, these contemporary media chose to use it simply to scare and engage Western non-Indigenous audiences (2018: 68).

The game's narrative evades further analysis into its categorisations by establishing the Wendigo as a monstrous creature – once human but no longer, and beyond redemption or saving from the audience. *Until Dawn* shows awareness of the genre's evocation of caveless creatures as an allegory for Indigenous culture, by bearing similarity to its predecessors in the way it depicts the Wendigo. The subtly demonising rhetoric

throughout transforms the Wendigo from native myth to a ‘descriptive template for the Indian savage’ in a similar way to Blackwood’s original short story (Nazare, 2000: 30). The Wendigo’s savage monstrosity is continually mentioned, along with how evil it is. This fulfils the expected expectation of fear and danger in horror. Whether it is combating the Wendigo or co-opting revered, private objects not meant for outsider consumption, the game is imbued with colonial imagery. Alongside others, the Wendigo as a feature of the game highlights the superiority of whiteness. The misappropriation of the Wendigo demonstrates one of two binaries of horror’s perception of Indigenous culture: ‘monstrous other’ or ‘a decorative overlay’ (Waldie, 2018: 95). The antagonistic positioning and shallow utilisation of Indigenous culture only reinforces the idea that indigeneity is lesser than the central, white characters, while also exacerbating the malevolence of the Wendigo and Indigenous culture.

Overall, to play in the game, both the virtual and real-world game within the landscape of contemporary Western media, we must sacrifice Indigenous culture and characters of colour to win.

Where do we go from here?

This paper has analysed how different media forms display the horror genre’s position towards caveless creatures and Indigenous culture. This article has specifically investigated the Wendigo myth’s formation within the horror genre in North American horror media. Horror within this article has been revealed as a genre that establishes its own misappropriated consensus for myths and deliberately frames the cultural context of caveless creatures like the Wendigo to suit its own aims.

I also believe that there are numerous other caveless creatures to be observed. Outside of the Wendigo, I did come across other Algonquian creatures such as the Odziozo, Baykok and the Moon Rabbit (the last a controversial one since it is not a scary figure) that I believe warrant investigation. I propose that analysis should also be extended across various Indigenous cultures, such as Innuit, Cherokee and Lakota tribes and their respective individual communities. One creature that I am incredibly fascinated and excited to see more discourse on are Skin Walkers (known as yee naaldlooshii). They are often entangled with conversations of the Wendigo; however, these creatures find their origins

in Navajo culture. I also believe there is even possibility to expand the geographic and ethnic marker for the definition beyond Indigenous to include creatures such as the Huay Chivo from Mayan culture – a half-beast creature, with burning red eyes, specific to the Yucatán Peninsula.

So, where do we actually go from here? Horror, as well as other speculative genres, is a budding, increasingly popular form in Indigenous film and fiction. Outside of observing the caveless creatures present within horror media, recentring Indigenous writers within this discourse is necessary. Observation of the problem, like this paper, can still fall into the trap of continuing to sideline Indigenous people too. Nazare pointed to Indigenous writers who better structure the Wendigo within their texts and focus on the intimate relationship Indigenous peoples have with the creature. These texts render the Wendigo with regard and do so without the framing of this relationship as delusion or mocked superstition as the texts I have observed. The genre has grown, and I believe these authors tackle the problems of the caveless creature with an opposite construction – a 'situated/embedded creature', if you will. As I have previously explained how I arrived at the term 'caveless creature', by contrast, a situated/embedded creature is not superimposed into the story; instead, the story is constructed around its qualities – within these Indigenous stories, it is one with the land it is surrounded by. Often these stories take place from the perspective of Indigenous people and within the small communities of Indigenous tribes. I suggest looking to the work of Indigenous writers and filmmakers such as Grace L. Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), which collects contributions by Native American, First Nations, Aboriginal Australian and New Zealand Māori authors. To re-centre Indigenous voices in critical discussion, I would suggest Billy J. Stratton's 2016 *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones* and William Lempert's *Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film* (2014), which provoke intrigue into gothic noirism and interrogating the embracement of the horror genre as a native writer. Although they are not the prevailing and dominating texts of the genre commercially speaking, and are probably not media that the average media consumer viewer is engaging with, they do open up new possibilities for the Wendigo in contemporary discourse, ones that are not appropriative or flattening but centred and grounded in also exploring the rich cultural cave this creature comes from.

Horror as a genre largely promotes colonial narratives of occupying what serves preservation and continuation of the genre's white characters creators and consumers. My investigation into this topic also hopes to steer more discourse into capitalism's role in the genre's repeated cannibalisation of Indigenous culture that is only heightened by the high turnover of media content within the contemporary landscape. Observation of the Wendigo as a caveless creature reveals a more parasitic landscape of horror within the genre – one that is as ruthless and monstrous as the creatures like the Wendigo it uses to scare us.

Notes

[1] There are more creatures that fit into this category other than the Wendigo, such as the Deer woman and Bigfoot among others. I will outline these later on to name some that have surfaced many times within modern media.

References

Filmography

Bowen, N. and W. Byles (2015), *Until Dawn* [Videogame], SuperMassive Games: Sony Computer Entertainment

Davis, J. dir. (2011), *Teen Wolf*, MTV: MGM Television Distribution

Kripke, E. dir. (2005), *Supernatural*, The WB, The CW: Warner Bros. Television Distribution

Wemple, B. dir. (2020), *The Retreat*, Uncork'd Entertainment: 377 Films

Bibliography

Allison, T. (2020), 'Losing control: Until Dawn as interactive movie', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 18 (3), 275–300, doi:10.1080/17400309.2020.1787303

Blackwood, A. (2019), *The Algernon Blackwood Collection.* Penguin

Carter, A. (1979), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Penguin Books

Clover, C.J. (1992), *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton University Press

Clover, C. J. (1987), 'Her body, himself: Gender in the slasher film', *Representations*, 20, 187–228, doi:10.2307/2928507

Dillon, G. L. (2012), *Walking the Clouds: An anthology of indigenous science fiction*. University of Arizona Press

Lavigne, C. (2018), 'Pressing X to Jason: Narrative, gender, and choice in heavy rain', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 41 (1), 15–36, www.jstor.org/stable/26582195. Accessed 03.09.2021

Lempert, W. (2014), 'Decolonizing encounters of the third kind: Alternative futuring in native science fiction film.' *Visual Anthropology Review*, 30, (2), 164–176., doi:10.1111/var.12046.

Nazare, J. (2000), 'The Horror! The Horror? The appropriation, and reclamation, of Native American mythology', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 11 (1), 24–51, www.jstor.org/stable/43308417. Accessed 03.09.2021

Pavlica, C. (2014), 'Teen Wolf review: It's only human', *TV Fanatic*, 8 July 2014, www.tvfanatic.com/2014/07/teen-wolf-review-its-only-human/. Accessed 03.09.2021

Polidori, John. (1819), *The Vampyre: A Tale.* Oxford University Press

Smith, T. S. and J. M. Fiore (2010), 'Landscape as narrative, narrative as landscape', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 22 (4) 58–70, doi:10.5250/studamerindilite.22.4.0058

Stratton, Billy J. (2016), *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A critical companion*. University of New Mexico Press

Waldie, R. (2018), 'It was just a prank, Han!": Wendibros, girlfriend woes, and gender politics in Until Dawn', unpublished thesis, *Concordia University*, 1–110

Glossary

Antagonist: A person actively opposing someone or something any given fictional story.

Anthology: A collection of literary works.

Author: The creator of a fictious artefact in any given media form.

Cross-media analysis: The observation and comparison of multiple media artefacts.

Deuteragonist: The secondary protagonist in any given fictional story.

Horror: A genre of fiction that prioritises frightening or scaring its audience.

Indigeneity: The fact for originating persons or cultures naturally in a particular place, here understood as Native American.

Misappropriation: Misrepresentation or misconstruction of an established idea.

Mythology: A traditional story or epic concerning the early history of a people, nation, event, culture or social phenomenon.

NPC: A non-playable character in game media.

Protagonist: The primary leading character in any given fictional story.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Johnson, F.A. (2022), 'A Creature Without a Cave: Abstraction and (Mis)Appropriation of the Wendigo Myth in Contemporary North American Horror', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/906. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.906, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

The Once and Future Story: Arthurian Mythology as an Emblem for Western Ideals

Estelle Mary Wallis, University of Warwick

Abstract

This article analyses three key texts in Arthurian literature to illustrate the changes the myth has undergone from its popularisation in the twelfth century to its rediscovery in the nineteenth century. It compares Geoffrey of Monmouth's unfounded insistence on historical accuracy with Chrétien de Troyes' focus on interiority and male–female dynamics before making a leap in time to explore Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and its anxieties concerning gendered power dynamics and material culture. The paper draws on these comparisons to demonstrate the malleable nature of the Arthurian myth, as well as its status as both a reflection of Western values and a focus point for the authors' priorities within their own environments and cultures. This is achieved through a focus on social commentary and the creation of a plethora of characters and symbols that will become rooted in the European psyche.

Keywords: Arthurian literature, Arthurian myth and national identity, Evolution of Arthurian mythology, Chrétien de Troyes and chivalry, Alfred Tennyson and Victorian Medievalism

From the Sword in the Stone to the Holy Grail or the figure of Merlin, the Arthurian legend has played an important role in the collective Western imagination. While there is no factual basis for the existence of an Arthur exactly as he is portrayed in most literature, the myth itself[1] has remained present from its first conceptions in the early medieval Latin historical texts to contemporary re-imaginings. However, through its many retellings, it has obtained a shifting and malleable nature, which many artists have found valuable to illustrate and propagate their respective society's moral and cultural values. This shifting collection of European

moral priorities, cultural expectations and historical biases concerning, for example, gender dynamics or the importance of individual desires – these signifiers mentioned earlier – will be referred here to as the 'Western psyche'. Three examples of this phenomenon reside in medieval scholar Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, French poet Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances, and Victorian poet Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Through an analysis of the way their different styles and themes interact with their culture's preoccupations, it becomes clear that the Arthurian legend functions less as a unique, defined story and more as a focus through which the authors reflect the evolution in cultural and moral priorities in European society. In this case, it illustrates the shift from a historical figure to a more narrative and individual ideal of courtly love, which is then repurposed in the Victorian age as an examination of the anxieties surrounding the shifting political and cultural landscape. I will first demonstrate Monmouth's role in precipitating the Arthurian myth to the forefront of a brand-new national identity. Then I will analyse Chrétien de Troyes' contribution to this process through shifting the focus to a more introspective version of the myth, which establishes a collective emotional connection to the Arthurian legend. Finally, I will explore Tennyson's reprise of the Arthurian tradition as a symbol, or symptom, of a nostalgia for a non-existent, idealised collective past and a tool for Victorians to come to terms with their own present. Through these three case studies, I will show that the mythology surrounding Arthur and the Round Table has been shaped by Western philosophies and moral priorities while contributing to shape these same societies' values, thus proving its status as a myth.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the creation of a national identity

Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1136 text *History of the Kings of Britain* transformed the figure of Arthur from a few mentions in Latin chronicles, such as Nennius's or Gildas's texts (Wilhelm, 1984: 5–7), to a key emblem of British reunification. Monmouth's goal is to present a coherent history that portrays a common and proud ancestry before the invasion of the Saxons. The text prides itself in its historical emphasis, as shown by Monmouth's dedication which assures us the work is a translation of 'a certain very ancient book written in the British language' – a source that historians have emitted many hypotheses for, all of which

are unverified – paired up with the author's 'own expressions' and 'own homely style' (Monmouth 1966: 51). Arthur's story is indeed narrated through a historical lens. Originally written in Latin,[2] the *History* is built using a paratactic style through a series of important events, such as battles or alliances, all connected by chronological conjunctions such as 'then' (164), 'as soon as' (218) or 'in the end' (256). These links bring focus onto the events themselves, rather than the characters beyond their actions. There is very little commentary about the causality of events, and practically none about the characters' personal motivations or the author's own moral conclusions. Even though the details are often fabricated, the language used is factual, with precise accounts of the players (such as the long list of actors in the battle between Arthur and Lucius Hiberius at the beginning of Book 10) and locations (such as the 'river Humber' (212) or 'Caledon Wood' (215)). This serves to anchor the account into history, or Monmouth's version of History, and ascribes a factual, unbiased tone to his work. In doing so, he moves the figure of Arthur from a nebulous folkloric presence to a tangible hero in the British imagination.

The historical emphasis serves to sway the Arthurian legacy away from traditional folklore and into a more 'acceptable' or scholarly aspect of the British past. The effect of this was the creation of a political past that many factions could subscribe to. As Alan MacColl states:

> The English quickly adopted Geoffrey's account as the first part of their own national history, and it was not long before the Welsh followed suit. Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, both the English and the Welsh made the idea of an ancient British heritage the historical cornerstone of their national identity. (MacColl, 2006: 249)

The period of literary uncertainty that preceded Monmouth's time, with few written vestiges, emphasises this need for a national history for factions to rally behind.

This need for a glorious Briton past is also shown through the depiction of the figure of Arthur. In the *History*, Arthur is first and foremost a military hero. The praise of his character comes from his prowess as a tactician and warrior. In a glorious description of one of Arthur's first battles (in 'Arthur of Britain'), Monmouth tells us:

> He drew his sword Caliburn […] and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men.
> (Monmouth 1966: 217)

While Monmouth's style still resembles a historical account, this description of Arthur comes close to that of an epic hero. Hyperboles and absolute terms abound, and the supernatural undertones of the extract through the calling upon God suggests Arthur's character holds an aspect that goes beyond a human king of the past. The apotheosis of Arthur's reign in the *History* comes when he is crowned as emperor of Rome after his victory over Lucius. This expansionist ideal of British conquest is the mythical aspect that Monmouth emphasises through Arthur's constant victories. The image of Arthur-as-Britain as a conquering force establishes the mythical aspect of the tale, as it builds the foundations of a national identity through collective imagination. The extract also features Arthur's sword Excalibur (here 'Caliburn'), a well-known object that has taken a significant place in the modern conception of the legend. The fact that the sword is the first legendary object that appears in this Arthurian tale tells us much about the primarily military purpose of its beginnings. Monmouth inscribes himself into a tradition of epic heroes while adapting these traditions for a British audience.

Finally, Monmouth does not forget to invoke God in his description. In many other instances, he attributes Arthur's victories to the grace of God, establishing him not only as a champion of Britain but also as an emblem of the Christian faith, expanding its influence through all of Western Europe. Thus, as Ad Putter concludes, 'Arthur is above all a conquering hero, and the story of his rule is one of continual territorial expansion … The values that Geoffrey's Arthur embodies are primarily martial ones: pious patriotism, bravery, generosity' (Putter, 2009: 41). Signifiers such as the sword, or the hyperbolic language, go hand-in-hand with the historical tone to shape a collective figurehead of British values of military prowess and Christianity. Through Monmouth, Arthur becomes a myth, an iconic emblem representing more than an individual, thus unifying a country's collective consciousness.

However, or perhaps because of this, the subject of Arthur's death itself is treated with surprisingly little detail. After extensively describing the final battle of Camblam, naming every casualty on either side, Monmouth concludes Arthur's story by stating: 'Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to. He handed the crown of Britain to his cousin Constantine' (Monmouth, 1966: 261). While his wounds are mortal, there is no explicit mention of Arthur's death. Arthur's death is shrouded in mystery, left for the reader to interpret its significance. Even if Monmouth's audiences would not interpret the passage as a statement of Arthur's immortality (Putter, 2009: 41), this still serves to further elevate the character into an emblem, a mythical figure. In the end, Arthur's death is inconsequential to his story – instead, his existence is remembered; he lives on through Monmouth's work, and through his place in Britain's consciousness.

In this context, one of the *History*'s passages stands out as a mysterious addition. Monmouth interrupts his account of Vortigern (one of the kings preceding Arthur) to introduce the character of Merlin, and proceeds to transcribe an entire chapter-full of his prophecies. These prophecies are opaque, deliberately overzealous with metaphors and obscure symbolism: 'the Boar shall come the Ram of the Castle of Venus, with golden horns and a beard of silver [...] in the days of the Ram there shall be peace' (Monmouth, 1966: 176). This whole section is based on images that are signposted as metaphors, but leave us at a loss to determine an objective interpretation. Committed to his role of historian, Monmouth does not comment on these prophecies, leaving the reader to interpret. Putter informs us that 'Geoffrey planted in the midst of Merlin's prophecies several that obviously tally with historical events, thus creating the impression that others will be fulfilled in future' (Putter, 2009: 39). Scholars used Merlin's metaphors for various purposes, whether to stoke Welsh ambitions of power (MacColl, 2006: 251) or to frame Arthur's possible return as a mythical Messiah-like figure (Thorpe, 1966: 22). In the words of Kimberly Bell, 'Merlin becomes a shaper of history himself, whose prophetic text mirrors Geoffrey's own historical narrative' (Bell, 2000: 14). Through our interpretation, Merlin transforms history into an active task; he 'breaks the illusion of narrative (and historical) linearity and forces readers to participate actively in the construction of the text rather than passively receive information given to them' (Bell, 2000: 18). Monmouth

thus uses the pagan figure of Merlin in his Christian history to create an impression of a predestined future on top of a glorified, united past for Britain. The reader becomes directly involved not only in the act of history – and myth-making – but also in their own perception of their future. The role of Merlin, just like Arthur's ambiguous death, serves to further inscribe the Arthurian myth into a legendary story, one that claims to be predominantly historical and political while also shrouding it in an aura of unexplained, supernatural and, therefore, inherently fascinating mystery.

Chrétien de Troyes' romances and the individualisation of chivalry

Following Monmouth's depiction of Arthur as a martial hero and ultimate unifier of Britain, the twelfth century starts shaping cultural notions of an idealised noble behaviour in literature. While maintaining the ideals of martial prowess and chivalric valour, the developing romance genre transforms Monmouth's *History* into a framing narrative through which various individuals are placed in the forefront. Chrétien de Troyes's works – notably his two romances, 'The Knight with the Lion' and 'The Knight of the Cart' – exemplify the genre's new focus on personal integrity and interiority. Chrétien employs various narrative devices in order to stoke the audience's interest. For example, 'The Knight with the Lion' begins with a member of Arthur's entourage telling a story of his adventures; this prompts Yvain, the protagonist, to avenge him, thus propelling his own story. This framing device achieves two purposes: building a coherent, interlinking structure and creating a subjective point of view that allows for a more personal relationship with the characters.

Through the framing device, Chrétien gives the story a structured plotline, which results in a loss of the 'authentic' history-telling style, and a rise in a stylised form of narration. As William Kibler points out, Chrétien was influenced by the French *chansons de geste*, which were not meant to be read but to be performed and widely distributed in oral form (Kibler, 2004: 3). He followed a tradition of epic poetry that presupposed an aesthetic of storytelling, which is identified by Carol Chase: '[Chrétien's] works are constructed following a pattern incorporating a crisis and a quest: they can all be divided into "before" and "after", with the crisis as the dividing line' (Chase, 1984: 301). The structure allows for a smooth and enjoyable rhythm while also emphasising the key themes of his story (for example,

this before-crisis-after structure strengthens the weight of Yvain's redemption in 'The Knight with The Lion'). Because of his adherence to the tradition of the chanson de geste, Chrétien frees himself of Monmouth's historical priorities and allows Arthurian literature to move towards a more narrative and stylised direction.

The second effect of the framing device in 'The Knight with the Lion' is its focus on a singular, subjective experience rather than a direct transcription of events by the narrator. We are introduced to the main features of the story (the enchanted fountain and its protecting knight) through a secondary source, told through Calogrenant's first-person perspective. Chrétien's works often prioritise their protagonists' 'inner lives', their psychological journeys, over an impartial, events-based point of view. In many instances, the knights go through a kind of psychomachia, where they deliberate in profound detail over a particular choice, studying the advantages and the negative impacts of their potential actions. For example, in Lancelot's story 'The Knight with the Cart' (which I will study using Kibler's translation), the protagonist must choose between showing mercy on an enemy he just vanquished or complying to a maiden's request to have him killed. Chrétien frames this through an inner monologue featuring a confrontation between the personifications of Generosity and Compassion:

> Generosity and Compassion demand that he satisfy them both, for he is both generous and merciful. Yet if the girl carries off the head, Compassion will have been vanquished and put to death, and if she must leave without it, Generosity will have been routed. Compassion and Generosity hold him doubly imprisoned.
> (De Troyes, 2004: 242)

Chrétien plunges into Lancelot's mind in order to show us the dilemma he is going through. Qualities that define the period's ideal of chivalry are given human form, a technique that both highlights this focus on interiority and, on a meta-textual level, embodies the author's urge to ascribe a personality to previously one-dimensional characters – even disembodied concepts are attributed an individuality. This person-within-a-person narration technique brings complexity and nuance to the characters as well as emphasising focus on the struggles within.

For this same reason of individuality, Chrétien seems to pay a close attention to names and the power they hold – the knights have to gain the right to be referred to by their real names through various chivalric actions. For example, Lancelot's name is only spoken in the text by Guinevere after he has proven his worth in the tournament. Names mean not only recognition of their existence but also acceptance of their status as complex characters within the legend of King Arthur. Chrétien de Troyes is responsible for the creation of many iconic features of the Arthurian myth – he created Lancelot and his affair with Guinevere, as well as the story of Percival and the apparition of the Holy Grail, which would later play a highly prominent part of medieval Christian retellings of the legend. This attention to individuality and interiority therefore served to create a plethora of various personalities within Arthur's court, adding to the complexity and appeal of the genre. Adding an individuality to the names serves to cement them in the collective imagination, allowing for a more personal connection between the myth and the individuals that retell it, as well as the society that receives it.

Finally, medieval Arthurian romances bring a new aspect to the relationship between chivalry and gender dynamics. Alongside the knight's preoccupation with military prowess, a new ideal of courtly love takes a predominant role in the chivalric code. In Chrétien's works, this love takes precedence over any and all action, to the extent where the traditional knightly values – the virtues of honour and reputation established by Monmouth – are challenged by the protagonists' duties towards courtly love. While we have already discussed the use of personification earlier, it is worth noting the extreme language used in this passage of 'The Knight with the Lion' regarding Yvain's sudden love for the lady Laudine:

> He who refuses to welcome Love eagerly as soon as she draws near to him commits a felony and treason; and I say […] that such a person does not deserve any happiness […] I must not bear her any hatred if I do not want to betray Love. I must love whomever Love chooses. (De Troyes, 2004: 312)

Yvain's submission to the capitalised Love is absolute and unequivocal, and his commitment is rewarded by the narrative at the end of his journey. In this passage, Love is associated with feudal and legal language related to the knight's duties towards his lord: 'felony', 'treason', and 'betray' would

all be recognised by a contemporary audience as capital offences in a system based on trust and delegation of power. To place this value on Love is to give it the same political and societal status. The language used in the extract is not restricted to Yvain either – the general expressions 'he who refuses' and 'such a person' leave no room for Love to be negotiated with by anyone. This could be the result of specific influences that Chrétien was submitted to due to his audience. Indeed, the poet was under the sponsorship of the countess Marie of Champagne, whose court played an important part in the establishment of the ideals of courtly love (Michener, 1970: 355). This influence is an explanation for why Chrétien placed a particular emphasis on the knights' submission to Love. This new influence that women had over Arthurian literature resulted in a shift in gender dynamics. While Monmouth's *Historia* only mentions women offhandedly, as either wives or mothers, Chrétien's works constantly place them at the forefront of the protagonists' priorities, often in direct conflict with the 'traditional' expectations of chivalry.

The most striking example of this is the problem of Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Queen Guinevere, which Chrétien de Troyes is the first Arthurian author to write about. This key aspect of the Arthurian legend has later been used as a morality piece, especially by late medieval texts – for many, Lancelot and Guinevere's affair directly causes the fall of the Round Table. However, Chrétien's 'The Knight of the Cart' implies no such interpretation from the story. On the contrary, as Pamela Raabe argues:

> We are not asked to believe that Lancelot fails to achieve spiritual perfection because of his sin, as in the thirteenth-century prose *Queste del Saint Graal*, or even that Lancelot achieves perfection despite his sin; but that he is like a saint and martyr precisely because of his illicit love.
> (Raabe, 1987: 259)

Narratively, Lancelot is rewarded for choosing Guinevere over his knightly reputation. The language used to describe their love is not only positive, it is almost divine in nature. Lancelot's quest for Guinevere is closely intertwined with the Christian quest for holiness, as shown through the graveyard episode where Lancelot goes through a journey similar in structure to Christ's Harrowing of Hell in order to pursue his journey towards the queen. By portraying his protagonist's motivations of Love in

the same light as Christ's unifying Love of humanity, Chrétien suggests the human act of love comes from God, and therefore transcends earthly concerns. Raabe adds: 'divine faith and profane love are somehow paradoxically united in Lancelot, so that Amors is the ultimate perfection of faith' (1987: 264). Therefore, Chrétien's ideal of chivalry views love as the ultimate drive for human salvation. He transforms Monmouth's portrayal of a unified political and military system into an exploration of the psychological effect of love and morality on an individual. Through him, Arthur's collective story becomes more fragmented and complex, as well as interacting with a broader, more international audience than the *Historia* would have been intended for. Chrétien de Troyes' contribution to the Arthurian myth served to settle the legend as a rich universe through which to present more individual stories, tailored to the writer's particular audience.

Lord Alfred Tennyson and the fading Camelot

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes contributed greatly to the popularisation of the Arthurian myth, and their influence led to a great number of retellings and additions to the legend. However, interest in King Arthur dwindled down after the fifteenth century – partly due to scholars' newfound scepticism regarding Arthur's historical veracity, and partly due to a renewed interest in classical literature of the Antiquity (Gossedge and Knight, 2009: 103). It was not until the nineteenth century that the Arthurian myth was properly revisited by writers and artists, influenced by the period's fascination with medievalism. Perhaps due to the shifting social structure of the Industrial Revolution, there was a cultural pull towards the medieval and its feudal systems of nobility. 'Ideas of ancient beauty, antiquity and mystery', explains Julie Pridmore, were romanticised by authors such as Tennyson or Walter Scott, 'inciting a wholly new interest in the past, and in the customs and manners and personalities of ages remote from the civilised present' (Pridmore, 2000: 89). When writing *Idylls of the King* between 1859 and 1873, Tennyson was influenced by this idealised version of the Middle Ages and was attracted to the figure of medieval Britain as a glorious land. Thus, Tennyson's presentation of the Arthurian setting helps to pinpoint his contribution to the legend.

This mythical Camelot translates into a highly symbolic language, with clear motifs of savagery against civilisation instead of precise locations or accurate descriptions. Arthurian Britain is described with surreal and mystical imagery: 'the land of Cameliard was waste / Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein' (Tennyson, 1996: 21). The surroundings shift depending on the poem's tone, from a field of flowers for Arthur and Guinevere's wedding (33) to a 'tempest' at Arthur's passing (302). Much like Camelot disappears before Gareth in the poem 'Gareth and Lynette', shrouded in 'the silver-misty morn' (41), Tennyson's setting is elusive and draped in vague but atmospheric language. Avalon, the mystical land where Arthur is brought, receives the same treatment. As Inga Bryden points out:

> Tennyson's Avalon is associated with the features, recognizable to contemporary readers, of an idealized, rural landscape: meadows, orchard-lawns, bowery hollows. Such a place, bound up with national identity … is both actual and mythical: shaped in earthly terms, it also signifies an already disappearing English landscape. (Bryden, 2020: 14)

This depiction of Avalon contributes to Tennyson's Britain's status as an imaginary, idealised dreamland rather than a historical setting, confirming this Victorian picture of the Arthurian land as a static ideal that is pasted on the medieval period as a distant appealing past, much in the same way as Geoffrey of Monmouth used Arthur as a political figure for British national pride.

This political facet to Victorian medievalism is articulated in various ways in Tennyson's *Idylls*. While the poems' setting is idealised and mesmerising, there is a theme of corruption and decay running through the work, as well as light fading into darkness. The ideals of chivalry, trust and 'social unity' romanticised by the Victorians (Bryden, 2020: 662) are visibly crumbling, culminating in the eventual fall of the Round Table and the death of Arthur. The recurring motif of the tension between spiritual virtue and bodily desire illustrates Tennyson's growing anxieties over the shifting cultural landscape of his society. The nineteenth-century individual was plunged in an increasingly material culture, and objects held a prevalent role in everyday life. Even the medievalism trend discussed earlier was submitted to this: Bryden mentions an 'ambivalence

(or rather, fascination and anxiety) towards objects and material culture' (Bryden, 2020: 655) as well as 'desire to market an authentic version of the medieval/Arthurian object' (656). This shift into materiality could explain the anxieties that seep into the *Idylls.* While the explicit criticisms of Arthur's court are made by the antagonists Tristram and Vivien, they still manage to sow doubts into the reader's mind regarding the Round Table that 'blinds [it]self' (Tennyson, 1996: 162) for fear of finding something beneath the society's appearances of virtue. Moreover, in the poem 'Guinevere', Tennyson articulates Guinevere's betrayal, the main conflict that precipitates the fall of Camelot, as a conflict between flesh and spirituality. Arthur states, 'I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh / And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd; and mine own flesh / Here looking down on thine polluted' (283), as if Guinevere were made of a corrupting matter different to Arthur. The last lines in the *Idylls* refer to 'The darkness of that battle in the West, / Where all of high and holy dies away' (302), and the final battle of Camlan is related through nightmarish, almost hell-like descriptors. This obsession with flesh and the abandonment of 'higher' thought links back to Victorian anxieties over materialism – there is a notion in Tennyson that modern changes corrupt what were once chivalric virtues, and now only seem to have value as objects to fawn over. This work, therefore, presents an ambiguous duality between the idealisation of Camelot's setting as a celebration of the past, and the slow changes that pervade Arthur's court as an exploration of contemporary material culture.

Another nineteenth-century anxiety exemplified by the *Idylls of the King* is formed around the place and meaning of masculinity in Victorian Britain. Tennyson seems to reject Chrétien de Troyes' emphasis on the superiority of Love as the ultimate chivalric ideal. Instead, he replaces it with a more traditionally masculine view of knightly morality. Lancelot and Tristram – the two members of Arthur's court most associated with the service of women and their amorous adventures – are presented in a more passive light, if not as downright antagonists. Lancelot is associated with flower imagery through the poems, and Tennyson is more concerned about his adultery than his military prowess – the latter of which is mentioned in 'Lancelot and Elaine' but never explicitly narrated. Tristram has no respect for fundamental ideals of trust or feudal vows, and has eyes only for Isolt, to the point where he neglects his chivalric duties. Arthur, on the other hand, is referred to as 'guileless' (Tennyson, 1996: 270) and a 'stainless gentleman' (163). There is a long and extensive description of

Excalibur's importance – much like in Monmouth, the sword is a prevalent marker of the King's identity. This relates to Pridmore's view of the Victorian interest in soldier-heroes. In her words, 'the attention given to individual heroes was a reflection of the Victorian concern with "great men", a worship of self-discipline in myth if not necessarily in reality and the production of biographies of recent heroes' (Pridmore, 2000: 98). This anxiety over the meaning of manliness in Victorian England shows that – in the same way that British medievalism was a way to escape from the growing changes in nineteenth-century culture – Tennyson's portrayal of Arthur betrays a desire to move back to the 'roots' of British masculinity.

In parallel to Tennyson's anxieties over the loss of male identity, the *Idylls* also deal with the shifting nature of gender dynamics. The role of women in the poems is peculiar and ambiguous, especially the poet's treatment of Vivien, previously Neneve in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* Tennyson's main fifteenth-century source. Indeed, while the original text portrays Neneve as a young maiden unjustly pursued by Merlin, Vivien holds a much more threatening position of power. Her motivations are not self-defence, but rather vengeance and ambition. She infiltrates Arthur's court, spreading false rumours and attempting to seduce Arthur, then Merlin, in order to achieve her goals. She is at times manipulative and lewd, a 'harlot' (Tennyson, 1996: 167) using her serpentine body as a way to win Merlin's trust: 'There while she sat, half-falling from his knees, / Half-nestles at his heart' (166). At other times, she is wrathful and brutally honest, calling out the Round Table's hypocrisy: '*They* bound to holy vows of chastity! / Were I not woman, I could tell a tale […] Not one of all the drove should touch me: swine!' (160). This strange dichotomy between the powerful, influential female and the wily, sexualised witch parallels Victorian instability regarding the role of women, especially when put in relation to the shifting version of British masculinity. Following Wollstonecraft's example, nineteenth-century women were more and more present in the public world, with figures like Anna Jameson 'rethinking the roles of women in society and the nation' (Peterson, 2009: 39). In this way, the women's emancipation signified a blurring of the lines, which Tennyson's Vivien represents through her ambiguity and double nature. By its nature as an epic account of knightly prowess, the private sphere – conflated with medieval women's power – is often neglected by Arthurian writers. However, Vivien challenges this by stepping into Merlin's sphere of power and gaining political power in

Arthur's court. Vivien therefore represents, as Linda Peterson suggests, 'the extension of domestic life into the social community and the nation at large' (Peterson, 2009: 40). The result is a threateningly powerful woman whose influence is dangerous to men's place in society.

Thus, Tennyson reinvents characters and settings that were well-rooted in his culture's imagination and uses their pre-conceived connotations, while also subverting them to explore themes of societal change, such as growing materialism and questioned gender roles. In shifting the myth to his vision, the author finds a way to grapple with his society's own shifting vision of British ideals. By creating a comfortable distance from both the 'historical' Middle Ages and his own period, Tennyson uses the Arthurian legend as a filter through which he can explore the unstable culture he is experiencing.

Through the study of these three extremely influential pieces of Arthurian literature, it is clear that the myth of King Arthur is used by different authors to express the values and sentiments of their own environment. While Monmouth's *History* aims to rally Britain behind a common glorified past, Chrétien de Troyes' romances represent the twelfth-century ideals of courtly love and internal morality. Seven centuries later, Tennyson uses Arthur to reconnect with British medievalism and explore Victorian gender dynamics. The texts constantly interact with each other, drawing on common features such as Excalibur or Lancelot to highlight different priorities in their stories. Unlike the famous sword, the Arthurian legend is not set in stone; it is a constantly shifting and reinterpreted source that, while having been separated from 'true' history, still attracts scholars as a funnel through which to analyse the authors' contexts and cultural anxieties. Because of this, King Arthur finds his place among mythical studies as a powerful emblem that resides in the collective mind throughout European history

Notes

[1] Here I use the definition of a myth as the societal phenomenon through which popular folkloric images are used as signifiers to communicate political or cultural meaning.

[2] However, in this article, I will use Lewis Thorpe's translation and the Penguin edition of the text: Of Monmouth, G. (1966), *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe, London: Penguin.

References

Bell, K. (2000), 'Merlin as historian in "Historia Regum Britanniae"', *Arthuriana,* 10 (1), 14–26, available at https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2000.0011, accessed 1 March 2021.

Bryden, I. (2020), 'Tennyson and the return of King Arthur', in Parker, J. and C. Wagner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 654–669, available at https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199669509.013.39, accessed 27 February 2021.

Chase, C. J. (1984), 'Review of *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay in Narrative Art,* by Norris J. Lacy', *Modern Philology*, 81 (3), 300–303, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/437274, accessed 1 March 2021.

De Troyes, C. (2004), *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W.W. Kibler, London: Penguin.

Gossedge, R. and S. Knight (2009), 'The Arthur of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries', in Archibald, E. and A. Putter (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 36–52, available at https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CCOL9780521860598.003, accessed 18 February 2021.

Kibler, W. W. (2004), 'Introduction', in De Troyes, C. (ed.), *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W.W. Kibler, London: Penguin, pp. 1–22.

MacColl, A. (2006), 'The meaning of "Britain" in medieval and early modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2), 248–69, available at https://doi.org/10.1086/499787, accessed 27 February 2021.

Michener, R. L. (1970), 'Courtly love in Chrétien de Troyes: The "Demande d'Amour"', *Studia Neophilologica*, 42 (2), 353–360, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/00393277008587472, accessed 1 March 2021.

Of Monmouth, G. (1966), *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe, London: Penguin (originally published as *Historia Regum Britanniae* in 1136).

Peterson, L. H. (2009), 'Tennyson and the ladies', *Victorian Poetry*, 47 (1), 25–43, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/40347424, accessed 10 March 2021.

Pridmore, J. (2000), 'Reconstructing the Middle Ages: Some Victorian 'medievalisms'', *Kleio*, 32, 84–102, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/00232080085380051, accessed 6 March 2021.

Putter, A. (2009), 'The twelfth-century Arthur', in Archibald, E. and A. Putter (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 36–52, available at https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CCOL9780521860598.003, accessed 18 February 2021.

Raabe, P. (1987), 'Chretien's "Lancelot" and the sublimity of adultery', *University of Toronto Quarterly,* 57 (2), 259–269, available at https://muse.jhu.edu/article/513012, accessed 1 March 2021.

Tennyson, A. (1996), *Idylls of the King*, London: Penguin (originally published by Edward Moxon in 1859).

Thorpe, L. (1966), 'Introduction', in Of Monmouth, G. (1966), *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe, London: Penguin.

Wilhelm, J. J. (1984), 'Arthur in the Latin Chronicles', in Wilhelm, J. J. and L. Zamuelis Gross (eds), *The Romance of Arthur*, London: Garland, pp. 3–9.

Glossary

Chanson de geste: A long, narrative, sung poem celebrating the feats, the 'gesta', of medieval heroes. The genre was popularised in France during the twelfth century, mainly by minstrels and jugglers.

Courtly love: A medieval ideal designating a form of loving based on courtesy, respect and honesty. The trope is usually accompanied by highly stylised verse, stemming from the poetry of the French *troubadours*, the composers that performed mainly between the twelfth and the fourteenth century.

Medievalism: An artistic, literary or cultural movement taking inspiration from elements of the Medieval period. The phenomenon usually presents an idealised version of the era.

Paratactic: Said of a style using parataxis, or the juxtaposition of clauses without any subordinative conjunctions.

Romance: A Medieval genre of prose or verse narratives, usually depicting the adventures of chivalric wandering knights. The genre is vast and contains many variations, taking inspiration from the *chansons de geste*, the *troubadours*' lyric poetry or, in some instances, even the burlesque.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Wallis, E.M. (2022), 'The Once and Future Story: Arthurian Mythology as an Emblem for Western Ideals', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/872. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.872, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

The Relationship Between History and Mythology in Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins*

Kirsten Scheiby, University of Warwick

Abstract

This article analyses Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins* to explore the way in which historical events are transformed into mythology. Following Barthes' (1972) *Mythologies*, I propose that *Assassins* demonstrates how mythology simplifies history to serve a dominant narrative. *Assassins* creates a dialogue between contrasting historical narratives through the Balladeer, who embodies a simplified mythology, providing ironic contrast to Sondheim's complex characterisation of the assassins. The characterisation of Guiteau provides an example to examine Sondheim's character in comparison with historical and fictional accounts, in order to appreciate how mythology alters the perception of this figure. The scene with Lee Harvey Oswald invites discussion of cultural mythologies defining American national identity: the American Dream, independent freedoms and gun culture. These mythologies arise from historical mythology, but also through commodity fetishism and conspiracy theories.

Assassins restores the complexity of characters who are otherwise reduced by mythology to consider how cultural mythology leads to the formation of these assassins, and to challenge the biased narrative of American historical mythology. By comparing *Assassins* to the historical accounts and folk songs it references, we can better understand the role of mythology in *Assassins*, illuminating the process by which historical mythology is produced, and indeed produces the fictionalised assassins.

Keywords: Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*, American assassins, US Presidential Assassinations, historical mythology, American musical, Stephen Sondheim

The 1990 off-Broadway musical *Assassins*, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by John Weidman, explores the long-popular mythology of assassination stories as they manifest in contemporary American society by depicting an anachronistic performance of songs and dialogue between nine assassins and attempted assassins of the Presidents of the United States. The cultural interest in assassin stories relates to their unique subject matter: the term 'assassination' is used in reference to the murder of a powerful or politicised figure – thus assassinations are distinctly public in their impact. Looking specifically at the modern American culture out of which Sondheim's *Assassins* is created, we can clearly see an ongoing public obsession with the mythology of Presidential assassinations in historical study, amateur detective work (or conspiracy theories), and artistic and cultural renderings.

In his seminal book *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes identifies myth as the language used in reference to mythological subjects, whereby myths capture the dominant perspective which comes to be accepted as 'natural' truth (1972: 109, 129). Additionally, we might understand myths as being those narratives or subjects that penetrate a society to the point where they are instantly familiar and become emblematic of that society's ideals and collective identity. These myths are produced through an accumulation of the various narratives found in historical account, media and artistic interpretations, which together create an overarching mythology in the cultural conscience. Constructing a narrative is core to mythology: as with President Kennedy, whose image was 'constructed through a series of hero tales that, told and retold, produced a politician as the hero of an unfolding mythology' (Hellmann, 1997: ix). Hellmann elaborates that history 'recorded particular stumbles and failures', whereas the produced mythology 'preserved […] the meaning of John F. Kennedy' (Hellmann, 1997: 146). Where Kennedy is mythologised as a 'hero', his assassin is consequently characterised as the villain. This American mythology encourages patriotic celebration of the martyred Presidents while vilifying the assassins and simplifying their stories and motives.

The mythologies of US history and culture are inserted into *Assassins* – predominantly through the plot and characters, but also through intertextual references to popular American writers, patriotic music and projections of iconic visual images of pertinent historical moments. Sondheim investigates this American historical mythology[1] by creating a

dialogue between the mythologised versions of history and an imagined demythologised account. Since mythology reduces the complexity of historical events, the American assassins are generally mythologised as being archetypal 'madmen' shooters, and the villains of America,[2] rather than real people with complex inner lives and frightening motivations.[3]

This article analyses Sondheim's *Assassins* through the lens of mythologising history, looking at how the musical uses characterisation, intertextuality and musical pastiche to explore the relationship between history and mythology. By comparing the musical to the historical accounts on which it is based, we can better understand how history is transformed into mythology, and how these narratives interact within *Assassins*. I argue that Sondheim and Weidman craft a dialogue between these narratives to demythologise certain patriotic ideologies that are presented as natural truths in America – such as the American Dream, individual freedoms, and gun culture. Moreover, Sondheim's exploration of the production of mythological narratives informs the argument that the assassins themselves are produced by these myths in a cycle of myth being told and retold.

Assassins considers American historical mythology from an alternative and challenging perspective, encouraging its audience to interrogate the perceived 'nature' of these patriotic ideologies – to the extent that it was initially rejected by critics who struggled with its counter-cultural and seemingly anti-American sentiment. However, by reading *Assassins* as an exploration of the production and reception of mythology and ideology, we can better appreciate how the musical grapples with the significance of American myths and national identity.

The Balladeer as mythologist

The narrative of *Assassins* is shaped by the looming presence of the Balladeer: a transcendent, timeless figure who sings cheery ballads about three of the four successful assassins – 'The Ballad of Booth', 'Czolgosz', and 'Guiteau'. The Balladeer's tone, both musically and textually, captures that of many traditional American folk songs, incorporating themes of optimistic patriotism, the American Dream and sometimes acting as cautionary tales with a Christian moral. This style captures the voice of American mythology – as Sondheim, on the Balladeer's purpose, stated:

> myths and historical stories are […] primarily passed down through story and song, so [we] thought it would be useful to have a balladeer who would sing folk songs throughout the show: the received wisdom of what's happened in American history
> (Sondheim *et al.*, 1991b: 00:05:23–00:06:25)

In this way, the Balladeer documents the assassins' mythologies by collecting and reciting the received narratives of these historical events. Each ballad serves to cast this political history as a simplistic tale of heroes and villains. As Barthes writes, in turning history to nature, myth 'abolishes the complexity of human acts' (1972: 143): thus mythology does not serve to create a false history, but naturalises a biased perspective as the truth. As we will see, through the Balladeer, *Assassins* investigates both the mythological version of each assassin – whereby they are reduced to the 'madman' lone shooter with simplistic motivations – while also unveiling demythologised versions: crafting three-dimensional characters out of the reductionist myth, thereby restoring their complexity as disenfranchised individuals with very real, frightening motivations.

The Balladeer's role as storyteller and mythologist is established in the opening verse of 'The Ballad of Booth':

> BALLADEER.
>
> Someone tell the story,
> Someone sing the song.
> Every now and then
> The country
> Goes a little wrong.
> Every now and then
> A madman's
> Bound to come along.
> Doesn't stop the story—
> Story's pretty strong
> (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 15)

With this verse, Sondheim celebrates the power of storytelling, highlighting the importance of stories and folk songs in preserving history. This prelude establishes the Balladeer's characterisation, embodying a mythology that glorifies the narrative of America as a unified 'story'.

Through this patriotic characterisation, the national consequences of horrific acts of violence are undercut as something going 'a little wrong', trivialising the influence of these assassins. A key component in assassination mythologies is the incomprehensible loss, leaving many asking, 'how could one inconsequential angry little man cause such universal grief and anguish?' (Sondheim, 2011: 113). Yet the Balladeer undermines the power these assassins sought, his trivial tone asserting that their violent interference and inflicted grief cannot alter America's story. Thus the Balladeer's verse is a patriotic homage to the country's strength in the face of national tragedy and a celebration of America's national identity. However, it must be acknowledged that the myth of American patriotism is heavily racialised, and the Balladeer's narrative awkwardly avoids discussing the Civil War: Booth is condemned as a 'traitor', but not as a racist. This epitomises the danger of over-simplifying historical narratives, as the received wisdom of American mythology excludes any voices that differ from its ideal.

Through the Balladeer, *Assassins* is able to craft its own complex, humanised versions of American history's greatest villains, while still exploring the biased characterisation found in the received wisdom of historical mythology. Weidman has said that their purpose was not to make audiences 'sympathise' nor 'empathise' with the assassins, but to merely recognise them as being 'multidimensional and complicated' individuals with conviction behind their abhorrent acts (Sondheim *et al.*, 1991b: 00:04:40). This characterisation allows for a fascinating interaction between multiple historical narratives, as the 'real' assassins are allowed to interact with the patriotic mythology embodied by the Balladeer. Each character is depicted with a desire of how they want to be remembered, while the Balladeer mocks them with the contradictory reality of how the myth of American history remembers them:

> BALLADEER.
>
> But traitors just get jeers and boos,
> Not visits to their graves,
> While Lincoln, who got mixed reviews,
> Because of you, John, now gets only raves
> (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 22)

This tension fuels the ironic humour of the Balladeer's role, as the conversation between the past itself and historical mythology highlights the inconsistencies between these narratives, setting Booth's egotism and lack of self-awareness against the mythological perception of Booth as a 'traitor'. Even as Booth tries to convince us of his ideological motivations, the Balladeer contradicts his narrative by repeatedly asserting that Booth acted for petty, personal reasons, such as negative theatre reviews.

This contrast is emphasised by the ternary form of 'The Ballad of Booth', with the Balladeer's upbeat 'A' section, accompanied by banjo, juxtaposed by Booth's rubato, mournful aria in the 'B' section. Booth's assertion of his ideological conviction and lack of remorse as he takes his life is abruptly followed by a return to the Balladeer's upbeat melody, with the outrageously funny line 'Johnny Booth was a headstrong fellow, / Even he believed the things he said' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 22). Both the lyrics and musical style serve to create humour and undercut Booth's ideology, once again reducing his characterisation to the historical mythology of Booth as a foolish and stubborn traitor. Sondheim has noted that it is vital to 'set off the dispassion of the balladeer and the passion of Booth' (Sondheim *et al.*, 1991b: 00:24:05), highlighting the contrast between the complex, emotional Booth and the Balladeer as a dispassionate embodiment of mythology. Moreover, the Balladeer's reductionist, taunting treatment of characters such as Booth is a means to refuse these assassins the aggressive power they sought. Sondheim employs this technique throughout the show, as the Balladeer's restless optimism and upbeat folk melodies create irony through their inappropriate tone for such dark, violent subject matter.

Mythologised and demythologised history in 'The Ballad of Guiteau'

The musical's dialogue between contrasting narratives is most pertinent in 'The Ballad of Guiteau', sung by the Balladeer and Charles Guiteau as he mounts the scaffold to be hanged. To understand the different narratives at play in this scene, we must examine the historical accounts and cultural legacy that together produce the myth of Guiteau. An enigmatic narcissist with various unsuccessful careers, Guiteau assassinated President Garfield in July 1881 after becoming convinced he was owed a diplomatic office, or that God had commanded him to shoot the President (Ayton, 2017: 102,

109). Guiteau pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, and his erratic and obliviously sanguine behaviour during his trial garnered much public interest and debate over whether he was truly as 'insane' as he seemed, or whether this was an act to gain attention and reduce his sentence (Rosenberg, 1968: 77, 175). This shapes the historical mythology as it characterises Guiteau: an 1881 political cartoon published in *Puck* magazine shows a caricatured Guiteau clutching a gun in one hand, in the other a sign, 'An Office or Your Life!', accompanied by the sarcastic caption 'A model office-seeker' (see Figure 1). This cartoon shows that, even at the time, Guiteau came to be seen less as a dangerous and malevolent killer, but rather a comical caricature of the archetypal 'madman' shooter. Meanwhile, a traditional American folk song, 'Charles Guiteau', belittles and criticises Guiteau's demeanour on trial: 'I tried to play off insane / but found it would not do' (Kelly Harrell and the Virginia String Band, 1997). Certainly, Guiteau has long been an unusual mythological figure of American history, simultaneously characterised as being 'insane', but also sane, a foolish man, but also a 'cool calculating' criminal (Rosenberg, 1968: 77).

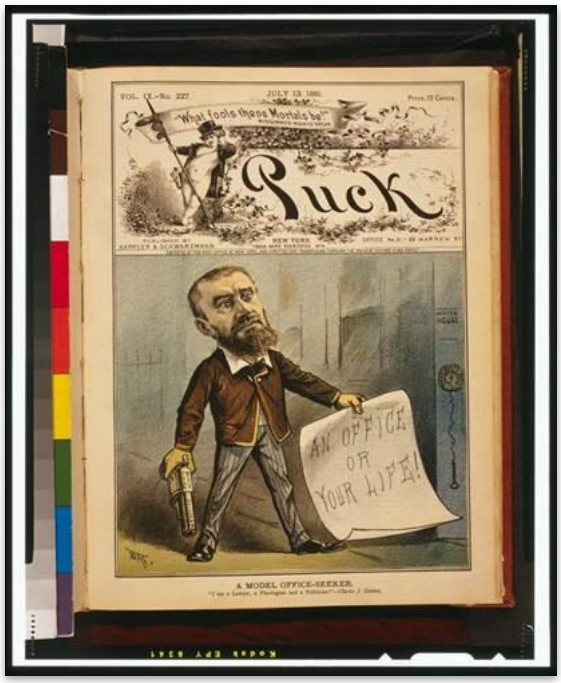


Figure 1: 'A Model Office-Seeker. "I am a Lawyer, a Theologian and a Politician!" – Charles J. Guiteau', *Puck*, 13 July 1881, Library of Congress.

This historical mythology of Guiteau as a 'madman' allows him to fulfil the archetypal role of the theatrical clown in *Assassins*. Weidman's characterisation captures the unrelenting optimism of Charles Guiteau, as

he consistently provides comic relief to the intense troubles of the other assassins, cheerily reminding them to 'look on the bright side' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 66). While his fellow assassins are overwhelmingly disillusioned with the myth of the American Dream, Guiteau resolutely believes there is hope; as he tells Czolgosz, 'You know your problem? You're a pessimist. […] This is America! The Land of Opportunity!' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 27). Guiteau's persistent faith in America's possibilities positions him in a similar comedic role to that of the Balladeer, providing an ironic contrast to the cynical assassins. In this way, Guiteau's characterisation remains confined to that of the mythologised Guiteau for much of the show, showing little complexity in favour of fulfilling the comic's dramatic role. This initial depiction matches not only the historical perspective of Guiteau, but potentially his own perception of himself, as he said to the jury during his trial: 'I am not here as a wicked man, or as a lunatic. I am here as a patriot' (Guiteau, 1882: 108). While Sondheim and Weidman certainly depict Guiteau as being psychologically distressed, Guiteau's self-assertion that he was first and foremost a 'patriot' rings true in his dialogue with fellow assassins.

Yet 'The Ballad of Guiteau' observes a transformation in Guiteau's character from the theatrical clown to a fearful man facing his mortality. In this number, Guiteau dances between embodying the mythological caricature of a 'lunatic' and a complex character with a frightening ambition who grapples with surging emotions as he nears his death. This is achieved through Sondheim's use of various intertextual references in the song, drawing attention to the contrasting narratives within historical mythology. Guiteau opens the song with an unaccompanied solo refrain that recurs at the end of each verse – 'I am going to the Lordy' – the lyrics of which are taken from a poem the real Guiteau wrote and recited the morning of his execution (Sondheim, 2011: 134). In quoting Guiteau's own words, Sondheim's fictionalised character is able to embody the voice of the historical Guiteau. The repeated mantra of 'I am going to the Lordy, I am so glad' in both Guiteau's poem and Sondheim's song is characteristic of Guiteau's persistent optimism, even as he faces death. However, as the song progresses, Sondheim's musical setting subverts our perception of the ever-cheery Guiteau: the key modulates higher at the end of each iteration of this refrain, with Guiteau's vocal pitch moving up a step as he physically steps closer to the scaffold, articulating his growing uncertainty. By singing increasingly higher in his vocal range, Guiteau's song emulates

the infantile tone of the poem, his '*shrill'* intonation demonstrating his increasing sense of fear (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 67 [stage direction]).

Sondheim's sorrowful, hesitant and hymn-like melody for Guiteau's poem is an unsettling contrast to our previous impression of Guiteau as relentlessly cheerful. As Valerie Schrader notes, the musical's non-chronological structure indicates a clear decision to '[give] the audience time to connect with the more likeable Guiteau' (2017: 330). Indeed, by the time his ballad comes into the show, the audience have formed a stronger connection to Guiteau – not that he is necessarily a sympathetic figure, but his role as the comic relief certainly leads audience members to often look to Guiteau for comfort amid the show's more dismal scenes. As such, it is all the more disturbing when Guiteau ceases to provide this comic relief, and we are left to face the reality of Guiteau as a killer without solace. His mantra of 'look on the bright side' becomes less assertive, exposing this optimism as a façade that conceals the anger and anguish beneath.

While Guiteau sings his own words, the Balladeer's verses contain intertextual allusions to the folk song, thereby capturing the received mythology about Guiteau:

> Come all you tender Christians
> Wherever you may be
> And likewise pay attention
> To these few lines from me
> (Kelly Harrell and the Virginia String Band, 1997)
>
> and
>
> BALLADEER.
>
> Come all ye Christians
> And learn from a sinner:
> Charlie Guiteau
> (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 65)

While narrated from different perspectives, both songs give the impression of being a morality tale, that 'all' Christians might heed the warning of

Guiteau's sinful misdeeds. In this way, both songs paint Guiteau as a character in a fable, further mythologising the man and distancing his memory from the reality of his acts. This 'Christian' perspective of each song (particularly in Sondheim's version) also alludes to Guiteau's religious fanaticism, disparaging his conviction that he acted on God's instruction by instead presenting Guiteau as a paradigmatic 'sinner'. In changing the first-person narration of the folk song to the Balladeer's omniscient third-person perspective, Sondheim distances this narrative from Guiteau's perspective to highlight the contrasting renderings of Guiteau within the historical mythology.

Just as with the lyrics, Sondheim's use of musical pastiche creates a patchwork of intertextual references, combining 'three popular song types – the parlor waltz, the cakewalk, and the hymn' (Lovensheimer, 2000: 14). The musical stylings of a hymn reinforce the ironic contrast between Guiteau's blasphemous beliefs and the morality-tale style found in the lyrics. Meanwhile, the use of different dance styles articulates Guiteau's erratic mania as he jumps between the upbeat cakewalk and lethargic waltz. The waltz is a recurring musical style throughout the show, while the cakewalk is unfamiliar and unusual, highlighting Guiteau's abnormal and eccentric character.

In summary, 'The Ballad of Guiteau' combines the narratives of Guiteau's own words, American folk song and Sondheim's original lyrics to create a musical and lyrical pastiche of the indiscernible man, Guiteau. This blend of styles and narratives explores Guiteau's mania, as well as illustrating the different narratives of perception of Guiteau as they blend together to portray one complex human being among the myriad of mythologies informing our understanding of the man.

22 November 1963 and the myths of America

The climax of the musical comes at Scene 16: Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas School Book Depository on the morning of 22 November 1963. It is logical that this scene provides the dramatic pinnacle of the show given its poignancy in recent history – especially for the original 1990 production of *Assassins*, the grief of Kennedy's assassination was within living memory for the majority of audiences. The dramatic intensity of this scene is heightened by the show's structure, since Oswald is the only character to

not appear in any previous scenes; as such, the audience are somewhat distracted by the whimsical display of seemingly larger-than-life characters. The audience are gradually drawn into the mythology of these assassins who seem more removed from present-day reality, until Oswald's reveal is a startling reminder of an assassin who made a devastating impact on the nation within their own lives. Accounts of the original production demonstrate how set design can intensify the dramatic interpretation of this historic event: as artistic director André Bishop recalled, 'when the Dallas Book Depository set was revealed' – the only completely detailed setting in a spare, abstract design' – it 'inevitably evoked gasps of surprise and occasionally horror' (1991: ix). This illustrates the ability of visual images to signify myths, and the profound power of this image of the Book Depository to encapsulate a public memory and evoke such reactions (see Figures 2 and 3).[4]

Figure 2: Exhibition space, the sixth-floor storeroom of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, Texas. The open window to the right shows where Oswald was allegedly perched when he fired at the President. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

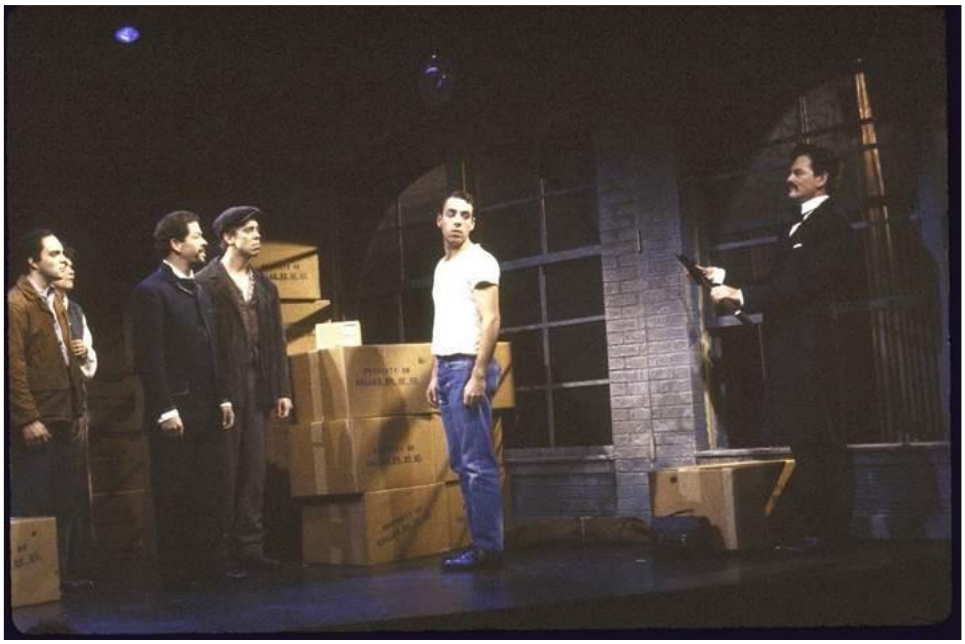


Figure 3: Scene 16 – A storeroom on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, from *Assassins'* 1990 production. Lee Harvey Oswald (portrayed by Jace Alexander) stands in the centre in his recognisable jeans and white T-shirt, while John Wilkes Booth (right, portrayed by Victor Garber) entices him with the rifle as the other assassins (left) look on. Photograph by Martha Swope, 1991, New York Public Library.

Scene 16 marks the culmination of the various mythologies presented throughout the show: not just those of various assassins, but indeed the cultural mythologies defining the American experience and national identity. One such myth is that of the neoliberal free market and capitalism, the ideologies of which have become synonymous with the American Dream of wealth and success (Churchwell, 2018: para. 8.11). Sondheim connects this with the American mythology of gun culture in the earlier 'Gun Song':

> CZOLGOSZ
>
> A gun kills many men before it's done,
> Hundreds,
> Long before you shoot the gun:
>
> Men in the mines
> And in the steel mills,
> Men at machines,
> Who died for what?
> (Sondheim and Weidman 1991a: 49)

Czolgosz's condemnation here of exploitative labour is informed by his experiences as a wage-labourer in brutal factory conditions (Sondheim and Weidman 1991a: 26–27). We might analyse this verse through the lens of commodity fetishism, as Sondheim captures the alienation of the modern production process that separates workers from one another and their 'finished product' through specialised labour, as with the miners, millworkers and machine operators (Lukács, 1971: 88). With commodity fetishism, the 'social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped onto the product of that labour' (Lukács, 1971: 86) so, in this case, the gun seems to hold the essence of these social relations between workers and the production process. By bringing together each stage of production into the narrative of one song, Sondheim demystifies the process of alienation, revealing the full picture of exploitation and inhumane working conditions that go into the making of a gun: an object so glorified in American mythology, yet simultaneously invoking contentious debate.

Indeed, 'The Gun Song' enters the debate around gun ownership in America, conveying the voices of four characters most entranced by the gun's fetish. To see these assassins, who have committed awful acts of violence, fawning over their guns is a terrifying portrayal of the dangers of mythologising guns. The musical style of this song as a barbershop quartet – another quintessential American form – shows that guns are a distinctly Americanised commodity fetish, and a marked aspect of the nation's mythological identity. Czolgosz's claim that 'a gun kills many men before it's done' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 49) is arguably a response to the cliché often invoked by advocates of the second amendment, such as the NRA: 'guns don't kill, people do' (Fletcher, 1994: 6). Thus the Marxist perspective of the production process depicted in this song subverts the argument that guns are 'not dangerous by themselves' but only when they are misused (Fletcher, 1944: 6), by showing that even before the commodity of the gun is finished, it leads to the deaths of miners and factory workers. For a gun owner with violent intentions, such as the assassins, these lives sacrificed in production adds to the fetishism of this commodity, as the gun seems to contain the power of the deaths it has already caused and will go on to inflict.

This exploration of commodity fetishism posits that one object – in this case, the gun – is formed by the interweaving relations of workers at each

stage of the production process.[5] As such, the gun as a weapon is produced by the lives sacrificed in its production. I argue that this notion presented in 'The Gun Song' lays the theoretical groundwork for the show's climax in Scene 16, as each of the assassins materialise in the Book Depository to convince Oswald to shoot President Kennedy. Just as the gun is the product of the lives that came before it was fully formed, so too, Sondheim and Weidman suggest, is the assassin produced by all the assassins who came before him:

> CZOLGOSZ. *(Indicating pre-Oswald Assassins)*
>
> You're going to bring us back.
>
> HINCKLEY. *(Indicating post-Oswald Assassins)*
>
> And make us possible.
> (1991a: 96)

With this pinnacle anachronistic scene, Sondheim and Weidman present a seemingly supernatural explanation for what *really* happened that day. Sondheim has stated 'the idea [was] that all these myths have somehow coalesced and have caused that last scene' (1991b: 00:20:38), reinforcing how this scene follows on from the themes of 'The Gun Song', in showing the Kennedy assassination and its mythology to be produced by many myths. Textual references to 'The Gun Song' emphasise the immense power the gun bestows upon the assassin – a key theme of assassin mythologies. As Booth tells Oswald, 'all you have to do is move your little finger' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 101). Booth likens the destructive power contained within the fetishised gun to 'Pandora's box', a statement that positions Oswald at a turning point in history (Sondheim and Weidman 1991a: 101).[6] Thus the presence of past and future assassins emphasises the monumental impact of this historical moment, both politically and culturally, as being the culmination of past mythologies and the genesis of future assassination attempts.[7]

The Kennedy assassination is still surrounded by intrigue, a matter only heightened by Oswald's murder three days later (Brotherton, 2015: 126).[8] With such historical events, it is somewhat inevitable that

conspiracy theories abound – a fact that *Assassins* alludes to as Booth encourages Oswald:

> BOOTH.
>
> Fifty years from now they'll still be arguing about the grassy knoll, the mafia, […] but this – right here, right now – this is the real conspiracy.
> (Sondheim and Weidman 1991a: 97)

The lack of satisfying answers about the Kennedy assassination – did Oswald truly act alone, and *why* did he do it – intensified public attention and doubts about the official story, leaving plenty of space for speculation. It is through these conspiracy theories that members of the public create a fiction for themselves to explain the unknowable aspects of this historical and national trauma. As psychologist Rob Brotherton informs us, conspiracy theories emerge from a cognitive bias where we seek to transform 'chaos into order' (2015: 11). I propose that conspiracy theories act in a similar way to mythologies, and are themselves integral to the mythology of the Kennedy assassination. Conspiracy theories allow an individual to search for answers in the overwhelming array of questions that remain about the Kennedy assassination, just as fictional and artistic interpretations of those events can allow creators and audiences a sense of catharsis from the uncertainty and disorder. Not only is the Kennedy assassination a popular subject for amateur sleuths and conspiracy theorists, but it is also the subject of frequent fictional adaptation.[9] All of these mythological reinventions serve to 'recreate public memory' (Schrader, 2017: 327) of an event that was so publicly traumatic. With Scene 16, Sondheim and Weidman present their own conspiracy theory as to what happened that day: although the appearance of the ghost of John Wilkes Booth to recruit Oswald is an impossible claim, the overarching suggestion that Lee Harvey Oswald is produced by a culmination of myths – both the myths of his fellow assassins, and of American ideals of independent freedoms and the right to pursue one's dreams – invents an explanation that might satisfy some of the many unanswered questions as to why Oswald took the action of killing the President.

Assassins explores the myths that define America's national identity from the perspective of mythical individuals considered adversaries to American

ideals, subverting patriotic ideas about America's heroes and villains. Mythology can reinforce patriotism by uniting people against the common enemy of 'what is opposed to [the nation]' (Barthes, 1972: 158) – as such, American national identity is defined in opposition to its mythologised villains. However, *Assassins* encourages the audience to consider that these great villains of American history were not necessarily opposed to American values, nor were they external from the American experience, but are a part of it. As Weidman has said, *Assassins* portrays an America 'whose most cherished national myths, at least as currently propagated, encourage us to believe that in America our dreams not only *can* come true, but *should* come true' (cited in Bishop, 1991: xi), thereby critiquing the individualistic ideals of the American Dream. Many of the assassins are portrayed to be disillusioned by the American Dream, yet retaining the conviction that, as Americans, they have the 'right' to pursue their 'dreams' (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 13). As such, while rallying against these mythologised antagonists might reinforce American patriotism, *Assassins* shows that the assassins were not 'outside [of] the American experience' (Sondheim *et al.*, 1991b: 00:04:55) but themselves participants in these American myths. This shatters the illusion that America can be defined in opposition to the assassins, revealing instead how the very beliefs many Americans hold dear – of the American Dream, of individual freedoms, of the right to own a gun – might just be ideologies that enabled these assassins. This idea is captured by the moment in Scene 16 when a trio of American assassins not featured in the show – Arthur Bremer, Sirhan Sirhan and James Earl Ray – call out to Oswald from *'somewhere in the house'* (Sondheim and Weidman, 1991a: 99 [stage direction]). By placing these extra assassins among the audience, a sinister message is conveyed that these assassins are not as different from the ordinary American as mythology would have us believe, and that they could even be lurking among us. Following the attack on the US capitol in January 2021, it is evident that acts of domestic terrorism (particularly when committed by white Americans) can be perceived as wholly patriotic; a disturbing paradox that truly reveals the underlying violence in these myths of American patriotic ideology.

Conclusion

The mythology of assassinations is a popular subject in American culture due to the frequent attempts to kill the US President throughout history,

which invoke public outrage and uncertainty. The difficulty in comprehending these historical acts of violence leads to the reinvention of history through both conspiracy theories and artistic adaptations, ultimately creating a historical mythology. With *Assassins*, Sondheim and Weidman use drama and music to explore the received wisdom of popular American mythologies and mythological figures. *Assassins* examines the identity of America as a nation by interrogating the mythologies that define it, particularly the historical mythologies that position the assassins as America's enemies. These figures are perceived to be in opposition to American ideals, thus hatred of them reinforces the myths of the American Dream and patriotism. By creating a more complex, demythologised characterisation of each assassin, we are allowed a greater understanding of their motives; this ultimately challenges the idea that these people acted in opposition to American ideals, suggesting instead that American mythologies such as individual freedoms and gun culture in part produced these assassins. With the role of the Balladeer and the techniques of intertextuality and musical pastiche, a dialogue is created between the complex versions of the assassins and the received wisdom of American history, or the dominant mythology through which America's history is purported as a unified story of American patriotism. Thus Sondheim and Weidman craft an incredibly nuanced exploration of mythology, utilising a wide array of intertextual references to explore the contrasting narratives that form the mythologies of American history and culture. By reinventing their own version of this mythology, Sondheim and Weidman challenge the audience to become aware of our own received biases and interrogate the national and historical mythologies defining the society in which we live.

List of illustrations

Figure 1: 'A Model Office-Seeker. "I am a Lawyer, a Theologian and a Politician!" – Charles J. Guiteau', *Puck*, 13 July 1881. Image in the public domain, available through the Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92508892/, accessed 30 March 2021.

Figure 2: 'Exhibition space, the sixth-floor storeroom of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, Texas'. Image in the public domain, Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/item/2014632037/, accessed 10 April 2021.

Figure 3: Scene 16 of the Playwrights Horizons production of *Assassins*, featuring actors (L-R) Eddie Korbich, Debra Monk, Jonathan Hadary, Terrence Mann, Jace Alexander & Victor Garber. (New York, 1991). Photo by Martha Swope ©The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Endnotes

[1] The term 'historical mythology' is used here to recognise that the received wisdom of history presents a biased, dominant narrative.

[2] The public hatred of the assassins as America's enemies or villains is seen in the crimes of passion of Jack Ruby, who murdered Lee Harvey Oswald, and John A. Mason and William Jones, attempted assassins of Charles Guiteau. Jones in particular received huge public support, and both he and Mason were pardoned of their crimes, highlighting their differential treatment from that of Guiteau. See Ayton (2017: 107–08).

[3] I use scare-quotes when referring to the assassins as 'madmen', or similar synonyms, to note that these are outdated, medically imprecise terms that carry ableist connotations – however, when looking at the historical context through which each assassin lived, many were perceived as 'insane', largely due to the historical misunderstanding of psychopathology.

[4] It is arguably for this same reason that the Texas Book Depository has preserved the sixth-floor window as a museum exhibit, recreating how it looked on that day (JFK.org, n.d.).

[5] Raymond Knapp similarly writes that the song demonstrates 'how one gun connects backward to the many lives it consumes in its manufacturing, and forward to the "just one more" it might consume' (Knapp, 2005: 169). Indeed, the idea here of consumption connects powerfully to the song's Marxist themes of commodification and exploitation of workers. Yet I wish to suggest the song goes further than connecting the gun to the lives it

takes, but indeed that the gun contains and is produced by these social relations.

[6] 'Pandora's Box' may also be an allusion to Samuel Byck's failed attempt to assassinate Richard Nixon. Byck named his plan – to hijack a commercial airliner and crash it into the White House, in order to kill President Nixon – 'Operation Pandora's Box'. See Clarke (2012: 131–33).

[7] The decision by some productions of *Assassins* to cast one actor as both the Balladeer and Oswald adds further significance to this interpretation. (Such productions include the 2004 Broadway revival directed by Joe Mantello, and the 2021 Classic Stage Company production directed by John Doyle). The optimistic Balladeer, having been chased off the stage by the embittered assassins in 'Another National Anthem', reappears as Lee Harvey Oswald, his optimism shattering to disillusion after exposure to the assassins' cynicism. This casting emphasises the notion of mythology being produced and, simultaneously, the assassin being produced by this mythology. The Balladeer as mythologist observes and documents American mythologies, thereby constructing and then becoming Lee Harvey Oswald: the recipient of these myths.

[8] Both because Oswald's murder by Ruby may give the appearance of a conspirator being silenced by a co-conspirator, and because his death prevented a thorough investigation and trial. With Oswald dead, we will never hear his testimony or come to understand his motivations, preventing closure for all who were emotionally affected by the assassination.

[9] The assassination of President Kennedy is such a popular subject for fictional adaptation that there is even a sub-genre of science fiction following the use of time travel to prevent Kennedy's death. For examples, see Britt (2017); Dyke (2000); Green (1990); Hallemann (2020). On the rise of literature of conspiracy and paranoia following Kennedy's assassination, see Melley (2020).

References

Ayton, M. (2017), *Plotting to Kill the President: Assassination attempts from Washington to Hoover,* Dulles: Potomac Books

Barthes, R. (1972), *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd (originally published by Editions du Seuil in 1957)

Bishop, A. (1991), 'Preface', in Sondheim, S. and J. Weidman, *Assassins*, New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc, pp. vii–xi

Britt, R. (2017), '6 Science fiction explanations for JFK's assassination', *Inverse.com*, 26 October 2017, https://www.inverse.com/article/37792-jfk-assassination-scifi-conspiracy-theories-quantum-leap-xfiles, accessed 3 April 2021

Brotherton, R. (2015), *Suspicious Minds: Why We believe conspiracy theories*, New York: Bloomsbury

Buckingham, S. (2010), 'Call in the women', *Nature*, 468, 502

Churchwell, S. (2018), *Behold, America: A history of America First and the American Dream*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Clarke, J. W. (2012), *Defining Danger: American assassins and the new domestic terrorists*, New York: Routledge

Fletcher, C. D. (1994), *Guns Don't Kill, People Do: The NRA's case against gun control,* University of Canterbury, http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/3980, accessed 2 April 2021

Guiteau, C. J. (1882), *The Truth, and The Removal*, https://archive.org/details/truthremoval00guit, accessed 24 June 2021

Hallemann, C. (2020), 'Why is science fiction so obsessed with the assassination of John F. Kennedy?', *Town & Country*, 9 August 2020, https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a33513567/jfk-kennedy-assassination-time-travel-movies-shows/, accessed 3 April 2021

Hellmann, J. (1997), *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK*, New York: Columbia University Press

JFK.org (n.d.), 'History of the Texas School Book Depository Building', *The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza*, https://www.jfk.org/the-

assassination/history-of-the-texas-school-book-depository/, accessed 5 April 2021

Kelly Harrell and the Virginia String Band (1997), 'Charles Guiteau', in Smith, H. (ed.), *Anthology of American Folk Music* [CD], United States: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Knapp, R. (2005), *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity,* Princeton: Princeton University Press

Lovensheimer, J. (2000), 'Unifying the plotless musical: Sondheim's *Assassins*', *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter*, 29 (2), 5,14

Lukács, G. (1971), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. R. Livingstone, London: The Merlin Press Ltd (originally published as *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein – Studien über marxistische Dialektik* by Malik-Verlag in 1923)

Melley, T. (2020), 'Conspiracy in American narrative', in Butter, M. and P. Knight (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, London: Routledge, Chapter 4.4

Rosenberg, C. E. (1968), *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and law in the gilded age*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Running Against Time (1990), Directed by B. S. Green, [Television Movie], United States: MCA Television Entertainment

Schrader, V. L. (2017), '"Another national anthem": public memory, Burkean identification, and the musical *Assassins*', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 33 (4), 320–32, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X1700046X, accessed 22 March 2021

Sondheim, S. and J. Weidman (1991a), *Assassins*, [Libretto], New York: Theatre Communications Inc

Sondheim, S., J. Weidman and L. Sherman (1991b), *Assassins: A conversation piece*, Video conversationpiece™, Directed by R. Englander, New York: Conover Production Services

Sondheim, S. (2011), *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected lyrics (1981–2011) with attendant comments, amplifications, dogmas, harangues, digressions, anecdotes and miscellany*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Timequest (2000), Directed by R. Dyke, [Film], United States: Ardustry

Glossary

Cakewalk: a dance style originating in African American communities in the mid-19th century

Pastiche:an artistic work which imitates the style of another work, genre or period

Ternary form: a musical form characterised by an opening "A" section, followed by a contrasting "B" section, before returning to the "A" section

---

To cite this paper please use the following details: Scheiby, K. (2022), 'The Relationship Between History and Mythology in Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins*', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/879. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.879, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Examining Patroclus' role in Homer's *The Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

J. S. Campion, University of Warwick

Abstract

This paper argues that Patroclus plays a significant part in developing themes of war and nuancing the presentation of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* and works that it inspired – namely William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1604) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). Although much analysis of these texts focuses on Achilles, Patroclus' death is central to both themes and plot in each, and his changing characterisation and role within each narrative heavily impact the exploration of war and heroes. His presence nuances the characterisation of Achilles in each text, particularly when we adopt queer readings, and his death enables poignant explorations of grief and revenge. This paper will therefore reinvestigate these aspects of Patroclus' importance in the *Iliad,* and examine the way in which his character has been received and utilised in a selection of more modern works.

Keywords: Patroclus' importance in the *Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus, queerness in the *Iliad*, Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Patroclus' death

Introduction

Patroclus is not quite so well-known as many other figures in the *Iliad,* nor is his name as widely recognised as that of Achilles. Despite this, his narrative role and characterisation have a large bearing on Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad* – a work that inspired William Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida* (1604) and Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011). In each text, Patroclus enables a deeper exploration of the themes of war and grief, and significantly nuances the presentation of Achilles. This paper will reinvestigate these notable aspects of Patroclus' involvement in the epic, and the way the two more modern works have utilised his character to explore both war and the character of Achilles in differing, but equally significant, ways. I will analyse each text in

chronological order and trace the development of Patroclus' characterisation and role: from a powerful soldier in the *Iliad* to Achilles' sidekick in *Troilus and Cressida* to a healer figure and Achilles' lover in *The Song of Achilles.*

While I will discuss Patroclus' impact on the presentation of war and loss within each text in his own right, a great deal of my analysis will nonetheless remain focused on Patroclus' relationship with Achilles; the two are tied together closely by personal and military bonds, and Patroclus is part of what makes Achilles' grief so tangible, even to an audience reading the *Iliad* over 2700 years after its composition.

The *Iliad* was composed in a tradition that had previously been shaped by centuries of oral storytelling (Nagy, 2015: 59), and Margalit Finkelberg argues that it was a 'foundational text' (2019: 353) in Ancient Greek society. The *Iliad* provides rich source material for deeply compelling retellings that can speak to more modern audiences, as demonstrated by Shakespeare and Miller's works, which are culturally significant in their own right.

Given that the three central texts of this paper consist of an epic poem likely composed in the eighth century bc (Burgess, 2015: 51), a Renaissance play first performed in 1604 and a contemporary novel published in 2011, I will be using a range of narratological tools to analyse each one appropriately. To minimise the effects of anachronisms, I will examine each text alongside research into the time period in which it was written, as well as using secondary sources analysing the original text of the *Iliad*. Finally, I will use Latinised names throughout the paper (i.e. Achilles rather than Achilleus and Patroclus rather than Patroklos), although when directly quoting from Martin Hammond's translation of the *Iliad,* I will keep his spelling of names.

Best of the Myrmidons: Patroclus in the Iliad

Amid the heroes of the *Iliad,* Patroclus is hardly the most well-known, but he is nonetheless largely the reason that Achilles' grief and desire for vengeance are so compelling and central to the epic. His presence in the narrative also provides an illuminating contrast to the often cruel and arrogant figure of Achilles, thus further enabling the text's exploration of

war. While Homer's society celebrated militaristic prowess and glory in battle, Homer nonetheless expresses sympathy for the plight of soldiers. The epic engages with human suffering, and presents war with nuance alongside themes of vulnerability, loss and revenge, exploring each of these through Patroclus.

Patroclus' thematic and narrative significance becomes particularly apparent through his death. He saves the Argive army and progresses the narrative of the epic, first when his appearance in battle (following his successful appeal to Achilles) drives the Trojans away from the Argive camp, despite this leading to his own death, and then, more importantly, when his death is the only event capable of spurring Achilles into fighting in later Books. The importance of Patroclus' death is highlighted by Homer's use of apostrophe, a technique used infrequently throughout the *Iliad* in moments of gravity, such as the narrator's warning in Book 16 that 'Patroklos, the ending of your life was revealed' (Homer 1987: 16.787).[1] This metalepsis creates a tone of pity for Patroclus, particularly as it is used so disproportionately towards Patroclus when compared to other characters. Patroclus is apostrophised to a total of eight times, all in Book 16, making him the most frequent recipient of Homer's apostrophes (Allen-Hornblower, 2016: 46). Through this, Homer creates a scene in which 'the real world recedes as the past becomes present' in the audience's minds (Strauss Clay, 2011: 26). This temporal blurring conveys Patroclus' death as inescapable, thus imbuing his downfall with a sense of inevitability and gravitas.

But the impact of his death stretches far beyond Book 16, acting as the central point in a chain of revenge. Patroclus' death mirrors that of Sarpedon, whom he kills earlier in Book 16, and is echoed by the death of Hector, killed by Achilles in Book 22 in an act of revenge for Patroclus. Allen-Hornblower positions Sarpedon's death as 'significant largely because it establishes patterns of theme and diction and a template for the two other great heroes' deaths to come: the death of Patroclus (his killer) and then that of Patroclus's killer, Hector' (2016: 35). Indeed, repetition is a common feature of epic oral poetry, as it acted as a memory aid for poets recounting the epic, although Homer frequently uses practical techniques such as repetition to develop and create skilled literary impacts (Allen-Hornblower, 2016: 22). This is especially true of the many parallels between Sarpedon, Patroclus and Hector. Each of their deaths has been

prophesied throughout the text, while their downfalls are all depicted using lion imagery, and framed with Zeus considering saving each of them before ultimately leaving them to their demise. All three characters are treated with sympathy during their deaths, which encapsulates the *Iliad's* nuanced portrayal of war as a tragic occurrence in which there is no clear-cut dichotomy between good and evil, but which incurs suffering on both sides. The cyclical representation of these three characters' deaths also embodies the repetitive nature of revenge, and Patroclus' centrality in this cycle is a testament to his narrative significance in exploring this theme of vengeance.

Having discussed the significance of Patroclus as an individual, I will highlight the ways in which his characterisation complements and contrasts Achilles, thus making the latter a more nuanced and compelling character. Jonathan Shay observes that 'the *Iliad* is the tragedy of Achilles' noble character brought to ruin' (2003: 31), and nowhere is this made more poignant and vivid than when Achilles' downfall into arrogant pride is compared with Patroclus' gentleness and role as a healer. Achilles and Patroclus are antithetical in nature, and Hammond, who translated the *Iliad,* notes that 'the Greek epithet meaning "kind" attaches to Patroklos alone in the *Iliad'* (Hammond, 1987: xxxvii). This is significant given that most heroes' Homeric epithets, such as 'swift-footed godlike Achilleus' (Homer, 1987: 2.688) or 'bronze-armoured Hektor' (Homer, 1987: 5.699), connote military prowess or abilities. The unconventional focus on Patroclus' kindness therefore sets him apart from other heroes such as Achilles. The framing of these heroes as antithetical to each other makes the 'tragedy of Achilles' noble character brought to ruin' (Shay, 2003: 31) even clearer through contrast, thus situating Patroclus as a significant figure when characterising Achilles.

To continue discussing the significance of Patroclus on Achilles' characterisation, I will argue that a queer interpretation of their relationship magnifies Homer's themes of grief. I am using 'queer' to connote a same-sex attraction and partnership rather than using it to invoke modern queer theory, which 'push[es] beyond the question of identity itself' (McCann and Monaghan, 2019: 4) and has 'situated itself as challenging normativity' (McCann and Monaghan, 2019: 11). Neither of these definitions apply to same-sex attraction in Ancient Greece, which

had a place within society and was not considered anti-normative (Morales and Mariscal, 2003: 293).

I do not mean to suggest that Achilles' grief would be made any lesser by interpreting their relationship as a non-romantic friendship. Jonathan Shay argues that a romantic reading invalidates the emotional attachment formed between friends in war and frames powerful friendship as inferior to romantic or sexual attraction (2003: 40), which is certainly not my intention. Achilles' grief is overwhelmingly powerful no matter its nature, although there is suitable evidence in the epic to argue that the pair are romantically or sexually involved. Although scholars have been debating the exact nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship for thousands of years, academics have observed that, in Ancient Greek texts written after the *Iliad's* composition, generally 'the view that they were lovers prevailed' (Morales and Mariscal, 2003, vol. 53: 293). Although Homer does not explicitly refer to the two as lovers, '[a]ccording to Aeschines, Homer was silent […] about the erotic nature of the connection between Achilles and Patroclus, because he could take for granted that the erotic undertones would have been perfectly intelligible to his audience' (Fantuzzi, 2021: 188).

Interpreting the pair as lovers using this evidence and context can therefore imbue their dynamic with more complexity and establish a sense of loss for Achilles' lover as well as loss for a friend, counsellor and trusted second in command. In many eras and regional areas throughout Ancient Greek history, societies fostered an entirely different understanding of homosexuality; in same-sex relationships between men, it was expected that one would be the 'lover (*erastês*) [and one would be] the beloved (*erômenos*)' (Morales and Mariscal, 2003: 293). Aeschylus presented Achilles as the *erastês*, or lover, in their relationship, which would magnify his sense of authority as Patroclus' commander (Fantuzzi, 2021: 190). However, Plato's argument, presented by the fictionalised figure of Phaedrus in *Symposium,* is that Achilles was the *erômenos,* or beloved, and Patroclus the *erastês*, or lover (Plato, 1925: 107). Although it is worth considering that both writers were adapting the myth for their own literary or philosophical ends, I find Plato's presentation to be the more convincing and grounded in evidence from the *Iliad*, as Patroclus is 'the older' of the two (Homer, 1987: 11.786), whose 'proper task is to give [Achilles] words of wisdom and advise him and guide him' (11.787–788), as

the character Nestor observes. In light of this, a queer reading of the characters' intimacy and love adds another dimension of loss to Achilles' grief, as it positions him as having lost not only his closest friend and ally but also his romantic and sexual partner. If we take Patroclus to be the *erastês,* or lover, then Achilles has lost the man whose role includes being Achilles' guide and source of reason and emotional grounding, which amplifies the sense of loss.

One can also draw parallels between Achilles and Patroclus and different romantic relationships within the epic, thus deepening the epic's portrayal of love and grief. The most significant of these is the parallel between Achilles as he mourns for Patroclus, and Andromache as she mourns for Hector, which adds to the poignancy of the similarities between Hector and Patroclus' deaths. This once again elevates the audience's sympathies for the victims of war, and situates Patroclus as a pivotal character in Homer's exploration of loss. Allen-Hornblower writes of Andromache that 'The phraseology used to describe her reaction suggests that, poetically and emotionally speaking, she too has died; that is, that Hector's death amounts to her own' (2016: 41). Andromache's collapse, wherein 'the spirit breathed out of her' (Homer, 1987: 22.467), mirrors Achilles' reaction to learning of Patroclus' death; he lies in the dust, 'huge and hugely fallen' (18.26). This phrase is used elsewhere in the epic to describe characters' deaths, such as that of Kebriones, felled by Patroclus in Book 16 (16.776). By depicting characters' mourning as a form of death, Homer illustrates the overwhelming sense of grief faced by both characters. Achilles' reaction to Patroclus' death makes him significantly more humanised and compelling; 'He's at his most moving when he's at his most human, prostrate, weeping, knowing he's done the wrong thing' (Jordison, 2016). Through the parallels between Achilles and Andromache, Homer prompts our sympathies for the lovers or companions of both Greek and Trojan soldiers, conveying the horrors faced not only by the fallen but also by those who are left to grieve them. Patroclus, as the object of Achilles' grief, is therefore a pivotal character in conveying this sense of loss.

Through Patroclus, Achilles' grief becomes painfully tangible, revealing a more human, vulnerable and nuanced individual who is 'huge and hugely fallen' (Homer, 1987: 18.26). Achilles' trauma and sense of loss surrounding Patroclus encapsulate Homer's presentation of heroes as flawed soldiers whose struggles are poignant and deserving of sympathy.

As an individual, Patroclus is also central to Homer's exploration of war through themes of revenge, vulnerability and helplessness against fate, particularly at the moment of his death. Therefore, while Patroclus remains in the shadow of Achilles, he should be acknowledged as a pivotal figure in the *Iliad* whose presence makes Achilles such a compellingly complicated and vulnerable character, and whose struggles encapsulate Homer's portrayal of war.

Achilles' brach: Patroclus in Troilus and Cressida

By the time William Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida,* which was first performed in 1604, the events of the *Iliad* had been retold by many different authors. Renaissance England, much like Ancient Greece with its frequently warring city states, was no stranger to the idea of warfare due to the multiple European and Anglo-Spanish wars, and 'early modern cultural imagination and practices [...] were deeply rooted in all things military' (Daems and Nelson, 2019: 14). Although the Renaissance play and Homeric epics both rely on oral performance, Shakespeare's work does not engage with characters' interiority so much as Homer's epic does; nor does it have the omniscience of an external narrator. Patroclus' significance in *Troilus and Cressida* is not quite so noteworthy as it is in the *Iliad,* partially because his role has little stage time. However, his narrative role also continues to mobilise Achilles and further the plot, while the narrative and thematic implications of his death situate him as an important character despite his apparent insignificance. A queer reading of his relationship with Achilles also nuances both characters.

Due to his more limited role within the military and events of the war, Patroclus' bearing on the characterisation of Achilles is considerably more subtle in *Troilus and Cressida* than in the *Iliad.* In Shakespeare's play, he does not fulfil a military role as a healer or soldier, nor does he display the same selflessness as in Miller or Homer's versions of Patroclus. Instead, he remains idle by Achilles' side and is labelled as 'Achilles' brach' (Shakespeare, 2015: 2.1.111)[2] by Thersites, a derogatory term meaning fawning hanger-on or bitch hound, and which was changed to 'bitch' in Gregory Doran's 2018 RSC production (00.40.30–00.40.32). Indeed, Patroclus seems to answer to Achilles' every whim and appears to be little more than his obedient subordinate. However, Patroclus' role as Achilles' faithful companion has a subtle – but significant – bearing on the power

dynamics within the Greek army. J. S. Garrison argues that ‘the fact that the king must speak with Achilles through Patroclus arguably shifts power to the pair of friends’ (2014: 30). Indeed, Patroclus loyally recounts Achilles’ messages verbatim, whereas Ulysses rephrases Agamemnon’s messages when relaying them. Alternatively, Patroclus’ relatively unseen significance as a negotiator could be interpreted as amplifying Achilles’ sense of dishonour in avoiding warfare, as he appears to hide behind Patroclus rather than facing his fellow commanders in person. Under this interpretation, Patroclus becomes the barrier that separates Achilles from the direct appeals which beg him to fight, thus enabling Achilles’ neglection of his military role and contributing to the play’s theme of deromanticising heroes. Whichever interpretation one takes, Patroclus’ role, although subtle, influences Achilles’ place within the power dynamics within the Greek army.

Patroclus’ death is afforded significantly less narrative focus in *Troilus and Cressida* than in the *Iliad*, although it still causes Achilles’ return to war and highlights the play’s cynical outlook on heroism. In line with the events of the *Iliad,* Patroclus’ death is what motivates Achilles to join the fighting; Ulysses reports that ‘Patroclus’ wounds have roused [Achilles’] drowsy blood’ (Shakespeare, 2015: 5.5.32). However, Patroclus’ death occurs offstage; we only see the aftermath as Nestor enters ‘with soldiers bearing Patroclus’ body’ (5.5.16). The brevity of this moment contrasts the emotional attention afforded to Patroclus’ downfall in the *Iliad,* and contributes to Shakespeare’s presentation of war without glory, heroism or meaning. Furthermore, Patroclus is treated as little more than a tool to bring Achilles into the fight; no soldier besides Achilles mourns him, and Ulysses simply commands his soldiers to ‘bear Patroclus’ body to Achilles’ (5.5.17). The impersonal treatment of Patroclus’ death amplifies Shakespeare’s presentation of the Greek heroes as cruel individuals. Ulysses’ order to take Patroclus’ body to Achilles also highlights the importance of Patroclus’ death: the other Greeks are fully aware that his downfall will spur Achilles into action. This demonstrates Patroclus’ significance for Achilles and the war in death, which contrasts with the little attention he himself is paid in life.

Achilles’ initial reaction to Patroclus’ death also occurs offstage; the audience is told second-hand that ‘Great Achilles / Is arming, weeping, cursing, vowing vengeance’ (5.5.30–31). By having this moment reported

through Ulysses' dialogue rather than shown directly to the audience, Shakespeare hides a moment of grief that could have humanised the arrogant and unheroic figure of Achilles. Furthermore, 'weeping' and 'cursing' are both placed between 'arming' and 'vowing vengeance' (5.5.30–31), which places the emphasis of the dialogue on Achilles' violence rather than his grief. When Achilles next appears onstage, he is battle-ready, portrayed only in his rage as he declares that Hector will 'Know what it is to meet Achilles angry' (5.5.48). By exploring Achilles' bloodthirsty anger rather than his loss and vulnerability, Shakespeare builds into his subversion of heroic ideals within the play.

The anti-climactic nature of Patroclus' death and Achilles' grief culminates with Achilles' eventual retreat against Hector, and eventually the shockingly unheroic scene in which Achilles has his men surround an unarmoured Hector and kill him. Both of these scenes demonstrate Achilles' lack of heroism, particularly as he does not even kill Hector himself; he commands his Myrmidons to 'Strike, fellows, strike!' (5.9.10) rather than fighting against Hector in an equal match. Furthermore, in Hector's moment of death, Achilles does not mention Patroclus, which subverts the audience's expectations for a narrative of revenge. Patroclus' absence feels painfully present within this moment; given that Achilles previously named Patroclus as his reason for fighting, it seems strange that a dialogue-focused form of text should not even have Achilles mention Patroclus as his Myrmidons kill Hector at his command. Compared to Achilles' mighty rage in the *Iliad,* this moment of cowardice (made all the more underwhelming by the absence of Patroclus' name) serves to characterise Achilles as an unheroic figure, which builds into the play's presentation of heroes as deeply flawed individuals.

A queer reading of *Troilus and Cressida* also adds depth to Achilles and Patroclus' characterisation, and centralises Patroclus in Achilles' decision to abstain from fighting. In the *Iliad,* Agamemnon's capturing of Briseis was Achilles' original reason for abstaining from battle*,* whereas Shakespeare does not include her among the cast of characters, or even mention her in dialogue*.* Without her, Achilles no longer has a reason to remove himself from battle, thus making him a more two-dimensional character due to his lack of motivations. However, a queer interpretation of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship can nuance Achilles by ascribing motivation to him, largely through suggesting that

his desire and affection for Patroclus is behind his refusal to fight. Although not explicit, there is a great deal of textual evidence in Shakespeare's play to imply a homoerotic relationship between the pair. Indeed, Alan Sinfield argues that, due to the characters' intimacy and dynamic together, 'Nowadays, everyone can see a homosexual couple in Achilles and Patroclus' relationship' (2011: 379). Heather James, referring to the original play, suggests that Achilles 'withdraws from war officially for reasons of honour but privately to negotiate with the enemy for a girl while he enjoys continued dalliance with his ingle [an early modern slang term for a young, male lover], the "boy" Patroclus' (2007: 14). Indeed, other Greeks such as Ulysses mock Achilles for lounging around with Patroclus in his tent. Meanwhile, Patroclus tells Achilles he is concerned that the other Greeks think 'my little stomach to the war, / And your great love to me, restrains you thus' (Shakespeare, 2015: 3.3.222–223). If we take this to be the reason why Achilles abstains from fighting, a queer interpretation therefore ascribes a motivation to Achilles that, while not making him a *noble* figure, does serve to make him more nuanced through suggesting reasoning to his refusal to fight. Furthermore, queerness in the seventeenth century was associated with stereotypical femininity and sinfulness (Garrison, 2014: 35), so a queer interpretation would have developed both characters as unheroic figures.

However, when the pair are framed as lovers in modern adaptations, the connotations of same-sex attraction become less degrading. Gregory Doran's 2018 RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida* makes Achilles and Patroclus' relationship explicitly romantic and sexual, and uses this queerness to humanise the pair. When Patroclus shares his concerns about rumours that he 'stand[s] condemned' for Achilles' inaction (Shakespeare, 2015: 3.3.221), Achilles holds Patroclus and kisses him in a display of reassurance (Doran, 2018: 1.33.35–54). This moment of affection makes the pair seem more tender and vulnerable, leading critics such as Louis Train to feel that 'James Cooney as Patroclus, the lover of Achilles, is charming and touchingly real; his relationship is the play's true romance, his death, the true tragedy' (Train, 2018). This moment demonstrates the ability of modern adaptations to add meaning within different social contexts, and builds upon the importance of Patroclus as the implied lover of Achilles, developing a layer of the narrative in which his presence causes the audience to sympathise with him and Achilles.

Overall, Patroclus' role in *Troilus and Cressida* seems minor and unimportant at surface-level. However, if one examines the play more closely, it becomes clear that Patroclus plays an important role in characterising Achilles and developing the play's presentation of Homeric heroes as deromanticised figures.

A gentle healer: Patroclus in The Song of Achilles

Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles,* published in 2011, is a text told from the first-person perspective of Patroclus, and which spans Patroclus and Achilles' whole lives rather than just a short period of the Trojan war. Although it is primarily based on the *Iliad,* Miller acknowledges drawing inspiration from *Troilus and Cressida* (Miller, 2012), and she portrays Achilles and Patroclus' relationship as explicitly romantic and sexual. Patroclus' role, due to his centrality as the novel's narrator, is more prominent and significant in this novel than he is in Homer or Shakespeare's works, particularly in reflecting the novel's anti-war themes and messages.

The Song of Achilles takes a heavily anti-war stance in which Patroclus' role is central, as he is positioned as a healer who feels sickened by battle and helps captured Trojan women such as Briseis. Patroclus encourages Achilles to take Briseis as a war prize to protect her from other men; neither he or Achilles sleep with her, and he attends to her wounds, 'dress[ing] the wound, and [tying] it closed with bandages' (2011: 216). As Jonathan Shay argues, 'Homer minimised to the point of falsification […] the suffering of the wounded, and the suffering of civilians, particularly women' (2003: 121). In contrast, by having Patroclus demonstrate care for female war slaves, Miller imbues the women with a sense of humanity and uses Patroclus as a voice through which to critique war. As well as positioning Patroclus as a narrator who rallies against the misogyny of Ancient Greek war practices, Miller also draws upon Shakespeare's presentation of Achilles and Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*. She interprets it as 'a story of two men in love, one who is the world's best warrior, and one who has little stomach for it' (Miller, 2011). Indeed, in *The Song of Achilles,* 'Miller's Patroclus does what he cannot do in Homer. He dislikes fighting and has no talent for it' (Miller and Minkowich, 2012), a dislike and lack of talent which would have alienated a more militaristic Homeric audience from him. In contrast, we see Miller's

Patroclus demonstrate disgust at Achilles' transformation from an honest boy into a soldier; Patroclus longs to 'release him from [bloody images], and make him Achilles again' (Miller, 2011: 212). Patroclus' separation of Achilles as a soldier from the Achilles as he used to be highlights his despair at the ruinations of war.

Unlike Homer's *Iliad* or Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida,* Miller's novel makes the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles explicitly queer. *The Song of Achilles* was published in America in 2011, at which point homosexuality was no longer criminalised in the USA. However, it was (and still is) criminalised across much of the world, and homosexuality is globally surrounded by negative stereotypes and persecution. Gay marriage was only legalised across the USA in 2015 ('US Supreme Court rules gay marriage is legal nationwide'; Train, 2015), and Miller wrote hoping 'to combat the homophobia that [she sees] too often' (Miller, 2019).

Although Miller removes Patroclus' status as a powerful and distinguished soldier, she maintains his position as a respected healer, a position through which she explores the horrors of war. Some readers argue that removing Patroclus' fighting prowess and magnifying his nurturing role as a healer makes the novel problematic in that it aligns him with stereotypical femininity and thus applies gender roles to his relationship with Achilles. This is often a problem with contemporary representations of queerness; some authors seek to map traditional heterosexuality onto queer relationships, making one character more masculine and the other more feminine. Indeed, Miller has been critiqued by some readers who believe that 'Achilles and Patroclus are assigned very stereotypical tropes in their relationship' (Watson, 2021). Although nurturing characteristics have often been linked to femininity, it is reductive to suggest that a healing role might inherently effeminise a character, particularly given that medicine was a male-dominated field in Ancient Greece.

Furthermore, rather than feminising and trivialising his role in this retelling, Miller's focus on Patroclus' role as a healer positions him as an important voice seeking to redress the violence of war. She has written that she wanted to focus on Patroclus as an ordinary person who 'has more power than he thinks' (Miller, 2019) when offering help to others, and sought to explore the question: 'What does it mean to try to be an ethical person in a violent world?' (2019). Her investigation of this topic is evident

through Patroclus' comment that he does 'not stop to think' before going to heal his comrades (Miller, 2011: 303), which demonstrates instinctive heroism. Although Miller's version of Patroclus is not a soldier, he is nonetheless labelled by Briseis as the 'best of the Myrmidons' (2011: 298) for his bravery and kindness, which demonstrates to a contemporary audience that queerness is not anti-heroic. Furthermore, it shifts traditional ideas of heroism; traditional heroes are often presented as figures with military prowess (such as Achilles), although Miller treats Achilles' eagerness to fight with a sense of alienation and disgust, as mentioned before. By elevating the heroism of a gentler healer figure, Miller celebrates the position of a character who seeks to help others rather than contribute to violence in war. Therefore, by presenting Patroclus as a queer healer, she uses his character to establish a message of queer empowerment while critiquing brutality in war.

Miller further uses the wider narrative scope of the novel to explore more facets of Achilles' and Patroclus' characters. Patroclus acts as a first-person chronicler for both of their lives, so the reader witnesses Achilles through Patroclus' unreliable narration of his adolescent beauty, honesty and vulnerability. For example, Patroclus observes that Achilles 'said what he meant; he was puzzled if you did not' (Miller, 2011: 41). The novel's inclusion of this childhood innocence humanises Achilles through Patroclus' adoring narration. By following his arc from childhood, the novel makes Achilles' later presentation as a nearly invincible soldier all the more brutal and alienating in comparison, thus developing Miller's anti-war critiques through Patroclus' depiction of Achilles (as previously discussed). As well as exploring Achilles' childish honesty, the narrative scope covers his death, an event not included in the *Iliad,* and which Miller subverts by having Paris shoot Achilles' chest rather than his heel. Here, Patroclus' ghost watches as Achilles feels Paris' arrow 'worming its way past the interlacing fingers of his ribs. […] Achilles smiles as his face strikes the earth' (2011: 337). The use of bodily and poetic imagery to describe Achilles' ribs invokes a sense of intimacy that highlights Patroclus' enduring love for Achilles. Meanwhile, Achilles' dying smile conjures the memory of his childhood and adolescent vulnerabilities, which contrasts his role and brutality as a soldier and therefore highlights the extent to which war has changed him and corrupted his childlike understanding of the world. Patroclus' narration therefore makes Achilles'

death more shocking and tragic by reminding the reader of the history of and between both characters.

Overall, Miller's Patroclus plays a very different role than he did in the *Iliad,* although, narratively, he still humanises Achilles through grief and through the exploration of their happier youth. His disgust at war and kind interactions with Briseis and common soldiers, as well as his disgust at Achilles' descent into soldiery, allow the novel to explore the horrors and brutality of war through a contemporary lens.

Conclusion

Overall, Patroclus is clearly a significant character in Homer's *Iliad* and its inspired works, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Miller's *The Song of Achilles.* Patroclus has a considerable bearing on the plot, saving the Greek army in Homer and Miller's works, and motivating Achilles to join the fighting in all three. Although the texts were written in vastly different time periods, a queer reading of each (or an engagement with explicit queerness, in Miller's case) enhanced the thematic development and characterisation of the texts. While intrinsically linked with Achilles, Patroclus influences the presentation of war through his role and characterisation, from Homer's sympathetic portrayal of human suffering to Shakespeare's deromanticised vision of heroism, to Miller's critique of the cruelties of warfare.

Endnotes

[1] Book 16, Line 787, henceforth written as Book.Line – for example, 16.787

[2] Act 2, Scene 1, Line 111, henceforth written as 2.1.11

References

Allen-Hornblower, E. (2016), *From Agent to Spectator*, Berlin: De Gruyter, *De Gruyter e-book:* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1515/9783110430042, accessed 10 April 2021

Burgess, J. (2015). 'Coming Adrift: The limits of reconstruction of the cyclic poems', in M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A companion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43–58. *Cambridge e-book:* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511998409, accessed 27 September 2021

Daems, J. and H. Nelson (2019). 'The interplay of games and war in early modern English literature: An introduction.' In J. Daems and H. Nelson (eds), *Games and War in Early Modern English Literature: From Shakespeare to Swift*, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 11–22. *Cambridge e-book:* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/9789048544837, accessed 29 September 2021

Doran, G. (2018), *William Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida,* production, Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, *Digital Theatre Plus:* https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/collections/rsc/troilus-and-cressida, accessed 06 March 2021

Fantuzzi, M. (2021), *Achilles in Love: Intertextual studies,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, *Oxford Scholarship Online e-book: https://0-oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603626.001.0001/acprof-9780199603626,* accessed 01 April 2021

Finkelberg, M. (2019), *Homer and Early Greek Epic*, Berlin: De Gruyter, *De Gruyter e-book,* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1515/9783110671452, accessed 20 March 2021

Garrison, J. S. (2014), *Friendship and Queer Theory in the Renaissance: Gender and sexuality in early modern England*, Oxfordshire: Routledge, *Routledge e-book:* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315883434, accessed 01 April 2021

Hammond, M. (trans.) (1987), *Homer: The Iliad*, London: Penguin

Homer (1987), *The Iliad*, trans. M. Hammond, London: Penguin

James, H. (2007), Shakespeare's Troy: Drama, politics, and the translation of empire, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jordison, S. (2016), 'Achilles is brutal, vain, pitiless – and a true hero', *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/feb/16/achilles-homer-iliad-brutal-vain-pitiless-hero, accessed 11 April 2021

McCann, H. and W. Monaghan (2019), *Queer Theory Now: From foundations to futures*, London: Macmillan Education UK, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=6234860, accessed 08 February 2021

Miller, M. (2011), *The Song of Achilles,* New York: Bloomsbury Publishing

Miller, M. (2019), 'Q&A with Madeline Miller', http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/

Miller, M. and H. Minkowich, (2012), 'The Song of Achilles: UCL interview', interview by Hamutal Minkowich, *UCL,* https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/outreach/public-engagement/song-achilles, accessed 14 April 2021, accessed 02/04/2021

Morales, M. S. and. L. Mariscal, (2003), 'The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus according to Chariton of Aphrodisias', *The Classical Quarterly*, 53 (1), 292–95., doi:10.1093/cq/53.1.292, accessed 09 April 2021

Nagy, G. (2015). 'Oral traditions, written texts, and questions of authorship', in M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A companion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 59–77. *Cambridge e-book:* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511998409, accessed 27 September 2021

Plato (1925), *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias,* trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Harvard: Harvard University Press

Shakespeare, W. (2015), *Troilus and Cressida*, Arden Shakespeare revised edition, ed. D. Bevington, London: Bloomsbury

Shay, J. (2003), Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character, New York: Scribner

Sinfield, A. (2011), 'The leather men and the lovely boy: Reading positions in *Troilus and Cressida', Shakesqueer: A queer companion to the complete works of Shakespeare,* M. Menon (ed.), Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 376–84, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=1172298, accessed 18 March 2021

Strauss Clay, J. (2011), *Homer's Trojan Theater: Space, vision, and memory in the Iliad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *Cambridge e-book,* https://0-doi-org.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511667022, accessed 01 April 2021

Train, L. (2018), 'BWW Review: TROILUS AND CRESSIDA, Royal Shakespeare Theatre', *Broadway World,* https://www.broadwayworld.com/westend/article/BWW-Review-TROILUS-AND-CRESSIDA-Royal-Shakespeare-Theatre-20181019, accessed 12 March 2021

Train, L. (2015), 'US Supreme Court rules gay marriage is legal nationwide', *BBC News,* https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-33290341, accessed 12 April 2021

Watson, N. (2021), 'Queer representation in literature: The Song of Achilles', *The Courier,* https://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/queer-representation-in-literature-the-song-of-achilles/, accessed 29 March 2021

Glossary

Apostrophe: A dramatic technique in which the narrator addresses a character or abstract concept.

Argives: Another name for the Greek soldiers.

Metalepsis: a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase from figurative speech is used in a new context.

Myrmidons: Achilles' soldiers.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Campion, J. S. (2022), 'Examining Patroclus' role in Homer's The Iliad, Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida and Miller's The Song of Achilles', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/884. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.884, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Always, There Is The Night and Other Poems

Alex Fewings, University of Warwick

Abstract

Always, There Is the Night is certainly the one of my poems most closely-related to *Crosses to Cullens*. It deals with the reinvention of ideas and themes across time through the lens of the vampire. However, where the article functions to explore the ideas of sexuality and romance in relation to the vampire, *Always* is much more a commentary on capitalism, avarice and the physical and spiritual fallout of their running loose. In this, I see it as one in a long line of such comparisons, leading all the way back to Marx's description of capital as 'dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour' (Marx, 1887: 163).

The Run, by contrast, is less closely-connected. Instead of giving light to a facet of the vampire that I could not include in the paper, it represents my attempt to capture a sense of the sublime awe of nature on which Romantic literature (and the Gothic which grew out of it) was founded. The poem describes a natural force which the people contrasted against it cannot overcome, then 'pans up' to a greater force only a few metres away.

Finally, *Amphora* is a direct way of addressing the sexual elements of the vampire mythos. Though it does not deal directly with vampires, and owes much more to Greek myth and its reinventions, the poem is an attempt to grasp the kind of 'feverish' desire for another that often characterises both vampires' frequent attitudes towards their prey, and the allure of the creatures themselves towards others. However, I alloyed sexual desire with a more emotional sense of intimacy.

Always, There Is the Night

Always, there is the night.

A hand, an eye,
here, there,
a glint on nails, on teeth

high, high:
The billboard their
white-toothed epitaph,
fading on their curves
their black suit,
their lace dress
rot-eaten.

Always, there is the night.

A cap, a face,
palefish smog-swimmer
beneath the gaslight stars,
their fading shimmer.
One hand
around a glass neck,
the other chewed,
gnashed and
steel-tooth torn away,
fired.

Always, there is the night.

A ship, a sail,
the bobbing werelight,
the heaving deep,
the white-lined shore.
The thirstless land
wetted red.
The scar-lines laid
for howling engines,
their gunshot laugh.
The bison lie, gutted.

Always, there is the night.

Poetry commentary

This poem was based on the concept of the vampire, using the eternal life and thirst of that figure to comment upon the perennial parasitism of a

capitalist system. Each stanza represents a historical phase as one looks back upon this process, from the first, which depicts modern times in terms of commodification of appearance, rotting from within, to the second – the industrial revolution and its brutal factories – to the third, which depicts a snapshot of colonialism.

The Run

I went down to the Run on Sunday,
the gargling mouth of the tide,
unsatisfied
with the river or the sea alone.

The sand is a pod of whales, rising
smooth islands in the stream,
stoneless, bare, the sun slanting low
to gild the pools of abandoned brine
and skip over the crests of the rapid ripples.

Beachgoers wander here becoated,
tall shore birds going this way and that,
startling at the dogs that run
between their feet,
remembering
only barely the beast that stalks them
in their too-close passages.

I saw three, mother-child-child,
who made to wade the Run,
their rubber-yellow legs like storks,
too wide, too tall.
I saw it take a hold of them,
tug them out, the greedy thing,
against the mother's hand,
the child like a windsock in the current.
They turned back,
and I saw that that was not the Run -
only a second channel to the Channel sea.

And I turned my eye to greater course, and saw the rocks there worn.

Poetry commentary

This poem was composed after visiting the Run at Avon Beach near Christchurch. The Run is a channel from Mudeford Bay to the sea, where the tide runs powerfully. While I was there, I saw a woman and what I presumed to be her two children attempting to wade across a side-channel, but turning back, and the contrast between them and the power both of the side-channel and the Run itself struck me with a strange kind of awe I attempted to capture here.

Amphora

You are terracotta, your skin
here and here and here,
moves out and in,
beneath my hand, the curve
of your well-worn hip,
its sun-brown smooth ceramic
pale-chipped
where that stone caught you
on Pelion.

My finger is another apology
laid there atop the rest -
though you have never held me
to account.
I am not used to guilt,
but for this I feel it, no matter how
many times your laughing lilt
lends assurance
I need not.

Need, though, I know
too well; your mortal clay
and the red wine below
that cools my hands,
held against your flesh
feverish with divinity,
hoping you might

bless another day
and pour out the sun
for me to drink.

Poetry commentary

This poem is based upon the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus as depicted in Homer's *Iliad*, and in Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*. The novel focuses on the way in which Achilles is torn between glorious divinity and mortal happiness. I tried to write a poem from his perspective, emphasising his desire for and devotion to his lover. It was also an experiment of attempting to depict a sexual act in terms less of physicality and more of emotional intimacy and profundity of feeling – what it *means* rather than what it *is*.

Pygmalion

I see your marks here, signs of the chisel
you chose; that old bronze thing re-sheathed in steel,
and then again in polymer, gunsmoke
wafting from the blows. You picked ivory
as well, gave the hunter obols to put
bullet to tomorrow for your image,
your hungry, hideous desire: skin
white, eyes white, teeth white, white hands, white blood, waist
anorexic-thin, tapering out, down
to the serpent-flesh, many-branched, twisting
back around, idiot ouroboros,
to eat itself, your desire made flesh
in its perfect, sterile self-consumption.

Oh, you wail and cry, you give us the dust
of your carving and say you make it right.
You make us worms, gnawing at the roots of
the world, you and your vile Galatea.

Poetry commentary

Pygmalion draws on the imagery of the figure depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but is more concerned with the hypocrisy of

modern powerful figures blaming individuals or others for the ecological devastation and economic inequality created by the system they uphold and benefitted from, and for the cyclical violence that system requires to be sustained.

References

Marx, K. (1887) *Capital*. Progress Publishers, Moscow.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Fewings, A. (2022), 'Always, There Is The Night and Other Poems', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/984. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.984, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Mal De Ojo and Other Poems

Alba Alonso Palombi, University of Warwick

Abstract

Female sexuality makes people uncomfortable, and, from this fact, rises the Madonna and whore dichotomy, as it allows for the division and neat categorisation of chaste and promiscuous women that keeps female sexuality in check. In both the Madonna and the whore, the sexual facet is outside of the woman's control, and both are objects of desire for the heterosexual male – very much like the femme fatale. I have here three poems that reflect on female figures and how they have been viewed through their sexual acts, and their vilification or idolisation.

Mal de Ojo

Spoon out my eyes with your fingers,
clearly I loved you too much.
The good doesn't last and the other lingers,

I miss your winged touch.
It was my green that cursed us
clearly I loved you too much.

The lonely's ok, it's the silence that cuts.
I throw sand in my face, but color doesn't change
it was my green that cursed us.

They call me a witch and arrange
my pyre, and I, soon to be bones
throw sand in my face, but color doesn't change.

I see what you don't want to own
and you, scared, blame it on a curse and prepare
my pyre. I, soon to be bones,

kneel, wail, pull out my hair.
Spoon out my eyes with your fingers!

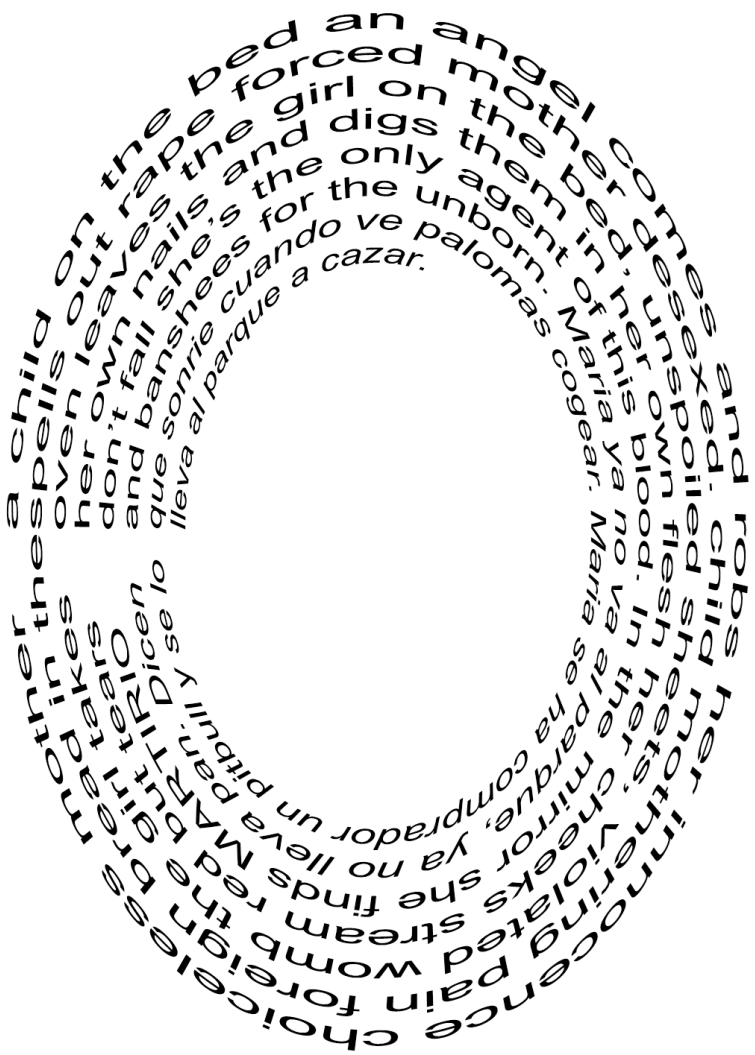
You, scared, blame it on a curse. I prepare.
The good doesn't last and the other lingers.

Merlin Killed By Gold Digger

The wizard lies caught
by roots and branches and leaves.
He fell prey to her,
the child lied with him
and meanwhile she lied to him
and stole his secrets,
or so the tale goes.
I have been to the forest
where he was enthralled,
and the grass whispered
that he asked for his prison
of bark, dark, and moss.
The worms know the truth,
of the gifted, not stolen,
of the girl who took
the heavy burden
off his frail chiselled shoulders.
Of love turned treason
by those who could not,
by those jealous of her worth
blinded by her locks
of auburn. By sex
and what she could not. By sex
and the witches' blood.
And the witches' blood
and what she could not. By sex
of auburn. By sex
blinded by her locks.
By those jealous of her worth,
by those who could not,
of love turned treason.
Off his frail chiselled shoulders
the heavy burden.
The girl who took it,

of the gifted, not stolen.
The worms know the truth,
of bark, dark, and moss.
That he asked for his prison,
and the grass whispered
where he was enthralled.
I have been to the forest,
or so the tale goes,
stolen his secrets.
And meanwhile she lied to him,
the child lied with him.
He fell prey to her,
by roots, and branches and leaves.
The wizard lies caught.

Mandorla



Transcript

a child on the bed
angel comes and robs her innocence
choiceless mother spells out rape
forced mother *desexed*. child mothering pain
foreign bread in the oven leaves the girl on the bed,
unspoiled sheets, violated womb
the girl takes her own nails and digs them in her own flesh
her cheeks stream red but tears don't fall
she's the only agent of this blood.
In the mirror she finds Martirio and banshees for the unborn.

María ya no va al parque, ya no lleva pan. Dicen que sonríe cuando ve palomas cojear.
María se ha comprado un pitbull y se lo lleva al parque a cazar.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Alonso Palombi, A. (2022), 'Mal De Ojo and Other Poems', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/982. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.982, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Fade In: Spiral biting a pinkie cuticle and Other Poems

Francesca Amee Johnson, University of Warwick

Abstract

The following corpus of four poems indicates a knowledge and engagement with the retelling of antiquated myths in art and fiction. *Chew and Swallow* was informed by Francisco Goya's *Saturno devorando a su hijo* (*Saturn Devouring his Son*), painted between 1820 and 1823. The poem investigates acts of masochism in terms of male-centric violence. *It was a pity about her eyes* is directly inspired from readings of John Polidori's *The Vampyre: A Tale* (1819) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Like *Chew and Swallow*, this poem explores acts of cannibalism, masochism and violence. However, *It was a pity about her eyes* is an exploration into the traumatic effect of sexual violence caused by men. I wrote *Fade In: Spiral biting a pinkie cuticle* in the form of a free verse poem that is aesthetically structured in the format of a script/screenplay. *The truest moment of reflection* is a palindrome; therefore, lines are repeated in descending order towards the end to demonstrate a reflective conversation between the speakers.

The selected poems focus on intricate themes of the self, horror and violence and the speakers go through a psychological process related to their mythological intertexts as each poem goes on. I close many of the poems with affirmed definitive statements reflective of newfound ideas.

Fade In: Spiral biting a pinkie cuticle

```
INT. ROOM - DAY

There's no witty title for girls with Anxiety,
and so I just sit here,
with my teeth gnawing at the same tendon,
of my slow roast thought,
the same joint, that won't seem to loosen
as the rest of the meat does,
the rest of me does,
```

but the biting never stops,
it's all teeth, all chew.

UNGIRL

Bite.
Bite.
Bite.
Bite.

FADE OUT.

LATER

There is a lot of screaming during this,
and perhaps this is too raw of me,
perhaps this is too uncooked,
unready, rare meat,
matted hair and sticky skin.

UNGIRL

Have I told you before that you have
the nicest skin I’ve ever slept in?

I want to carve permanent laugh lines
into my cheeks
into the claw marks of my face,
or embed all the stitching of happiness
with my hair and into my pillow,
maybe then it will sink in,
or force its way into my dreams.

FADE OUT.

INT. ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

Last night I slept on my back for a change.
for a second, I felt it work,
but Anxiety has a voice you see,
and it shouts:
she's sleeping,
she's slipped off into oblivion
she's jumped,
she’s pool no water,
she’s ligaments on the loose,

she's feet twisted,
she's ankle click,
she's bone pop,
and it won't stop.

INT. ROOM – THE NEXT DAY

I had a question midway through the chewing.
Is self-cannibalism a symptom of Anxiety?

FADE OUT.

END

It Was a Pity About Her Eyes

age 8
She should never have looked.
The First punches her before bedtime stories, when the lights are out,
she would not have seen.

age 11
Clouded are limerent memories.
On the playground The Second kissed her for a bet,
she should never have looked.

age 16

Blood soaks her skirt, fruit juice from a bruised peach.
Her body a discarded seed, nectar wiped off The Third's unbuckled jeans as if a stain,
this is what it means to be seen.

age 22
Her mouth fills with it, blood, in her ears, up her nose.
She can still hear The Fourth's snicker, drowning in it--she wakes up again,
she should never have looked.

age 26
The Fifth held her hand, as she felt out the cave walls.

They were walking in the wrong direction,
but she couldn't have seen.

age 28
Their portrait is on the floor, glass (like her body) smashed into the table.
Shattered! Embedded in her desperate fingers trying to hold a dream,
she should never have just looked,
maybe then, she would have seen them all.

The truest form in the moment of reflection

In those eyes of mine,
I saw a face,
a gaze of one I don't recognise,
eyes lowered down,
she peers into me
with sad eyes,
and a quivering mouth,
bottom lip heavy,
bitten and stung,
the face is bruised,
blotchy with memories,
my eyes are open to her
and she sees me,
less than nothing,
less than nothing,
and she sees me,
my eyes are open to her,
blotchy with memories,
the face is bruised,
bitten and stung,
bottom lip heavy,
and a quivering mouth,
with sad eyes,
she peers into me,
eyes lowered down,
a gaze of one I don't recognise,
I saw a face,
In those eyes of mine.

Chew and Swallow

Before I was afraid,
there was no light here,
I thought the head would come clean off--it went first,
like tableaux,
I could feel movement in my side,
they writhed, but I couldn't think on that,
chunks of chewed joint wrestle me,
I bite,
beasts come of monsters without the chains of reason
they each thrash,

Now I am tired,
there is no beauty here,
only crouched, ready to receive another,
I must continue,
there is only the ripping of skin,
torn flesh from bone,
this one does not move anymore,
I can feel the vertebrates disconnected in the soft folds of the back,
I chew,
the taste gristle and marrow is on the tongue,
the children are swallowed by fear,
raw their eyes are,

Soon I will cease,
there will be no *thing* here,
but there will be only blood,
and loose ligament caught between my teeth,
merging with tendrils of fine hair,
I swallow,
hopefully it will be the last time I do,
the abject will never return though they will claw without arms,
they will wretch and squirm, still babes fresh from primordial sleep,
I hope they do not return.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Johnson, F. A. (2022), 'Fade In: Spiral biting a pinkie cuticle and Other Poems', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/1067. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.1067, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

The Lord's Goodbye / Bertilak's Ghazal and Antigone Regina

Estelle Wallis, University of Warwick

Abstract

With *The Lord's Goodbye / Bertilak's Ghazal*, I wanted to give myself the challenge of incorporating the Arthurian legend into the Medieval Persian ghazal form. The ghazal's stylistic characteristics are incredibly fascinating and unique compared to traditional Western forms, especially the rhyming patterns. I realised I also found this stylistic distinctiveness in Medieval poems, notably 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', with its unique alliterative form. This poem draws similarities between the themes generally explored in a ghazal (abandonment, love, and religious imagery) and the story of Sir Gawain. I created a deliberate ambiguity between the two female characters, respectively described as *her* and *Her* (the capitalisation reinforcing the religious aspects of the Virgin Mary, who has a major role in the poem). The erotic connotations of Gawain's relationship with Bertilak also helped with adapting the ghazal to the Arthurian genre. Through this poem, I hope to illustrate the malleability of the myth; a modern Arthurian retelling could deal with queer themes and interpretations, for example, or explore its influence outside of the Western psyche from a non-European perspective.

I wrote *Antigone Regina* to experiment with the triolet form and to expand on the father-daughter relationship in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. My favourite aspect of this form is the opportunity to make the same line take different meanings through the poem. The line 'Oedipus' grave and weeping blood' plays on the word 'grave', hence the comma that appears in the last line. I also wanted to draw on the relationship that various retellings of the myth placed between humans and gods, as well as the role of ancestry and inheritance – not as a curse, but a fundamental part of human experience on both the individual and the societal level. Although this poem does not explicitly deal with the Arthurian story, it therefore still speaks of the role of poems as important reinterpretations of a myth.

The Lord's Goodbye / Bertilak's Ghazal

Tell me, O Knight, how blind you were to Her
Whose sapphire smile was hidden to view *her*?

How far away She seemed, the moonlit church,
Salvation-girdles, victory through *her*!

They would have laughed, O Knight, to see you pray
Between their hips – the Maiden, and You. *Her*.

The holy trinity – three kisses deep
My breath is tinged with both our sins. *Woo her*.

Delve, O Knight, into the greenlit chapel.
Your lover grazes your neck. You *knew* her.

My girdle green upon your waist, you ride,
You tell your tale, and find a brand new *her*.

Bleeding on the marsh, Knight, your eyes shut tight:
Remember green, and Bertilak, and your two *Her.*

Antigone Regina

The touch of sun-soaked hands against her cheeks;
Oedipus' grave and weeping blood
Spilled on her baby dress in steady streaks;
The touch of sun-soaked hands against her cheeks:
"The gods will never love the Greeks."
She'll prize above a silent god
The touch of sun-soaked hands against her cheeks,
Oedipus' grave, and weeping blood.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Wallis, E. (2022), The Lord's Goodbye / Bertilak's Ghazal and Antigone Regina', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth,

https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/981. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.981, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Elegy for a Love Still Breathing

J. S. Campion, University of Warwick

Abstract

Within this poem, I wanted to explore the nuance within Achilles and Patroclus' dynamic, taking a romantic interpretation of their relationship. After reading the Iliad by Homer, I have been fascinated by the ways in which these characters contrast each other; though both men are powerful fighters, Homer pays particular attention to Patroclus' kindness and often presents him as Achilles' narrative foil. I was interested in exploring why a character such as Patroclus, who is depicted by his gentleness, would choose to remain by the side of somebody as prideful and aggressive as Achilles. This is something which other authors have previously presented in many different ways. For example, Madeline Miller's novel The Song of Achilles (2011) presents Patroclus as a gentle individual who dislikes fighting, though within my own poem I wanted to acknowledge Patroclus' capacity for violence when war necessitates that he kills enemy soldiers. Therefore, I experimented with the idea that Patroclus' resentment at Achilles' actions might manifest itself in the form of violent desires despite his great loyalty to, and love for, Achilles. To explore this conflict and bittersweet love within their relationship, I used the stereotypically romantic form of the sonnet. Furthermore, Patroclus' sense of infatuation begins and ends the poem, as I wanted to highlight his tragic entrapment within his feelings for Achilles.

Elegy for a Love Still Breathing

The earth would tear itself at every seam
to boast your perfect feet had kissed its maw,
but in your eyes the heavens' battles teem.
I carved a home beside embodied war.
Your fingertips and lips and white-toothed gleam
all haunt me; now you're only tooth and claw.
On sleepless nights I grip my knife and dream
it finds the tender flesh beneath your jaw.
It won't, I can't, my need for you won't yield.

Alone, my name is glass or foreign bone,
and breaks without *Achilles* as its shield.
The world will swallow me if I'm alone.
Your shadow tastes like poisoned wine to me,
but love, where else could your Patroclus be?

To cite this paper please use the following details: Campion, J. S. (2022), 'Elegy for a Love Still Breathing', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/983. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.983, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Piranhas in the Stomach and Other Poems

Italo Ferrante, University of Warwick

Abstract

Can you experiment by stripping things to the basics?

Björk's *Medúlla* (2004) is by far her most revolutionary release: yet, the album features vocals only. The record suggests that beat boxing, growls, and squelches resonate louder (and more viscerally) than the finest symphony orchestra. The Icelandic singer's larynx seems regressive and progressive at once. I am not Björk but I embrace her artistic vision: there is something primal about obsessive anaphora and plain diction which outweighs the sophistications of meter. After all, parallelism and catalogue verse were widely used in epic poetry and other instances of verbal lore. That said, conforming to the long tradition of anaphoric listing does not prevent the imagery from being fresher than a multi-fruit smoothie. Popular culture icons such as Donnie Darko and SpongeBob are welcomed into my poetry, where the confessional always blends with the consumerist. What is more, pop art-esque references ('Sad Meal') coexist with surreal phrasings ('sliced eyeballs'), thus raising questions like: what if *Un Chien Andalou* was shot inside a McDonald's restaurant? Or even: what if Salvador Dalì redesigned the logo of IKEA? Juxtaposition is the key to unleashing a world where piranhas swim in rivers of gastric acid. Björk's acapella tour de force taught me this – who said that a choir cannot be paired with a human trombone?

Piranhas in the Stomach

after Hera Lindsay Bird

It's like sharing a London bedsit with your high school bully.
It's like receiving an ovation after crawling over glass shards.
It's like having to take lifts that will always stop working.
It's like nicking your own wallet and reporting yourself.
It's like getting end-of-year results every day of your life.
It's like being tied to your dog's chain and gobbling kibble.

It’s like having people’s kind words muted.
It’s like having people read your mind aloud.
It’s like breathing in a human centrifuge.
It’s like being superglued to the pool floor.
It’s like brushing your teeth with a bradawl.
It’s like getting beaten up in slow motion.

It’s searching for discarded mannequins on Google Maps.
It’s learning how to like your own comments on YouTube.
It’s getting judged by Instagram when “you’re all caught up”.
It’s teaching your grandmother how to forward obituaries on WhatsApp.
It’s feeling like the Vine of the little girl with messed-up makeup in the car.
It’s wanting to post a review on TripAdvisor: “I would not recommend ~~Sea~~ Life.”
It’s actually posting a review on Goodreads: “It was a let-down. Everyone survived.”

“Mindfulness didn’t help last time. Can I try mindlessness now?”

Tears to Mould

Let's dance to the Donnie Darko
soundtrack till our shoes fill
with torn confetti.
Let's water plastic cacti
while we watch a storm cloud
break in and raid the safe.
Let's go to McDonald's,
I'll get a Sad Meal,
you can keep the toy
unless it's a sliced eyeball.
Let's go to IKEA,
I'll hide my wisdom tooth
inside a smelling bottle;
you can milk carpets
in the meantime.

Let's steal hammers
from the hands of a chipmunk.
Let's spot middle fingers
in hand-me-down constellations.
Let's marry a rope
on our low-impact honeymoon.
Let's lick the dust off
urinal kissers gone broke.
Let's run out of bottled silver
linings and china blue moons.
Let's make night soil
out of our play-dough tears.

Eternal Moonshine of the Spotted Mind

He wails when
The sun shows up, the coffee brews,
BBC One wants to join him for breakfast.

He grins when
The stars burst out, the milk is warm,
Graham Norton flips a dad off his red chair.

He will be put down by dawn.

Blackout

I count the toothpaste stains
on my pajama top.
They are six - the number
of weakness, work, and your ward.
I'm drinking little water
since I'm too used to wetting
my SpongeBob sheets.
I have to change
my pillowcase every night.
I've sprained my ankle
and got groggy smelling
Devil's claw cream.

I don't know if it's a Tuesday
or a Wednesday.
I don't care if the TV screen
goes black every 10 minutes.
I wasn't paying attention to
the weatherman anyway.
I only like it
when clouds take a shower
after a grudge match with the sun.
I only liked it
when you were around
telling me to rest my eyes
and get some fresh air.
I don't read anymore.

Euphemisms

No, I won't say
you bought the farm,
you rode into the sunset,
you kicked the bucket,
you took a dirt nap,
you bit the dust.

I don't want to hear about
met makers, left worlds,
given-up ghosts, lost races,
dropped bodies, popped clogs,
pulled plugs and hopped twigs.

I don't care if they are sorry
for my loss. They are not really.
They just want to make small
talk around an open coffin.

What can I say about the dog days
when you are (*Write it!*) dead?

To cite this paper please use the following details: Ferrante, I. (2022), 'Piranhas in the Stomach and Other Poems', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertexutality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/871. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.871, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.

Eve and Other Poems

Lily Thwaites, University of Warwick

Abstract

To further explore the patriarchal adaptations made to female biblical characters, I have experimented in creating poetry from the female perspective of Eve in the creation story (Genesis). Like Mary Magdalene, Eve has been aligned with original sin and it is this story that was frequently used to justify the treatment of women by the church. Instead of focusing specifically on sin, I wanted to create a poem that explored what it may have been like to exist before the concept of 'the past' and 'time', as well as suggest what it may have been like for Eve to experience the world after she had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. If our understanding of good and bad is a result of their contrast, then surely, without ever having experienced evil before she bit the apple, how could Eve (and Adam) ever have truly appreciated or understood 'paradise' or the parameters of the Garden of Eden? There are more interesting philosophical discussions to be had about the creation story aside from simply that women are the cause of original sin. 'Mother Nature' encompasses both the labours of women and the present-day ecological issues that connect with the original creation story. Likewise, on the theme of feminist mythological retellings, the tale *Pygmalion* inspired the poem 'not my bed', which is a modern-day take on the blurred lines of consent, focusing solely on the female experience, in the wake of the #MeToo Movement and the Warwick Rape Chat Scandal.

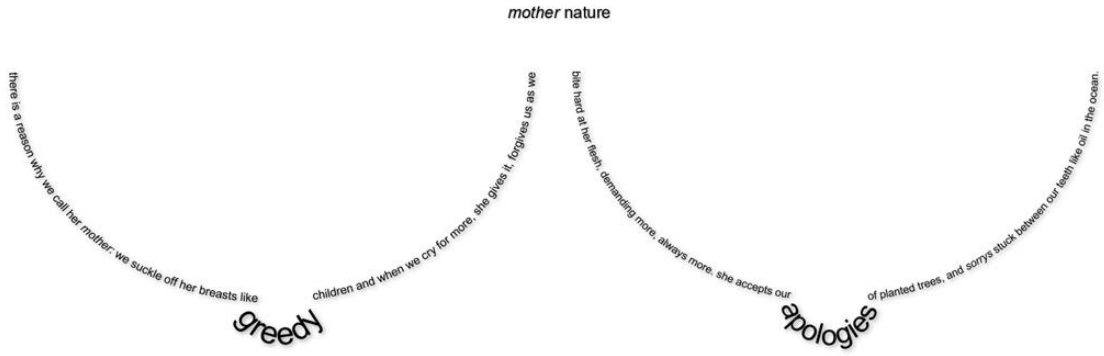
Eve

and so, she looks around and sees this:
grass that is always green, flowers
that are always open,
their delicate centres exposed towards the sky,
petals reaching upwards and outwards.
she stretches her arms upwards and outwards
looks beyond her finger tips, sees a line of trees,
and thinks
- has that always been there?

she looks up. the sky is clear, the sun is strong
but not too strong, she sees the flowers again
and thinks
what does it mean to bloom, if the flowers
always look like this?
something comes over her, an urge, she
picks one in between her fingers and crushes it
the stoma bleeds into her fist
she wipes it on her leg
the deep red lingers on her thigh
she tries to wipe it off again, sees her skin flush and mark,
scrubs and scrubs, pinpricks of blood rise to the surface
she thinks
it burns
then steps into the stream,
- why? -
feels the cool against her skin
and thinks
the water's never felt as sweet as it does now
and then she halts.
she inhales.
she feels the air inside her lungs
and holds it there for a while until
it burns
then blows it out and lets it ripple across her lips
breathes in again, quickly,
the air has never felt as sweet as it does now
feels her heart thudding in her chest
and stops and thinks some more.
lifting her right fingertips to the inside of her arm
she hesitates and brings her nail against the flesh
and presses - cautiously at first, then hard
it burns
and so, she pulls her hand away and watches as
red trickles down her arm
then dips it in the water, sees the colour swirl
and disappear away from her.
she laughs
and stretches her arms upwards and outwards

towards the sky.
here's something new:
a dark cloud looming in the distance
she watches it as it grows closer
looks back above her hands and thinks
the sky has never looked as blue as it does now
the world appears in front of her.

mother nature



Transcript

mother nature

there is a reason why we call her *mother*: we suckle off her breasts like **greedy** children and when we cry for more, she gives it, forgives us as we bite hard at her flesh, demanding more, always more, she accepts our **apologies** of planted trees, and *sorrys* stuck between our teeth like oil in the ocean.

not my bed

the woman lies
here on a bed frame
not on the side
of a street but inside a house. she is not far from
her home, her bed
but here she is asleep or awake and waits just
there with the stiff air caught

in her throat.
although some time has passed now
she waits to hear the breath next
to her loud and deep with sleep and the odd car
outside the walls.
head full of fog she tries to move one leg out of
the sheet onto the cold floor, sees a bruise

on her hip
bare thigh caught in the breeze
she trips over her top and
blinks in the dark, shakes as her mind thinks of
his lips on her cheek
her neck. at the edge of the room her skirt has been
left, she thinks “that will leave a crease

in the morning” and
looks at the watch still on her wrist
but it is the next day
so it will be creased and it will be thrown out.
still she goes to put it on
it weighs down on her limbs. Clothes don’t
feel the same, not now, and she

can’t find her pants
leaves them behind and creeps down the stairs
can’t find her keys or phone
and so she goes back up the stairs, which door was it
she came from?

shuts her eyes and picks the one on the left and
finds her bag, picks it up goes back down the stairs leaves

out onto the drive walks down the road
to see what she can see and sees
a street sign that says almost home
in more or less words and also says my bed, my house
and safe
goes down five streets along six houses, puts her key into the
lock, falls back against the door, at last she cries.

It is curiosity that drives me there.

Excitement is humming through the city, the fervour of it hangs thick and heavy in the air. Frenzied chatter lines the marketplace and hurries down the side streets, questions are shouted through windows to neighbours, answers given at shop stalls as they buy their daily loaves. But underneath there's something else, a subtle stench of fear; it lingers behind each spoken word and answered question, behind each set of eyes, a hesitation.

It is curiosity that drives me there,

later, when the crowds have dispersed and only a few are left lounging across the earth, talking to friends and neighbours, the spectacle in front of them forgotten as they break their bread and eat, their children running and playing games across the open land outside the city walls. Only when they glance up to check where their children have run off to do they catch sight of the wooden crosses in front of them and pause, mouth full of bread, and swallow heavily, it catching in their throat. But then, someone asks another question – how old is your son now? Isn't the air warm tonight? – and the spectacle is forgotten once again.

It is curiosity that drives me there

to look into his eyes and know for certain who I am looking at: a liar or a king. Instead, I see a man. A man whose face is streaked with tears, blood dripping down his brow, whose hands and feet are dirtied, flesh torn, limp limbs nailed in place, out of place. I see a man whose eyes are not quite shut, head hanging as he mouths words lost to the warm air and cloudless sky.

And when I turn away, I pray death comes for him soon.

Generational dementia

They say they think it is dementia, but
there's nothing showing on the tests they do.
The scans look normal. The blood tests they
take *just in case* run clear as water.
Each time we take the trip to The Royal Free,
and they ask you questions, play memory games
with you, you say *I am not a child*
and repeat
cat, house, watch,
simply, quickly, clearly,
placing numbers around clockfaces;
I know how to tell the time
(but forget your daughter for a moment
when you wake).
Later in the day
you recall how, when I was seven,
I went to the hospital with a splinter in my foot
That had grown into the sole,
Swollen like a sixth toe.
You remember being told that
the surgeons had put me to sleep, sliced it out
And stitched me up.
But you do not remember how
I had been running around the
busy streets for days, barefoot because
you would not buy me shoes –
complained I wore them out too quickly:
a girl should not run about as you do,
her shoes should not last less than a year,
or feet grow big like a man.
You do not remember that I woke up
in hospital,
with a slice of my foot gone,
alone,
because you had gone for champagne and scones

at the Peninsula.
And now, I sit in the waiting room
as they take you for another scan.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Thwaites, L. (2022), 'Eve and Other Poems', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertexutality and Myth, https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/980. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.31273/reinvention.v15iS1.980, ISSN 1755-7429, c 2022, contact reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Published by University of Warwick and Monash University, supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance.