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**Silence and Voice in Literary Representations
of the Mermaid in World Literature**

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Introduction

The present thesis studies voice and silence in literary representations of the mermaid in world literature. I will discuss the different concepts and representations of voice in mermaid literature through the centuries and across the world, considering works including Homer's *Odyssey*, a group of tales found in the Brothers Grimm's collection, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo*. Each individual work considered will be studied in its own literary and social context. Emphasis will be placed on the relations between mermaid tales, with an examination of how a mermaid tale is influenced by its predecessors and how it is received and incorporated into later tales. I will also discuss the contribution of each writer to the collective mermaid story and consider to what extent the author is successful in conveying the writer's own message, poetic skills and sensibility. Gender and multi-cultural approaches or other theories and criticism will be applied where appropriate. This thesis will also address silence-related issues such as self-expression and incommunicativeness, muteness and deafness, madness and rebirth.

Siren- Mermaid

Sirens originate in Greek mythologies have birds' bodies, whereas mermaids are related to European folklore and have fish tails. The two figures merged by the end of the medieval period. The resulting hybrid has given us the mermaid figure in literature or visual culture as we know it today. The early sirens do not always bear the same characteristics. The best known passage on sirens can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. Sirens can also be found in the following texts: Apollodorus's *The Library*, Aelian's *De Natura Animalium* (17. 23), Plato's *Republic* (X. 616-7), Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica* (IV. 885-992), Cicero's *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (V. 49), Hyginus's *Fabulae* (125, 141, 151), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5. 552-62), Lucianus's *The True History*, (II. 6, 46), Pausanias' *Description of Greek* (I, 21), Hyginus's *Fabulae* (141), Lycophron's *Cassandra* (712 ff.) and Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (768).¹ Homer does not give any physical description of his sirens.² Euripides describes his sirens as

¹ See the following versions and editions of the work cited respectively: J. G. Frazer, *Apollodorus: The Library*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1921) 2:290-91; Mary Grant, *The Myths of Hyginus* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Publications, 1960); Mary Innes, *Ovid: Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin, 1955); G. V. Rieu, *Apollonius of Rhodes: The Voyage of Argo* (London: Penguin, 1971); A.M. Harmon, "Lucian of Samosata: Introduction and Manuscripts" *Lucian: Works*, 9 vols. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London, Heinemann 1913); W. H. S. Jones, *Pausania Description of Greek*, 8 vols. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London, Heinemann, 1918); Stephanie West, "Lycophron," *Encyclopedia of ancient Greece*, ed. N.G. Wilson, (London: Routledge, 2006) 114-135; *Lemprière's classical dictionary* (Simsbury, CT: Bracken Books, 1984).

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E.V. Rieu (1946; revised, London: Penguin, 1991) XII. 39-52. Later citations are from the same edition and the page numbers will be given in the text.

“winged maidens.”³ In the visual culture of the Greco-Roman tradition, a siren is often represented as half-bird and half-woman.⁴ After the classical period, the sirens slowly evolved out of their bird-bodies. For example, in the tenth century, the entry for sirens in the Byzantine historical encyclopedia known as the *Suda* describes them as being sparrows from the chest up and women below (sigma 280).

Whether Greek mythology has any direct influence on the initial form of Nordic folklores is yet to be proved, but seafaring activities may have shaped the sailors’ experience and inspired their creativity in similar ways. The sirens were soon influenced by the image of the mermaid in folklore which has a woman’s head and body but a fishtail from the waist down. In Guillaume le Clerc’s *The Animal Divine* of the early thirteenth century, the section on “Sirens” was adorned with an illustration of a fish-tailed woman.⁵ Some other publications sometimes write differently of the figure. A

³ Euripides’s *Helen* 167. In *The Complete Greek Drama*, eds. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr. Vol I, 2, trans. E. P. Coleridge (New York: Random House, 1938).

⁴ A well-known example of the visual reference to Homer’s sirens can be found among the collection of London’s British Museum. On an artifact titled the “Vase of the Sirens” (E440), the bird-like sirens are swirling above the Odysseus’ vessel on which the hero is fasted to the mast. Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx gives detailed descriptions and developpement of the form of sirens in her book, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l’art de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age: Du Mythe païen au symbole chrétien* (Brussels : the Royal Academy of Belgium, 1997). Diana Buitron-Oliver and Beth Cohen also give a chronological account of the visual tradition of the Sirens in their essay “Between Skylla and Penelope: Female Characters of the *Odyssey* in Archaic and Classical Greek Art, *The Distaff Side: Representating the Female in Homer’s Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 30-34.

⁵ Guillaume le Clerc, “Les Syrènes,” *Le bestiaire divin*, ed. C. Hippeau (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970) 224.

bestiary of the twelve century writes that a mermaid can also have wings.⁶ It may have been the fact that, as written by the author of another animal book, several decades after le Clerc, most of the people around that time did not make a distinction between a siren and a mermaid.⁷ The physical aspects of the siren and the mermaid were indistinguishable.

The confusion is carried on into our time. Ruth Berman cites, as examples for the figure's occurrences, the "Mermaid" in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" as well as in W. M. Thackeray's *Pendennis*.⁸ It does not seem to concern the author that the mermaids in the former piece of work are portrayed with "silver feet" while the latter have tails. Other scholars, like Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, study the differences between the siren and the mermaid in terms of their origins as well as their physical characteristics.⁹

Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx's *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l'art de l'antiquité et du Moyen Age* provides a comprehensive overview of sirens in visual culture as well

⁶ T.H. White ed. and trans., *The Bestiary: A Book of Beast, Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Putman's, 1982) 134-35.

⁷ Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, trans. John Trivisa, ed. M.C. Seymour et al. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 2: 1248.

⁸ Ruth Berman, "Mermaids," *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, ed. Malcolm South (New York: Bedrick, 1988) 149. The section on "Mermaids," 133-145, can be compared with another section in the same book under the entry "Sirens," 147-153.

⁹ Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and her Kin* (London: Hutchinson, 1961) 35-50.

as in several other disciplines.¹⁰ S. W. de Rachewiltz's Ph. D. thesis *De Sirenibus* studies the development of sirens in literature from Homer to Shakespeare.¹¹ George Kastner's *Les Sirènes* is a collection of siren myths.¹² John Pollard's *Seers, Shrines and Sirens* is an example of studying the sirens in specific religious and social contexts.¹³

Language differences play a considerable part in the problem of identification in the siren-mermaid studies. Romance languages in general do not make a distinction between the terms "mermaid" and "siren": both are translated as *sirène* in French, *sirena* in Spanish, *sirennna* in Italian, *sereia* in Portuguese, *Syrena* in Polish, and *Sirenă* in Romanian. "Mermaid" in English is equivalent to *havfrue* in Danish and Norwegian, *hafmey* in Icelandic, *merenneito* in Finnish, *deniz kizi* in Swedish, and *die Meerjungfer* in German. In Germanic languages, the term "siren" is mainly reserved for the device that makes a loud warning noise.

In the course of time, the siren and mermaid have grown inseparable, not only in the popular imagination but also in serious literature. Shakespeare employs the two indiscriminately in his *Comedy of Errors* (Act 3, Scene II, 44-47). John Keats also

¹⁰ Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l'art de l'antiquité et du Moyen Age: Du Mythe païen au symbole chrétien* (Brussels: the Royal Academy of Belgium, 1997).

¹¹ S. W. De Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare*, Diss, Dissertation Abstracts International, Dec. 44:6 (1983) 1782A-1783A.

¹² Georges Kastner, *Les Sirènes: essai sur les principaux mythes* (Paris: Seuil, 1958).

¹³ John Pollard, *Seers, Shrines and Sirens: The Greek Religious Revolution in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965) 137-45.

features a mermaid in his “Lines on a Mermaid Tavern” (l. 22). His character does not allude to either Nordic mermaids or Homer’s sirens but to the Platonic deities that watch over the mechanics of time. The fish-tailed figures in contemporary novels by Romance language authors, for example Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Jean de Brunhoff, allude to European folkloric mermaids as well as ancient Greek sirens.¹⁴

Homer’s Winged Sirens

The sirens episode in the *Odyssey* consists of three parts, which are respectively Circe’s advice, Odysseus’ preparation and the encounter. Homer does not describe the sirens’ physical features. Their physical look does not constitute an important element in the story plot. Moreover, there is no mention of whether Odysseus and his crew actually catch a glimpse of the sirens when passing through the strait. It is rather unusual for Homer not to pay any attention to the physical aspects of the sirens, in contrast to the way he treats other characters. He gives elaborated descriptions of Scylla and Charybdis, who lie in wait for Odysseus after the sirens’ rocks. Moreover, the sirens episode is uncharacteristically brief and short. The Book of the Dead, which precedes it, is longer and emotionally charged. Homer may have left out the description on purpose. As the sirens were already well-known at the time, the author might want to call upon

¹⁴ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Two Stories and a Memory*. trans. Archibald Colquhoun (London: Collins & Sons, 1962); Jean de Brunhoff, *Les vacances de Zéphir* (Paris: Hachette, 1936).

the audience's knowledge and imagination to complete the picture. By so doing, he could concentrate on one single aspect, which is the sirens song and its impact on Odysseus. In Chapter One of the present thesis there will be further discussion of the relation between the sirens' physical charm and their alluring power.

Sirens are often represented as bird-like creatures in Hellenic artistic expressions.¹⁵ Other characters related to the sirens in the *Odyssey* can also give clues to the latter's appearance. Homer often portrays female immortals as aerial beings. He describes how the goddess Athena changes into a seagull, soars into the air or plunges into the water (V. 357). Several other deities of sea origin can also fly. Seabirds are no strangers to the Greek seaports and make perfect objects for the backdrops for mariners' tales. Birds are easily associated with singing immortals. Homer's sirens can be assumed to be aerial creatures.

Between Song and Voice, Celestial and Abyssal

If Homer's singing immortals reign over the sea and sky, mermaids in Northern European folklore dwell primarily in the realm of the sea. In some tales, a mermaid can come to the land and live with men. She can change her form at will and walk like

¹⁵ The sirens are presented as half-bird half-woman posing next to Odysseus on an Attic stamnos (475 B.C.) in the British Museum, London, and on an Attic lecythus (5th century B.C.) in the Central Museum, Athens. See also the image of the sirens with Orpheus on an Attic lecythus (580 B.C.) at the Ancient Museum of Archeological Institutes, Heidelberg.

human beings. The mermaids in principle can sing, and their voice is sweet and attractive. These are qualities that the mermaid shares with the Greek siren. However, there is one little, but important, difference between them. The lyric of mermaid songs are seldom recorded. In Homer's epic, the lyric of the song is the climax of the sirens episode. Not only do the mermaid tales of folklore origin lack words but some of their heroines who live among humans may even lose the power of speech.¹⁶ Compared to Homer's sirens, the mermaid of folklore has a voice which is not only less important but also dispensable. Another major point of difference is that the mermaid's physical beauty and its effect on men are greatly elaborated in folklore, whereas the face or body of Homer's sirens is of absolutely no importance in the story.

This thesis attempts to address the issue of voice and its opposite, silence, in their different states and in a variety of situations. Chapters One and Two study the connotations of voice and song manifested in the texts and contexts of siren-mermaid literature, which will hopefully provide the basis for the discussion of other works in the other chapters of the thesis.

With a chosen few examples, this thesis follows the process of evolution of the siren-mermaid, which shows how the winged messenger is put aside, making place for the sweet-voiced entertainer. As the background changes from the transcendent realm of the open sky to the fathomless mystery of the sea, and the feathered wings are

¹⁶ Benwell and Waugh, 74, 76, 81; see also *Standard Dictionary of Folklore: Mythology and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach and Jerome Fried (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1972) 710.

clipped and eliminated, to be replaced by the curves of a feminine body, the siren song is drowned. A medley of mermaid tales was accepted by the popular culture as well as the sophisticated literary world. For example, in one of Shakespeare's plays, the shadow of both the mermaid and the siren can be found in the character of a courtesan who is interested only in material security.¹⁷ Another example is James Joyce's mermaids who are young women working as barmaids, nicknamed "Bronze" and "Gold."¹⁸ Related to pleasure principles and material greed, these characters can best be regarded as corrupted versions of their originals. The novel *Possession* tells of a Victorian epic "The Fairy Melusina," in which a fairy is a fish or serpent from the waist down. In the novel, the Melusine character is married to a human for a soul,¹⁹ recalling Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid," which is in part inspired by La Motte Fouqué's theater piece *Ondine*.²⁰ Details of Andersen's tale will be discussed in Chapter Three of the present thesis. A.S. Byatt's Melusine can foretell deaths, a characteristic associated with some versions of Greek sirens. Byatt's mythic figure is related to a story compiled by Jean d'Arras in the late fourteenth century.²¹ Jean

¹⁷ "The Comedy of Errors," *Shakespeare's Complete Works* (Michigan: Univ. of Michigan, 1958) Act III. Sc.ii. 47.

¹⁸ They are called respectively Lydia Douce and Mina Kennedy. See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992) 328-76.

¹⁹ A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (1990; rpt, New York: Random House, 1991) 38.

²⁰ Christabel LaMotte, the name that Byatt gives to her fictive Victorian poet, bears some resemblance to the name of this German Romantic writer.

²¹ Jean d'Arras compiled a collection of tales from various sources entitled *L'Évangile des quenouilles* ("The spinners' gospel") between the years of 1382 and 1394.

d'Arras' tale contains fairytale motifs – such as a king hunting in the forest, the failure to keep a promise, the secret chamber, and the birth of three children – which can be found in the group of silent tales that Chapter Two is going to explore. These are only a few examples to show the diversity in the representation of the siren-mermaid characters in literature.

Mermaid voice is found again in contemporary novels to be discussed in the last two chapters. They are contemporary novels or short stories from two different continents, embedded in their respective societies and traditions. In spite of the differences, their stories share some common features in the representation of songs, which can be compared with the sirens song in the *Odyssey*. This thesis is an attempt to find out the meaning of the siren's song by exploring various possibilities: Is it an object of sensual pleasure? Is it a tool for self-empowerment and to influence people? Or, can the song represent intellectual curiosity, cultural pursuits, or high ideals in life? Homer's hero may have found an answer, and some later writers and critics may find others. It is our turn to see what we can of these siren-experiences.

The prototype of the sirens is found in Homer's *Odyssey*, which has a decisive influence on later imagination relating to these figures. Chapter One readdresses the issues of sexuality, pleasure and power in an attempt to define and evaluate the sirens song for the purpose of its identification and interpretation in later literature. This chapter does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the epic. The focus is on the sirens song

and what it means to the hero. The strategy is to compare the sirens to the constellation of characters and investigate the relations among them.

How can the sirens be a threat to Odysseus, the paradigm of men, who wins in every battle and resists the temptation of the most beautiful nymphs? What kind of danger does the sirens song represent that is different from the songs of other immortal women or the minstrels of the royal courts? How does the hero react to the song? What does the sirens episode mean to Odysseus? Does the experience make him a better man and how does it prepare him for the obstacles ahead? Chapter One is an attempt to find out the meaning of the sirens song, which is essential in the discussion of more recent siren-mermaid literature.

The story of the mermaid took a drastic turn in the nineteenth century, notably with the publication of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." Andersen's captivating story is not only the creation of a talented literary man but also a response to the literary context of the time. In order to understand the significance of "The Little Mermaid," it is important to understand how the theme of voice and silence are manifested in other tales in the first half of the nineteenth century. There is a strong albeit intrigue relationship between the singing and silent mermaids, between Homer's alluring sirens and Andersen's self-sacrificing princess of the sea-kingdom. How can such opposite and incompatible natures coexist in the same figure? And what is the place of Andersen's tale in the larger picture of mermaid culture? Chapter Two looks

into the domain of nineteenth century fairy tales, mainly the works of the Brothers Grimm and Andersen, in particular a group of tales featuring the motifs of silence, metamorphosis and birds. At the centre of the action of most of these tales, the female protagonist has to observe a vow of silence in order to free her brothers from a spell that changes them into birds. The conception and use of silence are different from one tale to another, which prompts us to look at its extreme opposite, voice, from another viewpoint. These seemingly innocent and simple tales raise questions that are relevant to the central theme of the present thesis. What are the many facets of silence, with its diverse properties and rich nuances? Can silence and voice complement each other to enhance communication? And, last but not last, what can these silent-tales tell us about the evolution of the siren-mermaid story?

Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" can be understood in relation to the siren-mermaid tradition as well as the literary context of his time. In the next chapter, I observe how the humble Danish writer associates silence with madness and death, and eventually destroys the singing sea-woman for good. Although most of the material story had already existed prior to this, Andersen's rendition has a very strong influence upon later perception of the mermaid figure. He tells of a mermaid who abandons the sea-kingdom and gives up her tongue for the prince who will not marry her. Her life and talents are wasted on land, which cannot be compensated for by a vague promise of eternal life. The mermaid is turned into a helpless and miserable creature, in stark

contrast to her predecessors. Is Andersen breathing new life into the ageing mermaid culture or simply finishing it off? As Andersen also wrote other tales involving mutilation, bleeding feet, dance of agony, silence and isolation, I will try to analyze these motifs in these works and find out what they mean in “The Little Mermaid.”

The mermaids have undergone another metamorphosis when making their way into contemporary literature. They vary from what can be seen as degenerated copies of the fearsome sexual object to a completely new breed of self-invented individuals embodying high ideals. I have chosen Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Yan Lian-ke’s *Shouhuo*, for their representation of new mermaid models from different ethnic groups and social contexts. Chapter Four studies Morrison’s unconventional character Pilate, who is called mermaid by her lovers because of her special physical trait, and treated as a monster by her people who misinterpret her power. Pilate is versatile and resilient like the traditional mermaid. She shows an extraordinary strength of character and commits to the community’s causes. Her strength is crystallized in the songs which are not only her personal expressions but also a gateway to the history and future of her people. The songs are later transmitted to the protagonist and change the course of his life. This larger-than-life African-American character seems to be an unlikely successor to the long line of egocentric and unpredictable singing women from the sea. How can she be related to Homer’s sirens or Andersen’s mermaid? Above all, what is the meaning of her songs on a personal or collective level?

Chapter Five is mainly about the Chinese “Granny” Maozhi, who is an incarnation of the spirit of the founder of the Shouhuo village, and keeper of songs which keep alive the dreams and values of the community. In a remote area far away from the political or economic center of the turbulent nation, Shouhuo people strive to keep to a simple way of life. Their physical deformity singles them out from the rest of the country’s population, and is symbolic of their strength. Maozhi manages to preserve the village on several occasions when the political turmoil of the outside world threatens the village. However, when the burden becomes too much to bear, Maozhi is reduced to silence, and then death. Maozhi is also to be compared with characters from other Chinese novels and short stories, some are written by Yan and the others by his contemporaries.

Song of Solomon and *Shouhuo* are set in widely different cultural and social backgrounds, and each is marked by a distinguished style. How can the two novels be juxtaposed and studied together? How can their female protagonists – a stately-looking African-American on the one hand, and a crippled old Chinese woman on the other – be associated with Homer’s sirens? And, finally, are Morrison and Yan’s portraits of the mermaid figure relevant to our world today? Contemporary literary criticism is concerned with the theme of silence and related gender and ethnicity issues. These writings shed light upon the reading of these two stories which, in turn, lends another perspective to the study of the issues. How do we interpret the independent woman’s voluntary sacrifice for the male protagonist, to be his nurturer and mentor? Both of the stories end when the female character dies and the hero is accepted into the

community. Does it give the male voice the legitimacy in the mermaid legend or make him accountable for the future development of the sirens song?

Each individual work selected here will be studied in its proper right as well as in relation to the others in order to examine how the notions of voice and silence have developed in mermaid tales over time and space. Each piece of work – a mere few drops in a vast ocean – is part of the corpus of the mermaid literature, like an episode in a never-ending story. I am trying to scrutinize through these works several particular moments of the mermaid's legacy, to find out if her song has any message for us today, the everyman of the hyper-communication age.

Chapter I

The Calling of a Hero: the Sirens Song in Homer's *Odyssey*

This chapter is an attempt to define, identify and interpret the sirens' song and address a number of related issues found in the text and context of Homer's *Odyssey*. The representation of women and voice in the epic will be studied with reference to literary and other approaches, mainly with emphasis on gender and ethnic related studies. The chapter will try to understand the characters of the sirens in relation to the constellation of characters in the epic, and the sirens' song in comparison with other obstacles in the way of the hero's home-coming journey. Special attention will be paid to Odysseus' reaction to the sirens' song, and what the experience means to his evolution. The discussion here can be construed as part of the continuous discourse concerning the sirens' legacy.

Homer's Sirens and the Others

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the sirens sing to the sailors passing by and lure them to stay. Following Circe's advice, Odysseus stops his sailors' ears with wax and has himself fastened to the boat's mast. He also orders his crew to bind him tighter if asked to be released. Upon reaching the strait, the sirens start singing, enticing him to listen to their song. When the hero gestures to his crew to release him, they bind him with more ropes, as he has instructed them to do earlier. Finally, they sail past the strait unscathed (*Odyssey*, XII. 158-200).²² The short passage depicts a significant moment in the epic and is an inspiration to later literature.

The sirens are also represented in a number of classical texts.²³ But the information about these figures is fragmented and inconsistent, contributing to the versatility and enigma of the persona. Their character varies from one text to another, and is associated with diverse, wide-ranging themes such as death and music. Norman Douglas makes an attempt to summarize the representation of the sirens:

The Sirens, says one, are the charms of the Gulf of Naples. No, says another; they were chaste priestesses. They were neither chaste nor priestesses, but exactly the reverse. They were sunbeams. They were perilous cliffs. They were a race of peaceful shepherds. They were symbols of persuasion. They were cannibals. They were

²² Homer, *The Odyssey*. The English translations used here is from many sources, including E.V. Rieu (1946; revised, London: Penguin, 1991), Samuel Butler (UK: Digireads.com, 2009), and also Ian Johnston, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/odyssey12.htm>.

²³ These classical texts include the ones mentioned in footnote number 1 of "Introduction."

planetary spirits. They were prophets. They were a species of Oriental owl. They were the harmonious faculties of the soul. They were penguins.²⁴

The sirens passages in Greek and Roman texts are generally short and of relatively little importance. The work in which the sirens have a more elaborate presence apart from Homer's epic is *Argonautica*, a story about Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Apollonius Rhodius writes that the sirens live on three small, rocky islands called the *Sirenum scopuli*, singing to the ships passing by and causing them to be wrecked. The story goes that they start singing once Jason's ship sails close to their dwelling place. One of the crew members jumps into the water trying to join them but is saved by the others. Afterwards, Orpheus uses his lyre to drown out the sirens' singing so that the Argonauts can steer to safety.²⁵ Although there is a close resemblance between the Rhodius sirens and Homer's sirens, their difference is equally important. Rhodius' sirens threaten the sailors' life in a different way than Homer's. While Homer's sirens lure the mariners to stay and hear their song, their counterparts in *Argonautica* actually wreck the ship and try to kill the crew. The former can be accused of lacking compassion, but the latter appear as willful killers. Homer gives men free will and dignity, whereas the Egyptian writer makes them hapless victims of mischief. Rhodius' sirens are much less powerful than Homer's because words are missing from their songs. The sweet voice by itself cannot fulfill the mission. The wordless sirens can no longer be invincible. Their empty voice is subsequently drowned by a musical instrument. Since their voice alone

²⁴ Norman Douglas, *Siren Land* (London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1911) 26.

²⁵ G. V. Rieu, *Apollonius of Rhodes: The Voyage of Argo* (1959; rpt. London: Penguin, 1971) IV. 893-921.

is not sufficient to be a threat, Rhodius' sirens have to wreck the ships to demonstrate their destructive power. The Greek and Egyptian versions of the sirens' story represent the two major different directions of later siren-mermaid creativities. One would give emphasis to the physical part of the voice or of the singing woman; the other would work into the more profound meaning of the experience on the man.

The Sirens' place in the Constellation of Characters in the *Odyssey*

In an essay on female characters in the *Odyssey*, S. L. Schein points out that, each time when Odysseus encounters a female character, it "constitutes a coherent episode thematically and ethically relevant to the entire poem."²⁶ She elaborates the point by analyzing the Calypso episode. She also states that the sirens "apparently constitute a danger for Odysseus that is different in kind."²⁷ However, Schein concludes that "the dangerous pleasure [that the sirens' song] offers is distinctively Odyssean because it is fundamentally sexual."²⁸ While the sirens' danger is different from the threat caused by other immortal female characters in the epic, it is debatable whether their song is about "pleasure" or the experience is "fundamentally sexual."

²⁶ Seith L. Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*," *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 19.

²⁷ Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*," 20.

²⁸ Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*," 21.

The sirens can be studied among other female immortals in the epic. In the introduction of a collection of essays that examine from a multi-disciplinary perspective the representation of female characters of the *Odyssey*, A. J. Graham finds that the sirens are not significantly different from the other female characters that Odysseus meets during the voyage. He writes that “in the great panorama of womanhood presented by the *Odyssey*, the non-Greek [... female characters] were all, if in different degrees, sinister and destructive.” He concludes that the message carried by the epic is that foreign women were not considered appropriate wives for the Greek men.²⁹ His view that all female characters in the *Odyssey* are the same reflects the opinion of several other critics as well.³⁰ Such a view corresponds to the general perception of the sirens as being evil or indifferent to human suffering. However, the sirens should not be cast into the same basket with every other dangerous creature. Odysseus wants to listen to the sirens song, which he must have known to be worthy of the risk. What can he get from the experience? What then do the sirens have to offer to today’s critics? What does the brave, flexible and knowledgeable hero teach us in terms of the sirens song?

We may be able to understand the sirens better by comparing them with other female characters in the *Odyssey*. The portrayal of the sirens can be seen as part of the

²⁹ A. J. Graham, “The *Odyssey*, History and Women,” *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer’s Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 13-14.

³⁰ For example, the comparison between Circe and Penelope in Richard Brilliant’s “Kirke’s Men: Swine and Sweethearts,” *The Distaff Side*, 165-174, and the seductive sirens and other sexless muses in Lillian Eileen Doherty’s “Sirens, Muses and Female Narrators,” *The Distaff Side* 81-92.

larger pattern of characterization in the epic, and the occurrence of the sirens incident is part of the scheme that is embedded in the structure. The constellation of characters is engaged in a constant and dynamic interaction, at the center of which is found the hero and his action. The typical bipartite interpretation of the characters – that the siren is the destructive *femme fatale* as opposed to the benevolent woman represented by several other characters – is to be scrutinized closely. There may be nuances between the extremities of the bipolar division of characters. The relation between the sirens and other characters may be extremely complex. When these questions are answered, one can start to see the sirens in their many possible facets.

Joseph Campbell writes of the relationship between the hero and the typical woman in myths: "The ultimate adventure [of the hero] is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World." She can be represented by "[t]he Lady of the House of Sleep [... who is] mother, sister, mistress, bride," which is the "goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest."³¹ His image of the "Universal Mother," however, has a double face: the "good" mother who is "comforting" and "nourishing," and the "bad" mother who is "unattainable" or overly possessive. The two sides of the figure are at once inseparable and contradictory: "For she is the world creatrix, ever mother, ever virgin. She [...] is the life of everything that lives [...] She is also the death of everything that dies." He also concedes that it is the man who

³¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; rpt. London: Fontana Press, 1993) 120.

creates the two incompatible images of motherhood “with respect to his childlike human convenience,” and, in consequence, the woman who is originally considered the hero’s “life” can be perceived later as “the queen of sin” when he loses his purity and innocence.³² The mythological woman has by function to adapt to the man’s various stages of evolution, “[s]he is the womb and the tomb.”³³ Campbell recognizes that the archetypal descriptions of the mythological female character are mainly subjective: “By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness.” The woman is a convenient object for a man to project his insecurity and insufficiency onto; she provides for him and at the same times bears the blame. His vision and action defines and legitimizes her existence. “The composite hero of the monomyth” is the center and the goddess-mother is his subordinate.³⁴ Campbell thus points out the making of the queen-goddess with regard to psychological and social factors. The nature of the mythic woman as he sees her is all-embracing, comprising qualities that are incompatible and contradictory:

She is identical with the universe [...]. She is time and space herself, and the mystery beyond her is beyond all pairs of opposites. So it isn't male and it isn't female. It neither is nor is not. But *everything* is within her.³⁵

This is an example of one of the responses to the concept of bipolarization of the female characters: she can be anything. Even the boundary between gender distinctions is

³² Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 120-6.

³³ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 109.

³⁴ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 87.

³⁵ Joseph Campbell, *Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 167.

falling apart. This viewpoint has something in common with some critics in gender studies which hold that a woman cannot be categorized. Drucilla Cornel states that the "[w]oman cannot be contained by any definition, including Nietzsche's name for her as the non-truth of truth."³⁶ Can such ideas be applied to literary studies and help us to understand individual characters? How can we read the sirens by such definitions?

Campbell's double-faced "Universal mother" is echoed in many other critics' findings, for example Robert Graves' "White Goddess,"³⁷ which has three different phases and is called the "Triple Goddess."³⁸ This hypothesis is problematic according to critics like Annis Pratt, particularly with regard to the last of the three phases: "The third figure in the triad [...] has often been gynophobically perceived as 'devouring mother' or 'crone.'"³⁹ Mary Anne Ferguson, who comments on how womanhood in literature can be distorted by means of over-simplification and bipolarization, comments to the same effect:

[The sociologists and writers] describe their reflections – or models – in literature which include such baffling pairs of opposites as passive-aggressive, intuitive-logical,

³⁶ Drucilla Cornel, *Beyond Accomodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 85-86.

³⁷ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1848; rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

³⁸ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (1955; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1992) 48-49, 38, 52. See also Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections in the Archetypal Feminine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

³⁹ Annis Pratt, Barbara White, Andrea Loewenstein and Mary Wyers, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Sussex: Harvest Press, 1982) 172. See also Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

possessive-self-sacrificing, materialistic-spiritual, frigid-lustful, [in order to demonstrate that] the characteristics of men are the norm, those of women subsidiary.⁴⁰

For Ferguson, the concept of the beneficial "Great Mother" is arbitrary and male-oriented.⁴¹ Mary Daly also writes about the notion of binary opposites in mythological criticism.⁴² Susheila Nasta expresses similar opinions on contemporary fiction. She goes further and warns against hauling motherhood to the summit of human virtue, for fear of the "counter-creative[ness]" of such attempts: "[The good mother will be] silent and silenced by the structure surrounding them."⁴³ Campbell's omnipresent motherhood is, therefore, under the threat of being silenced by its own system.

In a study on Victorian literature, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that male writers of the nineteenth century represented the woman as "angel and monster," in a variety of forms such as "ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and spirit."⁴⁴ Gilbert and Gubar liken the Victorian literary men's misconception and misrepresentation of the woman to "[t]he Queen's looking glass [which] speaks with the king's voice." Gilbert and Gubar warn against presenting the woman as a monster as much as an angel, because

⁴⁰ M. A. Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1977) 7.

⁴¹ Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature* 10.

⁴² Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 67.

⁴³ Susheila Nasta, "Introduction", *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: the Women's Press, 1991) xiii.

⁴⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 17, 44.

"the angel's necessary opposite and double [..., the] Medusa-face also kills female creativity." They hold it important to prevent women being "killed into art."

However, some critics see the interpretation of mythological women as the Mother in a more positive light. Janet Todd, after reviewing the evolution of the concept of "mother and myths" in history, observes that motherhood is rightly glorified in mythology.

The motifs and messages [found in the representation of women in myths] were feminist. Above all motherhood came to the fore, remembered, anticipated, investigated, eulogized and mythologized.⁴⁵

Northrop Fry also looks for binary pairs in myths and folk tales. He states that a pair of characters of contradictory qualities is found at the center of all mythic actions: "[The] quest involving conflict assumes two main characters, a protagonist or hero, and an antagonist or enemy."⁴⁶ He cites "the light and dark heroines" of Victorian literature as an example. There is a clear distinction between the two groups; the helper and the villain are easily identifiable. "Characters tend to be either for or against the quest [...] like black and white pieces in chess."⁴⁷ The dark heroine is the "moral opposite" of the

⁴⁵ Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988) 30.

⁴⁶ Northrop Fry, "The Mythos of Summer: Romance," *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; rpt. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 189.

⁴⁷ Fry, "The Mythos of Summer: Romance," 183.

hero and is often represented as “sinister figures, giants, ogres, witches and magicians.”⁴⁸

In the study of the *Odyssey*, it is possible to study the female characters by placing each of them at either end of the binary scheme, label them with terms like “mother,” “witch” and so on. Her primary function can be helper or destroyer, but it can only be one of the facets. The relation between the characters at the two poles in this system is often described as “opposing.” But it is possible that it is not oppositions but connections and interactions that are the dominant features in the relations between the characters. Apart from that, a character’s role is neither definitive nor static, but constantly changing according to perspectives and situations. What remains unchanged is the character’s being, which determines the meaning of her existence in the work. One of the means to understand the sirens is by studying their place in the network of characterization in the epic.

⁴⁸ Fry, “The Mythos of Summer: Romance,” 195-96.

The Triple Role of the Sirens:

1. The Ultimate Villain

The hero nearly succumbs to the sirens' calls. The sirens can be viewed as the enemies, destroyers and villains who pose a serious threat to Odysseus' life. This is the general perception of the sirens in terms of their role in the epic and relations with the hero. The sirens cannot be subdued or destroyed, unlike the Cyclops' men, Polyphemus or the suitors at home, nor can they be dissuaded and won over like Calypso or Circe. In that sense, the sirens are more dangerous than most other enemies, and can be considered, under the binary system, as the ultimate villain in the epic poem.

1.1. The Hero's Extreme Opposite in the Binary Pair

In the binary scheme, the sirens are at one pole and Odysseus is at the other. They stand in sharp contrast to one another and can be studied as a pair of opposites. In terms of physical appearance, a siren is half bird and half woman; she is less than a beast or woman. Odysseus is not only a perfect human but the best of all men, a leader and role-model for his fellow-warriors to look up to. Born to be king, he also possesses every quality of one. Besides, he is highly regarded by the gods and humans alike. Zeus praises him as the wisest man on earth (*Odyssey*, I. 66, 67). Nestor acknowledges Odysseus' wit and eloquence, and also his good sense and judgment (*Odyssey*, III.

119-128). Menelaus remembers him as the bravest fighter in the battle of Troy and a greatly cherished friend (*Odyssey*, IV. 106-108, 169-170). Odysseus is also a man of great self-confidence. He brags that he is the best treasure-hunter of his time (*Odyssey*, XIX. 283-296). On top of that, he is portrayed as a man with strikingly good looks and a noble bearing. He wins the heart of many women, mortal and divine. The beautiful goddess Calypso offers him immortality if he stays with her (*Odyssey*, V. 135). Circe, the goddess who knows the secrets of nature, and the virtuous princess of the Phaeacians, also find him irresistible attractive (*Odyssey*, VI. 340-345). Odysseus represents the paradigm of manhood. The hero is revered and loved by men and gods alike, whereas the sirens are condemned and feared.

1.2. Physical Difference

The physical appearances between the hero and the sirens are beyond comparison. However, the sirens prove to be the hero's equal in the encounter. Both parties are the pinnacles of their kinds. Besides, in Homer's writing, the sirens are not portrayed as hideous creatures. Although Homer does not describe the sirens' appearance, ancient Greek art work portrays them as having bird-like bodies.⁴⁹ The sirens are not inferior because of their appearance because goddesses or sea deities

⁴⁹ Schein mentions that there is a general lack of description of female characters in the *Odyssey*, "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*," 17-19. The detailed description of Scylla is an exception (XII, 85-91).

sometimes change into birds. The goddess Athena sometimes shows herself in front of humans in the form of a bird.⁵⁰ Other characters who also look like birds include Eidothea, the daughter to Proteus, the immortal sea-wizard (*Odyssey*, IV. 385-387, 416-424), and Ino, who can rise and dive back into the sea like a seagull (*Odyssey*, V. 337, 357). These immortals only have small roles to play in the epic but show support for the hero's quest. They also share some similarities with the sirens although they seem to be working in opposite directions. The two groups are bound together in many ways. The discussion of their relation will be continued later on.

1.3. Ethnic and Cultural Differences

The ethnocentric Achaeans do not always respond positively to other cultures, represented in part by the sirens, who in turn do not relate to the hero's beliefs, customs and etiquette. The epic hero is god-fearing, which by the tradition of his country means obeying Zeus' will and following closely Athena's instructions. The sirens are not subjugated to the domination of the Olympic deities. Their island belongs to another world. It may be different from Odysseus' homeland, although Homer's work gives no description of the sirens' island. The physical outlook of their land probably reflects the nature of these magical outlandish characters. The character of Polyphemus corresponds to the condition of his place which is described in detail. The Cyclops can

⁵⁰ See Chapter One of the present thesis.

be related to sirens in many ways, and the two seem to be complementing one another in the constellation of characters in the epic poem. The analysis of the Cyclops' country's landscape may help us to understand not only the characterization of the one-eyed giant but also that of the sirens. Like the land of the sirens, that of the Cyclops does not have any law-making body or administration structure. Neither do they fear the gods the way Odysseus and his people do (*Odyssey*, IX. 111-115, 275-279). From the hero's ethnocentric viewpoint, of which the major Hellenistic culture with its religious, social and judicial patterns is the norm or framework of reference, the sirens and the Cyclops belong to another system, which is considered as alien, illegitimate, savage and potentially dangerous. Further comparison of the two will be continued later.

1.4. Difference of Economic Mode

The hero and the sirens do not live for the same goals. Odysseus set his sail to go after fame and fortune in foreign lands. The sirens make music and tell stories. The hero plunders, kills and robs the otherwise peaceful and affluent nations, while the bird-women do not have any material concerns. He accumulates wealth abroad, while the sirens stay on their island and collect sea-weary travelers. The great Greek warrior has amorous relationships with his immortal hostesses; the foreign singers are not reputed to have any intimate contacts with men. Odysseus go to the islands for provisions, but the sirens cannot provide him food or shelter. Here again, the Cyclops episode can give

a clue to the differences in economic activities between Odysseus and the other land's inhabitants.

2. The Helper

2.1. Benevolent Goddesses

The sirens are seen, at the primary level, as destroyers. And yet they have many similarities with other female characters which are considered helpers. These characters are often of sea origin and sometimes appear in the form of birds. The first goddess-helper to appear in the epic poem is Eidothea, who is said to share heritage lineage with the sirens. In the story, she helps Menelaus to tame her father so that Odysseus' friend can bring the news of Odysseus to Telemachus (*Odyssey*, IV. 336-424). It is said that Eidothea's father can change his form at will (*Odyssey*, IV. 385-387, 416-424), which explains Eidothea's ability to metamorphose. Ino is another immortal who lives in the sea, and can rise and dive back into the sea like a seagull (*Odyssey*, V. 337, 357). She saves Odysseus from shipwreck on one occasion (*Odyssey*, V. 333-353). The most important in the list of goddess-helpers is the powerful Athena, who defends Odysseus in front of the gods and intervenes at several crucial moments of the story. For example, she flies away like a bird after giving counsel to Telemachus, encouraging him to look for his long-absent father. Athena appears again in the midst of Odysseus' combat against the suitors. She first disguises herself as a friend, and then

takes the form of a swallow and flies up to perch on a beam of the hall (*Odyssey*, I. 96-324; XXII. 205-300). These beneficent deities appear at different moments responding to Odysseus' needs, and together they propel the hero to his famed fate. They also stand as extreme opposites to the sirens. If the sirens are the monsters of the sea, these immortals can be called the "angels of the sea."⁵¹

2.2. Benevolent Wife, Mother and Virgin

The sirens' human opposites are the Greek women, the mortal counterparts of the celestial-helpers. The group of the "angels of the fatherland" is headed by Penelope, who is the faithful wife at home awaiting her husband's return. She is described as being as beautiful as a goddess; and she excels all the others at the loom (*Odyssey*, II. 117; XVIII. 248-249; XIX. 325-326). Although she is not the only woman to possess such qualities – Calypso and Circe, for example are also very skillful weavers – Penelope shares with Odysseus the same cultural heritage and national identity, on top of the fact that she is married to the hero and recognized as his wife and the mother of his heir. In comparison, the immortal women are of another race. They can be best identified as marginal in terms of cultural status from the hero's ethnocentric viewpoint.

⁵¹ The term or "angel of the sea, and its opposite and complementary "angel of the fatherland," puns on "angel in the house," inspired by a long Victorian poem of the same name written by Coventry Patmore (1862), and commented vehemently by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their critical work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2 edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Their idea of "angle of the house" is represented by the typical Victorian heroine who is strictly conformed to the conventional gender role.

Penelope is hailed as the exemplar and paragon of the gender, whereas Odysseus' immortal mistresses are treated as the "others."

Penelope finds her minor double in Arete, who is loved by her people and often settles quarrels in her husband's court (*Odyssey*, VII. 66-72). Arete pleads Odysseus' cause in front of her husband, the king of Phaeacia (*Odyssey*, VII. 233-239), in the same way as Athena does in front of Zeus. Another "angel of the island" is Nausicaa, whose importance in the epic is implied by the length of her episode, which in this respect is comparable to that of Calypso or Circe. Being still a maiden, she has not reached the physical or mental stage to practice weaving like Penelope, Calypso or Circe. On her first encounter with Odysseus, Nausicaa is on a special mission to clean clothes for herself and her family (*Odyssey*, VI. 34-40). Laundry is one of the major household skills to learn during the growing-up process, before the stage represented by the apprenticeship of weaving.⁵² Although also attracted to Odysseus, the innocent and sexually inactive Nausicaa is not a candidate to be Odysseus' conjugal partner the way Penelope, Calypso and Circe are. She brings the hero to her parents, who then offer him help. In this sense, Nausicca fulfills only part of a helper's function, or plays a sub-helper's role. The maiden needs her mother Arete, a chaste married woman, to complete the mission. Together they represent the "angel in the other-land," who can be compared to Penelope, the "angel of the homeland." Since Arete and Nausicaa do not

⁵² For the apprentice of the three household skills that accompany a girl's evolution, including laundry and weaving, see discussions on the topic in Chapter 2.

try to seduce Odysseus, they are not in competition with Penelope, which makes them absolute helpers.

2.3. Modified Helper

Penelope is the woman of the hero's dreams, the mortal and absolute helper in the story. However, this character is rendered with considerable depth and complexity, which gives another dimension to the helper-destroyer scheme. She shows extraordinary intellectual and emotional capacities. Men are attracted to her but she is not a seductress. She is cunning enough to hold them back day after day but does not have a plan to get rid of them (*Odyssey*, XV. 373-379). Most importantly, she is ambiguous in handling the matter, and her sentiments towards the suitors seem contradictory. This is revealed in her dreams about the geese that consume the grains from her courtyard. She is overcome by sadness in these dreams when they are killed (*Odyssey*, XV. 540-550). The geese are symbolic of the imposters who drain the wealth of her household. Her attitude is incomprehensible to Telemachus, who complains to a servant that his mother treats the suitors better than worthy guests (*Odyssey*, XX. 133-134). Although a woman considered highly by most people, Penelope does not inspire enough trust from her husband nor her son. At the beginning of the story, Telemachus openly questions his parentage (*Odyssey*, I. 214-217), casting doubt on Penelope's chastity. Penelope is portrayed with human strengths and weaknesses. She has only herself to rely upon to fend off the contenders for the throne and protect her family. She

tries different tactics, always prudent, pacifist and diplomatic, which is a strong contrast with what her husband, the militant hero, will do under the same circumstances.

Telemachus' anxiety is in fact fuelled by many causes. He realizes that his mother's suitors are plotting against him. The young man is in the process of readjusting his relationship with his absent father and distracted mother. Upon his return from abroad, he does not share his precious information with his mother. Instead of answering her questions, he demands that she stay away from him. (*Odyssey*, XVI. 45-55). The author of the epic reveals an extraordinary insight into life in the way he handles the relations between mother and son in the shadow of an absent father. The hero's son is growing up to be a man, worthy of his father's name and teachings. In an effort to affirm his identity, Telemachus first follows Odysseus' footsteps to go abroad, and then after coming home, competes with the suitors to pull his father's bow (*Odyssey*, XVI. 110-117). His action should not be interpreted as an attempt to challenge his father's position but rather as a king's heir's concern for his own future in relation to the fate of his nation. As Joseph Campbell states, when a mythic character looks for the father, the goal is "his own character and destiny."⁵³ Telemachus associates closely his own destiny with his father's. He wants to restore peace and order to the family and kingdom much as his father does. Telemachus feels uncertain of Penelope's stance in the situation and needs some kind of reassurance. His doubts are going to be echoed by Odysseus' test of his wife's loyalty later in the story, not out of distrust but as a

⁵³ Campbell, *The Power of Myth* 166. Also see the same author's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 40.

necessary step to proceed with his plan to get rid of the suitors. Homer makes a successful portrait of Penelope, who is more than an idealized wife and mother, the helper, or the angel of the land. The difference between the good and bad women in the epic may not be a black-and-white matter after all.

Helen can also be considered as a helper but is different from Penelope. Telemachus meets Helen during his visit to Menelaus to ask for Odysseus' news (*Odyssey*, IV. 217-235). Like Penelope and Arete, Helen is highly honored in her husband's house and together they reign over the country in harmony (*Odyssey*, IV. 120-137). While Helen can be seen as Penelope's equal and parallel, her name is always associated with a one-time temptress and unfaithful wife. She is generally remembered as "the face that launched a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium,"⁵⁴ the reason or pretext for the great Trojan War that has destroyed many great men and brought numerous noble families down. Although largely understated in the *Odyssey*, she is a potential threat to men. Helen in the *Odyssey*, however, is supportive of the quest and her presence enriches the palette of the beneficent woman. A seductress at one time can be a virtuous and respectable wife at another. The difference between the virtuous and the adulterous is not definitive or constant. It all depends on the situation and the viewpoint.

⁵⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Sc. XIII, 88-89. The quotation is from the quarto of 1604, ed. Rev. Alexander Dyce, on <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/cmarlowe/bl-cmarlowe-faust.htm>

The roles of supporter and destroyer are interchangeable, subject to many external factors. Helen can be compared to Penelope as well as to the sirens. The tamed Helen is the Penelope of another kingdom. The difference between Helen and the sirens does not lie in the reputation – as both are taunted temptresses – but the manifestation of their prowess. Helen influences men with her physical beauty, much the way Calypso and Circe do. The sirens are different.

The twelve young servants in Odysseus's house who sleep with Penelope's suitors stand in contrast with Penelope; they show disrespect to their master who comes home in disguise (*Odyssey*, XXII. 413-426). They are on the side of the suitors, and help them in many ways to topple Odysseus' household. As soon as Odysseus regains control of his house, they are all punished by death. These servant girls can be considered as seductresses and traitors, i.e. the direct opposites of Penelope. They are somewhat reminiscent of Helen, whose illicit affair marks the beginning of Odysseus' long trip abroad. In comparison with the invincible and exotic "monsters in the sea," these domestic enemies are at once more dangerous and less powerful.

3. The Destroyer-turned-Helper

The story of the *Odyssey* begins with the predicament involving Calypso's attempt to retain Odysseus against his will (*Odyssey*, V. 203-204). Calypso reluctantly lets Odysseus go only after the Olympians' intervention (*Odyssey*, V. 115-124). Another immortal woman, Circe, tries to use her magic potion to change Odysseus into an

animal. Overpowered by Odysseus, she offers him her bed and agrees to free his comrades (*Odyssey*, X. 301-302). The descriptions of the physical appearances of the two characters have many points in common. They both have enticing features (*Odyssey*, V. 214; X. 136) and have beautiful tresses (*Odyssey*, V. 30; X. 220). Even their attire is similar: the goddesses are each depicted wearing a long silvery robe, golden belt and head-scarf on the day of Odysseus' departure (*Odyssey*, V. 230-233; X. 544-545). Their most significant similarities, however, are none other than their sweetly singing voices and impeccable weaving skills. The meaning of weaving in relation to sexuality is to be discussed further in the next chapter.

Both goddesses want to keep Odysseus for themselves but eventually agree to let Odysseus go. They give him generous provisions as well as useful advice so that he can continue his journey. They play the role of the destroyer in the beginning and then the helper in the end. The second phase of their relationship with Odysseus resembles that of the other-land's angle or the beneficent goddess-mother. Calypso and Circe's alliance to the hero makes them parallels to Penelope or Arete, but their relations with the hero are only temporary. Before Athena's or Hermes' intervention, they play the role of the seductress, or dark goddess and witch. Calypso and Circe can be considered as less distant from the hero's culture than the sirens, or Scylla and Charybdis. And yet compared with the Olympian goddess Athena, they are the foreign and "other" kind of divinity. Living in splendid isolation in reclusive territories makes them independent from the major culture. Calypso's intelligent and free-spirited personality is revealed in her speech to Hermes, the divine messenger and favorite son of Zeus. She eloquently

defends her causes but eventually submits to Zeus' wish, because she is part of the Greek hero's major belief system although her status is only marginal (*Odyssey*, V. 116-135). Circe's has a close relationship with nature, which renders her resourceful and knowledgeable. The independent spirit of the island goddesses finds full expression in the sirens' behaviors. Taking no heed of the major culture and tradition of the Greeks, the singing immortals are non-compromising and indifferent to men's fate. They also try to lure Odysseus to stay with them, like Circe and Calypso. However, what the sirens offer is their song, not sex, food or immortality; and they nearly succeed where Calypso and Circe fail.

Temptress or Helper

If a character is considered in terms of functions,⁵⁵ and if the significance of her existence is defined purely in terms of her relationship with the hero, she can easily be put into one of the bipolarized categories of helper and destroyer. In the *Odyssey*, the characters Athena, Ina, Eidothea, Penelope, Arete and Nausica can be seen as representing respectively the beneficent goddess, the good wife, and the helpful maiden. These characters are easily categorized in a simple binary system, although Penelope has more complexity in her character than the rest. In comparison, Calypso

⁵⁵ In Propp's *Morphology*, Russian folktales can be deciphered by means of 31 major functions. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Pirkova Jakobson, trans. Lawrence Scott (1928; rpt. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1958).

and Circe are characters which are relatively more difficult to categorize. They change from the role of destroyer to helper, and from independence to servility. The portraits of these women are multi-dimensional, incarnating contradictory qualities in the same character. Further reading into the characters would always reveal another dimension of meanings, which makes it hard to determine if the extremities of the bipolar system can really be maintained. The twelve servant girls are characters playing one single role, that of adulterer and conniver to Odysseus' enemies. Their tragic end seems justifiable from the hero's viewpoint. However, ascribing to them the role of absolute enemy may not be doing them justice. These young women in Odysseus' household may not be more disgraceful than the beneficent Eidothea, who betrays her own father to help Odysseus, or, for that matter, Calypso or Circe, who offer their bed to a foreign visitor. On top of that, Odysseus is also to be blame. Given his place as the master of the household, he can be held partly responsible for his servants' conducts. His long absence invites intruders and is a main reason of the anarchic situation at home. The young women who serve as lowly servants in a decadent court can be particularly vulnerable. The predator-like suitors lust after these girls the way they consume Odysseus' livestock. Those who dare to compete for the queen's hand would not hesitate to seduce the women younger and lower in rank. These girls need protection or support from their master. But there is practically no master to reckon on. Moreover, they are condemned for having lovers as if their bodies are Odysseus' inviolable property. It is as if the hero wants to have the right over every woman, home or abroad. His insecurity and self-projection make him a jealous husband. While Penelope is left

alone for long years fencing off suitors by whatever meager means that she has, Odysseus lives a conjugal life with women abroad. He does not seem to be conscious of having committed adultery and makes no resolution to amend his fault. Instead he suspects his wife of infidelity. He does not see his wife as his equal. Nor does he have enough trust in her. Although the hero's behavior can be considered normal in the historical-literary context, this can be a case of double moral standards, prejudice and intolerance in gender issues. It suffices to say at this point that a temptress is not necessarily helper or destroyer. The characters in the *Odyssey* cannot be simply put under the categories of helper or destroyer.

Incarnation of Pleasure Principles

Each character in the epic poem can be better understood when it is studied as part of the constellation, and in relation to other characters. Some critics write that women are often misrepresented in literature to cover up men's weaknesses. Dorothy Dinnerstein observes that the man tries to take control of the woman to appease his lack of security.

[The] man has magic feelings of awe and fear, sometimes disgust, toward all things that are mysterious, powerful, and not himself, and [...the] woman's fertile body is the quintessential incarnation of this realm of things. Alien, dangerous nature, conveniently concentrated near at hand in [the] woman's flesh, can be controlled through ritual segregation, confinement, and avoidance [...].⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976; rpt. London: Women's Press, 1987) 12.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that a woman in a male-centered universe is seen as the “other.” “Society sets up the male as the embodiment of “humanity,” “normality” and “what is essential.” He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.”⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter examines the representation of gender roles in literature and concludes that female characters are often “melancholy projections of a repressed male self.”⁵⁸ G. C. Spivak criticizes literary works which present a woman as the “other” relative to the man:

The woman allows the man to acquire a 'passivity' that would prohibit 'activity.' [...B]y being an object, [...] she allows the subject to deconstruct its sovereign motive to disguise its masochism/narcissism.⁵⁹

She cites as examples the works of Dante and Yeats in which women are “objectified, dispersed, or occluded” and whose presence is “a reactionary operation” to keep the men’s world in balance. Spivak describes how the men’s dreams and desires are projected onto a female character in Dante’s work. She states that Beatrice is a character that “remains mute, acts against her will.” To stress how the figure of a courtly lady in the medieval tradition is not represented in her own right, she uses the image of

⁵⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. M.M. Parshlay (Paris, 1949; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 12.

⁵⁸ Elaine Showalter, “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 27. See also her *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1930-1980*. 1985; rpt. London: Virago, 1987).

⁵⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Otherworlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 19-20.

a woman who "possesses the phallus by a grotesque transplant" to convey her message.⁶⁰

In a discussion about the representation of women in classical literature, Annis Pratt says that the place of woman within Western culture is one of "otherness." She claims that both the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions "propounded a [...] split between men and women in all aspects," and that men stand for "all that was right and good," and that "all negative qualities" are ascribed to the opposite sex.⁶¹ The siren is sometimes used to demonstrate the misinterpretation of women in traditional literature. In Nina Auerbach's study of the demonic figures of Victorian literature, the siren is held as a typical example of the ultimate other.⁶² Using a psychoanalytic approach, Silla Consoli also concludes that sirens are projections of men's fear and desire.⁶³ In this line of argument, sirens resemble the extremely negative, the most feared monsters in literature. However, does this image correspond to Homer's portrayal of the sirens in the *Odyssey*?

⁶⁰ Spivak, *Otherworlds*, 18, 19.

⁶¹ Annis Pratt says that the place of woman within Western culture is one of "otherness." *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1981) 6-9.

⁶² Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 3-32.

⁶³ Silla Consoli, *La Candeur d'un Monstre: Essai psychanalytique sur le mythe de la sirène* (Paris : Centurion, 1980).

The sirens are versatile creatures with multiple faces, which can be revealed when studied together with other characters. Odysseus is a hero who draws a sword to threaten the beautiful goddess Circe (*Odyssey*, X. 323) and drives a burning pole into god-like Polyphemus' eye (*Odyssey*, IX. 374, 393). However, with all his bravery and cunning, Odysseus cannot hurt or subdue the sirens. Before reaching the sirens' strait, he has to do some meticulous planning and rehearsing. He immobilizes himself but, upon hearing their songs, he loses control of himself (*Odyssey*, XII. 193-194). The hero cannot overpower the bird-women and bring them to his feet, because his physical strength is irrelevant in the sirens incident. The sirens' threat is not physical; they represent a force that is intangible, incorporeal and indestructible.

Odysseus profits from his intelligence and perseverance in the combat. He begins by making good use of the information and advice provided by Circe. He then reviews the situation thoroughly and takes every necessary measure. Odysseus has himself bound to a ship's mast, a posture that implies self-imposed restrictions and discipline. He chooses to take the risk of listening to the sirens' song. He could have chosen the other option, which is to stop his ears with wax as he obliges his men to do. He could have turned a deaf ear to the legendary magic song. However, his curiosity and courage urge him to make the best of the experience. He has a clever and flexible mind, as rendered in the Greek word "*polytropos*" in the first line of the *Odyssey*.⁶⁴ The sirens' song is a test of his

⁶⁴ Thanks to Guido Latré, the supervisor for the present thesis, for the insight on this important trait of personality of the hero.

fortitude as well as his faculty for facing a challenge. He resolves to use his intelligence to plan his actions, and his mental strength to discipline himself. He accepts the prerequisite for the test, for he knows that the reward is going to be worthy of the effort. He understands that without using restriction or moderation, the result will be fatal. The others who lack intellectual curiosity or sufficient capacities to assimilate the knowledge have to miss an invaluable experience. Those who have problems with self-restraint will end up giving up complete control of their lives and await destruction. To these lesser men, the sirens' songs can simply be reduced to an object of fear or desire, or both. It has to be an exceptional character to be able to make the most of what is offered by life and at the same time not to lose one's focus. These are exactly the qualities that render Odysseus a hero and, first and foremost, human. But what do the sirens have to offer to Odysseus, who has already had everything that a man can wish for before he comes to them?

The sirens are among the characters in the *Odyssey* that appear frequently later in folklore or literary works. They go through a process of development, from the invincible singing immortals to the "mute" and "objectified" figures in nineteenth century literature.⁶⁵ Their place in popular and literary imagination alike owes a large part to

⁶⁵ Franz Kafka contemplates the silence of the sirens, which he considers to be more dangerous than their songs: "Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing never happened, it is still conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never." However, Kafka's view of the mermaid is largely influenced by the conventional perception of their being the malicious seductress and destroyer of men. The silence he mentions is not passiveness or self-abnegation but a calculated move or strategy on the sirens' part to continue their dominance over the other sex. See "The Silence of the Sirens" [*Das Schweigen der Sirenen*] (1917), *The Complete Stories and Parables*, Franz Kafka, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1983).

Homer's powerful rendition, which is highly condensed and focused, but at the same time malleable enough to allow ample space for later interpretation and re-creation.

The sirens offer the seafarers a unique experience with lasting effects. As has been mentioned before, the sirens are affiliated to Calypso and Circe, the other deities living on foreign islands. But Calypso and Circe correspond to an earlier stage of the hero's evolution and the purpose of their existence is more easily discernible than that of the sirens'.

At their first appearance in the story, both Calypso and Circe are heard singing while their hands are busy at their looms (*Odyssey*, V. 61-63; X. 221-223). Skill in weaving is said to be a gift from the gods (*Odyssey*, VII. 107-111), the idea of which is related to the importance of the activity and the status of the person who practices it. It is above all a symbol of female sexuality; in folklore tradition, weaving is often associated with women who are eligible for marriage.⁶⁶ These divine women can be worthy wives to any man, but instead voluntarily become Odysseus' mistresses, and are then deserted. They are by no means inferior to Penelope except for the fact that they do not share the hero's cultural heritage. Graham observes that the idea is politically implicit, because it is inconceivable that "Greek colonists would expect to establish a new Greek community in which the women were not Greek."⁶⁷ National or cultural

⁶⁶ The relations between female sexuality and weaving, spinning or sewing are to be further discussed in Chapter 2.

⁶⁷ A. J. Graham, "The *Odyssey*, History and Women," 14.

identity is an important part of a character. Similar to Calypso and Circe, the sirens and the Cyclops are also of foreign origins. There will be further discussion of this point below, after dealing with the differences between Calypso, Circe and the sirens, with special emphasis upon the hero's evolution.

Circe is depicted as a goddess who speaks with an ordinary woman's voice, which suggests the mundane nature of her character. Circe tends to nature, herds animals and makes wine (*Odyssey*, X. 233-237). Composing her world of eternity are yearly seasons and life cycles. She stands for the essence of life, nurturing humanity's biological and basic instincts. Her productive activities can sustain life at its primary level. She is also a woman in her prime, mature, independent and self-sufficient. Circe has attained the status of being her own master, which allows her the freedom to decide on her marital affairs.⁶⁸ Circe is an ideal mate to any man, and can provide all the earthy bliss that any ordinary man can wish for. However, Circe's magical drink can turn a man into a pig, an animal that craves for food and depends on its master. Circe's guests descend to a more primitive existence, one like that of animals. The material comfort and carnal pleasure that she provides to men are catalysts for change that is against human progress. Odysseus' other crew members cannot resist the temptation and consequently become pigs. In a similar fashion, the suitors at home who lust after Odysseus' women and feast on his stock are all destroyed in the end. These men are

⁶⁸ Independence and self-sufficiency allows a woman to choose between marriage and celibacy. Further discussion on the subject is found in Chapter 2.

driven by pleasure principles and do not develop higher goals in life. Naturally, Odysseus is superior to these men and becomes their leader and the victor.

Like Circe, Calypso also offers Odysseus corporeal satisfaction. Instead of trying to transform him into an animal, she offers him a place among the gods. Circe's pigs are never hungry; and an immortal will never have to die. The gifts from the two goddesses are not different in kind but only in degree: they can sustain a man's lifespan but hold him back from his goals. Circe represents nature and its life-generating power. In her domain, the difference between human and animal is little and negligible; she sees the animal nature in human beings and nourishes it till a man gives away his humanity and is concerned about nothing but his primary needs. What Calypso offers is not very far from Circe's gift. The eternal life that she proposes to Odysseus can eliminate the physical limits of human existence. She can make Odysseus live forever, but she cannot give his life a more sublime meaning than earthly pursuits. Should a man be trapped by his own desire, his quest would be thwarted. If women's sexuality is the reason for fear and desire, as some of the above-mentioned critics claim, Odysseus can rise to the challenge without any difficulty. For the man who has turned his back on two beautiful goddesses, it is most unlikely that he would fall for some bird-like creatures. He is treated like a king or an immortal by his divine hostesses, but for his encounter with the sirens he binds himself to a staff like a convict or slave. Odysseus knows that the sirens are special.

As noted before, Homer does not specify the physical appearance of the sirens. What makes the sirens passage exceptional is the author's careful choice of materials, keeping the focus on the essential for optimal effect, and his ability to depict the moment with an intensity and grandeur that befits an epic. What is important is not only what is written but what is unwritten, where words are missing or meaning is to be found between the lines. If the sirens do not stand for sexual seduction, what then do they represent? And how does it relate to an epic hero's journey?

Personal and Group Identities

Unlike most other characters in the *Odyssey*, the sirens are known by their collective names, like that of the Cretans (*Odyssey*, XIV. 205), the Danaan (*Odyssey*, I. 350), the Furies (*Odyssey*, XI. 280) and the Cyclops (*Odyssey*, IX. 275), all of which are less important characters. The sirens do not have individual identities or personal names. This point can be rendered clearer by using the case of the Cyclops, which complements the sirens episode.

The politics of names in the course of colonization finds is well demonstrated in the *Odyssey*.⁶⁹ It involves the strategy of naming, renaming and un-naming in the text and context. Odysseus goes to the island of the Cyclops and meets one of its

⁶⁹ The politics of names will be discussed again in Chapter IV, regarding the white administrators' manipulation of the names the African-Americans' personal and street names.

inhabitants, who is known by his neighbor as “Polyphemus” (*Odyssey*, IX. 403).

However, the Greek hero never addresses the owner of the land by his personal name (*Odyssey*, IX.364), a refusal to acknowledge that he is a respectable individual, let alone that he is Odysseus’ equal. In his turn, Odysseus announces his name to Polyphemus as “nobody,” and tricks the neighbor into believing that it is only Polyphemus who has inflicted injury on himself (*Odyssey*, IX. 366). The incident shows the hero as a cunning fighter who outwits the godly giant. But it also shows his treatment of a member of a foreign race.

L.E. Donaldson discusses the issue of identity. Individual identity is a contrast to the group identity: “[N]ationalist identity exists as a racially, culturally, and metaphysically pure essence that excludes all other marginal and impure ‘particular selfhoods.’”⁷⁰ Individual identity or “selfhood” can be complementary to group identity if a balance can be kept between the two. To address another person by the proper name is the first requisite step for proper personal communication. The failure to recognize a person as an individual with particular qualities and needs is one of the major causes of dysfunctional interpersonal relationship. An aggressor may deliberately address his victim by the collective name which is abstracted from his origin, color, or any other physical traits. This is a tactic to deny the person his individuality and therefore his humanity, and an attempt to put him in an inferior position.

⁷⁰ Laura E. Donaldson, “Rereading Moses/Rewriting Exodus: The Postcolonial Imagination of Zora Neale Houston” *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire-Building* (London: Routledge, 1993) 103-04.

In the *Odyssey*, the Cyclops and the sirens are of another race and considered the hero's opposites, which from Odysseus' ethnocentric viewpoint, the "vice" and "other."⁷¹ Luce Irigaray points out that the "other" character "never has any 'proper' name [...] so that [...] one can forget without even having recognized her."⁷² As the reversed reflection of the hero's image, his opposite is denied the right to be recognized as unique or individual.

The Hero's Ethnocentricity

Odysseus comes home to reunite with his faithful wife and destroy the unlawful suitors. The rightful lord of the land executes the intruders who have exploited his resources, coveted the hand of the lady of the house, and plotted against the heir to the kingdom. The insolent usurpers seem thoroughly to deserve their brutal end. The hero spares no one, not even the lesser culprits who beg him for mercy (*Odyssey*, XXII.310-324). This is how the story comes to a happy ending. But if Polyphemus is the

⁷¹ In her commentary on a movie version of Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass," Luce Irigaray points out that the reflection of Alice in the mirror is the "other." Luce Irigaray, "Le mirror, de l'autre cote" *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977) 9. In folklore, sometimes the object of mirrors is associated with mermaids. The mirrors are men's products and therefore a symbol of the human world. Like Irigaray's interpretation of Alice's image in the looking glass, the mermaid is not presented in her proper right.

⁷² "[...] qu' [elle] n'a jamais de nom « propre » [...] pour qu'on puisse [...] l'oublier sans même l'avoir identifiée." "Le mirror, de l'autre cote" 20.

protagonist of the story, what is revealed if the last chapter of the epic poem is compared with the Cyclops episode?

Living in harmony with nature does not make the Cyclops a savage people as claimed by Odysseus. Polyphemus' island is similar to that of Circe, where the beauty of nature strikes every passer-by. And like Circe, he is also a deity by birth. According to Zeus' speech earlier in the story, Polyphemus is the favorite son of Poseidon and the sea-nymph Thoosa, which gives the giant a status equivalent to a god (*Odyssey*, I. 68-75). It also explains the extraordinary beauty and wealth of the island. In spite of their physical strength, the Cyclops are not militants or looters; they neither go to battles nor launch wars against other countries to expand their territories or increase their wealth. They have an agricultural economy and are self-sufficient. The Cyclops have too much that the hero wants to have.

The Cyclops' island has an abundant supply of crops and fruit, and wild goats roam the luxuriant woods (*Odyssey*, IX. 107-110, 117-124, 132-143). As soon as he sees the harbor, Odysseus figures out how he can make the best use of it (*Odyssey*, IX. 124-130). While his crew wants to leave the island immediately after stealing some cheese and some sheep, Odysseus sets his mind on a bigger prize. Being a plunderer and looter, of which he boasts as being the best in his time (*Odyssey*, IX. 505; XIX. 285), he insists on asking Polyphemus for generous gifts (*Odyssey*, IX. 224-226). Eventually he makes off with a sizable flock of fat sheep and goats, leaving behind a wounded giant and a bereaved farm (*Odyssey*, IX. 464-465).

What happens at Polyphemus' place is not a singular incident. Earlier in the story, Odysseus recounts to his host how he and his men invaded the city of the Cicons, killed the men, took their women and made off with the spoils (*Odyssey*, IX, 46). Before his arrival, the Cyclops' land was peaceful and quiet (*Odyssey*, IX. 167-169), the same way that Cicons' once was. These island inhabitants do nothing to provoke Odysseus and certainly do not deserve the treatment that they receive. Odysseus' conduct is not better than the suitors' back in Ithaca. However, he comparison seems to be far-fetched and irrelevant from an ethnocentric perspective. Driven by greed, Odysseus is totally oblivious of the rights of the natives.

The intruder judges the Cyclops to be a group of unlawful savages (*Odyssey*, IX. 106, 215), on the ground that they do not have the same religious beliefs, political or judicial systems as his native country (*Odyssey*, IX. 111-115). Although he notices that the Cyclops do not mind other people's business and that each of them lives very much by himself (*Odyssey*, IX. 113-115, 186-192), Odysseus still insists on meeting Polyphemus and asking for presents (*Odyssey*, IX, 256-271). He wants to impose Aecheans' customs or etiquette on an inhabitant of a reclusive land. Although not living up to the hero's expectations, the Cyclops seem to respect each other's territory and privacy. Odysseus fails to show understanding, tolerance or respect to the other people or their culture. He has his eyes on their material wealth, and also wants to show off his strength (*Odyssey*, IX. 474-526). His behavior in the Cyclops' island stands as a strong contrast to the prudence which he manifested in the sun-god's island, where he shows again his civil manners and goes to the length of ordering his crew members to swear

solemn oaths not to touch its herds (*Odyssey*, XII, 387-394, 417-422). He is shown, on the one hand, as a respectable hero worthy of his name, while, on the other, as a pitiless raider who robs, rapes and kills. We would not say that he suffers from a double personality, but he is shown to entertain a double moral standard. He is selective in his communication of good-will. This behavior also calls into question his personal integrity, although this notion, as it is known today, may not correspond to the representation of a hero in Greek mythology. After all, a Greek mythological hero is geographically and historically bound. The application of the concept of a universal hero based on characters such as Odysseus in contemporary literature is yet to be discussed.⁷³

Whether Polyphemus deserves the treatment that he receives needs further investigation. First of all, the descriptions concerning this character through the narrator or the protagonist's voice are inconsistent or self-contradictory. The way Polyphemus tends to his sheep and keeps his house shows him to be a diligent and skilled farmer, and a conscientious house-keeper (*Odyssey*, IX. 183-186, 217-223, 232-250, 307-315, 335-339). It is hard to imagine that the same person can tear apart human bodies and dump the bones on the floor in a house as meticulously arranged and well-kept as described a few moments earlier. The alleged cruelty and bad temper do not match the gentleness that Polyphemus shows toward his animals. Even after being assaulted by Odysseus, he does not fail to notice the distress of one of his rams. He tries to comfort

⁷³ The idea of the universal hero is central to the work of Joseph Campbell such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The characterization of the contemporary hero corresponding to the modern sirens is to be discussed in the last two chapters of the thesis.

the animal in spite of his own distress. Moreover, the words he speaks to the animal are surprisingly tender and loving (*Odyssey*, IX. 440-454). The giant shows an extraordinary sensitivity and self-discipline, immensely different to the hero, who sees in the animal nothing more than a delicious meal. Odysseus describes the tactless Cyclops as “lawless and inhuman” (*Odyssey*, IX, 105).⁷⁴ But what is shown here is a man who tries to protect the animals that he has raised with care. In contrast, the hero robs and consumes, leaving in his trail devastation and waste.

The one-eyed giant incarnates the essence of his land, which is resourceful, untamed and heavenly. He is simple and private, distinctly different from the hero who is charming, eloquent, sophisticated and worldly. Polyphemus is accused of killing and eating Odysseus’ men. However, as human history shows, aborigines are often accused of cannibalism, because this is a capital crime and a major taboo in civilized human society. This is another pretext for aggression towards the otherwise inoffensive people. One cannot tell if Odysseus lies about the murder of his crewmembers, as the Greek hero’s words should not be taken at face value. But telling the truth is not one of Homer’s hero’s strengths. For example, he has deliberately misled Polyphemus about his ship and his name (*Odyssey*, IX. 281-286, 364-367). His only concern is his host’s wealth. The hero’s words are unreliable in judging this strange-looking inhabitant of a foreign island.

⁷⁴ Translation by Ian Johnston, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/odyssey12.htm>

Polyphemus' situation can be compared with that of an exotic character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The character Caliban in *The Tempest* represents an original inhabitant of a prospective colony, as Trevor R. Griffith argues. He is the native and original master of a "virgin land," reduced to the status of a slave by a forceful intruder from the civilized world.⁷⁵ A possible interpretation is that Prospero is the newcomer who appropriates the island and usurps the power of its rightful owner. The frustration and anguish that accompany the exile are translated into forcible control of the new land and its local inhabitants. Charles Lamb pictures Shakespeare's hero in such a stressful situation: "Prospero in his boat [...] suffers himself to be conveyed away at the mercy of his enemies to an unknown land."⁷⁶ Odysseus is in a similar state when he comes to the Cyclops' doorstep. He needs provisions for the journey; the abundance of the earthly paradise enlarges his appetite. He also wants a boost of his personal esteem, which has suffered considerably during his previous misadventures. At the sight of the stately-looking man, he knows that he has found an opportunity to prove his strength to the world.

Polyphemus is master of his land as Odysseus is in Ithaca. But seen from the hero's ethnocentric viewpoint, the one-eyed giant represents the evil enemy and the destroyer, although in reality it is Odysseus who is the intruder and aggressor. The

⁷⁵ Trevor R. Griffiths, "'This Island's Mine': Caliban and Colonialism," *The Yearbook of English Studies: Colonial and Imperial Themes*, Vol. 13 (1983) 159-180.

⁷⁶ Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles Lambs*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1924) 553.

Cyclops is presented as the hero's "other" and opposite. With regard to his relation with the hero, Polyphemus resembles any member of the sirens, who then can be seen as his female counterpart, the hero's twice-removed "other."

Polyphemus is similar to the sirens in more than one way. He has only one eye; and the sirens are only half women. Both of them look like monsters from the aesthetic norm of the hero's culture. Besides, they are immortals and have divine parentage. Most importantly, they possess extraordinary power that can threaten the hero's life. In a binary system, Polyphemus can be regarded as Odysseus' direct opposite, and the male counterpart of the sirens. The affinity between the Cyclops and the sirens is captured later in medieval folklore. The half-fish woman called Melusina is married to a human and one of their children is a Cyclops. This tale originated in the Near East or South Central Europe, as noted by Sabine Baring-Gould and Horace Beck.⁷⁷ The resemblance between the sirens and the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* is hard to miss.

However, the differences between the two are equally important. Polyphemus performs the function of providing food and glory to the hero, albeit involuntarily. He concerns with the very basic necessities of life, which constitutes the very meaning of his existence. In this respect, he resembles Calypso and Circe, the beautiful and affluent goddesses, owners of beautiful foreign islands, who, on the one hand satisfy Odysseus' physical needs in the most luxurious manner and on the other hand threaten

⁷⁷ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (1868, rpt; London: Rivingtons, 1876) 206; Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Middle Town, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 233.

his quest. The sirens episode has practically no description of the appearance of the landscape surrounding the sirens' dwelling place, which is in sharp contrast with the episodes involving Polyphemus, Calypso and Circe. The absence of description leaves ample room for free interpretation. The affinity between the sirens and these other-landish immortal figures suggest that the sirens' island would have a similar outlook. However, since the sirens do not represent basic necessities but the intellectual and cultural aspects of life, the appearance of their dwelling place may not be relevant at all. In a study of ancient Greek history, Alain Ballabriga says that the sirens' island represents what is evil and dangerous for the colonizer: "In the eyes of the Greeks, long after the beginning of the colonial adventure [the sirens' island] remained a sea of frontiers and monsters."⁷⁸ The idea of "frontiers and monsters" is an expression of fear on the part of the colonizers. In fear, one can imagine the sirens' abode as a barren and wasted island, as one can associate temptation with a luxuriant paradise. It is possible, therefore, to picture the singing bird-women's native country in all the possibilities according to different viewpoints. However, Homer declined to give any explicit suggestion of how his sirens' place looks like. The lack of description is hugely significant; it indicates that what the sirens represent is ethereal and intangible. What they mean to the hero is also very special.

⁷⁸ "[l'île des Sirènes] qui aux yeux des [Grecs], longtemps après le début de l'aventure coloniale en Occident, resta une mer des confins et des monstres." Alain Ballabriga, *Les fictions d'Homère: L'invention mythologique et cosmographique dans l'Odyssée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) 166.

Homer's treatment of the sirens is extremely intelligent and controlled, particularly in comparison to their rendition in other classical works. *Argonautica* is notable for the rendering of the sirens episode with regard to the length and details. To begin with, the sirens song in *Argonautica* does not have lyrics and thereby is disassociated with knowledge or culture. Apollonius Rhodius' sirens attract the seafarers not by words but by their voice, which appeals to sensual pleasure, with an effect similar to the episodes of Calypso and Circe in Homer's epic. In *Argonautica*, the part about a crew member jumping into the sea but being saved by the others bears a great resemblance to the lotus-eaters episode in the *Odyssey*. In Homer's tale, just before arriving at the Cyclops' island, Odysseus meets the lotus-eaters who offer his crews the plant that can make them stay forever (*Odyssey*, IX. 85-101). The lotus-eaters lure the seafarers to their peril by using magic plants, with an effect not unlike the one Circe's magic potion has on Odysseus' men. Homer's sirens do not offer any magical plants or potions, or any other substances that can induce illusions or escapism. Like Calypso or Circe, the lotus-eaters lure their victims who let themselves be guided by pleasure principles. Odysseus is superior to the average man and can resist these temptations without effort. In that sense, Apollonius Rhodius' sirens are not much different from Homer's lotus-eaters, Calypso or Circe. Homer's sirens is of a different kind.

The sirens test constitutes another level of difficulty in the *Odyssey*. The sirens' song means danger for the unprepared or under-qualified. It also means a great reward for the one who succeeds. The sirens guard the threshold of an unknown domain where

human limits are tested. Odysseus has gone through hell earlier in the story, but the sirens' world lies beyond the hero's native culture and belief system. He is unprotected; his fortitude and intelligence are all that he can depend upon to get himself through. In Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, an image of the sirens hovering over Odysseus' head is used to illustrate the section on the "crossing of the threshold."⁷⁹ However, the sirens are not mentioned in the text. Campbell states that the guardian of the threshold embodies the danger of the unknown and is responsible for some destructive aspects of the challenge.⁸⁰ But he also points out that, for those who have "competence and courage," the risk will be proved worthy to take. "A genuine psychological readiness" will be needed to cross the threshold to reach a "new zone of experience."⁸¹

The sirens' rock is situated in the waterway between Scylla and Charybdis, and marks a rite of passage for the hero. Scylla and Charybdis test the hero's ability to set priorities, to make choices and to make sacrifices. Odysseus has to eliminate unnecessary burdens in order to make further progress. The sirens' challenge involves diligence and self-restraint. This is also an opportunity for the hero to enhance his knowledge of the world and of his proper self. Successfully going through this piece of water can take Odysseus' personal evolution to another level. As discussed earlier on,

⁷⁹ For the idea of "threshold guardian," read Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 83.

⁸⁰ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 77-79.

⁸¹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 82.

the sirens can be seen as helpers and destroyers, or angels and monsters, depending on the man's reaction. A deeper look into the sirens reveals that these figures represent something more complex and complete than can be shown by a bipolarized helper-opponent schema. Moreover, they have a versatile and dynamic relation with the hero and the other characters. It may not be enough to read the sirens as simple monsters, or the hero as a helpless victim. The sirens episode carries a rich message, about the offering of a beautiful gift and the celebration of personal achievements.

Virgin and Land

The sirens represent untamed women and their native land, both of which are objects coveted by the colonizer. The female body is often used as metaphor for fertile land; a newly discovered country is often referred to as a "virgin land." From the intruders' point of view, a new colony is considered unexploited and uninhabited, which is a strategy to deny the natives' right to the land and to establish the intruder's legitimate governance. The notion of "virgin" is associated with the phase of a woman's life in which she is inexperienced, inoffensive, and, above all, uncharted and free. The relentless and aggressive colonizers see the new territories and their women as prey, the prize and trophy of their adventures. The virgin is metaphoric as well as metonymic for the prospective colony. Colonial culture is incorporated in the Greek epic.

In order to establish his sovereignty over the newly conquered land, the invader has to dominate the female, like the suitors who compete to marry Penelope. In an

article "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas," Philip Young quotes from Hart Grane how the New World opened itself for Columbus, "like a woman, ripe, waiting to be taken."⁸²

Copulation is compared to territorial occupation; the fate of the inhabitants is closely connected to their land. Susheila Nasta observes that it is both a historical phenomenon as well as literary convention to compare women's bodies to the land, particularly in the context of colonialism:

Colonized nations have frequently been represented by Europeans as "female" requiring "paternal governance" by the dominant power. Later, this mythologized femaleness of the nation culture was perpetuated in the work of male writers who created stereotypes of woman: the "mulatto figure."⁸³

Dorothy Jones uses arguments from the works of both Katherine Mansfield and Henry Handel Richardson and concludes that "[c]olonial and post-colonial writing frequently personifies the newly settled land as female," which results in the "personifications of landscape."⁸⁴ Young writes about the personification of the colony in the history of America. He states that the new continent is personified by Pocahontas, the daughter of the chief of an aboriginal tribe. She became the symbol of the land, and "was made a fertility goddess, the mother of us all."⁸⁵ To be hailed as a national symbol, Pocahontas

⁸² Hart Grane, "Poem," quoted in Philip Young, *Three Bags Full: Essays in American Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, 1972) 195.

⁸³ Susheila Nasta, "Introduction," *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (London: The Women's Press, 1991) xiii.

⁸⁴ Dorothy Jones, "Women, Place, and Myth-Making: A Post-Colonial Perspective," *A Talent(ed) Digger*, eds. Hena Maes-jelinek Gordon Collier, Geoffrey V. Davis (Amsterdam: Atlanta, 1996) 194,195.

⁸⁵ Jones, "Women, Place, and Myth-Making," 194.

loses her individual identity, in the same way as Polyphemus loses his in the face of foreign invasions.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope gives a human face to the hero's homeland, and Nausicaa personifies a friendly overseas state. While Penelope is the mother and wife, the latter is a daughter and virgin. Unlike the other overseas goddesses, the sirens do not have sexual contacts with the travelers. They are virgins of a savage race of the unmapped territories, the "new" world and "virgin" land. The new playground sometimes turns out to be the colonizers' graveyard, as implied by the mariners' overstaying their welcome on the exotic soil. The exotic is often associated with the erotic. Odysseus takes the Cicons' women after ransacking the city, as if the foreign land and its women are mere objects to be used and trashed. It seems that it is not only the natives who are the victims. In the end even the most experienced and cunning colonizer may have to suffer.

The Cicons' women are objectified and used to satisfy the Greek adventurers' biological or economic needs; Odysseus uses Calypso and Circe in a similar way, although without violence or bloodshed. The hero disrupts the peaceful life of the Cicons just as he disrupts that of the Cyclops. If the union of the hero with the Great Goddess is the ultimate aim of his quest, as Joseph Campbell suggests, then the aboriginal women are the adventurers' most prized loot. Annis Pratt talks about how this phenomenon in history is represented in mythology:

With a highly militarized, patriarchally structured culture, the Achaeans [...] were convinced of their right to take over the cultures they conquered and impose their way of

seeing things upon them. A frequent narrative form that their accounts of invasion assumed was the story of the rape of some local female divinity by a member of their pantheon of gods.⁸⁶

Pratt calls it the “rape-trauma archetype” and cites the stories of Apollo and Daphne, as well as the myths involving figures such as “Alpheus and Arethusa, Pan and Syrinx, Zeus and Leda/Io/Europa/Danae.”⁸⁷ She further elaborates her point by citing a group of tales called “pursuit narrative,” “in which a rejected male continues to pursue an unwilling woman.

The pursuit narrative in mythology often involves a green-world locale, an island, “well,” or grotto, invaded by men who rape the beneficent women residents – followed by an account of the destruction and theft of the area's natural value.⁸⁸

Pratt states that the woman often uses nature to protect her from assaults: “Daphne turned into a laurel tree in order to escape Apollo, Syrinx became a reed to avoid Pan, Arethusa changed into a spring to elude Alpheus.”⁸⁹ Robert Graves refers the rape myths to the historical cultural context: “Zeus’ rapes apparently refer to Hellenic conquests of the goddess's ancient shrines, such as that on Mountain Cyllene.”⁹⁰ Rape is a premeditated and organized act of violence against another land and its people, and a strategy to break its former social tissue and destroy its value system, with an aim

⁸⁶ Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982) 3.

⁸⁷ Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* 4. Susan Brownmiller also discusses about the issue of rape and its political and social implications. Her view is similar to that of Pratt. See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

⁸⁸ Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* 25.

⁸⁹ Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* 25.

⁹⁰ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 56.

to establish the aggressor's sovereignty and superiority. The woman in the occupied territories is referred to as either a virgin or whore, to be taken by the new master for pleasure, but never as his wife or as a mother to his children. Her role alternates between the provider and the destroyer, depending on the colonizer's policy and strategy. The result, however, turns out to be unexpected sometimes. In the documents involving early immigrant activities in Australia, Henry Handel Richardson and A.D. Hopes show that the colony and its women often surprise their new rulers with their versatility, complexity and unpredictability.⁹¹ These women may prove to be disappointing to the colonizers.

The new world or its women may not correspond to the expansionist's dream but rather his worst nightmare. As Dorothy Jones remarks, the nineteenth century British settlers eventually found that paradise is not any colony overseas but their own country.⁹² The colonizer's goal is to have their achievement abroad recognized at home; home-coming is the real goal of their life. The theme of the *Odyssey* is the return of a hero. His great adventures and the conquests that he has made are subject to this ultimate goal. The ethnic and cultural identity of the protagonist is a constant factor,

⁹¹ Henry Handel Richardson, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, vol. 1: *Australia Felix* (1917; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 8; A.D. Hope, "Australia" (1939), *Collected Poems 1930-1970* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972) 13.

⁹² Jones, "Women, Place, and Myth-Making: A Post-Colonial Perspective," 193.

unaltered by his experiences or circumstances.⁹³ In response to the two worlds and two separate realities, the protagonist adapts a dual system of behavior and moral standards. Jones observes that, at the height of the colonization era, literature reflects the corresponding collective psyche of the colonizers who bipolarize the women into angel and monster, or the goddess and the whore, in the process. When studying the Manawee story, Clarissa Pinkola Estes discusses the phenomenon of the *criatura*, the incomprehensible quality of the "wildish woman":

Anyone close to a wildish woman [sees in her] the presence of two women: an outer being and an interior *criatura* [...]. The outer being [...] is often pragmatic, acculturated, and very human. The *criatura*, however, often travels to the surface from far away [...], always leaving behind a feeling: something surprising, original, and knowing.⁹⁴

In this passage, a woman of a particular ethnic group is described in abstract terms that contradict one other. The inconsistency of her character is a projection of the dichotomist world-view of the man. It can be used to describe Penelope, Calypso, Circe and the sirens, as well as the relationship between them. The essence of the characterization lies in the integrity and the wholeness of the persona, not in the agglomeration of parts. These female characters should be studied each in her own right.

⁹³ The theme of home-coming in fairy tales in regard to the protagonist's personal development is to be developed in the next chapter.

⁹⁴ C. P. Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) 134.

Sailors' Stories and Tall Tales

In a book originally titled *Superstitions of Sailors*, Angelo S. Rappoport observes the similarities between the *Odyssey* and most mariner stories: "The entire *Odyssey* is practically nothing else than a collection of sea-stories current among the Greeks at the time of Homer and collected by the latter."⁹⁵ As Rappoport explains, one of the main shaping forces of sea-stories is "the love of travelers to exaggerate and to tell adventures which in reality they had never experienced."⁹⁶ He goes on to cite the example of Circe and the sirens to illustrate the ancient seamen's "ignorance" and proclivity for "exaggeration."⁹⁷ With its geographical situation and political-social condition, ancient Greece provides a perfect environment for the birth and growth of mariners' tales. The sirens' stories are byproducts of overseas adventures and reflections of the Hellenic colonization culture. In the *Odyssey*, the most incredible tales of the voyage can be found from Book IX to XII, recounted by the hero in direct speech. The subjectivity of the narrative voice may be an issue. The reception and expectation of the audience also play an important part in the treatment of subjects. Both in the story and in real-life, tales are traded between the adventurer and his host over a glass, to kill time or rekindle friendship. In the chapters shown above, Odysseus impresses King

⁹⁵ A. S. Rappoport, *The Sea* (1928; rpt. London: Senate, 1995) 9.

⁹⁶ Rappoport, *The Sea* 9.

⁹⁷ Rappoport, *The Sea* 9.

Alcinous with the recounting of his adventure. Other instances involving telling tales within the tale include Menelaus' speech to Telemachus (*Odyssey*, IV. 350-587), and Eumaeus' to Odysseus (*Odyssey*, XV. 384-402). Two levels of story-telling are involved: the first one is Homer the historical tale-teller entertaining his patrons either in court or in public places with the stories about a hero's homebound journey; and the second is the fictive hero Odysseus – and to a lesser degree, Menelaus or Eumaeus – telling their own adventures to their foreign hosts. Through the use of direct speech to recount tales within the principal tale, the borderline separating the real and the fictive audience diminishes. The mariners' tale-exchanging is a social event; the teller needs the audience to complete his creativity. In the *Odyssey*, the development of the action is partly unfolded in speeches exchanged over a feast or on similar social occasions. This is fundamentally different from a theatrical monologue searching for the truth or soul, or a journalistic report documenting information or opinions. Seafarers' tales are for the sole purpose of entertaining and impressing. A story like Odysseus' journey must have helped numerous sailors to pass their long evenings on deck or in public houses.

Mariners' tale can be compared with later folklore, fairy tales, *contes de fées*, or *Hausmärchen* which were told at the hearth, exchanged in the market place or circulated near water sources.⁹⁸ Fairy tales provide insights into issues that accompany a young person's growth to adulthood, whereas a mariner's tale is often about a male

⁹⁸ However, mariners' tales bear some resemblances to *eventyr*, a literary genre specific to Danish literature which can be translated into the "adventure tale," which is to be discussed in Chapter 3.

adult's overseas adventures. As will be demonstrated later in the next chapter, fairy tales generally do not suggest home-coming as an ideal solution for young people's problems. Another difference to note is that fairy tales are not as preoccupied with ethnic identity issues as mariners' tales are. The *Odyssey* shows little tolerance to differences and does not hide a discriminative attitude towards the other sex or other ethnic groups. However, the epic also carries an important message about personal development that puts it on a par with many fairy tales. For the hero, the physical journey represents the path to the acquisition of knowledge about the world and himself. Whatever obstacles are lying in waiting for him are meant to serve this purpose. The sirens experience in the epic is more than a catalyst for the sentiments of fear and desire. It is an important test, a great challenge and rite of passage for Odysseus on the route to glory.

The Sirens Song

1. Not Food, Sex or Immortality

The lack of description of physical appearance and landscape in the sirens episode is a textual and contextual silence which is poetically significant. The silence contrasts with the words and punctuates the written lines, like a pause that enhances the notes in a piece of music, or a blank space in a traditional Oriental painting. The wordlessness invites the reader to participate in the creation by using his own

experience and imagination, to find what is missing in words or between lines. The treatment of the sirens episode forms a contrast to that of the Cyclops, in which, as already mentioned, the island's natural landscape is described in detail, to reveal a picture of abundance and promise. However, the Cyclops' island does not have much to offer other than plenty of good food. Polyphemus is the incarnation of the island, spending his eternal life herding livestock and processing dairy products. In spite of his great skills and effort, his existence has little meaning other than physical comfort. He is not a free man. He is detained by his immortality, imprisoned by the paradise-like island, and trapped in the primitive stage of life. The giant's physical size is in contrast with his mental state. Lack of higher aspirations in life, he is in effect closer to an animal than a human being. His one-eyedness can be seen as an indication of his narrowness of view and mind. The owner of the abundant island does not cultivate social relations or try to lend a helping hand to those in need. Odysseus is in every way Polyphemus' opposite. The hero has a free spirit which allows him to continue exploring and growing. That is the real reason why the godly giant is defeated.

The Cyclops' island is reminiscent of the lands of Calypso and Circe, which are of a similar nature. While the sirens do not even get to show their faces in the *Odyssey*, the beauty and sweetness of Calypso and Circe are described in elaborate detail. The charming goddesses can satisfy the physical needs of a man, but cannot offer what the hero aspires to. The supernatural powers that they possess – Circe's magic drinks and animals, and Calypso's gift of immortality – are solutions to hunger and death which are human physical limits that men have to deal with. However, the hero has to exercise

control over his desire, to prevent excessive consumption. Indulgence in comfort or pleasure has a high price to pay. Odysseus declines the offers, which proves that he knows better than the average man. This is an achievement not to be underestimated.

However, the sirens pose an even harder challenge for the hero. By the time that Odysseus encounters the sirens, he has proved to be able to accept gifts and favors without giving up his objectives. The sirens do not induce carnal desires, nor do they comply with primary preservation principles. The sirens' domain does not promise food or sex; as a result, it attracts neither thieves nor invaders. It is also the reason why the sirens' treasure cannot be vanquished or diminished. While the services offered by Calypso and Circe are consummative in nature, what the sirens can offer is less tangible but more sustainable.

The essence of the sirens episode is manifested in the song, of which a small fraction of the lyric is shown in the text. In what sounds like an introduction, the sirens entice the hero to hear them sing about the battles of Troy and promise to give him knowledge about the world and its future. The sirens have the abilities to be reporters, historians, prophets, as well as poets, storytellers and vocalists. In view of the sailors' reactions, the sirens song must also be appreciated for its artistic excellence.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Cicero holds that the sirens song invokes a kind of "intellectual curiosity" that is inherited in man. See "Les Sirènes dans l'Antiquité," *Dictionnaire des Mythes Littéraires*, ed. Jan-Paul Bertrand (Paris: Roches, 1988) 1290.

2. Sirens as Foreign Female Minstrels

The sirens are, as a matter of fact, not the only ones who entertain the weary travelers with songs and stories. The minstrels by profession also relate history or news, and communicate their personal opinion and make predictions of events that are yet to come. An example is Phemius, who serves in Odysseus' court, whose song covers the Achaeans' hapless return journey from Troy. His audience is visibly affected: his song brings silence to Telemachus and tears to Penelope's eyes (*Odyssey*, I. 325-335). Eumaeus also describes his song as captivating and spellbinding (*Odyssey*, I. 336-344, XVII. 514-520). After Odysseus has killed all the suitors, Phemius begs for his life. His argument is that the talent of a minstrel is a gift from gods and his service to Odysseus' enemies should not be seen as a crime (*Odyssey*, XXII. 330-354). Phemius is pardoned, and then praised. This incident shows the special status and privilege that a minstrel enjoys at that time. Another example in the epic involves a bard's singing on the occasion of Odysseus's visit at the Phaeacian court. His talent is also greatly admired by the audience. His song, which is recorded in its entirety in the text, is about the illicit love affair between Aphrodite and Ares (*Odyssey*, VIII. 266-369). While love is a major theme in artistic expressions, this song in particular can be, to a certain extent, a reflection of Odysseus's predicament with the opposite sex abroad as well as his fear of his wife's possible infidelity during his absence. The minstrels' songs are relevant to the theme and action of the story. Their occurrence in the text corresponds to the plot development and the hero's psychological state. The content of these songs is a

reflection of the characters' thoughts and feelings at the time. The profession of minstrel is widely revered in Greek society, as shown in the *Odyssey*. Minstrels are considered to be wise and worldly. Their songs provide not only entertainment but also insight into various aspects of life, including human relationships and emotions, as demonstrated by these two minstrels' work.

A siren can be considered as just another talented minstrel who sings of the deeds of men and the will of god. What the sirens are doing is not fundamentally different from the professional undertaking of Phemius or the unnamed Phaeacian minstrel, or again, for that matter, Homer, the real-life narrator and legendary author of the *Odyssey*. His other epic, the *Iliad*, is about the Trojan War, which is also the subject matter treated by Phemius and the sirens.

3. Knowledge and Artistic Excellency

The sirens can be comparable with these reputable minstrels. But their performance may excel many others, which can be proved by in the extreme reaction of their audience. While Phemius and his Phaeacian colleague are loved and praised in the tale, and their creator Homer has been revered through the centuries, the sirens are feared and slandered by many. While Phemius' performance moves Penelope deeply, the effect of the sirens song on Odysseus is much stronger. The sirens can lure men to stay at their peril, whereas Phemius has to beg for his life. The prowess of the sirens song lies in their artistic excellence as well as their knowledge of the world, which is

different from that of the other minstrels in degree and not in kind. The most significant difference – the danger that causes fear – can be her gender or origin, which makes her the “other” voice, which is in contrast with the performers from the main-stream culture. The foreign female minstrels’ song may be an unedited or uncensored version of information that is at once enchanting and dangerous to the Greek hero. On the one hand, it opens his eyes to events or viewpoints which he has never experienced before, while on the other, his former system of thought is challenged. The average traveler can be overwhelmed by this new knowledge and thereby get confused. The sirens’ song represents the forbidden and otherwise unattainable knowledge that the Achaean hero learns during the rite of passage that propels him from innocence to knowing.

Apart from being great story-tellers, these sirens must also be extraordinary singers possessing beautiful voices and exquisite vocal techniques. One can imagine from Odysseus’ reaction that the performance must be impeccable, a true joy and a feast to the ears. Since, as has been pointed out earlier, the pleasure that the sirens’ song offers is not carnal or sensual, and therefore unlike Calypso or Circe’s temptations, it is not just entertainment but belongs to the domain of high culture. The sirens’ experience cannot relate to the hero’s biological needs but enriches Odysseus’ aesthetic and artistic capacities and is therefore an integral part of the process of his evolution.

4. Strengthening of Character

For the home-coming hero, the new thoughts and exotic sensations can be overwhelming and even disturbing. He has to show self-restraint and moderation so as not to lose himself. Diligence and the ability to focus on his final goal are prerequisite qualities to anyone who claims to be his own master. For a lesser man, the sirens' song is a threat to his conventional beliefs and values. He will try to find a way to avoid the test, like turning a deaf ear to the voices. A man who caters to pleasure will indulge in the sirens' experience and stay forever. One is taken by fear and the other is overcome by his own desire. Neither of them understands the meaning of the test or profits from it. In fact, the sirens do not kill their audience. The sailors perish for having abandoned the purpose of their lives. They misuse the sirens' song and mistake the means for the end. These men would most probably also succumb to the temptation of Calypso, Circe or the Lotus-eaters. The sirens' gift becomes a deadly obsession that eventually destroys them.

The hero is able to rise above the challenge by fixing his mind on his goal. The sirens' test requires fortitude of character as well as meticulous planning. He strictly observes the rules and obligations, rehearses to perfection all the steps, and is persistent in carrying them out. It requires extraordinary effort and intellectual capacity, as well as a sound balance between the pursuit of pleasure and a moral purpose, which makes the hero stand out from the rest. The sirens' challenge is associated with courage, resilience, choice and discipline.

5. Song for a Hero

Odysseus succeeds in giving a meaning to the sirens song. His reaction to the song in turn makes the event a success, as an educated audience does to a distinguished artist. As the only one not to abuse or to flee the sirens' song, Odysseus is a worthy audience, one that can do justice to the sirens' performance. He has the appropriate attitude and makes effective preparation. As a result, he comes out of it enlightened, enriched, and invigorated. Thanks to the hero, the sirens are proved to be no monsters and their song can be a precious gift to have. Eventually the mythic bird-women's song is received as what it is; and the beauty and wisdom that it carries find the way at last to the ears of the one who is ready. The sirens song makes a hero, and is of a hero's making.

The interpretation of the sirens' song in the *Odyssey* in this chapter provides the basis for later discussions in the thesis, notably concerning the songs in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Yan Lian Ke's *Shouhuo*. The essence of the song of the Greek bird-women is recaptured and developed further in the context of African-American and Chinese contemporary novels. Homer's sirens are also to be compared to the mermaids in folklore, and the singing immortal figures can be related to Hans Christian Andersen's muted protagonist in "The Little Mermaid." The representations of voice and silence in a group of fairy tales found or written in the first half of the nineteenth century shed light upon the meaning of the new siren-mermaid song. The sirens have been a source of inspiration through the centuries and continue to be so.

Chapter II

Demise of Silence: Representation and Use of Silence in Nineteenth-Century Fairy Tales

The theme of silence has a special place in nineteenth-century fairy tales, in particular the Brothers Grimm's "The Twelve Brothers" and "The Six Swans,"¹⁰⁰ and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Wild Swans."¹⁰¹ Their plots are very similar: a young woman has to observe a code of silence in order to free her brothers from a curse.

Why do the Brothers Grimm tell the story twice and Andersen a third time? Textual and contextual repetition is common, even necessary, in fairy tales. Repetition can mean similar events recurring in a tale, or stories having minor plots borrowed from

¹⁰⁰ These tales are collected in *Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [Children's and Household Tales], editions 1812 and 1857. There are minor albeit significant differences between the two versions, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The text used here is based upon the following translation: *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and ed. Jack Zipes, (New York: Bantam, 1987). Later reference to the book will appear in the text as *CFBG*.

¹⁰¹ "The Wild Swans" was first published in 1843 together with several other tales. The English text used here is based upon the following translation: *The Complete Illustrated Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. H.W. Dulcken (London: Chancellor Press, 1982) 560-72. Later reference to the book will appear in the text as *CISCA*.

other tales, as Stith Thompson defines the term.¹⁰² He also says that repetition appears “mostly threefold,” which is meant “not only to give a story suspense but also to fill it out and afford it body.”¹⁰³ According to Derek Brewer, fairy tales that have similar “underlying patterns,” or an “intrinsic story,” belong to the same group, like a “family.” Accordingly, the reader or audience reacts and interacts with the tales as if they are part of a group rather than individual works.¹⁰⁴

The three tales in question have many things in common. First and foremost, there is a very similar underlying pattern or structure. Other similarities include subjects and motifs. These tales can be grouped together and put into a category which I would call “silent tales.” This chapter will also compare these tales with a number of others which, to a certain extent, deal with the issues of voice and silence. The list of tales includes “The Seven Ravens,” “Goldilocks,” “Our Lady’s Child,” “The Three Spinners,” “The Juniper Tree,” “The Brother and Sister,” “The Sleeping Beauty,” “Aschenputtel”, all found in the Grimms collection.¹⁰⁵

This thesis does not try to determine if “The Twelve Brothers” or “The Six Swans,” or in this case, any of the Brothers Grimm’s tales to be studied here, are

¹⁰² Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1946) 436.

¹⁰³ Thompson, *The Folktale* 456. According to Thompson, other forms of repetition are related to “variations” or “changes.”

¹⁰⁴ Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Cambridge 1980; rpt. Suffolk: Rowland & Littlefield, 1994) 6-7.

¹⁰⁵ These tales and their translations are all from the same collection mentioned-above.

authentic folklore or “fakelore,” a term suggested by Lutz Rohrich.¹⁰⁶ These tales will be read as they appear in their written form, and compared with the others from the Grimm collection or Andersen’s work. As remarked by Brewer, “[a]ny telling of a traditional story is an interpretation and a rationalization.”¹⁰⁷ This chapter endeavors to find out the interpretation and rationalization of the tales in question.

Today, little has been written about this group of silent tales, in spite of literary critics’ renewed interest in fairy tales in general.¹⁰⁸ Jack Zipes has done extensive research on fairy tales, particularly those of the Brothers Grimm, but writes very little about these tales. On one occasion, however, he analyses briefly “The Twelve Brothers” together with another tale called “The Brother and Sister.” His conclusion is that the authors express through these tales a desire for a stable home, in view of the political and economic situations in the German territories at that time.¹⁰⁹ Zipes’ conclusion indeed provides an illuminating insight for the understanding of the tales like “The Brother and Sister” or “Hansel and Grethel,” in which the children come home again in the end to live with their parents. These tales, however, are substantially

¹⁰⁶ Lutz Rohrich, “Introduction,” *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: UP of Pennsylvania, 1986) 4.

¹⁰⁷ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 19.

¹⁰⁸ Heidi Anne Heiner enlists some of the recently rewritten work on the same theme, including novels, children’s books, theatre, movie, poem, etc. See the following site.
<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/sixswans/themes.html>

¹⁰⁹ See his essay “Dreams of a Better Bourgeois Life: the Psycho-Social Origins of the Tales,” *Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1988) 28-42.

different from “The Twelve Brothers,” or, again, “The Six Swans.” The endings are not the same. The protagonists of the silent tales do not relapse into childhood security.

There is one piece of critical work on “The Twelve Brothers,” “The Six Swans” and “The Seven Ravens,” written by the French critic Jean Bellemin- Noël. He employs a psychological approach and analyses some of the details of these tales. While the discussion overall is interesting and illuminating, there is little attempt to relate his observations to the theme or general meaning of these tales. His interpretations of silence, laundry and spinning, for instance, seem to lose touch with either the social context of the time or the literary context of the genre. Most importantly, he overlooks the differences between these tales, or the significance of repetitions between them. The risk of such practice is that these tales can be reduced to trivial footnotes for a literary exercise on the Freudian theories about castration and incest.¹¹⁰

R. B. Bottigheimer argues that the notion of silence, as demonstrated in “The Twelve Brothers” and “The Six Swans,” is a major issue in nineteenth century fairy tales. She points out how the “narrative” and “textual” silence shown in these two tales is related to the weakening of female power.¹¹¹ According to Bottigheimer, the notion of silence is invariably associated with passivity and submissiveness. Zipes arrives at the

¹¹⁰ Jean Bellemin-Noel, *Les Contes et Leurs Fantasmés* (Paris: P U de France, 1983) 31-107.

¹¹¹ R. B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls & Bold Boys: The Moral & Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), particularly p. 36 et seq. Also “Silenced Woman in the Grimms' Tales: The ‘Fit’ Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context,” in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 115-131.

same conclusion about most of the Grimms' heroines, and says that they are "passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hard-working, patient, and straight-laced."¹¹² Both of them blame it on the narrating voice which represents the interest, sensibility and ideology of a certain class. However, they are not speaking of the same class. Zipes argues that the voice represents middle class values and Christian morals,¹¹³ whereas Bottigheimer contends otherwise: "It is the folk, not the bourgeoisie, which preserved harsh patterns of conduct for girls and women."¹¹⁴ It remains to be discussed if female silence bears certain class labels, as suggested by these two fairytale authorities. But they both seem to agree on the deduction that silence in nineteenth century fairy tales is a constraint on female expression. Bottigheimer explores further the issue of silence in comparing the treatment of the theme in these tales.

[T]he three tales differ in that they progressively weaken the figure of the sister in the numerically ordered sequence "The Twelve Brothers," "The Seven Ravens" and "The Six Swans."¹¹⁵

Bottigheimer claims that the silence in "The Twelve Brothers" is, in comparison with the others, less degrading or destructive: "The princess evinces much more innate power

¹¹² Jack Zipes, "Who's Afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and Politicization through Fairy Tales," *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1983) 57.

¹¹³ See Jack Zipes' series of work on fairy tales including "Who's Afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and Politicization through Fairy Tales," in his *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 45-70; also *Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹¹⁴ Bottigheimer, "From Gold to Guilt: The Forces Which Reshaped Grimms' Tales," *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, eds. James M. McGlathery et als. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 192-204.

¹¹⁵ Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls & Bold Boys* 37-38.

[than the sister figure in the other tales].”¹¹⁶ However, she believes the difference between them is only a matter of degree and intensity. For her, the representation of silence is basically the same in all these tales.

The complexity of the issue of silence manifested in fairy tales is yet to be explored. In the fairytale tradition, characterization is often subordinate to theme and action.¹¹⁷ In effect, a fairytale character often gets analyzed alongside theme and action, begging the question if it can exist in its own right. It is possible that, in the genre of fairy tales, character issues are less evident than the cause and effect of events and their reactions. In the reading of the silent tales in question, I find no particular personality traits or predispositions ascribed to the characters at the outset which significantly influence the course of action. As a result, the analysis below focuses on the action of the tales, to find out what they have to say on the theme of silence.

“The Twelve Brothers”

In the kingdom where a king and queen live with their twelve sons, a girl is soon to be born. The king plots to kill the boys so that the daughter alone can inherit the kingdom and all his wealth. He has twelve little coffins made and put in a room, the key

¹¹⁶ Bottigheimer, *Grimms’ Bad Girls & Bold Boys* 39.

¹¹⁷ Fairytale characters are, in the words of Elliott Oring, “two-dimensional” with little development or complexity. See his “Folk Narratives” in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, ed. Elliott Oring (Logan: Utah State Univ. Press, 1980) 127-129.

of which is entrusted to his queen. The youngest son learns about their danger from the mother and tells the others. The princes leave the castle, watching out every day for the queen's signal. On the twelfth day, a red flag hangs over the castle tower announcing the birth of a baby-girl. The princes go into the woods and stay in an enchanted house. Every day the older brothers go out and hunt for food, while the youngest keeps the house.

Many years pass and the princess grows up. One day when participating in a big laundry event, she discovers twelve little shirts. She begs of her mother to tell her the family history. Having learnt about what has happened, she resolves to look for her brothers. She goes into the woods and finds the enchanted house where her brothers live. The youngest brother hides her away until his brothers promise to remove their deadly vow against her. The princess makes up with her brothers and is allowed to stay with them. In return she does the cooking for everybody.

The siblings live together for many years and everything seems to go well, until one day the princess holds a feast and picks twelve flowers from the garden. All of a sudden, the princes change into ravens and fly away. Gone too are the enchanted house and the magic garden. When she is alone in the wild forest, an old woman appears in front of her, saying that the only way to set her brothers free is to abstain from speaking or laughing for seven years. The princess accepts the advice, sits on a tall branch of a tree and starts spinning. A king hunting in the forest proposes to marry

her, to which the princess gives her consent by a nod of her head. He then climbs up the tree and takes her down. Together they go to his castle and get married.

The young queen keeps her silence, even at the threat of the king's mother's vile accusations. Finally, the king sentences his wife to death. The moment when the queen is put on the stake, seven years have just come to pass. The curse is broken; the ravens fly in and change into princes again. The queen is now free to speak. The king and the queen are reconciled to each other, and everybody lives happily ever after, with the exception of the king's mother.

This tale is about the experience of a child growing up and dealing with family relations. As Derek Brewer says, the "family drama" is the universal theme of all narratives. He goes on to explain that the parental attitude has much influence on a young person.¹¹⁸ His development can be easily thwarted by hostility, jealousy and abuse, but also by too much protection: "The womb becomes a tomb if it is not left behind."¹¹⁹ The protagonist has to "escape from the mother-image as he is to kill the father-image."¹²⁰ Otherwise, regression will be the result and he would relapse to a former and inferior phase of development. In the worst of cases, he would fall into the

¹¹⁸ Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories*, in particular 7-8. See also Brewer, "Escape from the Mimetic Fallacy," *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. Derek Brewer (rpt. 1988; Cambridge: St Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1991) 3.

¹¹⁹ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 8.

¹²⁰ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 86.

stage of stagnancy or death, which Brewer calls “infantilism.”¹²¹ Brewer’s concept of the “family drama” can help us to understand the relationship issues of the silent tales.

1. First Phase of Sibling Relationships and Paternal Tyranny

1.1. Child Abuse

The tale reveals a child’s worst nightmare: absolute paternal authority that becomes cruel tyranny. The story begins when the peaceful kingdom and happy family is blessed with the birth of another child. The news, however, fails to bring any joy to the family. Instead, the event reveals the problem of the family and accelerates its disintegration. The king-father wants to get rid of his sons. He is the cause of disaster although the narrative voice passes no judgment on the father or his wanton behavior. Under his absolute authority, the queen is not his equal but a passive accomplice, a conniver; she keeps the key to his secret and upholds his status. Even at the pivotal moment when the youngest son demands to know, she shows great reluctance to speak out. An ineffective mother and wife is both the cause and effect of absolute paternal authority.

¹²¹ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 89.

The son has to flee the family house or be killed. In the case of “The Twelve Brothers,” the princes have to make for the woods. Before the flight, they are also symbolically executed; their death is represented by the twelve coffins in the locked chamber. The somber and secret chamber can be interpreted as the mother’s womb, while the key is a paternal phallic symbol. If the sons do not grow away from the dysfunctional parents, they may find their end in the womb or tomb.

Another possible form of child abuse implied in the tale involves the father’s dubious intention with regard to his then fetus-daughter. It is not favoritism but perversion that a father would decide on killing all the sons in order to make the daughter his sole heir. The princes’ lives are in danger, but the princess is hardly out of harm’s way. The brothers are saved, but their deadly vow poses a serious threat to the princess. The despotic father is the cause of distress for the children, male or female.

Derek Brewer has this to say on the relation between tragedy and family drama in his *Symbolic Stories*: “*Tragedy only arises within the family drama when the parent-figures kill the protagonist; not when the protagonist kills the parent.*”¹²² He explains further that “[i]n the family drama death of parents is the happy ending; it is the death of children which is tragedy.”¹²³ He claims that this is a significant point “which Freud and

¹²² The original is in italics. Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 58.

¹²³ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 132.

Propp do not see.”¹²⁴ Although Brewer assures us that “it is all right, indeed it is necessary, for children to kill parents,” ¹²⁵ in “The Twelve Brothers,” the father is neither judged nor punished. Fairy tales in general seldom have a father figure eliminated by force, which is a significant contrast to tragedy. Moreover, the young people always survive. Even if a protagonist is killed, the death is reversible or rendered in figurative terms, which gives fairy tales their epitaphic happy endings.

In “The Twelve Brothers,” the preparation and installation of the coffins is the young men’s execution in figurative terms, and keeping the coffins in a secret chamber is a symbolic burial. This part of the action is the focus of the tension in the early part of the story; it also triggers the complication of the plot. The symbolic death of the princes in the locked chamber to which the mother is a key-keeper signifies the imprisonment of the sons under the mother’s overprotection against the abusive and violent father. With the mother’s consent, the princes in “The Twelve Brothers” are able to escape from their parents – their womb and tomb – and continue their evolution. When they leave behind their parents as well as their past, they can move on.

¹²⁴ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 58.

¹²⁵ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 58.

1.2. Sibling Rivalry

Sibling rivalry can be as life-threatening to a young person as parental abuses. The arrival of a new baby can lead to deprivation of resources or attention for the other family members, in reality as well as in their imagination. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the king decides that his sons should be stripped not only of their rightful heritage but also of their lives. The pretext about the daughter that he uses is unimaginably weak. However, since fairy tales do not encourage young people to challenge paternal authority or to commit patricide, the infant daughter has to bear all the blame and become her brothers’ sworn enemy.

The father’s action towards his sons also has a negative impact on the sibling relationship. The father is not protecting the daughter’s rights. Instead, he is poisoning her relation with the brothers. The imposition of parental authority is certainly not a solution but rather the very core of the problem. The tale seems to suggest that if the children survive the predicament, it is often not because of but in spite of the parents’ interventions. Child abuse and sibling rivalry are closely connected in a number of tales, as discussed below.

1.3. Other Examples of Child Abuse and Sibling Rivalry

Child abuse is the subject matter of several other tales from the Grimms' collection, including "The Brother and Sister," "Hansel and Grethel" and "The Juniper Tree," to name just a few, where children are victims of poverty, negligence, abandonment, or even murder. In "Hansel and Grethel" and "The Brother and Sister," the children are starved by the poverty-stricken parents. The children in "The Juniper Tree"¹²⁶ suffer complicated family relations, comparable to those of "The Twelve Brothers."¹²⁷

In the beginning of "The Juniper Tree," a family is devastated after the mother passes away. She is buried under a juniper tree in front of the house. Her son suffers at the hands of the ruthless stepmother, who wants her own daughter to inherit the family fortune. In spite of this, the siblings are on good terms. One day, the stepmother kills him and puts the blame on her daughter. The boy's body is cooked and served to his father. The ignorant father dines insatiably on his son's meat. The sister mourns her brother, collects his bones and buries them under the juniper tree. The boy's spirit becomes a bird and flies to a goldsmith, a shoemaker and a miller. He sings to them

¹²⁶ *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes, 186-193. Later references to the translation will be cited in the text.

¹²⁷ Other fairy tales of a similar story plot can be found in the section of "AT-450, The Brothers Who Were Turned Into Birds" in D. L. Ashliman, *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language: Based on the Aarne-Thompson Classification System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Heidi Anne Heiner includes more tales of the similar theme. See the following site: <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/sixswans/other.html>.

and, in return, he gets a golden chain, which he later gives to his father, and then a pair of red shoes, to his sister, and finally a millstone, with which he kills his stepmother. Finally the bird changes back into the little boy again. When the story ends, he joins his father and sister for dinner.

In “The Juniper Tree,” a parent wants to get rid of the male heir for her daughter’s sake, a reminder of the situation in “The Twelve Brothers.” However, if the stepmother killed for her daughter as is claimed, she would not have tried to put the blame on her daughter. Her motive is as questionable as the father’s in “The Twelve Brothers.” In both tales, infanticide is disguised as sibling rivalry and the youngest child is used as a scapegoat. The boy in “The Juniper Tree” believes his sister’s innocence, whereas the twelve brothers vow to take their revenge on the little sister before the reconciliation. Relations between siblings can become normal only when the influence of the parents subsides.

While the twelve brothers leave the parents alone and turn a new page, the boy of “The Juniper Tree” is vindictive and plans to kill the stepmother. S. M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar approve of the matricide in “The Juniper Tree” and write that “the male child’s progress toward adulthood is a growth toward both self-assertion and self-articulation.”¹²⁸ Being offensive or vindictive may not be the same as “self-assertion” or “self-articulation”; their difference is qualitative. The youngsters in “The Twelve

¹²⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, 1979) 42-43.

Brothers” do not have to kill anybody to show that they are self-assertive. Having said that, the boy is the victim and should not be blamed for what he has done. In a way, he has little choice because the other parent does not offer help, unlike what is the case in “The Twelve Brothers.” When the problem of child abuse gets out of hand, the child is transformed into an inhuman creature. The boy carries out the plan of revenge in the guise of a bird, in a manner as gothic as the stepmother’s plan of murder. To change into a bird is a way to say that he is not himself: his action is outside human physical and moral restraints. While this can help him to achieve his objective, he may lose himself and become schizophrenic in the process. Although he succeeds in eliminating evil and restoring order, his journey is yet to begin. Till now all his resources have been spent in survival and taking vengeance. Many problems will persist and become major obstacles later, such as the father’s role in the young person’s life.

The father does not kill the child; but he is hardly innocent. He does not intervene in the conflict between his son and his second wife, and he does nothing to prevent the escalation of the hostility. Moreover, he clearly savors the fruit of the murder – he dines greedily on his son’s dead body. He may be cheated into cannibalizing; but his insatiable appetite on his son’s flesh is revealing. He might be the one who profits most from the family conflict. He has an ambiguous attitude toward the situation, more than the queen’s in “The Twelve Brothers.” He offers no help to his children, and turns a blind eye to his wife’s wanton behavior. He is, at best, a weak and negligent father, and

shows little care for his children. Brewer claims that a fairytale protagonist seeks reconciliation with the parent-figures.¹²⁹ Tales such as “The Juniper Tree” and “Hansel and Grethel” recount how the young people go back to their parents and bestow gold or other goodies on them. In other tales, such as “The Twelve Brothers”, the protagonist leaves the parents alone, making no effort to take revenge or to solicit their recognition. According to Brewer, killing a parent is not detrimental to a young person’s development.¹³⁰ As mentioned above, fairy tales do not kill the father or his substitute, although the mother surrogate figure, like the stepmother or mother-in-law, is occasionally killed in retribution, as in “The Juniper Tree.” Nonetheless, patricide or matricide carries a mixed message, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Matricide is not a long-term solution if the boy does not run away from the father. Nothing guarantees that the family drama is not going to repeat itself one day. The boy’s failure to recognize his father’s part in the crime shows that he has not learned the lesson yet. Fairy tales are about a child’s process of growing up into adulthood. “The Juniper Tree” may just represent one single phase of the process, or show a part of a complete process like the ones shown in the silent tales.

Sibling rivalry is also the main theme in at least three other Grimms tales, notably “The Two Brothers,” “The Three Brothers,” and “The Singing Bone.” They show

¹²⁹ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 9.

¹³⁰ In the fairy tales, mothers or stepmothers are not killed by daughters but by sons, which suggests how a young man can escape from the mother. This may constitute one more detail in the “family drama.”

different kinds of sibling relations, ranging from harmonious to fiercely contentious. The Old Testament also recounts sibling rivalry as one of the primary problems in human relations. The stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his eleven brothers, all represent the difficulty and importance for young people to grow out of sibling rivalry.

2. Human Relationships and Apprenticeship of Three Crafts

2.1. Laundry – Cleaning the Soiled Family History

While the princess withdraws to the woods, life is uneventful in the castle. The day comes when the princess is old enough to take part in a big wash, and to discover her brothers' shirts. Laundry represents a rite of passage for the young protagonist to acquire the necessary knowledge. She learns her duty and rights, and speaks on equal terms to her mother. Taking part in the wash implies that the princess engages herself in the act of cleaning up soiled family affairs. The apprenticeship of laundry is the first of the three steps towards self-realization and autonomy.

Now the princess resolves to play an active role in her sibling relations. To leave the parents' house and live with the brothers is an important step for her growth. Brewer writes that, in the "family drama," the female protagonist has to leave the parents and find "the mate, whom the protagonist marries."

The protagonist “has to cast off the shell which once defended but is now oppressive, and go forth alone [...], find our peer, our equal in status, with whom we can live in terms of freedom yet stable relationship.”¹³¹

In the tales like “The Twelve Brothers,” “The Six Swans” and “The Wild Swans,” the protagonist lives with her siblings in the phase after leaving the parents and before meeting the spouse. This is the time when she learns about relations as well as her own identity, thanks to her siblings, who are also her peers and her social equals.

The princess finds the twelve little shirts and visits the chamber where the coffins are kept. The shirts or coffins are certainly too small for the long-absent and by now grown-up princes. However, they may fit the little princess, who is now old enough to be an active actor in the family saga. What she receives from her father is not his kingdom or wealth as he pretends, but the burden of dealing with the family trauma. It concerns her because her brothers’ fate is connected with hers. Consequently, she takes her brothers’ shirts and follows their footsteps, which leads to her odyssey.

2.2. Cooking, or the Oral Period in the Woods

The protagonist’s second phase of evolution happens in the woods. In fairy tales, a period in the woods/fairy tale is generally associated with the young person’s self-discovery. It does not, however, necessarily mean an “escape back into a conflict-free

¹³¹ Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 8.

latency period,” as Bruno Bettelheim holds in his analysis of “Snow White.”¹³² The princess in “The Twelve Brothers” frees herself from her parents’ plan and goes out to the woods to find her own way; but she does not relapse to a former or inferior stage. In the depth of the woods her instincts and potential are hidden, waiting to be discovered by her. As J. E. Heuscher says, the protagonist in many fairy tales spends some time in the forest for good reasons: “[T]he quest for wholeness is the basic theme. This quest requires integration with one’s other, hidden side [...]”¹³³ Untamed and resourceful nature provides nurturing ground for the protagonist to develop her personality.

On the one hand, the brothers represent the princess’s “other, hidden side.” Their reunion is a necessary step towards the princess’s “quest for wholeness.” The brothers are also related to the woods, which are associated with her potential and innate strength. She has to learn to survive and cope with basic needs in life. The brothers and the forest are the principal motifs in this phase of her development. On the other hand, the brothers are family members that demand her time and care. A nurturing sibling relationship and the acquisition of adequate social and communication skills are crucial

¹³² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1978) 209-11.

¹³³ J. E. Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales: Their Origin, Meaning and Usefulness* (Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1974) 366. Citing examples from Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, “Snow White,” the Arthurian romances and Greek tragedies, Heuscher concludes that “[t]he wood is a common symbol for the human being’s loss or abandonment of previous values and securities.” Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*, 117. He only sees the dark and gloomy part of the woods. The forest in “The Twelve Brothers” embodies both the beneficent and destructive aspects, which can be supportive as well as destructive for the protagonist.

to true fulfillment. Heuscher calls this phase one of the oedipal confrontations.¹³⁴ This stage of evolution is about her innate potential as well as her human relations. In terms of concrete image and figurative speech, this phase is represented by the activity of cooking.

2.2.1. Hunter/dwarf-Siblings and the Subconscious of the Princess

In the enchanted house, the protagonist is remarkably close to her youngest older brother, who is a great help to her. He is called Benjamin in the Grimms' last version.¹³⁵ The fact that he is the only character that has got a name proves his importance. On two important occasions, he acts as her predecessor. He asks the mother about the family secret, the way the princess does several years later. And he performs the duty of cooking in the house before the sister takes over the work. Moreover, Benjamin is the gatekeeper of the enchanted house, her guardian and mentor – the first one to meet the princess, and is instrumental in the reconciliation between brothers and sister. Most importantly, Benjamin shows attentiveness and understanding, which are qualities that the protagonist has to learn in order to develop good relationship skills. He can sense their mother's sadness and eases the brothers' anger towards the youngest sister. As a result, he is the adolescent protagonist's male

¹³⁴ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 111.

¹³⁵ The youngest brother is named Benjamin in the version of 1857 but has no name in the first version which was published in 1812.

counterpart at this phase of life, or in Carl Jung's terms, her "animus."¹³⁶ In this phase of pre-sexual awakening, the young protagonist's animus is her brother. Gender difference does not divide brother and sister in this case. The reunion signifies the reconnection of her "anima" and "animus;" the second time is after she gets married.

Benjamin proves himself to be the leader of the brothers in spite of his age. He is the one who has saved the other brothers and now the sister. He also represents the essence of life in the enchanted house. Being small but smart, he can be compared to the dwarf, the small man of the forest. The dwarf is related to the protagonist's subconscious, like hidden treasures or unpolished gems. Nonetheless, the dwarfs are miners of gold or precious stones in some fairy tales, for example in "Snow White."¹³⁷ The dwarf incarnates both the richness and weakness of the primitive stage of being. The dwarf is the wise old man in a small body, as demonstrated by Jung.¹³⁸ His voice is one of wisdom and truth, worldly and ageless. He represents the female protagonist's intuition and, therefore, can play the role of her guide and guardian during this phase of her life. She is to learn survival skills from him. However, his life has no more meaning than this. Striving to survive at a subhuman level of existence, he will never grow up to be a real human being or take further challenges than what represents the basic needs

¹³⁶ C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness*, in *The Collected Works of Carl Jung*, Vol. 9, Part I, trans. R. F. C. Hull, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1968, 2nd edition. For anima and animus, see mainly "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," 230 – 254.

¹³⁷ For the tale and its development in history, read Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974) 175-82.

¹³⁸ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness* 222-23.

of life. His growth is thwarted, as if arrested perpetually in a kind of purgatory between the human and the animal world. Although he cannot grow up, he can grow old. He can even become degenerated both literally and symbolically. He looks like a child, but sometimes behaves like an old man. The dwarfs are “diminutive” men, as Bettelheim observes.

Failing to develop into mature humanity, [the dwarfs] are permanently arrested on a pre-oedipal level but fail to set off the important developments taking place in [the protagonist].¹³⁹

The dwarfs are caught and trapped in the passage of time, living only in the present and are indifferent to the past or the future. They are completely absorbed in themselves and live in a reclusive world all by themselves. The dwarfs in the woods incorporate the characteristics of a young person’s early mental development. They embody both strength and fragility, permanence and transience, youthfulness and old age, potential as well as limits. These opposing yet complementary qualities of the life force exist side by side, colliding with one another at times.

As survival is their only concern in life, the dwarf-like brothers spend their days hunting animals, the most primitive way to find food. Compared with rearing animals for food, hunting is a more consumptive way to use natural resources. The protagonist cooperates closely with the hunters, taking on her part of the work and performing it to the satisfaction of the other parties. The search for and processing of food are the dominant issues of this phase of their lives. The brothers and sister are connected

¹³⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 200, 209.

through food. The young protagonist's human relationships largely depend upon survival principles. The protagonist learns to work in order to be fed and have company.

Hunters are close to dwarfs because both of them dwell in the woods, live on natural resources, and represent the primitive and an underdeveloped stage of life. Dwarfs in fairy tales often engage in work, which seems to be the sole meaning of their existence. In many Germanic fairy tales, dwarfs work in mines, looking for hidden treasures.¹⁴⁰ Among the best known today are the seven dwarfs in "Snow White." In Walt Disney's version, each of the dwarfs is given a distinguishable personality trait, which does not cause any change to the fact that they are hard-working creatures that exploit the natural resources of the forest for a living. Wolfgang Mieder says that the movie is "a trivialization of the dwarfs who in the traditional fairy tale represent the solid work ethic."¹⁴¹ Giving them a few human characteristics does not change the fact that they make good workers. Mieder has pointed out the close relationship between the dwarfs and work.

¹⁴⁰ "Das Rheingold," the first part of Richard Wagner's epic opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, relates dwarfs who work in gold mines. The composer was inspired in part by German folklore, in which the dwarfs are often depicted as greedy, selfish and mischievous. One of the examples of dwarf-characters can be found in "Rampenstinzchen." The tale is translated by Zipes and collected in his *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 677.

¹⁴¹ Wolfgang Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature*, (London: University Press of New England, 1987) 28.

As Bettelheim observes, “[t]he dwarfs’ life is a never-changing circle of work in the womb of the earth.”¹⁴² In the woods, the brothers’ daily routine is scheduled according to work. If the seven dwarfs represent the seven days of the week, the twelve brothers may represent the twelve months of a year, or the twelve working hours in a day. Corresponding to time’s measuring units, the dwarfs represent the most down-to-earth aspect of life. The protagonist of “The Twelve Brothers” learns from her peers’ example – and from her natural instincts – the natural rhythm of work and discipline.

The protagonist’s work puts her on an equal footing with her older brothers. It can earn her mutual respect and assistance as well as independence and autonomy. Her work is cooking, the household activity after laundry which she has learnt in the previous phase. In comparison to the first, which she learns from her mother, she now enjoys greater autonomy and takes her time to perfect her skill. The youngest of the brothers acts briefly as her mentor and predecessor, but she soon takes over the center of the stage. Benjamin soon retreats to the background, which allows the protagonist to continue to search for her individual identity and autonomy.

The blissful reunion brings about support and warmth in the beginning, but after some time becomes an obstacle to the protagonist’s evolution. Having succeeded in acquiring the skill of survival, the protagonist may begin to question its meaning. She may also understand that she will never attain mature womanhood while living like her

¹⁴² Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* 209-10.

diminutive siblings. She is now ready to reach out to another phase of life, which is implied by holding a big feast for the brothers. A feast is more than a normal meal, as is shown in the quality of food as well as in the human relations. It indicates that the protagonist has finally brought to perfection her cooking skill, and that she is finding expression for her view of life and her joy in life. She has outgrown the survival phase. Her new aspirations are incompatible with the dwarf-hunters' mode of life. The protagonist realizes that it is time to leave the diminutive siblings and get out of the enchanted house that has protected and nurtured her all this time.

2.2.2. **“The Seven Ravens” and “Goldilocks”**

Sibling relationships are also the central theme of a number of fairy tales, two of which bear a strong resemblance to “The Twelve Brothers.” They are “The Seven Ravens” (*CCFTBG*, 91-93) and “Goldilocks.” The tale of “The Seven Ravens” begins where a girl is born to a peasant family of seven boys. The father sends one of his sons to fetch water for the baptism. The others follow him and fight for the pitcher, which then falls into the well. The boys do not return home for fear of punishment. The father casts a curse upon his sons who then turn into ravens. After a few years, the girl learns of what has happened and decides to look for her brothers. She takes with her four objects: a ring that belongs to her parents, some bread and water, and a little chair. The girl goes to the end of the world, meets respectively the sun and then the moon, which she finds either too hot or too cold. Both of them are known to be child-eaters. She last

goes to the stars and finds them each sitting on a chair. The girl takes her chair and sits down next to them. She finds them kind and helpful.

The morning star offers the girl a chicken bone which it says she can use to open the door of the glass-mountain where her brothers live. The girl puts away her gift carefully. Upon reaching the mountain, however, she cannot find the bone again. Without hesitation, she cuts off one of her little fingers and uses it to open the door. A dwarf lets her in to wait for the brothers' return. He then brings in the brothers' food. The girl eats a mouthful from each plate and drinks from each glass. When she comes to the last glass, she put in it her parents' ring. When the raven-brothers fly back, they find their glasses and plates used. The youngest of the brothers finds the ring, and knows that their sister has come for them. At the sight of their sister, the father's curse is lifted. Together they go back to the parents' house.

"The Seven Ravens" bears close resemblance to "The Twelve Brothers." The story of "The Seven Ravens" takes place in a Christian peasant family, a contrast to the king's castle which stands for an undefined time and space. In spite of the difference, "The Seven Ravens" starts with a similar predicament: the father wishes his sons away because of the arrival of a new-born daughter. The journey takes place in the grand cosmos, which has the same meaning as the woods. What makes "The Seven Ravens" different from "The Twelve Brothers" is the lesson that the protagonist learns from her quest, in terms of material security and human relationship.

The story of “The Seven Ravens” involves visiting three cosmic bodies and tasting of food and drinks. Choices have to be made and corresponding actions have to be pursued. A similar episode can be found in “The Three Bears,” which is better known as “Goldilocks,”¹⁴³ which Bettelheim points out is about a pre-adolescent girl looking for identity.¹⁴⁴ The protagonist estranges herself from her family and immediate surroundings. She imagines her parents and sibling to be bears. Her self-awareness makes her feel like a stranger and intruder in the bear family. To put herself to test, Goldilocks then puts herself in the place of each of the family members. She prefers childhood comfort and would like to continue playing the role of the baby. However, the baby bear’s bowl of porridge is too small for her, and the little chair breaks under her weight. She realizes that something fundamental has changed: it is no longer possible or desirable to remain in a state of physical and psychological dependency. The newly emerged awareness hits her so hard that it feels as if she is being brutally woken up from a sweet dream. Goldilock’s bear habitat can be compared to the gingerbread house in “Hansel and Gretel,” which lures the young people to their doom. Should Goldilocks stay in the house, she would feel imprisoned and suffocated. Like the protagonist of “The Twelve Brothers,” Goldilocks abandons the bear house and makes for the woods.

¹⁴³ For the translation, origin and evolution of the tale, see Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974) 199-205. The interpretation presented here is feasible to the tale’s various versions.

¹⁴⁴ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 218-23.

Bettelheim comments that “Goldilocks” does not make enough effort to grow up.¹⁴⁵ However, the protagonist embarks on a journey and makes attempts to find her own way. Fleeing from the house is the beginning of a young person’s new life. Her future may still be uncertain, as Bettelheim argues.¹⁴⁶ At the present stage, she is aware of the fact that the world is going to change in spite of her wish. Most importantly, she takes the important step of going out of her comfort zone. She shows qualities of a brave, imaginative and even scrupulous person, which is a positive sign.

“Goldilocks” has some points in common with “The Seven Ravens” and “The Twelve Brothers.” The protagonists in “Goldilocks” and “The Seven Ravens” are both attracted to the role of a little child. They both have a small incident with little chairs. Goldilocks breaks the little bear’s chair, which makes her understand that she has grown out of that mode of life. The protagonist in “The Seven Ravens” has her own chair with her, to avoid any problem of adaptation or confrontation with reality. She shows reluctance to let go of old habits. The protagonist is not yet ready to explore life on her own. As a result, she returns to her parents with her brothers.

The food-tasting episodes in both “Goldilocks” and “The Seven Ravens” give indications of the main characters’ place in the family that they desire. Goldilocks finds no satisfaction in any of the bears’ plates. By contrast, the sister in “The Seven Ravens”

¹⁴⁵ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 224.

¹⁴⁶ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 222.

has no personal comments on the food prepared for the other members of the family. From the beginning to the end, she is completely dependent upon her family's provision. She takes with her on the journey the bread and water from the parents' home. Upon arrival at her brothers' house, she consumes their food and drink. Unlike Goldilocks, she does not judge if they suit her liking or not. She is content to be provided for. The sister shows no willingness to grow up. This is an exemplary case of what Heuscher means by "total regression," emphasized with italics.¹⁴⁷ She may have less chance to succeed in the quest for self-identity than Goldilocks.

In "The Twelve Brothers" and "The Seven Ravens," the theme of sibling relationship is handled in different manners. The princess in "The Twelve Brothers" does not help herself to the brothers' food but does the cooking and serves the others. She develops the art of cooking is developed alongside the skill in handling human relationships; she has learnt the importance of mutual respect and assistance. After spending years to learn about food and sibling relationship, she leaves the security of the enchanted house to go on with her journey. The protagonist in "The Seven Ravens" goes no further than the phase of food consumption. The interaction between the brothers and sister is passive and limited. On top of that, while the princess of the former tale develops her sibling relationship away from the influence of her parents, the protagonist of the latter tale lets her parents' authority overshadow her relationship with

¹⁴⁷ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 118.

her brothers. She lets herself be subjugated by the condescending Morning Star, who represents nonetheless an authoritative paternal figure. She does not express any doubt on the idea that a chicken bone can open the door to human relationships. Given all the seriousness of the situation and grandiosity of the setting, a chicken bone seems oddly out of place – at best an arrogant joke to tease the stupid but ambitious girl. As the chicken bone can be seen as a phallic symbol as well as a remnant of a meal, all the advice the morning star can give to the girl is to give away her integrity and live on men's provision all through her life. The star's chicken bone is also associated with the plates of food served to the brothers. On the threshold of transformation, the girl resumes her habitual role in the family, to be the docile daughter and dependent sister that the parents expect of her. She places so much trust in the bone as the key to her questions that she takes great care to put it away safely. But she cannot find it again at the moment when she needs it, which in this case suggests that the object cannot be the right key to open the door of a mountain. The chicken bone is an ineffective solution to arduous sibling issues. An object pertaining to another person's meal can never be the key to an identity quest. Instead of listening to her inner voice, or trying hard to look for the real solutions, she relies on other people's ideas. Breaking her own fingers to replace the lost chicken bone shows her blind faith in the paternal figure and his authority. In her value system, the finger has the same value as some garbage from the dinner table. Physical mutilation of the self can be compared to giving up a person's

integrity.¹⁴⁸ The little sister gives the priority to personal survival over personal integrity. The loss is irretrievable and the sacrifice is futile. Without a balanced personality, she may lose herself in human relationships. In most fairy tales, self-mutilation or any other form of sacrifice does not yield the desired effect. One of the examples is “Aschenputtel,” better known as “Cinderella,” in which the stepsisters cut off part of their feet so that they can fit in the slipper. Those who give up their integrity will not get happy endings.¹⁴⁹

Having reduced herself to a lesser and therefore inferior being, the girl enters the brothers’ dwelling and is received by a dwarf-servant who serves food. The dwarf mirrors the girl’s state of mind, which is underdeveloped, related to primary survival issues. This part bears a strong resemblance to “The Twelve Brothers,” at the moment when the sister enters the enchanted hut.

The sister helps herself to the food and the drinks, to alleviate her hunger and thirst as well as to use this as a means to communicate with the brothers. While the princess in “The Twelve Brothers” masters the technique of cooking, the girl in “The Seven Ravens” is only a consumer of food and has to be served. Contrary to “Goldilocks,” the protagonist in “The Seven Ravens” feels at ease with her relationship with her then unknown brothers. She even feels she has the right to her brothers’ food,

¹⁴⁸ Further discussion of this issue will be carried over to the next Chapter of this thesis.

¹⁴⁹ Mutilation and relationship are important themes in H. C. Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” which will be studied in detail in the next chapter.

which does not make her the brothers' equal but their inferior or, worse still, their dependent and burden. Having assimilated the paternal star's teaching, the girl allows herself to be dominated and provided for by the others. "The Seven Ravens" can further be compared to "The Twelve Brothers" or "Goldilocks" in terms of independent judgment, autonomy and personal integrity.

When the girl leaves the parents to look for the brothers, she carries with her, among other objects, food and drink provided by her parents. The parents are her ultimate providers. The girl makes no attempt to learn a craft or a trade, and is unable to live on her own. Her dependency upon the parents makes her quest doomed from the very beginning. It is no coincidence that as soon as she enters the raven-brothers' shelter, she starts to help herself to their food. In the absence of the parents, the brothers are to support the sister who refuses to grow up.

The girl has no intention of growing away from her parents, which explains why she carries her parents' ring for the voyage. As a token of recognition between the siblings and a symbol of the reunion, the ring represents the presence of parental authority and dominance, which reigns over the sibling relationship in a remote but absolute manner. It is again the smallest of the bird-brothers – associated with her restrained gender role and thwarted development – who takes note of the ring and guesses their sister's presence. After the reconciliation, the young people hurry back to their parents' home, where the girl confirms her former mode of life.

Each of the four objects the girl carries with her serves a specific purpose. Unfortunately, all of them contribute to the protagonist's failure in her quest for identity. The chair she carries around is her habitual place in the family, an old identity that she has no wish to change. The food and drink is the family's provision, which prevents her from making any effort to earn her own living. The protagonist employs her parents' ring to call for her brothers' recognition. The ring is a symbol of reunion. However, reconciliation before dealing with paternal tyranny is unwise. She appeals to the parental authority instead of creating a new relationship with her estranged siblings. She makes no attempt to cultivate a durable relationship with her proper personality or define her existence in her own terms. Much like the full circle of a ring, the girl ends up where she started, without learning anything.

Although Goldilocks leaves the bears' house feeling lost and bewildered, she has learnt her lesson. She turns her back on the comfort of home and embarks on a journey. The protagonist in "The Seven Ravens" returns home, resuming her old place in the conventional family hierarchy. It is quite unlikely that she will ever set foot outside her comfort zone again. In "The Twelve Brothers," the princess lives with her brothers for many years, the time necessary to learn about survival and relationship issues, in the resourceful depths of the innate human nature. In comparison, the sister of "The Seven Ravens" is reluctant to leave the previous phase of life. She lets the paternal voice direct her actions, and falls back on the same old place given by the family. The princess acquires a skill that can earn her a place in the family or the society. Only from there can she pursue further objectives in life. This moment comes when the princess

has to bid her brothers goodbye and take the necessary step to grow up to become a queen, a term in fairy tales indicating being the master of oneself.

2.3. Metamorphosis

In the midst of a harmonious life in the woods, the protagonist parts with her brothers again. She starts becoming conscious of what she needs and likes, thereby discovering her own identity as distinct from that of her siblings. She prepares a feast and picks twelve flowers. At that very moment, the brothers are changed into birds and fly away and the house and the magic garden disappear. She is now in the wilderness, all by herself, trying to figure out what to do next.

The metamorphosis of the brothers carries two different but complementary levels of meaning. The initial level is that the protagonist is growing out of the phase which is preoccupied by primitive instincts and needs. Between the hunter and the princess, the animal and the human, and the dwarf and mature womanhood, the conflict between the two bipolar forces grows till it reaches boiling point.

Relating to the protagonist's subconscious and natural instincts, the brothers are first hunters and later turn into ravens. As Jung points out, both the hunter and the raven are "dominant of the collective unconscious."¹⁵⁰ However, in "The Twelve

¹⁵⁰ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness* 246.

Brothers,” the two represent different aspects of the unconscious corresponding to two distinct phases of development. The hunter collaborates seamlessly with the protagonist in dealing with survival issues, whereas the raven is incompatible with the young woman’s budding consciousness of her existence. The brothers change their forms according to the protagonist’s development. According to Bettelheim, the animal-sibling is the Id that has to obey the human-sibling which represents the Ego or Superego.¹⁵¹ In the woods, the animal-sibling dominates the human-sibling. Survival instincts override the pursuit of the higher goals in life. Later, the protagonist’s awakening topples the existing order and former state of being. The temporary equilibrium holds no more. As she envisions fundamental changes in her perspective, her brothers are alienated and change into ravens.

Consciousness emerges in many ways, including rational thinking and guided imagination, as well as appreciation of art and beauty, in an active or passive sense. The princess is aware of her action when she picks the twelve flowers from the magic garden. It is connected to her preparation of the feast for her brothers. The apparently innocent and simple action, however, signifies an important change with regard to her personal development as well as her relationship with her siblings. Growing in the magic garden in the depths of the woods, the flowers represent the love of beauty in human nature. While beauty is part of nature, the conscious effort to enhance or rearrange

¹⁵¹ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 74-83.

beautiful objects belongs to the domain of art, a higher aspiration in life in comparison with survival skills as represented by hunting and cooking. She has been working to feed herself and to gain her brothers' acceptance. Now she wants more than that. Instead of an ordinary meal which can satisfy day-to-day physical needs, she prepares a feast which brings other aspects of life into focus, notably creativity, beauty and other more elevated concerns in life. She is also looking for a relationship that brings joy and not just material support.

Her new aspirations are incompatible with the nature of hunters, dwarfs or ravens. When she first arrived in the enchanted house, she adapted to suit the brothers' mode of life. Now she has to break out from the relationship that is based on survival principles. By picking the twelve flowers from the garden, the princess is making a statement about the kind of life led by hunters or dwarfs. The separation is essential to the further development of the sibling relationship. The brothers will appear as human beings after she has become a mature and fulfilled woman. The sibling relationship will be back on track after the transformation is completed. The temporary rupture is, therefore, a blessing in disguise, a timely necessity and a quantum leap.

3. Spinning and Abstaining from Words or Laughter

At the juncture between two phases of evolution, the princess seeks the guidance of an old woman, who appears all of a sudden from nowhere. At the moment when the princess finds herself all alone in the woods, the old woman is standing right

next to her. The old woman also belongs to the princess's unconscious, which is always there waiting for the protagonist's awakening. Compared to the hunter or dwarf, the old woman belongs to a more advanced stage of the protagonist's psyche, relating to the awareness of one's own actions and thoughts.

The old woman makes the princess aware of her responsibility in the brothers' metamorphosis.

My child, what have you done! Why didn't you leave those twelve white flowers alone? They were your brothers, and you've changed them into ravens forever.¹⁵²

She then tells the princess how she can save the brothers.

[Y]ou have to remain silent for seven years and neither speak nor laugh. If you utter but a single word and there is just an hour to go in the seven years, everything will be in vain, and your brothers will be killed by that one word.¹⁵³

This is the part where silence starts to come into focus. It marks the end of the phase of primitive existence, and the beginning of the search for fulfillment. A few questions arise here: Why is not speaking or laughing for seven years a solution for the metamorphosis? What is the place of silence in the princess's maturing process? And how effective is silence as a means to repair relations? These questions touch the core of the issue of silence as represented in the tale. First of all, if silence is the solution, its opposite must be the cause of the problem. At the time when the protagonist is searching for her self-expression, she may not always choose her words conscientiously. The youngest sister may have been taking too much liberty to speak

¹⁵² Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* 34.

¹⁵³ Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* 34.

and laugh at her older brothers. Her language may have been experienced, in the context of a patriarchal society, as excessive or abusive. She may be too self-centered or negligent of the others' feelings. As she thinks that picking the flowers is to please her brothers, she may also think that interfering with her brothers' affairs is doing them a favor. If she shows insensitiveness to their feelings, the brothers may change their composure and take refuge in an inhuman form. Heuscher says that in the context of fairy tales, one of the major relationship problems among young people is the "increased selfishness and self-centeredness with lack of consideration for others."¹⁵⁴ On top of that, the protagonist may have committed errors in communication. She has to find a balance between her newly developed self-confidence and acceptable social behavior.

Much of the adolescent's rebellion is not yet a free, realistic and truly moral self-assertion, but rather a blind reaction against the superego in a rash attempt to gain independence.¹⁵⁵

As her self-consciousness starts to emerge, her relationship with her brothers also undergoes an important change. The protagonist experiments with different ways to communicate with her siblings, sometimes pushing the communication to the extremes.

Swinging from one extremity to another is the natural mechanism to regain balance that a young person resorts to in her growing process. The protagonist listens to her inner voice as represented by the old woman; this is also the last time that she

¹⁵⁴ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 112.

¹⁵⁵ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 113.

lets her intuition dictate her action. From now on, she has to develop her intelligence which requires much learning and practice. The duration of the silent period corresponds to the third phase of her process of growth. Heuscher claims that human development “occurs in phases,” each of which takes seven years to complete. Fairy tales demonstrate three “seven-year cycles” in a young person’s evolution. They are the “oral, anal and oedipal” phases, or, to put it in another way, the “formative period,” the “latency period,” and “adolescence.”¹⁵⁶ He describes the second period as follows:

[The protagonist is] primarily involved in (a) acquiring the academic and physical skills which will enable him to develop experience in a trade or profession; and (b) expanding toward satisfactory friendships and group-relationships.¹⁵⁷

This period roughly corresponds to the forest episode of “The Twelve Brothers” in which the protagonist lives with the brothers and learns to cook. When she tests her limits, it results in what Heuscher describes as assuming “reactivity” but not “responsibility” in her actions.¹⁵⁸ At this point of the story, the protagonist intends to take her relationship with her siblings to another level and yet needs to improve her social skills. The next cycle aims at a higher goal, a “true intersubjective relationship,”¹⁵⁹ which means a “healthy self-preservative drive, which combines with a deep respect for the feelings and rights of other people.”¹⁶⁰ She needs another seven years for the practice, to

¹⁵⁶ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 111-115.

¹⁵⁷ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 111.

¹⁵⁸ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 114.

¹⁵⁹ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 111.

¹⁶⁰ Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* 107.

discipline her impulses and to relate to the others. After the latency period, there will still be the possibility that she will fall back to the previous stage. Should she choose to do that, her evolution will be thwarted, and she will stay uninitiated at the end of her journey like the protagonist of “The Seven Ravens.”

During the next cycle of evolution, the protagonist reacts against her former habits, and experiments with the opposite pole of possibilities. The heroine sits on a high tree branch contemplating, a scene reminiscent of the one in which the twelve brothers take turns to climb on a tall tree to wait and watch for the news of her birth. Her posture resembles a bird’s, reminding one of her brothers who have lately changed into ravens. These are the moments of anticipation and changes. The young woman is ready to take off, like her siblings before her.

The protagonist does not speak or laugh for seven years, the duration that corresponds to a phase of her evolution. There is no short cut, no fast lane for the smart or lucky ones. She has to finish her training honestly and conscientiously in order to be qualified to be a mature and fulfilled woman. Abstaining from speech or laughter, she explores other means of communication including body language, which she uses effectively during her first encounter with the king. The absence of words does not prevent her from expressing her thoughts and sentiments. Before meeting with the king, she sits quietly on the tree, finishes practicing her third and last handicraft. Although this period is brief, it is rich in symbolic meanings.

According to Bottingheimer, spinning often signifies a domestic and social confinement or repression for women, an activity that “fill[s] [their] quiet hours.”¹⁶¹ Looking from another perspective, spinning can be an occupation to render a woman independent and self-sufficient. It can assure the protagonist a place in the adult world in social as well as economic terms. In “Mother Holle,” a Grimms’ tale seldom mentioned today, an industrious young woman is able to support herself by practicing the profession of spinning. There is an absence of high-profile suitors or any form of male relations’ influence in the tale. Thanks to her professional skill, the protagonist does not have to precipitate or force herself into the marriage market. In spite of the negative connotations of the term, spinsters are women who live by themselves and earn their own living. Although fairy tales seldom overtly celebrate female celibacy, “Mother Holle” conveys the message that a woman can be master of her own life by practicing spinning or other a professional skills. It can be argued that spinning is a manual activity not unlike mining or hunting. There is a purpose to the activity, which is a means towards emancipation and not an end to itself. The protagonist has to acquire the knowledge of the professional or domestic skill but resist the temptation of neglecting higher goals in life. In the meantime, as the protagonist in “The Twelve Brothers” has learned her skill, she is given a free hand in the matter of marriage.

¹⁶¹ Zipes, *Grimms’ Bad Girls & Bold Boys* 78, 112-122.

On the symbolic level, spinning is associated with adolescent sexual awakening. Spinning is the subject matter in another Grimms tale, “Little Briar Rose,” better known as “The Sleeping Beauty” after Charles Perrault’s seventeenth century version.¹⁶² Like the distaff, the circular staircase and the bleeding finger, spinning is associated with the psychological aspect of the adolescent’s development. The tale implies a girl’s sexual awakening and her parents’ attempt to alter the course of nature.¹⁶³

In another Grimms’ tale, “The Spindle, Shuttle and Needle,” spinning signifies both the heroine’s autonomy and sexual maturity. She receives as heritage a spindle, a shuttle and a needle, which help her to earn a living as well as to get a husband. She too is working on the spinning machine silently when the suitor comes to ask for her hand. She also gives a little nod of the head to show her consent. As soon as she is married, however, the spinning tools are laid aside and not used any more. In most fairy tales, the protagonist is not seen carrying on the activity once she is married. As in the case of “The Twelve Brothers” and “The Spindle, Shuttle and Needle,” the protagonist acquires the skill, which signifies physical and mental maturity. This subject is discussed further below.

¹⁶² Also seen in the Grimms’ collection. Iona and Peter Opie write that the most complete version of “The Sleeping Beauty” is to be found in Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, 1697. See Iona and Peter Opie’s comment and translation of Perrault’s version of the tale in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, 81-92.

¹⁶³ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 225-236.

In a number of other tales, notably “The Three Spinners,” “The Lazy Spinner,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” and “King Thrushbeard,” the protagonist has reached marriageable age but is untrained or unwilling to do spinning work. As a result, she has to resort to external help, which inevitably leads to complications and sacrifices. The inability to use the spinning wheel implies an insufficiency or immaturity which risks jeopardizing her married life. In order to complete her development she has to go through another test. Not before she succeeds in surmounting the final obstacle can she be a real queen. The protagonists of these tales stand in sharp contrast to the ones in “The Twelve Brothers” or “The Spindle, Shuttle and Needle,” who do not have to cheat or repeat the third phase of development.

Back to “The Twelve Brothers,” as the acquisition of the three skills accompanies the protagonist to adulthood, the practice of word and silence brings her to successful adulthood. The young woman takes seven years to practice the art of silence, to understand its power as well as its limits. Her silence causes no harm in her marital relationship. And yet she faces problems in the face of another relationship. She fails to respond effectively to the mother-in-law’s vicious slanders and accusations. The mother-in-law uses language as a tool to hurt and dominate the others. Words are used abundantly and elaborately in order to manipulate situations and hide the truth. This is a counter-model for the protagonist who is still learning the power of words. The more the mother-in-law speaks, the less the protagonist feels like using words to defend herself. The older woman also reminds the protagonist of her former mistakes of abusing words in a sibling relationship.

In a sense, the king's mother is also related to the old wise woman who represents the heroine's inner voice. While the latter gives direct instructions to the protagonist as to what to do, the former shows what the protagonist should not be doing. In the deep structure of the tale, the two women are complementary to each other. Their function is to train and test the heroine's perseverance. The situation can also be a distant reminder of the protagonist's early childhood, where communication with the tyrannical father is impossible. The protagonist left her parents long before, but the young king still lets his mother influence his decisions. Before learning his lesson, he cannot help but put jeopardize his marriage and his wife's life.

Silence is practiced together with perseverance, patience, resilience and self-discipline, which are also part of the training. While silence can bring her brothers back, it also jeopardizes her marriage and nearly costs her her life. Pushing the practice to its limits, she neglects the mother-in-law's malignancy and remains indifferent to her husband's growing distrust. The dilemma can be solved only when she understands that silence is no virtue and eloquence is no sin. Both silence and words have to be employed with moderation and be kept in perfect balance. In fairy tales, silence or the misuse of words is often a manifestation of the character's state of maturity as well as the quality of her relationship.¹⁶⁴ Having understood the essence of words, including their strength and danger, the protagonist can resume her voice. Her silence saves her

¹⁶⁴ In Perrault's *Contes de ma mère L'Oye* (1695), a tale titled "The Fairies," the good girl's mouth pours out diamonds and jewels at her speech, whereas the bad girl's mouth produces toads and snakes. The Grimms' collection also recorded a similar tale which is called "The Three Little Men in the Wood."

sibling relationships, and her voice saves her marriage. And a balance of the two ensures her life in future. Now the protagonist has mastered her voice and silence, which makes her a real master of herself.

“The Six Swans”

The story begins when a king goes hunting in the woods and gets lost. He seeks the help of a witch who then makes the king marry her daughter. Being aware of the evil nature of his new wife, the king hides his children – six boys and a girl – in the woods. The king visits them regularly, with the help of a reel of magic yarn. The queen soon discovers the secret, steals the reel, and goes to their hiding place. She throws magic silk shirts upon the princes, who then turn into swans and fly away. The king's daughter is able to escape from harm but has witnessed everything. The next day, the king wants to take his daughter away but she asks to stay for one more night.

When night falls, the princess escapes and looks for her brothers. She comes to a hut and finds six little beds inside. She creeps under one of the beds and waits. At nightfall, six swans fly in and change into humans. The princess recognizes them as her brothers. However, they can only stay for a quarter of an hour's time. Before they leave, they tell the princess that, in order to free them from the spell, she must not speak or laugh for six years. At the same time, she has to make six little shirts out of starwort.

The girl goes to the middle of the forest, climbs a tree, and stays there for the night. The next morning, she starts gathering aster-flowers and sews them together. One day, a king from another country goes hunting in the woods. His huntsmen find the princess and call out to her. She shakes her head and, wishing them to go away, throws down her clothes and accessories one after another. The huntsmen bring the girl to the king, who tries to speak to her in all kinds of languages. She does not speak a word, and remains non-responsive. The king wraps her in his cloak, sets her on his horse and rides with her to his castle.

The king marries the princess in spite of his mother's disapproval. When their first child is born, the mother-in-law hides the child away and accuses the queen of cannibalism. After two more sons are born and taken away, the king sentences his wife to death. The moment when she is put on the fire, six swans fly in. Six years have passed by now. She throws the aster shirts on each of them and they resume their human form. The youngest of the princes has a wing in place of the left arm. The mother-in-law is burned to death and the king and the queen are reconciled.

Although the plot of "The Six Swans" is very similar to that of "The Twelve Brothers," the two tales carry very different messages. It is again the seemingly small and unimportant details that set the two tales apart. The title tellingly shifts the center of focus from "brothers," signifying family relations, to "Swans," the animal form into which the brothers are transformed. The common black ravens that used to roam the rural setting of fairy tales are replaced by elite white swans adorning the artificial waters

around royal palaces. The number thirteen, the number of children in the former tale, is changed probably due to its connection with pagan beliefs, whereas the even number sounds more orthodox and conventional. One cannot tell if the latter tale is inspired by the former, or if this is an example of the Brothers Grimm's attempts to tame and purify tales of folk origins. However, the issues of silence and voice can be illuminated by juxtaposing the two tales and comparing the one with the other.

The King and the Witch

The structure and language of "The Six Swans" is more complex and sophisticated than that of "The Twelve Brothers." A mysterious woman traps the king in the woods. The evil new queen is determined to get rid of the children while the good father tries his best to help them. Although outdone by his witch-wife, he has proved his intelligence and virtues in the situation. The recounting resembles a defense attorney's argument; much effort is made in order to free the man from any possible blame. There is a tone of anxiety and intensity in the narrative voice that is lacking in the former tale.

Although at first glance, the king seems to be a righteous person and react in a correct way, his behavior is somewhat self-contradictory. Fairy tales always require reading on a secondary level, to look for another layer of meaning. In the case of "The Six Swans," the hidden meaning seems to show something very different from the appearance, and sometimes goes so far as to defeat the purpose of the depiction. The king goes deep into the forest to get in touch with the depths of his psyche, but loses his

way and is overpowered by evil forces embodied by the other sex. This may well be an implicit representation of his own mental and moral weaknesses. The women that he meets represent his illicit and clandestine desires that eventually he has to bring into the daylight. His inner conflict and lack of self-discipline unleash the chain of events that topple the peace and harmony of the family. Under the pretext of protecting his sons, he sends them away from home. He can reach them by means of a reel of magic yarn, which proves that he is not a stranger to magic. The purportedly powerful and evil queen too has to depend on the reel to find the children. As the king can hide his children cleverly in an enchanted forest, one may wonder why he was so helpless in the woods earlier on. He resembles the queen in more ways than he would admit. After his sons are gone, he asks his daughter to come home, again under the pretext of protecting her. He ought to know whether the children are safer in the woods or in the castle. The daughter escapes and never comes back for fear of her stepmother and, more precisely, her father's ineffectiveness to protect his children, or worse, his secret intentions towards her.

Should the king be presented as faultless, someone has to bear the blame. The women in the tale are represented simply as malefactors. The first woman character entering the scene is labeled as a "witch" (CFTBG, 168). Her daughter is lumped together with her even before committing any crime. The story tells us that the king does not like his new queen, but her mother cheats him into the marriage. The king tries to protect his children, but the witch-queen is more cunning. Dark female power is to be held responsible for every problem, in the same way that mothers-in-law are always

punished for the false accusations, although it is the king who orders the execution.

Female characters in fairy tales are often described as irredeemably evil. The protagonist is the only exception, in every way an opposite of the other members of her sex, and their victim. However, the relationship between the protagonist and the other women characters is more complex than it seems.

Punishment and Slavery

Sewing is the only handicraft activity that the princess practices in “The Wild Swans.” Not unlike spinning, sewing in fairy tales is part of a girl’s education in a practical sense, and associated with her sexual maturity in symbolic terms.¹⁶⁵ However, the practice of sewing in “The Six Swans” is significantly different from spinning in other tales mentioned above. The duration of time expands far beyond the normal period, the protagonist carries on with her sewing activity long into her adulthood and after marriage, which means complications and incomplete maturity. The over-extended practice interferes with subsequent phases of life. It does not give her the freedom or respect that is normally associated with the professional or household task. What draws particular attention to this story is the austerity and cruelty accompanying the sewing

¹⁶⁵Yvonne Verdier studies the motif of pins or needles in some versions of “The Little Red Riding Hood” in relation to customs in certain areas of France during the nineteenth century. Verdier argues that a girl’s process of maturity can be represented by the three apprenticeships, namely laundry, sewing, and cooking. See her article “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” in *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 11:1-2 (1997)105-108.

activity. The work is so tedious and painstaking that it takes a toll on her social and marital life. It works against her efforts to attain a proper place in the adult world, contrary to what work, or a proper job, is supposed to do. Excluding oneself from other aspects of life and finding refuge in work thwarts the growth of a person, as demonstrated in "The Twelve Brothers."

In "The Twelve Brothers," the brothers' shirts are objects associated with the protagonist's first apprenticeship and family history. In "The Six Swans," the shirts have another meaning. The stepmother uses them to change the princes into swans. When the swans change back temporarily into human form every evening, their feathers and skin shed off in the same way as a shirt a man removes when he undresses. As the evil queen sews magic charms upon the shirts to change the princes into swans, the protagonist, who has become a queen in the meantime, has to make new shirts in order to remove the curse.

In the deep structure of the tale, the two queens seem to have more than one thing in common. Both the (step-)mother and daughter are married to a king that goes hunting in the woods. They are regarded as mysterious and foreign in their respective husbands' kingdoms. Moreover, both of them can make magical shirts that have the power of metamorphosis. While the older woman gets away without being punished, the younger one has to repair the damage and pay the price. The protagonist's suffering is not a matter of bad luck, but related to the other female characters' actions. She is punished not for any of her actions but for her affiliation with the older women. The

young protagonist has to shoulder the burden for the older generations of her sex, much the same way that female characters are made to bear the blame for the men. Having the ability to make shirts that can turn birds back to human beings demonstrates a budding power that is equal to that of the woman preceding her. It also leaves the men worrying how she is going to use the power. The men therefore take preventive measures, to keep the young queen busy night and day with some hard and tedious manual work.

The protagonist of “The Six Swans” is caught in the conflict between self-empowerment and keeping harmonious relationships. She sacrifices herself for the male members of the family. During the long period of manual labor, she experiences excruciating pain and social isolation. To make shirts out of starwort for six long years is tormenting, even sadistic, which resembles a punishment meted out to a convicted criminal. Such a sentence is likely to break her spirit and mind, causing irreversible damage to the protagonist’s mental health. In contrast, her counterpart in “The Twelve Brothers” focuses on improving herself, at the same time improving her relationships and communication skills. The protagonist in the latter tale practices sewing but does not let it dominate her life. Most importantly, she does not have to strain herself to help her siblings. The message is that if the sister makes good use of her resources and has a healthy and balanced development, the other siblings will turn out normal in the end. “The Six Swans” makes the young woman a martyr for a cause that is dubious and unjustifiable.

The function of work in “The Six Swans” is largely exaggerated. The meaning of work is distorted. It is a harsh punishment that the innocent and inoffensive protagonist has not actually brought upon herself. However, it is a retribution for the crime of her kind, her predecessors in the family and all woman-kind. She also bears the brunt of all the mistakes made by her father, brothers and husband. The female-prowess is undermined and contained through the protagonist’s hard manual labor. Only through her voluntary suffering can man find his security. When it is certain that her subsequent existence is not going to endanger any man any more, she is allowed to be taken down from the stake.

Keep Her Hands Full and Her Mouth Shut

With her hands full, the protagonist also has to keep her mouth shut. The work of spinning or sewing is always closely connected with silence in this group of tales. The representation of silence in “The Six Swans” is very different from that in “The Twelve Brothers.” In the beginning of the story, the princess confronts a situation where communication is the key issue. The king hunting in the woods discovers her and proposes to marry her. Unlike the princess in “The Twelve Brothers,” who gives wordless but clear expressions, the protagonist of “The Six Swans” becomes unresponsive and uncommunicative. While the former character’s communication is unambiguous and effective, the latter seems to have abandoned not only words but all other means of expression, together with her imagination and willingness to

communicate with the king. While the former accepts muteness with a goal in mind, much as her practice of the handicraft skill, the latter does not seem to have the same kind of will-power or incentive. It makes a huge difference in the meaning of the actions. More evidence can be found in the prelude of the courting scene.

The beginning of the scene shows the young woman sewing in the tree. When the king's huntsmen ask her questions, she responds by throwing down her jewelry and most of her garments. Throwing away expensive clothing and accessories can be a way to show her eminent social and financial status, but responding to men's queries by strip-teasing is not only inappropriate but downright self-deprecating. Moreover, she shows an uncanny misinterpretation of the huntsmen's intentions and serious misjudgment of the situation. This is not a test of whether she can abstain from words, but of her common sense or interpersonal communication aptitude, which is proved to be extremely poor. She not only keeps her mouth shut but also abandons her rights, her privacy and creativeness of expression. In consequence, she is taken down the tree against her will and brought to the king demeaned and debilitated.

In front of the king, not only her silence but also her intelligence, judgments and reasoning power undergo a harsh test. "He tried questioning her in all the languages he knew, but she remained as silent as a fish" (CFTBG, 200). The contrast between the two characters is revealing. The king shows his learnedness as well as his goodwill by trying to speak in many languages to the princess, who in turn makes no attempt to respond, either in body language or any other means of communication. Under the

pretext of sacrificing herself for her brother's freedom, the princess avoids all other aspects of life, and holds on to the sewing work as if it is her only objective. The protagonist is not only silent but is downright dumb, in the immediate and extended meaning of the word. Being dumb and undressed in front of her marital partner can only land her on inferior ground, which denies her any equal footing in a relationship. As a result, she is wrapped in the king's cloak and is taken away to the castle, like the grand prize of a royal sport. From then on, her passive and submissive behavior remains consistent throughout the story.

The courting scene in "The Six Swans" is not only more complicated and complex; it should be viewed in the light of another scene that precedes it, one that depicts the older king, the protagonist's father, encountering the witches in another hunting trip in the woods. The two episodes have many points in common. Both kings go hunting in the wood and are then married to mysterious strangers. The contrasts between them are just as strong. While the older king is cheated into the marriage in the first scene, in the second it is the new queen who is reluctant to enter into the union. The latter is the consequence of the first and serves to undo the mistake committed by the former. Since the older king's wife outwits and overpowers the king, the younger queen is stripped of her power and honor. She gives up control of everything including her own body and destiny as a result. As the older queen forces her hand into the king's, her younger counterpart has to be carried off against her will like a mentally retarded slave girl. As the wicked queen sews the charms onto the shirts to change the princes into birds, the young queen has to sew other shirts to change them back to

human form again. Two hunting events, two stranger-wives, two kings getting married, two sets of charmed shirts – these are elements forming the structure of the story comprising a bipolarity of evil and virtue, manipulation and submissiveness, crime and punishment, mischief and redemption.

Six years of muteness and manual labor tie up the protagonist's tongue as well as her hands. The protagonist lives in complete isolation and social seclusion, hiding away in her little cell embracing a meaningless piece of work and indulging in her self-inflicted sufferings. The number six that corresponds to the silent period of "The Six Swans" does not have the same symbolic reference as the seven years' period in the growing process. Unlike the princess in the other tale, she has learned practically nothing about communication in spite of her restraint. Nor does she earn her independence, although she does not stop sewing. Having served a full term of muteness and hard labor, neither her tongue nor her hands will ever be free again. While silence and spinning help the protagonist in "The Twelve Brothers" to grow up into a fulfilled adult, passive muteness and obsession with work do not make her counterpart in "The Six Swans" a more mature or a happier person. Instead, tying up her hands and tongue can only be a vindictive action and preventive measure.

The episode in which the protagonist gives birth to three boys, who are then stolen away, can be found in other tales, among which are the Grimms' "Our Lady's

Child” and one version of “The Sleeping Beauty.”¹⁶⁶ The same action taking place three times is a common cliché in fairy tales. In “The Six Swans,” it reinforces the impression that the protagonist is an inadequate adult and incompetent mother. By the end of the story, after the restoration of order, the siblings get together, the couple are reunited, and the babies are neatly forgotten. This indicates that the episode is not very relevant to the story, except to add more misery to the protagonist’s life. In the development process, she shows incompetence in the handling of the babies in the same way as she fails in her managing of her silence and work.

In “Our Lady’s Child,” the Virgin Mary gives her adopted daughter a key to a secret chamber and asks her not to open it, a request reminiscent of the one in “Bluebeard.” Naturally, the daughter disobeys and does exactly the opposite of what she is told. At the confrontation with her mother, the daughter refuses to speak. The Virgin then takes away her three children as a punishment. The moral lesson of the tale is that one should render absolute obedience and submissiveness to one’s parents. However, it is the natural curiosity of human nature that is put to the test. Curiosity is a quality that can be developed into intelligence and independent thinking. This is a trap that the mother sets up to gain total control of the younger woman. As was to be expected, the child fails the test and awaits her punishment. It is significant that she turns down all verbal communication with her mother as a show of defiance and

¹⁶⁶ In Perrault’s version (1697), the king’s mother is an ogress and wants to eat Sleeping Beauty’s children. In an earlier version, “Pentamerone” by Basile (1636), the king’s first wife is the malefactor.

rebellion. In order to bend her spirit, the Virgin takes away what is most important in her life, her children. The punishment meted out is neither fair nor relevant to the mistake she has made. Therefore, it cannot help the child to learn anything but to break her heart and mind. Like many a manipulative mother, our Lady abuses her power in order to stay in a dominant position. As the child has also grown to be a mother, taking away her children is an effective way to deny her motherhood, and subsequently also her maturity. She is forced to relapse to a previous phase where she has to live under the authority of her mother.

“Our Lady’s Child” is about the taming of the willful and the rebellious, a counter-growth message. The protagonist uses silence to protest against the mother’s attempt to bend her will. Silence shouts loud, being probably the only means against the maternal tyranny that keeps her in eternal childhood. Her silence is no less expressive and communicative than words.

In “The Six Swans,” the prosecution of the female sex comes to an end only when the king’s mother is executed. The heroine is replaced by the old woman to be burned alive at the stake. A fire is constantly ready for women, old or young, tongue-lashing or tied, to punish or warn them against any dissenting behavior. The fire keeps alive the human-sacrificing ritual that guarantees female passivity and self-abnegation.

“The Wild Swans” by Hans Christian Andersen

In an old kingdom, the king has eleven sons and one daughter, Elise. They live a happy and lavish life: the boys write with diamond pens on golden slates and the girl has a picture book that costs half a kingdom. And then the father is married again, to a wicked woman who, on their wedding day, refuses the children cakes and baked apples and makes them play with sand instead. Soon afterwards, the stepmother sends Elise to live in the countryside and slanders the boys in front of the king. One day, the queen casts a curse upon the princes and changes them into wild swans. Meanwhile, Elise has grown up to be a beautiful girl. She is also particularly religious and pious, as proved by the praises given by the roses and the prayer book. She returns home on her fifteenth birthday but is turned away from the father.

Elise resolves to look for her brothers and sets out into the wood, where God feeds her and puts her to rest. The next day, she goes further and meets an old woman, who tells Elise about eleven swans with golden crowns. Elise reaches the seashore and sees her brothers, who change back into human form after sunset. The swans have to fly to another country for the rest of the year. Elise decides to go with them. The journey over the ocean is extremely dangerous and difficult. Before reaching her destination, Elise sees the mirage of Fata Morgana's palace. Elise prays to the fairy for a way to release her brothers. In her dreams, Elise meets Fata Morgana, who resembles the old woman who helped Elise to find her brothers. The fairy tells Elise to make eleven coats

of long sleeves out of stinging nettles growing in the churchyard. Until the work is done, Elise has to remain silent. Elise does as the fairy says and has finished one coat when discovered by a hunting party led by the king of the country. The king proposes to take her to his castle, but she wrings her hands and sheds tears to refuse him. He takes her away anyway, saying that he is only thinking of her happiness and that one day she will thank him for his.

Elise is married to the king. But the archbishop is suspicious of the new queen and advocates against the marriage. Meanwhile, Elise goes on with her sewing. Every time she uses up all the nettles, she steals away at night to pick nettles in the churchyard. The archbishop sees this and reports it to the king. They both follow Elise to the churchyard where the ghouls dig into the graves and eat dead bodies. The king thinks that Elise is one of them and orders her to be tried. She is sentenced to death by fire.

On the day of the execution, the brother's coats are nearly finished. The eleven white swans come to the palace and try to save Elise. When she is put on the fire, they fly forward and she throws the coats over them. They then change back into men. But the youngest brother's keeps a wing instead of his left arm because of the unfinished sleeve. Elise can speak now and declares her innocence. Then she falls into unconsciousness and her eldest brother goes on to explain things to the crowd. Fragrance fills the air and roses blossom from the pile of wood under her. As the king

places a rose on her bosom, Elise is awakened. The royal procession goes back to the palace in joy.¹⁶⁷

What cannot be shown in the brief synopsis above is the polished style, exquisite language and elaborate details that distinguish “The Wild Swans” from the Grimms’ tales. Writing techniques apart, the few important changes in the story render significant differences between Andersen’s work and the others. Some critics believe that Andersen does no more than embellish a traditional story. Elias Bredsdorff, one of the most eminent Andersen scholars, quotes from a letter written by Andersen dated October 1838 to support the claim that Andersen’s tale followed closely a traditional folk tale of a story similar to the Grimms’ “The Six Swans,” a printed version of which was published in Matthias Winther’s *Fokeeventyr* in the year 1823.¹⁶⁸ Reginald Spink, another celebrated Andersen authority, believes that Andersen’s tales invariably come from traditional stories that he “had heard as a child in the spinning room and during hop-picking.”¹⁶⁹ Andersen himself seldom mentions the sources of his tales. He only admits that nine of his 156 printed tales originate from traditional tales, among them

¹⁶⁷ *The Complete Illustrated Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. H.W. Dulcken (London: Chancellor Press, 1982) 560-72. The same translation will be used for later references to the text.

¹⁶⁸ Elias Bredsdorff, *Hans Christian Andersen: the story of his life and work 1805-75* (Cambridge: Phaidon, 1975) 310.

¹⁶⁹ Reginald Spink, *Hans and His World* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972) 60.

“The Wild Swan.”¹⁷⁰ The story could have been well known at that time. Perhaps the origin of the story is not important, as Bo Grønbech contends. He believes Andersen’s most important achievement is to have given the tales a “cultivated literary taste,” adapted for “well-reared” children and their parents.¹⁷¹

Other critics believe that Andersen does more than rewrite and adapt traditional stories. Spink writes that Andersen owes nothing more than a story outline to the predecessors of his tales. Andersen’s personality and life experience are the main factors in the character of his work. Spink never mentions “The Wild Swans,” neither do most other Andersen critics. However, his notion that Andersen’s tales reflect the author’s thinking and life experience is shared by another critic, Niels Kofoed, who writes that Andersen’s fairy tales “became a supple instrument for expressing the writer’s personal philosophy of life.”¹⁷² He stresses that Andersen “deliberately kept in touch with the unconscious aspects of his soul” and even “tried to develop his own mythology based on tradition.”¹⁷³ Although it is hard to determine how and to what degree Andersen’s personality or life experience help to shape his tales, a detailed analysis of the tale may help to find its message. “The Wild Swans” is to be compared

¹⁷⁰ Bo Grønbech, *Hans Christian Andersen* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 91.

¹⁷¹ Grønbech, *Hans Christian Andersen* 96.

¹⁷² Niels Kofoed, “Hans Christian Andersen and the European Literary Tradition,” in *Hans Christian Andersen: Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: GA 1996), 245.

¹⁷³ Kofoed, “Hans Christian Andersen and the European Literary Tradition,” 246-47.

with the Grimms' tales, in terms of plot, characterization, and, above all, the representation and use of speech and silence.

Right from the beginning, the protagonist appears at the center of the tale, without digression or unnecessary actions. "Far away, where the swallows take refuge in winter, lived a king who had eleven sons and one daughter, Elise" (*AFT*, 36). She is given a personal name – a privilege enjoyed only by the youngest of the brothers in "The Twelve Brothers." Her name also gives her an individual identity that sets her apart from most fairytale characters. Instead of recounting the circumstances of her birth like the two other tales, Andersen describes her lifestyle instead. "Elise sat upon a little footstool of looking glass, and she had a picture-book which had cost the half of a kingdom" (*AFT*, 37). The character is portrayed amidst a display of luxury uncommon in fairy tales. While fairy tales use royal titles to indicate independence, and richness to mean innate resources, Andersen exploits the literal senses of these terms. In "The Twelve Brothers," the only description concerning the princess's wealth is "the gold star on her forehead," (*TCFTBG*, 33) which is a symbol of her courage and strength. Her royal heritage stands for her inherent resourcefulness. In "The Six Swans," her wealth is manifested in material worth, inappropriately displayed in the courting scene where the dumb princess removes her "golden necklace" and expansive clothing and casts them away to the king's huntsmen. (*TCFTBG*, 39) However, luxury of the expensive jewels and clothing pales in comparison to Elise's "footstool of looking glass" and "a picture-book which had cost the half of a kingdom." Andersen paints a picture of a child at once

privileged and vulnerable. She is not properly equipped to cross the threshold of adulthood.

The Representation and Use of Magic

Magic is expected in fairy tales. To a certain degree, its presence is one of the defining components of the genre. However, the representation and use of magic or other supernatural elements can have significant effects on the meaning of the tale. Magic is an integral part in “The Twelve Brothers” although its occurrence is infrequent. It involves basically the brothers’ metamorphosis, the enchanted dwelling, and the appearance of the old woman. Magic is a way to present events figuratively. Instead of describing the alienation and disconnection among the siblings, the fairy tale presents an image of the brothers changing into birds. Instead of recounting how the protagonist goes through the process of contemplation or reflection, an old woman materializes out of the blue to talk to her. Magic is represented as natural cause and effect rendered in condensed and symbolic terms. It also serves to highlight the importance of the event. It crystallizes the action into a highly economical, imaginative and stylized language. This special way of presentation becomes a defining trait of the genre of fairy tales. Magic touches the events that mark the turning points in the plot.

Most fairy tales reflect real-life problems and suggest possible solutions. As pointed out by Karen E. Rowe, the original and correct definition of the term *contes de fées* in French is the “telling of fated truths.”¹⁷⁴ A fairy tale can be said to be “fated” in the sense that a certain action leads to a certain result. The relationship between cause and effect is mechanical and inexorable, and this forms the basis for plot structures in most fairy tales. This is a major characteristic of the popular narrative, shared by *contes de fées* and their equivalent in other cultures, such as *Hausemärchen* in German and fairy tales in English.

“The Twelve Brothers” is an example of how magic is represented and used in some traditional tales. Fairy figures, magical objects and supernatural powers are part of the metaphorical language. As some of the examples described above, the deterioration of the sibling relationship can be shown through a quarrel scene, or the protagonist’s inner voice can be heard in a monologue. The magical moments are not indispensable to the plot development, which is governed by the law of cause and effect, but are significant as a literary characteristic of fairy tales. Magic is merely an alternative expression of common sense or the natural course of action. It is employed in a controlled and manageable manner. It is not meant to distract, trivialize or escape from reality, but to enhance and clarify the situation. It can be called the “true magic” or the “magic truth.”

¹⁷⁴ Karen E. Rowe, “To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale,” in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed, Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1986) 62.

In comparison, magic in “The Six Swans” has other connotations and functions. The protagonist’s stepmother and grandmother know black magic; even the king possesses supernatural objects. Magic is an agent of change that can change the course of life drastically. It sometimes appears as improbable and illogical intrusions and does not reflect the necessity of actions. Magic is a dominating force in the tale, to such an extent that at times it overwhelms the story. Other factors pale by comparison. The tale carries the message that human beings are small and powerless confronted by magic. This may explain why the protagonist does not have to go through any handicraft apprenticeship before adulthood, because her effort will amount to nothing anyway. The tale implies that the only thing that one can count upon is magic, or fantasy, or mere chance, which is beyond human control or comprehension.

The representation of magic in “The Wild Swans” is comparable with that of “The Six Swans,” but goes even further. In Andersen’s tale, the magical instances are greatly elaborated and exaggerated. Elise is described as virtuous and pious, in the strict sense of popularized nineteenth century European Judeo-Christianity.

The wind whistled to the roses, “who can be prettier than you are?” The roses shook their heads and answered, “Elise!” And when the old woman sat in the doorway reading her Psalm, the wind turned over the leaves and said to the book, “Who can be more pious than you?” “Elise!” answered the book.” (*AFT*, 38)

It is injudicious to conclude that Andersen the tale-writer is a defender of a certain religion, for his use of religious objects or ideas is a hybrid of several sources of popular beliefs prevalent at the time. As Spink points out, Andersen “was hardly ever a conventional believer,” and it was “his mother’s pagan superstitions” that had important

influence on him.¹⁷⁵ Andersen's knowledge relating to religions and traditional beliefs is reflected in his use of magic in his tales.

As a response to Elise's prayer, a fairy of the folk tradition Fata Morgana comes to Elise's rescue, in the manner of a *deus ex machina* (AFT, 45). Compared with the old woman who voices the protagonist's intuition and learned common sense in "The Twelve Brothers,"¹⁷⁶ the fairy represents a superior power that demands submission and obedience on the part of the protagonist, which can be compared to the godly mother figure in "Our Lady's Child," and has the same effect.

The kind of magic which is present in "The Wild Swans" is hardly the "fated truth," a term that Rowe uses to describe and define fairy tales. It is not clear if Andersen ever considers his work as fairy tales. But at least on one occasion, he called his tales published around the 1840's and 1850's *historier*, meaning "stories," and the collected edition of his 156 tales the *Eventyr og Historier*.¹⁷⁷ *Eventyr* can be translated as "adventure stories" or "fantastic tales," which are recounted by sailors about unbelievable and marvelous events that take place overseas. The setting of Andersen's

¹⁷⁵ Spink, *Hans and His World* 78.

¹⁷⁶ The origin of this tale is attributed to Dorothea Viehman, as written in the prefaces of the first and second edition of the Brothers Grimm's tales. Although the authenticity of the tale remains a question, this version provides an example to the use of the magic elements in some traditional tales. Heinz Rölloke writes that "there is not a single witch or woman versed in magic" among stories provided by Dorothea Viehman. See his "New Results of Research on Grimms' Fairy Tales," *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm* 105. Besides, it is not uncommon for a fairy tale not to have any particularly magic character or objects.

¹⁷⁷ Spink, *Hans and His World* 80.

tales often covers vast geographical distances, like sailors' stories. In "The White Swan," the description of the travel over oceans and mountains is distinctly different from traditional fairy tales. The enthusiasm and optimism of the author about long-distance travelling is shown in his description of the journey, which is far more joyous and compassionate than that of the forest or the palace. Moreover, it is in the middle of the journey that the fairy appears. She is the only character in the tale that shows some human warmth. The thrill of adventure compensates for the hardship of the situation. Like the sailors' stories exchanged in public houses, his tale seeks to entertain and impress his audience. Fantasies and magic find a common ground in "The Six Swans" and "The Wild Swans." The treatment of magic is closely connected with the representation of silence. The theme of both of these tales is not about silence or words but magic and fantasy

Reluctant Silence and Voluntary Deaf

In "The Wild Swans," when the king is about to take Elise away, "she wept and wrung her hands." However, he insists and says, "I only think of your happiness; you will thank me one day for what I am doing" (*AFT*, p. 46). If we compare this episode with "The Six Swans," where the king tries his best to talk to the incommunicable princess, Elise's suitor sounds and acts like a manipulator and tyrant. The protagonist in "The Six Swans" accepts voluntary dumbness and gives herself up to fate or the wills of others, whereas Elise reacts in a visibly different way to the proposal and yet gets the same

treatment. Expression and reception are not the problem; it is the king who refuses to acknowledge the protagonist's right to choice. Shakespeare describes this kind of communication break-down through the mouthpiece of Falstaff:

“[...] it is a kind of deafness,”

[...]

“[...] it is the disease of not listening, the malady of not marking.”

(*Henry IV*, Part 2, Act I, Scene ii, 134, 139-40)

Andersen's king must be afflicted with “the disease of not listening, the malady of not marking.” If the protagonist in “The Six Swans” is mute and dumb, the king in “The Wild Swans” must be blind and deaf. He is mentally conditioned to not hear her because he cannot take a negative answer to his question. Worse still, he denies her will and right to decide. With his hunting party of armed men and hounds, the king possesses a kind of superiority over Elise which he exploits to his advantage. This is a case of abduction of a young woman by force, a serious case distinctly different from the courting scenes in the other two tales. What is more alarming is that the whole scene is presented in a matter-of-fact manner and a tone of normality. There is a total lack of critical distance or judgment in the narrator's voice.

Andersen's protagonist is disrespected and humiliated by her suitor's deliberate negligence of her expressions as well as her wishes and rights. She loses her independence and integrity despite herself – and despite her eloquent body language. It is her loss of integrity that finally silences her. Her misery is not due to the lack of words, but to the selfishness and tyranny of the king. At the end of the story, after she is allowed to speak again, one wonders if she will really be heard.

The Metamorphosis of Elise

It is remarkable how the use of shirts, spinning or sewing and how they are related to silence differ between the three tales. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the scene of spinning appears very briefly and the activity stays at the symbolic level. The shirts are related to the apprenticeship of laundry, the only function of which is to initiate the protagonist into the family problems. Laundry and spinning are two of the three skills that the protagonist has to master before reaching adulthood. The third skill is cooking, which the protagonist of “The Twelve Brothers,” learns in the phase of living in the forest with her siblings. The princess in “The Six Swans” does not learn to cook or to do laundry. Sewing is not a skill to learn but an activity that occupies her days. The meaning of the apprenticeship of these skills is lost in the tale. The shirts do not reveal family history to the protagonist but are agents which change the boys into birds. Sewing in this tale is connected directly to the shirts and, therefore, directly related to magic. Expendng her energy in practicing a magical activity, the protagonist can aspire to be a witch but not a queen. For no obvious reason, the protagonist accepts the punishment that ties her hands to the work. Embracing silence and sewing can be a way to avoid other obligations or relationship issues. Adult life can be too much for her; she neglects her marriage and lets herself be put to the stake. Although she is saved at the last minute, the young queen does not seem to be equipped yet to enter into another phase of development. Her life still depends upon the king and the brothers,

whose least mistakes or show of weakness will probably put her back to hard labor or on the fire.

The motifs sewing, shirts and silence have different meanings in “The Twelve Brothers,” whereas the three are closely connected in “The Six Swans.” In the former tale, silence is used to keep in balance the young protagonist’s over-assertiveness and inflated ego. But the latter portrays silence as a punishment. While the protagonist of “The Twelve Brothers” practices spinning as the last of the three apprenticeships to prepare her for adult life, her counterpart in “The Six Swans” is condemned to sewing shirts as a retribution which devastates her adult life. “The Wild Swans” takes the negative effects of silence and sewing to another level. Elise has to collect the “horrid” and “stinging nettles” that “burn and blister” her hands (*AFT*, pp. 45-46, 48-49). She has to work long hours under extremely inhuman conditions. On top of that, she has to suffer her husband’s misunderstanding and unjust accusations from the others. However, what is the most important is her attitude towards the injustice done to her. On hearing the decree announced by the fairy Morgana, the princess “fell upon her knees with thanks to God [and] she suffered it willingly” (*AFT*, pp. 45-46). Voluntary silent suffering becomes her epithet, her sole reason for existence. If “The Twelve Brothers” shows a picture of a beaming young queen learning and trying various things in life, “The Wild Swan” portrays a prematurely aged woman, bent with family burdens and shame, and hands fanatically sewing day and night. Compared to the protagonist in “The Six Swans,” who endures and assimilates the suffering passively, Elise seeks it out and constantly craves for it. In the context of the religious piety that is so manifest in

this tale, one can interpret this behavior as inspired by an exaggerated Christian spirit of self-sacrifice. She seems to hide behind her pain and solitude to avoid living an independent and meaningful life, in which choices and conscious efforts have to be made. Seldom does a protagonist in a tale designated for children suffer so much and in return gain so little. A literary tale writer's boundless imagination is on display in this show case, but in a destructive way.

The protagonist may be judged culpable of one more mistake that she has committed earlier in life. Although described as being impeccably virtuous, the young Elise is accustomed to wealth and privileges. Her status and wealth is matched by the exquisite pain that Andersen gives her. Under the pen of a poverty-stricken writer, the young queen is treated like a most dangerous criminal. He makes sure that she is not spoiled again in her adult life, with or without a needle in her hand.

The three tales studied here manifest how silence and work can be represented and used with different results. The protagonists undertake a similar journey but travel in radically different directions. The present study is primarily based upon textual analysis. The origin and the source of Grimms' tales are of secondary importance, and so is the question about how the Grimm brothers' ideology influenced their choice of tales or the way the tales are edited or rewritten. "The Twelve Brothers" and "The Six Swans" can be considered as two completely different stories apart from a similar story plot. Whether Andersen was inspired by traditional tales or not, "The Wild Swans," is a remarkable story in its own right. The author's imprint is strongly present in the tale.

Toward the end, the protagonists grow up into distinctly different people. As Bottigheimer observes in her study of “The Twelve Brothers,” “The Six Swans” and “The Seven Ravens”, the protagonists are rendered very differently, “from inherently powerful to utterly enfeebled” respectively.¹⁷⁸ The discrepancies in the representation and use of silence are largely responsible for the difference between these tales. In a similar way, the development of the stories of “Sleeping Beauty” and “Little Red Riding Hood” also shows the degradation of the protagonists, who show less courage and initiative in the later versions of the tales.¹⁷⁹ Most probably in the course of its evolution, the silent tale has been developed into several parallel versions, reflecting a wide range of views and values of the society that nourishes it. The coexistence of different representations of the silent protagonist shows the diversity and complexity of the oral tradition.

The notion of silence was also explored in many ways, alongside the characterization of the protagonist. Having made its way through the market place or family home, and arrived at the printer’s or at recital halls, the silent tale takes on another life. “The Wild Swans,” provides an example of a case in which the representation of silence has become rigid and stagnant. It is important to look back to other interpretations of the silent tales for the origin and meaning of silence, which is a

¹⁷⁸ Zipes, *Grimms’ Bad Girls & Bold Boys* 37.

¹⁷⁹ For the analysis of “Red Riding Hood,” see Yvonne Verdier, “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” 101-23. Also Jack Zipes, “The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood,” *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in Social-Cultural Context* (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey, 1983), 1-65. For “Sleeping Beauty,” see also Jack Zipes, *Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forest to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 150-64.

contrasting and complementary phenomenon to voice. Using other terms, “The Twelve Brothers” can be described as a tale about the education of voice, and “The Six Swans” is a story about absolute silence. “The Wild Swan” evokes pity for its protagonist’s suffering, which consists of hard manual labor, excruciating pain and denial of self-expression. Andersen’s notion of silence is further elaborated in another tale, “The Little Mermaid,” which will be discussed in the next chapter. The present chapter has explored the meaning of voice through studying various facets of silence as manifested in several nineteenth century fairy tales. It may lead towards a better understanding of the loss of voice in Andersen’s mermaid tale. It also prepares the ground for further discussion on the birth of new voice in more recent literature, to be found in the last two chapters of the present thesis.

The study of the various facets of words and silence in the group of silent tales can help to bridge the difference between Homer’s singing mermaids and Andersen’s mute mermaid. While the sirens’ song empowers Odysseus and opens another dimension to knowledge and self-control, the fairytale protagonists find or lose their own voice in association with independence and human relationships. The female voice evokes fear as well as curiosity, can be destructive or constructive depending on the male counterpart’s assumption. The voice is a means of initiation both for the hero as well as for the mermaid character, which is shown in the contemporary novels to be studied in the later chapters of the thesis.

Chapter III

H. C. Andersen's Silenced Mermaid

On the success of “The Wild Swans” [*De Vilde Svaner*], Hans Christian Andersen wrote to a friend disclosing his plan of writing more tales. In 1836, after two volumes of tales and two novels, he published two fairy tales including “The Little Mermaid” [*Den Lille Havfrue*],¹⁸⁰ which helped to establish Andersen as an important author of the genre.

Sources and Origins

¹⁸⁰ The other tale published in the same year was “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” For the complete story of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” translated by Jean Hersholt (latest update: January 2010), see the official site of The Hans Christian Andersen Center, a department of The Faculty of Humanities at The University of Southern Denmark. Its site is as follows: http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheLittleMermaid_e.html
This thesis uses another translation: *The Little Mermaid: A Fairy Tale by Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. David Hohnen (Copenhagen: Host & Son, 1959). All quotations from the book are cited by page number in the text, preceded by ‘TLM’, the abbreviation for the title of the novel.

The story of “The Little Mermaid” is about the unrequited love of a princess of the sea-kingdom. Two years before its publication, Andersen wrote a lyrical drama, *Agnes and the Merman* [*Agnete og Havmanden*], inspired by an old Danish ballad of the same title. It tells of the marriage of a merman to a human wife, which has a sad ending. Around the same time, on other cultural fronts, the dancer and choreographer of the Royal Danish Ballet Filippo Taglioni created a ground-breaking piece of Romantic ballet called *La Sylphide* (1832).¹⁸¹ Four years after its première in Paris, in the same year as “The Little Mermaid” was published, a second version of the dance was staged in Copenhagen under its Swedish title *Sylfiden*. It was the work of a Danish ballet master August Bournonville and a Swedish composer Herman Severin Lovenskiöld.¹⁸² In fact, it is not uncommon to find love stories between human and mermaids, or other supernatural beings, featured in Danish literature or performing arts in the nineteenth century. Mermaid stories can also be found in other parts of the continent at the time. For example, in 1823, the German poet Christian Johann Heinrich Heine¹⁸³ wrote a poem called “Die Lorelei,” alluding to the Rhineland folklore regarding a fairy who lives on a rock and lures the sailors to their death with her sweet songs. However, the theme of a mermaid dying of unrequited love was first suggested in a play titled *Undine* by

¹⁸¹ Filippo Taglioni (1777 - 1871). The story of the ballet is based on a novel entitled *Trilby* or the *Lutin d'Argail* by Charles Nodier (1780 - 1844), with the libretto written by Adolphe Nourrit (1802 - 1839), and music by Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffter. Apart from the choreographer who was Italian, the rest of the production team was French.

¹⁸² August Bournonville (1805 - 1879); Herman Severin Lovenskiöld (1815 – 1870).

¹⁸³ Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797 - 1856), a German poet and master in German language, showed keen interest in German folklore and was implicated in politics.

Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué around 1911.¹⁸⁴ Andersen's tale can be seen as part of the bigger cultural picture of the continent of that time.

The rich tradition of siren-mermaid stories in European culture also accounts for the creation of Andersen's mermaid. The sirens in Greek mythology are immortal women with the bodies of birds, noted for their musical talent.¹⁸⁵ The image of Homer's sirens who lure the sailors to their peril is particularly persistent through the ages. Mermaids in folklore differ from the sirens not only in their origin but also in certain characteristics that are not shared by Greek sirens. Generally speaking, mermaids have fishtails and live in the sea. Their enticing power lies in their physical features but not in their song lyrics. They can change their forms at will and can appear like ordinary women and come to live on the land. They are not invincible and can occasionally save fishermen's lives. The merging of the bird-bodied sirens with the fish-tailed mermaid can be seen in medieval iconography. The process was long but the result was definitive.¹⁸⁶ For example, some bestiaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries show the figure of

¹⁸⁴ Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué (1777 – 1843) was a German writer active in the beginning of the 19th century. His work showed a mixed influence of romances and folklore of Northern European origin.

¹⁸⁵ See John Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977).

¹⁸⁶ For the evolution, see the detailed and well-documented research on the subject by Siegfried de Rachewiltz, in his *De Sirenibus: an Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987) 85-108.

the mermaid as a curious amalgam of the two, liberally selective of characteristics from both traditions.¹⁸⁷

In her studies of the origin and development of mermaid folklore, Ruth Berman states that the mermaid, in the particular guise and characteristics as we know her today, “is a late-developing legend, taking shape chiefly in the Middle Ages in the countries of northern Europe.” She also points out that every ancient culture has legends associated with water deities or spirits, including the Babylonian Ea or Oannes, the Syrian Atagats, Philistine Dercet, the Cornish merrymaid, the Irish merrow, Shetland’s sea-trow, the Scandinavia neck, havfrue and havmand, the Germanic meerfrau, nix and nixe, the Lorelei of the Rhine, French Mélusine, and the Russian water-king’s daughters, the Rusalka. She suggests that it is a general rule that mermaids in folklore have special power over humans. Some of them bring disaster to men, while some help men out of danger; still others marry humans and live briefly on shore. Other stories relate mermaids to vanity and sensual pleasure, which, Ruth Berman observes, is a result of later developments.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ See T.H. White, ed. and trans., *The Bestiary: A Book of Beast, Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, (New York: Putnam’s, 1954) and also Guillaume le Clerc, *Le Bestiaire divin*, ed. C. Hippeau, (Geneve: Slatkine Reprints, 1970). A survey and discussion of the trail of development from the bird-bodied sirens to fishtailed mermaids is found in Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and her Kin* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), particularly pp. 35-50.

¹⁸⁸ Ruth Berman, “Mermaids,” in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, ed. Malcolm South (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987) 135-141.

Ailene S. Goodman also discusses the origin of the mermaid legends in several ancient cultures:

The mermaid's story is rooted in evolving traditions ranging from a Philistine fertility deity mentioned in [*The Dartmouth Bible*]; a Sumerian water god and a Babylonian fish god[...]; a fish goddess of ancient Syria; and a porpoise-tailed woman described in stolid narration published in London in 1625 and written by the explorer Henry Hudson.¹⁸⁹

Goodman states that the fish-tailed mermaid story already existed four thousand years ago and later joined with myths from India, ancient Celtic lore, Teutonic sagas and, lastly, the Melusine legend.¹⁹⁰ She cites Horace's *Ars Poetica* as an example of the representation of a fish-tailed mermaid during the first century.¹⁹¹ However, Horace's depiction of an attractive woman with a black fishtail is only for the illustration of his theory about unity and harmony and does not concern any myth in particular. Most importantly, Horace does not attribute musical talent to this fish-tailed woman.¹⁹² The same applies to Enki or Ea, the Sumerian god related to water, who cannot sing and is therefore different from the singing women of the sea.

Jacqueline Leclercq-Max has studied the physiology and metamorphosis of the mermaid from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. She finds that the earliest literary and

¹⁸⁹ A.S. Goodman, "The Extraordinary Being: Death and the Mermaid in Baroque Literature," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Winter, 17/3 (1983): 32.

¹⁹⁰ Goodman, "The Extraordinary Being," 37.

¹⁹¹ Goodman, "The Extraordinary Being," 36.

¹⁹² Horace's *Ars Poetica*, l. 3-7. *Horace: Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*. Written between 23 and 20 B.C. Modern versions include the one published by Loeb Classical Library (No. 194) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

artistic representation of the fish-tailed mermaid can be found not before the seventh century. And even at that date, as she proclaims, a pisciform mermaid did not constitute a so-called “tradition.”¹⁹³ Neither does she believe that the serpent-tailed woman as is found in a ninth century Byzantine manuscript can be related to the fish-tailed mermaid figure, which is developed later.¹⁹⁴

Another folklorist, Dag Stromback, believes that mermaid stories have their origins in Scandinavian and Germanic folklores: “The association of song and music with water-demons is a very old idea in the northern cultures as well as in the ancient Mediterranean cultures.”¹⁹⁵ Below is one of the examples he cites about these water-spirits.

The female water-spirit in Old Norse called *margygr*, according to the larger Saga of Saint Olaf, had such a lovely voice that she was able with her singing to cause Olaf’s men to fall asleep during a sea voyage.¹⁹⁶

Many stories in Stromback’s collection are similar to Homer’s sirens although the latter’s direct influence on Northern folklores is yet to be proved.

The folklorist Horac Beck delineates the varieties of “mer-tales” In his *Folklore and the Sea*. He says that mermaids are often disguised as human beings, pursuing

¹⁹³ Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l’art de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age: Du Mythe païen au symbole chrétien* (Brussels : the Royal Academy of Belgium, 1997) 69, 75-87.

¹⁹⁴ Leclercq-Marx, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l’art de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age* 75.

¹⁹⁵ Dag Stromback, *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies*, eds. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 253.

¹⁹⁶ Stromback, *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies* 253.

sailors' boats, or living on land temporarily. They are unpredictable, extremely self-centered, and are often seen wreaking vengeance on men. According to Beck, the core of mermaid tales is derived from Nordic folklore, while other variations come from Babylonia, Greece and Egypt. These fish-like supernatural women are called respectively mermaids, the Lorelei, the Kelpie, and the Orians.¹⁹⁷ Mermaid stories seem to have stopped evolving at a certain point and started repeating themselves. As Beck puts it, "Mer-people's [...] stories are losing strength and vitality."¹⁹⁸ By the nineteenth century, when the mermaids caught the imagination and fantasy of literary men and artistic performers, their stories have been heavily interbred and lack freshness and creativity.¹⁹⁹

The major components of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" can be found in both the literary and folk traditions; while the possible sources of the tale have to be taken into account, their importance should not be overstated. Folklorist Alan Dundes points out that most folklore studies are devoted to the research of folkloristic elements manifested in a piece of literary work – the approach of "identification" – but that too few attempts are made to analyze the meaning and ideas conveyed in a tale – the "interpretation" approach. He holds that "Identification" is not an end in itself but

¹⁹⁷ Horac Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Conneticut: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973) 233.

¹⁹⁸ Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* 253.

¹⁹⁹ Stich Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1946) 5.

complementary to “interpretation,” and that a component can be judged only by its relevance to the final work.²⁰⁰

Dundes’ view is echoed by F. L. Utley, who writes that critics should put more emphasis upon the tale itself instead of its circumstantial information. But he disagrees with the assumption “that continental scholarship [...] has been remiss in other areas than the historical and geographical ones.” Utley goes even further and calls for “the approach to the folk tale simply as a work of art.” He suggests that, instead of doing research on the background information, one should proceed to analyze the meaning of the work directly and “quickly get down to business.”²⁰¹

The aim of the present chapter is not to try to identify all the origins and sources relating to Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” Instead, it is an attempt to find out the messages that Andersen tries to convey in his work, and how successfully he renders them through the use of the richly-coded character of the mermaid.

²⁰⁰ Alan Dundes, “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader*, ed. Elliott Oring (Logan: Utah University Press, 1989) 350.

²⁰¹ Francis Lee Utley, “Introduction” to Max Lüthi’s *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970) 5-7.

Motivation and Objectives

Even though one should not confuse the author's intention with the meaning of his work, it is useful to ask the question what Andersen's aim was with this story. Was it created for the sole purpose of entertaining himself and his readers? Or does the author attempt to insidiously promote through the tale a particular value system or ideology? Although it is always hard to find out what an author has in mind at the moment of writing, the discussion may help to understand the story better. Perhaps that is the reason why many Andersen critics make speculations about his intentions and motivations. Niels Kofoed, for one, argues that Andersen's tales were intended for the promotion of Danish nationalism and Judeo-Christian values. He thinks that Andersen was motivated in the same way as his German contemporaries the Brothers Grimm, who collected and rewrote folk narrative in an attempt to establish the validity of a cultural tradition for the land of German states and thereby to create a kind of national identity. Kofoed states that some of Andersen's work demonstrates intentions to the same effect, in particular the "romantic-religious group conveying the tradition of the folktale and the German literary tale." The two tales he cites as examples are especially interesting for the present thesis: "The Wild Swans" and "The Little Mermaid".²⁰² His view on these tales is to be examined later in the chapter. Some other critics, including

²⁰² Niels Kofoed, "Hans Christian Andersen: And the European Literary Tradition," *Hans Christian Andersen: Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 247.

the renowned folklorists Roger Sales and Jack Zipes, also hold that Andersen devotes his work to converting his readers to “bourgeoisie values” and “Christian beliefs.”²⁰³

1. Neither National Identity nor Spiritual Mission

Is it Andersen’s goal to use tales to promote Christianity or Danish “national identity”? As observed in the previous chapter, there is a lack of evidence to prove that Andersen’s tales speak for any ideology or belief. Most of the folklore materials he employs are pagan in nature. The objects closest to Judeo-Christian tradition, such as the Psalms, the rosaries and the Bible in “The Wild Swans,” do not have particular religious implications. Instead, religious allusions in his work are often associated with the secular imagination. The religious belief in his tale, if there is any, is generally comprehensive and non-exclusive. Components related to religion are there to serve his tales, not vice versa.

Andersen’s story resembles strongly the Brothers Grimm’s “The Six Swans,” with the same characters except the jealous mother-in-law. In her place, the Danish writer

²⁰³ Roger Sale describes Andersen as “retarded” and “handicapped.” See his *Fairy tales and After* (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978) 63-75. Jack Zipes criticizes Andersen as “a most humble servant,” “known to kowtow to the upper classes throughout *all* of Europe.” See his “H. C. Christian Andersen and the Discourse of the Dominated,” *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (Meuthuen: New York, 1983). 71-98. See also the comparison between Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, in Jack Zipes, “Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm,” *Brothers Grimm* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 23. Jack Zipes also accuses the Grimms of having “distorted,” “corrected” and “cleansed” the traditional tales “by making ‘ideographs’ out of them.” Read his *Brothers Grimm*, 147-64. But he does not accuse Andersen of having committed the same mistakes.

invented the character of the archbishop, who slanders the new queen in front of the king.²⁰⁴ If the tales had been written for a religious cause, Andersen would probably have avoided portraying a Christian priest as a villain. Andersen was undoubtedly aware that the negative image of the servant of God would betray any attempt to bring his readers closer to the church.

2. Andersen's Unrequited Love

Perhaps the author was never really inspired by any spiritual ideal because he was preoccupied by his personal problems. Unrequited love is the dominant theme in "The Little Mermaid." Andersen had often wanted to be recognized and loved. As Roger Sale and Jack Zipes remark, Andersen's biggest problem is his insatiable craving for glory and fame.²⁰⁵ For all his success with readers abroad, he did not win his fellow Danes' acceptance. In 1834, on coming home to Denmark after one of his long trips, Andersen wrote that he was welcomed by "Judas kisses and cups of bitterness," and that he felt like "a butterfly [...] wriggling on the pin."²⁰⁶ Later in the same year, as a

²⁰⁴ However, Andersen uses plain narrative writing to relate the archbishop's action without using many qualifiers. Compared with the witch-stepmother, in connection with whom the adjective "wicked" appears twice preceding "queen," no qualifier is associated with the noun "archbishop." There is only one occasion that, when the archbishop whispers into the king's ears, his words are described as "evil" (*HCA*, 560-1, 569).

²⁰⁵ Same as footnote number 24.

²⁰⁶ *Breve fra Hans Christian Andersen*, eds. I. C. St. A. Bille and Nicolai Begh (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1878) 59. Cited and translated by Niels Kofoed, "Hans Christian Andersen and the European Literary

response to the audience's unenthusiastic reaction to his stage work *Agnes and the Merman*, he let his despair be known again: "The Danes can be evil, cold, satanic!"²⁰⁷ One year later, after receiving a mixed public reception to *The Improvisatore*, Andersen wrote to a friend about his distressing relations with the Danish public: "I want to become the best novelist of Denmark! Now I am getting dropped and my songs with me, no one listens to them in poor distant Denmark."²⁰⁸ He felt that his voice was not heard, and his songs were lost to his compatriots.

The deeply disappointed Andersen tried to escape from the Danish public. He turned to other European countries for attention. He took long trips abroad, fervently courting foreign admirers. Andersen needed desperately to be loved and nurtured, which modern critics like Sale and Zipes claim to understand but cannot sympathize with. These critics share the idea that the main motivation of Andersen's creativity is his insatiable hunger for fame.

"The Little Mermaid" is about a young mermaid sacrificing her native country, her family and her most precious personal asset to pursue the improbable dream of marriage and immortality. One cannot fail to see the parallel between the leading character of the tale and her creator; the fictive character's salvation depends upon the

Tradition," ed. Sven Hakon Rossel, *Hans Christian Andersen: Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 229.

²⁰⁷ Kofoed, "Hans Christian Andersen and the European Literary Tradition," 238.

²⁰⁸ Kofoed, "Hans Christian Andersen and the European Literary Tradition," 232.

prince, and the author needed his readers' recognition. An outstanding Andersen scholar Elias Bredsdorf observes that the little mermaid represents the author himself who related "her desire to become human with his longing to be accepted in the New World into which he had moved."²⁰⁹ He projected his state of mind on to the protagonist. He makes the little mermaid come to the human world, the author's native land. In this "evil, cold, [and] satanic" place, the mermaid shares Andersen's fate; both the author and his protagonist walk every step with a bleeding heart. Believing that he was "getting dropped and [his] songs with [him]," he has the protagonist's tongue cut off.

Andersen had won what he wanted; his efforts are duly repaid. "The Little Mermaid" and his subsequent collections of tales brought him to literary circles throughout Europe and also got him accepted in high society. But his feelings of deep insecurity persisted. In fact, he never felt quite at ease with the acclaim that he had earned the hard way. He often felt misunderstood and rejected, and these sentiments continued to find expressions in his work. "The Nightingale", published in 1844, is yet another story to manifest his yearning to be recognized and loved (*HCA*, 341-48). In this narrative, the nightingale is brought to court to serve the Emperor but later banished from the kingdom to make way for an artificial bird.

There may be another explanation for the tale, as suggested by another eminent Andersen critic Reginald Spink: the nightingale may not represent Andersen himself but

²⁰⁹ Elias Bredsdorff, *H. C. Christian Andersen and his World* (Cambridge: Phaidon, 1975) 357.

the woman with whom he fell in love but whom he failed to win. Her name was Jenny Lind, renowned at her time as “The Swedish Nightingale.”²¹⁰ Although similarities can be found between the nightingale and the singer, mainly in the gift of voice, their fates turn out to be quite different. While the nightingale fails to please the emperor and is forced into exile, Lind enjoys a successful career and also a fulfilled emotional life. Spink first compares Lind with the artificial bird, and then Andersen: “[She] triumphed with her natural song over the fashionable Italian opera-singers of her day, just as Andersen had triumphed, or would triumph, over the academic *littérateurs*.”²¹¹ The gifted but unlucky singing creature is made in the image of the self-pitying Andersen, who lamented that his “songs” are “getting dropped.” If Lind were to be given a place in this tale, she would more likely be the haughty emperor who commands his admirer’s unconditional devotion and dismisses his servant at will (*HCA*, 347).

Another person who could have inspired the creation of a character in Andersen’s stories, in this case the character of the emperor in “The Nightingale” or the prince in “The Little Mermaid” is Louise Collin, as suggested by H. C. Brix and quoted by many critics.²¹² It is also possible that the emperor and the prince represent not only the author’s romantic interests but also his readers in general. Andersen had problems in

²¹⁰ Reginald Spink, *H. C. Christian Andersen and his World* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972) 76.

²¹¹ Reginald Spink, *H. C. Christian Andersen and his World* 77.

²¹² H. C. Brix, his thesis on H. C. Andersen and his Tales, 1907, quoted with references in “Introduction”, written by Erik Dal, *The Little Mermaid*, trans. David Hohnen (Høst & Søn: Copenhagen, 1959) 10.

relationships throughout his life. His disappointment in both his emotional life and professional performance is duly reflected in his tales.

The devoted singing bird is reminiscent of the little mermaid; both of them are cast aside and replaced by usurpers. The mermaid's devotion and the nightingale's fidelity are all spent in vain; both of them disappeared in the end. The two tales have many similarities, including the treatment of voice. The nightingale entertains the Emperor with his songs, and the little mermaid does everything to please the prince. The mute protagonist loses her lover to a foreign princess. And the nightingale is replaced by the artificial bird and banned from the court, his voice is unheard and, in a way, silenced.

Both the nightingale and the little mermaid lose the one they love and the same fate befalls their author. Andersen is the singing nightingale, the talented storyteller who enchanted Europe with his world of magic and fantasies. He was also the mutilated little mermaid, who tries desperately to please the capricious and self-absorbed prince. The humble writer dreamt of being acknowledged one day, and somehow compensated in the same way as the nightingale is finally welcomed back to the court, or as the mermaid who becomes a fairy of the air.

At around the same time as "The Nightingale" was published, Andersen wrote "The Ugly Duckling," a tale concerning social status and personal identity, subjects that kept haunting Andersen in reality. The story is about a duckling that is constantly rejected and persecuted by other ducks but in the end lives happily among his own kind (HCA, 155-67). There is a major difference, however, between the mermaid and the

duckling: the former seeks love and recognition in a foreign land, while the latter happens to find his proper place among his own kind. Andersen seems to suggest that the biggest joy one can have is to be recognized and appreciated by one's own people.

"The Silver Shilling," published in 1862, has a happy ending. The protagonist after being repeatedly falsely accused of being a fake at last comes home and receives due recognition (*HCA*, 1-4). By the time Andersen wrote this tale, he had already won wide acclaim both at home and abroad, which might be a reason for the optimistic ending. The lengthy monologues that the protagonist gives are an indication that Andersen had found his audience again. Long monologues are rare in fairy tales; Andersen's intense emotion and self-pity are singular in the genre. This is typical of how he laments over the way that he has been received: "I thus wandered [...], always abused, always unwelcome; no one trusted me; and I lost confidence in the world and in myself" (*HCA*, 4). Andersen uses the shilling as a mouthpiece to vent his frustrations. These works often show a lucid picture of the author's view of himself and his relationship with the world.

What gives "The Little Mermaid" its universal appeal is Andersen's powerful rendition of a tragic love-story using a figure familiar to the nineteenth-century readers. His work can be seen as a milestone in the development of the tale of the singing sea-maiden. But what has Andersen actually brought to the siren-mermaid culture?

The Mermaid Song

1. Knowledgeable and Talented Mermaids

Both Greek sirens and folkloristic mermaids have beautiful voices. As is explained in the first chapter, Calypso and Circe and other female characters in Homer's epic also have enticing singing voices. What distinguishes the sirens from the other singing goddesses or women is the content of their song.²¹³ These knowledgeable and talented female minstrels captivate many a mariner who, like the first man, succumbs to the pleasure and power of knowledge and savors the forbidden fruit. He becomes the woman's accomplice and has to go into exile to the unknown. In the process, the man may lose himself, as in the case of most sailors, who know no self-restraints or lack the intellectual capacities to prepare for the encounter. Or he can rise above the test and fulfill his destiny.

2. Voice and Carnal Pleasure

Mermaids in folklore lure men with their singing voice. But the lyrics of the songs are seldom mentioned in traditional tales, as if the content of the songs is of little importance. In most mermaid folklore, men seem to react to the sensual delights of the

²¹³ *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) XII, 184-191.

voice but not to the message. In this aspect, the mermaids bear a resemblance to Apollonius Rhodius' sirens in *Sirenum scopuli* rather than to Homer's.²¹⁴ This can be an indication that, at the time when the fish-tailed woman replaced the bird-bodied deities in the popular imagination, women's words in general no longer carried a weight that could impact on society.²¹⁵ The mermaid songs do not have the knowledge and artistic excellence that the foreign female minstrels once imparted. As is shown in the *Odyssey*, a female's sweet singing voice – together with carnal pleasure – has no effect on a man who aspires to be a hero.

However, for an average man who cannot respond with intellectual and emotional strength to the evocation of desire, the result can be disastrous. The mermaid becomes an object of projection of his fear. Marina Warner states that the "siren song condenses all inherited belief in women's sexual powers."²¹⁶ The power that Warner refers to can be associated with the folkloric mermaids' voice; but it cannot be used to describe Homer's siren song. The ancient Greek visual arts consistently show the sirens as having women's heads and birds' bodies. It is inconceivable that these weird-looking creatures could provoke sexual desires. The idea of the sirens as sexual symbols was

²¹⁴ Please see Chapter 1, p. 3, of this thesis.

²¹⁵ Benedetta Craveri describes the Renaissance as a period when women's conditions regressed in every domain, and when women were more contained in terms of role model in comparison with previous eras. See her *L'age de la conversation [La Civiltà della Conversazione]*, translated into French by Eliane Deschamps-Pria (Paris : Gallimard, 2002) 23-41.

²¹⁶ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blond: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (1994; rpt. London: Vintage, 1995) 396.

generated later in history, involving many other factors in the process. Leclercq-Marx explains the psychological implications behind the metamorphosis of the siren-mermaid: “The fish siren is linked to the sexualisation of the notion of siren.”²¹⁷ She says that the aquatic mermaid is more easily associated with the misogynic fantasy and, therefore, becomes the “*anima/femme-fatale*.”²¹⁸ She also observes that the changes of the siren-mermaid image correspond in the main to the historical development of the society’s mores and ideology.²¹⁹

Andersen’s little mermaid is the fish-maiden who comes on shore to win the love of a man – a contrast to the more common story about the experienced sea-seductresses who lure men to their island or to the depths of the sea. But she is no different from the others in her goal which is to use her sexual powers to seduce men. As the sea-witch observes when speaking to the little mermaid: “and you think you will be able to enchant [the prince] with [your voice].” And the innocent little mermaid replies, “But if you take my voice, what have I got left?”²²⁰ This passage reveals the author’s notion of the function of a mermaid’s voice. The demonic yet maternal figure is in charge of the actual execution: she cuts out the mermaid’s tongue, taking away the “the loveliest voice of

²¹⁷ [La métamorphose de la Sirène poisson est liée à la sexualisation de la notion de Sirène.] In Leclercq-Marx, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l’art de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age* 241.

²¹⁸ Leclercq-Marx, *La Sirène dans la pensée et dans l’art de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age* 241.

²¹⁹ For the development from the Greek sirens to post-Renaissance mermaid, read Siegfried de Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus* (New York: Garland publishing, 1987).

²²⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, trans. David Hohnen (Copenhagen: Høst & Søn, 1959) 48. Further citations of the tale will be followed by their page numbers from the book.

all.” The action is physical as well as symbolic. This is a preventive measure to prevent the woman from the sea successfully seducing men again. The cutting out of the mermaid’s tongue as a kind of metaphorical castration has significations other than what it means to a personal level. It practically puts an end to the two-thousand-year campaign against female intellectual or sexual expression.

Traveling the distance from Greek mythology to medieval folklore, the aerial minstrels’ lyric has worn away; also diminished are the hero-apprentice’s intellectual and cultural capacities. Except for some rare exceptions, the most important asset of an aquatic mermaid is the sweet singing voice during the folkloric mermaid’s growth and existence. In 1430 in the area of the Low Countries, men had found a mermaid who never learned to speak.²²¹ However, it is not mentioned if she could sing or make sounds. There are also stories that some descendants of a union of men and mermaids are mute for life.²²² Muteness can be seen as a variation of the theme of voice. Other variations include the benevolent mermaids who warn sailors about dangers in the sea. A life-saving device invented in the early nineteenth century that sends out shrill alarm sounds to boats was baptized as the “siren.” From seduction to life-saving or muteness, the mermaid voice was exhausted by the nineteenth century. But the content of the song is seldom explored.

²²¹ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (London: Rivingtons, 1884) 509.

²²² Funk and Wagnalls, *Standard Dictionary of Folklore: Mythology and Legend*, eds. Maria Leach and Jerome Fried (New Yoek: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972) 710.

Mute mermaids in folklore are rare but not unheard of, but the themes of suffering and sacrifice are mainly of Andersen's creation and signature. As is argued in the previous chapter on "The Wild Swans," the author gives a new interpretation of the traditional story and associates silence with extreme passiveness and severe punishment. "The little mermaid" closely resembles the tale of "The Wild Swans" in the way that both protagonists voluntarily give up their voice and accept excruciating physical pain. The innocent young protagonist in "The Wild Swans" has to suffer in silence so as to in order to redeem the other women before her. Andersen's sad protagonist also stands out from and at the same related to the other singing and intimidating mermaids.

3. The Singing Tongue

The scene where the little mermaid is persuaded to give up her tongue is impressive. The writing skill demonstrated here is exquisite. "I know what you want all right!" said the sea-witch. "And it's very silly of you. Nevertheless, you shall have your way [...]" (*TLM*: 46-48). The sea-witch begins her speech like a tactful professional salesperson, issuing warnings to the client and declining all responsibilities. And then, without missing a beat, she urges her potential client for a hasty decision: "[Y]ou've come just at the right time," said the witch. "After sunrise tomorrow I shouldn't be able to help you until another year were out" (*TLM*: 46-48). The old woman knows the protagonist's weakness and takes advantage of it. She knows too well that the love-

stricken young woman is too desperate to wait out another year. At this point, she makes the bill: "But then you must pay me too!" The price she claims is the little mermaid's tongue (TLM: 46-48). In the domain of fairy tales, the description of violence is often brief and abstract; the act is metaphorical rather than literal. Any damage done can usually be undone later in the story. With Andersen's tales, however, the violence is literal and non-retrievable. Using the witch as executor, the author cut off the little mermaid's tongue once and for all, in a most brutal and horrid scene seldom seen in the genre. The young woman is symbolically bereaved of her femininity, fertility and identity.²²³ As discussed in the previous chapter, it is the killing of a young protagonist that makes a tragedy.²²⁴ The little mermaid's lost is unrecoverable. Starting from this point, the life-force of the young woman starts to decline. The tragic tone becomes dominant thereafter. The mutilation scene is the climax of the tale, after which the story moves toward the predictable sad denouement.

In all the horror that the scene conveys, there is a matter-of-fact tone. The witch's demand for a tongue in exchange for a pair of legs is as illogical and vile as that of Shakespeare's merchant of Venice, who insists on getting a pound of flesh for his loan of money to the young protagonist. The commercial dealing is a thinly veiled action of jealousy and revenge. When the young woman enters the witch's cave, she is in a bad

²²³ In her classic work on Women's Studies, Germaine Greer summons up the concept of the elimination of the woman's body parts by an opening quote in *The Female Eunuch*: "The world has lost its soul, and I my sex." (New York: McGraw-hill Book Company, 1971) 1.

²²⁴ Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* 58.

position to bargain and finds herself at the mercy of a greedy and manipulative merchant. The mermaid gives away her voice which is also her only chance to live and to be loved. And she does not even receive a healthy pair of legs in return. Most disquieting is the air of business-like normality under which the deal is conducted. The tale seems to imply that the voice, sexuality, aspirations and life of the legendary singing women are not much of a big deal after all.

This is exactly the moment where we reach the turning point in the siren-mermaid's destiny. Cutting out her tongue not only neutralizes the mermaid's power, but also hands over the control over her fate to the others. The sacrifice is not sanctified or revered. The trivialization of the loss of the most precious asset of the singing woman of the sea is the ultimate violence that Andersen does to the mermaid-lore. The little mermaid is disabled both physically and mentally. She becomes fragile and vulnerable, inferior to a common human being. She is deprived of all the necessary means to survive in her quest. The unhappy writer thus transforms the fate of the mermaid.

4. A Conformist Mermaid

The little mermaid gives up her voice and accepts the pain without hesitation. At first sight, it seems to be a beautiful act of sacrifice, a *tour de force* of personality and determination. And yet, other instances in the tale cast a very different light on her personality. On the occasion of her fifteenth birthday, when she is allowed to visit the surface of the water for the first time, her grandmother dresses her up. The little

mermaid complains: “[I]t hurts so!” Then the old lady replies: “[Y]es, you must suffer a bit for finery!” (TLM: 30) And then the little mermaid gives in. She does not seem to have the maturity or gravity of character for the big decision that she is going to make soon afterwards. There are striking similarities in the grandmother’s speech: “Come along, let me dress you up,” and that of the sea-witch: “Come, stick out your little tongue so that I can cut it off” (TLM: 48). Both the grandmother and the sea-witch assume a voice of gentle authority over the younger woman; and the latter plays the game in a compliant manner. Incapable of independent thinking, the protagonist accepts the terms imposed by the others. The narrator comments that the little mermaid “d[oes not] dare change.” The real reason that the protagonist gives up her voice can be that she does not dare to challenge any existing regulations or habits.

“[Not] dare to change” is definitively a new idea incompatible to the traditional mermaid who used to take no heed of any human mores or regulations. Andersen’s mermaid follows what others expect of her. Her decision is, therefore, not a sign of strength of character but rather an impulsiveness that eventually destroys her.

Almost by accident, the singing maiden from the sea is silenced once and for all. The mermaid has become absolutely inoffensive and harmless. She does not appreciate what she is and what she has. Now she only has her eyes and legs with her. And yet, again, her biggest assets become her fatal liability. Her speaking eyes and body language do not help her to reach her goal, but make her the prince’s fond toy, an object of royal pastime. She neglects her bleeding feet, and denies her pain. She is

alone and humiliated. She abuses herself, and she does not inspire respect from the others. Instead of endeavoring to realize her dream, she accepts whatever happens to her. Her sacrifices do not make her a saint or martyr but an inferior being, one that is unimportant and dispensable. The story unfolds as the little mermaid desperately struggles against an unavoidable failure. The little mermaid finds her end in a thinly-veiled self-destruction. In consequence, the tradition of mermaid undergoes another kind of metamorphosis, an irretrievable and fatal one.

The Silent Mermaid

The motif of silence in fairy tales also underwent a transformation in the nineteenth-century, as discussed in the previous chapter. In a study of European fairy tales of the nineteenth century, Bottigheimer holds that “the admiration of silence moves through German literature like a leitmotiv,” and that silence “made [itself] felt at every level of German society in the nineteenth century.” However, in her opinion, silence represented in the Brothers Grimm’s tales has a fatalistic and passive tone, which makes them “diverge sharply from the French [...], English and American traditions.”²²⁵

Bottigheimer does not give any comment on Danish tales. However, Andersen’s “The

²²⁵ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, “Silenced Women in the Grimms’ Tales: the ‘Fit’ Between Fairy Tales and Society in their Historical Context,” *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania press, 1986) 118, 125, 127.

Little Mermaid” is grim, oppressive or inauspicious, qualities that are comparable to the Brothers Grimm’s silent tales considered in the previous chapter.

The little mermaid tries to seduce the prince with her “eloquent eyes,” as suggested by the sea-witch (TLM: 48). Indeed, the prince does not fail to notice: “My little dumb foundling, with those eloquent eyes of yours!” (TLM: 55) He understands in those eyes her feelings and aspirations, for he goes on and gives some sort of promise: “If I were to choose a bride, then I should rather choose you” (TLM: 55). The mermaid cannot express herself in words but she succeeds in her communication. The problem, therefore, does not rest with the protagonist but with her lover who does not want to return her love.

1. Dumb or Deaf

The little mermaid encounters the same problem of communication as Elise in “The Wild Swans,” whose clear and eloquent body language is simply neglected by her aggressive suitor.²²⁶ Both protagonists get the opposite of what they want, not because of their non-verbal expressions but because the men ignore their wishes. The king and the prince will only act according to their own interest.

²²⁶ See Chapter 2 for the analysis of the tale “The Wild Swans.”

In fact, the prince does not only neglect the little mermaid's messages; he exploits her sentiments and manipulates her for his pleasure. He encourages and helps her to entertain her hope.

[He] kissed her red mouth, played with her long hair, and laid his head against her heart, so that it began to dream of human happiness and an immortal soul. (TLM: 55)

But he does not want to marry her and honor their relationship: "But as for making her his queen, the idea never occurred to him" (TLM: 54). The prince is self-contradictory. One day he tells the little mermaid that he will never marry the neighbor king's daughter; the next day he changes his mind. And then when the protagonist is in distress, he tells her to feel happy for him: "You must rejoice at my happiness, for you are fonder of me than all the rest" (TLM: 57). The prince's speeches and action are inconsistent. He is either too self-absorbed to notice the little mermaid's reactions at best, or deliberately misinterprets her feelings. Similar to what happens to the protagonist of "The Wild Swans," the mute but expressive little mermaid is confused by a partner who does not seem to understand. Again, the parallel between the prince in "The Little Mermaid" and the young king in "The Wild Swan" is striking: both men deliberately neglect or misinterpret the protagonists' feelings so as to impose what they want on the young women. It is not the problem of expression but a lack of good-will. The prince shows an extremely ambiguous attitude toward their relationship. Patricia de Martelaere also observes that the prince is "reluctant to understand" what the little mermaid wants to say. She attempts to find reasons for his behavior: "Maybe he doesn't really want to

know anything about her? Because he cannot give it, because he is afraid of giving it?”²²⁷ The prince’s ambiguity is one of the obstacles in the little mermaid’s quest.

2. Misuse of Expressions

The little mermaid cannot speak, and her speaking eyes do not work the miracle that is expected. She desperately looks for other ways to attract the prince. She is beautifully dressed with “costly raiments of silk and muslin [...]”(TLM: 52). She is dressed like the slave-girls whose only function is to entertain the prince. The little mermaid is thus assigned the place of a slave, which she unconditionally accepts. She is even jealous of other slaves who sing for the prince, “for she knew she had once sung far more beautifully.” She dances to compete for the prince’s attention, “even though every time her foot touched the ground it was as if she were treading on sharp knives.” The grace and joyfulness that she shows is in strong contrast to her deep agony. The little mermaid is not using her body language to convey her real feelings but lies and denials. Her concealment can only aggravate her situation: when the prince is pleased, “She was given permission to sleep on a velvet cushion outside his door” (TLM: 52). She is given the place and status of a lowly slave. She betrays her own feelings, gives up her integrity, and loses sight of the goal of her quest.

²²⁷ Patricia de Martelaere, “The Little Mermaid,” *Wordlessness*, ed. Bart Verschaffel and Mark Verminck, (Ireland: Lilliput, 1993) 94.

3. Bleeding Feet

The prince does not only make the little mermaid dance for him, but he also takes her hiking with him. “[H]er delicate feet bled so much that the others noticed it, she made light of it and went on with him.” Her negligence and denial of herself is regrettable. On a symbolic level, the feet represent female sexuality, much in the same way as the voice does. The little mermaid gives up her tail for a pair of human legs to take the journey. She dreams that “his soul would flow over into [her] body and [she] would be enabled to share in the happiness of human beings” (TLM: 40). The description has strong sexual implications, which are often rendered in symbolic terms in fairy tales. The pain and bleeding feet may suggest a mature woman’s body on the one hand, while, on the other, they also mean unpleasant sexual experiences or unhealthy relationships.

The prince’s attitude is a major challenge to the little mermaid’s quest. He can see that the little mermaid is a mature woman and obviously treats her as one: “The prince kissed the little mermaid’s red mouth, played with her long hair, and laid his head against her heart” (TLM: 55). But the tale’s narrative voice tries to disguise the action as innocent child-play: “[H]e love[s] her as one loves a good, sweet child” (TLM: 54). The narrator may well be as hypocritical and manipulative as the prince. Later in the story the prince behaves in a similar way to the neighbor king’s daughter: “The prince kissed his lovely bride and she played with his black hair [...]. [T]he lovely bride slept with her

head on the prince's breast" (TLM: 58-59). It is undeniable that the little mermaid is not treated as a child but as a convenient and disposable playmate.

The prince first refuses to notice her bleeding feet. And then, playing deaf and blind, he declines any responsibility for or engagement in the relationship. He pretends that his intimacy with the little mermaid is innocent and of no consequence. His selfishness finds an ideal but unfortunate accomplice in her silence. Her newly matured sexuality is severely damaged.

4. Silent Secret

Suffering in a sexual relationship is often covered up by silence. In order to keep their intimate relationship a secret, the man has to depend on her tongue, or rather, the lack of it. The woman has "to remain silent and betray no secrets."²²⁸ The little mermaid keeps the secret to herself, and, when the prince gets married, carries it with her to the tomb, or, as she hopes, into thin air. There is a similar case in Ovid's *Metamorphose*, in which Philomela is raped and then her tongue cut off.²²⁹ She does not sing to lure men to their peril. She only sings of women's sufferings. The violence done to her is an attempt to destroy the person as well as her song. Her "body and spirit [are] doubly

²²⁸ Karen Rowe and Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 54.

²²⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), VI, 143-51.

mutilated.”²³⁰ The little mermaid is disabled in order to come to the prince. But she is reduced to complete silence when her love and sexuality are badly used. Andersen does not only destroy the temptress’ sexuality but also buries her ravisher’s secret and shame.

Speechless Pain, Painful Speechlessness

The physical pain and disappointment are too much for the little mermaid to bear. At hearing the news of the prince's wedding, she reacts in a strange way.

[The little mermaid] let herself be whirled into the dance, never had she danced so marvelously. It was as though sharp knives were cutting into her delicate feet, she laughed and danced with thoughts of death in her heart. (TLM: 58)

She laughs when she should be crying, and dances marvelously despite her sadness.

Andersen’s mermaid cannot shed tears because, as explained by the narrator, she has no eternal soul. Tears are strong expressions of feelings. Does it mean that since the little mermaid has no soul, she has no right to express herself or be heard? And someone who does not cry is denied an eternal soul. It seems that she is caught in a vicious circle here. As C.P. Estés observes: “Tears are important as the first step to relieve women from secrets to healing.”²³¹ The little mermaid cannot shed tears perhaps because she has to keep the secret of their relationship. And since she cannot relieve

²³⁰ Rowe, *The Nightingale’s Burden* 54.

²³¹ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 428.

her feelings, there is no way in which she can be healed. There is no cure for the wounded tongue, the bleeding feet and the broken heart, all on the ground that she has no human soul.

She has no right to shed tears, but it is her personal choice to hide her sadness and to fake joy. She lies to the others as well as to herself. Laughing and dancing in exuberance while her heart is broken and her feet are bleeding, the little mermaid has literally gone mad. She has been in that situation before, dancing to compete with the slave girls for the prince's attention. Now on the prince's wedding night, she dances again, and this time even more exuberantly, nursing the dark idea of self-destruction. On the earlier occasion, she is driven by jealousy and reduces herself to the status of a slave. Now that the prince is no longer in her company, she dances with the sailors. She has descended further, from a slave- girl at the palace to become an entertainer for sailors. Dancing is a way to express herself when she becomes mute. When used incorrectly, she dances to deny her feelings and renders herself an object for pleasure. Her transformation takes a negative turn. Her new life is totally corrupted: physical pain and bleeding is linked to mutilation and unfulfilling sexual life. Non-communication leads to psychological isolation, which in turn causes insanity. She is mad with jealousy, desperation and pain when she dances her last dance in the tavern full of sailors. She is extremely cruel to herself and is killing herself in the most horrible manner. All her life-force is gone, and she is practically a walking corpse after that scene.

Ophelia in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is driven mad by the murder of her father, the rejection by her prince, and by the chaos and futility of the Danish court. She eventually surrenders herself to insanity which liberates her power of expression. Her previously subdued and short speeches give way to mad songs which are surprising eloquent and beautiful (IV, v-vi).²³² Adopting the voice of madness, she is finally able to vent her grievances which have become too much for her to bear. But this is no solution to the problems as they are. Her madness brings about her death shortly afterwards. Silence and madness have often been related in women's studies. Mary Jacobus claims that "speaking both for and as a woman," the experience of writing is "on the side of madness as well as silence," and both of them resemble a "mental convulsion." Jacobus says that this is the core of "the problem of women's writing,"²³³ which is the case when the woman does not find her right voice and, as a result, has to resort to madness as expression. Surrendering to insanity gives the protagonist immediate relief but it also further weakens her.

The dance-madness-death process is to be found in another Andersen tale, "The Red Shoes," which is the story of a young woman who once wears a pair of red shoes to church. As punishment, she has to keep dancing till both of her feet are cut off (*HSC*, 181-85). In this tale, dancing as an expression of female passion is interpreted as a sign

²³² G.B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Work* (Michigan: Univ. of Michigan, 1928).

²³³ Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 12.

of vanity and eccentricity, and the result is mutilation or death. C. P. Estés argues that since the feet represent mobility and freedom, and red is the color of life as well as sacrifice, “The Red Shoes” is a story of waste and death.²³⁴ The same can be said about the little mermaid, whose new legs give her excruciating pain although she can walk and dance gracefully with them. She seems to be punished as if her budding sexuality is interpreted as brazen or sinful.

Several fairy tales relate dancing to punishment and madness, such as the myth cycle including *The Seven against Thebes*, in which the evil queen at the end has to dance to death in red-hot iron shoes.²³⁵ In most others, dancing expresses the joy and passion of youth, as manifested in tales like “Cinderella.” It is also a courting ritual and communication between prospective marital partners. Dancing slippers in tales can sometimes be associated with mature female sexuality.²³⁶ Bettelheim also states that slippers or shoes suggest female genital organs.²³⁷ In the Brothers Grimm version of the story, the stepsisters in Cinderella try to cheat by cutting off their toes or heels to fit in the slippers. But the bleeding feet give them away, smashing their dream of a royal marriage. Bettelheim compares the stepsisters’ self-mutilation to “self-castration.”²³⁸ The

²³⁴ Jacobus, “The Difference of View,” 14.

²³⁵ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 195-96.

²³⁶ Leah Kavablum argues that Cinderella’s slippers represent her vagina in her book *Cinderella: Radical Feminist, Alchemist* (New York: Guttenberg, 1973) 231.

²³⁷ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 274.

²³⁸ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 268.

bleeding or hurting feet signify unfulfilled sexual life or complications in attaining maturity, not unlike that of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid."

The little mermaid's feet bleed like those of Cinderella's stepsisters because those beautiful legs that she has are not natural. She too tried to cheat the prince to marry her. She pays a heavy price, like Cinderella's sisters, and yet fails in her mission. The bleeding feet are reminders of the women's dishonesty. Since the little mermaid trades in her tongue for a pair of human legs, the feet are closely connected to the tongue. A tongue is not only important in verbal communication but also in the physical expression of love. Given overtly sexual connotations in the context, the tongue behind the lips can be compared to the clitoris behind the labium. Removal of the tongue, therefore, can suggest some form of genital mutilation. Both the severed tongue and the bleeding feet correspond to what Bettelheim says about female castration.

Bettelheim writes that the bleeding feet of the stepsisters in "Cinderella" represent the menstruation that Cinderella does not have; and that this shows that Cinderella is more innocent than her sisters.²³⁹ This hypothesis is debatable because the fact that Cinderella is in possession of the slippers means that she has attained sexual maturity; at least not less than her stepsisters. Bleeding in "The Little Mermaid" does not stand for healthy menstruation; instead, it involves a wound which, as Estés says, represents waste and death.

²³⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 268.

While Cinderella dances with her admirer, Andersen's little mermaid dances in agony to entertain the prince or the sailors. The former is on her way to fulfillment whereas the latter follows the steps of traditional fairytale antagonists to self-destruction.²⁴⁰ The little mermaid is punished more severely than Cinderella's stepsisters. The symbolic castration leaves an open wound never to be healed. The pain inflicted by the feet may be related to genital distress, and the bleeding may indicate sexual impediments. As mentioned before, dancing is a courting ritual and prelude to coupling. Cinderella's dance prepares for the next stage of development which is "rediscovery." In comparison, the little mermaid dances in ecstasy and agony, which is not a preparation but the final action of love-making. "[H]ymen is easily lost at the end of a ball when one's lover tries to keep his hold," as Bettelheim comments on similar fairytale situations.²⁴¹ That explains the necessity of the midnight curfew, such as the one in "Cinderella." The protagonist has to remove her disguise before entering a true relationship. As a contrast to Cinderella's magic slippers, the painful and bleeding feet are reminders of the protagonist's fakeness and secrets. They also render the protagonist more vulnerable, which causes severely damages to the awakening sexuality. It can be detrimental to the young woman's evolution at a time when she is

²⁴⁰ In comparison with "The Little Mermaid," "The Wild Swans" also closes emotional communication with the others and ends up nearly like the old women at the stake.

²⁴¹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 265.

crossing the threshold of adulthood. Unlike Cinderella or protagonists of other fairy tales, the little mermaid never marries the prince or finds fulfillment in her womanhood.

Feminist critics often see fairy tales as conveyers of the concept of female passivity and conformity. K. F. Stone argues that feminist criticism about gender stereotyping is based on a few fairy tales, notably protagonists in “Cinderella”, “Snow White” and “Sleeping Beauty.” She points out that this practice dominates the discourse “until the feminist view of such heroines has itself become a stereotype.”²⁴² Some protagonists represented in fairy tales cited above possess certain gender values corresponding to old tradition. Nonetheless, many tales also demonstrate the way to mature womanhood and healthy marital relationships, which could be valid in those days. Contrary to some views on “Cinderella,” the protagonist is not necessarily degraded by her marriage to the man of her choice, particularly if the protagonist is the master of her proper life, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Jane Bingham and Grayce Scholt find that children's literature in nineteenth century Britain is too didactic. Some other writers see fairy tales and nursery rhymes as being dangerous or having “irrational influences” on the mind of young people.²⁴³ They also write that fairy tales were used to teach people to conform to the social rules or

²⁴² Kay F. Stone, “Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales,” *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 230.

²⁴³ Jane Bingham and Grayce Scholt, *Fifteen Centuries of Children's Literature* (London: Greenwood Press, 1980) 151.

religious doctrines of the time. “[W]hen fairy tales as well as other allegories were allowed, they were often used to point out moral principles.” They state that the submissive and passive female protagonists in fairy tales provided negative gender role models to young women.²⁴⁴ They claim that British children were more severely disciplined through a “hardening process” and “self-control” than their counterparts on the continent.²⁴⁵ Although British nineteenth century fairy tales are harsh on girls, but none of their protagonists have to be mutilated and then killed. Half a century after Andersen’s invention of the cruel red shoes that brought a little girl to her knees, another literary fairytale writer across the Atlantic used another pair of red shoes to help a young woman to reach her goal, and in her way helps other people to overcome their shortcomings. In the American fairy tale *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, written by L. Frank Baum in 1898, the red shoes are related to the heroine’s resourcefulness in finding her way to mature womanhood. She puts her red shoes to good use, defeats illusion, makes friends, and finds her self-confidence.

Shoes representing challenges to their owner are featured in other tales in Europe. According to Verdier, in one of the versions of “Little Red Riding Hood”, the protagonist has to wear out her iron shoes or iron dress before finding her way home.²⁴⁶ It indicates that patience or efforts are needed for the protagonist to attain her goal, but

²⁴⁴ Bingham, *Fifteen Centuries of Children’s Literature* 153.

²⁴⁵ Bingham, *Fifteen Centuries of Children’s Literature* 152,153.

²⁴⁶ Bingham, *Fifteen Centuries of Children’s Literature* 107.

little physical distress is involved in the process. In another tale called “The Juniper Tree”, also found in one of the Grimms’ collections, red shoes signify positive human qualities. In the story, the stepsister receives a pair of red shoes as a reward and recognition for her empathy and honesty shown towards the murdered male protagonist.²⁴⁷

The story of “Cinderella” exists in many parts of Europe. Its various versions are distinguished by differences in the materials of which the slippers are composed. They are respectively made of fur or glass (Charles Perrault in France), red velvet (Madame d’Aulnoy in France), stilts (Basile in the Italian states), gold (the Grimms in the German states), and satin (Andrew Lang in England). Whatever the footwear is made of, it is to equip the protagonist to dance joyfully through the threshold of adulthood, in the prospect of a fulfilling marriage life.²⁴⁸ Andersen is alone in transforming the shoes into torturing tools and, by so doing, associating a young woman’s natural body language with madness and death.

Andersen reminds his readers, time and again, that his protagonist’s every step feels like “treading on sharp needles and knives” (*HCA*, 553, 554,555,558). These lines elaborate the physical pain and emotional stress of the protagonist, which differs from the use of needles in the traditional fairy tales. Yvonne Verdier explains the meaning of

²⁴⁷ See Chapter 2 for details of the tale “The Juniper Tree.”

²⁴⁸ For the different versions of the tale, see Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1974, rep; Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992) 117-22.

“the language of the pin and the needle” in one of the three stages representing a young woman’s physical and mental development.²⁴⁹ She points out that, between “the road of the pin” and “the road of the needle,” there is a narrow but significant difference. In certain French regions in the nineteenth century, girls reaching the age of puberty wore shoes and pins which were “symbol[s] of the arrival at puberty.”²⁵⁰ A girl goes to the seamstress “gathering pins,” which means to learn to dress up and to cultivate a veneer of refinement. Pins are associated with respectable social status and fulfilled life, whereas needles imply the lowly paid manual or even sex labor. “In the folklore of seamstresses, [the needle] refers to an emphatically sexual symbolism.” The needle suggests hardship and pain, due to abnormal bleeding or undesirable sex. The pin and the needle are two activities of opposing characters and functions. In this particular “ethnographic context,” a happy protagonist “takes the road of the pins to [...] her puberty. The road [of the] pins for dressing up [is] opposed to the needles associated with work and the mending of torn dresses.”²⁵¹

Andersen may not have been aware of the symbolic meaning of needles in French customs. Nonetheless, the image of the little mermaid’s bleeding feet is associated with the physical sensation of treading on needles and knives, which

²⁴⁹ Yvonne Verdier, “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 11/1-2 (1997): 102.

²⁵⁰ Verdier, “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” 105.

²⁵¹ Verdier, “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” 106-107.

together may allude to the bleeding and physical pain of the vulva. In this sense, Andersen's representation of the needle coincides with Verdier's interpretation, which suggests sexual abuse. The little mermaid's sexuality is badly developed and used. Going through the threshold of womanhood, the protagonist undergoes a debasing metamorphosis. Having given up the place of a princess for the status of a slave, and hurting herself at every step she makes, the little mermaid will never grow up into a queen. The status of a queen means, in the figurative language of fairy tales, the acquisition of personal integrity and mature adulthood. The little mermaid is going in the opposite direction of growth.

The needle encompasses the bleeding feet, the dance of madness and the passive silence, all of which debilitate the little mermaid. Bit by bit, she is broken and spent. The protagonist who transits from the innocent asexual world of childhood to the grown-up world is severely punished. In real life, Andersen often blossomed in the company of children, but felt ill at ease with women. On the one hand, the little mermaid seems to be made in the image of the author and reenacts the author's personal emotional experience. Both the author and the mermaid seek attention and love but instead feel humiliated and miserable. His desires and frustrations were sublimated into ingenious literary creativity, but he also imparted to his protagonist a broken will and heart. On the other hand, the little mermaid in all her youthful charm also represents the fair opposite sex that he was attracted to but treated him with indifference. Andersen must have grown pessimistic about his romantic relations and therefore become apprehensive of mature womanhood, to the point that he deemed it necessary to

prevent a girl from growing up, or to punish her in his tales if she starts wearing shoes and pins.

Andersen's protagonist is not just any young woman dreaming of eternal love; she is a descendant and representative of the traditionally irresistible temptress. Andersen inflicted the most horrible punishment on the once invincible *femme fatale* and thus also brought the final judgment to her kind. The former singer *par excellence* is turned mute; the princess of the aquatic race forsakes the mysterious water realm for good; the heartless seductress is desperately attracted to a man and, the once immortal mermaid has to depend upon the humans for an eternal soul. The little mermaid sheds her blood in a rite of sacrifice, for the redemption of the gravely sinning mer-race women. Andersen's tale has relieved mankind from the threat of one of the most fearsome monsters in literary history. The mermaid's course of fate is also drastically reversed.

Immortality

To what extent is immortality the ultimate goal of the little mermaid's quest? As explained through the mouth of her worldly grandmother, a mermaid has only three hundred years to live, and after that they will all become foam and disappear. The mother-surrogate figure also suggests a solution: a mermaid can get an immortal soul by marrying a human (TLM: 38). The little mermaid has always been curious about the land but the grandmother's words propel her to embark on the journey. It prompts the

question whether she really wants the love of the prince or an immortal soul. The simple answer to the question is that she wants both. But a closer look of the tale may show a more complex picture.

1. Immortality or Love

If the little mermaid really wants the prince's love, she should do everything she can to attain this goal. However, there is a conflict between her decision to go to the human world and her resolution to disable herself. Her drastic and irretrievable physical transformation weakens and degrades her severely, so much so that her pursuit of love or immortality is seriously endangered. Sabrina Soracco uses a psychoanalytic perspective to analyze the little mermaid's transformation: the little mermaid's acceptance of her own castration is, in Freudian terms, the prerequisite for the phallic desire that she directs toward the prince. Soracco also states that, in terms of Lacanian theory, castration or muteness prevent her from participating in the symbolic order of love seeking. Her repression and eventual annihilation of the feminine in an attempt to integrate the masculine eventually thwarts her effort to be whole.²⁵²

The little mermaid is doomed to fail, which she knows right from the beginning. She asks of the sea-witch, when the latter wants to cut off her tongue, a concerned

²⁵² Sabrina Soracco, "A Psychoanalytic Approach," *Scandinavian Studies*, Spring 63/ 2 (1991): 146-48.

question: “But if you take my voice, what have I got left?” The little mermaid knows that her voice is her most valuable asset. Without her voice, she has no confidence that she will be able to win over a lover. It is an important choice to make: the mermaid voice or the human legs. Despite the doubt, she still accepts the deal most probably because she thinks that the legs are more important than her voice. It may imply that she thinks that to be able to walk like a human is more important than genuine communication. She trades in her unique quality for imitation human limbs.

Nonetheless, she also understands that even if she were to marry the prince and live an immortal life, her tongue is lost forever and her feet are still going to hurt her for the rest of her life. Is this her vision of a happy life? The only answer to this question can be that she has not thought about the question. It is even possible that she does not expect to live much longer after the metamorphosis. It is inconceivable that she gives away her tongue and her life in a rash decision.

Most importantly, in spite of the pain that she has accepted in order to live with the man she loves, the little mermaid abandons all the means to express herself honestly. Right from the beginning, when she has saved him from drowning, she hides herself from him. She had not lost her voice back then but she let the opportunity slip away. When the foreign princess is going to take the credit for saving the prince, the little mermaid does not even try to explain. Besides, she could have used gestures or other body expressions to tell the prince who she is and why she is there. Her every action and reaction seems to be against common sense. She may be hiding her real

self behind her muteness, which may serve as a kind of protection for her. If her eyes can speak, what then is the message? Is she capable of telling the truth? She does not show her real feelings on the occasion of the prince's wedding. She fakes happiness, and she laughs and dances to amuse the sailors. She keeps lying to the prince as well as to herself. Why should she hide herself? She does not seem to be keen on constructing a true and enduring relationship with her lover. Is it possible that she is not really in love but only uses it to reach her real goal, which is immortality?

De Martelaere observes that the relationship between the little mermaid and the prince is aberrant or perverse: "Some insurmountable, absurd misunderstanding, a lack of comprehension which becomes impossible to understand, obviously remains between them."²⁵³ She thinks that the little mermaid and the prince will never really fall in love because "[b]oth are being led in their love by an image, [she, by his statue, and] he by the image of the girl glimpsed on the beach whom she, the mermaid, will also resemble so strikingly."²⁵⁴ De Martelaere argues forcibly that the little mermaid is not in love with the prince. The critic rightly points out the core of the mermaid's predicament, but one may also argue that illusion and love are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the same goes for love and immortality. Any illusion inevitably results in eventual disillusionment. If the little mermaid is disillusioned in love – should love be her goal –

²⁵³ De Martelaere, "The Little Mermaid," *Wordlessness* 94.

²⁵⁴ De Martelaere, "The Little Mermaid," *Wordlessness* 96.

she would learn a lesson about love. The experience would not kill her. However, fail in the quest for an eternal soul can lead to life-threatening results.

Is “The Little Mermaid” a love story at all? Gregory Nybo gives a categorical answer to this question: “‘The Little Mermaid’ may well be a tale that does not celebrate human love but renounces it.”²⁵⁵ He explains further his view: “[The tale’s] subtext keeps compromising, contradicting, and even resisting the story [the author] tells ‘in the lines.’” In his opinion, the little mermaid can only love a lifeless statue but cannot love a real man; she “does not want to realize herself in the mutuality of human love.” His conclusion is that “the deepest and most troubling motive for her quest is not love, not the affirmation of another or of life, but fear. An abiding fear of death.”²⁵⁶ Nybo provides an important insight into the little mermaid’s psyche: it may well be the fear of death rather than love that motivates her to undertake the journey and accept all the sufferings. It can be fear, not love, that induces her to put up with violence. And she may just get what she fears. By avoiding mortality, the protagonist unconsciously walks into the death-trap of her own making.

The little mermaid remains deeply attached to the prince. Pil Dahlerup also discusses the issue and points out that there is a “confusion of theme” in the tale, which is a result of “a conflict of rhetoric.” He claims that the mermaid’s love for the prince is

²⁵⁵ Gregory Nybo, “A Synopsis,” *Scandinavian Studies*, Spring 63/ 2 (1991): 152.

²⁵⁶ Nybo, “A Synopsis,” 153.

only “the symbol’ of a longing for eternity.”²⁵⁷ And as she is ambiguous in the pursuit of immortality, Dahlerup concludes, “she, in fact, does not want eternal life either.”²⁵⁸ There is confusion not only between love and immortality in the order of means and ends; the greater conflict lies in what the protagonist claims she wants and what she really does. Dahlerup might have made the point that, after all, the little mermaid does not want either of them.

2. By Merit or By Chance

As the story comes to an end, the protagonist is also approaching her unavoidable death. Precisely at this point comes a sudden turn of fortune. The little mermaid learns that she can win immortality by being a daughter of the air and doing good deeds for three hundreds years. Ironically, at the moment when she is giving up her life, immortality seeks her out. It seems that all the endeavors to win love and eternal life are but a sidetrack, an extensive digression that leads toward her real destiny. Her emotions, reasoning and determination are but camouflage for this little surprise saved for the end. Andersen stated his intention explicitly in a letter addressed to B. S. Ingemann dated 1837:

I have not, like de la Motte Fouqué in *Undine*, allowed the mermaid’s acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being. I’m

²⁵⁷ Pil Dahlerup, “‘The Little Mermaid’ Deconstructed,” *Scandinavian Studies*, Spring 63/2 (1991): 156.

²⁵⁸ Dahlerup, “‘The Little Mermaid’ Deconstructed,” 155.

sure that's wrong! It would depend rather much on chance, wouldn't it? I *won't* accept that sort of thing in this world.²⁵⁹

The author's love life was a series of disappointment and anguish. The pursuit of world fame became a primal purpose and motivation of life. He could not understandably give his protagonists blissful love on earth or beyond. In the same letter, the author admitted: "The Little Mermaid [... is] the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it. I suffer with my characters, I share their humors."²⁶⁰ He admitted how much he was emotionally involved in the process of writing the tale and identified himself with his protagonist. He could not see the point of winning immortality through love, neither for himself nor for the little mermaid. He had low esteem of himself, which probably explains why his protagonist hides her true self to the prince. He has no faith in love, which is why he would not let his little mermaid be saved by the love a man. In the letter quoted above, he declares overtly that his protagonist's goal depends on "chance," not love. After all, it is possible that the mermaid wants an eternal life, just like her creator who strove to achieve immortality with his work. Although both Andersen and the little mermaid fail in their romantic pursuits, they finally get what they really want.

At the moment when the reader thinks that the little mermaid's ordeal has come to an end, Andersen added a final twist to the plot.

[F]or every day we find a good child, one that makes its parents happy and is deserving of their love, God will shorten our period of trial. [...]

²⁵⁹ Erik Dal, "Introduction", *The Little Mermaid*, trans. David Hohnen (Copenhagen: Høst & Søn, 1965), 12-13.

²⁶⁰ Dal, "Introduction", *The Little Mermaid*, 12.

The child never knows we are flying through its room, and if we smile with joy at it, a year is taken from the three hundred; but if we see a naughty child, one that is evil, then we must weep tears of sorrow, and each tear will add a day to our period of trial. (TLM: 62)

The little mermaid has no control over the duration of her suffering. When Andersen explained in his letter that he did not think that his little mermaid has to “depend upon an alien creature” for her immortality, but he has to depend upon the children for his immortal fame, and made them responsible for the little mermaid’s resurrection. The message to the children is that if they make their parents happy, the poor little mermaid may suffer less. Andersen seeks to please their parents by blackmailing the youngsters to obedience. The skillful story-teller was able to silence not only the fictive mermaid but the real-life little children.

3. A Mortal Mermaid

In Andersen’s re-creation, the resilient and invincible mermaid becomes a mere mortal, a cripple woman. She is reduced to a “little” status and being. La Motte Fouqué created a mortal mermaid who would win a soul if her lover were true. It is also recorded in old Swedish folktales that a mermaid can be saved by a man’s love.²⁶¹ But she does not have to die if her love goes away. Andersen associates the human soul with immortality, thus giving the human race a superior status to the sea-folks. His mermaids only have three hundred years to live; this is the first history to put a limit on the duration

²⁶¹ Horace, *Folklore and the Sea* 335.

of a mermaid's life, which is like putting a curse or a sentence on the magic figure. The little mermaid's chance to get eternal life is slim because the prerequisite is beyond her reach. Death is a major theme dominating the plot starting from the moment when the grandmother mentions about mer-people's life span. Although it is not uncommon for a fairytale character to be threatened by death, "The Little Mermaid" is found in an unusually desperate situation. She is not only no longer immortal, but she is also under her lover's mercy. He can decide if the mermaid is to live or die. The death of the mermaid is Andersen's most important contribution to the plot.

4. Reversed Roles for the Men and the Mermaid

In the ancient Greek epic of *the Odyssey*, human beings were in the lowest stratum in the hierarchy of the universe. Man felt ineffective in controlling his proper destiny, and is incapable of challenging the will of the gods. Even the hero is nearly subdued by the sirens' power. In Andersen's tale, however, the world order is revised. As manifested by the tale, the man has gained much self-confidence and places himself at the center of the universe. Nineteenth century politics witnessed the conquest of the uncharted seas and the colonization of remote countries. The man was no longer a hero, but his ambition remains unfathomable and his ego insatiable. As human confidence soared, the mermaid's magic waned.

In Andersen's world, the man is the master of the world. More than that, he has total power over the mermaid and has her fate in his hands. He can grant her an

immortal soul as well as take away her life. Through the mouthpiece of the grandmother who is an authoritative and worldly figure in the sea-world, humans enjoy absolute superiority over the sea people. A man possesses a soul; and eternal life is his indisputable right of birth. In Andersen's tale, the prince does not have any moral constraint or obligation. By contrast, in spite of her selfless devotion and sacrifices, the little mermaid is nearly denied the right to heavenly bliss. She must depend upon the good will of the humans, including, first and foremost, the hypocritical and inconsistent prince whose life she has saved, and after that, the unpredictable and often capricious young children that she chances to come across. Consequently, the little mermaid finds herself in a perilous position similar to that of the ancient mariners who were at the mercy of her singing ancestors.

The little mermaid is found in a situation similar to that of Odysseus, when he is kept on an exotic island by Calypso, the beautiful goddess who has a beautiful singing voice. She promises Odysseus immortality if he stays with her and forgets about Ithaca and Penelope (*Odyssey*, V, 157).²⁶² As discussed in the first chapter, the character Calypso is closely related to Circe and the sirens in the *Odyssey*, who test the hero in several aspects. An opposite situation is found in "The Little Mermaid." The relations between man and woman are reversed. The mermaid gives up everything that she has to ask of the man the single gift which Calypso once offers freely to Odysseus. And yet

²⁶² *The Odyssey*, trans. E.V. Rieu (Middlesex: Penguin, 1991).

unlike the noble deity, the prince would not care less. He first uses her, and then lets her conveniently disappear after he has found a new love.

Whatever her real goal is, Andersen's mermaid acts like any young person in love even if her love is but an illusion: she keeps the prince's statue, comes up in secret to watch over him, and gives up her family and future only to be with him for a short period of time. The mermaid's affection and devotion are visibly genuine whereas the prince is ambiguous and uninvolved. The man lures the mermaid to land, and is instrumental in her final self-destruction. As indifferent as the earlier mermaids were to men's sufferings, the prince is the only one who does not notice the little mermaid's bleeding feet. The protagonist places her destiny in the hands of the one who has nothing to give, and gives up her life for an imaginary immortality. The tale seems to wreak revenge for the harm done to earlier generations of seafarers. In this respect, the little mermaid is punished for the crimes that her predecessors committed. The little mermaid is found in the same position as the protagonists in "The Wild Swans," in the sense that both protagonists, by accepting unreasonable torments, redeem their predecessors' wrong-doing. Nonetheless, Andersen's mermaid is as unlikely a successor to Homer's omniscient sirens as Elise of "The Wild Swans" is to the resourceful princess of "The Twelve Brothers." Andersen's tale is a declaration that the earlier siren-mermaids' sins are not forgotten, and even less forgiven.

Progress or Relapse

1. The Sea

The action of the tale follows the little mermaid's journey from the sea to the land. However, Northrop Frye observes that, in most romances, the hero follows the route from the land to the sea, where the world of adventure is situated and where the hero achieves his greatest feat.²⁶³ In Joseph Campbell's sequence, the "Water" world is the last of the four prehistoric world ages, where the world ended in a flood, the heavens fell down and the people became fish.²⁶⁴ In narrative traditions, the sea is the place where adventure takes place, a place where new worlds are discovered, or a place where thresholds are crossed. It represents the unknown, the dangerous, the unstable, the unconscious and death.²⁶⁵ Campbell describes the threshold as "the belly of the whale,"

²⁶³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; rpt., Princeton University Press, 1971) 191. Also see Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1978).

²⁶⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), 153-54. The idea is close to one of the Chinese short stories analyzed in the last chapter.

²⁶⁵ Campbell describes the typical "crossing of the first threshold" with a scene of "the sailors of the bold vessels of Columbus breaking the horizon of the medieval mind – sailing, as thought, into the boundless ocean of immortal being that surrounds the cosmos, like an endless mythological serpent biting its tail." *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 78.

“the World Womb, the World Navel,” or “the earthly Paradise.” He nonetheless associates the hero’s sea trip with symbolic death.²⁶⁶

The little mermaid undertakes a journey in the opposite direction, in which the starting and finishing points in traditional quests are exchanged. For the reversed quest, the sea is the home, the land is the new world, and the fish becomes human. In “The Little Mermaid,” the sea stands for the familiar, the home and stability. It is the protective womb, the secure nursing place and the innocent Eden. Nonetheless, the womb is the tomb if overstayed. She has to leave the habitat for the land to reach her goal.

Colonization involves the exploration of the unmapped water and virgin lands. As explained in the first chapter, the sirens represent, among others, the inhabitants of a remote foreign land. For the colonizers, the country of birth is compared to the fatherland, which gives the displaced individual a collective identity. However, in the history of natural science, the evolution of life follows the course from the sea to the land. The notion of the mother’s womb can be associated with the conception of lives, in relation to the mother earth that provides food.

The course of the little mermaid’s journey corresponds to the biological evolution of life on earth. From the viewpoint of an island country, anyone coming from abroad seems to come from the sea. An uninvited foreigner can trigger different reactions. The Cyclops wants Odysseus and his sailors to leave, while the goddesses want Odysseus

²⁶⁶ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 90-92.

to stay. Odysseus is an unfortunate soldier finding his way home, which subjects him to the mood of his hosts. The foreign visitor can also try to rob and steal on his way. Compared with Odysseus the strong and cunning adventurer, the little mermaid is a wounded young woman who has to beg for love and an eternal life from a foreign land. Unlike the Greek hero, she has turned her back on the sea and has no intention of returning home. She has lost her capability to live in the sea-world, whereas Odysseus reaches home at the end of his journey and defeats the enemies usurping his rightful place. Most fairytale protagonists do not choose to come back to their birthplace. As discussed in Chapter Two, those who return to their parents usually do not finish their growing process. Contrary to the course of evolution of life, the little mermaid's reversed journey is self-destructive. She is alienated from the sea as much as from the land. The only place where she can go is into the thin air, but she has no forceful presence like Greek winged sirens. She has completed the sea-land-air journey, to earn an existence that is invisible and irrelevant.

2. Anti-Mermaid, Anti-Romance and Anti-Fairytale

As argued earlier, Andersen might not have intended to give love or immortality to his little mermaid. Nevertheless, most fairy tales convey some kind of encouraging and optimistic messages. The protagonist is often happily married and lives a long life – a cliché at best in the eyes of many critics – which in metaphorical terms signifies physical and emotional fulfillment. There were not many mermaids in fairy tales, not

even in the nineteenth century when popular tales were collected on large scale. Andersen employed a well-known but under-represented figure as the protagonist. He uses many components from folklore for his own work. But unlike his contemporaries the Brothers Grimm, Andersen is not interested in recording or transmitting folklore. Andersen's tale eventually changed the course of the mermaid tradition once and for all.

According to Northrop Frye, romance is the higher order of fairy tales and comprises three parts: the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the last of which resembles the last stage in mythology, which is the hero's return.²⁶⁷ In Vladimir Propp's analysis of Russian fairy tales, the last stage is the restoration of the order which involves the return of the hero. Ascending the throne is one form of restoration of order or improvement of the initial situation.²⁶⁸ The two systems of interpretation have many points in common. The "cause of the departure" in Propp's definition corresponds, to a certain extent, to the "conflict" in Frye's pattern. Propp's "adventure" is similar to Frye's "death-struggle"; and the former's "return of the hero" is comparable to the latter's "discovery."

Derek Brewer discusses the content of the romance as such: "Romances are essentially stories about growing up to adulthood, both literally and symbolically [...]."

²⁶⁷ Northrop Frye classifies all narratives into five fictional modes basing upon Aristotle's idea in *Poetics* in which the hero's power of action constitutes the main criterion. See his *Anatomy of Criticism* 33, 187.

²⁶⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, tr. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed., rev. and ed. Louis A. Wagner, Publications of the American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, Vol. IX; Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics Publication 10 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

The special concern in romance [is] with being adult.” During the growing process, the two genders follow different actions: “[F]or the male hero, [it] involves defying his father, dodging his mother, and getting his girl.”²⁶⁹ He also claims that symbolic elements that are extracted from myths and folklore are fundamental to the structure of romance.²⁷⁰ Otto Rank tries to apply an early Freudian approach to his study of the mythic hero. He finds a pattern in the hero’s development from birth to young adulthood, of which the emphasis is on his endeavor to earn recognition away from home.²⁷¹ For a more liberal definition of romance, Peter Conrad discusses the differences between the aspects of epic and romance in opera.

The nineteenth century makes romance a record of battles not with giants and dragons but with the obstacles which lie in the way of self-discovery [...]. Romance becomes the form in which the migratory individual searches for himself.²⁷²

His view provides an insight into the literary background and context for the study of Andersen’s tales. “The Little Mermaid” can be considered as a romance. The protagonist does not battle against giants or dragons but with herself. Her only competitors, if there are any, are the slave girls who dance for the prince and the maiden of the temple who is not a villain figure. The protagonist is constantly fighting

²⁶⁹ Derek Brewer, “The Nature of Romance” *Poetica* (Tokyo), 9, 1978, 37-38.

²⁷⁰ Brewer, “The Nature of Romance,” 40-44.

²⁷¹ Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings*, ed. Philip Frund (New York: Vintage Books, 1959) 3-96.

²⁷² Peter Conrad, *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 10-12.

her inner demon and cannot find herself. As she loses herself, she also loses the prince and eternal life.

The action of the romance often centers on the pivotal moment when the protagonist crosses the threshold of adulthood. In “The Little Mermaid,” the “conflict” or cause of departure is her discontent with her existence; the “death-struggle” or adventure corresponds to her silent and tormenting journey outside the water kingdom. However, the little mermaid does not prevail: her journey does not end in “discovery” or “marriage-coronation.” Her eventual suicide does not fit into the romance pattern. The promise of an eternal life after three hundred years of good deeds is not the equivalent of a return or restoration of order. Moreover, failure and self-destruction are inevitable final outcome of Andersen’s tale, which is coherent with its plot structure and characterization. “The Little Mermaid” falls squarely outside the category of romance or fairy tales, or, in this respect, can be seen as the genre’s counter-example.

3. Little Mermaid and Anti-Hero Character

The studies of myths or romances use mainly masculine expressions and codes of behavior as reference. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell cites a Grimms tale, viz. “The Frog King,” to illustrate “the call to adventure.”²⁷³ Although most

²⁷³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 49-50.

of his examples involve male protagonists, Campbell deliberately depicts a princess, at the very first stage of the departure, in an attempt to embrace both sexes in his representation of the archetypal hero. On top of that, by using a fairy tale at the beginning, the comparative mythologist gives the popular genre the same status as myth and romance, and suggests that the three can complement each other in his monomythic structure. And again, in order to explain the second stage, or the initiation phase, Campbell employs the adventure of Psyche to demonstrate how principal roles can be reversed to accommodate female protagonists.²⁷⁴ However, female-originated tales only account for a small proportion of the large number of stories that Campbell cites in his study. The significant presence of heroines in fairy tales, in terms of quantity and quality, calls for a re-appropriation of mythological theories and criticism.

Campbell's mythic hero can be a deity, possessing qualities superior to those of most gods and men. However, to be mortal is a prerequisite in Frye's system; his hero can be a descendent of a godly race and have supernatural power but nonetheless has to endure pain and can perish like any human being. Homer's sirens or the folkloric mermaids do not fit in the description of the heroine in either system. Andersen's mermaid is of another race, mortal and more vulnerable than humans.

The little mermaid has a journey to go through. However, unlike Campbell's typical hero, she does not "survive the impact of the world," and fails to "effect a

²⁷⁴ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 97.

reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will.”²⁷⁵ Thus, she is denied the stage of “freedom to live.” At the end of the journey, her body and spirit are irreparably broken. She also gives up the last chance to go back and live in the sea. There is no return to the beginning. The sea is no longer her home or the womb but has become her tomb. The derogatory image of the sea is death. As Campbell states, a hero who has to overcome difficulties metaphorically emerges “from the bondages of the sea of death;” only then can he find again his “centering in the principle of eternity.”²⁷⁶ The sea can no longer nourish the mermaid and eventually turns against her; she is thus bounded by “the sea of death” which eventually becomes her tomb. Even if Andersen’s tale employs a number of components from the folk tradition, he does not give his mermaid the mental strength that characterizes most fairytale protagonist. Although the little mermaid has the talent to walk and dance with seemingly effortless grace, the constant pain in her legs reminds her that this is not a gift but a curse. Although “The Little Mermaid” resembles a fairy tale, it does not belong to the tradition of fairy tales. By the end of the story, the protagonist is no longer a mermaid but a daughter of the air. Never before in history was there a mermaid ceased to be what she was.

²⁷⁵ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 226, 238.

²⁷⁶ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 226, 238.

4. Sea-Witch as Anti-Helper and/or Anti-Villain

The little mermaid does not resemble most fairytale protagonists, neither do other characters in the tale fit easily into fairytale character categories. According to Frye, characters in a narrative can be dichotomized by their functions: "The characterization of romance follows its general dialectic structure. Characters tend to be either for or against the quest."²⁷⁷ He explains further: "A quest involving conflict assumes two main characters, a protagonist or hero, and an antagonist or enemy." The two forces belong to two opposite worlds, the "upper" and "lower world."²⁷⁸ Frye's theory can be manifested in fairy tales, in which the bipolarization of the good and evil forces is sometimes criticized as over-simplified characterization or unrealistic representation of situations. However, when conflicts and obstacles externalized and represented in concrete terms, it is easier to identify problems and thereby find suitable solutions.

Unlike most other fairy tales, the antagonist in "The Little Mermaid" is not easily discernible. Since Andersen's protagonist fails in her mission, many characters can be held responsible.²⁷⁹ One character which has most power and appears at the most crucial moment is the sea-witch. She takes away the little mermaid's most valuable

²⁷⁷ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 195.

²⁷⁸ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 187.

²⁷⁹ See the definitions of enemies by Frye and Campbell in, respectively, *Anatomy of Criticism* 193 and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 129.

asset, which eventually causes the protagonist to fail in her quest. In that aspect, the sea-witch can be an adversary, antagonist or destroyer. The potion she offers to the little mermaid is malicious poison, and the dagger she gives to the sisters is a murder weapon.

However, the sea-witch's role in the tale is more complex than that. There is another dimension of her character revealed in closer details. She offers the little mermaid a pair of human legs to walk among humans. Without these legs, the protagonist would not be able to embark on her journey. However, the sea-witch has no intention to invest in the mermaid's goal; her only concern is to exploit the situation to the maximum and to get what she wants. She alone knows how to transform from sea-creatures to human beings, the sea-witch is the person to be in charge of the connection between the two worlds. She holds the key to the entry into the new world. Without her intervention, the protagonist cannot come to the land. The sea-witch is not identifiable as a malefactor, at least not at first sight. Instead, she bears certain resemblances to the authoritative and knowledgeable grandmother, who represents a mother-surrogate to the little mermaid. The sea-witch assumes a matriarchal voice towards the love-stricken young woman. As Frye states, "the antagonists of the quest are often sinister figures, giants, ogres, witches and magicians, that clearly have a parental origin."²⁸⁰ Campbell also states that a male protagonist's enemy, often in the

²⁸⁰ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 193.

form of an ogre or dragon, is actually the male god or the father in the hero's ego-generated process.²⁸¹ The relation between the enemy and the parental figures in fairy tales is often ambiguous and yet significant. The sea-witch shares common points with the grandmother and implements the latter's idea, in that she brings about the materialization of what is necessary for the little mermaid to undertake her quest. The cave that she dwells in symbolizes the tomb, which is associated with the mother's womb, but in a negative perspective. The sea-witch is presented as the little mermaid's mother-surrogate figure. In this sense, her potion for the mermaid hints at a situation in which the mother kills the daughter. The situation is tragic, and the surrogate mother is the culprit, or the major enemy.²⁸²

The sea-witch can be interpreted as a helper as much as an enemy. The mermaid's mutilation is an act of violence against her heritage, her parents and her kind. The mermaid gives them up willingly, together with her tongue, in a rite of sacrifice, in exchange for two legs that give her autonomy to embark on her journey. As discussed in the previous chapter, those who remain in the parental home can never attain adulthood. Such is also the theme of the "refusal to return" that Campbell talks about and illustrates with a Hindu tale.²⁸³ In this sense, the little mermaid's decision and

²⁸¹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 128-30.

²⁸² Derek Brewer states that a child being killed by his parents is a tragedy. See his *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Suffolk: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980) 132.

²⁸³ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 193-96.

efforts to leave the sea-world coincide with Campbell's mythological structure. Since the grandmother is the initiator of the idea, and the sea-witch implements it, both of them can be identified as supporters of the adventure. However, as discussed before, the sea-witch's magic does more harm than good for the little mermaid. Moreover, while the grandmother expresses a certain enthusiasm for the human world, the sea-witch seems to be indifferent to the passion shown by the little mermaid toward the prince or an eternal life. She has not expressed any personal opinion on the protagonist's goal – she is neither for nor against it. Since the protagonist does not seem to be particularly keen on winning the prince's love or living a long life, the sea-witch may just be the little mermaid's rightful accomplice. The sea-witch is not immediately recognizable as the enemy because she provides the little mermaid the means to leave the sea-world. If the protagonist has been more prudent or mature, the sea-witch may not be able to contribute to the little mermaid's fall.

In many fairy tales, the good parents or their surrogates give the protagonist an object that has symbolic or practical significance. It can be food, a key, an animal, or, in the case of "The Twelve Brothers," little shirts. The sea-witch's potion can be considered as a parental gift. But unlike a normal parental gift, it is not free. The price that the sea-witch demands is so steep that it costs the little mermaid every chance of winning the prince's love. It is expensive for what it is: "[The potion went] burning sharp as though a two-edged sword passed through her body" (TLM, 50). The feet is going to hurt and bleed with every step she takes. The sea-witch succeeds in selling poor quality merchandise to the inexperienced customer for a high price. The image of knives

appears again in the form of a weapon intended to kill the prince, an object and idea sold by the sea-witch to the little mermaid's sisters. For the second time, this brilliant salesperson makes a profitable sale, and this time the price is the sisters' beautiful hair. The little mermaid throws the knife into the sea and jumps after it. The knife represents, on the one hand, the brutal and destructive force of masculinity, an energy that the protagonist desires but cannot master. It also represents, on the other hand, the surrogate mother's murderous ideas. The little mermaid dies twice, and each time her death is orchestrated by the sea-witch. This presumably parental gift is in fact a thinly disguised murderous tool. The sea-witch character is an amalgam of mother, step-mother, helper and enemy. Such a character cannot be found in most traditional fairy tales.

5. Protagonist and Antagonist are One

There is no clearly identifiable absolute enemy in "The Little Mermaid." There is an absence of a jealous stepmother or mother-in-law. Even the sea-witch is a partial helper.²⁸⁴ She then meets the prince and entertains a romantic relationship with him. There seems to be no external force that stands between the protagonist and her goal. And yet the little mermaid fails.

²⁸⁴ In spite of the fact that Homer's sirens can be helpers as well as enemies from the hero's perspective, as discussed in Chapter 1, their song is a gift of knowledge and beauty, which is very different from the poison or dagger that Andersen's sea-witch offers.

Her silence is a big obstacle. However, as discussed earlier, the little mermaid seems to use her silence to hide her real self. She does not want to be heard, as much she does not want the prince to see her when she rescues him earlier. She may not want the prince to know of her identity and intentions. She lets the prince think that she fears the sea, and pretends to be pleased with the prince's marriage to another woman. Whatever her reason is, she wears her silence as a mask to conceal herself, to the point of completely denying and effacing herself. It is not wordlessness but rather her lies and denials which are problematic. All her sacrifices are rendered meaningless without implementing her plan. The only explanation can be that she never envisions joy or immortality. She embraces pain as her lifestyle and death as her rightful destiny. She aims at martyrdom and not fulfillment. Andersen's protagonist is the most important antagonist to herself.

6. Prince as Anti-Animus

A fairytale protagonist sometimes encounters resistance or obstacles from her lover, in the form of a job to be accomplished or a constraint to abide by. In the case of "The Little Mermaid," the prince gives vague promises and confusing signals to the little mermaid, which keeps her perpetually trapped between expectation and desperation. One of Shakespeare's tragic heroines is found in a similar situation: Ophelia is driven to madness and then to death by the decadence of the court and the alienation of her self-tormenting lover. However, unlike the sensitive and vulnerable Hamlet, the prince in

Andersen's tale seems to know exactly what he wants and how he wants it. He wants the little mermaid to sleep outside his door and go riding with him in man's clothes (TLM: 54). He tells the little mermaid that he would not marry the maiden of the temple; but then as soon as he sees her he changes his mind (TLM: 54). He has complete freedom to choose and act. He does not want to acknowledge her wish or her suffering. The prince can be seen as a selfish person and an opportunist, passively manipulating the protagonist for his own interests.

He cheats himself or the others into believing that the little mermaid is not the person who has saved him from the sea; and later he pretends that the maiden of the temple is the one that he has been looking for. He is after an illusion or a fantasy woman but not the real person. He has a tendency to deny the reality in order to fool both the little mermaid and himself. He is unable or reluctant to see both women as they really are.

This character in Andersen's tale has a parallel in a modern mermaid tale by Jane Yolen called "The River Maid," in which a man kidnaps a mute mermaid and forces her to stay with him.²⁸⁵ The kidnapper tries to imagine that his prisoner is as happy in the situation as he is. "And as she never learned to speak with him in his tongue and thereby beg for release, Jan convinced himself that she was content."²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Jane Yolen, "The River Maid," *Modern Fairy Tales*, ed. Alison Lurie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 422-26.

²⁸⁶ Yolen, "The River Maid," 425.

This man takes advantage of her and refuses to understand the woman's wish, in the same way as Andersen's prince does to the little mermaid.²⁸⁷ The prince does not recognize the little mermaid as the one who has saved his life; he just wants her to be his slave girl and encourages her to try her best to please and flatter him. The prince constitutes the biggest obstacle in the little mermaid's way; he is in effect the enemy, the opponent in disguise. In Carl Yung's archetypal theory, a female protagonist has to reunite with her equal – her animus. The prince does not correspond to the general criteria of an animus. Without a worthy animus, the protagonist will not complete her quest for love.

However, it is not unusual in fairy tales that a protagonist's life is threatened by the husband or fiancé, who requires her to accomplish a difficult task as a condition to marriage. In "The Little Mermaid," however, there is an absence of malefactors preventing the union of the mermaid and her lover. Unlike most fairy tales, the prince's parents are largely absent. And there are no vicious characters like the archbishop in "The Wild Swan." The prince is alone the incarnation of the obstacle or destructive power on land. Perhaps that can account for the sea-witch's idea that, if the little mermaid wants to stay alive, the prince must die.

²⁸⁷ Both the mute mermaid's kidnapper and the little mermaid's prince show similar behaviors to the king in "The Wild Swan." See Chapter 2 for the discussion on the voluntary and selective deafness of Andersen's male characters.

It is rather uncommon in the fairytale tradition that the protagonist's lover is being held responsible for her failure. In "The Little Mermaid," the prince represents the destroyer as much as the sea-witch, both of which take advantage of the young woman's weaknesses. He is instrumental in finishing the destruction of the little mermaid, a work that the sea-witch has started. As the little mermaid hides her true self behind her muteness, the prince connives with her in keeping her secret, thereby becoming her helper. And at the same time, she is also keeping his secret, as mentioned before. He is in fact the protagonist's accomplice, and a complementary character to the sea-witch.

7. Reversed Relation between Protagonist and Competitor

The maiden of the temple takes the little mermaid's place and marries the prince; but that does not make her a villain. Although bearing some resemblance to a fairytale's usurper or false bride, she is a different type of character. She is not the antagonist by normal definition. However, "The Little Mermaid" presents an extraordinarily complex situation, in which it is hard to determine the role of each character. To begin with, in the history of mermaid culture, the traditional mermaid is often the antagonist. In the romantic mode, as Frye summarizes it, the heroine often finds her antagonist in the siren or beautiful witch.²⁸⁸ However, in Andersen's tale, the mermaid is the protagonist

²⁸⁸ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 196.

herself: the former antagonist becomes the protagonist in this very unusual tale. As she is also acting against her own quest, the little mermaid is both the protagonist and the antagonist in Andersen's story. Other characters play her *alter ego*. The sea-witch is the helper-destroyer but exits right after the mutilation scene. The maiden of the temple is the mermaid's rival for the prince's love. However, it turns out that the rival ascends to the throne as princess and bride; it is the protagonist who has become the whore and the false-bride. The roles of the protagonist and her opposite are thus reversed. To make the situation even more complicated, the rival resembles the protagonist to a large extent. She looks like the little mermaid, as the prince proclaims. The maiden of the temple is as young and innocent as the princess of the sea, and also comes from another country. Last but not least, this total stranger does not utter one word in the story and remains as passive as the protagonist. The maiden of the temple resembles the little mermaid in terms of physical appearance and behavior; she is the latter's double rather than her opposite.

However, the differences between the little mermaid and the maiden of the temple are equally significant. This supporting character reacts correctly to situations where the protagonist commits mistakes. She reveals herself to the prince when he is saved from drowning, whereas the little mermaid hides away from his sight. She does not dance like a slave to win the prince's attention. She is to share the prince's royal chamber, while the little mermaid cannot even retain her usual sleeping place, which is outside his chamber.

In the story of “Cinderella,” the protagonist waits for her prince to find her again in her true appearance; so does the maiden of the temple. The little mermaid comes to the prince naked and mute, like the protagonist in “The Six Swans.” She has put herself in such a position that it is hard for her to be on an equal footing with her prospective partner. The maiden of the temple has the dignity and integrity: qualities that coincide with the norm of a traditional fairytale princess. As a result, she marries the prince. The traditional roles of the true and false bride are therefore reversed. Should the maiden of the temple be the protagonist of the tale, “The Little Mermaid” has a happy ending.

In fairytale tradition, at crucial moments, the protagonist receives a piece of helpful advice or a gift that can help her to overcome obstacles. However, this does not seem to have happened to the little mermaid. She seems to have fallen out of favor with whoever or whatever comes her way, which is in contrast to the maiden of the temple who seems to be in the right place at the right time. Nonetheless, luck only plays a minor part in the tale, although Andersen reveals in no ambiguous terms his intention that only by sheer luck can the little mermaid receive an immortal soul. The fatalism expressed by the author is best manifested in the ending of the tale. However, one can also read the author’s fatalism in the characters’ behaviors and reaction to the circumstances. The protagonist seems to be making mistakes all the time. She is responsible to a large extent for the outcome of her quest.

In Walt Disney’s version of the tale, the sea-witch and the bride are the same person and represent the antagonist. By having the evil force externalized and the

antagonist identified, the protagonist can focus on a target. It seems that Disney's production conforms better than Andersen's tale to the traditional structure of the romance or fairy tale.

8. Anything But a Fairy Tale

8.1. Andersen's Tragic Tales

Many among Andersen's tales do have happy endings; but most of his best-written and well-known pieces finish in a certain kind of waste. In many traditional tales, an old witch or mother-in-law is put on the fire and burnt in the end, as in "Cinderella" or "The Six Swans." Although a part of the protagonist also goes up in flames together with the old and decadent queen, as analyzed in the previous chapter, these tales nonetheless have happy endings. However, the death of the little mermaid renders the tale ostensibly tragic. This tale does not carry traditional fairytale messages, like the ones discussed in the previous chapter. Instead, the young audience is blackmailed into silence, which is unseen before in fairy tales or in mermaid culture.

In a number of Andersen's tales, young people are killed and not resurrected. Babies and young children die in tales like "The Angel" (1844), "The Story of a Mother" (1848), "Anne Lisbeth" (1859) and "The Child in the Grave" (1859). Young innocent girls get killed for no obvious reasons in "The Little Match-Seller" (1846) and "The Jewish Girl" (1856). Young men lose their lives in accidents in "The Brave Tin Soldier" (1838),

“Under the Willow Tree” (1853), “A Story from the Sand-Hills” (1860) and “The Ice Maiden” (1861). In some fable-like tales, the protagonists meet death while pursuing personal fulfillment, for example, as in “The Fir Tree” (1845), “The Farm-Yard Cock and the Weather-Cock” (1860), “The Butterfly” (1861), “The Snail and the Rose Tree” (1861) and “The Snow Man” (1861). Honest and innocent people are murdered and robbed in tales such as “Little Claus and Big Claus” (1835) and “The Shadow” (1847). In these tales, waste and misery seem to actuate the action, give the plot structure, and determine the characterization.

Nonetheless, it is hard to find any particular meaning in the protagonists’ demise in these tales, as if he was trying to say that life itself has no value and is not worth striving for. The fatalistic and tragic undertone is a major trait of Andersen’s tales. Human relationships as shown in “The Snow Man” are extremely cold and distant. Nobody cares about the protagonist, whose existence does not affect people around him: “Nobody thought any more of the Snow Man” (*HCA*, 489). The saddest of all is not the death of the protagonist but the people’s general lack of interest in one another. In “The Wind Tells about Waldemar Daa and his Daughters” (1851), the narrator of the tale concludes that nothing is important and that everything goes without leaving a trace in the course of time: “[T]he graves [...] are forgotten like the names – hu-ush! Passed away! Pass away!” (*HCA*, 303). In a similar way, in “The Fir Tree,” the protagonist passes away in oblivion: “Pass! Pass! – and that’s the way with all stories” (*HCA*, 247). The protagonists in these tales are often isolated and abandoned by society. There is no hope, human warmth or sympathy conveyed in these tales. They stand in sharp

contrast to Greek tragedies in which life and death assume great seriousness and dignity, and the heroes often rise to greatness, in life or death, and never fail to inspire awe and respect.

The author expresses his personal view of life in his work with a certain consistency. The protagonist in “The Farm-yard Cock and the Weathercock” expresses great despair before being destroyed: “The World is worth nothing [...]. The whole thing is a stupidity” (*HCA*, 276). In “Under the Willow Tree,” the young man prefers dreaming to living a real life. On his death bed, he says, “That was the most delicious hour of my life! [...A]nd it was but a dream. Oh, let me dream again!” (*HCA*, 511). The pessimism or escapism shown in Andersen’s work is rare in traditional fairy tales. Sometimes he uses a bitterly satiric tone. In “The Butterfly,” the poor protagonist pokes fun at his own situation, “Now I am perched on a stalk, like the flowers. It certainly is not very pleasant. It must be something like being married, for one is stuck fast” (*HCA*, 525). Seldom does a fairytale character find humor in his own death – it trivializes life and renders the challenges meaningless. Moreover, comparing death to marriage is brutally sarcastic. His characters often do not have a goal in life and can give their lives away easily, which is another big difference between Andersen’s work and traditional fairy tales.

Fairy tales are expected to have happy endings. Bruno Bettelheim observes that in a fairy tale, a “‘happy’ solution will be found.”²⁸⁹ A happy outcome is one of the defining characteristics of the genre: “To decide whether a story is a fairy tale or something entirely different, one might ask whether it could rightly be called a love gift to a child.”²⁹⁰ A happily ending tale can be considered as a “love gift” because it assures the child that human virtues can prevail. Happy endings do not only provide emotional relief; they imply that obstacles can often be overcome by being persistent and resilient. Traditional fairy tales are closely associated with people: they reflect the masses’ psyche and, in turn, have a strong impact on the masses. The fairytale characters show examples how to tackle problems with positive and proactive attitudes, all in a language rich with metaphors.

The tale’s theme has a problem fitting into the genre defined by several twentieth century theorists. For Frye, the fairy tale is a variant form of the romance in which one of the most important characteristics “is clearly the successful quest.”²⁹¹ Brewer also states that romances are principally “stories of love and adventure, with a happy ending,”²⁹² and that “[l]asting sorrow would arise from sin and destroy romance.”²⁹³ “The

²⁸⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 36.

²⁹⁰ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 27.

²⁹¹ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 187.

²⁹² Brewer, “The Nature of Romance,” 14.

²⁹³ Brewer, “The Nature of Romance,” 27.

Little Mermaid” is incapable of conveying a loving message and, therefore, can only be a shadowy mimicry of romances and fairy tales.

Tragic tales do not provide solutions. The ones written by Andersen often leave the reader lost and disappointed. Greek tragedies show the extent and limit of human will and strength. Homer’s *Odyssey* has a plot structure and characterization that can be compared with some fairy tales. This epic encourages calculated audacious actions, and has a happier end than one would expect in an epic. Odysseus becomes a great figure, respected by humans and gods alike. The little mermaid remains small and insignificant, so much so that her disappearance hardly causes a stir. There are many similarly miserable characters in other Andersen’s work, like “The Ice Maiden,” “The Brave Tin Soldier” or “The Little Match-Seller.” Not only do these tales not provide solutions, they actually manifest a lack of trust in man’s will power, which makes the tales really tragic. The message conveyed in “The Little Mermaid” can hardly be called “a love gift”; it does not help to build up the child’s self-confidence or trust in humanity, both of which are necessary to face problems later in life.

On top of the little mermaid’s sad destiny, the author adds a passage towards that end that can be disturbing to the young audience: it is said that any naughty child that the little mermaid happens to pass by will lengthen the duration of her trial (TLM: 62). The message to the children is that if they do not behave themselves – which usually means obeying the adults – the little mermaid will have to suffer. The author was

manipulative and meant to win the parents' support. The tale is not meant to be a love gift to young children.

8.2. Unhappy Endings

Andersen did not only write sad tales; as a matter of fact, many of his tales do have happy endings. However, even in his happily-ending tales, the characters are hardly contented or fulfilled. A comparison with the other tales written in the nineteenth century can show the difference.²⁹⁴ Andersen's protagonists are irrevocably sentimental and prone to self-pitying, and this kind of characterization becomes a hallmark of the author's personal style.

In "The Ugly Duckling," the protagonist shows a lack of independent judgment and internalizes other people's negative opinions about him. When he sees the swans, he goes toward them, not to make friends but to get killed.

I will fly away to them, to the royal birds! And they will kill me, because I, that am so ugly, dare to approach them. [...] "Kill me!" said the poor creature, and bent its head down upon the water, expecting nothing but death. (HCA 162).

From an emotional perspective, this is a heavily charged passage, uncommon in traditional fairy tales. The Duckling is disturbingly self-centered and ignorant. Although

²⁹⁴ A few examples of the nineteenth-century fairytale collections include Peter Christian Asbjornsen and Jorgen Moe's *Norwegian Folk Stories*, 4 vols., (1849-44); and their *Norwegian Folk-Stories and Folk Legends*, (1945); Alexander Afanasyev's eight installments of Russian folktales (1855-66); Richard Francis Burton's translation of *The Book of the Arabian Nights* (1883-88); Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* (1890); Andrew Lang's twelve volumes of *The Coloured Fairy Books*, etc.

he at last finds his own kind, we can't be sure that he will live happily ever after. His sense of inferiority is overwhelming, rendering the tale as sad as any other work by Andersen.

The protagonist in "The Shilling" seems to be more verbal and confident about his good fortune. He gives a lengthy and repetitive moral discourse:

A glow of joy thrilled through me when I heard myself called a good honest shilling; and now I was to be taken home, where each and every one would know me, and be sure that I was real silver and properly coined. [...]

I was shown about, and they spoke very well of me: they said I was interesting. [...] And at last I got home again. All my troubles were ended; joy came back to me [...]. One must wait for the end, and one will be righted at last – that's my belief. (HCA 4-5)

There is a gleam of joy in these passages that is rare in Andersen's work. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the tale coincides with the values that Andersen had developed out of his own life experience. This is an example of Andersen's happy tales. The author seems to say that to be recognized and appreciated is the epitome of happy endings.

To be fair, Andersen never identified his works with the genre of fairy tales. However, he mentions tragedies and comedies in a tale entitled "The Porter's Son." He voices his opinion about endings in these two literary genres through the eyes of one of his supporting characters: "Life is either a tragedy or a comedy," said the General. "In tragedies they die, in comedies they marry one another" (HCA 874). As the speaker represents a worldly and paternal figure, his speech has a certain weight on the subject. In spite of the mocking tone, which is common in Andersen's work, this declaration is undeniably solemn if not authoritative. At this point in the narrative, when we are only just halfway through the story, the result of the quest is already revealed: "In this case

they married.” What Andersen means by “tragedy” are tales with sad endings, and by “comedy,” tales with happy endings. Nonetheless, more than anything else, he might want to show that the final result was a mere matter of luck and that every human effort was futile. The message conveyed is extremely bleak: there is practically no difference between death and marriage, between success and failure. This kind of fatalism reigns in all his work, happy- or sad-ending tales alike.

8.3. Anti-Fairy Tales or No-Fairy Tale

Can a fairy tale have a sad ending? This is just one of the many challenges that Andersen’s work poses concerning the genre. Andersen’s tales are at once part of the tradition and a counterexample to the established pattern familiar in literary history. As suggested in the previous point, the incongruity between his tales and the tradition defines his work to a large extent.

“The Little Mermaid” has fallen out of the current literary taste; few critics of our time mention the tale in serious literary discourse.²⁹⁵ Roger Sale makes a brief remark about the tale and says that it is “a chaotic, desperate piece of work, very out of touch with itself.” He also says that Andersen often exploited popular themes, but kept

²⁹⁵ The tale is seldom mentioned in literary criticism except in Scandinavian studies. However, during the *Hans Christian Andersen 2005* festival in the U.S.A., new interests in the Danish writer and his work have been shown.

“outfitting objects and animals with his own feelings.”²⁹⁶ Sale does not consider Andersen’s work as fairy tales at all: “[Andersen’s tales] show on almost every page how much a break had been made, with the oral as well as the written tradition.” Sale denies the literary tale writer’s influence on the later development of the genre.²⁹⁷

Jack Zipes describes Andersen’s work as a collection of “anti-fairy tales.”²⁹⁸ Wolfgang Mieder uses the same term to describe twentieth-century versions of traditional tales. He recounts, with examples and illustrations, how traditional fairy tales go through the process of “reinterpretation” and “disenchantment.”²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Mieder has a fairly positive opinion of the phenomenon.

Fairy tales show us the progress of their heroes toward a happier life by overcoming obstacles of all kinds. Perhaps the modern transformations of these fairy tales will teach humanity meaningful solutions to its difficult and complex problems.³⁰⁰

He further stresses that these “anti-fairy tales,” or “the surviving forms” of the traditional fairy tales, represent “a continuous move toward improving the human condition.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁶ Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* 67.

²⁹⁷ Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* 63, 77.

²⁹⁸ Jack Zipes, “H. C. Christian Andersen and the Discourse of the Dominated,” *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Meuthuen, 1983) 91.

²⁹⁹ Wolfgang Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* (London: Univ. Press of New England, 1987) 10-44.

³⁰⁰ Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* 8.

³⁰¹ Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* 44.

After a brief review of the eminent fairy-tale critics' definitions of the genre – such as Max Lüthi's "purposeful motion," Jack Zipe's "emancipatory potential," and Lutz Röhrich's "human emancipation from certain role expectations" - Mieder draws his own conclusion that the traditional fairy tales are fundamentally "therapeutic, didactic, and optimistic." He states that the "anti-fairy tales" embrace these qualities and therefore are entitled to be considered legitimate successors to traditional tales.³⁰²

Andersen's tales can hardly be called "optimistic" or "emancipatory" in nature and certainly lack the "move toward improving the human condition." They do not belong to the genre of fairy tale; but they are not qualified to be "anti-fairy tales" either, according to Mieder's definition of the term. As a prefix to terms, "anti" mainly indicates a condition which is outside or opposite to the norm. An example is Brewer's use of the prefix to modify the term "romance" to describe *Don Quixote*, which he calls a "water-shed in the history of romance."³⁰³ Likewise, Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" makes a special mark in the history of fairy tales, if this work is accepted as one among them. It is also a watershed in the mermaid tradition.

"The Little Mermaid" continues to exert its influence in the modern literary era where fairy tales are re-created and deconstructed. "The Little Mermaid" provides a framework for a Disney animated picture of the same title, but which gives the mermaid

³⁰² Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* 5, 8.

³⁰³ The work is described as "anti-romance realism." See his "The Nature of Romance," 22, 45.

a chance later in the story to correct her mistakes. The characterization of both the protagonist and the antagonist are closer to what is expected in the genre. In many respects, the movie is more in tune with fairytale tradition. As is argued in the previous chapter, fairy tales often inspire courage and propose solutions to real life problems faced by young people. The Hollywood version is an attempt to bring hope and love to Andersen tale.

8.4. “The Little Mermaid” as an Adventure Tale and Compared with the *Odyssey*

Instead of reading Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” as a fairy tale, one can try to approach it as an *eventyr*, a literary genre specific to Danish literature which can be translated as an “adventure tale,” which can shed light upon the reading of the *Odyssey* as is discussed in the first chapter. It is mainly about foreign land or improbable events recounted by sailors or travelers, with the intention to entertain and impress. Niels Kofoed suggests that Andersen’s narrative is a “literary arabesque,” which is a mixture of “the episode, the free flight of fancy and a structuring concept.”³⁰⁴ Andersen’s “The Wild Swans” which takes place in a vast expanse of space corresponds to this kind of writing. These characteristics bring Andersen’s work closer to the mariners’ tales and Homer’s *Odyssey*.³⁰⁵ Andersen’s mermaid travels from the sea to the land and lives in

³⁰⁴ Kofoed, “Hans Christian Andersen,” 219.

³⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 for the discussion on the hypothesis that *Odyssey* is a mariners’ tale.

a foreign society. This theme, taken on its own, corresponds to the general unstated requirement of the genre. “The Little Mermaid” partly originates from Nordic folklore, which is strongly related to seafarers’ culture. If “the Little Mermaid” is to be compared with the *Odyssey* as adventure tales, the most important difference between them is the reaction of the protagonists with regard to the obstacles found in their way. The hero of the *Odyssey* travels far away from home to acquire knowledge of the world and thereby of himself. The little mermaid leaves the sea-world to find love and an immortal soul. Both protagonists pursue important, though different, goals. But the results are not the same. Odysseus comes home strengthened by experiences abroad and reclaims his rightful place. Homer’s protagonist holds on to his goal with resilience and perseverance, whereas the little mermaid is weak, introversive and inconsistent in her actions, and has a tendency to self-destruction. While one reclaims his kingdom, the other loses nearly everything. The nineteenth-century hybrid descendant of the sirens gives up her integrity, indulges in the pleasure of the encounter, and loses control of her life – she is like the lotus eaters or sailors who pass by the sirens’ rock.

8.5. Sequence or Mono-Tale

Campbell’s studies of mythology and anthropology lead him to the theory of the “Monomyth” and his notion of the “composite hero,”³⁰⁶ which essentially means that all

³⁰⁶ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 37.

myths carry similar components and that all heroes share the same traits. Sale finds that all fairy tales share a common beginning, which can be simplified by the image of “a girl in a wood.” The structure and development of the tales are similar.³⁰⁷ Campbell’s monomyth and composite hero have to be modified in order to accommodate “The Little Mermaid.” So do Sale’s fairy tale pattern and Frye’s theory of the romance. The relation between Andersen’s tale and the literary genre of fairy tale is rather complicated.

“The Little Mermaid” is a deviation from the mermaid stories, and has an important place in the larger picture of mermaid-lore. Over a long period of time, the sirens have survived Greek Antiquity and settled in the folkloric domain where mermaids play only secondary and supporting roles, in the same way as many mythic figures used to do. Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” has metamorphosed into the legendary singer. The story continues and is carried over to contemporary literature in many variations.

The larger mermaid tale can be read as a “mono-tale,” with a composite heroine in various guises. The term is modeled on Frye’s theory, of which the three stages can also be applied in this case. The “conflict stage” is when the Homeric sirens used songs to lure the helpless mariners to peril. Sirens in other sources also help to shape the beginning of the mermaid romance, but Homer’s work has defined to a large extent the

³⁰⁷ Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* 29.

³⁰⁷ Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* 186.

characterization and core of action. The next stage is the “death-struggle,” where mermaid tales in popular narrative became repetitive or interbred. The folklore mermaid story has lost its vitality when the literary tale-writer comes to its rescue. Andersen the tale-writer conjures a metamorphosis that gives the mermaid a new life as well as killing her in the end. Last but not least comes the “discovery” stage of contemporary literature, where the mermaid is transformed again into a thousand faces. The mermaid romance has found a positive form in the contemporary literary context, which will be discussed in the next two chapters.

Chapter IV

A Modern Mermaid: Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

"What are you? Some kinda mermaid?" One of Pilate's lovers remarks on noticing that her belly does not have a navel.³⁰⁸ Toni Morrison has created a mysterious and powerful character in *Song of Solomon*, a work which W. K. Benston calls a "dialectic of enchantment and desire."³⁰⁹ Although a woman of great beauty (SO 144, 230) and exceptional generosity, Pilate is deserted by her lovers and scorned by all. "Men frowned; women whispered and shoved their children behind them" (SO, 148). In the face of discrimination and sometimes hostility, Pilate hardens and becomes literally tearless (SO, 149). They consider her as "something God never made" (SO, 144); she is dehumanized to become an object, "something" that is malevolent or potentially dangerous. "[T]he men [...] called her mermaid and the women [...] swept up her

³⁰⁸ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Picador, 1978) 148. All quotations from the book are cited by page number in the text following 'SO', the abbreviation for the title of the novel.

³⁰⁹ W. Kimberly Benston, "Reweaving the 'Ulysses Scene' - Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991) 90.

footprints or put mirrors on her door” (SO, 150). Pilate is stigmatized by the absence of a navel, and identified as a mermaid.

Power to Heal and to Kill

Pilate is rejected no matter where she goes since having left her hometown at the age of twelve. As a consequence, “she is isolated” (SO, 148) from the rest of the community, which makes her profoundly sad. “[H]er face was dark and still with the memory of how she was ‘cut off’ so early from other people” (SO, 142). However, instead of resorting to bitterness or defensiveness, she endeavors to be a stronger and better person. In order to reinvent herself, she starts with a clean slate: “[S]he threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero.” She asks herself questions which concern the essence of existence, such as “how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her.” In her search for identity, she looks for the meaning of life in a broader sense: “What is true in the world” (SO, 149). As Genevieve Fabre notes, “[t]he absence of a navel isolates her, ensuring both fear and respect [...]. It sets her free from conventional relationships [...].”³¹⁰ Isolation from family and community makes her the honest and perspicacious observer that she becomes. She is free from mundane and often superficial social interactions as well as popular pseudo rationale and biases.

³¹⁰ Genevieve Fabre, “Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay, Boston: G.K Hall, 1988) 110.

Fiercely uncompromising, she determines to live a life that is free from lies and all kinds of constraints. In spite of the judgment of others, she respects and cares for everybody, and helps whoever is in need.

It takes some time for the people in her neighborhood to recognize what she does for them. They acknowledge that she “never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody.” But they are too self-absorbed to bother to try to understand her or appreciate her efforts. They marvel at Pilate’s mental strength; but since they do not trust her, they can only worry what she will do with her power.

[Pilate] was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush fire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga – all on account of the fact that she had no navel. (SO, 94)

They let ignorance and aggressiveness get the upper hand over them, and they use Pilate to project their superstition and fears onto.

The absence of a navel becomes a symbol of her uniqueness. The description of her birth is particularly significant because it provides an explanation – however unscientific it may seem – for the absence of a navel. Her mother is diagnosed dead during the labor and no one believes that the infant can have any chance of survival (SO, 244). As if by miracle, Pilate is alive and finds her way into the world all by herself: “[The baby] inched its way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her” (SO, 244). The “cave of flesh” can be associated with a grave or an underworld. There is an extraordinary life force at

work in the baby. This is what Pilate will become: an embodiment of the life force.³¹¹

This is an awe-inspiring scene; it effectively brings to life one of the most extraordinary and intriguing characters in contemporary literature.

Susan Willis thinks that the absence of a navel is a “lack, deformity” which can serve as “figures for liberation” and represent the “difference” of African-Americans in general.³¹² A natal cord can nourish or destroy a newborn. Its absence may foretell a lack of family support; but it also frees her from all conventions and social constraints. Although being constantly rejected and misunderstood, she does not turn into a self-centered or vindictive woman. Instead, Pilate becomes the generous and resourceful person that the others come to know, thanks to her innate strength – an inexplicable power manifested at the moment of her birth, symbolized by a motherless birth, the lack of a navel.

Toni Morrison has this to say about this special character that she creates: “Pilate [...] was not born, anyway – she gave birth to herself.”³¹³ Pilate is literally a self-made person, “all on account of the fact that she had no navel.” With her free spirit and creative mind, she transforms the negative attention into a blessing in disguise. As

³¹¹ Thanks to Guido Latré for this idea, and also the suggestion that Pilate in *Song of Solomon* is the opposite of the character of the same name in the New Testament who condemns others to death.

³¹² Susan Willis, “Eruptions of funk: historicizing Toni Morrison,” *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1984) 276, 278.

³¹³ Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 146.

Barbara Christian says, "Pilate sees her social marginalization not as victimization and exclusion but as freedom to explore herself."³¹⁴ Pilate succeeds in transcending problems and becomes the incarnation of love and moral strength. In another interview, Toni Morrison explains her conception of the character which is extraordinary by any standard:

The woman that is most exciting, I suppose, is Pilate, not only because she has a kind of ferocity, that's very pointed, astute, and she's also very generous and wide-spirited; she has fairness, and braveness, you know, in a way I'd like to be.³¹⁵

She claims that she has given Pilate the best of human qualities and makes her the author's role model.

Neither Eve nor Goddess

While McKay calls Pilate a "larger than life" character,³¹⁶ David Cowart compares her to Eve of Genesis and Robert Grave's White Goddess.

Pilate [...] reveals her identity as a kind of primal mother, an Eve guiltless of the world's sin [...]. Grave's White Goddess becomes Morrison's black goddess, an all-nurturing mother.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1980) 78.

³¹⁵ Anne Koenen, "The One Out of Sequence," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 69.

³¹⁶ McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison* 146.

³¹⁷ David Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *American Literature*, 62 (1990): 106,107.

Cowart compares Pilate to the representation of women in the two major sources of Western culture, respectively Judeo-Christianity and Greek mythology. According to Cowart, the absence of a navel alludes to the first woman who is born of no woman and, therefore, mother to all. However, Eve is made from Adam's rib bones, whereas Pilate comes into the world from a dead womb. Eve is traditionally related to the origin of sin whereas Pilate suffers from people's ignorance and narrow-mindedness. Eve receives the curse of death but Pilate does not believe in death (SO, 140) and is a "natural healer" (SO, 150) who can bring a person back to life. Cowart also attempts to relate Pilate to the prototypes of womanhood in Western culture and to incorporate a contemporary African-American character into traditional Western literature. Although Morrison says that Pilate represents the ancestor of African-American culture,³¹⁸ this character has her own temporality and particularity, which may not correspond to the image of a universal mother or goddess.

She is also the keeper and transmitter of an ancient message and has foresight not very different from that of a prophet (SO, 49, 140). However, she does not grasp the full meaning of the message, and she cannot see the whole picture before her. Her power is very much limited; as a matter of fact, Pilate errs and makes mistakes. She cannot interpret accurately her father's words. She cannot make other people accept her. She watches helplessly as her granddaughter dies from heartbreak. Moreover, all

³¹⁸ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 344.

through her life, she is victim to people's discrimination and misunderstanding. However, Pilate continues to make efforts to transcend human limits, which shows her extraordinary strength. The fact that this female African-American character does not resemble the Judeo-Christian first woman or a Greek mythological deity does not make her a lesser figure. Morrison stresses on several occasions the importance of this character. She claims that her novels only represent figures from African-American culture, and that "Pilate is the ancestor" of them all.³¹⁹ While Pilate possesses some of the qualities which are usually attributed to the universal mother or goddess, Pilate is very special in her own way. The character can be better understood by studying her in particular ethnic and social contexts, although it does not mean that the significance of the character is limited to African-American culture. Carolyn Denard states that Pilate is one of the most "exciting" and "most awesomely attractive of Morrison's women characters."³²⁰ Christian even claims that Pilate is "one of the greatest original characters of American literature."³²¹ Morrison has succeeded in creating a loving and talented character who qualifies to be, as Jones puts it, a true "legend."³²²

³¹⁹ Morrison, "Rootedness," 344.

³²⁰ Carolyn Denard, "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 1988) 177.

³²¹ Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 78.

³²² Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) 138.

Transformation and Eternity

This woman “who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree” (SO, 39) is fascinating but not easy to understand. No wonder the other African-American community members in the novel call her a “mermaid” and some literary critics liken her to “Eve” or “the white goddess,” as if her identity depends on an established image or her being requires some kind of reference. In the novel, Pilate does not succumb to the pressure to conform to other people’s tastes or expectations. For example, she wears soiled clothes and stares people in the eyes. Her appearance and social manners could be considered as unbecoming and even rude in mainstream culture. In spite of other people’s opinion of her, she genuinely cares for the members of her community: “She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (SO, 149). Her apparently incompatible and self-contradictory behavior can be confusing to the others. She feeds and heals anybody who comes to her; but she makes and sells wine in the full knowledge that most people buy it not for the taste but to get drunk (SO, 41, 48). Her brother believes that she even sells wine to children (SO, 24), although this accusation is not substantiated. She confronts the man who hits her daughter Reba and makes him back off (SO, 93-94), but she fails to protect her granddaughter Hagar from her nephew Milkman’s exploitation. Hagar suffers from a broken heart and eventually kills herself (SO, 315); and yet Pilate helps Milkman to find his purpose and fulfillment in life. Moreover, she is incapable of solving her own problems. Pilate bears the secret of her

community but cannot decipher the riddle of her own life. She keeps the bag of bones which turn out to be her father's. It seems so ironic that Pilate seems to know so much and yet she is so ignorant. This is an unusually complex character, one that cannot be put into any cliché or stereotype, as pointed out by Christian:

[E]arlier African American women characters tend to be stereotypes such as the all-nurturant Mammy, the loose woman, or the tragic mulatta. Pilate exists completely outside of these categories, indeed outside almost all social categories.³²³

The fact that Pilate does not fit in any conventional category makes it hard for the other characters to understand her. She seems to be incoherent and unpredictable, which gives rise to the rumor that she can change her appearance at will. After Milkman and his friend Guitar are apprehended when trying to steal Pilate's bag, Pilate comes to their rescue. Milkman recounts how Pilate takes in the police officers by changing her voice and appearance: she suddenly appears to be "[s]hort and pitiful." And as soon as she gets out of the place, as Milkman observes, "Pilate was tall again. [...] Her voice is back" (SO, 205, 207). Pilate's amazing versatility helps her to survive in difficult situations, and, as in this case, helps her nephew to get out of trouble. Transformation is a means to preserve her strength and adapt to a world which does not treat her favorably.

There is a mixture of admiration and distrust in the dialogue exchanged between the father and the son with regard to Pilate's extraordinary qualities.

[Macon said,] "Who knows what Pilate knows?"

³²³ Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 78.

Milkman shook his head. "Only The Shadow knows."
[... Macon said....] "I'll never understand that woman. I'm seventy-two years old and I'm going to die not understanding one thing about her." (SO, 206)

The episode is less about Pilate than the two persons having the dialogue: the main male character who recounts the scene at the police station, and his father, who is a biased audience. The young man is apparently fascinated and amused by Pilate's performance. His words give the impression that Pilate possesses magical power. The old Macon tries to justify his fear and distrust of Pilate by judging her actions in an unfavorable light. While Pilate's unfathomable power is dazzling, it is Macon's hostility and aggressiveness that steal the limelight in this scene.

While Pilate endeavors to transform herself into a loving person to her community in spite of being resented and alienated, the older brother who used to take care of Pilate since infancy has grown up to be a "truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving" person, the opposite of his sister (SO, 151). Macon's greed and selfishness turns him away from her. In his blind materialism, he actually believes that Pilate has stolen his treasure. He tries to influence Milkman's view of Pilate: "I told you she was a snake. Drop her skin in a split second" (SO, 205). Macon compares Pilate to a snake which is capable of infinite transformations. He also suggests that she is dangerous and evil. Mermaids are often associated with Melusine, the snake-woman in seventeenth century folklore, as explained in the previous chapter. As Pilate is called a mermaid by her lovers, it does not come as a surprise that her brother compares her to a snake. Macon is mean and narrow-minded like the other men. As he is only interested

in material wealth, he does not understand his little sister who has grown very different from him.

Black Telemachus

Many critics find that Morrison's novel is related to Greek mythology in various ways. With reference to Victor Turner's theory of the "ritual of Initiation," Linda Krumholz claims that the *Song of Solomon* is a "myth of manhood."³²⁴ Benston writes that *Oedipus the King* is the model for Morrison's leading character, and that Milkman is a "self-obsessed hero" and "his story appears to recapitulate the essential pattern and stigmata of oedipal narrative."³²⁵ A. L. Harris sees Milkman as yet another of the thousand faces of Joseph Campbell's hero.³²⁶ Gerry Brenner conducts thorough research on Morrison's use of myth.³²⁷ Harris Trudier thinks that the novel can be understood in relation to mythology. He also writes that Milkman is an "anti-Classical Hero" and that his root-searching quest can be compared to Odysseus' homebound

³²⁴ Linda Krumholz, "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, Fall/Winter (1993): 554, 558.

³²⁵ W. Kimberly Benston, "Reweaving the 'Ulysses Scene': Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991) 94.

³²⁶ A. Leslie Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS* 7 (1980): 69-76.

³²⁷ Gerry Brenner, "Song of Solomon: Morrison's Rejection of Rank's Monomyth and Feminism," *Studies in American Fiction*, 15/1 (Spring 1987): 13.

journey.³²⁸ Hortense Spillers argues along the same lines and defines *Song of Solomon* as a “counter mythology.”³²⁹

Flying is one of the major subjects in the novel, which is closely associated with root-searching of the African-American community. As remembered in one of the songs of Solomon, one of Milkman’s ancestors has literally flown away. When the story ends, the protagonist leaps up from the ground, as if taking off into the air. Some critics compare the flying theme to the Greco-Roman myth of Icarus, while some others relate it to the African-American folk tradition of the flying man.³³⁰ Morrison explains on several occasions her notion of the flying man as manifested in the novel:

If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: It is about black people who could fly. That was part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts [...], it’s in the spirituals and gospels.³³¹

³²⁸ Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

³²⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, “A Hateful Passion. A Lost Love,” *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 293-323.

³³⁰ Norris Clark, “Flying Black: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*,” *Minority Voices* 4 (1980): 51-63; Cynthia A. Davis, “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction,” *Modern Critical views: Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990) 16-25; Dorothy H. Lee, “*Song of Solomon*: To Ride the Air,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16 (1982): 64-70; Linda Krumholz, “Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 3&4 (1993) 551-574; Ousseynou Traore, “Creative African Memory: Some Oral Sources of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, *Of Dreams Deferred*, *Dead or Alive: African Perspectives on African-American Writers*, ed. Femi Ojo-ade (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) 129-141; Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry, “Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*,” *CLA Journal* 27 (2): 119-140.

³³¹ Thomas LeClair. “The Language Must Not Sweat” A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” *New Republic*, March 21 (1981): 27.

Morrison denies the influence of European mythology and states that the origin of the flying myth depicted in her work stems from African-American folklore. She stresses that the action of flying in *Song of Solomon* is not symbolic but “the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody’s dream.” In view of the unrealistic nature of the subject, the author points out that “the magic and superstitious part of it” is an important component of the novel.³³² Morrison expressively introduces this very special element to her narrative writing.

Morrison seems to be equally skeptical about the comparison between her novel and Homer’s *Odyssey*. Morrison has a strong opinion about the ancient Greek hero’s values and family ethic:

Ulysses abandoned his child for twenty years and he didn’t go anywhere since he was just hanging out over there with the Sicilians. But he’s considered a hero! He knew that there was a child there and never once said that he had to go home to his son. He said he had to go home to his property.³³³

Morrison might have just created the same problematic paternal figure in Milkman’s father, the second Macon Dead. Macon is an egoistic and narrow-minded person whose only goal in life is to accumulate wealth and procure financial security. As Morrison says, “[Macon] is property.”³³⁴ He travels afar and makes his name in his younger days. But then for the most part of his adult life, he spends his time pursuing a soulless

³³² Mel Watkins, “Talk with Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 46.

³³³ Betty Jean Parker, “Complexity: Toni Morrison’s Women,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 65.

³³⁴ Koenen, “The One Out of Sequence,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 76.

existence. Having accomplished his Odyssey, he settles down in material comfort. His now vanished courage and compassion find a place in Pilate's loving memory as well as in the Danville countrymen's proud speeches. One can catch a glimpse of the remnant of his glamour at the beginning of the novel when he intervenes and prevents the drunken Porter from killing himself (SO, 40, 234, 24-26). This is a man who can be a leader of the community but his narrowness of vision prevents him from achieving his full potential.

There are times that the aged hero remembers his youth and cherishes what he has lost. One evening, Macon comes to Pilate's door, to listen to her singing. He wants some "memory and music," to recapture some joyful moments that belong to his younger and innocent days (SO, 20). He must have been bored by his comfortable yet banal and meaningless life. However, unlike Dante's or Alfred Tennyson's Ulysses, Macon makes no effort to get out of the stifling condition that he has made for himself. The deteriorated hero has found his treasure and forgotten his dreams. He is looking for that last sparkle of his life which is inspired by Pilate's voice.

Benston describes the above-mentioned paragraphs as the "Ulysses Scene" and compares it to the Calypso episode in the *Odyssey*. Benston claims that Pilate resembles Calypso, who sings to seduce Macon, the modern African-American Odysseus.³³⁵ However, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the person that is found outside Calypso's

³³⁵ Benston, "Reweaving the 'Ulysses Scene'," 89, 95, 96.

cave listening to her songs is not Odysseus but Hermes, Zeus's messenger.³³⁶

Moreover, there is no trace in the epic about the alleged influence of Calypso's voice on the hero or the herald. But Macon is irresistibly drawn to the trio composed of Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter. Further details of the scene are to be discussed later in this chapter.

In fact, the main male character in *Song of Solomon* is not Macon but Milkman, who represents neither Odysseus nor any "anti-classical hero," as mentioned by one of the critics cited above. Instead, Milkman can be compared to Telemachus, who traces his father's footsteps to the unknown territories. Telemachus makes one single trip to collect information about his father's voyage. Milkman's journey actually comprises two different parts. The first trip brings him to his father's place of birth, Danville, and learns about his father's childhood. On his next journey, he finds the ancient town of Shalimar where he discover his ancestors' lives and his family's history. Milkman could just have stopped at Danville, where he meets his father's friends and hears their recounting of the old man's past glory; this is where Telemachus' Odyssey ends. Milkman goes much further. He ventures far beyond his father's itinerary, to find the roots of his family and thereby his own meaning of life, which his father chooses to ignore. Milkman does not want to be like his father. His destiny is tied up with his ancestors' and therefore he tries

³³⁶ *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Doubleday, 1963) Book V, Line 57-63. All quotations from the book are cited by page number on the text. Other references to the translation of the epic include *Homer - The Iliad and The Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler, Ed. James Ford (New York: El Paso Norte Press, 2006).

to retrieve the collective history of his family. By so doing, he opens the door to the future for himself as well as for his people.

Now that the ailing hero is reduced to an insignificant existence, the son prepares for an even bigger quest. The difference between the two characters, with their respective worldviews and aspirations in life, is manifested in the description and events in the towns of Danville and Shalimar. Danville's countrymen dwell on the past and content themselves with the two Macon Deads' success stories, which are embellished to satisfy their sentimental and nostalgic needs. They have no vision of the future. Nor do they bother to reconnect with the modern world or with their tradition. The scattered and fading memory of the past provides the only life source for this group of people and an escape from the reality. Even Milkman cannot resist the enthusiasm of their displaced pride: "[Milkman] could not recognize that stern, greedy, unloving man in the boy they talked about, but he loved the boy they described" (SO, 234-235). Milkman feels obliged to join them in their lies. He feeds them with the yarns spun in his own imagination to exaggerate his father's accomplishments: "He bragged a little and they came alive" (SO, 236). As shown in the conversation, these people are obsessed with business success, wealthy marriages, college education and prestigious cars – things that represent a person's worth in terms of material wealth and social status. This has a bad influence on Milkman, who then is changed into a greedy brat: "Suddenly, in the midst of his telling, Milkman wanted the gold. He wanted to get up right then and there and go get it" (SO, 236). The head of this group of men is the pretentious and self-important Reverend Cooper (SO, 230), who first makes Milkman wait, and then

abandons Milkman, leaving him to the care of his thirteen-year old nephew who has no driving license (237). Nephew is in every way one of the Danville folks, Because of his tender age, the mask he put on is thinner than the rest. He is not known by his personal name but according to his place in the family. He is a superficial person: "He seemed interested only in Milkman's clothes, which he took every opportunity to examine" (SO, 237). He leaves Milkman half way to his destination, promises to return but does not keep his word (SO, 237-238). Like Reverend Cooper, he breaks his promise to Milkman and leaves the latter alone to find his way. Danville's inhabitants do not understand Milkman or the purpose of his visit, and even less do they provide sympathy or support. They are self-indulgent, narrow-minded and live in an escapist reality. Although they are still alive, their existence is moribund.

[Milkman's grandfather's] death [...] was the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time. [...] And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still. (SO, 235)

Symbolically, they not only abandon Milkman in a strange place, the personal belongings which Milkman have entrusted to Cooper are never to be found again. In contrast to these men is a sensible and generous man called Fred Garnett who, probably weary of Danville's mentality, keeps away from the town (SO, 255). This minor character is presented as an opposite to Danville folks, his appearance in the novel is scheduled after Milkman's encountering of Circe and before his return to town. A man of integrity and genuine generosity, Garnett is a parallel to Circe. He is the first of his kind to appear before Milkman, who is going to see many more in Shalimar in the near future.

It comes as little surprise that Macon is greatly pleased to learn of the Danville people's fantasized memory of his father and himself.

[T]here were long rambling talks with his father, who could not hear it enough – the “boys” who remembered him in Danville [...]. He wasn't a bit interested in the flying part [...]. (SO, 234)

The selfish and mean-spirited old man is drunk with vanity and nostalgia, much as his old townsmen are. This rare moment of exchange between the father and son reveals a significant discrepancy in their personalities and goals. Macon does not care for the family's real history and even less for its future.

“I ought maybe to take me a trip down there,” said Macon.
“Virginia?” Milkman asked him.
“Danville [...].” (SO, 234)

Danville is Macon's world, which affiliates to the dead and is fed on lies. While Macon does not care about anything other than feeling good about himself, Milkman wants to know the truth. The protagonist is a listless young man who has grown up in a well-off but loveless family. He has suffered from “his family's dependence, hatred [...] to hear all the misery and mutual accusations his parents unloaded on him” (SO, 276). Milkman feels suffocated by the family; but when he finds his father's natal town, he does not feel loved or nurtured either. “He thought of the pitiful hungry eyes of the old men, their eagerness for some word of defiant success accomplished by the son of Macon Dead” (SO, 250). “He didn't want to see Reverend Cooper and his success-starved friends again” (SO, 256).

Although Circe lives in a place not far from Danville, she represents another world, one which is related to the ancient and the eternal. Trapped in the materialistic

world, the idea of flying would not occur to old Macon. He cannot make full use of the resourcefulness of Pilate. The young Dead has to leave his father's path and goes further. Morrison says that the final stages of Milkman's "rites of passage" involve going over the water and into the air.³³⁷ The water and the air represent the two parts of Milkman's journey. Milkman first sets sail on the old explorer's waterway, in a reverse direction, to retrace his father's itinerary. That is where he reaches Dansville. And then he follows his forefathers' route, which is an ancient path to the heart of the family tradition, to Shalimar of the deep South. From there he finds his inspiration and destiny, and takes off into the air. Milkman succeeds in transcending his father's limits to restore his family's history and find an answer to his questions. Pilate and Circe, Sweet and Hagar are there to provide necessary help.

Black Mermaid and Contemporary Circe

Following in his forefathers' footsteps, the waning hero's son ventures into the unknown. On his way he meets many helpers, among whom women play particularly important roles. Pilate prophetically announces to Ruth, Milkman's possessive mother, that "It'll be a woman [who] save[s] his life" (SO, 140). Later in the story, Milkman gets into trouble due to his stupid arrogance when two women interrupt the fight and give time for Mr. Solomon to intervene (SO, 268). At the story's end, Pilate saves Milkman

³³⁷ Benston, "Reweaving the 'Ulysses Scene'," 95

from his best friend's assault, at the risk of her own life. These women-helpers assist the protagonist to reach his goal by providing him with guidance and all kinds of support. In turn, Milkman is able to make use of their help in a positive way and eventually brings his quest to full fruition, which renders due value to these women's being and presence.

In the story of the *Odyssey*, the role of women in the hero's quest is often understated or misrepresented. As discussed in the first chapter of the present thesis, the sirens are one of the thousand-faced water-goddesses, and closely connected to other female characters in the epic. One of the most important characteristics that distinguish the sirens from other women-helpers is their talent in story-singing. Those who indulge in their songs find imprisonment and eventually death, whereas the disciplined and the prepared can become a more knowledgeable and cultured person. Odysseus embodies discipline and readiness, and these are qualities which Milkman will acquire.

Milkman's father Dead Macon has his Odysseus moment, as mentioned earlier, in the scene where Macon hears Pilate's singing, which is referred to by Benston as the "Ulysses scene." Benston compares the scene to Homer's Calypso episode and writes that the confinement of Odysseus is "the terror of seduction by female presence and voice [... and] an alluring amalgam of scent, song, shuttle, and sexuality."³³⁸ As

³³⁸ Benston, "Reweaving the 'Ulysses Scene,'" 95.

described earlier, although Calypso offers Odysseus her companionship, it is not Odysseus but Hermes, who on approaching the beautiful goddess' dwelling place hears her singing (*Odyssey*, V). Calypso has the "female voice" which, together with "scent," "shuttle, and sexuality," represents sensual delights. Similarly, in Homer's Circe episode Odysseus's men hear Circe sing when they first come to her door. But only after having drunk her potion do they change into animals (*Odyssey*, X). Circe's beautiful singing voice has no effect on Odysseus. Eurylochus hears Circe's singing but escapes unharmed because he does not take the drink. The sweet female voice represents carnal temptation but has very little power over men. Only the sirens' song can have the power to make them stay.

Macon's Odysseus moment shares similar characteristics with the Calypso episode, but the theme is very different. Contrary to Benston's conclusion, Macon does not come for a woman's "scent" or "sexuality." Instead, he wants to recapture the joy and beauty of life which has deserted him a long time ago. "Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer [...] to listen [...] to the] music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (SO, 29). The feeling of love and harmony which the song evokes is a contrast to Macon's dreary world of competition and material accumulation. In effect, he feels rejuvenated by her songs, even though the moment is short-lived: "Macon felt himself softening [...] Macon Dead could not leave" (SO, 30).

There are few parallels between the above-mentioned scene and the episodes of Calypso or Circe in the *Odyssey*, because Macon is not retained against his wish.

Neither does he have to depend on the woman to answer his sexual or material needs. The scene, instead, can be compared with Homer's sirens episode in the sense that both men greatly profit from the experience. The lyric of the song is not important to Macon, who cannot understand the significance of its words. However, the magical woman's singing voice evokes family love and warmth for the ageing businessman. The scene shows that the contemporary African-American mermaid can soothe and heal the soul, which is a special power that is less marked with Homer's sirens or folkloric mermaids.

The encounter with the sirens is brief but the effect is sustainable. Soon afterwards, Odysseus and Macon are on the road again. Their presence has little impact on their hostesses. And neither of the men is aware of the significance of the meeting, at least as far as is manifest in the text. In Morrison's novel, it will have to wait for the next Macon Dead, the Danville hero's heir, to recognize and appreciate the specialness and kindness of Pilate. He is receptive of the mermaid's gift and therefore is ready to embrace his destiny and accomplish his dream.

Circe is a character whose name Morrison borrows directly out of Homer's epic poem. Her appearance in the novel marks the turning point of the protagonist's psychological development. Milkman searches for Circe after having visited Danville, whose people are lost in a world of lies and denials. The Danville version of Milkman's family history is largely exaggerated or fictive, not unlike the tall tales that old sailors or travelers trade at taverns over strong drinks. They find in Milkman's visit a perverse way

to boost their morale and find refuge from their lives of boredom and futility. In the mouth of the self-deceiving townsmen, Macon and his father become symbols of courage and success. In this old town with the pretentious people, Milkman starts boasting about his father and about his family's assets. The protagonist cannot get the information or the emotional support that he badly needs to continue his search.

At this crucial stage of his quest, Milkman finds Circe, who points him in the direction of Shalimar in Virginia. The Danville men do not dare to go close to where she lives. Her habitat is extraordinary, full of wonder and magic. The first impression of the place is dark and suffocating. But everything changes when the door is finally opened; there is music in the background and a pleasant scent in the air. Circe's dwelling place is inhabited by many dogs, which are of a very special breed: "The "golden-eyed dogs [...] with the intelligent child's eyes [...] calm [...], appraising eyes" (SO, 242). These dogs show intelligence and emotions superior to the Danville people, who are fake and "success-starved" (SO, 256). At this time, the protagonist has just left the irresponsible and superficial young nephew of the town's chief; the pack of extraordinarily humane creatures must be a delightful surprise for him.

Circe guards the door between the fake and the truth, between decadence and growth. When he first pushes the door open, a repellent smell greets him. But soon it disappears and is replaced by a kind of pleasant and reinvigorating scent: "a sweet spicy perfume" (SO, 239). The author uses smells to evoke the difference between the two worlds. The odor in the house comes from what remains of a once expensive and

prestigious residence, in which marbles, chandeliers and Belgian silk brocades on the walls are crumbling and falling down (SO, 247-248). The house reminds the kind of life led by the former owner of the house and by Danville inhabitants, who always feel insecure and empty. Circe lets the house go to ruin and teaches Milkman the importance of emerging from superficiality and materialistic constraints.

Circe is an unpredictable person. Milkman believes that the woman must be very old, so old that “she *had* to be dead” (SO, 240). Instead, she is alive, and seems as though she always will be; time and age “meant nothing whatsoever to her” (SO, 241). She can cross the frontier between life and death, and defy age and mortality. The contradiction is manifested in the contrast between her wrinkled face and youthful voice: “out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (SO, 240). Circe is a wonder of life, and incarnates hope amidst the ruin of humanity. She also inspires hope in Milkman’s quest. Circe gives him the name of his grandfather, an important index to solve the mystery of his family history.

Her whole being and the environment of her abode have an air of otherworldliness. At the beginning of the chapter about Danville and Circe, Morrison alludes to the tale of Hansel and Gretel, to compare it with the protagonist’s experience. Milkman travels alone in the woods and finds the house, which is “the biggest house he’d ever seen” (SO, 238). In his imagination, it is the “beautiful... palace,” but it can also be “dark, ruined, evil” (SO, 238). In this fairy-like setting, he encounters a fascinating character who resembles a fairy or a witch, who have the power to help or

destroy the protagonist. He remembers his dreams as a child about witches (SO, 239). Circe can also be compared with the old woman in "The Twelve Brothers," who is found standing next to the protagonist at the crucial moment when the magic house and garden disappear together with the raven-brothers. She is related to the protagonist's instinct and innate resources.

The depiction of Circe is steeped in magic, but her appearance is short and limited to a one-time occurrence. She appears at the pivotal moment and is instrumental in bringing about a change in the protagonist's perspective. She has a special role to play, similar to that of a fairy-mother in fairy tales who gives the protagonist a gift or a piece of information crucial to his quest, or a gate-keeper in the quest myth, giving the protagonist a glimpse of his destiny. It is noteworthy that Morrison borrows Homer's character of the same name for the creation of this personage. This part of the story can be better understood by re-reading Homer's Calypso episode.

In Homer's epic, there are significant resemblances between Calypso and Circe, at least in their appearance and behavior. Both of them sing beautifully and are seen sitting in their houses weaving fabrics as their visitors come to their doorsteps (*Odyssey*, V: 61-63; X: 221-223). Each of them wants to keep Odysseus with her; and only after Hermes's intervention do they agree to release him and give him provisions to continue with the journey (*Odyssey*, V: 96-115; X: 280-303). Their similarity is shown even in minor details like the way they are dressed: at Odysseus's departure, both women are described as wearing silvery mantles, golden belts and headscarves

(*Odyssey*, V: 230-232; X: 543-545). As argued in the first chapter of the present thesis, the characters of Calypso and Circe in the *Odyssey* have much in common.

Homer's and Morrison's Circe share many features. Both are immortal, surrounded by supernatural animals, and live in harmony with nature. Homer's goddess uses a potion to change men into swine or other animals (*Odyssey*, X: 235-237), whereas Morrison's Circe is a "[h]ealer" (SO, 246), and delivering babies and "birth[s] dogs" (SO, 243). Their difference is just as significant: Homer's Circe has a beautiful singing voice but when she speaks, her voice is the same as that of a mortal woman (*Odyssey*, XI, 7). In *Song of Solomon*, Circe has a young and "strong, mellifluous voice" (SO, 240) but does not sing. On the one hand, one can argue that both writers mean to surprise their readers by giving an unpredictable voice to the character. On the other hand, one can also argue that Homer's character sings to seduce, that is why she can be categorized as a deceitful and dangerous destroyer. However, when she speaks with a woman's voice, her words impart information and truth, which makes her a helper. Morrison's Circe does not sing. But her spoken words are equally authoritative and useful to the protagonist, similar to those of Odysseus' hostess. It can be concluded, therefore, it is not the voice that is most important but the words which give the message.

The voice of Circe is accompanied by the humming of the dogs which constitutes the background music that Milkman hears as he steps into her house (SO, 240, 248). The humming song in Circe's house can be related to Pilate's songs, a prologue to the

natural sound of the woods and the songs that Milkman will hear in the Shalimar area. Unlike Pilate's songs or of the children songs in Shalimar, Circe's words are not song lyrics but indicate the direction of his search. The relation between Morrison's Circe's words and Pilate's songs are similar to that between Homer's Circe's words and the siren song. In *Songs of Solomon*, Circe is the character that resembles Pilate the most. She is what Pilate would become if she existed in different circumstances. She is a complementary character to Pilate.

The relationship between Circe and Pilate is similar to that between the sirens and other female immortal characters in the *Odyssey*. To begin with, the description of Circe's abode is comparable to that of Pilate's birth. Both scenes are horrifying but strangely attractive, appropriate introductions to the entrance of two extraordinary characters into the story. Neither of them pays any attention to their physical appearance, and they can both be considered untidy. Their dwellings are welcoming and magical. On entering Circe's house, Milkman is greeted with a repellent odor which changes suddenly into something very pleasant. Pilate's place also has a special smell, as Guitar recounts of his experience of his breaking into her house (SO, 36). Circe is as mysterious and unpredictable as Pilate. She has a "strong young cultivated voice" which does not correspond to her age and look, and "dainty habits" that do not match her clothes (SO, 242). The most important quality of these two women is their ability to sustain or give life: Pilate is a "natural healer" (SO, 150), and Circe delivers all the

women in the area and almost never loses any life.³³⁹ There is also a special relationship between the two women. When Pilate is twelve, Circe tells her how to heal her newly-pierced ear: to “put cobwebs on it to draw the pus out and stop the bleeding” (SO, 167). Circe is Pilate’s mentor and initiates her into the magic of healing. Both women are not seen in a favorable light by other people, and are marginalized even in their own community by the people that they have helped. Pilate holds the most important piece of information regarding the protagonist’s heritage and identity, but it is Circe who gives him the key to decipher the riddle, which is the name of his grandfather. Through the mouth of Circe, Milkman hears for the first time a real name of one of his family members, not the kind of dehumanized or false identity that he has been used to living with since his birth.

Circe gives life, and Pilate can heal. Circe does not die, and Pilate gives birth to herself. They have faith in life and share it with the others. Pilate once tells Ruth that death is unnatural, and that “nobody have to die if they don’t want to” (SO, 140).³⁴⁰ The power and beauty of such statements are, however, lost to Pilate’s interrogator, a possessive mother who craves death. Circe is a living example of Pilate’s beliefs: against all counts, she is still alive. Nobody knows how old Circe is – “Was a hundred

³³⁹ Circe only loses one life in her entire career of deliverer, which is Pilate’s mother (SO, 231, 243).

³⁴⁰ Trudier says that that “Ruth and Pilate are contrasting nurturers who reflect the dualistic world view in the novel,” and that “Pilate represents the secular side of the traditional dichotomy,” *Fiction and Folklore*, 91-92. However, Ruth is possessive and worships the dead. She has neither emotional depth nor moral courage. As mother and individual, she is largely insufficient and irrelevant. She is self-serving and dependent. Ruth is an opposite and not a complement to Pilate. The “dualism” that Trudier uses to describe the relationship between Ruth and Pilate may suit better that between Circe and Pilate.

when I was a boy,” claims an old villager (SO, 233). She is the one who delivered Pilate’s mother, grandmother and great-grandmother (SO, 243). She seems to have been there all the time – since history began – giving birth to everybody and witnessing everything. And she will most likely outlive everybody, the way she survives her mistress, who sees value only in fiscal numbers (SO, 242-243). The materialistic and narrow-minded people, as represented by the mistress and the Dansville inhabitants, are obliterated by the world long before their death. But Circe will live on, because she represents the combination of the concrete material world with timelessness. The ageless and eternal woman plays an essential role to uphold the values and virtues of humanity as well as to ensure the continuity of the community.

Similarly, one never knows for sure if Pilate dies in the end. Although she is shot and lies lifelessly on the ground as Milkman leaps and rides the air (SO, 336-337), she does not necessarily die, at least not in the sense that is commonly associated with death. When Morrison was asked about the fate of Pilate in an interview, she declines to give a definitive answer:

Pilate is larger than life and never really dies in that sense. She was not born, anyway – she gave birth to herself. So the question of her birth and death is irrelevant.³⁴¹

As already mentioned, Pilate delivers herself from her mother’s dead womb. Even though she does not receive much support from the community, she renders help and service to the others. The constraints of basic needs of life do not have any impact on

³⁴¹ Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 146.

her. She seems to engender so much life-force that death becomes improbable. Her complementary character Circe never dies. Both of them are life-givers and healers. In fact, the issue of immortality gives an unrealistic overtone to the novel, which might work against the message of common humanity in the novel. However, it also begs the question of the meaning of eternal life in Morrison's work. Circe and Pilate concern themselves with the bigger self, their community's well-being, tradition and future. The notion of immortality as manifested in the novel implies an existence beyond the physical boundaries of individual persons, which means the elimination of the limits of the life not only to eternity but also from the individual to the others. Pilate lives on in Milkman's being. After all, the issue of immortality – and in that sense, its opposite, mortality – may not be relevant at all, as Morrison suggests. The character has larger-than-life goals and impacts.

The resemblance between Calypso and Pilate is partly explored by Benston, who compares the corresponding scenes as discussed earlier. Another view of the relationship between Homer's foreign immortals – Circe, Calypso and the sirens – finds an interpretation in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a deconstructive rendition of the epic. In the structure that Joyce drew for his novel, the three characters find their parallels in the *Odyssey*. Joyce named his three characters after Homer's Greek goddesses and puts them in charge of the respective domains: Calypso is the Nymph related to Economics, Circe is the Whore attributed to Magic, and the Sirens are the Barmaids affiliated to

Music.³⁴² Joyce's structure is inspirational: one can associate Morrison's Circe with the domain of magic, and Pilate with music. Magic and music are not exclusive and can complement each other. Joyce's notion of Economics can also be applied to the reading of the Greek epic and the American novel. Homer's Calypso is a provider for Odysseus, but Circe in the *Odyssey* also weaves clothes, rears animals and makes wine. Morrison's Circe earns her living by delivering babies and breeding dogs. And Pilate, who can be allocated the field of music, also produces and sells wine. Self-sufficiency and independence allow these female characters to enjoy complete independence, whether they are Greek immortals or characters in the twentieth-century African-American novel. Odysseus cannot produce food for himself or for his men and, therefore, provides a contrast to these female characters. He has to depend on the generosity of the foreign rulers or he has to rob and steal from the others. The epic hero finds a modern counterpart in Milkman, who, in the beginning of the story, is an idle young man living on the back of his family and has no goal in life. Until his awakening, he assumes that he has all the rights but no obligations.

Several other women characters in *Song of Solomon* also play the role of helpers and are related to Pilate in various ways. Homer's Calypso and Circe invite Odysseus to their tables and beds; Morrison's Hagar and Sweet have an intimate relation with Milkman. Pilate's granddaughter Hagar makes herself available to him. In the *Old*

³⁴² James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963) 38. The chart of the structure of the plot and characters was first published with the novel in Gilbert's 1930 edition.

Testament, Abraham's bondwoman and Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden of the same name is given to Abraham because Sarah cannot have children (Genesis, 16:1-4). Hagar later gives birth to a son Ishmael, who is promised a great nation (Genesis, 21: 9). Like the Hagar in the novel, the one in the Old Testament has to struggle with the sharp pain of being rejected in favor of one or more other women. In the biblical context, the promise of a great nation is to some extent God's compensation for her suffering and sense of betrayal. In *Song of Solomon*, since Hagar is Milkman's blood relative (SO, 43-44), their union is bordering on incest. However, taking into account the novel's magical realism, one should look into the symbolic meanings of the relationship: that Hagar gives herself to the protagonist in a selfless way, much in the same way as her grandmother is ready to give up her life for his. If one logically pursues the biblical aspects of the imagery related to the characters, both Pilate and Hagar acquire Christ-like features in this manner, even though the writer is careful enough not to overdo this symbolism. Pilate is in sharp contrast to Milkman's possessive and self-centered mother, in the same way as Hagar is very different from his sisters, who are alienated by his chauvinistic and egoistic behavior. Although Milkman at first cannot understand Hagar's sacrifices for him, such unconditional love, in biblical terms, is an essential element of God's divine Grace.

As a woman "who wanted to kill for love, die for love," Hagar has qualities that are incomprehensible to Guitar, who yet gives a long lecture to her that sounds like a

feminist's discourse (SO, 306).³⁴³ He pretends that Milkman is an independent and contented man who has no need of anybody's love, which is quite contrary to the reality. Pilate observes that Milkman at this stage "doesn't know what he loves [...]." And yet Pilate is positive and full of hope about the young protagonist. She assures her granddaughter: "[B]ut he will come round" (SO, 315). Several critics actually blame Hagar for giving so much to Milkman and thereby destroying herself. Morrison's answer to these opinions is unambiguous.³⁴⁴ She holds that these critics too might just have misunderstood Hagar, although she concedes that Hagar does not have the presence of men "in a nourishing way" in her life."³⁴⁵ However, her lack of men's love does not make her egocentric or possessive. Instead, her emotional neediness prompts her to give the best of woman's love to Milkman. She pays a price, but not in vain. For, after her death, Milkman understands at last.

Hagar dies when her resources are used up. Her unfinished mission is passed on to Sweet, a native of Shalimar, Milkman's ancestral town. Sweet is as much her name as her nature. She washes Milkman, symbolically soothing and healing his

³⁴³ Further discussion of the above-cited passage is found later, in the section about Guitar and his ideology.

³⁴⁴ Jane Bakerman, who claims that Hagar's life is a tragedy and is a result of Pilate's "initiation [... and] way of life," "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," *American Literature* 52 (1981) 115; similar opinions are held by Trudier, *Fiction and Folklore* 109; and A. Leslie Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," 318. When asked about the question of "the young woman dying so that the young man can learn and rise," Morrison answers: "there is something here which people miss. Milkman is willing to die at the end, and the person he is willing to die for is a woman." See McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," 144.

³⁴⁵ Morrison, *Rootedness* 344.

physical being, the same way that Pilate does his soul. Sweet's "silvery voice" (SO, 322), together with her relations with water, link her to the mermaids. The moment that she washes Milkman and bathes with him in the river can be hailed as a milestone in Milkman's psychological development (SO, 285, 327). This is the first time that he shows consideration for the others. He is even capable of imitating and returning the kindness that he receives, perhaps for the first time in his life establishing a relationship of genuine reciprocity with a woman. The description of the scene is simple but immensely beautiful.

He soaped and rubbed her [...]. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scored her bath. She ironed his shirt and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth. He touched her face. She said please come back. He said I'll see you tonight. (SO, 285)

More than any other paragraph in the book perhaps, the beauty of this passage reminds one of the images and the style of the dialogue between the woman and her spouse in the biblical Song of Solomon, in which spices, soothing balm and "kisses of the mouth" are generously exchanged:

The song of songs, which is Solomon's.
Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.
Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment
poured forth.
(Song of Solomon, 1:1-3)

The passage in the novel, like its biblical antecedent, conveys mutual love and respect, which is in great contrast to the scene in which Milkman tries to write Hagar off with a postcard. He understands later that he has used Hagar, and that he has shown "mindlessness in love" (SO, 305). Milkman used to treat women as objects, which

offends Shalimar men (SO, 265). Later, he realizes in deep shame that Hagar was the one that he could rely on whenever he needed emotional support. In fact, Milkman used to call Hagar “sweet” (SO, 89); so it is no accident that this woman who washes and soothes Milkman’s tired body is also known by that name. Sweet succeeds Hagar’s to give support to the protagonist. Love is the main theme of the novel, manifested by Pilate in various ways. Womanly love is incarnated by Pilate’s female characters like Hagar and Sweet.

The meaning of Hagar’s love dawns on Milkman during a sacrificial ritual in the woods. Hunting in the woods is an initiation ritual for the protagonist to become a member of the community. He learns to open up his natural senses and be genuinely receptive to nature. At this moment, Guitar attacks and tries to kill him. When Milkman thinks that he is going to die, he remembers Hagar in her loving-giving: “his life flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable” (SO, 279). With the “music” and “colored lights” that occur in his head as a result of the attack, Milkman celebrates the unconditional and unreserved love that Hagar has given him. The initiation ceremony is completed with the killing of a Bobcat, which has the status of a prestigious scapegoat. It sacrifices its life to free the man of an inferior stage of existence, which is like what Hagar has done for Milkman.

His manhood is further confirmed by the purification ceremony held by Sweet. As already suggested, on this occasion he shows his capacity for receiving and giving in a

relationship. His reaction to Sweet is an index of how he is going to handle human relationships from now on. After Milkman has deciphered the Solomon songs, he goes bathing again in a river in the valley. "I need the sea!" he proclaims. "The sea! I have to swim in the sea. [...] I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!" (SO, 326-327) Sweet leads the protagonist to go through the first part of the ritual of purification.³⁴⁶ He then finishes the ritual by himself alone. In Sweet's arms, Milkman dreams of flying, a symbol of conjugal bliss as well as mental freedom. It is also a prelude to the final success of his quest, the actual action of flying away. In his dream, somebody is "watching him and applauding" (SO, 298); it can be Pilate, Circe, Hagar, Sweet or other women who help him to find the meaning of his life.

Name and Voice

1. Christ-killing Pilate or River-boat/Airplane Pilot

Pilate is a strange name for a woman, particularly so for a contemporary African-American character. Given the importance of her role in the novel and the complexity of the character, the meaning of the name is not to be ignored. In the story, her illiterate father picks a name at random from the Bible at her birth. Being read the name aloud,

³⁴⁶ The archetypal character who conducts the purification ceremony is John the Baptist, who prophesies and baptizes Jesus Christ (Mathew 3:15).

he asks, “[is it] like a river-boat pilot?” (SO, 19) Years later, the hunting party in Shalimar also mistakes Pilate as “pilot” and asks: “Pilot Dead. She do[es] any flying?” (SO, 283). The repeated pun prompts serious thinking about the possible association between the two words that sound alike but have very different meanings.

Pilate is indeed the pilot that knows the way and that leads the protagonist to find his destination. She can be a pilot in the air as well as on the sea. She steers the riverboat like Huckleberry Finn in search of an identity and a purpose i life for both the individual and the community. As a mermaid of modern times, Pilate is a master of waterways and a guide to navigators: this function is reminiscent of the mermaid statues posing at the head of sailing boats that brave the waves to the unsafe and the unknown. The father chooses the name in ignorance and a confused state of mind. But when he has learnt about the name and is conscious of its meaning, he keeps it anyhow, which expresses unconsciously his expectations for his child. The Southern rivers are associated with routes that slaves follow to find their freedom.

The Shalimar hunting man sees another dimension of the relationship between the name and the person, which is Pilate’s capacity to fly. The innocent joke reveals the very fact that Pilate – the pilot – is the person who teaches the protagonist to fly. The name Pilate embodies the notion of flying that implies freedom and bliss. Shalimar is the land where the legend of flying men prevails. Naturally, its natives associate Pilate’s name with flying. And it is in this blissful land of the Deads’ ancestors that the protagonist is initiated into the idea of flying.

What is common to both the Roman chief who put Jesus to death and a gifted, beautiful and generous black woman? The father has chosen the name blindly, but he does not have to keep it if he does not want to. Pilate's mother dies at her birth, or rather before she was born. Disoriented and devastated, the father repeats: "I asked Jesus to save my wife" (SO, 19). It is understandable that, in his subconscious, he defies Jesus and even accepts the name of the person who killed the Christ. What is unknown to him is that her daughter of the same name is not going to take revenge for the death of the mother but bring life back to the Dead family.

The name is the father's gift, but it is Pilate's choice to keep it and revere it. She confirms its legitimacy and turns it into her conviction, by putting the paper that bears her name into a box and hanging it on her ear loop. Her father has given her the name, and the box belonged to her mother. The ritual of confirmation has a special significance, which is comparable to the Christian communion or any religious practice that binds an individual to the tradition in her conscientious consent. Pilate accepts her name as her rightful inheritance and endorses it, in a similar spirit as she carries the bag of bones with her wherever she goes. She accepts them as her life responsibility, even though she does not know the meaning of her name, or the real identity of the dead man in the bag. The ear box and the bag are her only belongings; the two are closely related to her origin. Although she has travelled far away from her place of birth, reinvented herself, and become the extraordinary and unique person that she is later in life, she feels the need to embrace, commemorate and celebrate her heritage and roots.

Morrison was once asked to explain her character's name in an interview. She replies: "It's not about literary associations; it really is about the fatality of it, the chance."³⁴⁷ However, the choice of the name of Hagar, who is a woman who gives herself selflessly to Milkman, does not seem to be mere "chance" or coincidence.

Morrison explains the way she uses the Holy Scripture:

I used the biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes.³⁴⁸

A good example demonstrating how the Bible is "distorted" or exploited for the purposes of "black people" can be found in Pilate's speech to the police officer who has detained Milkman and Guitar for the attempt to steal her bag. "Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder – Matthew Twenty-One: Two" (SO, 207). Pilate wants to make the police believe that the bones are her husband's. She deliberately misquotes a passage in the script to pretend that her state of mind is impaired.

Another instance of distortion of the original biblical meaning of a name is associated with Hagar. In Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:21-31, Hagar as a bondwoman is interpreted allegorically as the Law, which is associated with the old covenant between God and his people, whereas Sarah stands for the liberating Grace of God in

³⁴⁷ Koenen, "The One Out of Sequence," 80.

³⁴⁸ Thomas Le Claire, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 126.

the New Testament. But like Pilate's, Hagar's name here appears to be a misnomer in Morrison's book. Instead of the Law, she represents a liberating freedom that Milkman can only begin to understand long after he has left her for the sake of superficial relationships with other women. He understands it only, in fact, after her death – much in the same way as the disciples only understand God's Grace communicated through Christ after his death.

When Pilate's daughter is born, Pilate calls for the Bible and chooses a name. This is done in a matter-of-fact manner, without a fuss. This shows that Pilate respects necessary convention, and incorporates forms of tradition, including the Jewish and Christian ones, that are important to human society. However, she is not attached to it or restricted by it. Noteworthy also is the little detail that, in the village where Pilate feels most at home, not a copy of the Bible is to be found (SO, 147). It indicates its inhabitants' liberty of mind.

2. Naming, Misnaming and Un-naming

What, then, is in a name? The famous question is addressed again in Morrison's novel in relation to the identity of an individual or an ethnic community. The authorities have a huge presence in everyday lives, so much so that one cannot afford to ignore them. Macon's neighbors find ways to incorporate or get round interference from the local authorities. Naming and renaming becomes a game that manifests power politics in this city. An example is that the inhabitants rename the original "Main Street" as

“Doctor Street,” to commemorate the success story of a fellow community member. When the city administration issues decrees forbidding the use of the unofficial name, they deliberately misread the legislator’s notice and call their street “Not Doctor Street” (SO, 4). The incident shows the people’s determination and tactics to try to re-appropriate their territories and make their voice heard. They avoid direct confrontation but they persist, with a touch of humor.

Naming is a means to appropriate an object and legitimize ownership. In the Book of Genesis, God asks Adam to name all living creatures and thereby makes him their master (Genesis 2:19).³⁴⁹ The colonizers used to rename the newly acquired territories after people and places of their native country.³⁵⁰ In the history of human civilization, the process of naming, un-naming and renaming reflects the struggle of power between the dominant and the dominated. Byerman puts it this way:

Names have a concrete history; they keep alive the complex, painful, disorderly, creative reality of human experience that dominant, logocentric structures seek to suppress.³⁵¹

In the context of African-American literature, the issue of naming represents political, historical, social and personal implications that are at once symbolic and realistic.³⁵² In

³⁴⁹ In ancient China, Confucius stresses the importance of names and titles in politics and administration. The discussion of the importance of “naming” in political practices can be found in *Zi Lu* [子路]: I.13.3 and *Xian Wen* [宪问]: I.14, 27-2, in *Si Shu Wu Jing* [四书五经], ed. Zhu Xi [朱熹] (circ. 1313, rpt; Beijing: Sindhua Shudian, 1991) 57, 59.

³⁵⁰ Paul Carter traces the practice and meaning of naming and renaming places in the New Continent in his *The Road to Botany Bay: Essay on Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987). Read particularly Chapter 1 and 3.

³⁵¹ K. E. Byerman, ‘Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison,’ *Modern Critical views: Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990) 75.

Song of Solomon, every major character has to deal with the issue of names.³⁵³ The pursuits of ethnic equality and personal fulfillment find a common ground in the matter of names. The core of the matter is brought up in a casual conversation between Milkman and Guitar in the text. The name Macon Dead is a mistake made by a drunken official at the Freedmen's Bureau during the emancipation (SO, 53). Milkman cannot accept that his inherited name is a result of sheer accident. He does not like his name, and demands to know about the meaning of it. He wants to ask Pilate about "her own name and everybody else's" (SO, 89).

His best friend Guitar is not interested in the meaning of names: "I don't give a damn about names" (SO, 160). Instead of trying to understand or to make changes, Guitar tends to resort to radical and destructive means:

"I don't give a shit what white people know or even think. Besides, I do accept it. It's part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does." (SO, 88)

On an earlier occasion, Guitar tells the protagonist, who is under his strong influence, not to distinguish what is right or wrong but to accept things as they are. Guitar's speech is an example of well-versed arguments that are used in a destructive way:

³⁵² Some discussions on the issue can be found in W. Kimberly Benston, "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: Methuen, 1984) 152-57.

³⁵³ Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat," 119-128; T. O. Mason, Jr, "The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Modern Critical views*, 175-77.

“Try to understand it, but if you can’t, just forget it and keep yourself strong [...]. Niggers get their names the way they get everything else – the best way they can. [...] The best way is the right way.” (SO, 88)

Exploiting the worn and empty words prevalent in daily language, Guitar’s argument can only be empty and deceptive. In the face of his best-friend’s assertive passiveness, Milkman begins to lose his words: “Milkman’s eyes were blurred now and so were his words” (SO, 88). Milkman’s curiosity and commitment to truth and relationships cannot be understood by Guitar, who increasingly concerns himself with nothing other than his immediate interest. He is obsessed with gold, which prompts him to steal from Pilate and, later, tries to kill Milkman. He has considerable influence on Milkman. He persuades the protagonist to undertake a gold-hunt, which in a fortunate reversal turns out not to be about fortune and wealth but about the discovery of the real name and identity of Milkman’s family. Guitar’s sophisticated and eloquent discourse is the proclamation of an opportunist who has a strong survival instinct but no real goal to live for. Such a way of thinking has jeopardized the lives of many, who either accept things as they are, or react in a destructive way. An example for the former case is the salesman Robert Smith, who kills himself at the beginning of the story. Examples for the latter include members of the vindictive Seven Days, who are involved in organized hate-crime. “Niggers get their names the way they get everything else – the best way they can.” His apparent acquiescence to the status quo is used to hide the fact that he is bent on vengeance. Guitar holds strong prejudice against the non-black population and uses violence against innocent people. Guitar uses the same logic to try to dissuade Milkman’s search for the truth. He cannot understand Milkman’s questions.

Nor does he really concern with the future of the individual or of the whole community. What is particularly detrimental is that he pretends to know better than Milkman and tries to mislead him.

Guitar also tries to influence Hagar with his world view after Milkman has left her. His speech fails to give Hagar any practical or psychological support. He is incapable of understanding Hagar's emotions because he has no genuine love for anybody. He is incapable of having a loving relationship. He tries to possess the woman that he likes. And as he is rejected, he murders both the woman and her lover. This is not a man to give advice on matters of the heart. He says to Hagar: "Everything I ever loved in my life left me" (SO, 307). The fact is that he destroys everything that comes near him. The eloquence of this cowardly and selfish man is confusing and dangerous.

As Milkman tries to look for the roots and real identity of his family, Danville's people do not real names. The head man lets Milkman call him "Reverend Cooper," while in reality people used to call him "Coop." As soon as Milkman comes back to reality, he realizes how pretentious the name is and corrects himself: "Is Rev – is Coop still here?" (SO, 256) in contrast, the man who comes to Milkman's rescue tells Milkman his full name: "My name's Garnett, Fred Garnett" (SO, 255). He gives his name but refuses to be paid for the ride and drink that he offers the protagonist. It could well be the first time that Milkman has heard a proper name, born and given in dignity, in contrast to his own name.

The journey of name-searching brings Milkman to Circe, who is then directed to Shalimar, where inhabitants bear majestic names like King Walker, Mr. Solomon and Luther Solomon. Even children's songs carry his ancestors' names. The process of deciphering the family's name is rendered step-by-step. For instance, he finds his grandmother's name first as Sing Dead (SO, 243), and then Sing Byrd (SO, 284), and finally Singing Bird (SO, 304), thus establishing a strong link not just with his black ancestors, but also with the native Americans at the roots of his family tree. He at last confirms his earlier speculation that names do have meanings. Names matter, from the home of his ancestors, the town where his father stayed as a youth, or back in the street where he was brought up. "Their names. Name they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness" (330). The protagonist has found the meaning of names, which brings him to the discovery of the family history and his own identity.

3. The Family of Dead

Macon Dead is a name given by a drunken official to Milkman's grandfather at the registration office. However, he does not have his name corrected when he learns of the error; and neither does Milkman's father. But Milkman's attitude is ambiguous. He hates the name and yet defends it vigorously. "He had always hated that name. [...] Now he was behaving [...] as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride" (SO, 39). The three generations of Macon Dead hold on to the name because

subconsciously it represents best the life of the Dead family. Milkman's father is only concerned with money. He lives from day to day collecting rents from his tenants. His mother does not have a goal in life. She is neglected by her husband and is possessive of her son. After the death of her father, she lives a soulless existence. They do not teach their children the values of tradition or community. This is a family of no passion or vision. The young Milkman lives a soulless life, and is deeply bored. At a young age, he took to flying. But on discovering that a man cannot fly, "he lost all interest in himself" (SO, 9). Milkman has an innate interest in learning to fly, which is manifested very early in life but disappears soon afterward because, for lack of spiritual guidance on the parents' part, flying remains a pursuit for pleasure which, like everything else of the same nature, will inevitably lead to disillusion. The real significance of flying comes to light only after he gets in touch with the tradition of his family and also with his inner self. As a consequence, Milkman has to get away from the family, leaving the others to continue to be the Deads, and to find his real name.

Milkman and Guitar address one another by nicknames instead of their real names. So do the members of the Seven Days, a criminal and racist group consisting of young men of African-American origin. A given name is part of a person's paternal inheritance while a nickname is related to a man's social status, the way he is received by and interacts with other members of his social group. Milkman and Guitar used to refer to each other by nicknames because, when the protagonist and his then good friend were young, social relations in a group are more important than hereditary identity. However, the protagonist's nickname suggests some kind of deficiency and

failure, much the same way as his official name does. The name Milkman is a source of embarrassment to both himself and his father. It suggests immaturity and dependency, manifested by the fact that his mother holds him to her breasts despite his age. This is not his fault but a result of his mother's possessiveness and lack of purpose in life. But the name also reflects his state of being, which is far from being enviable. The nickname Guitar is a reminder of brief attempts at cultural pursuits in adolescence, the only potentially fulfilling activity that he has undertaken in his life. While Milkman hates his own name, Guitar does not want to change his. Later on in the story, Milkman finds the name of his ancestors, and then manages to discard the embarrassing name born by three generations in the family. When searching for the meaning of his name, he also experiences a life that differs from the lifeless existence that his parents have shown him. He also leaves his best friend Guitar, who put the blame on the others and has gradually become just as materialistic as Milkman's rent-collecting father. After the renaming, the protagonist set about to remake himself and become his own man. He no longer belongs to the Dead. He takes back his name and the control of his life.

4. The Treasure and Wisdom of a King

If a character's name speaks volumes, so does the title of a novel. David Cowart holds that the theme of the novel is love.³⁵⁴ He goes on to compare it with the book of the same title in the Old Testament:

³⁵⁴ Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *AL.*, 62 (1990): 87.

[T]he biblical Solomon, whose name in Hebrew, Shelomo, means *peaceable* [...]. He also lends his name to that splendid compilation of love verses in the Bible wherein the loved says, "I am black, but comely" (*Song of Solomon* 1:5). The Song of Solomon gives the novel its title and, obliquely, its underlying theme: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the flood drown it" (8:7).³⁵⁵

Jane Campbell states that the novel, apart from the name, bears no significant relation to the Bible. She suggests that it is African cultural tradition that the author makes reference to: "Morrison lures the reader into expecting a fictionalization of the Biblical Song of Solomon but replaces Christian associations with African ones."³⁵⁶ As discussed before, the characters' Christian names have more complex meanings than their Biblical origins. The title of the novel is just another example of how Morrison employs components of a large range of sources for her work. Contrary to Campbell's claim, the novel may not have used the canticle as a "lure," but its title actually alludes to the wealth and wisdom that befit an ancient king. The initial incentive for Milkman to embark on a journey is gold-hunting, which is related to King Solomon's alleged hidden treasures. Soon after he has embarked on the journey, however, Milkman is aware that there are things more valuable than gold. In the Holy Scripture, the Lord bestows wisdom on King Solomon, who then becomes one of the greatest kings of the Israelites (1 King: 3.9 -28). In the biblical story, Solomon does not ask for wealth, but gets it when as a good king he asks for wisdom rather than gold. 'King' is a title given to the man who is a real master of his own wise choices and actions.

³⁵⁵ Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," 105-06.

³⁵⁶ Jane Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986) 152.

Over the course of time, Milkman shows the courage and wisdom that befit a king. In the beginning, when he first arrives at Shalimar, the home of his ancestors, he is regarded as deceitful, greedy and hostile: “[T]hey knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers” (SO, 266). The values of this ancient town are radically different from the materialistic northern town, the place that the protagonist used to call home. They are a contrast to those of Dansville, where his father comes from and wants to return to. Milkman notices with pleasant surprise the freedom from materialistic constraints of the town’s inhabitants: “women’s hands were empty” (SO, 259). This is the opening line of Chapter 11. It takes a long time, and help from many people, to help the protagonist to transform himself. Later, he learns to shed off his sense of insecurity, and to gain courage to face life. “He had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties” (SO, 271). The hunting in the wood with Shalimar men is the most intense part of the transformation, which, as argued above, enacts a kind of initiation ritual. He enters the place where ancient legends are alive and genuine kindness and compassion still prevail. In the beginning, he is suspicious and hostile to his companions, projecting his psychological state onto the others. Soon he finds himself in a circumstance which is new to him: “Under the moon, on the ground, alone” (SO, 277). The protagonist is connected to nature for the first time. Money is of no use here, it may even jeopardize the goal. Even human civilization is submitted to a severe test. Now he is stripped of what he has accumulated in the consumptive society, and has to count on the essential of his human nature:

[A]ll a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch – and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on. (SO, 277)

He has to face human nature. He starts to recognize what he has and to deal with himself honestly. He realizes that it is not with words but with the heart that human communication can be best rendered. Words are one of the products of civilization, which is not essential in communication with nature, with other animals or with himself:

No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another [...]. Or the earth itself, for that matter. (SO, 278)

The protagonist begins to perceive words and language from another point of view. He understands their limits, and appreciates utterances without words, or other expressions that do not involve any language. He also experiences reception of information by his whole body other than the ears. “He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say [...].” (SO, 279).

Suddenly he understands Guitar, for the first time in his life: “he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him” (SO, 278). His newly awakened senses save his life by saving him from a sudden attack from Guitar. When Milkman assists in the carving of the bobcat, a conversation between him and Guitar comes into his head. He can read between the lines of Guitar’s eloquent speeches, and point out the latter’s mistakes. When he is opened to his natural senses, he also understands Hagar. At this point, he catches the first glimpse of the meaning of life: “*It is about love. What else?*” (SO, 283) He succeeds in finding the core of it all, his name, relationships and destiny. Shortly before then, his idea of love has been faulty: “Apparently he thought he

deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted” (SO, 277). Now he finds an answer to his question: “*It is about love.*” As if the others are aware of his thoughts, or as a confirmation of the validity of his new findings, he is asked: “You want the heart?” And then he is told: “now, get the heart” (SO, 282).

Having found the essence of real love, he comes back from the woods feeling at peace with himself.

Laughing too, hard, loud, and long. Really laughing, and he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were [...] comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked.” (SO, 281)

This is the beginning of him finding his place on earth, his identity and purpose in life.

Fairy tales often have the protagonist going into the woods to find his potential, to nurture and develop it. Milkman has looked at himself honestly, confronted his fears and met the dark force. He has gone through the stage of hunter, and proceeded to a more advanced stage of consciousness. He eventually understands the hidden messages which concern the past and future of his people, the wisdom and engagement that are appropriately embodied in the name of the ancient king, who according to at least one tradition was the composer of some of the world’s most moving love lyrics.

5. Human Relationship versus Commercial Dealings

By the time that Milkman has left Circe, he has lost his suitcase and his clothes and shoes are in very bad shape. He checks the valuables that he still has: “Five hundred dollars, his driver’s license, phone numbers on slips of paper, social security

card, airline ticket stub, cleaners receipts” (SO, 254). There is no genuine human relationship between Milkman and the Danville inhabitants – one party resembles dying people and the other is already dead. And then a total stranger comes to his help. Milkman offers to pay him, but he tells Milkman his name instead. To address another person by his proper name is indicative of regarding the other party as his equal.³⁵⁷ His host is visibly uncomfortable with Milkman’s proposal: “The man was smiling, but his face changed now.” After giving his name, he tells the protagonist, like explaining to a student who does not understand the lesson: “I ain’t got much, but I can afford a Coke and a lift now and then” (SO, 255). Milkman also shows that he is sensitive to the reaction: “Milkman could see him shaking his head as he drove off. Milkman’s feet hurt him so, he could have cried [...]” (SO, 255). He wants to cry, not for his feet, but for feeling misunderstood. But he is still not aware of his behavior. On his arrival at Shalimar, he again treats his dignified host like one of the salesmen in his hometown. “Mr. Solomon sounded slightly offended” (SO, 262). And then later, “Mr. Solomon kept his eyes on the counter [...]. His voice was soft; he spoke as if he was embarrassed about something” (SO, 265-266). It is Milkman’s arrogance and ignorance that irritate Shalimar’s men. “He hadn’t bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them ‘them’ ” (SO, 266). Name politics again plays out literally as well as symbolically in

³⁵⁷ In Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, the well-to-do black couple, Ondine and Sydney, do not bother to know the names of their domestic helpers. Instead, they insist on calling them the names that they invent. Naming or renaming is related to race and class issues. Homer’s Odysseus never calls Polyphemus by name, and does not give his adversary his real name. He never treats the Cyclops as his equal. See discussions on the same subject in Chapter 2.

human relationships. Milkman used to respect nobody, not even his mother or Hagar. He is not used to making efforts to entertain relationships. Naturally his attitude provokes aggression and he is saved by the kindly and fatherly Mr. Solomon.

When Milkman thinks that he is “unknown” and “unloved” (SO, 270), he is yet to discover a new kind of friendship, one that is proved to be greatly beneficial later. At King Walker’s place – another of the names suggesting people of the highest integrity and humanity – Milkman is pampered. The wound on his foot is tended to, and he is given shoes, clothes and a gun to go hunting in the woods with the others (SO, 271). Milkman surrenders himself to their care, and feels “grateful” (SO, 272). This is a healthy social relationship amidst men independent of wealth or social status, which is a new experience to the lonely and egocentric Milkman of the North. By now he has in his possession only a broken watch and two hundred dollars (SO, 277). For the first time, Milkman faces a situation in which there is no place for prestigious attire or expensive cars. In fairy tales, this is also a period of time that a young protagonist makes friends with hunters in the wood, learns from them about natural instincts and community life.

Now he starts to understand Guitar, and appreciate Hagar’s love for him. And then at the end of the initiation, he is given another piece of information, which is the name and origin of Milkman’s grandmother. Only when he discards the superficial can he understand the essential; only when he finds real love can he be at ease with himself. It needs the two together for Milkman to start being perceptive of or capable of contributing to beneficial human relationships. And then he is given the gift of

information about his ancestors and therefore about his identity. Human relationships and personal identity are closely related, the way individual and community destiny are interconnected.

Now he has learnt the lesson of love, and feels grateful for what Hagar gives him. He is then given a chance to experience an intimate relationship with a woman as loving and generous as Hagar. He has changed himself to be another kind of lover, one that is appreciative of these women-helpers. Only when he perceives the limit of what money can buy does he begin to see the real value of things. When he gives money to Sweet later, the gesture shows his genuine gratitude and affection, in comparison with his earlier condescending offer to pay Circe out of her present living condition. His value system starts to change, and so do his human relationships. The change helps him to come closer to the discovering of his proper self.

Mermaid-Solomon Song and the Heroes

In the *Odyssey*, the beautiful singing voices of Calypso and Circe are mere pastime and sensual entertainment, much like the food and bed that they offer to Odysseus. They have no power over the Greek hero because what they offer is neither unique nor sustainable. The sirens' song is related to knowledge and culture. The encounter involves conscientious preparation and self-control. As argued in the first chapter, the sirens are singers, poets, historians and prophets all at the same time.

Pilate is related to the singing women who have birds' bodies, as suggested by her mother's name, Singing Bird. Pilate is also the one who knows, as Milkman says early in the novel: "Pilate knows" (SO, 89). Pilate is a prophetic figure who conveys the message in songs. Although her brother is dumb to her songs' lyrics, Pilate's voice can still nourish and heal his blemished soul. The brother and sister used to grow up together, but a clash of values set them apart. He is not interested in the lyrics of her songs and even less tries to understand them, but Pilate's singing voice evokes pleasant memories for him. Macon slanders her in front of his son (SO, 54), who is drawn to Pilate and makes her his mentor later. Macon teaches his son greed and hatred, whereas Pilate teaches Milkman how to sing and to fly. She also protects him from harm when he is a baby and again when he grows up. Pilate initiates the protagonist into the Solomon songs, for his enlightenment and the community's continuity. In the end he learns to sing the songs, and is reconnected with the family's roots and finds his own goal. Milkman rises to the status of a hero, whereas his father is forever lost, not to the sirens' song but to the lure of power and status.

Requiems and Cradle-songs

When the story starts, Pilate is heard singing at the funeral of the black salesman Robert Smith, who has jumped off the roof of the insurance company's building. Smith can be seen as a black counterpart to Willy Loman of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949); both suffer from disillusionment with the American dream. His self-

deception renders his life a failure and his death a farce: he puts some blue fabric round himself and pretends that he can fly. Pilate's song is like a requiem that mourns his death. She sings for a life which has been spent in vain, like many of her community members who have given up all ideals to go after social success and, in the end, even their selves are lost to them. Her song is to soothe and cleanse the community, offering her people a hope to live on.

O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home.... (SO, 6)

The content of her song is about the legend of the flying man who finds real liberty and fulfillment. It is not a coincidence that Pilate sings this song on this particular occasion, because Robert Smith writes on a note before the suicide that he will "fly away on [his] own wings." He even has his occupation written on the note after his signature "Ins. Agent" (SO, 3). There is a comic effect of his note, the irrelevant noises and excited crowd, which gives the scene an air of sadness and absurdity. Pilate may just want to remind the others that it is possible to fly away, not like an insurance man, but like Sugarman, aka an ancestor of the Solomon clan.

Smith's suicide is like a well-orchestrated show, of the kind the salesman used to stage to attract attention of his clients. His audience is as apathetic and indifferent as usual. The only person who is really concerned is Pilate, who is, however, regarded as someone exterior of the community. Her presence is somehow anticipated and even welcomed. A woman in the crowd, Guitar's mother, can represent the crowd's attitude towards the singing woman: she "smiled when she looked at the singing woman" (SO,

8). Pilate is a special role to play: she is at once familiar and mysterious, an outsider as well as a pillar of the community. At this very beginning of the story, , Pilate is heard singing at her entrance into the story. Pilate is recognized as both an observer and a healer particularly in times of crisis.

Pilate sings again later at another funeral, to mourn her granddaughter's early death. Pilate interrupts the Christian service that Ruth arranges for Hagar, and replaces the sermon by her songs. Her first song resembles a psalm, recounting the moments of communication with the higher consciousness. The second is a lullaby that Pilate used to sing to Hagar when she was a little girl (SO, 317-319). Pilate is trying to tell the people attending the funeral that the essence of Hagar's life – as everybody else's – is how much she has been loved. Her commemoration for Hagar stands in contrast to conventional funerals which consist of speeches that extol the social success of the deceased in terms of fame and fortune. In the end, Pilate announces to everybody: "And she was *loved*" (SO, 319). Such is the legacy of Hagar's life, recognized and endorsed by her loving grandmother. Milkman also echoes the message of love after the sacrificial ritual. Milkman at last understands the meaning of Hagar's life: "*It is about love. What else but love?*" (SO, 282) Love-giving is Hagar's life achievement, and the central theme of the novel.

Ruth describes herself as "a small woman" (SO, 124). She is indeed small and insignificant in terms of emotion and spirit. A woman "dying of lovelessness" (SO, 151), she cannot give much to her family or to society. She stands in sharp contrast to Pilate,

who embraces life with great ardor and extraordinary passion. The two women used to be very close when they were young. “Old, crazy, sweet Pilate,” Ruth remembers her sister-in-law who gave her loving help after Milkman was born. But when Ruth arranges Hagar’s funeral, Pilate prefers to conduct her granddaughter’s commemoration in her unique way. Pilate’s songs express a profound and genuine compassion whereas Guitar’s speech to Hagar before her death is void of emotions. The loveless man’s clever and deceptive words are just the last straw.

Words and Music

Pilate’s songs used to lift the mood of younger Hagar when she felt lonely. Pilate also sings to Reba and Milkman when they are babies (SO, 22, 147). Her songs are love gifts that nourish the young ones and sustain their emotional well-being long into adulthood. Pilate must have learned the Sugarman song from her father, who also has a beautiful singing voice (SO, 235). Pilate’s version of the “Sugarman Song” is a variation of the original “Solomon song” which is sung by Shalimar children later in the story. The “Sugarman Song” has lost its context in the northern city that promotes individualism and materialism. Nonetheless, Pilate manages to keep alive the collective memory and aspirations of the family and community, and transmits them to the younger generations.

The first time Milkman hears the Shalimar song, he thinks that it is “some meaningless rhyme” and “nonsense words” uttered by children (SO, 264). Different from

his father, Milkman is not only looking for emotional relief but for meaning of the words. He soon recognizes Pilate's "Sugarman Song" in the children's "Solomon Song." When he starts analyzing the lyrics, Milkman realizes that the songs carry important messages.

[The children began] another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sings all the time: "O Sugarman don't leave me here," except the children sing, 'Solomon don't leave me here.'" (SO, 300)

It suddenly dawns on him that the song provides an answer to his question about his ancestors' name and family history. Milkman has learned to take the lyrics seriously, and that music can communicate better than official records. Soon afterwards, deep in the Shalimar woods with the hunting party, he is able to open his ears to the sound of nature:

The men and the dogs were talking to each other. Indistinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated thing [...]. [One of the men] whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground [...]. (SO, 277-278)

He has to learn to use his "eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch" and every sense if he wants to understand the sound and music of nature. As a matter of fact, Milkman has never really made efforts to understand the others. As Circe remarks, "You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (SO, 247). Once he learns how to discard prejudices and lies, he can open up to people, nature and the truth.

At this moment, Milkman thinks of Guitar. "[H]e thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him" (SO, 278). Milkman starts to observe and analyze events from another perspective. He used to consider Guitar "wise and kind and fearless" (SO,

47). On several occasions, Milkman even imitates the way Guitar speaks (SO, 87, 233). Going deep into the woods with the local hunters, Milkman finds again his real self. This is a situation often found in fairy tales. Listening to the sound of the wilderness opens his ears to his own voice, like the princess in “Twelve Ravens” who finds herself all by herself after the enchanted house and garden have disappeared. The old woman represents her inner voice, a more elevated stage of consciousness and instincts. Milkman remembers Guitar’s speeches which he used to agree with. He starts to find his own voice, and speaks with conviction: “*It is about love.*” For the first time in life, he realizes that he does not want to follow Guitar’s example. He begins to see his former mentor and best friend in a new light (SO, 278). He realizes that he used to believe in Guitar, whose eloquence is in fact a camouflage of elusiveness and lies, whereas the truth sometimes are less convincing : “[I]t was the truth, but it sounded like a lie” (SO, 296). Milkman now has grown up and away from Guitar. Milkman has also gained an important insight into verbal communication: words can be deceitful and misleading at times. More important is the fact that truth can be conveyed by other means than words: “[I]t was not language; it was there before language” (SO, 278). Milkman abandons writing materials which represent products of the civilized world, and learns the Shalima songs by heart, which is the way illiterate Pilate and young children do. Only then does he succeed in deciphering correctly the meaning of the songs.

Morrison elaborates further the idea of language or words versus sound or music in another novel, *Beloved*, the title of which again evokes the theme of love. There is an

important scene in which a group of women try to free Sethe from her past with a ritual that involves no language but only sounds:

They [...] took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.³⁵⁸

Morrison alludes to the beginning passage of Saint John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John: 1.1), not as a challenge to the Evangelist's statement, but a poetic strategy to stress the importance of the aural culture in African-American tradition.

Language plays an important role in the progress of human civilization particularly in Europe. As Spiller observes, "the Word, for Europe, engenders Flesh [...] that feeds the [...] acts of European invention and intervention."³⁵⁹ And as a major communicative means, it is equally "a constituting agent" and a way to "define history [...] in the process of artificial symbolization or arbitrariness," as Mason says.³⁶⁰ Morrison's novel shows that sounds or music can be an alternative to language as effective means of communication.

In an article titled "Rootedness," Toni Morrison explains her view of music as well as other forms of expression represented in her novels.

³⁵⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 259.

³⁵⁹ Spillers, "Who Cuts the Borders," 3.

³⁶⁰ Mason, "The Novelist as Conservator," 174-75.

The lower classes didn't need novels, [... because] they had songs and dances, and ceremony, and gossip, and celebrations. [... Music is] the art form that was healing for Black people.³⁶¹

Morrison further explains that literature in written form is useful in the modern era because it "carries new information,"³⁶² and that "narrative remains the best way to learn anything."³⁶³ She tries to advocate "a new voice" that can accommodate other cultural sensibilities, in particular African-American ones.³⁶⁴ Morrison wants fiction to fulfill a specific function:

"[A literary work has to be] a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other [...] and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization."³⁶⁵

Morrison also says that novels can "encompass [...]" something that has probably only been fully expressed in music.³⁶⁶ In her opinion, text and music can enhance each other for optimal results.

The sound of the novel, sometimes cacophonous, sometimes harmonious, must be an inner ear sound or a sound just beyond hearing infusing the text with a musical emphasis, that words can do sometimes even better than music can.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 340.

³⁶² Morrison, "Rootedness," 340.

³⁶³ Le Claire, "the Language Must Not Sweat," 123.

³⁶⁴ Jones, *Liberating Voices* 179.

³⁶⁵ LeClair. "The Language Must Not Sweat," 121.

³⁶⁶ McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," 426.

³⁶⁷ Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990) 228.

She holds that, in order for a novel to function properly, its “sound” or “voice” has to be right. She says further that “some voice” is missing in the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright.³⁶⁸ She claims to have endeavored to incorporate in her novels other forms of expression essential to African-American culture:

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print; antiphony, the group nature of its art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance.³⁶⁹

She pursues a style that can incorporate African-American musical elements in her writing.³⁷⁰ Morrison wants her novels to be “dismissed or embraced on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which [she] wrote.”³⁷¹

The aural effect of her work is equally important for Morrison, who is very specific in what she wants from “Black music”: “The group nature, [...] its improvisational nature, [and] its relationship to audience performance,” which, when translated into writing, should give an “oral quality, [involving] the participation of the reader and the chorus.”³⁷²

The “group nature” that Morrison advocates is manifested on two levels: community value as embodied by Pilate in the novel, and, in reality, the reader’s active

³⁶⁸ Charles Ruas, “Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 96.

³⁶⁹ Toni Morrison, “Memory, Creation and Writing,” *Thought*, 59 (1984): 388.

³⁷⁰ Morrison, “Rootedness,” 342.

³⁷¹ Morrison, “Rootedness,” 342.

³⁷² Morrison, “Rootedness,” 343; see also Jones, 187; also Ruas, *Interview with Morrison* 101.

psychological participation. As for the latter, Morrison says in an interview: “I rely very heavily on the reader to know a lot about what he does know.”³⁷³ In the case of *Song of Solomon*, it is probable that Morrison expects the reader to know and draw from stories about the sirens, Circe and Odysseus’ adventure. She engages her novel in an open dialogue with stories of the mermaids and Circe in the Western literary tradition. The representation of these figures is related to the community history, values and aspirations which the novel addresses directly. The sirens in Homer’s epic are not individuals but a group of women, forming a female community in which all the members are equally talented and knowledgeable. In a similar way, although recognized as a visionary and pioneer, Pilate is identified first and above all as a member of her family and community. Pilate’s songs are not self-serving but pertain to the interest of her people: she sings to soothe and to heal. Sometimes she sings alone, at other times she sings in choral unison with her daughter and granddaughter when working together in the family house. The “Sugarman Song” that Pilate used to sing to the protagonist is in fact a part or refrain of the “Solomon Song” sung by Shalimar’s children. The “Sugarman” or “Solomon Song” is the record of a collective experience as well as a personal achievement. The memory of a family and a clan is kept alive in the form of music.

³⁷³ Bakerman, “Failures of Love,” 35.

Pilate incarnates the gifted and wise woman who transmits the community's tradition and aspirations in the songs that she carries. Pilate is instrumental in the protagonist's progress. Her role is also complemented by other female characters, notably Circe, Hagar and Sweet. She used to sing to Milkman when he was a baby. When Milkman grows up and meets Pilate again, Milkman is again taken by the charm of her being and songs. He is "spellbound" by Pilate's voice, which is described as "light but gravel-sparkled" (SO, 36). He is enticed by Pilate and Hagar's singing: "Milkman could hardly breathe. Hagar's voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own" (SO, 49). Their voice evokes loving emotions that are lost to him: "it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy." This scene distantly recalls the enticing power of the mermaids' voice in folklore. Morrison's novel does not interpret beautiful voices as threatening. But Milkman thinks to himself: "No wonder his father was afraid of them" (SO, 47). Old Macon is like the ancient sailors who were afraid to hear the sirens sing, out of his own insufficiencies. This seems to be Morrison's interpretation of the sirens' menace in Homer's epic.

Deep in the woods, together with hunter siblings, the protagonist is initiated into sound and silence. This is a motif in fairy tales as discussed in Chapter 2. After the initiation, Milkman understands the singing game of the "Solomon Song" enacted by Shalimar's children (SO, 264). He relates the song lyrics to Pilate's "Sugarman Song," and starts to reconstruct his family's history (SO, 392-393). He needs to assimilate the new information and emotion, this time all by himself away from the hunters, in a setting that is of a higher level than the woods. He proclaims: "I need the sea!" (SO, 326). It is

also a place to finish his rite of initiation. Milkman has traveled a long distance from home, into the wood and then to the sea. The North-to-South itinerary is a voyage through time as well as space, to gather information and reinforce his intellectual power. The forest awakes his natural senses, and the sea opens up his emotional capacities. Sweet has been his guide to a loving relationship. Now he is sufficiently prepared to bring to completion the purification ceremony. The open space of the sea is also the domain of the singing women. The protagonist has no fear of the sea or its singing women. He is even affiliated to the singing women, and incorporates and re-appropriates the song after memorizing and deciphering it thoroughly. The song belongs to him: "I can play it now. It's my game now" (*SO*, 327). The action of going into the sea is full of symbolic meanings, one of which is that the protagonist goes to the domain of the sirens and joins the chorus to sing.

And yet his quest does not end here. It is not enough to learn the songs; Milkman's mission is more than just researching and analyzing information. He is expected to contribute to the tradition with his own creativity and personal expression. Pilate is again Milkman's mentor in this last stage of apprenticeship. In the end, after she is touched by a bullet, she urges Milkman to sing to her. After some hesitation, he starts singing. And then he cannot stop. He sings so loud and long that he awakens the birds (*SO*, 336). At long last, the protagonist has found his voice, established his own legacy, and become part of the tradition. The voice he has acquired is both personal

and collective. Jones says that the novel follows “a movement [that goes] from the restrictive forms to the liberation of voice and free personalities.”³⁷⁴ The protagonist thus realizes his dream, which is to ride the air. After having accomplished the journey, he leaps into the unknown with confidence and conviction. Milkman goes much farther than Odysseus or Telemachus. Neither he nor Pilate has to accept the painful limitations of Andersen’s Little Mermaid. The winged woman’s song can indeed help the man fly.

³⁷⁴ Jones, *Liberating Voices* 178.

Chapter V

The Song in Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo*

Once upon a time, when the central earth was ravaged by war and famine, a dumb and deaf woman led a group of disabled people and found refuge in the deep mountain. A village was founded and named Shouhuo. Its people lived in peace and self-sufficiency for many generations. The outside world was oblivious to their existence until one day modernization found its way to this backwater haven.

All the inhabitants in Shouhuo are physically deficient in one way or the other, as on one occasion a villager tries to explain to the visiting governor:

There are a hundred and ninety-seven of us in Shouhuo; thirty-five are blind, of which there are old and young. Apart from that, forty-seven are deaf and thirty-three are cripples. As for the others, some have one arm missing, some a broken finger or an extra thumb; still others who are more or less normal except for some deficiencies in one way or another. That comes to some several scores [...].³⁷⁵

³⁷⁵ In Yan Lianke [阎连科], *Shouhuo* [受活] (2003; rpt, Beijing: People's Daily Press, 2007) 50. Page numbers of subsequent quotations will appear in the text. *Shouhuo* can be translated as *Enjoyment* or *Living*. All subsequent English quotations in the text from this novel are my translations except specified otherwise. Authors, critics and fictive characters that bear full Chinese names will be referred to in the Chinese naming convention – family name followed by given name. Chinese names or terms in their

In spite of their physical condition, Shouhuo people are visibly happy with their situation. Happenings in Shouhou seem to defy common logic. As the narrator brings fellow-officials and the reader to the village on a hot summer day, they find a valley covered in snow. They expect the abnormal weather to spell disaster. But instead, a joyful harvest scene unfolds before them (*Shouhuo*, 11). In this reclusive land, contradictions and mysteries abound. Its people prosper in spite of its disconnection from the modern world. While the rest of the country is torn and consumed by political persecution and social turmoil, Shouhuo people alone live in peace and bliss. Shouhuo is a standing counter-example of the country's dominant culture. What is considered as logical or natural in the outside world seems to be irrelevant or simply out of place here, as is witnessed by the government officials who visit the place. The paradox is incarnated by the name of the village, as explained at the beginning of the novel. Shouhuo means at once "to enjoy" and "to suffer," suggesting that this little village is constantly pulled apart by life and destruction, two opposing forces (*Shouhuo*, 4).

Mother and Goddess

The history of the village has an epic-like grandeur. It encompasses heroic deeds and sufferings which become part of Shouhuo's heritage. Many centuries back, a deaf

original form are listed at the end of this chapter. The French translation bears the title *Bons baisers de Lénin*, trans. Sylvie Gentil (Arles: Editions Philippe Picquier, 2009).

and dumb woman offered her hand to a total stranger, and subsequently saved the lives of many refugees. By her example, hospitality and generosity have become a tradition in the Shouhuo community (*Shouhuo*, 4-6). The old woman is revered as “Granny of Shouhuo” and worshiped in a shrine (*Shouhuo*, 24), which is both a pagan and peasant way of remembering their benefactor. Her physical defects have become metonymic for her humanity and symbols of wisdom and kindness.

The founder sets the bar high for the moral standards for her successors. In the contemporary era, when political and social calamities consecutively hit the country, Shouhuo village managed to keep the damage to a minimum. It succeeds where the whole country fails, to a certain extent thanks to its leaders’ vigilance and selfless devotion to the community. The modern leader of the village is Maozhi. She embraces the ideal and strength of Shouhuo’s original founder , whom the villagers affectively refer to as Granny Maozhi.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶ As the author puns on most characters’ names, it is logical to argue that the name of the leading female character of the novel has symbolic meanings. I would venture to suggest that Maozhi, the insightful and selfless leader of the reclusive village of underprivileged but resourceful people, is a pun on the name of the long-time leader Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-tung according to Wade-Giles’ transliteration system). As the story tells of a village which is in great contrast with the rest of China at the time, the chief of the village can be presented as a contrast to the country’s former leader. My interpretation of Maozhi is inspired, in part, by Yan’s other novel *Serve the People* [为人民服务] (2005), the title of which originated as a maxim rendered famous by Mao Zedong and widely used during the Great Cultural Revolution. Several English versions of the novel are available, including one translated by Julia Lovell and published by Groove Press in 2008. The novel is also translated into French by Claude Payen and published by Philippe Picquier Editions, 2007.

Speechlessness

As everybody in Shouhuo is disabled, Maozhi is no exception. But Maozhi is neither mute nor deaf, unlike Granny of Shouhuo. However, in this strange village, a person who cannot speak or has impaired hearing power never encounters communication problems. Each member in the village cares for the others. No one is neglected or taken advantage of because of his physical condition. For instance, when the mute farmer comes to express his wish to Maozhi, the carpenter helps to interpret his message which Maozhi notes in a serious manner (*Shouhuo*, 13).

Maozhi is not mute, but she is not a verbose person. On the occasion of the annual harvest festival, which is the most important event in this agrarian society, Maozhi has to deliver an opening speech. But, Maozhi's speech is short and seemingly irrelevant to the occasion (*Shouhuo*, 56). Standing in contrast to her unassuming presence is the deceitful and corrupted governor Liu Queying. He gives an elaborate and eloquent speech, in an attempt to manipulate the crowd (*Shouhuo*, 57-62). His given name literally means "bird eagle," one who sings and preys.

As Liu exerts his control over Shouhuo and its villagers, Maozhi grows silent (*Shouhuo*, 93). Historically speaking similar situations have been encountered before. Maozhi succumbed to a loss of speech a couple of times in the past decades, when political campaigns and social movements affected Shouhuo. Sometimes the villagers refuse to follow her advice, and other times, they blame her for every mishap that takes

place. Either way, she feels despair and powerlessness, which find expression in voluntary muteness (*Shouhuo*, 119, 266). Once again, Maozhi is confronted with aggression from the outside world. In the face of inevitable disaster, her silence aggravates. She grows mute: "She has not been speaking much, as if her lips are sewed up, like dead" (*Shouhuo*, 93, 347).

The novel employs a duo-system of language. Outsiders speak the standard national language while Shouhuo people use a local dialect. The governor's speech is riddled with terms and proverbs that are used in government documents and media. The representative of the Great Cultural Revolution also employs phrases out of official propaganda. The two modes of expression are not compatible, and neither are the thoughts and values. Their conflict reflects the power struggle between the two worlds, with the local peasants on one side, and the state, institutions or mass media on the other. Maozhi is the representative and spokesperson for the forgotten community as well as the bearer and transmitter of its language. Her ineffectiveness in speech-making can be seen as an indication of weakness in the major culture though not in the local communicative tradition. The village chief Maozhi is not crafty in her speeches. But her thoughts and feelings are adequately expressed. She can even communicate her personality and particular sensibility in the sparing lines that she speaks. She is like Moses in the Bible, who is said to be "slow of speech." The Lord knows his servant's shortcomings and guides him in his speeches in front of the Pharaoh. He also gives Moses the power to perform miracles (*Exodus*, 4:11-12). Maozhi has an extraordinary strength of character that seems miraculous to many. Although she seems to be

silenced by the glamorous wordings of the governor, her songs persist after her death. Songs are an important medium of local expression in Shouhuo. Music and rhythm are also part of the language which is unique to the place.

The duo-system of expression is a textual strategy that aims to restore the right of voice to the people. Shouhuo people use their specific words, terms, syntax and figurative expressions not only to express their thoughts and feelings, but also to remember and revere their past. The official language that has been shaped and used in the outside world is inadequate to express the truth.. Maozhi or indeed the other villagers are always at a lost when trying to translate their aspirations or compassion into standard language. They give an impression of being inarticulate or confusing in comparison to the eloquent governor or representative of the Revolution. But words are not the only element in the Shouhou language. Music and silence also have an important part in the communication habits of the people in the region. In real China, music always plays an important part in the traditional cultures of minor ethnic groups. The author appeals to the reader's ear with the sound and musicality of the local language. The author explains the special words and how they should be pronounced. The blending of two different systems of articulations renders a rich musical texture to the language in *Shouhuo*.

The introduction of alternative languages or dialects is also a contextual strategy to break away from the main stream of writing. The unorthodox form of Chinese language is employed to de-familiarize the reader and thereby distance him from the

normal reading experience. The effect of alienation is essential in order to successfully convey the Shouhuo experience which is quite apart from the current Chinese culture. It also invites the average reader to reexamine the regular use of general Chinese as well as the worldview, ideology and logic that it embodies.

In order to enhance the significance of his language, Yan gives detailed explanations of local expressions, in terms of their origin, etymology and implication in today's society. These expressions record the life of many generations in highly condensed and poetic forms. This is also the language used in the transmission and interpretation of current events. Through the language, the villagers are able to relate effectively to their history as well as to their present. The explanations of the local expressions are rendered in the form of notes on each chapter. These notes are relatively long and carry a considerable amount of information pertinent to the development of the plot, which makes them just as important as the main text. Yan is not the only novelist to explore and experiment with local expressions or footnotes to special effects.. *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, the work of the Chinese contemporary writer Han Shaogong, is a further example of another successful attempt to bring public attention to alternative language practices in literature.³⁷⁷ This practice is an effective means of documenting local languages or dialects and giving them a place in the Chinese language. Incorporating local languages into standard Chinese can also be

³⁷⁷ Han Shaogong, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, trans. Julia Lovell (Mew York: Lovell Dial Press, 2005).

seen as an attempt to diversify literary expressions, which can duly reflect the complexity of Chinese culture.

Shouhuo Songs

Homer's Circe has a beautiful singing voice. In Toni Morrison's *Songs of Solomon*, when Milkman is about to meet Circe, the dogs' humming noise forms music behind the scene. The music is used to highlight the impact of the encounter that is going to take place. It also denotes the magic of these female characters regarding their beauty, ability or relation to nature. A similar scene in Morrison's novel shows Milkman's father hiding outside Pilate's house to hear the women singing. The governor Liu in *Shouhuo* also experiences a unique moment as he approaches Maozhi's house.

The village was immersed in deep silence. [...] The sounds that [the farmers] drove the oxen and dented the soil for winter seeds rippled forth in waves, fast and slow, rising and falling, just like the music of *Hu*³⁷⁸ playing a *Balu* air of the theme "Flying Birds."
(*Shouhuo*, 46-47)

This is a picture of calmness and serenity, free of disruptive or disconcerting noises. The silence described here is a contrast to a total absence of sound or the soundless world of a deaf person's experience. The sound of nature and farming activities constitute the earthy yet magical tune, evoking feelings of joy and bliss, which is the dream of wary wanderers and forlorn souls. The scene at once enchants and appalls the visiting governor who is deeply immersed in domestic conflict and career problems.

³⁷⁸ *Hu* is a Chinese string instrument widely used in a large variety of regional music.

Hu and the *Balu* air represent local musical traditions and are related to an unblemished nature. They nourish the villagers' spirit and sustain their lives, and connect them to tradition and the soil. The relation between humans and nature is one of peace and harmony. Taking central stage in this pastoral scene is Maozhi, who is the incarnation of Shouhuo's tradition and essence of being.

Although a person of sparing words, Maozhi embodies the village's traditional songs. The village's history and values are remembered in the songs of Shouhuo. As the keeper of the village, Maozhi assumes the role of the guardian and interpreter of its songs. She is recognized as the authority in matters relating to songs and tradition, as revealed in a snippet of conversation exchanged between the villagers after her death:

Someone asked, "How to sing that song of Shouhuo?"
Another one answered, "Granny Maozhi is dead; I fear nobody remembers the lyrics anymore." (*Shouhuo*, 356)

At the end of the novel, the reader is given a glimpse of the lyrics of some of these songs. The very last song in particular captures the spirit of the Shouhuo community:

I am the blind you are lame,
You sit on the cart and then I'll pull,
My feet will then become yours.
(*Shouhuo*, 362-363)

Being the last words of the novel, this song can be read as the definition and conclusion of the experience of Shouhuo. Like the *Song of Solomon*, the Shouhou songs have a purpose, and that is to show its people the way to personal fulfillment and communal well-being. Maozhi is the person who ensures the up-keep and transmission of the songs and their spirit.

During the Great Cultural Revolution, a representative of the revolution comes to the village with the aim setting the villagers against each other. The villagers have nothing to complain and present their case in the following way:

The blind [...] replies: I am a bamboo weaver. I help each family to weave baskets and they plough my land.

[...]

The cripple [...]: I have an ox. Whoever borrows my ox will give a hand to my family.

[...]

The deaf said: I don't have an ox but I have a cart that my neighbors often use. They help me when I am in need.

[...] Everyday, the cripple employs the blind's legs, and the blind employs the cripple's eyes. The deaf stays close to the ear of the dumb, and the dumb stays close to the mouth of the deaf. (*Shouhuo*, 267)

This conversation can be related to the last *Shouhuo* songs mentioned above. The villagers' description of their mutual assistance is an elaboration and extension of the song. While the song is a testimony of the values upheld by tradition, the conversations manifestly show how these values are translated into everyday life. The representative of the revolution tries to provoke the villagers into internal strife; once again the outside world that survives on mutual-denigration and destruction knocks at *Shouhuo*'s door. The two worlds are hugely different and are incompatible in terms of worldview, principle and values. For the outsider, the only means to personal preservation is to engage constantly in rivalry and antagonism. But *Shouhuo* people know better. The songs have proved to be still relevant in the modern era, to remind the community of its core values and to carry them through hard times.

Songs are as important as food and medicine to those who toil in the field. In one harvest scene, there is a group of villagers work together in seamless cooperation.

Those incapable of manual works contribute to the productive activity through their singing (*Shouhuo*, 114). Music can boost the workers' morale and rekindles team spirit. In a similar way, in the *Song of Solomon*, Pilate sings with her daughter and granddaughter while working together. Milkman's father hides outside their house and listens. The songs are a source of comfort as much for the working women as for the weary old man. The content of Pilate's song is not revealed; but the music alone has enough power to revitalize the world-weary spirit. Homer's sirens sing to the travelling sailors and soldiers. The songs tell of the triumphs as well as the mishaps that the travelers have lived through or witnessed. They equally soothe the pain of the seafarers who are worn and torn by merciless battles and endless trips. In this forgotten village in modern China, music is an important form of expression for its unsophisticated inhabitants. A singer enjoys a special status in society, and her contribution to the people's wellbeing is generally recognized. This appreciation of music reveals the quality of life in *Shouhuo*, particularly when compared to other societies where economic activities often take priority over culture. In this sense, this simple society is way ahead of other rich regions of the country.

A celebratory festival is held each year after the harvest. The climax is a singing performance in which the vocalist praises a woman who, for the love of her family, hesitates about entering paradise after death. The villagers are deeply moved and want to hear more of her songs. The governor Liu is greatly offended that this singer should be acclaimed more than he is. It is beyond his comprehension that his speech should receive such little attention, or the money he hands out fails to evoke the enthusiasm

that he expected. When the singer returns to the stage, Liu resolves to impose himself by all possible means. In the open field of the ancient mountains, a power contest is staged between songs and authorities. The contrast between the two worlds is visibly revealed in the tension that exists between the singer and the governor, condensed by her songs and his speeches. The song reflects the villagers' emotions, whereas the governor's embellished language is used to conceal his greed and lies. Liu uses his authority to send the singer away (*Shouhuo*, 62-73). Expressing in songs the villagers' thought and feelings, the singer can be seen as a double of Maozhi, and represents the latter's artistic presence on stage. The singer's song is an echo or modern version of Shouhuo's songs. This episode is one of the turning points of the story. It is worth noting that, for the first time since the story begins, the people's voice is silenced. The intruder's ambitions and manipulation is gaining ground. Maozhi's unpretentious speeches and plain warnings go unheard; her simple common sense is drowned out by the governor's false promises. Seeing that her fellow-villagers do not take heed of her warnings, Maozhi then quietly prepares her shroud (*Shouhuo*, 94).

Since the dawn of Chinese civilization, the lunar calendar has been instrumental in structuring agricultural activities and human events. The calendar is the only reference to time throughout the book. Shouhuo songs are also related to seasons and festivities, and correspond to the traditional calendar. The villagers depend on the tradition for their everyday life.

Someone asks, "Between working seasons, what do we do with the festivals of Dragon, of Wind and of Elderly?"

And so another one answers, "Don't ask me. Maozhi is no longer there; ask the old ones." (*Shouhuo*, 356)

Maozhi is again the recognized authority empowered to conduct agrarian and social festivities corresponding to the calendar. Her presence is, in itself, an assurance of the continuity of the community.

The village is, to a certain extent, dependent on Maozhi's knowledge and tenacity. Her death is a sore loss for Shouhuo. toward the end of her days, she is able to get Shouhuo withdrawn from the communal system that has cost several lives and much material waste (*Shouhuo*, 351-352). It is to redress the only mistake that she has ever made during her long years of service to Shouhuo. Afterward, the memory of her courageous deeds conjures up conscientious efforts to restore tradition and confidence in the region. A group of new arrivals move in from afar, settle in a nearby area and build a village modeled on Shouhuo (*Shouhuo*, 355-356). Maozhi has always been a source of strength for her people, in so much that even after her death she continues to inspire hopes and strength.

Circe's Animals

Homer's Circe can change humans into animals with her magic wine; the warmth of a homely hearth can imprison the lonely and weary traveler. In the *Songs of Solomon*, Circe's dogs have human-like faces. Similarly, Maozhi is always surrounded by strange-looking animals, as is witnessed by Liu.

The governor went to see Granny Maozhi. Maozhi was in the yard feeding her several dogs, her manner not unlike a mother to her kids. These dogs are all crippled: some were blind, crippled or bald on the back [...], and the others, for some unknown reasons, have a tail or an ear missing. (*Shouhuo*, 46)

The governor is the man who has impregnated and then abandoned Jumei, Maozhi's only daughter. When he comes to see Maozhi again, the latter neglects him and goes on tending the dogs. The self-important Liu is quick on the defensive and plans for a revenge. In comparison to the dogs, the man appears to be inferior in terms of positive human qualities.

Later on in the story, on a trip to a city for the negotiation of the performance payments, Maozhi witnesses an accident in which a dog is run over by a car. As she is taking care of the injured dog, many old and cripple dogs gather and follow her. She decides to abandon the negotiations in exchange for immediate transport to bring home all the unfortunate animals (*Shouhuo*, 214-218). It is clear in Maozhi's mind that the well-being of an old or invalid animal is worth more than any amount of money.

In the aforementioned speech delivered by Maozhi at the opening of the harvest festival, the theme is that of a sick dog.

The Shouhuo Festival was going to start soon.

Somebody had to make an opening speech. It used to be Granny Maozhi who would stand there and speak a few words. She always said, "Yesterday a blind dog has found its way to my house. Its eyes were scooped out. How terrible. Pus kept coming out of its eye sockets. I'd better go home and do something." (*Shouhuo*, 56)

To give a talk on the subject of dogs seems on the occasion to be somewhat strange and irrelevant; but it is not inconsistent with her usual habits. Maozhi cares for men and animals alike, and these dogs always stay close to her. They are around her when she

is sewing the shroud for her funeral (*Shouhuo*, 94), and follow her during her last days (*Shouhuo*, 348-349). And at her funeral, they join the procession and follow the coffin to the graveyard.

As the coffin was taken from the village to be buried, in everybody's plain sight, the sixteen or seventeen invalid dogs followed the procession in great grief. While people cried out aloud to moan for Granny Maozhi, each of these dogs bore on their cheeks two strings of tears which were soiled with mud and dirt. Shedding tears in silence, they walked behind the coffin with the funeral procession, the same way that they had followed Granny Maozhi from place to place in the old days.

However, after the coffin had left the village and advanced for half a mile on the mountain ridge, the number of dogs grew even bigger. Not only sixteen or seventeen, but twenty, thirty or even more. Nobody knew where they came from [...], in color black, white and grey. Also a few very skinny and shabby cats, all of which were visibly invalid. As the procession matched on, the number of animals increased from some three dozen to more than a hundred. All blind or cripple, they gathered together and began to form a big mass which outnumbered the people in the funeral. (*Shouhuo*, 353)

The dogs' loyalty to their mistress is both surprising and touching. The dogs pay her their last respects in their own particular way:

After the *Shouhuo* people had left the cemetery, the dogs were still lying around the tomb, all over the place.

One person said, "So many dogs. I have never seen such a huge pack of dogs in my life."

Another said, "They are all invalid, too."

And then, all of a sudden, they heard behind them over the tomb the sound of howling and weeping. The numerous crippled dogs and cats had gathered over the tomb and started crying and howling sadly [...]. (*Shouhuo*, 353-354)

Although the novel has more than a few moments where events are implausible, this scene is particularly remarkable for its emotional intensity. The magical funeral pageant is the final touch to the portrait of this extraordinary woman. Maozhi's animals are able to show love and loyalty, similar to some of the best of human qualities. Ironically, given that *Shouhuo* is a place where a cripple can move faster than a healthy person, animals can manifest noble human traits better than some people, notably the governor Liu and other outside people.

Mother-Goddess, Guardian-Leader, or Every-Woman

Though taking into account of Maozhi's vision, ability, courage and achievements, she is nonetheless presented as a mere human. This village chief is surprisingly normal amid the many extraordinary and gifted fellow-villagers who are endowed with various talents to cope with everyday life or perform on the stage. For example, a cripple runs faster than a healthy young man, a deaf can feel the words by touching the ear-lobe of the speaker, the blind can hear a needle and locate it exactly, and the list goes on and on (*Shouhuo*, 353-354). Unlike other cripples, Maozhi cannot run fast. In fact, Maozhi is the only one who fails to show any particular skill or ability. Her worst default is that she has limited vision and power. At the beginning of the new regime, she is taken in by the government's propaganda and makes the serious mistake of bringing the village under the commune system. During the Great Cultural Revolution, her people are being ripped off or murdered, and then she submits herself to the authorities taking all the suffering on herself. She tries, several times but without success, to get the village out of the commune system. And now, sensing dangers ahead, Maozhi is desperate to keep the villagers out of harm's way. But she is no match to the cunning and manipulative governor. In the end, she finds herself alone in the struggle and isolated from her fellow-villagers. She is obliged to witness once again the downfall of her people. The sadness is so great that it costs her her life. Being *Shouhuo*'s longtime leader, she is partly responsible for the suffering of her people, which eventually result in her own demise. She has made a variety of decision-making

mistakes. Moreover, she is prone to being remorseful and emotionally susceptible to accusations. All this goes to prove that she is not represented as a superhuman or a living god. She is merely a human, with complete integrity and also great faith in humanity and compassion for her people. Her human weaknesses only will make her more endearing.

A Chinese critic Lu Wei writes that the novel represents a “combat between political radicalism and cultural conservatism,” and that Maotze symbolizes “cultural conservatism” and the governor Liu, “radical political progress.”³⁷⁹ Although Maotze upholds community tradition, she is not against sustainable growth in society. It is not to confuse a society’s healthy progress with the blind pursuit of material gains. Maotze represents the voice that protects the welfare of the community, whereas Liu acts out of personal interest at the expense of that of the others. Although an ambitious person, Liu does not manifest any political ideals.

Another Chinese critic, Liu Jinyu, makes an attempt to apply gender theories in the reading of Yan’s novel. She states that Maozhi and her family represent the development of the three stages of a woman’s place in society: they are, respectively,

³⁷⁹ Lu Wei [卢炜], “Combat between Political Radicalism and Cultural Conservatism: Studies on Yan Lianke’s *Shouhuo* [政治激进主义与文化保守主义的对决—读阎连科《受活》],” *Contemporary Literature* [当代文学] 2 (2007): 87-88.

“the age of goddess, of female slave, and of woman.”³⁸⁰ Liu Jinyu says that Maozhi’s daughter Jumei is a slave because she is seduced and used by a man. He also states that one of Jumei’s quadruplets Huaihua represents the self-fulfilled woman because pregnancy frees her from slavery and makes her equal to men.³⁸¹ This point is contestable because, first of all, Jumei has been cheated into a futile relationship, and cannot feel at ease in her former suitor’s presence; but it does not make her a slave to anybody or to any ideology. Moreover, if fertility is the saving grace, as presumed the critic, Jumei has given birth to four children and, therefore, by all counts, should be considered more than an equal to men, or, for that matter, not less than any other woman. In fact, Maozhi was raped by an army superior and her four granddaughters have all fallen victims to violence and rape. But these unfortunate events do not tarnish their independent spirit or integrity. Most importantly, the differences between the three generations of women can, in fact, be attributed to environment and personality. Maozhi has survived atrocities early in her life, which makes her a solitary warrior, whereas the younger women in her family develop other surviving skills and character traits. Liu Jinyu’s preposition with regard to the development of a woman’s place in the society is, therefore, less than convincing.

³⁸⁰ [女神时代 - 女奴时代 - 女人时代]. Liu Jinyu [刘静宇], “Ultimate Dialogue between the Sexes – analyzing Yan Lianke’s novel ‘Living’ [两性终极对话 - 译读阎连科的长篇小说《受活》],” *Literature Criticism* [文艺评论], September (2006): 194.

³⁸¹ Liu Jinyu, “Ultimate Dialogue between the Sexes,” 195.

However, Liu Jinyu's discussion brings about other questions of equal importance: are there any important changes through the years in the woman's role as manifested in the three generations of Maozhi family? To what extent does the history of this family represent Shouhuo society as a whole? It seems that life in its essence has remained unchanged since the beginning of time. The villagers' lifestyle and values are challenged again and again but eventually survive. Shouhuo people seem to be content with their life. Maozhi's is a typical Shouhuo family in which tradition passes on from one generation to another and the continuation of their special life style is ensured. After the passing away of the matrimony figure, a new baby is soon to be born— a female child of the fourth generation in Maozhi's household – to succeed in the line of the Shouhuo women.

While some critics have called Maozhi the “guardian,”³⁸² Liu Baoliang argues that Maozhi is not only a guardian or competent “administrator” but above all a “giver of pan-motherly love.”³⁸³ Liu Baoliang states that Maozhi uses motherly tolerance and consideration to endure the “misunderstanding” and “repugnance” that the villagers

³⁸² [守护者]. Yang Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin [杨剑龙，梁伟峰，赵欣], “Absurdity as Representation on the Reflections on History and Reality - a Conversation on Yan Lianke's ‘Enjoyment’ [在荒诞里表达对历史与现实的思考 - 关于严连科‘受活’的对话],” *Theory and Writing* [理论与创作], (2007) 59. 1994-2007 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House, <http://www.cnki.net>

³⁸³ [管理者] and [一位泛化的母爱施予者]. Liu Baoliang [刘保亮], “On Female Images in Heluo Area in Novel “Palou” by Yan Lianke [论严连科‘耙耧小说’中的河洛女姓形象],” *Journal of Louyang University* [洛阳大学学报] No. 20/3 (2005): 18.

unfairly repay her with.³⁸⁴ Moreover, Maozhi never seems to have any personal objectives or want anything for herself. Liu Baoliang studies the characterization in several of Yan's novels and concludes that:

As Yan Lianke ceaselessly strives to create an idealized and chastised woman of Balou, underneath the (idea of) "women worshipping" may hide the taste and fancy that belong to a traditional male(-dominated) society.³⁸⁵

Indeed, one gets the impression that Maozhi is doing all the work as well as getting all the blame. She functions as both the giver and the sinner, which is the double role of a mother. Her presence is taken for granted till she disappears for good. Her absence is lamented only when people get nostalgic. The ancient founder of Shouhuo, the nameless blind and mute woman, is revered as the common ancestor, put into a shine and to be "worshipped," while Maozhi has little power and her leadership is open to questions and challenges.

Liu Baoliang makes it a point that Shouhuo's author Yan Lianke was born in the home town of the ancient philosophers Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao.³⁸⁶ The renowned Cheng brothers played an important role in reviving Confucianism in Chinese history and, to a certain extent, can be held responsible for the growing constraints on women

³⁸⁴ [误解] and [怨恨]. Liu Baoliang, "On Female Images in Heluo Area in Novel "Palou" by Yan Lianke," 18.

³⁸⁵ [阎连科坚持不懈地塑造理想化及圣洁化的耙耷女性, 也许在"女性崇拜"的背后, 曲折隐晦的透露着男性传统的趣味和梦想.] Liu Baoliang, "On Female Images in Heluo Area in Novel "Palou" by Yan Lianke," 4.

³⁸⁶ The Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao [程颢] (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi [程颐] (1033-1107), in particular the latter, have had a strong influence on Song and Ming's philosophy. *Cheng's Commentary on Zhou Yi* [周易程氏传] was reprinted with annotations in *Anthology of Two Chengs' Work* [中华书局校点本"二程集"] (Shanghai: Chunghua Press, 1920).

in the last millennium in Chinese history.³⁸⁷ As a matter of fact, although Maozhi is hardly a model of Zhu Xi's ideal woman, she is nonetheless rendered impeccable in terms of traditional virtue. Liu Baoliang further points out that the traditional women's role in the region influenced the conceptualization of Yan's characters. He then criticizes Yan's representation of women as somewhat "backward" and "anti-modern"³⁸⁸ – these two Chinese terms have been popular in twentieth century Chinese literary criticism particularly in specific social or political contexts. In this case, Liu uses these terms to project ideas which represent out-of-date values and practices. Liu Baoliang's view complements those of the afore-mentioned critics who think that Maozhi is against the modernization of China.

Indeed, moral principles constitute an important aspect of this character. The critics Yang Jianglong, Liang Weifeng, and Zhao Xin say that the character Maozhi is a "flat character" representing the "glory of human nature."³⁸⁹ The remark about "human nature" is a remnant of criticism levied at literary or artistic work, particularly during the Revolution era.³⁹⁰ Generally speaking, the works in question are criticized as playing

³⁸⁷ Cheng's ideas were developed further by Zhu Xi [朱熹] (1130—1202), who was the founder of the "Li Xue [理学]." Zhu's interpretation of Confucianism has greatly modified traditional Confucianism and influenced the popular understanding of the philosophy even today.

³⁸⁸ [落后性] and [反现代性]. Liu Baoliang, "On Female Images in Heluo Area in Novel "Palou" by Yan Lianke," 20.

³⁸⁹ [人性光辉]. Yang Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin, "Absurdity as Representation on the Reflections on History and Reality," 59, 60.

³⁹⁰ "Human Nature" was an issue during and shortly after the Revolution. One of the well-known examples is Bai Hua's [白桦] *Bitter Love* [苦恋] written in 1977, script of the film named *Sun and Man* [太阳和人]

down the differences between social classes, and a lack of what is described as “class compassions.” After that, with the change in the political climate, literary criticism also took a drastic turn. As a reaction against the earlier trend, the term “human nature” took on a positive connotation. In the present case, Yang, Liang and Zhao again use the term “human nature” to describe Yan’s character. But their comment is not substantiated or elaborated. Cheng Guanwei also says that Yan’s characters are “thin, lacking in variety and complexity.”³⁹¹ But again, it is a passing comment without much elaboration. Although the representation of Maozhi seems too idealistic to be realistic or plausible, she is also shown making wrong judgments and decisions. She learns her lessons all along, and the hard way. Moreover, in several instances, she reveals her grief, fears and desperation, which certainly add other dimensions to the character. This extraordinary woman in the remote mountains, among strange-looking people and dogs, is not a character easy to relate to and sympathize with.

Realistic or Fantastic

Given that realism has been a popular topic in literary and artistic criticism in modern China, the relationship between the literary theory and Yan’s work is a frequent

directed by Peng Ling [彭宁]. The script is also known as *Call of Human Nature* [人性的召唤]. The discussions developed rapidly into ideological disputes and eventually led to political persecution.

³⁹¹ Cheng Guangwei [程光炜], “Yan Lianke and Realism,” 56.

topic of discussion. Liu Zaifu says that *Shouhuo* is written with “an extremely lucid spiritual reality.”³⁹² Liang Weifeng also holds that the novel manifests “artistic reality versus real life reality.”³⁹³ Lai Qiongyu describes Yan’s narrative work as an example of “liberated realism.”³⁹⁴ These critics all invariably try to modify the definition of “realism” to accommodate Yan’s novels.

The author himself also has his own idea about the literary term. Yan speaks openly against the theory and practice of realism as used in the Chinese literary field.³⁹⁵ He claims that realism “is the most imminent murderer of literature.”³⁹⁶ In his opinion, Chinese realism is responsible for the production of literary work that is “false, pretentious, shallow, superficial, conceptual and didactic.”³⁹⁷ He tries thereby to

³⁹² [非常透彻的精神真实]. Liu Zaifu, “A Fabulous Novel in China: Analyzing Yan Lianke’s novel *Shouhuo* [中国出了部奇小说 - 读阎连科的长篇小说《受活》],” *Contemporary Author Criticism* [当代作家评论] 2 (2007): 40.

³⁹³ Yang Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin [杨剑龙，梁伟峰，赵欣], “Absurdity as Representation on Reflections on History and Reality: a Conversation on Yan Lianke’s “Living” 57.

³⁹⁴ Lai Qiongyu [赖琼玉], “Liberated Realism: Yan Lianke’s novel *Shouhuo* [解放的现实主义 - 阎年科《受活》解读],” *Contemporary Literature* [当代文坛] 2 (2005): 59.

³⁹⁵ The basis of the theory of Chinese communist realism stems from Mao Zedong’s talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art [在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话] delivered on February 1, 1942, which initiated the campaign for Rectification Movement [整风运动] between the years 1942 and 1944. The speeches were collected and published as the *Documents of the Rectification Campaign* for internal circulation of the party. See one of the English translations in David Ernest Apter, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³⁹⁶ [謀殺文字的最大元凶]. Epilogue, Yan Lianke [阎连科], *Shouhuo* [受活] (2003; rpt, Beijing: People’s Daily Press, 2007) 364.

³⁹⁷ [虛偽、張狂、淺浮、庸俗、概念而且教條]. Epilogue, Yan Lianke, *Shouhuo*, 364.

dissociate his work from Chinese realistic writings.³⁹⁸ However, instead of abandoning the term completely, Yan adopts a similar tactic to that of the critics who defend his work: he claims that his work manifests “genuine realism, the realism that transcends ‘isms.’”³⁹⁹ It is written at the back cover of one of the versions of *Shouhuo* that the novel “is a foundation piece of ‘fantastic realism’ of Chinese contemporary literature.”⁴⁰⁰ Yan is reported to have described his proper style as “fantastic realism” or “absurd realism” in an interview.⁴⁰¹ Realism in Chinese literary criticism is a complex issue, its relationship with Yan’s novels more so.

³⁹⁸ Epilogue, Yan Lianke [阎连科], *Shouhuo* [受活] 364-66. In another interview, Yan says that realism is a constraint to the development of Chinese literature and cannot be related to his work. Cf. Chong Hongming, Yan Lianke [钟红明、阎连科], “Reality stemming from the Author’s Heart: Dialogues on Yan Lianke’s novel *Shouhuo* [真实来自作家的内心—关于阎连科长篇小说《受活》的对话],” *Wanhuei Dushu Zhoubao* [文汇读书周报] (28 November, 2003).

In an interview by Stéphane Fièvre, Yan explains that the style in *Shouhuo* is “both poetic and realistic but also neither poetic nor realistic at the same time [...]” [à la fois poétique et réaliste mais aussi non poétique et non réaliste à la fois]. See “Yan Lianke: A very Big [Figure] of the Chinese Contemporary Literature [Yan Lianke: un très grand de la littérature chinoise contemporaine],” (20 April, 2009). <http://www.radio86.fr/decouvrir-et-apprendre/culture/8470/yan-lianke-un-tres-grand-de-la-litterature-chinoise-contemporaine-par-stephane-fièvre>.

In another interview, by Raphaëlle Rérolle, Yan “discard[s] completely the constraints of the spirit: to get rid of the academic styles, whether poetic or realistic [...]” [se débarrasser totalement des contraintes de l’esprit: quitter les styles académiques, qu’ils soient poétique ou réaliste [...]]. See “Yan Lianke: discard the constraints of the spirit [Yan Lianke : Se débarrasser des contraintes de l’esprit],” *Le Monde des livres* (17 April, 2009).

³⁹⁹ [真正的现实主义，超越主义的现实主义]. Epilogue, Yan Lianke [阎连科], *Shouhuo* [受活] (2003; rpt, Beijing: People’s Daily Press, 2007) 365.

⁴⁰⁰ [中國當代文學 “狂想現實主義” 的奠基之作]. Yang Jianlong, Liang Weifeng, Zhao Xin, “Absurdity as Representation on the Reflections on History and Reality,” 57.

⁴⁰¹ An interview by Stéphane Fièvre, “Yan Lianke: A very Big [Figure] of the Chinese Contemporary Literature.”

Another Chinese critic Liu Chao claims that Yan's style is heavily influenced of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Liu Chao believes that by adopting the "Latin-American fantastic realism," Yan is able to "come ever closer to certain realities of countryside."⁴⁰² Unfortunately, Liu does not develop this point sufficiently. Neither does he provide analytical studies of the text to establish the alleged influence of the purported "Latin-American" style in Yan's work. Some other critics like Yang Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin question the definition of the term realism and its value in the literary discourse relating to Yan's work.⁴⁰³ It is possible that Yan has come into contact with Marquez's work because the latter's *Hundred Years of Solitude* [*Cien años de soledad*] is widely read and commented in the Chinese academic world today.⁴⁰⁴ In fact, Marquez is one of the few authors that Yan names in the epilogue for one of the major editions of his work, as an example of the diversities and modifications of the term realism.⁴⁰⁵

Several critics study foreign influence in Yan's work, but its relevance to the reading of the novel is less apparent. Liu Zaifu compares *Shouhuo* to Eugene Ionesco's "*Rhinoceros*," and makes an attempt to apply Albert Camus's literary theory as

⁴⁰² [拉美魔幻现实主义] and [更走近了乡村的某种真实] Liu Cao [刘超], *Allegorization of Yanlianke's [sic] Rural Novels* [论阎连科乡土小说的寓言化倾向], M.A. Dissertation [硕士学位论文], Wuhan University [武汉大学] 34.

⁴⁰³ Yang, Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin, "Absurdity as Representation on Reflections on History and Reality," 57-58.

⁴⁰⁴ Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, "The Post-Modern 'Search for Roots' in Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Wang Anyi, in *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other,'*" *Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 191.

⁴⁰⁵ Epilogue, Yan Lianke, *Shouhuo*, 365.

demonstrated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to Yan's novel.⁴⁰⁶ The comparison is brief but inspiring. Zhou Bingxin holds that *Shouhuo* is an example of M.M. Bakhtin's literary theory of the "Carnival." She uses a political-social approach and points out that Yan uses sarcasm and irony to create a "world of absurdity," which allows the author to record accurately and entirely his observations about life.⁴⁰⁷

Any Chinese who is capable of independent thinking would never take [*Shouhuo*'s political-social setting] as a mere "imaginary world"; for this is the real China.⁴⁰⁸

Zhou further concludes that stories in Yan's novels can serve as "sample cases to study China."⁴⁰⁹

Some critics write that Chinese literature is the major source of inspiration to Yan's novels. Yang, Liang and Zhao state that Yan's work employs traditional allegorical expressions together with "a structure of fables" to represent today's political reality.⁴¹⁰ Liu Chao compares *Shouhuo* to Lu Xun's (or Lu Hsun) short story A

⁴⁰⁶ Liu Zaifu, "A Fabulous Novel in China," 39. Cheng Guangwei [程光炜], "Yan Lianke and Realism," 53.

⁴⁰⁷ [荒诞世界]. Zhou Bingxin [周冰心], "Contemplating China in metaphoric sarcasm and shrew irony – a Study of Political People of the 'Cultural Revolution' in Yan Liangke's Novels [在谑虐隐喻和冷峻反讽里考量中国 - 阎连科“文革”政治人小说研究],” *Xuedang* [学灯] February (2004): 60.

⁴⁰⁸ Zhou Bingxin, [有一点独立认知的中国人决不把它仅仅当作“想象世界”，因为这才是真正的中国世界]. "Contemplating China in metaphoric sarcasm and shrew irony," 59.

⁴⁰⁹ [研究中国的标本]. Stressing the gloomy aspects of society, she associates the term "Shouhuo" - which literally means to live and enjoy - to "Shoulan" which means to suffer great misfortunes. Zhou Bingxin, "Contemplating China in metaphoric sarcasm and shrew irony," 63.

⁴¹⁰ Yang, Jianlong, Liang Weifeng and Zhao Xin, "Absurdity as Representation on the Reflections on History and Reality," 58-59.

Madman's Diary in the usage of metaphors and other figurative expressions.⁴¹¹ Both Liu Zaifu and Cheng Guangwei compare *Shouhuo* to “The True Story of Ah-Q,” another Lu Xun’s well-known short stories.⁴¹² The protagonists in these works of Yan and Lu Xun are tested in very difficult situations caused by political and social problems.⁴¹³

Liu Baoliang writes that Yan’s characters show qualities such as resilience and optimism that are lacking in earlier literary models like Ah-Q. He says that only an author with a strong compassion is capable of creating such characters.⁴¹⁴ Zhang Lianyi studies the psychology of the masses in *Shouhuo* and states that the demise of the villagers is caused by their ignorance and, more importantly, their susceptibility to temptations. Zhang expresses his disappointment at their acquiescence to authorities, while at the same time complimenting their instinct and skill of survival. Zhang also comments on the relation between Yan and his novel, saying that the author’s anger at

⁴¹¹ Liu Cao, “Allegorization of Yanlianke’s [sic] Rural Novels,” 35.

⁴¹² Liu Zaifu, “A Fabulous Novel in China,” 40; Cheng Guangwei, “Yan Lianke and Realism,” 53.

⁴¹³ Both “A Madman’s Diary” (1918) and “The True Story of A-Q” (1921-22) were ground-breaking pieces of literary work that, to a certain extent, define and introduce the New Cultural Movement around the end of the First World War. The story of *A Madman’s Diary* is about a man waking up one morning is completely disillusioned with his life. He starts questioning Chinese traditional culture and social norms which, he eventually concludes, are detrimental to the individual who seeks enlightenment and progress. The protagonist of *The True Story of Ah-Q* is a village laborer who, instead of facing up to the political and social realities, chooses to play into the system and finds victim in the weaker ones around him. This pretentious and egoistic character is a representation of the average Chinese who failed to react effectively to social ills. Liu Zaifu and Cheng Guangwei imply that the corrupted and deceptive Governor Liu in *Shouhuo* is a contemporary version of Ah-Q.

⁴¹⁴ Liu Baoliang [刘保亮] has written several essays on the subject. One of his essays is the following: “Seeking for the Original Meaning of Life – On the life consciousness of Yan Lianke’s novel [sic] [探寻人生原初的意义 - 论阎连科小说的生命意识],” *Academic Exchange* [学术交流], 143/2 (2006):174-175.

the country's politics is passed on to his characters.⁴¹⁵ The silence that Zhang mentions may refer to the instances in the story when, each time a political movement subsides, the villagers return to their old way of life, without complaint or retrospect.

Cheng Guangwei is one of the critics who, in unambiguous terms, express disappointment in Yan's writings, in terms of content as well as style. He thinks that Yan's work carries a mixture of surrealism, utopian narrative mode and "verbal Carnival," which brings about confusion in the story and does not connect with the average reader.⁴¹⁶ Cheng has equally strong opinions against the use of note form in *Shouhuo*; he actually accuses Yan of "showing contempt" to the tradition of the genre.⁴¹⁷ Cheng goes the full length to denounce the entirety of Yan's work on the grounds that Yan's only motivation is material gains and personal fame.⁴¹⁸ The accusation has little to do with the domain of literary criticism but can be considered an extremely serious offense in China. Incidents with regard to Yan's career and

⁴¹⁵ Zhang Lianyi [张连义], "Yan Lianke Key Words: Fear and Anger – With *Fleeting Lights of Days and Years* and *Enjoyment* as examples [阎连科关键词：恐惧与愤怒 - 以《日光流年》《受活》为例]," *Contemporary Literary World* [当代文坛] 1 (2006): 67-68.

⁴¹⁶ Cheng Guangwei, "Yan Lianke and Realism," 55-56.

⁴¹⁷ Cheng Guangwei, "Yan Lianke and Realism," 57.

⁴¹⁸ Cheng Guangwei, "Yan Lianke and Realism," 58-59.

publications manifest some of the implications of literary creation and criticism in the country.⁴¹⁹

Wen Hongxia uses Cao Wenxuen's theory of tragedy to read *Shouhuo*. She writes that Yan's novel is a tragedy because it depicts evilness in human nature and people are doomed by bad karma. She expresses her belief that humans are helpless in front of the reality of life.⁴²⁰ However, Wen Hongxia does not follow through Cao Wenxuen's discussion on tragic structure. Her interpretation may stand as a parallel to the previously mentioned discussion about "human nature," but keeps clear of any political or social issues. Wen's conclusion is strangely pessimistic or fatalistic.

Shouhuo is related to traditional Chinese literature on the theme of dream or land of bliss. Y. M. Feuerwerker states that one of the writing tactics of Chinese contemporary fiction is to reach out to the nation's ancient myths – to remember or reinvent the past – in order to denounce the present situation.⁴²¹ Ancient myths often provide rich materials for literary or artistic creativity. This is particularly so in contemporary China, where references or allusions to traditional literary themes or

⁴¹⁹ After *Shouhuo* has been published, Yan was forced to leave the army which he had served since 1978. His subsequent work *Serving the People* [为人民服务] (2003) and *Dream of Village Ding* [丁庄梦] (2005) have attracted unfavorable attention from authorities and eventually encountered publishing and distributing issues. Read also Jonathan Watts, "Censor sees through writer's guile in tale of China's blood-selling scandal," *The Guardian*, Monday 9 October, 2006; guardian.co.uk.

⁴²⁰ Wen Hongxia [文紅霞], "On Yan Lianke's Descriptions of Agony and Notions of Tragedy [論閻連科的苦難敘述和悲劇意識]," *Journal of Pingdingshan University* [平頂山學院學報] 22/ 3 (2007): 38-40.

⁴²¹ Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, "The Post-Modern 'Search for Roots' in Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Wang Anyi," 191.

subject matters give the modern writer freedom to break away from the main-stream culture, and to be reconnected with the country's long past. The twenty-first century can be the time which comes closest to the re-creation of Chinese culture, after the first wave of language reform following the fall of the last dynasty a century ago. Chinese literature of the new era may be a kind of Renaissance, encompassing its national heritage as well as awareness of the larger world.

Between Two Worlds

Shouhuo is an extraordinary place inhabited by extraordinary people who are at once the blessed and cursed. A district official tries to explain the unexplainable to his superior:

"It's real. Have you seen red dates grow on a peach tree? Can you believe that a one-legged man runs faster than a normal person? Or a blind man can find orientations with his ears? And a deaf one touches your earlobe with his finger and understands what you say? Or a man declared dead for seven days, buried in the tomb for four days, and then returns to life again? Have you seen that before? Crows can be domesticated and become as tame as pigeon-doves. You would not believe it. I will show you when the car arrives at Shouhuo [...]" (*Shouhuo*, 36)

The speaker is a minor character serving as an intermediary between Shouhuo and the uninitiated. He shares with the governor his observations from the villagers to the trees and birds. It paints the picture of Shouhuo, in which everything is miraculous. The following passage describes the richness of the land.

[Each family put its share of the crop] into the available earthenware in the house, all filled up to the brims. Families that had prepared coffins for the elderly would also use them as containers for the grains. Those who had no coffin at home would pour the wheat onto the naked bed mattresses. After that, more grains were being distributed. Bags started piling up in every corner of the houses. Even the toilets that had used to

stink in summer now had the scent of wheat. What remains after that was stored in the couple of common barns standing next to the village's wheat processing ground. (*Shouhuo*, 116)

With the wheat surplus, Shouhuo manages to provide for its neighbors who are often ravaged by famine (*Shouhuo*, 111). The contrast between Shouhuo and other parts of China is again revealed in the food production. Moreover, the fertility of the land is a kind of mystery, much like the talents of the villagers.

Since the beginning of time, Shouhuo has been free from state control. Its name has not featured on the map of the country's administration (*Shouhuo*, 109-110). "Shouhuo is a village outside of this world," declares Maozhi (*Shouhuo*, 72). The village has long been an unmapped territory on Chinese soil. Its good-natured people are incompatible to the egoistic or success-starven outsiders. Like the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, their strange appearance distinguishes them from the greedy and aggressive intruders.

At the beginning of the new regime, Maozhi wants the village to become part of the new nation and join the communal system. In order to get the village accepted, Maozhi has to reveal her past connection to the revolutionary Red Fourth Army, which happens to be a memory of glory as well as shame (*Shouhuo*, 111-112). Since Shouhuo's fate is now connected to the rest of China, the village's new-found status is the source of many nightmares. During the period of the Great Leap Forward, trees are felled and burnt, and farming as well as cooking utensils are all confiscated (*Shouhuo*, 117-119). The blundering, however, is only a prelude to greater catastrophes yet to come. Soon afterwards, the country is engaged in a series of violent political campaigns

that stigmatize the educated and more affluent members of the society. To fuel the revolution, the advocates go to the remote countryside to stir up conflicts among people. These propagandists are represented by a character called simply and symbolically “Revolution,” who one day comes up to Maozhi’s doorstep coercing her to turn in innocent villagers for execution. Maozhi refuses to give up any villagers to be purged or persecuted. Revolution insists, “It doesn’t exist in this world a single village that has no landlord” (*Shouhuo*, 260). Revolution and Maozhi have a lengthy conversation which reveals the difference between Shouhuo and the rest of the country.

In the place of the traditional festivals, Chinese people have found new distractions and entertainments in the chronic parades of innocent citizens being accused of betraying communism or exploiting the proletariat class.

In this way, after many years, it is found that there is a deficit of landlords or rich farmers for execution. The commune therefore [...] remembered that, three years into the revolution and deep back at Balu, a lost village was found again. [...] The commune told Maozhi to render a service, which is to send to the commune a landlord on the day of the next new moon.

Maozhi said: There is no landlord in the village.

Revolution said: How about rich farmers?

Maozhi said: There isn’t any rich farmer either.

Revolution said: If you don’t have any landlord or rich farmers, give me an upper-middle farmer.

Maozhi said: We have no upper-middle farmer, middle farmer, lower-middle farmer or employed farmer. Every household in the village is revolutionary. (*Shouhuo*, 265-266)

The argument touches upon the fundamental differences of the two worlds, which is, simply put, between common sense and insanity. Revolution’s discourse is alimented by political propaganda and slogans prevalent in China at that time.⁴²² The categorization of farmers is a way to set the villagers apart and against one another, a

⁴²² During the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-76), people were classified into different categories, or “political elements,” according to their social status, economic situation, education level and family ties.

power game aimed to destroy the social fiber of the area. Sensing that his tactics to pressure and intimidate Maozhi do not work, Revolution is finally overtaken by fear.

Revolution ushered a cry; he was so scared that he lost his composure. [...]e has decided that Shouhuo must learn a very important lesson of the history of revolution. (*Shouhuo*, 266)

The reaction of the representative of authorities is captured in a dramatic scene. The depiction highlights the absurdity of the situation. In retaliation, Revolution labels Maozhi as a “black household,” and put her under torture and humiliation. Besides, a number of villagers are murdered or forced into suicide (*Shouhuo*, 260-274).

The Great Cultural Revolution is just one among the many political movements that Shouhou has fallen a victim to. They have cost the Shouhuo people a big price which is but mere mimicry of what the whole Chinese population has to suffer. After each movement, the village is again left alone to recuperate its loss. It then resumes its own way of life, until the next calamity strikes again. The memory of the past returns in the wake of new events that take place in the present.

Here comes the “Economic Reformation Period,” in which economic profit or material gain rules the agenda of the day. The governor Liu represents civil service employees who see it as their rights to pursue personal interests at the expense of the country and its people. He functions as a private entrepreneur, but at the same time abuses his power. His behavior is likened to a totalitarian ruler in ancient China (*Shouhuo*, 167-175). He wants to use Shouhuo to help find as solutions to his personal relationship problems as well as career obstacles. When Liu first appears in the story, before his trip to Shouhuo, he is deep in troubles. His district chief is seen exchanging

hot words with his foreman; and Liu himself is still agonizing over a failed plan that he had hoped would acquire a huge amount of money from an overseas Chinese. On top of that, Liu's wife keeps finding fault with him. She eventually takes a lover and leaves him (*Shouhuo*, 32-40, 176-179). In a desperate attempt to save his work, Liu tries to exploit the villagers' talents, to gather enough money to purchase the corpse of Vladimir Lenin and exhibit it in a luxurious memorial hall.

The project sounds absurd but has important ramifications. Lenin represents ideologies that have once been deemed sacred by the Chinese new regime. His remnants are discarded in his native country, so is his thinking and legacy. To the Chinese party member and upstart rural official, however, it represents a golden opportunity to make a fortune. He wants to exploit the remaining value of the figure of Lenin and the country's communist history to boost tourism. The dream of communism is long dead and forgotten, but its remains can be used today to provide novelties and exotic curiosities to entice the average Chinese who, being financially better off, become nostalgic of an allegedly romantic communist past. To enhance the comic effect, the author even shows that Liu researches his project seriously and even succeeds in convincing his boss. The governor also attempts to rewrite or fake the history of the region so as to render it more attractive to the tourists. Liu shows his weird creativity in inventing folktales and vulgarizing traditions. On top of that, he does not hesitate to over-exploit the area's natural resources at the risk of destroying it (*Shouhuo*, 29-31). Yan Lianke drives home the point that fortune hunting has replaced all ideals and values, and that the trend spreads at high speed and infects every corner of the

country without exception. The governor Liu represents those in power who feel free to transform ideologies, history and nature into lies and, hopefully, instant fortune.

Western Counterparts

The island of Cyclops is also a forgotten place and home to a people of strange looks and special talents. For the explorer, however, it is the virgin land that holds promises of fortune and glory. As analyzed in the first chapter of the present thesis, the intruder pretends to be morally and intellectually superior to the local people, and justifies his own greed and conceit by interpreting the local inhabitants' behaviors in negative terms. Shouhuo is the Cyclops' island, graced with the beauty of nature and abundant food. It is also a Chinese version of Circe's cave or Calypso's dwelling, where Liu in his younger days found his love.

Shouhuo village is a parallel to Tony Morrison's Southern town of Shalimar. Both cities seem to be poor and underdeveloped compared to the big cities. In the ancestors' hometown, where women do not carry handbags and shopkeepers are generous and helpful, Milkman's attire and behavior render him superficial and irrelevant. Yan's protagonist is also running away from troubled relationships; and he too mistakenly considers money to be the only solution to his problems. In comparison with Liu, however, Milkman proves to be a quick learner. His trip is motivated by an imaginary fortune, but eventually he finds his rightful heritage which is something far richer and

more durable. Milkman soon gets rid of his expensive but redundant personal belongings when travelling in the wild, which signifies a return to the essence of life. Liu finally becomes a cripple and settles down in Shouhuo for good. Liu's healthy body and Milkman's glossy attire represent superficiality and self-deceit that one must discard in order to achieve his goal.

Female characters are guides and guardians for Milkman and Liu. A Shalimar woman named Sweet takes care of Milkman, and Pilate's daughter Hagar gives herself to Milkman. Maozhi's daughter Jumei is in love with Liu and bears him four daughters. Romance may not be a major theme of both stories but is a significant factor in the development of the leading characters. Sweet initiates him to the sacred journey; soon after their encounter, Milkman sets off on a pilgrimage-like trip to see Circe, who points the way to the ancient domain. Hagar's love helps Milkman to understand about the quintessential essence of life. Both Maozhi and Pilate use their wisdom and compassion to help the protagonists. However, the male protagonists are not always appreciative. On various occasions, they place their helpers in precarious positions. In the end, Milkman soars into the air and becomes part of the ancient legend; and Liu becomes a member of the Shouhuo community. Women helpers play an important role all the way through.

When the story ends, the Chinese hero has an accident that costs him both legs. He may have orchestrated the incident in order to be accepted in Shouhuo, in the same way as Hans Andersen's little mermaid mutilates herself in order to be able to live

among humans. Self-mutilation is also a self-imposed punitive action; the protagonists admit past mistakes, repent and try to redeem themselves. However, as discussed in the previous chapters, maiming one's own body does not help one to reach one's goal. Instead, self-mutilation weakens the person and thereby betrays its very goal. However, the ancient Greek hero in *Oedipus Rex*, after having learnt the painful truth about his crime, administers a severe punishment to himself. Maiming himself is his reaction against a fate over which he has no control. China's political and social ills are too much for Yan's protagonist. Self-crippling is a statement against the existing system and the only means of escaping from it. He regains his integrity in exchange for his legs. Liu has lacked vision and committed mistakes, which is the pathos of the novel. Contrary to Liu, Milkman receives much help from his people and encounters relatively few obstacles. Milkman's biggest enemy is none other than himself. Yan's topsy-turvy world of Shouhuo is the adventurers' haven, only it does not have the dangers found in Odysseus' journey.

Chinese Utopia

Shouhuo bears a resemblance to Tao Yuanming's fictive work *Taohuanyuan* or the "Source of the Peach Blossoms," dated from the late fourth to the early fifth century. It is written in both prose and verse. The story is about a fisherman who follows the trail of petals of peach blossoms up a stream and discovers an unknown village of great beauty and prosperity. The fisherman learns that the inhabitants' ancestors fled the war

and settled in this place many generations ago. After the fisherman leaves the village, however, he cannot find it again.⁴²³ While the story might have been inspired by earlier work, its unique literary imagination and style have served marked its place in literary history. It also finds resonance in a number of later works.

The “Source of the Peach Blossoms” is part of a tradition that can be traced back to literary and philosophical works from earlier times, notably Lao Tse’s passage on the “Little State” in his *Book of Daode*, and Chuan Tze’s essay “Land of Supreme Virtues.” They both celebrate the joy of living in a land of harmonious human relationships. A similar theme can be found in an even earlier poem called “Blissful Land,” from the *Book of Poetry*, a collection of ancient verse compiled by Confucius. The notion of a peaceful society is also expressed in Confucius’s the “Great Sharing” or “Grand Union” from the *Conveyance of Rites*. At the time of Confucius, around the fifth and the sixth century B.C., the Chinese territory was overridden with civil wars and social instability. The Confucian political ideal is to restore peace and prosperity in the ancient order. In the model society, everybody is taken care of and provided for, including the old, the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the disables. The “Source of the Peach Blossoms”

⁴²³ Tao Yuanming [陶渊明], “Taohuayuan ji [桃花源记],” *Tao Yuanming Ji 陶渊明集* (Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1979) 165-68. Many translations are available today. Some of the examples are: William Acker, *Tao the Hermit: Sixty Poems of Tao Chien (365 – 427)* (London; New York: Thames and Hudson, 1952.); A. R. Davis, *Tao Yuan-ming, A.D. 365-427, His Works and Their Meaning*, 2 vols. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and, David Hinton, *The Selected Poems of Tao Chien* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993).

is a literary work, less political or philosophically implicated than the Taoist masters' work, and more elaborated than the ancient verse.

Chen Guohe states that Shouhuo village is part of the Chinese utopia that embraces Communist concepts and "Chinese socialism." He goes further and says that the governor Liu is the leader of the utopian society and plays the role of the "spiritual tutor of the Third World."⁴²⁴ Chen argues that in spite of the satirical tone, the novel is about the success of communism and Chinese socialism in transforming the country into an ideal society. He thinks that industrialization is to be blamed for the downfall of Chinese utopia. In his opinion, Shouhuo is an example of the mainstream Chinese society, in contrast to the degenerating outside world.⁴²⁵

As a prologue to the People's Daily's edition of the novel, a critical essay written by Wang Hongsheng forcefully claims that *Shouhuo* should not be "interpreted as a political critical or allegorical novel." He argues that the novel is an attempt to recapture the theme of the "utopia" relating both to the Chinese and Western traditions of utopian literature.⁴²⁶ Wang evokes Thomas More's idea of Utopia,⁴²⁷ and also mentions briefly

⁴²⁴ [第三世界革命精神导师]. Chen Guohe [陈国和], *A Multi-perspective Study on Contemporary Literature* [多维视野下的当代文学研究] (Harbin: Helongjiang People's Press, 2007) 164.

⁴²⁵ Chen Guohe, *A Multi-perspective Study on Contemporary Literature* 162-165.

⁴²⁶ Wang Hongsheng [王鸿生], "A Utopian Story of Dystopia: on *Shouhuo* [反乌托邦的乌托邦故事 – 读《受活》]", *Shouhuo* (2003; rpt, Beijing: People's Daily Press, 2007) 369.

⁴²⁷ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Raphe Robynson (1556); Thomas More, *Utopia*, eds. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Lao Tse's passage on the "Little State" and Tao Yuanming's the "Source of the Peach Blossoms."⁴²⁸ Chen Guohe cites several other examples in modern or contemporary literature that corresponds to the Western idea of utopia. He equally mentions the poems of Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Han Yu in addition to the classical works mentioned above.⁴²⁹ This last point is also mentioned by another critic, Chen Xiaobi, who studies Yan's work in relation to folklore. She claims that *Shouhuo* is a "variation" on the "Source of the Peach Blossoms."⁴³⁰ Both Lu Wei and Liu Zaifu also write about the similarities between Tao's "Source of the Peach Blossoms" and *Shouhuo*. Both of them believe that *Shouhuo* is influenced by the philosophy of Lao-Chuan Taoism and Zen-Buddhism.⁴³¹ Cheng Guangwei also mentions briefly the utopian theme and motifs in *Shouhuo*.

Daria Berg makes references to Confucian and Zhuangzi's writings as well as the "Supreme Harmony" depicted in *Master Lü 's Annals*, or *Lüshi Chunqi*, and the land of Huaxu sketched in *Liezi*.⁴³² Berg goes on to give other examples including two short stories found in the eighteenth century narrative work *Preaching to the World with*

⁴²⁸ Wang Hongsheng, "A Utopian Story of Dystopia," 370-371.

⁴²⁹ Chen Guohe, *A Multi-perspective Study on Contemporary Literature* 146-152.

⁴³⁰ [变体]. Chen Xiaobi [陈小碧], "Interpreting Folklore Archetypes in Yan Lianke's novel *Living* [严连科《受活》中民间原型阐释]," *Competing Literary Voices* [文艺争鸣] 8 (2007): 150,151.

⁴³¹ Lu Wei, "Combat between Political Radicalism and Cultural Conservatism: Studies on Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo*," 88; also Liu Zaifu, "A Fabulous Novel in China," 38-39.

⁴³² Daria Berg, *Carnival in China: A Reading of the Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 39-40.

Enlightened Words, or *Yushi Mingyan*, written by Feng Menglong.⁴³³ These two short stories are set in places of extraordinary beauty, similar to the one depicted in Tao's "Source of the Peach Blossoms." One is called the Peach Blossom Estate and the other one is Daoist Li's immortal land.⁴³⁴ Berg finds another typical Chinese utopian narrative in Xi Zhousheng's *A Tale of Marriage Destinies that Will Bring Society to Its Senses*, or *Xingshi Yinyang Zhuan*, a series of love stories printed before 1721.⁴³⁵ Berg states that Xi Zhousheng creates a land of total bliss and harmony, as a reaction to the new society where urban and commercial cultures challenge the traditional social hierarchy.⁴³⁶ She states that the writers of the seventeenth century were "torn between escapism and an addiction to the cosmopolitan world."⁴³⁷

Chapter 23 of Xi's book recounts an episode about the utopian land of "Water of Clear See," or *Mingshui*, where the newly crowned emperor of the Tang dynasty loses his ability to speak after waking up from a dream. In order to recover the sovereign's voice, a royal commissioner is sent to the "World of Utmost Happiness," which alludes to the "Source of the Peach Blossom." Berg points out that the story corresponds to the

⁴³³ Feng Menglong's [冯梦龙], *Yushi Mingyan* [喻世明言] (Changchun [长春]: Shidai Wenyi Chubanshe [时代文艺出版社], 2002).

⁴³⁴ Berg, *Carnival in China* 49-50.

⁴³⁵ The story is also referred to as *Evil Marriage Destinies* [Wu Yinyuan 恶姻缘], published in Xi Zhousheng [西周生], *Xingshi Yinyang Zhuan* [醒世姻缘传], 3 vols. (1981; rpt. Shanghai : Guji, 1985).

⁴³⁶ Berg, *Carnival in China* 1-32.

⁴³⁷ Berg, *Carnival in China* 47.

historical fact about the twelfth emperor of the Tang dynasty, who was indeed mute at birth. The country was left ungoverned, and its administration was mostly deserted. A similar situation happened at the time when the story was written: the emperor Wanli of the Ming dynasty seldom attended state affairs and, thereby, left the court unattended (1600-1620). The restoration of the emperor's voice is essential to the normal functioning of the government.⁴³⁸ Berg concludes that one can "trace the idea of the body politics as a physical organism in the written philosophical and political discourse from the pre-Han era to modern times."⁴³⁹

Shouhuo village can be seen as the Source of Peach Blossoms in the contemporary era. As long as the rest of the country continues to lose its sanity, the ideal society is forever out of touch, and its inhabitants will always be disabled. Common people from other parts of the country flee from their land to allow people of the lost paradise to settle in. The body politics in Yan's novel is used in optimal effects.

Fatherland and Other Land

In the story generally known as the "*Huangliangmen*," or the "Dream of Yellow Sorghum," a king one day falls into a deep sleep and dreams of glory and great fortune. When he wakes up, he realizes that worldly pleasures and achievements are mere

⁴³⁸ Berg, *Carnival in China* 33-37.

⁴³⁹ Berg, *Carnival in China* 37.

illusions. The earliest written record of the story is found in a collection of philosophical writings and fictions written by *Lie Zi*.⁴⁴⁰ During the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.), the genre of fiction had matured and become an independent genre. The theme of the “Dream of Yellow Sorghum” is recaptured in, notably, Shen Jiji’s “Story of a Dream [*Zhenzhung ji*].”⁴⁴¹ The mythic quality of the earlier work is subdued. The protagonist had become a scholar in pursuit of a public career.

The governor Liu has a dream of fame and wealth but is then sorely disillusioned. Chen Xiaobi compares Liu to the king of the “Dream of Yellow Sorghum,” and writes that both stories share a “beautiful imagination” about life,⁴⁴² by which the Chinese critic means social success and accumulation of wealth. About the story structure, he states that both protagonists leave their native land, find the magic kingdom, and then returns home. He writes that it is the “departure – transformation – return” pattern. Chen Xiaobi’s comparison between *Shouhuo* and the “Dream of Yellow Sorghum” successfully relates the contemporary novel to another source in the tradition of Chinese literature, a variation to the “Source of the Peach Blossoms.” His attempt to

⁴⁴⁰ “Huangliangmen” [黃粱夢]. *Lei Zi* [列子] is a collection of stories and speeches of the Warring States Period. The date of its first appearance is controversial but generally recognized as between 450-375 B.C. The best-known modern editions include Yang Bojin’s [楊伯峻] *The Interpretation of Lie Zi’s Collection* [列子集釋] (Xiaoshan Chen shi Hu hai lou 蕭山陳氏湖海樓, 1813); the most recent edition is *Lie Zi* [列子] (Jiling: Time Art and Literature Publisher [時代文藝出版社], 2008).

⁴⁴¹ Shen Jiji [沈既濟], “Zhenzhung ji [枕中記].” Read the story and other related short stories mentioned above in *Tang Fiction* [唐人小說] (Taipei: Halo Publishing [河洛圖書出版社], 1974) 37-42.

⁴⁴² [美好想象]. Chen Xiaobi, “Interpreting Folklore Archetypes in Yan Lianke’s novel *Living*,” 148.

use an archetypal approach to read the novel is equally inspiring. However, the two stories seem to have more differences than similarities. First of all, the contemporary protagonist does not succeed in any of his objectives. Most importantly, he does not return to the world where he comes from, unlike the king in the “Dream of Yellow Sorghum,” or the fisherman of the “Source of the Peach Blossoms.” Chen’s proposed “departure – transformation – return” does not correspond to the story structure of *Shouhuo*. The protagonist does not always return to his birth place, as is discussed in Chapter Three of the present thesis. His final destination is essential to the theme of the work.

Odysseus completes the cycle from departure to return; so do the king and the fisherman in the respective Chinese narrative works. While Homer’s hero is the only one who is determined to return home against all odds, his Chinese counterparts are less than willing to go. The African-American protagonist in the *Song of Solomon* also embarks on a journey of no-return. In *Shuohuo*, Liu’s legal wife betrays him during his absence and demands a divorce after his career fails. Betrayal and strife abound at home, and there is an absence of any form of help or support. For Liu, therefore, return is not a good choice. And as for Milkman, he goes to the far South to his ancestor’s home, not his place of birth.

As a source of joy and fulfillment, the new land is represented by its native woman. The islands’ goddesses invite Odysseus to their beds. The beauty of the South by the name of Sweet rekindles Milkman’s tie to the old ancestral town. Liu finds his first

love in Shouhuo and has four children by her. And the scholar in the “Story of a Dream” is married to a high ranking mandarin’s daughter, which marks the beginning of his remarkable career. The woman is inseparable from the magic realm and incarnates the magic power of the land. She also initiates him to fulfilled manhood. Odysseus forsakes the benevolent immortal women who foster and nourish him. He flees from the sirens who partake of both truth and beauty. Odysseus wants to come home to the wife. Penelope represents the hero’s native soil and root. Liu stays in the strange land, out of choice or necessity. When Pilate dies at the end of the story, Milkman has already learned her songs. After Maozhi’s death, Liu removes Shouhuo from the commune system, an objective that she has strived to achieve for many years. Milkman and Liu are not only being adopted by the village, they are indeed active members of the respective communities, contributing to the continuity of the wellbeing of the land.

Dreams and Nightmares

Mental reality finds its expressions in dreams. Dreams are silenced words and muffled voices, conveying the unedited or illicit fear and desire. The dream featured in the “Dream of Yellow Sorghum” can be categorized as a sweet dream, one that is too good to be true. Although the dream evokes pleasant feelings, the protagonist wakes up disillusioned and feeling lost. The “dream” is not an uncommon theme in Chinese literature. Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of Red Chamber* or *Story of the Stone* is a notable

example in which dreams are the core of story content and structure.⁴⁴³ It recounts the story of a gifted young man growing up in an aristocratic household with many beautiful and talented young women. In the story, dreams and reality are blended together, without any clear distinction between them. The reality is often anticipated or remembered in a dream. The narrative voice states, right at the beginning, that the story is a thin disguise of the author's life. It repeats on several occasions that the story is nothing but a dream and so is life, an idea similar to those found in vulgarized Chinese-Buddhist or Taoist teachings. The metaphor of dream is fully developed, and the complexity of dreams is explored in certain depth. One can have sweet dreams or nightmares, or both at the same time. Ming Dong Gu writes about the two different worlds represented in this classic Chinese novel: "[This is] a female kingdom, a utopia, and a fairyland [... that ...] represent one pole, [whereas] a brothel, hell, and a prison represent the opposite pole."⁴⁴⁴ His interpretation of the female kingdom-utopia-fairyland on one hand and the brothel-hell-prison on the other is useful to read the *Dream of Red Chamber* as well as *Shuohou*. The implausible village resembles more a dream than a reality. The theme of the contemporary novel is effectively conveyed through the interplay of dream and reality.

⁴⁴³ Written in the eighteenth century, the novel is considered one of the most important narrative works in Chinese literature. It is translated into many languages. A fine example among its English versions is the following: Cao Xueqin, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. David Hawkes (New York: Penguin Group, 1996).

⁴⁴⁴ Ming Dong Gu, *Chinese Theories of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative System* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006) 176.

For the people who have experienced war, poverty and political persecutions, Shouhuo is a paradise and dream. It is both a blessing and a curse because, having had many mostly happy and uneventful years, the villagers have forgotten about the reality of life in the outside world. They cannot tell the difference between truth and lies, reality and hoax. Perhaps out of boredom and curiosity, they cannot resist temptations. The absence of common sense and worldly knowledge becomes a collective trait of the Shouhuo personality. On top of that, they also seem to have short memories. They are forgetful of the painful past, or they leave it all to Maozhi. But they resist Maozhi's warnings and refuse to take necessary measures to protect themselves. Eventually, history repeats itself. Their greatest mischief is not their physical condition which does not cause any inconvenience in daily life, but their mental ineptness that handicaps themselves when dealing with the modern world. Shouhuo people's physical condition is emblematic of their psychological state of mind. In other words, Shouhuo people are not only physical disables but psychological inapt for the modern world.

The apparent and the truth interact in a complex way in the novel. The villagers are crippled but can move around faster than ordinary people. They have special talents that can compensate for their shortcomings. However, they cannot cope with real life. The blind can move around without problem, but he cannot see that a catastrophe is coming. The deaf can understand what the others say, but he cannot tell that the governor Liu's beautiful words are actually lies. On the first level of interpretation, the villagers are cripples but in reality agile. On the second level, they seem to be agile but in reality disabled. The novel manifests the cursive way to reality in all its complexity.

Apparent-truth and dream-reality are the binary pairs found at the basic structure of the novel. Lurking beneath a peaceful and harmonious moment is the memory of a painful past or a subtle sign of oncoming disasters. For instance, in the joyful scenes of harvest and celebration, power play raises its ugly head and casts an ominous shadow over the open field. The Shouhuo villagers' talents eventually put them in peril; and their phenomenal success is a significant factor contributing to their undoing. In the first place, Shouhuo is a place for the unfortunate. Many have to maim themselves in order to stay. Hurting oneself is against human nature. It is ironical that the very basis of their happy life is suffering. In this reclusive world, life-giving and destructive forces are constantly at war, ignited by external influence. There are times in history when the two forces manage to strike a delicate balance, but the few moments of bliss and prosperity are proved to be precarious and short-lived. Their life keeps drifting between nightmare and sweet dreams.

Some critics see Shouhuo as a land of perpetual suffering and defeat. Wei Yongheng writes that the villagers' lives are neither joyful nor fulfilling, because they are destined to feed the greed and bullying of the government officials.⁴⁴⁵ Zhang Lianyi also writes that Shouhuo villagers are victims of the double mishap of their physical condition and authorities' manipulation.⁴⁴⁶ Life in Shouhuo is seen in a negative light, contrasting

⁴⁴⁵ Wei Yongheng [韦永恒], "On the Geographical Cultural Favor in Yan Lianke's novel [论阎连科小说创作中的地域文化色彩]," *Guangxi University Journal* [广西大学学报], 29/ 4 (2007): 113-114.

⁴⁴⁶ Zhang Lianyi, "Yan Lianke Key Words," 67.

with the opinions expressed by the aforementioned critics. It may just be possible that both of them are right.

The scenes of harvest and the celebration resemble “a utopia and a fairyland.” The natural landscape with its background music helps to complete the picture. The very best of the villagers’ personality qualities, such as a trusting nature and selflessness, make them appropriate inhabitants of the earthly paradise. Their simplicity has also become their biggest liability. In the inevitable confrontation with the real world, they are mercilessly reduced to mere objects for exploitation and abuse. The moment when they think that their dream is within reach, they find themselves instead living their worst nightmare. After their last show, they are locked up, harassed and starved. They are cheated out of every penny that they have earned. This is the “prison” and the “hell” that Shouhuo people have to live through again. It also becomes a “brothel,” as Maotze’s four teenage granddaughters are savagely ravaged and gang-raped.

This incidence can be read on several levels. With regard to body politics, rape is a violent act against these four young women. Moreover, it can also be understood in connection with the family history. Maozhi has also been raped by a comrade of the army, and her daughter Jumei has been seduced by Liu, then a young visitor from the outside world. The repetition or continuation of the aggression toward women is happening again in the “female kingdom,” represented by Maozhi’s family. Women of three generations suffer similar injuries and insults, which indicates that this is not an isolated incident but the issue has important implications for the community. On a

symbolic level, these young and beautiful women in the prime youth also represent Shouhuo's natural resources, as well as the community's pride and hope. The healthy men of the outside world represent the country's present economic atmosphere which seeks to explore and exhaust all natural resources in every corner of the country. Maozhi's women are the crown jewels of the lucrative countryside that the explorers defile in the most brutal manner. The men of the outside world try to objectify the women's bodies as well as all that these young women represent. Generations of Maozhi's women recover after each set-back, showing neither remorse nor self-pity. They demonstrate the extraordinary resilience and strength of Shouhuo people as a whole. The weakest is also the strongest, the dialect mechanism of the two forces as indicated in Taoist philosophy. The unsophisticated villagers are defeated but can never be destroyed.

The final incident is a wake-up call to the villagers. The villagers are lured out of their home and village and consequently lose their fortune and innocence. The villagers gather what is left of them and retreat to their corner once again, hiding away from the rest of the world. In order to be free from outside menaces, they have to confine themselves in their place. They are condemned to stay in Shouhuo, and imprison themselves for life, not out of choice but of necessity.

Ming Dong Gu's observation about Shouhuo being a female kingdom-utopia-fairyland on one hand, and brothel-hell-prison on the other is indicative of the coexistence of the two opposing facets of the happenings which have taken place.

Taken from the point of view of the outsider represented by the protagonist, the land and its people provide a female kingdom-utopia-fairyland. But to the Shouhuo villagers, the outside world is but a brothel-hell-prison. The villagers are lured to their peril, by a minstrel with pompous oratory.

In another of Yan's novel, the *Dream of Ding Village* tells of the inhabitants of a poverty-stricken village who sell blood for a living and subsequently contract AIDS and are dying off.⁴⁴⁷ Through the mouth of a dead child, the story revisits the past events in flashbacks that evoke a painful emotional journey. In the dreams, the images of gold and coffins recur, reminding the leading blood dealer of the village what he has done.⁴⁴⁸ While both novels address the issues of rural poverty and massive-scale corruption in a fast-growing economy, the *Dream of Ding Village* is a darker version of *Shouhuo*. Both stories end with that awakening from the dream of materialistic pursuit.

Sebastian Veg compares *The Dream of Ding Village* to Western literature:

⁴⁴⁷ The novel was first published in Hong Kong in early 2006 and then in China by Wenyi Publishing Company of Shanghai, or Shanghai Literary Publishing Group. The permission to publish the book in China was retrieved soon afterwards. For the restriction of the printing or circulation of Yan's books, please read Edward Cody, "Persistent Censorship in China Produces Art of Compromise", *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Monday, July 9, 2007, A09.

The novel is translated into French: *Le Rêve des Ding*, trans Claude Payen (Arles : Philippe Piquet, 2007). And in English: *Dream of Ding Village*, trans. Cindy Carter (London: Constable and Robinson, 2011).

⁴⁴⁸ The story has been compared to Camus' *The Plague* [*La Peste*], but Yan denies having read the French novel. See the interview in Beijing Yule Xinhao, http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2006-01/25/content_4096220.htm (accessed on January 25, 2006).

The importance of dreams is underscored by the biblical epigraph taken from the Old Testament story of Joseph, in which the Pharaoh's dreams prefigure seven years of plague.⁴⁴⁹

The Dream of Ding Village alludes to the Pharaoh's three dreams which Joseph interprets as alternation of the years of plenitude and famine (*Genesis*, 41: 25-31).⁴⁵⁰ The dream of gold is followed by the dream of the coffin. Ding villagers experience nightmares after years of sweet dreams. The village's short-lived prosperity soon gives way to eternal grief.

Apart from the episode of dreams, the *Dream of Ding Village* finds another parallel in the Bible. Moses turns water into blood with the intention of convincing the Pharaoh to let go of Israel's off-springs (*Exodus*, 4:9, 19-20). In the Ding village, the trade of human blood is so lucrative that pipes are built to collect the blood and transport it to the manufacturing plant. In both stories, the image of running blood warns of forthcoming disasters. Both the *Dream of Ding Village* and *Shouhuo* are set in an era in which economic development is the priority. The geographical background is Yan's native province of Henan, a relative backwater area where people at the lowest social stratum are tempted and coerced to pursue great fortune by all means. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Yan explains his idea of disillusionment in the *Dream of Ding Village*.

⁴⁴⁹ Sebastian Veg, « Yan Lianke, Le Rêve du Village des Ding », *China perspectives*, n°2009/1, 2009; <http://chinapersonpectives.revues.org/document4793.html> (accessed on April 1, 2009).

⁴⁵⁰ *Holy Bible*, King James Version (rpt; Arhens, Georgia: Broadman & Holman, 1996). All quotations from the Bible are from the same edition.

China is always chasing utopias. That was the mistake we made during the Great Leap Forward. And today, again, China seems to be in too much of a hurry to realize its dreams.⁴⁵¹

The terms “dreams” and “utopia” are mostly pejorative terms in this context, associated with unrealistic expectations. In successive political, social and economic campaigns that promise better life for everybody, numerous people are killed or ruined. Backwater areas like Shouhuo and Ding become victims and are devastated. Dreams in the *Dream of Ding* are associated with the reality that the village is going to be destroyed, as well as their blind pursuit of fortune.

Dreams are figured only metaphorically in *Shouhuo*. The story tells the protagonist’s journey through paradise and hell, trying to realize the dream of money and fame. The governor and outsiders covet Shouhuo’s wealth and women, because the outside world represents a nightmare and prison for them as much as for the Shouhuo people. Adultery and rapes take place outside the village. Liu can be compared to Odysseus, who couples with the goddesses, and makes away with the best of Cyclops’ flock. But Liu eventually comes back, and makes the village his home. And he pays his price.

⁴⁵¹ Jonathan Watts, “Censor sees through writer’s guile in tale of China’s blood-selling scandal,” *The Guardian*, Monday, October 9, 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/oct/09/books.china>

Han Shaogong's Dumb Boy and Deaf Woman

Maozhi shares some common qualities with several of Han Shaogong's leading characters. Han Shaogong is a prominent writer advocating for *xungen* or "root searching," one of the most important literary movements in the ninety-eighties.⁴⁵² Soon after publishing "The 'Root' of Literature," an essay that has drawn extensive attention and triggered heated discussions, he wrote a series of works including two of his well-known short stories: "*Pa Pa Pa*" and "*Nu Nu Nu*," which literally mean "Father" and "Woman" respectively. Two unconventional characters are created, one of them has a speech deficiency and another is hard of hearing.⁴⁵³

The protagonist of "*Pa Pa Pa*," by the name of Child Bing,⁴⁵⁴ is mentally retarded. At a very young age, Bing has learned to say "pa pa pa" and "f--- mama" which remain to be his only verbal expressions. His communication with the others is ineffective, in

⁴⁵² Lin Jianfa [林建法] eds., *Conversation between Han Shaogong and Wang Yao* [韩少功王尧对话录] (Su Zhou [苏州]: Su Zhou University Press [苏州大学出版社], 2003) 56-61.

⁴⁵³ Han Shaogong [韩少功], *Pa pa pa* [爸爸爸] (1985, rept; Beijing [北京]: People's Literary Press [人民文学出版社], 2006) ; Han Shuogong [韩少功], "Woman Woman Woman [女女女]," *Homecoming* [归去来] (1985, rpt; Beijing [北京]: People's Literary Press [人民文学出版社], 2008) 106-151. Both novellas can also be found in Han Shaogong, *Homecoming ? and Other Stories*, trans. Martha Cheung (Hong Kong : Research Center for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992). Their French translations are the following: *Pa Pa Pa*, trans. Noël Dutrait and Hu Sishe (Paris: l'Édition de l'Aube, 1995); *Femme, femme, femme*, trans. Annie Curien (Arles: Picquier poche, 1991).

⁴⁵⁴ Martha Cheung translates the protagonist's name 丙崽 as "Young Bing," *Homecoming ? and Other Stories*. Rong Cai translates it as is "Bing Zai," see her "The Spoken Subject: Han Shaogong's Cripples," *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii's Press, 2004) 60-91.

spite of his sometimes very strong emotions. The critic Rong Cai states that Bing uses muteness as a convenient way to bear the pain of his father's absence, but it also denies his subjectivity and becomes an obstacle for change. Cai bases his idea on Jacques Lacan's theory of language and self, as well as Anthony Wilden's definition on "subjectivity" and James A. Mellard's discussions on the "Symbolic."⁴⁵⁵ The child shows great reluctance to learn from his environment or to adapt to it. "Obviously, Bing Zai's lack of voice is not silence but muteness."⁴⁵⁶ Cai says that the character's relation with the world reflects the author's view on the future of the nation, which is one of ambiguity and contention.⁴⁵⁷

The protagonist of "*Nu Nu Nu*" devotes all her life to the care of her family and community. She does not have any personal name and is known only as the youngest auntie. She has hearing problems, like her father and many others in the family before her ("*Woman Woman Woman*," 106). She is said to have been a beauty in her younger days, and is forced into marriage with the villain Big Beard Lee. Her only child dies at birth, which makes her a social outcast, the "woman of shame" according to the custom of the area. She is then forced to flee from her native land ("*Woman Woman Woman*," 110, 135,136,144). She abstains from all luxury, and gives all her savings to family or friends who are in need ("*Woman Woman Woman*," 115-116). The story's protagonist

⁴⁵⁵ Rong Cai, "The Spoken Subject," 62-71.

⁴⁵⁶ Rong Cai, "The Spoken Subject," 65.

⁴⁵⁷ Rong Cai, "The Spoken Subject," 60-61, 90-91.

and narrator, Maoto, and his family are wrongly accused of corruption and are persecuted publicly during the Great Cultural Revolution. There is no help from friends or neighbors, but the youngest auntie brings Maoto's family food and other support. In fact, she is always helpful and generous in spite of her own financial and personal problems. She once explains the reason for her altruism in this way: "if every one of us can be rid of selfishness, the world would be a wonderful place to live" ("Woman Woman Woman": 120). This is her conviction, which shows extraordinary moral courage as well as naïve idealism. She knows that there is a price to pay for every good deed performed, and it is always at her expense. As the narrator discovers later with no little astonishment: "She always has very sound judgment about where her interest is at stake; but she chooses by instant what is bad for herself" ("Woman Woman Woman," 122). She has no illusions about the world or the people, and yet she is always at their service. She is a great contrast to her adoptive daughter Black, who advocates the vision of the much publicized ultimate socialist society: "the future must be beautiful. After the revolution has gained victory, there will be dishwashers, television sets and domestic robots" ("Woman Woman Woman," 120). This is the kind of future to which the younger generation aspires, as being influenced by school and the media, in which the youngest auntie does not partake. Nonetheless, she shows tolerance and genuine interest in the young woman's speeches.

Similar passages can be found in *Shouhuo* which describe how Maozhi in her earlier days anticipates the happy life that can be lead in the communist system and likens it to "living in paradise" (*Shouhuo*, 112, 116). The governor Liu also promises the

villagers that, the moment when they possess Lenin's corpse, they will live "a paradise-like way of life" (*Shouhuo*, 91). The villagers begin to imagine a life without work. -. The younger Maozhi and her contemporary fellow villagers share much enthusiasm with Black for a materialistic society.

The protagonists of "*Pa Pa Pa*" and "*Nu Nu Nu*" can be better understood if studied together. Child Bing is a young boy while the youngest auntie is an old woman. The former fails to develop speech capacity, whereas the latter's ears are impaired. The two characters together represent people crossing boundaries of gender and age. Both of them stand out from the crowd because of their innocence and marginal social status, as well as their special perception of the world. Due to their difference from others, they become recipients of people's fear and suspicion. They have to keep drifting from one place to another, like Pilate in her younger years in the *Songs of Solomon*. They are rootless and have no place to belong to. They are unconfined and unconformable to any place or time, which render them universal and timeless.

Maozhi grows silent toward the end of her days. The youngest auntie is paralyzed after a stroke, which starts the transformation process. She then goes back to her birth place, where her sister Zhen takes care of her. Her death prompts the protagonist to make the journey. In this remote and strange place, he finds the roots of his family. This ancient land has a legend which says that its people are supposedly the offspring of a spider ("Woman Woman Woman," 133). Ancient myths are still alive, and traditional values are prevalent in everyday life. In Chinese tradition, spiders are also

known as “the child of happiness” and are a symbol of a solid home base and strong family bond. The protagonist finds that the houses here seem to be alive and can grow like trees (“Woman Woman Woman,” 134). All of these are nothing compared to the society in which the protagonist grew up. It is the first time that Maoto witnesses people living harmoniously with nature, having convictions and respect for tradition. Close to the end, as Maoto swirls along a rapid river on a raft, he takes part in an ancient ritual that makes him feel connected to the past. He feels related to the people in this land, and can understand how the others think and feel. Some important changes take place in him.

Although a total stranger to this other-land, Maoto feels immensely familiar with the scenery he sees and the people he meets. He recognizes the accent of his father from the words of the passers-by. In turn, the villagers recognize him as a descendent of their family and tell him about his ancestors. He finds his identity and the meaning of his existence (“Woman Woman Woman,” 135-137). Maoto returns to his roots and feels nourished. This is a quest for personal identity in relation to community tradition. It results in heightened energy and awareness in one’s responsibility. In this respect, Maoto can be compared to the Milkman in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. The journey undertaken by this character is comparable with that of Milkman.

In the outside world, Maoto is a man unceasingly tormented by political movements and problems of everyday life. He has begun to grow numb to people’s suffering and impatient to the youngest auntie’s kindness. Having educated by political

propaganda since a young age, he was used to discarding tradition and spirituality as being superstitious and regressive, or simply as a lack of class-consciousness. He could not appreciate the youngest auntie's sacrifices for him and his family. He grew indifferent and sometimes impatient with his aunt, who in her old age needs some love and care in return.

He sets out on his trip to look for the youngest auntie. In the depths of the woods, he finds her sister. Old Woman Zhen adopts three orphans and a crippled child, and takes care of old relatives like the youngest auntie. Zhen is marked by exceptionally big features and looks like a giant in comparison to the blemished soul and thwarted body of the youngest auntie in old age. She is like the youngest auntie that Maoto used to know and can be seen as the former's double. She too is instrumental in helping the protagonist's quest. Zhen resembles Morrison's character Circe, who lives in the wilderness tending strange animals. She is also Pilate who is a larger-than-life figure and gives help to whoever needs it.

Zhen is another version of the youngest auntie. The former stays in her birthplace and continues to be nurtured by nature and tradition. The youngest auntie wanders around the country till her body and spirit are eventually worn and torn by political movements and social pressures. She is filled with sadness and has become, in her old age, self-absorbed and insane.

The youngest auntie undergoes a metamorphosis both physically and mentally. She now craves for raw meat whereas before she only ate vegetable. After a fatal

stroke which would normally paralyze anybody, she moves around with even greater agility. She can hardly hear and yet she makes sounds full of musical rhythm. She has also grown smaller. Her body, skin and the form of her eyes resemble that of a fish. She goes around naked and is adopted as a pet by the village children, who proclaim: "What is that?" "Perhaps ... a fish-human" ("Woman Woman Woman," 142). A similar remark can be found in the *Song of Solomon*, when the men discover that Pilate does not have a navel. But the fish-woman image in Han's novel has no relation to the sirens or mermaid. The degenerated youngest auntie makes rhythmic sounds but does not sing. She does not identify with the songs that carry beauty or wisdom as mentioned above. Here the fish represents a more primitive life form of evolution of life. Its only concern is day-to-day survival. The youngest auntie relapses into an earlier phase of life, one that strives on the principle of pleasure and individual survival.

Altruism and generosity are qualities which belong to a society that treasures human values and has a future to look forward to. The world that the youngest auntie lives in is not compatible to her values and beliefs. She is used to giving away what she receives. But mistreatment and misunderstanding from the others have taken a toll on her. Her rich resources are completely exhausted after many years living among people who do not share her convictions. Accordingly, she is not able to regain her energy because of the lack of family or social support. After the metamorphosis, she has become a different – smaller and lesser – person. She becomes one of those egocentric and narrow-minded beings just like the average people of the country. The role is now reversed; now she becomes completely dependent on others for mercy and

charity. She can even be declared dead both intellectually and emotionally. This is a sad end for someone who used to be a beautiful person and contributed so much to her family and community. At the end of the story, nobody really knows how the youngest auntie dies, which seems to say that her life or death is of no significance to anyone anymore. Her end is in strong contrast to Pilate or Maozhi's death. Her demise brings about the disappearance of the magic place. The songs that burst out amid the spectacular earth movement are a statement about the solemnity of the funeral. It celebrates the youngest auntie's life which is one of love and compassion.

The special significance of the character of the youngest auntie becomes more evident when juxtaposed with that of her sister Zhen and adopted daughter Black. Zhen bears a distinct family resemblance to the benevolent youngest auntie, whereas Black shows no such resemblance and is, in fact, the opposite in every way. The latter shows a strong tendency to go with the flow: first she adopts wholeheartedly the country's political dogma, and then she becomes a model consumer in this materialistic society. The youngest auntie cannot make the young woman see the truth. However, when she becomes old, the youngest auntie adopts a life-style similar to that of her adopted daughter. She succumbs to the influence of the very society which she was resisting during the most part of her life. The future is bleak for the old woman as well as for the whole Chinese population. At the end of the story, both the young auntie and Black are compared to fish ("Woman Woman Woman," 150). The three women – the young auntie, Black and Zhen – represent three different ways to react to the popular

craze of the larger world. In the process, Black is lost; the youngest auntie is scalped and impaired; only Zhen persists.

After the youngest auntie's death, the island encounters first a plague and then an earthquake. When Joseph Campbell writes of the last of the prehistoric world ages, he describes it as the "Water" world, the entire world is flooded, the heaven falls down and the people become fish.⁴⁵⁸ The ancient village in "*Nu Nu Nu*" sinks into the sea, an event that has been predicted earlier by the youngest auntie ("Woman Woman Woman," 146). The ancient land of traditional values, together with its representative figure, disappears without a trace ("Woman Woman Woman," 149). During the funeral, held in the midst of plague and earthquake, the whole village breaks into song. The epic-like scene further enhances the mythic qualities of this female character. Her downfall also means the demise of the magical realm. The lyrics of the funeral songs describe the beginning of earth and life, prophesying a rebirth after destruction.

These funeral songs are echoes of those in *Shouhuo*, both of which announce the end of an era. The songs also connect the people to their ancient ancestors and goddesses. This nameless place mentioned in Han's novella and which is found at the source of long rivers resembles Shouhuo village, being similarly embedded and hidden away in deep mountains. These magical lands provide havens for the unlucky or the hapless, or anybody who cannot survive in the mainstream of society. Their very

⁴⁵⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 153-54.

existence can be a threat to the country's current system and therefore is constantly subject to challenges from the outside world. These communities have to keep renewing themselves in order to persist and survive.

At Hagar's funeral in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Pilate sings to celebrate love which is the meaning of her granddaughter's life. The requiem of Hagar foretells the success of Milkman's quest. Similarly, after the funerals of Maozhi and the little auntie, the songs bring new hope to the place. The old South described in Morrison's work and the remote villages in the Chinese novels represent different visions of the blessed land. In these novels, a central woman figure, sometimes accompanied by her complementary characters, incarnates the spirit of the sacred place. She plays an important role in the protagonist's transformation. Her death marks the coming of a new age, and of the protagonist's final awakening. In "*Nu Nu Nu*," the disappearance of the ancient island suggests the beginning of a promising future: "every beginning is a repetition and not a repetition." The phrase can be understood in the sense that the process of evolution is going on in spite of setbacks ("*Woman Woman Woman*," 148). The youngest auntie, even in her death, continues to keep alive the most passionate dream of the community: "Many deaths lead to immortality" ("*Woman Woman Woman*," 148). When the story ends, the protagonist returns to the outside world empowered by self-knowledge and hope. The silent woman is dead, but her spirit finds new expression.

Conclusion

Homer's sirens are invincible. The strong and cunning Odysseus cannot defeat them, and nearly succumbs to their calls. The siren song represents an intellectual and artistic challenge that requires great self-restraint and meticulous planning. The sirens experience, although fatal to many, is in fact part of the rite of passage that a hero must go through.

The main feature of mermaids in folklore is a sweet singing voice which is a metonymy of feminine charm, relating not to intellectual curiosity but carnal pleasure. The fish-tailed mermaid is an incarnation of the average man's desire or fear. However, a mermaid song is often without lyrics, meant to be heard but not listened to. It is as if, while a woman's voice is seen as desirable, her words are not considered worth listening to. Andersen's ingenious creation of a mutilated mermaid is an important milestone in the evolution of mermaid-lore. "The Little Mermaid" can be related to other nineteenth century fairy tales which deal with voice and silence. In some of these tales, the period of silence corresponds to one of the stages of personal development, which

also involves crucial lessons of human communication and relationships. Some other tales associate silence with resignation, madness and death. The voice in fairytales is represented in different kinds and degrees.

Anderson's mermaid gives up her voice and consequently all her magic. The mermaid no longer has any power over men; she is not even the master of her own life. The old situation is reversed: the mermaid is at the mercy of her lover's volatile passion, and now the man holds the key to immortality. The fate of the mermaid is thus drastically changed. Andersen's tale gives a tone of finality and fatality to the on-going mermaid story.

The mermaid character has undergone another phase of metamorphosis and is given a new voice in the contemporary works that we have studied here. The female protagonists of Toni Morrison and Yan Lianke belong to a new breed of mermaids. They are song-bearers and keepers of traditional values. They help the male protagonists to live a life of integrity and fulfillment, which is not unlike what Homer's sirens did for the ancient hero. Their songs contain the essential qualities of the original sirens experience, which is about the strengthening of character and not sexual gratification. Pilate and Maozhi's songs are more than a source of intellectual and artistic stimulation for the individual. They are not for personal power either. Instead, the goal extends from personal growth – which becomes a means rather than an end in itself – to the welfare of the whole community, the remembrance of its past, the future of its younger generation, and the continuation of its traditions. The new mermaid song embodies the

three major elements: pleasures which are nourishing and enduring, self-empowerment and fulfillment, and genuine concern for the society and humanity. Personal and communal interests are equally represented. The hero can also learn to sing the song, as manifested in *Song of Solomon*. Does it mean that the siren-mermaid song transcends gender limit and is opening to completely new perspectives? Is today's reader ready for the new encounter? There seems to be more questions than answers to these issues.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AFT Hans Christian Andersen, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. Erik Christian Hangaard (New York: Doubleday, 1974)
- HCA Hans Christian Andersen, *The Complete Illustrated Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. H.W. Dulcken (London: Chancellor Press, 1982).
- SO Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*. London: Picador, 1978.
- TLM Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," *The Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. Erik Christian Hangaard (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 57-76.
- TCFTBG Brothers Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1987).

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