

Colóquios de Outono 2005-2006
O PODER DAS NARRATIVAS
AS NARRATIVAS DO PODER

Organização de

ANA GABRIELA MACEDO
MARIA EDUARDA KEATING

UNIVERSIDADE DO MINHO
CENTRO DE ESTUDOS HUMANÍSTICOS

Fred's parents live presents a disillusioned figuration of home, more deeply wrecked than Mrs. Miniver's bombed English middle class home but certainly less uncanny. For Fred, home is a misnomer and the family an imaginary signifier. Of the three returning vets, he is the one with the highest rank, the war hero, but he is also the one for whom home is not a performative but rather an empty signifier. In contrast to the economy of *Since You Went Away* and *Mrs. Miniver* where the family is presented as the ultimate motivation for the engagement, Fred Perry, the hero, struggles in his dreams and nightmares to overcome the true reason why he fought, comradeship and patriotism. Once that is over, the home and the family become eerie aberrations, and it is only in the last scene of the film, whilst walking through a field of scrap propellers and decommissioned castrated bombers, that he returns to the only familial womb he has truly known, that of the bomber. It is then that Fred really returns home, confronts his fears and picks himself up for a new beginning in the business of family housing construction. The emasculated male is renewed through a symbiotic link with the emasculated plane, that henceforth, as scrap for construction, renegotiates a new identity within peacetime economy.

As Elaine Tyler May and Stephanie Coontz have shown, the traditional narrative of home in America during the 1940s was a historical luke,²⁸ essentialized to suit the demands of the war effort. However, despite conveying a model of self-containment and moral highground that sought to erase or at least control the marks of crisis and instability brought on by the social upheaval of war upon the home, Hollywood film also spoke to the meaning of current events. The magic doctriation of images simultaneously asserted and subverted the hegemonic narrative of the legitimizing Victorian values of home. Hollywood, the dream factory, used the home, on the one hand, as self-referential metaphor to a sanitized imaginary of the nation. During the war years, the representation of the family in home front melodrama served to support the architecture of the united house America. On the other hand, film also showed the disrupted home the sign of a house divided, that nonetheless continued through antagonistic figurations to negotiate the search for the ever deferred but relentlessly sought sense of belonging.

²⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, p. 28. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound. American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York: Basic Books, 1988.

Modelling Female Identities: the Power of Patriarchal Discourse in Literary Narratives

MARGARIDA ESTEVES PEREIRA

Universidade do Minho

In patriarchal Western culture (...) the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose power is an instrument of generative power like his penis. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

At a certain point in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes about the surprise she felt at finding so many books on the subject of woman in the catalogues of the British Museum. Needless to say, all these were written by men. She tells us:

Sex and its nature might well attract doctors and biologists; but what was surprising and difficult of explanation was the fact that sex – women, that is to say – also attracts agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the M.A. degree; men who have taken no degree; men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women (Woolf, 1945: 28-9).

In these books women's identities are modelled to correspond to a certain idea of femaleness, one that is either contradictory to the point of bafflement and distress¹, or downright humiliating for women,

¹ As is stressed in the same passage, when Woolf argues: "Wherever one looked men thought about women and thought differently. It was impossible to make head or tail of it all; I decided (...). It was distressing, it was bewildering, it was humiliating. Truth had run through my fingers. Every drop had escaped" (*Idem*: 32).

as is the case with one of the books Woolf finds under the title *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*. We would be inclined to agree with Woolf that "[o]ne does not like to be told that one is naturally the inferior of a little man" and, with her, assert that all this writing about women, all these attempts to determine what a woman is, are clearly indicative of the dominance of patriarchal ideology in our society².

It is clear to us now that this discourse has been pervasive in our education as literary people, since we have all been confronted with readings of the classics, which, more often than not, represent women stereotypically within binary oppositions (public-private, reason-emotion/beauty, strength-frailty/weakness, among others) that dismiss women as the inferior pole of the dichotomy. Something that is addressed by Virginia Woolf both in her essays on women and in her fiction, namely in *Orlando*, where the Lady Orlando is continually being reminded of the inferiority of women in a very subtle way. In Sally Potter's film adaptation of the novel, there is a scene that sums up the spirit of male contempt for the female sex present in the novel and in Woolf's essays. In this passage, we are presented with some aphorisms by the poets John Pope, Swift and Spencer about the identity of women, which are representative of the patriarchal and misogynistic view pervasive in literary texts.

The aim of this essay is, thus, to address the question of the discourses by which female identities are constructed in the literary narratives of the Western canon and the way contemporary women writers incorporate the canonical texts in their writing in order to interrogate them, interact with them and, ultimately, destabilize them. The paper will do this by focusing on two examples, one drawn from a text by Zadie Smith and the other taken from a short story by A. S. Byatt.

From Shakespeare to Molière, from Coleridge to Keats, from Flaubert to Eça de Queirós, from the Bible to the Coran, the great works of Western culture and literature have consistently helped to model an image of woman within certain stereotypical patterns, construing "woman" along binary oppositions of goodness/badness. Many contemporary feminist critics and theorists have explained the dichotomies underlying female representations in literature either as

² Woolf states: "The most transient visitor to the planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy" (*idem*: 35).

angels (the famous Victorian "angel in the house") or as demons (in the figure of the temptress or the whore) and monsters (the witch, the shrew, the vampire, etc.). In Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), among others, we are presented with the history of mis-representations of women in literary texts written by men. These three revolutionary books draw our attention to the necessity of a revision and a re-reading of literary texts, which represent woman as the other (Beauvoir), the passive inferior being (Millett) or the object generated by the male penis (Gilbert and Gubar).

Generation upon generation of women has been confronted with a mirror that reflects them as the fantasies of male imagination. These representations of women as either idealised angels or feared monsters are so ingrained in our own view of womanhood that, as Virginia Woolf so aptly explained in "Professions for Women", in order to write women must first "kill the angel in the house". On the other hand, these representations are so pervasive in the western culture that they are also reflected in many women writers' portrayals of the female sex. As Gilbert and Gubar state in their study on the nineteenth-century woman writer (*The Madwoman in the Attic*): "(...) The images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitively killed either figure" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 17).

The question that this paper wants to raise – in relation to the way contemporary women writers incorporate and interact with traditional and stereotypical representations of women in their writing – imposed itself by the recurrent reference to such representations in a variety of novels. We have seen to what extent Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* incorporates this question as a recurrent motif. But references to the way women are represented by the male pen can be found in a plurality of nineteenth-century women's novels, from Jane Austen to Charlotte Brontë and to George Eliot. The example that comes to mind right away is the one, also cited by Gilbert and Gubar, of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, where the protagonist Anne Elliott, in conversation with Captain Harville, exclaims that written words cannot be brought to make evidence on the character of women, answering back to the Captain's comment that woman's inconsistency of feeling is thoroughly registered in hundreds of books, in the following way:

'Yes, Yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything' (Austen, 2003: 220).

In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* we find a similar example – which shows how aware female writers were of being misrepresented through the male pen –, when the protagonist remarks:

'If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light: they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. Then, to hear them fall into ecstasies with each other's creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem – novel – drama, thinking it fine – divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial – false as the rose in my best bonnet there. If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stone in half an hour' (Brontë, 1987: 343).

The remarks to the way women have been misrepresented in literature and culture throughout history are recurrent in the texts of many twentieth century and twentieth-first century women writers, some of which were/are clearly struggling against the imposing and powerful images they encounter in their readings. A good example of this can be found in the novel *Still Life*, by A. S. Byatt. Here, we are confronted with the choices of the protagonist of the novel, Frederica Potter, a clever and high-minded girl in her early twenties, struggling to adapt to Cambridge life in the 1950s, that is, at a time when the university was overwhelmingly populated by men.³ Frederica, an aspiring intellectual and writer, is aware of the "imposing tags" that condition her own self-discovery as a woman, as the following quotation reveals:

She believed, with a mixture of 'realism' and resignation, that women were much more preoccupied with love than men were, more vulnerable, more in pain. There were imposing tags on her mind. 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart/Tis woman's whole existence.' 'He for God

³ As the text acknowledges – "She knew that there were eleven men for every woman in the university" (Byatt, 1995: 134). Writing about her own student days at Cambridge, in the 1950s, A. S. Byatt declares that [women] "had fought, much harder than the men, who outnumbered us eleven to one, to be allowed to study at Cambridge (...) (Byatt, 1991: ix).

only, she for God in him.' 'In those days I could not see God for his creature.' 'I claim only this privilege for my sex – you need not covet it... this distinction of loving longest when life, when hope is gone.' (Byatt, 1995: 153).

From Milton to Lord Byron, extending even to Charlotte Brontë, the great works of literature are there to reinforce the ideology of the separate spheres, helping to perpetuate an idea of woman as the second sex. For Frederica this entailed a belief, as the narrator of the text stresses, that "a woman was unfulfilled without marriage, that marriage was the ending of every good story" (*ibidem*). That this seemed to be a prevailing feeling among the female students of Cambridge is somewhat evidenced by A. S. Byatt's recounting of her own experience as a female undergraduate at Cambridge University in the 1950s. In her "Introduction" to the 1991 edition of *The Shadow of the Sun*, she states, for example: [Women] "were fatally torn, when thinking of [their] future, by hopes of marriage, and hopes of something, some work, beyond getting to university at all. Men could have both, work and love, but it seemed that women couldn't" (Byatt, 1991: ix).

But, as Frederica rightly notes, it is not only the male authors that impose on her a restraining idea of what a woman is, for, as we have already mentioned here, the dominant ideology pervades women's novels as well as male ones, Rosamond Lehman as well as D. H. Lawrence, as is stated in *Still Life*:

She was conditioned to desire to be abject. This desire was reinforced by the behaviour of Rosamond Lehman's heroines and of Ursula Brangwen (whom some other part of Frederica was ready to despise heartily). And there was the knowledge gleaned from agony columns, where abject women asked for help with the indifferent, the unfaithful, the only-wanting-one-thing, the other women's husbands (Byatt, 1991: 153-4).

But acknowledging the constraining role literary texts may play in perpetuating a certain idea of female identity, is not the same as revising this idea. So, to what extent do contemporary female writers deal with this male legacy of feminine representations? Let us focus now on two texts that overtly dialogue with the canon, incorporating it, interrogating it and, to a certain extent, destabilizing it. These are texts that perform a re-vision of the canon, re-interpreting some canonical texts in the light of feminism and feminist theories.

My first example is drawn from Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000). Zadie Smith's novel is set in London and focuses on the

lives of two working class "exotic" immigrant adolescents, Irie Jones, whose grandmother came from the Caribbean and Millat Iqbal, whose father is originally from the Bangladesh. Apart from these two families, one, British and Jamaican, the other, Bangladeshi Islamic, there is a third family, the Chafens, who stand for white-anglo-saxon-middle-classness, though they are Jews. The novel explores contemporary multiculturalism at the centre of the former Metropole of the British Empire, focussing on the way the two protagonists live in a contact zone, between different cultures, and are the products of cultural hybridization; thus, the novel emphasises their struggle to smooth over the perplexities of belonging to a culture that, nevertheless, keeps reminding them of their otherness. The novel is divided in five parts, dedicated, specifically, to different characters in the novel.

The part consecrated to Irie Jones includes five chapters, the first of which is entitled "The miseducation of Irie Jones". The text enhances the typical identity problems underlying the growth of any adolescent who is confronted by beauty patterns she strives to attain. In this particular case, the identity problems are the site of a cultural clash between a white-anglo-saxon pattern of beauty and Irie's family original Caribbean roots. Though a Londoner, the marks of her black Caribbean origin are imprinted in her body. And though her mother, coming from another culture, would reassure her that her overweight body was "fine", she felt it as an acute misadaptation in the land which, supposedly, was her own: "But Irie didn't know she was fine. There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land" (Smith, 2001: 266). Irie is, thus, obsessed with a beauty pattern she is unable to fulfill. She was

unwilling to settle for genetic fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to *English Rose* – oh, you know her – she's a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled by the wave (...). (*id.*: 266-7).

It is in this context that Zadie Smith introduces a dialogue with canonical English literature, in the form of two Shakespearean sonnets, in order to propose a new outlook on the sonnets that might give Irie Jones a chance to perceive herself as a part of this strange white anglo-saxon culture, thus, helping her build a positive self-esteem. The novel quotes sonnets 127 and 130 to introduce the idea that "black is beautiful". And to prove it there is Millat Iqbal with all his exotic beauty. However, when Irie Jones puts forward the hypothesis that the Lady

the sonnets address might be black, she is completely put off by the teacher with a blunt no: "No, dear, she's dark, she's dark. She's not black in the modern sense. There weren't any ... well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That's a more modern phenomenon, as I'm sure you know (...)" (Smith, 2001: 272). And although the teacher admits that there is no way of having any certainties as to the colour of the Lady's skin, she completely rejects Irie's interpretations and, with it, the girl's sense of identification with a form of beauty that would include her. By contrast, she is warned by the teacher to "[n]ever read what is old with a modern ear" (*ibid.*). That this is not only a question of race, but also one of gender is reinforced by the subsequent actions of Irie Jones, who strives to conform to a certain ideal of feminine beauty by having her hair straightened, going through all the agonies that this implies – "It was a competition in agony. Like rich women in posh restaurants ordering ever smaller salads." (Smith, 2001: 275) –, as is expressively stated in the text, which shows a contrast between the male and the female sections of the hairdresser's:

(...) The male section was all laughter, all talk, all play; there was an easiness that sprang from the male haircut ever costing six pounds not taking more than fifteen minutes. (...)

In comparison, the female section of P. K.'s was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission. (Smith, 2001: 275).

To read what is old with a modern ear is, precisely, what many a woman writer does in fictions that question the canonical works of literature by interrogating them from a gender-based perspective. Another example of this questioning can be found in much of A. S. Byatt's work, from *Possession to Angels and Insects* from the "Frederica quartet" to many of her short stories. For example, in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), the nineteenth-century female protagonist Christabel LaMotte may be said to rewrite the image of the Victorian fallen woman. Moreover, this character evokes specifically romantic and Victorian intertexts – like Coleridge's Christabel, the innocent female portrayed in the poem with the same title, or John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" – in order to revise the stereotypical image of woman conveyed in these poems (as either innocent passive angel or corrupt active temptress), and to propose a new female identity in the form

of the autonomous Victorian poetess Christabel LaMotte. In the same manner, the twentieth-century female protagonist, Maud Bailey, may be said to rewrite her Victorian namesake Maud, in the poem with the same title by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which is clearly addressed by Byatt's text, namely, in the form Maud Bailey's psychological traits reproduce the description of the protagonist of Tennyson's poem. However, although Byatt's protagonist is, like her Victorian namesake "[f]aulty faultless, icily regular, splendidly null", she is far from the passivity ascribed to the protagonist of Tennyson's poem. On the contrary, her behaviour evinces an autonomy which she is unwilling to abandon.

Here, however, I would like to focus, particularly, on a shorter narrative by A. S. Byatt, which is paradigmatic of the kind of intertextual dialogue this author establishes with the canon. The short story is titled "A Lamia in the Cévennes" and is part of the collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). In this story Byatt's intertext is clearly the poem "Lamia" by John Keats. Keats's poem epitomizes the idea of the *femme-fatale* in the figure of the monstrous lamia transformed into a woman of dazzling beauty, with the purpose of seducing the male protagonist of the poem, the Corinthian Lycius. In the poem, the lamia is described as a mellifluous serpent that, when transformed into a woman by the God Hermes, becomes a cruel temptress, ensnaring Lycius with her mellow words. Finally, she is exposed by the old and sage Apollonius, Lycius former master and friend, who unveils the serpent behind the woman and restores the order, preventing Lycius from marrying a serpent, but, at the same time, precluding any possibility of romance and happiness, as the final scene may demonstrate, with Lycius lying prostrate, his arms "empty of delight":

"A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,
As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
On the high couch he lay! – his friends came round –
Supported him – no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.
(Keats, 1999: ls. 305-311)

Keats's poem sets romantic love against reasoning science, in order to critique what in the poem is called "cold Philosophy", which destroys all beauty by explaining and exposing its mysteries, as becomes evident in the following extract:

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.
(Keats, 1999: ls. 229-238)

Byatt's short story counters this idea by proposing a different outlook on artistic representation, one that implies that science or "exact study" does not "clip an Angel's wings", but, on the contrary, enhances its beauty. "A Lamia in the Cévennes" tells the story of the painter Bernard Lycett-Kean – whose name strikes a note of resemblance both to the name of the male protagonist of "Lamia" and to the name of Keats –, who in the mid-1980s decides to leave London for the peaceful and rather isolated Cévennes in the South of France. As in Keats's poem, this story features a lamia, which appears in Bernard's swimming-pool, but in this case, the male protagonist, although tempted by the enchanted Lamia, is not interested in romantic love, but only in painting the creature in its snake form – as the text unveils later on, "[h]e didn't want a woman. He wanted another visual idea. A mystery to be explained by rule and line" (Byatt, 1999: 110). The Lamia acquiesces to this with the condition that in the end he kisses her, so that she can metamorphose into a woman and marry him. In the end, though, Bernard is saved by a friend, Raymond Carver, who shows up at his house, and is seduced by the Lamia, who finally attains her desired woman form. The story aims at a dialogue with John Keats's poem in order to deny the romantic notion of artistic representation, proposing that the work of the artist is not opposed to that of "cold Philosophy", in that the artist strives to be able to understand the Universe by "rule and line". Thus, the artist in Byatt's story says that "he had never gone with Keats about all that stuff" (Byatt, 1999: 109) and explains why:

By philosophy Keats seems to mean natural science, and personally he, Bernard, would rather have the optical mysteries of waves and particles in the water and light of the rainbow than any old gnome or fay. He had been at least as interested in the problems of reflection and refraction when he had had the lovely snake in his pool as he had been in its oddity – in its *otherness* – as snakes went (*id.*: *ibid.*).

The point to be made here has to do with the female figure of the lamia in the story. It becomes clear that, although this is a creature physically similar to the one described in Keats's text, she is no longer the evil monster she is said to be in that poem. Byatt's text rewrites the figure of the lamia, from female monster-seducer to harmless victim, trapped by the desire of a painter to capture her colourful creative aspect. He was clearly not interested in her womanly aspects, only in the utter otherness of her being:

He never painted her head, which he found hideous and repulsive. Bernard liked snakes but he did not like women. The Lamia with female intuition began to sense his lack of enthusiasm for this aspect of her. 'My teeth,' she told him, 'will be lovely in rosy lips, my eyes will be melting and mysterious in a human face. Kiss me, Bernard, and you will see.' (Byatt, 1999: 101).

And although she is slightly cunning in that she tries to seduce Bernard Lycett-Kean, so that she can be transformed into a woman, she becomes ever more sad and depressed for he is unwilling to let himself be seduced by her. However, this would-be victim manages to outwit her gaoler by seducing a friend of his and, finally, acquiring a female form and attaining her "immortal soul", which is what she ultimately wants. The dramatic unweaving of the lamia in Keats's poem is here transformed into a comedy, with Bernard's friend, Raymond Carver, leaving the house accompanied by a lovely woman, Melanie, whose first wish, incidentally, is to go to Cannes to the Film Festival.

Like the episode in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* we have analysed here, Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes" preforms an intertextual dialogue with a specific canonical text, in order to interrogate it, not particularly from a gender-based perspective, but including it. Zadie Smith's text, on the other hand, interrogates Shakespeare's sonnets from the perspective of race, but, as this paper argues, this interrogation, in the case of the character of Irie Jones, assumes gender as another point from which to perform a revision of the literary canon. However mild these rewritings of the canon may be they, nevertheless, change the way women's identity is represented in literature. And yet these texts, and others, are still in many senses prisoners of the patriarchal ideology that is still dominant in the minds, in the actions, in the feelings of all women, of these writers. In "Professions for Women" (1931), Virginia Woolf draws our attention to the fact that, besides the angel, women have "still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices

to overcome" in order to write "the truth about [her] own experiences as a body". She states:

These then were two very genuine experiences of my own. These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful – and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. And if this is so in literature, the freest of all professions for women, how is it in the new professions which you are now for the first time entering? (Woolf, 1988: 62).

Thus, however changed these texts are in telling a different story about women, we have still to look at them carefully in order to avoid re-producing a long lasting assumption of what woman is. Moreover, were we to look at the representation of women in men's novels today we would find, I suspect, some slight changes in the way women's identities are portrayed; for if we assume that we live in a post-feminist age, then, it should be more or less obvious that the dominant ideology of the times assumes a liberated autonomous womanhood, be it conveyed by the female or the male pen. A person writing novels in the twenty-first century may not be able to ignore the fact that most western women today have a completely different way of living. This paper does not address this issue, and to tell the truth I have doubts as to the dominance of a completely autonomous female creature coming out of the male or, even, the female pen today.