

# THE RE/MEMBERING OF THE FEMALE POWER IN “LADY ORACLE”

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**T**HE MAIN THEME OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *Lady Oracle* is represented by the quest the main character is engaged in, to find her real hidden self out of a split identity. Such a quest, which can be seen as a journey through different stages of self-consciousness, is epitomized by the archetype of the Great Mother, or White Goddess, which recurs throughout the novel and which represents its mythological dimension.

As Robert Graves remarks in his *The White Goddess*, around 1900 B.C. Greece was invaded by the Achaeans; at first their society was a strictly patriarchal one, but later on it interwove with a semi-matriarchal one:

The first Greeks to invade Greece were the Achaeans who broke into Thessaly about 1900 B.C.; they were patriarchal herdsmen and worshipped an Indo-European male trinity of gods. . . . Little by little they conquered the whole of Greece and tried to destroy the semi-matriarchal Bronze Age civilization that they found there, but later compromised with it, accepted matrilinear succession and enrolled themselves as sons of the variously named Great Goddess.<sup>1</sup>

The Great Goddess appears to have been worshipped, under different names and different forms, by several civilizations, from the Greeks to various societies of North Africa and Asia Minor and, eventually, to the Romans. Graves gives her the appellation of White Goddess because of her prominent colour, “the colour of the first member of her moon-trinity”;<sup>2</sup> in her cycle she undergoes a series of metamorphoses which correspond to the three phases of the moon: “the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination.”<sup>3</sup> Originally, the Great Goddess was the only power to be worshipped in Europe since there was no male god ruling with her. She had, however, a lover who was represented by the dichotomy Serpent/Star-Son. The former, the Serpent of Wisdom, was in a sense the father of the latter, the Star of Life. But the Son, in due course, would become the Goddess's lover and eventually would kill his father, which established a cycle of birth-growth-death-regeneration:

The Son . . . was reborn every year, grew up as the year advanced, destroyed the Serpent and won the Goddess's love. Her love destroyed him, but from his ashes was born another Serpent which, at Easter, laid the *glain* or red egg which she ate; so that the Son was reborn to her as a child once more.<sup>4</sup>

After a while, however, a change took place, since from the East was brought into the European countries the new institution of monogamy. Up to that moment, in these societies the role of the father had been unimportant; the marriages were characterized by group-unions of women belonging to one society with men belonging to another. Thus the mother was the only parent who could be established without any doubt. As again Graves points out:

Once this revolution had occurred, the social status of women altered: man took over many of the sacred practices from which his sex had debarred him, and finally declared himself head of the household, though much property still passed from mother to daughter.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Great Goddess became of secondary importance since her status was reduced to consort of the Father-God. Later on, in "later Judaism, Judaic Christianity, Mohammedanism and Protestant Christianity,"<sup>6</sup> the Goddess's worship disappeared completely to give way to an entirely patriarchal society.

If we read *Lady Oracle* keeping in mind its mythological dimension, we will realize that it represents a journey into the past from which its author wishes to bring back a society where the woman's authority was acknowledged and her role respected. In her article "My (m)Other, My Self" Barbara Godard notes:

Atwood . . . take[s] the quest motif from men's writing (a quest for the Holy Grail) and drape[s] it in the garments of the Great Mother. In [her] novels, the discovery of the self comes not from a movement towards unity of being, but, rather from a recognition of the lost tradition of the goddess, triple in nature. . . .<sup>7</sup>

At the opening of *Lady Oracle* its heroine, Joan Foster, is in a small village in Southern Italy where she has decided to retire to create her new self. Her quest for a new identity has already reached its climax before the actual beginning of the narrative; when the novel starts Joan is in fact trying to build her new identity after having apparently let her former self drown in Lake Ontario. Joan's two selves represent the first dichotomy in the novel: two selves which, as a matter of fact, will appear to be more than two. Referring to the clothes she was wearing when she threw herself into the water, she describes them as "jeans and navy-blue T-shirt, my funerary costume, my former self, damp and collapsed, from which the many-coloured souls had flown."<sup>8</sup> The colour of her clothes recalls that of the third member of the Triple Goddess, the black goddess of death. The black goddess is destroyed, "buried" in the depths of the lake, but from her a new deity rises again. The goddess rising from the waters is Aphrodite, the red goddess of love and battle, and second member of the trinity, symbolized by Joan's waist-length red hair. As Graves points out, "Aphrodite . . . can

be identified with the Moon-goddess Eurynome . . . ,”<sup>9</sup> thus we have here reunited all the three members of the Great Goddess. As the novel proceeds, we become acquainted with Joan’s “many-coloured souls.” The first one is represented by Joan when young, the fat Joan who has spent her whole infancy and adolescence prisoner of her own grotesque body which, eventually, she has decided to get rid of. It appears that she has never had a complete and realistic perception of her body till the moment she takes this decision. Joan is aware of her fatness but at the same time she overcomes it since she is totally projected toward the “thin girl” entrapped in the monstrous body. When, at last, she will resolve to lose weight and her grotesque body will become a normal one, her perception of it will still be a distorted one. Once thin, she is still haunted by her other self from which, as Joan herself states, she is unable to free her mind: “when I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn’t see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own” (*LO*, 216). Thus Joan has always had a double identity: she has been an imaginary thin girl when she was actually fat, and she is an imaginary fat woman while actually thin. Yet, her double identity does not exhaust itself here, since Joan is constantly confronted with an endless reflection of infinite images of herself which multiply in the distance; “I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many” (*LO*, 247). She is in fact also Louisa Delacourt, writer of Costume Gothics and unknown counterpart of Joan Foster, Arthur’s wife and celebrated author of *Lady Oracle*. Moreover, even the Joan-narrator of the story defines herself as different from the Joan Foster-writer; “it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I’d never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-mirror reflection” (*LO*, 252).

**T**HROUGHOUT HER SEARCH for her real self, Joan is always haunted by the figure of her mother who is portrayed as a real tyrant during Joan’s childhood, and as a phantom haunting her mind during her maturity. Joan has already freed herself once from her mother’s influence by getting rid of her fatness and by plunging herself into a new life apart from her mother. However, even though she has been able to free herself in a physical sense, her mother has become an obsession for her, another reflection of herself, or better, a projection of Joan’s fear of becoming a reflection of her own mother. What Joan does not yet realize, at this stage, is the fact that she cannot reject the figure of her mother since she is actually part of her. This very fact brings us back to the

archetype of the Great Mother. When the Goddess lost the great part of her power and became the Father-God's consort, the daughters she had from him were "limited versions of herself — herself in various young-moon and full-moon aspects."<sup>10</sup> Joan does, however, realize the connection at an unconscious level, since in her dreams her mother appears as having three heads; "In the dream, I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn't frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I'd always known . . ." (*LO*, 63-64). At this stage Joan, still a child, is not afraid of her three-headed mother's apparition since, being still endowed with that instinct that only children have, she perceives in it something natural. And what else could that be if not the Great Mother who, at the beginning, was the main and the only principle of the world? But as Joan grows older, she begins to consider the dream of her mother as monstrous, probably because she does not have the intuition of the triple nature of the Mother represented in the dream but, instead, is overwhelmed by the third member of the trinity, the black goddess, who becomes a negative power if separated from the other two. Margaret Atwood herself is well aware of the three-fold nature of woman. In *Survival*, referring to the three mythological categories of identities into which women are divided, she comments that:

First comes the elusive Diana or Maiden figure, the young girl; next the Venus figure, goddess of love, sex and fertility; then the Hecate figure, goddess of the underworld, who presides over death and has oracular powers. In Robert Graves' mythology, . . . the three phases together constitute the Triple Goddess, who is the Muse, the inspirer of poetry; she is also Nature, a goddess of cycles and seasons. Hecate, the most forbidding of the three, is only one phase of a cycle; she is not sinister when viewed as part of a process. . . .<sup>11</sup>

In *Lady Oracle* all the three phases are present, but the first two, Diana and Venus, the white and the red goddesses, are trapped inside the black goddess. The Diana figure, represented by Joan's infancy and adolescence, is shown as prisoner of Hecate by the symbol of the monstrously fat body imprisoning the "thin girl." From the Hecate phase, Joan will eventually free herself, thus giving life to her Venus phase, Venus seen as capable of love, both maternal and sexual. The beginning of her Venus phase is symbolized by her encounter and her following relationship with the Polish Count. With him Joan has her first sexual experience, and she is even seen by him as a goddess; "'You have the body of a goddess,' the Polish Count used to say, in moments of contemplative passion" (*LO*, 141). These comments are followed by Joan's ironic speculations about which goddess he meant; she is unable to accept her Venus phase since she is still victim of the Hecate figure. Even though her body has been freed from Hecate, her mind is still imprisoned, and she has a perception of this fact during her

experiments of automatic writing. The words she collects during these experiments appear to be:

all centered around the same figure, the same woman. After a while I could almost see her: she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me. She wasn't like anyone I'd ever imagined, and certainly she had nothing to do with me. (*LO*, 224)

It will not be till she is in Terremoto that Joan will realize who this woman is: namely her mother and, at the same time, a reflection, a part of herself. The woman appears powerful, almost like a goddess, like the goddess Hecate who lives under the earth somewhere being the goddess of the underworld; who at the same time lives inside a huge building, Joan's former huge body; who has oracular powers, Lady Oracle herself; and who is an unhappy power because not yet in harmony with the other two goddesses, Diana and Venus.

The above quoted passage introduces the image of the cave which is recurrent in *Lady Oracle*. As underlined in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "in patriarchal culture, the woman's cave-shaped anatomy is her destiny. . . . Destroyed by traditional female activities . . . women . . . are buried in (and by) patriarchal definitions of their sexuality."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, every woman can "have metaphorical access to the dark knowledge buried in caves."<sup>13</sup> The knowledge buried in the cave, which is a place belonging to women, was once conveyed by the Sibyl, the prophetess who inscribed her "divine intuitions on tender leaves and fragments of delicate bark."<sup>14</sup> But as Gilbert and Gubar notice in their comment on Mary Shelley's story of a cave (in "Author's introduction" to *The Last Man*),<sup>15</sup> the "truths" inscribed on the leaves are now difficult to interpret since the leaves are shattered so that their meaning is confused. The cave symbolizes the mind where the woman has to descend to recover her own past, a past in which women's power was recognized; she has, in a sense, to recover the myth of the Great Mother. This is, however, a hard task, since women in general, and women-artists in particular, seem to be prisoners of a patriarchal tradition which prevents them from expressing themselves, from creating. As Margaret Atwood remarks in *Survival*, in Canada the heroines of many feminist novels (heroines who are projections of their own authors) have internalized the values of their cultures to such an extent that they have become their own prisons. In Joan's case, even symbolic death is not able to free the heroine from her phantoms; she is still imprisoned, and the ghost of her mother, which is a reflection of her former self, will continue to haunt her even in Terremoto. A glass seems to be always between herself, the world she has built around her, and real life, but eventually she will realize that she has to go through that glass to get rid of her phantoms, of her mother:

She was smiling at me now; with her smudged face, could she see I loved her? I loved her but the glass was between us, I would have to go through it. . . . She'd never really let go of me because I had never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. . . . How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. . . . Why did I have to dream about my mother, have nightmares about her, sleepwalk out to meet her? My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying. (*LO*, 330-31)

Joan has to go through the glass to come to terms with her real self. At last she realizes that only trying to accept her real essence, only stopping to try to get rid of her mother and of her past and accepting them under their proper light, she will be able, perhaps, to find an equilibrium. Her mother, who is a projection of Joan herself, will continue to be a monster until Joan will be able not to destroy her, but rather to free her mother from her own intimate nature, which can be achieved only by accepting also this side of her personality. In accepting her mother, she is able both to revive the myth of the Great Mother and to find a unity in multiplicity.

To free herself, Joan has to descend to the Sibyl's cave which is symbolized by Joan's entering the maze of her own mind through the experiments of automatic writing. What she ends up with are only scattered words with no meaning, like the Sibyl's leaves, and she has to try to give a sense to them. As we have already noticed, the message these words convey seems to lead always to the same figure, a woman, a mother, a goddess. The scattered words represent the shattering of female power, and in particular of woman-writers; only through a long and hard work of interpretation and revision will their meaning become clear and the original power recovered. We could comment on Joan's attempt to interpret the message of her automatic writing experiments by referring to Gilbert & Gubar's comment on Christina G. Rossetti's poem "Mother Country":

The attempt of reconstructing the Sibyl's leaves. . . . haunts us with the possibility that if we can piece together their fragments the parts will form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist, a "mother of us all," . . . a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember.<sup>16</sup>

Entering her mind, Joan will recover her past, but this very recovery opens the possibility of artistic creation for women-artists since, again in Gilbert & Gubar's words, "the cave is not just the place from which the past is retrieved but the place where the future is conceived, the 'earthen womb' . . . from which the new land rises."<sup>17</sup> In *Lady Oracle* Joan's imprisonment clearly symbolizes also the feminist writer's imprisonment in canons dictated by a society in which art has always been the domain of men, and her quest for a new self represents the

woman-writer's quest for a new identity as an artist, an identity freed from the traditional stereotypes imposed by a patriarchal culture.

The novel is, however, open-ended. In fact it is not certain whether its heroine will avail herself of the knowledge she has achieved during her quest: namely that in order to find her true self she has to accept her multiplicity. Or whether she will just slip into another identity, again entirely separated from the former ones, without thus achieving that unity of self which arises from a multiplicity in which every version of the self is only a "phase" of a cycle.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), p. 62.
- <sup>2</sup> Graves, p. 70.
- <sup>3</sup> Graves, p. 70.
- <sup>4</sup> Graves, pp. 388-89.
- <sup>5</sup> Graves, p. 389.
- <sup>6</sup> Graves, p. 389.
- <sup>7</sup> Barbara Godard, "My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 26 (1983), p. 24.
- <sup>8</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), p. 16. All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- <sup>9</sup> Graves, p. 395.
- <sup>10</sup> Graves, p. 389.
- <sup>11</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 199.
- <sup>12</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), p. 94.
- <sup>13</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 95.
- <sup>14</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 96.
- <sup>15</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 95.
- <sup>16</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 101.
- <sup>17</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 102.

