



**T.C.**

**EGE ÜNİVERSİTESİ**

**Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü**

**REMAKING OF MYTHOGRAPHY:  
FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN  
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S NARRATIVES**

**Doktora Tezi**

**Yöntem Kılıfı**

**İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı**

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## ETİK KURALLARA UYGUNLUK BEYANI

Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğüne sunduğum **Remaking of Mythography: Feminist Reconstruction of Knowledge in Contemporary Women's Narratives** adlı doktora tezinin tarafımdan bilimsel, ahlak ve normlara uygun bir şekilde hazırlandığını, tezimde yararlandığım kaynakları bibliyografyada ve dipnotlarda gösterdiğimi onurumla doğrularım.

Yöntem Kılış

## ÖNSÖZ

Lisans, yüksek lisans ve doktora eğitimim boyunca bana vizyon katan ve araştırmamdaki her aşamada bana destek olan değerli tez danışmanım Prof. Dr. Nevin Yıldırım Koyuncu'ya en içten teşekkürlerimi sunarım. Tüm tez süreci boyunca ve her günümde yanımda olan ailem Sevgi Ural, Burçin Kılış ve Sadık Kılış'a koşulsuz sevgileri ve destekleri için sonsuza kadar minnettarım. Bu tezin çoğu Aralık 2019'da patlak veren Covid-19 pandemisinin gölgesinde yazılmıştır. Karamsarlığa kapılmamaya çalıştığım bu dönemde yaşam bana hayatımın en güzel iki hediyesini, yeğenlerim Aren ve Ege'yi verdi. Onların sevgileri ile tıpkı çalıştığım yazarlar gibi ben de kendi hikâyemi yeniden yazmaya başladım. Bu çalışmayı hayatımı her gün sevgi, neşe ve müzikle dolduran yeğenlerim Aren ve Ege'ye adıyorum.

## ÖZET

Bu çalışma, çağdaş kadın yazarlar Margaret Atwood ve Jeanette Winterson'ın mitografilerine odaklanmaktadır. Bu yazarlar, daha önce görmezden gelinen, değersizleştirilen ve marjinalize edilen karakterlerin hikayelerini anlatarak, deneyimlerine sahip çıkarak ve onları anlatılarının merkezine yerleştirerek, egemen mitleri yeniden yazmışlar ve nihayetinde sadece kadın değil, aynı zamanda erkek deneyimi hakkında bilgimizi yeniden inşa eden, yeni anlamlar, varyasyonlar ve kalıplar üreten alternatif metinsel politikalar sunmuşlardır. Her iki yazar da eserlerinde ataerkil mitleri sorgulayarak ve yeniden değerlendirerek, Batı Edebiyatının temelini ve ataerkil sistemin bilinçaltını oluşturan kanonlaşmış mitleri yeniden yazarak, bu egemen anlatılara alternatif bir anlatı geleneği oluşturmuşlardır. Bu yeniden yapılanmanın feminist bir bilgi birikimini gündeme getirip getirmediği feminist epistemolojik yaklaşımlar aracılığıyla incelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** feminist revisionist mythmaking, feminist epistemology, feminist standpoint theory, epistemic injustice

## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the mythography of contemporary women writers Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson. These writers not only challenge, question, and revise androcentric nature of myths in their work, but they also intend to provide alternatives to the canonical discourses of myths that constitute Western literary heritage. Their remaking reclaims the voices of the previously silenced and marginalized discourses. By narrating the previously ignored stories of the epistemically marginalized characters, claiming their experiences, and situating them at the center of their narratives, these writers present alternative textual politics to remake the prevailing myths as well as invest them with new meanings, variations and patterns that ultimately provide us with new knowledge about not only female but also male experience. The primary purpose of this study is to elucidate how contemporary writers Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, through their remaking of mythography, invest myths with new meanings and new ways of knowing in light of theories of feminist epistemology.

**Keywords:** feminist revisionist mythmaking, feminist epistemology, feminist standpoint theory, epistemic injustice

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## INTRODUCTION

When they wake up from among the dead, from among words, from among laws. . . [...] *Once upon a time*...One cannot yet say of the following history 'it's just a story.' It's a tale still true today. Most women who have awakened remember having slept, having been put to sleep. *Once upon a time . . . once . . . and once again.*

- Helen Cixous, from "*Sorties*"

Researching her topic on women and fiction, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) observes the lack of women's literature and biographies on the bookshelves<sup>1</sup> of British Museum Reading Room, which she thinks ought to be abundant in works of literature written by women. Women writers' works are now not only legitimately shelved in libraries, but they are also the subject of more extensive academic analysis than ever before in literary history. Elaine Showalter's seminal work in the field of feminist literary criticism *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) analyzed English women novelists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She identified three historical phases of women's writing: "feminine," "feminist," and "female" (15). The first phase is a long period of "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition"; the second is "a phase of protest against these modes, and 'advocacy' of independent rights and values" and the third is "a phase of self-

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf makes the following remarks regarding women and fiction: "It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lopsided; but why should they not add *a supplement to history*, calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear" (42).

discovery a search for identity and a specific aesthetic” (16). Showalter, in her work *A Jury of Her Peers*, adds a fourth historical phase to the three phases she had previously identified: “free” (xx). She claims that in the twenty-first century, women writers have complete freedom to explore any topic in any form of expression, which opens up a previously unimagined world of possibilities (xx). Moreover, the year 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972) in which she made a call for a reconsideration and reinvestigation of the misogynist construction of knowledge in the dominant traditional discourses.

If our contemporary world, as Showalter puts it, becomes a myriad of possibilities, we may situate Rich’s call for re-visionist mythmaking in a “technology of cultural memory that changes” as culture's perception of and relation to the past changes (Plate *Transforming* 29). Feminist revisionist mythmakers’ rewritings of the primary sources that have influenced literary and cultural history have reconstructed our knowledge of the past. Nevin Yıldırım Koyuncu states that myths’ pervasive use of canonical images creates strong cultural representations that could become imprinted in people's minds and cultural memory as norms that are most often than not patriarchal. Revisiting such cultural images reveals culturally constructed nature of these norms and “their impact on women’s marginalization, silencing and exclusion” from dominant stories (74). In this regard, their rewritings open the doors of the archive of images that have served to silence women throughout history. As such, they expose how our knowledge and cultural memory are formed by the biases and injustices that are embedded in these dominant discourses.

According to Liedeke Plate, the works of Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Christa Wolf and Michèle Roberts, among others, were largely responsible for the development of feminist re-visioning as a distinct literary genre (*Remembering* 393). Plate, in her work *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*, differentiates women's rewritings by referring to the ones that were produced in the 1970s as "feminist re-vision" and those written by contemporary mythographers as "mythical retelling" (*Transforming* 31). She writes that "never a myth's final telling, mythical retelling is merely a moment in a cultural process of storytelling that is ongoing" (30). By stressing the "never-endingness" of mythical retellings, Plate reminds us here that retelling or rewriting myths is an act of "renewal, resistance, and transformation" that taps into the collective and individual memory of a culture (31). Mythmaking by women writers is a constantly developing process starting from Rich's call until today. In various locations and at different eras, stories are told and retold, reconstructed or deconstructed, written and rewritten "[o]nce upon a time . . . once . . . and once again" (Cixous *Sorties* 63). They circulate: "Stories slipped across frontiers of culture and language as freely as birds in the air as soon as they first began appearing" (Warner *Once Upon a Time* xv). Stories are the essence of myth. The word "myth" is related to *the mythos*, which is a Greek term meaning "word" or "story," — which also serves to underline mythology's fictional quality (Doty 7). While the stories that make up classical myths would seem to be a compilation of long-ago tales, they remain significant as their themes continue to influence our contemporary thinking.

Women's rewriting of myths from its beginnings in the 1970s to its contemporary manifestations, in Plate's words, "as a feminist genre," gradually evolves to produce new ways of knowing (4). Mythography, which is generally defined as the study of myths and rituals, is an "ancient term for the compilation of mythological accounts" (Doty xii). William G. Doty also describes it as "the work of writers who generated written forms of myths from accounts in poetry, literature, and public life" (Doty, xii). He asserts that myths can be manipulated to mean anything the mythographer wants, and their rhetorical influence can be shaped by the dominant discourse patterns of a particular period or ruling class (Doty 25). The ancient stories that form oral and literary traditions were mostly penned by male mythographers. Accordingly, myths that have been preserved in written form contain the values and structures of hegemonic ideology which primarily serve to maintain male dominance. Myths are considered to be foundational stories, the central accounts of a culture that have served as the primary means of transmitting and revealing the values, beliefs, ideals, and self-conceptions that constitute its "roots" (210). Knowing old stories that "wear ancient wisdom" as undeniable sources of knowledge, expressing the values and norms of our societies, has a great impact on our lives (Warner *Six Myths* 19). This is because "they can represent ways of making sense of universal matters, like sexual identity and family relations, and that they enjoy a more vigorous life than we perhaps acknowledge, and exert more of an inspiration and influence than we think" (Warner *Six Myths* 11). Therefore, myths are not just old tales that belong to a distant past; they are stories that are still relevant today.

In light of the above arguments, the aim of this study is to analyze Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* in terms of revisionist mythmaking which not only sheds light on the androcentric nature of myths but also reclaims the voices of the previously silenced and marginalized discourses. I claim that through their act of revising both Atwood and Winterson invest myths with new meanings and new ways of knowing. Just as Plate writes about revisionist mythmaking writers, Atwood and Winterson have dived into the ancient texts to know and understand "how women have been defined and femininity constructed" because they have intended to reveal this knowledge "not to pass it on, but to break its hold on the contemporary imagination" (53).

For the purposes of this study I have chosen Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson because both of these writers can be considered to be mythographers since they have had a lifelong fascination with ancient myths, and they frequently incorporate mythological stories and characters into their fictional works. Another reason for selecting their works is to investigate how, by re-visiting the mythic worlds of the two heroes—Odysseus in *The Penelopiad* and Heracles in *Weight*--, both mythographers undermine two parameters of masculinity: mental and physical strength. In their rewriting, these mythographers not only challenge and rewrite the canonical myths that have been passed down through generations, but they also look for ways to provide alternatives to the conventional dominant practices. Their remaking articulates marginalized voices that have been unheard, denied, or devalued. I try to investigate how feminist mythmaking as a project has altered the story we know since Rich's call for survival with its emancipatory promise by tracing

contemporary women's rewriting of the myths. As Rich brilliantly states, we aim to know myths "differently than we have ever known" (19). Drawing attention to the androcentric nature of myths that perpetuate patriarchal culture and dominance, Rich calls for "a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse," by rewriting the metanarratives and canonical works of the Western tradition (19). Myths, which have been described as "essential accounts" and "primary stories" of a culture have undoubtedly become the primary focus of the remaking attempts of feminist revisionary fiction (Dotty 210).

Accordingly, following a brief attempt to define the terms "myth," "mythology," and "mythography," the first chapter of this study will focus on works on feminist myth and archetypal criticism. Authors and critics that will be studied include, among others, Adrienne Rich, Helene Cixous, Estella Lauter, Carol Schreier Rupprecht, Marina Warner, and Maria Tatar. In addition to criticizing the androcentric nature of canonical myths, they also challenged and refuted the claims of male critics of myths and archetypes who failed to account for gender bias in their analyses.

Mythos is a way of describing and making sense of the world that existed prior to the emergence of logocentric, scriptocentric, and ideological systems. Mythos is inherent in literature since literature entails mythical tenets and systems. However, the transition from mythos to logos, from an oral to a written culture of storytelling means that myths undergo a patriarchal transformation. When mythos is written

down, it loses its dynamism and evolves into a canonical structure (Tatar 50, Kaya<sup>2</sup> *Kültürbilimsel Mitoloji* 12:00- 23:17). In her book *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*, Tatar furthers this argument by emphasizing the significance of oral storytelling as a source for the formation of canonical mythologies such as Homer's epics because as soon as they were written down, “they became part of the literary-historical record,” and their patriarchal norms and beliefs solidify into “timeless and universal truths” (50). The rewritings of Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, which will be analyzed in this study primarily challenge the notion that there is one, universal, and definitive version of a story.

For my methodology I will employ the theories of feminist epistemologists, such as Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Nancy Tuana, Miranda Fricker and Karen Barad, which are going to be discussed in the second chapter. I will concentrate specifically on feminist standpoint theory, feminist epistemology of ignorance and feminist new materialist epistemology. Feminism has made significant contributions to the ongoing conversation regarding the production of knowledge through both the critique of dominant paradigms and the construction of alternate ways of developing knowledge. Fundamentally, a feminist approach to knowledge creation seeks to investigate and value inclusion and connection over exclusion and separation, to value the subjective and emotional components of our knowledge, and to recognize and embrace the diversity and difference that are inherent in our embodied experiences of the world. The foundation of Western epistemology is regarded to emerge during the Enlightenment period and evolved into the Cartesian tradition,

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<sup>2</sup> When I cite Nevzat Kaya, I use my translation.

which was founded on a dualistic ontology (Jagger and Bordo 3). This dualistic ontology could also be traced back to early Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and remained prevalent in the works of later thinkers like Descartes and Kant (Stanley and Wise 19). Feminist thinkers have posed a challenge to the hierarchical sets of dualisms that characterize western thought, such as reason/emotion, culture/nature, and universal/particular. They brought to light the underlying patterns that were present in each set. In every set of paired terms, the first term is related to science, rationality, and the masculine, while the second is related to irrationality, non-scientific, and the feminine. (Harding; 1983; Lloyd 1984; Jagger 1992; and Wilshire 1992).

Feminist epistemologists, therefore, have a vested interest in exposing how knowledge construction is not gender-neutral and in challenging the dualistic ontology of Western knowledge that privileges men. Furthermore, they believe that the subject of Western thought has been a unified, disembodied, universal, and abstract knower; or, as Sandra Harding puts it, the traditional “knowing subject” has been “culturally and historically disembodied” and governed by the presumed rationality, so a “new subject of knowledge” would be “embodied and visible” and “socially situated” (Rethinking 63). Consequently, as opposed to universality claims of the ideal subject with no particularities, the subject's social situatedness — such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical capacities — plays a significant role in feminist attempts to reconstruct knowledge. Their main paradigm in knowledge production is the concept of “situated knowledges” outlined by Donna Haraway, who suggests that epistemologies of positioning should emphasize

“partiality and not universality” (589). Moreover, they developed a theory called feminist standpoint theory, following Marxist tradition, which incorporates the knowledge of marginalized groups into a society's epistemic resources, recognizes them as epistemic agents in knowledge production and values their knowledge for social transformation. According to Gaile Pohlhaus, “it is from marginalized situatedness that the inadequacy of our epistemic resources for making sense of parts of the experienced world is noticed” (721). The central tenet of feminist epistemology is to generate epistemic resources comprising the knowledge produced by marginalized situatedness to be acknowledged and used by all positions in society (720). In this regard, feminist epistemology provides a valid theoretical and critical background for the works of feminist revisionist mythmakers who invite us to visit the world of the epistemically excluded characters in canonical myths by placing these previously marginalized knowers at the center of their narratives. Accepting canonical myths as dominant epistemic resources that are less likely to be adequate for marginally situated knowers, this research aims to examine whether rewritings of the selected feminist revisionist mythmakers create new epistemic resources and to explore alternative ways they present to reconstruct conventional knowledge paradigms.

The aim of the third chapter of this study is to analyze the selected works of Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson in terms of feminist reconstruction of knowledge. While attempting to debunk a mythology created by centuries of literary representations, feminist mythographers seek to reconstruct our knowledge of the central texts of the Western canon from a revisionary feminist perspective. Thus, their

re-visioning as a feminist genre addresses the emancipatory promise of feminism that acknowledge women's subjectivity. As such, they aimed to create "a legitimate space for the expression of female experience" and "female subjectivity" in their narratives (Plate 54). Feminist mythographers' retelling of the canonical myths "from the standpoint of the margins are not limited to voicing" the untold stories of women, but also "[e]qually important are the intersections of gender with sexuality, social class, and ethnicity" (Plate 396). The remaking of dominant narratives that make up our collective memory be it literary, historical, or mythological "from the [marginalized] perspective of post-colonialism, feminism, and gender and queer studies," has altered our perception of the past (Plate 389).

What intended meanings and knowledge are revealed by the themes in these canonized versions of myths as foundational narratives of Western culture feminist mythographers seek to challenge? According to Dilek Direnç<sup>3</sup>, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* center on masculine heroic values, and the worlds of both epics are those of warrior men seeking wealth, power, leadership, reputation and immortality (55). The heroic deeds glorified in these epics and "their historically contingent values and beliefs harden into timeless and universal truths" constitute Western cultural heritage and have become deeply embedded in cultural memory, inspiring both previous generations and those of today (Tatar 149). Maria Tatar reminds us that the canonized epics, such as Homer's or Ovid's, are included in the curricula of educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, and that reading the canonical

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<sup>3</sup> When I reference Dilek Direnç's book *Kadın Yazarlardan Eski Masallar Yeni Meseller*, originally written in Turkish, I use my translation.

versions of heroes such as Achilles, Odysseus, Prometheus, and Hercules-Heracles teaches students of all ages how to be heroes. As a result, feminist revisionist mythmakers believed that the time had come to pass on new perspectives and voices to future generations through counter-narratives. What, then, is the issue with their heroic deeds? These mythical heroes embark on quests and journeys seeking glory in battle, which typically involve military and martial endeavors. Yet, as part of their heroic deeds in the course of their quests they not only kill enemies or slay monsters, but also abuse or rape women, silence “the other” and commit “insensate slaughter of the innocent” (Tatar 28). The myth of Medusa is one of the many examples of this. Once renowned for her unique beauty and who, “depending on which translation we read”, was subjected to seduction, violation, or rape by Poseidon (285), was punished for her interaction with a deity and transformed into a monster by Athena, who turned her beautiful hair into a web of snakes. Poseidon, on the other hand, was cleared of any wrong doing. Perseus, who beheads Medusa, was then hailed as “a shining hero” (286). Besides Medusa, Europa, Io, Leda, Callisto, Persephone, Philomela, and countless others make up a long list of women who were kidnapped, victimized or raped. Each of these tales can also be found in collections of mythographers such as Robert Graves, Edith Hamilton among others. Thus, myths that have survived in written form “contain the values and models of patriarchal femininity and masculinity in a hierarchical patriarchal structure with the dominant male hero at the top, the women and the alienated or demonized others identified with the body and nature at the bottom” (Direnç 56). These canonical myths uphold men's dominance, authority, and control over women, portraying women as commodities of this patriarchal order

that devalues them, renders them powerless and vulnerable, and silences them, as can be seen in the stories of Penelope and Briseis, among others (57).

As contemporary women writers Atwood and Winterson have offered alternative ways of knowing that reconstruct our knowledge by demythologizing canonical myths and investing them with new meanings. This study aims to provide alternative readings of Margaret Atwood's and Jeanette Winterson's rewritings in an effort to shed light on the feminist reconstruction of knowledge that both authors engage in.



## CHAPTER ONE

### FEMINIST REMAKING OF MYTHOGRAPHY

#### 1.1. Defining “Myth,” “Mythology,” And “Mythography”

Knowing old stories that “wear ancient wisdom” (Warner *Six Myths 19*), these abundant sources of knowledge expressing the values and norms of our societies construct and nurture how we define ourselves and how we see the world around us. The term “myth” is considered to have originated from the Greek word *mythos*, which can be translated as “word or story” (Doty 16). For William G. Doty, “Mythology is either a story or a word” (16). Complying with Roland Barthes’ understanding of the term *myth* as “a system of communication, ... a message” (109), Doty asserts that whoever engages in the *mythos*, “has the power to control the message, which is to create meaning in an effort to construct truths” (16).

In his broad-spectrum work, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, William G. Doty begins by noting the complexity involved in determining *myth* before proceeding to provide a definition:

Myths are culturally important, imaginal stories, conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation in the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind’s roles and relative statuses within...[They] convey the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as aspects of the natural and cultural

orders. Myths may be enacted or reenacted in rituals, ceremonies, and dramas. (Doty 34)

In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes designates myth as “a type of speech” that provides ideological foundations to guide individuals on a social, personal, and psychological level (109). If, as Roland Barthes puts it, “myth is a type of speech chosen by history,” then no myth can be said to be timeless” (132).

For the purpose of this study it is relevant to ask: What is mythology? Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* defines it so:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung) as the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God’s Revelation to His children (the Church). *Mythology is all of these*. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.... (Campbell *The Hero* 382; emphasis mine)

Since the present study aims to analyze the works of contemporary mythographers, we should also define the meaning of mythography. Mythography, the study of myths and rituals, is an “ancient term for the compilation of mythological accounts,” which was described as “the work of writers who generated written forms of myths from

accounts in poetry and literature and public life” (Doty XII). Equally important, it is the practice of applying analytical lenses to traditional forms of mythological writing. He claims that definitions of myth change as mythographic approaches change: “Myths can be made to mean whatever the myth teller wants them to mean, and their rhetorical power can be subjected to the prevailing modes of discourse of a particular era or power elite” (25). According to Doty, if mythography is critically analyzed, it “may function as a curettage device, scalping away debris (from our present perspective) that should have been removed long ago. It should provide us with a heightened dedication to forging the best possible personal and cultural mythos stories, stories that may lead to individual freedom and social growth” (Doty 47). This aspect of mythography allows for constant re-visioning.

Myths, according to mythographer Marina Warner, are more than just long-ago tales with seemingly harmless, or innocent images and themes since they carry deeply political and cultural understandings and meanings, and serve as invisible enforcements that shape individuals’ and societies’ values and experiences (*Six Myths* xix). Myths, for Warner, communicate universally applicable themes such as sexual identity and family dynamics, and thus have a greater potential to influence us than we might realize (*Six Myths* xix). As a result, the world of myths serves as a continuous source of knowledge that can be used to construct narrative patterns that shape the way we think (19). Although “they wear an ancient wisdom” which is “their seductive charm,” myths communicate the codes and structures inherent in our ideologies beneath our perceptions (19). She warns us that myths can cause us to act in irrational ways out of biases and fears, but she also believes “they’re not

immutable,” and by unboxing them we can make space for new stories to be told (*Six Myths* 19). Ultimately, while interpreting our reality they are simultaneously constructing reality. In other words, myths create a pretense of a universal truth that does not accommodate alternate visions. Throughout the course of this research, this presumption that myths embody universal truths plays a significant role because canonical myths which feminist mythographers revisit and rewrite, in Warner’s words, “successfully conceal their own contingency, changes and transitoriness so that the story they tell looks as if it cannot be told otherwise, that things always were like that and always shall be” (43).

## **1.2. Female Mythographers/Feminist Myth Criticism/Theory**

*What would happen to logocentrism, to the great philosophical systems, to the order of the world in general if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble? ..So all the history, all the stories would be there to retell differently; the future would be incalculable. [...]*

—Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*

Myth theories are constructed within the context of broader theoretical, ideological, and cultural concerns. Multiple disciplines, such as religion, anthropology, philosophy, literary criticism, analytical psychology, and sociology, have employed a variety of critical approaches to explain the nature of myths. This part of the study focuses on the feminist criticism of myths. Feminist critics, in a broad sense, draw awareness to the androcentric existence of canonical myths and the way in which they

were recorded, interpreted, and discussed from the male-centered perspective and discourse. For this reason, they investigate the male-centric attributes of mythical discourses in order to identify characters, usually female, who have been relegated to the periphery of mythologies. In addition, they criticized male critics of myths and archetypes for ignoring or failing to take gender bias into account in their studies. Feminist critics approach the leading critics in this field, such as Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye, Carl Jung and Erich Neumann, for their critical stance that reinforces patriarchal patterns of thought.

Freud's attribution of the “symbol of horror” that symbolizes castration to the Medusa myth, for example, is directly contradicted by Hélène Cixous' reading and understanding of the myths in her well-known work “The Laugh of the Medusa” (273). Even when women are the primary focus of male mythographers, as they are in the works of critics such as Robert Graves, they still treat women as sources of inspiration rather than embodied and fully realized human beings. As stated by Diane Purkiss, “Graves’ Muse may write and may eat her children, but she is still a figure in a poetic discourse which assumes the poet to be male” (443).

Carolyn Harrington in her work explicitly assumes that myths written about women cannot be classified as “women's myths” due to the fact that the narratives about women in mythology are written through a male discourse (*Companion to Mythology* xii). She continues by asserting that women authors have historically been prevented from having access to the resources necessary to construct their myths in written form, which would allow them to articulate their distinctive experiences and perspectives (xii). As a result, the fundamental tenet that feminist critics of myths

must adhere to is the denial of the traditional gender-biased misrepresentations that are deeply embedded within myths.

In her seminal 1972 essay “When We Dead Awake: Writing as Re-Vision,” American poet and literary critic Adrienne Rich offered a “new critical direction” for feminist critics and writers by revisiting the foundational texts of the literary heritage, thereby opening “a chapter in cultural history” as well as literary history and critical theory:

Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this derive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (18)

She viewed re-visioning of women writers as a medium of cultural transformation by introducing alternative narratives to the past, thus introducing new possibilities to the future. Going back to canonical texts of Western literary heritage necessitates rereading them through "fresh eyes" of feminist perspective. Since she considers revision as “an act of survival;” she believes that it is essential that it takes place. Sandra Gilbert also makes reference to this necessity in her essay “What Do Feminist Critics Want?” when she urges women to rewrite their history in order to claim a legitimate space for their voice, thereby reevaluating the patriarchal and hegemonic worldview in tradition: “We must redo our history, . . . review, reimagine, rethink,

rewrite, revise, and reinterpret the events and documents that constitute it” (31). Because myths are the “essential accounts, the primary stories” (Dotty 210) that constitute the core texts of the Western historical and literary canon, women writers of feminist re-visionary fiction have chosen myths to rewrite.

Liedeke Plate claims that “the awakening of a feminist consciousness” and how it will lead to “self-knowledge” is the central theme of Rich's essay (46). Plate thinks that when women finally wake up to their reality, they will acquire self-knowledge. In their pursuit for self-identity, it is crucial for women to have this self-knowledge as it allows them to recognize the ways in which their perception is formed and the limitations placed on their imagination (Plate 47). Another underlying reason for rewriting literary canons that constitute the cultural imaginary stored and transmitted by myths of literary past is that they form our “knowledge from which we derive identity, both at the individual and at the collective level” (Plate 9). As a result, in order to break the hold of the limitations of this knowledge, rewriting becomes a textual strategy for women writers to narrate their alternative stories to counter dominant myths. This contributes to the reconstruction of our knowledge in a way that does not reduce the marginalized characters, particularly women, to objects of knowledge. Instead, by giving them agency to tell their stories, they acknowledge marginalized experiences as sources of knowledge.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous shares assertions analogous to those of Adrienne Rich. She introduces the concept of feminine writing, or *écriture féminine*. She investigates how women relate to language, and encourages women to rewrite themselves. Cixous implements her theory into practice by reversing the

values that have traditionally been assigned to Medusa. Medusa, who transforms anybody who gazes upon her into stone, isn't a terrifying mythical creature anymore: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). Liedeke Plate attributes the literary appearance of Cixous' Medusa to two overlapping reasons: "on the one hand, the denial of her traditional form (she's not deadly) and, on the other, the affirmation of her new one (she is beautiful and she is laughing)" (*Transformig* 52). Plate believes that these two linguistic threads reflect the dual methodology of the rewriting process: "as rereading and as rewriting, oriented towards the past it revises and the future it envisions" (52).

In a similar vein, putting her theory into practice, Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" offers "guides, maps, possibilities" to women writers who are in search of their "way of being in the world" (22). The poet persona, having finished her reading of "the book of myths," descends into the ocean's depths to investigate the wreck to unearth ancient treasures buried beneath the decay (22). For Margaret Atwood, the wreck she dives to investigate contains "obsolete myths, particularly myths about men and women" (qtd. in Plate 281). It is comparable to her essay in which she urges feminists to delve into "an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich *When* 19). In this sense, revisionist mythmaking aims to discover this hidden mythical treasure "for the truth behind the myth, seeking to recover the reality of the wrecked lives" (Plate 49).

In her essay titled "The Thieves of Language," Susan Alicia Orstiker encourages female authors and poets to become "thieves of language, female

Prometheuses” when they retell traditional stories and myths (210). For Ostriker, mythological accounts are “the treasures” that store and maintain our conceptions of what it means to be female and male (211). In light of this, the revision of myths provides us with new alternatives that enrich our knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman or a human being (211). Ostriker analyzes women’s poetry, including works by Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, and Margaret Atwood. She contends that in order for “the old stories to no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy,” it is the responsibility of women poets to ensure that “the old stories are changed, changed utterly by *female knowledge of female experience*” (Ostriker 73; emphasis mine). As such, for Ostiker, it is crucial for them to engage in feminist revisionist mythmaking.

The concept of the archetype is a fundamental part of myth criticism in literary theories. Myth critics analyze the literary works to find symbols, images, characters, and motifs, called archetypes. Jung provides the following meaning for the word “archetype”: “The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure...that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure” (*On the Relation* 80).

Jung held the belief that myth is the product of a phenomenon he refers to as the “collective unconscious” (2). His theory suggests that people's minds are organized in accordance with repetitive and universal archetypal patterns that are common to all cultures. This pattern of recurrence, he says, is “the contents of the collective unconscious” (4). Because archetypes are the patterns that lie beneath mythic stories, which in turn shape literature, language, and ultimately culture,

archetypes, for Jung, could be seen as the collective heritage that are related to humans as a whole. Feminist critics of Jung's work take a more skeptical approach to his ideas regarding the collective unconscious and archetypes, particularly due to his view that these concepts are fundamental and universal. Feminist critics do not completely refute these concepts; rather, they advance the discussion about archetypes by drawing attention to the social and political consequences of the term. That's why, for example, they reject the traditional definition of the term archetype and instead view it as having the potential to shape and reshape images in response to specific types of recurrent experience, making it distinct both within and between individuals as well as within and between cultural contexts (Lauter and Rupprecht 12). Accordingly, feminist myth critics argue that archetypes are not fixed representations of reality or unchanging social truths, but rather dynamic social constructions that are capable of taking different meanings depending on the cultural context and time in which they are situated. If we take this definition into account, it becomes an effective resource for literary criticism in examining the formation of the universal and the particular, the social construction of gender, and the reconstruction of theory of knowledge that takes subjectivity into account.

*Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-visions of Jungian Thought* edited by Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht was published in 1985. The contributors to this book, all of whom are feminist archetypal theorists, revisit and reevaluate Jung's archetypal theories in order to present new ways of thinking and knowing. They offer a new perspective on archetypal theories by emphasizing the importance of giving women a space to articulate their voice, experiences and

perspectives. They advocate for the forgotten texts that were excluded from the canon to be rediscovered and recovered, as well as for the canonical texts to be reevaluated by uncovering the ideological underpinnings of the narratives. They intend to construct a theory in order to explain concerns that are unique to women (14). They hoped that by surveying a wide variety of works written by women authors, they would be able to find a model to narrate “the female experience” (14). The primary criticism leveled by feminist archetypal theorists is directed toward the practice of viewing the archetype as an immutable image. They regard archetypes as changing images rather than fixed images. In addition, Carol Schreier Rupprecht argued that Jung’s views on women have limitations because they tend to create dualism and define women primarily in relation to the men, where they are portrayed as a shadow of male subjectivity (282).

In a related vein, Annis Pratt, in her essay “Spinning among Fields,” shows how men dominate the field of archetypal theory and criticizes them for failing to address female psyche. According to Pratt, Jung’s approach rests on the assumption that archetypal patterns that are generated by male experience can also be applicable to female experience. Thus, female archetypes are read through the lens of male patterns, which obscure and marginalize women’s lived experience. By doing so, he fails to recognize the archetype of feminine can originate from the experiences of women (96). Her critical aim is, for Maggie Humm, “to reconstitute latent meaning in mythical stories, and also, simultaneously, constitute new knowledge about women” (67). She has investigated recurring symbolism in a variety of woman authors' works, which she characterizes as a “collective psychic repository albeit fluid and in

progression rather than ontologically or even genetically absolute” (164). By criticizing the unchanging, absolute presumption of myth in relation to the fictional world it generates in canonical mythological narratives, she intends to argue that myth should be described in this context by its potential for transformation. By employing a feminist perspective, these scholars aim to liberate the image and the archetype of femininity from the constraints of male criticism and recreate them with alternate perspectives. Thus, they reconstruct a diverse analysis of both males and females in mythology and literature by reimagining these mythical stories through the lens of female experience. As stated by Maggie Humm “the core of feminist myth criticism is a refusal of existing mythical representations of gender and an attempt to find new literary vocabularies” (56).

In her book titled *Women as Mythmakers*, Estella Lauter explores women poets and artists who, through their mythmaking, attempt to legitimize women’s experiences that have been ignored and misrepresented by dominant literary tradition. She regards mythmaking as “a continuing process and not a stage that human beings passed through thousands of years ago” (1). Lauter's emphasis on mythmaking as an evolving and ongoing process is important in this context. Because, unlike canonical myths of the past, this focus enables contemporary women mythographers to create new cultural myths that are non-hierarchical, adaptable, and transformative.

In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis intends to figure out the narrative strategies and approaches employed by contemporary female poets in their retellings of classic myths. The most ideological aspect of a myth, for her, is its refusal to admit that it never addresses anything that is not universal or transcendent

(106). Therefore, when rewriting myths, the challenge for women writers is to overcome the prevailing universal pretense of myths hidden behind ideology: “Of all stories, myths are considered the most universal, describing deep structures of human need and evincing the most cunning knowledge of ‘mankind’... claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural or even archetypal status” (106).

DuPlessis identifies the two narrative strategies that women writers use when revising myths: The first one is referred to as “displacement,” which is a narrative approach that entails shifting the emphasis from the center to its periphery, from the narrated to the unnarrated part of the story. This is accomplished by giving those who were previously silenced and marginalized a space from which to voice their perspectives (107). As for the second, it’s called “delegitimation,” and it involves rearranging the order of events and/or breaking the narrative’s continuity (108). Displacement and delegitimation are DuPlessis’ strategies for remaking known mythical stories by focusing on what Alicia Ostriker refers to as “female knowledge of female experience” (Thieves 318).

DuPlessis claims that by altering the narrative, giving voice to the marginalized, and creating spaces for identification, women mythographers simultaneously reclaim “the dark, secret, always unconscious truths that the fathers have struggled to repress” (444). The difficulty for women revisionist mythographers in rewriting master narratives, for her, stems from the fact that rewriting “goes against the grain of a major function of myth: the affirmation of dominant culture” (DuPlessis 107). The goal of feminist revision is, therefore, to reconstruct female subjectivity by directly challenging this “cultural agreement” (DuPlessis 106).

Diane Purkiss, in her essay “Women’s Rewriting of Myths,” in a related manner, argues that myth’s apparent timeless and universal qualities can be challenged by employing postmodern narrative techniques such as high/low art, pastiche irony, parody, and the juxtaposition of myth and contemporary culture (445). She concludes her essay as follows: “Women must continue to struggle to tell the stories otherwise. The possibilities are endless” (455).

Feminist myth critics and/or feminist archetypal theorists have continued to work on feminist revisionist mythmaking ever since Rich’s call in 1972. The last two contemporary feminist mythographers we will examine are Marina Warner and Maria Tatar, both of whom are still actively publishing works on feminist mythmaking. Marina Warner distinguishes her approach from that of Freud or Jung in the same way that feminist archetypal theorists do because she emphasizes how the social context in which a myth is enacted and interacted with can alter the meaning of the myth (*Six Myths* xx). She also emphasizes here that myths are socially constructed, and that the process of creating myths, as well as the knowledge they generate, can be influenced by social and historical contexts. Therefore, she believes that this changing and evolving quality of myth “can give rise to newly told stories” in order to correct the stereotypically negative traits associated with women and men, such as “dangerous mothers and warrior heroism” (xx). She believes these “newly told stories” have the potential “to sew and weave and knit different patterns into the social fabric” (xx). Thus, they can produce “more helpful sets of images or tales” (xx).

In her 2022 book *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*, Maria Tatar, a contemporary feminist myth critic and folklorist, challenges the canonical configurations of heroism in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. She claims "nowhere does the rigidity of archetypal thinking emerge more clearly than in the binary model of the male and female principle as it surfaced in Campbell's study of world mythologies" (9) because he states, for instance, "the woman's the mother of the hero; she's the goal of the hero's achieving; she's the protectress of the hero" (qtd. in Tatar 8). In addition, for him, "she's the inspirer of poetry," with three functions: "one, to give us life; two, to be the one who receives us in death; and three, to inspire our spiritual, poetic realization" (qtd. in Tatar 9). Throughout her work, she demonstrates how his ideas continue to shape the Western imagination, concealing our view of how women have been figured in fictions we've internalized and transformed into canonic and universal cultural expressions. She claims that when identifying the distinguishing features of the hero archetype, Campbell gives no place to women "in his pantheon of heroes" (24). Women, according to Campbell, represent "the totality of what can be known," reducing her to an object that can be known by a hero, who, he adds, is "the one who comes to know," making him the ideal, universal subject of knowledge (qtd. in Tatar 24).

However, for her, since the emergence of feminist myth critics and women rewriters, once they redefine the archetypes that male critics such as Joseph Campbell have identified in mythology, the silenced and marginalized characters of the canon have resurrected "to take their places in a new pantheon that is reshaping our notion of what constitutes heroism" (13). She thinks despite the fact that our understanding

of gender has been broadened in recent years to include “non-binary and gender-fluid identities,” it is still crucial to reexamine the culturally scripted performances and rigid binary codes depicted in myths, legends, and fairy tales from the past (29). She places a strong emphasis on the necessity of revising these stories because they are stored in cultural memory and they become sources of knowledge for future generations (30).

Maria Tatar, then, turns to one of the foundational texts of the Western world, Homer’s *Odyssey*. She argues that *the Odyssey* provides us with archetypes of women from which “the foundational stereotypes” are derived (50). There we read about Helen, the seductive femme fatale who poses a threat to society. Then there’s virtuous Penelope, who serves as a model of fidelity as the faithful wife. And finally, there is the murderous Clytemnestra, who conspires with her lover to murder her husband. Tatar brings to our attention the fact that these canonized classic texts have been given a place in the classroom, specifically in foundational, nationwide curricula that are made to construct cultural values. This fact alone, in her view, should be enough to convince us that the way we interpret Homer's epic and other classics is important (36). As stated by Tatar: “students have been taught to accept these stories as canonical, authoritative, and normative, and were rarely, if ever, encouraged to question silencing or to challenge gender stereotyping. Until now” (50). She emphasizes the significance of oral storytelling as a source for the formation of canonical mythologies such as Homer's epics because as soon as they were written down, “they became part of the literary-historical record,” and “their historically contingent values and beliefs harden into timeless and universal truths” (50). In her

view, despite the fact that women may appear in these accounts of a hero's deeds and achievements, they are frequently "invisible, lacking agency, voices, and a public presence" (15). Feminist mythographers' heroines, on the other hand, are not looking for heroic actions to perform. Instead of using violence and weapons, they seek justice by telling stories that expose wrongdoings and injustices (36). Therefore, she identifies these mythographers as "Social Justice Storytellers" because "they make visible the faces of the marginalized and let us hear their voices," (53) thereby altering the myths that we know and live by.

This study aims to explore mythographies of contemporary women writers Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson. These writers not only challenge, question, and revise the myths that sound highly patriarchal in their fiction, but they also attempt to offer alternatives to the established literary traditions. Their remaking articulates the voices of the marginalized that have been unheard, denied, or devalued in the canonical versions. By narrating their previously ignored stories, claiming their experiences, and situating them at the center of their narratives, these writers presented alternative textual politics to remake the prevailing myths as well as investing them with new meanings, variations and patterns that ultimately provide us with new knowledge about not only female but also male experience. To reconstruct feminist knowledge they challenged the dualisms and biases dominating the whole system of thought that conceives reality in binary terms. In addition, the unchanging, absolute, and universal presumption of myth in relation to the fictional world it generates in canonical myths was criticized by these rewriters. This criticism is similar to feminist epistemologists' claims regarding knowledge production. To this

end, how these feminist revisionist mythologists changed our knowledge by remaking mythography will be investigated in light of feminist epistemological theories.

### **1.3. Myth as a Source of Feminist Knowledge**

In his book *Myth as a Source of Knowledge* Harold Harmaan claims that all forms of knowledge are attached to myth-making because of “the inclination of the human mind to attach all sorts of sentimental speculations, metaphorical connotations, beliefs and values, wishful thinking, and expectations to the core of something people take as truth” (11). For him, knowledge is interconnected with myth through the abundant connotations and meanings associated with it: “The values crystallizing around items of knowledge are the stuff from which myths are made, for people to live by” (11). Accordingly, he asserts “people live by myths in our day as people did in ancient Greece” (12).

Reading the history of Western philosophy may lead one to believe that philosophers have prioritized rational discourse (logos) over myth (mythos). This presumption that philosophy places a greater emphasis on reason than mythos has been the central tenet of the feminist agenda. However, as we will observe in the readings of feminist critics, understanding the relationship between myth/mythos and reason/logos “as complementary rather than exclusive offers us the opportunity of tapping into a resource of cultural knowledge” (Harmaan 4). In this sense, mythology, as a source of knowledge, offers a great deal of information for exploring the evolution of human understanding to explain the world. In its earliest sense, myth meant “neither a true nor false story, but as the total experience and expression (in narrative form) of life” (Heller 13). As William Doty states “mythic narratives are a

form of knowing (note the Indo-European cognates from the Proto-Indo-European stem \*gno-: know/cunning/ken/cognition/narrative/gnosis). The knowing is not just that of the rational, ideational aspects of human consciousness, but that of the sensual-aesthetic, moral, and emotional as well” (Doty 55).

Feminists’ attempts to reconstruct myths show their desire to remake not the gender bias but also this privileging of logos over mythos that has been established and sustained by the dominant myths of Western thought for centuries. Therefore, this part of the study aims to explore feminist critics’ reinterpretations of myths to reconstruct feminist knowledge.

In the chapters they contribute to *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Donna Wilshire and Alison Jaggar, like the other essays in the book, offer a critique of mainstream epistemological and ethical traditions while pointing to alternative ways of knowing. In their critique the knowing subject emerges as embodied, emotional, and rational whose body, emotions, and reason are the constitutive elements of knowledge.

Donna Wilshire in her essay “The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-Visioning Knowledge” argues against the conventional western theory of knowledge—which she calls “the Apollonian model” as it places the utmost importance on rational thought—and proposes an alternative to it. She replaces it with “a field or matrix model” that recognizes and values all patterns of our thinking (116). She criticizes Aristotle’s world of hierarchical dualisms and his claim that “Reasoned Knowledge is the highest human achievement,” which makes men superior because

only they are “capable of achieving in this mental area” (116). She claims that while the history of western civilization and philosophy has been diversified over the centuries, with each period emphasizing its preferred, different aspects of knowledge and its acquirement, she contends that all of these periods have overtly degraded “the earth and body, most especially the female body along with female-associated ways of knowing and being-in-the-world” (118). She describes Descartes’ separation of knowledge and reason as a quest for “Pure Knowledge” based on “hierarchical dualisms — with their bias for Mind (i.e. maleness) and bias against body and matter (i.e. femaleness)” (119). Wilshire creates a list of contrasting word clusters, the “core dualisms” that underpin western philosophy and ethics (120). These clusters prioritize “mind over body, reason over emotion, the public over the private, literal fact over metaphor and myth, light over darkness, and spirit over nature” (120). Instead of choosing or degrading one column or the other, she proposes integration of both that appreciates the various ways of knowing the words and ideas presented in both columns (95). If we take this approach to interpreting myths, for her, they will reveal us that the true essence of life lies “in wholeness, in interconnectedness, and in a cyclical experience of time—not in dualisms and not in linearity” (119). As such, Wilshire disagrees with the epistemological constraints imposed by the Cartesian worldview, advocating instead a more pluralistic approach to knowledge. She contends that there are multiple ways of knowing that can coexist and complement one another (95). Donna Wilshire’s integrated approach to knowledge reclaims the value of the emotions and the bodily experience as legitimate means of knowing the world (98). In a nutshell, a feminist vision/revision of knowledge, for her, must be a

non-dualistic one that eliminates oppressive hierarchies, thereby opening up fascinating opportunities for the future, for greater insight into our nature.

In her essay “Myth and Feminist Philosophy,” Pamela Sue Anderson describes myths as stories that transform the lived experiences of embodied beings into narrative form. Myths play an important role for a society to develop their culture of thought, situates its knowledge, and constructs its heritage by providing people with context for making sense of their lived experiences (101). She demonstrates in her essay that myth and feminist epistemology entail sets of terms that are intertwined in the transformation of Western philosophy. Anderson argues that we, including philosophers, need to engage in “mythopoesis” (13). In explaining the feminist’s choice to focus upon myth, Anderson writes that myth comprise rich imagery and narrative that have contributed significantly the rational discourse in philosophical texts. Therefore, myth becomes an essential tool for feminists seeking justice in order to reconstruct the established power structures that have excluded women and other marginalized groups from full participation in society (120). She believes feminist theorists must employ this “mythic imagination” in order to unearth and reimagine the world's underlying meaning formations in order for them to have an impact on the liberatory transformation of the immediate world (101).

Anderson asserts, following Michèle Le Doeuff<sup>4</sup>, that myth narrates reason and emotion as two complementary attributes, and the epistemological rendering of

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<sup>4</sup> Michele Le Doeuff, a feminist philosopher, says that myth has always been a source of imagery for philosophy as well as a way to incorporate emotion into rational thinking. She regards myth as an integral part of philosophical texts and argues that the two cannot be separated. For Le Doeuff, the

the world of corporeal beings requires both (101). Anderson creates a classification of four distinct feminist epistemological approaches to myth. Kevin Schilbrack rephrases and shortens them “as strategies to retrieve, transcend, subvert, and refigure myth” (13). To address the first approach, she claims, they attempt to look beyond the patriarchal images concealed in myth, so that they can “reverse the reversals of patriarchy,” and old myths need to be retold in a manner that is radically different from their original versions (104) to uncover mythical images of women prior to patriarchy. In short, this group aims to expose patriarchal myths that are responsible for the death of the mother-goddess in an effort to reclaim the truthful, empowering and positive representations of women's connections to the natural world (104). She names Jane Harrison, Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly in this category, who contend that patriarchal structures conceal “primitive matriarchy in myth,” which holds positive representations and meanings that can reconstruct maternal values (104). As for the second which she calls “a liberal-existentialist or liberal-culturalist feminist approach,” they believe that patriarchal myths help perpetuate the false images and configurations of woman as the other lacking agency and thus, contribute to gender inequality (105). In this group, Anderson exemplifies Beauvoir's approach to myth, which seeks to engage in eradicating the patriarchal structures that are embedded in myths (105). The third approach is a “progressive-poststructuralist feminist approach to myth,” which seeks to unearth and deconstruct patriarchal construction of canonical myths. This approach is exemplified by Luce Irigaray, who contends that

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integration of myth and philosophy provides a comprehensive account of lived experience which necessitates the inclusion of aspects of an embodied being such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, class. See Le Doeuff, M.(1989) *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. C. Gordon, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p.1-20.

myth necessitates destructive refiguration: “miming,' mimetic refiguration – which disrupts and so transforms history,” (106) and American philosopher Donna Haraway whose transgressive perspective on spatial and temporal dimensions of myth dismantles the binary reasoning and privilege of paternalistic myths (108). Her theories explain the function of myth in acquiring socially situated knowledges. At the very end of her chapter, she offers a fourth approach, drawing inspiration from Drucilla Cornell's reexamination of Kant's theory. Anderson agrees with Cornell's review of how the imagination works when it comes to myths and the imaginary domain, which is a space to articulate “the self-representation of our sexual being...” (qtd. in Anderson 113). Anderson believes the productive functioning of the imagination should be used to construct a space in which gender bias in myths can be transformed (114). As such, she agrees with feminist revisionist mythmakers that their primary goal should be to transform the patriarchal biases and flaws embedded to the canonical myths to reconstruct our knowledge.

Anderson claims that the tools provided by feminist epistemology contributed this transformation of the patriarchal distortions in myths. At this point, she draws attention to Haraway's perspective on myth and how it contributes to the development of feminist socially situated knowledges. The concept of “situated knowledges” proposed by Donna Haraway refers to a way of understanding that all knowledge derives from positional and partial perspectives. Therefore, Anderson argues that feminist mythographers can advance feminist socially and materially situated knowledges through the imaginatively productive process of myth-making:

it is precisely myth's role in the productive functioning of the imagination which, I insist, can inform us epistemologically. That is, the productive functioning of the imagination as manifest in myth-making can help us to achieve feminist socially and materially situated knowledges; it should enable us to know the difference between the conditions of oppression and the freedom of women and men in full view of our highly specific social and material conditioning. (113)

Since the purpose of this research is to explore feminist reconstruction of knowledge through remaking of mythography, Anderson's claim that the tools offered by feminist epistemology contributed the transformation of the patriarchal distortions in myths plays an important role. Therefore, the second part of this study aims to examine feminist epistemology.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

#### 2. 1. Feminist Epistemology

*All men naturally desire knowledge.*

—Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

*We who have not been allowed to be the subjects of history, who have not been allowed to make history, are beginning to reclaim our pasts and remake our futures on our own terms.*

—Nancy Hartsock, *Rethinking Modernism*

Feminist mythographers turn to canonical myths as sites of knowledge-making to produce alternative representations alongside the dominant epistemologies or canonical myths to interrogate the mainstream assumptions about gender, power, privilege, sexuality, and race. Feminist mythographers' rewritings and criticism generate a form of knowledge "which translates or reconstitutes latent meaning in mythical stories and simultaneously constitutes a new knowledge about women" (Humm 96). Therefore, exploring theories of feminist epistemology can provide valid theoretical background to examine alternative ways of knowledge reconstructed by feminist mythographers in their rewritings.

Knowledge, in traditional epistemology, is defined as a relationship between the knowing being (subject) and the known or desired to be known (object). The position of subject and object, the possibility or impossibility of knowledge; its source, scope, and limits, are the kind of questions that form the branch of philosophy

called the theory of knowledge, or epistemology (Arslan 27). Grounding knowledge merely on a subject-object relationship means to perceive the world as something made up of objects to be known by subjects. Feminist epistemologist Susan J. Hekman argues that most Western philosophy, including the epistemology that characterizes Enlightenment humanism, is highly biased. As stated by Heckman: “Since the Enlightenment, knowledge has been defined in terms of ‘man,’ the subject, and espouses an epistemology that is radically homocentric” (*Feminist Epistemologies* 2). Therefore, how gender situates this epistemic subject, i.e. knowing subject; is one of the main questions of feminist epistemology. In traditional epistemology, such as that presented by Plato, Descartes, and Locke, among others, the subject is generally understood to be “the would-be ideal knower” (Calvin 26). Therefore, feminist epistemologists renamed this subject as a “featureless abstraction” (Code 1). In this position, the subject does not have particularities such as classes, races, religions, genders, sexes, and sexualities. Here, rather than positing an abstract “knowing subject,” feminist epistemologists introduce the notion of the situated subject or knower which focuses on the subject's embodiment, “as well as the specific social and historical contexts” of it (Nelson 121). This presumed universal subject is referred to by Donna Haraway as the “God-trick” of “the idealized would-be-knower” and his “view from nowhere” (458). Feminist epistemologists countered this view by positing the idea of a knower who is embodied and culturally situated, that is, a knower who has a view from a specific location. As Haraway stated: “I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality

and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway *Situated knowledges* 589).

In her chapter in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* entitled “Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity,” Elizabeth Grosz scrutinizes the relations between feminist theory and the male theoretical mainstreams. She argues that feminist theory needs to commit to developing new paradigms and norms of knowledge while also using a “critical,” or “reactive,” strategy against sexism (59). She believes that so as to go beyond prevailing patriarchal knowledges, feminist theory “must work through them, understand them, displace them in order to create a space of its own, a space designed and inhabited by women, capable of expressing their interests and values” (60). In order to challenge patriarchal knowledges, Grosz claims, feminist theory should generate “a positive and constructive project by creating alternatives, producing feminist, not simply anti-sexist, theory” (59). In other words, it is necessary for feminist theory to “exist both as *critique* and *construct*” (59; emphasis mine). In a similar vein, feminist epistemology also emerged as *critique* and *construct*.

In their collection entitled *Feminist Epistemologies* (1993), Linda Martin Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter state that they employ the phrase “feminist epistemology” to address “women’s ways of knowing,” “women’s experience,” or “women’s knowledge,” (Alcoff and Potter 1). They introduce feminist epistemologists’ aim as questioning “of a general or universal account of the nature and limits of knowledge, an account that ignores the social context and status of knowers” (1), and as engaging with “the politics of knowledge and the impact of the social status as well as the

sexed body of the knower upon the production of knowledge” (2). To be more specific, it studies how socially constructed gender conceptions and norms, as well as gendered values and experiences, affect the generation of knowledge.

*Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Decartes (1596–1651) is frequently cited as the work that marked the beginning of modern epistemology. His contributions to the theory of knowledge in his *Meditations* caused some epistemological discussions ever since the seventeenth century (Calvin 5). He represents, for feminist theorists, “an example of a systematic theory of knowledge that has had gendered consequences” (Calvin 5). Feminist epistemologists, then, have constructed a variety of approaches so as to show that women are able to generate and verify knowledge, as well as reshape the parameters of knowledge itself (Calvin 5). They seek to uncover the identity of the knower, and “mak[e] subjectivity count<sup>5</sup>” in order to reveal “politics of epistemic practice<sup>6</sup>” (Madhok and Evans 3).

Feminist epistemology does not offer a single or unified critical position; rather, it encompasses a wide range diverse, dynamic, pluralistic and interdisciplinary theoretical projects (Campbell 96). Therefore, it intends to investigate how a variety of factors contribute to the construction of knowledge, such as “one’s historical and cultural location, and social locations, including class, race, gender, religion, and the cognitive role of emotions” (Tuana 36). Feminist epistemology, in this sense, is similar to earlier feminist theories that interact with and challenge dominant

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to Code’s frequently quoted phrase “Objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account” (21). For further assessment see Lorraine Code ‘Taking Subjectivity Into Account’, in L. Alcoff and E. Potter (eds), *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York: Routledge. 1993):15–48

<sup>6</sup> Referring to Miranda Fricker’s work : Miranda Fricker. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

discourses including science, religion, the legal system, and literature. In this context, their critical orientation as critique and construct focus on the gendered biases at the heart of philosophical endeavors such as objectivity, reason, rationality and subjectivity on the production of knowledge.

The universalist pretensions of reason as well as the gender neutrality of the knower are called into question by feminist philosophy and epistemology. Therefore, feminist epistemologists question the idea of a unified, universal, and disembodied subject as well as the duality of rational/irrational thought. They highlight the contributions of the emotions and the significance of the body in the process of generating knowledge. The epistemic role of embodiment was either disregarded or undervalued by traditional epistemologies. As a consequence, the embodiment of a knowing subject is regarded as epistemically significant. They also ejected the epistemic validity of our bodily differences (Stanley and Wise 8). Therefore, feminist epistemologists position the subject in the everyday lived and bodily experiences. In other words, in contrast to the traditional view that one's knowledge is gained through the application of a universal, disembodied, and rational mind, feminist epistemologists accept that knowledge is embodied.

In "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," Harding notes that the traditional "knowing subject" was "culturally and historically disembodied" (63) and, accordingly, that a "new subject of knowledge" would be "embodied and visible" (63). They reread the key texts of the Western philosophical tradition from feminist perspectives. Descartes' ideals of reason, for example, have been challenged by these feminist re/readings. It is necessary to emphasize here what Genevieve Lloyd makes

clear in her essay “Rationality” (2017). For her, it is not necessary to reject reason or philosophy in order to participate in the critique of reason and mainstream philosophical practice: “The history of philosophy, after all, is full of such critiques and challenges. Properly understood, feminist critique of reason can be seen as an enrichment and revitalizing of philosophical practice - to the benefit of all philosophers” (165).

In a nutshell, rather than focusing on “an abstract, ideal would-be knower,” feminist epistemologists reconstruct the traditional knowledge claims by suggesting “the concrete, everyday would-be knower, in relation to the world and both the subjects and objects that occupy that world” (Calvin 30). Knowers, then, are “social, embodied, interested, emotional, and rational and whose body, interests, emotions, and reason are fundamentally constituted by [their] particular historical context” (Jaggar and Bordo 6).

Although feminist epistemologists offer diverse accounts of how to challenge the mainstream epistemological thinking, Sandra Harding in her influential book *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) divides feminist epistemology into three categories —feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism, and feminist empiricism (Harding 106). More recently, “new feminist materialisms” have shifted feminist epistemological attention to the issue of conceptualizing materiality and subjectivity. It aims to explore “how to understand the physical embodiment of the biological subject and how to extend epistemological analysis to include the material physical world, such that it includes non-human things and objects as well as humans as epistemological agents” (Campbell, 97).

### **2.1.1. Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theorists contend that prevailing knowledge theories disadvantage women because they perpetuate stereotypes about women as being inferior, irrational, or unimportant except when supporting male interests, or because they generate theoretical underpinnings that render the lives and interests of women invisible, or strengthen gender as well as other forms of social distinctions. These problems, according to feminist epistemologists, stem from distorted understandings of knowledge, knowers, objectivity (Anderson 1; Code 147). Therefore, they provide a variety of strategies for overcoming these failures.

Feminist standpoint theorists including sociologists Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins, political philosophers Nancy Hartsock and Alison Jaggar, philosophers of science Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, following the Marxist tradition, reconstructed the concept of proletarian standpoint. One of the assets Marxism provides feminists is that the material conditions, in other words living circumstances, of peoples' lives can form their perception and knowledge of the world; namely, his pointing out the knowing subject's social position (Potter 135). Borrowing this idea, they assert that knowledge is "socially constructed" (Potter 135).

Alison Jaggar, in her essay "Feminist Politics and Epistemology: The Standpoint of Women" states that in class societies, knowledge is generated from the standpoint of the ruling class, which reflects the interests and values of that class. Because the ruling class tends to conceal how it oppresses and exploits the other members of society, the reality it creates will be distorted in recognizable ways

(*Feminist Epistemology Reader* 56). Accordingly, many members of the ruling class fail to understand “the suffering of the subordinate classes” or ignore their experiences by justifying them as “freely chosen, deserved, or inevitable” (56). Members of the oppressed groups, however, experience direct consequences of the oppressive system (56). According to Jagggar their suffering can serve as a catalyst for identifying the problems, challenging the validity of our commonly held beliefs about reality, and for creating the ways of comprehending the world that are less distorted (57). Therefore, the standpoint of the oppressed “is also epistemologically advantageous” (57) because the members of the oppressed can “see more clearly the ruled as well as the rulers and the relation between them” (59). Jagggar summarizes her point by saying, “this distinctive social or class position provides women with a distinctive epistemological standpoint” (57).

Feminist standpoint theory is a critical theory developed by feminists in the 1970s, and it has its roots in the practice of “consciousness-raising” (*Code Feminist Epistemology* 12). Consciousness-raising<sup>7</sup> groups influenced the development of feminist theory of knowledge. In these groups, women talked about their lives and reflected on their own experiences and found out that their individual problems were also shared by many other women. This enabled them to see the patterns that they could not discover on their own; hence, they started to recognize oppressive patterns

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<sup>7</sup> Philipa Rothfield in her article “Feminism Subjectivity, Sexual Difference” in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* asserts that consciousness raising (CR) enabled women to articulate their personal issues, including body image, sexuality, sexual relationships, and motherhood. She states that: “it is possible to say that CR functioned historically to help feminists flesh out the content of their subjectivities, and to perceive connections in relation to their shared/common experience” (129-131).

they were subjected to and developed an awareness of the ways in which oppressive systems restrict and form their knowledge (Intemann 786). After acknowledging their individual experiences to be recognized as social and political problems, “the personal thus became not only political, but also theoretical” (Tuin 1).

Feminist standpoint epistemologists base their studies on the marginalized lives because they believe the knowledge of the marginalized can serve as a resource for social transformation (Harding *Rethinking* 127). Marginality here also implies “being left out as known or knowable; being denied credibility in knowledge production processes and practices” (Evans and Madhok 15). The working hypothesis of feminist standpoint theory is knowledge is “socially constructed” (Potter 135) and all attempts to know are “socially situated” (Harding *Reader* 11). For Nancy Tuana, accepting the social situatedness of knowledge, they, in general, shows “the ways that a knower’s situatedness affects not just *what* she or he knows, but also *how* she or he knows” (Tuana *Feminist* 128). Concisely, feminist epistemologists lay epistemic importance to situated knowers – to the particulars of a person's knowledge, such as their sexual identity, racial group, socioeconomic status, and other contexts. In doing so, they challenge the universal knowledge claims of conventional epistemology.

Reading standpoint theories in line with feminist rewriting of myths can offer critical insights into dominant structures of knowledge in canonical myths. It can also help to analyze how deconstructing and reconstructing myths in feminist re-writings can lead to reconstructing knowledge spaces that are more democratic and non-oppressive. I will use certain key concepts employed by feminist epistemologists such

as accepting knowledge of the marginalized or other oppressed groups a source for social transformation, or their primary argument regarding situatedness of knowledge.

The concept of a situated knower and situated knowledge, is one of the key concepts employed by feminist standpoint theorists. Donna Haraway in her essay titled “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” claims that “the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent positions,” but rather appreciative because they offer “more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (584). As remarked by Haraway, they are advocating for “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (*Situated* 589). Adrienne Rich’s “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” is also one of the key essays on the locatedness of knowledge in which she narrates her personal life and situates her own subject position as a white, North-American, Jewish, lesbian, female poet (Rich 1) to avoid universalizing positions (35). Understanding the partiality of knowledge and reality, according to Patricia Hills Collins, leads an individual to acknowledge that he or she cannot have a complete comprehension of social reality (Collins *Black Feminist* 270). Collins believes “partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard” (270).

Another argument of standpoint theory is that social locations and positions taken up by the marginalized can become sites of epistemic privilege: “the idea that positions of structural exclusion provide the best resources for theorizing social power” (Sweet 922). In other words, those located in marginalized positions understand practices of oppression, and bias in dominant structures. Thus, standpoint

theories aim to show “how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage” (Harding *Reader* 7). They center their attention the historical and social locatedness of knowledge developments which “transform a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation” (10).

The question posed by standpoint theorists is “whether women as culturally diverse collectivities could produce knowledge that answered their questions about nature and social relations” (Harding *Reader* 56). By acquiring agency in knowledge generation, women can gain an understanding of the underlying structures “through which their oppression [has been] designed, maintained, and made to seem natural and desirable to everyone” (6). Here, Harding positions standpoint theory as opposed to the assumptions of the subject of knowledge in mainstream epistemologies which is “historically and universally disembodied, or invisible” and “homogeneous or unitary” (132). In contrast, for feminist standpoint theory, Harding transforms this subject of knowledge into an “embodied and visible” being who is “socially located”, and who can be “contradictory or incoherent, not unitary, homogeneous, and coherent” (132).

In like manner, Haraway states that knowledge generated from “the point of view of the unmarked”; “disembodied, unmediated, transcendent” subject “is truly fantastic, distorted, and so irrational” (*Reader* 90) because it “den[ies] the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well” (*Situated Knowledges* 584). This is what she calls “god-tricks,” promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully (*Situated Knowledges* 584).

However, Harding cautions us that “feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement” (127). Feminist standpoint theorists, then, claim that the liberatory potential of standpoints can only be achieved by epistemic agents who can analyze their own social context critically in terms of the social and political oppression and control that shape it and, by extension, the circumstances in which knowledge is produced and legitimized.

Another argument of feminist epistemologists is on objectivity. Haraway claims that “feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges” (*Situated* 188). She urges a “feminist objectivity [of] limited location and situated knowledge” (190). Therefore, for her, “the moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (190).

As we have seen in previous chapters, feminist epistemologists explored the constitutive role of one’s historical and cultural location, and various locations such as gender, class, race, religion. For Nancy Tuana, it is this focus on subjectivity that “gave rise to an appreciation of the role of affective dimensions of cognition in the knowledge process: the role of emotion, imagination, empathy and values” (36). This awareness, for her, led to emphasize “whose values and whose imaginings are taken as credible, and whose stories are silenced” (36). In a nutshell, by bringing to light the distinctive positions of various social groups, standpoint theorists demonstrate that there are a variety of knowers and this variety can be used as a resource in the construction of knowledge.

### **2.1.2. The Path through Postmodern Feminist Epistemology to New Feminist Materialist Epistemology**

One of the central tenets of postmodern criticism is that Western thought is founded on universalizing theories—metanarratives. Many postmodern theorists argue that the hegemony of these oppressive metanarratives should be broken and the pretension of a universal, disembodied, dislocated knowing subject needs to be displaced. Postmodernists refuse Enlightenment humanism because of its appeal to a universal subjectivity or human condition and its “excluding quality of the supposedly inclusive ‘we’ of much humanist discourse” (Lennon and Whitford 266). Rather, it offers a conceptual acceptance of difference, partiality and multiplicity. Feminist epistemologies and feminist theories in general found common ground with postmodernist theory because both critically approach universalist theories and they are concerned about the social exclusion and marginalization of the others (Weldon 78). Linda Nicholson, for example, thinks postmodernism ought to be integrated into feminism, or that feminism ought to become even more postmodern (5). That is to say, postmodernism appeals to feminist theorists because of its stress on “partiality and multiplicity, with its apparent attention to difference, diversity, and locale” (Strickland 266).

For Susan Heckman, when feminists and postmodernists attempt to explore the construction of knowledge, “they are not engaged in ‘epistemology’ as the Enlightenment defined it,” rejecting “both the notion that knowledge is the product of the opposition of subjects and objects and that there is only one way in which knowledge can be constituted” (Heckman 9). Heckman argues that it is important for

postmodern feminist epistemologists to reject the masculinist bias in Western thought and they need to take the stance that there are multiple truths, that they have no gender-based privileges (9). This very idea of postmodernism has encouraged standpoint theorists to embrace a more pluralistic approach by acknowledging multiple situated standpoints.

In “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” Harding integrates and connects the concepts from earlier formulations of feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism. Employing postmodern arguments, Harding claims that there is more to gain from multiple standpoints and from diverse subaltern perspectives. She writes that “there is not one feminist standpoint but many; the perspectives of middle-class, black, and lesbian women cannot be subsumed under a single viewpoint” (141). However, this requires one to consider “multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments” (141). For her, the subjects/agents of knowledge are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent (66).

In line with Haraway and Harding, Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, incorporates multiple perspectives as she states: “multiple groups of knowers with distinctive standpoints share their knowledge with each other, with each group using its unique epistemological approaches and avowing its distinctive standpoint. Each group shares its own ‘partial, situated knowledge’” (Collins 16). For her, recognizing their standpoint and situating their knowledge is crucial for credibility. As a result of this shared understanding that each “perceives its own truth as partial,” they acknowledge

their mutual dependence on other knowers; thus, they do not suppress or silence the partial perspectives of other groups (Collins 270).

However, feminist epistemologists started calling into question some of the outcomes of postmodernism and attempted to find a new approach<sup>8</sup>. Jane Flax has identified three characteristics of the postmodern condition: “the deaths of Man, History and Metaphysics. It involves the rejection of so-called ‘essentialist’ conceptions of human activity: the dismissal of unity and totality” (Flax 31). Many feminists have argued that feminist thought is not ready to accept the death of the subject. For instance, Rosi Braidotti states that: “In order to announce the death of the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one” (qtd. in Heckman 80). Therefore, while challenging the subject in order to reconstruct it along anti-Enlightenment lines, feminists struggled “to carve out a space between the Cartesian subject and the postmodernist ‘death of man’” (Heckman 80).

Another criticism directed at postmodern theory is that in their quest to replace truth with truths, postmodern theorists lost touch with reality. According to Haraway, the end result of their efforts is “multiple personality disorder,” as they “end up with a kind of epistemological electro-shock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder” (Haraway 186). Susan Heckman also agrees with Haraway in that feminists have to stay grounded in reality because it is essential that they make true statements that accurately reflect

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<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of this debate see the introduction the anthology *Material Feminisms* written by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008; 1-10)

“the reality of women’s lives, their oppression, their inferior social status, the pain inflicted on their bodies. Without the ability to make true statements about women’s lives, feminism, like science, makes little sense” (Heckman *The Material* 66).

What postmodernists claim but fail to achieve is thus: “instead of deconstructing the discourse/reality dichotomy, instead of constructing a new paradigm for feminism that integrates the discursive and the material, feminism has instead turned to the discursive pole of the discourse/reality dichotomy” (74). According to Heckman, postmodern theorists’ emphasis on the discursive construction of reality led them to dismiss the significance of the material, so they ignored the material in order to pursue the discursive (74). They have demonstrated how women's social standing is determined by discursive practices, highlighting the role of language in the construction of social reality. The publication of Haraway's *Modest Witness* (1997) almost a decade afterwards revealed a significant reorganization of her ideas, though she remained devoted to situated knowledges. What is at stake now, she announces, is a “materialized refiguring,” to show how “reality is collectively, materially, and semiotically constructed” (301).

As a result of the restructurings of standpoint theorists, a new approach that embraces an engagement with “matter” and “materiality” developed. In the anthology called *Material Feminisms* edited by Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo, the works of scholars from various disciplines, such as Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook, Elizabeth A. Wilson, Susan Bordo, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicki Kirby, Donna Haraway, Nancy Tuana and Karen Barad, constitute what they call “the ‘material turn’ in feminist theory, a wave of feminist theory that is taking matter seriously” (6). They seek to

achieve where postmodernists did fail: “a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either” (6). Iris van der Tuin call this wave “third wave feminist epistemology” (93). Their primary aim is to redefine our knowledge of the natural, human, and nonhuman interactions in order to demonstrate how they are interconnected. They situate the embodied nature of the subject drawing attention to the partiality of human knowledge, and the question of sexual difference or gender, at the center of *matter*. They acknowledge, thus, the role of materiality, including the interactions between human materiality and the materiality of the more-than-human world, in the production of knowledge. As stated by Nancy Tuana, they show “the need for a close examination of the entanglements of materiality, the cognitive impact of embodiment, and the relationship between human materiality and the more-than-human world” (221).

### **2.1.3. Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance**

Feminist revisionist mythmaking aims to give voices to the characters, mostly women, who were previously ignored, victimized, enslaved, and sidelined in canonical versions, particularly Homer’s. They resurrect them by endowing them agency to tell their lives, their experiences, the traumas they endure and the epistemic injustices they face in the patriarchal world. Their accounts, in their pursuit of justice, expose social inequalities and gender biases that permeate dominant discourses. Therefore, it will be pertinent to briefly review feminist epistemology of ignorance theories with a particular focus on epistemic injustices caused by willful ignorance and testimonial injustice.

Charles Mills, in his book *The Racial Contract*, coined the term “epistemologies of ignorance” to describe systems of belief that promote ignorance (1997), which inspired feminist and critical race theorists to conduct extensive research to uncover systematic epistemic silences. In *The Racial Contract*, Mills used the concept to show the ongoing production and maintenance of ignorance by those in privileged positions who choose to ignore the injustices and inequalities that exist in social reality. He contends that the “social contract” that is fundamental to Western political thought is inapplicable to anyone other than “the people who are really people ('we the white people)’” and that this makes it “a Racial Contract” (3). For Mills, it is also an agreement to “misinterpret the world” (18) for white people because they are “unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (18).

In their *Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan urge feminists to investigate ignorance because, in their view, ignorance practices are connected to women's subjugation and marginalization. It is developed as a result of the awareness that without first acknowledging the common structures that cause not knowing, we cannot completely comprehend the complicated processes of knowledge generation (1). Nancy Tuana suggests that they should examine the practices through which ignorance is generated and preserved through the very structures that govern these practices, by making connections between identities, social position, and ignorance, and how they are related “to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty” (*Coming to Understand* 195).

In *Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Linda Alcoff considers ignorance to be a “substantive epistemic practice” (39) which includes individual, social, and structural knowledge construction practices. For Alcoff, substantive practices of ignorance, such as willful ignorance, occurs because “oppressive social structures construct systematic distortion of social reality” (48). Within systems of injustice, privilege frequently contributes to the development and maintenance of willful ignorance. Tuana asserts that people prefer not to recognize the disadvantage or oppression of others, as well as their own privilege, because they would not want to acknowledge these facets of a disadvantaged social position (*Speculum* 11).

Nancy Tuana in her work *The Speculum of Ignorance* urges researchers to investigate the institutional and cultural mechanisms that ensure and legitimize ignorance. Tuana developed her argument by applying Mills’ concept of the racial epistemology of ignorance to the epistemology of ignorance concerning gender. As outlined in the previous chapter, feminist epistemologies rely heavily on the concept of situated knowers. Referring to Haraway’s situated knowledge, Tuana claims “ignorance, like knowledge, is situated” (3). She declares her aim as furthering feminist epistemologists’ claims “by reflecting on the role of not knowing and to encourage further work in this arena” (4). Tuana's taxonomy of ignorance comprises six categories; one of which is willful ignorance which she defines briefly as “they do not want to know”. Needing not to know, or willful ignorance, is a form of epistemic injustice where dominant knowers ignore the fact that there are alternative epistemic resources (Dotson 32). Throughout her work she shows epistemic ignorance as “a practice of silencing though a recurring pattern whereby certain groups are left out as

knowers through the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities” (Tuana 13). The concept of willful ignorance will be the focus of the third chapter of this study.

With their ongoing resistance to oppressive systems, feminist/epistemologies of ignorance studies have initiated more structural analyses and approaches on epistemic injustice and oppression. In particular, the recent formalization of ‘epistemic injustice’ by Miranda Fricker has been a huge influence. Fricker's views on epistemic injustice and ignorance sparked numerous conversations in feminist epistemology.

#### **2.1.4. Queer Epistemology**

*what we now know as sexuality is fruit—apparently the only fruit—to be plucked from the tree of knowledge.*

—Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, *Epistemology of the Closet*

In this section of the study, I would like to briefly examine queer epistemology in order to provide a valid theoretical framework for the analysis of Winterson's rewriting. Among the most widely-accepted arguments of queer theory is that one's sexuality defines an epistemic space. As a way of thinking about sexuality, queer theory denaturalizes sexual identities and practices and the assumed intrinsic linkages between them (Hall 158). Kim Q. Hall in her article “Queer Epistemology and Epistemic Injustice” investigates the epistemic violence that can occur when someone is forced to testify about their gender or sexual orientation. Queer epistemology

exposes a different pattern of testimonial injustice: “the epistemic violence of compulsory testimony about one’s gender and sexuality” (Hall 158).

A central concern of a queer epistemological approach to testimonial injustice is the epistemic violence that results from insisting on a particular identity and perceiving oneself as a particular type of person due to one's desires (Hall 159). What Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr calls “willful hermeneutic injustice” describes the ignorance of dominant knowers to understand knowledge of those who are marginally situated (722) because epistemic resources held by the dominant are not adequate to understand them (719). In a related vein, Hall claims epistemic resources; from queer epistemological perspective, such as binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, held by the dominant groups are not adequate to understand the complex experiences of gender and desire (Hall 160).

Kim Q. Hall reads Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky’s *Epistemology of the Closet* as a deconstructive approach which regards the closet as a space central to the transmission of knowledge and ignorance about sexuality (169). As a spatial metaphor “the closet,” in Sedgwick’s words “[has been] the defining structure of gay oppression this century” (71). The act of “coming out of the closet” then becomes a performance to break the oppressive structure of silencing; however, for Hall, it also “requires adopting sexual and gender categories” by being compelled to use specific language when discussing one's sexual orientation and gender identity (160). Knowledge behind the closet’s closed door waiting to be uncovered, then, is knowledge about gender and sexuality. Eve Sedgwick in her book *Tendencies* describes queer epistemology as the “open mesh of possibilities” (8). Sedgwick

asserts that "...knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion" (73).

Hall sates that queer knowing puts at risk the assurance of self-knowledge that is given by conforming to identity categories because it views identity as historically contingent and revisable rather than an inherent consequence of an individual's actions, biology, or appearance (161). As remarked by Hall focusing on the risks involved in identity categories, and drawing "attention to what or whom they include and exclude, can be a source of queer epistemic resistance that denaturalizes dominant narratives and re-conceptualizes, rather than rejects, identity" (161). Hall also shows areas of overlap between feminist standpoint and queer epistemology. Paraphrasing Sandra Harding's assertion about queer movements that produced "standpoint themes" in their resistance to heterosexism and homophobia, Hall suggests that queer epistemology shares the same critique of dominant epistemic paradigms with feminist standpoint theory (163).

Specifically, queer epistemology is concerned with challenging the binary systems that underpin conventional understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, in which all human beings "are obliged to identify/be identified as either male or female, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual" (164). The term queer is not employed synonymously with lesbian, gay, or homosexual; rather, it describes a body of thought that challenges the conventional understanding about how sex, gender and

sexuality are related (Antosa 492) on which “compulsory heterosexuality<sup>9</sup>” and normative gender roles are constructed. Queer<sup>10</sup>, for Sylvia Antosa, challenges the status quo of heterosexuality and heteronormativity<sup>11</sup> and strives for the exploration of alternative sexual expressions which go beyond the binary gender system (“Queer Sexualities” 492).



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<sup>9</sup> See Adrienne Rich “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Poetry and Prose, Norton, New York 1993 (1980), pp. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describes the concept of heteronormativity as ‘the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent– that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged’ (548). Berlant and Warner points out the pervasive nature of heteronormativity: See: Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998), pp. 550-66. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>. Accessed 03 Sep. 2022.

## CHAPTER THREE

### NARRATING THE UNNARRATED

#### 3.1. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

“Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader / here is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to *know*” (Atwood *Second Words* 334; emphasis mine). Margaret Atwood has been inviting her readers to her fictional world for almost sixty years. She is a published author of over forty works, including novels, collections of poetry, short stories, literary essays and book reviews. She has maintained a lifelong fascination with ancient myths and mythical characters ever since the publication of her first collection of poems *Double Persephone* in 1961. Her other works of fiction share the same profound and unending fascination with mythology and fairy tales as her earliest writings such as *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Her fiction reminds her audience of what Rich once said: “We all know that there is another story to be told” (qtd. in Plate 25). Her writings entail those “alternate versions” of stories that provide “an entirely different set of emphases and values” (Hite 4). While telling stories of women's lives, she wants her readers to hear them.

In the “Notes” section of *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood informs us that she hasn't only rewritten Homer's *The Odyssey*, but also referenced some other

ancient sources.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, Atwood refutes the presumed universality claims of canonical myths because, for her, “a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another” (xiv). Atwood’s emphasis on the social and cultural location of creating myths demonstrates that she refutes the possibility of universal knowledge in a manner similar to feminist epistemologists’ claims of situatedness of knowledge, “where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway *Situated* 92). In an interview about the stage adaptation of *The Penelopiad*, Atwood said the following:

[Penelope] is speaking from the world of the dead to the world of the living. She wants to tell “you” that she’s not what people thought, that other people had told stories about her, but now she is down in the underworld she doesn’t care about social convention, she’s going to tell her own story. She lives or dies depending upon which version of the myth you are reading or listening to. (The Guardian, Wednesday, October 26, 2005)

Atwood’s novel challenges the patriarchal domination of myths and transforms the story we know by reconstructing male-centered mythical narratives around the experiences of silenced and marginalized women. *The Penelopiad*<sup>13</sup> (2005) is analyzed from different critical perspectives<sup>14</sup> most of which focus on Atwood’s use of

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<sup>12</sup> In her introduction to the text, Atwood informs us that she has drawn on other ancient sources for information about Penelope and in the Notes section of her text, she lists some of these sources (which include Robert Graves, Heroditus, Pausanius etc. (Atwood 197). Therefore, *the Odyssey* is not her only reference.

<sup>13</sup> The full title of the book in its initial publication was *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*.

<sup>14</sup> Most scholars and researches have analyzed *The Penelopiad* in several alternative ways, but mostly accept it as an example of postmodern fiction. For instance, Rita Slapkauskaitė (2007) and Saman Khalid (2010) examine the novel through the lens of postmodern literature. Hilde Steals's (2009) Comparative analysis of *Weight* and *The Penelopiad*, as two examples of postmodern retellings, explores the role of parody and burlesque in these narratives.

postmodern techniques of parody, irony, gender reversals, and plot displacements. Atwood's writing, according to Coral Ann Howells, reimagines "*The Odyssey* as 'herstory'" (We Can't Help 59). She says Atwood places the emphasis on the "micronarratives of women at home," rather than the "grand narratives of war" (63). Howells draws attention to Atwood's transformation of themes, noting that "instead of war she deals with domestic relations, shifting the action indoors and dismantling the epic model by transforming it into a double-voiced female confessional narrative" (64). These dynamic, constantly shifting forms, in Howells' view, show how the variety of possible generic conventions at play when telling stories, so raising doubts on the authority and the credibility of any single account (). Hilde Steals interprets *The Penelopiad* as a work that combines elements of burlesque with parody. Steals asserts that Atwood's revision blurs the line between "high" and "low" literature (106). *The Penelopiad*, for her, is a "multivoiced and multiperspectival novella" (106) since Penelope's retelling is repeatedly refuted by the Maids' retellings, rendering the text multi-layered and calling the authority of storytelling into doubt (106). She claims that Margaret Atwood's ultimate goal is to free Penelope and the Maids from the constraints of "the ancient epic story world" (106). Another scholar, Sharon Rose Wilson claims that Atwood generates "a new feminist mythology" through her revisionist mythmaking ("Mythological Intertexts" 226). Wilson also believes that, particularly in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood creates "a feminist anti-myth" (59).

Because Penelope and the Maids tell their own stories in their own voices, narrative strategy identified by DuPlessis as "displacement" occurs, in which the familiar story shifts from the center to the periphery, from the narrated to the

unnarrated part of the story (107). In other words, unlike Homer, Atwood is inspired by Penelope and the Maids not by Odysseus.

As previously stated, mythography developed allegorical narratives of myths told prior to patriarchal transformation. These interpretations identify Odysseus with mental strength, making it a paradigm of masculine heroism and a representation of the triumph of reason. In these narratives, everything outside of man's control or that cannot be explained rationally is either devalued or reduced to a subordinate position. Penelope is one of those who are objectified and reduced to a secondary position in these dominant stories, whose story is overshadowed by the male hero's quest narrative in which he seeks power, authority, and fame. Penelope symbolizes the model of femininity that the patriarchal system celebrates and approves as a virtuous and faithful wife and mother in the world of these epics, particularly Homer's. She is depicted as being submissive to male authority throughout her life, including that of her father, husband, and son. Most notably, she earns a reputation within the patriarchy for her cunning in protecting her husband's kingdom and her son's rights during her husband's twenty-year adventure.

We all *know* the story of Penelope. She spends her days weaving the shroud and her nights unweaving it, during years of waiting for her husband's homecoming: a faithful and wise wife. In Atwood's retelling, the twelve Maids accompany her throughout these long years of waiting. Atwood, by placing all these women at the center of her mythmaking, has created "a vividly realized female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer" (Howell, 78). In doing so, she challenges male-centered literary traditions by establishing women as epistemic subjects in their own

right and making their lives, domestic experiences, and relationships with each other worthy of being told.

According to Diana Purkiss, when women rewrite the myths recorded by their male ancestors, they are “recovering the dark, secret, always unconscious truths which the fathers have struggled to repress” (12). The Underworld appears to be the place of the secret and the forbidden knowledge in Atwood’s fiction, as Atwood writes: “The Underworld guards the secrets. It’s got the skeletons in the closet, and any other skeletons you might wish to get your hands on. It’s got the stories, or quite a few of them. ‘There is something down there and you want it told, as poet Gwendolyn MacEwen says’ (*Negotiating with the Dead*, 163). Two years before *The Penelopiad*, Atwood published *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. In her final essay, “Descent: Negotiating with the Dead,” she responds to the question: “Who makes the trip to the Underworld, and why?” (145). Atwood herself seems to take a number of trips into the dark Underworld as she writes: “all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality — by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (156). Her use of the metaphor of the writer’s descent into an underworld resonates with Adrienne Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck.” Atwood also quotes Rich’s poem in order to support her metaphor (164). Similar to Rich, Atwood believes “the dead have some very precious and desirable things under their control, down there in their perilous realm, and among these are some things you yourself may want or need” (167). The knowledge of these “very precious and desirable things” is kept under control by ancient poets:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descent to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change. (165)

It is no coincidence, then, that *The Penelopiad* begins in an alternative social or testimonial space: Hades; from “The Dark Continent<sup>15</sup>” which, for Cixous, is “not impenetrably dark” and which is “explorable” (885). The Underworld of ancient epics now becomes a space for the individual and collective stories of women written “beyond the ending” (DuPlessis 6) to be heard and known. Atwood has made “the risky trip to the Underworld”, and brought Penelope and The Maids “back from the dead” (156). The dead awaken (as in Rich’s call for revisionist mythmaking) and are negotiating with the readers now. It is the return of “the repressed” (Cixous 886). Penelope and the Maids have emerged from the depths of the underworld in order to narrate in their own voices the stories through which they have been wandering for centuries like silent ghosts. Cixous claims that “men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex” (885). In Atwood’s epic, both are represented artfully. Now, it is time for Penelope to spin the thread of her own, weave

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<sup>15</sup> Cixous refutes here Freud’s description of women as a “dark continent” as he stated: “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’” (In *The Question of Lay Analysis* :1926): 212 for psychology” (p. 212). His reference to female sexuality as a dark continent which is not explorable is a recurrent theme in Cixous’ works, and also in feminist theory.

her web of words: “Now that all the others have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making” (1).

“*Now that I am dead I know everything*” (1) announces Penelope in the first line of Atwood’s epic. Although she is a ghost communicating with us from the underworld, in a state that she describes as “bonelessness, liplessness, and breastlessness” (1), Penelope appears to be conveying what Cixous says in her revision of the Medusa myth: “Text is my body” (Cixous Medusa 882). Atwood, in a manner that is analogous to how Cixous affirms life over death by giving the Greek mythological figure Medusa a textual existence, gives Penelope a textual existence as well. As such, Atwood challenges the Homeric epic, which is more often associated with death than with life and depicts women as sexual objects embodying male desires and demands. So where can Penelope start her story? In her words: “The real beginning would be the beginning of the world, after which one thing has led to another; but since there are differences of opinion about that, I’ll begin with my own birth” (*TP* 3). For Cixous the beginning is the “Primitive Scene,” “Genesis,” (2) where “the question of knowing, of the desire for knowledge, of the means of knowing, and of the symbolic value of knowing” emerges (2). The real beginning is the story of Eve we all know. She is warned not to eat the apple: “So the message is ‘Don’t’” (Cixous 3). Therefore, knowledge starts with Eve’s desire to discover forbidden knowledge. Accordingly, Penelope reasoned that, as a woman who is prohibited from acquiring knowledge, death could give her access to it; as she says in her beginning line, because she is dead now she knows everything (1). As readers we expect a secret or forbidden knowledge is about to be revealed with the return of the

dead from a dark place of mystery. Unfortunately, not even death could grant her access to know everything she desired. The following sentence immediately undermines her introductory statement: “This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true” (1). Therefore, the novel begins with a focus on Penelope’s partial knowledge.

As a dead narrator, Penelope’s disembodied voice starts with her personal genealogy. She has made the decision to tell everyone her account of the events because “his [Odysseus’] version of the events” has been considered to be true until now (2). “The official version” (1) of the myths told about her throughout the ages applauds her fidelity and patience as “an edifying legend” that has served like “[a] stick to beat other women with” (2). Penelope represents traditional patriarchal femininity within the social structure narrated in Homer’s epics in which male dominance and patriarchal hierarchy are deeply entrenched. She is defined by her marriage and portrayed as the ideal wife and mother, exemplifying the patriarchal virtues of femininity that served to address women like a cautionary tale: “Why couldn’t they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all suffering as I had been?” (2). Atwood’s Penelope cuts the yarns that weave her into the narratives of traditional patriarchal femininity as she does not approve of this image and warns us this time: “Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours!” (2). In a recent interview, Atwood tells us why she has chosen Penelope for her novel:

I would have much rather written about murderous Clytemnestra or scandalous Helen. Those are much more dramatic subjects ... What’s to say about someone who’s merely good? It was the Victorian idea

that a lady should never get her name in the paper, except for three times in her life: born, married, died. Other than that, you stayed out of public view and concerned yourself with the healthy home. So that was the fate of Penelope. But, as she says in the first chapter, I don't approve of this version. There's more to it, and to me

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood gives voice not only to Penelope but to other marginalized and silenced women, allowing them to be heard and known as in the ending of her essays in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* where she quoted the poet Ovid:

But still, the fates will leave me my voice,

and by my voice I shall be known. (qtd. in Atwood 166)

### **3.1.1. Testimonial Injustice: Silencing the Testimony of the Maids**

*Therefore do I tear at your web, that your rage may lure you  
out of your den of lies, and that your revenge may leap forth  
from behind your word "justice"*

—Friedrich Nietzsche- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Epistemology is derived from the words "episteme" and "logos." "The English translations of the Greek words "episteme" and "logos" are, respectively, 'of or relating to knowledge' and "account" or "reason" (*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). We can define epistemic injustice, simply, as a form of injustice related to knowledge and knowing, which "refers to those forms of unfair treatment that

relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices” (Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus 1). These practices include the following: “exclusion and silencing; invisibility and inaudibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one’s meanings or contributions systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented; being marginalized as a result of dysfunctional dynamics; etc.” (1). To restate this idea, epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are not provided the same opportunities to communicate their personal experiences and testimonies. This kind of injustice ignores distinctive experiences of the marginalized. Epistemic injustice, as Miranda Fricker introduces the concept, wrongs or harms knowers “in their capacity as knowers” (1). In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing*<sup>16</sup>, Fricker notes that there are some injustices committed against “a knower in her/his role as knower” (2). She calls these kinds of injustices epistemic injustices (Fricker 1). In other words, there are some epistemically unjust restrictions faced by agents which cause epistemic injustice. In her work, she identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice, as Fricker defines it, “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (1). Namely, it occurs when the credibility of a person’s testimony is disregarded as a result of the hearer’s preexisting prejudice toward the person who is speaking (Fricker 1). Prejudices established against marginalized groups, particularly those based on race and gender, prevent members of those groups from sharing their knowledge of their

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<sup>16</sup> Feminist epistemologies have maintained a continuing interest this subject since Miranda Fricker’s 2007 book. See Linda Alcoff (2010); Dotson (2011); Pohlhaus, (2012); Anderson, (2012); Medina, (2016).

distinctive experiences. Consequently, gender and racial prejudices can distort our comprehension and interpretation of who is credible and who is not. Hermeneutical injustice, on Fricker's account, is "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization" (158). She defines hermeneutical marginalization as follows: "when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are hermeneutically marginalized" (153). In other words, hermeneutical injustice takes place when a culture or society does not have the requisite vocabulary and concepts to describe or make sense of a particular individual's lived experience. (6).

As an example of what she refers to as "testimonial injustice," Miranda Fricker quotes the scene from Anthony Minghella's "The Talented Mr. Ripley" in which Herbert Greenleaf discards Marge Sherwood's testimony: "Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts" (5). He silences Marge by invoking a "prejudicial stereotype"<sup>17</sup> (15) that a woman's opinion can be the result of emotion rather than reason. Fricker notes that some instances of testimonial injustice entail severe harms because a social agent, also known as a knower, suffers as a provider of knowledge which is fundamental to human value (44).

Margaret Atwood's fiction is greatly concerned with the gendered effects of the oppression, violence, and injustice on women. In her article, Mihaela Mihai makes the argument that literature has the potential to be an effective tool in the fight

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<sup>17</sup> Fricker provides a definition of stereotypes as: "widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes" (30).

against epistemic injustice: “Literature’s seductive ability to illuminate ideational, experiential and moral limitations renders it a valuable ally in the effort to apprehend the causes, mechanics and effects of epistemic injustice – and of other injustices it compounds”(396). In *The Penelopiad*, while literally weaving Laertes’ shroud, Penelope metaphorically attempts to weave justice and to “spin a thread of [her] own” by the act of weaving/ unweaving (4). Atwood presumably intends to challenge the contemporary reader’s understanding of the concept of justice by putting it on trial in her fiction:

You’ve heard of injustice collecting? That’s what I’ve become—*an injustice collector*. It’s like a tax collector, only there’s nothing to be done with the injustices once you’ve collected them except to pass them on, as best you can; though there’s always the possibility that merely telling such stories will make people angry and thus give rise to other injustices. Still, after four centuries, I think I’m prepared to speak. To tell how things are, now, on this earth. Finally, I’m ready to begin. So shall you hear of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts; of accidental judgments, casual slaughters; of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause; and, in the upshot, purposes mistook, fall’n on the inventors’ heads. All this can I truly deliver. (Atwood *The Tent* 65; emphasis mine)

The Maids’ hanging in Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* seems to be the main impetus for Atwood to write *the Penelopiad* as she states: “I’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids, and in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself” (*TP xv*). In the introduction to her rewriting, she alludes to this passage from *The Odyssey* that describes how Telemachus hangs the twelve maids.

He took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare ... so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (*The Odyssey*, Book 22, 470–73)

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood invites her readers to acknowledge the epistemic injustices written in canonical texts that rationalize myths of rape and violence against women. In the episode “The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” (175), which is set in the present day and is populated by mythical figures from Homer's works, we observe epistemic injustice as an example of the practice of silencing testimony. This testimonial-quieting ignores what less powerful and marginalized epistemic agents say: “A speaker needs an audience to identify, or at least recognize, her as a knower in order to offer testimony” (Dotson 4). Therefore, “we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us” (4). In this respect, The Maids repeatedly address the reader as “you” and “the educated mind” in order to be heard and regarded as a knower and to be given credibility to share their knowledge of their distinctive experiences (163; 168). To achieve their justice, they ask the reader to assume the role of the judge: “You are our last hope! We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf! Be our defenders, we who had none in life!” (*TP* 183). When interpreted metaphorically, their call for educated minds

represents the epistemic injustices committed against voices excluded from contributing to epistemic resources of knowledge.

Testimonial oppression which can be observed in this part of the novel, is the kind of silencing illustrated in Fricker's, Dotson's and Sullivan's work. It takes place when members of an audience fail to recognize a speaker as a knower (Collins 69). For Collins, stereotypes and negative assessments about black women, in our case slave maids, appear "natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins 69). This normalized flaw keeps them from being seen as knowers (Collins 72-81). She explains how black women's "controlling images" contribute to audiences' refusal and ignorance to recognize them as knowers (69). The images of the Maids are similar to the 'controlling images' of these black women because they are also the slaves, as evidenced by their lament about being born into "wrong parents, poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents" (*TP* 13). They are marginalized because of their gender and social class and are frequently subjected to sexual abuse at the hands of the masters or their guests. Because of their, to borrow Tuana's phrase, "epistemically disadvantaged identities," (Tuana 13) the Maids were not seen epistemically credible; as a result, their testimony was discredited and their knowledge was ignored.

In this part, the novel asks some epistemological questions concerning knowledge production and validation of knowledge. Who has the claim to "authority" in the court or in the story in general? What do Penelope and the Maids know? Can we believe the subjective accounts of these women? The narrative, by raising doubt

on the credibility of their accounts, invites the reader not only to question the patriarchal construction of the canonical myths but also their authority.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope is depicted as having to endure a twenty-year wait for her husband while tricking the suitors who pursue to gain control of Ithaca through marriage by weaving/unweaving the shroud. During Odysseus' absence, Penelope did a lot more than just weave and shed tears; she also ran the household and directed the servants. Penelope delegated her twelve most trusted maids to carry out her orders, which included distracting the suitors and gathering information. However, Penelope's order made it possible for the suitors to sexually abuse the Maids. Several accounts in *The Odyssey* claim that these girls were compelled into having sexual encounters with the suitors. Homer mentions the suitors coercing sex with the maidens in two separate books, both of which contain statements that are very similar to one another: "...these shameful activities, guests being battered about, or to see them rudely mishandling the serving women all about the beautiful palace" (Homer 16.107-09 ; 20.3175-19).

Besides, before Odysseus slaughters the Maids, he even admits that the maids did not voluntarily sleep with the suitors: "and for that you despoiled my household, / and forcibly took my serving women to sleep beside you, / and sought to win my wife while I was still alive," (Homer 22.36-8). Even so, he blames the maids for bringing shame on him and his country. After killing the suitors with his son Telemachus, he gave the maids order to clean the blood off the floor and dispose of their bodies. Then, he ordered Telemachus to kill the twelve maids by sword. However,

Telemachus kills them more brutally with “the cable of a dark-prowed ship,” by giving them a “most pitiful” death (Homer Ody. 22. 464-470):

So he spoke, and taking the cable of a dark-prowed ship,  
fastened it to the tall pillar, and fetched it about the round-house;  
and like thrushes, who spread their wings, or pigeons, who have  
flown into a snare set up for them in a thicket, trying  
to find a resting place, but the sleep given them was hateful;  
so their heads were all in a line, and each had her neck caught  
fast in a noose, so that their death would be most pitiful.

They struggled with their feet for a little, not for long. (Homer 22.465-472)

Odysseus' homecoming put an end to all of the misfortune that had befallen Ithaca in *The Odyssey*. In Atwood's rewriting, however, the return of Odysseus does not seem to bring a happy ending as in *The Odyssey*. Atwood shifts the focus of the narrative away from the male heroes who ultimately emerge victorious, onto their helpless victims: the Maids.

In “The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” (175), Atwood places ancient mythical figures in a twenty-first century courtroom, presided over by a contemporary judge and a defense attorney. By doing so, she not only demonstrates how injustices against women, even in violent crimes, are still as prevalent today as they were centuries ago, but also how patriarchal ideology hidden in canonized myths is still relevant today, even in the courtroom, which represents legitimate rational minds that claim authority. In an effort to reclaim their voice, the Maids attempt to address the fact that Odysseus killed them and that Penelope was involved in their

murders; however, the judge and the attorney for the defense never take any of these attempts seriously. The judge's first order to the Maids upon entering the courtroom is to "adjust [their] clothing" and to "take those ropes off [their] necks" (TP 177). Even though we do not know the gender of the judge or the attorney, we are able to observe the discriminatory and oppressive nature of the patriarchal ideology from the very beginning of the trial. The Maids are at the trial in the hopes of holding Odysseus accountable for their deaths, but he stands accused of murdering only the suitors. Although the Maids are present at the trial and have the opportunity to give their testimony, the judge instead turns to Homer's *The Odyssey* because he considers it to be the "main authority" (179). Fricker suggests that an agent might experience testimonial injustice by being kept from testifying at all—she might, in other words, have her testimony preempted (123). This kind of injustice, as The Maids suffer, preempts testimony, so that the speaker cannot even tell what she knows. Being ignored and undervalued as epistemic subjects, the Maids' unjust exclusion from communicating their knowledge is the primary harm of this epistemic injustice because, according to Fricker, they are wronged "in their capacity as a subject of knowledge" which is "a capacity essential to human value" (5). As a consequence of this, I suggest that they are subjected to silencing through a process that Fricker refers to as "epistemic objectification" because they are disregarded as credible knowers, denied the status of knowing subjects, and thus prevented from contributing to collective knowledge (133). In this regard, Atwood shows the implied twenty-first century reader that assaults and other forms of violence against women are still dismissed as they were centuries ago. Furthermore, by transferring the case from the

mythical past to a courtroom in the present, Atwood also demonstrates to the implied twenty-first century reader that assaults and other forms of violence against women are still dismissed in the same way they were centuries ago.

Atwood's choice of video-taping the trial also reminds us of the existence of video evidence today which "helps to draw attention to the ways that testimonial and hermeneutic injustices have likely operated in the absence of such evidence" (Sullivan 296), and can also provide "the larger public useful information about what kind of things are going on in law enforcement" (296). It can also be used as a proof to demonstrate how various groups have such distinct perspectives on the same issues. By allowing the Maids to videotape the trial, Atwood appears to be implying that the Maids, as representatives of the marginalized, also cast doubt on the credibility of the testimony of those who are in dominant positions. In this episode, Atwood, in a manner that is analogous to the claims made by standpoint theorists, demonstrates the partiality of knowledge and reality. This invites the reader to acknowledge that he or she is unable to have a comprehensive understanding of social reality.

At the trial, Odysseus's attorney argues that his client was innocent of slaughtering the suitors as he was merely defending his property. The judge finds no fault with this defense and acknowledges that it is a legitimate argument (175). After that, we hear the Maids screaming in an effort to attain justice: "You've forgotten about us! What about our case? You can't let him off! He hanged us in cold blood" (177). However, the judge completely disregards the fact that Odysseus killed the Maids and; thus, doesn't let the Maids give their testimony. This is analogous to the

Maids' ignorance in *The Odyssey*, which Atwood is attempting to expose, but with one crucial difference: this time, we get to hear their voices. In *The Odyssey*, they had no chance of defending themselves during the massacre, and so they were effectively silenced, becoming like a footnote in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, whose main focus is on a heroic journey of Odysseus with his victorious return home.

Following this scene, the court, rather than questioning The Maids' murderer/s, starts to debate whether or not the Maids were forced to have sexual encounters with the suitors. In order to reach a verdict, the judge looks through Homer's *The Odyssey*, as if it were a legal document. He reads the following: "The Suitors raped them. Nobody stopped them from doing so. ... Your client knew all that—he is quoted as having said these things himself. Therefore, the maids were overpowered, and they were also completely unprotected" (180). Despite evidence of the suitors' rape of slave girls, he refuses to hear the Maids and give them justice. Instead of pursuing offenders of the Maid's sexual violence, rape, and subsequent killings, the court accepts their sexual behavior constitutes an adequate justification for their hangings because they were "raped without permission of their master," Odysseus, who is the owner of their bodies. The judge, then, dismisses the case because he considers the perpetuation of the well-known myth of Odysseus to be of greater significance than the killing of the twelve slave women: "It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career" (*TP* 178). In this regard, by remaking the case of Odysseus, Atwood makes an allusion to long-standing structures of oppression and injustice.

We also see here an example of what Miranda Fricker refers to as “hermeneutical injustice,” which occurs when a considerable part of an individual’s experience is rendered invisible to the collective understanding (154). In order to explain hermeneutical injustice, Fricker focuses on the issue of sexual harassment. Before harassment was identified as sexual harassment, women who were harassed lacked the vocabulary to describe their experiences that they were subjected to. Accordingly, not acknowledging the Maid’s rape as a crime to be punished by law is an example of what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice that occurs on the social level. Rape wasn’t conceivable as happening between a slave woman and her owner because the patriarchal society created a context which lacks the concepts necessary to understand their experience (Fricker 6). This kind of hermeneutical injustice also occurred in this part because legal authority cannot recognize the harm experienced by the Maids. According to Shannon Sullivan, if a society as a whole fails to recognize rape as harmful and unjust, then it does not truly and justly comprehend the experience of being a victim of rape (206). Focusing on the importance of feminist epistemologists’ need to insist on “situated interests, perspectives, and experience,” Sullivan asks “Who are the interested parties in a particular situation or conflict, and how do we ensure that all of their perspectives and interests are included in knowing what happened?” (209). Her answer is that we must account and include women’s “experience (of pain, confusion, and so on) in the knowledge of what happened” (210). Ignoring their experiences “impacts the perceived reasonableness of the entire culture or community in question” (210). This, I contend, is what Atwood’s rewriting does: it calls into question the knowledge-making practices of the entire culture or

community by giving credence to the Maids' own lived experience, thereby making their experience matter. In doing so, she incorporates the knowledge that arises from experiencing the pain and suffering caused by rape into epistemic resources, rather than ignoring it.

In the trial scene, Atwood gives the Odyssean myth's largely sidelined and ignored female characters, the Maids, a space which they can finally speak about their experiences. The Maids are now seeking justice. Furious at the verdict of this modern-day judge, who discredits their claims and refuses to recognize their victimization even in this day and age, they started crying out for justice: "We demand justice! We demand retribution!... We call upon the Angry Ones!... Oh Angry Ones, Oh Furies, you are our last hope!... Be our defenders, we who had none in life!" (182). As opposed to *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus makes an appeal to the Erinyes to demand that suitor Antinous be killed (Homer 18.475-476), in Atwood's rewriting, the Maids are the ones who appeal to the Erinyes to punish Odysseus. The Maids' demand from "a troop of twelve Erinyes" (182) is to exact their vengeance on Odysseus by pursuing him through Hades for the rest of his eternal afterlife, whenever he appears "in songs and in plays, in tomes and in theses, in marginal notes and in appendices!... Let him never be at rest!" (183).

By calling on Erinyes, Atwood's epic reminds the readers of Orestes' trial in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* which resulted in "the triumph of paternity over the chthonian-maternal principle" (Bachofen 110). Erinyes stand in for the previous order, which holds Orestes accountable for his crimes due to the unforgettable nature of his mother's blood; but Apollo and Athene represent the new system, "that of the

higher paternity and of the heavenly light” (110). According to Bachofen, this is the trial that marks the end of the previous age and the beginning of the Apollonian age, which will emerge from its ashes and which is “diametrically opposed to the old one. The divinity of the mother gives way to that of the father” (110). As the patriarchal order of Apollo disregards the laws of the Erinyes, the legal order of Apollo, that is, the product of culture, who acquitted Orestes, is judged in the court. Graves writes that after Orestes’ trial “Olympianism had been formed as a religion of compromise between the pre-Hellenic matriarchal principle and the Hellenic patriarchal principle” (Graves 22). In a similar vein, Genevieve Lloyd’s writes that in early Greek literary works, most notably in Aeschylus, there is a remarkable transition from the “cults of the earth goddesses to the rites of rational gods and goddesses” (2). In light of this, Orestes’ trial validates “father-right against mother-right” (4). Hence, The Maids’ calling of Erinyes to the implied twenty-first century court revives the long-forgotten law of the mother, which can bring justice to women.

To put it precisely, being a member of a subordinate group unjustly prevents the Maids from sharing their knowledge with the court via testimony. They had no opportunity to testify since they were not considered a credible source of knowledge due to their disadvantaged status as an epistemic subject. In addition, the Maids’ testimony was discounted because they can employ an alternative system for the production of knowledge. The third section of this chapter will focus on the alternative knowledge system that the Maids produce.

In the ending lines of the novel, we see that the Maids have been ironically transformed into owls, which is the symbol of the goddess Athena, Odysseus’

defender, who is the founder of the father's law. Before the rule of the father, however, the owl was known as the wise and healing bird. Therefore, Atwood transforms the Maids into wise owls that have the healing power and the knowledge to recover the story: "now we follow you, / we find you now / we call to you / to you too wit too woo too wit too woo too woo The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls" (*TP* 190). The Maids' call, "[t]oo wit too woo" is interpreted as "a pun" by Tuğlu, who writes that "'too' much 'wit,' or awareness and wisdom, is only to 'woe'" (Tuğlu 18). This is also the echo of their silenced voices by their deadly exclusion in *The Odyssey*. The Maids' persistence and resistance during *The Penelopiad* demonstrates that they are not going to vanish, nor will they allow themselves to be silenced. They will be rewritten, retold again and again.

Of particular interest to our analysis in this part of the study is Lorraine Code's idea, in *Epistemic Responsibility*, that literature can serve as a valuable epistemological resource for its author and its audience (201). Code believes that literature has the power to question our assumptions about oppression and recognition as well as model effective critical thinking skills that can help those who hold privileged positions begin to recognize and take responsibility for the ways in which their privilege has shaped them" (Code *They Treated* 216). With the epistemic injustices suffered by the Maids at the center of her literary work, Atwood explicitly addresses the readers, asking them to take responsibility and recognize the ways in which oppressive structures silence and harm the marginalized members of society.

To sum up, by giving the Maids a voice, Atwood illustrates the harm that epistemic injustice can cause to individuals as knowers and as knowable and, thus,

creates a level of narrative justice. She shows how oppressive systems produce an active and repeated cultivation of ignorance. Retelling their unvoiced stories places their knowledge within the lives of historically situated women as knowers. Their narratives enable us to hear the multiplicity of voices out of which knowledge is constructed, thereby posing a challenge to the hegemonic knowledge held by the dominant voice. As a result, I suggest that Atwood's retelling demonstrates fiction's ability to adapt and transform the social imagination, as well as its significance in combating epistemic injustices.

### **3.1.2. To Know or Not to Know: Willful Ignorance of Penelope**

Willful ignorance is claimed to be the product of privilege in systems of injustice. When someone chooses to ignore the oppression and disadvantages of others, as well as their own privilege, they are exhibiting willful ignorance. For Nancy Tuana, “willful ignorance is a systematic process of self-deception, a willful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one’s role in that exploitation” (*The Speculum* 11). Willful ignorance is a pattern of “non-knowledge” that can be useful for dominant groups to rationalize or refuse to recognize “the reality of past and present atrocities against the less powerful” (Gross and McGoey 4). It serves the interests of those who are in a privileged position “by means of a structured not-knowing that is in itself a form of domination” (Gilson 5).

In this part of the study, I claim that Penelope has developed a willful ignorance so as to maintain her status in myths throughout the ages as a perfect

example of the waiting, faithful, clever, woman possessing self-control over and against the Maids who fail on this scale as slaves and whores. This ignorance helps her to protect her safety and social value which is “secured through social structures that systemically disadvantage” others like the Maids (Gilson 232). In this sense, Penelope chooses to remain willfully ignorant so that she won't be affected by the conditions and experiences of the others with the expectation of receiving approval and benefit for doing so.

In addition to being a confession, Penelope's desire to share her story in order to reveal “the plain truth” is an attempt to justify the actions that she has taken in the past (139). However, her narration is complicated by her competing desires: on the one hand, she wants to correct her story through her own mythmaking; on the other, she wants to protect her reputation as a model wife and her privileged status as a queen by embracing how she is portrayed in Homer. Penelope, for instance, chooses to ignore her husband Odysseus' misdeeds and failings so that she can maintain her position in the familial patriarchal structure. She ignores his betrayals, lies and tricks. To do that she “[keeps] the right doors locked and [goes] to sleep during the rampages” (*TP* 3). She ignores her husband's inappropriate behavior to maintain her safety and status:

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his—how can I put it?—his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages. (3)

Penelope's admission in the quote above, as she says: "happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and sleeping through the rampages" reveals that she adopted willful ignorance as a strategy. It also evokes the image of her sleeping through the slaughter of her maids. Though Penelope ignores confronting the upsetting events of her past, she still desires to share her story in order for it to be comprehended. However, recalling and voicing her past leads her to realize her complicity in the maids' slaughter.

Even though Penelope asserts that she was blameless in their slaughter, we know that she slept through their hangings. During the entire course of the trial, despite the fact that Penelope was granted the right to testify, which places her in a powerful position, she contributes to the victimization of an entire group of women with her ignorance. When Penelope is called to testify, she justifies her husband's murder of the maids: "But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission" (181). With her testimony, Penelope also rationalizes their rape as something common in ancient Greece. Penelope's acts of blindness and continuous ignorance partially contributed the Maids' hanging:

What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years. Dead is dead, I told myself. I'll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I'll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me, as well. (67)

Even if she strives to rationalize her guilt by rewriting the story to emphasize the violent nature of men and the patriarchal system, her story shows that her ultimate desire is to be with her husband within these social norms.

One of the most disturbing illustrations of willful ignorance in the novel is that the society as a whole knows that the Maids have been subjected to years of rape, and yet they choose to ignore this fact: “[t]he Suitors raped them. Nobody stopped them from doing so” (179). They “were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist” (115). We witness the sexual and physical abuse of the Maids, as well as the violence perpetrated against them by men. They themselves declared “If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse” (5). As a result, Atwood's rewriting emphasizes issues of gender and social class discrimination that can lead to violence, which are largely ignored in *The Odyssey*. However, the Maids consistently resist the injustices that distort their stories and their position as knowers—just like the Erinyes: “Now you can't get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives” (192).

In the novel, Odysseus and Telemachus attempt to forget their past and begin a new life on Earth by drinking “Waters of Forgetfulness” from the river Lethe. Both drink these waters repeatedly in order to ignore the weight of their brutalities and to rediscover their masculinity every now and then. Yet, drinking from Lethe, as Penelope says, “is only a theory,” because this whole thing is an illusion simply

because they don't perform as expected, so many people do recall everything and choose to ignore it (187). This part of the novel, then, illustrates that in producing and validating knowledge, the Maids are left vulnerable because of their position as “outsiders within<sup>18</sup>” (Collins *Reflections* 86). Their “outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice” (Collins 86). By situating Penelope in a state of ignorance, the novel, in this sense, foregrounds the reader's attention to epistemological questions that need to be addressed.

Willful ignorance, or as Pohlhaus calls willful hermeneutical ignorance, is evident in Penelope's complicity in the murder of the Maids. Despite telling us about her oppression in a patriarchal society, Penelope ignores the power imbalances and injustices that structure her relationship with the Maids. The Maids, by contrast, highlights how their mistress becomes part of the system of injustice that maintains their domination. The Maids' active resistance to injustices throughout the novel as marginally situated knowers explicitly reveals how “dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret their world” (Pohlhaus 716).

Although Penelope can identify her own victimization within the oppressive gender system, which we will analyze in the following section, she fails to recognize how her thoughts and actions maintain the Maids' victimization. What Lorraine Code refers to as “destabilizing narratives” investigate the epistemic tension that exists

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<sup>18</sup> According to Patricia Hill Collins, even though Black women are perceived as “insiders” by white families due to their intimate relationships with them, they are still viewed as “outsiders” regardless of their participation in these families or society at large. This “outsider within” status provides a unique standpoint on their experiences, resulting in two ways of knowing (86-88).

between hegemony and subjugation, as well as between what an individual knows and what they choose to willfully ignore (210). Following Code, it could be asserted that Atwood wants us to acknowledge that in order for epistemology to take into account a variety of ways of knowing, it is necessary for it to acknowledge untold and silenced stories. Calling upon the law that does not protect the Maids, writing Penelope's account which ignores or forgets their torture and class issues in order to save herself, *The Penelopiad* addresses injustices in which women are also complicit not only in the past but also today. This affirms Atwood's claim that her fiction aims to depict women in all their human complexity, with all of the good and evil behaviors because she believes that they cannot be just angels, but they can also commit wrongdoings (qtd.in Howel 4).

To sum up, Atwood by rewriting the trauma of ancient times and today reveals the structures that render us all blind. Accordingly, as an "injustice collector," she reminds us we still live in the same system we look back to revise (Atwood *The Tent* 65). We can conclude with a quote by Anne McClintock whose words I believe perfectly articulate Atwood's primary goal in rewriting:

Perhaps in the labyrinths of torture we must also find a way to speak with ghosts, for specters disturb the authority of vision and the hauntings of popular memory disrupt the great forgettings of official history (qtd. in Craig 52).

### 3.1.3. The Standpoint of Penelope and the Maids

Feminist standpoint theorists prioritize women's lives as a starting point for the reconstruction of knowledge, as demonstrated by Sandra Harding's methodological insight, "start thought from marginalized lives" (121). As remarked by Harding, examining social realities from the perspective of women's lives can help us to realize the biased nature of the dominant discourses and oppressive structures (Harding *Whose* 121). Feminist standpoint theorists, while underlining "the destructively mythical character of the essential and universal man which was the subject and paradigmatic object of non-feminist theories," also deny "essential, universal woman as its subject or object" (Harding *Instability* 284). The working hypothesis of feminist standpoint theory is that knowledge is shaped by individuals' dynamic social positions, and thus, "socially constructed" (Potter 135). This requires accepting the idea that every endeavor to know is socially situated (Harding *Reader* 11 ; also Haraway *Situated* 92 ; Potter 135; Tuana *Feminist* 128).

I believe that the claims made by feminist epistemologists can be read in line with Alan Sinfield's theory of cultural materialism, which he developed as a literary theory. The first analogy I will present is that ideology, in Sinfield's view, serves primarily to legitimize oppression and inequality by characterizing the social structure that sustains them "as immutable and unalterable" (45) This is analogous to the denial of the universal applicability of knowledge claims by feminist epistemologists and the rejection of the universality of canonical myths by feminist rewriters. In addition, his main objective is to expose the subordinate voices of subcultures that form knowledge in dissident forms within dominant narratives. Sinfield claims that

dominant ideologies of social order that manifest themselves in canonical texts inherently contain “dissidence” because these ideologies “produce faultlines” (45). In his explanation of the faultlines in ideologies, which are also embedded in the literary canon, he asserts that “all dominant ideologies contain conflicts and contradictions” (35). In an effort to triumph over these conflicts, these ideologies attempt to justify their claims, and in doing so, they create a space for dissidence (35). Therefore, analyzing these faultlines in literary texts, he believes, “a dissident perspective may be discovered and articulated” (46). According to Sinfield, dominant narratives with the faultline stories need the most diligent and ongoing remaking because “they address the unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute” (47). In brief, finding faultlines within the literary texts and recognizing occurrences of dissidence which are obscured in any textual expression of ideology pave the way to unearth voices that have been lost or repressed. In this context, this part of the study also employs Alan Sinfield's cultural materialism because revisionist mythmaking proves to be a dissident genre which seeks to give voice to the subordinate and the marginalized. Atwood, in explaining her desire to rewrite the novel says that “the story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies” (ii). Her desire to voice dissident standpoints of Penelope and the Maids, in my view, can be read in line with Sinfield's claim that the potential for dissidence arises from the internal ideological conflicts and inconsistencies that literary texts in many ways produce while struggling to remain coherent. Therefore, this part of the study will examine how Atwood's rewriting addresses these faultlines

in canonical myths by articulating dissident perspectives or the standpoint of marginalized characters: Penelope and the Maids.

I argue that Atwood transforms the canonical myths in which women are portrayed as mute, passive objects into one in which they are subjects who actively contribute to the production of knowledge. Atwood situates Penelope and the Maids' voice within the canonical tradition of myths as speaking subjects, within the dynamic intersection of gender and class. In order to locate the dislocated women and to seek out their contemporary form, Atwood looks across time, weaving together their literary images from varying cultural sources. Penelope and the Maids construct their story in between the heritage of their representations in traditional accounts of myth that put them in a marginalized position, and in Atwood's contemporary retelling which places them in a privileged position. *The Penelopiad*, also, as a retelling of the dominant stories of our cultural memory enables us to see the impact of hegemonic gendered constructions of knowledge/s that governs the mainstream social and cultural practices, as well as how these knowledge/s were constructed and can be reconstructed. As Plate writes that the mythical retellings can reconstruct our cultural memory and knowledge through their evolving interaction of culture and the story being told (Plate *Transforming* 32).

In this section, I will be analyzing the underrepresented lives of Penelope and the Maids through the lens of feminist epistemologies, in particular feminist standpoint theories, to help uncover knowledge that has been obscured by dominant myths. This chapter will also examine the situated, subjugated standpoint of Penelope

as a woman and the Maids as slave women in order to explore their partial, situated knowledges.

For standpoint theorists, a standpoint is attainable through the application of critical awareness “on the relationship between power structures, social locations and production of knowledge” (Intemann 785). Located differently in their relations of domination and oppression, after critically reflecting upon their distinct experiences upon their lives, Penelope and the Maids have multiple standpoints that complement one another that offer a more multifaceted comprehension of their position in myths.

Penelope and the Maids are now in Hades, both disembodied because they are dead; however, because they narrate their lives through their experiences, emotions, and thoughts, their narratives construct them as living beings in front of our eyes, allowing us to imagine them to be embodied as well. Their situatedness in this way also blurs the boundaries of the dichotomy of embodied/disembodied knowledge claims so far. Atwood gives agency to Penelope, who exists as Odysseus’ long waiting, faithful wife in the epic, and to her twelve maids, who are but a detail in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. They are not the subjects as “the would-be ideal knower” (Code *What* 1) accepted in classical accounts, or which is “historically and universally disembodied,” or “homogeneous or unitary” (Harding *Reader* 132). They are the “situated Subject(s)” as offered by feminist standpoint theorists (Nelson 121). They are the subjects of knowledge as “embodied and visible”, and they “are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent” (Harding 132; also Haraway *Situated* 92 ; Potter 135; Tuana *Feminist* 128). They are knowers who are “social, embodied, interested, emotional, and rational and whose body, interests,

emotions, and reason are fundamentally constituted by [their] particular historical context” (Jaggar and Bordo 6). As situated subjects in Atwood’s novel, Penelope and the Maids’ narration destabilizes the so called “neutrality” of the male subject who has a “view from above, from nowhere” and thus is “universal” (Haraway *Situated Knowledges* 589) and undermines what Haraway calls “the god-trick” which excludes all other subject positions by hiding behind the position of white, heterosexual male and thus denying subjectivity, voice, and presence to all others. Therefore, Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* reconstructs the knowledge claims that privilege male subjectivity as foundational to the epistemic enterprise.

Situatedness basically means “how relations with others position the knower in relation to the world” (Pohlhaus 717). A position from which we can observe Penelope’s partial knowledge is socially structured by the intersections of her various relations. Penelope’s interaction with Odysseus and the Maids and achieving of her standpoint changes in relation to her negotiation of her past and current life—a negotiation that demonstrates her position in mythological accounts as a woman. In other words, Penelope’s critical narration of her life may illuminate questions and concerns that were not evident within the dominant myths told about her. The “situatedness” of Penelope’s partial knowledge grounded in patriarchal myths can shed light on the systems that perpetuate her victimization by revealing the gaps in her knowledge caused by the dominant myths told about her.

For feminist standpoint theorists, the oppressed possess a privileged position from which they are able reveal the underlying ideologies and systems that sustain oppressive social hierarchies (Harding *Whose* 121). In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood

engages in what Howells terms a “postmodern domestication of myth”. She rewrites the ancient world in its everyday practices of women, “thereby revealing principles which are eternal and immutable from the feminine point of view” (14). In Atwood’s epic, women can speak about their domestic life, they can expose their emotions; their pleasures and desires, as well as their anger and agony. She reconstructs the Homeric epic narrative of men and their heroic adventures by transforming it into a tale of women and their everyday life. Therefore, we hear the everyday life stories of women as opposed to heroic adventures of men.

Atwood gives agency to Penelope to critically recount her life story. Penelope now openly exposes her feelings about Helen, her dissatisfaction with her son Telemachus, and her disapproval of Odysseus’ cruel actions. She recounts every act and aspect of her life critically. Penelope knows that in the version of her story that is considered canon and upon which everyone places their trust, she is portrayed as reliable, loyal, enduring (2). Penelope, in Atwood’s novel, recognizes that her canonized image is a product of her culture and society, but she does not affirm her culturally and socially approved iconography. Her story embodies the difficulties that a woman faces when attempting to establish her identity in a society that demands domestication and passivity. She objects to the association of her name with “Penelope’s web” since for her “if the shroud was a web, then [she] was a spider,” (73) and all she was trying to do was avoid getting entangled; that is, avoid becoming involved in any complicated situations. She was also criticizing her so called “wit”: “I foolishly thought myself quite wise. In retrospect I can see that my actions were ill-considered, and caused harm” (73). Therefore, she realizes her responsibility for the

actions that led to the executions of her servants. She tells us that she is aware of Odysseus' misdeeds and considers him dishonest and cunning (2). She hadn't bothered him with questions into his "unscrupulousness" at the time because she had been brought up to believe in happily ever afters (3).

Penelope's cultural and social marginalization in a male-dominated society demonstrates how categorical structures divide women. This is especially evident in Penelope's relationship with Helen. Atwood also challenges the gender norm by illuminating competitive female friendships. She phrases her aim for doing this in her "Globe and Mail": "My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviors this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing" (qtd. in Howels 4).

Penelope's critical retelling of her own life negotiates with and re/affirms her insider/outsider position. Her life account in the underworld now allows her to understand the experiences of slave maids and their marginalized and oppressed position in a way that she had never done before. Because of the incoherence and contradictions that are inherent in her storytelling as a knower, her account, like the arguments put forth by standpoint theorists, can be described as "contradictory or incoherent," which undermines the universalist supposed subject (Harding 133). On the other hand, she is conflicted between submitting to and challenging the authority of patriarchal society through passive obedience or self-assertion. Atwood presents Penelope as a "contradictory or incoherent" (133) subject. In doing so, her story's inconsistencies and discontinuities debunk the stereotypes and biases that have been attached to Penelope's myth throughout the ages. In addition, the inconsistencies and

contradictions in her story—or, to use Sinfield's terminology, her faultline story—shows her “failure—inability or refusal—to identify [her] interests with the dominant” (41), which represents “an insecure moment for patriarchy” because the threat posed by her narrative is a direct result of the inherent complication that exists within the ideology that governs gender relations (43). This demonstrates that prevailing ideological formations of gender, despite their power, are constantly under pressure, and are working to establish their “plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances” (41).

Penelope writes in the first person narrative “I” which disentangles her from the patriarchal texts written by men: “men have told the stories and framed the cultural precepts, women, reading those stories bound by those precepts, have too often found themselves living men's stories rather than telling and living their own” (Frye v). She wants her own voice to be heard as the subject of her own narration. The marginalized subjects’ own life accounts, as standpoint theorists argue, are informative sources of knowledge because they reveal the ways of their systemic oppression that permeates society. Analyzing Penelope’s standpoint reveals that Penelope also, like the Maids, is situated in a traumatic history and ongoing legacy of violence directed toward women. Her account also exposes the social function of marriage in her society, which includes having children to pass on one’s wealth and status, forming new alliances or strengthening existing ones. As such, Penelope and the Maids’ stories demonstrate the patriarchal view of women as property or commodity.

In her article, Laurie Vickroy states that “Atwood’s victim protagonists often experience emotional neglect early in life that makes them more vulnerable to subsequent traumas” (256). Atwood’s “trauma-survivor” characters, for her, are “overly passive and emotionally paralyzed, unreliable and overly defensive, unheroic and even unethical—failures that are manifestations of trauma” (256). Once Penelope begins to recount her life, she uncovers that she, too, is a trauma survivor. This also explains why Atwood depicts her as an unreliable narrator with inconsistencies in her narration. During her childhood, Penelope was also emotionally neglected by her parents. In Penelope’s words, she could hardly rely on her mother, who avoided intimacy, as she recalls: Her mother “had a habit of sliding away” whenever she attempted to embrace her even when she was a little child (5). As for her father, she tells us that, following the advice of an oracle, he gave the order for her to be drowned when she was quite young. She would have died if not for a flock of ducks that came to her rescue (8). She still feels scared of her father, even in the Underworld because she thinks it would not be difficult for him to put an end to her life by pushing her to the ground or crushing her to death with a rock (9). Although her mother hadn’t done anything to rescue her, she also made up a story about being saved by her mother’s help. She does, however, state that it is unlikely because if his father hadn’t done it “[her mother] might have dropped [her] in herself, in a fit of absent-mindedness or irritation. I often slipped her mind” (8). Therefore, her childhood instilled in her a “mistrust of other people’s intentions” (6). Penelope knows the effects of her childhood trauma on her: “I knew that I would have to look out for myself in the world. I could hardly count on family support” (11).

When it comes to her marriage, she tells, sarcastically, that she was presented to Odysseus as a gift much like a piece of meat that had been wrapped in gold by her father Icarius (*TP* 9). Penelope is aware that her body is an object that men can exchange for wealth. In this regard, her story demonstrates that in the patriarchal marriage market, women have value only insofar as they contribute to patriarchal norms and institutions. Then, she recalls her wedding ceremony:

The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood. (44)

When she was married to Odysseus, she was a 15-year-old girl. She recalls feeling nervous and scared throughout their wedding ceremony. The Maids' tales about Odysseus becoming the owner of her body deepened her fear, as they said: “— once [you were] in the bridal chamber—[you] would be torn apart as the earth is by the plough” (11). Penelope is now offering a straightforward account of the ideology of marriage, and voicing the helplessness of women in the marriage market. However, because of her vulnerability, she feels compelled to affirm the patriarchal pattern of femininity that prioritizes submission to paternal authority, and because, as Sinfield notes, ideology tends to create good subjects who experience a threat when they transgress (45).

Sinfield argues that all institutions in society have some role in the development of ideology, but some institutions are much more influential than others. Their endorsed narratives are harder to refute or even reject. Ideology also constitutes these institutions and the people within them, transforming them into characters in its narratives and granting its authority over those it considers subordinate (33). Sinfield observes the occurrence of this process in Shakespearean plays, where the most compelling narratives revolve around powerful men. These canonical writers “authorize scripts” that mute characters that they consider to be the other (33), which is also evident in Homer’s epics. One of those influential institutions he mentioned is marriage. The institution of marriage was meant to ensure property rights and inheritance, but it was also intended to be a happy union. Penelope is not only obligated to obey her husband in her actions, but she is also required to love her husband. This is what Sinfield refers to as “divided duty,” and it is how the world is structured to accommodate her (43). However, the ideological inconsistencies surrounding marriage create a space for dissident voices (Sinfield 45). In this sense, Penelope’s dissident voice criticizes the patriarchal marriage customs, which disregard her perspective as a woman, exposing a faultline in ideology that exists regarding the institution of marriage. In this regard, the inconsistencies and contradictions in Penelope's story represent the same ideological faultline, revealing that Penelope, as a woman, cannot exist outside of her marriage and thus cannot escape the entanglements of her story, which is deeply entwined with Odysseus.

Before Odysseus embarked on his journey to the Trojan War, he made it explicit that he intended to preserve his ownership of her and he cautioned her about

the perils that would await her if she committed infidelity, as she says, and he made the threat that he could have “[chopped] her into little pieces with his sword or hang [her] from the roof beam” (17). This unsettling scene is evidence of her dread about the possibility of him being violent toward her as “[she] really was frightened” (74). Therefore, her husband imposed the patriarchal doctrine of marriage, which reveals the commodity status of women within marriage. Sinfield stressed that one of the most disruptive things a woman could do to the system is having an affair with another man: that is, adultery (47). The husband's sense of dignity, masculinity, and property are all damaged by adultery (47). Even the slightest rumor of Penelope's infidelity is enough to cause Odysseus to become extremely anxious and it appears that this was the prime motive for him to eliminate not only the suitors but also the twelve maids. After all of these traumatic events that she had endured during her life, she had no intention of resurrecting: “My past life was fraught with many difficulties, but who’s to say the next one wouldn’t be worse?” (35). As a result, following Vickory’s claims, Atwood writes the flaws of Penelope’s “avoidance of the suffering of others” so as to avoid further trauma and her “faulty cognition or memory” which are “symptomatic of trauma” (257).

Bousan phrases this as “the drama of the female self-in-crisis emerges in all of Atwood’s novels as a kind of recurring textual anxiety, a repetition compulsion that is enacted and reenacted” (11). Bousan believes that what appears in Atwood's fiction is not only the anxieties of growing up in a patriarchal society, but also the traumas inherent in playing the culturally expected roles of obedient daughter, submissive wife, sexual object, or female victim (11). In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood appears to be

concerned with these ongoing issues that haunt women in a patriarchal culture, as evidenced by Penelope's life account, in which she tells us that being a queen does not change her status as a victim.

Without a doubt, Penelope's story cannot upend the patriarchal structure of marriage. However, her experience reveals that the institutional structure of marriage is primarily founded on the inequality of sexes. In this regard, her articulation of her standpoint, does constitute dissidence. As Sinfield notes, dissident voices can produce series of small breaks (42). Therefore, female characters like Penelope can reconstruct our knowledge "in dissident forms," allowing us to question the position of women within patriarchal institutions such as family and matrimony (Sinfield 38).

Penelope's standpoint is challenged by The Maids'/slave women's standpoint which undercuts societal assumptions in ways that Penelope's, from her privileged position as a white woman and queen, may not. Their marginalized, disadvantaged position puts them in a position of epistemic privilege/advantage which can turn their oppression into a source of knowledge that is not apparent to the dominant group members (Harding 10). It is through their stories we learn some truth that was not visible in earlier canonical versions. The Maids, in their roles as servants for men and women, can expose the naturalized social structures. As stated by Nevin Yıldırım Koyuncu, Atwood in her works by "exposing unequal social relations opens up a gap within ideological operations of these relations which enables them to be reevaluated so that they can also contain the marginalized other and empower them" (84). The prose monologue of Penelope is interweaved with the interludes of the twelve maids in which they express their own accounts of the official story and of Penelope's

version, establishing one collective voice in a variety of genres, mostly in verse, ranging from nursery rhyme to sea shanty to ballad and idyll. Their removal from the Penelope's main narrative helps to establish the social status of the Maids as outsiders in a structural sense as well.

Sandra Harding insists that the subjects/agents of knowledge are “multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent” which is exactly opposite to traditional epistemology which “required the fiction that we have and thus think from unitary and coherent lives” (65). She claims thinking from multiple standpoints from a variety of subaltern perspectives gives more advantage than one dominant perspective. She, therefore, convincingly claims that acknowledging this “subject of liberatory feminist knowledge must also be, in an important if controversial sense, the subject of every other liberatory knowledge project” (66). Therefore, The Maids' multiple standpoints as agents of knowledge challenges unitary, definitive and monologic of voice of dominant epistemic subject.

The Maids started their lives with no social foundation on which to build their identities because they had no parents. Their stories tell us even when they were still young, helpless, and vulnerable children, they were forced to have sexual encounters with their owner, his relatives, friends, and anyone who came to visit (13). They were reduced to sexual objects and the whole society justified their exploitation. Since their bodies were of “little value,” they were treated as mere commodities and traded like goods (Atwood 14). They perform a sea shanty in the “The Wily Sea Captain” chapter to tell the adventures of Odysseus with monsters and goddesses, who “scratched [his] itch / with every goddess, queen and bitch” (*TP* 3). We see that the

Maids are systematically subject to epistemic injustices that are intrinsically linked to dominance and oppression:

I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey,  
t's Yes sir and No ma'am the whole bleeding day;  
I smile and I nod with a tear in my eye...  
Hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!... (52)  
Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when  
bloomless....(66)

They vocalize their physical and sexual exploitation as slave women, who have no control over their bodies and are helpless victims of male abuse. The Maids see and understand those in power in ways that they cannot see themselves. It may be relevant here to read Charles Mills' quotation from Du Bois' passage from his autobiographical *Dusk of Dawn* (2007) where he modifies Plato's Cave:

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave . . . sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world....It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. . . . [The passing white world] either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand. (qtd. in Mills 108)

As remarked by Mills, du Bois forms his account of epistemic justice: “those in the darkness of the cave already know the social truth, viz. that they are living in an unjust society of white supremacy” (108). Mills furthers his claim “the racially subordinated – victims, after all, of genocide, expropriation, and slavery!– are often quite well able to recognize their situation” (108). This describes the Maids’ knowledge. They know their situation, they know how they encounter injustices in an unjust society.

In addition, their brutal hanging that followed the return of their king Odysseus shows how violence is legitimized when it serves the interests of the ruling power structures. In his analysis of Shakespeare's plays, Sinfield identifies this as “state violence” which “is justified through stories about the barbarity of those who are constituted as its demonized others” (*Faultlines* 34). In these faultline stories, according to Sinfield, characteristics that could cause disobedience “are expelled after being demonized, or incorporated after being represented as inherently submissive” (128). This situation is quite similar to that of the Maids and Penelope. King Odysseus' brutal treatment of the Maids to preserve his throne is justified by casting them in the roles of villains and threats. Penelope, on the other hand, is not demonized but rather integrated into the narrative as a figure submissive to authority in her role as a faithful and submissive wife. Apparently, their gender and sexuality pose potential threats to the kingdom, which necessitates one of two responses: either they must be eradicated, or they must be subjugated.

The Maids' portrayal as a trickster archetype should also be mentioned here. Nevzat Kaya asserts that historically, the trickster is a superior creature belonging to

the hunting-gathering era that have characteristics attributed to animals. Wisdom, according to Kaya, is another quality that is inherently present in tricksters. That is to say, they know both good and evil of the earth and the underworld. In light of this, Atwood's transformation of the Maids into owls, which are associated with wisdom, is no mere coincidence. In this sense, their knowledge serves as a mirror, reflecting both good and bad in a patriarchal social structure as well as in individual attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, trickster characters represent transgression due to their ability to fly and transform into other forms. (*Kaya Trickster* 11:00-12:00). In their animal forms, for Kaya, tricksters always pose a threat to the rigid cultural systems because they are seen as barbaric and as representatives of nature that cannot be domesticated or rationalized. When viewed in this light, the Maids become a metaphor for the transgression of norms and other social boundaries. Kaya adds that wherever there is a trickster, there is a transformation and this transformation counteracts the rigidity of the ideology that silences diversity. In other words, where tricksters emerge, imbalances and inconsistencies in the system's integrity rise to the surface (*Kaya Trickster* 07:45-09:41). Accordingly, the very existence of the Maids creates "an insecure moment" within patriarchal ideology, causing its "plausibility to fall into disarray" (Sinfield 43). By narrating the untold stories of the Maids, Atwood makes visible the legitimized state violence against women in the dominant patriarchal culture and let them "develop dissident subjectivities" which would trouble the very principles upon which our civilization rest (Sinfield 299).

### 3.1.4. We Gossip, Therefore We Are!

Homer's *The Odyssey*, which is widely regarded as one of the core literary works in Western thought, contains a substantial amount of content on the gender biases that significantly shape our cultural memory. With Odysseus' heroic deeds and actions outside the home taking center stage, Penelope is relegated to domestic arena and the marriage plot as a faithful wife, with no voice for herself in this "official version" (*TP* 2), which ultimately becomes "the main authority on the subject" (*TP* 181). Atwood's Penelope, in an attempt to challenge this male-dominated discourse, embarks on her quest to tell stories, as she explains in the novel's opening chapter, "Low Art":

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to do it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children – folks with time on their hands. Once people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel – there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts. (*The Penelopiad* 3)

Penelope's description of tale-telling which she associates with old wives and maids refers to the kind of storytelling that does not claim universality of canonical myths. These tale-tellings such as old wives' tales have always been an integral part of cultural memory as they serve as sources of knowledge, providing insight into the norms and values of the society in which we live and facilitating social interaction. However, because these stories were associated with women, they were easily ignored, as Angela Carter states: "Old wives' tales—that is, worthless stories,

untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the genuine art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it” (xii).

As Atwood notes in her introduction, she draws the material for her rewriting from oral stories, particularly from rumors and gossip (2). Indeed, she places gossip and rumors at the center of her rewriting. By doing this, Atwood offers an “alternative”—to use Spack’s words for the use of gossip in literature—“to the dominant discursive mode” (Spack 263). Therefore, in this part of the study, I will examine how Atwood reconstructs knowledge through the use of gossip and rumor in her rewriting as a way for marginalized women to have their stories heard.

Lorraine Code, one of the feminist epistemologists discussed earlier, in her essay “Gossip, or in Praise of Chaos” argues that gossiping can provide “a rich resource to revisionary, successor epistemology projects” for anyone engaged in constructing an “epistemology of everyday life” (144). She wants to reclaim “the value of gossip from its habitual denigration as merely an idle female pursuit” (144). It is also worth noting that the goal of Code is not to promote the value of gossip, but it is rather to explore the ways gossip “for all its randomness, produces knowledge so valuable” that it has the potential to challenge traditional monologic knowledge claims as the only dependable means of determining truth (150). Similar to standpoint theorists’ situated knowledge claims, she defines gossip as “located, situated discourse, subtly informative, yet never stable nor fixed” which she sees as a site for feminist epistemologists to work so as to “contest injustices and oppressions” (153). Margaret Atwood, in her rewriting, transforms the Homeric “high art” of myth into the female “low art” of gossipy storytelling. Indeed, Atwood locates gossip to the

center of her narration. Although gossip belongs to oral tradition, Atwood's work shows us that it can serve as a hermeneutic resource in literary contexts. As a result, the focus of this part of the analysis will be on identifying how and why Atwood incorporates gossip into her rewriting.

Inspired by Lorraine Code, Karen Adkins in her book *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power: Knowledge Underground* offers a wide spectrum of analysis from academia to the history of political gossip, and from journalism to internet blogs and websites. She believes that Code shows us how gossip undermines the fundamental assertions of legitimacy and authority that are inherent in mainstream discourse (148). Her book's central argument is that "gossip is a path to knowledge" (3). Considering gossip's transgressive nature, she claims, "it can add chaos to normal workings of structures and institutions of power" (4). For this reason, in her view, gossip is an effective means of communication for people on the margins of society not only because they are either denied or unable to gain access the knowledge sources, but also their credibility has been called into question or discredited. As discussed earlier, Miranda Flicker identifies epistemically unjust restrictions on marginalized agents as epistemic injustice. In this respect, when epistemic injustice occurs, gossip can be a way of communication "that people pursue when they are otherwise blocked from avenues of knowledge" (51).

Although the word "gossip" is most often applied to marginalized communities including "women, people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ" because of its association with being "less rational, less logical" (Adkins 4), and thus "taken on the most negative aspects of stereotypes of femininity: irrational,

disorderly, emotional, malicious” (95), the original term in its original Old English form is “god sibbe,” which means “god-related, or good friend” or “friend of the family” (7). According to Adkins, this means that the beginnings of gossip indicate its roots in close relationships: “intimacy” (21). It is an applicable topic for feminist inquiry, for Adkins, because it represents a form of marginalized discourse that is generally disregarded by conventional academic circles. (*The Real* 216).

Adkins traces Patricia Spacks’ work “Gossip” in which she analyzes the role of gossip in various literary works. Spacks is also one of the few scholars, for Adkins, who “recognizes that gossip can be a channel for the marginalized to express resentment or resistance” (29). In like manner, I suggest that Penelope and the Maids use gossip and rumors as an alternative path to knowledge to express their resentment or resistance and as a way of critiquing or challenging the main sources of their myths.

Penelope informs us at the novel's beginning that even though she is dead, she still doesn't know everything. She only knows “a few *factoids*” (1; emphasis mine) and she has been able to pick up some information by “listening at windows” or “opening other people’s letters” (1). Therefore, she has made the Maids become her source and agent of gossip:

The maids were my sources of information. They were ever-flowing fountains of *trivial gossip*: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as they pleased. (25; emphasis mine)

It could be argued that gossip serves as a means for Penelope and the Maids to gain access to restricted knowledge, thereby liberating them from patriarchal control and oversight. In the absence of Odysseus, the Maids become Penelope's "most trusted eyes and ears in the palace" (*TP* 56), and they form a "female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer" (Howells, 78). They "told stories," "shared riddles," "made jokes" (52). While together weaving and unweaving behind locked doors at night, their female talk gives them a sense of agency and it also helps them build intimacy (*The Real* 228). For Adkins, the power of gossip lies in this intimacy; while this power has the potential to be constructive, it also has the potential to be destructive. Penelope burst into tears whenever her maids, her constant sources of information, report on "malicious gossip(s)" (52).

Jason van Niekerk in *The Virtue of Gossip* writes that gossip has the potential to act as a "moral sandbox" that allows us to figure out our own stances by analyzing the behaviors of others (408). Similar to this sandbox, Penelope tells us at the beginning of Atwood's novel that everyone brings a bag stuffed with words and stories with them to the underworld: "words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you" (1). Atwood appears to demonstrate from the very start of the novel how gossip and rumor contribute to what we know about these ancient mythical figures. Penelope now knows how people turned her "into a story, or into several stories" (*TP* 2). These rumors and gossip with their "border-crossing nature" (Adkins 42), shape her character and the plot of her story. Despite her claim that "who cares about public opinion now?", Penelope continues by saying, "The opinion of the people down here: the opinion of shadows, of echoes" (2). It seems

difficult for her to understand herself beyond what other people say about her in stories, rumors, and gossips: “So much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadows, that sometimes it’s hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside” (8-9).

Gossips are like “spiders who spin entangling webs” says Spacks. Indeed, the meanings associated with Penelope’s web are also reconstructed by Atwood: “If the shroud was a web, then I was the spider...., I’d merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself” (73). To avoid becoming entangled in the slanderous gossip that serves as an effective force to destroy her reputation, she defends herself against what others say— against gossip. In the “Slanderous Gossip” part, Penelope gives her side of the story in response to numerous slanderous gossips that have been passed down through the ages which for her “are completely untrue” (70). She informs us that she was never physically close to any of the suitors during the time that Odysseus was away (143). She denies all the malicious gossip and rumors circulated about her betrayal. Robert Graves’ *The Greek Myths* includes references to slanderous gossip spread about Penelope. During Odysseus' twenty-year absence at the Trojan War, he writes, she had sexual encounters with the potential candidates and bore the Great God Pan (Graves 645). Graves relates these rumors as follows: “Some say... others say... ... others say ... But, according to a third” (646). In a similar way, Penelope follows the same style when distributing these stories: “I was told the story,” (8); “Some say,” (89); “everyone knows,”; “being told by someone,”; “The songs say...” (143); “the more outrageous versions,” “such a monstrous tale,” “some songs aren’t worth the breath expended on them” and “various commentators have cited” (144)

with absence of an appeal to truth pervading her narrative. The world as an agent of gossip, similar to the “featureless abstraction” of would-be-knower of traditional knowledge claims (Code 1), with its powerful voice judges people who violate social standards. By generating shame on those who violate them, it contributes to the enforcement of social norms and values (Spacks 183). In order to avoid what Spack calls “a socially circulated disapproval,” Penelope is now responding to the rumors that others have been spreading about her sexual behavior (Spacks 204).

Penelope also informs us about the gossip surrounding Odysseus. One gossip has it that Odysseus passed out at the very first harbor after having too much to drink with his traveling companion: “no, *said others*, they eat magic plant”; Odysseus was captured by “a goddess on an enchanted isle, *said some...* she’d turned his men into pigs”; however, “the two of them made love deliriously every night; *said others*, it was just an expensive whorehouse” (41; emphasis mine). Then she adds these are not the stories that have been transmitted through “the noblest versions”:

Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest versions in my presence – the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses (*TP* 54).

Her reference to the noblest form of stories in this passage is undoubtedly the canonized “high art” of myths. Atwood appears to cast doubt on the veracity and authority of these myths, while also highlighting how they are molded to reflect the author's patriarchal worldview. As a result, I argue that by employing slanderous

gossip in her narrative as “a marker of underlying and unjust social structure,” to use Adkins' words, Atwood reveals unavoidable consequences of dominant structures of social order and calls into question the reliability of official discourses (Adkins 178). In *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives* Sarah Allen writes “gossip includes tales that relay particular information about particular historical people who were presumably known to the tale’s audience through reputation” (3). These stories recount personal encounters and knowledge that have been omitted and recounted from the official record which is also evident in *The Penelopiad*. Accordingly, as Maria Tatar argues, it can be considered a counter-discourse that challenges the accepted social norms (138).

Gossip, for Adkins, provides us choices “by which to imagine and choose alternatives” (223). She names two functions of gossip; one of which is the selective function, as Adkins suggests, which “runs as a ‘background check’ on potential beliefs” (223). As such, gossip becomes a “playful arena” that allows the possibilities that might be implausible in more conventional settings (225). In that sense, by adding alternative stories that were not mentioned or ignored in *The Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* becomes “a playful arena” with many stories to be heard. In this way, instead of providing a single, definitive narrative, Atwood provides the audience with multiple options.

Penelope’s narration, which she herself defines as a “tale telling,” is followed by the lyrical interludes of the Maids (4). The Maids’ interludes function as the chorus of Greek tragedy, in Atwood’s words: “The chorus of Maids is in part a tribute to the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, in which lowly characters comment on the

main action, and also to the satyr plays that accompanied tragedies, in which comic actors made fun of them. The Maids in *The Penelopiad* do such things” (*Penelopiad: The Play* vi). Therefore, their chorus line forms a “shadow discourse, a hypothetical alternative rejected yet always conceivable because so obvious, so easy, as a way of discussing sex, adultery, divorce” (Spacks 263).

Code uses a play and a story written by Susan Glaspell. In the story, two women by “reciprocal prompting, imagining, picking out and integrating details” articulate their ideas for why another woman named Mrs. Wright killed her husband in his sleep (146). They gather their knowledge out of their activities, which “neither one of them could have produced alone” (147). In so doing, they form “a micro-community” as the Maids form in *The Penelopiad* (146). This micro community’s “mutual, speculative, engaged critique and correction integral to gossip” is evident in the Maids’ interludes. The Maids in this sense, in line with Code’s claim, present “a dialogical moment of knowledge production, in a cooperative epistemic negotiation” (14).

“Slandorous Gossip” is followed by “The Perils of Penelope: A Drama.” The Maids playfully, like a trickster persona,<sup>19</sup> invites us to listen to them. Atwood gives them the voice of the goddess of Rumor. As a result, their stories provide readers with a variety of perspectives and truths: “Let us just say: There is another story. Or several, as befits the goddess Rumor” (147). Their diverse voices transform the original myths’ immutable and timeless truths into a kaleidoscopic variety of stories. In Prologue, Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks shares with us the rumors that circulate

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<sup>19</sup> Hilde Staels reads the maids as trickster archetype (109).

around Penelope's well-known faithfulness, specifically those that pertain to her sexual encounters with the suitors:

Word has it that Penelope the Prissy  
Was – when it came to sex – no shrinking sissy!  
Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping,  
Masking her lust with gales of moans and weeping;  
Others, that each and every brisk contender  
By turns did have the fortune to upend her,  
By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan  
Was then conceived, or so the fable ran.  
The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain. (78)

The Maids, who respectively perform Penelope and Eurycleia, are now confirming the rumors that Penelope is unfaithful and unreliable through their own gossip:

Penelope:  
While he was pleasuring every nymph and beauty,  
Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?  
While every girl and goddess he was praising,  
Did he assume I'd dry up like a raisin?  
Eurycleia:  
While you your famous loom claimed to be threading,  
In fact you were at work within the bedding!

They accuse Penelope of being complicit in their execution because she laid the blame on the Maids out of fear of what the public would think and in an effort to maintain her virtuous image. Gossip in this sense has become a channel for the voiceless and the marginalized Maids whose testimony was discredited because of

their social status. With their speculative talk with its erotic connotations, they offer a counter-narrative not only to Penelope's story but also to the dominant social structures and discourses that marginalize them. As discussed earlier, for the standpoint theorists, the marginalized position enables them to understand both the dominant social structures and their own. By means of their storytelling, the Maids' stories reveal not only their discrimination, but also the alternative perspectives that undermine immutable truths and the presumed universality of the canonical myths. In other words, Atwood does not only destabilize canonical narratives, particularly Homer's *The Odyssey*, but also draws attention to the marginalization of certain oral narratives in the dominant discourses.

Adkins claims that gossip and rumors help "us make connections between seemingly unconnected ideas" (Adkins *The Real* 223). Atwood informs us in her introduction: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies" (I). Accordingly, following Adkins' claim, I suggest that by using gossip and rumors, Atwood fills the holes, shifts perspectives, connects some seemingly unconnected inconsistencies in the source texts of *The Penelopiad*. Employing gossip and rumors in her rewriting, Atwood demonstrates an alternative to the dominant discursive narratives that challenges traditional knowledge claims as the only reliable means of determining truth, as well as a path to knowledge for the marginalized to articulate their experiences and resistance.

To sum up, I believe that by narrating and thereby acknowledging the neglected ways of knowing and knowledges of marginalized women, Atwood presents Patricia Hill Collins' concept of "oppositional consciousness" which is a

“critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies” that provides the “conceptual tools to resist oppression” (The Social 745). Atwood's work can be interpreted as a fictional rendering of Collins' concept because she positions previously marginalized women with 'oppositional consciousness' as knowers. By doing so, she challenges the exclusion of marginalized groups from the category of knowers and enables them to serve as subjects of knowledge that can uproot oppressive practices.

### **3.2. Jeanette Winterson's *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles***

In *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (2005), Jeanette Winterson remakes the stories of Atlas and Heracles that “we think we *know* and record them differently,” by deconstructing patriarchal and heterosexual discourses and investing them with new meanings (xviii, my emphasis). Winterson's work, beginning with her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and continuing through her most recent novel *The Stone Gods*, is marked by its frequent reworking of myths and fairy tales that are stored in the cultural memory of Western society. She employs the possibilities and “the power of storytelling for its mythic” qualities in her fiction not only by weaving myths, fairytales, and legends into the fabric of her narratives, but also by incorporating her own traumatic personal story (Winterson *Weight* ii). She seems to use retelling as a strategy for challenging grand narratives or heteronormative discourses that have historically ignored those on the margins of society, as she says: “Break the narrative. Refuse all stories that have been told so far...and try to tell the story differently – in a different style, with different weights” (Winterson *Powerbook* 53). Indeed, ignorance of the marginalized other is a recurring theme in Winterson's

fictional universe. She writes into literary and cultural history the voices that have been ignored or silenced, such as Dog Woman in *Sexing the Cherry*, who is marginalized due to her deprivation, sexual identity, and grotesque body.

Ignorance is one of the main themes of her essays in her new book *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next* (2021) in which she bites twelve apples from the tree of knowledge in “world-wide wonderland” to critique artificial intelligence. In one of the twelve essays titled *Gnostic Know-How*, after explaining that gnosis literally means “knowledge” in Greek, she delves into the Gnostic view of reality (79). She holds the belief, similar to Rich's allegory of the shipwreck, that the “knowledge (gnosis) whereby humankind can be informed” (80) is hidden and controlled by the traditional and patriarchal ancestors, awaiting discovery. For her “There is no Golden Age. No Good Old Days. No Paradise. No Fall. Our world was created badly from the start – not out of evil, but out of *ignorance*” (80; emphasis mine). By challenging the origin stories of humanity as created by the prevailing religious, philosophical, and mythological discourses, she intends to highlight how this ignorance was constructed by “stereotypes of gender and race—the binaries (me boy/you girl/me Black/you white) that have caused, are causing, untold human pain and suffering” (*12 Bytes* 157). In *Weight*, she reveals this “untold story” of Atlas “the long-suffering” (22) by drawing a thematic comparison with a fictionalized version of her own traumatic experience and liberate them from boundaries and the “monstrous burden” they have been forced to carry (18). Given that the majority of the stories in the Greek mythological canon revolve around the gods and heroes of the Olympian generation, Winterson’s choice of Atlas, who is a part of pre-Olympic generation of

divinities known as the Titans, is an interesting one in this context. The story of the Titans, whose demise led to the establishment of Olympian hegemony, is mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is considered to be one of the earliest works of classical literature. As stated by Nevzat Kaya, it is an important record that, even though biased, shows how a matriarchal society or pre-Olympic culture transformed into a rational and patriarchal one establishing Zeus' androcentric authority. This transition is significant because it highlights Atlas' marginalization under the patriarchal hegemony of the Olympians with his "exemplary punishment" (Graves 41) and because his myth has been ignored in canonical versions in favor of Heracles' accomplishments. Winterson appears to associate the Olympian regime with patriarchal hegemony that marginalizes all difference in order to maintain the existing order.

Hesiod's *Theogony* is also used as a source for Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*, which Winterson uses as a reference to form her story. According to Graves, "Gigantic Atlas" was a Titan who had an intimate knowledge of the ocean's depths because he was the son of Poseidon. He reigned the land that is known as Atlantis. His kin cultivated a huge plain, built palaces, and temples and lived in great wealth. Be that as it may, one day with Zeus' help, the Athenians were victorious over them and completely obliterated Atlantis, burying it underneath the sea. Atlas sided with Cronus and the Titans in their battle with the Olympian divinities. Zeus, defeating his father Cronus, succeeded him as ruler of the gods in Olympian pantheon. All the defeated Titans were exiled to British Isles. However, Zeus sentenced Atlas to "carry heaven on his shoulders for all eternity" (139). Atlas' story concludes as he was exiled

to margin of the world. After that point, he is ignored or only mentioned as a minor figure to glorify the myth of Heracles. Heracles, which means “Glory of Hera,” is the son of Zeus and the mortal Alcmene. Hera drove Heracles mad and made him kill his sons. After Heracles recovered his sanity, he had to perform twelve labours to become immortal. The eleventh labour consisted of gathering apples from the golden apple-tree in Garden of the Hesperides which was Mother Earth’s wedding gift to Hera (458). However, Heracles was not permitted to personally pick the apples, so Atlas became his agent, while Heracles “reliev[ed] him of his fantastic burden” (459). Their encounter appears to have influenced Winterson's desire to retell the story. In the introduction, she states that the “story of Atlas' punishment and his temporary relief when Heracles takes the world off his shoulders” is the one that “was waiting to be written, Re-written” (Winterson xiv).

The novel is told from multiple points of view, including a third-person who recounts Atlas’ and Heracles’ stories, a first-person narrator representing the author, and Atlas' first-person voice, which is occasionally interwoven with that of the author. These various story worlds, for Hilda Steals, “are interconnected by a thematic concern with boundaries, desire” (112). Indeed, “boundaries and desires” is a recurring motif in Winterson's novels. *Weight*, in the words of critic Sonya Andermah, “extends into mythology the exploration of what has become the defining theme of Winterson's work to date: 'boundaries, desire', and the limits of the self” (119).

In *Weight*, Winterson tells “the same old story – boundaries, desire” (60) in her creative, imaginative, blurring, and subversive way again. The main boundary

Winterson blurs in *Weight* is the one between mythos and logos. Mythologia or mythology derives from Greek words mythos (meaning “word” or “story”) and logos (meaning “words about words”) (Doty 6). William Doty in his work *Mythography*, tells us that historically this combination was separated and logos “gained the sense of referring to words comprising doctrine or theory” because Greek philosophical and scientific discourse and its “rationality (its logos) had supplanted mythological thinking” (6). Winterson refutes this separation of logos and mythos as she weaves and blends scientific concepts like quantum physics, geography, and geology into the narrative fabric of her mythical retelling. Paul Ricoeur cautions us against trying to rationalize myth because “in losing its explanatory pretensions the myth reveals its exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding” (5). He claims “to exclude its etiological intention is the theme of all necessary demythologization” (5). Winterson, similar to Ricoeur, believes “in the power of storytelling for its mythic and not its explanatory qualities” (Winterson *Weight* ii). In her novel, she incorporates the scientific logos into her mythic storytelling in order to offer a way of perceiving the world that is open to an infinite number of possibilities. *Weight* demonstrates her rejection of fixed historical or scientific knowledge of the world through her emphasis on the narrative construction of religious and scientific discourses: “If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story. Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true” (145). Furthermore, the repeated use of the phrase “I want to tell the story again” demonstrates that Winterson places the act of retelling at the novel’s center (Winterson *Weight* xiv). Therefore, Winterson's revisionary project

embraces myths in a manner analogous to Ricoeur's understanding of myths with their possibilities to "constitute a disclosure of unprecedented worlds" (Ricoeur *Figuring* 488).

With her use of "postmodern aesthetics of fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, parody, and hybridity," as well as "postmodern epistemological tenets such as fluidity and instability of self and world, and the ultimate unknowability of things," critical works on Jeanette Winterson's texts mostly regard her as a postmodern feminist writer (Andermahr 21). Yet, she refuses to be postmodern and "would like to be known as a modernist in the European tradition of Borges and Calvino" (2), or "in the tradition of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot as a committed experimenter with literary form and genre" (Andermahr 18). For Andermahr, Winterson is unquestionably a modernist because she not only experiments with various literary forms, but also places utmost importance on art in the same way that Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce did (17). Winterson's work is, as remarked by Sonya Andermahr, "well known for its multiple border crossings and fantastic journeys through space, time, genre and gender. Her fictional universes blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine, past and present, material and magical worlds" ("Cyberspace" 108).

This part of the study aims to examine how her retelling, which she also calls "Cover Version" (i), creates alternative ways of knowing by her emphasis on the role of narrative construction of the dominant discourses and how it maps subjectivities of her characters so as to reconstruct knowledge.

### 3.2.1. Queering the Myth: Queer Temporality

*Thinking about time is like turning the globe round and round, recognizing that all journeys exist simultaneously, that to be in one place is not to deny the existence of another.*

— Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*

In her article “‘My Monstrous Burden’: Queering the Myth, Rewriting the Self in Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight*,” Silvia Antosa argues that Winterson, in *Weight*, challenges and subverts dominant patriarchal and heteronormative discourses which have ignored and marginalized nonconforming subjectivities. Antosa contends that by depicting Atlas as “the perfect synthesis of masculinity and femininity,” Winterson challenges the prevalent notions of hetero-centrality and assertive models of masculinity (68). In addition, one of the recurring themes in Winterson’s novels is her interest in “making time strange, or queering temporality” (Jenzen 32). In accordance with these dictums, I would like to analyze in this section of the research how Winterson, in *Weight*, uses various means or expressions to queer time and space, with a particular focus on the concept of queer temporality. I will use Sylvia Antosa’s definition of “queer,” which she defines as “not just a synonym for lesbian and gay, but rather as a word (and a system of thought) that questions the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender, sexual desire, and sexual practice on which the heteronormative system is founded” (492).

Carla Freccero explains that the term “queer temporality” refers to the exploration of “some of the radically subjective experiences of time and temporality”

and a recognition of “the queerness of non-progressive, non-sequential time” (22). It puts an epistemic emphasis on how time is ideologically and socially constructed, calling into question “the past, present, and future march of time” (Freccero 22). In *Weight*, Winterson integrates multiple layers of temporality within her narrative structure that is both multidimensional and distinct. She describes her disruption or “queering” of time elsewhere as follows: “All of my books manipulate time, in an effort to free the mind from the effects of gravity. The present has a weight to it— the weight of our lives, the weight of now. By imaginatively moving sideways, I try to let in more light and air” (Winterson website, Art & Lies). In this sense, as we also observe in *Weight*, her narratives destabilize and reconstruct temporal and spatial norms through the simultaneous portrayal of the weight of the past, present, and future in the present moment. As Mine Özyurt Kılıç writes in her introduction to *Winterson Narrating Time and Space*<sup>20</sup> that as a critic of the official historical account, patriarchal hegemony, and all the boundaries that confine human potential, Winterson also disrupts traditional concepts of time and place as “the first filters of socio-cultural knowledge” (xii).

In her book *In a Queer Time and Place* Judith Halberstam describes queer conception of time as “non-teleological and non-reproductive,” placing it “in

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<sup>20</sup> *Winterson Narrating Time and Space* is published after 2006 14th METU British Novelists Conference. The volume comprises ten essays analyzing time, space and narrative in Winterson’s works which has guided my research to comprehend Winterson’s narrative interest in time and space. See: *Winterson Narrating Time and Space*, edited by Margaret J-M Sönmez, and Mine Özyurt Kılıç, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009.

opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction”<sup>21</sup> (1). She asserts that the “birth-marriage-reproduction-death” cycle of time does not apply to queer temporality, which exists outside of this cycle (4). By locating “reproductive temporality” within the heteronormative power structure of contemporary Western capitalist society, she explains how the organization of time has a foundational value system that prioritizes (re)productivity and a family-oriented time line (5).

*Weight* starts with the “I Want to Tell the Story Again” episode in which the first-person narrator challenges grand-narratives and teleological aspect of time and space right from the start. Winterson creates her own version of genesis related to time and space. She juxtaposes scientific and mythological discourses of time and space in her mythical retelling “in a parodic pseudoscientific version of the Biblical account” (Antosa 66), as she writes: “In the beginning there was nothing. Not even space and time... The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut....Your first parent was a star” (*Weight* 3). She deconstructs theological and mythological creation stories that begin with reproduction in her rewriting of genesis by making our first parent a star. In this way, she presents time and space as “non-teleological and non-reproductive,” to use Judith Halberstam's terminology (1). In other words, she denaturalizes the reproductive principle that predominates religious and mythical discourses. Then, in the following paragraph, Atlas' identification with

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<sup>21</sup> Halberstam's use of the term “queer” refers “to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). She also examines Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, rewriting of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* which “takes the temporal frame of Woolf's novel (life in a day) and emphasizes its new, but also queer rendering of time and space” (3). For more detail see: Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*. New York: New York UP, 2005.

the author is made clear by a blending of their voices, leaving the reader uncertain as to who is narrating the creation myth. Atlas or Winterson describes the origins of life:

Science calls it the world before life began – the Hadean period. But life had begun, because life is more than the ability to reproduce. In the molten lava spills and cratered rocks, life longed for life. *The proto, the almost, the maybe*. Not Venus. Not Mars. Earth. Planet Earth, that wanted life so badly, she got it. (4)

It is also worth noting that in Winterson's reimagining of the creation story, the origin of life is not rooted in the capacity to reproduce but rather in what it is capable of becoming; in its potential; in its longing for life: or what has become the defining theme of Winterson's work to date: desire. Accordingly, I believe that Winterson's reconstruction of the creation myth undermines the traditional heteronormative, reproductive, and linear temporal order of the world.

In the chapter called "Leaning on the Limits of Myself," the author's persona recounts the traumatic experience of being rejected by both her biological mother and her adoptive mother. She places emphasis on the "weight" that she has shouldered throughout her life, identifying herself with Atlas, as says without any parents "to carry [her], she learned to carry [herself] (45). Her girlfriend even believes that she suffers from "an Atlas complex" <sup>22</sup> (45). As Steals reads it, Winterson's personal

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<sup>22</sup> Winterson here also rejects the Oedipalized Freudian subject whose psychosexual development is defined by the parental triangle of "daddy-mommy-me" (See Deleuze, G and Guattari, E. *Anti-Oedipus*, trans R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane, London and New York: Continuum, 2004. p.87-93.) The ending of *Weight* also deepens this idea particularly once it is compared to the ending of *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. Most Woolf critics focused on Oedipal relationship of Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay, and their son James. (see, for example, Abel, Elizabeth. *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. *Virginia*

narrative universe is paralleled by Atlas' epic narrative universe. According to Steals, these fictional worlds are connected by recurring themes of boundaries, desire, and "the longing for infinite space" (16). In addition, by connecting marginalized subjects from different periods of history and by blending geology with mythology, Winterson not only creates various story worlds that transcend genre and thematic conventions, but also challenges conventional notions of time and space.

In the chapter called "Desire," Winterson's desire to find her origins in a temporal frame of family, her search for continuity, which was predicated on a searching out of historical heritage or family ties has been completely upended. Her birth parents, for her, "live on a lost continent of DNA. Like Atlantis, all record of them is sunk. They are guesswork, speculation, mythology" (64). She is burdened not only by her lack of knowledge about her biological parents, but also by the intolerable constraints imposed by her adoptive parents. As Andermah states, the works of Jeanette Winterson are highly intertextual in the sense that her works are in conversation with one another. The same sentences reappear; each time they do, they bring with them the reverberation of their past usage in the new setting (28). The intolerable burden she has "so many times written over" appears to carry a hidden message to be discovered in her fiction: "Written on the body is a secret code, only visible in certain lights" (*Weight* 62). The same sentence occurs in *Written on The Body* which exemplifies "a queer poetics of desire" that disrupts the conventional

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Woolf and The Problem of the Subject. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987). Mr. Ramsay and James' journey to the lighthouse in the end was seen as resolving of James' Oedipus complex. Lily, their daughter, however; rejects to go to the lighthouse and goes on drawing her painting. The novel concludes with Lily's famous line "I have had my vision" (TL 137) after she sees their image of sailing to the lighthouse. In *Weight*, Winterson as a writer, similar to Lily as an artist, has her vision not on parental triangle but a man and a dog: "But I think it is Atlas and Laika walking away".

heterosexual concept of sexuality (Nel in *Winterson Narrating Time and Space* 26). This queer knowledge can only be obtained “in certain lights,” which hints at the secretive nature of the narrator’s (lesbian) relationship as well as the fact that it goes against the norms of traditional marriage (Nel in *Winterson Narrating Time* 26): “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there.... I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (Winterson *Written* 89). Although the narrator’s sexuality is not obviously a central concern of *Weight*, this recurrence is another illustration, in my opinion, of a queer space that exists figuratively outside the story itself and outside the realm of typical stories about marriage and family. This claim has been reinforced in her subsequent sentences, as the first person narrator (Winterson) in *Weight* goes on to say, “there are two facts that all children need to disprove sooner or later; mother and father. If you go on believing in the fiction of your own parents, it is difficult to construct any narrative of your own” (72). This narrative is not “a lottery win or Mr. Right will make the world new” (72). This is the narrative of a self-journey, but it is not a journey toward marriage or reproduction; rather, it is one in which you learn to lift your own weight without relying on the support of some fictitious “Mr. Right” (72).

Winterson’s search for the self is a never-ending and fragmented repetition of a lost original wholeness that takes her in a place “with all the pieces” to “this moment, not once, many times, [she has] been reaching it all [her] life” (63). That’s why she keeps telling the story again. As stated by Antosa: “In invoking the transformative power of art on personal experience, Winterson is acknowledging that

such an inner, authentic ‘reality’ needs to be retold again and again, especially if it is marked by a violent trauma” (60). Accordingly, her fiction, as can be seen in *Weight*, highlights the power of rewriting or retelling stories in order to overcome both the loss of the past and the fragmentation of the self: “I want to tell the story again. That’s why I write fiction – so that I can keep telling the story. I return to problems I can’t solve....Always a new beginning, a different end” (71). Winterson, thus, crafts an alternative queer time and place not only by stepping outside the boundaries of reproductive temporality, but also introducing new ways of being in time driven by creative expression: art.

In Winterson's retelling of the tale of Atlas, the Greek mythological time is brought into the present moment. She creates a multidimensional narrative framework that incorporates layers of temporality. In the novel, the past, present, and future interact in a way that transcends time and space. Shouldering “the world in time as well as in space” living in “a celestial city of millions or billions of stars,” he notices the disappearance of the gods and the coming of Christ although there is no one to tell him: “the old gods had vanished or that the world had changed through a pale saviour on a dark cross” (123). For Atlas, time has lost its meaning: “He was in a Black hole. He was under the event horizon” (123). He realizes now he is “carrying not only this world, but all possible worlds” (11). Winterson’s Atlas speaks to us from the “measureless sea of space-time” (132) as a “half man, half god” who represents “singularity” as he is all alone (Weight 13).

The narrative of Atlas's life is told in the first person, and it begins with his origins. He is the son of Poseidon and the Earth, who represent the act of creation in

Winterson's rewriting of mythological beginning of life: "They were life. Creation depended on them and had done so before there was air or fire" (7). According to the Olympian creation myth, "at the beginning of all things Mother Earth emerged from Chaos and bore her son Uranus" (Graves 32).

Under the Olympian religion, the story of Uranus—whose name means "the sky"—was seen as the origin of patriarchal ideas (Graves 32). Uranus' marriage to Mother Earth was recorded as "deadly strife," which for Graves, alludes to "the clash between the patriarchal and matriarchal principles" (32). After dethroning Chronus and the Titans, Zeus takes the role of Uranus and is elevated to the status of sky deity; hence, Olympianism emerges as a religion founded on adaptation of "the pre-Hellenic matriarchal principle and the Hellenic patriarchal principle" (Graves 111). In Robert Graves's *Myths*, Winterson's source text, Atlas is "the son either of the Titan Eurymedon, or of Iapetus and the nymph Clymene" (135). Graves says, though briefly, that in another version of the story Atlas is accepted as the son of Poseidon (143). Apparently, Winterson has decided to adopt this version. By transferring paternity, patriarchal principle to Poseidon, Winterson rewrites Atlas' origin by giving him a father associated with water rather than air and fire. This adoption seems important because like earth, water is generally identified with femininity, whereas air and fire represent masculinity. In the following lines, Atlas relates to us the story of his mother Earth's and his father Poseidon's peaceful and harmonious coexistence:

Sometimes he was a long way out and she missed him and the beached fishes gasped for breath. Then he was all over her again and they were *mermaids* together because there was always something feminine

about my father, for all his power. Earth and water are the same kind, just as fire and air are their opposites. (12-13; emphasis mine)

Atlas paints a picture of a paradisiacal or utopic pre-Olympic world, before Zeus overthrew the Titans. The fluidity and harmony between earth and sea, personified as Atlas' mother and father, in this space challenges the binary thinking that supports heterosexuality and heteronormativity. As Simpson states “transgression of land/sea borders acts as a spatial metaphor” by rejecting “the logic of either/or, of fixed boundaries between stable oppositions, these liminal spaces can be read as sites of queer resistance to heterocentric imperatives” (57). The use of the mermaid figure can help deepen this reading. The mermaid is a figure that depicts the rupture of culturally imposed boundaries and the privileging of both/and because of her position in the fluid space between land and sea, human and animal, and masculine and feminine (57). Atlas is, therefore, depicted as “a queer hybrid who combines the characteristics of both of his parents” as a “synthesis between masculinity and femininity” (Antosa 68).

Atlas also lived idyllic life, much like his parents did, in his edenic “Garden of the Hesperides” with his daughters (Graves 8). Their life in this garden is similar to a time that depicts idealistic belief that people lived in peace and harmony with one another, known as the Golden Age (Graves 37). In this garden stands the golden apple tree that his mother Earth gifted upon Hera in honor of her wedding; the goddess is so fond of the tree that she has given its care to Atlas (8). His life with his daughters and his parents was going along well up until the point where his daughters

ate some apples from Hera's tree. After that, everything started to fall apart quickly. Atlas is expelled from the heavenly garden he built and cultivated, drawing an analogy to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from heaven in Christian mythology. This marks the beginning of Atlas' marginalization from the patriarchal norms established by the Olympians. Then, as Atlas tells, mankind launched an attack on peaceful Atlantis, and it was Zeus who assisted mankind in destroying his people. That's why, he escaped and became a war-leader in the revolt against the heavens which he "preferred to avoid" (*Weight* 9). After Olympic gods' victory over Titans, Atlas was punished "to support the Kosmos on [his] shoulders" because he knew "the positions of the planets and the track of the stars" (10). The weight of his punishment has become his "monstrous burden. The *boundary* of what [he is]" (10). Atlas' "exemplary punishment" not only serves as a warning against any further rebellion, it also acts as a symbol of the establishment of strict binary thinking within patriarchy (Graves 41). Daniela K. Fasching emphasizes this idea in her dissertation as a form of fragmentation and separation, which reenacts the process of replacing the unbounded diversity of pre-Olympic world with rigid binaries and reasoning of the Olympic world order (60). In this sense, the patriarchal world order has constructed "invisible walls" just as this boundary to what he is, and these "invisible walls" are just as oppressive as the "'monstrous burden" that both he and humanity carry: "Why did the gods insist on limits and boundaries when any fool could see that these things were only rules and taboos – customs made to keep people in their place? (48). Atlas appears to dismantle such models as "the perfect synthesis between masculinity and femininity" (Antosa 68). Winterson's depiction of Atlas as a "kind-hearted," (37)

submissive, patient man who accepts his punishment obediently “almost like surrender” stands in opposition to the dominant and assertive conceptions of masculinity. In depicting Atlas a “queer hybrid,” Winterson deconstructs traditional forms of masculinity (Antosa 68). Following Antosa, we could also argue that Atlas' isolation in the Kosmos is analogous to the spatial metaphor “the closet” that requires the act of coming out, which is for Atlas to leave the weight of the world. Kim Hall describes it as a form of epistemic injustice caused by the compulsion to occupy an identity category in which all human beings “are obliged to identify/be identified as either male or female, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual” (164). As such, the weight of the world can be seen as a metaphor for the oppression that results from this forced categorization.

In addition to this, Atlas' in-between space, which is situated between the space of the heavens and the space of the earth becomes a spatial embodiment that blurs the logic of either/or, of fixed boundaries that are governed by the heterocentric norm. This is a space “never more outside, never more than nothing. Nothing bounded by nothing” holding not “only this world, but all possible worlds” in time as well as in space. Winterson's works, according to Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, strive to explore “the space of desire that is fluid and unbounded,” and in pursuit of this space “her characters discover the apparent boundaries of his or her subjectivity” (66). This can be seen in Atlas' desire for “infinite space,” which stands for his need to transcend boundaries (*Weight* 10).

For Sylvia Antosa, Atlas inhabits this in-between space as a kind, loving and caring man which contrasts sharply with “the dominant and assertive models of

masculinity epitomized by Heracles” (*My Monstrous* 69). Heracles, for Bachofen, in all his myths is portrayed as a determined foe of matriarchy and a tenacious fighter: “the misogynist, in whose sacrifice no woman takes part, by whose name no woman swears, and who finally meets his death from a woman’s poisoned garment” (78). Heracles “the hero of the world” (*Weight* 21), who appears in many ancient literature and illustrations so far, who “shall have undying fame among men” (Graves 420), represents the patriarchal masculinity with his glories and “invincibility” (125). The tragic hero of the ancient epic universe, whom Winterson parodies and dismantles, is transformed into a comic character as “a *joke* and a *god*” (*Weight* 35). Heracles’ masculinity is portrayed by Winterson as violent and sexually abusive: “[I] killed everything, shagged what was left and ate the rest” (*Weight* 31). He rapes or kills women who don’t want him or who refuse to submit to his demands, and he kills everyone who disagrees with him. In his role as “hero of the world,” he embodies the divine Olympian order’s highest principles, beliefs, and ideals. Winterson parodies and dismantles Heracles and the patriarchal structures he represents in her rewriting. Heracles who has “no brains but plenty of cunning” (*Weight* 83), has never questioned Olympian order or his fate. As opposed to Atlas, he has never rebelled against Zeus or the other gods until his encounter with Atlas in order to take the Kosmos from his shoulders.

In her book *Tendencies* (1993) Eve Sedgwick explains how cultural discourses are constructed on a concept of time that is strongly associated with heterosexuality. For example, within story, time frequently advances in accordance with the progression through a series of conventional life phases, such as childhood,

adolescence, marriage, and reproduction (4). Queer temporality, according to Sedgwick, is made up of “a continuing moment” that eddy outside of the cyclical flow of heterosexual futurity and can be repeated without the need to advance the dominant narrative of progress (xii). Queer moments, for Kate Haffey<sup>23</sup>, “represent whirlpools within the flow of time” (8) and “move in strange and unpredictable ways” (3).

The queer moment that has changed Atlas and Heracles’ lives occurs when Heracles “slide[s] himself up Atlas’s back, like a mating snail<sup>24</sup>, and pull[s] the world down onto his own shoulders” (25). This reflects a moment of transformation not necessarily that of same-sex sexual behavior, but the fluidity of an expression of desire beyond the heteronormative binary. Queer temporality, according to Elizabeth Freeman, is not only a non-binary construction of time but also an embrace of the diversity of temporal experiences, from which non-normative relationships can develop (Freeman 3). Up to this point, Heracles has not previously been prone to thought; however, after their encounter, at this temporal location on the edge of the world carrying the Kosmos, he begins to engage in some degree of self-reflection and, for the very first time, questions his identity. He questions his fate and gods’ power on him and keeps repeating: “Why? Why? Why?” (45). In *Weight*, the gods and goddesses; Zeus and Hera, are well aware that the concept of fate is what

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<sup>23</sup> In her essay “Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in “Mrs. Dalloway” and “The Hours” Kate Haffey expands Judith Halberstam’s brief analysis of queer temporality in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*.

<sup>24</sup> It is also worth mentioning here that snails have both female and male reproductive cells. They are hermaphrodite. In addition, they don’t actually need to mate with another snail in order to reproduce. This also could be read as a reference to their queer identification. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snail>.

prevents Atlas and Heracles from being knowers or achieving freedom. As Heracles began to cast doubt on the divine power, Zeus became concerned. (57). Therefore, Zeus appeared to Atlas in disguise to learn if Heracles questions his authority. When Atlas said nobody has the right to question the gods, Zeus felt a sense of relief, but began to wonder if Atlas himself was suspicious too. Heracles' questioning reveals, for Steals, an understanding of "contemporary existential freedom," prompting him to examine his own "absolutely fixed identity and [consider] his personal freedom in determining the course of his life" (Staels 113).

After leaving Atlas alone, Heracles, who represents "a stereotypical macho man, a womanizer and a buffoon whose behavior is grotesquely marked by sexual excess" (Steals 114), transforms into a good man and follows, in Edelman's words, heterosexual "reproductive futurity" (4). This transformation involves "the penetration of profane space and his historical time, which belong to the novella's non-epic story worlds, into the story world of mythical space and cyclic, sacred (synchronic) time" (Steals 113). He asks Zeus to forgive Atlas' brother Prometheus. When Zeus honors his submission and acceptance of his dominance, Heracles "felt he was at last being rewarded, instead of punished, for the hero, the conqueror, *the good man* that he was" (Weight 93). Then he "had other things on his mind. He was getting a new wife" (51). Yet, despite his best attempts to settle down, the happily ever after does not come. According to the myth, Heracles' story concludes with his apotheosis and admittance into the pantheon of gods. Zeus congratulates his favourite son and announces that "Heracles's immortal part is safe from death, and [he] shall soon

welcome him to this blessed region” (Graves 507). However, Winterson chooses not to give him this ending. He dies by a poisonous t-shirt his beloved wife gives him.

Atlas and Heracles’ lives touch at a moment where a choice made leads down a different path. Atlas, after Heracles tricks him into retaking the weight of the world, “wanted to hurl the universe at Heracles, crush him, annihilate time and *make the story start again*” (83; emphasis mine). Winterson demonstrates the transformative potential of telling the story again by restarting Atlas’ story. In this new story, Atlas has a new encounter that eventually leads to his liberation. This encounter also transcends mythic time frames and combines the story with real twenty-first century events.

Queer temporality, for Carolyn Dinshaw, opens up the potential of what she refers to as “touching across time” by utilizing “the vectors of desire that connect marginalized subjects from various time periods in history” (“Theorizing” 178). These marginalized subjects that touch across time in Winterson’s retelling are Atlas and Laika. Laika is a devoted dog who follows her master’s orders without question when he straps her into a small capsule and binds her so she cannot escape and allows the dog to be sent into space, where it would suffer and die alone in the Russian Sputnik in 1957 (57). When Laika enters space in her rocket, she touches Atlas, who “with infinite care” frees her at the very moment (58). For Freeman, queer time becomes possible when the “established temporal order” of straight time “gets interrupted and new encounters consequently take place” (Freeman xxii). Atlas’ encounter with Laika changes everything in infinite time and space: “Atlas felt the skin and bone of this little dog. Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep,

and that changed everything” (127). As a direct result of this unanticipated encounter, Atlas makes the decision to relieve himself of the responsibility of carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. By giving such an unpredicted ending in which Laika and Atlas touch across time, Winterson not only transcends mythic time frames but also let her story eddy outside of the cyclical flow of heterosexual futurity.

Winterson undermines Decartes and Cartesian ideals of reason. As evidenced by the way she incorporates Laika's story into her novel, her retelling could be viewed as an act of defiance articulating her resentment of injustices caused by science. Winterson writes:

Descartes didn't believe it matters how humans treat animals – animals don't really feel any pain, and they cannot suffer.... Descartes' failure of observation, his failure of compassion,...—sounded the all-clear for the horrific treatment of animals in farming, breeding, medicine, and science. Untold horrors and tragedies – the vileness of humans towards the rest of nature. (*12 Bytes* 99)

In this regard, Laika becomes the embodiment of cruel silencing for the sake of scientific advancement. Winterson employs ironically the time in which the human most visibly and viciously displays its dominance over the animal in order to highlight human failings. It is no coincidence that spaceships are named after the Greek God Apollo, who represents the domain of logos: Reason. This naming exemplifies how patriarchal rationalization of myths can serve to support dominant discourses as a means of dominating not only this world but also the universe, with

particular emphasis on the rational discourse of science. As such, Atlas and Laika's touch across time and space reflects a synthesis of mythos and logos in the novel, and provides a powerful critique of the scientific advances. Scientific progress as a symbol of human desire and dream for freedom appears to represent for Winterson "the same old story – boundaries, desire" (60).

Atlas and Laika are now watching humanity's advances in space travel together. Atlas's companionship with Laika leads him to believe that "there are no boundaries. The universe has no centre. Every limit can be crossed" (70). Atlas finally puts the world, his weight, his monstrous burden down and only then he realizes it doesn't need to be hold up: "There was no burden. There was only the diamond-blue earth gardened in a wilderness of space" (70). Their encounter remade space and time in a manner that liberates all boundaries. This is achieved by expanding the constraints of spatial and temporal horizons into a topography that appears boundless and infinite. In this sense, Winterson's panorama of epistemological possibilities embraces infinity. Atlas, with the company of Laika, is eventually merged with the "infinite space" he longs for. In the end, only a fraction of universe can be viewed—or "dark matter" or "the small stars called Brown Dwarfs, or it could even be black holes. Or it could be Atlas holding up the universe" (71).

Winterson believes that art is a dynamic affective relation as "energetic space" (*Art Objects* 114) that "enlarge[s] emotional possibility" (108). In light of this, as demonstrated in the novel's concluding phrase, the creative imagination of art may allow us to see the dark matter as "*Atlas and Laika walking away*" (70). This conclusion is comparable to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which similarly

places an emphasis on the role of art in making sense of the world at its end. James' journey to the lighthouse with his father in the end was seen as resolving of James' Oedipus complex. Lily, his sister, however, rejects to go to the lighthouse and works on her painting. The novel concludes with Lily's famous line: "I have had my vision" (TL 137). *Weight* ends with Winterson's artistic vision, just like Lily's vision ends both her work of art and the novel.

However, this vision in *Weight* depicts a different futurity, one that looks not at the traditional "parental triangle," but rather at a single man and a dog that eddy outside of the cyclical flow of heterosexual futurity. Therefore, Winterson's rewriting of myths, by refusing heteronormative, reproductive, and linear temporal order of the world, presents a queer perspective that corresponds with Eve Sedwick's description for queer as:

open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (*Tendencies* 8)

In light of the arguments presented above, we can draw the conclusion that Winterson undermines the limitations of normative conceptions of time, and provides an alternative perspective known as queer temporality in response. "Winterson weds the act of storytelling to the body," Jennifer A. Smith claims, "specifically to the touching of bodies and the transformative energy that such contact creates, thus adding the body's variability to the already established fluidity of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, language, and love" (418). In brief, Winterson presents a queer temporality that is

multiple, fluid, continuously transitional which is open to multiple meanings and series of revisitings and retellings. In addition, as remarked by Antosa, she has reconstructed classical myth in order to undermine dominant canonical versions and “create[d] a counter queer feminist mythology” (56).

### 3.2.2. Making Mythical Retelling Matter

*It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories ... it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.*

— Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

Winterson’s retelling, not only opens up a space for the stories of the marginalized characters, but also for matter, materiality of the world. Examining materiality in *Weight* means taking into account not only art and mythology, but also recent scientific advances, particularly quantum physics. Winterson integrates scientific concepts into her mythical retelling and reproduces them with literary strategies and mythological themes. In this section of the study, I will analyze *Weight* through the lens of material feminist theories, with a particular focus on Karen Barad’s concept of spacetime-matter, as Winterson’s text provides both textual and material spaces for the disruption of social and cultural norms. She, I contend, casts doubt on Descartes’ separation of the subject (*res cogitans*), who is responsible for the generation of knowledge via faculty of reason, from the external world (*res extensa*). Karen Barad’s concept of “quantum dis/continuity” provides another lens through which to analyze Winterson’s perception of temporality as she presents temporal and spatial dimensions as an interconnected whole.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter*, Karen Barad provides a new way to re/construct knowledge. For her, the entire generation of feminist thought has not valued “matter<sup>25</sup>” enough, therefore “making matter matter” (132) is Barad’s main motive. The emergence of nonhuman forces, objects, and materialities, and the crucial role they play in shaping and influencing human life and reality, is pacified, excluded, or marginalized in Western philosophy and knowledge construction (Moslund; Marcussen; Karlsson 7). In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, feminist eco-critic Stacy Alaimo posits her notion of trans-corporeality at the intersection of environmental feminism, corporeal feminism, feminist science studies and material feminisms. She imagines human corporeality “as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment” (2). Alaimo also states that “trans-corporeality, as a descendant of Darwinism, insists that the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world” (11). Human bodies “from the pre-historical past through unknown futures—” as Alaimo puts it, “are inextricably interconnected with material worlds” (*Bodily* 25). Alaimo relies significantly on Karen Barad’s theoretical works in order to highlight traits of trans-corporeality and to provide clarity about the concept of matter. Barad’s account of agential realism uses the ideas related to quantum mechanics borrowed from Danish physicist Niels Bohr. By constructing a new epistemology to support her

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<sup>25</sup> Adrienne Rich also speaks of the importance of the material “Begin, we said, with the material, with matter, mma, madre, mutter,moeder, modder” (“Notes Toward a Politics of Location” 213).

theory of agential realism, Barad reclaims matter, the materiality of the world, and human and nonhuman bodies. As she writes:

agential realism is a theory of knowledge and reality whose fundamental premise is that reality consists of phenomena that are reconstituted in intra-action with the interventions of knowers. ‘Intra-action’ signifies a dynamic involving the inseparability of the objects and agencies of intervention (as opposed to interactions which reinscribe the contested dichotomy). (“Agential Realism” 15)

For her, matter is not passive and inert or inanimate; on the contrary, she suggests that “[m]atter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agential, not a fixed essence or property of things. Mattering is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences” (Meeting 137). Her concept of “phenomena” describes “inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies” (Meeting 139). In this sense the universe becomes “phenomena,” and everything in this universe is agential and trans-corporeal, intra-acting with other agencies: “The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (Meeting 141). We all are “of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming” (Barad 396). In Barad’s account of agential realism, matter has an agency. As Barad puts it,

agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. It cannot be designated as an attribute of subjects or objects (as they do not preexist as such)....Agency is “doing” or “being” in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices—iterative reconfigurings of topological

manifolds of spacetime, alter relations-through the dynamics of intra-activity. (*Meeting* 178)

Derek Ryan quotes Virginia Woolf's article "The New Biography" (1927) where she writes we cannot yet "name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that *queer* amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of *granite* and rainbow<sup>26</sup>" (478; emphasis mine). Ryan associates "granite with solidity and hard facts and the rainbow with intangibility and personality" (20). Winterson's rewriting is also infused with the material world, which is solid, multidimensional, ever-changing, and never complete.

In the paratext of *Weight*, Winterson draws a metaphorical parallel between the strata of sedimentary rock and the pages of a book. In the paratext's typography, Winterson uses "differently sized fonts to suggest the evolutionary process" (Andermah 120) and In order to demonstrate the incompleteness of the record kept in this book's many layers, she depicts it physically with her lines:

Sedimentary rock is formed over vast expanses of time,...  
is usually arranged in a succession of horizontal bands, or strata...  
The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a  
book, each with a record of contemporary life written on  
it. Unfortunately, the record is far from complete...

The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a book.  
Each with a record of contemporary life written on it ...  
Unfortunately the record is far from complete ... (paratext)

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<sup>26</sup> See Derek Ryan's article "Woolf's Queering of Granite" where he traces queer appearances of Granite in Woolf's works.

Textuality, materiality, meaning and matter, human and non-human life are all intertwined from the very beginning of Winterson's rewriting. Winterson writes that the record that is written on the sedimentary rock, regardless of which discourse, "contains large gaps, untold stories, and uninvestigated understandings or versions" (xiii). She says geological forces cause strata to become distorted, making it difficult to see through to lower layers. This record, which refers to all previous written discourses that have contributed to the development of our knowledge, demonstrates the flaws and misconceptions that have permeated our cultural memory. The world itself, for Winterson, holds "all the stories [that are] here, silt-packed and fossil-stored" (*Weight* 4). This is analogous to Barad's words: "Memory—the pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intraactivity—is written into the fabric of the world. The world 'holds' all traces; or rather, the world is its memory (enfolded materialization)" (*Nature's* 146). The fossil metaphor can be interpreted as a mapping of all stories, historical records, memories, theoretical frameworks, and literary canons that have been layered over time that carry their scars and complexities into the present. In Winterson's retelling, matter, in all its forms, becomes a site of a "storied matter", stories of fossils, sedimentary rocks, and other matter embodying its own narratives. (Opperman 66).

After the paratext, in a Darwinian manner, she goes on to list the various species. "[R]ock, sand, soil, fruit trees, roses, spiders, snails, frogs, fish, cattle, horses, rainfall, sunshine, you and me" (4). All life forms, like all texts—whether scientific, literary, mythological, and geological—are actively entangled. As a result, it could be argued that Winterson does not regard humans as merely agents in the processes of

knowledge production. The objects of knowledge, which are thought to be immobile and solid, become active and gain agency in her retelling. She, like Haraway, challenges the dichotomy between subjects and objects by endowing inanimate objects with agency. As stated by Haraway: “The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization; ... the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity” (593). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Winterson’s fiction also becomes the layers of her textuality or the strata of the same sedimentary rock which forms and is formed by her life.

The main theme that runs through all of Winterson's works is incorporated into mythology in her novel *Weight*: “Always boundaries and desire ...” (32). Viewing desire as a material-discursive phenomenon produced by intra-actions, as outlined by Barad, might provide useful insights into what desire might be in the novel. Barad argues in her interview that “[m]atter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. Materiality itself is always already a desiring dynamism...” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 59). In a similar vein, the earth itself is a desiring thing in Winterson’s retelling: “But life had begun.... In the molten lava spills and cratered rocks, life longed for life...Earth. Planet Earth, that wanted life so badly, she got it” (3). With its strata of the sedimentary rock, “sand, soil, fruit trees, roses, spiders, snails, frogs, fish, cattle, horses, rainfall, sunshine” (4), the earth in Winterson’s retelling “feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers” (Barad *Meeting the Universe* 59). In a similar vein, the third person narrator tells us that the earth remembers not only the success stories but also the failures of humankind (*Weight* 4).

*Weight*'s leitmotif "I want to tell the story again" (xiv) also illustrates Winterson's desire for telling and retelling in a variety of ways by utilizing the metaphor of a "book of the world." She integrates limitless potential of storytelling with the limitless universe in the metaphor which serves as the novel's leitmotif. Winterson speaks of the desire to write herself as "a character in her own fiction" as she has also previously written in *Art Objects* "I prefer myself as a character in my own fiction"<sup>27</sup> (53). Likewise, in the introduction to *Weight* she explains, "Of course I wrote it out of my own situation. There is no other way" (p. xviii). At the end of the novel she repeats the same sentence: "That's why I write fiction – so that I can keep telling the story. I return to problems I can't solve [...]" In light of this, I contend that Winterson's artwork conveys the following message: *I retell, therefore I am*. Retelling, thus, literally becomes the embodiment of Rich's call for an 'act of survival' for Winterson. The author's persona in *Weight* recounts her childhood trauma of her rejection by both her biological and adoptive mothers by placing emphasis on the 'weight' that she, like Atlas, has had to carry her entire life (45). In her dissertation, Estor argues that Winterson's use of quantum terminology is most apparent in passages dealing with characters' emotional breakdowns and their subsequent quests for meaning because it opens up a world of possibilities (100). I contend that her incorporation of quantum physics into the mythical world in which an imaginative mythical character, Atlas, and a real character, Winterson, are

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<sup>27</sup> Winterson appears frequently in her fiction as a character. As Susana Onega points out: "Strikingly echoing Pound's poet as wandering Odysseus, then, Winterson presents herself as a mythical quester cutting across the boundaries of her own books and knitting them together by means of slightly differing repetitions of recurrent themes or leitmotifs, in an attempt to unify individual works into a single art object that may be said to have the shape of Winterson's own process of artistic or spiritual maturation" (p. 7).

interweaved also alludes to the origin of myths as opposed to canonical versions. This is due to the fact that, as Nevzat Kaya explains, myths originated as stories that made our unknown fears and anxieties known; as a result, they are told and retold over and over again to make life meaningful (*Mitostan Logosa*). In this sense, *Weight* demonstrates how myths can help an individual in making sense of their experiences. Accordingly, in contrast to fixed, definitive forms of canonical myth narratives, quantum physics opens up an infinite number of possibilities for telling myths.

Winterson's ideas of space, time and matter involve a blurring of the boundaries between subject and object. In her retelling, the "inseparability of intra-acting agencies" or "the mutual entanglement of agency" (Barad 139), to borrow Barad's words, is generated by and generating intra-actions might also be noticed in her connection with her bedside lamp which is shaped like "a light-up globe" (45). It refers to her childhood pastime of remaking the world via storytelling and serves to deepen the connection between herself and Atlas. By drawing connection between retelling and spinning, she integrates meaning-making and materiality as well:

Spin the globe. When I made it, it was small as a ball. I carried it on a stick over my shoulder. I was the fool, new and careless. I didn't know that worlds are on the Planck scale – infinitesimally tiny, exploding to grow. It grew. It utilized free energy from the sun. It learned to break the oxygen-carbon compounds. It started a life of its own. I used my world like a crystal ball, gazing into it, looking for clues. I loved its independence, the unknownness of it, but like everything you birth, it gradually becomes too big to carry. It's on my back now, vast and expanding. I hardly recognise it. I love it. I hate it. It's not me, it's itself.

This inanimate object creates meanings, takes on a life of its own and it becomes agentive, dynamic being. This living and dynamic entity is materially embedded not only in the author persona's world, but also in the mythic world of Atlas, with both of them having the ability to spin stories. This intra-action where meaning and matter are entangled, is reinforced each time she “spin[s] the globe”: “Here I am, turning and turning the lit-up globe, leaning on the limits of myself..In space, nothing tends directly; matter and matter of fact both warp under light. If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story” (66).

In addition, Winterson depicts the material world on a microscopic scale that is invisible to the human eye; this is the realm of atoms, light particles, empty spaces and gravitational force. There is no fixity, the absolute, the universal, the coherent in the limitless possibility of this world: “What limits? There are none. The story moves at the speed of light, and like light, the story is curved. There are no straight lines... In space, nothing tends directly; matter and matter of fact both warp under light.... What am I? Atoms. What are atoms? Empty space and points of light” (*Weight* 75)

Winterson raises doubts about the Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of knowledge and materiality. In this understanding, hierarchical and oppressive power dynamics have their roots in the paradigm that separates the mind from the body, the cultural from the natural, and the human from the non-human. Winterson reconstructs this understanding by breaking its hierarchal structure. Furthermore, she incorporates concepts from quantum physics to illustrate the recurring topics of love, desire, and the boundaries of both the self and the world in her writing. As Barad writes, matter is

always entangled with nothingness. Bodies, space, time, and the void are not separate matters (Barad *No Small Matter* 110). In a related vein, Winterson portrays Atlas' body as entangled with space, time, and nothingness:

This is the body, the sealed unit that cautiously takes in what it needs to survive, that stoutly repels invaders of the microbe kind. This is the body, whose boundaries weaken only in decay and then the freedom it brings is useless. United with the world at last, I am dead to it. This is the body, and my body is the world in little. I am the Kosmos – the all that there is, and at the same time I was never more outside, never more than nothing. Nothing bounded by nothing. (4)

Furthermore, the depiction of his body also echoes Alaimo's words: "the human body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world of biological creatures, ecosystems, and xenobiotic" (Alaimo, *Bodily* 115). Atlas' body is not depicted as a fixed entity; rather, it is portrayed as a dynamic interface of flows, interactions, and movements that are the result of iterative intra-actions that take place within the material universe. During the course of his punishment of carrying the world "in time, as well as in space", he says "time spattered my calf muscles and the sinews in my thighs. I felt the world before it began, and the future marked me....As the Kosmos came nearer, the heat of it scorched my back. I felt the world settle against the sole of my foot (10-11). Atlas notices his body solidifying and fossilizing, and eventually becoming indistinguishable from the body of the earth: "As the dinosaurs crawl through my hair and volcanic eruptions pock my face, I find I am become a part of what I must bear" (10).

Furthermore, when Winterson is describing how the universe came into existence, she speaks directly to the reader. Time moves through human bodies where space, time, matter and human bodies are all entangled through the ongoing intra-activity of the universe. In this retelling, the body is integrated with the universe, the cosmic, and the infinite illustrating how the universe is inextricably bounded to the human body:

What is it that you contain? The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut. Every minute, in each of you, a few million potassium atoms succumb to radioactive decay. The energy that powers these tiny atomic events has been locked inside potassium atoms ever since a star sized bomb exploded nothing into being. Potassium, like uranium and radium, is a long-lived radioactive nuclear waste of the supernova bang that accounts for you. Your first parent was a star. (1)

This could be interpreted as a fictional rendering of Barad's claim; thus, I believe that Winterson endorses Barad's words: "we are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming" (Barad 396). Andermah believes that quantum theory, which deals with the dispersion of unpredictability and allows for numerous alternatives, enhances Winterson's position (160). As Winterson elsewhere writes that "space is not simply connected. History is not unalterable. The universe itself is forked...In a quantum universe, heaven and hell are simply parallel possibilities [and] particles can hold positions contradictory and simultaneous" (Winterson *Gut Symmetries* 160; qtd in Andermah 96).

Barad states “space, time, and matter are mutually constituted through the dynamics of iterative intra-activity” (*Meeting the Universe* 181). She writes “the past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold; the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering” (315). Their intra-actions reconfigure the possibilities for change. Space, time and matter as agents of change play “an active role in the unfolding of events” (224). In this sense, Atlas’ choice of three apples representing past, present, and future in *Weight* corresponds to Barad’s concept of “iterative intra-activity” and “spacetimemattering” with the possibility of alteration or un/folding of events. Hera’s interaction with Atlas in the garden of Hesperides, when Atlas collects apples for Heracles, is noteworthy in this sense. After picking up three apples from the tree which has “Mother Earth’s greatest gift”: “Knowledge of past and future” (71), Hera, with her wisdom, tells Atlas that the first two apples represent his past and future and the third is the present, “made from [his] past, pointing towards [his] future” (72). Then, Hera asks him if he has chosen those three apples “accidentally or by chance” (72). Atlas informs Hera that there were just three apples on the tree, but when Hera urges him to look more carefully, realization started to dawn on him: the tree is loaded with fruit. (72). As part of her explanation on why this happened, she states, “There was no enchantment, Atlas. You could not see the tree as it is. You could not see the changefulness of the world. All these pasts were yours, all these futures, all these presents. You could have chosen differently. You did not” (75). As a result, for Hera, his possible pasts and futures imply that he had the opportunity to make a different decision, but he did not (75). In this conversation, we

can assume that Winterson invests knowledge itself with agency which becomes time and space to move through all dimensions shaping lives. She transforms knowledge into something that is dynamic, interactive, interconnected, in-motion, and ever-evolving. During their conversation, which is told in the first person, the narrator switches to the third person, who in a manner that is analogous to Barad's assertion that the sedimenting material consequences of spacetime matter's "reconfigurings—memories/re-member-ings are written into the flesh of the world," (*Nature's* 150) informs us:

Earth is ancient now, but all knowledge is stored up in her. She keeps a record of everything that has happened since time began. Of time before time, she says little, and in a language that no one has yet understood. Through time, her secret codes have gradually been broken. Her mud and lava is a message from the past. Of time to come, she says much, but who listens?" (*Weight* 71)

In this context, the earth does not denote to something that is fixed, solid, and external; rather, it is an active agent that is entangled in "material-discursive intra-acting" (48). By emphasizing the agential, material, and constitutive nature of the world in knowledge/meaning making practices, Winterson challenges the matter/meaning dualism that has framed philosophical and scientific debates based on the assumption that the world is indeterminate outside of constitutive practices. Reconstructing our knowledge/meaning making practices of not only the mythological stories, but also our understanding the world as a whole, Winterson merges the "mythic qualities" of stories (*Weight* ii) and narrative poetics with the

logos of scientific knowledge, in a manner similar to that of Barad: “We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (*Meeting* 185).

In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway defines humans as hybrid beings and employs the cyborg as a myth, an embodied imagination that exposes the boundary between human/nonhuman and all binaries that correlate to it: “mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized,” (2284). As Haraway also writes, “situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor or agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource. . . . Actors come in many wonderful forms” (Haraway *Situated* 198). This actor or agent appears to be Laika, whose company frees Atlas of his burdens in Winterson's retelling: “Now it seems there are no boundaries. The universe has no centre” (*Weight* 132).

Haraway poses two questions in *When Species Meet*: “Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” and “How is ‘becoming with’ a practice of becoming worldly?” (3). She contends that “becoming with” other species, notably dogs, is closely entwined with being human. According to Haraway, they are subjects and active agents within both their own and our worlds. She goes on by asserting that the “molecular record” of humans and dogs incorporates traces of each other (3; 31). This intermingling is highlighted in Winterson’s novella by the significance of Laika on the moulding of her companion Atlas’ desire to leave the weight of the world: “Atlas had long ago ceased to feel the weight of the world he carried, but he felt the skin and bone of this little dog. Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep, and that

changed everything” (Weight 127). Accordingly, I suggest that Laika and Atlas' mutual entanglement transcends the human/animal dichotomy. Their entanglement serves as an important illustration of Winterson's anti-hierarchical literary discourse that dethrones humans from the center the world. In addition, narrating animal concerns, as Donna Haraway puts it, requires “inverting meanings; transposing the body of communication; remolding, remodeling,” which enables us to hear the voices of animals in "stories about stories, all the way down: Woof!" (*Companion Species* 21).

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the conclusion of *Weight* leaves open an epistemological ambiguity about the nature of dark matter, allowing the reader to imagine of an infinite number of possibilities: “*All that we can see is only a fraction of the universe....dark matter and no one knows its composition*” (151). However, in Winterson’s artistic imagination “*it is Atlas and Laika walking away*” (151). As a result, we can draw the conclusion that Winterson incorporated these quantum entanglements into her retelling to demonstrate that the life vein of these entanglements, in her view, is a desire for infinite space, for love, and for the epistemological value of art. She denounces the Enlightenment worldview—that of Descartes, Hobbes, and Newton— as being exclusively rational and interweaves it with the world of art, where imaginative possibilities are substituted for conventional means of producing knowledge. Winterson engages in a reimagining and rewriting of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, between subject and object, agency and non-agency in a way that rejects the notion of hierarchical distinctions between them, resignifying them in a more egalitarian system of meaning making.

### 3.2.3. Dethroning Heroes: Odysseus and Heracles

This section of the research will focus on how selected rewritings of Atwood's and Winterson's reconstruct our knowledge of what constitutes heroism. Both authors use parody as a narrative device to critique the heroism discourse of the western literary heritage as represented by Odysseus and Heracles. The heroic deeds, glorified in canonical myths, according to Tatar, and "their historically contingent values and beliefs harden into timeless and universal truths" which constitute Western cultural heritage and have become deeply embedded in cultural memory, inspiring both previous generations and those of today (149). What intended meanings and knowledge do the heroic deeds in the canonized versions of myths reveal, which Atwood and Winterson seek to challenge? Heroes embark on quests and journeys usually involving military and martial activities in pursuit of glory in combat. Yet, as part of their heroic deeds in the course of their quests, they not only kill enemies or slay monsters, but also abuse or rape women, silence "the other," and commit "insensate slaughter of the innocent (Tatar 28). Through mythical stories, these deeds are preserved in collective memory and become aspirational sources for everyone.

Odysseus, the protagonist of *The Odyssey*, goes beyond what is humanly possible, to become a prototypical cultural hero, one who is fearless, courageous, adventurous and driven by a desire for reputation and immortality. In Atwood's retelling, Odysseus is stripped of his heroic deeds, and he is transformed from a man of courage and cunning into someone cruel and less than admirable. When we read his heroic story from different perspectives, we observe that it changes dramatically.

Now that Penelope and the Maids have voices of their own, they expose his flaws, which include lying, trickery, thievery, adultery and brutality. Penelope and the Maids' stories cast doubt on the heroic image of Odysseus and, by extension, on patriarchal heroic ideals.

To illustrate, in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope discredits the myth surrounding Odysseus' heroic bravery in his encounter with the giant Cyclop during his mythological adventures by claiming that Cyclop Polyphemos was merely “a one-eyed tavern keeper” and that the only reason they fought was because Odysseus hadn't paid his bill (49). Penelope believes that Odysseus is undoubtedly a liar who has only told her “the nobler versions” of his heroic quest with slaying the monsters and escaping the enchantments of the goddesses, but he has left out “the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores” that make up “the fraudulent life histories” he has fabricated for himself (93).

The heroism of Odysseus, which was constructed by the patriarchal ideology's masculine values, and his position as the story's protagonist who triumphed over the perils he encountered during his quest are both disrupted by Atwood's rewriting. As a perfect example of male heroism for centuries, Odysseus and his adventure have been reduced to a pointless and meaningless journey. The chorus of the Maids tells its story by exposing the system's flaws in its treatment of women and the slave/servant class through the misdeeds of Odysseus, thereby demythologizing the hero. Odysseus' heroic quest ends with the brutal murder of the Maids and the slaughter of hundreds of suitors, both of which are seen accepted as acts of justice carried out by the hero whose heroic tale is covered in glory. Joseph Campbell tells us that “A hero ventures

forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men” (The Hero 28). As a result, he believes that the hero will come back transformed and “teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed” (28). This indicates that the superhero is purified of sins and offenses, thus becomes not only a role model as a savior but also a mentor for subsequent generations, or, in Campbell's words, to “fellow men” (28). As a result, Atwood's rewriting criticizes the prevailing ideology that elevates heroes to the status of cultural icons by praising their heroic deeds and lauding their quests, even if their heroic stories are plagued with injustices and flaws. Thus, her rewriting causes us to question what kinds of lessons these heroes actually teach.

Similarly, Winterson's rewriting parodies and demythologizes the archetypal superhero Heracles, as well as the patriarchal heroic structures he represents. Heracles, for Bachofen, in all his myths is portrayed as a determined foe of matriarchy and a tenacious fighter: “the misogynist, in whose sacrifice no woman takes part, by whose name no woman swears” (78). Therefore, the foundations of his masculinity are built on violence and misogyny. Heracles, “the hero of the world” (*Weight* 21), who appears in many ancient literature and illustrations so far, who “shall have undying fame among men” (Graves 420), represents the patriarchal masculinity with his glories and “invincibility” (125). In his role as the hero of the world, he embodies the divine Olympian order's highest principles, beliefs, and ideals (125). As part of his heroic quest, he performs his twelve labors to achieve heroic

reputation and immortality, during which he slaughters his children, murders those who happen to be against him and subjugates women.

The tragic hero of the ancient epic universe, whom Winterson parodies and dismantles, is transformed into a comic character as “a *joke* and a *god*” (*Weight* 35) in her novel. Heracles' masculinity is portrayed by Winterson as violent and sexually abusive: “[I] killed everything, shagged what was left and ate the rest” (*Weight* 31). He rapes or kills women who don't want him or who refuse to submit to his demands, and he kills everyone who disagrees with him. “No woman who ever refused him lived to tell the tale,” as was the case with Hippolyte, the Queen of the Amazons, whom he “knocked off her head the way you open a desert cactus” because she refused to marry him (*Weight* 39).

Mythographer Edith Hamilton describes Heracles as follows: “The greatest hero of Greece was Hercules....Hercules was the strongest man on earth and he had the supreme self-confidence magnificent physical strength” (225). The mythical strength of Heracles can be interpreted as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity. This heroic strength is one of the means by which patriarchy maintains its hegemony, which is employed to eliminate differences and punish those who dare to challenge the established order (*Antosa* 71). Winterson's Heracles is a hero whose strength stems from the level of violence he inflicts on nature, animals, men, and especially women who are subjected to rape, sexual violence, and murder. As a result, the heroic glory that once surrounded his persona has completely vanished, and Heracles' status as the defender of Olympian values has been reimagined in a profoundly unfavorable light.

In another example, Heracles abducts Iole, daughter of King Eurytus, because she does not want him and her father refuses to surrender her. However, he sees “Iole as his, married or not” (61). After burning the city and slaughtering its settlers, he begins by cutting the throats of every member of Iole's family. Male or female, whenever he gets a hold of one, he thrusts a dagger into their neck and yells, “Iole! Say you’ll be mine and this one lives!” (61). In this sense, his supposedly heroic deeds become what Sylvia Antosa refers to as “violence masquerading as heroism” (Antosa 71). In an article, Winterson considers the concepts of heroism and masculinity in relation to Heracles:

The hero figure can be simple – Hercules is no brainbox – but he is not simplistic. He comes with moral strengths and moral flaws....Yet the hero has one very curious privilege; outside forces cannot kill him unaided. He must collude in his own death....his strength and self-belief become his snare. ... A woman is usually all or part of their destruction....Death by female is likely in the hyper-masculine worldview of the hero. (The Guardian)

It is his wife, Deianera, who is ultimately the one to put an end to his life. As Winterson explains in the same article, the simple interpretation of such a conclusion is that “a strong man snared by weak female,” but what his myth actually tells us is that “whatever you have left out of the picture will be what you must eventually confront” (The Guardian). Eventually, he confronted his disdain, exclusion, hostility and oppression that he had harbored toward women his entire life.

On the other hand, Atlas, who is physically stronger than Heracles, does not engage in any of these violent behaviors. Instead, he shoulders his burden with “such

grace and ease, with such gentleness, love almost,” (*Weight* 83). The fact that he is portrayed as kind and caring does not contradict, but rather complements his strength. In contrast to Heracles' violent labors, Atlas' gentle carrying of the Kosmos with care and love demonstrates that mythical strength and heroic deeds need not be oppressive. Atlas is liberated from his burden by his ability to feel and express love. As we've already seen, the way he loved and cared for Laika made it possible for him to let go of the world. In addition, Laika's existence in this sense, I believe, serves as a counter-argument to Heracles' annihilation of nature and animals. Mythos, as defined by Nevzat Kaya, is a way of describing and making sense of the world that existed prior to the emergence of logocentric, scriptocentric, and ideologic systems. He views literature as the inheritor of mythos because it entails mythical tenets and systems. However, the transition from mythos to logos, from an oral to a written culture of storytelling means that myths undergo a patriarchal transformation. When mythos is written down, it loses its dynamism and evolves into a canonical structure. (Kaya *Kültürbilimsel Mitoloji* 12:00- 23:17). Kaya states that one of the earliest archetypal hero myths is that of Heracles. The heroic deeds that he performs primarily center on the quest to civilize and domesticate the world, a theme that emerges after the patriarchal transformation of the mythos. Heracles is a cultural hero who tames all animals in all realms whether they live in the sky, the sea, on earth, or even in the underworld. According to Kaya, his myth is "a Neolithic revolution story," because his exploits represent the mythos' patriarchal transformation and rationalization. (*Herakles* 10:00- 21:00). In her novel, Winterson sheds light on Laika's story in which she has been muted for science's mission to advance civilization. In this sense,

I believe that Winterson's inclusion of Laika's story in her mythical retelling demonstrates that the rationalization process which began with the patriarchal transformation in ancient times is still going strong today.

Winterson's novel dethrones Heracles through focusing upon sexual and physical violence he committed throughout his life. In light of this, in both rewritings, mythical heroes are put under the epistemic scanner, and their morals and deeds are revealed to be flawed, particularly with regard to their treatment of women.

Winterson, in her article, criticizes the self-help trend of today which encourages us to look for heroes within ourselves because she thinks “we discover the hero we will also meet the monster. If we want the strength, we will find the flaw” (The Guardian). She believes that art is a means of coping with such complex emotions and situations. Through art, we can have a wider understanding and recognize that mythical heroes are not there to tell us universal, absolute truths “but to provoke questions” (The Guardian).

Kaya's view could be read in line with Ursula K. Le Guin's (1985) essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”. I suggest that the revisionist attempts of both mythographers, Atwood and Winterson, represent Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction or storytelling. Le Guin contends that the stories of the heroic man have captivated people throughout all of human history. In a manner befitting of heroic masculinity, the weapons used by the hunter-man were accepted as the first cultural tools, which resulted in history being written in masculine terms. Le Guin agrees with anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's contention that the use of bags and containers, rather

than spears or other weapons was the driving force behind the progression of human evolution (Fisher 59). Le Guin writes that "so long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing," she has never been able to relate to this side of human history (4). She suggests using the metaphor of a container to tell stories that would otherwise be obscured in favor of the hero. She refers to Virginia Woolf's suggestion to replace the words "hero" and "heroism" with "bottle" and "botulism" which represents the dangerous heritage of the hero's killer story: "told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story" (2). Le Guin argues that this dominant story, "the Ascent of Man the Hero," which we have been exposed to throughout history in the form of myths, legends, and epics, recounts the combative exploits of the Hero, "the Ascent of Man" that has overshadowed other stories. Therefore, she offers an alternative way of looking at humanity's foundations, shifting from a narrative of domination to one of gathering, holding, and sharing, in which essential technology is the "carrier bag" rather than a weapon of domination. She urges us to recognize the ways in which history has been colonized by the hero's journey so that we can begin telling the stories of other agents: "we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished" (6). However, it is not an easy task because "we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story" (6). This is not the story, as Campbell and others have described it, in which the hero is "the carrier of

the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence, will liberate the land”  
(Campbell 16)

In this regard, I believe that both Atwood and Winterson use the counter technology of carrier bag storytelling as a response to the Ascent of Man the Hero, the privileged subject who has been held up as the archetype of the universal human, a subjectivity endowed with Enlightenment’s rationality praised as an objective voice that tells the God’s eye view of history, art, and science.

In conclusion, Atwood's and Winterson's rewritings make visible the violence concealed behind the mask of heroism for centuries. They reveal hierarchical structures embedded in canonical myths that rationalize all forms of violence against women, nature, animals, and people they categorize as 'others'. By using an attitude and language that devalues the stories of heroes that have been glorified for centuries, Atwood and Winterson have shaken the place both heroes and dominant stories hold in the traditional hierarchy of values.

#### **3.2.4. Atlas: Transforming “The Man of Reason”**

Unfortunately, Descartes didn’t say: I love, therefore I am.

You *know* what he said: Cogito ergo sum.

Jeanette Winterson- *12 Bytes*

Genevieve Lloyd demonstrates in *The Man of Reason*, through a rereading of the fundamental philosophical works of the Western tradition, that there is a connection between the conceptualizations, symbolisms, and connections of masculinity and those of reason. Lloyd notes a gendered reason/emotion; rational/emotional dualism

can be traced back to the Greeks (3; 23), and she underlines Descartes' influence to the legitimization of this duality: "his influential dualism has interacted with and reinforced the effects of the symbolic opposition between male and female" (Lloyd xiv). She states that in Greek theories of knowledge, from the earliest days of Greek philosophy, femaleness was used as a symbolic representation of what reason had apparently abandoned. Plato, for example, believed that knowledge involved a relationship within human beings that replicated the relationship between knowable form and unknowable matter that existed in the rest of the world. Matter, with its female connotations, is viewed as something to be transcended in the pursuit of rational knowledge (4-5). The symbolic associations between maleness with a definite, distinct manner of mind and femaleness with the vague and indeterminate persisted, for her, in later refinements of the ideals of reason (2-3). In classical accounts of epistemology, in accounts of Plato, Descartes, and Locke, for instance, the man of reason as the subject of knowledge is accepted as "the would-be ideal knower" (Code *What* 1). Therefore, feminist epistemologists renamed the traditional would be knower as a "featureless abstraction" (1) by questioning "the supposed universality and neutrality of these ideals of reason" (Lloyd ix).

In her recent book, *12 Bytes*, Winterson argues that Descartes' approach was flawed because it didn't take into account "intuition or what we now call emotional intelligence" (96). She argues that the mind is capable of a great deal more than just thinking, and that there are numerous paths to knowledge. However, in the Western world, thinking has come to represent the highest form of human task because "the Supreme Being" spends his entire day thinking (96). The "*cogito ergo sum*" of

Descartes, for her, means more than just a belief in the superiority of the mind over matter. It detaches us from the entirety of the natural world, drawing a hierarchical picture of the world with male humans occupying the highest position, just as Aristotle did thousands of years ago (97). She adds that Aristotle made a distinction between “reason and instinct,” relegating instinct to animals and women. Descartes modified this duality by introducing the concept of “reflexes” (97). She continues her criticism by claiming that Descartes considered animals to be “biological automata” whose cries and affectionate displays were being nothing more than conditioned reflexes designed to increase their chances of survival (98). Therefore, he didn’t think “it matters how humans treat animals – animals don’t really feel any pain, and they cannot suffer. Only rational beings can suffer” (98). She makes a convincing argument that Descartes' supposedly enlightening certainty is to bear responsibility for the cruel treatment of animals used in scientific research, medical practice, and food production, which results in “untold horrors and tragedies” (98). In her mythical retelling, Winterson tells the untold tragedy of Laika, an animal who was silenced so that rational men could make scientific progress. In this section of the study, I combine Lloyd's and Winterson's critiques of rationality to argue that Winterson portrays Atlas as the man of reason who carries the unbearable weight of rational thought, yet she eventually transform him from “I think therefore I am” to ‘I love therefore I am’.

Atlas is a part of a pre-Olympic generation of divinities known as the Titans. The story of the Titans, whose demise led to the establishment of Olympian hegemony, shows how a matriarchal society or pre-Olympic culture transformed into

a rational and patriarchal one establishing Zeus' androcentric authority (Graves 41). In addition, Titans, whom Hesiod referred to as "earth-born" (chthonic), along with their chthonic and titanic powers, posed a threat to the newly established order. Although all other Titans were punished to live in the underworld, still in contact with their Mother Earth, Atlas' "exemplary punishment," in Graves' words, separates him symbolically from his Mother Earth (41). According to Kaya, the Titans represent the untamable power of nature called "titanic," which cannot be cultured, transformed, or rationalized. In this sense, his myth which tells the story of his punishment shows how myths are rationalized by dominant patriarchal discourses.

His punishment and his temporary relief, as Winterson notes in her introduction, serve to structure her story. We first observe Atlas in the sky, where he is engaged only in rational thinking, and then, after his release, we see him embracing his Mother Earth in his garden where he discovers his emotions. Accordingly, why this transition is important in Winterson's retelling, and how she reached a resolution by portraying this duality between reason and emotion will be examined.

For the way that universal truths are formed by disembodied men of reason, such as scientists, Donna Haraway coined the term "god-trick" by employing the visual metaphor of the gaze from "nowhere and everywhere" (*Situated* 581). In *Weight*, Atlas speaks to us as a demigod from the Kosmos. He is situated above the sky which Karen Armstrong refers to as the realm of "God who reveal(s) himself to beings in the Logos, the divine Word and Wisdom" (Armstrong *A History of God* 57). As "the Lord of the Kosmos, wonder of the universe" (*Weight* 70), he performs god-trick by "gazing at this tiny world" (38). He attempts to comprehend the world

rationally by constructing a “giant history of the world” (66), in a manner very similar to that of influential thinkers who, ever since the time of the ancient Greeks, have been constructing patriarchal grand narratives of literature, philosophy, religion, or science. Rational thinking becomes an act of survival for him: “He saved himself in his lonely hours by thinking. He invented mathematical puzzles and solved them. He plotted the course of the stars” (66). He endeavored to comprehend the workings of gods and human race while simultaneously building in his rational mind his metanarrative of the world's history (66). He distanced himself from his emotions by engaging only in thinking since “he was not used to feeling. He saved himself in his lonely hours by thinking.... His thoughts kept him from feeling” (38).

In the episode called “Private Mars,” Atlas creates his own private Mars in the “limitless universe of his imagination” (104). He endeavors to “reviv[e] life on the sun-abandoned,” barren, and waterless landscape of Mars, the planet associated with masculinity. However, because his reasoning has no bearing on reality, the material world, or human lives, he realizes that something is lacking from his discourse (105). The real boundaries become the words that make up the rigid structures of the dominant discourses: “He turned over the words like stones. The words were stones, as dry and inhospitable as the Martian regolith. Nothing grew out of those words” (105). He is trying to build his narrative all alone “on his own private Mars” (105). Winterson explicitly opposes scientific exploration of other worlds, as also evidenced by her critique of Stephen Hawking elsewhere, in which he asserted that humanity must colonize space for its own survival. Winterson criticizes the desire to explore faraway planets and travel to outer space instead of staying at home and “honoring

the earth,” comparing it to destroying and then abandoning a place (“Books”). She also illustrates how dominant discourses can become rigid and fixed when based solely on rationality or the man of reason as an abstract knower.

When he was in the garden of Hesperides on the earth after his monstrous burden is taken off from his shoulders temporarily by Heracles, “like all the sons of Mother Earth, his strength was renewed when he came in contact with the ground” (40). He experienced a feeling “he hardly recognized. He did not dare to name it” (41). For the first time, he feels “affection, and pride, and that unbearable tightening in his chest again. He wanted to cry, his tears pouring over the apple, like rain” (41). He realized that it was not the weight of the world but the weight of his own rational thinking as “his punishment was a clever one – it engaged his vanity” (41). In Kosmos, he was constructing his own narrative without listening to any human voices; however, now on earth, he heard a woman for the very first time. He listened to her sigh as she worked while thinking about her children, and he wondered “Would he now, this minute, change his life for hers, give her the world and pick up her pestle and mortar?” (41). Then he responded that he would not, as “he was still Atlas” without emotions (41).

After Heracles tricks him into carrying the Kosmos once more, he completely loses all of his vision, thinking, and other abilities (42). When trying in vain to build “the Atlas of the world,” he fails to realize that the gigantic weight he was bearing was actually himself (46). Despite the fact that his rational thinking and reasoning may provide him with power and endurance in his current circumstances, it is evident that it cannot lead him out of his dilemma. Indeed, one could argue that his

dedication to rational reasoning and, by extension, his avoidance of emotion perpetuate his captivity prevents him from visualizing a way out of his predicament, so he perceives boundaries everywhere.

Nonetheless, Winterson's ending to his story comes as a surprise which reveals Winterson's true priorities: love and art that bridge reason and emotion. Love and art, according to Susana Onega, are the primary, unifying visions that inform all of her fictional works (8). Laika, the dog sacrificed for science, enters Atlas' orbit and changes the course of his story, taking him from a place of “nothingness” to a place of infinite possibilities. Atlas liberated her and cared for her with a maternal love that awakened him from his state of emotionlessness. Accordingly, in Winterson’s retelling, reason and emotion meet in a way that it gives birth to a story of infinite potential. As Winterson states in her latest book “We are smart enough to know this... Love is the highest value. Yet for all of history, love has also been seen as a weakness, as a diversion, as a spanner in the works in the fight between rationality and emotion” (*12 Bytes* 219).

All in all, Winterson's mythography transcends the hierarchal relation between dichotomies of mythos and logos, reason and emotion found in the most of literary, philosophical, and religious texts. Winterson also rewrites Decartes’ dictum because she believes that it is not his “thinking thing” but rather:

“It is this: L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.

The love that moves the sun and the other stars.” (*12 Bytes* 220)

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to elucidate how contemporary writers Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, through their remaking of mythography, invest myths with new meanings and new ways of knowing. The main thesis underlying this examination is that the feminist reconstruction of knowledge in their discourses not only exposes androcentric nature of the canonized discourses of myths, which are regarded as foundational pillars of Western literary heritage, but also reclaims the voices of the previously silenced and marginalized discourses.

Stories are the essence of myth. The word “myth” is related to the *mythos*, which is a Greek term meaning “word” or “story” (Doty 7). Stories are told and retold, reconstructed and deconstructed, written and rewritten, and passed down from one generation to the next in a variety of settings and times “[o]nce upon a time . . . once . . . and once again” (Cixous *Sorties* 63). Once these orally transmitted stories were compiled and written down by mythographers, they ended up losing the improvisational energy that enables storytellers or listeners to interact, transform and reshape their words. More importantly, they have been transformed into narratives that provide cultural validation for the values and beliefs held by the dominant social classes, races, and gender. This means that they have been reshaped, modified, adapted, and kept in circulation to conform to the norms of the dominant groups by devaluing, silencing and marginalizing women, those who live in a society's periphery, and nature (Doty 25; Tatar 148; Kaya *Edebiyat ve Mitoloji* 11:00-12:20). Their culturally and historically contingent beliefs and ideals evolved and solidified into immutable, timeless, and universal narratives that became deeply ingrained in

cultural memory, thereby becoming sources of knowledge for both past and present generations (Tatar 149). To reveal a full understanding of the norms and beliefs embedded in these fixed, definitive, and universal discourses of myths that lead feminist theorists to question and undermine them, I examined feminist myth critics including Adrienne Rich, Helene Cixous, Estella Lauter, Carol Schreier Rupprecht, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Marina Warner, and Maria Tatar, among others. Drawing attention to the androcentric nature of canonical myths, that perpetuate patriarchal culture and dominance, they challenged and refuted the claims of male critics of myths and archetypes, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell, who failed to account for gender bias in their analysis. Accordingly, they call for revisionist mythmaking, which is "feminist in its impulse," that inspired women writers such as Christa Wolf, Angela Carter, Michèle Roberts, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, and Jeanette Winterson, among others, to respond to tradition with literary works of their own (Rich 19). By narrating previously marginalized discourses, feminist revisionist mythmakers give voice to characters, primarily women, who were previously ignored, victimized, enslaved, and sidelined in canonical versions.

Myths, as Marina Warner convincingly argues, "aren't writ in stone" (*Managing* 26). In various social and cultural settings, their meaning and content undergo radical transformations. Therefore, they are not unchangeable and their retelling can give rise to new stories. (*Managing* 26). Thus, one of the primary arguments of feminist myth critics is that myths and archetypes are dynamic social constructions that can take on different meanings depending on their cultural context in which they are situated (Lauter and Rupprecht 12; Ostiker 211). They regard

mythmaking as “a continuing process and not a stage that human beings passed through thousands of years ago” (Lauter 1). Beginning with Rich’s call for revisiting the foundational myths of the literary heritage with a “new critical direction”, women’s revisionist mythmaking, “as a feminist genre,” creates an alternative archive and evolves to produce new ways of knowing (Plate 4).

In her essay “Myth and Feminist Philosophy,” Pamela Sue Anderson argues that mythic imagination should be used to create a space in which patriarchal biases and flaws embedded in canonical discourses can be transformed in order to reconstruct our knowledge. (114). Focusing on the concept of ‘situated knowledges’ proposed by feminist epistemologists, which refers to a way of understanding that all knowledge derives from positional and partial perspectives, Anderson contends that feminist mythographers can produce feminist socially and materially situated knowledges through the imaginatively productive process of myth-making: “it is precisely myth’s role in the productive functioning of the imagination which, I insist, can inform us epistemologically....it should enable us to know the difference between the conditions of oppression and the freedom of women and men in full view of our highly specific social and material conditioning” (113). In light of the aforementioned arguments, my analysis connected the theories of feminist epistemology with the textual reconstruction of myths in the works of Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson.

For my methodology, I examined feminist epistemologists including Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Alison Jaggar, Linda Martin Alcoff, Lorraine Code, Linda Martin Alcoff , Elizabeth Potter, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Tuana, among others.

They seek to demonstrate that the construction of knowledge in traditional Western epistemology is not gender-neutral by drawing attention to the inherent bias that it harbors against women. They believe that the subject of Western thought has been a disembodied, universal, and abstract knower; or, as Sandra Harding puts it, the traditional “knowing subject” has been “culturally and historically disembodied” and governed by the presumed rationality, so a “new subject of knowledge” would be “embodied and visible” and “socially situated” (*Rethinking* 63). As opposed to universality claims of the ideal subject with no particularities, the subject's social situatedness — such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical capacities — plays a significant role in feminist attempts to reconstruct knowledge. Accordingly, one of the core tenets of feminist epistemologists is the concept of “situated knowledges” which suggests that all knowledge derives from positional and partial perspectives (Haraway 589; Anderson 17). Moreover, they developed a theory called feminist standpoint theory, following Marxist tradition, which recognizes the marginally situated knowers as epistemic agents in knowledge production and incorporates their knowledge into a society's epistemic resources (Harding 1991; Alcoff 1993).

Following these dictums, particularly Pohlhause and Mihai's terminology, I examined canonical myths as dominant epistemic resources that produce knowledge from/for the dominantly situated world rather than the marginally situated one. According to Gaile Pohlhaus, “it is from marginalized situatedness that the inadequacy of our epistemic resources for making sense of parts of the experienced world is noticed” (721). Thus, as dominant resources, they are less likely to be

adequate for knowing the experiences of those in the peripheries of the world. In this sense, being marginally situated appears to be epistemically disadvantageous because epistemic resources available are inadequate for making sense of their experienced world. Therefore, I suggest that Margaret Atwood and Jeannette Winterson, in their selected works I analyzed, transform this disadvantage into an advantage by inviting us to visit the world of the epistemically excluded characters, such as Penelope and the Maids and Atlas, in canonical myths, by placing these previously marginalized knowers at the center of their narratives and recognizing the epistemic value of their knowledge. As a result, the main finding of this study is that Atwood's and Winterson's works create new epistemic resources for knowing the world that are developed by the experiences of marginally situated characters and, thus, are adequate for both marginal and dominant positions in the social order.

The selected works of these mythographers, which shatter the rigid structure of canonized discourses of myths, demonstrate the possibility of producing knowledge in diversity of ways. They achieve this by recognizing the validity of their characters' particularities in the production of knowledge, such as gender and social class in Margaret Atwood's *Penelope and the Maids* or heteronormative structures in Jeanette Winterson's *Atlas and Heracles*. They present counter-discourses in response to the canon that unsettle the universality claims and authority of the dominant stories by altering their themes, narrators, plots, and narrative techniques.

Margaret Atwood right from the beginning of her novel *The Penelopiad* (TP), casts doubt on the authoritative and canonical perception of the Odyssean myth that is attributed to Homer, stating that she also used other sources, including the works of Robert Graves, in her rewriting, because “[m]ythic material was originally oral and also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another” (TP 1). This highlights two significant aspects of the nature of mythic stories: first, there cannot be a single version of these stories, and second, these stories cannot be universal. Atwood then proceeds to ask the following questions, the responses to which contribute to the formation of the plot of her narrative: “[W]hat led to the hanging of the Maids, and what was Penelope really up to?” (TP 2). In her rewriting, then, Atwood gives voice to these women who were previously ignored, victimized, enslaved, and sidelined in canonical versions, particularly Homer’s.

Atwood resurrects Penelope and the Maids by endowing them agency to tell their lives, their experiences, the traumas they endured and the epistemic injustices they face in the patriarchal world. Their accounts, in their pursuit of justice, expose social inequalities and gender biases that permeate dominant discourses. Her rewriting sheds light on the harm that epistemic injustice can cause to individuals as knowers and as knowables. Epistemic injustice practices include the following: “exclusion and silencing; invisibility and inaudibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one’s meanings or contributions systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented;” (1); which are evident in Penelope and the Maids’ portrayals in not only in canonical discourses, but also in *The Penelopiad*. Accordingly, I examined Atwood’s response to these epistemic injustices in her

rewriting through the lens of feminist epistemologists' theories on the concept of epistemic injustice, with a particular emphasis on testimonial injustice and willful ignorance. "You've heard of injustice collecting?" asks Atwood elsewhere, adding "That's what I've become—an injustice collector" (Atwood *The Tent* 65). As an injustice collector, Atwood shifted the focus of the narrative away from the victorious male heroes onto their helpless victims: the Maids. As stated by Nevin Yıldırım Koyuncu, Atwood "exposes myths as a history of images replete with terror, violence, and repression, in short, destructive forces directed against women" (78). Looking through the concept of epistemic injustice provided by Miranda Fricker (2007) and Nancy Tuana (2007), I drew the conclusion that the Maids' testimony was discredited and their knowledge was ignored because of their, to borrow Tuana's phrase, "epistemically disadvantaged identities" (Tuana 13). In her revision, Atwood places ancient mythical figures in a twenty-first century courtroom, presided over by a contemporary judge and a defense attorney where being a member of a subordinate group unjustly prevents the Maids from sharing their knowledge with the court via testimony. Their brutal hanging that followed the return of their king Odysseus shows how violence is legitimized when it serves the interests of the ruling power structures. Therefore, Atwood shows the implied twenty-first century reader that assaults and other forms of violence against women are still dismissed as they were centuries ago as well as how oppressive systems produce an active and repeated cultivation of ignorance. By placing the epistemic injustices suffered by the Maids at the center of her literary work, Atwood's retelling also demonstrates literature's ability to adapt and transform the social imagination, as well as its significance in combating epistemic

injustices. In this regard, Atwood depicts how literary texts can expose us to what it feels like to be systematically discounted as a credible knower and prevented from contributing to the pool of hermeneutical resources.

It is possible for dominant epistemic subjects to ignore epistemic resources that have been generated to make sense of the experienced world of those who are marginally situated (Pohlhaus 722). This form of ignorance, which involves “refusing to learn to use epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness,” is referred to as “willful hermeneutical ignorance” by Gaile Pohlhaus (Pohlhaus 722) and as “willful ignorance” by Nancy Tuana (13). Looking at the concept of willful ignorance through the lenses of Fricker, Tuana, and Pohlhaus, I suggested that Penelope has become willfully ignorant in order to preserve her status, ensure her safety, and maintain her social value, which is protected by social structures that systematically disadvantage others, as evidenced by her ignorance of the Maids. Although Penelope narrates her story about her oppression in a patriarchal society, she ignores the epistemic injustices that the Maids suffer and becomes part of the system of injustice that maintains their oppression, revealing how, to quote Pohlhaus, “dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret their world” (716). In addition, as marginally situated knowers, the Maids have no community to which they can communicate their knowledge and they were not allowed to develop adequate epistemic resources for making sense of their experiences. As a result, I suggest that Atwood demonstrates how willful ignorance can manifest as a systematic ignorance of the knowledge of the marginally situated by narrating the trial scene, in which the Maids' testimony is refuted and Penelope's

complicity in their hangings is revealed. In doing so, Atwood acknowledges these historically marginalized epistemic agents and allows her readers to revise the assumed knowledge paradigms by voicing the marginalized stories of the Maids, which can pave the way for the inclusion of their alternative knowledges in the pool of epistemic resources.

I also examined Atwood's work through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, which mainly claims that marginalized and excluded social positions have distinct knowledges that can expose hegemonic and oppressive structures, as well as flaws and biases in dominant practices. (Harding 2004; Heckman 1997; Jaggar 2004). I linked it with cultural materialism using Alan Sinfield's perspective. He claims that dominant ideologies of social order that manifest themselves in canonical texts inherently contain “dissidence” because these ideologies “produce faultlines” (45). According to Sinfield, dominant narratives with the “faultline stories are the ones that require most assiduous and continuous reworking”(47). Finding faultlines within the literary texts and recognizing occurrences of dissidence which are obscured in dominant textual expression of ideology, pave the way to unearth voices that have been lost or repressed. (Sinfield 38). In this regard, by unearthing the repressed voices of Penelope and the Maids, I suggest that Atwood let them “develop dissident subjectivities” which would trouble the very principles upon which dominant ideologies rest (Sinfield 299). Analyzing Penelope and the Maids' standpoints reveals that they are situated in a traumatic history and ongoing legacy of violence directed toward women. The ‘situatedness’ of Penelope and the Maids' knowledges based on their life experiences serve as sources of alternative knowledge to the hegemonic

structures that systematically place them in subordinate, marginalized positions. Atwood transforms the canonical myths in which women are portrayed as mute, passive objects into one in which they are subjects who actively contribute to the production of knowledge. Their dissident voices expose the patriarchal view of women as property or commodity. Additionally, the Maids' stories tell us that they were reduced to sexual objects and the whole society justified their exploitation. The Maids' presence in Atwood's text as archetypal trickster figures, which I interpreted in line with Kaya's description of tricksters, demonstrates the necessity of transgressing norms and other social boundaries and this transformation counteracts the rigidity of the ideology that silences diversity (*Kaya Trickster* 11:00-12:00). Accordingly, I drew the conclusion that through their stories, the imbalances and inconsistencies in the system's integrity rise to the surface.

Atwood refutes the presumed universality claims of canonical myths by focusing on oral origins and transmission of myths. She highlights the impossibility of a single version of myth due to the variety of retellings and locations in which it was told (1). Moreover, as she noted in her introduction, she draws material for her rewriting from oral stories, particularly rumors and gossip (2). To reveal a comprehensive understanding of how and why Atwood weaves gossip into her novel, I examined the works of Lorraine Code, Karen Adkins, and Patricia Spacks. I argued that Atwood, by using gossip, offers alternative and multiple paths to knowledge that have been left out of canonical versions. Accordingly, I drew the conclusion that Penelope and the Maids' narratives enable us to hear the multiplicity of voices out of which knowledge can be constructed. Considering gossip's transgressive nature,

Code claims, “it can add chaos to normal workings of structures and institutions of power” (4). For this reason, in her view, gossip is an effective means of communication for people on the margins of society not only because they are either denied or unable to gain access the knowledge sources, but also their credibility has been called into question or discredited. In this regard, I suggest that Atwood employs gossip in her work in two ways. First, gossip becomes a channel for the voiceless and the marginalized Maids whose testimony was discredited because of their social status. With their speculative talk, they offer a counter-discourse to the dominant social structures and discourses that marginalize them. Second, the world as an agent of gossip similar to the “featureless abstraction” of would-be-knower of traditional knowledge claims (Code 1), with its powerful voice judges people who violates social standards, and thus, it contributes to the enforcement of social norms and values (Spacks 183). This is evident in Penelope’s account where she responds to the gossips and rumors that others have been spreading about her in order to avoid what Spack calls “a socially circulated disapproval” (Spacks 204). Accordingly, I claim that Atwood reconstructs knowledge through the use of gossip and rumor in her rewriting as a way for marginalized women to have their stories heard.

Jeanette Winterson’s writing centers on the retelling of myths, and her novels recurrently remake canonical literary works that have played a foundational role in shaping cultural knowledge and memory. Because she thinks myths are “a marvelous way of telling stories — retelling stories,” *Weight* centers its theme on the act of retelling (xvi). Winterson takes a different path than Atwood, who reimagines female persone. Unlike Atwood, Winterson choses male persone, Atlas and Heracles.

Winterson's decision to retell the myth of Atlas as a passive, silent, and submissive demigod is one reason I chose to analyze this novel. I intended to examine how rewriting a previously silenced male myth can transform the story we know. Atlas is a pre-Olympic Titan, who was condemned to bear the weight of the cosmos as retribution for disobeying the new order to be established by Olympian deities. Since the Greek mythological canon is dominated by stories about the gods and heroes of the Olympian generation, his myth has been overshadowed in canonical versions in favor of Heracles' heroic achievements. Therefore, his story is bound up with that of Heracles due to the well-known "twelve labors" Heracles performed in an effort to achieve the right to eternal life and avoid the wrath of Hera, his father Zeus' wife. The story of the Titans, whose downfall led to the establishment of Olympian hegemony, is mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is one of the earliest accounts that have survived to the present day. Many subsequent rewritings and reinterpretations of the myth have drawn from this source. It also provides a framework for Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*, which both Winterson and Atwood cite as a reference in their respective works (ix, paratext). It is important to stress two aspects of Hesiod's *Theogony* here. For one, his work signifies "the end of an oral tradition" because it is among the earliest mythography to record myths in written form (Mondi 332). Secondly, as stated by Nevzat Kaya, it is a crucial record that chronicles the transformation from a matriarchal society or pre-Olympic culture to a rational and patriarchal one by establishing Zeus' androcentric authority over not only all gods and goddesses in his Olympic pantheon, but also over the mortals<sup>28</sup> (*Mitostan*

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<sup>28</sup> M.T.Greene similarly stresses Hesiod's adoption of rational and patriarchal Greek thought had a

*Logosa* 04:50-05:45). This transition plays an important role when examining Jeanette Winterson's retelling because it highlights the oppression and marginalization of Atlas under the patriarchal hegemony of the Olympians. In addition, Titans, whom Hesiod referred to as "earth-born" (chthonic), along with their chthonic and titanic powers, posed a threat to the newly established order. Therefore, Atlas' punishment represents his forced transition to the realm of the father, and his symbolic separation from his Mother Earth which was imposed by the newly established law of Zeus (Graves 697). Kaya states that one of the earliest archetypal hero myths is that of Heracles. The heroic deeds that he performs primarily center on the quest to civilize and domesticate the world, a theme that emerges after the patriarchal transformation of the mythos. Heracles is a cultural hero who tames all animals in all realms whether they live in the sky, the sea, on earth, or even in the underworld (Kaya *Herakles* 10:00- 21:00). In her telling, Winterson brings to light yet another figure that has been muted and marginalized; this time, the figure in question is a dog, Laika, who is killed for science's mission to advance civilization. In this sense, I believe that Winterson's inclusion of Laika's story in her mythical retelling demonstrates that the rationalization process which began with the patriarchal transformation in ancient times is still going strong today.

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significant influence on the development of Western thought: "The Greeks made, for the first time in human history, the transition from mythic to rational thought. As such, Greek myths become more than another mythology: they are the beginning of our culture, our arts, our sciences, and our political forms. This explains why a document as otherwise unexceptional as the *Theogony* is still studied and interpreted at such length: as the first document of Greek mythology, it is the beginning of the beginning of Western civilization" See: M. T Greene *Natural Knowledge in Preclassical Antiquity*. (The Johns Hopkins University Press: USA, 1992): 42.

Winterson also incorporates her own life story into the myth as she “[writes] it directly from [her] own experience” (*Weight* xiv). For Liedeke Plate, “Winterson’s self-mythologizing as Atlas—drawing specifically on the analogy between Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders and the storyteller—extends the relevance of *Weight* beyond authorial metafiction” (403). She transforms the myth from the universal to the personal by interweaving aspects of her own life narrative with the tales of Atlas and Heracles. In doing so, she presents a convincing argument for the significant place that myth holds in our individual memory and its continued relevance in our contemporary world.

Silvia Antosa writes in her article “My Monstrous Burden: Queering the Myth, Rewriting the Self in Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight*” that Winterson “has rewritten classical myth to deconstruct pre-existing patriarchal discourses and create a counter queer feminist mythology” by dismantling conventional notions of masculinity and sexual binaries (56). Hers is the only article I have found during the course of my research that specifically addresses queer epistemology in *Weight*. Accordingly, I examined Winterson's rewriting with a particular focus on queer temporality, drawing on the work of Judith Halberstam, Carla Freccero, and Elizabeth Freeman, among others. Examining the novel through the lens of queer epistemology reveals that Winterson, in *Weight*, challenges and subverts dominant patriarchal and heteronormative discourses which have ignored and marginalized nonconforming subjectivities. Furthermore, her narrative destabilizes and reconstructs temporal and spatial norms. Tracing the concept of queer temporality in Winterson’s rewriting shows that she undermines the traditional heteronormative, reproductive, and linear

temporal order of the world. Therefore, I drew the conclusion that Winterson presents queer temporality that is multiple, fluid, continuously transitional which is open to multiple meanings and series of revisitings and retellings.

Winterson also weaves and blends scientific concepts such as quantum physics, geography, and geology into her mythical retelling, revealing a way of perceiving the world that is open to an infinite number of possibilities by combining, rather than separating, the scientific logos and her storytelling, mythos. Thus, in order to reveal why Winterson employed scientific concepts, particularly quantum physics, in her retelling, I examined theories of new feminist materialism, which Iris van der Tuin refers to as “third wave feminist epistemology,” with a particular emphasis on Karen Barad’s concept of spacetime-matter and Donna Haraway’s work on companion species (93). Winterson’s rewriting is infused with the material world in which textuality, materiality, meaning and matter, human and non-human life are all intertwined. Reading Winterson’s novel through the lens of new feminist materialist epistemology reveals that she does not regard humans as merely agents in the processes of knowledge production. The objects of knowledge create meanings, and become agential, dynamic entities that are entangled in “material-discursive intra-acting” (48). Winterson transforms knowledge into something that is dynamic, interactive, interconnected, in-motion, and ever-evolving. By emphasizing the agential, material, and constitutive nature of the matter in knowledge/meaning making practices, Winterson challenges the matter/meaning dualism that has framed philosophical and scientific debates based on the assumption that the matter is indeterminate outside of constitutive practices. According to Haraway, animals as our

companion species are subjects and active agents within both their own and our worlds (3). In this sense, Laika and Atlas' mutual entanglement in the end of the novel transcends the human/animal dichotomy. It also serves as an illustration of Winterson's anti-hierarchical literary discourse that dethrones humans from the center of the world. Accordingly, I suggest that her retelling, which bridges the discursive and the material, logos and mythos, reason and emotion, and remakes new forms of conceptualization of our material outside, is a liberating endeavor. It is liberation from dualistic thinking, from subjugations, from the limits and boundaries that prevent our imagination from appreciating the vibrant diversity of the world we are part of.

I also intended to depict how Atlas' story is transformed in Winterson's novel by examining rationality critiques in Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* and Jeanette Winterson's *12 Bytes: How We Got Here Where We Might Go Next*. Winterson contends that the “*cogito ergo sum*” of Descartes detaches us from the entirety of the natural world, drawing a hierarchical picture of the world with male humans occupying the highest position (*12 Bytes* 98). She also criticizes Descartes, who considered animals to be “biological automata,” which ultimately results in “untold horrors and tragedies” (98). In her mythical retelling, Winterson tells the untold tragedy of Laika. In so doing, I suggest, Winterson demonstrates that love and imaginative power of art can bridge reason and emotion. Love and art, according to Susana Onega, are the primary, unifying visions that inform all of her fictional works (8). Laika's presence and love transform the course of Atlas' story as the man of reason who carries the unbearable weight of

rational thought, transforming him from “I think therefore I am” to “I love therefore I am”. Therefore, I believe that her rewriting illustrates how the power of our imagination can allow us to create a more meaningful world than the one that our faculty of reason can help us to comprehend.

In order to elucidate how Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson in their rewritings reconstruct our knowledge of what constitutes heroism, I looked through Ursula K. Le Guin's (1985) essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” and Maria Tatar's work *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* (2022). Both Atwood's and Winterson's rewritings disrupt the heroism constructed by patriarchal ideology's masculine values and heroic discourses that center on heroes' triumphs over dangers during their quests. They dethroned Odysseus and Heracles by focusing on the sexual and/or physical violence they committed against women. As was the case with Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons, and Iole in *Weight* : "no woman who refused [Heracles] ever lived to tell the tale" (Weight 39). Likewise, as in the story of the Maids who were brutally killed by Odysseus. Accordingly, I concluded that Atwood's and Winterson's rewritings challenge the conventional knowledge that is deeply ingrained in androcentric, heroic traditions by making visible the violence concealed behind the mask of heroism for centuries. In this regard, their rewritings generate new epistemic resources that challenge hegemonic heroic discourses.

To sum up, both Atwood and Winterson illustrate that stories can be narrated with kaleidoscopic dynamism, that they can undergo transformations when given a twist. By narrating the untold side of the known stories, their works demonstrate how the meanings and knowledge/s created by these stories can change dramatically. In

their act of rewriting, told in a diversity of voices, both mythographers transform the canonical myths' immutable and timeless truths into a kaleidoscopic array of stories. Their rewriting acts as a source of knowledge and a form of dissent to deeply embedded epistemic exclusions. They expose injustices and inequalities in patriarchal conventional knowledge systems, criticize epistemic privilege of the dominant discourses and propose more egalitarian and democratic alternatives for remaking our knowledge. By remaking of mythography, both writers created new myths, to quote Marina Warner, “to live by and live with” (“Imagining”).

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

Yöntem Kılıkş earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from the department of English Language and Literature at Ege University in 1999. Along with her education, she also held a part-time position at EKAM (Ege University Women's Studies Research Centre) as a student. Her experience at EKAM helped her pursue a master's degree in the Women's Studies department at Ege University. She received her Master of Arts degree with her thesis entitled 'Gender and the Body in Modernist Writers'. She has been teaching at Ege University School of Foreign Languages department since 2000.